

# FUNDING CIVIL SOCIETY FREEDOM

Models, Stories and Strategies for Making Flexible Funding Work

Executive Summary



## Overview

The unprecedented cuts to so-called foreign aid (formally known as Official Development Assistance, or ODA) in 2024 and 2025 served as yet another reminder that unilateral, top-down ways of funding do not serve the cause of creating a more equitable and decolonised global system. And luckily, an alternative already exists: flexible funding that gives people and communities the freedom to tackle their own needs and challenges. Funding that is liberating, rather than constraining.

This research on flexible funding models, therefore, does not start from a 'neutral' standpoint. We believe that flexible funding is both vital and preferable to existing mainstream, rigid forms of funding. And it is a **crucial part of shifting both power and resources from the Global North/ Minority to the Global South/ Majority**. This report describes how organisations implement flexible funding – the nuts and bolts of their approaches – and identifies the benefits and challenges of different flexible funding models.

Our aim with this report is to encourage and inspire policymakers and funders to learn from existing models and take the leap into flexible funding for civil society. The report's message is clear: there is no need to reinvent the wheel. Proven approaches to resourcing civil society exist; scaling and replicating these models is simply a case of political will and imagination.

## Definition of flexible funding

It is difficult to settle on a universal definition of flexible funding, a dynamic concept that has different meanings for actors across the funding ecosystem. But flexibility is more often than not defined by several key principles:

- **Long-term commitment** in the form of multiyear funding that allows for organisational or movement strengthening.
- **Ability to adapt** funding allocations, approaches and timelines according to the changing context.
- **Responsiveness and speed**, allowing for partners to quickly meet needs as they arise.
- **Unrestricted where possible**, allowing recipients of funding to determine their own priorities.
- **Accompanied by non-financial support**, supporting funding recipients according to their needs.

For the pioneers, who have always funded this way, being a flexible funder is much more than what they do – it is **part of who they are**, and an **ongoing practice**. Flexible funding is therefore an **identity** and a **philosophy** as much as a funding modality, one which is often based on a worldview and mindset of trust, openness, equity and decoloniality. It is also important to emphasise that flexible funding is **not static, nor is it one-size-fits-all**. It is a concept that lives and breathes and adjusts to changing contexts over time.

## Four flexible funding models for shifting power and resources

Through desk research and in-depth conversations with a wide range of funders, we have identified the four flexible funding models that are currently being used by a wide range of funders and re-granters: **Direct Champions, Connectors, Experimenters, and Convener-Advocates**. *It is important to note that funders and organisations rarely fit neatly into a single model. Many move between models or operate across multiple models depending on the context, internal shifts or external pressures.*



## DIRECT CHAMPIONS

**Snapshot description:** Organisations designed to provide flexible funding, alongside other forms of non-financial accompaniment support, **directly** to individuals, organisations, communities, networks or movements that do ‘the work’. We identified the following sub-categories: intersectional feminist funds; community-led funds; community (philanthropy) foundations; crowdfunding; membership and network funds; and, in some cases, Global North/Minority philanthropic funders. Key features include:

- **Application processes:** These vary across funders, but two common features are that groups receiving the funding are often required to be self-led by the constituencies they intend to benefit, and that written proposals (which are usually but not always required) tend to be light-touch. Indeed, the application stage is seen as the start of relationship and trust-building processes, where funders come to understand the priorities and needs of their prospective grantee partners.
- **Decision-making processes:** Direct Champions tend to have advisory or oversight groups that are representatives of focus communities. These bodies help to review applications and make decisions. In some cases, funders also introduce a voting system, where applicants can vote for each others’ proposals, as a way to strengthen networks.
- **Grant management and reporting:** These processes are designed to be as minimal and flexible as possible to allow grantee partners the freedom to pursue their goals. Due diligence procedures do exist, but are implemented in a way that reinforces rather than undermines trust and accountability. Alongside funding, Direct Champions also provide non-financial accompaniment support, including training, wellbeing support, and movement-building opportunities.



## CONNECTORS

**Snapshot description:** Organisations (Global North/Minority-based) that channel funding indirectly by partnering with other organisations that are more proximate to the communities they serve in the Global South/Majority, thereby strengthening local and national funding ecosystems. Connectors work with partners most proximate to the issues, including regional hub partners and other types of in-country entities (which we refer to as facilitating partners). We identified a few different sub-categories: multi-country hub partnership; single-country hub partnership; fiscal sponsors or hosts. Key features include:

- **Partner selection processes:** Connectors do not select grantee partners directly – rather, they select facilitating partners which then issue calls for applications tailored to their specific contexts. Facilitating partners then design a decision-making process that enables flexibility and inclusivity, similar to those of Direct Champions.
- **Due diligence:** Due diligence or vetting processes seek to balance their commitment to the values of flexible funding against the pressures from traditional donors in accounting for how the money is spent.
- **Support to facilitating partners:** Connectors, who receive funding directly from traditional Global North/Minority donors, seek to bear as much of the reporting burden as possible, freeing up facilitating partners to support grantee partners in a similar way.



## EXPERIMENTERS

**Snapshot description:** Organisations that do not operate entirely as flexible funders, but which have succeeded in creating discrete flexible funding channels – either through direct funding, like Direct Champions, or indirectly, like Connectors. Through these channels, Experimenters can enable more flexible funding to flow within an otherwise traditional funding environment. We identified the following sub-categories: Global North/Minority INGO funds; bilateral donor support for women’s funds; bilateral donor programme funding; bilateral donor embassy-level funding; donor pooled funds. Key features include:

- **Different options:** There are no standard structural features across all Experimenters, given that each funder takes advantage of specific opportunities as they arise, and therefore they are free to adopt aspects of either the Direct Champions or Connectors models.
- **Design:** Experimenters often conduct consultations with experts to assist in the design of a flexible funding channel or mechanism. Through this, there is often room for negotiation, for instance on the ability to use funds for core costs rather than projects.
- **Flexibility in experimentation:** Precisely because Experimenters frame their funding as ‘experimental’, they are often able to secure high degrees of freedom for their grantee partners, for instance by providing direct, multiyear and core funding.

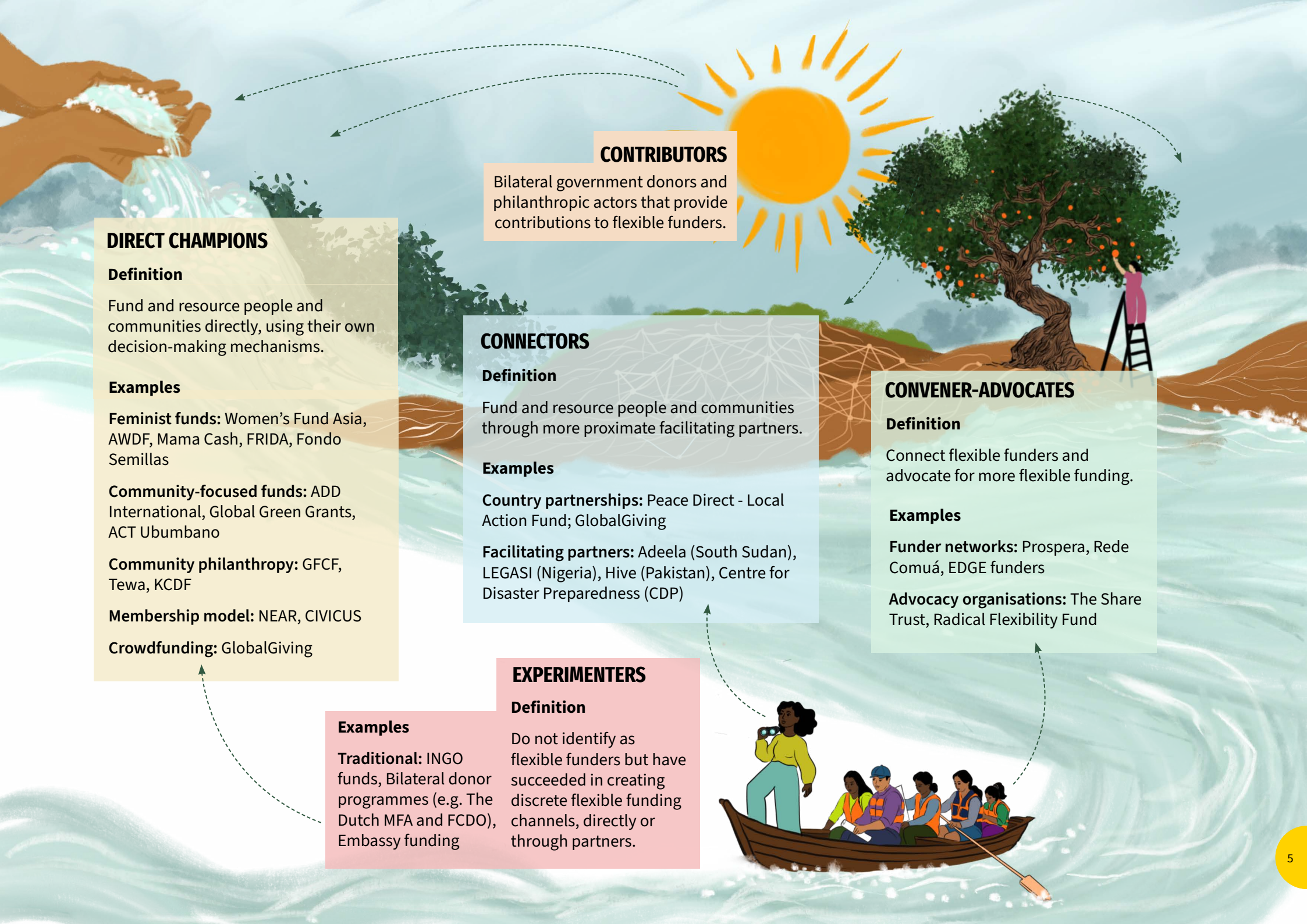


## CONVENER-ADVOCATES

**Snapshot description:** Organisations that convene flexible funders and other stakeholders, produce knowledge, and advocate for flexible funding across the ecosystem. We identified the following sub-categories: flexible funding networks; advocates and knowledge producers. Key features include:

- **Funding the funders:** Convener-Advocates do not typically fund grantee partners, but many offer funding to flexible funders to assist with organisational development and learning, including through peer-to-peer learning grants.
- **Influencing:** Convener-Advocates provide key spaces to nurture peer-to-peer influencing, especially among the more traditional bilateral and philanthropic funders.





## CONTRIBUTORS

Bilateral government donors and philanthropic actors that provide contributions to flexible funders.

## DIRECT CHAMPIONS

### Definition

Fund and resource people and communities directly, using their own decision-making mechanisms.

### Examples

**Feminist funds:** Women's Fund Asia, AWDF, Mama Cash, FRIDA, Fondo Semillas

**Community-focused funds:** ADD International, Global Green Grants, ACT Ubumbano

**Community philanthropy:** GFCF, Tewa, KCDF

**Membership model:** NEAR, CIVICUS

**Crowdfunding:** GlobalGiving

## CONNECTORS

### Definition

Fund and resource people and communities through more proximate facilitating partners.

### Examples

**Country partnerships:** Peace Direct - Local Action Fund; GlobalGiving

**Facilitating partners:** Adeela (South Sudan), LEGASI (Nigeria), Hive (Pakistan), Centre for Disaster Preparedness (CDP)

## CONVENER-ADVOCATES

### Definition

Connect flexible funders and advocate for more flexible funding.

### Examples

**Funder networks:** Prospera, Rede Comuá, EDGE funders

**Advocacy organisations:** The Share Trust, Radical Flexibility Fund

## EXPERIMENTERS

### Definition

Do not identify as flexible funders but have succeeded in creating discrete flexible funding channels, directly or through partners.

### Examples

**Traditional:** INGO funds, Bilateral donor programmes (e.g. The Dutch MFA and FCDO), Embassy funding

## Guidance on selecting a flexible funding model

- ★ If you have funds and a desire to channel flexibly, but no infrastructure to disburse funding to ultimate grantee partners (directly or indirectly), **we recommend becoming a contributor through providing core funding and other support to DIRECT CHAMPIONS and CONNECTORS.**

### Characteristics needed:

- Internal commitment to supporting the flexible funding ecosystem.
- Ability to delegate decision-making responsibilities to other trusted funders or re-granters.

- ★ If you have an organisational philosophy that supports flexible funding but is seeking to strengthen the ecosystem of local and national support organisations rather than funding directly, **we recommend adopting the CONNECTOR model by engaging with facilitating partners proximate to communities in the areas you wish to fund.**

### Characteristics needed:

- Strong network of people and organisations in countries or locations where you want to fund.
- High-level organisational commitment to funding flexibly.
- Internal processes that allow you to provide facilitating partners with freedom to fund as they see fit.

- ★ If you have a mature grantmaking infrastructure and the resources to engage directly and deeply with partners, **we recommend adopting the DIRECT CHAMPION model.**

### Characteristics needed:

- Bold, long-term vision to directly fund and support people and organisations doing frontline work.
- High-level organisational commitment to funding flexibly.
- Internal processes and procedures that reduce funding bureaucracy to the minimum level required to ensure strong accountability.

- ★ If you are not a funder yourself but are passionate about promoting and supporting flexible funding models and approaches, **we recommend that you become a CONVENER-ADVOCATE (or partner with existing networks).**

### Characteristics needed:

- Internal culture and spirit of sharing and horizontality versus competition and top-down governance.
- Organisational mission to support other funders in their mission to fund flexibly.
- Ability to build trust with funders and skills to support them to fund flexibly.

★ If you do not have the necessary funding infrastructure or organisational philosophy, but see an opportunity to fund flexibly, **we recommend becoming an EXPERIMENTER, with a longer-term vision of fully adopting one of the above models.**

### Characteristics needed:

- Ability to gain buy-in from board or executive/senior leadership to approve a discrete flexible funding pot.
- Organisational appetite to experiment and take bounded risks in order to learn what works.
- Processes for sharing these lessons across the organisation to increase buy-in to flexible funding over time.

## Specific recommendations for Global North/ Minority bilateral donors and philanthropic funders

1. Rather than reinventing the wheel, fund those who already have flexible mechanisms set up. These actors have the relationships, infrastructure and organisational culture that support flexible funding.
2. Flexibility starts with being open to doing things differently and listening to how your processes affect those who are ultimately intended to benefit from your funding. Be curious and find creative ways to let go of control over conditions and restrictions. Re-evaluate your risk appetite so that you are able to create an enabling environment within your organisation that is supportive of funding flexibly.
3. Engage in mutual accountability processes by participating in initiatives such as the CIVICUS Donor Transformation Challenge,<sup>1</sup> the Funder Report Card,<sup>2</sup> and the Racial Equity Index.<sup>3</sup> Through this, ensure the ethos of flexible funding reaches the most senior levels of your organisation.
4. Advocate and mobilise your peers to collectively embrace flexible funding. Share your experimentation with flexible funding and the good practices drawn from those examples to normalise risk, adaptation, and conversations about power within your sphere of influence.

<sup>1</sup> CIVICUS. Donors Transformation Challenge.

Available at: <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/donor-transformation-challenge>

<sup>2</sup> Peace Direct, to be published in 2026.

<sup>3</sup> The Racial Equity Index. Available at: <https://www.theracialequityindex.org/> [Accessed 5 December 2025].

