

Weaving Across Hierarchies: Applying a Participatory Model to Grantee Convenings

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Forging collaborative partnerships with grantees means acknowledging and challenging the power roles that tend to mark grantee-donor relationships. A growing trend in the philanthropic community is the shift towards placing those in the margins of societies and movements at the forefront of articulating and advocating for their own agendas. For example, in recent years, several new funds have been established by representatives of the communities these funds intend to serve (i.e. FRIDA for young feminists, Red Umbrella Fund for sex workers, and the International Indigenous Women's Forum).

Just as taking a social justice approach has implications for how we mobilize resources and do our grantmaking, this approach also leads us to reflect on the ways in which we, as funders, organize convenings for and with grantees.



Photo: www.MamaCash.org

How can we ensure that these shared spaces are meaningful for *all* participants -- funder(s) and grantees alike? While we expect grantees to be accountable to us, how can we, as funders, ensure that *we* are also accountable to them? One way to ensure that funder-organized convenings are actually meaningful for social change movements is to give grantees decision-making power at all stages -- from planning and organizing to evaluating the process.

This participatory approach allows grantees to gain full ownership and contributes to making the convening a learning experience for everyone involved. It is also a valuable demonstration of trust, which is critical in developing accountable relationships.

Planning and Organizing

In November 2011, Mama Cash organized a convening for a diverse group of Latin American grantees in Bogotá, Colombia. This meeting took place both *before* and *after* the 12th Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Gathering (*Encuentro*) that brought together 1,200 feminists from across the region. Specifically, we brought together 35 grantees diverse in age, sexual orientation, gender identity, nationality and type of community represented. They represented groups working on a range of topics, including sex work, *maquila* (manufacturing) work, sexual diversity, abortion rights, domestic work, and women human rights defenders.

In a conscious effort to “weave across hierarchies” -- by which we mean breaking down the traditional pattern of donors making all of the important organizing decisions -- Mama Cash's grantees made decisions about the logistics and the agenda of the pre- and post- *Encuentro* convening. This was another way in which we demonstrated trust and made ourselves accountable to our grantees. Grantees submitted proposals for peer-to-peer learning sessions and collectively

voted to select the sessions that would be part of the convening. Two of them -- Desalambrando (Buenos Aires) and Aireana (Paraguay) -- also designed and facilitated a session to evaluate Mama Cash's performance as a funder and as an ally. We also entrusted logistics to Mujeres al Bordo (Colombia), a grantee that is not the "typical" group a funder would choose, as it is not legally registered and is led by young women working on "activism" (art and activism).

Evaluation

Likewise, the evaluation of Mama Cash was put into the hands of our grantees. We indicated three areas of our performance we wanted to assess, and three of our grantees developed the evaluation methodology and questions, as well as led the evaluation session itself. The convening was filmed by the same grantee that was in charge of the logistics. This particular grantee's main expertise lies in training others to use video as a tool for activism. True to its mission, they involved other grantees in the filming process. This activity had not been planned, but developed spontaneously. What we learned was that it gave grantees insight into how they could move away from being the subject of their funders' communications to actually taking charge of framing their work for a range of audiences. This participatory approach to communications is enriching for both grantees and funders and makes the relationship less hierarchical. It also serves to put into practice one of the tenets of social justice philanthropy: that of "nothing about us, without us."

Based on our experience and feedback from grantees, these are some of Mama Cash's recommendations to fellow funders for organizing participatory convenings:

1. **Be willing to relinquish some control to grantees.** Having grantees involved in deciding what is on the agenda can make the convening more relevant to their needs and realities, which in turn gives funders a better sense of priorities on the ground.
2. **Structure convenings in ways that are participatory and "horizontal" to give funders an opportunity to learn from their grantees.** Having grantees *facilitate* sessions allows funders to listen and learn openly and experience first-hand how grantees do their work.
3. **Entrust grantees with the logistics, and look beyond the usual grantees as a way to challenge power relations.** Giving responsibility to a grantee can also be a way to strengthen that organization's capacity, its standing in the community, and its own sense of empowerment. We have observed that the relative size and formal structure of an organization are not always synonymous with skill and efficiency. A good practice is to look for those organizations that have wide networks, show strong listening skills, are flexible, and pay attention to detail.
4. **Engage grantees in creating communications materials about the convening as a way to break down donor-grantee hierarchies.** For example, having grantees film the convening is a way to give them a voice in how their work and presence is framed -- moving from subject to valued contributor.

When the grantee convening takes places in the context of a larger conference:

1. **Organize a pre-orientation convening to allow participants to weave together a shared history.** This is very useful if you are already planning to bring grantees to a larger conference, such as the *Encuentro*, so that grantees are not isolated at the main conference. It also gives newcomers a clear idea of what to expect in a large conference space.

2. **Have a moment of reflection together after the larger convening ends to collectively process and bring closure to the learnings that took place over the past days.** It serves to consolidate the relationships between grantees and can open up opportunities for groups to plan joint activities. The time for joint reflection also reinforces the idea that this is a learning experience for both grantees and funders -- with every participant bringing something valid to the table and learning from each other.

Resources for funders:

- Contact Alejandra Sardá-Chandiramani at a.sarda@mamacash.nl.
- For examples of participatory decision-making in action, visit the websites of [FRIDA- the Young Feminist Fund](#), the [Indigenous Women's Fund](#), and the [Red Umbrella Fund](#).