

The Montreal Roundtable: Improving solidarity and reciprocity in funding and support relationships

December 2022



Background

In December 2022 the Forest Peoples Programme convened a roundtable discussion exploring how to improve direct and indirect financial and technical support for the actions of indigenous peoples and communities in managing, using, conserving, and claiming their territories and resources. The Roundtable invited representatives of philanthropic funders, indigenous peoples' organisations working on the local level, global and regional networks of indigenous peoples and community organisations, academic research institutions and non-government organisations to share views and perspectives from across different sectors.

Significant work is already being done in this area, by indigenous-led coalitions and networks as well as philanthropic organisations and networks, and by bilateral funding agencies looking to improve access for indigenous peoples and community-based organisations. This is increasingly important as greater flows of finance are directed towards indigenous peoples and their roles in tackling the climate change crisis.

This event was intended to contribute to this on-going work and to identify and support learning and exchange on this topic by gathering some key actors to share perspectives, in an open and collaborative space. This document collects some of the key themes, priorities and areas for collaboration that emerged, as well as the main take-away messages collected during the roundtable, without attribution. We have chosen to share a version of the notes that hopefully serves not only as a record for the conversation, but also can help enable the further sharing and development of these lines of inquiry and thinking. It is designed for sharing amongst those present, those who were not able to be present, our organizations, networks and beyond. The conversation was held under Chatham House Rules, meaning that we agreed in advance that direct quotes would not be attributed to promote open conversation. Some direct quotes have been used where particularly illustrative of key points raised, but these are unattributed as well.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

The roundtable centred around analysing the main issues and dilemmas in current dominant funding models to indigenous peoples. Participants shared the work they and their organisations had undertaken in this area, providing examples of key initiatives, research projects, documents, and resources to be shared and referenced. Some of these (those publicly available) have been collected in a [shared folder online](#).

Many participants spoke to the unequal power dynamics and relationships often created or reinforced by funding provision, made significantly worse through the often top-down, opaque, and the unnecessarily complex administration of financial resources, a situation worse in some funding sectors than others. Some felt that these shortcomings are in danger of rendering some forms of funding inaccessible or unwanted by indigenous groups, if not theoretically then at least practically.

Participants brainstormed on future directions and pathways for research, analysis and discussions and ways of rethinking the funding ecosystem and the values it represents. Several common themes emerged on the need to create new kinds of relationships for participatory funding mechanisms, and the desire to reimagine the language and metaphors used to describe this work. Many in the group agreed that the preferred model of funding for civil society organizations and indigenous groups would be direct long-term funding, with simplified proposal and reporting requirements.

The conversation recognized that the intention and desire by some funders to provide more flexible and direct funding, that they are trying to learn how to be flexible and adjust their procedures. The current increased focus on providing direct funding to indigenous peoples has also included many funders responding positively to suggestions for change, and participants shared experiences where funders welcomed constructive and honest feedback for improvement. This was identified as an area where those working in this field need to be honest, self-reflective, and pro-active, and to find moments and ways to engage funders in these conversations to ensure that they are aware of the impacts of their systems.

All those present expressed the desire for collaboration, cooperation and exchange going forward. We hope this Roundtable is a meaningful contribution to our on-going process of collective learning and sharing, as we endeavour to improve the ways that we support indigenous self-determination and find ways to together address the ecological and environmental crisis.

Rethinking the funding relationship: a new way forward based on unconditional solidarity and mutual accountability

'Unconditional global solidarity' was put forwards as a way to insist that funding organisations challenge power dynamics instead of reproducing and reinforcing them. Currently indigenous peoples and their organisations and authorities are usually being asked to conform to funders' way of working and seeing the world and the problems. Funders need to also be held accountable, and challenged to understand the situation of indigenous peoples, what their situation and context is, what it is that they want for the future.

“It is clear from indigenous peoples that the basic tenet is self-determination. But for donors and others, what is the corresponding value or principle to meet up with self-determination? ... It is global solidarity.”

The challenge for funders is: if you want to be in a funding relationship with indigenous peoples, do you understand how to support self-determination?

Within the field of funding, too often questions about capacities, priorities, and mechanisms are directed only towards indigenous peoples and towards funders. Questions should be directed at donors to establish what barriers they are putting up for the self-determination of indigenous peoples, and what their own capacity, priority and operational barriers are that make it difficult for them to have mutually respectful funding relationships with indigenous peoples. This could reshape all areas of how funding is provided, not just how areas explicitly related to human rights and due diligence. If done effectively, it should play out in changes to monitoring and evaluation expectations, the ways in which indicators are set and assessments are undertaken, the requirements for application, reporting and all other administrative and process systems in dispensing funding and other forms of support.

“We need to recognize that money corrupts everyone, even indigenous leaders - and we should not allow funding to destroy us. We have to make sure that we hold each other accountable.”

Participants also reflected on the increased attention to funding for indigenous peoples in the context of the global climate and biodiversity crises. They noted that indigenous peoples shouldn't be burdened with solving the imbalance between humans and nature alone. While indigenous peoples bring a lot of value and many positive contributions, it is too big a burden to place on their shoulders alone, and it should be viewed as a collaborative endeavour. Funding relationships should be established on the basis of dignity and equality.

The discussion also addressed the fact that some indigenous organizations are being weakened or are cracking under pressures related to increased perceived availability of funding, in part and at times because their leaders are positioning themselves in a place of power and seeking control of resources. Indigenous leaders too must be accountable to their people and to their communities, and to other indigenous organisations, to make sure

that leaders are using funds in an accountable way. Accountability should apply across the board, understood and realised in appropriate ways.

Rethinking the funding relationship also means creating new language and using different terms to refer to ourselves. We shouldn't be talking of beneficiaries and recipients on one side and funders/donors on the other, but instead of equal "partners" that all have a lot to contribute to a common project.

A number of the participants also reflected on the undifferentiated nature of the term 'intermediary organisation', that it contains a wide range of possible types of organisations, and that it is applied or used in widely varying contexts. Organisations present reflected that 'intermediary' is not nuanced enough for using with 'support organisations' or those try to facilitate/enable funding for indigenous-led projects. Breaking apart the different roles that exist in a mosaic of support for indigenous peoples' organisations and communities is important in understanding how financial support needs to be channelled in a diversity of ways, appropriate to the contexts in which it is being offered. In some cases, support organisations and allies are essential to enabling communities to access funds in the manner that works for them.

There was also discussion on the need to transform the way financial support is seen and to relink finance to other forms of solidarity, including political, technical, social, and other relationships of solidarity. Why has funding in particular become so decoupled from other forms of support? Whenever there is discussion about funding models, these discussions should not be reduced to talking solely about finances but should link more broadly to other forms of support. If we think that this is about solidarity and a common goal, we need to come up with ideas to always link financial support to technical support, movement-building, and partnership.

There is the possibility of empowering communities, of making sure that they are asked about who they want to work with. Indigenous groups should be able to decide which organisations they feel comfortable working with and receiving support from. They could be the ones to choose their intermediary or implementing organization, if they need or want one, reversing the usual dynamic of support organisations and/or intermediaries selecting communities and peoples with whom to develop funding proposals.

Rethinking capacity-building as a two-way process

Funders and organisations across the wide range of support and intermediaries need to rethink ways of working and talking about capacity-building. Currently the balance of power is such that funders too often decide the what, the where, the why, the how and then fund people to implement it. Intermediaries and support organisations act as translators and interpreters to support access to these restricted funds.

“A lot of people say: ‘indigenous peoples and local communities do not have capacity!’. When we sit down and question ourselves, we should also agree that sometimes it is the funders who don’t have the capacity.”

Too often funders focus on imposing models and processes, and the “beneficiaries” or “recipients” need to learn them (examples being log-frames, theories of change, complex budget formats), demanding indigenous people to develop capacities in these systems. We need to think about capacity-building as a two-way process, create participatory funding mechanisms and increase direct, trust-based funding to indigenous groups. Some of the ideas that emerged as strategies or approaches to building capacity for funders in reaching indigenous peoples included:

Funders need capacity-building to develop a better understanding of indigenous peoples and their organisations and authorities: Funding bodies need to develop an understanding of the governance structures they are working with: the difference between indigenous representatives, indigenous-led organisations, civil society organizations, indigenous networks, and to build respect and understanding for how decisions are made and what visions for the future, or aims for self-determination each organisation or people have.

Rethinking processes, budgets, formats to streamline them across funders: *“It should be possible to do this in a simple and streamlined way, especially when we look at funding streams. There are very few donors, very few intermediaries”.* So much time is currently spent, for indigenous organisations, on reporting; every funder has different schedules, budgets, and rules. Instead of doing the work for which the funding is intended, a lot of time spent on producing paperwork. Standardizing or streamlining processes can also make sense for funders too. Many funders agree that the current model isn’t working, and many are already calling for this.

Flexibility in processes to improve access: Some funders are moving away from grants and towards competitive tenders that indigenous groups would be competing for. But funders need to understand that onerous proposal, preparation, and reporting requirements can render funding inaccessible for indigenous groups. So how to make these funds accessible? Funders need to be more flexible: *“Who can speak English in Asia? Few can imagine submitting proposals in English - you cannot expect that from too many. People should be able to submit proposals and reports in different ways, videos, their national language. Funders should be the ones finding ways to adjust, not the other way around.”*

Build in new ways to make funding accessible to non-legal entities: There are already a lot of experiences and experiments in this area – it will be very interesting to see where the Asia Indigenous Solidarity fund fits in seeking and providing new ways to access funds for informal groups.

Other ideas that were raised and discussed at less length include:

- Focus on longer term flexible core funding for indigenous authorities, organisations and communities.
- Improving partnerships between international NGOs and local CSOs to improve and enhance the collaboration between allied organisations.
- Considering pooled-fund approaches to share risk and increase collaboration.

“The tendency from bilaterals is that they give money to the multilaterals, so we go from multilaterals which are difficult, complicated, bureaucratic to UN agencies and other agencies that are even more bureaucratic. There’s one question: would it be possible for bilaterals to send money to philanthropies as a conduit to more direct funding under lighter conditions? Is that helpful?”

Understanding tensions and supporting re-thinking

This Roundtable did not seek to establish singular answers to the challenge of developing better forms of direct financing and better forms of getting support to indigenous peoples’ organisations and communities, whether direct or facilitated. Instead, we sought to identify some of the ongoing tensions and challenges that present themselves to those organisations seeking to change these funding relationships, and some concrete recommendations about next steps needed and how to address the evidence and data gap that was identified.

Tensions and questions for those of us working in this space

- How to build a collaborative/cooperative ecosystem when there is competition for limited funds?
- Should we be scaling up or stepping back? What role do organizations like ours (support organisations and allies of the indigenous movement, and funders) play in getting funding to the ground, at scale? Should we be scaling new modalities or stepping back to test these ideas first?
- How do we avoid becoming managers for indigenous peoples, or creating management focused processes for our partners?
- How to get these stories about the contributions and leadership of indigenous peoples to the general public? How do we make these issues visible? A lot of the money in this space is tax-payers money, so how do we make these issues visible? What kind of public campaign do we need to develop? How do we tell this story?
- How do we, those with relationships with funders now and particularly with bi-laterals, ensure that we are having open, frank, and reflective conversations with these funders about constraints and barriers in their funding models?

Rethinking how we do research: developing evidence and compiling data on funding and how we track the money

- Indigenous-led research is needed, to track where the money is going, how it’s dispersed, particularly for pledges dedicated to increasing financing for indigenous peoples
- Governance-systems research in this area: initial important research shows a lack of representation by indigenous peoples in funding governance. But how much does this really tell us about levels of

participation or influence of the very few indigenous peoples represented on boards and management positions? We need more on this, more developed methodology and better analysis.

- Finance flows are very difficult to research, there are inconsistencies in how government track and report within government, and even more across other types of funders, but it is important work for which we need better tools.
- Some interesting artificial intelligence research on this is being developed which may be worth tracking to see if it can contribute to clarity.

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