

Amplifying Community-led Innovation in the HIV/AIDS Response

A case study from the Love Alliance and community-led partners

What are the current best practices for accessing innovation funding and how can increase appetite for funding this moving forward?

March 2023

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*This research and report would not be possible without the support of Frontline Aids, UNAIDS, ViiVHealthcare, Elton John AIDS Foundation, and Avert. Thank you for your involvement and support.



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As we move ahead, innovation with, for and by communities is more critical than ever to end the AIDS epidemic by 2030 and reach Universal Health Coverage - Winnie Byanyima, UNAIDS Executive Director

Introduction

The Love Alliance, in collaboration with Frontline Aids, UNAIDS, ViiV Healthcare, Elton John AIDS Foundation, and Avert, worked with ThinkPlace to lead a participatory research study with HIV funders and community-based organisations to learn how better to support community-led innovations in the HIV/AIDS response. The overall goal of the research is to create a connected global innovation ecosystem to develop and scale community-led innovations.

Using a human-centered design (HCD) approach, the project conducted participatory research using various research approaches. First, a rapid document review was undertaken to examine existing literature to identify key priorities and gaps that informed the research lines of inquiry.

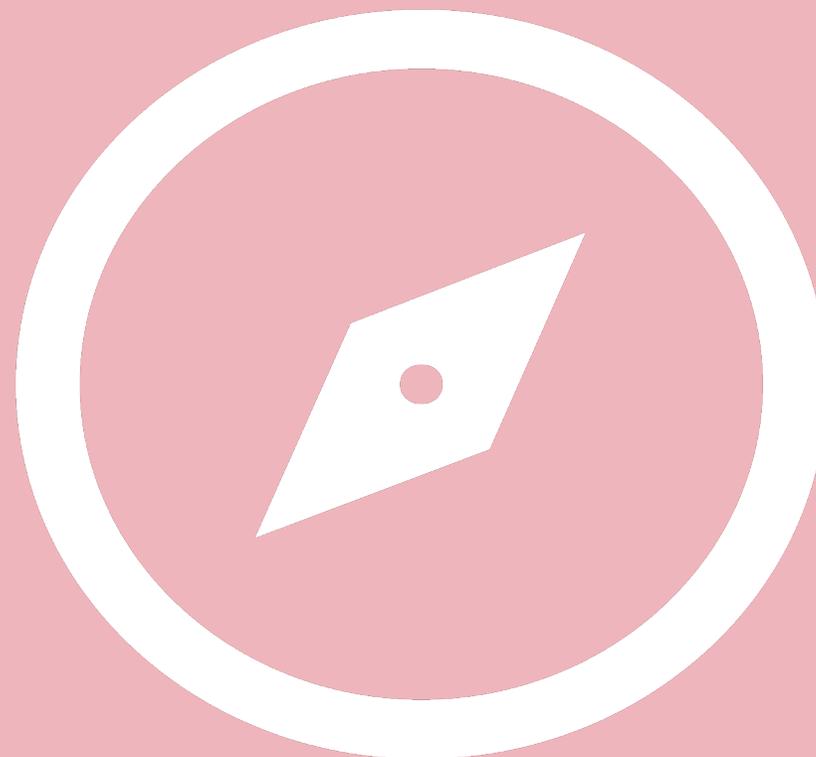
Then, participatory research was conducted through in-depth interviews and mini-focus group discussions with community-led organisations and funders working on the HIV/AIDS response to explore the gaps and opportunities for innovation funding. These findings were synthesised and validated during a set of collaborative co-design sessions with key stakeholders in the innovation ecosystem. The learnings and ideas generated through this iterative process informed the recommendations captured in this document.

This report captures the process, showcases learnings, and proposes recommendations for funding community-led innovations in response to the AIDS epidemic. The research also aimed to uncover support and approaches needed to strengthen innovation. It amplifies best practices implemented by Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), grantmakers, and funders and outlines opportunities for further exploration.



01

Our Process



Our Process

This section highlights the journey and key phases ThinkPlace undertook to uncover key findings and designing the recommendations.

March

April - June

July - August

August-September



Defining the intent

Setting shared intent

An inception meeting was held to set the pace of the project and establish shared intent. This was followed by a rapid document review process that laid the basis for the lines of inquiry.



Participatory Research

Uncovering insights

Research activities were conducted through virtual in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with CSOs and funders. A total of 6 grantmaking or funding organisations and 14 CSOs were engaged in the study.



Co-Design Workshops

Co-Design Workshops

Two co-design workshops were conducted. One with the CSOs and a second with grantmakers, funders and other stakeholders in the innovation funding ecosystem. The aim was to bring participants together to validate the emerging findings from the research and ideate on potential recommendations for amplifying best practices in funding community-led innovations.



Formulate best practices and recommendations

Report writing & sharing final outputs

Post co-design workshop and additional interviews were conducted before consolidated and shared into a report.

Our Methodology

Recognising problems as opportunities for design allowed us to apply inclusive research and innovation to provide insight and potential solutions toward increasing community-led innovations to help end the AIDS epidemic by 2030.

The purpose of this project was to gather key information to inform Love Alliance's work as well as that of other key stakeholders working within the innovation funding space. The overall aim of the research was to provide a clear understanding of the current status of the community-led innovation funding ecosystem and identify opportunities for amplifying best practices of these innovations. Additionally, we hoped to highlight potential design opportunities to improve the impact of advocacy efforts.

To achieve this, we applied a holistic and inclusive approach to the research process. By taking a human-centered approach to conducting the research, we were able provide a deeper and richer understanding of the underlying barriers affecting stakeholders' capability to confidently, willingly, and effectively promote community-led innovation. Applying a human-centered lens meant that the needs, experiences, and motivations of stakeholders, CSOs, and funders, were prioritised at different stages of the research process. We used 1-on-1 interviews, focus groups, and co-design workshop to capture and understand the experiences of key stakeholders which allowed us to develop relevant and tailored recommendations based on empathy.

Methods used to collect and synthesise data included the following:



Being inclusive

By applying human-centred approaches to conduct participatory research, we sought to engage with participants from a point of empathy to understand internal and social determinants. These can be leveraged into system-level interventions that have the potential for fostering community-led innovation.



Engaging with Love Alliance and the Innovation and Sustainability working group

A key element to making this an inclusive and iterative process was establishing a "Core Design Team," composed of difference voices from the Love Alliance and members of the Innovation and Sustainability working group. This team was actively engaged at each stage of the process and provided technical expertise and feedback on the research design and initial findings, identifying participants for interviews, participating the synthesis and co-design sessions, and providing input on the final outputs. They also worked to help provide perspectives of the community wherever possible.



Conducting literature review

A literature review process in which rapid document review was conducted to examine existing literature to identify key priorities and gaps that informed the research lines of inquiry. This data provided initial context for grounding the research prior to engaging with CSOs and funders.



Applying participatory approaches

We applied participatory research approaches to engage participants in individual in-depth interviews and "mini" focus group discussions. Sessions were conducted virtually and targeted community-led organisations and funders in the HIV/AIDS response. Secondary activities embedded in the research included prioritisation activities, ecosystem mapping, etc. We also conducted two co-design workshops bringing together actors to engage with each other. One session targeted CSOs while the other targeted funder organisations.



LIMITATIONS

Some of the challenges experienced included low internet connectivity, especially with participants from locations with poor connectivity. Also, it was difficult to mobilise multiple CSOs for one interview session (at the same time).

Our Participants

Our research was global in scope.

It leveraged the close network of Love Alliance members to reach community-led organisations from different countries across Western, Eastern and Southern Africa. From a funder's perspective, we connected with various investors working to prevent HIV/AIDS and scale-up innovative solutions related to health services for people living with HIV.

We focused on and engaged the following groups of stakeholders:



TARGET GROUPS

Community-led organisations

We spoke to various CSO profiles across East, West, and Southern Africa regions to gain insights into their experiences with innovation funding, understand how they work, and how they document and share outputs, etc. These CSOs varied in size (some have dozens of staff while others are larger with dispersed teams across different areas in their countries). Most CSOs have worked in their communities for over five years, with many operating for more than ten years. Across the board, the community-based organisations we spoke to work to improve the lives of community members in all their diversity.



14 CSOs
19 participants

Funders

We spoke to various funders and other key actors across the global HIV funding space to gain insights on how they define innovation, their experiences, successes and challenges for innovation funding.



6 funding
organisations
9 participants

Our lines of inquiry for CSOs

Our research focused on some of the following:

- Understanding the nature and work of CSOs from an innovation lens.
- Explore challenges with funding within the HIV/AIDS ecosystem.
- How CSOs relate with other CSOs. What are the gaps / potential opportunities?
- How CSOs approach the advocacy and scale of programmes.

Our lines of inquiry for Funders

Our research focused on some of the following:

- Understanding the funding landscape (challenges, opportunities) from a funder perspective.
- Defining innovation from a funder lens.
- Understand the relationship dynamics between funders and CSOs.

Why community-led innovation now?

Creating an environment that facilitates a culture of innovation

Innovation is a tool that can be used to accelerate the ability of the Love Alliance to deliver solutions led and influenced by communities in the HIV response. Communities already innovate and continuously improve their interventions in order to address structural barriers that the HIV response faces. Social media as well as networks and learning within partnerships such as the Love Alliance provide opportunities for doing this. The Love Alliance has set up an Innovation hub (consisting of Love Alliance members) to embed innovation and sustainability by creating a culture of innovation.¹ This includes looking at innovative approaches as well as at increasing organisation resilience and sustainability of funding models for community-based organisations.

The Love Alliance baseline report² revealed the need for more effort to be geared towards increasing inclusive platforms/networks strengthening for HIV organisations. However, in order to support Love Alliance stakeholders with strengthening innovation, there is a need to first come to a shared understanding of what innovation means. Community-led innovation currently takes place within a highly competitive funding environment which is often not conducive to the iterative processes.

There is a call for policies and strategies currently being implemented by donors, governments, and implementers to focus on strengthening comprehensive funding to meet the needs of key populations and communities.³ Some organisations, such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria and PEPFAR are dedicating their strategies to investing in community-led responses.

However, despite this call to action, many challenges still exist:⁴

- Limited appetite for risk to fund innovations without evidence or proof of concept clearly documented
- Lack of collaboration between different types of funders leading to confusion among actors, including CSOs looking for funding
- Siloed approach to HIV innovation limits the support of community programmes aimed at tackling crosscutting social issues such as stigma, harmful social norms that are perpetuating HIV

While many organisations and grantmakers fund innovation, there is a lack of alignment on what CSOs and funders mean by innovation and how to proactively engage in the different stages of the innovation funding process.

Cycle of Innovation

Many funding models for innovation begin with selecting proposals for concepts with evidence or proof of concept or those that are ready to pilot. Over the past few years, funders have introduced concepts and practices to manage risk sensibly, sometimes with staged funding depending on level of maturity of the innovation. How these innovations are funded, which features of innovation are highlighted, depends on the specific funder, and the overall mission it is focused on achieving. As part of this research, we were interested in understanding what CSOs experience at the different stages of innovation funding process, and whether we can identify best practices to amply more widely. After the research process, we developed the following model to plot key phases of the innovation and innovation funding process.

Searching for proposals

CSOs are looking for RFPs (request for proposals) to finance innovative programmes and interventions in the communities they work.

Challenges faced

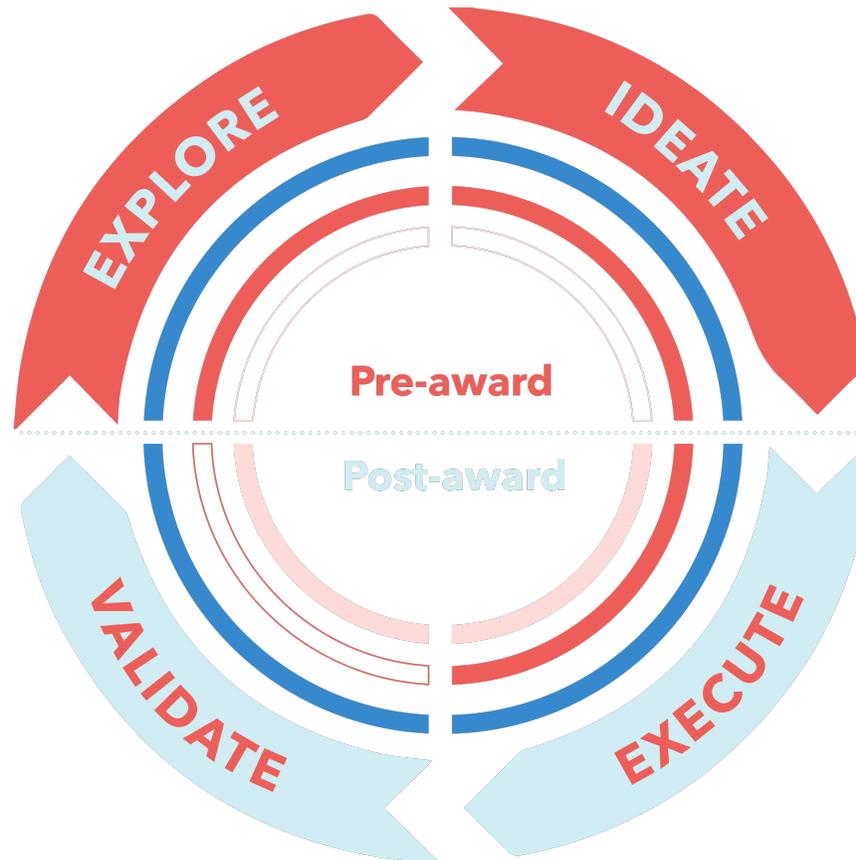
- Some CSOs do not have established relationships with grantmakers making it difficult to know who or how to initiate in conversations where they can share their innovative ideas. Sometimes this is due to lack of opportunities that CSOs must ask questions or clarify questions.
- Lack of awareness around where to source proposals, particularly through online portals or platforms.

Receive funding

Funding is received for community-led innovation and programme implementation activities are conducted.

Challenges faced

- Unable to effectively produce and manage compelling knowledge products throughout the innovation pilot process.
- Limited capacity to meet demanding funder reporting requirements.
- Lack of monitoring and evaluation systems to collect evidence on whether interventions are delivering intended impact.



Gathering information

CSOs gather information about RFPs, find partners and set the plan for pursuing the call for proposals.

Challenges faced

- For smaller CSOs they might lack the resources to engage in the application process, excluding them due to complex due diligence procedures.
- Lack technical capacity to write and submit a successful proposal, clearly demonstrating proof of concept for their innovation.

Proof of concept and scaling

Preparing reporting and documentation demonstrating strong evidence to support additional funding for scale-up.

Challenges faced

- High accountability burden on CSOs if innovation does not demonstrate clear evidence of success, leading to an imbalance in responsibility for risk and breakdown of trust.
- Lack of funding focused on sustainability and scale-up of successful community-led innovation.

02 Research Findings



Key Findings: Overview

The key findings in this section are the basis of the following sections that highlight key themes and opportunity areas for accessing innovation funding.

01

Both CSOs and funders agree that CSOs trying to adapt something new and functional within their context that targets communities they work with is innovation.

02

Innovation responds to the needs of different user groups and should involve them in the development of the innovation.

03

Funding for HIV/AIDS programming must be inclusive to address the diverse needs of the target community as this impacts the sustainability and scalability of programs.

04

The CSO and Funder relationship is a core component of the innovation process. Building trust between funders and CSOs takes intentional effort and time and is vital for fostering and scaling innovation.

05

Improving knowledge sharing and amplifying best practices can help develop better programs that create a positive impact in communities.

Defining Innovation

Both CSOs and funders agree that CSOs trying to develop something new and functional within their context that targets community is innovation.

Innovation is not limited to technology

It was clear that innovation within the HIV space has multiple definitions. It should not be limited to technology, as many CSOs are working at the cross-section of social innovation.

During the research, participants had multiple ways of defining innovation. However, one consistent element of this definition is that innovation means small changes or ways of doing things that facilitate the achievement of programme outcomes. Innovation is the process of adapting something new and functional within a context that targets the community. It responds to the needs of different user groups and involves these groups in the development of innovation.

Innovation is common but scalability and sustainability is a challenge

Innovation within the HIV space is seen as something common since many different interventions have been developed within the HIV space over the years. It is more challenging for CSOs to secure (larger) funding for scaling and making their innovations sustainable. The priority for innovation lies in the concern for scale and sustainability, as CSOs aim to demonstrate how their ideas or projects can be scaled up. Innovation has been limited to pilots but does not support the scale and sustainability of projects. A participatory approach for innovation-focused initiatives could achieve better impact and sustainability outputs for CSOs.

Some CSOs have described innovation as a process of making programs run smoother by not only considering the activities' sustainability but also considering the long-term positive impact these innovations have within their community. Conversely, others have focused on sustainability, including investing in CSO teams who help their communities.

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Innovation can be defined as a simpler way of doing things

CSO

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Sometimes they [CSOs] are the greatest innovation

FUNDER

Defining Innovation

Innovation responds to the needs of user groups and should involve them in the development of the innovation.

Innovation responds to the needs of the user groups and (in most cases) must involve these groups in developing the innovation. Sometimes there is a lack of support from funders to facilitate this process.

From the research, it is agreed that innovation starts with the community; however, existing processes are not adapted to facilitate the incubation and scalability of innovation. There is an overemphasis on the term innovation and its resulting values, but funders are not providing enough support to provide an enabling environment for innovative solutions.

Innovation needs to go beyond the current context of HIV funding and programming to respond to community needs. Community perspectives and context needs to be captured to facilitate innovation. Funding needs to consider the contextual complexities by taking into embedding intersectionality into HIV programming. For example, an HIV treatment project targeting to reach queer populations does not consider the sociocultural barriers that may prevent a queer person from walking to a facility to seek treatment services. In this case, it is essential to consider the root causes of a problem to ensure that the innovation addresses real needs and can thrive in a community. While funders acknowledge that CSOs understand their communities best, they do not always provide funding opportunities that address these communities' complex and intersectional needs. This misalignment contributes to the limitation in funding and not efficiently meeting the needs of CSOs.

Innovation often connects the dots between projects and approaches.

Innovation can be used to explore how successful approaches developed for one target group can be adapted for another group to help effective knowledge transfer. There is a need to focus on inclusive processes that allow CSOs to drive ideas across the innovation touch points. These touchpoints refer to the cycle of innovation funding and could be done by using a participatory approach for innovative initiatives to facilitate an improved environment for fostering sustainability.

EXAMPLES FROM CSOs

Innovation must understand lived realities of people and further explore interlinkages of problems to find appropriate solutions. There is need for community synergies. One CSO created several tools that assist CSOs at local level. One of the tool is a guide that maps out presence of local CSOs at local community level. This aids larger CSOs to identify smaller CSOs to engage with and leverage learnings from the organisations on the ground.

EXAMPLES FROM CSOs

The intention to be innovative is key. A CSO identified idea generation as one of their key pillars with the aim of fostering innovation amongst younger growing CSOs. They support them to foster innovative ideas, grow their capacity to implement and develop into independent organisations. Other mechanisms for promoting and fostering innovation include engaging members of the organisation to provide new ideas through physical forums, WhatsApp prompts within existing WhatsApp platforms.

HIV/AIDS Funding for Community-led Innovation

Funding for HIV/AIDS programming must be inclusive to address the diverse needs of the target community as this impacts the sustainability and scalability of programmes.

CSOs are limited by eligibility requirements and the lack of access to knowledge of where to source and how to produce proposals.

Eligibility criteria limit CSOs. Funders also acknowledge the due diligence processes are more complex for small CSOs. CSOs we engaged with spoke of some of the challenges they encountered when sourcing calls for proposals. Some donors will require CSOs to demonstrate past experiences operating grants and even require financial reports from previous projects, often disqualifying most small CSOs. A significant challenge in how proposals are funded stems from the fact that there are multiple definitions of innovation, which impacts how funders access specific proposals and how they determine which projects to fund.

However, we acknowledge there are funders with friendly structures for CSOs. For example, some funders are shifting away from static models that only grant funding to established high-impact CSOs towards more dynamic and adaptive processes that open applications to proactive CSOs.

A majority of small CSOs do not have the knowledge or the capacity to know where and how to source funding. This is compounded by the fact that some funders will only provide grants to specific project stages. As a result, there is a need to build the capacities of CSOs on how they can identify and apply for innovation funding. Funders can develop a supportive and mentoring approach to help CSOs access funding for innovation. The call for proposals should be adapted and accessible for CSOs to understand.

It is critical to explore how funders can facilitate reaching out to CSOs about funding opportunities and how the process can be more inclusive and more accessible as well.

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There needs to be an investment for the long-term sustainability of innovative projects being implemented by CSOs

cso

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The majority of CSOs don't have access to paid sites like Devex [a platform that posts jobs, funding opportunities, and more within the international development and humanitarian context] . It would be ideal if CSOs get access to platforms where they can filter through funding opportunities based on their needs (grant size, funding area etc.)

cso

EXAMPLES FROM CSOs

CSOs did mention the struggle to access funding opportunities. The majority do not know where and how to source for financial support and therefore struggle with fundraising. However, some CSOs have sought alternative means of funding. One local CSO relies on a purely community-driven model for sustainability by leveraging locally available community networks and resources for sustainability. They count on fundraising through conducting monthly ticketed events that generate income. They also have formed an online community through social media platforms like Instagram to engage audiences and garner community support.

HIV/AIDS Funding for Community-led Innovation, continued

Different types of funders have different priorities for funding.

CSOs felt there is little willingness for funders to invest in innovation-focused funding, contributing further to the limitation of funding opportunities. However, CSOs often have limited knowledge and limited understanding of the ecosystem of funding. For example, some funders will fund the initial project but do not take on the scaling of this project. For this, other funders can be brought on board. This shows that more communication between funders would allow CSOs to understand how to maximise their chances of accessing specific funding opportunities.

There is a gap in the ecosystem that can be filled by providing CSOs with the knowledge of what funders expect and will fund at what stage of a project. Since many CSOs believe that innovation is a box, they must tick on a check-list, as it is often asked required by funders for specific grants; providing opportunities for funders to define what they are looking for clearly can provide the transparency needed to help connect the right CSOs to the proper funding. Funders can also explore how to align funding calls that consider the intersectional nature of HIV programming with a focus on people and communities.

Funding is very focused on people living with HIV and doesn't consider the intersectionality of these communities

c̄s̄o

There is now a big shift towards leveraging a lessons learned approach and using this for growth. Continuous learning and evolution is vital

c̄s̄o

EXAMPLES FROM CSOs

One local CSO, a grantee of the Love Alliance, is mostly working on HIV programming because their funding (accounts for about 80% of the funding they receive) is tied to this. However, the CSO works on a lot of different and equally important programmes that unfortunately do not always prioritised. As a result, they are trying to create different programs that address the needs of key populations such as men who have sex with men and transgender people.

HIV/AIDS Funding for Community-led Innovation, continued.

Despite the challenges in accessing funds CSOs are finding ways of collaborating such as through consortium approaches. However, there are barriers hindering effective collaboration.

CSOs are partnering to form collaborative consortiums to apply for funding. However, due to the mismatch in funder requirements and the focus on metrics and quantitative driven data, consortium members are not interested in strengthening CSOs' ability to access funding. Even with the consortium model, CSOs struggle to combine their skills and expertise to access funding. Funders should seek to make simpler diligence processes that work for both funders and CSOs.

There needs to be a focus on social and qualitative data beyond quantitative data to encourage a constant learning process to strengthen and improve innovation. Social and qualitative data that focuses on helping uncover the underlying needs of CSOs and the communities they work with can help strengthen collaboration. There needs to be a focus on strengthening cooperation to enhance innovation, scaling, and cross-learning from innovation in other countries/ sectors.

CSOs also mentioned not being aware of what other CSOs are implementing within their countries and beyond borders.

Consortiums are a great way to facilitate intentional collaboration between CSOs. While consortium approaches are encouraged by funders, they could enable competition which hinders effective collaboration. There needs to be a focus on healthy competition linked to CSOs learning and growing with each other. For example, in one consortium, a higher-ranking CSO worked with younger CSOs. While this can still create room for power dynamics, there is a transfer of knowledge and more collaborative ways of working.

On the other hand, consortiums can be used to amplify innovation. Different CSOs have different ways of how they create or engage with consortiums for the purpose of innovation. Some CSOs will engage with other CSOs as partners, working together to apply for grants. Established CSOs working with smaller growing CSOs to support them in incubating innovative ideas and helping them towards growth that will enable them to grow and become sustainable, supporting and sustaining innovation. While power dynamics might still be at play, there is a need to encourage knowledge exchange among CSOs to promote learning. Additionally, CSOs can consider collaborating with other CSOs at the same level, which could help them see each other as equal partners and facilitate a healthy learning environment.

Working in consortiums is difficult due to the differences in working structures and processes across CSOs

CSO

EXAMPLES FROM CSOs

One local CSOs partnering with medical and facility-based organisations and CSOs providing health support to the LGBTIQ+ community. This collaboration enables the CSO to not only include their collaborators into the programme and funding. The CSO in question recognised the importance of collaborating with others working with similar key communities because they can share their resources, knowledge, and clients, therefore scaling their impact.

CSO & Funder Relationships : Current State

The CSO and funder relationship is a core component of the innovation process. Building trust between funders and CSOs takes intentional effort and time and is vital for fostering and scaling innovation. Trust helps build intentional collaboration which is needed to help scale innovation across communities.

Power dynamics

Building and maintaining trust is a process that implicates both funders and CSOs. Both must be implicated to ensure an open relationship. To begin, funders must avoid the harmful assumptions that CSOs only want money and are only applying to grants to take their money. CSOs and funders both play a role in breaking these harmful stereotypes as there are explicit power dynamics at play, and funders are not the only stakeholders implicated in the process. Regardless of these dynamics, there is ongoing work that funders are doing that is helping CSOs to become more empowered implementers. One funder is making a strategic shift towards empowering CSO to lead the group's programs. Some funders acknowledge that there is a focus on power from donors instead of listening to CSOs and transferring power to them as they know their communities best.

Openness

Currently, the power dynamics between some funders and CSOs limit the growth of openness and trust. The lack of openness that many CSOs feel towards funders stifles progress, transparency, and innovation, with some CSOs operating under the guise of fear. In some cases, there is a fear of being unable to share failures, ask questions or even seek advice. CSOs are not meeting regularly with funders; when they do, they avoid conversations that could allow them to reflect on failures and learnings. Failure is part of innovation.

Scalability

The stages for innovation include scaling and implementation. CSOs have concerns about funding security to support their work, growth, and future sustainability, but these are often not discussed with donors. This demonstrates that CSOs are acutely aware of the need of scaling their innovation projects beyond current funding structures but sometimes lack the capacity and knowledge to execute this. Some CSOs have made necessary adjustments to improve processes, structures, and overall programming to allow them to grow and access more funding opportunities. Some have embraced working within consortiums to increase their chances of accessing funding opportunities. Funders can help by linking CSO and improving their confidence.

Capacity Building

Capacity building is a vital component of the innovation process. Funders must invest not only in programmes and projects but in teams. They are building the capacities of teams to improve the confidence required to move forward with programs that positively impact their communities. This can look like funders investing in capacity-building activities that increase teams' technical capabilities or providing organisations with unrestricted funding to determine what their teams need.

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Funders must let communities shape and define at their own pace

FUNDER

Amplifying Best Practices

Improving knowledge sharing and amplifying best practices can help develop better programmes that create a positive impact in communities.

Knowledge Sharing

Gaps

CSOs acknowledge the importance of sharing best practices within their community, with other CSOs, and abroad. Sometimes, CSOs struggle to know what to share and how to share this information.

Barriers

CSOs are looking for capacity-building opportunities to improve how they share their projects' outputs and learnings. They sometimes struggle to determine which results are best for the work they are trying to convey.

Another barrier is that the fear of competition is very real. CSOs competing for the same limited funding is preventing them from sharing the best ideas and successes for fear that other CSOs will steal their ideas. This is limiting collaboration and trust.

Opportunities

CSOs leverage social media to share their work, experiences, advocacy campaigns, collaborations, etc. One CSO has amassed a following of 14,900 followers. Engagement on their posts includes likes, comments, and videos from different followers.

Another CSO is leveraging the power of WhatsApp and using it as a safe space forum where community members can come together and share relevant information and tips.

How can we amplify best practices?

In order to create an enabling environment around best practices, both funders and CSOs must come together

Funders are accountable for: ensuring that there is support to help CSOs identify which lessons learned can be shared with the wider community, promotion of good work, and connecting CSOs to other funders or organisations who can support them in their work.

CSOs are accountable for: committing to sharing lessons learned across various mediums to help improve the overall community-led innovation ecosystem, despite a fear that others might steal their ideas. Additionally, leveraging the support of the Love Alliance to help with the dissemination of information and creating a community of practice.

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There is a lot that we don't know about what other communities are doing

cso

Amplifying Best Practices

Knowledge Production

Gaps

While knowledge sharing is essential, some CSOs are missing the knowledge and experience of collecting data and information that goes beyond reporting. In many cases, funders require specific information for reporting and documentation purposes. The practice of documenting lessons learned, failures, and work is a gap among some CSOs who struggle to point to specific references for their work. While CSOs are spending a tremendous amount of time writing reports about the work they are doing for funders, which is often tied to their grant, they do not always have time to prioritise capturing essential information (both quantitative and qualitative) that can be referenced in the future for visibility and advocacy.

Barriers

CSOs do not always have the knowledge, tools, or resources to document, access, or share their work adequately. Staff are not necessarily and always trained on improving knowledge production as part of their projects. As a result, CSOs are limited in terms of their capacity to conduct monitoring & evaluation. One of the possible recommendations is to ensure the full involvement of the planning, monitoring, evaluating, and learning (PMEL) to show evidence, impact, changes, and learnings within the Alliance in supporting CSOs.

Opportunities

Funders can help facilitate intentional capacity building into program and funding support that allows CSOs to prioritize knowledge sharing and production. Funders can also help share tools, resources, and pieces of training that will enable CSOs to leverage the resources they have (such as social media, knowledge, etc.). Templates that can be shared across CSOs can help create a uniform narrative around their work. Additionally, there are many things that CSOs can do to improve knowledge sharing. One is tasking specific, time after each phase of a project to “track” what went well and what didn’t go well to help improve future phases and future projects. This can demonstrate a growth and learning mindset to other CSOs and funders.

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We must celebrate failures together

c̄s̄o

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We borrow ideas from CSOs in other countries, within our country as well as create our own ideas on how we can improve our programming models

c̄s̄o

03

**Key Insights and
Recommendations**



Overview of an enabling environment for innovation funding

The following section builds on the findings developed from the interviews and co-design workshops with CSOs and funders by addressing key elements that both CSOs and funders must consider to improve the innovation funding ecosystem. When these core components are acknowledged and prioritised, they create an ideal environment to help foster and perpetuate innovation funding for CSOs, ultimately allowing them to advocate and secure more funding for innovative programmes focused on improving their communities, and take risks to explore innovative ideas that go outside the box or would normally not be supported.



CORE COMPONENTS

The core components allow CSOs and funders to have a better and holistic picture of the desired state needed to improve the innovation funding landscape and promote more innovative programming. These core components were chosen as they consistently emerged in conversations with CSOs and funders and also represent some key priorities for the Love Alliance.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations in this section highlight a mindset shift that is needed to create an enabling environment for each of the core components.

Core components for innovation funding

The core components uncovered during the research present a helpful framing to strengthen the relationship between CSOs and funders. These components are two-way and require both the funder and CSO to be aware and engaged in order to promote healthy and equitable partnerships.



Desired State → creating an enabling environment for community-led interventions to grow and scale by helping CSOs access new knowledge and opportunities to grow

CORE COMPONENTS FOR SUCCESS: [trust]



For CSOs to consider

Open lines of communication with funders that enables support and openness to ask questions

Share data that demonstrates their impact. CSOs shouldn't be limited in only sharing quantitative data/metrics

To define their own pace and project

Share results without fear of repercussions from the donor speaking up

To feel empowered to be the experts and leaders in their projects by leveraging their own own experiences

CSOs need to control the narrative of their own projects and the relationships with communities to help provide an intersectional lens to their work

For Funders to consider

Funders to support CSOs at different stages of the process (from responding to the proposal to executing the project)

Funders need to breakdown harmful assumptions that CSOs are driven by money and are only applying to grants to take their money

Funders should focus on CSOs experiences and knowledge of the context; they understand their communities needs best

In the eligibility criteria, focus on the CSOs work (potential for innovation) rather than prioritise processes/ strict measures for application (based on accountability limitations)



OUR RECOMMENDATION

Start from the beginning of the innovation

Building and maintaining trust starts at the beginning of the innovation process. Funders must allow CSOs to identify the challenges in their community they think should be addressed and solved. Building open communication channels that enable CSOs to ask questions every step of the way will help develop more equal power dynamics with funders.

Funders should invite CSOs to a co-creation process to collectively work on the proposal or bid. Ideally, CSOs are part of developing the TOR and calls for proposals to help determine funding priorities, requirements, etc. This will allow CSOs to forge their own narrative, suggest ideas that will positively impact their community, develop the call for proposals and funding priorities, and begin to build openness and transparency.

CORE COMPONENTS FOR SUCCESS: [*capacity building*]



For CSOs to consider

Capacity building must start at the beginning of the innovation cycle: by influencing funding priorities by sharing evidence, knowledge of local context/needs and ideas for what would work in the communities CSOs work in

Building intentional partnerships with other CSOs who can provide technical support and guidance throughout

Investing in capacity building will help build sustainable projects and scale impact across key communities

Understanding the key requirements for proposals requires CSOs to have the skills to correctly respond to them

For Funders to consider

Funders must acknowledge that due diligence is important and that smaller CSOs may be excluded because of it. It's important to find a balance between due diligence and accessibility of proposals.

Funders play a key role in promoting healthy competition and collaboration amongst CSOs by promoting the work of CSOs and connecting them to one another

Funders must allocate funds to the project as well as to the team (and focus on team well-being)



OUR RECOMMENDATION

Creating an enabling environment for capacity building

CSOs and funders are both accountable for creating an enabling capacity-building environment. Investing in teams and people will increase their confidence and scale their ability to contribute to designing and building impactful projects in their communities.

Funders should separate their grants into 1) programmatic elements and 2) team and organisational support and growth. By focusing on these two aspects, CSOs can focus on what is required to complete their work but also manage and determine the best way to use the resources available to them to deliver results. By investing in team support and growth, funders can help CSOs build long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with each other and grow into sustainable organisations.

While due diligence is an integral part of the process, funders must ensure that it is transparent to allow CSOs to easily apply for funding and dedicate time to guide CSOs through it.

CORE COMPONENTS FOR SUCCESS: [*knowledge production and management*]



For CSOs to consider

Collaboration between CSOs working across the same key communities, bringing an intersectional lens to the work across communities

Documentation of best practices, lessons learned and outputs must be embedded throughout the programme or project

Learning how to leverage different tools to help with data collection and analysis

Embedding knowledge production, what went well/what did not go well, into different phases of projects

For Funders to consider

Funders must invest in CSOs and capacity building to help co-create a process of knowledge production and documentation that works for both parties

Collaborating with CSOs to create final outputs and products that can help communities scale and have their desired impact

Funders must not only focus quantitative data and metrics, but also on qualitative metrics to measure impact

Amplifying lessons learned and best practices that CSOs share on websites



OUR RECOMMENDATION

Investing in knowledge production and management

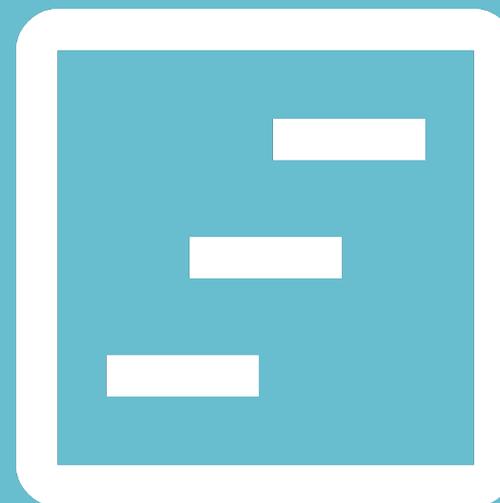
Funders can invest in several areas in building sustainable knowledge products and management systems.

Funders must re-evaluate the type of data and information that is most valuable to them. First, quantitative data has historically been the most requested by funders but often removes CSO's narrative around impact and collaboration. While many CSOs understand and value sharing lessons learned, there is a gap between documentation and determining which information is best to share across their network. By working with CSOs to capitalise on sharing both quantitative and qualitative narratives, funders can help enable and improve knowledge dissemination.

There is a need to support CSOs with the resources to better engage in research findings. The qualitative and quantitative metrics collected by CSOs are used to help shape programmes and projects. Having the resources and capacity to delve into and interpret implementation research findings would greatly support CSOs to consider implementing innovative ideas that have possibly already been through pilot testing. This would continue to enable CSOs to help identify key opportunity areas and needs within their communities.

04

Best Practices



Overview of best practices

Charting a path for the future of innovative programs

The following section describes the importance and need for promoting best practices among the HIV/AIDS innovation and funding system.

The best practices in this section were shared during the research process with CSOs and funders for their feedback and include additional examples following a brainstorm.



STAGES OF INNOVATION

For each of the themes of this section, which follow the core components, we will share how they relate and link to the stages of innovation. There could be several stages in the innovation process (including the pre and post award process) that connect to the themes, but we will highlight the most prominent one.



BEST PRACTICES OF INNOVATIVE PROGRAMMES AND PROJECTS

The examples shared in this section were taken directly from interviews and focus groups with CSOs and funders. Many CSOs expressed interest in learning about what innovative approaches other CSOs are working with to understand if there are shared learnings and challenges.



OTHER IDEAS FOR BEST PRACTICES

Additional examples of best practices, that have not been tested by CSOs but are our recommendations based on the research process and our experience.

Summary of recommendations & best practices

01

TRUST

Building trust throughout the innovation process to build an open and transparent relationship between CSOs and funders.

How do I build trust with funders?

- Learning from failure workshops
- Build retrospectives into project plans

02

CAPACITY BUILDING

Reinforcing skills and competencies through collaboration and partnerships to help CSOs feel supported in their work.

How do I create the right environment for capacity building?

- Ask me anything
- Innovative partnerships
- Speed-dating: finding the right funder
- Consortia approach to mentoring young CSOs
- Knowledge sharing cafes

03

KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION & SHARING

Share lessons learned and best practices to enable scaling promising innovations.

How to document and share learnings to increase the visibility of my work?

- Using engaging media formats for reporting
- Social media interaction
- Building a Community of Practice



How do I build trust with funders?

A core component of building trust is being able to have open conversations of what is working and what is not working. CSOs must feel like they can go to funders with their question and concerns, especially when things are not going according to plan.

1. Learning from failure workshops

What is it? Safe spaces and an opportunity for both CSOs and funders to reflect on key aspects of program and initiative delivery. Funding must exist to help create these safe spaces. They will allow CSOs to share what has been working and what hasn't while reflecting on changes that can be made to future iterations of programmes. Failure workshops are grounded in trust and communication as CSOs must feel comfortable to share without fear of being blocked or penalised by funders. These workshops will be open forums where both CSOs and funders can share their experiences of failures from past projects.

What do you need?

- Organise forums (failure workshops) in collaboration with funders and CSOs.
- Document failures with the purpose of learning.
- Invite funders to take part in the forums and actively share their failures and learnings.

2. Build retrospectives into project plans

What is it? Intentional effort to create spaces for reflective practices where CSOs, together with the funders, can deliberate on progress, identify successes and weak points, and plan mitigation strategies in advance. This allows both CSOs to strengthen project success outputs and be iterative with the donor having the perspective of the process.

What do you need?

- Plan for reflective check-in points from the beginning when applying for grants. Build reflective meetings into the project plan.
- Request for donors to be flexible and adaptive with the granting process. This could also be done by leveraging learning and adaptive methodologies that promote a learning and adaptive process from the beginning.



Creating transparent systems

Funders work alongside CSOs to develop the right systems and mechanisms for reporting. This must be defined at the early stages of the grantmaking process to allow for both CSOs and funders to align on the process of engagement.

Funders should appoint a contact person that is accessible to CSOs whenever they need consultations or support to break the fear barrier that CSOs may have.



STAGE OF INNOVATION : EXPLORE

Trust begins before awards are shared with CSOs. In order to feel like they can go to funders with questions, CSOs should participate in conversations on funding priorities (that are based on lessons learned from other projects).



How do I create the right environment for capacity building?

Capacity building builds confidence which helps lead to sustainable and scalable programs. CSOs must be active participants in forums to bring about important and sustainable change to the innovative funding landscape.

1. Ask me anything

What is it? Monthly meetings for all grantees to come and ask questions and clarify concerns. Funders make themselves accessible to CSOs helping build trust and confidence amongst their teams. Funders share resources, tools, training, etc. that can help CSOs solve challenges they may be facing in their role or programmes.

What do you need?

- Identify challenges or topic areas (i.e. challenges with proposal writing) that CSOs may need support with.
- Organise monthly forums and invite CSOs and funders to attend.
- Archive resources, tools, and materials on platforms where the content will be accessible for CSOs.
- Ensuring CSOs utilise resources and share with other CSOs within their networks.

2. Innovative partnerships

What is it? CSOs with different competencies and skill sets can join to bid for projects. For example, advocacy organisations can partner with technical or medical CSOs as part of a consortium and bid for projects together.

What do you need?

- A mechanism or know-how to identify the best fit of a consortium prior to pursuing projects.
- A good knowledge of CSOs implementing locally (on the ground) and their focus areas.
- Access to resources or tools that will make it easier for CSOs to map out other organisations in their vicinity.

3. Speed-dating: finding the right funder

What is it? A step-by-step process that empowers CSOs to determine and select funders who are open to working with them side-by-side throughout the whole project, including project design phase.

What do you need?

- A checklist of important qualifications funders value in CSOs, to help them understand where their strengths are and potential areas for improvement.
- Create a database of funders and the projects they fund that can be shared with other CSOs.



Big Sibling: Mentorship

Modelled after Big Brother, Big Sister, this best practice enables 1-2 staff from CSOs to be partnered with staff from other CSOs working with the same key communities either in their country or from another country in the region. The goal of this mentorship programme is to have CSO colleagues learn from one another, develop different skills that can benefit their own team and projects, and learn about what other communities are doing.



STAGE OF INNOVATION: EXECUTE

Important to create intentional support to help CSOs meet funder requirements. After CSOs receive funding, funders can work with CSOs to improve their confidence to deliver innovative programs and impact in their communities.



How do I create the right environment for capacity building? (continued)

4. Consortia approach to mentoring younger CSOs

What is it? More established CSOs work alongside smaller/less experienced CSOs to support them in growing and enhancing their capacity to implement projects effectively on their own. From the interviews we came across CSOs that are intentional about capacity-building and sharing their knowledge with newer and smaller CSOs.

What do you need?

- For well-established CSOs find smaller or newer CSOs you can mentor. Establish meaningful partnerships where both CSOs can effectively benefit from the partnership.
- For smaller CSOs be intentional about seeking mature CSOs that are willing to mentor and grow together with you.

5. Knowledge sharing cafes

What is it? CSOs deliberately learn about what other CSOs around them are doing and reach out to CSOs to learn more about each other's work or find ways of collaborating for enhanced efficiency.

What do you need?

- A challenge or question or topic that you would like to share with potential collaborators.
- Good knowledge of CSOs within your community, country, region etc.
- Reach out to other CSOs and organise a knowledge exchange (in-person meetings, virtual calls etc.) to get to learn about each other's work and seek areas of synergy for collaboration.



"Innovation Challenges"

CSOs from different areas to focus their knowledge and creativity on a particular challenge in the funding space. Competitions should be organised in ways that encourage teamwork while at the same time fostering positive competition and learning. A key focus area will be encouraging CSOs to carry forward project ideas beyond the competition and forming partnerships for projects as an output. Funders can be more deliberate in supporting the carrying forward of successful project teams and ideas that are successful within the competition.



How to document and share learnings to increase the visibility of my work?

Documentation and sharing of learnings contributes to the visibility of the CSO as well as the work they do. Creating a support network to share these lessons learned is vital for both sustainability as well as scaling innovation.

1. Using engaging media formats for reporting

What is it? Exploring interactive forms of media such as using video, photojournalism, social media (TikTok, WhatsApp, Instagram), podcasts, animation videos, how-to-videos, soundbites, to simplify and make it easy for beneficiaries/ public audience to interact with the project.

What do you need?

- An overview of the different media formats that could be engaging for your audience.
- Develop content (videos, posters etc.) and create a plan for sharing and monitoring user interaction and feedback on interaction with the content.

2. Social media interaction

What is it? Leveraging social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook or Instagram to share interactive content with community audiences as well as beneficiaries. Social media is a good way of sharing your work as well as creating a community.

What do you need?

- Identify which social media platforms work well for your audience.
- Create engaging content that speaks to your audience. Followed by a regular content plan and monitoring. Consistency is key for engaging your audience and build a relationship with them.



Virtual Webinars

Virtual forums where CSOs can come together to share and talk about the work that they do. Sessions should be open to the general public as well so people can learn about the work of CSOs. This will not only provide visibility to the CSO but also enhance awareness of the work they do enhance sharing of innovation and encourage spaces for the cross-sharing of experiences to enhance learning and impact. This will enable CSOs to learn from each other and gather learnings that can be used to strengthen project concepts prior to pitching for funding.



STAGE OF INNOVATION: VALIDATE

At this stage of the innovation process, CSOs are keen to scale the impact of their work in their communities and beyond. They can learn valid lessons learned on how to create a specific story about the impact of their work (by showing demonstrated evidence) by leveraging tools (such as social media) to help secure additional funding.



How to document and share learnings to increase the visibility of my work? (continued)

3 . Building a “Community of Practice”

What is it? CSOs create a network of support for sustainability and scaling of impact. These networks can include communities within which CSOs function, other CSOs and partner organisations, or funder organisations.

What do you need?

- Map out who exists around you (beneficiaries, partners, CSOs, funders etc.).
- Identify the most appropriate formats of engagement that work for you as well as your networks (physical or digital formats).
- Develop a strategy on how to engage/bring on board the different parties (as identified above).
- Encourage/ support CSOs to organise cross-sharing forums where they can learn from each other and encourage collaboration.



Meet-ups

Sessions organised by CSOs (physical or virtual) where CSOs invite beneficiaries, and CSOs within their network to interact and cross-share ideas on how to improve different aspects of programming. Such activities could support fundraising activities for initiatives where people can come together to brainstorm and find ways of enhancing innovation through local sustainable forums.

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