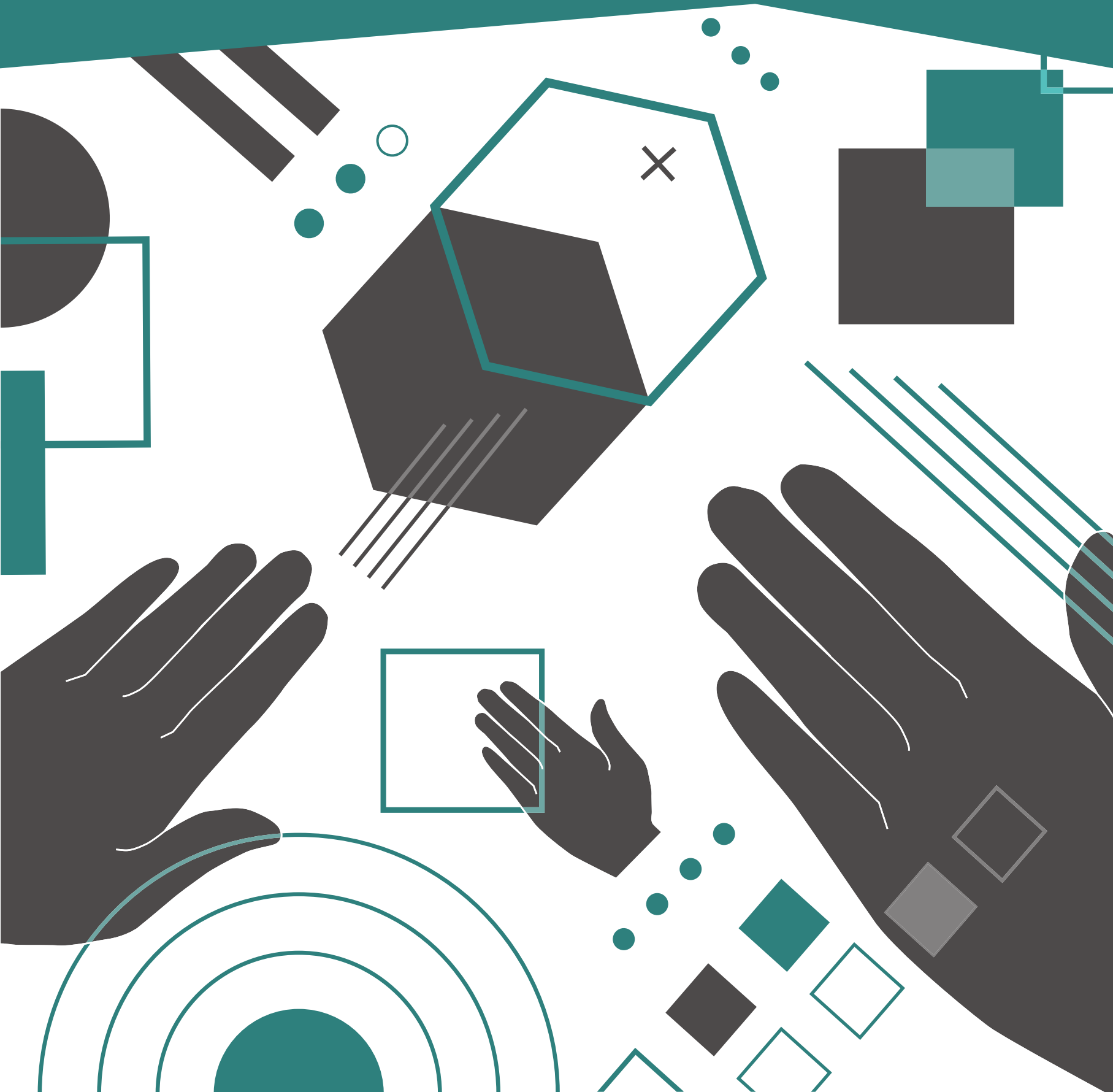


TIPPING THE SCALES

WHAT IT TAKES TO FUND
AN EQUITABLE TECH &
HUMAN RIGHTS
ECOSYSTEM

SUMMARY

THE ENGINE ROOM



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1. INTRODUCTION

The Information Program and the Strategy Unit Lab at Open Society Foundations commissioned this research project in December 2019 in order to identify potential opportunities for strengthening equity through funding practices within the tech and human rights ecosystem. Our findings are not unique to the tech and human rights ecosystem – however, we believe they are exacerbated in this space due to a combination of factors. These include the fast evolution of the sector; inequitable ‘tech solutionist’ approaches set by Silicon Valley companies; and blurry boundaries for what constitutes ‘tech and human rights’, meaning that civil society initiatives sometimes fall between the cracks of grantmaker portfolios.

The relationship between funding institutions and potential grantees reflects, from the start, an unequal distribution of power, where many activists and civil society organisations typically rely on resources from few funders to carry out their work. In this report, we look at the struggles of newer or smaller organisations in the field, to better understand and make explicit the barriers they face. We also look at innovative funding practices that are occurring in different sectors.

For this research, we defined equity as the presence of fairness and justice, considering each specific context and its inherent power dynamics. Equity factors in existing needs and assets, and takes into account structural issues such as power, previous access, exclusion, opportunity, etc. Inequity, by extension, speaks to a lack of fairness or justice. Our vision of an equitable and sustainable ecosystem is one with a diversity of actors, in which those whose experiences have traditionally been marginalised or ignored are brought to the forefront.

Our research identified that the main challenges and barriers for smaller and less visible actors in the tech and human rights ecosystem fall in the following categories:

- **Structural barriers:** stemming from existing power dynamics, inequality, scarcity of resources, unequal access and exclusion. These manifest mainly as restricted access to funders networks, scarcity of targeted resources, extractive practices, structural racism and privilege.
- **Bureaucratic barriers:** related to funding application processes, reporting obligations, and legal entity requirements. Issues of one-way accountability, transparency and trust were raised as being crucial.

- **Additional challenges:** include, but are not limited to – lack of core and multi-year funding, rigid frameworks for impact and evaluation, closing civic space, and the role performed by intermediary organisations (both facilitators and obstacles).

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for flexibility and for thinking long-term about sustainability and resilience of CSOs on the part of grantmakers.

In terms of funding and support practices for equity, our research identified two main areas where funders (both from the tech and human rights ecosystem and from other spaces) are attempting to mitigate potential asymmetries:

- **Fostering relationships rooted in equity:** Practices that include funders working to address biases in their networks, adjust their communication strategies to be more inclusive, and improve their outreach methods.
- **Building funding structures rooted in equity:** Initiatives that seek to restructure how funding is allocated, through the adoption of practices designed to shift decision making power from funders to movements, communities and organisations themselves. Includes practices such as participatory grantmaking, rethinking impact metrics/frameworks, and adopting flexibility as both a principle and a practice.



2. BACKGROUND AND ECOSYSTEM OVERVIEW

Drawing borders around ‘tech and human rights’

The ‘tech and human rights’ ecosystem is a hard one to define. For some, thinking about technology and human rights leads directly to considering how technology is (negatively or positively) impacting our ability to claim our human rights online – that is, our digital rights. For others, technology and human rights is focused more on how technology is affecting our ‘offline’ human rights.

For the context of this report, we considered both communities as falling within the broad ‘tech and human rights’ space, to account for the increasing overlap between organisations who focus on ‘digital rights’, and more traditional human rights actors that use technology to investigate rights abuses, or investigate the abusive potential of technology. Broadly speaking, the sector has undergone a lot of transition over the past decade or so, as digital technologies have become more widespread.

The new possibilities and challenges offered by technology in support of (or directly counter to) human rights – in tandem with relatively slow uptake of these opportunities by existing organisations – has encouraged new organisations to fill this gap over the past few years. These organisations are often focused on specific issues, or employ novel approaches to gathering data or using technology in pursuit of human rights.

In this research project, we look at the struggles of organisations who have had less access to funding, specifically those with less structural privilege, to better understand and make explicit the barriers they face.

Some current barriers to equity

The work that is required to build and establish nonprofits is inherently fuzzy and unclear, without specific guidelines or concrete processes to follow. Building strong relationships with funders, understanding who to approach and when, and developing strategies that meet observed needs and fit within funder portfolios, are not skills that are widely ‘taught’ nor easily clarified.

Much of this knowledge remains implicit, hidden behind barriers that are hard to overcome. Relationship building between potential grantees and funders usually happens in informal settings – over coffee at a conference,

or on the sides of workshops. Just ‘getting in’ to these spaces is a challenge, especially for people whose passports necessitate prohibitively expensive plane tickets and difficult visa applications to move through the world. Additionally, getting the required introductions that often preface such meetings is similarly difficult. These barriers are compounded by implicit biases, such as white saviorism¹ or colonial practices, whereby organisations led by (often) white Europeans or North Americans are funded to address problems in the Global South.

Challenges to overcoming barriers and exploitative practices

Exposing exploitative practices is difficult and will require concerted action from those holding power, not from those who are negatively affected by them. Amid limited resources, less established actors are unlikely to risk burning bridges in order to call out exploitative behaviours.

On the flip side, individual funders and grantmakers find themselves in an almost impossible position – tasked with strengthening or building equitable ecosystems, while often operating as a single individual, far from the realities of the grantees they work with. As individuals, they are often (though not always, in the case of newer funders or institutions) working within large, slow-moving institutions, where their own realm of control is limited and capped by higher-level strategy, upper management, and entrenched processes, approaches and culture(s).

For grantmakers, getting a ‘lay of the land’ of fast-changing ecosystems or communities they seek to serve can understandably be tricky given their positionality (i.e. often based on the Global North, with decision-makers mostly from privileged backgrounds – read more in the Structural Barriers section). This means the information they receive is often twisted by the power that they hold – potential grantees may say what they think the grantmaker wants to hear to increase their chances at securing funding, whereas the grantmaker might just need to hear the truth.

Same same, but different

The challenges raised here are not, for the most part, unique to the tech and human rights ecosystem. However, the ecosystem has some particular conditions that we believe exacerbate many of these challenges.

Firstly, this field has evolved rapidly to reflect the fast-changing opportunities provided by tech and data. New actors that focus on particular uses and purposes of tech as they relate to human rights have emerged. As a result, there are now many smaller and/or less visible actors.

Secondly, innovation is privileged to certain actors who already enjoy structural advantages. This contributes to what we call a ‘cycle of inequity’ – groups who have stability and privilege also have the luxury of experimenting and innovating with new methods and technologies, thereby increasing their capacity to come up with innovative (and fundable) projects. Groups who are focused on survival do not have the same flexibility to test new approaches, and as a consequence, are far less likely to get funding.

Finally: funding technology is new to most, if not all, grantmakers. Best practices on how to fund,² what to fund and what not to fund are emergent at best, rather than established, as they might be in other sectors. This means funders are less likely to know how to fund development of new tools in an equitable way, and often more likely to fund technology that (unintentionally) exacerbates existing power dynamics and imbalances.





3. THE TECH AND HUMAN RIGHTS ECOSYSTEM: CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS TOWARDS EQUITY

During our research, we grouped some of the main ways challenges and barriers express themselves within this particular ecosystem into two categories: structural barriers and bureaucratic barriers.

3.1 Structural barriers

Structural barriers stem from the overarching frameworks that make up the environment that philanthropic and civil society organisations emerged from, and operate within (i.e. issues that are related to and stem from existing power dynamics, inequality, scarcity of resources, unequal access and exclusion). Within funding structures, these dynamics are most commonly conveyed through conventions such as the ability to decide areas of interest, focus and priorities of work as according to funders' own strategies; the ability to make demands and complaints and have them addressed; and often one-way pressures over accountability and transparency.

Restricted access to funder networks

Most funding opportunities for civil society organisations doing tech and human rights work occur through connections to, and fostering of relationships with, funders. **Entering such networks, however, is not straightforward.** This access is often grounded in a set of exclusionary criteria such as prior knowledge of the philanthropic field (e.g. knowing its ways, its jargon and its accepted cultural behaviours), English fluency, nationality (e.g. via passports and access to travel), access to resources needed to attend events, etc. Being in this space also demands people frame their work in legible ways for funders, which is time-intensive and requires field-specific knowledge.



Scarcity of targeted resources

The issue of resource scarcity and funding opportunities was also flagged as a major problem in the tech and human rights space. While this is a trait shared by most nonprofit groups, it expresses itself in an exaggerated manner for tech and human rights organisations given the unclear outlining of the field and, consequently, limited funding opportunities that are relevant for the work being done.

A number of interviewees said they feel disadvantaged compared to other types of social sector work, given that the usefulness of their activities is not necessarily legible to funders, particularly those with lower levels of tech or data literacy. At the same time, these organisations compete in the ‘tech funding’ space with actors doing widely different types of work – from digital rights and civic empowerment to social impact private enterprises.

Funding is even more scarce with regard to maintenance of technology tools and tech-heavy approaches. The under-prioritisation of maintenance work – not by any means unique to this sector,³ – can make it even more difficult to create a sustainable tech tool.

Extractive practices

Under-resourced and less visible actors are also navigating an environment permeated by extractive practices in many forms – from funders, potential funders, intermediary organisations and even peer organisations. Knowledge and resource-sharing requests without any type of compensation, and especially without financial recognition, seem to be quite common in the tech and human rights ecosystem.

Structural racism and privilege

Structural racism also plays an important role in the way interactions and decision-making occur in the tech and human rights space. Taking into account that tech work in general, and tech infrastructure provision specifically, is predominantly white and Global North-based, this issue is even more prominent. This is compounded by the increased visibility and power held by certain demographics – specifically, white men based in Global North countries – who benefit from colonial dynamics through which their knowledge and expertise is prioritised over, for example, more traditional forms of knowledge held by Indigenous and other traditionally marginalised communities. Amongst interviewees, there was the overall perception that funders do not trust Global South organisations, and/or black and POC-led organisations, to manage resources in an effective and reliable manner.

This alludes to an important characteristic of the ecosystem structure: the composition of philanthropic foundation staff and boards. Though some teams are making progress towards becoming less white and Global North-centric, organisational leadership is still dominated by white voices from the Global North.

3.2 Bureaucratic barriers

A second set of challenges faced by organisations in the tech and human rights space comes from the bureaucratic practices and requirements for accessing support from funders at large institutions. This includes grant and general funding application processes, reporting obligations after the funding is secured, and legal requirements to be considered for funding in the first place.

Funding application processes

Participants interviewed for this project reported spending a minimum of 40 hours (spread over one to two weeks) per grant application – a task often involving at least two people. While established actors may have dedicated fundraising personnel, for organisations working with fewer resources this is a significant investment in a process which has uncertain outcomes.

Another common issue raised was the lack of transparency and foresight throughout the application process. For example, one could go months without hearing back from a funder after submitting applications or proposals, only to then have additional asks requested at short notice. This interferes with long-term planning for organisations, who find themselves having to drop work to tend to these requests, with no guarantee that their efforts will materialise in resource gains.

Reporting obligations

When funding is secured, the reporting obligations that organisations need to comply with are often labour-intensive and burdensome. While many requirements are a reflection of what donors themselves must report to government authorities within their own constituencies, the ways in which reporting demands are made, coupled with an absence of clear reasoning and transparency by funders towards their grantees was relayed as an urgent issue. Organisations interviewed reported having trouble complying with strict demands for accountability that do not acknowledge the particularities of their work or the context in which they operate, including for very small sums of money.

Bureaucracy as violence

Building on the work of anthropologist David Graeber, we found that bureaucratic procedures founded on structural violence inevitably contribute to pervasive social inequalities and “willful blindness”, requiring people to do tasks that are ultimately unhelpful.⁴ By structural violence, we mean “the systematic ways in which social structures harm or otherwise disadvantage individuals”.⁵ It “is subtle, often invisible, and often has no one specific person who can (or will) be held responsible”.⁶

This approach can also be observed in the role that bureaucracy plays between funders and grantees. Given that reporting obligations are currently a standard part of contractual agreements between funders and grantees, there is little space to negotiate.

As put by one interviewee working at a funder organisation: “Paperwork and metrics are practices brought to nonprofits from the business world, under the assumption that people can’t be trusted. But that [excessive paperwork and reporting] is just a security blanket, to work around the fact that there needs to be more trust, and not more paperwork or burdensome processes necessarily”

Legal entity requirements

What smaller or under-resourced actors need the most when it comes to funding is flexibility (read more in section 5.2) – flexibility with deadlines, reporting requirements, legal status, and access to funding for immediate needs. Making this a reality would require a compassionate and mutually beneficial approach to partnership by funders, grounded in the knowledge that different organisations have different capacities, needs and rapid response abilities. Such an arrangement also implies an atmosphere of trust and two-way accountability. The current lack of transparency with regards to how accountability functions within grantmaking organisations means grantees lack vital context, leaving them feeling mistrusted or like they are carrying out tasks with no real purpose.

3.3 Additional challenges

Lack of core and multi-year funding

A common theme across most interviewees was the lack of access to core, flexible funding. This is hardly surprising: in recent years the issue of core funding became widely discussed amongst philanthropic and nonprofit actors at large, as organisations pointed to and advocated for multi-year

core funding as means to ensure long-term autonomy, resilience and sustainability. However, the current lack of transparency on what is required to transform a relationship that begins with project-based grants, into core or multi-year funding, leaves grantees unsure about how to make that transition and which leads are worth pursuing and investing in.

Impact and evaluation

How impact is defined and measured and, more importantly, how organisations need to fit their work into ready-made metrics of success was consistently flagged as a central challenge for less visible actors. While these metrics might be relevant for funding institutions, many of them might simply not fit local contexts, the nature and type of work done by organisations.

This issue also raises a more complex question: how can social change be accurately measured? And should quantifying social change be a goal in the first place? A lot of important work being done in shifting conversations, influencing discussions and confronting harmful social norms might not be compatible with how a one-year grant cycle defines 'success'.

The role of intermediary organisations

The role performed by intermediary organisations (i.e. international non-governmental organisations – INGOs – and regional organisations that act as re-granters) came up during most of our interviews with civil society groups. Local organisations often feel their work is further 'invisibilised' instead of being amplified and elevated. As power brokers, INGOs must ensure that they strengthen the work of local and community-based organisations rather than take away the resources and visibility these organizations deserve.

3.4 Impact on organisations and people

Not only do these challenges and barriers exert tremendous stress on organisations – they also affect the people whose labour supports such organisations to begin with. Reports of psychological pressure and burnout were fairly common amongst our interviewees, given the impossibility of appropriate compensation or manageable workloads, which contributes to a high turnover of staff in many workplaces.

4. FUNDING AND SUPPORT PRACTICES FOR EQUITY

Our research finds that when striving for equity, the most innovative practices are often the ones that acknowledge the skewed power dynamics that exist within funding spaces. We have identified two main areas where funders are actively engaged in mitigating potential asymmetries.

- One area concerns how funders relate to actors in the space. This set of practices include addressing biases in their networks, adjusting communication strategies to be more inclusive, and actively seeking to be more open and to improve outreach methods.
- The second area addresses the imbalanced structure of how funding is conceived by adopting practices designed to shift decision-making power from funders to movements, communities and organisations themselves.

4.1. Relationships rooted in equity

A prevailing trend throughout this research was the notion that securing funding is overly dependent on having prior access to specific networks, organisations or people.

A big part of realising a more equitable ecosystem requires dismantling the existing barriers that contribute to this closedness – an obstacle unanimously shared by the civil society/grantee interviewees we spoke to.

Communication with actors in the tech and human rights space

Asymmetries of power between funders and organisations may manifest in how these different actors communicate to one another.⁸ An important step is for funders to acknowledge these power dynamics and base their actions on the idea of ‘power with’ and not ‘power over’.⁷ This means recognising that while this field may be structured on power dynamics based on factors such as prior access to resources, geographical location, race, ethnicity and institutional affiliation, their actions as funders need to intentionally minimize those asymmetries.

Feminist funds and participatory grantmakers shared that working towards dismantling the notions of hierarchies within funding structures is an ongoing process, that involves acknowledging different positionalities, bringing

together members of the communities you are working with and creating dedicated spaces for open communication, feedback and accountability from all sides (two-way accountability) – not just accountability from grantee to funder.

Mitigating network bias

A common challenge for many funders is mitigating biases that dictate who is included within their networks. Creating more open channels for potential grantees to access funders is an important step, which involves improving outreach strategies and developing relationships with advisors within the communities they serve.

“If you know 90% of the room, you’re in the wrong place”

In order to reach beyond the clusters of actors that they already feel acquainted with, one funder described a practice they call “destabilizing their networks”. This means actively seeking to connect with actors with whom they haven’t before, including attending conferences and events they normally wouldn’t, diversifying the set of organisations and activists with whom they engage on social media, holding open office hours, and consuming content by organisations and activists with whom they are not familiar.

Mitigating network bias as an institutional commitment

Addressing biases and developing better ways of working as grantmakers shouldn’t remain the task of individual grantmakers. Such practices should be widely incentivised and rewarded across the entire sector.

Application processes

Our research also summarizes the practices of a variety of funding institutions whose application processes involve proactive steps to increase equity. These are practices that focus not only on narrowing the perceived distance between funding institutions and other actors in the ecosystem, but also in recognizing how different actors might access and experience application processes differently.

Outreach

Successful outreach was frequently referred to as a process that ensures information about funding reaches communities who can benefit from this support, are doing relevant work and might not already be in a funder’s network.

Guidance and open communication

Interviewees highlighted the importance of providing guidance for applicants who may not have received funding from large funding institutions before, or who might not be familiar with a particular funding process.

Language & jargon

The importance of communicating funding opportunities in different languages was highlighted by a variety of actors in tech and human rights space. Unsurprisingly, working knowledge of English is a specific ability that not all actors in this space possess, and English-only application processes prevent many organisations from learning of the existence of the funding opportunity – let alone applying. Beyond the languages in which applications are available, the jargon used in applications is also a barrier that many funders are working to improve. The entire realm of ‘proposal writing’ was described by many interviewees as exclusionary. The deployment of specific jargon and terminology, which may be familiar to established organisations, has the effect of ostracizing other actors.

Format of applications

A common thread across interviews revealed the complexity of application processes. While actors widely recognise the importance of detailed applications and in-depth explanations of grant-seekers’ work, the formats in which applications are made may exclude certain actors. There were many instances where simplifying application processes was identified as a way to democratise access to funding. Some funding institutions we interviewed described that the first step of their application process involves only a simple concept note or a limited number of questions.

Compensation

Many funders recognise that not all potential applicants have the resources or capabilities to spend time on lengthy application processes without compensation, especially considering that many actors seeking funding opportunities are under-resourced and understaffed. In acknowledgement of this, multiple actors described the need to be paid for the time and resources spent on detailed applications.

Feedback

Providing meaningful feedback to applicants was described by multiple actors integral to strengthening future applications and propelling the entire ecosystem forward. One funder shared that it is common practice to never decline an application or an expression of interest without some form of feedback.

Fostering a collaborative ecosystem

Creating a more equitable ecosystem is also about ensuring that the environment is fit for collaboration between different actors. Some practices that funders have successfully adopted to create a more collaborative ecosystem include:

- Facilitating connections between grantees who might be working on similar topics, in the same region or who are conducting complementary work.
- Encouraging organisations who are more prepared to share resources and knowledge with actors who do not benefit from the same opportunities (e.g. informal collectives or organisations who haven't had access to prior funding), especially the ones led by vulnerable groups, minoritised communities and LGBTQI individuals.

Shifting the role of intermediary organisations

A common narrative that emerged during our conversations involves INGOs receiving funding and resources to partner up with local organisations who are awarded a portion of that to conduct activities.

INGOs may work as useful facilitators. However, as discussed in earlier sections, they may also occupy a privileged position in the tech and human rights space. Power imbalances quickly surface when INGOs and local organisations are working together. INGOs often benefit from the privilege of having more visibility in the sector, are likely to have previous relationships with funders, and are frequently identified as experts over local, less-known actors. While these connections between INGOs and local organisations can be meaningful and useful, it is important to create mechanisms that address such power imbalances.

To address imbalances in access, funders might want to stimulate INGOs to apply for funding in partnership with local community-based organisations, as a way to ensure that those less-known groups – many of which are led by traditionally excluded peoples – are able to enter the space. Funders could, for example, develop ways of recognising and limiting extractive behaviours.

4.2 Funding structures rooted in equity

Our research also looked at how funders can address inequity within their funding structures. This section includes practices shared by funding institutions and INGOs who are striving to build a more equitable ecosystem by shifting decision making power from funders to movements, communities and organisations themselves.

Decision-making about ecosystem's priorities

There is frequently a disconnect between what funder institutions identify as priorities within their fields and what emerges as a priority from the viewpoint of organisations and activists. To avoid perpetuating divergences and move towards a more equitable ecosystem, many funders actively adopt practices to better centre their agenda around the needs of grantees. Shifting decision-making power to the capable hands of the communities is a process that can take many different forms, varying in accordance with the possibilities funders have within their internal structures.

Shifting power in application processes

Participatory grantmaking has recently attracted a lot of attention, under the promise of making philanthropy more transparent and accountable. The distinctive feature of participatory grantmaking is the ability to “move decision-making about money – which many see as the epitome of power – to the people most affected by the issues donors are trying to address.”⁹

We found that applications processes may provide built-in pathways to directing funding decision-making power in the hands of communities, while simultaneously adapting to existing funding architectures.¹⁰ From clearly defining eligibility criteria through participatory processes alongside members from the community a grant seeks to serve, to ensuring the selection of applicants in a given funding opportunity is made collectively by members of the relevant community, to providing funding to participatory grantmakers – there are multiple paths to increasing participation.

Being accountable to the field

Increasing accountability to movements and organisations is crucial for funders to contribute to a more robust, balanced ecosystem.¹¹ Beyond the responsibility to be accountable to their institutions, boards and donors, funders must demonstrate their commitment to the movements and communities they work with.

Prioritising communication and transparency are essential for building accountability. A feminist fund explained that to increase their accountability to grantees, they produce annual reports that centre grantee partners as the target audience. This means that format, language and content are built with these communities in mind. Funders have also dedicated themselves to incrementing their transparency practices, by sharing information about their own fundraising practices, data protection policies and internal strategies. Another important piece here is building the structures for movements and organisations to inform funders' strategies and priorities.

Flexibility

The need for more flexibility emerged in several moments throughout this research. Rigid funding flows are an obstacle for actors in the tech and human rights space, especially the ones who don't currently have financial stability.¹² When it comes to what types of funding are seen as the most supportive for movements and organisations, it's no surprise that flexible, core support grants come to mind.¹³

We found that a guiding principle when striving for flexibility within funding structures is attention to grantees' contexts. To that point, funders shared different practices they've employed to increase flexibility in their processes. A feminist fund shared that they establish transparent deadlines with grantees, and allow space for participants to confirm whether or not they are capable of fulfilling them. Other funders shared that they try to be as flexible as possible with resource allocation requirements and stipulations on how grantees should spend funds. As a response to the cascading crises related to Covid-19, some funders have already demonstrated that increasing flexibility and creating unrestricted funds is a doable, tangible way of supporting organisations.¹⁴

Rethinking impact

Funding structures that include excessive reporting requirements – which can be highly technical and burdensome for under-resourced organisations – may make it difficult for some actors to engage with funding institutions.¹⁵ Simplifying reporting mechanisms is something many funders are taking upon themselves to better accommodate a more diverse set of actors in this ecosystem.

Adopting reporting practices based on trust

In that sense, many funders are adopting varied forms of flexible and straightforward reporting. This may take different shapes: from only soliciting narrative reports, to minimizing the number of required reports

a grantee must provide throughout a grant, to simplifying the structure of financial reports based on different grantee contexts. A funder operating in the tech and human rights field explained that their reporting is focused on establishing connections within their grantee community and opening up space for collaboration between grantees.

Non-financial support/additional forms of support

Overall, this research has found innovative forms of support that focus on strengthening actors according to their own demands and needs.

Focus on sustainability

A focus on increasing the sustainability of grantee organisations seems to be at the heart of relevant support. Beyond securing organisations' programmatic needs, funders have a responsibility to strengthen organisations in ways that support their stability in the long term. This may include creating opportunities for grantees to diversify their sources of funding and making an effort to establish connections between different actors and funders.

Capacity building

Increasing opportunities for capacity building is important for organisations to achieve sustainability and effectiveness, but that type of support must be aligned with the context the organisation is based in. One interviewee shared that it is crucial for funding institutions to invest in deep context analysis of the communities they work with in order to identify what type of support would be helpful. "While many funders assume that one organisation working with technology needs capacity building in one area; the organisation may actually need something else."

5. On The Engine Room's positionality

The reflections raised in this research would be limited if we refrained to critically inquire over The Engine Room's own positionality. It is not lost on us that having the opportunity to even conduct this research is connected to our own privilege as an international organisation, which allows us the space to imagine together with funders what helpful research contributions could be. Additionally, as an organisation we are privileged to have relative sustainability and trusted networks with funders and other international organisations, which has inevitably influenced who we've spoken to and whose perspectives we've prioritised. Therefore, when talking about how to promote a more equitable tech and human rights ecosystem, we need to look at our own practices and evaluate in what ways they help or hinder such effort.

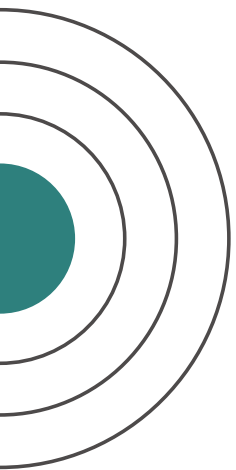
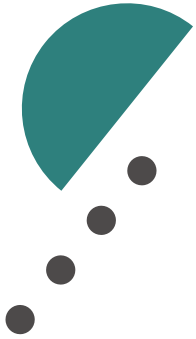
Our attempts to mitigate (or acknowledge) our own privilege and bias focused on asking our diverse team for suggestions of who to speak to; using a 'snowball methodology' to reach out to people based on suggestions from other interviewees; ensuring diversity in our interviewee cohort; and generally considering knowledge that came from different sources (ie. not just academic literature), in different languages. In our work, we intentionally prioritise activist groups who are protecting marginalised communities and organisations supporting social justice.¹⁶ Given the project focus and advocacy for equity, we felt it was important for us to establish within our research an acknowledgment of people's time and expertise. Therefore, we offered civil society organisations, activists and independent consultants interviewed compensation for their participation (read more on Methodology).

At The Engine Room – a team made up of people from ten different countries and partners all around the globe, including many in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa – our work is grounded in a commitment to deconstruct power and the way we think about knowledge. We understand decolonising as the “process of freeing our minds from colonialism but also as a lens to reflect on our work, power and methodologies.”¹⁷ In practice, this means actively challenging epistemicide¹⁸ and epistemic injustice,¹⁹ and assuming that knowledge comes from multiple sources, formats and languages. It means sharing the knowledge we produce, acquire and reproduce as we go. It also means actively carving space for voices often silenced or ignored, especially crucial for the tech space that is still very much dominated by white and Global North voices. In our support work, it means helping civil society organisations (locally, regionally and internationally) through collaborations and partnerships to build their own capacity and carry forward the work they



are best positioned to do. It also means supporting our partners in becoming more visible within our own networks.

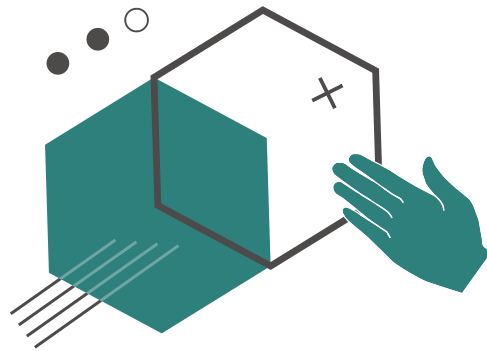
This, however, must also mean a commitment to acknowledging that we may not always get it right – and in fact, that there will always be more we could've done. But we will always strive to be better at every opportunity, and continue learning about the most effective ways to support positive social change. Perhaps what we can offer as a blueprint to other organisations seeking to be more accountable and do more equitable work is exactly there: a commitment to never settle, always keep learning and keep pushing to deconstruct their own practices.



Notes

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