



# Want to Fund in the Global South? Philanthropic Collaboratives Can Help

By Sonali Madia Patel, Alexandra Hughes Browne, Gayle Martin, and Zach Slobig

Back in 2019, Indigenous land defenders of the Amazon were under a level of threat not felt in decades. Illegal logging and mining in Brazil were in overdrive, and by year's end, over 7 million hectares of the Brazilian Amazon had burned. At the height of the fire season, a plume of smoke plunged São Paulo—some 2,000 miles away—into darkness at mid-afternoon. Experts warned of a tipping point.

Beneath that smoke, Indigenous communities did what they've done for thousands of years—work to protect their way of life and the ecosystems that their families, and the rest of the world, rely on. In the Riozinho region in the south of the country, three prospectors pushed their way into Indigenous territory with heavy machinery. Local people in several villages documented the destruction with drones, immediately sharing the information with one another and local authorities.

Meanwhile, Tuie, a member of the Tato'a Indigenous Association in the northern state of Pará, worried for his ancestral land and how the next generation could possibly survive. Bitaté, a member of the Uru-Eu-Wau-Wau Indigenous Association in the western state of Rondônia, described the local encroachment there as an invasion and helped to collect evidence, images, and coordinates to submit reports to the public prosecutor's office.

These are just a few of the grantee stories from Fundo Casa Socioambiental's initiative to strengthen Indigenous land rights in the Brazilian Amazon. [Fundo Casa Socioambiental](#) has fueled environmental justice efforts in Brazil for nearly two decades. In partnership with 57 Indigenous organizations, it has made grants, supported communication and knowledge sharing among disparate communities, and resourced communities to use technology to monitor and report threats to their land and protect their territories.

These Indigenous organizations have helped federal authorities identify and arrest illegal loggers and miners and have collectively protected some 63 million hectares—an area nearly as large as France. “Fundo Casa helps to strengthen voices that are often silenced or do

### **Representative Collaborative Funds**

In addition to the funds mentioned in the article, a few others came up frequently in conversations.

- [Fundo Baobá](#): Dedicated exclusively to the promotion of racial equity for the Black community in Brazil.
- [FRIDA | The Young Feminist Fund](#): Run by young feminists to support and help establish other emerging feminist organizations, collectives, and movements.
- [Masana wa Afrika](#): Supports community-based organizations that help ensure African children thrive.
- [The Samdhana Institute](#): Works alongside Indigenous peoples and local communities to achieve social and environmental justice in Southeast Asia.



Fundo Casa Socioambiental has made grants to 300 associations in Brazil to defend the Amazon's forests and the Indigenous communities living there. (Photo: iStock.com/@luoman)

not have visibility,” says Puyr Temb , president of the Federation of Indigenous Peoples of the State of Par . “When we talk about the defense of the territory, we are talking about the defense of life.” With its deep, longstanding relationships with local communities, the due diligence it performs on emerging groups, and its bird’s-eye view of threats to the Amazon, Fundo Casa Socioambiental is uniquely positioned to move resources efficiently and effectively where they will have the most impact.

In the last five years alone, they made 600 grants to 300 associations, covering over half of the ethnic groups in Brazil. Fundo Casa Socioambiental believes that when Indigenous communities are stronger and better organized, they are much more efficient in keeping their forests standing and protected for the long haul.

Fundo Casa Socioambiental is a philanthropic collaborative fund, one of many that The Bridgespan Group has researched in recent years. We use the term “collaborative funds” to describe entities that strategically channel financial resources from multiple donors to nonprofits and community-based organizations. Often these collaborative funds also help build the capacity and connectedness of grantees and advance the broader field and ecosystem. We charted the growth and value proposition of collaborative funds as giving vehicles in [Releasing the Potential of Philanthropic Collaborations](#).<sup>1</sup>

Yet we haven't focused squarely on collaborative funds working in the Global South—a noteworthy and largely underutilized segment of the global philanthropic landscape. In our literature review for this report, we found several pieces of research on collaborative funds working outside the United States helpful, among them an Asian Venture Philanthropy Network publication on [collaborative funding in Asia](#), Hispanics in Philanthropy's report on [funds working in Latin America](#), and Prospera International Network of Women's Funds' [tracking of trends in funding](#) to the Global South. We then conducted our own research in 2022 and 2023 through surveys and 16 interviews (see "[Research Methodology](#)" on page 5).

One key finding: collaborative funds working in the Global South are experts in channeling resources to "proximate" leaders—those with lived experience and local knowledge—and to local communities. In fact, for most collaborative funds we followed up with, at least three-fourths of grantees are led by an individual representative of the communities they serve.

This level of engagement with local leaders is striking when viewed against the backdrop of global philanthropic underfunding to locally led and Indigenous organizations and grassroots women's rights movements. Between 2016 and 2019, only "13 percent of US foundations' global grant dollars went directly to organizations based in the country where programs were implemented," according to the Council on Foundations, barely up from under 12 percent between 2011 and 2015.<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Funders Network found that, in 2019, foundations in the Global North controlled 99 percent of global human rights funding and awarded 88 percent of that funding to organizations based in the Global North.<sup>3</sup> Recent Bridgespan research has outlined similar disparities in funding for proximate African leaders.<sup>4</sup> In addition, while Indigenous peoples comprise less than 5 percent of the global population, they steward 80 percent of Earth's biodiversity<sup>5</sup> and receive under 1 percent of international philanthropic funding<sup>6</sup> for doing so.

"Collaborative funds with local teams unlock that ability for me to connect to organizations closest to the work," says Natasha Desterro Dolby, a philanthropist who supports funds working in the Global South. "Funds give me a pulse of what's happening on the ground level. They give me a level of granularity I just don't have individually from my desk in the US."

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That’s why collaborative funds working in the Global South offer a real opportunity for donors to engage deeply. “If you want to get money to the people closest to the ground, with the most wisdom, insight, and lived experience about how to actually solve problems in their context, then that is very, very hard to do sitting in an office in New York,” says Kathy Reich, director of the Building Institutions and Networks (BUILD) Initiative at the Ford Foundation. “That’s the first value of working with a Global South fund—that proximity and centering of local knowledge.”

Our analysis showed that funders underutilize these collaborative funds, however. Indeed, the donors for whom collaborative funds working in the Global South could be the best fit—high-net-worth individuals without large philanthropic teams, deep topical or geographic expertise, and relationships with actors on the ground—lag in participation in these funds, save for a few exceptions. Of the collaborative funds we surveyed, only 8 percent rely on individual donors for most of their contributions.

“Coming from an investment background, we want to have outsized impact,” says Alan McCormick, co-founder and partner at The Legatum Group, a pioneering funder of collaborative funds. He stresses the systemic potential of collaborative funds working in the Global South. “We’ve always talked about the good and the great. The good is changing a life. The great is changing a system, changing the paradigm of how we think about a problem.”

In the pages that follow, we highlight the unique value proposition of collaborative funds working in the Global South,<sup>2</sup> describe the larger landscape of these funds, and offer resources and practical next steps for funders to unlock the full philanthropic potential of collaboratives.

## **Research Methodology**

We derived these insights from a survey Bridgespan conducted in the second half of 2022. Of the nearly 200 funds that responded to the survey, the 74 that were working in the Global South constitute our primary sample. We then sent a brief follow-up survey, which received 38 unique and usable responses. Following that analysis, we conducted 16 in-depth interviews with leaders of these collaborative funds and funders of collaborative funds working in the Global South. Not all these collaborative funds and fund leaders we surveyed and interviewed are based in the Global South, but they all work in the Global South.

## How Collaborative Funds Working in the Global South Stand Out

“If you want innovations to grow and scale over time, the more they emerge organically from within communities, the better,” says Reich. “An argument for collaborative funds working in the Global South is their creativity and innovation. As these funds grow, there remains an awareness gap among donors.”

Philanthropic funding collaboratives have surged in the past decade, Bridgespan research has found.<sup>8</sup> In part, that’s because, as wealth has accumulated, interest in philanthropy has grown. We’ve also seen a concurrent shift away from more traditional forms of giving, including a trend away from launching new, big-budget foundations. Collaborative funds offer an attractive alternative to the philanthropic status quo. Still, so much potential remains untapped in these funding vehicles. As we sought in that research to understand the appeal of collaborative funds broadly, we found three prominent and intertwined factors at play: efficiency, effectiveness, and engagement. We explore these factors in the Global South in the sections below while keeping in mind, as Athena Ronquillo-Ballesteros, managing director of global climate strategies at Climate Lead, shared with us: “The overall pathway to change relies on deep local and regional action. Top-down funds in the Global North need to be balanced by bottom-up initiatives grounded in the Global South. Lasting global outcomes stem from the seeds sown by those closest to the challenges.”

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CLIMATE STRATEGIES, CLIMATE LEAD

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### Collaborative funds are efficient ways to manage the mechanics of giving

Many of these collaborative funds bring specialized expertise and an established track record in sourcing and due diligence practices. They often have deep relationships with local actors and have vetted networks—an advantage for donors who are eager to build issue-based or geographic knowledge efficiently and who don’t have big teams to do the work themselves. Local funds also can forecast potential political risks on the ground. “High-net-worth individuals look at us as a partner who can help identify where the needs are,” says Latanya Mapp, former CEO of the [Global Fund for Women](#) and current president and CEO of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors. “We have to find groups as they emerge, as they identify the problems, as they try to develop collective action and organize.”

Logistically, these collaborative funds enable donors to give across borders throughout the Global South with less friction. There are legal or security restrictions for US donors to give in certain countries, for example, and collaborative funds take on the work of navigating and complying with country-by-country regulatory procedures and processes. “We resolve a lot of the challenges in the architecture of philanthropy in terms of how money gets to be redistributed and how it arrives from a donor’s hands to support



Indigenous youth from Micronesia’s Laudato Si’ Club, a Global Greengrants Fund grantee partner, plant banana trees to improve environmental conditions in their local community. (Photo courtesy of Global Greengrants Fund)

grassroots movements,” says Laura García, president and CEO of the [Global Greengrants Fund](#), which mobilizes resources for environmental and social justice, making grants to civil society organizations and Indigenous federations globally.

Kate Mohan, senior foundation manager at the Target Foundation, agrees. “We are committed to ensuring compliance with local and national regulations in geographies where we fund, which requires managing through complexity and nuance,” she says. “We funded Dasra’s [Rebuild India Fund](#)—an efficient and effective approach to more directly provide resources to grassroots leaders, placing key parts of strategic decision making in the hands of those who work closest to the need.”

In times of crisis, those “challenges in the architecture” can become even greater roadblocks, limiting the flow of funds to the local communities in greatest need. Collaborative funds based in and working in the Global South are well placed to be nimble—they can move money quickly and step into a rapid-response role to close gaps even when that’s not their operating model. Collaborative funds also take on the liability of complying with funders’ accountability requirements—releasing local groups from much of the bureaucratic burden of applying for larger grants, which helps them focus on their core work.

“As a 23-year-old organization, we have developed certain institutional muscles by engaging with our grantees that facilitate trust,” says Ndana Bofu-Tawamba, executive

director of [Urgent Action Fund Africa](#). “We know that when crises erupt on the African continent, whether it is civil conflicts, outright war, pandemics, economic conflicts, or political instability, we reach out to frontline feminist defenders we have developed rapport with over many years. That’s not the work of a day. It’s political-movement-strengthening work that needs to be seriously resourced for the long run.”

When [Women’s Fund Asia](#) (WFA) reached out to its grantee partners as COVID-19 upended communities and restricted livelihoods everywhere, partners working with structurally excluded and marginalized communities shared that when their basic survival is under threat, they can’t do movement-building work. “So, we launched a special COVID-19 [support fund](#) and raised nearly \$1 million in two months so that the grantee partners wouldn’t have to tap into existing budgets,” says Anisha Chugh, executive director of WFA. In the years since, WFA has started similar funds to respond to a string of crises across the continent, quickly channeling support to communities that are often outside the reach of traditional philanthropy.

Our interviewees also underscored that collaborative funds help donors get past their hesitancy since they offer the specialized knowledge and proximate relationships donors lack. “We serve as a risk intermediary,” says Nick Grono, CEO of the [Freedom Fund](#), a global collaborative fund with the sole aim of helping end modern slavery. “We identify partners close to the ground and the communities impacted. If there’s a risk, then we’re the party responsible, not the funder.”

## **Funds are effective because they are proximate to communities and help build capacity**

One of the key differentiators of these funds is their ability to get proximate—to reach and resource local leaders and communities most impacted by the problems that a funder may seek to address. In fact, of the nearly 40 funds we followed up with, over 80 percent reported that more than three-quarters of their grantee organizations’ leadership teams are representative of the communities they serve. These funds often partner with early-stage and emergent groups funders may never uncover otherwise.

“We exclusively fund African-founded, African-led organizations,” says Atti Worku, co-CEO of the [African Visionary Fund](#) (AVF). “There’s a very direct line to proximate leaders, and funders often don’t have the kind of team or bandwidth to search for and go find them.”

There’s growing awareness in philanthropy of the power of proximity and trusting those closest to the problem to design and implement the solutions that maximize impact.

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Many funds working in the Global South anchor their approaches, from sourcing to due diligence and decision making, in principles associated with [trust-based philanthropy](#).

“Our basic premise is to make grants directly to the communities themselves for work they lead and execute,” says Maria Amália Souza, founder of Fundo Casa Socioambiental. “Our whole purpose as an institution is designed to reach and fund the otherwise unreachable and unfundable.” Fundo Casa Socioambiental has direct funding relationships with the Indigenous associations of more than half of the 385 distinct ethnicities across Brazil. “That sounds impossible,” she says. “It is impossible if you don’t have the mechanisms that we have.”

Souza describes the South American environmental funding landscape of the ‘80s and ‘90s as concentrated in the hands of a few very large, Global-North-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with a vision of land-based conservation not as deeply rooted in locally-led solutions. “Those big organizations became the reference for philanthropy and monopolized all the funding, while local activists got nothing,” she says. “But if you don’t fund the local people in the forest—the true guardians of these places—how are you going to save the forest?”

Another example is the [Pawanka Fund](#), an Indigenous-led fund that emerged from the 2014 UN World Conference on Indigenous Peoples to provide direct support to community-led organizations for the recovery and revitalization of Indigenous knowledge. Pawanka works to strengthen Indigenous movements on the local, regional, national, and global levels. In its 10 years, it has partnered with over 400 Indigenous organizations around the world.

“Our goal was to support local organizations that have little or no support from any other sources,” says Myrna Cunningham Kain, chair of the Guiding Committee of the Pawanka Fund. “This includes organizations led by Indigenous youth and women and Indigenous people with disabilities. We have been very inclusive from the beginning.”

While a core component of a fund’s business model is grantmaking, the vast majority also offer critical support aimed at building stronger, more resilient organizations and strengthening the larger ecosystem. Of the funds that responded to our survey, 96 percent provide additional support to grantees or applicants beyond funding, in what many funds call “accompaniment.” The most common types of support include technical assistance, donor introductions, and leadership development. “Funds rarely just dispense funding. They offer critical capacity building; produce knowledge; amplify smaller, more nascent organizations; and build community,” says Reich of the BUILD Initiative. “Those are often things we large, Global North-based funders just don’t have bandwidth to do and wouldn’t be all that great at if we tried.”

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Ronquillo-Ballesteros of Climate Lead also points out that many funds working in the Global South focus first on strengths in their capacity-building efforts and facilitate learning and sharing experiences across grantees. “It’s important to correct the misperception that there is no capacity in these countries,” she says. “Sometimes there are skills and resources in the Global South that industrialized countries lack.”

For example, [Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres](#), a feminist fund in Central America, facilitates convenings for grantees and other field leaders to meet, exchange knowledge, and create alliances across issues and geographies. [Fondo Semillas](#), a Mexico-based feminist fund, offers tailored training and capacity building for grantees based on an individualized needs assessment, which could include support related to communications, fundraising, strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation, and advocacy.

The Freedom Fund’s grantees report that these capacity-building efforts have helped them strengthen financial management, measure for impact, deepen government engagement, and sharpen overall management skills. Organizations have different strengths and needs, and the Freedom Fund, for example, works to ensure capacity-building efforts are grantee-directed, not top-down. “Partners take complete ownership over the capacity-building process and focus on areas of their choosing, rather than ours as the donor,” says Freedom Fund’s Grono.

What it comes down to, says Alexandra Garita, executive director of [Prospera](#), is that “you can’t divorce the accompaniment from grantmaking. These supports, together with connecting and promoting dialogue, are what builds movements.”

Movement building came up often in our interviews. Leaders of collaborative funds working in the Global South describe this approach in different ways—some talk of “movement building,” others of “collective action”—but each aims to solve complex and intertwined problems and operate with an ecosystem mindset. They bring a macro-level vision of problem solving and pursue multiple pathways that converge on a shared goal. Sixty-four percent of our survey respondents note that their primary investment thesis is to support a range of actors with a common aim.

García of Global Greengrants invites us to picture an organic whole, like a thriving reef in the ocean. “That’s what we fund,” she says. “We fund all the organisms in that ecosystem, from the corals to the algae and all the varied species of fish. The ability to consider the full context is the value of many of the funds working in the Global South.”

The Freedom Fund clusters its grants to frontline organizations with a geographic “hotspot” model. Some of these frontline partners work directly to free people from modern slavery,

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while others address root causes by improving education, health care, and jobs. For example, from 2015 to 2019, it supported 41 NGOs in India, zeroing in on ending bonded labor in specific communities—the brick kilns, stone quarries, and agriculture in the northern states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, and the cotton-spinning mills of Tamil Nadu in the south.

While fueling these frontline organizations, the Freedom Fund also engaged government, business, and other institutions to tackle the structures that allow exploitation to persist. Grantee frontline organizations brought together survivors to share their perspectives on an anti-trafficking bill with members of Parliament and strengthened accountability between lawmakers and marginalized communities. An external study showed a dramatic decrease in the prevalence of bonded labor in the two “hotspots” the Freedom Fund focused on—from 56 percent to 11 percent in 1,100 target villages across the two regions, or the equivalent of 125,000 fewer people toiling in bondage.<sup>9</sup>

“We’ve found that the power of our model comes from funding a large number of partners that aggregate and multiply the direct impact,” says Grono. “That clustering is key to driving deep change over time.”

### **Collaborative funds engage donors in a learning journey**

Collaborative funds working in the Global South give donors access to specialized issue-area knowledge and locally rooted expertise. A donor who engages a fund can get up to speed quickly on a range of solutions and build issue knowledge in unfamiliar geographies. Of the funds we surveyed, 81 percent reported that they actively work to inform and educate their donors. Some funds engage donors in a bespoke learning journey to deepen their understanding of an issue through the perspectives of those closest to the problem.

“One of the values we bring to donors is to accompany them in a process of seeing the way philanthropy has historically viewed Indigenous peoples,” says Pawanka Fund’s Cunningham Kain, “and inspire them to adjust to our way of working, with trust, respect, and reciprocity.”

Global Greengrants and Prospera, for example, have established a [Funder Learning and Action Co-Laboratory](#) that aims to break down siloed thinking in funding and illuminate the intersections between gender justice and climate justice. “We try to bring the donors along with a philosophy of learning how social change works in all its complexities,” says García.

AVF also takes a deliberate approach to learning with its funders, producing an “insider report” biannually and holding well-attended funder community calls several times a year. Discussions include such topics as AVF’s sourcing and selection process, regional ecosystem landscaping, and the rationale for AVF’s multisector approach. “It ends up

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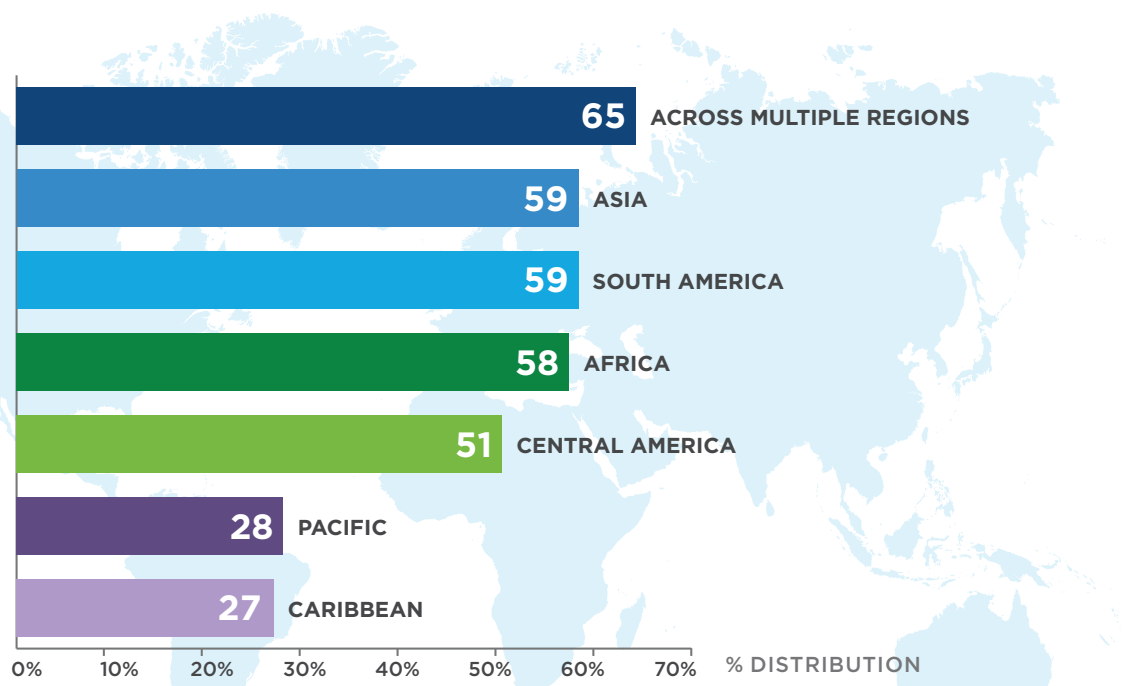
being a bridge for funders to understand the gaps that might exist between the funding landscape and the need on the ground,” says the AVF’s Worku.

Many of our interviewees noted the importance of accompaniment, not only in how collaborative funds engage with grassroots and frontline grantees, but also in how they engage with donors. “One of the founding principles of the [END Fund](#) is an awareness of the joy of philanthropic giving,” says Diana Benton Schechter, the fund’s COO. “We have a huge amount of rigor around our donor-experience journey, whether you join a field visit or receive a report on your donation, regardless of size.”

## The Landscape of Funds Operating in the Global South

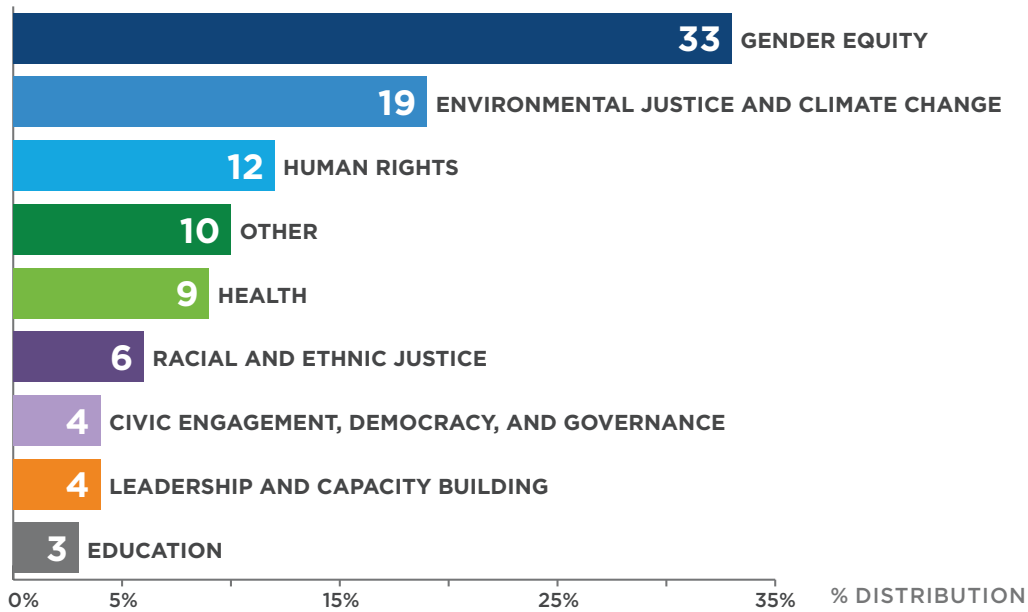
The number of collaborative funds working in the Global South has grown to at least 175 in the past two decades.<sup>10</sup> Of the approximately 70 collaborative funds that participated in our survey, 42 percent launched over the past 10 years, and 76 percent launched in the past 20 years. Yet they have remained relatively small—two-thirds of the funds we surveyed directed less than \$5 million in 2021—and could absorb and deploy far more funding. There are far more of these collaborative funds than most donors are aware of, and they are working across a wide range of issue areas and geographies.

**Figure 1. Collaborative funds work across multiple geographies in the Global South**



**Source:** Sample of 74 collaborative funds working in the Global South, based on a 2022 Bridgespan Group survey of 200 collaborative funds.

**Figure 2. On what issues do these collaborative funds work (primary issue specified)?**



**Source:** 2022 Bridgespan Group survey of collaborative funds.

While collaborative funds working in the Global South work across a wide range of issue areas, gender equality is the most prevalent area of focus, followed by environmental justice and climate change. We dig deeper into each below. To be sure, in our survey, collaborative funds identified one primary issue and as many secondary issues as they chose. And 89 percent of collaborative funds working in the Global South work on more than one issue, with a median of seven secondary issues, indicating how much funds work at the intersection of multiple issues.

### Gender equity

Over 80 percent of survey respondents indicated their collaborative fund had some focus on gender equity—and one-third said it was their primary focus. Several such funds have emerged in recent years; for example, the Black Feminist Fund focuses explicitly on supporting Black feminist movements, and the Equality Fund supports feminist movements worldwide.

One indication of growth in the field of gender-equity-focused collaborative funds comes from Prospera, which currently has 44 funds in its global network of women’s and feminist funds and expects to grow to 55 or 60 in the coming years. Most gender-equity-focused funds could absorb significantly more capital—a prominent opportunity for funders. Bridgespan research with [Shake the Table](#) has found that [collaborative](#)



**of respondents  
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some focus  
on gender equity**



Members of the Home-Based Women Workers Federation, Sindh Province, Pakistan. (Photo courtesy of Mama Cash/©Khaula Jamil)

[funds focused on gender equity](#) could deploy approximately 10 times their current funding.<sup>11</sup> Prospera members can fund only approximately 15 percent of their eligible yearly applications.

“I think that high-net-worth individuals, whether they’re on the African continent or in the Global North, have limited knowledge of the existence of feminist collaborative funds for various reasons,” says Nadia Ahidjo, director for partnerships and philanthropy at the [African Women’s Development Fund](#). “Maybe we’re not marketing oriented, or we don’t have access to the relationship building, and maybe we don’t have the dedicated staff to build those trusting relationships over a long period of time. We’re stretched thin.”

There’s no shortage of need for these collaborative funds, though. For instance, WFA is currently unable to resource 60 percent of the total eligible applications it receives as part of its grantmaking programs. Assumptions around the “absorptive capacity” of such funds are rooted in the paternalism of traditional Global North philanthropy, says WFA’s Chugh. “Feminist organizations are constantly having to push back against this construct that comes from the Global North and prove ourselves,” she notes. “It’s a myth, an excuse, to not invest in sustainable feminist movements and institutions.”

Ahidjo agrees. “Absorptive capacity? That’s fake news,” she says. “We can manage the resources. We have all the systems, and the processes are transparent and accountable. We need to dispel this myth of feminist funds being this small entity somewhere working within movements. Yes, we’re within and alongside movements. And yes, we can move the money.”

With greater resources, women’s movements can indeed make a sustainable, outsized impact. Back in 2001, labor rights activist Zehra Khan began informally organizing a group

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AFRICAN WOMEN’S DEVELOPMENT FUND AHIDJO

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of home-based female garment workers in the Sindh province of Pakistan. [Mama Cash](#)—the world’s first international women’s fund, founded in 1983—supported this grassroots movement from its early days, through and beyond the legal registration of the [Home-Based Women Workers Federation](#) in 2009.

In 2013, the federation introduced a draft law—the culmination of years of research, strategizing, and incremental advocacy work—that would give home-based workers access to the same rights and benefits as other workers. After another four years of dogged campaigning and lobbying, the law—16 years in the making—passed. Now these long-exploited laborers—at least five million in Sindh alone—have access to social security, pensions, and a minimum wage and can harness their collective bargaining power.

“Here’s a seed that grew into something that only this community of women workers could have imagined and made real,” says Saranel Benjamin, co-executive director of Mama Cash. “And we’re just one actor in this donor ecosystem, alongside other women’s funds, doing what we are best placed to do—moving money to where it matters most and to who can make the most impact.”

## Environmental justice and climate change

We also see accelerating momentum around two different kinds of funds—climate-focused funds and Indigenous-led funds centered on environmental justice. Fifty-five percent of funds surveyed indicated that their fund had some focus on climate change.

Indigenous-led funds are also becoming an increasingly critical avenue for addressing the climate crisis as well as strengthening livelihoods and rights for marginalized Indigenous peoples. There are now 28 funds that comprise the [Indigenous Led Funds Working Group](#), many of which are doing work in the Global South. We also see increasing efforts, primarily led by the International Funders for Indigenous Peoples and Pawanka, to strengthen collaboration and coordination among these funds.



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One example of this increased collaboration is the Wayfinders Circle, a joint initiative of Pawanka, the Council of Elders of the World Union of Indigenous Spiritual Practitioners, and Nia Tero, a peer funder in solidarity with Indigenous communities. The Wayfinders Circle is a coalition and learning network of Indigenous leaders and guardians from around the world who protect their lands, waters, and territories. “We understood that it’s important to create a movement of Indigenous organizations, bringing together Indigenous peoples who have gained recognition and a space where they exercise their governance system,” says Cunningham Kain.

In the Wayfinders Circle, disparate Indigenous groups share their stories and lessons from their governance structures and fights for autonomy, from the Wampis Nation of northern Peru to the Sámiid Riikkasearvi of northern Sweden. The Gabbra of northern Kenya exchange knowledge with the Blackfoot Confederacy of North America and the Udege people of southern Russia. The Wayfinders Circle has testified in front of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and collectively they are the guardians of 38 million hectares of land and 73 million hectares of oceans.

Cunningham Kain says this is just the beginning. “We have grown now to 15 Wayfinders, and the dream is to have 100 Wayfinders,” she says. “Imagine how strong that circle could be, applying different innovative ways to safeguard their territories.”

### **Working at the intersections**

Many of our interviewees pointed out the potential of working at the intersection of climate and gender and cautioned against funders’ tendency to think in rigid issue categories. “Greengrants and Prospera have jointly invested at the intersection of gender and the environment for 10 years because of the silos happening in the philanthropic



Indigenous women in Peru demand respect for their territorial rights during an event organized by Global Greengrants Fund grantee partner Organización Indígena Siekopai del Perú. (Photo courtesy of Global Greengrants Fund)



sector,” says García of Global Greengrants. “When you invest in gender justice, you are actually advancing climate justice. When you invest in climate justice, you are advancing women’s rights.”

The complexity of intersectionality is core to the movement building of women’s and feminist funds working in the Global South, says Chugh, executive director of WFA. “Frontline defender groups—which are most of our partners—are addressing multiple issues at the same time,” she says. “Whether it’s an Indigenous women’s group based in Bangladesh looking at common property rights or access to natural resources like clean water, these are groups with multiple marginalities working to secure broad social, political, and economic rights.”

## Community foundations in the Global South

In the Global South, many funds that focus on multiple issues are relatively small and identify as community foundations—a descriptor that may differ from the image of a community foundation familiar to funders in the United States and Western Europe, which are often large, multibillion-dollar organizations that host significant donor-advised funds alongside community programs. Community foundations in the Global South, which may also be known as community philanthropy organizations (CPOs), often surface and consolidate assets that already exist within communities—not just money, but also skills, knowledge, and networks—in addition to deploying outside funding sources. These small community foundations and CPOs are diverse and span a wide range of geographies. Examples include the [Monteverde Community Fund](#) in Costa Rica, the [Kenya Community Development Foundation](#) in Kenya, and ICOM - [Instituto Comunitário Grande Florianópolis](#) in southern Brazil. They’re an essential part of the architecture of locally-owned development.



**of collaborative funds  
working in the  
Global South work on  
more than one issue.**

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With this emphasis on local resources by design, community foundations—like all funds working in the Global South—shift traditional philanthropic power dynamics, says Jenny Hodgson, executive director of the [Global Fund for Community Foundations](#). “These are radical institutions in many places where no one would ever believe that this kind of thing was possible,” she tells us. “In this model, grantmaking is a way to encourage local giving to create a virtuous circle where people could give relatively small amounts to an institution that would then grant that on to somebody else in the community. Because they’re proximate, because they know their communities, because they have the trust, they can do things quickly and with mutuality.”

Hodgson says this is a fundamentally different frame through which to see philanthropy—to center local resources as the fuel for social change. “I think the power of these two words together, ‘community’ and ‘foundation,’ is extraordinarily important,” says Hodgson. “One is around ownership and participation, and the other is around longevity and

durability. It has simply not been a luxury of civil society in the Global South and Central and Eastern Europe to have institutions that were meant to last longer than a donor gave them permission to last. That's the radical innovation."

## How Funders Can Get Started

The potential of collaborative funds operating in the Global South isn't just a theory. They have already seen powerful results. Consider the END Fund, whose mission is to eliminate neglected tropical diseases. The fund launched in 2012, and within five years had moved \$75 million to local partners. Those partners then treated 140 million people, focusing on six diseases in several African countries, Afghanistan, and India in collaboration with local partners, NGOs, drug makers, and health ministries.

In Burundi, the END Fund set out to eliminate trachoma, a leading cause of blindness from infectious diseases worldwide. The END Fund has partnered with NGOs and government to distribute Zithromax antibiotics at a large scale, perform eye surgeries, and conduct impact surveys with great effect. [Surveillance surveys](#) conducted from 2020 to 2021 indicated that the country has effectively eliminated trachoma, and the World Health Organization is poised to certify Burundi as trachoma-free.

Achieving that milestone in Burundi was no accident. It required deep trust, expertise, and coordination by the END Fund, which played a critical role in identifying, vetting, and facilitating collaboration among the players in a complex system. The fund supported a range of entities through grantmaking, technical assistance, and convening to ensure that the issue was approached with the right combination of diverse and expert perspectives.

Importantly, 12 signatories of the Giving Pledge have longstanding funding relationships with the END Fund. "Our mission and vision are intensely specific, and we're now the primary stewards of philanthropic capital for eliminating neglected tropical diseases," says Schechter, COO at the END Fund. "With this mission, donors do not need to wait a lifetime to have a significant impact; they can see tens of millions of lives changed within a single year. That immediacy and intentionality is compelling."

Compelling, indeed, yet still underutilized. When Natasha Desterro Dolby was a program officer for a private office serving two dozen family foundations in the San Francisco Bay Area, the unwillingness of funders to engage in collaborative philanthropy astonished her. "The foundations I was representing at the time didn't want anything to do with collaboration," she says. "For me, that was the epitome of failed philanthropy—that insistence on doing everything alone. But thankfully the younger generation of funders has a greater awareness of philanthropy's role as risk capital and a greater understanding that collaboration, and specifically investing in pooled philanthropic funds, increases the potential for impact on the polycrises we're facing."

Dolby thinks that this generational evolution means more individual funders will engage with funds working in the Global South. "Funds give a philanthropist—no matter where they are in their journey—an on-ramp to the issue in a local cultural and geographical context," she notes, "whether you know nothing about local grassroots organizations or you're a more sophisticated funder who sees that your resources can't do it alone. It's an incredible opportunity to leverage resources and knowledge to create greater impact."

Reich of the BUILD Initiative suggests funders use the same approach to due diligence they would employ for other lines of investment. “Try to figure out who’s actually in the field,” she says. “Meet with them, try to understand what they do, meet their grantees, and don’t be afraid to start small and spread out your bets.”

As we’ve shown above, funds working in the Global South can be an incredibly powerful vehicle in a funder’s global grantmaking portfolio, particularly for funders moving into a new issue area or geography. A [database of funds](#), organized by both issue area and geography, is available on our website.<sup>12</sup> We hope funders will use these resources to find intersections with their individual philanthropic goals.

As counsel for funders interested in engaging with funds working in the Global South, McCormick of The Legatum Group suggests approaching the process much in the way they would with their private-sector investment. “In the commercial space, you go and look for the highest-return fund managers that you can find,” he says. “My advice is to find that vehicle that’s going to create the biggest impact. Our time and capital are limited. So, let’s steward them to the very highest impact that we can. Some of these funds are the highest use of capital in their space.”

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## Endnotes

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- 2 [The State of Global Giving by U.S. Foundations: 2022 Edition](#), Council on Foundations, 2022.
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- 6 Torbjørn Gjefsen, [“Indigenous people get less than 1% of climate funding? It’s actually worse \(commentary\).”](#) Mongabay, November 10, 2021.
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- 8 Alison Powell, Wendy Castillo, and Simon Morfit, [The Philanthropic Collaborative Landscape](#), The Bridgespan Group, September 18, 2023.
- 9 [Unlocking what works: How community-based interventions are ending bonded labour in India](#), The Freedom Fund, September 22, 2019.
- 10 This set of 175-plus funds surfaced through publicly available information found via desk research. They vary widely in size, issue area, and geographic focus. Many are community foundations focused on a specific community, region, or country (e.g., the Monteverde Community Fund in Costa Rica; Kenya Community Development Foundation). Others are multibillion-dollar global funds, such as The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria. Additionally, some organizations host multiple funds, each of which we have included in this analysis.
- 11 Pamela Shifman, Swatee Deepak, Tynesha McHarris, Anna Quinn, Nidhi Sahni, Deborah Bielak, Stephanie Kater, and Jasmine Reliford, [Lighting the Way: A Report for Philanthropy on the Power and Promise of Feminist Movements](#), The Bridgespan Group, April 12, 2022.
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