



Supporting Community-led Organizations to End AIDS: The transformative impact of long-term, flexible funding

The critical importance of anti-colonial funding

Community-led organizations (CLOs), run by and for their communities, are at the heart of effective HIV responses. Drawing on deep community connections, CLOs navigate the complex and nuanced cultural, social and economic contexts that can drive the HIV epidemic and they do so with great care and commitment to their communities. They are experts in their local HIV epidemics and work in ways others cannot.

When CLOs are well resourced and have the flexibility to respond to their communities' diverse and changing needs, they are powerful agents of change and drivers of sustainable development. Long-term, flexible funding allows CLOs to respond effectively to HIV and also mitigate the impacts of climate disasters, respond to new epidemics, and extend the reach and impact of government programs.

The Stephen Lewis Foundation recently undertook an assessment of the impacts of our long-term partnerships with three community-led organizations. We found that funding CLOS in anti-colonial ways results in greater impact in the short term and contributes to the staying power of CLOs, which has a multiplying effect over time.

This model of support accelerates and sustains the impact of other investments in HIV programming and community development by:

- ▶ unfettering CLOs from the restrictions of project-based funding, allowing them to collectively define their goals and implement long-term solutions to program and service gaps in their communities;
- ▶ ensuring community safety nets are in place when crises strike;
- ▶ reducing unnecessary and burdensome administrative processes, creating more time for genuine organizational priorities;
- ▶ supporting impact that is both deep in substance and wide in reach, at community, family and individual levels;
- ▶ and by strengthening CLOs by allowing their staff and programming to steadily grow over time to better serve community needs, particularly for those experiencing oppression and discrimination.

Weathering the ups and downs of the funding environment

Farm Orphan Support Trust (FOST), located in the Honde Valley in rural Zimbabwe, was founded in the late 1990s to support children affected by HIV living in farming communities through a kinship care model which sees orphaned children remaining within their own communities and families — often with grandmothers. In 2015, FOST experienced a funding crisis that threatened the organization. FOST had relied on support from several international donors, which had enabled them to run offices in six districts with a team of 30 staff members. However, when a number of international NGOs who had registered themselves as local NGOs received the grants instead of FOST, the organization was forced to drastically scale down operations to only one district and downsize to just five staff members. These changes significantly weakened their management structure and operations.

During this crisis, the SLF stood with FOST. Flexible funding provided by the SLF allowed FOST to hire Program Manager Blessing Mutema to help fill the void left by the loss of their management team. Blessing has played a crucial role in rebuilding FOST's operations. He developed a strategy, oversaw staff and project implementation, conducted monitoring and evaluation, wrote donor reports, successfully re-engaged previous funders, rebuilt the organization's reputation, and gradually increased its funding.

While FOST's success can be credited to Blessing and dedicated staff and volunteers, the SLF has played a vital role in ensuring FOST's survival during that difficult time. By providing a level of predictability in funding, the SLF supported the FOST in weathering a financial crisis caused by a precarious funding environment.



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Stephen Lewis Foundation has been able to respond to the real needs because they give you that space to determine what kind of support you want to give [to your community].

– Blessing Mutema
Director, Farm Orphan
Support Trust



Ensuring impact doesn't end when a grant does



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Our partnership with Stephen Lewis Foundation is that without unnecessary influence, they were supporting what we want to do. ... So instead of coming and saying this is what we fund and diverting maybe where we are going, all the time they were supporting what we dreamed of doing.

– Palesa Mphohle
Founding Member, Touch
Roots Africa

Touch Roots Africa (TRA), located in the kingdom of Lesotho, was founded in 2004 by four staff members of an international organization that was closing down. These founding staff were committed to continuing to support vulnerable children in Lesotho through peer support programs for young people and by identifying gaps in government child-protection policies and piloting interventions to fill those gaps.

With deep relationships in several communities in Lesotho and significant, impressive experience, TRA has been able to attract grants from several large, international funders. However, the funding for these projects often ends just as impact is starting to show. In some cases, the SLF's flexible funding has allowed TRA to sustain the most impactful of these initiatives. For example, TRA was seeing significant results from a USAID-funded internship and entrepreneurship project that addressed the needs of young people who had finished school but were struggling to find employment opportunities. The project provided young women with new skills and job opportunities that allowed them to prevent, reduce, or eliminate reliance on transactional sex for survival. It also supported young people to start their own businesses. When USAID funding ended, rather than ending the project, TRA redirected some of the SLF's flexible funding to sustain it.

Adapting and responding in the face of crisis

The Musasa Project was established in 1988 to address gender-based violence in Zimbabwe through direct support to survivors of violence and by improving the capacity of the public, the court system, and law enforcement to respond to gender-based violence. By offering a safe space and comprehensive assistance, Musasa empowers survivors to rebuild their lives and begin to process and heal multiple traumas.

CLOs' deep community connections and their trusted relationships with community members position them as the first, and often only, responders during climate and health emergencies. In recent years, communities in Zimbabwe have been hit hard by Cyclone Idai, COVID-19, and Cyclone Freddy. Musasa has been there throughout not only to continue to support women experiencing violence but also to address the ways climate change has impacted women's livelihoods.

While demand for Musasa's services has increased significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic began, their funding base has diminished. Many international funders have shifted their priorities to the war in Ukraine and climate change. Funders who back gender-based violence interventions are looking for new and "innovative" projects, leaving little funding available for the core costs of running shelters.

On a daily basis Musasa staff members are faced with the reality of not having sufficient financial resources to meet all of the community's needs. In addition, many staff members have experienced or are experiencing trauma in their own lives and face vicarious trauma at work. The toll on staff mental health and well-being is immense. In response to the needs articulated by our partners, the SLF was able to expand funding to Musasa and other GBV organizations to allow the organization to prioritize staff mental health and well-being. This support has not solved all of the problems Musasa faces, but it has supported an environment of increased healing and rejuvenation for staff, allowing them to better serve their communities and increasing the chances Musasa will be strong and ready the next time an emergency hits.



Photo Credit: Eva Gilliam

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If there's something that stands out about the Foundation's support, it's the flexibility of it. We always talk about the Foundation as our all-weather friend, no matter what the organization goes through.

– Vimbainashe Mutendereki
Director, Musasa

