



Mama Cash

Location:

Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Annual Grantmaking:

Approximately €6 million

Year Established:

1983

Type of Grantmaker:

International Women's Fund

Mission:

Mama Cash's vision is that every woman, girl, trans, and intersex person has the power and resources to participate fully and equally in creating a peaceful, just, and sustainable world. Mama Cash supports women's, girls', trans, and intersex people's groups with funds, and also shares knowledge and networking opportunities.



POWER IN PROCESSES:

Insights from a Top-Performing Global Funder

INTERVIEWEES:

TAMARA PELS-IDROBO TAPIA

Programme Associate for Latin America and the Caribbean

SHIKHA SETHIA

Programme Officer for Money - Labour Rights

[Research](#) conducted by the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) about how to build strong relationships between funders and their grantees finds that one important component is creating a grant selection process that is actually helpful in strengthening grantees. In the best-case scenario, a funder's application and selection process sets the stage for a positive relationship characterised by productive, meaningful discussions — and mutual respect. Separately, funders can strive to design their reporting and evaluation processes in such a way that they lead to learning, reflection, and improvement on the part of grantees.

But this is easier said than done. Despite best intentions, funder selection, reporting, and evaluation processes can sometimes turn out to be time-intensive and burdensome to grantees — and, in some cases, add no value to grantees at all. Not only that, they might not actually collect information that funder staff actually use either. So how does a funder build and implement processes that are helpful — both for themselves and for their grantees?

The Amsterdam-based international women's fund Mama Cash supports feminist groups globally working toward a world in which every woman, girl, trans, and intersex person has the power and resources to participate fully and equally. In its 2020 [Grantee Perception Report \(GPR\)](#), grantee-partners supported by Mama Cash rated the fund in the top 5 percent of CEP's overall comparative dataset for the helpfulness of its selection process in strengthening

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Let's put the power of change in [grantees'] hands. The grant is just a tool that will support them to do that work better.

grantees' organisations and/or programmes. Moreover, grantees rated Mama Cash in the top 10 percent of CEP's dataset for the extent to which its reporting process was a helpful opportunity for grantees to reflect and learn, and the extent to which the evaluation generated information useful to other organisations.

Tamara Pels-Idrobo Tapia, programme associate for Latin America and the Caribbean, and Shikha Sethia, programme officer for Money - Labour rights, shared their thoughts on which approaches they believe have been key to building processes that grantee-partners find helpful.

REVIEWING APPLICANTS HOLISTICALLY

Mama Cash seeks to support grantee organisations by providing flexible, core, multiyear funding, Sethia says. "We're looking to fund nonprofits and activists in a holistic way," she explains. "While projects typically get all the attention, enabling costs like overhead, employee compensation, and office supplies are equally important to fund." Given this approach, Mama Cash's selection process is centred on examining and understanding the mission and vision of the organisations they are looking to support.

First, the fund requires applicants to send a brief letter of interest to provide high-level organisational context and a short explanation of how the grant funds will be used. If the applicant meets Mama Cash's criteria, they are then asked to answer more detailed questions about their organisation and its work. ("We aim to provide applicants with specific feedback at each stage," Pels-Idrobo Tapia notes.) Then, applicants are invited to a conversation where they and programme staff collaboratively start working on grant planning, before the final step of submitting a work plan.

"By splitting up the process in smaller steps, we hope applicants are able to more effectively allocate their time," Pels-Idrobo Tapia says.

COLLECTIVE DECISION MAKING AND POWER SHARING

In order to make the grantmaking process more participatory, no grant is approved until Mama Cash's "collective decision moment," in which the entire programme staff convenes and discusses all potential grantees together, Sethia says. "We select our grantees together by voting, allowing us to share the decision-making power and leverage the expertise of everyone at the table," she explains.

This principle of "sharing power" not only influences Mama Cash's internal processes, Pels-Idrobo Tapia explains, but it is also driving the fund toward a more participatory grantmaking process in which they cede decision-making power to the communities impacted by funding decisions. To this end, Pels-Idrobo Tapia says Mama Cash has "begun by including local advisors in our selection process." These advisors are on-the-ground activists familiar with local movements and context who can provide relevant information and insights about applicants before programme staff get to the "collective decision moment," Pels-Idrobo Tapia explains.

In the future, Pels-Idrobo Tapia anticipates Mama Cash will be recruiting a larger number of local advisors and involving them on an even deeper level, as their perspectives have already proven to be invaluable to the fund.



Social change takes time and it's a process of living, struggling, and striving. It's not a project with indicators that indicate whether or not you've been successful.



ENCOURAGING SELF REFLECTION AND HONEST DIALOGUE

Early on, Mama Cash had asked very precise monitoring questions, requiring grantees to report on their financial activities in great detail. But the fund quickly realised that this was unrealistic since “about 98 percent of our grantees do not work behind a computer,” Sethia says, but rather are activists and members of grassroot community groups “hitting the road to fight for a changing world.”

Mama Cash staff felt that the level of detail they were asking of grantees was pedantic and ultimately not useful, particularly since, as a core funder, Mama Cash aims to support its partners holistically in achieving their goals. “We’ve adjusted our reporting and evaluation methodology to include only a limited number of value-add questions,” Pels-Idrobo Tapia says, while “trying not to burden [grantees] too much by asking for excessive indicators or numbers.”

Nowadays, Mama Cash asks grantees to complete a self-assessment once a year, which includes self-reflection questions like, “How was your work able to influence the community?” and, “What were the needs, challenges, and successes of the past year?” On the basis of this self-assessment, Mama Cash’s programme associates and grantees have a frank conversation, which allows grantees to surface challenges or any changes in their work or context. Pels-Idrobo Tapia says this approach creates a true win-win situation because it allows grantees to candidly discuss their work with staff, while at the same time providing Mama Cash with actionable feedback.

Yet, “the reporting process provides only one data point in the ongoing relationship with grantees,” Sethia says. “The strong relationships Mama Cash programme associates have built with grantees allow them to speak truthfully and engage in transparent dialogue.” This observation is consistent with patterns CEP identifies in its [research](#) on the conditions for strong funder-grantee relationships. Having such an honest dialogue allows programme staff to learn alongside grantees and assess how both parties can improve their work and enact meaningful social change.



We don’t try to really burden [grantees] so much with excessive indicators. We understand that they’re not behind a computer in an office for the sake of preparing information for reporting to donors. They’re really fighting for a changing world.



If you’d like to learn more about understanding and improving your relationships with grantees, including through collecting grantee feedback via the **Grantee Perception Report (GPR)**, contact CEP Manager, Assessment and Advisory Services, **Charlotte Brugman**, who is based in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, at charlotteb@cep.org.



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