

Scaling What Works

A LEARNING INITIATIVE OF



GRANTMAKERS FOR
EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONS

THE PROMISE AND PITFALLS OF LOCAL AND NATIONAL FUNDER COLLABORATIONS

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE SOCIAL INNOVATION FUND

A key objective of the *Scaling What Works* initiative has been to translate insight and learning from grantmaker intermediaries involved with the Social Innovation Fund and share them with the broader philanthropic community. The fifth guide in our Lessons Learned series presents the benefits and challenges of partnerships between local and national funders, and highlights key considerations for both kinds of funders to foster success in their collaboration.

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INTRODUCTION

A multitude of sparks can spur collaboration between local and national funders — a match requirement, a natural disaster, overlapping interests, and so forth. But there are just as many obstacles that can upend partnerships, including power dynamics and conflicting agendas. Successful collaboration, regardless of the impetus, requires humility, curiosity, shared goals and a willingness to take direction from the people and communities closest to the issues that partners are attempting to tackle.

Sometimes, an openness to new ways of working together can enable local and national funders to take advantage of new opportunities to advance their work and become stronger partners along the way. For many years, the Annie E. Casey Foundation provided funding to Mile High United Way in Denver to implement a large-scale community change initiative that the national foundation had developed. When the time came to close down that initiative, the two organizations had a series of conversations about the future of their work together. Leaders at Mile High United Way felt that efforts aimed at increasing grade-level reading had a lot of momentum in the state and would thrive with continued investment.

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In 2011, Mile High United Way propelled this work significantly when it became a Social Innovation Fund grantmaking intermediary. The Casey Foundation signed on to help Mile High United Way meet the SIF's one-to-one match requirement. Together with local grantees, the two funders would pursue the ambitious goal of raising third-grade literacy rates in Colorado by 25 percent over the next four years.

The SIF project has produced a meaningful shift in the relationship between Mile High United Way and the Casey Foundation — from grantee-grantmaker to co-investors or partners. The new collaboration has flourished for several reasons. First, the organizations had a solid pre-existing relationship, with a history of trust and open communication. Second, the larger, national partner (Casey) has been willing to take a backseat, defer to the direction of the funder on the ground and build on existing local momentum, rather than attempt to start something new. For its part, Mile High United Way, the smaller, place-based funder, brought valuable local knowledge and connections and has been comfortable sharing information and advice with its national partner. This type of collaboration is both impactful and necessary.

“With local funders as partners we can take informed risks, and learn from those, see what actually made a difference, and find out how to improve,” said Dennis Campa, associate director of state policy reform and advocacy at the Annie E. Casey Foundation. “We have to evolve, and that means looking for different relationships that will accelerate the results we want to see in the world.”

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ABOUT THE SOCIAL INNOVATION FUND

The Social Innovation Fund is an initiative of the federal government's Corporation for National and Community Service intended to improve the lives of people in low-income U.S. communities. It does so by mobilizing public and private resources to grow promising, innovative, community-based solutions that have evidence of compelling impact in three areas of priority need: **economic opportunity, healthy futures and youth development.**

The Social Innovation Fund awards funds to grantmaking institutions (intermediaries), which provide the grantmaking mechanisms to deliver Social Innovation Fund dollars locally. Such organizations have a track record of identifying, supporting and investing in the growth of promising community-based solutions. Each intermediary is required to match its federal grant dollar-for-dollar, in cash, and then regrant the funding to subgrantee organizations it has selected through an open and competitive process.

The subgrantees selected by the intermediaries must operate programs to improve measurable outcomes in one or more of the fund's designated issue areas and are required to generate a dollar-for-dollar cash match for their grants. As a result, the Social Innovation Fund provides leverage by aggregating philanthropic and government resources so that the most effective approaches can be expanded to reach more people in need and key lessons can be captured and broadly shared.

To learn more, visit www.nationalservice.gov/innovation.

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THE PROS AND CONS OF PARTNERSHIP

Partnerships involving local and national funders, like Mile High United Way and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, can produce powerful results. National funders often benefit from the local knowledge of place-based funders, who have a deep understanding of the needs, resources and politics in their community and who can draw on their networks and credibility to engage stakeholders who might otherwise distrust a national player. Local funders are able to leverage their investments with national dollars and gain field wide perspective on complex problems that national grantmakers bring to the table. Many also report that national grantmakers have helped them move projects forward and have raised the profile of local work by showcasing it on a national stage. Most important, when local and national funders come together and pool their respective resources — whether money, knowledge or connections — they have the opportunity to make faster, better progress on serious social problems.

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At times, it is simply this desire for amplified impact that drives national and local funders to collaborate. Other catalysts include joint responses to natural disasters or other crises, personal connections between foundation staff and board members or — as was true for SIF grantmaking intermediaries like Mile High United Way — a formal match requirement. These external catalysts can provide compelling reasons to work together. Yet none of them is sufficient, by itself, to ensure a successful partnership.

Further, forging successful partnerships between local and national funders has its own set of challenges, and the history of these relationships is sometimes fraught. The challenges inherent in any partnership are exacerbated when one partner has greater knowledge about the community and the other has greater resources. Complicating matters, local funders who fear losing access to resources from a powerful national partner may be reluctant to talk candidly about the nature of the relationship. In some instances, difficult partnerships between local and national grantmakers have led to failed projects, burned bridges and wasted resources.

Perhaps out of fear of such perils, local and national funders are still not working together as often or as deeply as they could be, considering the many benefits these partnerships can yield.

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“There has been leadership in the community and family foundation sector on this front, but we still have too many national funders parachuting in and local funders finding out later,” said Jim Applegate, former vice president of strategic impact at the Lumina Foundation for Education, Inc., a national grantmaker. “This is becoming less common, but it happens, and it should never happen.”

This guide provides advice for funders who are either engaged in or considering a partnership with other grantmakers whose geographic reach is different from their own. It draws on a broad range of experiences, including those of both grantmakers receiving support through the SIF and participants in other philanthropic partnerships, to shed light on the potential advantages of local-national funder partnerships and to distill lessons that enhance their effectiveness. Our conversations with a diverse group of grantmakers revealed that local and national funders must be proactive about identifying and overcoming the challenges that can plague such partnerships, and their experience offers guidance for both types of funders about how to develop and nurture successful local-national collaboration.

Of course, partnerships between local and national funders are varied and complex, and the experiences of those who have tried to make such partnerships work hold richer lessons than can be captured in these pages. Nonetheless, we hope the insights assembled here help funders of all types work together to bring sustained, positive change to the people and communities they serve.

Why National Funders Should Partner With Local Funders

National grantmakers have much to gain by working with place-based funders. Actively partnering with local grantmakers can make it easier to identify a community's most pressing problems, to invest in the right solutions and to sustain those solutions over time. Local grantmakers offer the following:

- **ON-THE-GROUND EXPERTISE**
- **MOMENTUM**
- **CREDIBILITY**

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ON-THE-GROUND EXPERTISE

Local funders know best what's happening in their communities. They understand the issues that individuals and families face and can make helpful recommendations about areas in need of investment. Many national grantmakers value introductions to strong community-based organizations whose missions line up with their own. Local funders are well positioned to identify successful programs — and to suggest supports that might help these programs become even more effective. This was true for the Duke Endowment, a local funder and match-funding partner to SIF grantmaking intermediary the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. “We have local knowledge about which organizations are the high-performing ones in our communities,” said Rhett Mabry, vice president at the Duke Endowment. “We have a good sense of an organization’s leadership, their resources and their governance — all of which are critical to any kind of success.”

Local grantmakers’ knowledge often extends beyond the nonprofit sector to business leaders and policymakers, who can also be vital partners in social change efforts. “Local foundations work in the community — we know the players,” said Lisa Cremin, director of the Metropolitan Atlanta Arts Fund at the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta. “We can illustrate how public policies influence the issues we’re working on, and we can help leverage initiatives that are already under way.”

MOMENTUM

Indeed, building on work that is already happening is a good strategy for national funders that want to have a lasting impact. There are numerous examples of national foundations introducing brand new programs in communities and then finding it difficult to get them off the ground or sustain them over time. Involving local grantmakers makes it more likely that a community will own an initiative and will find ways to support it even after a national funder has moved on.

“What you want is a situation where there is ongoing work, and your involvement will accelerate that work because your efforts are complementary,” said Campa of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. “It costs a lot to build and sustain capacity, and we aren’t going to be there forever, so it is better for the community to own it. We’d rather co-invest with people who already have local ownership.”

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When national funders arrive in communities uninvited or unannounced, the reality is that local stakeholders often perceive them as interlopers. Conversely, when national funders reach out to and actively partner with place-based grantmakers, they are signaling that they respect the community's native resources and knowledge. Local funders can serve as emissaries in the community, conveying some of their own credibility to a national funder and increasing the odds that other local actors will be receptive to collaboration.

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FOR NATIONAL FUNDERS: WHAT NOT TO DO

- **Don't Parachute In:** Reach out to local funders and leaders in the nonprofit sector before you enter a new community. Ask a lot of questions, get the lay of the land and secure local ambassadors before initiating high-profile work.
- **Don't Impose Your Ideas:** A strong local perspective can make your resources — whether funding or access to information or expertise — exponentially more valuable. Be willing to take advice and direction from local informants. This builds good will and allows you to learn, over time, how you can be most beneficial to a community.
- **Don't Neglect the Relationship:** There is no greater testament to your interest in and commitment to a community than taking the time to be in a real working relationship with local partners. Building trust and rapport encourages partners to be authentic with you and leads to stronger, more successful collaboration.
- **Don't Hide Your Plans (Even If You Don't Have Them All Mapped Out):** Clearly articulate what you are hoping to accomplish to local funders and discuss whether your goals and theirs align. Once you commit to a partnership, follow through and be transparent if you anticipate a change in plans. Talk openly with local funders about how they will sustain the work if and when your support ends.

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Why Local Funders Should Partner With National Funders

Local grantmakers also benefit from forming partnerships with national funders.

The money, perspective and influence of a national funder can be truly transformative for a community-based initiative. When goals are well aligned, a national partner can greatly increase the impact of local grantmakers' work. National funders' assets include the following:

- **MONEY**
- **NEW INSIGHT AND KNOWLEDGE**
- **STATURE**

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MONEY

The funding that national grantmakers bring to the table is critical, especially in communities with more limited resources. The size and scope of funds that national grantmakers have at their disposal often dwarf the money that local funders can distribute and can generate new exposure to attract other potential investors to the work.

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NEW INSIGHTS AND KNOWLEDGE

National funders bring fresh insights and a broader perspective about what is and isn't working in other communities and why. They can introduce local funders to promising strategies from all over the country, and they have the resources to do homework on issues — literature reviews, field scans, market research, and so forth — which produces valuable information they can share with local partners. Advance knowledge of emerging trends or upcoming shifts in public policy may be particularly important.

“National grantmakers have a lot of exposure to changes happening on a national level that might not have hit at the local level yet,” said Vignetta Charles, senior vice president at AIDS United, a SIF intermediary. “And if you aren't transparent about what those are, it can be surprising to your local partners when those changes eventually trickle down.”

National funders can play a vital role by sharing this kind of intelligence and helping communities prepare for what's coming.

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STATURE

Support from a national grantmaker can give a project gravitas and inspire action among local players. This may be especially useful when place-based funders are dealing with controversial or under-recognized program areas. For instance, Katie Brisson from the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan shared a story about the 1994 creation of the HOPE Fund. The foundation had not previously been engaged in LGBT issues but was considering launching the HOPE Fund as an endowed initiative to support local organizations serving the LGBT community. A challenge grant from a national funder helped persuade the board to move ahead with the fund.

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Similarly, Mary Walachy, executive director of the Irene E. & George A. Davis Foundation, believes the Casey Foundation's involvement helped elevate the issue of grade-level reading in Springfield, Mass., and encouraged local private, community and business philanthropy to join a collaborative effort and support related programming. Ultimately, joining the Casey Foundation's Campaign for Grade-Level Reading enabled the local project to receive national attention.

"We looked at our work — the result of more than a year of research and planning for a community-wide grade-level reading initiative — and saw how it was being done on a local, grassroots level. They felt it was worth sharing, so that other communities could envision some starting points," Walachy said. "We are now being showcased by the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading as one of a small group of communities that is setting the pace for others around the country."

That kind of national recognition can, in turn, help local funders leverage other resources.

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FOR LOCAL FUNDERS: WHAT NOT TO DO

- **Don't Be the Gatekeeper:** Introduce national funders to various players in your community. Raise up the work and perspectives of effective but less visible nonprofits. And remember: The fact that a national funder has established you as its point of contact does not automatically make you the best local lead for a given project. If you believe another organization could play that role more effectively, make the connection.
- **Don't Assume Outside Perspective Is Bad:** National funders can offer an objective and dispassionate assessment of dynamics in local communities. As outsiders, national funders are not burdened by the relationships and history that can make it a challenge to openly acknowledge entrenched systems and processes that aren't working or are dysfunctional. Don't assume a national funder's lack of familiarity with your community is unconditionally bad — sometimes it can be an asset.
- **Don't Hold Back:** Your knowledge of the issues and stakeholders in your community are vital to make the most of a national funder's presence. Speak up about local challenges and assets. Connect national funders to people and projects with momentum. Be candid if you believe a national grantmaker's plans may have little impact or create unintended consequences.
- **Don't Team Up With the Wrong Partner:** If you suspect that a potential partner doesn't value your input or has goals that substantially differ from your own, walk away. Not being in a relationship at all is better than being in a bad one. You may not be able to deter a national funder from proceeding with a project you believe is not suited to your community, but you can choose to not participate. Don't jeopardize your own credibility or derail your own grantmaking by signing onto something that is outside your organization's scope or comfort zone.

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Building a Successful Partnership: Considerations for Grantmakers

While local-national funder collaborations can deliver powerful results, they are also challenging to implement. There are critical factors that both local and national funders must consider if they want their collaboration to be successful. The following strategies can help maximize a partnership's potential.

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FOR LOCAL AND NATIONAL FUNDERS

- **Pilot the Relationship:** Taking the time to build a strong relationship before entering or expanding a partnership is essential. Pilot projects can be a great way to test out a partnership and create a base of trust before embarking on a larger joint effort.

In the case of the SIF, some of the most successful local-national collaborations have built on pre-existing relationships. For example, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and the North Carolina–based Duke Endowment had worked together on a child welfare initiative before EMCF became a SIF intermediary. That experience allowed both parties to test the waters and see whether their interests and philosophies aligned. When the Duke Endowment agreed to work with EMCF on the SIF grant, it was an opportunity to deepen the partnership they'd already forged. The project has gone well enough that both organizations are now considering further ways they might work together to bring high-performing organizations to scale and advance common goals around child welfare.

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- **Make Sure You Are on the Same Page:** Being clear about your objectives is vital for both national and local funders. Open and honest conversations about what each hopes to achieve — and how — are a crucial underpinning for a successful partnership. These discussions allow both prospective partners to ensure that goals, interests and work styles are compatible. Several of the grantmakers we spoke with noted that it is sometimes necessary to walk away from a potential partnership rather than engage in one beset with differing expectations about desired outcomes and criteria for success.
- **Recognize the Inevitability of Change:** National funders don't stay in communities forever. Leadership changes hands. New priorities and strategies come to the fore. Both national and local grantmakers have a responsibility to plan for the future and think about how to sustain work after a national funder departs. Early conversations about how long the national funder intends to stay are important, and partners should be transparent as their plans evolve. The onus is generally on national funders to initiate these conversations. But a solid strategy to sustain programming over the long term will require leadership, creativity and commitment from both national and local partners.

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The issue of sustainability has been especially acute with SIF programs, as public and private funders have invested substantial upfront resources to expand promising models. How can communities sustain this growth and support SIF projects over the long haul? Local funders have worked hard to answer this question. The United Way for Southeastern Michigan, for example, is using its SIF funds to improve kindergarten readiness in Detroit.

“The SIF has enabled us to pull together a portfolio of funders that will help maintain sustainability after the SIF funding is gone,” said Cindy Eggleton, senior director. “And that is something that we are always trying to do — find something that can be owned by the community.”



FOR LOCAL FUNDERS

Our conversations suggested several lessons specific to local funders. For those that are engaged in or considering a partnership with a national grantmaker, the following guidelines may be helpful:

- **Know Your Value and Share Your Knowledge:** “Nobody knows your community and its needs better than you do,” said Albert Ruesga, president and CEO of the Greater New Orleans Foundation. “You have something that is extremely valuable to offer in this partnership.” National funders can be more effective in reaching their own goals when local funders impart their wisdom about the community.

This insight has been central to the work of Jobs for the Future, a national funder and SIF intermediary, which is partnering with the National Fund for Workforce Solutions to expand its targeted training and technical assistance program. NFWS and JFF are using SIF funds to support 21 regional workforce collaboratives made up of local funders. These collaboratives engage employers to establish industry partnerships to develop training and improve employment opportunities in particular industry sectors.

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“No single funder can address the problems that we are trying to deal with on a relatively large scale, in terms of skill improvement and career advancement for low-skill, low-wage workers,” explained Navjeet Singh, deputy director of the NFWS at JFF. “The advantage of supporting a collaborative of local funders is that you are leveraging funds as well as leveraging perspectives.”

Wherever possible, NFWS and JFF rely on the local funder collaboratives to take the lead in determining how its model will be implemented. “They are making the decision of who to fund locally ... and what the focus is,” said Singh. Like many other national grantmakers, NFWS and JFF see collaborating with local funders as important for developing programming that is context specific and responsive to local needs.

- **Be a Voice for Your Grantees and Your Community:** As much as local funders may find it difficult to speak up when interacting with powerful national funders, the challenge for nonprofits is even greater. Local funders can play a valuable role in raising up the needs and perspectives of their communities. By advising national funders to make investments that will provide the most benefit to nonprofits and the community as a whole, local grantmakers can have an impact that far exceeds the size of their endowment.

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Local grantmakers can also direct national funders toward effective but less well-known nonprofits.

“Often, the groups that national funders can identify are the most visible but not necessarily the most impactful,” said Liz Sak, executive director of the Cricket Island Foundation. “And often the groups that are working with what we call more invisible populations, such as illegal immigrants, young people in the criminal justice system and others, are harder to identify from outside the community.”

As part of the SIF program, some local funders have created structures designed to amplify the voices of grantees in the design and implementation of their SIF initiative and in larger funding and policy discussions. For example, the United Way for Southeastern Michigan formed an advisory group of funders and grantees affiliated with its SIF project. This structure has served not only to surface input from local players but also to cultivate shared learning and a spirit of cooperation. The funder has also brought in experts to help grantees build their communications capacity. “We launched an every-other-month forum with an outside speaker who leads a topic — the first was data, and the second will be storytelling,” explained Eggleton. “We have breakouts to create an action plan around the area we are covering.” Sessions like these may boost local organizations’ skills so they can speak more effectively on their own behalf.

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FOR NATIONAL FUNDERS

There are also considerations that are unique to national grantmakers. These include the following:

- **Come to Learn First, Act Second:** The genuine desire to learn from local funders and engage in a shared analysis of the problems and resources in a community is a prerequisite for a successful partnership. This is just as true, perhaps even more so, in the context of a crisis when funders understandably have the impulse to act fast. Ruesga, of the Greater New Orleans Foundation, recommended that national funders take time to develop “shared strategy and tactics” with not only local grantmakers but also other national funders working in the same geographic area. Asking local players what’s going on in the community is a good starting point, even when there are urgent problems demanding attention.

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Campa of the Annie E. Casey Foundation described soliciting Mile High United Way's advice and taking its lead on efforts to advance grade-level reading in Colorado as a "no-brainer," given the local organization's knowledge and track record. And the willingness to learn from a local partner has helped the larger foundation advance its own work. "We challenge each other to be better around our shared goals," said Campa.

- **Co-design the Partnership:** Asking for local funders' input is one level of engagement, but working with them to design and develop a project that is truly a joint effort brings the relationship to another level. Not only does this process build trust, it also helps ensure that an initiative is grounded in the reality of a particular community. "Engage local funders early in thinking about the nature of the work," said Applegate, formerly with the Lumina Foundation. "Convene them on your dime with the goal of learning from them, not telling them what you want to do to them or their region." Co-designing a partnership with local grantmakers will ultimately bring more money to the table — and make that money more efficient — by ensuring that efforts are well aligned from the start of an initiative.

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- **Provide Support to the Partnership:** While partnerships can result in significant efficiencies and greater impact, they also take time and work to sustain. National funders can ease the burden of participation by covering the costs of staff time and meetings for partners.¹

“Funders need to recognize what it takes to execute this kind of partnership,” said Cremin of the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta. “Community foundations need the operating support. We are 501(c)(3)s, we deliver a lot of services and it requires overhead for us to do things differently. Covering overhead is critical.”

- **Be a Connector:** Introductions to other funders can have significant value for local grantmakers and can advance work happening at the local level. Brisson of the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan recalled a national funder who, every year, brought together various community foundations it had supported. “It helped us build relationships with others who are trying to do the same thing,” she said.

1. For more on the grantmaker’s role in building nonprofit capacity to partner, see *Working Better Together: Building Nonprofit Collaborative Capacity* (Washington, D.C.: GEO, 2013). Available at www.geofunders.org.

Similarly, as a SIF intermediary, JFF has sought to connect the various local funder collaboratives it supports. “We’ve also provided them with the opportunity to talk to national funders who might have a better perspective on what is being done in different parts of the country,” said Singh. “The benefits of these connections go both ways — with local funders learning about emerging trends and best practices and national funders learning about the specific challenges of a region and challenges local funders might be facing.”

In this way, national funders can use their field wide view to strengthen the ecosystem of actors in a given community. “We’ve moved from just talking to people in a region and launching isolated initiatives to active conversations about aligning with other national funders where we share a footprint and with local and regional funders,” said Applegate.

“That focus on alignment extends to other important stakeholders in the region: nonprofits, business, education and political forces, so that we can mobilize collective action, build capacity and achieve real impact.”

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When local and national funders act together, the results can be powerful. Each player brings a unique set of skills and insights to a funding partnership. By working together, funders have an opportunity to nurture more effective and sustainable programs and produce more profound changes for communities.

But these partnerships don't happen organically. They require self-awareness and ongoing care and attention to be successful. A negative past experience demands an even greater level of intentionality in developing the partnership.

Catalysts like the SIF can spark a local-national collaboration, but a catalyst is not a substitute for communication and trust building. Successful partnerships frequently grow from a strong pre-existing relationship, which allows partners to pilot joint work before embarking on a higher-stakes collaboration. Honest, ongoing conversations about both partners' goals and plans are essential. The best work often emerges when national funders are willing to learn first and act second and local funders are willing to drive projects and be a voice for their grantees and community.

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Many of the strategies that help these partnerships thrive run counter to traditional grantmaking approaches. Giving up control and collaborating with other funders can be difficult. But focusing on the outcomes these partnerships produce can facilitate a change in mindset.

“When I think about where we are successful, and then I look a few years ahead, there is a whole new set of challenges and complexities coming up on the horizon,” said Campa of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. “Unless we diversify our partnerships, we won’t be able to maintain our success and a competitive edge in our learning and investments that will ensure the well-being of kids and families.”

Grantmakers of all sizes are realizing that if they work together they have the opportunity to greatly expand their impact. While partnerships of this kind are not simple or easy, they do have the potential to create transformational change. We believe this makes them well worth the effort.



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Launched in 2010, *Scaling What Works* is a multiyear learning initiative of Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, a thought leader for promoting grantee-centric philanthropic practices that lead to more effective results. With the support of a coalition of [22 funders](#), GEO aims to expand the number of grantmakers and public sector funders that are working together to broaden the impact of high-performing nonprofits. Through *Scaling What Works*, GEO offers training, networking opportunities and a host of tools and resources to better equip grantmakers to help the nonprofit organizations they support to plan, adapt and grow their impact in creating sustainable benefits for people, their communities and our planet. For more information about GEO and *Scaling What Works*, please visit www.scalingwhatworks.org.

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