Effective funding practice for inclusive grantmaking

September 2024
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Key takeaways

- Funding is available for research but very few researchers based in Africa have direct access to these funds.
- The challenges faced by African grantees are grouped into three parts: institutional barriers within the funder organisation, field-facing barriers regarding the maturity of the African research landscape, and barriers specific to research grantees and organisations.
- Capacity building and collaboration between south-south researchers/research organisations and between funders of education research in Africa are key to overcoming many of these barriers.
- Funding conditionalities that limit grantee access and eligibility for funding also need to be addressed to ensure a more diverse and equitable research landscape in Africa. On the other hand, grantees need to be educated on the holistic nature of fundraising.

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Introduction

As a collaborative of funders who support education researchers in Africa, the African Education Research Funding Consortium (AERFC) is invested in ways to promote positive transformation of the African education research sector by pioneering new realms of research, challenging conventional norms long exhibited in the aid space, shifting power to locally led and based researchers, and demonstrating new standards for funder relationships with local researchers. All of these are informed by the 5 recommendations that were put forward by African education researchers and practitioners at the Forum for Education in/for/by Africa.

In June 2024, the AERFC Secretariat took stock of learnings and progress since its launch in November 2022 and identified ways its members, and by extension, the African education research funder landscape can deliver the 5 recommendations through a list of possible Action Research Projects (ARPs). One of the identified ARPs was to develop new practices to make it easier for African grantees to pitch or reach out to funders with project ideas or funding requests.

This brief provides an outlook on members' funding practice, the challenges faced by funders of education research in Africa as well as education researchers and research organisations in Africa, and implications for funders to consider as they make decisions in their grantmaking practice.

The findings presented here are intended to inform discussions among and within the funders of education research in Africa. Findings are based on the review of donor strategy documents, analysis of the AERFC member grant database and strategy review, think pieces, institutional reports and grey literature. Additional insights were adopted from the AERFC learning call held on September 9, 2024. Funders and grantees of education research in Africa present at the learning call explored barriers for African education grantees to access grants, approaches taken by funders to address some of the barriers (what has worked and hasn't worked), and how funders can improve their grantmaking or support to African grantees.

We believe this brief can help funders frame their approaches and grantmaking practices to improve funding access to African grantees.

Members' funder practice

Funders' grantmaking practices within the consortium are of three types: open, closed, or a mix of both. In May 2023, the Secretariat reviewed the funding practice of consortium members (AERFC, June 2023). Six of eleven members participated in the accompanying survey used for that report and from our analysis we found that:

Not all funders have open calls for funding opportunities. In most cases, funders formally reach out to potential partners to apply for grants or email grantee partners in their database. Only two of the six members surveyed have a completely open process for communicating grant opportunities. Of the remaining four members surveyed, only two occasionally award grants through published Requests for Proposals (RFPs).

Still, the **majority of members have information about their grantmaking process available publicly** to prospective grantees.

The approximate application timeline among members ranges from 2-12 months. **Members with closed/mostly closed grant processes have longer timelines when compared to those who have open grant processes**.

All the six members sampled are explicit about the duration and function of their grants during the application process. Of these six members, only four additionally discuss the size of their grant and communication preference during the application process.

Members' frequency of **communicating with grantee partners** during the grant cycle ranges from monthly to once at the end of the grant.

All members surveyed **discuss grant renewal with their partners/ grantees**. Members discuss grant renewal at the middle or end of the grant cycle. Four out of six members start to discuss the grant renewal at the end of the grant cycle. Renewed grants are considered separate/distinct grants and often built on the previous ones.

Why do funders choose open or closed grantmaking practice?

Our review of AERFC members' strategy (AERFC, June 2023) and other funder strategies outside of the consortium, as well as think pieces on funder grantmaking reveal why most funders choose to have open or closed calls in their grantmaking practice.

Open grantmaking practice	Closed grantmaking practice
Encourages innovation, diversity, and inclusion of ideas and promotes funders' reputation as fair, inclusive, and transparent (Ewuru, 2023).	Better concentration of resources to those who align with their cause.
Presents funders with opportunities to connect with many potential grantees outside their network or database.	Ensure only trusted grantees or those they have supported in the past receive their funding again (Ewuru, 2023).
Highly competitive, with many more qualified applicants than the available funds and lots of other grantees vying for funders' attention.	Eliminate competition and reduce the administrative cost of sieving through "unqualified" candidates (especially in cases where the organisation does not have the administrative stamina to deal with a large number of applicants).
Help funding organisations engage with their communities and make more impactful decisions in their grantmaking practice.	Allow funders to maximise impact within their budget.
Increase visibility for funders' grant opportunities, areas they support, and sphere of influence.	Close attention to compliance and funders' intention/impact.

Challenges to effective funding

Our review of funder practices and the AERFC learning call revealed institutional barriers impeding funders' ease in reaching new grantees and offered the following suggested ways to address them:

Institutional barriers	Suggested ways to tackle them
Bureaucracy. The process from application to receiving funds can be lengthy due to delays in approval. This can be a challenge for researchers or organisations that need immediate funding to pursue their research, develop innovative ideas, and contribute to their respective fields.	Streamline the requirements for grants and the approval process. Also, avoid duplicative grant management requirements/administration of grants. Work through intermediaries who can sift through large numbers of proposals (some funders do not have the bandwidth to do this internally) (AERFC, September 2024). Preview ideas with the board before putting grantees through a rigorous proposal or due diligence process (AERFC, September 2024).
Long and complex grant application process and conditions. Applying for grants often involves a complex and time-consuming application process, including detailed proposals, budgets, and meeting specific criteria. Some research funding organisations impose many conditions that may be difficult for many researchers to meet (ESSA & REAL, July 2021).	Simplify Terms of Reference (ToRs) and revise strict funding rules around grants (Philanthropy Circuit, 2021).
Top-down funding models often lead to funders not necessarily understanding the context of the work on the ground due to physical distance. This can make it difficult to communicate, monitor progress, and evaluate the impact of funding priorities.	Invest in data collection and research before assigning funds to grantees to be aware of the issues on the ground and have an active understanding of the system context in which they disburse grants (Philanthropy Circuit, 2021).
Lack of (detailed) knowledge about the local funding landscape and opportunities for engagement (Africa Grantmakers' Affinity Group, 2020).	Map research organisations/institutions and who fund them. Raise awareness about programme mission beyond existing grantees. Attend more national and regional policy research workshops/conferences to know more grantees or research organisations working in the field.

Identifying an implementation partner who is familiar with the funder's focus area, and is capable of informing them about new best practices, and technological developments that can improve impact (Philanthropy Circuit, 2021).	Invest in data collection and research to understand the funding landscape (who is doing what, what they are doing, etc). Funders should ensure that all relevant documents about their programmes and grants are publicly available, accessible and up to date. Such information includes their programme strategy and Theory of Change; funding timelines/cycles; grant processes and cycles; types of grants available and how to access them; who to contact with questions or clarifications about the grant; an explainer of their project's technical terms and tools, as well as who they fund through their grant database, press releases, website, grant processes, etc (Lucas, 2024). For their part, grantees need to ensure that the information presented about their programme or project is clear, fundable, easily accessible, and up to date.
Ensuring ongoing support for established initiatives.	Focus on long-term partnerships with grantees, rather than funding short-term projects. Invest more in pooled funds or funder collaboratives for synergistic positive impacts.

Field-facing barriers: challenges and solutions to explore

Based on our review of funder's practices and strategies, listed below are challenges we found peculiar to the African education research field and the solutions that could be explored collaboratively:

Challenges	Solutions to explore
Insufficient funding for African-led research.	Funders can invest in more South-South research collaboration. The network of African researchers or professional bodies like the Association of African Universities can build a database of funders and dedicate a unit to review this database regularly and share information about funding opportunities with researchers (ESSA & REAL, July 2021).
Funding for research within Africa is low and mostly provided by external agencies and institutions, and when it is provided, the majority goes to grantees from developed countries. While African-based grantees continue to outnumber North-based grantmakers in African education research, the value of grants awarded in Europe and North America is still significantly higher than grants awarded for education research in Africa. Global or multilateral organisations make up some of this difference. Our analysis of member grants in 2023 and 2024 shows that North American and European grantees receive grants that are significantly larger than those awarded to African organisations. For example, North American grants are 5.5 times larger than African grants (AERFC, March 2023) & (AERFC, March 2023).	Identify and eliminate institutional barriers that limit direct access to funding researchers based in Africa.
Differing priorities of funders and grantees. There is often a misalignment between the thematic area of the call for proposals and researcher's funding needs and expertise (Africa Grantmakers' Affinity Group, 2020), (Paul, Chick, Sulle & Nelson, July 2022).	Funders can be flexible and consider related topics to support.
Lack of awareness of funding programme opportunities, which limits grantee's chance to participate in research. This includes not	Fund more open calls and explore options for wide dissemination. This includes sharing on the funder's website, social media, and websites

getting information about the call or getting it too late.	dedicated to resources/announcements of funding opportunities.
Lack of cohesive, coordinated, and comprehensive action.	Acknowledge the need for greater and unified action.
Low capacity for grant writing and management.	Grantees need to be educated on the holistic nature of fundraising. Build technical skills and research capacity of early career researchers through involvement in research projects, mentorship, and training programmes.
Researchers based in Africa often do not have a strong network to apply for big grants and most grants come from re-granters or external researchers who collaborate with African researchers.	Build a database linking researchers with one another and with funders (ESSA & REAL, July 2021). Research institutions in Africa can develop a clear research strategy and support young researchers to work with experienced colleagues to implement it. Provide funding for African grantees to attend workshops/conferences for effective networking.

Challenges grantees face in accessing funding and what can be done

Our analysis and conversation with grantees and funders who attended the AERFC learning call provided insights into some of the major challenges that Africa-based researchers and research organisations face in accessing funds, how they can mitigate these challenges, and how funders can support them:

Challenges grantees face in accessing funds from funding organisations	Suggested ways to tackle them (Funders)	Suggested ways to tackle them (Grantees)
Lack of capacity for grantees to develop winning grant proposals.	Bridge capacity gap by funding capacity development.	Get mentorship from experienced researchers in Africa and abroad. Invest in building skills and capacity in grant writing.
Lack of technical expertise to manage and implement grants effectively, which can lead to poor project implementation and inadequate monitoring and evaluation of project impact.	Provide technical assistance or services aligned with the requirements of grant programmes and individual grantees' needs. Provide continuous mentorship to the grantees to support them, especially in areas of fundraising, project management, monitoring, and evaluation (Bonfoh 2016).	Maintain ongoing communication with funders during project implementation for guidance and alignment on priorities, ensuring project success by staying on track.
Inflexible eligibility criteria, such as the need to have previously managed a grant of a certain size.	Eliminate institutional barriers that limit access to funding, simplify ToRs and continue to engage on local and international platforms in advancing the conversation of research development in Africa and by Africans. Reduce the time commitment on grant applications for grantees by asking for a short concept note. A similar approach is the "two pages and two chats" used by uBoraBora (AERFC, September 2024).	Grantees, especially early career researchers should be open to collaborating with other (experienced) researchers to encourage more diversity and access to research funding (Opia, 2023).

Lack of institutional mechanisms to access competitive research funding and highly competitive application processes that can be difficult for African researchers to navigate (Bonfoh, 2016).	Fund capacity development.	Build and access relationships with funders before submitting a proposal and be clear on funders' strategy and criteria of the call. Study funder's strategies and align proposals or requests with their interest. Identify niche areas and develop a strong message to project to funders.
Majority of grants target senior academics who are mostly busy and may not even see the call or see it very late so will not respond (ESSA & REAL, July 2021).	Enable equitable access to funding – particularly for female researchers and other minority groups in research. This includes extending funding opportunities to female researchers and early career researchers to collaborate with experienced colleagues for mentorship and skill development. Embed funding for female and early career researchers and funding for mentors in big research projects. Utilise partner websites, social media, and other communication channels to promote grant calls.	Expand reach and networks and consider collaboration with other researchers or research organisations. Grantees, especially early career researchers should be open to collaborating with other (experienced) researchers to encourage more diversity and access to research funding.
Limited government support and limited resources from private funders to meet the needs of researchers (Opia, 2023). There is also little or no research funding in some disciplines. For example, areas such as early childhood education and Foundational Learning and	Build grantee's ability to develop resource mobilisation strategies or fundraise and tap into other sources of funding Be flexible and consider related topics for support. Invest in research and action to promote/strengthen National research funding	Grantees need to go the extra mile to institutionalise the structures and relevant strategies needed to replicate impact within their respective organisations. They must recognise that they cannot continue to rely on donors. They need to develop innovative approaches to funding local projects to ensure sustainability.

Numeracy (FLN) receive funding, whereas there is little funding or focus on technical and vocational education.	bodies and local philanthropy.	Utilise LinkedIn strategically to connect and engage with funders. By curating a newsfeed that alerts them on potential funder activities and also by engaging with their posts, grantees can increase their chances of being found by potential funders (ucas, 2024).
Corruption, leading to mismanagement of funds, nepotism, and favouritism, ultimately affecting the effectiveness of the grant management system (Opia, 2023).	Acknowledge risk and invest in explicit actions to address the risk of corruption in grant management.	Get buy-in from the government to set up policies, possibly around corruption, advocating for no corruption in government.
Tensions caused when international NGOs provide less funding compared to the percentage of work being done by local group(s). (Paul, Chick, Sulle & Nelson, July 2022)	Have a local team member who understands the context/peculiarities of the programme and the region/country where the programme is going to be implemented to make the grant decision-making process more proximate. Appoint local representatives to collaborate with organisations or institutions managing funds to ensure efficient and transparent allocation. Invest in African-based researchers to be principal investigators for research taking place in the region.	Upskill and ensure that capacity exists for funders to engage directly.
Tensions caused when grantees seek additional funds elsewhere. Grantees often look for additional sources of funding for the same project they're seeking funding for. However, some funders consider this	Funders should be more flexible and understand the precarious nature of the funding landscape and that grantees need to diversify their funding sources to ensure the sustainability of their projects (Mendizabal,	Persist in the face of setbacks and be transparent as much as possible about your fundraising objectives and strategies.

"double dipping" and may refuse to support the grantee or provide only partial funding.	2022). Additionally, there is value in shared learning and impact with other funders.	
Cultural and racial bias created as a result of much of the funding coming from northern-based organisations (Paul, Chick, Sulle & Nelson, July 2022).	Include those with local experience in decision-making.	Take opportunities to meet representatives of interested foundations or funders at conferences and local events since many projects start from informal conversations.
Accountability and trust issues between funders and researchers in Africa.	Build trust and relationships so that risk can be shared. Ensure a clear and transparent reporting process.	Be more accountable for resources received, and ensure delivery is based on what is specified in research contracts.
Differing priorities, especially in the case when the priorities of funders and the priorities of grantees do not align (Africa Grantmakers' Affinity Group, 2020). This may reflect limited local knowledge, a challenge in finding local funder partners, and/or funder priorities that have been established independent of direct input from local communities.	Seek out organisations whose interventions align with mission and take a more grantee-centric approach. Understand the critical roles of all players and sector leaders and their needs. Be flexible and consider related topics to support.	Create opportunities to meet or talk to funders in settings that are not about fundraising. This includes attending conferences and other events for education stakeholders. Expand reach and networks and consider collaboration with other researchers or research organisations (Opia, 2023).
Structure of funding (nature of funding, competition for funding, requirements for obtaining and maintaining funding) (Portilla, 2003)	Simplify ToRs, application process, budget template, and other reporting requirements. Collaborate with other funders to articulate simplified field norms that funders can adhere to.	Ask colleagues or experienced grantees for advice on proposals and the process – especially those who have been previously or currently funded by the funder.
Costly (time and resources) for smaller research organisations and early	Provide flexible funding to researchers without rigid constraints on what can be	Include operations, finance, and administration early on in partnerships, so that proposal

career researchers to apply successfully.	funded, such as professional development funds, administrative cost, transaction costs, and travel to conferences (Paul, Chick, Sulle & Nelson, July 2022). Fund administrative expenses/ take on transaction costs. Reduce legal barriers where solutions exist.	narratives align to the budget.
Challenging financial systems which can cause delays and problems in accessing funds.	Reduce tranche funding and account for these time delays.	Work with funders to explore possible easier ways in line with legal local context.

What can funders do? Better funding practices to improve funding access to African grantees

In summary, the following are what funders can do to increase funding access to grantees in Africa. Some of these recommendations were articulated during the AERFC learning call by funders and grantees on how funders can make it easier for African grantees to secure funding or pitch project ideas:

To reach new grantees:

1. Fund more open calls to ensure diversity of response and ideas, equity in access to research, and inclusion of minority groups in research.

2. Embed funds for early career researchers, female researchers, and other minority groups in large research projects (AERFC, September 2024).

3. Address funding conditionalities that work against African institutions and researchers. These conditionalities include matching funds, overhead limits, and the need to have previously managed a grant of a certain size.

4. Consider the mix of funding available for research topics versus research institutions. It's beneficial for both researchers and their institutions to receive support for growth (AERFC, September 2024).

To enable grantees pitch project ideas:

5. Ensure information about your programme, strategies and Theory of Change are publicly available, accessible, understandable, and up to date. It is also important to include information about team members working on the programme and how to contact them or the focal person for the programme (Lucas, 2024).

6. Share non-selected project ideas/proposals with other funders for funding consideration. This will help grantee project ideas reach other funders who might be interested in funding them.

7. Provide seed funding to support early funding for African education researchers to develop ideas and set research agendas. Education Sub Saharan Africa is currently developing this initiative under the Enhancing Education Research in Africa (EERA) project (AERFC, September 2024).

To ensure a more inclusive grant application process that support African grantees:

8. Produce simple ToRs and make funding processes/guidelines more accessible and easier for grantees. This includes reducing the time commitment on grant applications for grantees by asking for a short concept note or previewing their ideas with the board before putting them through a rigorous proposal or due diligence process to help prevent a heavy workload on proposals that don't get funded (AERFC, September 2024).

9. Build trust-based partnerships and enhance transparency in grant processes. Clear communication regarding funding criteria, application processes, and reporting requirements helps to build trust between funders and grantees (AERFC, September 2024).

10. Provide more direct access to funding for African researchers by transferring more assets to Africa-based research organisations and adopt a model that promotes equal involvement of partners from conception to publication. The funding arrangements, research leadership, advocacy, etc. — need to be rooted in the continent and driven by those who understand the context well.

11. Promote inclusive grant practices by challenging existing power structures. This includes having a local team member in the grant decision-making process as well as putting African institutions at the forefront of programmes and projects, restructuring programmes to be more African-led, aligning funding with grantees` priorities and strategies, and setting a target to ensure that the majority of partnerships are with African institutions – institutions incorporated in Africa, operating in Africa, and owned or led by Africans.

To improve access to more funding and ensure a win-win partnership with African grantees:

12. Give constructive feedback, offer referrals, coaching support, or provide funds for research applications of promising candidates.

13. Speed up the process of getting money into researchers' hands once funding decisions have been made (AERFC, September 2024).

14. Provide more flexible funds and core grants that cover administrative costs. This includes costs for training, travel, and communications in budgets (AERFC, September 2024).

15. Explore better ways of communicating with researchers. This includes making clear, for example, why the push for policy-oriented research, or why there is a need for South-North partnerships on certain projects.

16. Support capacity building of researchers through training and mentoring programmes, especially for early career researchers. This includes taking a cohort of researchers through a series of courses and workshops to ensure skills are transferred and networks are created.
17. Target long-term impact beyond the life of the grant rather than short-term projects by building local capacity to help address issues relating to differential capacity to develop partnerships and promote knowledge transfer in the African research ecosystem (Opia, 2023).

What else can funders do as a collaborative?
1. Invest more in pooled funds or funder collaboratives for synergistic positive impacts and diversity in grantee portfolio (Philanthropy Circuit, 2021), (Mendizabal, 2022), (Paul, Chick, Sulle & Nelson, July 2022).

2. Focus on supporting long-term partnerships for African researchers and universities to ensure succession and sustained research that prioritises the development needs of African countries

(Paul, Chick, Sulle & Nelson, July 2022). This can help build local leadership in evidence generation and improve the quality and relevance of informed decision-making.

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