**PORTFOLIO REVIEW OUTCOMES**

**(8.7.15)**

**DATE:** July 31, 2015

**TOPIC:** Portfolio Review: DPP’s Organizational Grantmaking 2007-2015

**PRESENT:** Ivan Sigal DPP Advisory Board Chair (Moderator)

Chris Stone President, Open Society Foundations (Discussant)

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**I. Portfolio Review Topic and Scope**

The Documentary Photography Project (DPP) launched at the end of 2004 and began making organizational grants in earnest in 2007. While there has not been an overall strategy, most of this funding has gone to project support for the production and distribution of photo stories that advance human rights issues, as well as for training and convening photographers. Despite an ad hoc approach, some significant relationships developed. With the exception of the Magnum Foundation, an organization that OSF was instrumental in starting, we did not consider or factor into our funding the long-term sustainability of our grantees beyond the project term.

Our strategy for 2016-19 proposes a more intentional approach to supporting organizations. We see funding organizations as a mechanism to support the ongoing development of the field, not solely to advance specific projects and issues. As we shift existing relationships and cultivate new ones, we are reflecting on our past organizational funding to consider what we might have done differently. In this review we are focused less on the outcomes of specific projects than on our histories and dynamics with these grantees: the way we structured our funding, how the organizations developed, and how our budget and staff capacity impacted our goals.

**II. Discussion/Major themes and questions raised**

The discussion kicked off with a very broad reflection: are there ways the $2M we invested in the six grantees profiled could have been used more effectively to build the field? Are there ways we could have built the organizations we supported differently? These questions opened up reflections on the organizations we supported and their current trajectories.

Start-ups: Project vs. Organizational Support

Three of DPP’s recurring grantees came to us as start-up projects and are currently at pivotal moments in their histories: Aftermath, Art Works Projects, and the Magnum Foundation. Chris, Sandra, and Ivan shared useful guidance around working with start-up organizations, noting the distinction between project support and an organization’s future sustainability. They encouraged DPP to use our perspective in evaluating which dynamic individuals and fledgling organizations might have the vision and momentum to become sustainable institutions in the emerging field we are trying to support. The art in those determining conversations is allowing the grantees to follow their own interests, not act to please the donor. The initial impulse of many people who are embarking on interesting projects is to establish an organization. Yet convincing a project/organization to build towards long term sustainability if they are only interested in producing a dynamic project is not a good strategy. This is particularly important to keep in mind when dealing with rapidly evolving fields. For example, the Program on Independent Journalism does not feel it makes sense to aim towards building solid institutions in a constantly shifting environment; rather, they are looking for people with bold ideas and flexible institutions with vision.

But if people *are* interested in organization-building, it is tremendously helpful to think strategically from the outset about selecting a board chair who can act as a partner and connect the organization to resources. Too many start-up organizations make the mistake of filling up their boards with those who they are closest to (e.g., friends, close colleagues), yet those people are not always the best equipped to strengthen the organization strategically or financially.

Engaging Other Funders

We discussed the challenges and opportunities of facilitating other donors to support the organizations we fund, particularly in a field which is undercapitalized and under-resourced. Could funders have been brought in earlier? Were there missed opportunities to broaden the funding base for start-up orgs we supported? We were encouraged to think about bringing in other funders from the outset, when it is easier to build excitement around helping to create a new organization. That said, we were cautioned from taking on the burden of finding funding for new organizations; we can support and assist, but it is not our responsibility to do that work for them.

Our Role: Knowledge Sharing and Bridge-Building

We also discussed the role of DPP in an interdependent field. We should consider what we get from grantees, in addition to what they get from us and each other – understanding what assets we bring to the community, and how they can share their own knowledge and skills with us and with each other. We bring organizational development skills, knowledge of other sectors, and a broader body of knowledge than just money. The connection to OSF’s global network also allows us to see a much bigger picture than other actors, and gives us a platform to frame a global vision, help configure and facilitate networks. Our ability to share that picture with others is key. We were also encouraged to think about the relationship between individual and organizational grantees. In facilitating networks, we were reminded that our role in initiating these conversations doesn’t mean we have to fund them entirely. If in-person convenings are being envisioned, we were encouraged to think about the funders of our grantees as a resource.

And yet, Chris pointed out the danger of believing our own spin. At the end of the day, grantees come to us for money and to leverage our power. It’s important to hold this role wisely and responsibly.

**III. Outcomes of those discussions / Main Takeaways / Questions to Consider**

When working with projects/organizations, we can be more pro-active in encouraging sustainable thinking. Some concrete suggestions that were made:

1. When we encounter a person with a valuable new project/idea, gauge whether they are interested in building an organization for the future. Project support is OK if that’s what’s appropriate, but a different investment is appropriate if they are thinking long-term.
2. Look for people with the capacity to see where the field is going and are trying to team up with others to create approaches towards that future, with an eye on how to position themselves.
3. For new organizations, bring in other funders at the start. The moment of creation is when it is easiest to influence the donors in a field, not once you’ve executed a project.
4. For new organizations, encourage EDs/strong individuals to find a board chair/partner early on who can broaden their circles of support.
5. Encourage thinking beyond project scale towards long term sustainability.
6. Our role is to open up thinking and provide funds when requested/appropriate. We should not commit to resolve any of their challenges. This preserves their agency.

In thinking about where to focus DPP’s future organizational work, we were strongly encouraged to exploit the OSF presence – 44 offices in 44 countries. It was felt that the power and potential of the network, where we have people on the ground and active grantees, presents the strongest opportunities and will make DPP’s work much richer. A Venn diagram was proposed as an approach to narrow the intersection between the existing projects and organizations in the field, DPP’s more focused interest/strategy, and OSF. Another possible vector includes an “energy vector” in terms of where there is the greatest urgency and potential effect.