

In Support of Those Who Take the Leap

Lessons on Leadership Transitions
from the Open Society Foundations'
New Executives Fund



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Prologue: A Message from Open Society's New Executives Fund

Over the next decade, thousands of executive directors worldwide will “pass the torch” of organizational leadership to a new generation of changemakers. Leadership transitions can be periods of robust renewal, but too often, they signal treacherous times for organizations.

At these moments, philanthropy can play a critical role. This report is a clarion call to the field to “own our impact” and immediately build the required infrastructure of intentional support and investment. Currently, funders lack a systemic and systematic approach to tackling these crucial and necessary leadership changes in the life cycles of the organizations we support. We are under-performing on leadership transitions and jeopardizing the ability of the next generation of executive leaders to soar.

Our grantees offer a mirror to the field of philanthropy. Their voices join others who insist that we must re-imagine and change our practices if the people, causes, and organizations we believe in are to thrive. Philanthropy's traditional aversion to uncertainty and risk can be fatal to how organizations experience transition. The common “wait and see” response to new leaders creates self-fulfilling prophecies of sputtering and unsteady progress during times of change. And these dynamics are compounded when new leaders are from non-traditional, non-

dominant, and non-wealthy groups. The resulting scarcity suffocates new leaders at a moment when they need to breathe. Instead, we must “lean in” during transitions and double-down on our investments.

COVID-19 arrived as the authors of this report were in the midst of writing, and as philanthropy rose to the occasion. A global pandemic accelerated a long overdue shift toward commitments to flexible funding and trust that enables organizations to act swiftly. We can—if we choose to—permanently shift to a new normal. We must do so if our sector wants organizations to survive the tsunami of transitions that lie ahead. At the Open Society Foundations, we join others in supporting general operating support, participatory grant making, and trust-based philanthropy as essential pathways to input, investment, and impact.

The New Executives Fund (housed within the Open Society Fellowship Program) has supported more than 130 leadership transitions between 2013-2021 on all continents.

We are proud of the partnerships we have had with new leaders, while also recognizing that our funding approaches may need to evolve to support effective leadership teams as new models of leadership emerge (such as co-directors and collectives).

This report centers the lived realities and experiences of these courageous leaders. Our grantees generously shared their views to advance the field's development.

Two messages to the field of philanthropy stand out, calling on foundations to:

1. **Fund leadership transitions with additional multi-year, general operating support.** Deep and intentional investment in leadership transitions fits the paradigm of supporting organizational resilience that so many philanthropic institutions purport to embrace. Flexible funding is **the** foundation for innovative adaptation and sustainability.
2. **Provide non-monetary support—including access to networks.** During transitions, expectations weigh heavily. This is precisely when assurance, patience, and flexibility from funders matter the most. Actively forging trusting relationships with new leaders is essential. Moreover, funders must integrate new directors

into the invisible networks of support and solidarity essential to long-term viability. Often founding directors have these relationships, but newer leaders may not have the organic connections to wealth that the previous generation of leaders possessed.

We are immeasurably grateful to the New Executives Fund grantees who participated in this report. Martha Farmelo and Victoria Wigodzky expertly engaged our community with curiosity, compassion, and professionalism. They surfaced, analyzed, and presented the findings of this report. We applaud the vision of Chris Stone in creating this Fund in 2013 during his time as Open Society Foundations president and the leadership of former Open Society Fellowship Program Director Leonard Benardo. This report honors the work of past and current New Executives Fund staff whose untold hours of dedication and commitment made this program possible, including Susan Allen, Anne Denes, Jessica Gisondo, George Hsieh, Joey Lee, Tanya Sukkari, Nia Tyler, and Isabel Weiner.

Alethia Jones, Director, Open Society Fellowship Program, Open Society Foundations

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Executive Summary

As a rule, transitions in executive leadership are a critical moment in the life of an organization, presenting risks but also an enormous window of promise and opportunity—especially when the incoming leader is a first-time or less experienced director. Yet, the field of philanthropy provides insufficient support to help grantees undergo these transitions in ways that leave organizations and their people strengthened and thriving.

Between the years reviewed by this report (2013-2020), the Open Society Foundations' New Executives Fund (NEF) has supported 121 newly appointed executive directors (Executive Directors) around the world with two-year unrestricted funding and peer learning opportunities, including an annual grantee convening. The New Executives Fund's mix of flexible funding and community support is in line with the idea that organizational resilience is a function of multiple elements and resources. This report provides learnings on the impact of the New Executives Fund to date, as well as more general insights on the opportunities and challenges presented by leadership transitions, and how these might be impacted by such funding. It centers the experiences of the Executive Directors themselves, with input from some of their board and staff members, Open Society Fellowship nominators, and New Executives Fund staff.

This summary contains the highlights of the findings and offerings culled from the study participants. The report contains key messages for the donor community on leadership transitions and on philanthropic culture and practices more broadly. Donors are invited to ask themselves: if you are 100 percent honest about what might apply to you or your organization, what learnings, reflections, questions, and concerns do you take away? What actions, large or small, might you consider taking as a result of this reflection?

What is at Stake

Support for leadership transitions is not a luxury or an add-on, but a critical, unattended necessity and a major opportunity to strengthen individual organizations and the social justice field as a whole.

The opportunities presented by leadership transitions include things like innovative thinking; expanding relevance and impact; reorganizing around structural inequality and affected communities; enhanced funding; and rapid changes spurred by adverse conditions. The challenges are also enormous: general stress and feeling overwhelmed from internal and external pressures; financial sustainability and crises; needed shifts in organizational dynamics; entrenched white supremacy and other oppressive cultures; staffing—including retention, hiring, and letting people go; or recouping visibility and relevance.

The New Executives Fund was created originally in response to the lack of attention to and support for leadership transitions and the enormous costs for individuals, organizations, and the field of nonprofit social change more broadly. The flipside of this need is the opportunity to address leadership transitions with a variety of forms of support.

While, of course, subject to improvements, the New Executives Fund has been extraordinarily effective in addressing the challenges of leadership transitions, making a positive difference in the lives of dozens of Executive Directors and their organizations. But there is much more need than it can begin to meet, and it cannot do so alone. There could be dozens of New Executives Funds and/or actions within the donor community to “mainstream” sensitivity to, and support for, leadership transitions as an integral part of overall mandates and grant making.

What Executive Directors Need Most

[See: Central Findings](#)

New Executive Directors need support as they face promise, hopefulness, and opportunities, while also experiencing intense levels of stress and multiple constraints that those of us who have never been in their shoes cannot easily imagine. What do they need most?

1. New Executive Directors need funders to understand and pay special attention to leadership transitions, and to step right up to the plate with tangible and intangible support.

One Executive Director we spoke with said, “Recognize your power! A donors’ response to a leadership transition can make or break that transition.” **Funders must build “transition-thinking” into their programs. Executive Directors also need donors to step forward with solid financial and other types of support** instead of delaying or cutting funding, or any other form of “waiting and seeing.” **They need funders to open doors**—to potential new donors and to other organizations and leaders—and to share tools and resources for leadership transitions and other organizational challenges, especially adapted to the Global South.
2. Unrestricted funding is critical—as is trust in new Executive Directors. Unrestricted funding is rare yet critical for the flexibility for Executive Directors to take the organization in exciting new directions; address internal and external challenges, foreseen and unforeseen; and focus on their own development, staff development, or other organizational strengthening efforts. “The biggest expectation for this study is to plant that seed in other donors,” said one Executive Director. This is about changing the culture of philanthropy. Executive Directors want donors to understand the problems of project funding and trust them to be good stewards of funds and to make tough decisions, while remaining accountable.

3. **New Executive Directors need psychological safety and empathy.**

Financial support is a powerful and highly needed vote of confidence, but it is not enough. **Executive Directors also need emotional support, including empathy and patience, and to feel accompanied as they take bold steps and make difficult decisions. Grantmakers need to inquire on that level and ensure that they feel prepared to make that an integral aspect of the scope of their support.** As one Executive Director stated: “Reassurance is a two-way street: it is not only the new Executive Director’s job to reassure you; it is also the donor’s job to reassure the new Executive Director.” Incoming Executive Directors request that donors provide honest feedback early on, and be mindful of the level of pressure that Executive Directors are under.

4. **New Executive Directors need each other for peer learning and support.**

New Executive Directors expressed a pressing need for opportunities to network with their peers to know that they are not alone in facing their difficulties, that all Executive Directors face similar issues, and that they learn from their peers how to foresee and address organizational and personal challenges. As a rule, Executive Directors highly value convenings focused on collective problem solving and relationship building. Funders can convene sessions for grantees, sponsor sessions at conferences, or create other mechanisms to encourage peer-to-peer connection and learning.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and “Historic Firsts”

[See: The Lens of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion](#)

Focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion around leadership transitions, as in all philanthropy, is a must. From a framework of justice and equity, **funder decisions about whom they choose to support (directors and organizations), what levels of support are provided to whom, and how they interact with their grantees all matter deeply and require thoughtful examination.** This shows up in everything from overall and relative grant size among grantees to the eligibility and selection criteria for supporting new executives. **The choice to support a critical number of what the New Executives Fund refers to as “historic firsts”—the first Executive Directors to come from communities historically excluded from leadership, such as women and trans people of color, first-generation immigrants, or persons from certain ethnic groups—can have real impact on those individuals and in the field.**

Top Advice for New Executive Directors from Their Peers

[See: Top Advice for New Executive Directors from Their Peers](#)

Participating Executive Directors shared their top advice for their peers. Just a few highlights:

- **Listen to and trust yourself.** Remain confident in your decisions. You are good enough!
- **Take time to reflect and learn.** You do not need to prove yourself in the very first months.
- **Be clear on your vision.** Believe in it fiercely and use participatory approaches to get others on board.
- **Understand the existing organizational culture early on and define the change you seek, why and how.** Know that organizational change takes time.
- **Address staffing issues head on and do not be afraid of letting people go.** Retain the amazing talent.
- Get the skills and connect to the support you need. **Find other Executive Directors and hold them close!**
- Spend time with your board. **If you cannot generate agreement with the board, get out.**
- **Build relations with your donors early on.** Tell them what you need.

Selected Questions for Further Reflection

[See: Part Four: Questions for Further Reflection](#)

Based on the report findings, the authors invite the donor community to reflect upon what it would look like to mainstream support for leadership transitions across their grant-making mandates and structures. Likewise, how might some of the contributions that are the hallmark of the New Executives Fund (unrestricted funding, peer connections, etc.) be achieved by different donors without necessarily replicating the New Executives Fund model per se?

Donors could also reflect on how they might best meet Executive Directors' needs for non-financial support. What orientation or training, if any, should foundation staff receive in order to effectively and responsibly play a supporting, empathic role focused on relationship building beyond funding? Finally, donors could also think deeply about the imperative and the opportunity for transforming the landscape of social change leadership by targeting transition resources for “historic firsts” or, more broadly, directors from groups directly impacted by structural inequality—and the implications of not doing so.

As authors, we have learned an enormous amount from all the voices we heard and have been both inspired and humbled by the experience. We are deeply thankful for everyone's generosity of thought and spirit—especially the Executive Directors—throughout this initiative. We are grateful to New Executives Fund staff for their guidance, collaboration, and trust. We hope the report leaves readers with energy, motivation, and a sense that executive leadership transitions are healthy and can be experienced and supported in ways that are life-giving and that build and strengthen our movements for profound social change.

Introduction

A. Welcome to an Abundance of Learning

As those who work in or with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) well know, as a rule, transitions in the executive leadership are a critical moment in the life of an organization, presenting risks but also an enormous window of promise and opportunity. This is especially true when the incoming leader is a first-time or less experienced director. At the same time, barring a few exceptions, it appears that the field of philanthropy pays little attention to leadership transitions and provides insufficient support to help grantees undergo them in ways that leave organizations and their people strengthened and thriving.

With this knowledge in mind, and committed to the holistic health of its grantees, in 2013 the Open Society Foundations created the [New Executives Fund \(NEF\)](#) to support new executive leaders who show promise to grow in fields that are central to the Open Society Foundations' mission.

The New Executives Fund's unique mix of flexible funding and community support is in line with the idea that organizational resilience is a function of multiple elements and resources. It provides two-year discretionary grants to Executive Directors within the first year of their tenure to allow them to advance their vision early on, pivot easily, and enhance the organization's culture, programming, strategy, staffing, or infrastructure. The funds can generally cover whatever the new director proposes, for their own development or for the organization as such, without restriction (within the general legal parameters of the sector). Uses of the funds have ranged from staff development and retreats to executive coaching, communications, and new programs; from new hires to lawyers' services for discontinuing a work relationship; and even gap-spending to cover financial shortfalls that allowed an organization to avoid folding. Directors can propose to change the use of funds, with minimal restriction, at any time.

New Executives Fund funding is complemented by peer learning opportunities, the highlight of which is an annual grantee convening. While an organization does not have to be an Open Society grantee for its director to be nominated to the New Executives Fund, candidates are nominated by Open Society staff or board members from across the entire network, representing all regions and themes of Open Society's work.¹

¹ In three recent cases, the New Executives Fund supported teams of two co-directors. In one earlier case, the funds were transferred to an Executive Director who succeeded the grantee who left their organization before the end of their grant term. Thus, while the number of directors supported between 2013-2020 is 121, the total number of *organizations* supported is 117.

In 2019, after six years of grant making, the New Executives Fund decided to undertake an exercise designed to glean learnings on the impact of the fund to date, as well as more general insights on the opportunities and challenges presented by leadership transitions, and how these might be impacted by such funding. This exercise was not an evaluation in spirit or methodology. It sought to discover and systematize lessons learned and share these with funders and NGO leaders who are—or could be—engaged with leadership transitions.

As further detailed below, the exercise also sought to incorporate a lens on diversity, equity, and inclusion and an anti-oppression perspective—paying attention to issues such as which individuals and organizations are supported (and who is left out) and the specific experiences of leaders from groups and communities historically marginalized from power and access to resources. Of course, those dynamics look different in varying contexts, including country, region, field or movement. The exercise began with a focus on how philanthropy might be most helpful in the context of leadership transitions, but evolved to address how philanthropy must also avoid being counter-productive, or inadvertently even harmful.

This study draws lessons that are relevant to most leadership transitions, though its focus is, in particular, new executives supported by the New Executives Fund, the majority of whom are first-time directors. In these pages, readers will see the immense potential and opportunity that transitions represent, as well as the challenges. They will hear from directors themselves about their needs and experiences, why it is important to support leadership transitions, and what types of support are most critical. The authors hope readers will find an abundance of lessons gleaned from the experience of one innovative program to deliver just such support.

If you are an Executive Director or a potential Executive Director, you might be particularly interested in the sections on directors' opportunities and challenges, and the advice for new Executive Directors. That said, the sections containing messages for the donor community are a very powerful and, we hope, empowering read for Executive Directors as well.

Beyond the New Executives Fund program, if you are a donor or interact with the donor community, the report offers the opportunity to understand leadership transitions from the perspective of the new leaders themselves. It provides numerous insights about the best way to support leaders and their organizations, and the fact that this support, or lack thereof, has critical consequences for the field. The sections [“Part Two: Messages for the Donor Community Around Leadership Transitions”](#) and [“Annex 4: Additional Messages for the Donor](#)

[Community Beyond Leadership Transitions](#)” are particularly relevant to the donor community.

Note from the authors: We concluded the first draft of this report in early April 2020, with all of us in quarantine in our respective homes and communities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We realize with great humility that we are not yet able to fully understand how the conditions in which we all operate will change, and how those might affect some of the participants’—and readers’—reflections and suggestions.

B. Methodology: Who Gave Input and How

This exercise prioritized qualitative learning over quantitative measurements and analysis. The unit of analysis was both the individual leader and the organization. At the same time, the authors were aware of relevant dynamics in the broader NGO fields in which the grantee organizations operate (defined by thematic focus, geography, field or movement, and type of organization).

i. Participating Groups and Forms of Participation

New Executives Fund Grantee Executive Directors

The authors sought to give every one of the 121 New Executives Fund grantee Executive Directors the opportunity to provide input to this study, ensuring confidentiality so as to encourage honest, open, and critical reflection and feedback. Input was sought through an individual interview, group interview, or in-depth survey.² Roughly 44 Executive Directors also shared their perspectives at a session

facilitated by the authors at the 2019 New Executives Fund-sponsored Executive Director convening.³

Of the 121 Executive Directors, 117 (that is, 97 percent) were invited to give their input to this study through a variety of vehicles. A total of at least 60 Executive Directors gave input into the study, representing a range of cohorts over the years.⁴ Executive Directors who participated in an interview (either individual or group) or via an in-depth survey mirrored the demographics of the overall group of 121 New Executives Fund recipients as the result

2 The interview questionnaire used for Executive Directors is included as Annex 2. Survey questions, based on this questionnaire, are available upon request. Both the interview and survey questions were modified slightly depending on the respondent group. Respondents to the survey had the option of anonymity.

3 We are aware of approximately three Executive Directors who were out of the room for all or part of the facilitated sessions on this study for illness or other reasons.

4 We are aware that, despite our best efforts to encourage participation, there may have been some bias in which Executive Directors self-selected to participate in the study. However, we believe that the lessons shared in this report reflect a significantly wide variety of experiences.

of a concerted effort to this effect. See [Annex 1: Methodological Details](#) for a breakdown of these demographics and other methodological details.

Board and Staff of Grantee Organizations

The authors asked participating Executive Directors to share the names and contact information for one staff person and one board member (or two staff persons) to whom an in-depth survey was sent to get their perspective on the experience of their Executive Director and their organization with the New Executives Fund, and on the program overall. Of the 33 persons who responded, 20 were staff and 10 were board members. Three were anonymous and did not indicate if they were staff or board. To simplify,

the term “board/staff members” is used when sharing insights from these survey responses.

Open Society Foundations Participants

An in-depth survey designed especially for nominators was sent to 61 of all of the Open Society networks’ 266 staff and board members who have nominated candidates to the New Executives Fund over the years. Of the 61 staff and board members we contacted, 14 replied. Additionally, one nominator participated in an in-depth interview. The authors also conducted in-depth interviews with five current members of the Open Society Fellowship Program staff, three of whom work specifically on the New Executives Fund.⁵

5 Open Society Fellowship Program staff interviewed include: Alethia Jones, Director; Anne Denes, Supervisor; Bipasha Ray, Project Director; Joey Lee, Program Officer; Tanya Sukkari, Senior Program Administrative Assistant.

Summary of Study Participants

Overall, 113 individuals provided input into this study.

| Participant Type | Number | Percent of Total Participants |
|--|------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>Executive Directors (interview or survey)</i> | 41 | 37% |
| <i>Executive Directors (facilitated session at convening only)</i> | 19 | 17% |
| Total Executive Director Participation | 60 | 54% |
| Board/Staff (survey) | 33 | 29% |
| Nominator (14 via survey, one interview) | 15 | 25% |
| Open Society Fellowship Program Staff (interview) | 5 | 4% |
| TOTAL | 113 | 100% |

Please note that, except where direct quotes are provided, the authors have summarized, condensed or paraphrased input provided from the study participants.

ii. The Lens of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

This inquiry was designed to surface issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion in a variety of ways.⁶ The authors looked at specific factors that affect New Executives Fund cohort diversity (that is, who gets access to the opportunity, who gets chosen, and who is left out), including the eligibility criteria and the processes used for grantee nominations, applications, and selection. The authors paid particular attention to identifying and exploring what the New Executives Fund refers to as “historic firsts”: transitions in which the organization

is run, for the first time, by someone whose background or identity mark a significant break with the past. For example, the organization was run by cis-gendered men or by someone from an older generation and that changes for the first time; or it is the first time someone from the community served becomes the director; and/or it is the first time the director comes from an underrepresented community.⁷

6 “Diversity,” “equity,” and “inclusion” mean many things to different people. The authors offer the following definitions from the [University of Manitoba](#) (Canada): **Diversity** “includes all the ways in which people differ, and it encompasses all the different characteristics that make one individual or group different from another. It is all-inclusive and recognizes everyone and every group as part of the diversity that should be valued. A broad definition includes not only race, ethnicity, and gender—the groups that most often come to mind when the term ‘diversity’ is used—but also age, national origin, religion, disability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, education, marital status, language, and physical appearance. It also involves different ideas, perspectives, and values.” We, the authors of this study, think of diversity as who “gets in the door” or is present at the table in the context of the New Executives Fund program and support for leadership transitions more broadly. **Equity** “is the guarantee of fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all [people], while at the same time [strives] to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of some groups. The principle of equity acknowledges that there are historically underserved and underrepresented populations and that fairness regarding these unbalanced conditions is needed to assist equality in the provision of effective opportunities to all groups.” We understand equity to be a broad concept of access and other conditions that lead to greater fairness of outcomes for all people. **Inclusion** “is the act of creating environments in which any individual or group can be and feel welcomed, respected, supported, and valued to fully participate. An inclusive and welcoming climate embraces differences and offers respect in words and actions for all people.” As study authors, we understand inclusion as how people are treated and participate once they get through the door. See also the Glossary of terms in [Awake to Woke to Work: Building a Race Equity Culture](#),” by Equity in the Center, a project of ProInspire (2019), page 24.

7 The New Executives Fund has developed this non-exhaustive list of examples of historic and transformative firsts within its grantees:

- Identification as a person of color, racial or ethnic minority, or indigenous person;
- Gender or gender identity;
- Identification as a lesbian, bisexual, gay, trans, intersex, queer or non-binary person;
- Experience as a person with a disability or disabilities;
- Experience as a refugee or vulnerable migrant;
- Experience as a formerly incarcerated person or as someone directly impacted by mass incarceration;
- Experience as someone of low socioeconomic status or hailing from a marginalized rural background;
- Experience as someone belonging to a religious minority;
- Experience as someone with an unconventional educational or professional background, including those who have faced constraints in attaining higher levels of education; or
- Experience as someone whose lived reality represents an intersection of these and other dimensions of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The authors opened up space that led to varied reflections about cultural sensitivity and power dynamics in relation to New Executives Fund monitoring and peer learning activities, including check-ins and peer convenings. Space was also created for directors and others to surface issues related to the broader donor community and the donor-grantee relationship in the context of leadership transitions. Overall, the report is rooted in the viewpoint that acknowledges that racism and other systems of oppression (for example, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, classism, ageism, and discrimination based on religion, caste, ethnicity, etc.), occur differently in various contexts (geographic, sectoral, etc.) and on numerous levels—advertently or inadvertently—such as personal/individual, cultural, and institutional or systemic.⁸ At different times, the report references white supremacy culture, other systems of oppression,

and intersectionality.⁹ The authors also worked off the belief that funding and other donor support is rarely, if ever, neutral. Despite good intentions, it generally either replicates patterns of oppression or disrupts them, or, depending on the level of analysis (a single donor action, a grant, a donor policy, grant program, etc.), some combination of the two.¹⁰

8 As with other terminology, the levels of racism and other oppressions have been defined in multiple ways. See, for example, the distinction between [personal, cultural and institutional racism](#), and a deeper dive into [systemic or structural racism](#), all at [dismantlingracism.org](#). We are using the word “oppression” to refer to “the systematic subjugation of one social group by a more powerful social group for the social, economic, and political benefit of the more powerful social group.” See this definition and the cycle of oppression also at [dismantlingracism.org](#).

9 “White supremacy is the existence of racial power that denotes a system of structural or societal racism which privileges white people over others, regardless of the presence or the absence of racial hatred. White racial advantages occur at both a collective and an individual level, and both people of color and white people can perpetuate white dominant culture, resulting in the overall disenfranchisement of people of color in many aspects of society.” See, again, the glossary of terms in [Awake to Woke to Work: Building a Race Equity Culture](#),” by Equity in the Center, a project of Prolnspire (2019), page 24. “White supremacy culture is the idea (ideology) that white people and the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of white people are superior to people of color and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions.” From an article on white supremacy culture at [dismantlingracism.org](#). “Intersectionality,” a term coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (a U.S. lawyer, activist, and critical race philosopher), recognizes that certain individuals face multiple and intersecting forms of structural discrimination.

10 The authors recognize the relevance of their own social identities to this exercise. One of us is a white, cis-gendered woman who is a U.S. citizen and a long-term permanent resident of Argentina who identifies as pansexual and has been generally perceived as heterosexual. The other is a white, Latina, cis-gendered, heterosexual Argentine Jewish woman who emigrated to the United States and became a dual citizen, and has lived extensively in both Argentina and the United States. We consider ourselves both bilingual (Spanish-English) and bicultural.

iii. A Note About “Measuring Success”

“Measuring success” is a difficult and loaded concept. Study participants represented a wide variety of backgrounds, demographics, lived experiences, and contexts, so it is natural that they thought of “success” differently. Thus, we take the terms “indicators of success” and “impact” loosely and prefer to focus on the New Executives Fund’s “contributions,” so as not to imply direct causation or correlation but rather unveil general learnings and commonalities, underscoring the fact that this study is not an evaluation.¹¹

iv. Acknowledgments

The authors would like to acknowledge and thank all of the study participants for their time and thoughtfulness. We would like to thank the participating Executive Directors, in particular, for their time, energy, trust, openness, and reflective and constructive feedback. We especially note and are grateful for the emotional labor that many invested in telling us their stories, including many members of various marginalized groups in different contexts around the world. Finally, we are thankful to the New Executives Fund staff for their guidance, collaborative spirit and trust, all of which allowed us to conduct this study under entirely favorable conditions.

11 See, in particular, questions 11 and 16 in Annex 2, the Executive Director Interview Questionnaire. While one of the questions mentions the word “indicators,” in the course of the interviews, we encouraged participants to reflect more broadly and freely on how they would define their own “success” as leaders as a result of the New Executives Fund grant, and that of the New Executives Fund as a grant-making program. Not surprisingly, participants pivoted among addressing the “success” of grants, individual leaders, organizations, and the New Executives Fund as a program.

C. Central Findings

New Executive Directors need support as they take on their new role. They simultaneously face promise, hopefulness, and opportunities while experiencing intense levels of stress and multiple constraints that those of us who have never been in their shoes cannot easily imagine.

What do they need most? Across the board, study participants shared these resounding messages:

- i. **New Executive Directors need funders to understand and pay special attention to leadership transitions.**

*As one Executive Director stated: “Recognize your power! A donors’ response to a leadership transition can make or break that transition.” **Funders must build “transition-thinking” into their programs and support openness around leadership transitions.***

- ii. **New Executive Directors and their organizations need funders to step right up to the plate with tangible and intangible support.**

***Executive Directors need donors to step forward with solid financial and other forms of support** instead of delaying or cutting funding, or any other form of “waiting and seeing.” **They need funders to open doors**—to potential new donors and to other organizations and leaders—and to share tools and resources for leadership transitions and other organizational challenges, especially adapted to the Global South.*

- iii. **In this context, unrestricted funding is critical—as is trust in new Executive Directors.**

Unrestricted funding is rare yet critical for the flexibility it gives Executive Directors to take the organization in exciting new directions; to address internal and external challenges, foreseen and unforeseen; and to focus on their own development, staff development or other organizational strengthening efforts. They want donors to understand the problems of project funding and trust them to be good stewards of funds and to make tough decisions (for example, if they decide to let staff go), while remaining accountable. They also want patience— for example, if there are hiccups on initial grant reporting.

- iv. At the same time, new Executive Directors need other types of support and accompaniment.

Financial support is a powerful and highly needed vote of confidence, but it is not enough. Executive Directors also need emotional support, including empathy and patience, to feel held up and accompanied as they take bold steps and make difficult decisions. Grantmakers need to inquire on that level and ensure that they feel prepared to make that an integral aspect of the scope of their support.

As one Executive Director stated:

“Reassurance is a two-way street: it is not only the new Executive Director’s job to reassure you; it is also the donor’s job to reassure the new Executive Director.” Incoming Executive Directors request donors provide honest feedback early on, and be mindful of the level of pressure they experience.

- v. New Executive Directors need each other for peer learning and support.

New Executive Directors expressed a pressing need for opportunities to network with their peers: to know that they are not alone in facing their difficulties, to hear that all Executive Directors face similar issues, and to learn from their peers how to foresee and address organizational and personal challenges. As a rule, Executive Directors highly value convenings focused on collective problem solving and relationship building. Funders can convene sessions for grantees, sponsor sessions at conferences, or create other mechanisms to encourage peer-to-peer connection and learning.

- vi. Focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion around leadership transitions, as in all philanthropy, is a must.

From a framework of justice and equity, funder decisions about whom they choose to support (directors and organizations), what levels of support are provided to whom, and how they interact with their grantees all matter deeply and require thoughtful examination. This shows up in everything from overall and relative grant size (among grantees) to the eligibility and selection criteria for supporting new executives. The choice to support a critical number of “historic firsts”—the first Executive Directors to come from particular communities historically excluded from leadership—can have real impact on those individuals and in the field.

- vii. The stakes are high: support for leadership transitions is not a luxury or an add-on, but a critical, unattended necessity and a major opportunity to strengthen individual organizations and the social justice field as a whole.

The New Executives Fund was created originally in response to the lack of attention to and support for leadership transitions, and the enormous costs for individuals, organizations and for the field of nonprofit social change more broadly. The flipside of this need is the opportunity related to addressing leadership transitions with a variety of forms of support.

viii. While subject to potential improvements, the New Executives Fund has been extraordinarily effective in addressing the needs and challenges of leadership transitions. But it cannot do so alone.

*The New Executives Fund has made an enormous positive difference in the lives of dozens of Executive Directors and in their organizations. But, clearly, **there is much more need than it can begin to meet.** As one Open Society Fellowship Program staff member stated, **“there could be 100 New Executives Funds in the world.”** More support is needed to “mainstream” sensitivity to, and support for, leadership transitions as an integral part of overall mandates and grant making within the Open Society Foundations and among the entire donor community.*

These are the central findings in a nutshell. Each of these points is developed in considerable detail in the following pages.

Part One: On Leadership Transitions

A. New Executive Directors' Biggest Opportunities

Leadership transitions provide numerous possibilities to strengthen organizations and their impact in the world. Directors were asked to share their biggest opportunity as an incoming Executive Director, from where they sit today. Of the 35 Executive Directors who weighed in, several mentioned more than one. Only a few said that their perception of their biggest opportunity changed over time. While these diverse responses reflect the variety of circumstances surrounding any given leadership transition, they underscore how transitions can serve as a catalyst for major organizational transformation and growth.

Fresh ideas and new perspectives. Several Executive Directors made general comments on being able to be creative, innovate and think outside the box, “bring fresh ideas and new perspectives,” and “reset anything you want” for the benefit of the organization. A number of external hires noticed the resulting ability to bring a fresh and critical perspective and clarity of thought. Internal hires had the opportunity to build on their deep knowledge of and legitimacy within the organization, to “tell a new story about [us]” or to be the face of an innovative, forward-looking approach as a young Executive Director in an “old” organization.

Reorganizing around structural inequality and impacted communities. Four Executive Directors from the Global South talked about reconfiguring their organization around inclusion and representation of the impacted community. In at least two cases, Executive Directors took on letting people go, and then hiring, to diversify staff (on gender, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, nationality, etc.). They also involved new staff in such aspects as defining the organization’s strategic direction. Another Executive Director spoke of transforming the organization around structural inequality and racism, hiring to make the team more diverse, while planning to create a program area to confront racism at a broader, societal level. Another Executive Director made changes to the leadership structure that permitted hiring a senior-level leader (and potential successor) from the community their organization represents. One Executive Director had the opportunity to incorporate more inclusive lenses on feminism, race, and gender into the organization’s work; another mentioned a deeper ability to lead the organization’s work with values of racial equity and justice.

Expanding relevance, impact, and reach. A number of Executive Directors said their biggest opportunity was recuperating the organization's political relevance; for example, by re-engagement of their network members and new participation in regional and international networks, or centering grassroots work to the national level. Another highlighted the re-internationalization of the organization, which allowed it to connect with the knowledge and expertise of peers in other countries, engage with international governmental organizations, and launch innovative work around LGBTQI issues, with the first transgender person hired to lead that work. One Executive Director spoke of returning a 40-year-old organization to its core values and more radical identity. For two others, it was delivering a timely win on the organization's top priority issue. One Executive Director opined that the greatest opportunity was the announcement of the transition, which was a means to legitimize the organization as having done the transition well, and the new Executive Director as a solid selection.

Enhanced funding. Two Executive Directors mentioned using funding from the New Executives Fund to leverage other financial resources, with one feeling "freedom" to make financial decisions and continue to implement his fundraising strategy because he had brought in his own funding (referring to the New Executives Fund).

The silver lining to adverse conditions. More than one Executive Director pointed out that adverse conditions can also provide opportunity. Two cases involved the ability to make new hires that, among other things, allowed for more rapid changes in organizational culture. Both involved massive departures of staff during or after the transition. Another case involved a financial crisis that allowed the Executive Director to let go so-called "underperformers" and "reboot" the organization.

Internal strengthening. Executive Directors mentioned the opportunity to reorganize internal processes and revamp communications; implement a management-by-results vision and culture change; move from one-person leadership to a shared, triangular management structure; improve evaluation measures to identify and ensure impact; institutionalize processes; improve compensation and human resource policies like staff assessments; and, overall, achieve greater professionalization and strategic growth. One Executive Director said that addressing internal issues allowed the organization greater leadership in its field and substantive, innovative contributions on the organization's core agenda, responding to demand and opportunities, and expanding their communications.

Stronger Executive Director leadership. One Executive Director's biggest opportunity was the ability to demonstrate leadership by showing that staying committed to the organization's mission, values, and founding principles allowed it to overcome the contextual odds and not just survive, but thrive. New Executives Fund support strengthened another's personal leadership as a young representative of the marginalized community served by the organization, who had never been in a management position before. For two others, the greatest opportunity was the trust in them by the New Executives Fund and their own staff.

B. New Executive Directors' Biggest Challenges

When Executive Directors were asked to identify their single biggest challenge, again, many understandably pointed to more than one, and underscored the interrelatedness of multiple challenges and opportunities. Their challenges and needs permeated many questions and conversations.

General stress and being overwhelmed. While not necessarily mentioned as the biggest challenge, feeling stressed and overwhelmed emerged as a common theme related to immense financial pressures, tough decisions (for example, regarding programs, strategy, and staffing), and the need for emotional support and connection to other Executive Directors. For example, one Executive Director expressed loving the opportunity to help co-create a "feel good" organizational culture, but not liking "the level of everything being on my shoulders and lots of responsibility. When things go great, it's a little bit because of you; when things go wrong, it's all because of you."

Finances. Ten of the 33 Executive Directors who weighed in, mentioned finances as their biggest challenge, including three who dealt with profound financial crises. Of these, one case involved major shortfalls provoked by donors shifting their commitments without previous notice, and another required the Executive Director to rescue the organization from insolvency. The other seven Executive Directors mentioned financial sustainability (including retaining funding, especially given the prevalence of one- to two-year grants), or fundraising more generally.

Organizational culture. The difficulties associated with internal cultural change figured prominently, including challenging staff and board's assumptions and introducing new ways of thinking. Examples included eliminating toxic internal dynamics and creating a culture of respect, innovation, and creativity; promoting greater staff participation in strategic or programmatic decision-making; moving from one-person, centralized rule to a more collaborative and horizontal leadership model; moving an organization away from a deeply insular culture

toward engagement with and leadership in the field; and moving an organization toward a greater international role.

One Executive Director shared her learning that “organizational culture work is never done. It’s a work-in-progress. Organizations have an emotional life of their own. We need to be constantly in tune with it and have ways to reflect on and challenge it.”

Disrupting white supremacy culture. One U.S.-based Executive Director mentioned that, in general, achieving change when white supremacy culture was deeply ingrained raised innumerable challenges; another noted that the biggest challenge was working in a system set up to benefit white modalities that “expressed support for more diverse leadership yet scoffed at that diversity once it tried to create actual change.” Both of these were people of color who were “historic firsts” in their organizations, as was a woman in Europe from an ethnic minority who named her biggest challenge as gaining the confidence of her board and staff.

In more than one case, disrupting white modalities required changes in the composition of the board and staff. One case, elaborated below, mentions a majority white, male board of directors that hired a woman of color Executive Director to continue to deepen the organization’s work on racial justice, though this board had not actually done the work to understand and disrupt their own white supremacy culture and dynamics. This was one of the cases in which the Executive Director departed before her grant period finalized. See the section below on [The Particular Challenges and Opportunities for “Historic Firsts”](#).

Another Executive Director of color alluded to the difficulties of leading underfunded organizations of color. “In my experience, being a new Executive Director means everything is on fire. You’re desperately trying to raise money so you don’t have to let staff go and look inept—especially as a person of color—while white donors wait for you to fail.”

Staffing—including letting go of staff. Several Executive Directors mentioned the challenge of addressing staff rotation during the transition and building up the right staff in terms of diversity (racial, geographic, gender, ethnic, generational, etc.), capacity and fit, which is, often, intricately related to generating cultural change. This generally involved hiring and, in several cases, required letting go of staff, which was identified as one of the biggest challenges any Executive Director has to face, especially when they are new. Understandably,

this was highlighted by some first-time Executive Directors with limited previous managerial experience.

Several mentioned lacking best practices and tools, knowledge, and expertise to do this well and compassionately, consistent with the organization's values and focus on people.

Two of these cases underscored the importance of being able to use New Executives Fund funding for external consultants.

Some Executive Directors faced significant gaps in internal second-tier leadership or institutional positions, such as fundraising or organizational development. Some had to do unexpected programmatic or other operational work to cover gaps in staffing until these were filled, undermining their capacity to focus on broader picture, strategic and substantive issues. One Executive Director highlighted her ability to rejuvenate and renew her staff, but identified as a pending challenge unexpected resistance from her board to mirror that renewal in its own composition.

Internal management. For some, the challenges were related to managing the demands on their time; understanding the organization and the direction in which it needed to go; setting reasonable goals; or tempering staff and board expectations of what the New Executives Fund funding could be used for. Five Executive Directors highlighted the challenge of finding time to do all the institutional, non-programmatic work, which tends not to be their strength or particular interest. One Executive Director mentioned a pending challenge of investing in staff development (for example, strengthening a senior management team) to continue to instill a less centralized leadership culture and avoid her own burnout and overwork.

Self-confidence and legitimacy. Numerous Executive Directors talked about having big shoes to fill after strong or long-time predecessors (often founders), or otherwise needing to win the trust and confidence of board and staff members who sometimes saw them as young and, perhaps, unprepared. This was especially true for the “historic firsts,” as discussed below ([The Particular Challenges and Opportunities for “Historic Firsts”](#)). Executive Directors referred to the “imposter syndrome,” the sense that they are not actually qualified for their job. One mentioned the persistent difficulty of speaking before her staff of 30, even though addressing donors and allies was not a challenge. The board-Executive Director relationship was repeatedly mentioned as a major challenge, as was meeting the expectations of constituencies and other external actors.

Predecessor Executive Directors who “stay around” and generate problems.

A few Executive Directors mentioned problems dealing with predecessors who fail to step back and relinquish control. In two cases, former Executive Directors became strong board members and continued to hold significant control of the organization. In a few other cases, they maintained informal contact with staff, at times undermining the new Executive Director’s leadership.

External conditions. For some Executive Directors, the greatest challenge was major threats to human rights and to their agenda, some of them totally unexpected, that demanded rapid response and consumed time and resources. In some cases, this was related to the overall closing of democratic space; in others, to threats to particular marginalized groups. Donors shifting priorities, cutting funding, or otherwise making unexpected interruptions in grant making (for example, during program reviews) made responding to these conditions exceedingly more difficult.

Recouping organizational visibility and relevance to the national agenda.

This opportunity also showed up as a challenge for at least four Executive Directors. In two cases, it was linked to engaging new audiences (such as younger generations, media allies, or new groups to join an NEF-supported coalition). In another, it was related to making an organization headquartered in the Global North more regionally embedded and relevant.

Numerous Executive Directors did not anticipate the scope or depth of the internal crises around finances, staffing, and organizational culture, which only became apparent as their tenure unfolded. Several Executive Directors also expressed that organizational change (including, but not limited to, organizational culture) takes longer than they expected, and was generally hard to implement—it requires flexibility, constant learning, experimentation, adaptation, and tolerance for “failure.” “Transition is longer than two years in most scenarios, especially if you define it in a broad organizational transformation sense. Some of the original challenges were always going to take longer than we originally hoped.”

In many cases, Executive Directors felt under-equipped to address the internal challenges. **The authors also heard a plea for practical tools for managing leadership transitions effectively**—both as an incoming Executive Director taking on the numerous challenges involved, and as Executive Directors and organizations plan for and manage their eventual departure and the new transition, when the time comes. **New Executives Fund staff also noted challenges in identifying and implementing such tools**, especially adapted to the realities faced by NGOs in the Global South.

C. The Particular Challenges and Opportunities for “Historic Firsts”

Of the 41 Executive Directors who participated by survey or individual or group interview, at least 19 identify themselves as a “historic first”: a director whose transition means the organization is run, for the first time, by someone whose background or identity marks a significant break with the past. Eleven were from the United States, two from Europe, and three from Asia; four were anonymous. Each of these Executive Directors are listed here, using the language they used to describe themselves:

1. First female director in 40 years, and first with EU citizenship
2. First female director
3. First woman director (and younger than the males who preceded her)
4. First woman and lesbian (succeeded a gay man)
5. First woman of color director
6. First woman and first person of color director
7. First young female from an ethnic minority (predecessor was an older man from the ethnic minority)
8. First Black male director of an organization serving a mostly Black and brown constituency (and who lives in the same neighborhood as their constituency)
9. First Black woman who followed a white male founding director, in the U.S. South. (She is also the second leader of color hired to lead a state-level policy organization in the more than 20-year history of the national network to which they belong. After more than four years in this role, she is still the only Black woman leading a group within that network.)
10. First woman director and the first in New York City (and one of the few in the country) to lead a major art museum
11. First person of color and gay director in the organization’s 20-year history. Possibly the organization’s youngest director.
12. First person of color following a straight, white, male founder

13. First generation immigrant woman (who immigrated to the United States) to lead an organization formerly led by an older white woman
14. First queer, immigrant, woman of color to lead an organization founded and led by white men in the United States
15. First Black person and fluid and gender queer
16. First trans person of color, who, at the time he became director, was also likely the first trans person of color directing a national LGBTQI organization. (That was four years ago; this Executive Director reports that, since then, several trans people of color have become Executive Directors of different organizations.)
17. First director under 35 years of age succeeding a woman of an older generation
18. First man to lead the organization
19. First man to lead an organization that had been run by a female founder and had a primarily female staff

Leaders who are “historic firsts” face a range of complex challenges and opportunities—sometimes the opportunities being precisely their biggest difficulty because of the magnitude or context. In several cases, the intersection of their social identities is particularly relevant for many new Executive Directors (for example, being both the first woman and the first person of color, or the first person of color and the first person who is queer).

In general, the authors heard about the major challenge of having to overcome distrust and establish legitimacy, even in the case of an Executive Director who was quite experienced.

The specific challenges for women. At least two women, one in North America, one in Asia, mentioned the disadvantages of “simply” being a woman: “When involved in negotiations with partners or decision-makers, I could see that they looked at the organization differently just because they were talking to a female leader, even if I was doing amazing things. I was treated as less of a leader because I am a woman.” This person also mentioned the expectations from people inside and outside the organization about what she could accomplish with the organization given that she had greater ties to the LGBTQI community.

Another female director's challenges were compounded by taking over when the organization was at its historically lowest position in terms of finances and staff morale. Challenges can also be related to age. In one case, a younger woman took over from a woman from an older generation—changing the demographics of the organization and whom it was able to reach, its messages, its youth engagement, etc.—while facing unanticipated resistance from the board. In another, a younger woman from the community the organization serves took over from an older man from that same community and faced the need for greater confidence in her leadership from the board, donors, and other external constituencies.

The deep challenges of disrupting white supremacy culture. As mentioned in the section on New Executive Directors' Biggest Challenges, the various cases of directors who sought to disrupt white supremacy culture (see: [New Executive Directors' Biggest Challenges](#)) each involved directors who are people of color. As one of the Executive Directors mentioned, a majority white male board of directors had hired a queer, immigrant, woman of color to succeed a white male director and to continue to deepen the organization's work on racial justice.

This Executive Director described the opportunity to publicly transition how the organization did organizing and campaign work to lead with values of racial equity and justice, especially as an internal hire who was trusted by the team. However, as she explained, the board members had not actually done the work to understand and disrupt their own culture and dynamics of white male privilege. When a conflict with the board on strategy related to racial justice became irreconcilable, this Executive Director left her position before the New Executives Fund grant period was complete. (As per New Executives Fund policy, the remainder of the grant—about 20 percent—was returned to the Open Society Foundations when this Executive Director stepped down.) Once she had departed, she heard from numerous colleagues and program officers that this is a very common story, and she could think of at least five leaders of color who were likely in a similar situation. When asked to help identify learnings from her experience, she shared that “you cannot get around a board that has not done its work to disrupt white supremacy,” and that the “unattended habits of white supremacy” in the field of power building and civic engagement need urgent attention.

This shines a light on the board-Executive Director relationship; in fact, there is a general sense that more work needs to be done around boards and this relationship in the context of leadership transitions. Another reflection is that, when she was making the decision to take the job, it would have been helpful to have someone to coach her to trust her own gut feeling that the process and the

situation were not fully healthy or tenable. She recognized that, ultimately, new leaders need to be supported and encouraged to do the inner work to trust their own instincts.

Another woman of color described the special challenges of being the only woman of color leading a legal defense organization in the United States.

[My line of] work is viewed as a space for the ‘very smart’ and is overwhelmingly occupied by cis[-gendered] white males. By holding this space, I believe I can, and do, challenge those assumptions and encourage more people of color to do work [in this field].

The authors would, again, like to acknowledge the time and, in particular, the emotional labor invested by the Executive Directors who shared difficult personal and professional stories. The examples in this section are by no means exhaustive or representative of all “historic first” Executive Directors’ experiences. And while they are primarily U.S.-based examples, we believe that they hold underlying lessons for other geographical contexts experiencing other types of oppression or discrimination (implicit or explicit). We are also aware that there may be other challenges experienced by Executive Director grantees who chose not to participate in this study.

D. Executive Directors Who Left Early and Organizations that Closed

To the best of our knowledge, of the 117 New Executives Fund grants awarded, just one involved an Executive Director whose organization closed during the grant period, while two Executive Directors’ organizations merged with another during the grant period. In one of those two cases, the grantee became the Executive Director of the merged organizations. In the other, the grantee Executive Director left and took a position elsewhere.

In addition, 14 Executive Directors left their posts before the two-year grant period concluded (just over 10 percent of Executive Directors supported). Two of these filled out surveys. One left their organization due to a serious conflict with the board of directors, and another due to “an unforeseen emergency,” which appeared unrelated to the job or organization. Four people in this group were offered interviews; the authors were able to interview one, whose story is cited in the previous section (see: [The Particular Challenges and Opportunities for “Historic Firsts”](#)).

Open Society Fellowship Program staff noted that while Executive Director departures before the grant period is finalized may be disappointing, they are not that surprising, and in some cases, may be part of the natural, organic evolution of an organization's life. One person observed that when an Executive Director leaves a situation that is unhealthy for them, it may be a positive overall outcome, especially when the process is conducted carefully and respectfully for all parties involved and the organization continues to be robust. Similar thoughts were shared about organizations that folded. Staff recognized that it is sometimes natural and healthy for an organization to cease to exist, and it is not taken as an indicator of the success or failure of an initiative that supports leadership transitions and new Executive Directors.

Finally, Open Society Fellowship Program staff noted that the New Executives Fund tends to support particularly complex leadership transitions involving heightened organizational risks, which increases the “high stakes” nature of New Executives Fund-supported transitions. Moreover, because the New Executives Fund's capacity is limited and necessarily funds fewer candidates than nominated, it tends to gravitate toward those transitions in greatest need of support, which may often translate to particularly complex “high risk” scenarios.

E. Top Advice for New Executive Directors from Their Peers

In light of the challenges and opportunities described above, this section offers new Executive Directors advice from their peers, inspired by a variety of sources. The first is a short document entitled “Advice and Tips from the New Executives Fund Community to a New Executive Director” that the New Executives Fund compiled from eight grantees in late 2017. In addition, during a participatory exercise at the November 2019 Executive Director convening in Barcelona, Spain, the approximately 44 directors in the room were asked to identify the single most important thing they wished someone had told them when they started their tenure. Finally, input is incorporated from Executive Directors surveyed and interviewed on their biggest learning associated with the New Executives Fund initiative and lessons that they would take to future jobs.

The authors believe these lessons are a welcome input to any incoming Executive Director in just about any organization around the globe.

Remain Clear that *You Can Do It!*

- Take a deep breath! It will be hard, but you can make it. Listen to and trust yourself, your instincts, vision, and purpose. Remain confident in your decisions. You were hired for a reason and you are already good enough.
- The challenges are real and every Executive Director will have their unique challenges. The work can be discouraging and frustrating. To be transformative, be internally driven and keep your head up.
- Extend yourself some grace. The first year is tough! And it does get better. For Executive Directors of color inheriting an organization founded and/or run by a white leader, the struggle will be more difficult. You will be held to a higher standard.¹²
- Keeping a healthy personal and mental health life is important for you and for the organization.
- Have a Plan B-Z. Prepare for the worse (it will come—and go), but always work, hope, and create for the best.
- Get comfortable with the uncomfortable. There will always be more things to do than time or resources allow. Be OK with not getting it all done at once.
- Own that organizations are a living and breathing thing. Make the changes your own.

Strategies for *Proper Orientation and Getting Started*

- Many Executive Directors do not experience any orientation process whatsoever. If there is no orientation process in place, request it.
- Engage the board and staff to join you in designing and planning a comprehensive and participatory orientation before your start date. This process reaffirms support for your vision as incoming Executive Director.
- There is no honeymoon period, so the best thing to do is focus on thinking about and organizing your own priorities and identifying areas where you need support, and where you will get it within a limited timeframe.
- Understand fully the organization you receive. Ask all the questions you need! Knowing exactly where you are starting will help you plan and get where you want to be.

¹² Authors' note: this would also apply to other leaders from historically marginalized or oppressed groups inheriting an organization founded and/or run by a person from the dominant culture or group in a given context.

- Get the “nasty” stuff done as quickly as possible, whether or not the organization is at risk: letting go of staff, finances, structure, legacy problems, changing the board.
- It is OK to take some time and space at the beginning to learn, be thoughtful and communicate why you are doing

things in a particular way. There is so much pressure to set unrealistic benchmarks and achieve them all in three months, or everything will fall apart. You do not have to prove yourself in the first three months or get everything right in the first year.

Make Time to Reflect and Gather Information

- Create a personal work plan for the first six months and gather data to inform the direction you’ll take.
- Protect time and space to think, reflect, meditate, and work with friends. You do not need to be available to all people at all times.
- Meet your partners and beneficiaries.
- Get on top of the budget.
- Conduct a participatory organizational development assessment, for self-awareness and shared vision.

Especially if you are an external hire, figure out how to understand organizational culture and get an honest assessment and diagnosis.

- Start slow to go fast. Most of us inherit crises where often we have to act quickly. If we do not know it and cannot see it, that is a big risk.
- Always be ready to listen, even if you are itching to jump in. Have patience for self-reflection and for challenging yourself and others within the NGO sector.

Implement Your Vision for the Organization

- Do not lose your vision. Know where you want to take your organization and be clear and transparent about it. Recognize that you will have to fiercely believe in it to move it forward. But do not forget that your plans will require constant adaptation. Be open to input and help along the way.
- Understand that not everyone on the staff or board is necessarily walking in the same direction as you are as Executive Director. It is your job to get everyone on the same page, heading to the same point and in the same direction.

- Include participatory processes so that others take ownership of changes.
- Balance internal and external needs, program and organizational priorities, strategic and operational work.
- Learn the importance of strategic focus, teamwork and inclusivity, while not losing sight of the organization’s vision of outreach and global impact.
- Innovate and take calculated risks, no matter how unconventional.

- Be aware that implementing your vision often changes not only the organization, but will also likely

impact you personally, deepening and widening your life perspective.¹³

Shifting *Organizational Culture*

- Early on, define the work culture you want to create.
- Understand the organizational culture of the staff before you try to change it. Do not dismiss it, and understand why you want to change it.
- Organizational culture shift takes a very long time. Pre-existing personal dynamics can be unseen and difficult to unpack. Navigate them with humility and patience with people and the process.
- Find the balance between freedom and flexibility on the one hand, and order and control on the other.
- Change is hard and can be painful and bring up a lot of emotions. The stress and emotional side of organizational change can be overwhelming, especially for an introvert. It is important to set your own boundaries as Executive Director and not become a martyr who is overwhelmed and overwhelming for others in the organization, especially if you belong to the community you serve. Do not merge into the organization, which can lead to burn-out.
- Make timely succession planning an integral part of your organizational culture. Leadership transitions and succession planning should be part of the DNA of the organization (whether the funder asks for it or not).

Address *Staffing Issues* and *Letting People Go*

- Top priority is getting the right people on the bus: move first and foremost on that. Do not try to do too many jobs at once and hire the people you need right away. Get on top of other staffing issues: dysfunctions, unhappy staff, staffing gaps, etc. Be aware of toxic behaviors that can impact the organization and your ability as Executive Director to implement your vision.
- Hire top-level leadership first, to help set the tone for the vision you want to realize.
- Understand emotional intelligence and prioritize that in hiring and internal dynamics. Screen for it in interviews.
- Recognize amazing talent within the organization and take care of them to retain them.
- Meet with each staff person regarding their work, ambitions, and suggestions for focus areas for the first six months. Keep career development in mind. Figure out individual staff's strengths and weaknesses, so you know how to empower them.

¹³ This was shared by someone who implemented a vision that incorporated a lens of diversity, anti-oppression, and racial justice into the organization's internal and external work.

- Cultivate a team environment.
- Everyone waits too long to let someone go. Move quickly. Letting someone go who needs to go is a better decision for you and the organization than keeping them in.
- Letting someone go can be done in a responsible and compassionate way so that the person can move on to something that is good for them and also for the organization. Letting people go can be challenging in some contexts with very good employment laws. Those laws are important, and we [Executive Directors] must learn to balance that [with what the organization needs].

Connect to the *Support You Need*

- It is not enough to know about the mission of your organization or to be an issue expert. Being an Executive Director requires management skills that may be very challenging: human resources, finances, managing governance and boards, reaching out to stakeholders, dealing with the media, etc. Identify areas in which you need help and find support, training, and coaching soon for areas that you need to strengthen. Invest in skill development for yourself. It is OK to ask for help!
- This can be a lonely job, so make connections. Develop or find a support network where you can be honest about your challenges and go for advice: a group of peer Executive Directors to share common experiences, a coach, people within your team and board, etc. Even informal, more intimate networks. These connections will hold you.
- Find other Executive Directors early on and hold them close! You must build an Executive Director peer network, even if you have to do it on your own. Connect to them in a group, or one-on-one, and maintain that connection or network for advice and support. Talk to them about institutional challenges, not just program work.

Regarding Your *Board of Directors*

- If you do not have or cannot generate agreement with the board, get out. Boards are often the reason why Executive Directors leave.¹⁴
- Spend a good amount of time with your board the first year; it will pay off later. Bring board and staff together. Talk to your board members, especially the chair or president.
- Understand the board's roles and responsibilities and move toward alignment. Assess the board's skills for supporting the organization, and be sure to pay attention to culture fit, not skills alone.

14 Executive Directors mentioned particular discrepancies or misalignment with the board regarding fundraising responsibilities and expectations; vision; and program and strategic focus, among others.

- Board members have varying interests and strengths. Learn what those are and why they are on the board—then be strategic in how to get what you need from them.
- Be aware that board renewal and

restructuring—to accompany changes in staff and organizational culture—take a lot of time and effort. Do not underestimate the time and effort required to transform your board!

Ensure *Freedom from Your Predecessor*

- [Take necessary steps to] ensure that the previous Executive Director lets go!
- In some cases, a predecessor can remain in the scene (and become a real obstacle or difficult person to manage), even years after the new Executive Director takes over.

Build Your *Donor Relations*

- Understand that fundraising is as much about building relationships as it is about the specifics of your program.
- Meet one-on-one with every funder and major donor within the first 60 days.
- Transitions create significant costs: ask your closest donors to increase their giving significantly just to maintain the same level of service. Be honest about the challenges.
- Communicate with your donors that innovations require a financial push to materialize.
- Be an excellent steward of the organization's resources with self-discipline, focused on real institutional funding. Do not go after unsustainable initiatives [even if they generate short-term project funding].
- Share with your donors that philanthropy can play a big role in helping new leaders take risks, grow, and develop.

Remember to *Communicate Success*

- Celebrate the win, again and again. Tell the story of what the change is.

Part Two: Messages for the Donor Community Around Leadership Transitions

This section contains messages for the larger donor community (beyond the Open Society Foundations). It complements the earlier sections about opportunities and challenges with additional information about new Executive Directors' biggest needs.

A. Important Introduction: When Context is Critical

At the November 2019 New Executives Fund grantee convening in Barcelona, Spain, the authors facilitated a participatory session to gather the expectations and concerns around this learning initiative from the approximately 44 Executive Directors present. Additionally, with the New Executives Fund staff having left the room (as previously agreed upon), the Executive Directors were asked to express in writing and out loud the most pressing messages about leadership transitions that they would like to share with the donor community.

Many important things happened during that exercise, including a sense of catharsis, above and beyond the session's initial focus on discussing leadership transitions. Executive Directors were invited to form a circle in which individuals took turns stepping into the middle to voice their most pressing message. The other Executive Directors were asked to move toward the person in the center to the degree with which they identified or agreed with what was being said. Some participants distanced from the exercise (which makes it difficult to know differing levels of conformity with the various messages). Also, in the process, without naming any names, some serious examples of donor misconduct were mentioned.

Toward the end, the group recognized that the combination of the need to release frustration and the lack of time led to a disproportionate expression of negative messages, which paints an incomplete picture of their relationship to their funder and the donor community. Participants noticed that much of what was said was framed through a U.S. lens. They also requested that this context be made explicit in this report. Readers are encouraged to see [Annex 3: "When Context Is Critical:"](#) [Additional Information](#), which provides greater detail on what occurred during the exercise and the Executive Directors' resulting reflections and concerns.

What follows is the first of two parts of a summary of the messages that were written down by Executive Directors and shared in the group.¹⁵ The first part focuses on leadership transitions; the second part, contained in [Annex 4: Additional Messages for the Donor Community Beyond Leadership Transitions](#), includes additional messages not specific to leadership transitions. Some are reflections and others express grantee preferences, while others are categorical requests. Participants expressed hope that this report could serve as a call to action to philanthropy more broadly about the seriousness of the issues that were named in the space. Some asked donors to take immediate action to assess their strategies and activate change.

If you are a donor, you are invited to ask yourself, if you are 100 percent honest about what might apply to you or your organization: what learnings, reflections, questions, and concerns do you take away? What points made you say, “How great that this is included!” and which gave you pause and/or caused you to disagree? What actions, large or small, might you consider taking as a result of this reflection?

B. How to Be in a Supportive Relationship with New Executive Directors

Initial timing. Study participants offered different messages on how to handle the initial contact with new Executive Directors. On the one hand, they suggested that donors invite the Executive Director to come and share their vision and discuss how you can support them, in person, as soon as possible, at a minimum, scheduling a call. At the same time, Executive Directors need time to articulate a new vision that incorporates inherited issues and allows for inclusive internal processes to align Executive Directors with the organization’s strategy. “Please don’t call me in the first month and ask what my new vision is, how I am going to implement it, and how far I have come. Limit your requests. We have a lot to figure out, and funding will be our top concern.” The lesson here may be to contact each new Executive Director early on to ask when would be the best time for them to share their vision and discuss how you might support them.

Executive Directors added to please remember that reassurance goes both ways: it is not only the new Executive Director’s job to reassure you; it is also your job to reassure the new Executive Director. Provide honest (perhaps confidential) feedback to the incoming Executive Director about the work and the organization (and do so early!), but be mindful of the fact that the incoming leader is under a great deal of pressure. Clarify your funding priorities, intentions, budget plans,

¹⁵ Most of the comments are paraphrased. Quotation marks indicate direct quotes.

processes, and decision-making processes for the new Executive Director; onboard the Executive Director regarding how you work.

Regarding the past leadership. Be open to investing in establishing a fresh relationship with the new Executive Director if there were problems under the previous Executive Director. Give the new Executive Director the benefit of the doubt; they are not their predecessor, their board, etc. Do not hold new leadership hostage for funding shortfalls that occurred under old leadership. “I understand you had a personal relationship with my predecessor. Please don’t make me feel that your support is contingent on my creating a personal relationship with you.” And, “Don’t exploit my newness and pull the wool over my eyes about things my predecessor said ‘no’ to.”

“Please trust us.” “Trust how we are going to spend the money. When I buy an iPhone, I don’t ask how much of my money goes to production, overhead, or administration. I trust that the money will go to making a good phone. The same applies to us. Please have patience with technical problems or hiccups in the first few months, such as late reporting. Transitions are risky for you and for us. They are not business as usual. If a transition disrupts your programs and schedules, please live with that and give us some space. Don’t freak out if we let people go.”

Have awareness of your bias. “If you think I am too young, the wrong color, or from the wrong background or professional experience, please trust that others have considered this and it’s OK. Be careful to check your bias, be it age, color, race, or anything else.”

C. Financial Support for Transitions

“Invest in the transition in ways that don’t add pressure. Offer flexible, generous, general operating, multiyear support to the incoming leader so they are set up for success.”

Organizations need core, flexible, multiyear funds, not project-based grants; otherwise it is very hard for the new leadership to implement the transition in mission and vision. This is especially true in regions where core funding is limited.

If you cannot or choose not to provide unrestricted funding, please allow line items not related to program work, or otherwise provide support for the transition itself. This could include:

- Coaching or other professional development
- Strategic planning support
- Support for new Executive Directors writing proposals¹⁶
- Sharing a list of experienced organizational development consultants, organizations, external resources
- Convening/networking for Executive Director
- Re-branding
- Expanding the staff
- Addressing inherited problems/budget shortfalls

Also, support for the Executive Director alone is insufficient as the whole executive team needs to be considered, especially the existing managers. Investment that supports the rest of the staff is important, too, including resources for staff development and team-building initiatives (retreats, trainings, etc.).

D. Level of Support

“An investment in new leadership because of new leadership, even if one-time only, is vital to the success of the leader and the organization. Consider a time-bound commitment of support at the current level (or higher) while the changes embed and can reach some level of fruition.”

“Funders are reluctant to make real medium-term commitments; they retain the flexibility.”

Do not write off an organization or reduce or stop funding when a leadership transition takes place, and do not decrease unrestricted funding. It is incredibly demoralizing to face a budget gap. A new Executive Director needs to manage a huge number of urgent, competing priorities. Do not add additional financial issues. On the contrary, invest in the organization’s transition period. We have huge ambitions and we want you to increase your support because we can do

¹⁶ “When a new Executive Director writes about how we plan to transform the organization, initially, we are probably making it up. One funder supported us to learn how to pitch. The [U.S.-based] [Haas, Jr. Fund](#) has a flexible leadership award that includes a consultant who writes proposals, reports, etc. That is an easy way to address this. This stress is bigger in smaller organizations,” commented one Executive Director. Another added in an interview, “I’d urge donors to invest in business training and mentorship through a global organization like [Vistage](#). It’s inexpensive and will have a profound impact on the leader and organizational growth. I know because I did it for five years.”

more. That vote of confidence builds momentum around the changes we are seeking to make. To the largest donor: you need to stay in as a signal to the community and to other funders that we are going to have continuity.

Commitment to support new leadership requires focus on existing organizational challenges and leadership structures and support. Often funding has to go to emergency organizational needs and leadership best practices have to be sacrificed, so funding may require a longer-term or deeper commitment than anticipated.

At times, donor expectations are disproportionate to the level of support. Donors should refrain from asking for three- to five-year outcomes if the grant is not multiyear, and from asking how this money will transform my leadership “unless they add another zero (at the end).”

E. Other Types of Support

Do reach out proactively to support organizational transformations through other means besides funds:

- **Open donor networks to new Executive Directors:** Please use your position and power to introduce Executive Directors to **potential new donors**, or invite them to spaces where they might meet them. Highlight their work whenever you can. Send a welcome note throughout your networks. Give the new leader all the new introductions to funding, but not program advice—unless asked.
- Help us connect with **other organizations, leaders and donors who have had successful experiences with leadership transitions.**
- Please introduce us to **other grantees** working in the same space.
- Offer additional **non-monetary resources**, including tools for leadership transitions.

Also, please keep in mind that, often, the outgoing Executive Director must be assisted to transition out. Do speak with the outgoing Executive Director and board about the transition process.

F. Summary of Key Learnings on Leadership Transitions for the Donor Community

Study participants expressed loudly and clearly that the New Executives Fund has a major opportunity to use Open Society’s convening power with other funders to spark groundbreaking conversations on the importance of leadership transitions, what Executive Directors and organizations need, the role of philanthropy in supporting them, learnings on how best to do that, and the costs of not doing so. This implies talking to people at different decision-making levels in various donor organizations, including donor trustees. As mentioned, one key message is the **need for unrestricted funding** during leadership transitions. Another is the awareness and understanding of **organizational health and effectiveness**. Both imply moving away from project support “to invest in organizations themselves, so that we can do better project work.” Several New Executives Fund grantees have been trying to convey this message to their funders. “The biggest expectation for this study is to plant that seed in other donors,” said one. This is about **changing the culture of philanthropy** to sustain accountability and be more trusting of grantees, focusing on organizations’ overall health, the demands of volatile political contexts, and the strain produced by reliance on project funding.

Throughout the study, participants reiterated repeatedly the importance of **centering the experiences of “historic firsts,”** and, in general, that of Executive Directors (and organizations) that represent groups and communities that have been **historically marginalized** from power and access to resources.

As developed below, Executive Directors want other donors to know that if they do not offer a program similar to New Executives Fund nor simply provide unrestricted funding, at the very least they should not keep organizations undergoing leadership transitions waiting on promised funds or cut their funding, but, rather, **give new Executive Directors the benefit of the doubt**. And, if there is a major concern with the organization, Executive Directors would like **clear and timely messages** from donors in this regard.

Part Three: Lessons From Open Society's New Executives Fund

A. New Executives Fund Background and Underlying Assumptions

So far, we have established that support for new executives is critical, why, and what type of support is most needed. At this point, we turn to the learnings from one experience of administering a program to support new executives. In 2013, then-Open Society President Chris Stone created the New Executives Fund to support new Executive Directors who show promise to grow in fields that are central to Open Society's mission. As mentioned, unlike other leadership transition support programs that provide executive coaches, courses, or other targeted leadership development, the New Executives Fund provides directors with two-year, fully discretionary grants early in their tenure along with peer learning opportunities, the highlight of which is an annual grantee convening. In 2016, administration of the New Executives Fund was transferred from the President's Office to the Fellowship Program.

As with any grant-making initiative, the New Executives Fund began with a few key assumptions about the experiences of new directors and the fund's focus and possible contribution, which, of course, developed over time. As culled from internal documents from the Open Society Fellowship Program, which houses the New Executives Fund, its underlying assumptions have included:¹⁷

1. [Executive leadership] transitions sometimes come after a crisis and expose the vulnerabilities of organizations that may have relied on a charismatic or long-standing director's network of contacts.
2. New executives often inherit budgets and strategies finalized for at least the first year, creating limited opportunities to leave an immediate imprint or realize their full leadership potential.
3. The first years of a new executive's tenure are ripe for support from funders, especially for a first time Executive Director, or if their predecessors and board have not prepared adequately.
4. New directors can bring fresh and creative thinking to the organization, lead staff into a meaningful phase of self-reflection, and effect internal change.

17 We were told that not all of the underlying assumptions were made explicit at the onset of the program, and identifying them has been part of the Fellowship Program staff's own learning process throughout the years. The authors created this list by excerpting key points included in a report entitled *New Executives Fund Portfolio Review* (November 2019) and an earlier *New Executive Fund Strategy* (October 2018). It was checked by the New Executives Fund program staff. Study participants were then asked to reflect upon this list of key points during interviews and surveys.

5. The first years of a new executive's tenure offer an unparalleled opportunity to think creatively about an organization's future, introduce new ideas, and effect internal change. Leadership transitions offer the Executive Director a chance to shepherd the organization through needed change.
6. With flexible grants and peer learning, the New Executives Fund strengthens new leaders when they are vulnerable.
7. Flexible grants allow new Executive Directors to increase their effectiveness and confidence in their own leadership, and be innovative in charting their organization's future.
8. The funds give Executive Directors the breathing room to devise solutions to long-term challenges.
9. This flexibility can be of particular value at organizations with fiscally conservative boards or extremely tight budgets. Grants can be used for individual development for the Executive Director or staff (similar to a fellowship) or for organizational or programmatic development.
10. The New Executives Fund's flexibility gives Executive Directors a stamp of confidence vis-a-vis other actors (board, staff, external).
11. The New Executives Fund grantee community offers up the space to reflect on leadership and learn from peers.
12. Even a small investment of funding during the critical transitional time can have outsized influence on the success of the organization and the individuals at their helm.

The following sections shed light on these assumptions, based on what Executive Directors expressed. Overall, readers will note that a majority of the assumptions are on the mark, with some requiring a bit more nuance. Executive Directors also reflected that many assumptions depend on the particular context. Perhaps the last is the most controversial, as explained in the section related to grant size (see: [Challenges around Grant Size](#)).

The information gathered suggests that this program has, as a rule, had a positive effect on the grantee leaders, on their organizations, and on the larger fields in which they operate. Much of the New Executives Fund's impact relates directly to what directors reported as their biggest challenges—things like addressing finances, the need for self-confidence, external legitimacy, peer support, and the arduousness of making cultural change.

B. The New Executives Fund's Biggest Contributions to Leaders

This section captures what Executive Directors considered the New Executives Fund's most significant contribution or positive impact on them as a leader, and opinions on the same culled from the board and staff surveys and Open Society Fellowship Program staff. Many of the points raised are intricately inter-related and echo the needs that Executive Directors expressed above, and raise interesting questions on whether some of these contributions might be achieved with actions or formats that look different from the New Executives Fund per se.

i. From the Executive Director Viewpoint

Participants made general comments about New Executives Fund grantee leaders feeling “empowered and strong no matter what the situation internally or externally.”

Boost to self-confidence.

Several directors described the New Executives Fund's biggest contribution as “the vote of confidence in my leadership” at a critical moment. Some directors related the importance of this contribution to their context as “historic firsts,” and others simply as first-time Executive Directors trying to be skillful in all the areas of their challenging jobs, some of whom had little experience in fundraising or organizational management. Two Executive Directors of color and one from the community the organization serves said the most powerful impact of the New Executives Fund grant on them was that it helped them combat the imposter syndrome and believe that they were the right person for the role.

Legitimacy. Numerous directors mentioned the biggest contribution of the New Executives Fund as the legitimacy before their board, staff, and external actors such as donors, media, government officials, and counterparts. This credibility resulted from the vote of confidence from an influential foundation, “a signal that they should trust me.” In one case, despite some staff resistance to change around the Executive Director's vision, the fact that “staff knew [support] came from a [known and trusted] funder made things easier.” Another Executive Director mentioned the unanticipated prestige from being listed with other Executive Directors in the New Executives Fund grant announcement. In multiple cases, that vote of confidence in the director and the organization made it possible to leverage other funds. The legitimacy was also cited as particularly important for some of the “historic firsts.”

Community with other Executive Directors. One of the most-mentioned and highly valued contributions was meeting other Executive Directors at the New Executives Fund-sponsored convenings, especially from around the world, “creating a sense of safety very quickly and of not being alone.” This was particularly appreciated given the isolation inherent in their leadership role, reported by so many of the Executive Directors who participated in this study. The word “community” came up repeatedly, as did “catharsis” and “empathy.” Breaking the loneliness and seeing the shared difficulties was highlighted often as a source of psychological and emotional support and “normalization” of their challenges.

One Executive Director said, “I’ve learned on the job and made many mistakes. No one trained me to be an Executive Director! But now, I have confidence that I have had a fairly robust sounding board of other people that have gone through the same situations and have found some things that I had instincts about, or practiced. Confidence in leadership enables you to make decisions better.” Another said the convening “gives us a general sense that... leaders of organizations doing this [important] work face serious challenges that require support to thrive, and that this is essential in the larger political picture.” In other words, it is important and OK for Executive Directors to get the help they need.

Peer learnings, collective problem-solving, and having a preview of potential challenges. The collective problem-solving activities at the convenings were particularly valued (see: [Peer Learning and Community Building](#)). The authors heard, “Learning from others helps foresee problems and put our own problems in perspective.” “I met members of my cohort who had very specific and tangible experiences with direct information that helped me do my job better.” At least one Executive Director appreciated direct referrals from New Executives Fund staff to other Executive Directors who shared similar challenges.

Flexible funding. Several directors considered the biggest contribution to be the discretionary funding “to breathe or innovate.” This could mean addressing organizational needs that other funders do not support, and the ability to deal with difficult situations like firings or budgetary gaps quickly and move on. One Executive Director from Latin America described the New Executives Fund assumption that “new executives often inherit budgets and strategies finalized for at least the first year,” as “the core of the matter...and a great point of departure for the New Executives Fund program.” An Executive Director from Europe reflected that the flexibility is important even in situations where money is not as tight: “My board is pretty conservative, so it was nice to have my own money to ‘play with.’”

In one case, the flexibility allowed an Executive Director in the Global South to complete an organizational transformation process that included staff renewal (“we don’t get that from other international funders”). For others, the contribution was the ability to expand or explore new programs. Those who focused on moving in new directions mentioned how the New Executives Fund support created a sense of freedom for Executive Directors to pursue their vision at the very beginning of their tenure, which is often a time when Executive Directors feel overwhelmed with more immediate priorities. In this way, the New Executives Fund provided “support for new ideas to kick off” or “to improve programs.” It is the allowance for innovation that is sadly lacking in most grant making, and this really allows for leadership to be proactive and visionary to the fullest.

Others. For one director, though the financial contribution was not very substantial, it was significant at the time.

“Opening up relationships within other Open Society programs [that could lead to additional funding] was much more significant.”

Other contributions included the ability to motivate staff and staff buy-in around the strategic vision; professional development and coaching; and open and frank conversations with the New Executives Fund team (at check-ins—see: [Monitoring and Other Follow Up](#)).

One Executive Director summarized the overall impact with these words: “The generous New Executives Fund grant has been invaluable in giving me the chance to experiment, develop and grow my own leadership, shape my team, and bring in high-level expertise to support us through the transition. It has helped me dedicate the necessary space and time to consider and make changes, during what has often seemed a turbulent and toxic environment for human rights.”

ii. From the Board and Staff Viewpoint

For the board and staff of the Executive Director’s organizations, flexible funding was mentioned most often as the biggest contribution of the New Executives Fund—for “blue sky thinking across a broad array of areas;” defining strategic direction; trying new projects or areas of expertise; and shaping the culture and mission. Others mentioned addressing capacity gaps such as a fund development person, needed innovation in communications strategies, or unspecified “institutional capacity to be prepared to manage growth.” For example, one survey respondent shared, “Without the flexible funding [from the New Executives Fund], the board wouldn’t have approved [the Executive Director’s vision around innovative communications strategies] as a priority because resources were so limited.”

Executive Director confidence and self-assurance also received numerous mentions: to make tough decisions; devise solutions to long-

standing problems; overcome a shaky start with the board; think big and actually implement a vision; bolster other fundraising efforts; or transform a moment of self-doubt as a woman Executive Director taking over after a man, which could have destabilized the organization, into “one of the most important phases of organizational growth and development.” One participant mentioned that the New Executives Fund grant signaled to other actors in the field that the organization’s transition was important, and that the Executive Director merited recognition and support.

Some board and staff members highlighted the Executive Director’s ability to network with and learn from similarly situated peers; others saw real improvements in the director’s leadership and professional and/or personal development and in financial, team-building, and other Executive Director skills. Seven respondents from this group highlighted tangible benefits of the Executive Director’s networking for their own organizations, including bringing back fresh solutions to shared problems.

iii. From the Open Society Foundations’ Viewpoint

For Open Society nominators and Open Society Fellowship Program staff, unencumbered resources were mentioned most often as the New Executives Fund’s biggest contribution, for new executives to handle emergencies, show effectiveness at the outset (a critical time) and innovate. One Open Society Fellowship Program staff person said, “The kind of grant we provide [to new Executive Directors] does not exist elsewhere in the philanthropy world, though there are other programs that support new Executive Directors through executive coaches, courses, and targeted support. Trusting the agency of new leaders is of tremendous value.” Another New Executives Fund staff person valued the nuanced and realistic understanding of the challenges of leadership transitions that they have not seen in other grant-making approaches. The fact that the New Executives Fund takes risks, supports professional development (including “soft skills”), and makes efforts to connect new Executive Directors with others across the world were also highlighted.

C. The New Executives Fund’s Biggest Contributions to the Organizations

i. General Reflections

Both Open Society Fellowship Program staff and Executive Directors were asked to share to what extent and how the New Executives Fund’s

impact on individual leaders translated into positive contributions to the organizations themselves. To spark wide-ranging reflection, participants were also asked to share their

definition of organizational resilience, what a “successful” New Executives Fund initiative might look like,¹⁸ and their assessment of sustainability of the impact of their own New Executives Fund grant over time. This section combines key insights from those questions.

One clear, overarching reflection is that, for many, an New Executives Fund grant may be considered “successful” if it goes beyond bolstering an individual leader and translates into real, concrete, and visible organizational change, on the various dimensions discussed below. Unsurprisingly, this and many of the other themes relate to, and build off, each other.

Finances. The impact that an influx of flexible funding can have on a new Executive Director, and consequently on their organization as a whole, is discussed above. Flexible funding can be impactful even at the level of basic infrastructure, upgraded technology, and “brick and mortar” investments. As one board/staff member remarked: “Very mundane things such as office setup and environment can affect a person’s performance greatly, and the New Executives Fund’s ability to

provide for this makes for a positive change that most would overlook.” For one Executive Director, “the overhaul of truly outdated infrastructure raised morale and [impacted] organizational culture.”

In multiple other cases, as mentioned, the New Executives Fund grant helped the organization leverage other funds (with various degrees of success), often implicitly spurring organizations to develop a strategy for sustainability since they knew the New Executives Fund would be a one-time grant. One nominator knew of an New Executives Fund-supported Executive Director whose organization had to merge with another group because of the unknown extent of a financial crisis, and, thanks to the New Executives Fund, was able to do so “with a slightly strengthened hand...[and] land smoothly in a larger institution that had the long-term resources to...sustain it.”

Strategy, vision, direction.

Several comments underscored the New Executives Fund’s biggest contributions as the possibility of helping the Executive Director clarify and move the organization in a certain strategic direction with greater buy-in, synergy and energy; and employing new strategies (e.g., on management, internationalization, communications,

18 “Measuring success” is a difficult and loaded concept. Study participants represented a wide variety of backgrounds, demographics, lived experiences, and contexts, so it is natural that they thought of “success” differently. Thus, we take the terms “indicators of success” and “impact” loosely and prefer to focus on the New Executives Fund’s “contributions,” so as not to imply direct causation or correlation but rather unveil general learnings and commonalities, underscoring the fact that this study is not an evaluation. See, in particular, questions 11 and 16 in Annex 2, Sample Interview Questionnaire. While one of the questions mentions the word “indicators,” in the course of the interviews, we encouraged participants to reflect more broadly and freely on how they would define their own “success” as leaders as a result of the New Executives Fund grant, and that of the New Executives Fund as a grant-making program. Not surprisingly, participants pivoted among addressing the “success” of grants, individual leaders, organizations, and of the New Executives Fund as a program.

networks) or key external activities that showed concrete steps toward mission.

Visibility and boost to the organization's issues. In a few cases, the New Executives Fund grant provided greater visibility at a key moment in the national agenda for the organization's issue—mentioned by an Executive Director as “a nice unexpected consequence of my arrival.” In one case, the New Executives Fund grant led to the organization becoming more innovative, activist, and committed to human rights within its field.

Change in organizational culture. This appeared in at least 10 cases as a key contribution to organizations. One board/staff member appreciated that the Executive Director's ongoing leadership development and sharing of their own learnings with the rest of the staff “impacted the culture without [disrupting staff's] day-to-day operations.” The main cultural transformations had to do with:

- *Hiring, letting people go and addressing “a toxic culture,”* including realigning and increasing human resources, achieving greater staff diversity (which in turn impacted how the organization was perceived externally), among others.
- *Improved management systems* (such as performance appraisals and feedback mechanisms), more open and inclusive approaches to decision-making; listening to staff concerns and ideas; visioning; annual staff

retreats; encouraging learning, creativity, self-reflection, teamwork and collaboration; and “fighting silos and pockets of entitlement;” among others. In many cases, these approaches were undertaken for the first time in the organization's history.

- *Staff well-being and morale.* Related to the previous points, at least 10 study participants including Executive Directors, board members, and staff highlighted having a stable team with “happy,” “motivated,” and “not burned-out” staff as a key “success” indicator of an New Executives Fund grant.

For one Executive Director, the change in organizational culture came from instilling a greater sense that racial equity needed to be embedded in their work. Another Executive Director summarized their changes as follows:

“Building a healthy culture, having work-life balance, well-being and mental health care, a learning culture where people can make mistakes and learn from them, empowering people to lead in whatever way works in their role, self-responsibility of everyone toward the common goal, [and] the nurturing of future leaders and investment in staff development [so as not to] rest too heavily on any one person or team.”

Confidence beyond the Executive Director: building staff capacity and leadership development.

Executive Directors and board/staff members mentioned increased

Executive Director confidence as a key contribution of the New Executives Fund to the organization's staff as a whole. One Executive Director noted that "through the learnings, I was better equipped as a leader and this positively impacted the organizational culture." And one "historic first" Executive Director mentioned the overlap between personal and organizational impact in her case, as the first woman of color to lead the organization, highlighting the importance of self-confidence and legitimacy before the board, her community, and other stakeholders. At the same time, she wondered whether her organization could have taken more advantage of her own bolstered legitimacy to advance its mission.

This confidence sometimes extended beyond the Executive Director, especially in cases where the funds developed the capacity of other emerging leaders within the organization, via skills training or coaching. Comments had to do with empowering and allowing for staff innovation, thought leadership, taking ownership, initiative and responsibility over programs, and enhancing the visibility of their own—and thus the organization's—work. Developing second-tier leadership is, of course, intricately related to the discussion of succession under the New Executives Fund's Contributions to the Field (see: [The New Executives Fund's Contributions to the Field](#)). One staff member shared: "[New Executives Fund] allowed...me to hone my leadership abilities and concretely... remove my fear of becoming a future director of an organization."

ii. Organizational Resilience

At least 10 study participants—including Executive Directors, board/staff members and nominators—mentioned organizational resilience as an "indicator of success" of a New Executives Fund grant. Participants most frequently defined it as the organization's ability to:

- Overcome external and internal obstacles and adversity (including funding, staffing and program setbacks) with limited damage or disruption to the organization's goals.
- Respond, adapt to—and even thrive through—changes, while taking risks and not compromising work quality and the effective pursuit of mission.
- Self-reflect, be honest about its role in the world as the context and operating environment changes, and adjust effectively.

For one Open Society Fellowship Program staff person, "[The] New Executives Fund's grant flexibility is an important contribution to support a moment of broad-brushed thinking from the Executive Director, staff, and board, to think through how the organization wants to adapt." As one nominator expressed, "At a minimum, we've taken the plane out of the turbulence zone. It's not shaking any more. At a maximum, we've reached higher stable altitude, in terms of staff development, funding, work quality. That's the best outcome."

And one Executive Director concurred: “Very few funders are willing to entertain resilience issues in such an intentional way. The New Executives Fund gives you the funding and space to think about how to become more resilient, even if it’s not all the funding you need. Leadership transition time is the perfect time to do this when you haven’t made many mistakes (yet).”

Participants underscored the following ways in which the New Executives Fund contributes to organizational resilience:

- Building the *skills and leadership capacity* of Executive Directors and other staff.
- *Institutional systems* that help the organization sail through hard times and think outside the box to generate resources.
- *Getting out of crisis mode*, building reserves, and addressing staffing and financial shortfalls.
- *External stamp of confidence*, especially when outside actors may be dubious of the organization’s future.
- Sharing wisdom and advice through *network-building, support and community*, especially around staffing and organizational development issues. As one Executive Director put it, “A network of people makes you feel resilient as a leader. The New Executives Fund builds bridges among NGOs and makes the whole sector more resilient.”

iii. Sustainability

When asked to reflect on the degree and ways that the impact of the New Executives Fund grant has been sustainable over time—and what they need to advance that impact—Executive Directors gave multiple examples, while some of them acknowledged that it was too early to tell, but that they hoped they had set the basis for future progress.

One Executive Director mentioned as a positive consequence that the New Executives Fund got Executive Directors and staff thinking collectively about and prioritizing management and organizational development. This set higher staff ambitions and commitment to institutionalize and prioritize management and development in future grant proposals. A couple of Executive Directors mentioned a sense that “there is no going back.”

In some cases, sustainability was ensured by devoting the funds to one-time costs, such as travel to attend conferences, trainings and visit other organizations for peer learning, coaching (which “helped our team build a culture and practices that [we] can use for years to come”), communications revamps (such as branding) or consultants to help roll out a particular organizational change as a pilot, which permanent staff continued to implement once they were able to secure other funds. For one group that invested in finding new allies, trying new strategies, and building team skills, “the impact is highly sustainable and it will be even more visible over the next few years.”

Some Executive Directors attributed sustainability to their ability to get real buy-in from the organization's middle tier and, in a number of cases, to formalizing and institutionalizing policies, procedures, and processes into key organizational documents.

One board/staff member shared that "the New Executives Fund grant gave the new Executive Director an opportunity to meet new funders and obtain new grants linked to his vision [and] strategy. Over time we expect that it will improve the overall outlook of the organization, especially in terms of sustainability, enabling it to further source other grants and donors."

Sustainability, but... Several study participants expressed that "sustainability" is a problematic concept and one that is often overused (or misused) by funders with unrealistic expectations. In the case of the New Executives Fund, and as developed in more detail below on grant size (see: [The New Executives Fund's Biggest Challenges](#)), at least three Executive Directors concluded that "the short-term nature of the grant doesn't help build long-term resilience" and that "the grant amounts are not significant enough and the periods not long enough to really contribute to organizational resilience over a sustained period."

In a few cases, sustainability was undermined by problems with the organization's board, either blocking change efforts or perpetuating difficult power dynamics. In those examples, Executive Directors were relatively successful at generating

organizational change within their staff, but ran into deep resistance at the board level, which in three cases resulted in outright rupture in the relationship with the Executive Director (one case ended with the Executive Director's departure, see: [New Executive Directors' Biggest Challenges](#)).

Sustainability was also threatened by too many competing priorities, unsuccessful attempts at leveraging other funds to sustain activities or lines of work, and high staff turnover (see: [Less Positive Cases and Remaining Challenges around Impact on Organizations](#)).

In the words of one Executive Director:

Three variables affect sustainability: staff commitment and passion; orderly processes, procedures and policies; and financial resources. We have improved in the first two thanks to the New Executives Fund, and [this will] probably [be] sustainable. But financial resources are still very unstable and uncertain. Not sure if [my organization] will be better financially when I leave.

Some organizations had mixed experiences, with some parts of the New Executives Fund grant (for example, to develop strategy, amplify contacts, and energize staff) being more sustainable than others (for example, implementing management systems or making technological or other purchases that could have long-lasting effects).

As expanded upon below, (see: [Less Positive Cases and Remaining Challenges around Impact on Organizations](#)) one learning that emerges is that for cultural change to be sustainable, groups need further investment in organizational development generally, and staff development at all levels specifically, over a longer time than the New Executives Fund grant provides. This indicates an enormous area of opportunity and potential for the Open Society Foundations and other funders.

While it is unrealistic to expect the New Executives Fund to fill this need for investment single-handedly, it has an important role to play in sharing this learning in order to manage expectations of Executive Directors, staff, boards, and other donors (see: [Sharing Learnings from the New Executives Fund](#)). The New Executives Fund could continue to engage in constructive and collaborative conversations about sustainability with its grantees during and after the grant period. As study authors, we believe the question is not: “How are you, as Executive Director, going to make this project sustainable?” but rather, “How can we, as partners, learn and work together to ensure that the changes that you have envisioned and made progress on can be sustained after the grant period? What do you need from us as donors to support you in this effort?”¹⁹

iv. Less Positive Cases and Remaining Challenges around Impact on Organizations

A few study participants shared less sanguine experiences. In some cases, there was deemed to be very little, direct, or difficult-to-isolate impact of the New Executives Fund grant on the organizations because the group was already on a path to improvement or, as mentioned, the grant size was relatively small, and one-time (see: [Challenges around Grant Size](#)). Some board/staff respondents opined that “the impact was almost negligible,” and that the amount of time invested by the Executive Director and board to apply “made it almost a zero-sum game.”

Some grantees faced limitations primarily around the themes of organizational culture and resilience mentioned as contributions above. Some caveats expressed:

- The grant was not used specifically to impact organizational culture, or no change in culture was anticipated or discernible.
- While the grant empowered staff, it was not able to change board culture.
- While the grant contributed to stability over time, it did not have as much of a direct impact on organizational culture.

19 During the course of this study, New Executives Fund staff acknowledged in a variety of ways the importance of engaging around this question within the Open Society Foundations and in the broader donor community. As study authors, we hope these reflections support those efforts.

- “While it helped improve the day-to-day functioning of our staff and meetings...questions about organizational culture are broader than just monetary issues. Those are questions about [maintaining] our core mission versus [expanding] our vision, diagnosing long-standing issues, and getting the board on the same page.”
- One board/staff member said, “[There is a need for] more support for grassroots organizations for staff development and incentives to retain staff.” In another case, a board/staff member noted the challenge of high staff turnover “most likely [because] many could not understand the new

Executive Director’s vision or strategy.” In a couple of cases, staff rotation—and delays in replacing them—resulted in increased workloads and low morale.

On the issue of organizational resilience, one board/staff member concluded:

By the nature of the grant and the fresh perspective, the New Executives Fund initiative pushes organizations into struggling with change. It feels like that challenges an organization’s resilience at a time of vulnerability, and while the new leader is similarly vulnerable. I hope that the initiative is working to help protect the organization while building up the new leader.

D. The New Executives Fund’s Contributions to the Field

This section includes the contributions that the New Executives Fund has made beyond individual leaders and organizations pointed out to us by the various study participants.

i. Shining a Light on Nonprofit Leadership Transitions

One Executive Director opined that the New Executives Fund’s biggest contribution has been to put the issue of NGO leadership transitions on the agenda as important to discuss and support. He noted that this is a change in discourse that is incipient and, as yet, insufficient. He pointed out that the private sector discusses leadership transitions as a matter of course and has leadership management schools that address them, while this is not the

case in the NGO world (especially in the Global South).

One nominator echoed this appreciation, highlighting how the New Executives Fund has elevated conversations on leadership transitions and how important they are.

[The New Executives Fund] pulled the process out of the black box and showed that there is no shame in getting involved in the process as a funder...the New Executives Fund made us more aware as a grantmaker

how critical these periods are and how we need to sharpen our assistance. We're quite unique and special as a funder because we're not running from these organizations at their time of need, crisis, and instability. We're doing the opposite.

ii. Supporting Diversity in the Social Change Field

As mentioned below, several Executive Directors pointed out the New Executives Fund's ongoing efforts and considerable success at achieving greater diversity within its cohorts (especially compared with other donors).

They underscored the positive impact that has for Executive Directors who are "historic firsts" (and their organizations), and for the quality of the exchanges within the cohort as a whole.²⁰ In a similar vein, one nominator opined that support for "historic firsts" is the New Executives Fund's greatest contribution: "giving a new Executive Director, who is perhaps a first ever person of color or immigrant or woman or LGBTQI or a young Executive Director for an organization, some leverage to push for their fresh vision against occasionally entrenched interests on boards or with staffers." One Executive Director from the United States spoke of the New Executives Fund's support for "historic firsts"

and, in general, for people of color, women, and leaders from other marginalized communities as helping build leadership structures in organizations that look different from spaces occupied principally by older white men or women (not just at the Executive Director and management level, but throughout the organization). "The New Executives Fund's support is deliberate in supporting shifts that are having an impact on who is driving strategies and what conversations look like," she said. "This is needed more than ever, especially as we face ongoing challenges and old strategies not working."

Another Executive Director from the United States discussed who gets chosen to receive New Executives Fund funding as having impact on the social change field more generally. He highlighted the New Executives Fund's intentional support for transgender Executive Directors and Executive Directors of trans organizations as "hugely significant," contributing to "normalizing and mainstreaming what leaders can look like." This both raises the visibility of the trans movement in the bigger social change field and lends credibility to trans leaders.

²⁰ Please note that the issue of cohort diversity based on geography (Global North versus Global South) is discussed below (see: [Challenges around Grant Size](#)). This section focuses primarily on other types of diversity (race, gender, sexual orientation, age, etc.) and is not meant to be exhaustive.

iii. Stimulating Transitions Where Needed

The unanticipated positive consequence of “normalizing” the future transitions of New Executives Fund grantees, across regional contexts, is already mentioned above. One Executive Director from Latin America became more aware at the convenings that “it is normal and healthy for Executive Directors to leave;” another U.S. Executive Director echoed this sentiment. Two Executive Directors from Europe observed the impact on their respective organizations’ future practices. One said:

Investing in a great leader is great, but we also need healthy organizations, so I'm worrying about succession, if something happens to me. That's my next challenge. I've given everything I've had to the organization over the past three-and-a-half years. I want to be able to lead it in a less centralized, more manageable way, without 72-hour weeks. How do I invest in staff development now?

Various participants mentioned becoming more aware of the importance of succession planning earlier on—by senior staff, boards, and funders. One shared, “I’m developing a succession plan in my organization now. It’s a long-term process, not just a recruitment process.”

An Executive Director from Africa pointed out that supporting transitions and contributing to their success can also have an impact in places where Executive Directors and organizations actively avoid leadership transitions: Executive Directors and boards may fear that a transition will go badly and even cause the organization to collapse, or Executive Directors may cling to power and privileges. “Our transition going well created a certain pressure on other organizations to do succession planning and think about transitions,” and it had a demonstration effect that positive transitions are, indeed, possible.

He feels that if organizations know that funding is available to support their transition, they would be less risk averse and argued that the higher the visibility of the New Executives Fund, the more Executive Directors would be encouraged to let go.

His reflections also suggest that perhaps publicizing more stories of successful transitions that describe the transition process itself would have multiple benefits: organizations might be more open to transitions, start earlier to plan for them, and carry them out with greater confidence and learning. Indeed, five participants mentioned “less risk aversion to transitions in other organizations” and “successful transitions” as a key indicator of success for the New Executives Fund.

E. The New Executives Fund's Biggest Challenges

The following challenges identified by study participants were offered in a widely held spirit of constructive reflection and deep appreciation for the New Executives Fund initiative and its many contributions.

i. The New Executives Fund Cannot Do It Alone: The Gap Between Demand and Funding

Executive Directors, nominators, and Fellowship Program staff all pointed to the gap between the enormous need for New Executives Fund-like support and the limited capacity of the New Executives Fund to respond. Too many worthy and eligible candidates are not being selected because there are not enough funds, what one nominator called an unintended consequence of “New Executives Fund success.” One Program staff member added: “For everyone we select, there is someone else just as strong. Non-selection is not non-worthiness.”

However, the issue transcends the possible scope of the New Executives Fund. The fund may be seen as a drop in the bucket—especially in regions like Asia and Africa where, to date, the program has funded a very limited number of grantees, or the Middle East, where it has funded only one. One Executive Director affirmed: “OSF can't do this alone. It will need to encourage other funders to organize similar arrangements.”

Fellowship Program staff interviewed for this study are fully cognizant of this reality and the New Executives Fund's ability to support only a limited number of leaders. Scaling up the New Executives Fund per se—even if resources and staffing were available—does not seem to be an adequate answer.

New Executives Fund staff could potentially take on the challenge of promoting “100 New Executives Funds,” but currently lack the bandwidth and mandate to do so, including adequate staffing. This suggests the question: Are there ways the New Executives Fund and/or other funders can provide peer-learning opportunities, emotional and/or other support for those to whom they may not be able to provide grants?

ii. The Challenge of “Mainstreaming” Support for Leadership Transitions

The New Executives Fund has developed solid know-how on how to administer such a program. One Fellowship Program member stated,

The New Executives Fund has aimed for excellence with clear process, predictability, and integrity. That's been extraordinary, an exceptionally good program.

Perhaps my biggest learning is how much it takes to do this well: to conduct the program with consistency and integrity, so that people feel supported...each step is a big lift: preparing the call [for nominations], disseminating the call, the interviews, etc.

This person noted that other Open Society programs could develop their own grant-making channels for leadership support, and some want to do this. However, this staff person wondered whether an unintended consequence of having the New Executives Fund is that some program officers may believe that they do not need to focus on leadership transitions precisely because the New Executives Fund does so. A future challenge, then, becomes how to mainstream support for leadership transitions throughout the entire Open Society Foundations network, creating baseline awareness for program officers on why and how to support leadership transitions, including a common vocabulary and set of tools.

It is important to note that both nominators and New Executives Fund staff identified this as an enormous potential area for growth, capitalizing on the New Executives Fund's accumulated practices and learning over the years. There appeared to be a widely held recognition that the New Executives Fund needs more staff resources to meet this internal need proactively and effectively. Of course, this “mainstreaming challenge” applies within the field of philanthropy at large—beyond creating additional New Executives Fund-like funds. This is another potential challenge and opportunity for the New Executives Fund in its outreach to other foundations (see: [Sharing Learnings from the New Executives Fund](#)).

iii. Challenges around Grant Size

As study authors, we learned that the New Executives Fund establishes grant size using a system with fixed amounts for a series of tiers based on an organization's previous year expenditures. Although the precise ranges for the tiers have changed since the New Executives Fund was created, grants have consistently represented roughly 4 to 6 percent of the organization's previous year expenditures. The minimum grant size is \$25,000 and the largest is capped at \$250,000, so for organizations with budgets over \$4,167,000, the grant amount may be less than 6 percent.

We believe it to be common knowledge that practically all funders exercise some degree of discretion in determining grant size; the New Executives Fund's level of discretion

appears to be minimal. Staff report that over the years, in only a handful of cases, New Executives Fund staff made the decision to accommodate an extra grantee within the constraints of a fixed grant-making budget by reducing a cohort's grant amounts slightly, and in proportion to their organizational expenditures (for small grants the difference was small, for larger grants, the difference was larger). This could mean that in some cohorts, grant sizes did not fit within the strict amounts established by the tiers.

During the course of this study, grant size was raised as a serious and controversial issue. While the following comments were aimed primarily at the New Executives Fund, they offer important lessons and reflections for the donor field more broadly.

Criteria for Determining Grant Size and Equity Considerations

Numerous Executive Directors took issue with the practice of basing New Executives Fund grant size on the size of the organizational budget (or expenditures, to be more precise). More than one participant had heard that New Executives Fund grants are in the range of \$250,000, but it became apparent to participants in the course of the Barcelona discussion that only larger organizations get grants of that size, revealing a perception—accurate

or not—that smaller (perhaps, or primarily, grassroots) organizations are being “underfunded.”²¹ A plea was issued for the New Executives Fund to be more equitable in future grant making.

Indeed, more than one Executive Director who received a larger grant expressed that this system is not fair, and noted that the application is the same for all. “If the amount of work put into the application is the same, the return should be equal or at least more equitable.” Some conversation ensued in favor of using greater equity and need as the criteria for grant amounts, and what that might look like. The argument was made that organizations with smaller budgets have a greater need for larger grant amounts versus organizations with larger budgets. This was described as an “inherent contradiction about resilience; larger grants go to already more resourced organizations.” Some Executive Directors expressed that they would rather take a smaller grant for the sake of more equitable funding.²²

The Executive Director of a larger organization noted that their application to the New Executives Fund was done by their development director. “My organization has those resources. I offer my development director to do research for those in less privileged positions, or to review

21 The comment did not clarify if it was New Executives Fund staff or others in the Open Society Foundations who might have mentioned amounts of this magnitude.

22 New Executives Fund staff members pointed out that while they are open to these considerations, they are also concerned about the risk of creating dependence on Open Society funding. The New Executives Fund carefully considers those organizations that rely on Open Society for more than one third of their budget and analyzes whether the New Executives Fund grant would contribute toward increasing this dependence.

a grant application. Others have done this for me.” Likewise, “Some of us have more privilege than others. We have reserves, not all do.” The Executive Director of a smaller organization suggested that the New Executives Fund bring more money to the table “so I don’t have to feel badly about taking money from other grantees in order to have a higher amount for my [smaller] group.”

A question was also raised about the proportion of labor required by the New Executives Fund application in relation to the amount of support, as mentioned above (see: [Less Positive Cases and Remaining Challenges around Impact on Organizations](#)). (In other contexts, Executive Directors have raised similar or larger amounts in far less time or with less effort.) At the same time, “[Executive Directors] get little money from the New Executives Fund; I am not sure we can do even one of the things that we proposed,” which relates to the next issue of transparency about the grant amount, from the time of preparing the application, and mutual expectations.

Transparency about Grant Size

Numerous Executive Directors recommended that the New Executives Fund share their criteria for establishing grant size more widely. Although New Executives Fund staff reported sharing the information with nominators and Executive Directors, the authors generally detected uneven information and confusion about how grant size is determined.

Several Executive Directors said that they had no idea how much their New Executives Fund grant might be, nor what process or criteria are used for determining grant amounts, and called this aspect of the program “opaque.” While they understood the possible reasons for asking applicants to think big and beyond the grant amount, they would have liked to have had a rough range of possible grant size in order to guide their thinking and manage expectations (especially in cases where the grant turned out to be quite small).

At the same time, the group was anxious to know about the breakdown of grant size between organizations operating in the Global North and the Global South. How many big grants went to the Global North? How many smaller grants went to the Global South?

The following tables contain information on grants broken down by geographic region, taking into account all of the grants the New Executives Fund has made from 2013 to 2019.

Number of Grants Awarded: Global vs. Global North vs. Global South²³

| Region | Number of Grants Awarded | Percentage |
|--------------|--------------------------|----------------|
| Global | 22 | 18.80% |
| Global North | 52 | 44.44% |
| Global South | 43 | 36.75% |
| Total | 117 | 100.00% |

Total Funds Awarded: Global vs. Global North vs. Global South

| Region | Total Funds Awarded | Percentage |
|--------------|------------------------|----------------|
| Global | \$2,905,000.00 | 25.41% |
| Global North | \$5,652,000.00 | 49.44% |
| Global South | \$2,875,000.00 | 25.15% |
| Total | \$11,432,000.00 | 100.00% |

Average Grant Size: Global vs. Global North vs. Global South

| Region | Average Grant Size |
|--------------|--------------------|
| Global | \$132,045.45 |
| Global North | \$108,692.31 |
| Global South | \$66,860.47 |

23 The authors understand that the terms “Global North” and “Global South” are amorphous, controversial, and inconsistently used throughout global philanthropy and beyond. For the purposes of this report, we seek to illustrate differences in New Executives Fund grant making between grantee organizations operating in wealthy developed economies versus those operating in emerging or developing economies. Thus, in creating these tables, at the New Executives Fund’s suggestion, we used the International Monetary Fund’s designation of “advanced economies” and “emerging market and developing economies” as placeholders for the “Global North” and the “Global South,” respectively. The authors acknowledge that this is an imperfect and perhaps oversimplified approach to categorizing a wide range of diverse national cultures and histories. See the IMF’s World Economic Outlook Database for April 2019 at <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2019/10/01/world-economic-outlook-october-2019>, including designation of “advanced economies” and “emerging market and developing economies” in Tables–Parts A and B of the Statistical Index.

Readers should recall that grant size is related to organizational budget size, which, in turn, is affected by local economies and exchange rates.

Average Grant Size by Region of Operation

| Region of Operation | Average Grant Size |
|---|---------------------------|
| Eurasia | \$36,667 |
| Asia Pacific | \$45,727 |
| Latin America and the Caribbean | \$54,909 |
| Europe | \$84,556 |
| Africa | \$88,077 |
| United States and Canada | \$117,974 |
| Global | \$132,045 |
| Middle East, North Africa, and Southwest Asia | \$160,000 |

Please note that there was only one grant in the Middle East, North Africa, and Southwest Asia region.

Grant Size and Funder Expectations Regarding Impact

Just about all Executive Directors spoke positively of the contribution of the New Executives Fund grant to themselves and their organizations, and in a couple of cases, the grant amounts were deemed to be appropriate and “though small, the grant had a long-lasting impact on the organization...we are more stable now, staff-wise and financially.” One Executive Director mentioned being pleasantly surprised by the amount.

At the same time, a few opined that the size of the New Executives Fund grants is insufficient to produce real impact or [Sustainability](#), especially when the grant is relatively small. This is directly related to the assumptions made explicit in New Executives Fund materials that even a small, flexible sum of money can have a big impact and allow for innovation. While that may be true, as evidenced by the various affirmations of the usefulness of the New Executives Fund grant, at least two Executive Directors from the Global South expressed concern about that assumption: “Flexible grants, yes, but amounts matter too. They need to be substantial and over a longer period of time. If an Executive Director has five years, she needs support during those five years to implement her vision. It takes longer, especially for Global South countries.”

One Executive Director noted,

We're not able to innovate and try new ideas because we're trying to keep our heads above the water. [I've]

just joined the board of another [organization] with a new woman of color Executive Director who is literally letting staff go as I type this. I would LOVE for her to be able to innovate in her first year (we are hired, after all, for our vision!), but no matter how awesome of an idea she'd pitch to be funded, ALL of that money would go to keeping her doors open. That's exactly what happened to me when I was in this role...

She believes that the grant amount she received was not sufficient to be able to talk about getting to a place of innovation, resilience, and culture shift, especially in organizations where multiyear funding is not the norm.

One person from the Fellowship Program said, “We want a lot for a little. I'm wrestling with when is that good and when is that part of the problem.” This person has real concerns about the possibility that philanthropy is perpetuating “exploitation dynamics.” She commented that while the Open Society Global Board and other funders are committing to more multiyear and unrestricted grants, “I am not sure if we get the depth of the structural problem.” This person mentioned the value of a common application process across funders, which was also suggested in one Executive Director interview and by several Executive Directors in [Annex 4: Additional Messages for the Donor Community Beyond Leadership Transitions](#).

iv. Grant Period

Some Executive Directors felt that the New Executives Fund grant period should be three to five years, not two, in order to mentor over a longer period and see people through to the next stage. This is tied to the learning that changes take longer and are often harder to implement than anticipated. One Executive Director from Asia added some nuance to the New Executives Fund assumption that “the first years of a new executive’s tenure offer an unparalleled opportunity to think creatively about an organization’s future” and suggested that it be applied “with a grain of salt. Effective internal change is more challenging than is alluded to here. Yes, [Executive Directors] have an opportunity to think creatively, but [it is] difficult to implement, slow and often painful.” A U.S.-based Executive Director opined similarly:

I’m...troubled by the idea that these funds are intended to give new Executive Directors a chance to work outside of the box. In my experience (and after talking with peers), we’re just hustling to close gaps from funders either ‘waiting to see what happens’ before funding, unrealistic budgeting, or other outside circumstances. These resources should be seen as providing stability, not innovation. It’s usually not until at least year two that we’re able to be visionary because it takes some time to get settled in these roles. And that should be okay.

Another Executive Director from Latin America raised questions about the

New Executives Fund assumption that “the funds give Executive Directors the breathing room to devise solutions to long-term challenges” and wondered about the impact that a short-term New Executives Fund grant can have on long-standing problems, echoing the question about funder expectations mentioned above. He observed, “Many of the social problems that we try to address are very long-term...The funds and the accompaniment support a particular leader at a particular moment...But we need to be careful not to overstate the expectation that an Executive Director can resolve a long-term problem during their tenure.”

One option proposed is the possibility of renewal for two additional years to allow for time and support to maintain programming while navigating the leadership transition and having the time to enact the new Executive Director’s vision. Related to [Sustainability](#) discussed above, one board/staff member remarked, “I wish the commitment was renewable. It’s important for foundations to continue investing in strong leaders and strong organizations, but too often...support...for one off, short-term initiatives...is destabilizing and doesn’t allow for organizations to be healthy and grow.”

v. Support for and Engagement of Alumni

This is related to the challenge of finding ways to support and involve New Executives Fund alumni once their grant is complete, which many identified as a source of enormous potential for shared learning—as

one Executive Director described, “mining a resource that is already there.” Several Executive Directors raised the question of what Executive Directors need a bit later in their timeframe, after the first two years. One Executive Director said, “There is a beautiful infusion of shared learning and space and then that kind of drops off...and you don’t get into your flow as new Executive Director until that time!” Another asked, “Do Executive Directors move on from that community as they get more tenured?”

General ideas for how the New Executives Fund might continue peer learning for alumni and help them navigate the post-transition phase—and how this might be sustained by the Executive Directors—include:

- Inviting more alumni to convenings
- Ensuring other support channels such as structured mentorships, peer coaching or periodic “peer consulting” alumni group calls, based on the highly valued model applied during convenings (see: [Peer Learning and Community Building](#))
- Engaging alumni Executive Directors in New Executives Fund strategic processes, as the New Executives Fund considers program changes

A few Executive Directors believe the New Executives Fund should be thinking about how to increase the retention of Executive Directors, and, in particular, how to support “reluctant leaders” so they stay on. One Executive Director told us that, at the convening, a surprising number of her colleagues identified as such, having never aspired to this job, and that the majority of those were people of color. Six participants (including Executive Directors, board members, and staff) mentioned the issue of Executive Director retention and avoiding burnout as an important indicator of “success” for the New Executives Fund,²⁴ in particular so “new Executive Directors from marginalized backgrounds don’t have to kill themselves to survive in this role.”

At the same time, one New Executives Fund team member emphasized the importance of honoring the validity of the decision to leave when that is a life-giving choice for a given Executive Director (see: [How the Funds Were Used](#)).

vi. Peer Learning and Professional Development

Executive Directors expressed over and over how much they value the New Executives Fund’s contributions to peer learning—especially through the convenings. Yet several Executive Directors and others also believe that the New Executives Fund’s biggest challenges are related to

²⁴ When asked, some examples of “success indicators” related to this point included: “Executive Directors going strong ten years later”; “remaining three or more years in the Executive Director position”; “the sustainability of leaders in light of burnout, which is worse in years three to four.”

providing Executive Directors with practical and relevant professional development, including things like making the convenings more useful; the Executive Director's time taken up in attending (which was also mentioned as a major challenge for the organization's staff); creating peer learning outside the convening given the Executive Director's time constraints; and making clear what is offered beyond the convenings. These issues are explored in greater depth in the section entitled [Peer Learning and Community Building](#).

vii. Additional Challenges

In addition, study participants including Executive Directors, board, staff persons, and nominators mentioned the following as the New Executives Fund's greatest principal challenges:

Networking to support fundraising efforts. The need to facilitate greater bridges between grantee Executive Directors and other funders (inside and outside the Open Society Foundations), related to the perception that New Executives Fund grantees must have informal relationships to get other Open Society grants. One Executive Director felt that "during the check-in hour, we have to perform. I would rather find out how they can resource us, how can I support you as Open Society versus what is going on in our organization. If you trust us, [provide us the funding] and help us find more donors."

Information on what could be supported. Several Executive Directors wish they had known the range of things New Executives Fund funds could be used for. This is addressed below (see: [How the Funds Were Used](#)).

Internal tensions within organizations. This was mentioned by at least two study participants as an unintended consequence of New Executives Fund support. There was some confusion among board and senior staff about what and who the grant was intended for (the Executive Director or the organization); staff frustration that funds were not used for what they felt was top priority; and the problem of new programs and ideas not being fully accepted or assimilated by the organization. All of these may relate to the issue of who was consulted on the content of the concept note (see: [The Application and Grant-Making Process](#)).

Financial stability after New Executives Fund core funding ends. This challenge was mentioned by a board member and relates to issues of sustainability discussed above (see: [Sustainability](#)). Indeed, 10 Executive Directors and board/staff mentioned budget stabilization, more and diversified fundraising, and/or financial sustainability more broadly as a key indicator of New Executives Fund "success."

Flexibility and trust, with accountability. One staff and one board member asked, “How do we maintain flexibility regarding the use of funds, but accountability and oversight mechanisms to prevent misuse?” The issue of balancing support and trust from donors with grantee accountability was also expressed by at least one Executive Director at the Barcelona convening (see: [Annex 3: “When Context Is Critical:” Additional Information](#)). At the same time, a Fellowship Program staff member reinforced that “the New Executives Fund tries to take the pressure off and boost confidence precisely when other stakeholders may hold back,” and is concerned about not adding additional pressure to Executive Directors who already have to be accountable to so many different actors.

Evaluation. How to evaluate the New Executives Fund’s long-term impact? How significant is the length of Executive Director tenure, when leadership transitions are natural and organizations may thrive in the wake

of them? As posed by one Fellowship Program staff member: “How do we evaluate the failure or success of a given [NEF] grant? Even if the New Executives Fund is an organizational grant, it’s been very individually focused. How do we evaluate the success of a grant to an individual?”²⁵

Sharing the learning. One Executive Director from Asia reflected on how to transfer the impact and pass on the learning from the New Executives Fund Executive Director to the next Executive Director. And more broadly, others raised the question of how to tap into the knowledge and experience generated by the New Executives Fund and share that with others. How to maximize the New Executives Fund’s impact across the larger community of stakeholders beyond grantees, and how to share its value more broadly? This is addressed more fully below in [Sharing Learnings from the New Executives Fund](#) (see: [Sharing Learnings from the New Executives Fund](#)).

F. Who Is Selected and How: Eligibility, Nominations, Applications, and Selection

Participants were asked about their understanding of and experience with the New Executives Fund’s eligibility and selection criteria and the nomination, application and grant-making process. As in the previous section, they shared insights about how these issues impact cohort diversity. Readers may reference [Annex 5: “Who is Selected and How:” Additional Information](#) for additional background information.

25 Open Society staff underscored the importance of jointly determining with grantees what “success” means and how to measure it. As authors, we hope this learning study contributes to those ongoing discussions.

One overarching theme that emerged is the challenge of meeting the needs and expectations for full clarity and transparency around terminology (i.e., “new executive,” “larger organizations,” “leadership potential,” “need”) and the nomination and selection processes. One Executive Director encouraged the New Executives Fund to distinguish more explicitly between what it looks for in the Executive Director versus the organization. A few requested more clarity on how different criteria are weighed in the final selection, while many (within and outside the Open Society Foundations) recognized the efforts and progress that the New Executives Fund has made in this regard.

i. The Nominations Process

Although many Executive Directors celebrated that a candidate does not need a previous affiliation with the Open Society Foundations (about a quarter of New Executives Fund recipients are not grantees of other Open Society programs), there were multiple critiques of the required nomination by someone in the Open Society Foundations. Some feel this system favors leaders and more established organizations with connections with the Foundations (making it “insular”).

Other Executive Directors and some board/staff members noted that the diversity of any given cohort is conditioned by nominations received. Many nominators considered the New Executives Fund a welcome service to the Open Society Foundations. Despite New Executives Fund outreach throughout the network, apparently due in part to the sheer size of Open Society's U.S. programs, the New Executives Fund receives most of its nominations for organizations based in

the United States. Their nominations generate diversity of race and gender identity—many of these “historic firsts”—but have skewed geographic diversity (close to one third of grantees operate in the United States). Some Executive Directors wondered whether certain nominators were “more successful at getting their candidates through” than others, though no evidence was detected in this regard. While Executive Directors appreciate the opportunity to learn about common problems from people from different regions, the predominance of Executive Directors from North America (as well as overrepresentation of certain programs or issues) at times affects peer learning.

To increase inclusiveness and diversity and cast a wider net, suggestions were made to combine nominations and open-call applications, and allow previous New Executives Fund recipients to nominate new Executive Directors to receive New Executives Fund support.

ii. The Application and Grant-Making Process

Selection, grant-making process, and time investment. The nomination and selection process was generally considered agile. However, several nominators and a few Executive Directors considered nomination and selection overly time consuming and involving repetitive questions. Multiple Executive Directors and staff members valued

the ease, smoothness, flexibility and unencumbered nature of receiving the grant (especially compared with other donors), with words like “too good to be true” and “tailor-made.”

The concept note. Several Executive Directors found the concept note sparked personal reflection and is a useful reference on their own vision, and found the guiding materials helpful.

As a rule, it appears consultation (with staff, board, peers) adds significant value: testing assumptions; tempering expectations; and generating alignment of Executive Director vision and organizational needs and buy-in. Consulting peers can also break the feeling of Executive Director loneliness and isolation early on. As discussed elsewhere (see: [Transparency about Grant Size](#)), some Executive Directors wished they had received parameters and guidance as to what the money could be used for and potential grant size, even a range, to orient the scope of the concept note.

Board involvement. While understanding the value of this component, concerns included: unintentionally creating internal tensions as a result of New Executives Fund interview conversations (especially if the Executive Director is not selected); skewing the New Executive Fund's perspective on the Executive Director “due to [some boards'] lack of appreciation and understanding of the New Executives Fund learning initiative”; or potentially affecting cohort diversity if boards themselves are not diverse. Suggestions included: guiding applicants through board outreach (including prepping them for the interview stage), ensuring greater board engagement pre-award, and incorporating observations from Executive Director peers to complement the board interview.

iii. Selection Criteria and Process

The New Executives Fund's selection criteria are systematized in Annex 5 based on the New Executives Fund's internal records (see: [Annex 5: “Who is Selected and How:” Additional Information](#)). Fellowship Program staff explained that criteria have developed organically over time, with increasing rigor, and are a work in progress. They added that one implicit criterion underlying others is whether Executive Directors are capable of reflection, candor, and realism

about their situation, so that their—and their organization's—resilience may be strengthened during a transition, and they may contribute to the peer community.

One Fellowship Program staff explained that **diversity** of cohort “is important not only in the final selection, but in encouraging nominators to help build a diverse cohort pool... Some of this is led by criteria of need, more broadly than financial (legitimacy, credibility)...But there [may] also be value in having cohorts around particular groups (women, people of color, other marginalized groups, only Executive Directors from the Global South, etc.)”

While many Executive Directors and others celebrated the New Executives Fund's and Open Society's accomplishments around cohort **diversity** over time, several raised issues about who has access to the opportunity, considering it one of the New Executives Fund's biggest challenges. Though some understand the rationale, the most problematic criteria for most participants was the English skills requirement, as privileging “elite” candidates, especially from the Global North, and potentially undermining geographic, racial, and ethnic **diversity**. While the requirement was described as a “necessary evil” to have a common language for productive and smooth peer learning, a couple of Open Society staff mentioned the disconnect between the requirement and Open Society values, and urged the network “to do better” and “embrace language justice.”²⁶ Multiple study participants noted that this challenge is easy to overcome with translation and interpretation.

One nominator also urged the New Executives Fund to re-assess, or at least more carefully define, words such as “**strategic**” and “**vision:**”

These words have historically been weaponized against women and people of color because they don't use the same words used by the white dominant culture, and have not been indoctrinated with the same worldview or education...Such bias can persist even when the selection committee is diverse if there has not been an intentional recognition of how white dominant culture is baked into the organization and its processes, and there has been intentional and cogent work to counter white dominant culture where it manifests and create a truly diverse culture.

Some questioned the criteria of **significance of the organization** to the field in which it operates, and wondered if the individual's potential, vision, etc. may be more appropriate. The concern, in the words of one Executive Director from

26 One individual in the Open Society Grant Making Support Group offered this definition of language justice: “The right of every individual to communicate in the language they find most comfortable and in the method or style that makes them most comfortable for presenting themselves and their work. This is about intentionally setting up spaces and processes that recognize, value, and allow for everyone's voice to be heard, disrupting systems of oppression that have traditionally disenfranchised groups based on their language or communication style.”

the Global South, is that “the biggest or ‘most significant’ organizations will always win more frequently and have more access.” One nominator critiqued **professional background** as “an elitist notion [that] replicates systems of oppression,” as does the “academic-like, performative” writing that is expected from grantees. One Executive Director added that race, age, gender identification, class, and other factors play into an Executive Director’s professional background and urged the New Executives Fund to check against implicit biases, something that Fellowship Program staff agreed with and mentioned as part of the New Executives Fund’s ongoing strategic thinking.

One nominator summarized the New Executives Fund’s biggest challenge as developing deeper awareness of the structural disadvantages encountered by Executive Directors from non-elite backgrounds and why they are in more need of support. Participants also opined that grassroots leaders often have a vision but lack the vocabulary to express it well and desperately need support because of the historic and structural marginalization that has denied them access to a resource like the New Executives Fund.

iv. Lessons and Suggestions around Cohort Diversity

Participants expressed repeated acknowledgment and appreciation for the New Executives Fund’s improvement of cohort diversity over time: “They’re doing great in doing diversity, not just talking about diversity compared with other donors and communities.” Another said, “We’re all learning how to do this better and cover gaps, and Open Society is learning with us.” One Executive Director urged the New Executives Fund to continue making criteria and processes more explicit and institutionalized, in order to make cohort diversity sustainable beyond current New Executives Fund staff’s selection decisions.

Executive Directors shared the following **general learnings and considerations**:²⁷

- **Diversity and inclusion look different in different places.** A few Executive Directors urged the New Executives Fund to reflect on how questions of race and ethnicity manifest themselves in various regions. They noted that some U.S. aspects of identity are different in Europe where there are highly marginalized white ethnicities, or in India, where “the idea of [a person of color] is very Western and unique. In some places [people of color] are a majority and it is other intersecting identities that will define diverse forms of discrimination.”

27 As authors, we are aware that New Executives Fund staff is already grappling with these issues and understand this learning study to be part of that exploration.

- **Cohort diversity not to “check boxes,” but rooted in meaningful, intentional context-specific analysis, with an explicit purpose.** For example, internally assess cohort diversity and selection decisions in terms of what is the added value to the human rights movement, or the human rights issues being advanced in a particular country or region.
- **Make explicit if the goal is more diversity of people or of organizations.**

One Fellowship Program staff member identified the following pending challenges and considerations, while recognizing that most are already being addressed, to various degrees:

- Noting that the nomenclature “of color” is quite specific to the United States and Europe
- Developing a cohesive list of diversity factors and using it consistently
- Considering each country’s context and marginalized populations in selection deliberations
- Awareness that the Global South has less unrestricted funding than the Global North

- More recent targeted outreach to Open Society’s national and regional foundations to encourage nominations and build a more diverse applicant pool, as well as to clarify expectations and misconceptions about the selection process
- Considering targeted ways to encourage Open Society Advisory Board members to nominate new Executive Directors for the New Executives Fund

Annex 5 summarizes specific suggestions around the nomination and selection process aimed at supporting cohort diversity (see: [Annex 5: “Who is Selected and How:” Additional Information](#)).

One general lesson is to recall that greater cohort diversity is related to the diversity of nominators and those selecting, and their proximity to the regions they seek to support. Another is the importance of making all aspects of diversity explicit in all communications and selection criteria, inside and outside the Open Society Foundations.

G. How the Funds Were Used

Some Executive Directors wished they had selected a different use of funds.

Several opined that it would have been helpful to know the variety of possibilities before doing their concept note, especially what other Executive Directors have used them for and/or which activities have been most impactful.

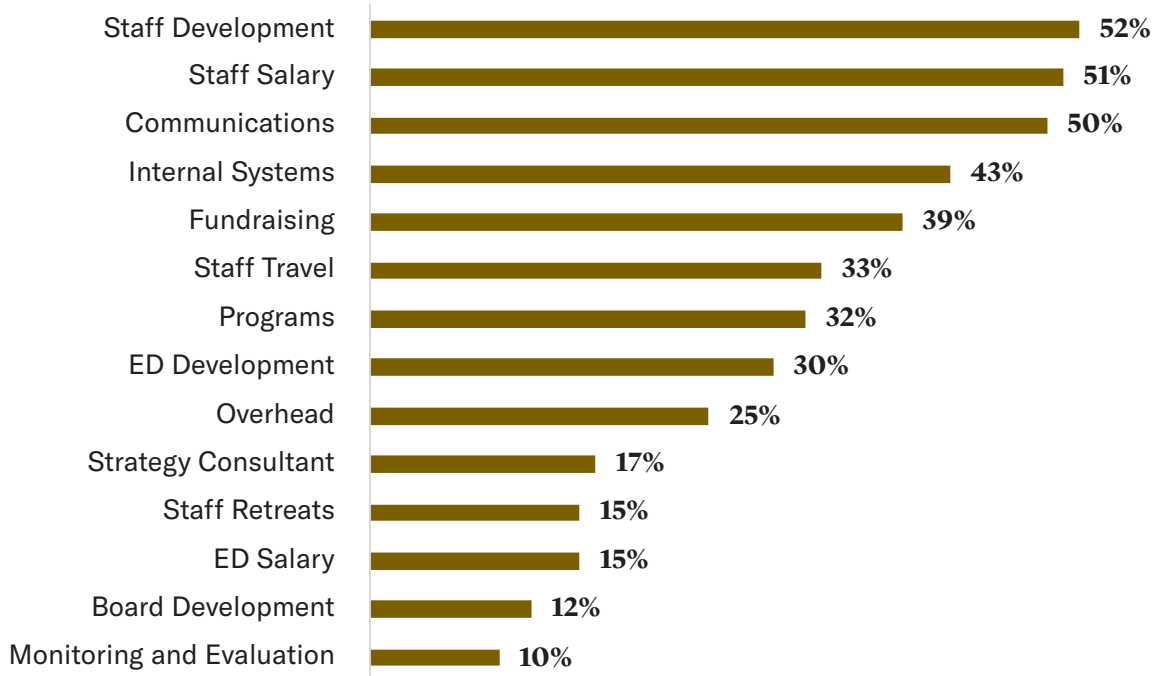
One suggestion was for the New Executives Fund to circulate [presumably anonymous] one-pagers from the Executive Director applications, so Executive Directors can learn from each other about how their peers see the transformation they want to make and its feasibility. One Fellowship Program staff wondered if New Executives Fund staff should encourage Executive Directors in a particular direction (for example, their own professional development), if they have a “hunch that the money could be used [more productively] for something other than what was proposed.” At the same time, New Executives Fund staff recognized that this could compromise the New Executives Fund’s principles of flexibility and Executive Director autonomy on how to use funds.

It was beyond the scope of this study to evaluate the relative impact of the New Executives Fund grants according to what the funds were used for. Moreover, because each Executive Director and each organization’s situation are unique, what is impactful in one case may not be so in another.

That said, and as mentioned under “New Executives Fund’s Biggest Contributions,” we heard some opinions about the particular usefulness of certain interventions, such as coaching and other forms of Executive Director professional development; staff retreats that contributed to cultural change; spending on external support to address human resources issues, such as guidance and appropriate practices for letting staff go; and the ability to fill budget gaps that allowed certain organizations to leverage other funds to get out of a financial crisis and/or avoid folding (one Executive Director, for example, was able to capitalize on an evolving, unanticipated opportunity to step up fundraising efforts).

The following provides a rough summary of how the funds were used. The data was compiled by the New Executives Fund using a combination of concept notes, interim reports, and final reports. The percentages indicate the proportion of the 117 Executive Directors who mentioned this item among those on which they spent their grant money. This is provided to indicate general trends, and is by no means a strict accounting of actual grant spending.

How the Funds Were Used



A majority of Executive Directors used the funds for what they initially envisioned in their concept note. However, at least four observed that their original plans were overly ambitious, so they used the funds for only one or two top priorities. The priorities selected were not always related to their biggest challenges, but rather a function of the money available versus the scope and depth of their principal challenges. This is related to the above-mentioned issue of Executive Directors not knowing how much money they would receive, and in several cases, the grant size being smaller than anticipated (see: [Challenges around Grant Size](#)). One Executive Director said, “There were two driving forces in writing the concept note: what’s the most urgent need and what will most likely be successful. My concept note was a combination of both. I identified strategic needs, but I also had acute financial needs that I needed to cover.”

In about four cases, the Executive Directors had to unexpectedly shift the way they used the funds in order to protect the continuity of senior staff positions (for example, to ensure the Executive Director would not have to assume that role, as well), or cover “fundamental brick-and-mortar needs absolutely necessary to get the organization up to proper functioning.” Two Executive Directors mentioned having to use the grant more for internal, organizational development issues than the envisioned program development. And one of these gave up his own professional development, his initial hope, to address unanticipated requests from the board. At least five Executive Directors reflected that changes in how they used the funds reflect that they did not anticipate the scope and depth of their internal challenges.

H. Peer Learning and Community Building

In addition to the grant money per se, the other pillar of the New Executives Fund program is peer learning and community building among grantees. The most important component is a three-day annual grantee convening, with generally about two days dedicated to peer learning in which Executive Directors work together around particular challenges they themselves identify (a dynamic also known as “collective problem-solving”). The convenings have usually included sessions by external experts on topics ranging from financial management to resilience and well-being. Some convenings have also included presentations by Executive Directors themselves on a particular topic of their expertise.

This section is based nearly entirely on Executive Director input, as the majority of their staff, board members, and nominators had only second-hand information about these aspects of the New Executives Fund, though many heard generally and anecdotally positive things.

i. The Benefits of the Annual Convening

Psychological support, relationships, and energy. As mentioned earlier, the convening benefit most mentioned by Executive Directors is the personal relationships and psychological support that manifests as providing perspective, confidence, a sense of connection, and a lifting of a weight off their shoulders (see: [The](#)

[New Executives Fund's Biggest Contributions to Leaders, From the Executive Director Viewpoint](#)).

Executive Directors said things like, “These people are facing the exact same problems, even in entirely different countries and contexts. [Our problems] are not the worst in the world; we just need to figure out how to handle them, and it is possible.” “[The convening] really encouraged me to trust my instincts and to lean into my vision in a more

public and fearless way.” And, “The convening was magical...You don’t know how much you need a support group until you are in it.”

Learnings. Executive Directors also emphasized learning from their colleagues’ mix of experience, skills, and abilities, especially through the small-group problem solving sessions and around common challenges such as how to manage boards. Others appreciated training by outsiders (for example, on finances), or keynote speakers to whom they normally would not have access.

i. **The Significance of Cohort Diversity**

Executive Directors become most aware of cohort diversity from their participation in the convenings. Many praised concrete improvements, especially between 2018 and 2019. They noted the inclusion of more trans leaders, as “amazing” and “nowhere near the norm of what any other leadership meetings in other spaces normally look like.” One said, “Conversations got more real faster when the cohort was more diverse.”

ii. **Suggestions for Improving the Convenings**

Some Executive Directors found it hard to establish relationships or make lasting connections at the convenings because there was not enough time or personal incentive; their organization had a different, less activist profile; the learning felt a

bit “forced”; or because the majority of participants were from North America and could not connect to the lived experiences of Executive Directors in the Global South. Many Executive Directors had ideas on how to make the convenings better:

1. **Integrate new Executive Directors with previous attendees.** New attendees could benefit from receiving a welcome packet that includes what to expect and how the convening dynamics work.
2. **Avoid delays between grant awards and convenings.** Scheduling convenings closer to the awarding of grants can help avoid missed opportunities for Executive Directors to re-prioritize or do important things differently earlier on.
3. **Assure broader participation from the Global South.** To increase the numbers of participants from Asia and Africa, convening planners should make a greater effort to invite Executive Directors from these regions.
4. **Hold convenings in the Global South.** Having fewer convenings in the Global North can communicate that locations in Africa, Asia or Latin America are also valid sites for learning and best practices.

5. **Provide interpretation, if needed.** A number of Executive Directors noted that participation by some colleagues was limited by their English proficiency.
6. **Allow for more Executive Director leadership and presentations.** Convening planners should view “external experts” as people who can complement the voices of Executive Directors about their lived experiences on the ground, paying special attention to Global South realities. Executive Directors suggested consulting participants ahead of time as to the topics they want included in the sessions, and perhaps having an advisory group of grantees to help design and plan the convenings. As the New Executives Fund is cognizant of not wanting to burden already busy Executive Directors, it was noted that some of this work could happen on site, with support of external facilitators if needed, so as not to create extra work for Executive Directors outside the event itself.
7. **Schedule more unstructured time.** Planners should put more “open” time periods in the agenda so Executive Directors can build personal, non-work related relationships with their peers, as well as network and hold bilateral and more ad hoc problem-solving sessions (around organizational and programmatic issues). Executive Directors also asked for time for individual check-ins with New Executives Fund staff to clarify doubts and discuss specific issues.
8. **Reduce the number of events on the agenda.** Having a less packed agenda can allow for deeper discussion and processing of potentially difficult issues raised during sessions. Notwithstanding, several Executive Directors urged the New Executives Fund to maintain a session for Open Society staff to share updates and answer questions about the New Executives Fund and other Open Society programs.
9. **Account for cultural differences in meeting design and facilitation.** Convening planners should take varying cultures and communication styles into account so more convening attendees are comfortable and can participate fully.

The authors also heard the need to avoid troubling dynamics that have at times significantly (though perhaps inadvertently) inhibited participation from attendees who were not from the United States. These were mentioned as including the general preponderance of North American voices and of micro-aggressions that silenced various participants who felt misrepresented and attacked. This has been the case, for example, of some lighter-skinned participants, given the fact that they are marginalized in their local contexts and, in their own words, it would be “extraordinary” to accuse them of privilege.

The suggestion was to delve more deeply with the group into what power, privilege, and marginalization look like in non-U.S. contexts, “to go further than just ground rules.” This is no doubt a common challenge in many diverse, multicultural, and multinational gatherings that can be named and addressed constructively in the future.

Similarly, Executive Directors spoke of particular tensions around “organizational type,” including the sense that community-based organizations had more value than those that address policymakers, perhaps those especially based in places like Europe.

The call was made to respect the diversity and contribution of all types of organizations supported by the New Executives Fund. “If you do not agree with my existence, I don’t want [to participate in the] discussion.”

iii. Other Peer Learning Activities

Through the years, the New Executives Fund has experimented with offering other peer learning opportunities beyond the convenings, to maintain momentum and connections, such as listserves, a Facebook group, online resources, and informal connections among Executive Directors. These methods seem to have had uneven participation and limited impact, in part because of time limitations, “digital overload,” or logistical challenges related to

technical platforms, time zones, etc. Executive Directors did self-initiated get-togethers around common geographic locations, or as a result of their travels for other activities, which were generally considered useful. They also valued being able to follow up with New Executives Fund staff to request additional contacts and resources, as needed.

Many of these challenges were acknowledged by Fellowship Program staff, who expressed willingness to continue experimenting and co-creating modalities that will be useful to Executive Directors, without overburdening them. One described the challenge as “[fueling] the community more thoughtfully, strategically, systematically, and intentionally.” One Executive Director advised: “It’s nice to have a universe of diverse new leaders across the globe and a sense of what their professional needs are. Trying to force learning communities with very busy new leaders is challenging [and I’m] not sure whether that should be a primary goal of New Executives Fund.” Another Executive Director stated: “Be thoughtful about assuming that more is better.”

iv. Suggestions for Improving Peer Learning Activities

Across the board, Executive Directors expressed strong preference for in-person convenings, but also made the following suggestions, acknowledging previous efforts and the need to bolster New Executives Fund staff resources to implement them.

1. **Schedule thematic peer learning calls.** These virtual exchanges can be effective with organizations that work on similar issues, perhaps segmented by country/region, type/size of organization, or type of challenge. Learning calls could also facilitate, though not force, programmatic connections as Executive Directors see fit, in order to—in the words of one Executive Director from the Global South—“capitalize on [the] network and mobilize grantees to make change collectively, with cross-border collaboration.”
2. **Organize regional peer learning exchanges.** These types of meetings and convenings could be organized by the Open Society Foundations or the Executive Directors themselves and would focus on language, common challenges, and contexts. These were recommended in addition to—not in lieu of—the current annual convening, also as a way to address English skills challenges (see: [Selection Criteria and Process](#)). For example, one Executive Director shared having formed an informal peer consultancy group with New Executives Fund Executive Directors in his city: “four of us meet every six months for half a day and do the same [collective problem-solving] exercise [from the convening].”
3. **Maintain a combination of predictable, focused online meetings and organic, self-organized exchanges.** One Executive Director deemed this mix important because “people will [naturally] gravitate to certain people to learn from them. It usually cannot be forced... Because convenings are only annual and so short, it is...difficult to forge ties so quickly.”
4. **Foster and support learning visits among organizations.** Learning visits are a great way for organizations to learn from each other by, for example, having finance staff or interns see firsthand how a similar organization works.
5. **Include a listserv moderator.** This would be a person who, at least initially, could stimulate and coordinate the sharing of resources on an ongoing basis.
6. **Explore new social media channels.** Platforms that Executive Directors can use to communicate should go beyond Facebook, and could include WhatsApp and Twitter.
7. **Invest more time in populating and curating a shared resources folder.** A centralized location for resources could provide geographically distanced Executive Directors with materials, recommended consultants, coaches, training workshops, etc., relevant and/or adapted to the Global South (many recognized that these are limited, a challenge exceeding the New Executives Fund).

8. **Consider involving one or two board members for capacity building.** Executive Directors could reach out to board members to develop peer learning initiatives to strengthen their capacity to support the Executive Directors as they implement innovative strategies.
9. **Involve new Executive Directors in the peer network immediately after receiving the grant.** New Executives Fund staff could provide substantial help to Executive Directors by informing them about the full range of possibilities and expectations for the grant.

One Executive Director summarized appreciation for the peer network activities in this way, capturing the spirit that any future mechanisms and channels should seek to maintain:

The cliché is true: [being] Executive Director is a very lonely position. The board, the team, everyone gives you a hard time and has expectations: What's the brilliant idea you have today? You face pressure from top and bottom. The New Executives Fund program came with solidarity that I didn't get from anywhere else. I spoke with other organizations [in my region], but there was always competition. [At] the convenings, the email exchanges [with New Executives Fund peers], there was solidarity, a genuine desire to help each other.

For other donors beyond the New Executives Fund: community building in between face-to-face convenings is hugely valued, but takes internal staff time, dedication, and resources to do well.

I. Monitoring and Other Follow Up

New Executives Fund grantees must submit a report after one-year and at the end of the two-year period, and participate in check-in calls with New Executives Fund staff every six months. Just a handful had received a site visit. Feedback from all study participants about these activities is summarized below.

Check-ins New Executives Fund style. Most Executive Director comments on check-ins with program staff applauded them as “excellent, encouraging,” and a way to help Executive Directors reflect on their challenges, plans, and progress. “They forced me to think, and were always a pleasure.” Echoing the sentiments expressed by their peers, one Executive Director noted that the New Executives Fund staff’s “deep listening and positive reinforcement was extremely welcome, motivating, and kind.” About the support provided by inquiring how an Executive Director is doing emotionally, some Executive Directors said “no [donor] has ever

asked me that before.” A few Executive Directors wished for even more frequent check-ins. None found the frequency onerous.

New Executives Fund staff told us they go out of their way to ensure that Executive Directors are convinced that they are actually welcomed to share their challenges and difficulties without fear of retribution. Just one or two felt that the check-ins required Executive Directors to “perform.” One Open Society staff person observed that Executive Directors and New Executives Fund staff seem to feel the level of trust and honesty in their check-ins is out of the norm. This person asked: “Why is the New Executives Fund team able to have conversations with extremely high levels of trust in which grantees can share their challenges openly, while they so often feel they need to hide and perform with their donors?”

There appear to be valuable lessons around monitoring efforts for other donors in terms of how to change the more commonly “performative” grantee-donor relationships, including that “it takes time and patience.”

That said, some Executive Directors opined that check-ins would have been more useful if they were conducted by people who could provide mentoring and advice based on significant personal experience leading organizations.²⁸ One person from the Global South suggested that New Executives Fund staff be aware of a U.S. cultural style during the check-ins, namely upbeat and somewhat informal. While this person considered this a small detail in the bigger picture of the New Executives Fund, she called out the importance of awareness and adjustment for cultural differences that can either constrain or promote a more comfortable and productive dialogue.

Connections to Open Society programs and other funders. A few Executive Directors were grateful for the New Executives Fund’s efforts to put them in touch with other Open Society programs, and noted that it had a real impact on the diversity of their funding sources and the size of their budget. One Executive Director appreciated that “New Executives Fund did get me intros [introductions] to programs when I asked” and another considered connections to other Open Society programs—and especially mentioning that he was an New Executives Fund recipient as a point of departure for building new relationships—as a positive unintended consequence of his New Executives Fund grant. Yet, as mentioned, some Executive Directors and nominators felt that the New Executives Fund could do a better job at that, and at connecting grantees with other funders and other

28 As informed by the New Executives Fund, during the years that Chris Stone ran the New Executives Fund from the President’s Office (2013-2015), he made a point of scheduling one hour with each grantee to answer questions and share his own insight as a former executive director of an NGO. After the New Executives Fund was transferred to the Fellowship program, he continued this practice to some degree until he left the Foundations in 2017.

grantees with whom they could collaborate. Two Executive Directors from the Global South suggested greater coordination and communication within Open Society around site visits, proposal submission, and reporting.

Reporting and the exit process. Most Executive Directors who commented felt that the reporting requirements were in keeping with the New Executives Fund's style of flexibility, support, and "a light touch." "The final report is a useful time to reflect," "a crystallizing moment." A few Executive Directors said it would be helpful to get feedback (and even acknowledgment) on the report; another suggested aligning their timing with the convening and check-ins to increase usefulness. One staff person suggested including staff feedback to complement the self-reporting of the grantee. One Executive Director echoed a similar sentiment and felt that a site visit would be an ideal way to accomplish that. One Fellowship Program staff person wondered if the exit process could be enhanced beyond just a final report.

J. Appreciation for New Executives Fund Staff

This report would be incomplete without highlighting the appreciation that Executive Directors in particular have for New Executives Fund staff. One Executive Director said that their single most important opportunity as a new leader was "the trust given to me by the New Executives Fund and by the staff who worked closely with me." Another stated, "Staff should know they have been really helpful, even in check-ins... above and beyond their role, very supportive to me as Executive Director." Another appreciated the staff's caring, time, and help connecting with other funders. He said, "[I have always been] impressed with the caliber of the Open Society New Executives Fund staff. They spend a lot of time on us, and are conscientious, organized, and caring."

One Executive Director stated: "The clear care from [New Executives Fund] staff and the thoughtfulness in setting up convenings clearly contributes to an atmosphere of collaboration and learning... which gave me a lot, including much-needed energy." Another added, "They've been responsive and brave. As a funder, you put yourself out there when you create a space [in which people] can criticize funders. There is a very strong ethos of trust between the New Executives Fund team and the [New Executives Fund grantees], which I wouldn't underestimate. The tone is set from the top. That's why it works as well as it does."

Several nominators also had positive feedback for the New Executives Fund team. Among other things, they appreciate the team's openness to criticism, their availability to provide information to colleagues, and improved communication about the application process stages and selection. They also noted marked

improvement in making the nomination and selection process more diverse and inclusive, encouraging greater participation from regional foundations and all levels of Open Society staff. One nominator remarked: “I really appreciate the efforts of New Executives Fund staff to document their interactions with leaders, boards, etc. through thoughtfully written assessments and organizational notes. This is an extremely rich resource.”

K. Sharing Learnings from the New Executives Fund

In this section, the authors share the study participants' opinions about what learning from the New Executives Fund program should be shared with whom, and how that might best be accomplished.

The Role of Philanthropy in Leadership Transitions

How and with Whom to Share These Lessons

Study participants considered that the New Executives Fund's main challenge in sharing learnings is to spark conversations that lead to buy-in and real change, and that for that to occur, learnings have to be memorable and make people think deeply. “Ideally, people will connect [this] report with real people.” Study participants suggested sharing Executive Director experiences via webinars, TED-like videos, and other video-stories. And one Executive Director recommended that the New Executives Fund organize a network of “champions” of this report—Executive Directors, Open Society staff, perhaps others—who actively help bring it alive

by disseminating it and talking about how they are a part of it and using it. The idea is to “enliven the report and thrust it into people's daily imagination through human interaction.”

Sparking actual dialogues is the main goal. As study authors, we can imagine numerous possible partnerships and venues for conversations: medium-sized donor convenings organized by the Open Society Foundations or co-organized with other donors (whether they have supported leadership transitions or not); bilateral or smaller meetings with donor colleagues; the New Executives Fund's continued participation in philanthropic conferences; and ongoing connections to donor affinity groups, among others.²⁹ The New Executives Fund could also place articles and blogs in philanthropic and other publications,

29 Some examples mentioned by study participants include the [Building Movement Project](#), which coordinates the Leadership Funders Group, a funder affinity group that is thinking about leadership transitions; and the [Skoll World Forum](#), which is holding discussions on the systemic role of philanthropy in perpetuating inequalities. [The Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund](#) was mentioned as a potential ally in future donor conversations given its experience with the Flexible Leadership Awards. The [Ford Foundation's BUILD \(Building Institutions and Networks\) Program](#) was also mentioned, given its focus on overall organizational health.

and encourage others who are thinking about and acting on leadership transitions to do the same, and/or do so collaboratively. We are aware that some of these conversations and connections have occurred in a more ad hoc way, as New Executives Fund staff capacity has permitted. This study is revealing enormous potential—and demand—for more.

Sharing the impact of the New Executives Fund on leaders and organizations is one way to convey these messages. This report contains significant information in that regard. Still, one of the challenges mentioned is how to do so in a sustained way, and not just around this report.

One Fellowship Program staff person asked a critical question that was echoed by some Executive Directors: how does Open Society make connections to others in philanthropy who also want to change it, “so that philanthropy is a friend and not an abusive partner?” This raises the broader question of to what degree Open Society feels that it has the mandate and position to spur and engage in a larger discussion about the culture of philanthropy, beyond leadership transitions. What resources would be required and are, or could be, available?

Key Internal Learnings for the Open Society Foundations and How to Share Them

The learning to be shared internally, within the Open Society Foundations, falls into two principal categories.

The Importance of Leadership Transitions and How Best to Support Them

First, this broader message is particularly relevant to Open Society as program officers have a mandate to look at organizations as a whole, whether they provide general operating or project support. Nominators’ survey responses revealed that there is substantial appetite within the Open Society Foundations to understand and support leadership transitions, at least among some. One nominator encouraged the New Executives Fund to share these findings widely within the Open Society network given that “all Open Society program officers have an assessment point on leadership and management, so anything that the New Executives Fund shares on leadership transitions we can use for our own assessments.” Another nominator observed: “Leadership transitions happen all the time, and I imagine that learning from the New Executives Fund [grantees] would help grantmakers ask better and different questions as they think about how to shape support to organizations that are undergoing a leadership transition and do not have an New Executives Fund [grantee].”

Yet another suggested making special efforts to engage local foundations (which would presumably help increase the geographic diversity of cohorts, see: [The Nominations Process](#)).

One nominator wondered how to deepen and sustain peer learning among funders, including within the Open Society Foundations. An Open Society community of practice around leadership transitions ran for a time but was not sustained, and was questioned as a feasible or desirable model: “We had a community of practice call. Listening to other Open Society colleagues talk about leadership transitions was very helpful. It’s a very sensitive process and we’re often lonely. It’s challenging for us as program officers and managers. But it’s been difficult to keep up because of limited New Executives Fund staff resources.” A better alternative is not yet clear and would need to be explored; a couple of participants suggested brown bag lunches, another suggested formal presentations to Open Society staff.

Insights on the Challenges, Opportunities, and Evolution of the Individual New Executives Fund Grantees and their Organizations

One nominator commented, “Programs which support organizations nominated by the New Executives Fund have a lot to learn from the New Executives Fund’s interactions because the New Executives Fund is looking at these organizations from a different perspective.” As mentioned, some nominators expressed their appreciation for the efforts by New Executives Fund staff to document their interactions with grantees and their organizations. In general, they believe that the New Executives Fund should share more information on its grantees with the relevant nominators and program staff. New Executives Fund staff themselves recognized that they could be using information from check-ins to analyze and feed into Open Society operations, future grant-making decisions, or ongoing support for a given grantee, which is not done in a structured way. An ambitious project would involve New Executives Fund staff efforts to convert notes from grantee check-ins and reports into some format that others can learn from.

Key Learnings for Executive Directors

While we hope the entire report contains useful learnings for Executive Directors, depending on their particular situation, we imagine that they will find the section on [Top Advice for New Executive Directors from Their Peers](#) and the section on [How the Funds Were Used](#) particularly relevant. Both of these could be useful

and disseminated to new Executive Directors anywhere in the world, whether or not they are connected to the New Executives Fund or to the Open Society Foundations. These could be shared with current and past Executive Directors and also be a component of the New Executives Fund's outreach to other donors, among other eventual dissemination channels.

Part Four: Questions for Further Reflection

In this section, the authors offer some questions that emerged from this exploration to stimulate future reflection on issues ranging from the ethical to the strategic. This list is by no means exhaustive.

A. On Expanding Support for Leadership Transitions

1. How can some of the contributions that are the hallmark of the New Executives Fund be achieved without necessarily replicating the New Executives Fund model per se?
 - What is the value of unrestricted funding for new executives in the absence of peer learning opportunities?
 - What might be the benefits and possibilities for bringing together Executive Directors in convening-like events or other forms of peer learning communities in the absence of a grant program such as the New Executives Fund?
2. How can donors best meet Executive Directors' emotional needs? What orientation or training, if any, should Open Society Foundations staff receive in order to effectively and responsibly play this role in their relationship with their grantees?
3. What are the most appropriate indicators of success for a program like the New Executives Fund? Are they more related to the individual or to the organization, or both? How to capture intangibles such as an Executive Director's ability to reflect and listen to themselves, and perhaps even exit their organization if the fit is not right, while also valuing Executive Director retention?
4. If other donors came forward to say they would like to replicate the New Executives Fund, what would be required to assist them collaboratively to create a program with their own hallmark, and yet without "reinventing the wheel"?
5. When supporting leadership transitions, what is the imperative and the opportunity for transforming the landscape of social change leadership by targeting resources for "historic firsts" or, more broadly, directors from oppressed or marginalized groups?

6. Similarly, how might the field of social change leadership be transformed by greater support for non-traditional leadership models, such as co-directors or other non-centralized and non-hierarchical configurations?
7. What role can donors play in stimulating leadership transitions and inspiring confidence in staff and board members and in those leaders who decide to leave? Would disseminating easily digestible stories of successful transitions help? And how can donors help meet the request for “toolkit”-like resources, especially adapted to the Global South? What else might be needed?
8. What might it look like to create a go-to, online, curated, interactive clearinghouse of existing organizational development resources to help Executive Directors and their staff, funders, and other practitioners in both the Global South and North find the strongest and most relevant materials to meet their needs, especially as these relate to leadership transitions, perhaps supported by a consortium of donors?
9. Is it useful to put scarce resources into attempting to foment non-face-to-face peer learning communities with very busy new leaders?
10. Given the abundance of learning that emerges from the New Executives Fund program, what is the best balance of (finite) New Executives Fund staff time between administering grants and greater outreach?
11. Do donors ever cause harm (to people, or to the field) if they intervene to prop up a leader’s tenure or an organization’s life in cases where they should come to an end organically? When—and under what conditions—should an Executive Director’s departure be not only accepted, but even encouraged? How can a donor best assess and address these situations, and what do they need to do so responsibly, and with sensitivity and integrity?

B. On the Culture of Philanthropy, Beyond Leadership Transitions

1. How can Open Society and other donors best engage in the larger discussion about the culture of philanthropy? What resources would be required and are, or could be, available?
2. What steps can readers of this report do to leverage their own privilege to disrupt the replication of oppression in their own donor-grantee relationships?
3. What makes the New Executives Fund check-ins with grantees so open and supportive? How could this level of trust and openness be achieved in other grantee-donor relationships, inside and outside the New Executives Fund?

A final note from the authors: It is tempting to delve into a report looking for solutions and answers. We saw ourselves as co-explorers in a journey of reflection and learning. We were given the privilege of unveiling numerous insights and lessons that we hope provide some “answers”—some commonly held and reinforced, some new—and some lines of future inquiry. That said, we are conscious that each reader will have their own questions for future reflection. This is likely true whether you are an Executive Director, a staff or board member of an organization, a donor, or someone interested in nonprofit leadership transitions more generally.

We have learned an enormous amount from all the voices we heard and have been both inspired and humbled by the experience. We are deeply thankful for everyone’s generosity of thought and spirit—especially the Executive Directors—throughout this initiative. We hope these pages leave you with energy, motivation, and a sense of promise that executive leadership transitions are healthy and can be lived and supported in ways that are life-giving and that build and strengthen our movements for profound social change. We hope that you are moved to explore the remaining questions and tensions with curiosity and humility, and above all, in community.

About the Authors

Martha Farmelo grew up in Buffalo, N.Y. (USA), lived in Washington, D.C., for 20 years and has been based in Buenos Aires, Argentina, since 2001. She learned Spanish in college and while providing support to recently arrived Central American refugee families in Washington during the 1980s. She has more than 25 years of experience in leading and facilitating institutional development processes for NGOs in Latin America and the United States. Before becoming a full-time consultant in 2009, she combined senior programmatic and management positions in several NGOs including the Washington-based Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice and the Buenos Aires-based Association for Civil Rights. She also served on the foundation side as a program officer for the Inter-American Foundation. Her thematic expertise is in human and civil rights. In recent years, she has assisted several Latin American NGOs in diverse institutional strengthening projects including board development and leadership transitions. She is the author of *[Executive Director Leadership Transitions: A Practical Guide for Non-Governmental Organizations](#)* (2015). She has an MA in public affairs from Princeton University, a BA from Georgetown University and training in the [Art of Transformational Consulting](#) and in [advanced meeting design and facilitation](#). She is also a certified professional coach.

Victoria Wigodzky was born and raised in Buenos Aires, Argentina, until her family emigrated to the United States in the early 1990s where she completed her academic training and spent the first several years of her career. She has worked with dozens of NGOs in Latin America and the United States—as senior management, program staff, and a grant maker—with a focus on institutional strengthening and with thematic expertise in human rights, democracy, and citizen security. In 2011, she moved back to Argentina to become the director of institutional development at the Center for Legal and Social Studies, a flagship human rights organization. Before then, she was a program officer in the Open Society Foundations’ Latin America Program and a program associate at the Inter-American Dialogue. Her current work focuses on organizational transformation (culture, relationships, structures, and operations), centered on organizational assessments, leadership transitions, board development, and team management, among other areas. Wigodzky has an MA in public affairs from Princeton University, a BA from Duke University, and training in the [art of transformational consulting](#) and in advanced [meeting design](#) and [facilitation](#). She currently lives in Washington, D.C.

Annex 1: Methodological Details

As mentioned in the methodology section (see: [Methodology: Who Gave Input and How](#)), of the 121 executive directors (Executive Directors), 117 (that is, 97 percent) were invited to give their input to this study through a variety of vehicles.^{30, 31} A total of 41 provided in-depth input through an individual interview (17), group interview (6), or in-depth survey (18). Of the roughly 44 Executive Directors who participated in the Barcelona convening, we know that 19 gave input in Barcelona only (as opposed to also participating via interview or survey). As such, we can confirm that a total of at least 60 Executive Directors gave input into the study.

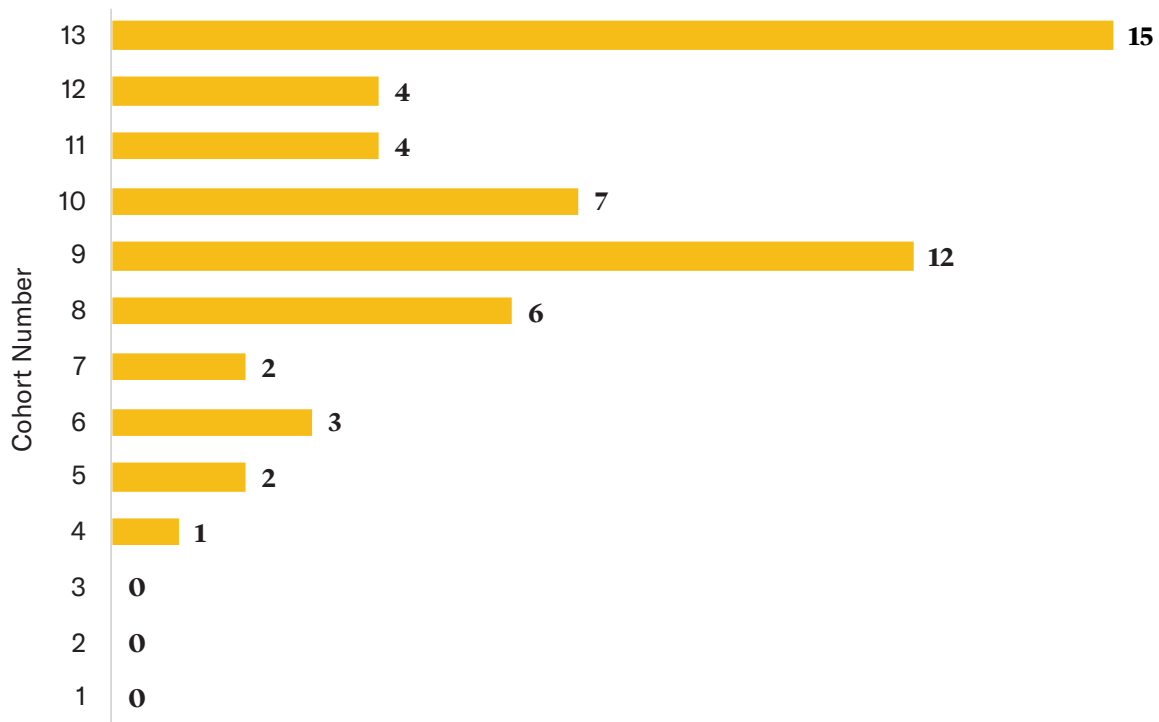
| Form of Participation | Number of Executive Directors | Response Rate |
|---|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Individual Interview | 17 | 52% (33 were invited) |
| Group Interview | 6 | 29% (21 were invited) |
| Survey | 18 | 38% (48 were sent the survey) |
| Facilitated Group Session Only | 19 | Not applicable |
| Total Confirmed Executive Directors Who Gave Input | 60 | |

30 The New Executives Fund made initial suggestions of how to group Executive Directors to participate by survey versus individual or group interviews. We then adjusted these groups principally to achieve geographic representation while seeking to limit possible selection bias.

31 On the four Executive Directors who were not invited to participate: at the time this study was conducted, the most recent round of New Executives Fund grant making (Round 13), consisting of 17 Executive Directors, was in the process of being finalized. Because this group had not yet received their funds nor begun their grant period, they were not invited to give in-depth input via a survey or interview but were expected to participate in the half-day, facilitated session in Barcelona. Of those 17 Executive Directors, two did not participate in the convening in Barcelona. Additionally, we did not have contact information for two Executive Directors.

The following chart shows the range of Executive Director cohorts over the years.³²

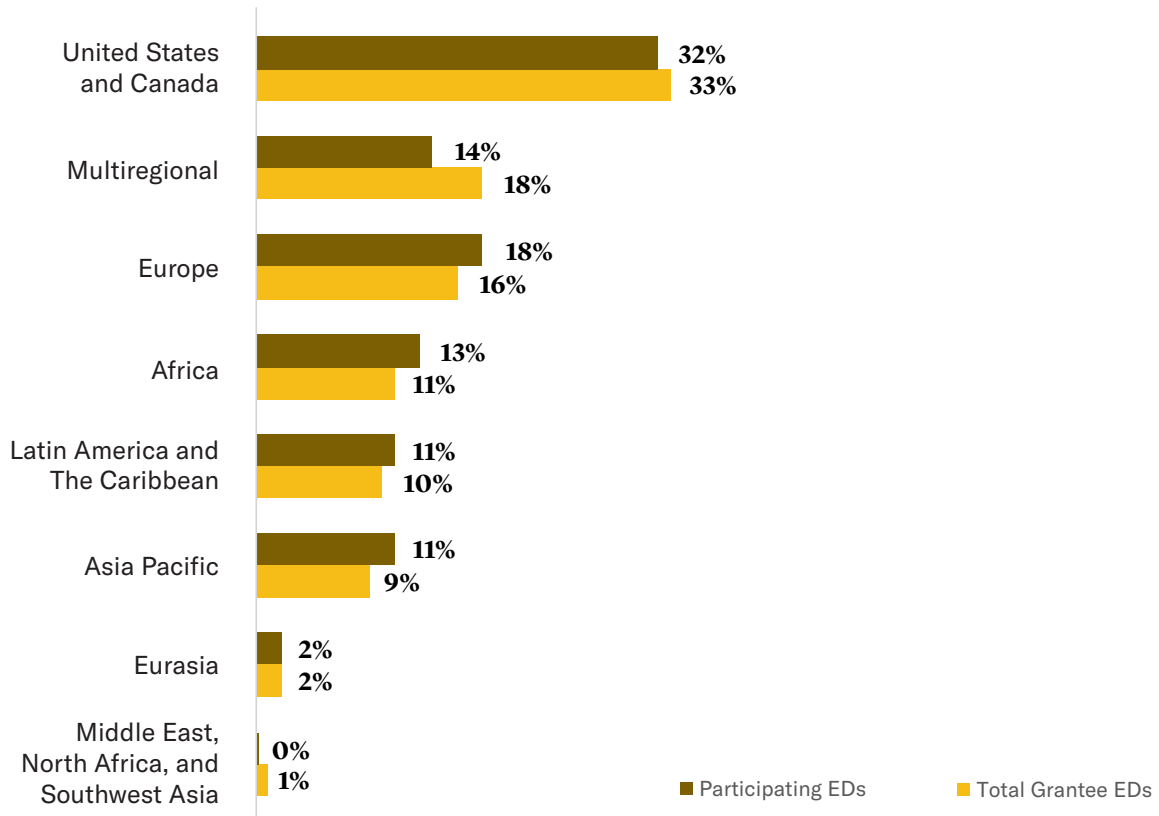
Number of Participating Executive Directors by Cohort



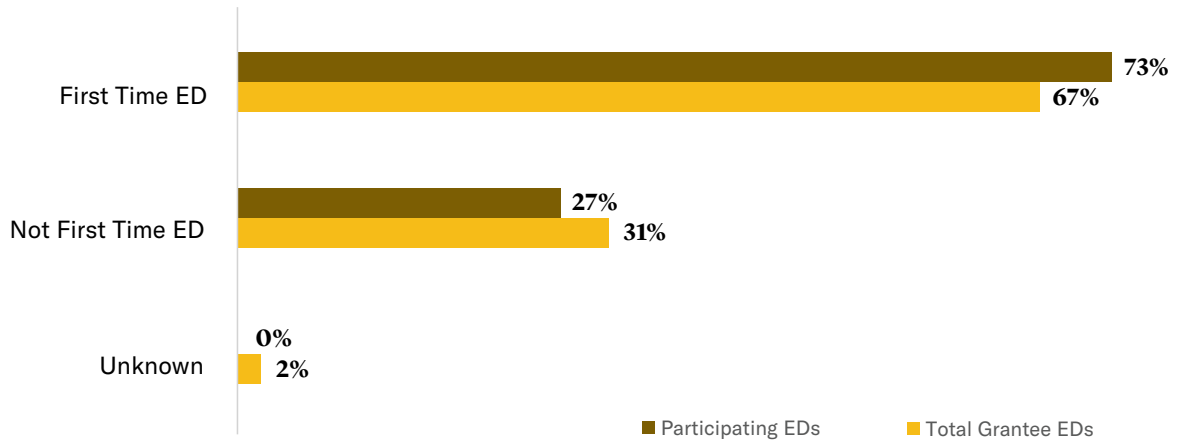
We made a concerted effort to ensure that the Executive Directors who participated in an interview (either individual or group) or via in-depth survey mirrored the demographics of the overall group of 121 New Executives Fund recipients.

³² For demographic purposes, we included 56 of the 60 Executive Directors whose participation was confirmed and for whom we had demographic data. We lack data for eight anonymous survey participants, but included four Executive Directors who attended the convening, who may or may not be among the eight anonymous survey participants. To avoid the possibility of double counting their participation in the study, we excluded them from the total number of participants.

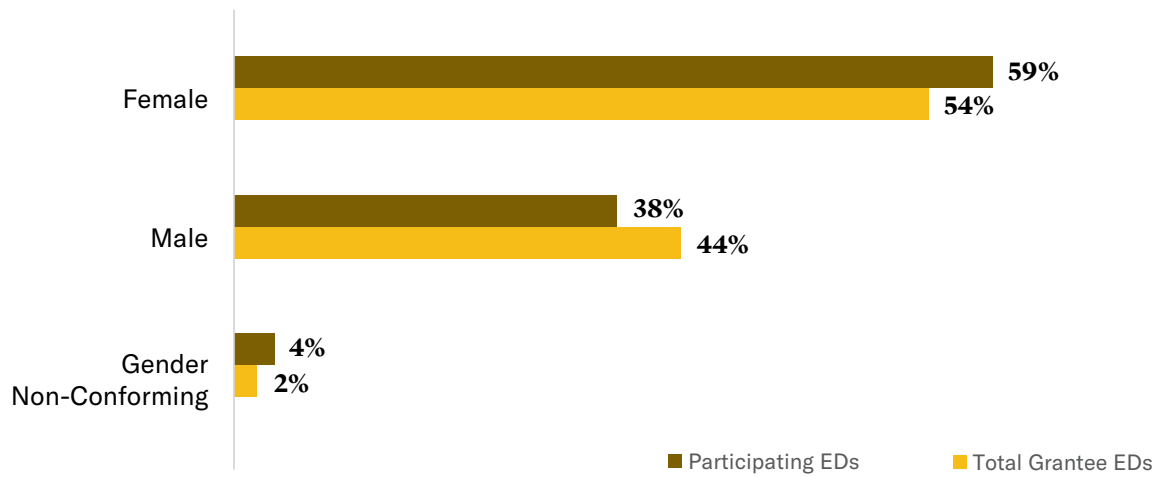
Region of Participating Executive Directors vs. Total Grantee Executive Directors



First Time Executive Director or Not (Participating Executive Directors vs. Total Grantee Executive Directors)



Gender of Participating Executive Directors vs. Total Grantee Executive Directors



Board and Staff of Grantee Organizations

We asked participating Executive Directors to share the names and contact information for one staff person and one board member (or two staff persons) to whom we sent an in-depth survey to get their perspective on the experience of their Executive Director and their organization with the New Executives Fund, and on the program overall. We received 54 names from 27 Executive Directors. Of the 54, 33 filled out the survey for a response rate of 61 percent.

Nominators

The New Executives Fund provided a list of 61 of a total of 266 staff and board members of the Open Society Foundations who have nominated candidates to the New Executives Fund over the years. The authors sent a survey to those 61 and received 14 replies, for a response rate of 23 percent.

Annex 2: Executive Director Interview Questionnaire

NOTE: This questionnaire was adapted to each interviewee. Participants received ahead of time a list of New Executives Fund assumptions and eligibility and selection criteria compiled by the authors based on New Executives Fund documents.

General information:

1. Please describe your relationship with Open Society-NEF: how long, in what capacity have you collaborated, what level of contact you've had with initiative.
2. What is your understanding of the definition of “new executive” by the NEF?
3. In general terms, what type of initiatives did you use the grant for? Was this what you had included in your concept note, or did that change?
4. We are aware that some of the NEF grants have supported a historic shift in the organization's leadership (for example, because the organization was run by cisgendered men for the first time and that changes, or it is the first time someone from the community served is Executive Director, or from some underrepresented community). Do you consider your tenure to represent a “historic first”?
5. How did you conceive of the idea? Did you consult people in your organization, board, external actors? What was the level of consultation? Do you think the level of consultation matters? Would you do anything differently?

Impact on individual:

1. What was/is your single most important challenge as a new Executive Director? How did the NEF grant support you in meeting that challenge, if it did? And if not, what personal, inner and external (to the organization) resources or support did you have or how, otherwise, did you meet that challenge?
2. What challenges remained unresolved despite NEF funding?
3. What was your single most important opportunity as new Executive Director? How did the NEF grant support you in taking advantage of that opportunity, if it did?
4. Has your view of your most significant challenge and opportunity changed since when you wrote the concept note? What changed? What assumptions changed?
5. In what ways, if any, did the NEF grant strengthen your leadership?
6. To what extent do you feel that you met (or are meeting) your own benchmarks / objectives for “success” (as you defined it), whether or not that meant sticking to initially planned activities?

7. If applicable: What is the most important learning that you took from this initiative to future jobs? (or anticipate taking, if still at the current job).

Impact on organizational change:

1. How did the NEF grant contribute to organizational change as you proposed it?
2. Did the NEF grant in any way impact your organizational culture? Why or why not? If so, how?
3. To what degree and in what ways has the impact of the NEF grant been sustainable over time in your org? (If the grant is new, what impact do you expect to have over time?) What do you need to advance that impact?

Impact of New Executives Fund more generally:

1. In your opinion, what does NEF “success” look like? What are likely indicators of “success”?
2. How would you define organizational resilience?
3. To what extent do you think the NEF initiative contributes to organizational resilience as you understand it?

General assessment and lessons:

1. Please describe your general assessment of the initiative: What is its biggest contribution? What is its biggest challenge?
2. What has been your personal biggest learning associated with this initiative?
3. Have you experienced any unintended consequences (positive or negative) of NEF support that the program should take into consideration moving forward?

Assumptions:

1. Which of the NEF assumptions jumps out at you as the most important of all?
2. Is there anything about the assumptions that needs to be changed?
3. Is there anything about the selection or eligibility criteria that needs to be changed? Are there any criteria that are most important to keep? Are there any that are problematic? Are there any that are missing?

Nomination, application, selection, grant-making process:

1. How would you assess the nomination, application, and selection process? What worked well? What did not? Do you have any suggestions for improvement?
2. To what extent does the selection process as it is now designed (in particular the nomination process) help advance cohort diversity (geography, gender identity, professional background, professional experience, organizational model and structure,³³ race, class, age, ethnicity, etc.)?
3. With regard to the grant and the grant-making process, what has worked well? What could have been done better or differently at any stage in the process, by yourself, and by NEF or other Open Society staff?

Follow-up (including Monitoring, Learning and Evaluation):

1. How useful have you found regular check-ins with NEF staff? Are there too many, too few, do they feel onerous? Do you have any suggestions for improvement?
2. If you have done one, how useful did you find the writing of the final report? What, if anything, was problematic? Do you have any suggestions for improvement?

3. If you have had one, how useful did you find the site visit by NEF staff? What worked well? What did not? Do you have any suggestions for improvement?
4. How useful have you found the peer network, specifically the NEF-sponsored convenings and other peer learning (Facebook group, listserves, etc.)? What worked well? What did not? Do you have any suggestions for improvement?
5. What are the key things that NEF should consider when sharing learning from the program within and outside of OSF?

Closing:

1. What recommendations do you have for improving the impact of the NEF program?
2. Is there anything else from your experience that you would like to add that would be useful for NEF staff to know?

³³ The first five factors are explicitly stated in the selection criteria under “diversity of cohort” that the New Executives Fund strives for.

Annex 3: “When Context Is Critical:” Additional Information

Note: like the messages for donors referenced below, the text of this annex was provided to the Executive Directors who participated in providing that input. They were given the opportunity to provide feedback, which was incorporated. The verbal agreement arrived at between the authors and the participating Executive Directors during that session is that the full introductory text, as it appears below, would be incorporated into this report.

At the November 2019 New Executives Fund grantee convening in Barcelona, Spain, the consultants responsible for conducting this learning initiative facilitated a participatory session to share information about the study and gather the expectations and concerns of the approximately 44 Executive Directors present.³⁴ Additionally, with the New Executives Fund staff having left the room (as previously agreed upon), the consultants invited the Executive Directors to write down the most pressing messages about leadership transitions that they would like to share with the donor community. They then invited Executive Directors to form a circle in which individuals took turns stepping into the middle to voice their most pressing message. The other Executive Directors were asked to move toward the person in the center to the degree with which they identified or agreed with what was being said.

Many things happened during that exercise. First, the Executive Directors crowded so closely so consistently to the first several speakers (showing nearly unanimous agreement with their messages) that soon they stopped moving into the circle at all. While it made sense at the time not to insist on that practice, we did lose the opportunity to register subsequent levels of individual agreement. Indeed, after the fact, several participants observed that some individuals began to step back and quietly disassociate as the conversation became more negative (see below). So, while verbal and non-verbal responses to many of the messages continued to indicate agreement, we are not fully aware of differing levels of conformity with the various messages.

34 “Messages for Donors around Leadership Transitions” session, Open Society Foundations New Executives Fund Convening, November 6, 2019, Barcelona, Spain. The session was designed and facilitated by the authors of this report. The raw notes of that session incorporated individuals’ written notes handed in to the facilitators, as well as outcomes of the plenary discussion. In December 2019, they were circulated among participants at their request, meant to be confidential and not shared beyond the session participants. The sections on donor messages contained in this report build off of those notes and were shared with participants, who had the opportunity to provide feedback, which was incorporated in the versions included here.

Second, the dynamic became one of significant catharsis for many of the Executive Directors participating, and it became apparent that several members of the group had some long-held frustration to release. We were struck by the quantity and breadth of the messages shared. And, in the process—without naming any names—some serious examples of donor misconduct were mentioned. In addition, there were some critiques about the structures of philanthropy itself and how power dynamics (and even colonialism) are intrinsic to the foundation/grant model.

In the conversation that followed immediately after the exercise, Executive Directors expressed gratitude for the entirely unusual opportunity to have this conversation among themselves. At the same time, they recognized with concern that the exercise led to mostly negative feedback about donors, which paints an entirely incomplete picture of their relationships with and opinions about their donors and the donor community. When discussing the inclusion of this material in this report, the group requested explicitly that we include this context and this recognition. “This is a manifestation of what we hold inside because we don’t have space to talk about it,” said one Executive Director participant. In exchanges after the session, another commented that the level of frustration reflects how, barring very few cases, fundraising is the largest source of stress and vulnerability, and that it is helpful for funders to see this. “When people are honest, the negative emotions come first,” they said. Another participant mentioned the need to have balance between support from donors and grantee accountability, and expressed discomfort that the latter had not been more present in the discussion.

As evident below, the group did not have time to process all that was said into a coherent whole. Ideally, the group would have had more time both to digest what emerged more fully, and to transition to expressing positive messages for the donor community.³⁵

Members of the group also acknowledged the potential impact on New Executives Fund staff of reading these pages of messages, even though they are mostly aimed at the larger donor community. They asked that we convey to the New Executives Fund that it was not the group’s intention to “dump on them” nor is it the New Executives Fund’s job to “fix things.” Executive Directors recognized, in particular, that the Open Society Fellowship Program is now being led by a Jamaican-American woman, and they expressed concern about burdening her in particular. They requested we both communicate this content with care and

³⁵ As facilitators, and despite our years of work inside and outside of social justice organizations, we recognize that we did not fully anticipate the volume or the content of some of the messages, nor the intensity of the feelings in the room specifically around this topic. In hindsight, we wish we had secured more time for this session and provided more space for discussion and proper closure.

grace, and that we convey their support for her and her team, her leadership role, and the emotional labor she invests in it.

At the same time, participants expressed the desire and need for a network of Executive Directors to address issues of problematic donor practices (including, in some cases, verbal and sexual harassment and the need to advance consent culture among donors, see below), funding crises, or donors cutting back on strategic lines of work. Such a network, presumably self-facilitated, could provide mutual support and a common front to set the agenda and effectively communicate their concerns and otherwise relate to donors.

Finally, as mentioned, it was also pointed out that much of what was said was framed through a U.S. lens with a North American focus. “Don’t leave us out,” said one non-North American participant. Another questioned the extent to which non-North American participants shared the views expressed by their (perhaps more vocal) U.S. colleagues.

Annex 4: Additional Messages for the Donor Community Beyond Leadership Transitions

These messages emerged in the facilitated session at the November 2019 grantee convening, as described above (see: [Important Introduction: When Context is Critical](#)).

“Sustainability is meant to be a problem for both of us. Let’s work it out together.”

“Don’t dance around the hard questions and concerns.”

Ethical Concerns

These concerns reflect experiences that Executive Directors have had. Many are extremely serious:³⁶

- Allow Executive Directors to tell you “no” and understand refusal as an act of relationship. Treat your financial support as collaborative, not dictatorial. Please see me as a collaborator and not as a servant or a contractor.
- Donors using my organization’s name and writing a grant document without my consent.
- Supporting 0.1 percent of the work and taking 100 percent of the credit.
- Inviting me to bid for a project you are quite certain you are going to give to someone else.
- Expecting me to hear your complaints or make you feel good about your job instead of speaking about the work.
- Pushing us against our personal morals and values and shifting our missions.
- Asking about staff demographics and staff equity, but refraining to do the same for your organization.
- Asking me to speak about equity and then not fund me.
- Funding us to do what you are supposed to be doing.

36 A message from the New Executives Fund team: The New Executives Fund team was deeply disturbed to learn about grantee experiences of past donor misconduct that were shared anonymously during the closed-door dialogue in Barcelona, particularly those implicating [Open Society policies prohibiting discrimination and harassment in the work environment](#) (“Expecting me to spy on other Black-led organizations” and “making a pledge in a meeting and 20 minutes later asking me to see your hotel room.”). In response to these developments, the New Executives Fund team directly engaged Open Society leadership to commence a process to determine whether the reported incidents involved an Open Society employee or board member, and/or if the reported incidents occurred at an Open Society-hosted convening. To protect the anonymity of those who reported these incidents, the Barcelona dialogue facilitators (and authors of this report) agreed to follow up with the relevant individuals without identifying them to the Open Society Foundations. These individuals then confirmed that the incidents did not involve any Open Society employee or board member, nor did they occur at an Open Society-hosted convening. While we are relieved that no Open Society personnel or programs were implicated in these disturbing incidents, we remain deeply troubled at the alleged behavior of our peers in philanthropy. We deeply regret that our grantees had to endure these experiences and we appreciate their bravery in bringing these issues to light. We hope this report will draw more attention to issues of discrimination and harassment in philanthropy and invite further dialogue on how to identify, prevent, and provide redress for them.

- Expecting me to spy on other Black-led organizations, which is racist.
- Cherry-picking people who are photogenic, speak English, and whom you want to sleep with.
- Making a pledge in a meeting and 20 minutes later asking me to see your hotel room.³⁷

The naming of such serious issues led to a brief conversation about how the group might and should address them. As mentioned, one line of thought was the building of a community of Executive Directors to support each other around issues of harassment, including, ideally, those who do not get funding from the donor in question. A couple of people in the room volunteered to follow-up with the group about this after the convening.

A few comments addressed the conditions under which many organizations are operating. In the moment of catharsis during the meeting in Barcelona, they were expressed in these terms:

- When we are working in countries where staff are experiencing arson and other reprisals and threats, do not just say “that is hard, good luck.” Please do practical things. Supports exist and can be resourced in areas such as protection, digital security, etc.
- We are undertaking movement work for liberation and saving lives that may not be counted, so please provide the funding and get out of the way. We’re in crisis, continually facing discrimination, violence, and murder.
- You are talking to me from your office. I am out on the ground. Please cut the critical questions and let me get back to you.

Other practices to refrain from:

- On the day I submit a million dollar grant renewal application to your organization, please do not ask me to be somewhere else in three days.
- Pausing giving when conducting strategy reviews in times of crisis. Please increase giving while you figure things out.
- Questioning my senior staff’s remuneration when your junior staff gets paid more than me, and you fly business class.
- Saying you do not fund that type of work and funding organizations in opposition to what we are doing.
- Talking about your concerns about shrinking civic space if you are cutting funding for those who are fighting the shrinking of that space.
- Affirming that participation in an activity is voluntary when you know I actually have to do this.

³⁷ Similarly, this allegation does not involve an Open Society employee or board member (including Open Society affiliate organizations such as national and regional foundations).

- Making organizations' leaders spend extensive time in activities, conversations, assessments, and other actions that support or benefit the foundation rather than the organization.
- Having me pick up the check at our pitch meeting.

We Challenge You to Increase Your Support!

“Just because we are a grassroots organization, don’t fund us at a fifth of national-level organizations; I challenge you to triple your support.”

“Double your contribution with flexible funds for institutional challenges like strategic planning, convenings, external help (organizational development consultants), re-branding, and expanding the staff.”

Executive Directors
mentioned several areas that merit multiyear support:

- Fund new initiatives for review, re-visioning, and fresh governance structures.
- Support innovations; provide flexibility; focus on skills.

Sharing Your Plans

Some comments had to do with transparency:

- Please practice the transparency we are all advocating for in public institutions and let us know your long-term visions and plans, including plans for the next couple of years—and if you plan to stop funding us.
- Now that we have shown you ours, what is your theory of change?
- Commit to consultative processes and listen to your grantees when determining your priorities.

On funding decreases, in addition to greater transparency:

- If you are going to discontinue funding, please decrease gradually.
- Check yourself when using language like “tying people off.” It could destroy our movement.
- Do not abandon work you had incubated and helped position.
- Donors have to be prepared to respond to crisis when grantee success harms other sources of funding (for example when a group was so impactful, a government source canceled core funding).

On More Operational Issues

- To donors that do not accept unsolicited proposals: making us try to get your attention in other ways takes up even more of our mutual time, so please have an open door.
- If there is a date for disbursement of funds in the contract, please respect that date. Do not make us beg for the money.
- Do conduct or require financial health checks.
- Executive Directors requested that applications be made available in other languages; that funders work with their peers and colleagues to streamline and standardize grant applications and evaluations; and please stop using portals!
- Please read the grant report or eliminate the requirement entirely.

Annex 5: “Who is Selected and How:” Additional Information

This section provides information on the New Executives Fund’s eligibility and selection criteria, as well as the nomination and selection processes. As reflected in the study, participants shared insights around these issues and how they impact cohort diversity. While this section can be interpreted as principally for use by Open Society and the New Executives Fund, Executive Directors will understand the New Executives Fund more fully and other funders will likely take away valuable insights on how to effectively support new executives.

For example, an overarching theme is the challenge of meeting the needs and expectations for full clarity and transparency around terminology and processes.

Eligibility Criteria

In order to be eligible for a nomination, candidates must:

- Be nominated by an Open Society staff member or board member (including from regional and national foundations).
- Be within their first year of tenure as an executive (the nomination must be submitted no more than three months before their official start date and no later than nine months into their tenure). This includes first-time executives as well as new executives who previously served as executives at other organizations.
- Lead an organization that is qualified as a public charity under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. tax code, a charitable foreign organization, or another entity for which a qualified public charity serves as a fiscal agent.
- Lead an organization whose work closely aligns to Open Society’s core mission but need not have current or previous affiliations with the Open Society Foundations.
- As of November 2018, co-directors are eligible. At least one of the co-directors must be within nine months of their appointment.

Nominations are ineligible if they meet the following criteria:

- Executive Directors of start-up organizations
- Executive Directors of affiliates of larger organizations (i.e., country offices or university centers, unless the actual structure of the organization meets standards of strategic and financial autonomy that make it equivalent to an independent nonprofit)
- Executive Directors who directly succeed a former New Executives Fund recipient at the same organization
- Executive Directors of organizations whose re-granting activities exceed one third of their overall expenditures
- Executive Directors who are Open Society Global Board or advisory board members

Definitions of “new executive.” The New Executives Fund defines a new executive as nominated in the first nine months of their tenure (and presumably within the three years of their tenure over the course of the grant period), whether or not they have directed an organization before. However, this definition does not appear to have been made sufficiently explicit, and there seems to be some confusion on these points.

Suggestions regarding criteria include:

- Expand the eligibility period to the first one to three years, as needs continue to be acute.
- Go beyond formal legal status to include those who confront barriers to registration and general shrinking space for civil society organizations in various regions, grassroots people, movements informally organized, with no bank accounts, etc.—those whose needs may be greater.
- Sustain support for diverse models (e.g., co-directors and directors of public foundations), and consider heads of national or regional offices of larger organizations that effectively act as co-Executive Directors; start-up organizations. Clarify terms like “larger organizations.”
- Allow Executive Directors who directly succeed a former New Executives Fund recipient, given how long changes take to implement.
- Consider limiting the New Executives Fund to first-time Executive Directors, or those with limited Executive Director experience. While many Executive Directors recognized the value of diverse levels of experience (and generations) in the peer community, some wondered if there was an alternative way to achieve this while prioritizing support for first-time Executive Directors.

The Nomination, Selection and Grant-Making Process

According to New Executives Fund internal documents, the overall process is as follows:

Once a nomination is received (generally twice a year), New Executives Fund staff conducts preliminary research about the nominee’s professional career, the organizational challenges at hand, and the significance of the nominee’s organization in the field. Open Society colleagues who may know the candidate or organization are consulted, as needed, at this phase. Select nominees are asked for concept notes to outline their own organizational vision, their challenges, and how they might use this fund. Finalists and a member of their board are interviewed separately. An

internal selection committee led by the Open Society Fellowship conducts the final selections. The entire process, from nomination to selection, takes about three months. The New Executives Fund awards grants to organizations (not individuals) in support of an Executive Director’s discretionary fund.

The New Executives Fund selection is a competitive process. The information and analysis gathered from nomination forms are used to decide which Executive Directors will be asked directly for a concept note. In the past few years, according to New Executives Fund records, between 80 and 90 percent of nominees are asked for concept notes, about half of them are interviewed, and only about 25 percent of all nominees are selected for the New Executives Fund award.

Selection Criteria

During the course of this study, the authors systematized the New Executives Fund’s selection criteria as follows:³⁸

1. Clarity of vision and understanding of challenges
2. Significance (current and/or potential) of the organization to the field in which it operates (generally gleaned by nominators)
3. Catalytic potential of the funds: the New Executives Fund award presents a unique opportunity for amplifying the Executive Director’s leadership and strengthening the organization’s health and effectiveness

³⁸ Based on several Open Society--New Executives Fund background documents, including Portfolio Review (November 2017), and an earlier “New Executives Fund Strategy Draft” dated October 2018. The numbering does not denote order of priority.

4. Diversity of cohort: geography base, nationality, gender identity, professional background, and experience (maximized primarily via outreach across the Open Society Foundations)³⁹
5. Leadership potential
6. Strategic departure from the past (vision, organizational culture, new programmatic work, etc.)
7. Need (e.g., for credibility, to fund certain activities, or for some other specific purpose)
8. Engagement with the New Executives Fund community (eagerness to learn and contribute to peer learning)
9. English skills (for the purpose of peer learning)

“Missing” selection criteria. While most study participants did not believe that criteria were missing, a few suggested consideration of the following:

- Personal integrity (“though perhaps a given”)
- Ability to put together a team
- Ability to articulate the organization’s issues and impact public discourse
- Openness to be challenged and bring the organization to another level (rather than “clarity of vision” or “strategic departure from the past”)
- Ethnicity, in societies where race and nationality do not cover this concept as well
- Compatibility and relationship with the board or oversight mechanism
- Buy-in of board and staff
- Link between the Executive Director’s vision, organization’s mission, and proposed strategies (to assess if vision is realistic in light of grant funds, and to ask Executive Directors to be more specific about implementation)
- In light of having a more richly diverse community, consideration of such criteria as sexual orientation, gender identity, ability (people with disabilities, different thinking styles), age (focus on youthful leaders)
- Ideological diversity (within the Executive Director cohort; or when an Executive Director adds this to their organization)

Ethnicity, age, and class were considered difficult to assess and/or achieve (especially class). At least one participant encouraged the New Executives Fund to target funding to Executive Directors from organizations that are diverse along these lines.

39 According to New Executives Fund documents, “diversity within the recipient pool with regards to the organizations’ fields of work and geographic locations as well as the executives’ backgrounds (e.g., race, gender, etc.) will be taken into consideration. The fund is eager to consider organizations that are new to the Open Society Foundations.” At the time of this writing, race was mentioned in a “Frequently Asked Questions” document only; other diversity factors such as ethnicity, age, ability, etc., were not explicitly mentioned.

Additional Suggestions for the Nomination and Selection Process

Participants shared additional suggestions around the nomination and selection process aimed at supporting cohort diversity. Some of these efforts are already taking place and some require additional New Executives Fund staff resources.

Nomination and application process:

- Motivate and support Open Society staff, particularly those who are nominating Executive Directors from diverse backgrounds and from the Global South to expand their nominations
- Consult with other Open Society entities on how to improve diversity and access
- Publicize the New Executives Fund more to get more candidates from regions beyond North America
- Feature past New Executives Fund recipients from marginalized groups in New Executives Fund publicity materials

Selection criteria and process:

- Have a global, diverse Open Society selection committee with different contextual understandings
- Consider diversity targets and introduce quotas, weighting of applications, or other affirmative action efforts to address under-representation of particular groups

- Allow for emerging leaders not yet clear on their strategic thinking and form cohorts so that organizations with different capacity levels can compete fairly within their category
- Continue commitment to equal representation of women within the cohort and select Executive Directors from organizations with gender diversity in their staff and board
- Keep connecting to and maintaining engagement with new Executive Directors of color
- Continue to support leaders from marginalized communities and/or “historic firsts,” taking into account geographical and thematic contexts
- Continue to embrace organizations and leaders beyond the “usual suspects,” such as cultural institutions working to advance social justice by opening hearts and minds
- Include groups that the Open Society Foundations have not funded or that are not well-aligned with Open Society’s work
- One nominator encouraged the New Executives Fund to “de-prioritize Europe and the United States (where civil society is strong) and focus on places where organizational growth can play a critical role in opening societies and creating meaningful change.”

- To get around the English skills requirement:
 - Have a separate New Executives Fund contest in regions that have lingua franca (for example, Spanish speakers, Serbian-Croatian speakers, French speakers, etc.)
 - Decentralize and have smaller New Executives Funds run from regional foundations to get closer to the ground and/or co-fund with other Open Society programs
- Remove the interpretation challenge by separating recipients into smaller cohort groups, perhaps along similar demographics, and/or have regional convenings