

Stop Funding Duplicative Projects

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Field scans are crucial for providing data about what has been funded and where funding gaps lie. **BY CHRISTINE E. SHERRY**

IN LATE SUMMER 2009, several months before the climate change conference in Copenhagen, I was asked to moderate a three-day discussion among a group of climate change experts in Europe. As leaders from Brazil, China, the United Kingdom, and the United States debated the national and international security implications of climate change, it became clear that the leaders in many diplomatic and foreign policy circles understood little about climate change. Without better communication between the security and climate change communities, the chances of meaningful action in Copenhagen were slim.

What should be done? Some argued that a major research initiative be undertaken linking climate change with national and international security issues—a nexus we envisioned as “climate security.” But such an initiative would be expensive and time consuming. Had others done similar work that we didn’t know about? Without that background, how could we know what research would be meaningful? And was funding research even the right way to go?

I approached my client, the Planet Heritage Foundation, a newly created foundation that hosted the gathering, to fund an initial field scan. The scan would include interviews with the funding community in the United States and Europe as well as with leading research experts. Through the scan, we would learn what others in the field believed would be useful and additive and test our assumptions coming out of our three-day retreat. And the cost would be a fraction of launching a major new research effort.

WHY A SCAN?

The Planet Heritage Foundation was intrigued but initially pushed back: Why fund a scan? Couldn’t the money be better spent launching a research agenda, especially because climate change posed such a huge threat with limited time to act? Why spend money on a scan when the resources could be given to deserving NGOs right away?

These questions were legitimate. But my decade as founding director of the Philanthropy Workshop West at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation had taught me the importance of understanding context, of having a framework for funding before launching an initiative. I had seen the value of scans undertaken by major foundations and the kinds of insights they provided about where additional philanthropic money could be truly well spent. Done thoroughly, field scans provide data not only about what has been funded, but also about where gaps exist;

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they point to underappreciated problems and where a small investment could unlock a major new area of much-needed engagement. Unfortunately, many field scans are kept proprietary by the commissioning funder, and their lessons are not shared with others.

In other cases, I had seen high-level field scans that examined funding flows without analyzing their effectiveness. Although useful to a degree, these scans often missed the critical questions: What is really working—and not? Where could more money make a significant difference?

Sadly, I have seen the fallout from funders who launched expensive initiatives without taking time to look around to see what else had been done before. It is the equivalent of “fire, ready, aim”—money spent on projects nearly identical to ones that others had already funded, resulting in a lost opportunity to learn from others’ trials, efforts, successes, and failures.

Why does all this matter? Shouldn't foundations just fund good projects and assume that well-regarded NGOs know best how to spend the resources? The answer is astonishingly simple. Because the field of philanthropy historically has done a poor job of commissioning and sharing fundamental field research, funders often fund duplicative projects, NGOs unwittingly repeat the work of others before them, and we miss opportunities to fund work that is crying to be done but unnoticed in our haste. We fund projects that mirror other efforts without even knowing it. And ultimately, we waste money by not identifying the critical areas or organizations where more funds could be effectively used.

In many other fields of endeavor, including business, doing market analysis is fundamental. Few venture capitalists or investors would fund startup companies without understanding market trends, opportunities, and gaps. Making a substantial investment without that deep market understanding would be seen as foolish.

But in philanthropy, a field that historically has seldom commissioned or shared this kind of analysis, we too often leap to fund a promising project first, then ask later what else is needed or even what else already exists. We often start with asking which organization or individual is doing the best work, creating a funding bias toward well-known NGOs or the hottest newcomer on the block. In so doing, we often skip over the fundamental underlying questions: What needs exist in a given field? What has been tried before and succeeded—or not? And where can a precious marginal additional philanthropic dollar make the biggest splash?

It was in this spirit that I recommended a field scan dedicated to understanding who was working in the important intersection between climate and security—and what was needed going forward. It could be a wise investment. The Planet Heritage Foundation agreed, and we launched a six-month scan.

WHAT WE FOUND

We began by having a team of analysts from Stanford University conduct an extensive literature review. To our surprise, we found an extensive body of reports going back over a decade examining the links between climate and security. More than 20 groups in Europe and the United States had studied the issue in some depth. As we gathered these reports, it became apparent that an idea from our European discussions—the need for fundamental research on the link between climate and security issues—was less important than we had thought. Instead, there was near-uniform consensus that conveying central insights from this research to policy circles to inform the decision-making process was far more necessary.

As we began our interviews, which involved detailed conversations with more than 20 experts from the United States and elsewhere, we were surprised again—by requests all around that we share our findings. Researchers and funders who had examined this link, or who were at least intrigued by it, were grateful that a new funder was systematically looking at the field and asked to see our findings. Many field scans are commissioned privately and never shared. The reasons are varied: a desire for confidentiality, sensitivity to criticism of other efforts, or proprietary considerations. The Planet Heritage Foundation understood and believed that the value of sharing our findings outweighed other concerns; it agreed to

publish a version of the report. What surprised us was that many researchers and the few funders in the field knew vaguely of work others had done, but they didn't have the big picture.

We were also surprised to learn that only relatively modest amounts of money had been invested in this particular subset of the climate change agenda. Millions of dollars have been spent in climate change efforts overall, but only a tiny fraction in the climate security space, despite the existence of well-regarded groups that had achieved success in this area. In short, the scan pointed out a true funding gap; for small amounts of money, important but underfunded groups could do powerful, much-needed work.

WHAT WE SHARED

Six months after launching the field scan we published a report, "Climate Change and National Security: A Field Map and Analysis of Funding Opportunities," that has influenced the field in ways we never imagined. It has been featured in national conferences of major climate change funders, has spawned briefings for leading organizations in the field, and has found its way into influential policy circles. The report identified areas of both consensus and disagreement in the field, and it continues to provide a valuable roadmap to funders and analysts alike.

For me, the response reaffirmed the critical importance of taking time to understand context through undertaking and sharing field scans. I have since had the privilege of working with other funders to commission scans in divergent areas, ranging from understanding the root causes and possible solutions to the epidemic of violence against women in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to analyzing the aftermath of post-earthquake funding in Haiti. In each case, the scans identified where popular interventions were working, where others were not (and indeed had inadvertent negative consequences), and where a donor could tackle an issue's origins rather than just treat symptoms.

For example, the DRC analysis suggested that small investments in local nonprofits working on women's leadership, media capacity-building, and land disputes could make a real difference in reducing violence against women. In Haiti, we learned that money spent on certain health interventions had negative consequences in the health sector and that underfunded areas included youth-focused professional development and rural agriculture.

More funders are realizing the importance of field scans, but we can do better. First, we should encourage comprehensive scans that not only list "who funds what," but also offer an analysis of program effectiveness. Second, we should find ways to share what we learn with other funders and nonprofits. Imagine what could happen if more funders were to share (at a minimum) the core findings of their reports or portions of their analyses? Sharing could foster honest discussion, encourage collaboration, minimize redundant funding, and redirect money to issues that are begging for attention.

To be sure, these scans take time and money to do well. And a scan alone will not invariably lead to better funding outcomes. But as we learned from our experience in Europe, money spent doing the analysis up front can be leveraged dramatically when shared more broadly and can point the way to interventions that may be genuine breakthroughs. ■