

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION<sup>Review</sup>

---

*Field Reports*  
**When Rapid Equals Urgent**  
By Michael Seo

Stanford Social Innovation Review  
Fall 2018

Copyright © 2018 by Leland Stanford Jr. University  
All Rights Reserved

## FIELD REPORT

↓ The Urgent Action Fund supports organizations like Identoba, which advocates for gender equality and LGBT rights in Georgia.

# When Rapid Equals Urgent

The Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights has pioneered a rapid-response grantmaking model connected to global grassroots activists.

BY MICHAEL SEO

Nearly 7,000 miles separated sexuality and gender activist Mariam Gagoshashvili in Tbilisi, Georgia, and the Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights (UAF) offices in Oakland, California. But in a matter of hours, the rapid-response grantmaker was able to mobilize and provide her organization, the Women's Fund in Georgia, a lifeline during a time of dire need.

Like many LGBT rights organizations, the Women's Fund in Georgia experiences frequent opposition and harassment. In 2013, the fund's landlord served the organization an eviction notice following an interview in which Gagoshashvili spoke out against the sexist traditional practice "virginity institute," which demands women remain chaste before marriage. During the following weeks, a crowd of Orthodox Christian fundamentalists and right-wing nationalist extremists verbally harassed staff and visitors coming in and out of the office.

Upon learning of the situation, UAF staff encouraged the women's fund to submit a rapid-response grant request. In fewer than five days, the Women's Fund received \$5,000 to support the preparation of a complaint for the public defender of Georgia, relocation assistance for a new office space, and an upgrade of its security equipment and protocol.

In response to the complaint, the public defender warned the landlord to cease its behavior toward the WFG—the only action available in the absence of national antidiscrimination legislation. (In 2014, Parliament unanimously passed the first broad antidiscrimination law in Georgia.)

Since its founding in 1997, UAF and its consortium of sister funds have provided more than 1,800 rapid-response grants to women and transgender human rights defenders around the world. During this time, as civil societies worldwide have experienced a reassertion of restrictive regimes and policies followed by waves of civic activism, the UAF model has endured as an effective way to swiftly mitigate the detrimental impacts of unforeseen events.

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace reports that nearly 100 governments introduced laws that restrict freedoms of association and gathering between 2012 and 2017. And many restrictions target women and transgender rights advocates who find themselves working in increasingly volatile settings.

About 65 percent of UAF grant requests relate to safety and security, including support to move to a safer community or country, hire guards, put up security cameras, or install bulletproof glass. This number is up from approximately 35 percent in 2012, says UAF Executive Director Kate Kroeger.

Grantees "are pushing things like gender norms and marriage equality—traditional aspects of society that are very ingrained," she says. "Because of who they are, the communities in which they work, and what they are fighting for, they are at a much higher level of physical risk."

Others in the field say the UAF is filling a critical need. "There's a general lack of resources going to locally led women's rights



organizations and even fewer quality, flexible sources of funds," says Leila Hessini, vice president of programs at the Global Fund for Women.

While the Global Fund for Women works to address systemic issues that undermine women's human rights, the power of the UAF model lies in its quick response to urgent needs and life-threatening situations, Hessini says. Such funding enables local groups to pivot and shift, define their priorities, and advance solutions that reflect their realities, she says.

In 2017, the UAF, working with University of San Francisco graduate students, analyzed impact data from its 2016 grantees. Three months after receiving a grant, 85 percent of security grantees reported feeling somewhat or much safer, and 94 percent said they were able to partially or fully return to or continue with their activism. The USF team reviewed 50 randomly selected grantees and found that everyone had been able to use the funds for an unforeseen advocacy opportunity within three months of receiving the grant and 90 percent had been able to scale their work in that moment.

## THINK FAST, ACT FAST

In 1997, in response to feedback from activists who expressed a need for quicker and more responsive funding during times of crisis,

**MICHAEL SEO** (@5lgordianknots) is the founder of ReaMedica and ReaMedica Health Care Kenya.

UAF cofounders Ariane Burnet, Margaret Schink, and Julie Saw developed a new philanthropic model they called Rapid Response Grantmaking. The model used technology and the explosive growth of the Internet to build processes focused on assessing grant requests with very little bureaucracy and to find ways to disburse grants in days, rather than months. Today, rapid-response organizations widely use many of these processes.

The UAF's rapid-response grant model has evolved but still relies on streamlined, processes. Funding requests arrive via the UAF website, text messaging, phone calls, and secure e-mail to protect applicants whose online activity may be under surveillance. Prospective grantees submit an application (designed to require just 10-15 minutes to complete) in their native language, succinctly describing their organization, their situation, and how funds will be used. In each of UAF's five offices, staff or external consultants translate and process submissions.

The UAF has also worked with local activists to create independent UAF sister funds, which now operate in Africa, Asia Pacific, and Latin America. Each fund is registered independently, hires its own staff, appoints its own board, and is responsible for fundraising. Each fund has an extensive network of regional advisors who are engaged in the activist movements UAF supports and are often previous grantees. Because the funds operate on such compressed timelines, advisors serve as a validation filter in the application review process while making it more participatory and reflective of on-the-ground efforts.

In 1999, the Women and Armed Conflict Working Group, which included representatives from nearly three dozen Colombian grassroots female-advocacy organizations, used a UAF grant to help peasant, indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and displaced women testify to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights' special rapporteur on violence against women. This led some working group members to launch the UAF Latin America in Bogotá in 2009. New sister funds have been introduced every five to seven years; the Asia Pacific offices

opened in Australia and the Philippines in January 2018.

UAF aims to create grantee-centric processes that contrast with grantmakers' often-unwieldy requirements. Staff respond to requests within 48 hours and disperse funds within 5 to 10 days—significantly faster than the typical grant disbursement time in the rapid-response sector, according to UAF staff. Grantees submit short reports three months later on how the money was spent, whether it helped, and whether they have recommendations to improve the grantmaking process. This “realistic reporting” is designed to avoid burdening the grantee, says Director of Programs Shalini Eddens. “An organization seeking a rapid-response grant is likely facing more pressing concerns,” she says. The shorter reports inform UAF's internal grantmaking review processes and help to efficiently inform UAF donors.

“We are in a movement moment, and that's exactly what rapid-response grants are intended to address,” Kroeger says. “When the context is shifting rapidly, activists have to pivot and re-strategize to advance their advocacy agenda.” Sometimes that means holding the line to ensure that rights are not revoked, and other times that means asking more of policymakers and community members. “Being adaptive means being able to work with the unanticipated,” Kroeger says. “Rapid funding supports activists to do just that.”

UAF's grants also support programming. In 2016, UAF Africa helped an Egyptian organization lead a “training of trainers” for 13 women artists, activists, and storytellers. The idea was to develop a larger network of storytelling workshops in Egyptian cities where both women and men could contribute to the discourse on gender-based violence and inequity. The training employed concepts from the Theatre of the Oppressed, which uses audience engagement to explore, analyze, and promote social and political change, and covered self-care and security measures for facilitators and workshop participants.

## COMING BACK

Today, Mariam Gagoshashvili, the Georgian activist, is a senior program officer for the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice and a UAF board member. Such ongoing relationships with former grantees are common. Grantees might become board members at sister organizations, get involved in the grantmaking process, or refer other colleagues or organizations, Eddens says.

Before joining the UAF board in the spring of 2013, Gagoshashvili had already served on the UAF's advisory committee for two years, providing advice to groups applying for rapid-response grants from Georgia and neighboring countries. “I knew how critical their work around Eastern Europe and Central Asia is, and I wanted to make a contribution to deepen and strengthen this work,” she says. “I also wanted to bring a perspective as a grassroots activist and a fellow feminist grantmaker.”

She continues to provide advice to UAF staff about women human rights defenders, activists, and feminist and queer movements in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Today, movements such as #MeToo and Time's Up, and the global push for gender equality and parity, reinforce why a rapid-response fund would focus on women human rights defenders. But when Kroeger first joined the UAF in 2012, funders and advocates frequently questioned its focus.

“There is a very clear resource argument for focusing on women,” Kroeger says, pointing to Human Rights Funders Network data. Only 19 percent of foundation grants go to women and girls, and less than 2 percent of global funding reaches locally led women's rights organizations. UAF's staff of 37 requires more than nimbleness to support a global movement—it relies on its network of supporters working together.

“Feminism is about achieving equality for women and men, but it's also about challenging power structures,” Kroeger says. “Women and LGBT people on the front lines of human rights struggles are doing that on a daily basis. We need to do the same thing within philanthropy in order to help them succeed.” ■