

EMpower's 10-Year Partnership Model: Benefits and Lessons Learned from Long-Term Funding

A Sunsetting Partner Review—Executive Summary

By Caitlin Mitchell and Eva Roca, July 2023



Introduction

Since our founding in 2000, we have awarded over \$47 million to nearly 350 grantee partner organisations in emerging market countries. Through an investment of up to 10 years,¹ we offer our grantee partner organisations funding, capacity strengthening, connections to other organisations, thought partnership, technical assistance, and opportunities for cross-learning (e.g., communities of practice, learning exchanges). And we do this through multi-year and flexible funding. This varied and holistic support is intended to help grantee partners deliver innovative and robust programming for young people and help them become sustainable organisations and leaders in their fields and communities. We tailor our support based on organisational needs, co-determined with the partner's regional programme officer, and this approach evolves over time.

Through a learning exercise, we sought to better understand the value of long-term funding and accompaniment as practiced by EMpower. We did so by exploring in-depth the changes experienced by our recently “sunsetting” grantee partners—those who have received 10 years of grants and partnership and have received their final grant within the last three years—and assessing EMpower's contribution to those changes.

Since our inception, we have awarded 43 sunset grants. In Fall 2019, we conducted a portfolio review of our first 15 sunsetting grantee partnerships. Since then, EMpower has awarded an additional 28 sunset grants across 11 of the 15 countries in which EMpower works.² All 28 were included in this sunset portfolio review, which sought to build on and extend the findings from the first review. We reviewed available materials from all 28 grantee partners' history with EMpower, including: proposals, grant summaries, and reports from the first and last grants awarded. We sought additional insights via an online survey for 14 of the organisations.³

¹ As of 2008, EMpower can fund organisations for up to 10 years (previously, the limit was four years, then six).

² 11 of the grantee partner organisations included in the review are from India. There are three each from Russia and South Africa, two each from Ghana, Colombia, and Peru, and one each from Argentina, Brazil, Indonesia, Philippines and Vietnam.

³ Eleven partners from India were excluded because they were already included in a recent (FY23) independent evaluation on EMpower's impact in India. Three grantee partners from Russia were excluded because of current political sensitivities.



Findings

Key Findings on Grantmaking and Other Programme Support

EMpower seeks to help organisations better support young people to live richer, fuller lives.

Sunsetted grantee partners reported that many of their programmes changed significantly in the last 10 years, citing EMpower as a key influence in helping shift their focus populations, programme components, and who is involved in decision-making.

Multiple partners shared that the 10-year horizon for support allowed them to **pilot, improve, validate, and scale programme models**. For example, 20% of sunsetted partners overall began to work with younger adolescents (many who didn't were already working with very young adolescents), creating age-specific programming for younger and older adolescents. Among survey respondents, nearly **2/3 of sunsetted grantee organisations reported more intentional work with girls and young women** over the course of their relationship with EMpower. Another 15% started working with or expanded their work with boys and young men, strengthening the gender components of their work. Such shifts shaped and were shaped by EMpower's priorities. Grantees also developed more holistic and responsive programming, like adding mental health components to their work after it became apparent that was a much-needed support during and after the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Others that were previously working only on, for example, livelihoods, expanded their work to include components related to education and health. This more holistic approach has been shown to be a more effective way to equip young people to deal with the multiple challenges they face.

Our partners reported bringing effective programmes to a greater scale, through reaching new populations of young people (83%) and/or expanding to new geographic communities (71%). Some achieved greater scale by teaching others how to implement their programmatic model or partnering to expand their work.

At the end of the grantee partner relationship, **86% of organisations surveyed had also increased the involvement of young people in the design of their programmes or in their decision-making, something EMpower has emphasised increasingly in recent years.**

Key Findings on Organisational Capacity Strengthening

Beyond grantmaking, EMpower seeks to provide tailored capacity strengthening to organisations so that they can more effectively meet young people's needs.

Multiple partners expressed appreciation for the arc of EMpower's funding relationship, which is flexible. In many cases, we started with programmatic strengthening and support and then followed with tailored organisational capacity strengthening. This ideally leads to the organisation being better positioned for success and sustainability beyond our funding relationship.

"Such a long cycle is key to assisting young organisations' growth...so many funders only focus on restricted funding for programmes, and as a result, the organisation has no room to grow its capacity and ability to secure the future of its operations and rather creates a hand-to-mouth tendency of living year-to-year, based on what programme funding can be generated from one year to the next."

— EMpower Grantee Partner



Grantee partners reported improvements in monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL), staff capacity, and their long-term sustainability.

Partners also reported that EMpower helped them be better learning organisations, both through strengthening their MEL and enabling them to better use results and learning to make programmatic improvements. Of survey respondents, 93% said their MEL was significantly stronger, and 86% said they used results and learning to make improvements in their programmes, highlighting the value-add of EMpower’s emphasis on programme learning.

EMpower support helped strengthen the sustainability of grantee partner organisations, a key goal for sunset grants. When asked about how they felt about their organisational sustainability, 78% of respondents said they were either “confident” (64%) or “very confident” (14%) about the financial sustainability of their organisations over the next five years. Those who expressed confidence cited factors like: diverse funders, multi-year budgets, strengthened internal capacity, staff dedicated to fundraising, and strategic plans helping them build sustainable and replicable programmes. Grantee partners also expressed that the depth of connection they now had with communities—including employing local staff—gave them confidence in their sustainability. Concerns about sustainability were mostly due to political and social upheaval or internal changes within the organisation (such as leadership transitions), which caused uncertainty. Some cited both.

EMpower’s model of “accompaniment, not just funding” was cited as essential to sustainability, giving organisations new knowledge, models, examples of interventions, and connections to other organisations. EMpower support was also cited as helping build the organisation’s reputation, through stronger methodologies and evidence-based programming.

Grantee partners were asked what additional support would be helpful to ensure sustainability. The common thread was funding and fundraising. Grantee partners asked for capacity building to learn how to engage international and other donors, and referrals to donors EMpower has relationships with. Relatedly, there was appetite for more MEL support to help identify areas for potential improvement and to demonstrate what is working well.

Key Findings on Cross-Sector Strengthening

EMpower also seeks to support grantee partners to build strategic alliances at the local, national, regional, and global levels and to share best practices more broadly so they are taken up in the sector. The goal is for marginalised young people to be better supported by a more connected ecosystem.

Grantee partners reported EMpower being a key contributor to strengthening their connections with the local community and key stakeholders at multiple levels, helping build community capacity and helping raise the profile of the organisation.

Organisations built stronger connections with key local stakeholders, like teachers and schools, who are critical constituents for reaching young people in many communities. The second group of key stakeholders that grantees were able to increase their connections with because of EMpower’s support was other youth-serving NGOs. Such connections between organisations helped provide stronger programming and a higher quality, more holistic continuum of support for young people.

A trusted relationship with communities is essential to sustainable, effective work. Grantee partners discussed ways that EMpower support helped strengthen the bond organisations had with communities—for example by working more closely with parents and developing local leadership among young people and adults. Both led to greater community buy-in, pride, and trust in the programmes.



Simply being connected to an international funder like EMpower helped organisations raise their stature in the community. EMpower support also boosted organisations' visibility in other ways, bolstering their credibility and perceived rigor and attracting donors. Increased visibility helps build organisational legitimacy and sustainability, ensuring the longevity and health of programmes that support young people in communities.

“EMpower was also one of the first institutional donors we had and it was a huge boost to our credibility to have the foundation's support.”

— EMpower grantee partner

Findings on What EMpower is Doing Well and Ways to Improve

When asked what aspects of the funding relationship were most helpful, all **sunsetting grantee partners said that what they valued most was support for innovation or piloting a new initiative** (100% saying this was among the most valuable supports), followed by multi-year, flexible funding (92% ranking as among the most valuable). The latter is encouraging because post-COVID, EMpower increased its commitment to multi-year and flexible support in its new grantmaking model. Also valued were “thought partnership from EMpower Programme Officer” (86%) and “capacity strengthening from EMpower Programme Officer” (80%).

When asked how EMpower's support differs from other funders, the top answer from our grantee partners was that EMpower offers **long-term support**, which ensures the continuity of programming and allows time to improve the programme model. The next most cited way that EMpower differs from other funders is in the **depth of the relationship**, which is one of trust and commitment.

“I can say that EMpower's support and commitment are different as we can really feel the partnership and close connection, more than the usual relationship. The 10-year path is very important in terms of security, commitment and trust. EMpower is side by side in all the moments, always giving support and strength in making a difference.”

— EMpower grantee partner

Some of the suggestions from grantee partners were to continue to do more and deepen some of the good practices EMpower employs. For example, a relationship of real trust between programme officers and grantee partners was repeatedly described by grantee partners. Yet there were comments that this trusting relationship could be extended to include more feedback about where the organisation's strengths and weaknesses lie, so they can get the needed capacity strengthening to thrive. Long-term, flexible funding and support that goes beyond grantmaking were all highly appreciated. While organisations felt well supported by EMpower, there were several useful suggestions for improvement. The first was to signal when grantees are likely to receive 10 full years of support. Partners reiterated their appreciation for flexible funding, while also mentioning that it would be helpful if EMpower could do more to connect them to other potential funders to increase sustainability. Multiple grantees suggested that EMpower can simplify reporting.

Whether and How to Engage Grantee Partners Post Sunset

Sunsetted grantee partners had specific suggestions about how EMpower could consider engaging with them after the 10-year official relationship period has ended. For example, some suggested that after a break in funding for two years, EMpower might again fund the organisation, citing an approach taken by some other funders. EMpower might also consider allowing sunsetted partners to incubate or



act as a fiscal sponsor to smaller organisations, which one grantee partner pointed out would help share grantmaking risk, while also moving money to more small grassroots organisations.

Recently EMpower has allowed a few exceptional cases of one-time funding post-sunset grant, which could be a model for post-sunset funding possibilities going forward. These are mostly small grants, used for specific strategic purposes such as: carrying out girl-led research, helping an organisation develop an advocacy agenda, funding a cadre of girls to participate in a learning community, continuing to support a programme as the organisation goes through a leadership transition, or supporting an organisational audit and development of a strategic plan.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This research confirms that many of EMpower's grantmaking and accompaniment practices are working well and are appreciated by grantee partners. Still, there are several ways EMpower could consider changing practices to respond to suggestions made.

Many of the needs focused on further connection and visibility, particularly to funders, but also to other organisations to enhance work through partnership with others. The goals of connection and visibility and more could be accomplished by creating a virtual network map of grantee partners, highlighting both their strengths and areas where they would like more support or links to peers. This would give grantee partners an opportunity to be recognised for areas where they excel, to share their expertise with other organisations, and to connect with other organisations working toward similar goals or with similar populations. And it would serve as a databank for other funders looking for trusted organisations to support.

Another theme that came out across several organisations was the rigour of EMpower's MEL and reporting practices, which were both helpful and seen as a burden. One way of reconciling these sentiments would be to dramatically simplify required reporting, while making available more robust practices and tools (and the training and funding to carry it out in a minimally-burdensome way) to those grantee partners who would like that kind of capacity strengthening support.

Some of the ways grantee partners use small post-sunset grants in exceptional cases point to a desire to do more work on youth-led research and learning. EMpower should consider setting aside specific small grants that could be accessed by organisations that want to train young people as researchers or build their capacity to help shape programme priorities.

Other needs expressed by grantee partners are for resources and offerings that already exist, for example, for help with communications. This suggests that EMpower should develop a menu of potential capacity strengthening that is made available to grantee partners, making it more explicit for all so they know what is on offer and can advocate for their needs.

Grantee partners expressed gratitude for long-term funding, but also some frustration that it was delivered in short-term tranches, leading to frequent reporting requirements. Two possible responses to the issues are to make more frequent reporting less burdensome, for example: allowing audio or video reports and only requiring written reports when there are significant changes or issues. Another possibility is considering longer-term funding for select partners (such as three-year grants) as well as communicating with our partners about the limitations EMpower has as a public foundation to make long-term grants into the future. We hope this review provides valuable insights into our 10-year grantee partnership model. It confirmed that our long-term support is valuable to grantees and helps position them for sustainability. We will be taking these recommendations forward under the guidance of a consultant and engagement with staff. We encourage other donors to join us in providing long-term flexible funding and accompaniment to better support grantee partners.



