

**ROBERT  
CARR  
FUND** *For civil  
society  
networks*

**ROBERT CARR FUND**

**GRANTMAKING MODEL:**

**WHEN COMMUNITIES DECIDE**



## **Robert Carr Fund for civil society networks**

**July 2023**

**This report was written by Kate Harrison and Helen Parry**

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### **Acknowledgements**

The Robert Carr Fund would like to thank everyone who shared their reflections so generously during interviews.

As the Robert Carr Fund celebrates 10 years, we would also like to thank everyone who has supported RCF's operations, including founders, donors, grantees, and members of the International Steering Committee and Program Advisory Panel.





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# Acronyms and Abbreviations

<b>CSO</b>	Civil society organization
<b>CVC</b>	Caribbean Vulnerable Communities Coalition
<b>EHRA</b>	Eurasian Harm Reduction Association
<b>EPLN</b>	European Prison Litigation Network
<b>FCDO</b>	United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
<b>The Global Fund</b>	The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria
<b>GNP+</b>	Global Network of People Living with HIV
<b>IAM</b>	Inclusive and Affirming Ministries
<b>INPUD</b>	International Network of People who Use Drugs
<b>ITPC</b>	International Treatment Preparedness Coalition
<b>ISC</b>	International Steering Committee
<b>MEL</b>	Monitoring and Evaluation for Learning
<b>Norad</b>	Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
<b>NSWP</b>	Global Network of Sex Work Projects
<b>PAP</b>	Programme Advisory Panel
<b>PCB</b>	Programme Coordinating Board (of UNAIDS)
<b>PEPFAR</b>	The United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief
<b>RCF</b>	Robert Carr Fund for civil society networks
<b>SRHR</b>	Sexual and reproductive health and rights
<b>UNAIDS</b>	United Nations Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS



# Executive Summary

## About

This report is about the Robert Carr Fund (RCF) model of participatory grant making. It describes the approach, and presents evidence and insights from grantees, funders, founders, and other stakeholders. RCF has found that combining a participatory approach with long-term, core funding builds strong, resilient, and sustainable civil society and community networks in the HIV response.

There is clear evidence in favor of participatory grant making. It comes from the stakeholder interviews, and it comes from the wider literature<sup>1</sup>. By using participatory approaches, RCF have improved their strategy and their grant making, and begun the overdue process of shifting power to inadequately served populations.

## Key Elements

There are four elements of the approach: participation, flexible core funding, long-term funding and shifting the power, which lead to five outcomes for grantees: civil society advocacy, resilience, organizational capacity, program quality and sustainability.

The four elements can be seen as causal ‘roots’, which lead to the ‘branches’ or outcomes for grantees. It is the principle of civil society participation that leads to the other elements of flexible, core, long-term funding, and the commitment to shifting the power.

This is shown in the diagram below:



<sup>1</sup> “Deciding Together: Shifting Power and Resources Through Participatory Grantmaking”, GrantCraft, 2018.

## Vision

RCF takes participation beyond grant making. We use a people-centered approach in all our work, which some prefer to call ‘co-creation’. This includes the development of the strategic plan, Theory of Change and monitoring and evaluation for learning (MEL) framework, as well as making grants. From RCF’s beginning, civil society and funders participated actively in designing the fund, and understanding the need for it. This participatory approach was then embedded into processes and governance structures.

Flexible core funding was Dr Robert Carr’s vision for civil society and was a principle of the founding members. They were aware of the vital importance of core funding for the work of regional and global networks. Yet there was, and still is, a general lack of this type of funding. Long-term funding provides security for civil society leaders to engage in national and global advocacy, to build sustainability and to invest in staff. **‘Shifting power’ to inadequately served populations leads to more effective grant making, as the people making the funding decisions know the context. This in turn improves the HIV response.**

## Outcomes

These approaches create positive outcomes for grantees, funders and ultimately the HIV response. Networks receiving RCF grants all reported increased network strength and influence, with the majority improving their organizational capacity. This has helped grantees to build their resilience, for example by developing fundraising strategies and plans. By the end of the 2019–2021 grant cycle, the number of networks with a resource mobilization plan more than doubled, according to RCF grantee data<sup>2</sup>. In turn, this has supported stronger civil society advocacy, which creates positive policy and legal change, and increases access to better quality services for inadequately served populations<sup>3</sup>.

RCF’s model supports sustainability at two levels: directly for the networks we fund, and indirectly for the sustainable financing of the HIV response for inadequately served populations. RCF funding is designed to improve the overall quality of HIV programming. That way it leverages better quality programming for all the funders investing in that grantee.

## 10 Tips For Funders

The report closes with 10 tips for funders who may be considering participatory grant making:

1. Simplify processes.
2. Listen to grantees.
3. Define success in grant making.
4. Learn from others about the benefits and challenges of participatory grant making.
5. Engage senior leadership and the Board in the discussion.
6. Decide how willing and able you are to change your rules and procedures.
7. Include more representation from grantees and the people they serve.
8. Establish and strengthen systems for managing conflict of interest.
9. Commit staff time.
10. Celebrate, document, and share your progress.

RCF broke new ground with participatory grant making. Our funders, UNAIDS, the Global Fund, civil society members and grantees speak highly of the approach, they see its value, and believe it should be used more widely. There are challenges involved, but they are worth taking on for the wider benefits the approach brings.

<sup>2</sup> The Robert Carr Fund Annual Report 2021 shows that in three years “networks showed significant gains in organizational planning and fundraising, with 45 out of 60 networks having a costed strategic plan in place at the end of the cycle (compared to 25 at baseline) and 46 having a resource mobilization plan in place (compared to 18 at baseline). Governance function remained strong across the funding period and was noted as a major beneficiary of RCF core funding support.”

<sup>3</sup> Grantee data in the Robert Carr Fund Annual Report 2021 shows that over the three grant cycle years, 35 networks reported positive policy or legal change linked to their advocacy. 30 networks reported increased access to services for ISPs and 41 networks reported better quality of services.





# Background and Overview

RCF has used participatory grant making from the start. As the fund celebrates over 10 years of grant making, it is a good time to explore the experience of our grantees, decision-makers, and funders. This report considers the value, benefits and challenges of the approach, and shares lessons learned for others.

RCF was founded by an alliance of civil society partners, donors and UNAIDS. It was named after Dr Robert Carr, to honor his memory and to recognize his contributions to the global HIV response. Dr Carr argued strongly for the vital role of civil society and for communities affected by HIV to be engaged directly in the HIV response. Our founding vision of RCF is a strong and vibrant civil society leading the HIV response.

Building on this vision, we provide flexible core funding to strengthen regional and global networks and consortia that meet the needs of inadequately served populations in the HIV response. We believe that if these networks are stronger, these communities will have more influence over the human rights and HIV issues that affect them. This in turn will lead to better health and wellbeing for inadequately served populations around the world.

RCF is a pooled funding mechanism. To date, we have raised and allocated US\$120 million, including the 2022–2024 grant cycle. We receive funding from the United States President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the United Kingdom’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands (MoFA), and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), as well as strategic support from UNAIDS and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (the Global Fund).

Partnership, participation, and joint reflection are fundamental to our approach. The RCF Secretariat is guided and led by the Program Advisory Panel (PAP) and the International Steering Committee (ISC). These structures ensure participation, empowerment, equity, transparency and accountability in fundraising and

grant making.

**What is participatory grant making and why is it valuable?** What are the benefits of providing long-term, flexible core funding? How can we ‘shift the power’ to enable those who benefit from funding to play a role in decision-making? Many funders and philanthropists are asking these questions. These principles have underpinned RCF’s approach since it was founded 10 years ago. This report shares this experience and the lessons learned.

## Participatory Grant Making

According to GrantCraft Foundation Centre<sup>4</sup>: “Participatory grant making cedes decision-making power about funding— including the strategy and criteria behind those decisions—to the very communities that funders aim to serve.”

RCF uses a people-centered approach in all its work. This includes the development of the strategic plan, Theory of Change, and monitoring and evaluation framework. The Fund’s governance structure ensures the participation of inadequately served populations in grant making decisions. Given these approaches have been used from the start, some have said that RCF’s approach goes beyond being participatory and would be better described as ‘co-ownership’. Funding priorities are agreed by the PAP and ISC through a consultative process and shared publicly with grantees and stakeholders. After grants are made, the Fund regularly convenes grantees to meet, exchange ideas, develop strategies, and build solidarity and collaborations.

<sup>4</sup> “Deciding Together: Shifting Power and Resources Through Participatory Grantmaking” GrantCraft, 2018.





# The Robert Carr Fund Approach

RCF uses participatory and co-ownership approaches, with funding decisions made by inadequately served populations themselves. Civil society input has resulted in RCF’s strategy to provide long-term, core and flexible funding. This in turn has enabled the networks to focus their attention on the HIV response, rather than battling for survival. Our approach has been cited by UNAIDS as a model of good practice<sup>5</sup> and has influenced Aidsfonds, RCF’s Fund Management Agent (see Box on Governance), to introduce more participatory processes into their own grant making.



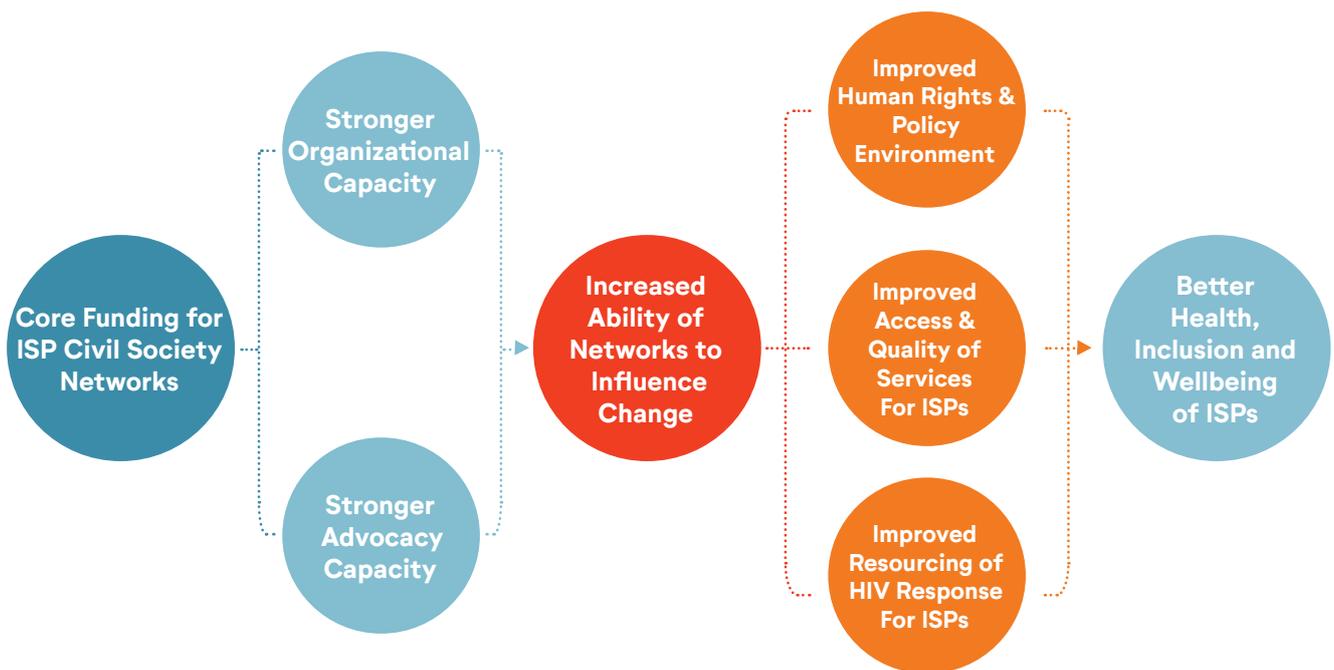
*Robert Carr Fund’s participatory approach has influenced our strategy... We have benefited from their 10 years of experience and all the processes and procedures that they’ve put in place. They’ve helped us see that it’s doable.*

**Mirjam Krijnen,**  
Aidsfonds, RCF Fund Management Agent



## Theory of Change

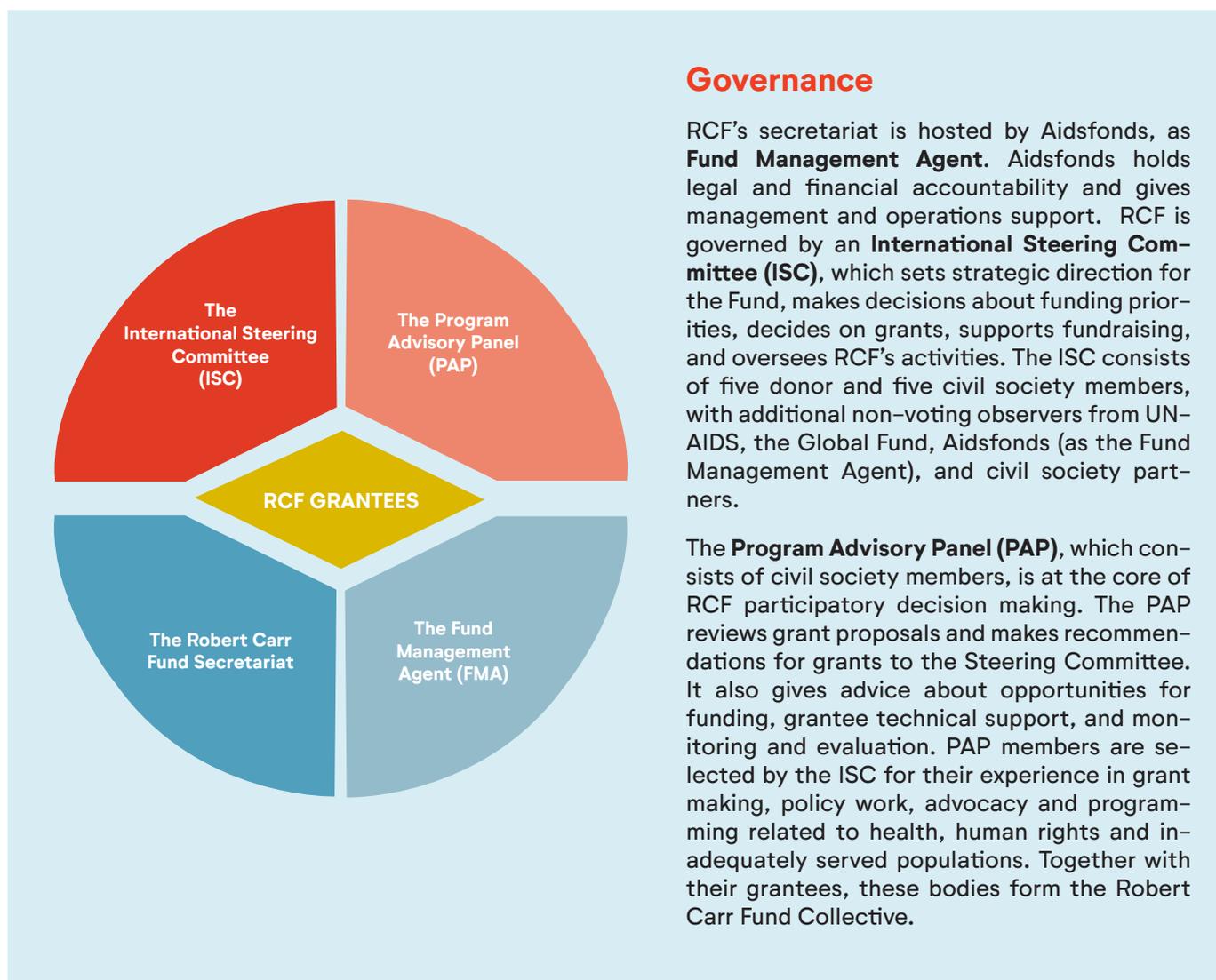
RCF believes that when the networks and consortia they fund are stronger, inadequately served populations have more influence over the human rights and HIV issues that affect them. This in turn improves the social, policy and legal environment for those groups, along with higher quality and well-resourced HIV services and programs. This leads to better health, wellbeing, and social inclusion for inadequately served populations across the globe.



<sup>5</sup>“Best practices on effective funding of community-led HIV responses”. UNAIDS, 2018

RCF's structures and actions follow core principles of human rights, including: participation; empowerment and equity; transparency and accountability.

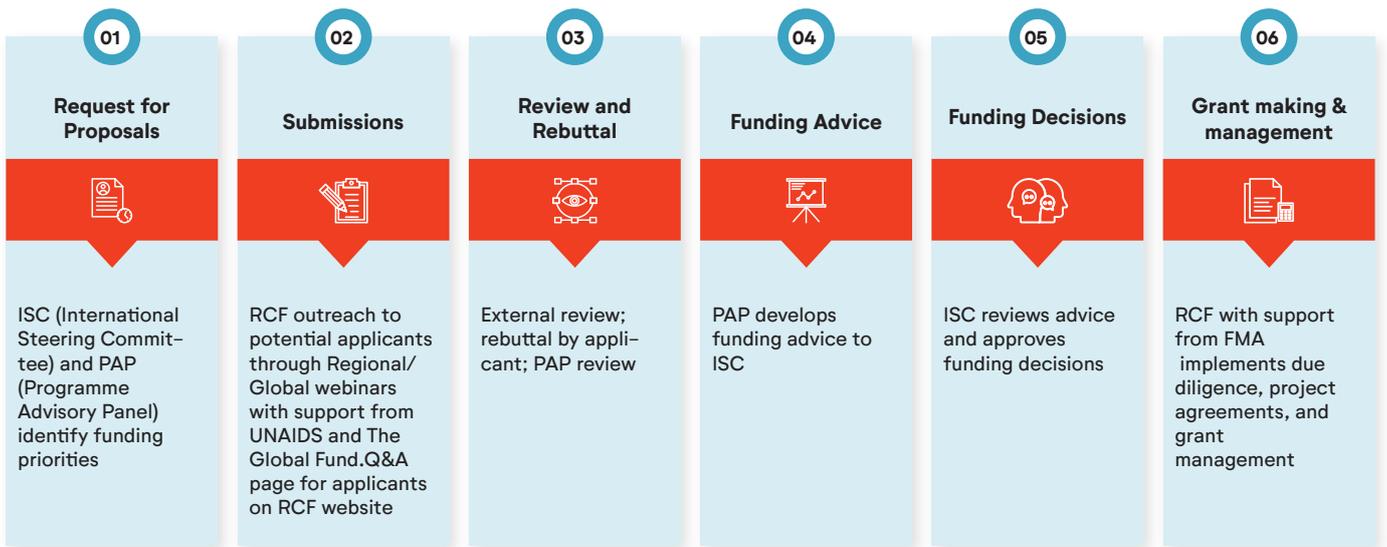
This section describes and analyses the RCF approach to grant making. It reflects on four themes: participatory grant making, flexible core funding, long-term funding and shifting the power. Reflections on the approach were gathered from our stakeholders, using the methodology described in Annex 1.





# Participatory Grant Making

RCF’s approach to grant making is summarized in the diagram below:



**Our participatory approach to grant making stands out because inadequately served populations are engaged in every step of the process**, through their involvement in the ISC and the PAP. PAP members understand the grant making context and often know the applicants and their circumstances. The structure of the ISC creates collective decision making. RCF has well-designed policies and processes for avoiding conflict of interest. Power dynamics are recognized and challenged through carefully facilitated meetings.

RCF’s commitment to participation goes beyond grant making. We use a participatory approach in strategy design, fundraising and in the development of the monitoring and evaluation framework, as well as in grant making. This approach builds the leadership and skills of all involved and leads to higher quality programs.



*A truer representation of the Fund’s vision would be to refer to ‘co-ownership’ rather than ‘participatory grant making’.*

**Peter van Rooijen,**  
RCF Founding Member



*This was not a funder show, it was a way to sit around the table together and figure out what we could do. The participatory approach was more than just about how to divide the money, but it was also about learning together and finding out what could work.*

**Sigrun Mogedal,**  
RCF Founding Member



*There are more opportunities to respond to the issues that communities have clearly identified as being priorities to them.*

**Neil McCulloch,**  
ISC Civil Society Member



One of the challenges of participatory grant making is that it takes time. The engagement and management of the different committees needs staff time at the secretariat. Participation in meetings takes commitment from the stakeholders, at an organizational and personal level. The process of review and approval means that grant making may be slower than if decisions are made by a single committee.

Proving the value of the RCF approach to funding is also challenging. Positive changes are hard to attribute and may not happen in the project's lifetime. RCF has been praised for its monitoring and evaluation framework, which takes on the challenge of tracking organizational strengthening and advocacy results. The positive results are clear, but not easy to communicate in an engaging way.

### Who are Inadequately Served Populations?

Inadequately served populations are people facing a high HIV risk, compared to the general population, because of systematic human rights violations and barriers to information and services. They include people living with HIV, gay men and other men who have sex with men, people who use drugs, people in prisons and other closed settings, sex workers and transgender people. Depending on the dynamic of the HIV epidemic and their legal status, inadequately served populations may also include women and girls, youth, migrants, and people living in rural areas.

This is a wider definition than the more commonly used category of 'key populations'. RCF sees inadequately served populations as central to efforts to improve human rights, access to HIV services, and the efficiency and effectiveness of national and international funding.



## Flexible Core Funding

**Flexible core funding is at the heart of RCF's approach and is vital for the regional and global networks and consortia that we support.**

Addressing the HIV and human rights needs of inadequately served populations does not fit neatly into time-bound, predictable outcomes. Without core funding, organizations may be driven by donors' priorities. They may struggle to invest in the staff and systems they need to deliver high quality and sustainable work. Flexible core funding was Dr Robert Carr's vision for civil society and was a principle of the founding members.

Our current strategic plan re-committed to this principle. **The Robert Carr Fund's annual report for 2021**

shows that core funding is vital to networks. Grantees consistently used core funding to support their basic operating costs and build capacity of their members. Grantees also used RCF's core funding to invest in their staff, understanding that people are the most valuable asset in any organization.

Generally, this type of funding is so rare as to feel like an unexpected luxury. Many other donors have strict rules regarding the proportion of funding allocated to people versus project activities. Salary costs for staff members to undertake advocacy work were the second most frequent use of RCF funds. Advocacy is a vital part of the grantees' work, but salaries of expert staff are often hard to fund.





Core funding is critical to be able to support community mobilization and networking activities. Very few funders provide this type of core funding – especially for advocacy work.

**Ganna Dovbakh,**  
Eurasian Harm Reduction Association, Grantee.



Core funding is so hard to access for networks...Networks often get drawn into the donors' agendas, for example having to deliver on particular projects or certain activities which take them away from their core work of supporting their membership.

**Kate Thomson,**  
The Global Fund, ISC Observer



I also really believe in trust as a basis for collaboration. Not trust without any mechanisms of accountability or compliance, but as a starting point. I think core funding is the translation of that. They know what needs to be done, they know how they want to be organized. Why should we sit here in Amsterdam and decide which activities are suitable and which are not?

**Mirjam Krijnen,**  
Aidsfonds, RCF Fund Management Agent



## Long-Term Funding

Long-term funding is fundamental to building stronger networks and provides a secure foundation for civil society leaders to engage in national and global advocacy.

Improving the laws and policies that affect inadequately served populations takes time. Advocacy work needs long-term commitment and does not always fit neatly into project cycles. **Long-term funding provides security for civil society leaders to engage in national and global advocacy, to build sustainability, and to invest in staff.** RCF grantees are part of a broader advocacy movement that results in positive policy outcomes. These include improvements in criminal codes related to drug use in Kyrgyzstan, legalization of same-sex relationships in Botswana, and adoption of the first Trans Health Policy in Jamaica.



RCF doesn't just provide core funding it also provides long term funding which is more constant than what individual funders are able to provide. Funders often have to be more time-bound, project focused while RCF can take a longer-term view.

**Siobhan Malone,**  
Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, ISC member



They are not worrying about keeping the lights on... it allows the passion to be set free.

**Tian Johnson,**  
African Alliance, ISC Civil Society Observer





## Shifting The Power

**‘Shifting power’ to inadequately served populations who know the context in funding decisions improves the HIV response.**

Empowerment is one of RCF’s core principles, and it includes shifting power to grantee communities, through their participatory grant making model. **Funders and civil society representatives participate jointly in governance and funding discussions, engaging as equals and benefitting from the range of experiences and perspectives.**

This approach also supports the ‘decolonization’ of philanthropy; this means challenging the power imbalances created by colonialism, including the financial, social, and psychological structures that still remain<sup>6</sup>.

RCF already uses many of the recommended systems and processes, such as facilitating community participation, focusing on the most marginalized, ensuring diversity in decision-making bodies and taking a more trusting and less controlling approach.



*RCF has crashed through the boundaries of good practice... RCF enables the power dynamics to play out differently, where even though it’s donors and inadequately served populations working together, they’re operating more like peers.*

**Kate Thomson,**  
The Global Fund, ISC Observer



*We don’t feel like we’re being ‘powered over’. Their job is to support us to be strong, our job is to deliver for the network.*

**Georgina Caswell,**  
Global Network of People Living with HIV (GNP+), Grantee

Sharing power will always come with challenges. Despite well-designed processes, there are inevitably power dynamics, vested interests, and the potential for conflict. These exist between grantees, as well as between funders and civil society. Objectivity can be a challenge when those who may gain or lose from grant making decisions are involved in the process. Monitoring and managing power dynamics is important and takes skill and diplomacy.



*Does my voice as a civil society representative truly have the same power as someone sitting across from me with a donor checkbook? I’m not sure that it does and that is why we need to constantly think about and talk about, no matter how difficult, how power manifests in our work.*

**Tian Johnson,**  
African Alliance, ISC Civil Society Observer

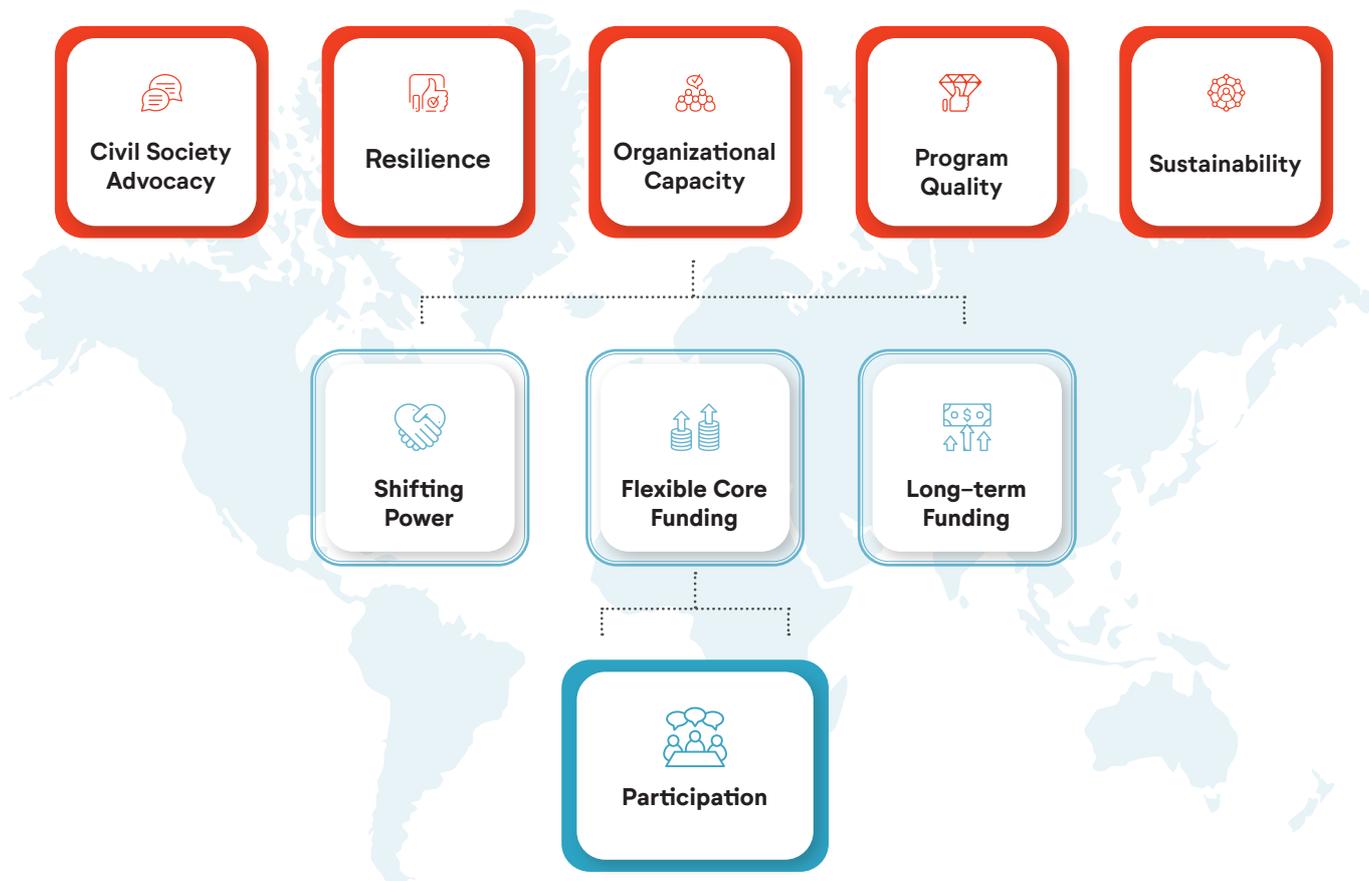
<sup>6</sup> <https://www.alliancemagazine.org/feature/decolonising-philanthropy-from-conceptual-apprehension-to-functional-progress/>





# Outcomes

The elements of RCF's approach can be seen as foundational 'roots', which lead to 'branches' or outcomes. It is the principle of civil society participation that led to the other elements of flexible, core, long-term funding, and the commitment to shifting the power. Each of these elements is described below, with a case study.





## Civil Society Advocacy

**RCF funding enables network leaders to engage in global advocacy work, creating positive policy and legal change, and increased access to better quality services for inadequately served populations.<sup>7</sup>**

RCF funds community-led and civil society networks and consortia who advocate for inadequately served populations' human rights to be respected, and for increased, high quality HIV services. We collect detailed grantee data for each year of the three-year grant cycle. The most recent Annual Report<sup>8</sup> shows that in 2019–2021 grant cycle, the majority of grantees reported positive changes to laws and policies, increased access to services for inadequately served populations, and better quality of services linked to their advocacy.

Network leaders represent the needs and interests of their members by being on the boards of UNAIDS and the Global Fund. Network leaders also represent inadequately served populations on the Global Fund's Country Coordinating Mechanisms.

Civil society leaders can engage in national and global advocacy because their organizations are stable and secure due to RCF funding.



*We've seen not only good work from the grantees, but a whole generation of leadership emerged through these relatively small grants.*

**David Barr,**  
RCF Founding Member



*RCF is a reliable and responsible vehicle for investment... (funders) are investing in a structure that has its feet and ears on the ground and is able to respond to issues on the ground and engage with funders as a partner.*

**Tian Johnson,**  
African Alliance, ISC Civil Society Observer



*We need strong local organizations that are there for the long haul and know their governments and their civil society partners much better than we and other international organizations would.*

**Siobhan Malone,**  
Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, RCF funder

<sup>7</sup> Grantee data in Robert Carr Fund 2021 Annual Report shows that over the three grant cycle years, 35 networks reported positive policy or legal change linked to their advocacy. 30 networks reported increased access to services for ISPs and 41 networks reported better quality of services.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Carr Fund Annual Report 2021



## International Network of People Who Use Drugs (INPUD)

The global HIV response for people who use drugs is being improved by INPUD's leadership. Their advocacy is leading to changes in global strategies. For example, harm reduction services are now mentioned in the UN High-Level Meeting's 2021 Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS, as well as the UNAIDS 10-10-10 societal enabler targets that include decriminalization of drug use and possession and the 80-60-30 targets on community-led responses. In previous years, INPUD had sat on the UNAIDS Steering Committee on Target-Setting, Impact, and Resource Needs. INPUD also channeled Global Fund money through to country level and made sure the Global Fund gave emergency funds to support people who use drugs during the war in Ukraine.



*"These global advocacy activities have impacts that reach to the grassroots."*

**Judy Chang,**  
International Network of People who Use Drugs,  
Grantee

RCF has supported INPUD since the beginning. This support has been vital for INPUD's survival, especially as few funders support organizations led by people who use drugs. When Judy Chang joined as Executive Director in early 2017, RCF's continued funding was made conditional on INPUD's commitment to organizational strengthening. This was the catalyst required to strengthen INPUD's financial management and governance systems. Judy notes that without this, they would not have been capable of managing further funding, particularly complex project grant funding. Judy credits RCF for supporting them through their challenges and giving them the space to respond. INPUD have continued to build their organizational capacity and reputation, which ultimately results in them having greater influence in the movement for drug user rights.



## Organizational Capacity

**RCF is unique in its commitment to supporting network strengthening through core funding, enabling civil society and community-led networks to build their organizational and advocacy capacity.**

Networks receiving RCF grants all reported increased network strength and influence, with the majority improving their organizational planning, fundraising, and governance. For instance, by the end of the 2019-2021 grant cycle, 46 of the 62 funded networks had a fundraising plan in place, compared to only 18 at the start of the cycle.<sup>9</sup>

This creates a positive feedback loop for grantees and funders. Core funding can be invested in the 'nuts and bolts' of an organization, such as governance, staff training, financial and office systems, communications, monitoring, evaluation, and learning. Stronger organizational structures contribute to greater sustainability, putting grantees in a better position to raise funds from other donors, and enables higher quality programming work.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Carr Fund Annual Report 2021





*Core funding does not simply allow networks to exist. It supports them to undertake work for which grant opportunities may not yet exist and to add value to work that is funded through other sources (such as the Global Fund, bilateral agencies, and UN partners). Core funding also enables them to invest sufficient resources in monitoring and learning from their work so they can continually improve their advocacy efforts.*

FCDO report on RCF, 2021

Ganna Dovbakh from the Eurasian Harm Reduction Association described organizational capacity in the form of a metaphor. She visualized their HIV response work as a series of trains, while the organization itself is the railway track that the trains run on:



*Sometimes you need to invest to rebuild part of the track in order for the trains to run smoothly.*

Ganna Dovbakh,  
Eurasian Harm Reduction Association, Grantee

### Consortium of Networks Led by Young People (Youth Lead)

Young people play an essential role in ending AIDS. Youth networks bring young people's energy, creativity and lived experience to the HIV response. They need good paid staff and systems to work effectively, but funders often only fund activities.

RCF provided flexible core funding to a global consortium of networks led by young people. The consortium was led by Youth LEAD, an Asia Pacific network of young people from key populations, and also included Y-PEER (a global network focused on young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights); Y+ Global (Global Network of Young People Living with HIV); and Youth Rise (a global network of young people who use drugs).

The consortium used the three-year grant to support organizations to become stronger, and to support joint action to address the high risks of HIV infection facing young people from key populations. The networks invested in strong management, built representative governing Boards and robust financial systems, gaining trust and credibility through regular audits.

At the start of the grant Youth LEAD was the only registered member of the consortium. By the end of the grant all the consortium partners were registered. This has made them more stable and sustainable, with much greater scope for future fundraising success.





## Resilience

**RCF core funding has helped grantees to build their resilience, allowing them to plan for the future and to respond quickly during times of crisis.**

Resilient organizations can anticipate, prepare for, and respond to change. They have strategies that evolve and adapt as the context changes, and they can also survive sudden disruption. They are able to react quickly to opportunities for advocacy. RCF core funding has helped grantees to build their resilience, for example by developing strategies and funding plans. This has helped them look longer-term and plan for the future.

Resilient civil society organizations (CSOs) are especially important during times of crisis. The sudden disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic created a challenge to the daily activities of CSOs. Many respondents reported that they were only able to survive because of their resilience, and due to the flexibility and adaptability offered by RCF.

### **Eurasian Harm Reduction Association (EHRA)**

EHRA tells the story of resilience during a crisis. The network has 342 members working on harm reduction across 29 countries in Europe and Central Asia. EHRA was able to respond quickly to the COVID-19 pandemic. They supported members to adapt to government restrictions and lockdowns which were restricting access to quality HIV services. Their work included:

**Community-led documentation** of the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on HIV service delivery, of access to COVID-19 vaccines for inadequately served populations, and of the provision of remote outreach services. EHRA also documented changes in the drug markets in Eastern Europe and Central Asia caused by the pandemic.

**Advocacy to update service delivery models**, such as take-home opioid agonist therapy, community outreach, and integrating mental health support into the comprehensive package of harm reduction services.

**'Upgrading the toolbox'** by developing new tools and additional capacity EHRA developed a peer counsellor manual to support peer outreach workers and harm reduction managers to safely deliver online counselling, deliver psychosocial support to staff and peers, suggest practical examples of harm reduction services in emergencies, and support other systemic responses to COVID-19.





## Sustainability

RCF's model of long-term flexible core funding supports sustainability at two levels: the networks they fund, and the sustainable financing of the HIV response for inadequately served populations through successful advocacy interventions.

At grantee level, core funding provides a level of security which means that organizations can focus on longer term income goals. At system level, RCF funding enables grantees to lobby and advocate for appropriate funding in the HIV response.

### Global Network Of People Living With HIV (GNP+)

RCF has supported GNP+ since the Fund began. This long-term, core and flexible funding has been vital for the network's sustainability. GNP+ has several other funders, but it is RCF funding that enabled them to strengthen their foundations and develop a shared advocacy agenda across the global network.

Sustained financing for the HIV response also needs a sustained response at national and community level. Networks help local communities to understand national commitments and foster and support community leadership. Regional and global networks are the bridge between the UNAIDS 2030 targets and the reality on the ground. RCF funding enables GNP+ to pay for the consultation and accountability mechanisms which are essential for valid representation and sustained involvement of such a large and diverse group.

GNP+ staff attend global meetings to speak on behalf of the wider community of people living with HIV. This is only possible because their staff time and other costs are funded. Georgina Caswell, Director of Programs at GNP+, notes the greater visibility of new partners and leaders living with HIV in the broader responses in their regions, such as the human rights field. This further embeds and sustains the HIV response.



*We need to have communities leading and responding to their own problems and solutions as it's the only way to bring about sustainable and meaningful change. In order to support national level action, you'll have to support national and regional networks to support those local networks.*

**Georgina Caswell,**  
GNP+, Grantee





## Program Quality

**RCF funding strengthens the overall quality of grantees' HIV programming, improving program outcomes for all funders investing in that grantee.**

RCF's funding model is designed to improve the quality of HIV programming. Every aspect of the approach supports this, and it is built into the Theory of Change and monitoring and evaluation for learning (MEL) framework. The Fund collects feedback from grantees about quality of HIV services on an annual basis as one of its four priority outcome areas. This feeds into strategy and funding decisions.

Flexible core funding liberates grantees from project-based cycles of funding, enabling them to assess and respond to the quality of HIV services and programs in their regions and globally. Knowing they have some longer-term income enables them to consider what their organization needs and adapt accordingly. This leads to higher quality program work across the board. RCF funding thus leverages better quality programming for all the funders investing in that grantee.

The findings about innovation were not clear cut. In some cases, grantees said core funding gave them the freedom to innovate. However, one grantee questioned "innovation for innovation's sake", when their current activity remained vital, and underfunded.

### **Caribbean Vulnerable Communities (CVC)**

Stronger organizations deliver higher quality work that has greater impact. Ivan Cruickshank, the Executive Director of Caribbean Vulnerable Communities (CVC), explains that RCF funding is not only essential to their survival, but it also improves the quality of their work. CVC is a regional coalition of over 60 grassroots Caribbean CSOs and community activists. They work with people who are vulnerable to HIV and AIDS or restricted in their access to justice and health care services.

RCF funding means that CVC is strong and stable. For example, the grant covers the salaries of senior leaders and covers the costs of Board meetings. This allows CVC to take part in national and regional policy and influencing initiatives. As a result, CVC have been able to consider the 'big picture' and be more strategic, without the constant pressure to deliver the outputs that so many other funders require.





# Conclusion And Lessons Learned

**Dr Robert Carr’s legacy underpins RCF’s approach and remains as relevant now as it did 10 years ago.** The principles of participation, empowerment and equity, and transparency and accountability have led to representatives of civil society and inadequately served populations playing a central role in RCF’s governance. While in the past it may have been seen as risky or outlandish, it has become a mainstream concept, with many donors making their governance and grant making processes more inclusive of the communities they serve.<sup>10</sup>

**RCF takes participation beyond simply grant making.** We developed our strategy and monitoring and evaluation framework through participatory processes. This has led to a strategy which supports long term, core, and flexible funding. It has also led to a commitment to measure and report the network strengthening effect of RCF core funding.

**Participatory grant making takes time and commitment from all involved.** We have created structures that engage all our stakeholders, who commit to taking part in them. We also recognize power dynamics and have processes to manage potential conflicts of interest.

**There is clear evidence in favor of participatory grant making.** It comes from the stakeholder interviews, and it comes from the wider literature<sup>11</sup>. Using participatory approaches leads to improved strategy, better grant making, and begins the overdue process of shifting power. RCF’s funders and other stakeholders speak very highly of the participatory approach, they see the value, and believe it should be used more widely.



*Robert Carr Fund is one of the best investments you can make. It lives and models many of the values and principles that we often talk about.*

**Kate Thomson,**  
The Global Fund, ISC Observer

<sup>10</sup> “The Rise of Participatory Grantmaking”, CSRWire come March 2023

<sup>11</sup> “Deciding Together: Shifting Power and Resources Through Participatory Grantmaking” GrantCraft, 2018.





# Ten Tips For Funders

The list below reflects findings from stakeholder interviews and from the wider learning taking place about participatory grant making:

- 01 **Simplify processes:** there are small changes you can make to processes that will make a big difference to grantees. These can include simpler reporting mechanisms and greater flexibility.
- 02 **Listen to grantees:** find ways to consult with grantees and the people they serve. This can be through reporting mechanisms, one-off consultations or using mechanisms such as the Grantee Perception Survey from the Center for Effective Philanthropy.<sup>12</sup>
- 03 **Define success in grant making:** consider what you are measuring, and whether this needs to change. RCF's MEL system focuses on organizational strengthening, advocacy, and sustainability as measures of success.
- 04 **Learn from others about the benefits and challenges of participatory grant making:** follow the discussion on decolonization and racial justice, on trust-based philanthropy and participatory grant making.
- 05 **Engage senior leadership and the Board in the discussion:** ultimate decision makers must see the value of change.
- 06 **Decide how willing and able you are to change your rules and procedures:** establish the boundaries of change, be realistic about what is possible for your organization.
- 07 **Include more representation from grantees and the people they serve:** establish advisory committees or diversify existing ones. Note that RCF is a collective, including RCF funders and other stakeholders in committees, as well as representatives of inadequately served populations.
- 08 **Establish and strengthen systems for managing conflict of interest:** shifting power creates new challenges for grant makers, who need to show how they keep their decisions as objective as possible.
- 09 **Commit staff time:** note that participatory, flexible funding takes time. RCF's approach to core funding is not 'hands off'; grant managers spend a lot of time communicating with grantees.
- 10 **Celebrate, document, and share your progress:** you are part of a growing movement to change the nature of grant making.

<sup>12</sup> <https://cep.org/assessments/grantee-perception-report/>





# Annexes



## Annex 1: Methodology

### Desk-Based Review

Robert Carr Fund (RCF) documents provided an in-depth understanding of the participatory grant making process and the values and principles underpinning RCF's work. Documents included RCF's strategy, annual report, statutory documentation and governance principles, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's annual reports on RCF, and relevant UNAIDS Program Coordinating Body reports. A list of documents reviewed is included in Annex 2.

### Interviews With Stakeholders

Twenty interviews were conducted with a range of RCF stakeholders. These included members of RCF's International Steering Committee (including donors, observers, and civil society members), PAP, founding members of RCF, the Fund Management Agent (Aidsfonds), grantees, and funders. Grantees were selected taking into account geographic representation and inclusion of different inadequately served populations. Time and language constraints made it unrealistic to interview all members of the governing bodies and grantees, so a representative sample was agreed in consultation with RCF. The list of stakeholders interviewed is included in Annex 3.

Interview questions were tailored to each type of interviewee and interviews were conducted in English. The interviews were designed to answer the agreed overarching questions, including gathering specific case studies where relevant. The interviews focused on understanding the RCF approach; the benefits and challenges of participatory grant making and the benefits and challenges of providing flexible, core and long-term funding, including lessons learned and tips for the wider donor community.



## Annex 2: Bibliography

- “Best practices on effective funding of community-led responses” UNAIDS, 2018
- Robert Carr Fund Annual Report, 2021
- Robert Carr Fund Strategic Plan 2020–2024
- FCDO, Department for International Development Annual Review of the Robert Carr Fund, 2018
- “Deciding Together: Shifting Power and Resources Through Participatory Grantmaking” GrantCraft, 2018.

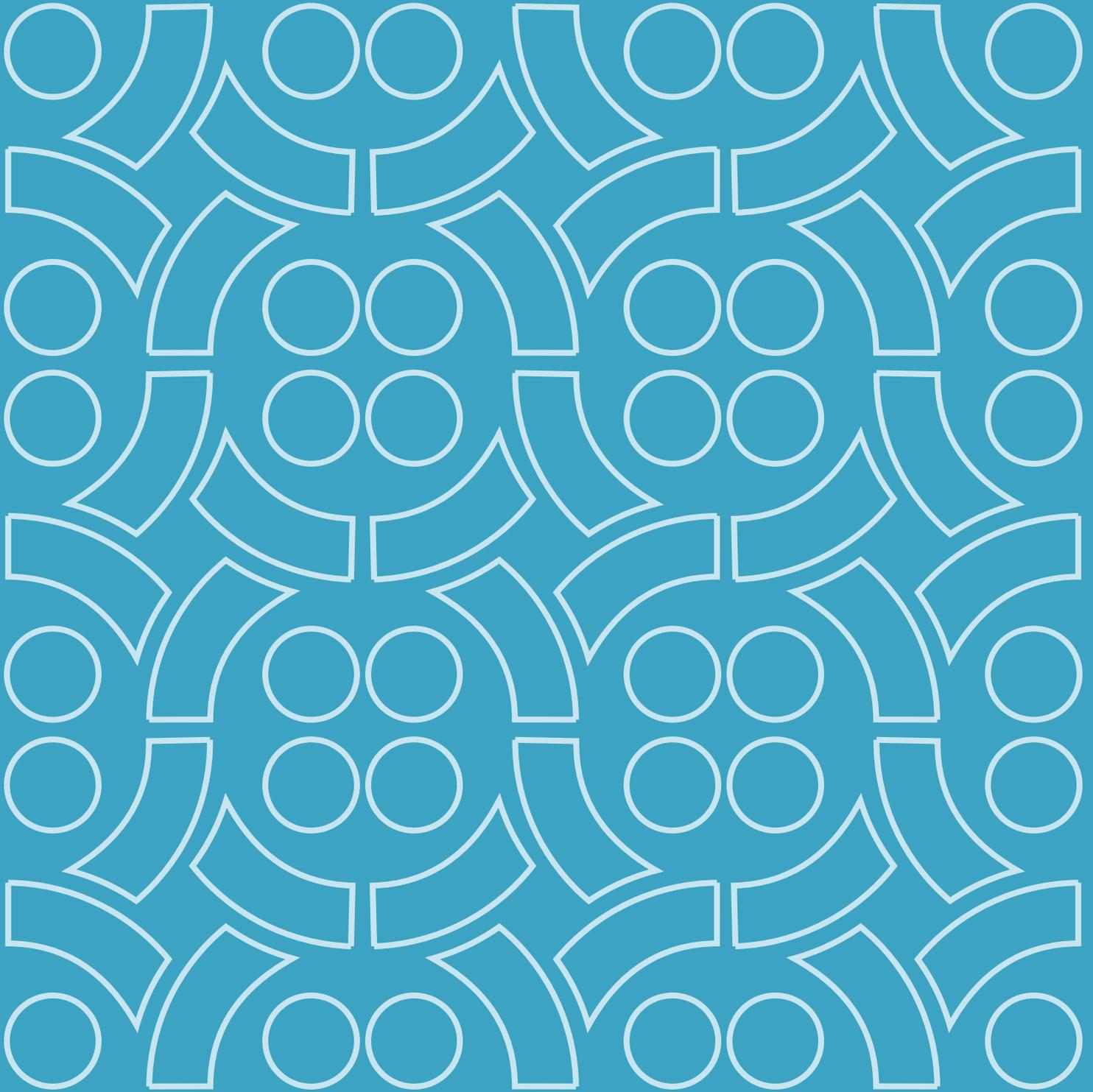




## Annex 3: List of Interviewees

1. **Sam Avrett**, RCF founder
2. **Georgina Caswell**, Global Network of People Living with HIV (GNP+), grantee
3. **Judy Chang**, International Network of People Using Drugs (INPUD), grantee
4. **Ivan Cruickshank**, Caribbean Vulnerable Communities (CVC), grantee
5. **Meg Davis**, Digital Health and Rights Project, former PAP member
6. **Monica Djupvik**, Norad, Norway, RCF funder and ISC member
7. **Ecclesia de Lange**, Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM), former grantee
8. **Ganna Dovbakh**, Eurasian Harm Reduction Association (EHRA), grantee
9. **Jennifer Ho**, Asia Pacific Council of AIDS Service Organisations (APCASO), former PAP member
10. **Tian Johnson**, African Alliance for HIV Prevention, ISC Civil Society Observer
11. **Mirjam Krijnen**, Aidsfonds, RCF Fund Management Agent
12. **Julia Krikorian**, European Prison Litigation Network (EPLN), grantee
13. **Vincent Leclercq**, Coalition PLUS, PAP member
14. **Siobhan Malone**, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, RCF funder and ISC member
15. **Ikka Noviyanti**, Youth LEAD, grantee
16. **Neil McCulloch**, Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) and ISC Civil Society member
17. **Johnny Tohme**, MPact, ISC Civil Society member
18. **Kate Thomson**, The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB & Malaria, RCF founder and ISC Observer
19. **Sigrun Mogedal**, RCF founder
20. **David Barr**, RCF founder
21. **Peter Van Rooijen**, RCF founder





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