

Bezos Earth Fund Community Priority Fund

Round One Retrospective

Abstract

Interviews with nearly a dozen The Nature Conservancy (TNC) colleagues involved with the creation and implementation of the Bezos Earth Fund Community Priority Fund were met with overall positive impressions of the Fund. Interviewees highlighted the intent of the fund and collaborative design aspects, while acknowledging a slow and cumbersome contracting process as the main obstacle. Such delays likely stemmed from limited staff capacity and the pitfalls of working through an untested allocation process with a large number of grants to manage simultaneously. For successful future funding rounds, participants at various stages of the process recommend changes to the nomination, selection, and grant agreement processes, and additional clarity in both internal and external communications.

Introduction

The Bezos Earth Fund (BEF) Community Priority Fund (CPF) was designed to provide grants to advance community centered initiatives across the TNC BEF project areas – PRANA, Emerald Edge, NCS Science, and Nature4Climate – with the primary purpose of building relationships and trust and sharing decision making agency and resources with local community organizations in the BEF project areas. A focus on community identified conservation work supporting community wellbeing was central to this funding endeavor. A secondary goal was capturing learnings from the CPF process in order to initiate change within the organization and ensure long-term commitment to community-led conservation and participatory funding.

The process for the first round of funding included fund design, community based organization nomination and selection, project development, due diligence, grant agreement, and evaluation and reporting. An advisory group designed the fund structure in spring 2022 and called for nominations from each BEF project area, assembling recommendations of organizations meriting funding consideration. A selection committee then reviewed the nominees and identified highly rated and strategic candidates, and the Conservancy's Director of Equitable Conservation made final organizational approvals. Once selected, organizations proposed specific projects to receive the funding and a grant agreement was drafted and executed by the grantee and TNC. As funded projects are being implemented, grantees, nominators, and CPF team members will meet for evaluation and reporting at identified milestones.

This retrospective document compiles feedback from eleven individuals involved in various stages of the first round of funding (advisory group, nomination, selection, and operations), with representation from three TNC BEF project areas. The main purpose of this retrospective is to home in on improvements for subsequent rounds of funding, but there were also many highlights identified by interviewees including the ambitious goals of broadening the definition of conservation, engaging practitioners on the ground, and reducing burdens on grantees, as well as the inclusive design process and concept of nominating an organization to receive funding rather than a traditional request for proposal process.

Insights and Recommendations

Through the first round of funding, team members have gained valuable insights into successes and suggested improvements.

Process Management

Interviewees emphasized that the CPF project manager's expertise, coordination, and communication provided a strong foundation for the grant process. Nevertheless, it was a widely shared opinion that to lead the development of the Fund, manage the nomination and selection processes, coordinate due diligence and grant agreements for multiple grantees across geographies, and adhere to project deadlines, the CPF could have benefited from additional dedicated staff capacity rather than relying on one part-time Coda Fellow.

Another consideration was the discrepancy between the CPF's aspirations and practical limitations imposed by TNC's procedural requirements. The CPF seeks to recognize and mitigate the power differential between TNC and local community-based organizations, but complications and restrictions of the grant agreement process demonstrated that while the Fund is well-intentioned, TNC's standard operating procedures and bureaucracy can inhibit effective community-led conservation.

For improved process, recommendations include:

- a. deploying additional staff capacity (*in progress: additional part-time Coda Fellow on board, contracts specialist currently being hired, and adding working CPF Advisory Group members*);
- b. streamlining the grant agreement process (*in progress - pending changes to payment and reporting processes*);
- c. piloting one or two grants to stress test changes to the fund design, ensuring templates are approved and identifying areas of potential delay; and
- d. offering rolling submission deadlines to allow for flexibility for grantees and a manageable number of grant agreements processed at one time.

Internal Communications and Role Expectations

TNC staff across the Conservancy who were identified for CPF roles dedicated time beyond their existing duties to support the development and implementation of the Fund. Interviewees felt the nomination and selection process they were asked to participate in lacked clear expectations, instructions, and ranking parameters which led to variations in approach across the BEF project areas. Selection committee members often were only familiar with their own BEF project, and did not have the proper framework or understanding to rank nominees from other project areas. Without having a proposal to review, this issue was compounded by the disparity between organizations' publicly available information; the size and scope of the organizations naturally impacted the extent of their publicly available information including their community impact.

Given these knowledge gaps, clearer communication about the expectations of the nomination and selection process would be helpful in managing workloads. Specific recommendations include:

- a. having different people participate in the nomination and selection processes;
- b. providing clarity and orientation on nominators' role and involvement if their organization is selected, the criteria for nominating an organization, and having nominators prioritize the organizations they nominate as they have the best understanding of which organizations are going to be most impactful in their communities;
- c. providing training for selection committee members that includes briefings on all BEF project areas and how to evaluate nominated organizations so there is consistency in decision making.

External Communications and Credibility

Additional considerations included outward-facing communication, relationship building, and TNC's reputation as a trusted organization supporting community-led conservation. On a procedural level, TNC inconsistently communicated with nominators and grantees once organizations were selected. Nominators and grantees alike were often uncertain what caused contracting delays and when or how funds would be delivered, which could have caused damage to TNC's and the CPF's reputation in the first round of funding. Some nominators were also unclear on whether they or the CPF project manager were responsible for next steps in the grant agreement process, wanting more frequent communications and the opportunity to connect in other ways besides email.

Recommendations for external communications include:

- a. potentially not nominating organizations that have fledgling but strategic partnership development with TNC in order to avoid any preventable harms;
- b. providing clarity around roles and responsibilities of the nominators and CPF project manager in the grant agreement process;
- c. providing clarity for both nominators and grantees on expected process, documentation needed, and timeline including communicating about any delays in the process;
- d. extending the timeframe for grantees to develop projects and offering more opportunities to communicate via calls and discussions rather than written memos and emails.

Conclusion

Overall, the CPF has provided a process for allocating BEF Program dollars to organizations around the world working on community identified conservation and community health and well-being priorities. Any new process is not without learning and challenges, and through this retrospective process we have explored areas of success and recommendations for changes for consideration in future CPF funding rounds and other similar funding opportunities across the Conservancy.

For additional information, comments, or questions, please be in touch with Elizabeth King at elizabeth.king@tnc.org.