Insights from the Funding Community

Gauteng Regional Event 15 July 2025

A strong, trusting relationship between funders and education NGOs enables the design and implementation of effective programmes linking resources to real needs, so that both funders and grantees can adapt and learn together for impact. NASCEE's recent regional event brought funders and education NGOs together to increase mutual understanding by sharing thoughts on funder roles, grant-making strategies and NGO-funder relationships.

Meet the Panel

Sarah Cairns
Head of Trust - Optima

Khotso Tsotsotso
Senior Education Manager - Old Mutual Foundation

Gail Campbell
CEO - Zenex Foundation

1. Funder Roles and Strategies

The event opened with representatives from three valued grant-making organisations – regular collaborators with many attendees – setting the scene by sharing views on funder priorities and responsibilities.

Catalysts and Amplifiers: Funders see themselves as catalysts who amplify interventions with proven traction and help alignment across education sectors and with government. The focus should not just be on service delivery but also on building institutional capacity (Sarah).

Testing Ground for Innovation: Corporate funders use CSI to test innovations, but also acknowledge the growing need to support basic services in light of systemic pressures (Khotso).

Flexible and Learning-Oriented Strategies: Funders are taking on adaptive strategies, reviewing them frequently to remain responsive to changing contexts (Sarah).

Data-driven and research-focused: Funders are listening more carefully to evidence-based research and focusing on supporting government to reach its goals (all).

Co-creation Models: Some funders are moving towards interventionist models, co-designing and managing programmes with NGOs and government, and avoiding unsolicited proposals (Gail).

Focus Areas: Most funders have their own key focus areas, and use pilot programmes in these areas to gather evidence around possible solutions (all).

2. Current trends and advice to NGOs

Observations on trends and shifts happening in the education sector and funding ecosystem framed some of the advice given on how to approach funders. Examples are:

Understand Government Goals: Government is itself becoming interventionist in that it is setting the agenda, clearly specifying its priorities and how it wants to achieve these. Both funders and NGOs need to consider their roles in relation to government drivers.

Frame Your Work in Systems Terms: 'Systemic impact' refers to educational change and improvement which has been entrenched into mainstream public education and all its systems and institutions. Currently there is less appetite for risk and more emphasis on scale and sustainability in the system.

Understand Funder Strategy: NGOs should thoroughly research specific funders' stated priorities and the ways in which they operate.

Long-Term Commitment: Funders prefer NGOs who commit as partners to long-term rather than short-term projects.

Evidence and Learning Orientation: NGOs should use evidence and data to clearly articulate the problem they want to address in a Theory of Change, as well as noting how they will gather and use data effectively throughout the programme. NGOs should be open to learning, showing how and what they learn and not just showcasing success.

Collaborative Proposals: Funders encourage collaboration between government and NGOs, and between different NGOs, including shared data systems and pooled resources. NGOs are encouraged to draw on partners such as Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to help with research.

Balance Innovation and Evidence: While evidence is key, funders are open to piloting new ideas, especially when gaps are well defined.

Leverage Proximity Power: While government holds policy power and funders hold financial power, NGOs hold 'proximity power'. NGOs should highlight their on-the-ground knowledge and access to communities as a unique asset.

3. Actions and Reflections for the Funder Community

Through interactions with questions and comments from the floor, the panel engaged directly with implementers on their funding experiences and challenges. Points made on how funder-partner collaboration could be strengthened, and topics for further reflection, are given below.

Navigating Power Dynamics: Funders need to openly recognise the power imbalances between funders and NGOs, and acknowledge the barriers to funding identified by NGOs (e.g. it's about 'who you know' and 'getting your foot in the door'). There are few accountability measures for what funders (either private or corporate) do and how they fund; funders influence direction through their strategies and structures, often creating competitive dynamics between NGOs. Funders and NGOs should work together to find ways to manage these power relations.

Transparency: Funders should become more transparent about upcoming opportunities and their award processes.

Participatory Grant-Making: There is interest in moving towards more participatory models, including involving beneficiaries and academics in decision-making.

Capacity Building: Funders recognise the need to support NGOs beyond operational funding, addressing skills transfer and governance support (e.g. project management, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning [MEL]) and reducing administrative burdens.

Shared Learning Ecosystems: Funders see value in contributing to shared learning spaces, using site visits and data sharing to stay grounded and responsive.

Clarifying Evidence Expectations: Funders need to spell out what they mean by 'evidence' and 'innovation' to avoid unintentional exclusion of smaller or newer NGOs .

There is a clear need for further conversations on major themes such as power relations, the tension between evidence and innovation, and collaboration dynamics. NASCEE will continue to facilitate engagements between funders, NGOs and government, to clarify funding models, priorities and gatekeeping dynamics so that the funding ecosystem is better understood. Future discussions could also explore the true costs of collaboration and how to manage these, as wells as the role NASCEE can play in curating and synthesising programmatic data, addressing historic fears of data sharing and helping NGOs use proximity data more effectively.

A big takeaway is that NGOs must recognise their own agency, including their collective power. NASCEE members can ask: 'What can I do in this role to help NASCEE strengthen its support for the sector?'