

# Key Learnings from the Culture of Solidarity Fund

## Reflections for Funders

### Introduction

*In 2020 the European Cultural Foundation (ECF) launched the Culture of Solidarity Fund (CoS Fund), a bold experiment in collaborative philanthropy. What began as an emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic quickly grew into a wider vehicle for funder collaboration, distributing more than €6.5 million to nearly 300 grantees across Europe. Along the way, it became both a lifeline for cultural actors in times of crisis and a testing ground for how funders can work together more effectively.*

*To mark the conclusion of the first cycle of the Fund, earlier this year ECF carried out an extensive, forward facing learning review, taking stock and capturing the achievements and the improvements – both the celebratory and the constructive. This short reflection shares the main learnings for ECF and fellow funders: what worked, what proved challenging, and what could guide future collaboration in Europe.*

### 1. Acting Fast Can Build Trust

The Fund's origin story holds an important lesson: collaboration often begins with action. When the pandemic hit, ECF decided to lead by doing—launching the Fund rapidly, making entry points for partners as open and flexible as possible, and inviting others to join. Funders responded, not only because of the urgency of the moment but because they trusted ECF's networks and ability to act. This trust, more than any structure, became the foundation of collaboration.



### 2. Flexibility Is a Strength – and a Challenge

Flexibility was another defining feature. Partners could engage in different ways, from simply contributing funds to co-designing calls for proposals. This openness made it possible to support initiatives that many individual foundations could not have tackled alone—such as cross-border projects, informal groups, or quick-turnaround grants to artists in war-torn Ukraine. At the same time, the Fund's breadth was also its challenge. Because it stretched across so many themes—pandemic response, the war in Ukraine, climate change, democratic resilience—it was not always clear to partners what the Fund ultimately stood for. For many, the CoS-Fund was a valuable partner in specific moments, but not a vehicle for sustained strategic investment.



### 3. Collaboration Thrives on Complementarity

Funders joined not simply out of solidarity but because the Fund offered something their own institutions could not. It provided a way to act across borders, to channel small rapid grants, or to support grantees in new ways. Some described it as a “sandbox” where they could experiment with different approaches, scout new initiatives, and later integrate promising projects into their own portfolios.



#### 4. Crisis Response ≠ Systemic Change

Perhaps the most striking contrast was between the Fund's success in acute crises and its struggles to engage funders around systemic issues. The model worked brilliantly when fast, small grants were needed—during COVID-19 or the first months of the war in Ukraine. But for themes like climate justice or democratic decline, funders tended to look elsewhere, seeking collaboratives with longer-term strategies and clearer frameworks for impact. The CoS-Fund's agility was an asset in emergencies, but less suited to the patience and stability required for systemic change.



#### 5. Relationships Drive Collaboration

What unites all of these experiences is the central role of relationships. Nearly every funder who joined did so because of their trust in ECF and its team—the professionalism, responsiveness, and collaborative spirit that underpinned the Fund's work. This underlines an important truth in collaborative philanthropy: structures are necessary, but trust and human connection are what make them work.

## Conclusion

*The CoS-Fund demonstrated that collaboration in philanthropy is not only possible but powerful when urgency and trust converge. At its best, it unlocked funding quickly, gave voice to artists and activists in moments of crisis, and built bridges across borders. The key learning for ECF – and for the wider funder community – is that collaboration works best when it plays to its strengths: clarity of purpose, complementarity of roles, and above all, the relationships that hold it together.*