



Summary of Familiarization Phase findings of the Developmental Evaluation of BUILD

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NIRAS, for the Ford Foundation

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What is BUILD?

BUILD (Building Institutions and Networks) is a five-year, USD 1 billion grant-making initiative, launched by the Ford Foundation in 2016. The initiative is based on the belief that a combination of grant-making strategies—unrestricted general operating support, multi-year commitment, core support for institutional strengthening, convening of grantees to share their learning, and technical assistance—will accelerate and amplify the impact of social justice organizations globally. BUILD’s primary goal is to foster a stronger, more powerful set of civil society organizations and networks working to address inequality around the world. Its second goal is to develop understanding within the Ford Foundation, and throughout the field of philanthropy, about how strengthening institutions and networks can advance social justice.

The BUILD Evaluation

The Ford Foundation has commissioned a developmental evaluation to assess whether and how BUILD is achieving these two goals. A multidisciplinary and multinational team has been engaged through the firm NIRAS in February 2018 to undertake this evaluation. This brief summarizes the initial and tentative findings of this evaluation, which will continue into 2021.

The evaluation seeks to:

- Examine the contribution of BUILD to the internal strengthening of grantee organizations and networks.
- Examine the contribution of BUILD to networks and ‘fields’ of social justice organizations to become more effective.
- Provide a deeper understanding of the contributions of internal strengthening to ultimate programmatic outcomes in overcoming inequality.

Focus of the Evaluation

The BUILD approach and results are being analyzed through the following learning questions.



Does strengthening key institutions and networks advance (or consolidate past advances in) social justice? If so, how? In what context? What grantee characteristics matter most in advancing social justice? Under what conditions are grantees most (and least) able to create this change?



How has BUILD strengthened grantees? Are there particular areas in the BUILD approach to institutional strengthening that stand out as more, or less, effective? Has BUILD supported grantees' strategic clarity and coherence in the effort to dismantle inequality? Did BUILD help organizations scale-up or decentralize? How is the BUILD impact different from the other types of grant-making? How have organizations strengthened or preserved essential organizational culture as they work towards changes such as growth, scaling and/or decentralization?



Did BUILD impact grantees' roles in leading or taking part in networks in a way that strengthened those networks? If so, how? Are BUILD grantees developing stronger capacities to catalyze, lead and/or support collaboration within the fields they engage? Have BUILD grantees elevated the work of their partners to respond to the strategic challenges in the field? Do BUILD grantees influence the ways that power is distributed among members of a network and, if so, how?



Has BUILD been organized and implemented optimally to achieve the desired impacts? How has the general operating support of the BUILD grant contributed to the strengthening of BUILD grantees' organizations? Have the general operating support and institutional strengthening funds contributed to the organizational development of BUILD grantees in ways that are different than general operating support or institutional strengthening funding from other sources? If so, how? Has the BUILD funding been designed in such a way as to contribute to increasing grantees' mission impact? If so, how? What is the impact of long-term funding commitment on grantees' institutional strengthening and mission impact? To what extent have the technical assistance and convening components of BUILD grants been utilized by grantees and to what effect?

Emerging Findings

Although BUILD is at an early stage, certain ‘hunches’ are emerging that appear to be indicative of BUILD’s wider impact. So far, we are able to say with a degree of confidence that:

The **promise** of BUILD is evident.

The combination of BUILD’s funding approach and technical assistance shows considerable promise as a transformative approach to social justice grant-making.

A key feature is the dedicated focus on **institutional strengthening**.

The emphasis on supporting institutional strengthening enables grantees to work more intentionally and strategically as they build their operating capabilities. This has also given the grantees the ability to act on these strategies for building their capacities as they strive to become stronger as leaders in the fight against inequality.

The five-year BUILD **funding commitment** is proving decisive.

The five-year BUILD funding commitment is proving decisive. The commitment to five years of predictable funding enables grantees to focus on reflective, strategic and structured strengthening of their organizations, networks and partnerships. These concerns are usually postponed or sidelined due to lack of funding and lack of sufficiently secure funding to make long-term plans.

BUILD is **deepening relationships** between Ford and grantees.

BUILD has often provided a basis for a more constructive and trusting donor-grantee relationship, based on a mutual commitment to seeing how stronger institutions can contribute to social justice.

BUILD’s **convening** function could be a powerful lever.

Grantees are keen to learn from each other and to share experiences with institutional strengthening and issues related to the contexts in which they work. Where convenings and peer-to-peer exchanges have happened, grantees report they have gained insight and learned strategies to deal with complex challenges.

There is **emerging broad interest** in BUILD.

Grantees regard the BUILD model as something they can actively showcase in their conversations with other funders. Being part of BUILD has begun to endow grantees with the increased confidence to “crowd in” additional and more appropriate support.

What makes BUILD different?

The following are some examples of how BUILD is becoming a game changer for grantees and for Ford Foundation's grant-making.



"Grantee in the driver's seat."

BUILD has taken forward the principle that grantees should play a key role in deciding how to use their Ford Foundation support. This way of working requires a shift of perspective and behavior by both the grantees, who have sometimes been initially cautious about taking the initiative and challenging donor priorities, and the Ford Foundation program officers, who have had to rethink their roles and relationships with the grantees.



Strategic thinking

The BUILD grants have already proven decisive in providing grantees with the time, space, resources and freedom to rethink how to achieve mission impact, including how to invest in their organizations. Many grantees were aware that they were under-investing in the organizational capabilities needed to achieve impact, but they had insufficient opportunity to do something about it due to day-to-day pressures. Some had strategies on paper but lacked the resources to do anything with them.



Safety and security

Civil society is under threat in many places, and the focus on cost-cutting 'efficiency' by funders has sometimes led to insufficient investments in safety and security for staff and for the people with whom social justice organizations work. BUILD takes these issues seriously, and grantees are actively choosing to make significant investments in physical, digital and legal security. Some realized that they need to foster a culture of protection within their organizations, wherein these issues are paramount – something they never had a chance to do before.



Being nimble

Many Ford grantees work in volatile contexts that impact both their organizations and the communities with whom they work. This has made it essential for grantees to be prepared to respond to emerging issues and sudden changes. They are more resilient financially and in responding to emerging political, and physical threats. Long-term funding stability and the leeway to adapt programming at short notice have enabled grantees to address immediate issues while maintaining their strategic direction.



Diversity, equity and inclusion

BUILD supports grantees to deepen their work on diversity, equity and inclusion within and outside their organizations. In several cases, grantees have significantly changed the way they behave and operate to meet these challenges. A number of grantees have expressed an interest and commitment to pursuing these values more directly in the future.

What conditions are needed for BUILD to work?

The heterogeneity of the BUILD cohort has constituted an evaluative challenge from the outset. At the same time, it is an opportunity to learn about BUILD's attributes and weaknesses across a broad range of social justice institutions. This includes factors such as:



Context counts.

Grantees' experiences of engaging with BUILD have differed, in large part, on how BUILD has been implemented in different regions, themes, strategies, and timeframes.



Strategy revisions impact BUILD.

Changes in the Foundation's strategic priorities inevitably have impact on the roll-out of BUILD as well as the institutional strengthening perspectives of the BUILD grantees. The long time-frame of BUILD grants and the more trusting relations between program officers and grantees may ease some concerns about shifting priorities, but grantees working in strategic lines of work that are discontinued (or significantly changed) are inevitably affected by the Foundation's changing strategic directions.



Transparency is key.

BUILD can contribute to the transparency needed to generate a constructive conversation about where Ford Foundation and grantee priorities meet. Transparency creates an environment for grantees to speak openly about issues that tend to otherwise be kept hidden from donors and other partners.



BUILD needs to be adaptable and flexible.

Grantees work for social change in dynamic and fast-moving terrains, and they see BUILD as providing them the stability they need to shift resources and respond quickly. However, that requires that the Foundation accepts that there may be many surprises during the five-year journey with a grantee. A critical asset of BUILD is the ability to sustain grantees and continue to foster the funder-grantee relationship during these turbulent periods.

Real-time lessons for BUILD to consider

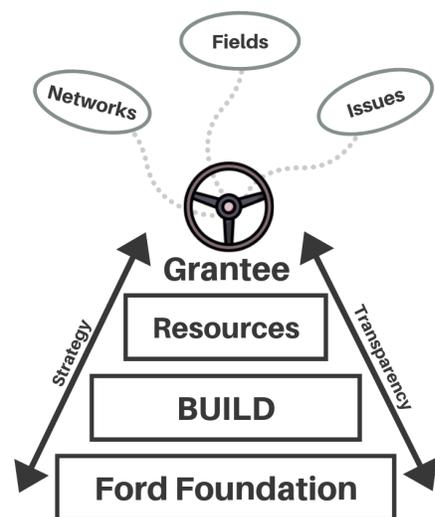
Already at this early phase in the evaluation, certain lessons are emerging that could inform improvements to the BUILD initiative:

Safety and security are critical emerging issues that can be broadened to better include protection and well-being – BUILD allows organizations to practice what they preach in terms of caring for people’s well-being. As Ford strategies increasingly emphasize safety and security, an important aspect of institutional strengthening will be to refine and define commitments and approaches for ensuring that protection is central to efforts to foster a positive organizational culture. This includes physical, digital and legal security, but also transcends these aspects to include overall well-being.

Ford Foundation should beware of overplaying its role in ‘field-building,’ and instead focus on facilitation of greater exchange, collaboration, partnership and network-weaving for grantees – Change in the ‘fields’ which Ford seeks to influence is an area which is beyond the direct sphere of control. It is therefore essential not to overlay assumptions about the change processes that a BUILD grant can directly trigger. Instead, it is better to focus on how BUILD has enabled grantees to better position themselves in their respective fields to be better placed to exert influence themselves.

Invest in training, on-boarding, and support of program staff to implement BUILD – Within the Ford Foundation there are varying understandings and commitments to the principles, goals and mechanisms of BUILD. Ford should continue to foster shared understanding of BUILD, while recognizing that staff manage a diverse range of grantees and will not apply BUILD tools and structures uniformly.

Transparency is essential, ‘warts and all’ – There is a strong desire among grantees for greater transparency about BUILD’s intentions, priorities and future direction now that the procedures for BUILD are becoming stabilized. They want to contribute to the success of BUILD and their peers. Transparency about BUILD’s present and future is important to enabling that level of grantee engagement.



Fostering, stronger, more powerful organizations and networks to address inequality.

Generating the evaluative evidence

- distance travelled, deep dives and ground-truthing

Successive phases of the BUILD evaluation will generate the evidence needed to examine the BUILD value proposition and assess the extent to which it is making a difference. The evaluation will use primarily qualitative case study methods to gather the evidence needed. This will include exploring processes of institutional strengthening supported by the grants and how changes within grantee organizations and networks may lead to more impactful programming. There will be two types of case studies – one set focusing on ‘distance travelled’ and another set on ‘deep dives’.

The first type of case study will focus on ‘distance travelled’.

These case studies will explore if and how BUILD grantees are changing over time. The categories for these case studies will be refined in the coming months, but the proposed categories are:



Established organizations—leveraging BUILD to stabilize and/or grow and to develop a clearer strategic focus.



Emerging organizations—new, relatively young organizations or those having a longer history of operating informally (recognizing that formalization may have a variety of characteristics).



Network organizations—growth and change in networks with special attention to those with highly democratic structures.



Organizations with leadership transitions—organizations undergoing a major leadership/governance transition, including from being founder-led.



Grassroots mobilizing organizations—focusing on organizations that mobilize large groups of people in a grassroots manner.

The second type of case study will consist of issue based ‘deep dive’ analyses.

These case studies will explore how the grantees are dealing with a particular challenge or opportunity and how BUILD is addressing potential gaps in how organizations in the BUILD portfolio are achieving intended aims. Although both categories of case studies will be contextualized, the deep dives will pay extra attention to how the BUILD approach plays out in different contexts. A limited number of these studies will be initiated during 2019, with other cases added over time. The following initial wave of ‘deep dive’ case studies will be undertaken:



Challenging environments—organizations and networks that are mobilizing to confront an acute existential threat, including protection risks for both staff and constituents.



Organizations led by people of color (in the US) or indigenous and/or Afrodescendent people (in the Global South)—if and how BUILD support has mitigated or removed historic barriers that people have faced to participating or leading these organizations.



Implications of changes in BUILD over time—how Foundation regional offices and thematic areas that invested in BUILD grantmaking early in the BUILD program differ from those that started with BUILD once the approach had time to mature and be integrated into Ford grant-making.

Bringing in perspectives from the broader cohort of BUILD grantees

The sample for the ‘distance travelled’ and ‘deep dive’ case studies may only cover 15% of BUILD grantees. In order to generate comparable data from the entire BUILD cohort of more than 300 grantees, the evaluation team will use quantitative methods to complement and triangulate evidence emerging from the case-studies. In this data collection, the evaluation team will engage with the full range and diversity of grantees, themes, and offices implementing BUILD.

Ground-truthing

It will also be necessary to “ground-truth” grantees’ own views of their mission impact by soliciting views from a grantee’s partners, network affiliates, and Ford program officers about what they believe has changed in the grantee’s work over the past few years. Constituent voices, i.e. those most directly affected or served by the grantees’ work, will provide valuable information on whether or not, and how, the grantee has generated impact. In the course of developing the individual case studies, the team will explore how to best harness these constituent voices in ways that enrich the evaluation.

Next Steps

During the current **Initial Trend Analysis phase** (November 2018 – June 2019), the evaluation team is visiting grantees and attending Ford Foundation convenings in order to raise awareness about the evaluation, share emerging findings and gather information for the case study profiles. The team will continue to engage with grantees and Foundation program officers until April 2019 to inform the development of the case study sample and the case study profiles. By June 2019, it is expected that plans for the case studies will be finalized, and case studies will begin. The report of the Initial Trend Analysis phase will be produced in the early summer and will include the case study profiles and initial baseline information about each grantee involved in the case studies, as well as general information gathered about the full cohort of BUILD grantees.

The subsequent **Evaluative phase** (July 2019 – March 2021) will involve data gathering with grantees taking part in the case studies, followed by learning sessions with the BUILD team, Ford Foundation, BUILD grantees, and other funders. A full-cohort survey will mark the start of the evaluative phase, as well as its end in March 2021. Two evaluation reports will be produced during this phase, in April 2020 and February 2021. The second report will conclude the BUILD evaluation.

Learn More

For further information and to obtain a full copy of the Familiarization Report please contact Ian Christoplos at ian.christoplos@niras.se.