



Stories from the community philanthropy field Number 1

Fostering local leadership in the Amazon region

Interview with the director of the Amazon Partnerships Foundation

Mary Fifield helped to set up a community foundation in Ecuador with a focus on environmental issues – the Amazon Partnerships Foundation (Fundación Tarpuna Causay). She spoke to the Global Fund for Community Foundations about her experience.



Mary Fifield in a community meeting in Campaña Cocha.
Photograph: David Barnes

1 Can you tell us about the origins of the Amazon Partnerships Foundation (APF) and the context in which it operates?

The Amazon Partnership Foundation's (APF) model grew out of an experience I had a few years ago when I first started working in Napo Province in the Ecuadorian Amazon for an international community health NGO, whose primary objective was offering health workshops. Visiting rural, indigenous communities, I discovered that many people had their own ideas for projects but lacked the technical skills or financial resources to implement them. I researched grassroots grant-making approaches and developed a model that applied to health issues. But then I found that communities were repeatedly asking for support to address worsening environmental degradation and the changing climate, which of course affects everything from health to economic development to community cohesion.

Meanwhile, I had begun to discuss some of these issues with my Ecuadorian and North American colleagues – in particular Natalia Santillan, Stella Klemperer and Susan King – all of whom had worked in the area and would later become APF board members. Given the fact that we were working in the world's largest tropical rainforest and one crucial to maintaining climate stability, we saw the opportunity to broaden and refine the model so it could be applied to conservation projects. We recognized that this strategy would also allow us to foster environmental leadership and a sense of ownership among traditionally marginalized communities. That was the beginning of the APF.



Mary helping people in the community of Isla Appai install a water system.
Photograph: David Barnes

2 Can you say something about the role that institutions play in local culture and also about how the communities you are working with relate to the mainstream in Ecuador?

The relationship between institutions (state, religious, and non-governmental) and communities is as complex here as it is in most developing countries. Rural communities, especially indigenous ones, have usually been regarded with a mixture of disdain, disregard, pity, or worse, and have been marginalized or discriminated against for years. Recently that dynamic is changing, and the new Ecuadorian constitution guarantees many more rights for indigenous groups than they've been afforded before. Some indigenous federations have made inroads in terms of development policy, government assistance in health and education, and land rights, but communities in Napo Province are still quite removed from most decision-making processes. Despite changes in the law that are intended to include and empower the grassroots, by and large many institutions still take a paternalistic approach to development, and many communities expect the government or NGOs to bring projects to them.

3 How did you come to the (community) foundation framework as a way of framing your work? How different is it, in your view, from what has gone before?

In Napo Province, one thing that always concerned me with the traditional NGO approach –whereby the organization designs the project (even with significant participation from community recipients) – is that the initiative, no matter how well researched and planned, comes from outside the community. Although the community may want a reforestation project, for example, it's the NGO that has to show results and therefore must do whatever is necessary to encourage community participation. Depending on the community, this may be relatively easy or difficult, but ultimately the NGO owns the project until the day comes when it has to be turned over to the community to make it 'sustainable'. At that point, it is difficult to convince people to take ownership, especially when they know they won't have any outside support. And that's when many projects fail.

The power dynamic inherent in this model, where the project really belongs to the NGO and the communities are participants, discourages a genuine sense of community ownership. That was one of the reasons that a community foundation model appealed to us: initiative, responsibility, and ultimately success or failure of the project rest in the hands of the communities. Through our competitive grant solicitation process, communities have to think carefully about what they want to do and how they are going to do it, and they learn more about how the world of grant-making works – this knowledge can help them find other sources of funding for future projects.

Of course, for this very reason, our model is much more labor-intensive than a conventional grant-making approach. We first conduct workshops with communities to teach them how to plan and design proposals. If our board approves their proposal, we work with communities for at least a year, teaching them how to monitor and evaluate their projects. Results based on benchmarks they set themselves help determine whether they qualify for follow-on funding from us.

Despite such a deep culture of paternalism, many communities respond favorably once they learn about our model. We see people – some of them indigenous women who are typically quite reserved – participating actively in meetings, brainstorming new project ideas, and even coming up with ideas to help us improve our process. Many of the techniques we use in our project management workshops were suggested to us by the communities.

4 What have you learnt about the context for local philanthropy in Ecuador and, specifically, how it relates to communities with which APF is working? What do local philanthropic traditions or systems of self-help look like at the community level? Do they provide a basis from which to build?

The philanthropic sector, as it might be defined in the US or Europe, is quite weak in Ecuador. The country suffers from a history of corruption, including in the non-profit sector, and many, including the government, view foundations or NGOs with distrust. The few wealthy individuals who give to charities tend to have a direct connection with them, whether it's their children's school or their church. With no government tax incentive for giving, there is no culture of social investing or supporting organizations working in social or environmental justice.

Despite these obstacles, we do see some potential for change. A number of high-profile environmentalists also have power and influence among potential philanthropists, and could be important allies in changing philanthropic culture. We focus on strengthening our relationships with local small business owners because they are often willing to provide in-kind support to local NGOs. We also find that communities themselves are willing to make a contribution to the project budget and, though the amount is usually small, the practice encourages a 'self-help' attitude.



A family in Campaña Cocha standing proudly by their water tank.

Photograph: David Barnes

5 In our report *More than the Poor Cousin?* we looked at the notion of building trust and of the role of community foundations in trying to build it within and across communities. Does this resonate with the experiences of APF?

Very much so. I think one of the reasons we have been well received by communities is that they know that we are committed to the process. We strive to be accessible and reliable, and we expect communities to fulfil the commitment they make to us. When they don't, we respectfully and directly address the problem with them, supporting their process for resolving it. Because there is a dearth of good jobs and local professionals to fill them, we are also committed to building a local team who can eventually manage the organization. Many of the skills we teach communities are the same we try to cultivate in our staff, though these may be on a more advanced level. This professional capacity building is a new approach for the region, and our partners view it favorably. All these activities have helped us build a good reputation with stakeholders, and we are very conscious of maintaining positive, transparent relationships in our area of influence.



Distributing saplings in Shiwa Yacu

6 Do you see the community-foundation approach – with its emphasis on local assets, ownership and participation – as having something to offer more mainstream development?

Absolutely. This is one of the hypotheses we want to explore as we continue to refine and implement our model. We have discovered that setting up a truly collaborative relationship from the beginning, where each party has well-defined responsibilities and commitments, is crucial. Mainstream development organizations could adopt this practice when starting new projects with new communities, though it requires a willingness to let communities learn through failure as well as from success. It may also mean that mainstream development organizations have to be more selective in choosing communities, because fostering ownership is both time and labor-intensive. In the short run, an organization might have to collaborate with fewer communities but do more far-reaching work with them.

With the community-foundation approach, to some degree we have to let go of our over-dependence on large quantitative goals and outcomes to prove we are effective. In the long run, though, I think this will serve both the grassroots and the development sector. Though it may be slow going at first, I believe changing the power dynamic and generating a true sense of ownership among communities will have farther-reaching, longer-lasting impact than efforts to impose development from the outside. In the long run, this approach may also prove more cost-effective, which is a theory we will test as we continue working. In the short run, we know we can help communities accomplish concrete projects, such as household ecological sanitation, small-scale reforestation, and organic agriculture, more quickly and with a smaller budget than most mainstream development organizations.

7 Who are your peers in this work? Are there others interested in taking a new look at ways of doing development?

We haven't found many other community foundations working in the Amazon, but we have strong partnerships with the Universidad Andina in Quito, as well as with the US Peace Corps, Ecuadorian environment ministry and the German Development Cooperation. All of these are primarily focused on conservation initiatives, but our model intrigues them. We've also been invited to participate in a regional sustainable development planning body, which we see as an excellent opportunity to lay out our version of the community foundation model to government officials and other institutional stakeholders.