LEANING ON OUR VALUES IN UNCERTAIN TIMES
Our Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic
When the COVID-19 outbreak was declared a global pandemic in March 2020, the shocks to our grantee-partners and their constituencies were severe and widespread. The effects of the pandemic in Africa, like elsewhere, extended beyond health and cut across all spheres of society and the economy. In the overwhelming disruption that brought global systems and services to an abrupt halt, many African non-profits also lost funding as donors redirected monies towards pandemic relief efforts.

We knew that we had the responsibility to help our partners across Africa to respond quickly. Yet, like other foundations in the initial days of the pandemic, we also grappled with how to make the best decisions in the midst of a crisis that far exceeded anything that we’d ever experienced or contemplated in its scope, complexity, and far-reaching impacts.

In hindsight, the COVID-19 pandemic was both an adaptive and transformative challenge for which no playbook existed to guide the best decisions. We did not set out with a planned, strategic response to the pandemic. In the face of great uncertainty regarding how the spread and impacts of COVID-19 would play out globally, we embraced an adaptive approach. The diverse types of responses that we supported evolved with continuous consultation with our grantee-partners and local team regarding what was needed to protect lives and secure the dignity and well-being of their constituents and communities at different phases of the pandemic.

Additionally, turning to our core values of Trust, Building community, Boldness, Fighting for fairness, and Learning and innovating with our partners as a North Star enabled us to overcome our initial paralysis. We realized that rather than slowing down to get it right—this was time to act with urgency in ways that felt right.

In 2020 and 2021, SFF collectively awarded 203 grants totalling $3.7 million for diverse COVID response efforts across Sub-Saharan Africa.

Additionally, we were able to facilitate $29 million in additional funding to our partners by maintaining close working partnerships with peer-funders throughout this period.
One of our key realizations in the early days of the pandemic was that our grant making approach had been intended for such a time as this; with the goal of providing our grantee-partners with as much trust, flexibility, and certainty as possible despite the tumult and uncertainty in the global financial markets.

A letter from executive director Andy Bryant in March 2020 assured our grantee-partners that their work mattered more than ever in turbulent times, and SFF would keep our promises and commitments to them. We know from testimonies shared by our grantee-partners, and other anecdotal evidence, that the continuity in support from SFF in a time when funding priorities globally were shifting towards responding to COVID-19 was crucial in helping them to maintain their core programs and keep their staff on salaries.

One of our hypotheses at the start of the pandemic was that we would need a special kind of support-survival grants—for the youngest organizations in our community, especially grantee-partners who did not have many institutional supporters. However, we saw partners deploy remarkable resilience strategies to sustain their staff and respond to their constituents’ urgent and changing needs. For example, partners who were unable to implement school or community-based outreach programs due to school closures and restrictions on gatherings used the savings to creatively pivot to other ways of serving their constituents.

We also lived our value of trust by prioritizing flexibility and responsiveness to communities over compliance, recognizing that our grantees would need to pause or change their plans to better meet the urgent and evolving needs of their constituents.

It was important to have our grantee-partners feeling trusted and empowered to spend more time understanding and responding to their constituents’ needs, rather than complying with funder requirements. This approach, in many ways embodied our founder Barry Segal’s style of trusting people, valuing relationships over process, and moving quickly and decisively in critical situations.

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Additionally, we saw partners like Set Her Free in Uganda, Kibebè in Malawi, and SaCoDé in Burundi leverage their assets (e.g. sewing machines) and networks of women tailors to make face masks, hospital gowns, and soap for health centers, and also as a way to also generate income for the women in their programs. Across our community, we witnessed incredible trust, commitment, and sacrifice among grantee staff, with many often agreeing to be compensated for reduced hours despite working round the clock, in order to help their organizations weather the down-turn in funding. Looking back, we are proud that 100% of our grantee-partners have been able to survive the pandemic and sustain their core missions.

1. We eased reporting timelines. End-of-grant conversations with program officers focused more on understanding how the grantee-partner was experiencing and navigating the pandemic rather than following progress on agreed milestones.

2. We radically stripped down the steps in our grant renewal process. We automatically renewed grant commitments to all grantee-partners in good standing, often with a simple email.

3. To support organizations facing cash flow issues, we gave grantee-partners the opportunity to request changes to their grant payment schedules to obtain advances if this was helpful for their COVID-response.
Building a Community Response
A key part of our initial COVID-19 response entailed sending a light survey to grantee-partners to understand the realities, challenges, and needs that they and their constituents were facing during the first weeks and months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Gathering views from a cross-section of our partners, many of whom are routinely working in ways that center, engage, and collaborate with their constituencies, proved to be immensely valuable for getting a pulse on the most pressing needs across countries.

These insights enabled our board to free up millions in additional funding to support our COVID-19 response during a period of great uncertainty in the financial markets.

We realized along the way that many grantee-partners were swamped with similar information requests from fellow funders. Hence, later stages of our response drew on optional grantee check-ins with program officers and other informal, less-burdensome ways of getting updates from partners on how their work and how the situation was evolving in their various communities.

Our earliest efforts involved awarding about $500,000 in small, rapid-response grants to grantee-partners running health facilities.

In the first few months of the pandemic, these rapid-response grants supported grantee-partners running health facilities to procure personal protective equipment and COVID screening tools to ensure the continuity of vital health services such as maternal care and immunizations. The rapid-response grants were also vital in training and equipping facility staff to stay safe and to detect, isolate, and refer suspected COVID cases to designated treatment centers. In addition, these grants supported widespread efforts to sensitize communities about the importance of masks, handwashing, and other key COVID-19 prevention measures.

The rapid-response grant making process was designed to move funds to partners as quickly and nimbly as possible.

1. The grantee-partner, following a conversation with their program officer, completed a quick five-question Google form with information on the situation in their community and a brief description of the nature of the COVID-response activities for which they needed support.
2. The grantee-partner emailed their program officer a simple budget to accompany the application.
3. Rapid-response grants were sent to partners within three to five days of receiving the application.
4. No extra reporting. Partners incorporated updates on their COVID response activities in their usual annual grant report.
Some grants fell into multiple categories.

**COVID GRANTS BY CATEGORY**

- 78% of grants went to locally-led organizations.
- 52% of grants went to women-led organizations.
Fighting for Fairness: An Equity Lens

Like other parts of the world, COVID-19 brought long-existing socio-economic disparities in Africa into sharp focus. We realized early in the pandemic that the population segments disproportionately affected by lockdowns, nationwide school closures, bans on movement, and other restrictions were, often, the poorest and most vulnerable in society (e.g. the sick, the elderly, persons with disabilities, and students dependent on school feeding programs for daily sustenance).

For instance, during the nationwide ban on public transportation in Uganda, Mukisa Foundation and Bless a Child Foundation organized door-to-door food distribution and transportation services to ensure that their clients (children with disabilities and children battling cancer) could continue to access therapeutic meals and make it to health centers for essential medicines, therapies, and treatments. In Rwanda, Solid’Africa was able to use SFF’s COVID rapid-response grant to ensure that vulnerable patients at CHUK, Rwanda’s biggest public hospital, got three meals a day to support their recovery. Approaching COVID response through the lens of the most disadvantaged members of society often enabled our partners to reach entire households and impact more people that they would have otherwise been able to identify.

Fortunately, SFF’s long-term investments in supporting local grassroots and place-based organizations with deep ties to their communities paid off. These grantee-partners found themselves well positioned to pivot quickly to identify and deliver thousands of dollars worth of food baskets, cash assistance, and other forms of relief to vulnerable individuals and households facing the threat of hunger, neglect, and evictions.
A Time of Remarkable Learning & Innovation

Although the pandemic was a time of great trauma and suffering, it was also a time where we witnessed remarkable innovation across our community of grantee-partners and peer-funders.

During this time of learning, we transitioned from the provision of rapid-response grants to a series of COVID adaptation grants. As more information on COVID-19 symptom progression and protocols for managing less severe cases at home was released, we witnessed health partners like DEVLINK and Lwala Community Alliance training Kenyan community health volunteers to provide support on home-based isolation, care, and management of COVID-19 in the community.

Amidst Africa's longest school lockdown in Uganda, we saw education partners like Teach for Uganda deploying volunteers to teach smaller clusters of students in villages to ensure that the children would keep learning; while other education partners like Building Tomorrow embraced radio and digital-enabled platforms to reach out-of-school learners. In Tanzania, Twende Social Innovation Centre developed foot-powered tippy taps and handwashing stations for distribution to public hospitals, orphanages, and marketplaces; while in the DRC, SFF partner UGEAFI embarked on an ambitious chlorine production project that helped in the sanitization of several schools and health facilities in South Kivu.

In Tanzania, our program officers awarded over $30,000 (in $2,000-$3,000 stipends) as the most equitable approach to supporting a vast portfolio of partners to meet the COVID prevention measures as they reopened schools, community outreaches and other programs with their constituents.

Collectively, SFF awarded over $2 million in COVID adaptation grants during this period. The adaptation grants proved key in supporting grantee-partners to meet the additional costs associated with resuming their operations safely in keeping with COVID guidelines (for instance building new classroom blocks). They were also instrumental in helping grant-partners to pivot to new ways of delivering services to their constituents, and in some cases, diversifying or adding new program components such as mental and psychosocial support to meet their constituents' shifting needs during the pandemic.
Embracing Decentralization & Emergence

Upon reflection, what is most striking about our response to the COVID crisis is how much we as a foundation learned and evolved alongside our partners—and how decisions and opportunities taken out of necessity have since become integral parts of our DNA and ways of working three years later.

We learned along the way that the impacts of COVID-19 and national responses to the pandemic varied greatly across our different focus countries. They ranged from Kenya and Rwanda where the government was taking a firm, proactive stance to the pandemic, to Tanzania and Burundi where denial and disinformation were widespread and the situation was further compounded by ambiguity in the official positions taken by their governments regarding the pandemic. We realized that by continuing to take a highly centralized approach to our response, we would be limiting the ability of our program officers on the ground to respond with the desired nimbleness and creativity.

Subsequent phases of our COVID-19 response were fully steered by our in-country program teams; this led to greater diversity and innovation in the structure and types of grants awarded.

By taking a decentralized approach that accommodated flexibility and contextualization of our COVID response, we were able to respond with more urgency to the immediate challenges and needs in different countries, yielding far better collective impact for our grantee-partners and their communities.

In uncertain times when fear, misinformation, and distrust run rife (like in the early days of the pandemic), communities look to those they already trust—such as homegrown organizations led by familiar faces. And those organizations in turn look to each other to fill the gaps between their respective areas of expertise. In Malawi, Uganda, and Burundi, our grantee-partners came together in coalitions and launched COVID-response programs. The coalitions received additional financing from Segal Family Foundation and other funders, on top of the constituent organizations’ own usual grants. These alliances were incredibly effective: by banding

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13 SFF grassroots grantee-partners in Uganda formed the African Coalition for Social Impact (ACSI) to collaboratively address education, health, and livelihood challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Between December 2021 and June 2022, ACSI members collectively:

- Administered COVID vaccines to over 83,273 people
- Provided COVID-19 safety kits including hand washing facilities to 99 schools
- Provided over 500 youth with business survival toolkits to ensure business continuity following the COVID-19 lockdowns.
- Conducted COVID-19 sensitization mass campaigns in various regions of Uganda, reaching over 1,000,000 people
together, their individual and collective impact was amplified through expanded networks. Now we’re thinking about how we can encourage collaboration between our partners in more countries and give these alliances more support to really go the distance. Of course, there is still a lot that we are learning about how these alliances can be adapted for maximum impact and what obstacles there may be along the way. We are hoping that those grantee-partners who are more practiced in working as coalitions will provide frameworks to guide those that are just catching on to the model, and to inform our evaluation of the same.

Additionally, our Southern Africa Hub in Malawi collaborated with UNICEF and three local innovation hubs on a design thinking challenge that competitively identified and incubated 10 young local entrepreneurs who had come up with practical ways to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. The innovations included a heavy-duty steam-based sprayer for disinfecting public areas and “Listen and Learn Malawi” – a radio and cellphone-based program that enabled rural learners to continue accessing teachers and educational materials during their pandemic without compromising their safety.

This decentralized approach has become the foundation of our programmatic operating model, which reflects our bold resolve to center our local teams and partners in shaping the foundation’s strategy, grantmaking, and operations. It is an approach that is enabling us to harness the power of proximity in responding to the diversity and complexity of challenges and opportunities in a dynamic, fast-changing continent.
Imagining & Acting Boldly with Others

COVID-19 brought with it unprecedented opportunities to act boldly with others to maximize the impact of our response efforts and to collectively envision the future we wanted for Africa in the aftermath of COVID. Of special note was a partnership with an anonymous peer-funder. This bold rapid-response partnership injected an additional, much needed $1.17 million into our COVID response at the height of the surge caused by the Delta variant. This partnership enabled us to substantially expand the scope and scale of our efforts to provide life-saving medical oxygen and equipment to public and not-for-profit health facilities that were serving high volumes of COVID-19 cases. Together, we impacted over 89 health facilities across Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, boosting their capacity to provide oxygen therapy to hundreds of COVID-19 patients during this critical time. The equipment that was donated through this partnership continues to be used in ICUs, neonatal, and high-dependency units to treat childhood pneumonia and other respiratory conditions affecting thousands every year.

Additionally, through a partnership with the Conrad Hilton Foundation and Give Directly, 17 community-based organizations in our Malawi portfolio secured $738,000 in additional funding to implement direct household cash transfers, as well as health access and food security interventions to mitigate the negative effects of COVID-19 on livelihoods and health access among their constituents. This partnership leveraged the strengths of the partner community organizations (their local context and connections), directly supporting nearly 70,000 individuals in the high density, peri-urban areas of central and southern Malawi.

Convening has always been one of the ways SFF creates spaces to connect local African visionaries with funders and other stakeholders who are committed to supporting African communities to develop and prosper on their own terms. COVID-19 gave us an opportunity to experiment boldly with the power of virtual convening and networking. In 2020 and 2021, we collaborated with Robert Bosch Stiftung and the BMW Foundation to convene The Future Summit. This virtual networking and community building event enabled us to bring together a plethora of African changemakers to discuss and explore how we could leverage on the lessons from COVID-19 to support a future vision for Africa that is locally-driven and globally relevant. Moreover, it proved to be a valuable opportunity to test virtual site visits, which our grantee-partners embraced as a powerful way to overcome the hurdles caused by global travel restrictions and share their work with their remote supporters.
Looking Ahead: Where Do We Go From Here?

There is still a great deal of work to be done even as the world transitions beyond the acute phase of the pandemic. Millions in lower-income countries are still waiting for COVID-19 vaccines, and the wait is unacceptable. Since late 2021, we have awarded COVID-19 vaccine access grants to support our community health partners in promoting COVID-19 vaccine access, confidence, and uptake in their communities. Community health partners continue to be key in the fight against the pandemic, and they are using a range of approaches to integrate COVID-19 considerations into maternal and primary care provision; to deliver vaccines to underserved, last-mile communities; and to counter still widespread myths and misconceptions about the COVID-19 vaccines.

COVID-19’s effects on the economy, livelihoods, education, and health systems will be felt for decades to come. The pandemic highlighted, in many ways, that inequity is the core problem in global development. This is an issue that SFF has been committed to addressing since our founding. For instance, as schools face the daunting task of supporting students in covering lost ground, learners from disadvantaged backgrounds who had to work to support their families during the pandemic are less likely to return to school compared to their peers from better-off homes.

Similarly, the rise in inflation and cost of living in the post-COVID recovery period poses particular risks for the poorest and most vulnerable, including millions of unemployed and underemployed youth whose livelihoods were rendered even more precarious by shrinkage in job markets during the pandemic. Therefore, SFF’s Vision 2030—our 10-year growth compass—affirms and strengthens our commitment to supporting efforts to advance equity and inclusion in education and creating dignified work and economic opportunities for Africa’s youth.

We still have unanswered questions regarding the aggregate reach and impact of the COVID-19 efforts that we supported given the diverse spectrum of approaches that our response took across different countries and phases of the pandemic. The combination of less burdensome reporting and flexible, unrestricted grants—pillars of our trust-based approach—can mean lower visibility into the day-to-day work of our grantee partners and the outcomes of their work over time. As funders, we are still grappling with how to navigate trust, visibility, accountability, and learning. How do we hold ourselves accountable as funders as we support a diverse range of partners, approaches, and outcomes—particularly in times of crisis? How do we support and embrace learning and adaptation over time, alongside our partners, with trust, but without burden?

One thing we remain certain about is the importance of investing in local leaders and organizations who are closest to both the problems and solutions, which was affirmed by how we saw our partners respond to COVID-19. Future pandemics are inevitable, but we can help to build self-reliance and preparedness by resourcing local leaders and changemakers with the flexible, long-term support needed to build critical infrastructure and develop resilient health and education delivery systems and economies that will continue to deliver for Africa’s people in good times and bad times. Now, more than ever, SFF is committed to supporting local African visionaries for years to come.