

Fundación Avina + Colectivo Raíz





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Fundación Avina: Building collective power, effecting systemic change

Guided by institutional identity and values

Fundación Avina is a global changemaker with a strong sense of self. The foundation's identity as a Global South organization is not merely a reflection of its geographical location – with 75 full-time staff members based in 19 countries in Latin America – but rather the lens through which it sees the world and constructs its understanding of how social change is catalyzed, attained, and sustained. Its roots and embeddedness in Latin American cultures and contexts are the driving forces behind its approach to building multistakeholder partnerships and equitably leveraging resources in service of the populations and movements it seeks to uplift in the region and beyond.

Fundación Avina has embarked upon a journey to better articulate this institutional identity and more rigorously and holistically operationalize its values across the numerous entities that comprise its complex [ecosystem](#). Avina Americas, for example, is a nonprofit grantmaking entity that supports initiatives aligned with the foundation's priorities across three interconnected pillars of sustainable development: democratic innovation, climate action, and just and regenerative economy. Over the past few years, it has come to embrace feminist principles that center the importance of building collective power and supporting collective care of people and the planet to effect systemic social change. So, what does this look like in practice?

“We mobilize flexibility, participation, agility, sustainability, and resilience strengthening...We need organizations to build collective power, not compete for funds.”

Valeria Scorza,
Fundación Avina Strategic
Alliances Director and Avina
Americas Executive Director

Collaboration and co-creation

Avina Americas mobilizes and channels resources from numerous and varied funders to local civil society organizations in ways that support their growth potential and ability to thrive. Its grantmaking approach is built upon a fundamental truth: progress toward attaining systemic change is not linear and cannot be achieved in silos. As such, diverse civil society actors with converging interests and shared visions for the future must work together and be resilient and enduring over time.

To that end, Avina works closely with its partners, both individually and in clusters through convenings, to ensure their self-identified needs and priorities are reflected in the support they receive. Grants are never one-size-fits-all. They are the products of collaborative co-creation processes. Additionally, partner organizations receive crucial nonfinancial support for organizational development to become sustainable and maximize their impact. Avina is also committed to supporting groups that are often overlooked in philanthropy, such as small and/or unregistered organizations that do not qualify for funding from large, traditional funders.

Trust, “radical transparency,” and “radical honesty” are embedded in the grantmaking process – from proposal development through project implementation and evaluation – in a number of ways:

- Partner-specific indirect cost rate:** As part of Avina’s commitment to increasing institutional support, it has implemented a new policy that sets a minimum indirect cost rate of 20 percent in project grants. The specific percentage in a given grant is determined based on transparent conversations with partner organizations grounded in mutual trust. Program officers are trained to ask the right questions to ensure their needs are embedded in proposals and continue to be met throughout project cycles.
- Continuous communication and flexibility:** Project grants are timebound; however, they are not static arrangements. Program officers work close to the ground in direct consultation with organizations to co-develop budgets and work plans at the outset and then collaboratively review them on an ongoing basis. They can be amended at any time based on evolving circumstances and priorities. Avina prides itself on being consistently accessible and reachable to its partners.
- Outcome harvesting:** Avina and its partners largely rely upon outcome harvesting to evaluate projects – a participatory post-project process that identifies what outcomes were achieved or changes took place, not based on predetermined objectives. Interviews are conducted to thoroughly understand what changes occurred and why, debunk assumptions, and facilitate greater learning upon which future efforts can be built.



Valeria Scorza,
Fundación Avina

“We really want to build that process together because, in our sense of promoting collaborations, we have access to different actors, to different knowledge, to different resources that our partners might need in order to facilitate that work or to really make sure that their knowledge and experience can be shared, expanded, and flourish.”

Valeria Scorza,
Fundación Avina Strategic Alliances
Director and Avina Americas
Executive Director

Between two worlds: Sub-granting

Insufficient indirect cost coverage is as salient of an issue to Avina Americas as it is to its partners. It falls into a category of funders known in philanthropy as “intermediaries” because the financial assistance it provides is made possible through sub-granting. Such organizations are often misunderstood to be mere pass-through entities for larger funders and, as such, tend to receive extremely restricted funds. Low indirect cost rates and small transactional service fees do not cover the true costs of their ambitious efforts to uplift and accompany civil society organizations. This jeopardizes Avina’s financial health and sustainability and, in turn, its provision of flexible funds and personalized nonfinancial support. Firsthand experience on the receiving end of grants that circumscribe its potential impact make Avina an empathetic and compassionate partner.

“We’ve seen the importance of core funding and how indirect costs affect organizations because we live it, too... it’s really important to be vocal, to show why those costs make us react better to opportunities and take risks when we have to. That gives us the flexibility to create and innovate and be bold with some of our actions.”

Valeria Scorza,
Fundación Avina Strategic Alliances Director and
Avina Americas Executive Director





Fundación Avina



Operating as a feminist organization

At the heart of a feminist approach to grantmaking is the acknowledgment that funders cannot establish mutual trust with civil society organizations without addressing the power imbalances between them. Avina operates with a keen awareness of its position and role in relation to its partners, as well as the positionality of its own staff members relative to one another. With strategic direction and political will from foundation leaders, program officers are sensitized to the issue of power asymmetries in the philanthropy ecosystem and trained to ensure these dynamics are not replicated through their day-to-day interactions with civil society organizations. All staff are meaningfully engaged in discussions around developing and implementing best practices, including those pertaining to indirect costs and flexible grantmaking. Additionally, multi-level task forces for specific issues have been created and organization-wide town halls are held every three months to create space for open conversations and horizontal decision-making.

Barcelona, Spain



Colectivo Raíz de Aguascalientes: No one defends what they don't know

Building momentum at home and abroad

In traditional philanthropy, it's rare for civil society organizations to see reflections of themselves in their funders. The partnership between Colectivo Raíz de Aguascalientes and Fundación Avina is evidence of how shared culture, values, and ways of building momentum toward social change can be powerful enablers of trust-based and impactful collaboration.

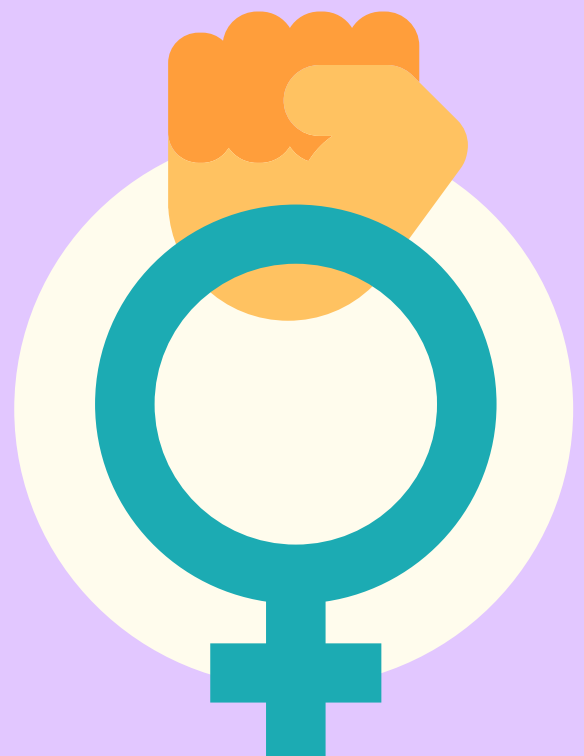
Colectivo Raíz has a saying that succinctly summarizes its mission to promote and defend labor and human rights: No one defends what they don't know. As a feminist organization, it emphasizes the importance of applying a gender perspective to its critical work – ensuring that the unique needs of women are not overlooked across the services it provides, including:

Education: Workshops, courses, conferences, and other activities to disseminate information so that workers can learn about their rights and advocate and negotiate for improvements in their conditions.

Legal assistance: Support to individual or collective legal cases, particularly for women workers.

Investigation: Collection and systematization of information on the working conditions of women, mainly in the maquilas in Aguascalientes, through field research and monitoring activities.

Although Colectivo Raíz is focused on Aguascalientes, its efforts have global impacts. For example, earlier this year, the organization was instrumental in filing a [petition](#) to the Rapid Response Labor Mechanism of the USMCA (U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement). Under this international trade agreement, U.S. companies that violate domestic labor laws in Mexico can be investigated and held accountable by the governments of both countries. The collective action of labor and human rights movements across the region were driving forces behind the labor chapter of the USMCA and development of the Mechanism.



Indirect costs are essential costs

“Indirect costs” are generally understood by funders to include those related to organizational functioning such as staff salaries, rent and office equipment, information systems for human resources and accounting, and other common expenses. For Colectivo Raíz and other civil society actors engaged in the human rights space, safety and security measures are also essential operating costs. It routinely conducts risk assessments and develops and implements safety protocols to ensure women workers, women labor rights defenders, and its own staff are protected.

“It’s important to have that initiative from funders to understand those contexts we are in and that indirect costs are a constant need embedded in the pathway of any organization that is having an impact.”

Sara Montes,
Colectivo Raíz

Parts of Aguascalientes are unsafe due to organized crime, including drug trafficking. Women face gender-based violence during long commutes at dawn and again at dusk after long workdays, as well as sexual harassment and other forms of workplace violence. Women labor rights defenders require protection from intimidation and even violence perpetrated by actors who oppose their work.

They also must practice self-care to prevent burnout. The rise of technology-facilitated gender-based violence against activists, human rights defenders, and their supporters necessitates digital security measures.

Members of Colectivo Raíz face similar risks. They work long hours to “do the work that would otherwise not be done” in difficult conditions and must use their own safety protocols, particularly as they frequently travel to meet with different constituencies. The populations they serve often do not have the time or capacity to physically come to the office nor consistent access to information and communication technology to meet online.

Despite how critical both physical and digital safety and security measures are, they are woefully underfunded. The costs associated with them are often unrecovered as most funders either do not provide a sufficient indirect cost rate overall or do not recognize these atypical expenses as a qualifying category.



Colectivo Raíz

Taking root: Formalization processes and organizational growth need indirect costs and flexibility

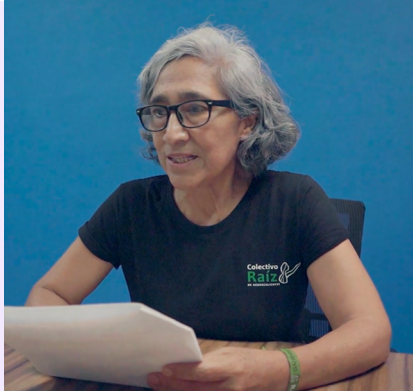
For over a decade, Colectivo Raíz operated as an informal association. Many grassroots groups in Mexico form organically over time and choose not to formally register in part because non-profits are strictly regulated and monitored closely by the government. Becoming a formal organization requires an immense amount of administrative work – spanning governance, finance, infrastructure, legal, and other areas of management – and invites intense scrutiny, all of which divert resources and attention away from mission-driven activities. However, remaining informal limits an organization's ability to mobilize and manage resources and, thus, scale up its impact. The cost-benefit analysis that informs a group's decision to formalize is unique to its context, priorities, needs, and strategic vision for the future.

"There was a great push, as we say here, in order for us to become more self-sufficient in the administration of our own resources. That's an important experience that we should congratulate ourselves for. That helped us create administrative support for areas in which we civil society organizations had no previous experience."

Sara Montes,
Colectivo Raíz

After much internal debate and deliberation, Colectivo Raíz recently decided to take a big step forward in its development journey and undergo the rigorous formalization process. Sufficient indirect cost coverage in project grants, flexible funding, capacity building, and other nonfinancial support from partners like Avina and women's funds all played critical roles in the organization's ability to file for nonprofit status last year. This has enabled it to streamline and strengthen its functioning, as well as access more and better funding.

Indirect cost coverage is more important now than ever before as Colectivo Raíz must maintain legal compliance through monthly and annual reporting to various government bodies – in addition to the accountability mechanisms and other requirements set by its funders. With Avina, project grants sufficiently cover all indirect costs. Staff meet with program officers each month to not only review budgets and work plans but also to meaningfully reflect upon their progress, have open dialogue about the difficulties they face, and problem-solve together. Avina has also leveraged its wide network to connect Colectivo Raíz with other similar organizations, creating new pathways for dialogue, exchange, and cooperation.



Sara Montes,
Colectivo Raíz

Look to lessons learned

Parallels can be drawn between the work Colectivo Raíz is championing to ensure the dignity, respect, safety, and fair treatment of workers and the issues that it and other civil society organizations face in the philanthropic ecosystem. Power imbalances, unmet needs, and negligence are common themes.

In the labor world, corporations and governments – those with and without good intentions – have unmitigated responsibilities to respect and protect human rights. Labor rights, feminist, and other intersecting movements are building their collective power to ensure they do so. In philanthropy, what about the responsibilities of funders? Colectivo Raíz urges them to look to lessons learned from its positive experiences with Avina, with women’s funds, and with other partners that apply a human rights and feminist perspective to grantmaking. Change is already underway.

“With Avina, that’s something else that helped us quite a bit – the human touch, the human approach to communicating...We’ve been able to focus better. We’ve been able to plan better...We can also use our resources in a flexible way.”

Sara Montes,
Colectivo Raíz



Colectivo Raíz

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