



FENOMENAL FUNDS

LEARNING STRATEGY





Introduction

“Learning is about power: the power to define what changes are sought, what data is seen as valid, who shapes the story the data tells us, and what lessons will be acted upon.¹”

Learning in the context of Fenomenal Funds is an emergent, adaptive, and co-evolutionary process. We see learning as an integral part of the grantmaking process in both the design and implementation phases. In our bold experiment as a feminist-funding collaborative that combines pooled funding, shared governance, and participatory grantmaking, the stakeholders involved are interacting in a power-sharing process. All stakeholders are engaged in the model, responding and adapting to each other so that what emerges and evolves is an ongoing cycle of learning.

The primary purpose of Fenomenal Funds' learning strategy is to lay out a process that facilitates and guides deep reflection, critical inquiry, and real-time learning in collaboration with women's funds. We believe our reflexive approach contributes to the ongoing process of refining our model and supports us towards achieving Fenomenal Funds' outcomes by 2025. This document is a summary of our learning strategy. It outlines our strategy development process, guiding principles, key components of our strategy and its implementation plan.

¹ Bofu-Tawamba, N. (2021, December 10). Transforming philanthropy with feminist principles. Retrieved from <https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/transforming-philanthropy-with-feminist-principles/>



Vision

1.1 Strategy Development

This strategy formulation was a year-long process that integrated multiple consultations and participatory learning and sharing sessions with women's funds representatives of Prospera INWF and our funding partners. The process included the conceptualization and articulation of Fenomenal Funds' theory of transformation. We complemented the theory of transformation with the adaptation and adoption of the Feminist Emergent Learning Framework and our learning agenda. It also included the formation of the Learning and Evaluation (L&E) Working Group of the Steering Committee (our governing body) to support our Learning and Evaluation work.

1.2 Purpose

This strategy lays out key elements that help us to improve our work and inform course correction based on evidence generated from operationalizing our model. The strategy also assists in keeping us (all key stakeholders)² focused on our line of sight: what we would like to achieve based on our learning agenda so that we remain responsive to the needs of women's funds. Our aspiration is that our collective learning will influence and consequently contribute to philanthropic actors in the ecosystem shifting power in philanthropy towards an equitable balance.

Guiding Principles

Our strategy is guided by a set of feminist learning and evaluation principles.

Taking a feminist lens to learning is about the application of feminist principles to the process and practice of learning. Drawing from the work of Brisolara (2014) and Podems (2018) on feminist evaluations, we have adopted these principles to frame our individual and community learning and sharing processes:

1. Acknowledge and take into account that learning is a political activity; personal experiences, perspectives, and characteristics come from and lead to a particular political stance.
2. Contextualize knowledge, as it is culturally, socially, and temporally contingent.
3. Generate and use knowledge as a powerful resource that serves an explicit or implicit purpose.
4. Respect multiple ways of knowing and pay attention to language justice needs.
5. Be cognizant that research and evaluation methods, institutions and practices are social constructs.
6. Frame gender inequities as one manifestation of social injustice: discrimination cuts across race, class, sexual orientation, ability, and culture and is inextricably linked to multiple dimensions of identity.
7. Examine discrimination based on gender as systematic and structural.
8. Act on opportunities to create, advocate, and support systems change.

² In the context of Fenomenal Funds our key stakeholders include our governing bodies - the Steering Committee, the Working Group on Learning and Evaluation of the Steering Committee, the Advisory Committee, Women's Fund Members of Prospera INWF and our funding partners.



Theory of Transformation

“Our work contributes to philanthropic systems change”

In the context of Fenomenal Funds, we talk about a theory of transformation instead of a theory of change because we are looking to contribute to philanthropic ecosystems change. Transformation in our case is framed by feminist values and ethics that give direction to the type of transformation we envision. A theory of change according to Patton (2019)³ is more project or program related. Transformation, rather, is larger in scope and scale: it is “...multi-dimensional, multi-faceted, and multilevel, cutting across national borders and intervention silos, across sectors and specialized interests, connecting local and global, and sustaining across time.”⁴ To this end, a theory of transformation incorporates and integrates multiple theories of change operating at many levels, woven together to explain how major systems transformation occurs. It transcends projects and programs while building on and integrating them for greater momentum and cumulative impact. This perspective recognizes that multiple actors have been and are part of the ongoing work to shift power in philanthropy. The efforts of Fenomenal Funds, are part of a broader set of actions by multiple organizations and networks.

For Fenomenal Funds, our long term aim ,through our model, is to decolonize philanthropy by influencing change in philanthropic practices.

As philanthropy shifts power and accountability; the changes serve as catalysts to transform towards a more dynamic, connected, and responsive funding ecosystem, and to unlock more and better resources for gender justice movements.

Our theory of transformation posits:

If we provide flexible institutional funding to Prospera INWF members through a pooled fund, shared governance, and participatory grantmaking, and use the insights and knowledge from the process to influence philanthropic practice, ***then***

- ✦ women’s/feminist funds are individually and collectively more resilient;
- ✦ and we can influence change towards a more dynamic, connected, and responsive funding ecosystem to unlock more and better resources for gender justice movements.

3 Patton, Michael Quinn. 2019. “Blue Marble Evaluation: Premises and Principles.” Guilford Press.

4 Blue Marble Evaluation “Theory of Transformation Principles” <https://bluemarbleeval.org/principles/operating-principles/theory-transformation-principle>



Hypotheses

a) If women's funds of the Prospera INWF have core, flexible, multi-year, noncompetitive funding to strengthen their institutional infrastructure⁵, collaborate across geographies and scales, and build up their voice & visibility, then women's funds will

- ✦ have the organizational and strategic capacity to adapt to changing conditions;
- ✦ rise up to opportunities and remain responsive to grassroots women's movements;
- ✦ co-create strategies to sustain a resilient feminist funding ecosystem; and
- ✦ use their collective voice to influence the agenda and flow of resources.

b) If we provide significant resources to strengthen the ecosystem of women's funds through a shared governance

structure, then women's funds and private funders exercise equal voice and equal power to determine who decides what, who gets what, who sets the agenda, and who does what, which leads to better decisions, greater transparency, and more accountability to women's funds.

c) If we engage key philanthropic stakeholders about the value of flexible funding using a pooled fund, shared governance model, and participatory grantmaking, then philanthropy will shift practices and policies as well as share power towards a more transformational funding ecosystem, which will unlock more and better resources for women's funds and gender justice movements.



⁵ Institutional Infrastructure comprises the individual and collective resources, systems and practices that support women's/ feminist Funds with a) the institutional capacity to remain responsive to the priorities of the gender justice movements they support; b) strategic capabilities so they can rise to moments of opportunity; and c) the agility to adapt in the face of unexpected challenges. This includes: 1. People (leadership and board development; diversity, equity and inclusion; organizational culture; talent management); 2. Strategy (mission clarity and coherence; organizational learning; adaptive strategy; network building); 3. Resources (financial management, operating reserve, fundraising); 4. Systems (physical and digital security; information technology; communications; legal compliance); 5. Partnerships & Engagement (Collaboration & Advocacy) see Ford Foundation link for additional information <https://www.fordfoundation.org/work/our-grants/building-institutions-and-networks/how-it-works/>



Feminist Emergent Learning Framework

We are implementing our learning strategy through our Feminist Emergent Learning Framework with oversight from the standing Working Group on Learning and Evaluation of the Steering Committee and external support from our Learning Partners (see section on the role of Learning Partners for more information).

Our feminist learning and evaluation principles form the lens through which we look at the process of learning and action. The Emergent Learning Framework provides us with guidance on navigating ambiguity and complexity, creating a strong link between thinking and doing. It encourages experimentation and cross pollination of ideas through a set of principles, practices, and tools and enables individuals, teams, organizations, and cross-sector collaborations to collectively learn from experience and adapt their strategies in real time.

“Emergence,” as a concept, is different from adaptation⁶. Emergence, from the perspective of complexity science, is about more than simply finding adaptable solutions or course correction. Emergence is a process by which, through many interactions (in our case interactions between and amongst women’s funds members of the Prospera INWF, funding partners, Prospera Secretariat staff, and Fenomenal Funds staff) we co-create patterns through a synergistic process that are more sophisticated than what could have been created by an individual. This mirrors our shared governance structure of having Prospera INWF members

and funding partners sitting at the table together supported by the Prospera INWF Secretariat and Fenomenal Funds staff. In order to exercise this type of agency, stakeholders need to share a common vision and also have the freedom to experiment with the best pathways to get there. In this context, learning happens by interacting with one another.

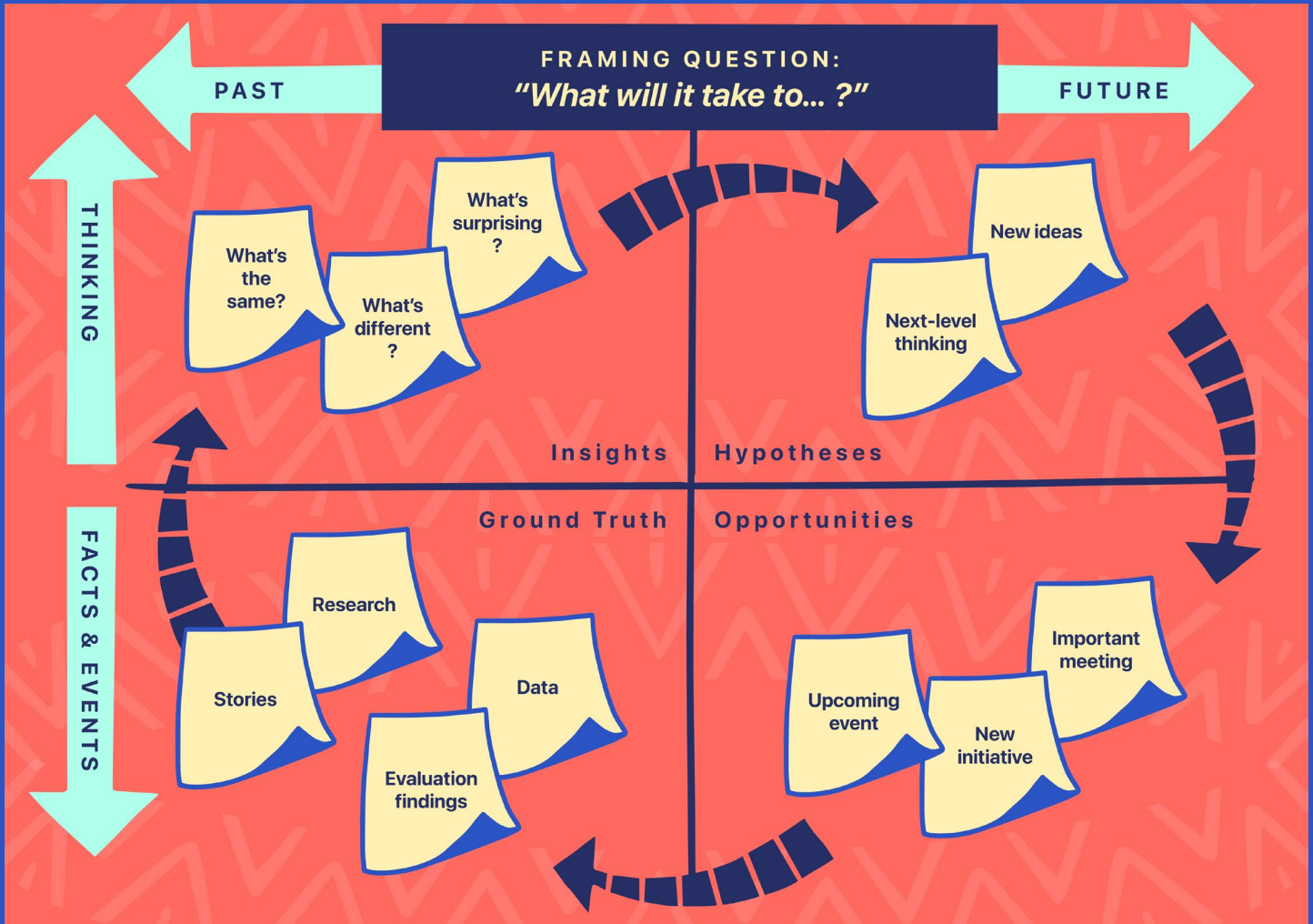
The Emergent Learning Framework has a number of tools that support us⁷ with how we can synthesize and document our learning. For example, the learning table below is a useful tool for analysis and documentation of learning. The application of the tool works on a reflection and action cycle. The learning question frames the discussion. The focus is on posing questions that invite a wider circle into the thinking process, making thinking visible to encourage a learning dialogue. The discussion using the table starts with multiple stakeholders who have the ability to address the learning question, reviewing evidence to see if actions taken to address the learning question worked. The shift from adaptive to fully emergent occurs when the whole community can participate in developing solutions. “From an Emergent Learning perspective, a group has learned only when people are conscious of their thinking, notice their results, reflect on those results, change their thinking and actions—and when their new thinking and actions produce better results, even as circumstances change.” (Darling, Guber, Smith, Stiles 2016, p. 64)⁸.

6 Darling, Marilyn & Guber, Heidi & Smith, Jillaine & Stiles, James. (2016). Emergent Learning: A Framework for Whole-System Strategy, Learning, and Adaptation. The Foundation Review. 8. 10.9707/1944-5660.1284.

7 Emergent Learning tools include Before Action Reviews (BARs), After Action Reviews (AARs), Learning Tables & Learning Logs <https://info.michaelsenergy.com/the-big-why/emergent-learning-frameworks>

8 Darling, Marilyn & Guber, Heidi & Smith, Jillaine & Stiles, James. (2016). Emergent Learning: A Framework for Whole-System Strategy, Learning, and Adaptation. The Foundation Review. 8. 10.9707/1944-5660.1284.

Learning Table



Fourth Quadrant Partners (2020) Introduction to Emergent Learning Tables

http://www.pointk.org/resources/files/Introduction_to_Emergent_Learning_Tables.pdf



Learning Agenda

Learning agendas are a set of prioritized questions and activities that guide evidence-building and decision-making practices and support stakeholders to engage in learning. In order to implement our Feminist Emergent Learning framework, we start with articulating a set of open-ended framing questions. What is interesting is the process of making tacit thinking visible and posing learning questions that hypothesize how we think transformation will occur – in a way testing our theory of transformation. This allows us to think synergistically, reflect on evidence generated, hypothesize on how change is happening/ or not happening based on evidence, and recalibrate our actions based on our learning. Through collective

agreement of our governing body, our learning agenda extends across the life of our initiative, and poses the following broad question and sub-questions:

It is the framing of these questions – which focus on the exercise of power in philanthropy – that makes them feminist. As the learning process and questions allow for us to generate evidence and build our model, we hope to shift and decolonize philanthropic practices and provide more and better flexible long-term funding for women's/feminist funds. This will eventually contribute towards enhancing vibrant gender justice movements.

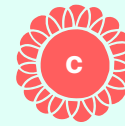
What will it take to build the resilience of women's/feminist funds members of the Prospera INWF through the Fenomenal Funds model?



What will it take to operationalize the Fenomenal Funds' model of pooled funding, participatory grantmaking, and shared governance within the current funding ecosystem?



What will it take to influence funding policies and practices of targeted funders in order to center the needs and priorities of women's funds members of the Prospera INWF?



What will it take to strengthen the individual infrastructure and collective ecosystem of women's funds members of the Prospera INWF?



Learning as a Community

Internal Learning

Now that we have articulated our strategy drawing on the outlined feminist principles, we plan to hold cycles of reflection, learning and action with the Steering Committee, Advisory Committee, funding partners and women's funds members of the Prospera INWF within the next two years. The flow and plan of the engagement will be determined by these groups and facilitated in some cases by Fenomenal Funds Staff, and in others by our Learning Partners. The Fenomenal Funds team is responsible for the overall design and implementation of the learning strategy. This includes facilitating documentation, analysis, and sensemaking of learnings from the model's implementation; coordinating the Learning and Evaluation Group; and providing oversight to the Learning Partner. It is also responsible for facilitating stakeholder engagement with and responses to the learning agenda and for consistently reviewing the theory of transformation for modification through bi-annual periodic reviews. A systematic data management system has been designed and is in use to support the process. In addition, our data collection and storage will be guided by a data security policy and protocol developed with the support of [The Engine Room](#).

External Learning

Fenomenal Funds has previously engaged a learning partner to support its initial governance review process. We are now contracting an external Learning Partner to support Learning and Evaluation for our grantmaking streams. Based on our theory of transformation and learning agenda, the Learning Partner will first engage in a co-creation process with our stakeholders drawing on our feminist learning and evaluation principles and then develop a learning plan which will include:

- ✦ Development of participatory tools, drawing on feminist research methodology to capture the contributions our grantmaking streams have made to women's funds through the Fenomenal Funds model.
- ✦ Engage in a process of data collection/data making and analysis based on the proposed tools and approach.
- ✦ Facilitate a participatory learning, sharing, and sensemaking process with key stakeholders to draw out insights that will inform our understanding of what change each funding stream directly and indirectly contributed to.
- ✦ Facilitate an additional sensemaking process to understand how the combined funding streams may have contributed to building the resilience and the visibility of women's funds, individually and collectively.
- ✦ Develop a set of knowledge products that tell the story of the contributions the Fenomenal Funds model has made to the resilience and visibility of women's funds.

Governance and Support

The Fenomenal Funds Learning and Evaluation Working Group of the Steering Committee is responsible for providing guidance on the learning strategy by sharing technical input, supporting the selection of Learning Partners, and making recommendations to the Steering Committee on any key strategic decisions related to learning and evaluation. The group is composed of representatives from Prospera INWF members and private foundations, and a member of the Prospera INWF Secretariat.



Communications and Engagement

Fenomenal Funds is currently in the process of designing its philanthropic engagement strategy based on a targeted philanthropic mapping exercise. This will determine the design of knowledge products and the targeted actors and spaces for external sharing. Internally, we are committed to creating learning and sharing opportunities for women's funds and private foundations to engage in creative and meaningful dialogue on the

grantmaking and governance processes as well as the overall model. Each year, two to three learning and sharing forums are planned with women's funds. We will also engage in learning conversations with each of our collaboration groups, documenting their knowledge and insights. Finally, we have a lineup of multimedia products, blogs, and visuals to share our insights on what we are learning from the strengthening of the feminist-funding infrastructure.

