



## **Prioritizing a Dignified Life, Collective Care and the Sustainability of Movements: The Case of *Fondo Semillas* for Updating Grant Amounts**

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### **Abstract**

This article will contribute to the construction of knowledge about philanthropy from a feminist perspective, proposing the incorporation of human practices centered on solidarity and sustaining life in its implementation. To this end, we use the case of *Fondo Semillas*' analytical process, developed in 2021, to update the amounts of donations granted. This resulted in an increase of between 25 and 100% of the grant amounts given. The process makes it possible to respond to the contexts of activists and feminist movements in Mexico, focusing funding decisions on people's lives and dignity rather than on the cost-benefit logic of traditional philanthropy.

### **Introduction**

In mid-2020, *Fondo Semillas* (a feminist and national fund in Mexico) began a series of reflective processes about the need to incorporate decolonial practices into its philanthropic activities. That is, *Fondo Semillas* sought a way of conducting philanthropy that is detached from the typical Eurocentric vision, unhooked from the logic of modernity, and capable of presenting itself as an epistemic alternative (Rincón et al, 2015). This, in which, from the specific context of the activism's development, the imbrication of systems of colonialist domination in donation-granting strategies is complexified (Cejas & Ochoa, 2021).

These reflections were carried out as part of policy debates that guided the Fund's Strategic Planning exercise for 2021-2025. Although not all of the reflections derived from this process were consolidated in concrete forms of action, one case in which their implementation can be observed was in the project "Analysis of differentiated amounts". This project was based on the need to update the donation amounts granted by the Fund after 10 years of remaining stable.

This text describes this project in order to contribute to the conceptualization of feminist philanthropy and promote the incorporation of practices with a decolonial perspective. At the same time, the text seeks to share the results of this process so that they can be replicated by other organizations in the philanthropic environment interested in improving the economic resources that reach feminist movements in the Global South.

## About the process

The purpose of the "Analysis of differentiated amounts" project was to update the Fund's donation amounts in order to respond in a timely and pertinent manner to the movements it supports. The need for the analysis and adjustment of amounts was based on the principles of 1) Trust in the people and movements funded, 2) Flexibility so that activists and movements can act according to their context(s) and situation(s), and 3) Economic and redistributive justice to ensure the sustainability of the movements and their activists, as well as systemic and structural transformation.

The project began in 2021 and was divided into four stages. During the first stage, a literature review and research were conducted with three main inputs: 1) public and private studies on income levels in Mexico, 2) a funding survey of 22 organizations belonging to the abortion rights movement during 2021, and 3) historical records of funding requests, budgets, and financial reports submitted to *Fondo Semillas* by funded groups.

In the second stage, members of the different areas of *Fondo Semillas* conducted a participatory analysis of the information, in which different scenarios and hypotheses were proposed and two criteria were defined to guide the reconfiguration of the amounts. These included: a) Contextualizing the funding to the place where the activism occurs, and b) Prioritizing the collective care and sustainability of the movements.

In the third stage, the comments gathered during the participatory analysis were systematized and the narrative with which the amounts were finally updated was configured. That is, meaning was given to the information based on the two criteria defined in a participatory manner, the results of which are presented in the following section. Finally, in the fourth stage, the project's results were socialized internally and actions to implement the new donation amounts during 2022 were defined.

## Results

This section reports the main results that made it possible to reconfigure *Fondo Semillas'* donation amounts, based on the two updated criteria defined in a participatory manner.

**a) Contextualize funding to where the activism takes place.** With this criterion, we sought to determine the base donation amount that prioritizes a dignified life in the Mexican territory. This is to avoid the precariousness of the movements financed and the attrition of their activists so that instead of responding to the amount available or to goals to reach a specific number of beneficiary organizations, the donations respond to the contextual needs of their activists.

To this end, public and private studies on income levels in Mexico were used as a reference. The first study used was the Multidimensional Poverty Measurement Study<sup>1</sup>, issued by the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL) in 2021, which measures both income levels and social deprivation from a social rights perspective throughout the country. According to this study, the Income Poverty Line in February 2020 amounted to \$3,549.11 MXN<sup>2</sup> in

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<sup>1</sup> This measure of poverty, in addition to income, considers dimensions such as educational backwardness, access to health, access to food, access to social security, housing quality and space, basic housing services and social cohesion.

<sup>2</sup> All figures are expressed in Mexican pesos.

urban areas and \$2,487.08 MXN in rural areas. The second study used was "The Standard of Minimum Wage in Four Large Cities in Mexico", issued by the *Centro de Estudios Espinosa Yglesias* (CEEY) in 2020. This study determines the social consensus on the level of income sufficient to achieve a dignified life in Mexico City, Puebla, Guadalajara, and Monterrey (the country's four most populated cities). According to data from the second study, the minimum income standard in February 2020 was \$15,813 MXN in Mexico City and \$14,795 MXN in the other cities analyzed.

To calculate the base amount, we opted to average the upper minimum income identified by both studies (urban in the case of the CONEVAL study and Mexico City in the case of CEEY), round it up, and update it according to inflation at that time. In this manner, a base amount of \$11,000 MXN was obtained (See Table 1).

**Table 1. Calculation of Base Donation Amount, December 2021**

Income level	Amount February 2020	Accumulated inflation March 2020 – December 2021	Amount December 2021	Rounded Amount December 2021
Poverty line by income	\$ 3,549.11	9.61%	\$ 3,890.18	\$ 4,000
Standard of minimum wage	15,813.00		17,332.63	18,000
<b>Donation base amount</b>	9,681.05		10,611.40	<b>11,000</b>

Source: Elaboration based on CONEVAL (2020), CEEY (2021) and INEGI (2021).

**b) Prioritize collective care and sustainability of the movements.** This criterion seeks to ensure that donation amounts respond to the configuration and administrative capacity of the groups requesting funding in such a way that the precariousness of their activists is avoided, and the long-term sustainability of the organizations is promoted. In other words, the objective is twofold: to avoid the attrition of members and to ensure that the resources granted do not generate tensions within a given organization, group, or collective.

To this end, 144 funding applications retrieved between January and February 2020 and 14 final financial reports submitted by groups funded in 2019 were used. These databases showed that most of the applicant organizations were composed of six people. In addition, the grant implementation timeline ranged from six to 18 months<sup>3</sup>.

These two data, together with the base amount, helped to determine the general grant range. This was done by multiplying the base amount (\$11,000) by the number of members that usually make up the organizations (six) and the months (minimum six and maximum 18) in which donations are historically made, rounding these amounts up. With this calculation, the general donation range fell between \$400,000 to \$1,200,000 (four hundred thousand to one million two hundred thousand Mexican pesos) (See Table 2).

**Table 2. Calculation of lower and upper limits of general donation, December 2021**

<sup>3</sup> *Fondo Semillas* provides grants for 18 months; however, some organizations have shown that they can use the amount provided in less time.

Range of General Donation	Donation base amount	Average number of organization's members	Number of months used to carry out donation activities	Final Amount	Final amount rounded
<b>Lower limit</b>	\$ 11,000	6	6	\$ 396,000	<b>\$ 400,000</b>
<b>Upper limit</b>	11,000	6	18	1,188,000	<b>1,200,000</b>

Source: Elaboration based on historical records.

The use of indicators of income level and number of members that usually make up the organizations does not mean that the donation amounts are conditioned to the delivery of salaries and wages. This is because the donation amounts are flexible; that is, they can be used according to the needs and expectations of social change of each organization.

Internally, the final decision on the specific grant amount to be awarded within the general grant range (\$400,000-\$1,200,000) is made according to a qualitative assessment of administrative capacities. This assessment considers the organization's past budgets, accounting and administrative processes, and information on the management and implementation of past projects.

Finally, with regard to donations for emerging issues that are granted on an extraordinary basis for strategic opportunities (Movement Support) or to respond to risky situations (Rapid Response Fund), the same logic was followed to determine general donation amounts. In these cases, the base amount was multiplied by the number of months that a movement's support or security response is usually granted and the number of members that, according to historical records, are usually required. This established a range of \$11,000-\$33,000 MXN for Movement Support and \$33,000-\$66,000 MXN for the Rapid Response Fund.

**Table 3. Calculation of lower and upper limits for emergency donations, December 2021**

Type of Donation	Range of donation	Donation base amount	Average number of organization's members	Number of months	Final Amount
<b>Movement Support</b>	Lower limit	\$ 11,000	1	1	<b>\$ 11,000</b>
	Upper limit	11,000	3	1	<b>33,000</b>
<b>Rapid Response Fund</b>	Lower limit	11,000	1	3	<b>33,000</b>
	Upper limit	11,000	6	1	<b>66,000</b>

Source: Own elaboration based on historical records of Fondo Semillas.

## Conclusions

Ongoing reflection on the ethical sense of the allocation of resources from philanthropy allows us to question the dynamics of power and incorporate new funding criteria. These criteria help to promote the transformative work of the supported movements and their activists towards a more just world where diversity does not imply inequality.

In the case of *Fondo Semillas*, the project "Analysis of differentiated amounts" was important for placing the needs, circumstances, and conditions of Mexican feminist movements and activists at the center of the decision-making process with respect to the allocation of resources. It also established that the Fund's donation amounts should prioritize a dignified life for its activists, as well as the collective care and sustainability of the movements supported.

The results are an input which argue with evidence and validate the need for more resources for social justice that put the sustainability of life at the center, starting with the activists themselves, of whom we ask to embody and implement actions that create structural changes for a better world for all people. In addition, we hope that they will encourage other organizations to incorporate these or similar criteria into their grantmaking. It is also a call to major donors and foundations to consider these criteria in their results frameworks and to take them into account when defining maximum percentages for salaries and wages in the proposals they fund. Most importantly, and as a final consideration, this process of reflection and analysis is based on the recognition of the work and commitment of activists, whose bodies inhabit and are traversed by specific contexts and oppressions; recognizing them, accompanying them, and also raising our voices so that their right to a dignified life is also prioritized, is a fundamental part of our work as a feminist fund.

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