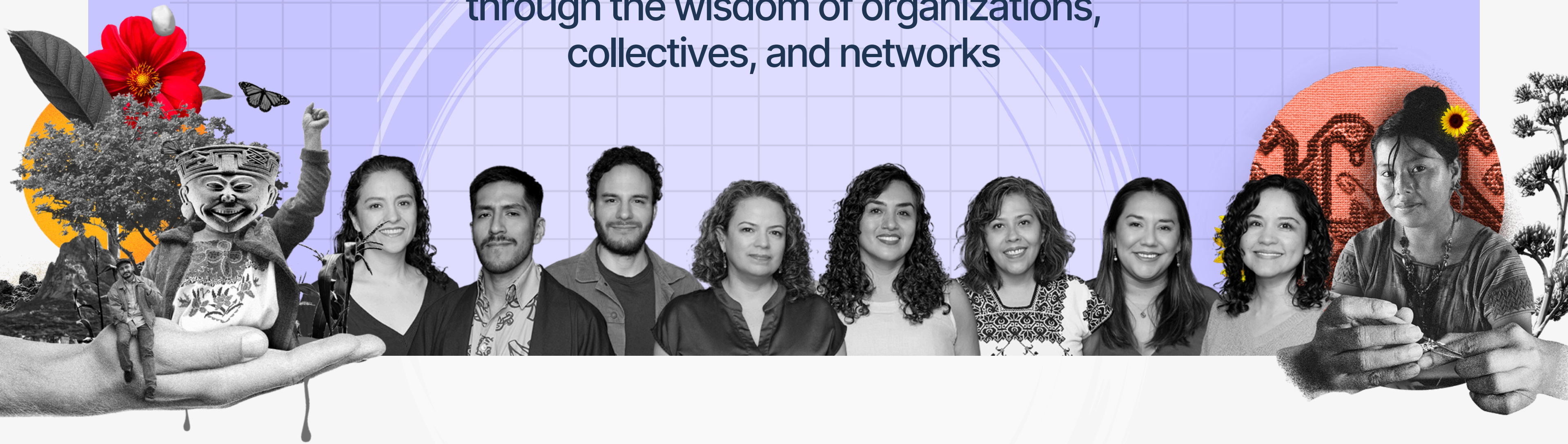




# ACENTO

Promoting social justice and human rights  
through the wisdom of organizations,  
collectives, and networks





The case study on **ACENTO** is part of a series contributing to a larger research on intermediary organizations. [You can find all the details here.](#)

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**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:**

A special thanks to Sylvia Aguilera, ACENTO's executive director, for her input and insights for this case study.

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ACENTO is identified as  
a locally registered organization  
with the primary goal of regranteeing,  
created through the support  
of a single donor\*



\*We have identified 4 different models on how intermediary organizations work. [To learn more, visit us](#)



# 01. How did they start?



**ACENTO, acción local\*** is a Mexican fund created in 2020 to strengthen the work of local groups, organizations, and networks whose actions advance social justice and human rights in Mexico.

As part of the departure strategy in 2020, the MacArthur Foundation conducted a study to better understand how to continue supporting human rights promotion in Mexico. The results revealed that the disparities shaping Mexican society also permeated the distribution of resources from philanthropic and international cooperation actors to civil society. This had led to a high centralization in Mexico City, favoring well-established and large organizations. **In response to these findings, the MacArthur Foundation established ACENTO through a \$10 million fund allocated over five years.** Founded to support smaller organizations and collectives working on social justice and advancing human rights throughout the Mexican territory, ACENTO aimed to support them address funding challenges hindering their progress.

\*More information on ACENTO available [here](#)



## 02. How do they define themselves?



**“We are a strategic ally for organizations,”** says Sylvia Aguilera, Executive Director of ACENTO. Within the ecosystem of human rights and social justice in Mexico, ACENTO’s role is linked to resource administration but its mission extends far beyond that. **“We aim to support the concrete needs of each organization, depending on their objectives,”** Sylvia says. This support primarily involves facilitating tools to strengthen organizations, groups, and networks.



# 03. How does ACENTO work in Just and Equitable Governance?



Through its work, **ACENTO aims to promote human rights and to enhance social justice, key pillars of good governance.** ACENTO's member organizations actively work towards these objectives, making equity and inclusion the main values that connect all of them. They also aim to reduce gaps and **promote leadership in historically excluded groups, prioritizing women's and indigenous organizations.** Moreover, ACENTO supports some organizations that work to promote local government transparency, particularly resource and information transparency.



# 04. How do they fund?

## A MODEL BASED ON TRUST

ACENTO's philanthropic model is based on trust, in which autonomy and learning are the key factors. **This model emphasizes the organization's learnings, both institutionally and in the promotion of social justice and human rights.** Fund execution is left as a second-tier priority. Moreover, "ACENTO does not intervene in the day-to-day execution of activities of the organizations," says Sylvia. "Organizations can strategically use their funds based on their knowledge and experience." The model aims to **increase autonomy**, allowing organizations to discern their needs and priorities in their respective territories, and determine how to best utilize funds strategically. The sole fixed requirement, particularly for small organizations, is allocating funding to have support on fiscal matters.

## SUPPORT BEYOND FUNDING

Support beyond funding. ACENTO implements an organizational strengthening strategy. Grantee partners' needs and requirements are identified through monitoring mechanisms. **Biannual meetings serve to reflect on grantee partners' learning processes and challenges** and to identify organizational and strategic capacity-strengthening needs. Furthermore, funding officers maintain constant communication via email and WhatsApp, adjusting intensity levels to match the organization's unique needs and characteristics. Beginning in 2024, ACENTO will start the implementation of a monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) scheme based on results, which also informs the organizational strengthening strategy.



## IDENTIFYING GRANTEE PARTNERS

In 2020, ACENTO launched its first open call for proposals, exclusively directed to small organizations. Over 400 applications were received, and 17 organizations were selected to become ACENTO's grantee partners. Building on this experience, another open call was held in 2022. Additionally, ACENTO issued direct invitations in 2021 and 2023. Moreover, **thematic mappings were one of the tools strategically informing direct invitations for funding.**

## MULTI-YEAR FUNDING

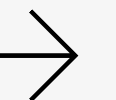
The organizations receiving funding and support from ACENTO become its grantee-partners (in Spanish they are called co-partes, which translates to co-partners. Most grantee-partners, particularly those that became grantee partners in 2021, **have secured a multi-year commitment from ACENTO, ensuring they receive funding for at least three years.**

## REACHING UNDERFUNDED COMMUNITIES

ACENTO is dedicated to rectifying geographical disparities in resource allocation. To achieve this, they **give preference to organizations situated outside of Mexico City** (CDMX). However, ACENTO occasionally engages with small and medium organizations in CDMX, as long as they work to address local disparities. Moreover, thematic mappings are used to reach underfunded communities. These **mappings aim to identify organizations facing significant funding challenges and broaden thematic and geographical representation.** As a result, for example, four organizations advocating for Afro-Mexican rights were invited to become grantee partners.

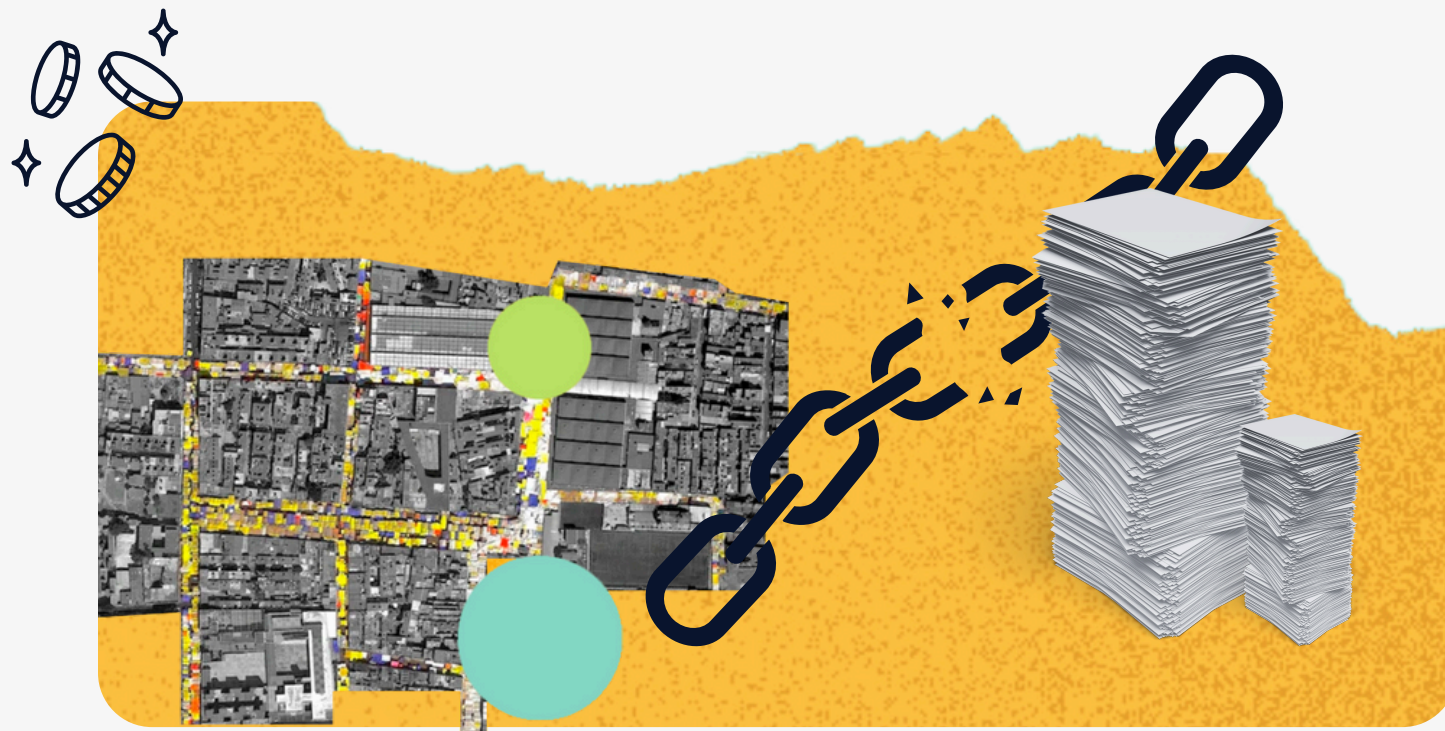
## THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

In its grant decision-making process, ACENTO turns to an advisory board composed of experts in civil society, human rights, and social justice. This board has endorsed general guidelines for selecting grantee partners. Final recipients are chosen by the board, based on a shortlist put together by ACENTO's team.



# 05. Who do they fund?

ACENTO **strives to reach organizations, groups, and collectives that have faced significant barriers in accessing funding.** These challenges are related to structural factors, such as historically underfunded and marginalized communities, as well as geographical constraints, lack of familiarity with grant application processes, and other barriers.



**TODAY, 69 GRANTEE-PARTNERS WORK WITH ACENTO. THESE ORGANIZATIONS:**

- Work in **25 of the 32 Mexican states.**
- Aim **to create systemic changes** in the public sphere.
- Have previously worked on human rights or social justice in their communities or their states.
- Were previously established, but not for the specific purpose of accessing funding.



## HERE'S HOW ACENTO'S FUNDING BREAKS DOWN:

### 50% directed to small organizations

Organizations that have not received funding previously, or whose annual funds amount to less than USD \$13,000. They typically do not receive support from other donors or rely on assistance from only one or two small donors. They may or may not be formally registered, and their operations are predominantly run by volunteers.

### 30% directed to medium organizations.

Organizations with annual funding between USD \$13,000 and USD \$25,000 per year. They tend to have limited access to donors, and their teams are a mix of volunteers and paid staff.

### 20% directed to large organizations

Organizations with annual funding exceeding USD \$25,000, up to USD \$200,000, and are legally constituted and have access to additional donors. Their team members receive some form of compensation, and they possess the capacity to manage volunteer personnel.



# 06. Who funds ACENTO?



In addition to the flexible funding from **MacArthur**, ACENTO also receives support from the **Ford Foundation**, aimed at internal organizational strengthening. Furthermore, specific funding is received from the **Open Society Foundations**, to support indigenous peoples' rights, and the Wellspring Philanthropic Fund, which focuses on Afro-Mexican rights. Furthermore, regarding the allocation of funding between operational activities and grantmaking, these percentages have evolved over time: in 2022, the allocation was 45% for regranting and 55% for operational expenses, but by 2023, **this distribution had shifted to 70% for regranting and 30% for operational costs.**



# 06. Challenges

## BUILDING TRUST WITH THE GRANTEE-PARTNERS

Due to the broad geographical dispersion of the Mexican territory, the number of grantee-partners, the limitations on staff to visit each of the organizations, and connectivity challenges, building trust with the grantee-partners has created an important challenge for ACENTO. To overcome this, flexibility has been key to accompanying organizations in their activities.

## UNDERSTANDING THE BROAD COMPLEXITIES OF THE TERRITORIES WHEN NOT BEING PRESENT THERE

Generalizations are not adequate for creating strategies and amplifying support. “Local” has different implications depending on the context of the previous struggles and experiences of people in the territory; a subject might be the same and the state might be the same, but how each organization faces challenges might be completely different. So, understanding that there are 69 different territorial positions (referring to the number of grantee-partners) has been challenging, but also a key to building trust.





Case study: **ACENTO**

## PROVIDING EVIDENCE THAT ACENTO'S MODEL WORKS

Investing in people organizing themselves has positive effects when advancing human rights and social justice agendas. It has been challenging for funders to understand that in the territories, social struggles, work, and daily life activities are not separated spheres.

## REGRESSIVE POLICIES RESTRICTING CIVIC SPACE

Creating a MEL (Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning) system that is focused on the needs of people in the territories and on gathering learnings about organizational processes.

## CRAFT FITTING COMMUNICATION TOOLS

Creating a communication strategy that accurately shares information regarding ACENTO's role, their reflections on how funding must be conducted, how alternative models work, the influence philanthropy has, and the achievements the grantee-partners, but also ACENTO, have accomplished.



# 07. Recommendations for funders and donors



## PROMOTE FLEXIBLE FUNDING MODELS

Create the conditions for funding to be flexible and capable of responding to changing local contexts. Organizations must adapt when there are violence peaks and climate-related issues, for example, and funding needs to adapt too. ensure resources are optimally allocated to create the intended impact without redundancy.



## ENHANCE TRUST AND AUTONOMY

Trust the organizations executing activities, particularly those working at the local level, and promote autonomy in resource management and activities execution. Autonomy in resource management allows organizations for higher levels of responsibility and ownership.



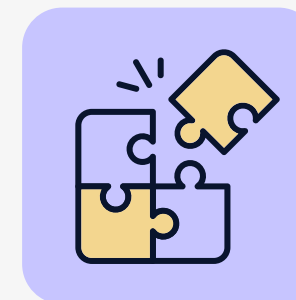
## TRANSFORM THE LOGIC OF REPORTING TO GO BEYOND MONETARY CONTROL

Focus instead on the lessons learned, on the adaptation processes, and the systemic changes organizations are aiming for. There is a lot of value in understanding why organizations change their original financial execution plans. By changing the reporting logic, the main lessons become about social transformation and learning, and not about money.



## PRIORITIZE FUNDING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Differentiate funding that supports social change and organized processes from the funding directed to consultancy, which is transactional and requires a product to be delivered at the end. They follow different logics and should not be treated as the same.



## DIFFERENTIATED STRATEGIES FOR DIVERSE TERRITORIES

Acknowledge that the realities in local contexts are broad and require differentiated strategies. For example, in many places where ACENTO executes its activities, public administration is barely present, so requiring invoices for each activity is unrealistic and limits support to grassroots organizations.





## FAIR WAGES ARE PIVOTAL

Remember that organizations are formed by people, and people deserve fair payment. Funding should allow payroll coverage for those working in the organizations.



## ADDRESS POWER IMBALANCES

Recognize the power gaps that occur when funding is involved, so that the privilege of those providing funds does not negatively affect the organizations' operations and autonomy.



## FACILITATE REGRANTING ORGANIZATIONS TO GET SPECIALIZED

Promote the specialization of regranting organizations. Support regranting organizations in fulfilling their roles, and thematic organizations in fulfilling theirs. Do not demand that thematic organizations deviate from their activities. Regranting requires particular know-how that does not come organically just because an organization is large.





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