

# With "A Little Courage," Ipas Is Shifting Money to the Front Lines of Abortion and Contraceptive Access

[Dawn Wolfe](#) | [January 12, 2024](#)



GERARD BOTTINO/SHUTTERSTOCK

In early December, Ipas, the world's only international NGO [dedicated exclusively to expanding access to abortion and contraception](#), announced that it had found a way to double the number of grantees receiving money through its Ipas Collaborative Fund. This year, 16 grassroots community

nonprofits in places like Indonesia, India, Mexico and countries in Africa including Kenya, Malawi and Ethiopia will receive increased average grants of roughly \$20,000, with a total of approximately \$300,000 being moved directly to the groups.

Ipas, whose overall work, including the Collaborative Fund regranting initiative, has received support from funders like the Ford and Susan Thompson Buffett foundations, didn't find the money for this effort thanks to a huge increase in donor support. Nor did the organization issue bonds, as larger grantmakers like the Ford Foundation did in 2020 to address the COVID crisis and increased awareness of racial iniquities after the police murder of George Floyd.

Instead, in a move that larger funders could possibly take a page from, Ipas cut its own overhead and organizational costs to increase its grantmaking capacity. While such a move would be pretty much unheard of among many funders, it's part of [big changes taking place at Ipas](#) as it remodels itself “with an eye to pursuing an antiracist, anticolonial approach to organizational design and management.”

As I've written before, support for actual abortion care makes up only a small segment of the overall funding field for reproductive rights. As Ipas seeks to remedy that by empowering ground-level providers and activists, its tough decisions about where to allocate resources are a call to action on the part of larger funders that have so far avoided resourcing the field in a more direct — and courageous — way.

### **“We wanted to do it right”**

It might be surprising to learn that a funder has been able to cut its overhead enough to double its portfolio of grantees, but Ipas didn't make the move suddenly. Instead, the organization decided to test out a smaller pilot program last year to ensure it could safely scale down the amount of technical support it was providing grantees, including tasks like designing

programs and creating grant proposals, and move those resources into providing more money in direct grants instead.

“When we started the pilot, we were entering into it with the conviction that the grants were going to support the ecosystem. So that was never in doubt. But we wanted to do it right,” said Dr. Angela Akol, regional director of the Ipas Africa Alliance. “So we wanted to start small and learn from those experiences,” including any mistakes.

The pilot program proved that the concept would work, Akol said, and so for its 2024 grants, Ipas followed through by shifting money from the expenses involved in providing technical support and making it available to double the number of grantees.

It’s obviously way too early to try to assess the ultimate impact of Ipas’ decision, but early indications are encouraging. The budget shift hasn’t had a negative impact on Ipas’ own employees who have been supporting grantees, Akol said. At the same time, “One impact that I can easily attest to is that visibility of Ipas’ work at the grassroots level is higher,” Akol said. “Now, I can't tell you by what percentage. But we know that because of our focus on grassroots, small CBOs, our work is visible at that level. And potentially, the impact will also be higher at that level.”

Ipas’ own funders, Akol said, are “very enthusiastic” about the new approach, but it’s also still too soon to know whether they will put their money where their enthusiasm is. “But the word is out there that Ipas has gone in this direction, and that the Ipas Collaborative Fund is one of the few, if not the only one, that is dedicated to abortion programming at the grassroots level.”

Regranting is just one portion of Ipas’ overall work. The organization is also involved directly in efforts including research, advocacy and providing workshops on a range of reproductive-rights-related issues, from abortion and contraception access to gender equity and sexuality education.

Founded in 1973, Ipas has an international impact, working across Africa, Asia and the Americas, including the United States.

### **“A little courage”**

Asked whether she has any advice for other funders considering ways to shift their own spending to increase their impact, Akol gave me a response that seemed extremely on point for any foundation or large donor seeking to make a true difference at the grassroots — in the field of reproductive rights or not. “The lesson, I would say, is that it takes a little courage and a lot of willingness to slip out of your comfort zone a little to create a larger impact,” she said. “Just by shifting about maybe \$150,000, we're able to bring more grantees into the pool, and that has multiplied the effect of the collaborative fund probably five to 10 times. So that is what I would advise: Maybe do some incremental increases to funding an area of great need.”

Between researching [my recent opinion piece](#) about the “shell games” that some billionaires and large foundations are playing to hang on to huge amounts of wealth, and rereading [my colleague Philip Rojc's account](#) of ongoing resistance to extremely modest proposals to move a fraction more of the money in big DAF accounts and foundation endowments to nonprofits, I have to admit to being deeply impressed with Ipas' willingness to question its own overhead needs in service of the organizations it supports.

If more large foundations would, at minimum, increase their payout to provide grantees with the same percentage of operational funding that they permit themselves, that step alone would be a welcome revolution. Truly, “a little courage” might be all it would take for many funders, with endowments in the hundreds of millions to billions, to make some of the lasting change they claim they're aiming for.