

Five Years Later - Has MacArthur's \$100-Million "Big Bet" Paid Off?

10.25.23 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



"Big problems require bold solutions."

That's how, in the summer of 2016, the world-renowned MacArthur Foundation described its breathtaking new grant competition: "[100&Change](#)."

The contest was for a single \$100-million award to "... [make measurable progress](#)" toward solving one of the world's most critical social challenges." Who was eligible?: Any organization or collaboration "working in any field, anywhere in the world."

The winner was (jointly) [Sesame Workshop and International Rescue Committee \(IRC\)](#). They had designed a compelling project to "educate young children [displaced by conflict and persecution](#) in the Middle East. It would be "the largest early childhood intervention program ever in a humanitarian setting."

Now, after more than five years of on-the-ground operation of the winning [100&Change](#) proposal, MacArthur officials have published the results of reviews, studies, and independent analyses of its own grant-making model as well as the impact of the Sesame/IRC project. See [How Much Good Can \\$100 Million Do? Sesame Street and IRC Put a Big Bet to the Test](#) (October 18, 2023) Alex Daniels, *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*.

A Big Leap of Faith

The Foundation was already well-known for its innovative, six-figure "genius grants" as well as other bold grant making. This project was a foray into what is now known as the "big bet" class of charitable awards. MacArthur's managing director, Cecilia Conrad, explained: "We believe [there are solutions to problems](#) out there that \$100 million might be able to make significant headway or

unlock resources, and we want to hear what those are.”

There were doubters and skeptics, including many who questioned whether putting so much money into a single project was a wise use of resources. Other critics worried that \$100 million would not be enough money – considering the scope of many critical problems – to make a dent. Still others expressed concern that “... concentrating attempts to define philanthropic goals to just a few people or organizations with enormous wealth, would give the elites undue influence and result in tunnel vision.”

It was a “a huge leap of faith” but MacArthur went ahead with the competition. “Solving society’s biggest problems isn’t easy, but it can be done.” The goal is to make “measurable progress toward solving a significant problem.”

The launch was more successful than even MacArthur officials had dared hope. Applicants submitted over 1900 proposals. As the competition proceeded, the field was narrowed several times but, during this process, the philanthropy community was permitted to take a glimpse into many thoughtful, creative, and innovative proposals.

We’ve covered this story in depth from the launch (See The MacArthur \$100-Million Grant Contest (July 7, 2016) *FPLG Blog*), through the early process of winnowing down the initial submissions to 800 that met all of the conditions and qualification. A requirement for each applicant was to include a 90-second video summarizing the proposal. Many were posted online via YouTube (See Exciting Submissions for MacArthur Foundation \$100-Million Contest (February 23, 2017) *FPLG Blog*).

We also reported on the selection of eight semi-finalists (See MacArthur \$100-Million Contest Semifinalists Announced (May 24, 2017) *FPLG Blog*, and then to four leading entries, accompanied by the presentation of more in-depth video presentations. (See MacArthur \$100-Million Grant Finalists Announced (October 3, 2017) *FPLG Blog*). The winner was announced in late December 2017 (See MacArthur Announces \$100-Million Contest Winner (January 18, 2018) *FPLG Blog*.)

Second 100&Change Contest

The original contest announced in 2016 was never intended to be a “one and done” project.

The 100&Change contest received enough praise and validation that a second round was launched. “Through the success of the inaugural round of the competition, foundation officials learned ‘there is no shortage of compelling ideas with the potential for tremendous social impact.’ This realization led to extending and expanding the project.” See MacArthur Foundation Launches New \$100 Million Competition (March 7, 2019 *FPLG Blog*.)

After two more years and in the midst of the global pandemic crisis, The MacArthur Foundation board announced its newest winner. See Community Solutions Awarded \$100 Million to End Homelessness (April 7, 2021) *Press Release*; see also New \$100-Million MacArthur Contest Winner (May 6, 2021) *FPLG Blog*.)

The \$100 million grant was made to Community Solutions “to accelerate an end to homelessness in 75 U.S. communities in five years. ”

Community Solutions is a non-profit organization that “works to achieve a lasting end to homelessness that leaves no one behind.” Its “initiative Built for Zero is a movement of 100+ communities working to measurably end homelessness.... Using this approach, 15 communities have ended chronic or veteran homelessness.”

“Homelessness is curable,” explained MacArthur President John Palfrey. “For too long, homelessness has been viewed as intractable and pervasive rather than a crisis worth solving....Community Solutions has proven that people do not have to live this way. Its racially equitable response is primed for this moment.”

Reviews of Sesame/IRC Winning Project

In *How Much Good Can \$100 Million Do? Sesame Street and IRC Put a Big Bet to the Test* (October 18, 2023) *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*'s Alex Daniels sets the stage describing the release of various analyses and critiques of the first 100&Change winning project by the people behind Sesame Workshop, who produce the worldwide TV show Sesame Street, and one of the leading relief agencies in the world.

“Six years into a collaboration designed for Syrian refugee children, the hope is that the adapted TV show will validate early-childhood development as a key to any humanitarian emergency response.”

According to MacArthur's John Palfrey, “... the effort to help refugee children in the Middle East was a gamble.” But the foundation is “convinced that taking chances with such a large commitment was worth it.” He adds: “If philanthropy doesn't act as society's risk capital, we're making a terrible mistake.”

The winning project diverged from “traditional humanitarian assistance programs” that “tend to go toward providing medications and basic necessities.” And the Sesame/IRC program may be considered by some as “touchy-feely – how preschoolers can recognize and regulate their emotions.”

Sesame/IRC used the TV program Sesame Street as a starting point, but it's much more than a simple dubbing of existing shows in Arabic. They created a new program with additional Arabic-speaking Muppet characters to appeal to children in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Called “Ahlan Simsim,” Arabic for “Welcome, Sesame,” it was designed for the nearly 3 million Syrian children whose families were displaced by the ongoing civil war and for their new classmates to help them become more welcome hosts.

According to Hirokazu Yoshikawa, co-director of the New York University Global TIES for Children program, which conducted several studies on Ahlan Simsim, the “real innovation ... has been using mobile apps and extensive person-to-person counseling with children's caregivers to ensure emotional growth was a family activity.”

The success of the Middle Eastern model prompted Sesame Workshop to roll out similar programming in Ukraine, and to create versions to help Venezuelan refugee children in Brazil, Colombia, and Peru. It also will develop “videos that can be easily dubbed into various languages and sent as emergency kits to aid workers and educators in areas where disasters or armed conflict

create new refugees.”

Some questions and skepticism remain, as Alex Daniels relates in his *Chronicle of Philanthropy* article, particularly as to the adaptability of a Western product for an entirely different culture, and whether it was worthwhile to put so much money into a single project or whether this project was the best choice.

For example, an Oxford University professor who directs its Refugee Studies Centre, is “wary” of applying “Western development psychology” which is “about talking about the past as a way of healing....But that’s not how the Arab world works.” She believes that a “[wiser use of the grant](#) ...would have been to focus on domestic violence in the region rather than introducing foreign concepts to vulnerable children.”

And, according to a UVA Professor who co-directs its Humanitarian Collaborative”: “Prioritizing the emotional health of young children as part of their education has gained acceptance in recent years, but it still hasn’t been mainstreamed...And, of course, the MacArthur grant was small compared with the scale of the problem — there are currently more [than 108 million displaced people](#) in the world and the number is growing.” Nevertheless, she said, the “studies of Ahlan Simsim show promising results and may make the approach an easier sell to other donors and relief agencies.”

See also, for instance, for additional commentary, evaluations, and reviews:

- [The Powerful Ripple Effect of Playful Learning](#) (January 11, 2023) [macfound.org](#);
- [Ahlan Simsim initiative is having a substantial impact on children’s learning, research shows](#) (May 22, 2023) Freya Lucas, [thesector.com.au](#);
- [Why we must invest in remote early childhood development programmes](#) (June 1, 2023) Sam Friedlander, et al, [World Economic Forum](#), [weforum.org](#);

Conclusion

There is undeniable good news, though, since this approach has been “making headway among other donors and nonprofits.” The LEGO Foundation added another \$100 million for Syrian refugee programming and to expand it to Bangladesh. Other international nonprofits, Mercy Corp and Save the Children, are helping to expand the program in Iraq, with assistance from the U.S. Agency for International Development.

And to underscore the MacArthur Foundation’s confidence in this “Big Bet” approach, there are plans to launch a third round of 100&Change next year.

– Linda J. Rosenthal, J.D., FPLG Information & Research Director