Seven Rounds, $100 Million. How One Global Foundation Responded During the Pandemic Year

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As things stand, the pandemic’s driven more than 1,500 funders to make at least 50,000 grants totaling $25.5 billion. Some made high-dollar commitments right away and took time doling it out. Others invested sporadically as needs evolved. Some are still holding their fire, reacting in real time to the virus’s stubborn staying power and after-effects.

One major global grantmaker, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF), recently wrapped a $100 million Global Relief Initiative to counter the effects of COVID-19. The seven rounds of funding it conducted between April 2020 and May 2021 followed an overarching mission to meet urgent needs in local communities.

Here’s a look at the evolution of the 208 grants the foundation made in 50 countries, and the lessons that can be drawn from its work, which put people and ideas over quick outcomes.

A global foundation

The Stavros Niarchos Foundation has awarded more than 5,000 grants totaling $3.1 billion since its founding in 1996. The foundation was initially funded with 20% of the estate of Greek shipping magnate Stavros Niarchos, then estimated at $12 billion. Niarchos was a larger-than-life Greek shipping tycoon minted in the 1950s, when the world was shifting its energy dependencies from coal to oil.

This year, SNF is celebrating 25 years and the thousands of partnerships it’s created along the way. In more typical times, Arts & Culture and Health &
Sports programs each garner roughly 32% of overall funding. Education draws 21%. Social welfare programs bring up the balance.

The foundation typically makes periodic big bets, landmark investments in areas like schools and libraries. The largest landed in its hometown of Athens, Greece, an $860 million investment in the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center, which comprises the National Library of Greece, the Greek National Opera and Stavros Niarchos Park.

Some big U.S. commitments include a $150 million gift to establish the SNF Agora Institute at John Hopkins University in Baltimore, which aims to raise the level of global civic engagement and discourse, and $75 million to help Rockefeller University expand its campus along the East River in Manhattan.

A long-standing supporter of libraries worldwide, SNF recently funded a $55 million renovation of the New York Public Library’s Mid-Manhattan branch. One of the city’s largest and busiest circulating libraries, the branch sees roughly 2 million visitors a year. Closed during COVID, it officially reopened this month as the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library.

SNF is led by three co-presidents: Philip Niarchos and Spyros Niarchos, Stavros Niarchos’ first and second sons, and his great-nephew, Andreas Dracopoulos, who’s credited with leading the foundation’s $500 million public Health Initiative in Greece. That undertaking has included a five-year, $15 million partnership with the U.S.-based Child Mind Institute, which has been a grantee for more than a decade.
The foundation has two main headquarters in Athens and New York City, and an office in Monte Carlo, but funds in all corners of the world, having worked in some 130 countries.

**Responding to a pandemic**

In April 2020, SNF announced a $100 million global response to the pandemic. Funds were disbursed in seven rounds, all roughly within a single calendar year, and all directed toward one goal: meeting urgent needs in local communities.

Andreas Dracopoulos said the foundation’s only pandemic policy was “to try to do good,” and followed two realizations it made early on: the needs were huge, and it would have to act fast. The announcement set the clock ticking. SNF worked quickly to put meat on its bones, something Dracopoulos likened to the old Wendy’s slogan “Where’s the beef?”

Investments landed on five continents and in 50 countries, addressing acute challenges like food and other necessities, support for front-line workers, mental health initiatives, and emergency relief for artists. The foundation turned to existing partnerships, built new ones and emphasized collaborative emergency funds. All people and ideas were welcome. Of its 175 grantees, 78 were new. And SNF was open to doubling down on those with the capacity to do more. A number of key partners drew repeat funding in later rounds.

The majority of grants moved out the door right away. In the course of 2020, SNF committed $31 million in April, $27.7 million in May, $2.7 million in July, $10.8
million in September and $9.8 million in November. In March 2021, it moved $6.9 million, then wrapped funding in April with a final round of grants that put it about a half-million dollars over the original commitment.

Geographically, it made the majority of pandemic investments in Greece and the U.S.—and more specifically, New York City—but funding extended to several regions, including Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America.

In all cases, need was the main driver. “Our approach to grantmaking is to try to go where the need is, rather than follow a preconceived notion of what’s important,” said Dracopoulos.

**Round one: first response**

The guiding principle for the more than 30 grants SNF made right off the bat was “getting funds quickly to those who need support.” The $31 million April investments established a throughline of support for Greece and New York City, which was then the epicenter of the virus, accounting for more than 20,000 of the 67,000 recorded deaths.

It directed nearly $12 million to Greece, “a special place in its heart and work,” where the pandemic was playing out against a decade-long socio-economic crisis. Work there built on two SNF rebuilding programs that were already long underway: one to mitigate socio-economic effects, and another to “recharge” youth.
As previously covered in IP, round one also included $5.9 million to organizations in the hardest-hit parts of the U.S., with a focus on essentials like food insecurity, and supporting displaced artists and shuttered arts institutions. That included its first grant to the Robin Hood Relief Fund’s pooled effort to help cover the basics in low-income communities.

And it didn’t shy away from funding mental health consequences, directing $1.5 million to support vulnerable populations including seniors, children and front-line workers. In fact, mental health’s been part of SNF’s overall healthcare portfolio for decades. Dracopoulos believes that COVID may even help overcome old biases, as mental health issues manifest in “people’s everyday lives across the board, and all families to various degrees.”

Globally, SNF collaborated with Bloomberg Philanthropies’ Resolve to Save Lives initiative in Africa, gave its first support to UNICEF’s collaborative COVID response, and invested in food and mental health organizations in Europe, and across France, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain.

It also placed two long-term bets with U.S. educational institutions: a testing initiative at Johns Hopkins, and a research initiative at Rockefeller University.

**Round two: communities in need**

The 25 grants SNF made in May mounted a $27.7 million response to urgent community needs in the U.S., Greece, Europe and Africa.
In the U.S., it took a granular approach, supporting the priorities of five local communities: seniors in New Orleans, food insecurity in San Antonio, meals and childcare for essential workers in Maine, the nonprofit sector in New York City, and two partnerships in Southeastern Michigan, with the local United Way and Community Foundation.

On a macro level, it made four grants to support young people: to Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, SEO, Summer Search and BRIC; it made seven grants to extend essential services in New York City, with partners like University Settlement and Nazareth Housing in the Bronx.

Globally, it invested $387,000 in the Alliance for International Medical Action to ease strained resources in places with high disease burdens like Niger, Mali and South Sudan. In Spain, it made three grants totaling $980,000 to support research and care for the most vulnerable, including one to the Hospital Sant Joan de Deu Barcelona, which helped create a biobank to gauge impact and transmission patterns.

In Greece, SNF boosted the $400 million investment it made to the country’s public-private Health Initiative partnership in 2017 with a commitment of $17.8 million. Funds helped facilities in 19 hospitals across the country accommodate additional intensive care units and staff training, building on testing insights garnered from its partnership with Johns Hopkins.

**Round three: essentials and the arts**

The cohort of 20 grants the foundation made in July was smaller, directing a total of $2.75 million to expert
organizations working collaboratively to address food and educational shortfalls, the struggling arts sector, and psychological support.

In the U.S., that included bridging educational gaps through five organizations, including DonorsChoose, which helps private donors fund classroom essentials, and the Harlem Educational Activities Fund (HEAF), which supports youth development beginning in middle school.

Three more grants addressed floundering urban food systems, including a commitment to the Street Vendor Project, which put sidelined, small-scale providers to work providing more than 6,000 meals in Brooklyn and the Bronx. The gift was a result of SNF’s open application process, and illustrates the foundation’s penchant for remaining open to all comers and all ideas.

It also continued its commitment to supporting New York’s struggling arts community by investing in small theaters and contemporary artists, and separately, its first responders.

Abroad, it continued the geographical focus on Africa, France, Italy and Spain, while expanding service to Central and South America through Spain-based nonprofit Ayuda en Accion. That grant supported distance learning, food insecurity and transmission reduction in 11 countries, from Ecuador to Honduras and Venezuela. Emergency relief in six African countries was funded through Save the Children UK.

**Round four: an equitable recovery**
Six months after making its first COVID relief grant, with the pandemic showing “no sign of abating,” SNF announced 38 new commitments totaling $10.8 million to support the “pressing needs of families and youth around the world.” September grants also began laying a foundation for equitable economic recovery.

One interesting turn in this round was the funding of direct payments, an empowering tool adopted by a number of other leading foundations in extraordinary times. The foundation’s grant to Moshulu-Montfiore Community Center, for example, funded both emergency food operations and individual cash assistance for essentials like utilities, bills and burials. Dracopoulos credits an earlier grantee, Robin Hood, with helping SNF gain a comfort level with direct giving.

Three other investments focused on helping the marginalized gain a better position during recovery. In the city, a grant supported equity and stability at the New York Immigration Coalition. Nationally, it partnered with Neighborhood Trust Financial Partners (NTFP) and the National Community Reinvestment Coalition (NCRC).

Dracopoulos explained that an active partnership with NCRC helped create another form of direct relief, this time for businesses. Along with funding the low-interest loans the organization works to deliver, it also provided outright grants. Sixty-five minority, veteran and women-owned small businesses rapidly received $20,000 each to sustain operations, no strings attached.
SNF also zeroed in on supporting young New Yorkers, with a focus on experiential learning, providing open spaces, and work that synced with its regular funding field, Heath & Sports. Nine grantees offered youth mentorship opportunities in disciplines ranging from soccer, sailing and basketball to StreetSquash and Figure Skating in Harlem.

It also helped boost New York’s large-scale green spaces by helping the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts reimagine its 16-acre campus during lockdown, and improving city parks.

Globally, SNF’s work continued along the same lines in Europe, supported education in Asia through United World Schools, and provided food and essential services in South and Central America. Grants to U.S. and European partners helped countries across Africa meet essential services, again employing direct cash payments through Trócaire, which works in Ethiopia, Rwanda and Zimbabwe.

**Round five: new and repeat partners**

As news of potential vaccines raised hopes in November, and the pandemic ground on, SNF made a fifth round of 26 grants, totaling $9.8 million. Again, the intent centered on addressing critical needs like food, shelter, healthcare and education, this time through both new partnerships, and additional rounds of funding for previous COVID grantees.

SNF helped struggling New Yorkers meet basic needs with nine grants to existing partners like Robin Hood, and new partners like Rethink Food, which helped
“mainstay” restaurants in hard-hit neighborhoods stay afloat.

Four additional grants helped support students preschool through college to progress academically. Another four focused on the health and wellness of children, essential workers and the elderly. Montefiore Medical Center and Service Program for Older People received a second round of support, while New York Presbyterian Hospital made its first appearance on the list.

Grants supporting relief for independent artists through groups like the Actors Fund were new, but sustained an ongoing interest in funding collaborative relief funds and the arts.

Internationally, SNF invested in a wide range of organizations in Greece, Italy and Spain. An innovative grant to the Ithaca Laundry in Athens provided mobile laundry services and jobs counseling to people experiencing homelessness, while fresh funding for Ayuda en Acción in Spain helped close the digital gap for students.

Across Africa, Asia and Central and South America, the focus was on delivering critical medical care locally through groups like Friends Without A Border, which provides free pediatric care in greater Luang Prabang, Laos.

**Round six: global women and girls**

Round six came in March, as rising variants were shifting the equation, and global cases were weeks away from registering an all-time high of 825,000.
Thirty-two grants totaling $6.9 million continued to combat food insecurity, healthcare disparities and educational challenges—and added access to clean water.

Community-based relief on the essentials, like food insecurity, shelter and employment, drew the highest number of investments at 11. They ranged from support for front-line workers through the Alaska Community Foundation and the homeless through the Bowery Mission, which hundreds of displaced New Yorkers depend on each day.

Four more grants ensured that students in the U.S. continued to learn; another four carried on SNF’s commitment to the “essential role” of the arts, by supporting both artists and storytelling.

Three partners provided support on the ground in France and Spain. In Africa, grants supported organizations in Zambia, Ghana and Madagascar with a focus on empowering women and girls, including Saha Global, which employs a network of women-run water businesses to meet the needs of Northern Ghana communities. Those commitments synced with other COVID funders like Jack Dorsey and Gates, which also boost women in the region.

Round seven: doubling down on partners and lifting up New York arts

The seventh and final round of grants renewed support for a handful of existing partners, like Amref Health Africa, which delivers maternal healthcare, and the San Antonio Food Bank.
SNF’s capstone commitment was another collaboration, this time a $5 million investment in the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation’s three-year, total $125 million “Creatives Rebuild New York” initiative, which hopes to boost the state’s creative economy by supporting the artists that fuel it.

**Measuring success**

Like all COVID funders, the foundation will have a hard time quantifying success, especially since so many put the typical metrics aside. No one can claim success. The global caseload last April was 67,000. Today, the seven-day average is more than 360,000—down significantly from a May high that hovered around 850,000—but still shooting up in places like South America and South Africa.

Dracopoulos isn’t worried about that. “Overall, I believe in data and numbers,” he said, “but in philanthropy, you need a softer approach.” Being wide open to new ideas means getting comfortable with risk, even when the numbers “don’t give you the big go-ahead.”

“Of course, we do our homework and have our processes,” he said. But at the end of the day, he says SNF is not afraid to bet on big change. “It’s OK to make mistakes.”

And the foundation isn’t just pulling up stakes on the pandemic. “Though the $100 million dedicated to the global COVID-19 relief initiative has been allocated, this does not mean that SNF’s focus is wavering from critical support related to the effects of the pandemic,” said SNF Chief Programs and Strategic Initiatives
Officer Stelios Vassilakis. Now that near-term support is at work, he thinks future grantmaking will inevitably be “directly or indirectly related” to the pandemic’s continuing effects.

Meanwhile, SNF appreciates the people and ideas that shaped its response, said Dracopoulos. “We’ve been listening and learning as we’ve gone along, and have had the best possible guides in this process—partners who have worked to overcome everything the pandemic has thrown at them in order to continue serving the most vulnerable among us.”

As the seven rounds conclude, “Our feeling as a team is one of overwhelming gratitude to our tireless partners.”