PERSPECTIVES
FROM AWID, CREA, JASS AND RESURJ
Convenings can be very valuable by serving as a platform for large-scale discussions, reflections and action steps for organizational assessment, future planning, and learning. They provide space for discussion within and between organizations to identify the scope of their work, the key players (which, for JASS, are activists on the frontlines), and the roles and goals of funders in supporting, strengthening and even modifying program operations. The interplay of joint players and ideas of people with a variety of experience can increase the overall impact and effectiveness of organizations, as opposed to an organization tackling everything single handedly and spreading itself too thin.

Convenings also increase the visibility of organizations. While creating common spaces for reflection and discussion is vital to the health and success of any organization, it is particularly valuable now, given the increase in violence and the closing of civic space. The richness of face-to-face encounters in place of webinars or conference calls is appreciated by staff. The real testament of their impact is in the follow-up, such as the development and honing of specific learning products and tools for organizations to utilize. The learning can be transformative and, in turn, help increase women’s agency, and build community and solidarity.

“Convenings are valuable because women on the frontlines of struggles rarely have time to come together in a safe space and sit, talk, reflect, learn and grow together with others.”

“Convenings are best when purpose and products are clear; there is dialogue among different actors and experiences; the methodology is explicit; there is participation of young as well as more experienced women/people; and when the funding organization is interested to deepen their own learning about the issue in question.”

REFLECTIONS FROM JASS STAFF

POTENTIAL VALUE/BENEFIT OF CONVENINGS
CHALLENGES

There are three outstanding shortcomings of convenings, according to JASS staff. First, they do not always produce concrete follow-up actions. It’s a real loss when this happens because follow-up — from assessment tools to publications — are vital for learning opportunities.

A second challenge is with regards to inclusivity. While convenings create space to share different perspectives, their value largely hinges upon identifying the purpose of the convening, and ensuring that it welcomes the participation of all groups of people, e.g., women, LGBT community, people with disabilities.

“Convenings are valuable, but the value has a lot to do with who’s in the space and why we’re having the convening, and ensuring that everyone in the space is catered for, e.g., different sectors of people. How accessible are the convenings for the people who are supposed to be part of that space? Who’s going to benefit from the convening?”

Convenings are sometimes elitist, both in respect to the language/vocabulary used, and honoring the participation of people who we think deserve to be in the space, as opposed to the perspectives and narratives of all.

“They also create a space for us to get different perspectives. But I think we need to be careful about who is invited into the space, or who gets to invite whom into the space. Sometimes they can become very elitist, and we need to be as inclusive as can be.”

A third challenge is that convenings require resources which typically entail time and money, both of which may be a lot to ask of small organizations, particularly nonprofits.

“One cannot have a convening for the sake of a convening. Such coming together has to be rooted in a feminist political agenda and process that has meaning for the group coming together.”

In order to maximize the value of convenings, we need to consider how the event or activity links to other process and/or how participants can be accompanied.
Funders are undoubtedly vital to the success of organizations they support, and it therefore can be beneficial to include them at convenings.

That said, it’s important for them to consider and acknowledge how their power may be used to enable and/or silence other actors, such as activists.

Some funders are hesitant to fund movement-building because they don’t fully grasp the value of it, so their support in convenings could be as simple as listening to the needs of organizations and individual players.

“Convenings are important to have different voices, to start questioning. To understand the activists on the frontlines and where the funders are coming from. To come to a common understanding of the needs of the people and how to work together collectively.”

“Funders need to see such work as a process and not a once off thing. More conversations with groups doing movement-building on the ground to know better what their real needs are given their political agendas and contexts.”
I think what matters in movement-building convenings are the periodic opportunities to create a swell of hope and inspiration, a space to collectively build shared analysis, strategies and campaigns, to build relationships and deepen comradeship. In the ways that a well-designed, well-facilitated and well-documented convening can do that — that is movement treasure!

**What Makes the Difference**

I've observed, participated, and organized all manner of convenings that were of different shapes and sizes. When I try and recall the most memorable ones — the ones that turned my head, heart and soul upside-down, and set (or re-calibrated) my course direction — a few stand out in my mind.

**Being Explicit about Our Values and Culture**

At the first Western States Center AMP conference I went to in Portland, Oregon in 2002, they put a tiny sign on the Reed College campus bathrooms that, in effect, said, "Western States Center works towards gender justice and understands that gender oppression happens when we make assumptions of people’s gender identity. Bathrooms have been documented to be unsafe places for transgender people. We believe people should be able to determine their gender identity and go to the bathroom of their choice in peace."

When I came on staff, I learned the long history of these signs being taken down everyday by hostile conference goers (or Reed campus students) and staff putting them back up everyday. This practice preceded the installation of gender-neutral bathrooms of today but more than ten years ago this was a brave and clear culture shift. It sent a powerful signal to me and shaped my politics that I would get to model and incorporate in my campaign work in the decades that followed.

**Be Terrifyingly Bold**

In 2007, I was privileged to be part of a series of reproductive justice convenings for a coalition of organizations that would eventually become the Strong Families network. We gathered to come at the problem of re-claiming and redefining family values from the fundamentalists from a different angle. The goal was overwhelming.

The genius of those convenings was the innovative approach to movement-building, integrating a mind-body methodology that allowed us to physically explore abstract movement-building concepts such as unity, escalation, alignment and such. We figured out with our bodies what formation made the most potent impact on a target (the wedge). As we used play, movement, art and creative expression, we broke down our terrifying and overwhelming goal into bite-sized questions that we explored, enacted, examined, postulated, explored some more. It helped transform it from the abstract and intractable into the tangible and moveable.
Who You Center and Critical Connections Matter More

My first AWID International Forum in Brazil 2016 was an incredible massive space of deep joy and solidarity, sobering stories and galvanizing analysis. It is so very easy to get lost in the scale and circumstance of convenings this size. What redeemed it from performance and display, were the meticulous preparations and paving of the road that led to the Forum — webinars, conference calls to conceptualize plenaries and workshops, shared leadership in designing hubs and tributes, a multitude of ways constituents, members and partners can engage, contribute and lead.

A feminist leader from the Pacific Islands shared with me after seeing me months after Brazil, how a traditional elder had been powerfully moved by the celebration and leadership of LGBTQ feminists at the AWID Forum. Soon after when they both returned home, she reached out and organized a series of meetings with traditional chieftains and the members of the LGBTQ group so they could build relationships and begin coordinated work.

It bears saying that critical connections are temporal, they require continuity and follow-up after the convenings. There is much hype and hoopla for the actual convening but the proof is actually in the post-convening work — a demonstration that the critical connections hold, gain traction, deepen and grow more roots.

It also takes discipline and rigor to ensure that the lessons harvested from the convening is shared with the movements back home. I have seen a range of ways that people echo back the multiple dimensions of their experience but the ones that herald growth and movement-building are those that are well-documented, accountable, and regenerative and what the significance of the convening bore for them.
Q **In your experience, are convenings valuable? Why, why not etc?**

A Yes! Convenings provides space or platforms to collectivise power to challenge and transform social norms that are rooted in unjust power structures. This kind of change never happens in a vacuity or in a single event. In some instances, convenings within a hostile operating environment and/or overcoming the layered barriers to enable a convening be it hosting or travelling and the like is a deep political act in and of itself.

Convenings may also provide deep political spaces to interrogate how to think and act in transformative ways. It works to strengthen our activism, connect cross movements, link intergenerational dialogues, share experiences, address key tensions and fractures. All these being essential mechanisms for movement building and alliance-building.

These spaces can serve to bring different movements together, not to always agree, but to lead to more discourse, more nuanced understanding and the production of new knowledge. Convenings offer an opportunity for collaborations to spark and foster new relationships and collective initiatives. Convenings invite us to routinely build and shape our collective goals and agendas and avert fragmentation, isolation, ossifying and dying out.
Q Can you share any overall learnings or thoughts about convenings going forward.

A One of the things we have found useful moving forward is grounding a collective social movement to prioritize developing a collective and shared vision, values and roles to be played within the movement and to one another.

The efficacy of any convening will depend on the tone set and the general expectations of those involved. Documentation of process and the learnings from convenings can become valuable resources for other activists and organizations to tap into. It is imperative that spaces are inclusive. Increasingly we need space[s] to come up with more formidable responses to the restrictive, right wing, fundamentalist discourse moving forward.

Q Please share any recommendations on how funders can support movement building and/or convenings?

A Even within a placing of partnership, money always changes the power dynamics. With this in mind is it crucial for feminist identifying funders to constantly be introspective on the effect of their resources in building or causing more harm to social justice movements.

It is a constant dance of ensuring that there is balance of power within the partnerships and in being more responsive to grantees. There is also something to be said about funders recognizing to support self-led movements with the space for strategic thinking and critical reflection and introspection.

Donors who are more responsive to the needs, nuances and shifts affecting their key constituencies are able to develop more effective partnerships that aim for demonstrable impact and not just change but transformative social change.
This convening was the catalyst for RESURJ and the political advocacy, organizing in intergovernmental spaces, movement building, and thought leadership work we have led alongside allies, both regionally and globally, in the past 8 years. So yes, we believe convenings are valuable, and a key aspect of movement building, collaboration, innovation, and strengthening, in particular, South Feminist voices, towards disrupting and transforming the status quo.

Similarly, we have led and engaged with numerous South Feminist convenings in recent years, regionally and globally, all of which have been spaces for strengthening South Feminist alliances and collaboration regionally and cross-regionally, spaces for learning, sharing lessons from organizing, and feminist accountability best practices, analyzing and understanding regional and global trends, contexts, and geopolitical analysis, and developing collective strategies. Many of these convenings have also resulted in ongoing alliances and collectives, such as the collective that came from the African Feminist Dialogue convened by RESURJ in Ghana in 2015, as well as advocacy action plans, and articulated political agendas, shared visions, and statements, such as the Our Rights, Our Lives: Women’s Call to Action Toward Cairo@20 from a convening hosted by RESURJ and allies in 2011. Others are simply a space of learning, sharing and building collective intersectional analysis, such as The Space, a convening for South Feminist newcomers attending the Commission on the Status of Women in the past 2 years, hosted by RESURJ and DIVA for Equality.
I think what matters in movement-building convenings are the periodic opportunities to create a swell of hope and inspiration

— Aimee Santos, AWID Feminist Movement-building Manager