

The Most Significant Changes Resulting
from Fund for Shared Insight's
Participatory Climate Initiative

Grantee insights from the US Southeast and Kōlea regions

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Introduction

Participatory grantmaking is an **inclusive philanthropic practice** that seeks to redistribute power by centering community voices in grantmaking efforts.

In 2019, the Fund for Shared Insight, a national funder collaborative seeking to improve philanthropy by promoting high-quality listening and feedback in service of equity, **created a participatory process** of design, grantmaking, and implementation.

After participatory Planning and Design Phases, two regional Grantmaking Groups made decisions to give grants to 35 grantees: 17 in the US Southeastern region and 18 in the Kōlea region (including nine in Alaska and nine in Hawai'i).

Prior evaluation efforts looked at the impact of the Design and Grantmaking Phases among those who participated. While Fund for Shared Insight had not independently or collaboratively set priorities around outcomes and impact, we wanted to hear from those who were funded regarding **what, if anything, had felt meaningful to them as a result of receiving a grant.**

Introduction *(continued)*

In early 2023, grantees from the Kōlea region and the US Southeast region were gathered independently as Fund for Shared Insight's Participatory Climate initiative was coming to end.

On the last day of the convenings, folks were asked to reflect on the question:

“What was the most significant change that took place due to this grant?”

The following slides provide a summary of insights from these conversations.

It's important to note that these conversations were not anonymous and happened in a room with Shared Insight staff and funders.

Summary of findings

- All people at both the Kōlea and Southeast convenings said that they experienced a significant change because of the grant.*
- Some found significance in what the grant **allowed them and their organizations to do**, others experienced significance in how the process **affected them and made them feel**, and some talked about both aspects.

* In alignment with [people-first language](#), we refer to grantees as “people” through these findings.



SIGNIFICANT ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACTS

*Examples from grantees of what the grants allowed them
and their organizations to do.*

Most people shared about the significance of living more fully into their organizational missions and addressing self-defined needs

- Some people talked about the funding as providing them the support needed to think about the **long-term vision** of the organization and **aligning their programming** more closely with their core organizational values.
- Others pointed to using the money to **fill in organizational gaps** (e.g., increase staff and organizational capacity and building organizational infrastructure) and **pursue opportunities** they wouldn't have been able to pursue otherwise.

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We had a good conversation about...what the money freed the organization to do ...flexible funding to think in [the] long term, freed up opportunity to talk about transitions, [and] recruit the next generation...

Many people mentioned having greater flexibility and innovation in their programs and operations

- Many people reported funds allowing them more **time, freedom, and expansiveness** in their program work. Some examples of what people talked about include the ability to:
 - Set their own organizational agendas
 - Create a pooled fund for regranting to partner organizations
 - Develop the legal framework for a community development corporation model
 - Expand a learning center
 - Research plant medicine
 - Participate in the mainstream media and speak against British Petroleum

Many people mentioned having greater flexibility and innovation in their programs and operations *(continued)*

- One person called participatory grantmaking “decolonized funding” and “healing” because of the **freedom gained** to do what was needed and take risks that could otherwise jeopardize their grant.
- Another person talked about the process **allowing folks the space to make mistakes**.

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Giving time and space to make mistakes, have things go wrong, not having to worry about being compliant with [the] grant or fear that funds will get yanked away.

Several people mentioned other gained benefits through funding

- A couple people talked about the grant money **opening the door to additional grants and funding.**
 - One person specifically mentioned that the grant gave their organization 501c3 status that allowed their group to pursue additional funding.
- Several other people mentioned that the funds helped **strengthen partner, community, and funder relationships.**



REFLECTIONS ON THE GRANT EXPERIENCE

*Examples from grantees of how the process affected them
and made them feel.*

Many people talked about feeling empowered by the participatory grantmaking process

- Several mentioned feeling **empowered** by the inclusive nature of participatory grantmaking and unrestricted dollars in that it allowed them to:
 - Set their own agenda and not compromise their work to fit into grant requirements
 - Feel trusted by funders, which increased their self- confidence to do their work
 - Find motivation to keep going against all obstacles

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I was losing my motivation, been at this for 15 years, [it was] hard to do this work, painstaking, COVID was around [as well as] people who [didn't] help motivate me... [it is] difficult to get motivation within your community, events like this [are] highly important for the motivators, because who motivates us, the leaders motivate each other, my tank was empty...

Several people connected the participatory grantmaking experience to Indigenous values and traditions

- People described participatory grantmaking as **rooted in relationships**, valuing oral history, and connected to culture, spirit and the land.
- One person talked about the participatory grantmaking process as **more reciprocal than transactional**.

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[I] appreciate[d] [the] whole process and how it honored our sovereignty as people, tribes, changemakers, thinking about the whole reporting process, paperwork, storytelling, doing it in this way makes me want to give my story back to you.

People also mentioned appreciation for the ability to make connections and develop relationships through the participatory grantmaking process and in-person convening

- A few people reported **deepening their relationships with funders**, shifting the funder/grantee relationship from a “mother, may I?” towards one that’s built on trust.
- Many people also reported having a **deeper sense of community** and connection with other grantees, especially after the in-person convening.

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For myself getting to know each of you individually without the title for me was important, not what you do but who you are, for me that was important, when you add the title, creates divisions, keep trying to teach my family this, coming here and reinforcing the values, learning about our cousins and our family.

Many people talked about their positive experiences with the participatory grantmaking experience

- Several people talked about this process having **low administrative burden** because they didn't have to write a grant application and instead could put this saved time and effort towards their work.
- Several people also noted the grant experience feeling **consistent with their community values and Indigenous traditions** such as the acceptance of oral history and storytelling over technical reports.
- A few people expressed **appreciation for how equity and inclusion and the values of trust and connection** were significant aspects of the process.

Some people looked to the future of this type of work

- Thinking both about the context of the grantmaking experiment, and Indigenous climate work, a few people at the Kōlea convening emphasized that this work **must continue**.

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This climate work cannot be experimental, [it] has to be [a] long-term commitment for all of us, [and] push for more opportunities and more for our people to be gathered, [to] build long term relationships and truly shift power from people with the resources... to us...



EVALUATOR REFLECTIONS

High-level reflections on grantee insights and on evaluating participatory grantmaking efforts.

High-level reflections

- Shared Insight supported a one-time experimental participatory process with a focus on **shifting and sharing power** with people who are closest and most affected by climate justice. As part of this initiative, the design team set forth goals to “fund grassroots groups that implement climate justice or environmental justice work in their communities that centers traditional and/or local ecological knowledge” and have the work “demonstrate approaches to adaptation that may also be applied in other contexts and influence policy.”
- During the grantmaking phase, 35 groups from the Kōlea region and Southeastern United States accepted funds. Reflections from these groups show that this initiative created **new opportunities for grantees to feel empowered to more fully live into their missions and allowed for greater flexibility to act in a ways that are aligned with their traditions and values.** More specifically, grantees felt empowered by the ability to make decisions that benefited their work and communities and multiply their impact.

High-level reflections *(continued)*

- Insights from grantees also demonstrated the **positive experience that folks had with the process**, evident from the ways in which they described relationships with other grantees and funders. Others expressed **appreciation for funders** trusting them to use funds in ways grantees determined were best and for valuing different ways of knowing and self-expression.
- While grant dollars made it possible for some people to take risks and innovate in ways that were previously challenging, it is **less evident whether these groups were able to demonstrate approaches to adaptation that could be used in policy and other contexts**. It's possible it may be too soon to know given the relatively short grant periods.
- Several grantees also pointed out that funding climate work must continue because of its importance and **shouldn't be treated as a one-off experiment**.

Rationale for evaluating participatory grantmaking efforts

- There is conversation in the field about whether participatory grantmaking efforts should be evaluated. Some argue that since these efforts are built on trust rather than accountability to funders, evaluation may not be appropriate because it would contradict the spirit of this less traditional grantmaking model. Others argue **there may still be value in evaluating participatory efforts**, especially if we place more focus on the grant makers than grant receivers.
- In a [recent report](#), the American Jewish World Service proposes the concept of “responsive accompaniment,” a model where funders follow alongside, learn from, and respond to/support grantees’ capacity building needs. This model places **greater onus and accountability on funders** to support grantees in ways that grantees identify for themselves rather than the other way around.
- In this way, evaluation is used as a tool to **keep funders accountable** for the ways in which they support grantees, learning from and supporting grantees in accordance with their diverse needs.

Benefits of evaluating participatory grantmaking efforts

- One benefit of focusing on funders when it comes to accountability is that it helps **reinforce a more equitable distribution of power**, providing grantees more opportunities to lead and have control over how to do their work and what supports they need.
- Another benefit of focusing on funders is it **continues to shift the dynamic from “power over” grantees to “power with and within,”** promoting collaboration and encouraging grantees’ self-determination and inherent power. Several grantees talked about this dynamic, shifting from a “mother, may I” framing towards a relationship that’s built on trust.



APPENDIX

Methodology

- In January and April 2023, 14 (out of 18) grantees from the Kōlea region and 15 (out of 17) grantees from the US Southeast region were gathered through two separate convenings in Guánica, Puerto Rico and O’ahu.
- On the last day of each convening, the facilitators asked grantees to line up and those in the room who were not grantees were then asked to select a person to stand with, creating pairs.
- In these pairs, grantees shared their reflection to the question: “*What was the most significant change that took place due to this grant?*”

Methodology *(continued)*

- Notes from these conversations were captured. ORS then took these written notes and developed the insights and reflections shared in this deck.
- While there was a higher volume of data from the Kōlea grantees, learnings in this deck are shared in aggregate.

Kōlea Gathering in O'ahu, January 2023



*Photos taken by Melinda Tuan and Katy Love





US Southeast Gathering in Guánica, Puerto Rico, April 2023



*Photos taken by Melinda Tuan and Katy Love





