

# Key Insights and Recommendations

Drawing from Shared Insight's own participatory grantmaking initiative (see the "How We Did It" section for details), we offer reflections on our experience and ideas for how you can apply the learning to your own philanthropy. Here are nine insights and the practices we recommend in response.

1. Use Expansive Definitions and Approaches
2. Take a Holistic Approach to Funding
3. Be Open to Communities' Definitions of Geographic Boundaries
4. Explore Trust-Based Participatory Philanthropy
5. Aim for Radical Hospitality and Inclusion
6. Increase Participation in Each Phase of Work
7. Embrace Interconnectedness (Including Conflicts of Interest)
8. Identify and Shift Administrative Risks and Burdens
9. See Beyond the 501(c)(3)

## 1. Use Expansive Definitions and Approaches



### The Idea

As funders engaging people outside of philanthropy who are more connected to issues and impacted communities, we should expect to be pushed outside of our comfort zone in many ways, beginning with how issues are defined and framed. If philanthropy continues to rely on rigid frameworks and definitions that are rooted in a false notion of objectivity, we risk failing to include people who are most impacted by the issues we are seeking to address; continuing to fund organizations that lack community backing and legitimacy; and remaining unaware of and unable to benefit from innovative knowledge that has sustained and advanced communities over many years.

In our [Participatory Climate Initiative](#), a Design Team member created this definition, which we used to guide our work.

Policy is a set of decisions that prioritizes what we think we need to live. Climate policy needs to state firmly the foundations, guidelines, and boundaries that society must have to maintain a livable climate, but these must be determined by a true representation of the communities that have faced the worst consequences of environmental and energy policy.

And the Design Team did not use the term "climate change" that the funders had picked for the initiative, instead choosing more expansive language. The purpose statement the team developed, for example, reads in part that the program would fund grassroots groups "that implement climate justice or environmental justice work in their communities that centers traditional and/or local ecological knowledge and connection with Mother Earth."

### Recommended Practices

#### Solicit meaningful input

Solicit meaningful input and create opportunities for power sharing with communities, rather than relying on mainstream organizations to represent them.

#### Value traditional knowledge and lived expertise

Value traditional knowledge and lived expertise on equal footing with "technical knowledge," and choose which "experts" to fund and rely on accordingly.

#### Use holistic definitions

Use holistic definitions and approaches whenever setting funding priorities. Be aware of differences in language used by communities and funders.

#### Be familiar with and adopt existing definitions and frameworks that are relevant to communities

For example, activists in the environmental and economic justice movement created the [Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing](#).

## 2. Take a Holistic Approach to Funding



### The Idea

While philanthropy organizations often separate funding programs based on technical expertise and conventionally defined issue areas, this approach often does not match the needs and solutions on the ground. Issues such as climate change mitigation, climate adaptation, climate justice, environmental racism, food systems change, the teaching of traditional knowledge, and land rights are not distinct and should not be siloed in funding. While there can be value in zeroing in on specific issues, funders often do this at the expense of more holistic and integrated approaches and thus opportunities for greater impact.

### Recommended Practices

#### Meet communities where they are by using language that resonates with them

For instance, ranchers in the Southwestern United States may have no interest in getting together to address climate change, but could be highly engaged in a discussion about water and agriculture. Another example is that some Native communities may not use the term “climate change,” and focus more on connection to land, language, and traditional ecological knowledge. If you don’t know what language resonates, ask!

#### Create cross- or multi-issue funds that reflect the complexity of the problem you seek to solve

Create cross- or multi-issue funds that reflect the complexity of the problem you seek to solve, and engage experts with traditional knowledge and grassroots organizing know-how along with technical experts.

#### Provide flexible, unrestricted multi-year grants

Since communities and the many issues impacting them cannot be dissected or separated, provide flexible, unrestricted multi-year grants, taking a holistic approach that recognizes the reality that meaningful systems change takes decades and long-term investments.

#### Commit substantial funding to a wider range of innovative grassroots initiatives

Recognize the limits of traditional grantmaking, such as requests for proposal processes and funding in silos, and commit substantial funding to a wider range of innovative grassroots initiatives.

### 3. Be Open to Communities' Definitions of Geographic Boundaries



#### The Idea

Funders that typically work in specific geographies or with a narrow geographic lens may find those conventions limiting in a participatory grantmaking effort. Geography can be an important way to understand how people are impacted by issues like climate change. For example, it can be a tool for focusing funding in areas like the Southeastern United States that have experienced systemic disinvestment and extensive extraction by industry. However, funders should not rely on political boundaries alone, but should be open to participants exploring geographic focus areas based on their own stated priorities, such as ecosystem links and land sovereignty issues.

In our [Participatory Climate Initiative](#), selecting a geography was a lengthy and somewhat painful process, particularly for grassroots activists working to build solidarity across regions. The Design Team ultimately selected two unique geographic focus areas:



1. The Kōlea Region, which encompassed Alaska and Hawai'i and was named for a migrating bird representing the links between the ecosystems of the two distant states and the historic, cultural, and navigational connections among Native peoples in the Pacific.
2. The Southeastern United States, which was defined as including U.S. Territories, like Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, areas that have experienced longtime disinvestment and overburdened infrastructure while facing severe impacts of climate change.

#### Recommended Practices

##### Consider cultural, historical, ecological, and thematic connections

When applying a geographic lens to funding programs, don't rely on conventional political definitions or boundaries. Consider cultural, historical, ecological, and thematic connections.

##### Remain flexible, creative, and open to unconventional definitions and the many benefits they may bring

Be prepared for difficult and time-intensive discussions. Remain flexible, creative, and open to unconventional definitions and the many benefits they may bring.

##### Act with sensitivity

Be mindful of the impact discussions about geography, or limiting the scope of your program in general, may have on participants who are working to build solidarity across regions and movements. Act with sensitivity.

##### Be open and transparent with everyone involved

Be open and transparent with everyone involved about what definitions you are working from and how this may impact funding opportunities or other opportunities for involvement.

## 4. Explore Trust-Based Participatory Philanthropy



### The Idea

Some principles of trust-based philanthropy and participatory philanthropy may appear to be opposed or mutually exclusive, while others are complementary. Both approaches have value and each design decision you make will involve trade-offs. While there is no roadmap for integrating these two approaches, we were able to refer back to the values participants identified as important when making tough decisions about these trade-offs.

Find more discussion about combining trust-based and participatory philanthropy principles in this [blog post](#) at Center for Effective Philanthropy and this video of our “[Nuts & Bolts](#)” webinar.

Examples of the tensions between participatory philanthropy and trust-based philanthropy from our [Participatory Climate Initiative](#):

- The Design Team had a strong preference for a very simple application process that would limit burdens on those who would receive the funding. At the same time, some of the same participants, when it came to decision making, lamented having less information than they would have liked in reviewing grant applications and making decisions.
- Participants wanted time to get to know grantees and establish relationships with them, but did not want this process to be burdensome for grantees. And yet, arranging meetings among many participants and 35 grantees became a complex logistical puzzle, and not every meeting met all needs for the grantees and the Grantmaking Group members. Grantees invested time in preparing for and participating in those calls.
- Groups being considered for funding were guaranteed a minimum grant of \$10,000. This was a requirement of the Design Team, and is good practice in philanthropy, but it also at least somewhat constrained the Grantmaking Group's options for their \$2 million.

### Recommended Practices

#### Recognize that both trust-based philanthropy and participatory philanthropy have value

Recognize that both trust-based philanthropy and participatory philanthropy have value and build your organization's understanding and practice in both approaches.

#### Compensate those you consult for their time and expertise, and share back with them the results from your work

Seek the advice of people with experience with each of the approaches so you can define the values that guide your work and effectively evaluate the trade-offs. Compensate those you consult for their time and expertise, and share back with them the results from your work. Consider how your work can add real value and be beneficial to those people.

#### Experiment and innovate as you seek to balance both approaches

Continue to experiment and innovate as you seek to balance both approaches. Be prepared for challenges and bumps in the road as you create new ways of working.

## 5. Aim for Radical Hospitality and Inclusion



### The Idea

Since participatory philanthropy efforts will often (and sometimes by definition) include a diverse group of participants – across race, geography, language, culture, religion, expertise, age, disability, gender, and sexual orientation – significant effort and expertise must go into creating a truly inclusive and accessible experience. Everyone should bring their full selves to this work and build meaningful connections with one another. This includes funders, grantees, and the people facilitating the work.

To optimize opportunities for inclusion and access in our [Participatory Climate Initiative](#), we:

- Worked toward digital inclusion, offering participants resources to meet technology needs, including equipment and stipends for internet or data usage and reimbursement for mileage costs associated with traveling to access the internet. We also worked with participants individually, collecting their input through their preferred communication method like phone or text, instead of asking everyone to submit written input to us.
- Actively sought out the opinions of those who participated less, starting by tracking who was speaking during group discussions. We then analyzed recordings to understand whether or not speaking time was shared equitably, making adjustments as needed, and actively seeking out the opinions of those who participated less.

### Recommended Practices

#### Devote adequate resources to facilitation

This may involve hiring experienced facilitators or building your capacity for facilitation in-house and ensuring staff are assigned to this work. Facilitators should have experience in areas that are relevant to the group, such as racial justice and disability justice.

#### Welcome participants as their full and authentic selves

Foster meaningful relationships with and among participants that go beyond their roles in the work, including opportunities for sharing their experiences, personalities, and cultures through activities like group discussions, paired conversations, and journaling.

#### Use different methods to share and receive information among participants, including written narratives, videos, audio files, illustrations, and more

Apply principles of disability justice and language justice, and consider how different methods of sharing and receiving information may or may not be accessible to all participants.

#### Design a schedule, time expectations, and a general pace and time commitments for activities for participant engagement

Share these requirements in advance to avoid asking more of participants than they originally committed to. Stick to these commitments.

#### Be intentional about navigating power dynamics within your group

Be intentional about navigating power dynamics within your group. Even when working outside of a traditional hierarchical structure, the roles and positionality of participants may influence outcomes and participant comfort. For example, be intentional about when you do or do not include funders in your space with participants.

#### Ask yourself who is not participating, and why

Is everyone participating? Notice who is contributing and engaging in activities and meetings. Seek to identify people who are not participating and consider access needs and what they would need to participate meaningfully. When in doubt, ask them.

## 6. Increase Participation in Each Phase of Work Boundaries



### The Idea

Participatory philanthropy approaches should be applied to the continuum of the funding process so that not all parameters are set by funders. If participatory practices are used only at the point of decision making about grants, for example, participants don't have the chance to define the funding focus or criteria, or to continue to support and learn from grantees during the implementation and evaluation phases of the work.

As we planned the [Participatory Climate Initiative](#), we considered how power was shared among different people during each phase of the project and how these shifts in power carried through or changed in each subsequent phase of work. This cascading approach had many benefits, since participants had an increasing voice in the design of the initiative, then in decision making, and then in implementation and evaluation.

Here is an idea of how we thought about power sharing and participation within the context of this initiative during each phase:

#### PLANNING PHASE:

Decision-making power is held by traditional decision makers (funders) in a collaborative space who establish the size of the portfolio and define a general focus of the fund; participants begin to inform the work immediately through consultation.

#### DESIGN PHASE:

Power is partially ceded to participants with some limits in place; participants hold influence and shape the plan for the next phase including the goal, eligibility criteria, geographic focus, and values of the fund.

#### GRANTMAKING PHASE:

Power is formally ceded to participants, who are responsible for making decisions about grants independently of funders.

#### IMPLEMENTATION & PRACTICES:

Responsibilities are shared among funders and participants.

Some participants noted that the extent to which power was able to shift systemically was limited by the scope of this initiative, since long-term work with significant resources would be required to shift power within the global philanthropy system. Significant power is also held by those who decide who is participating in each phase of work. By reaching out to many people during the early phases of this initiative, we were able to involve people with relevant expertise in making subsequent decisions about who was involved in each phase.

### Recommended Practices

**Expand participatory philanthropy practices to include participation in multiple phases of your work**

Expand participatory philanthropy practices to include participation in multiple phases of your work beyond just making decisions about grants. Incorporate the process and the ethos of participation beyond your grantmaking.

**Consider how participation or a lack of participation in each phase of your work will influence what happens in the next phase**

Are you moving decision-making power to your stakeholders in meaningful ways? Are community participants benefiting from their participation? Are they compensated?

**Conduct a power analysis**

Conduct your power analysis accordingly so that you can be intentional about how much power each group of stakeholders holds during each phase and communicate this power analysis with participants so it's clear to them how much power they have in each phase.

## 7. Embrace Interconnectedness (Including Conflicts of Interest)



### The Idea

Since one approach in participatory grantmaking is to get to the grassroots by working with people with the broadest and deepest ties in their communities, stakeholder groups tend to overlap. There may be little or no separation among the people and organizations designing the program, nominating grantees, and receiving the funds. As long as potential conflicts of interest are acknowledged and addressed, this interconnectedness is a strength of the process and not a flaw.

In our [Participatory Climate Initiative](#), some Grantmaking Group members deciding about grant funding were also participant partner-selectors, Design Team members setting the focus and criteria, grantee nominators, and/or grantees receiving funding. Many of the participants often shared ties among each other. We recognized that participants came from different backgrounds and had different ideas about what constitutes conflicts of interest and how to navigate them. Many may have dealt with conflicts as part of their movement work and had negative experiences. To mitigate these concerns, we sought to destigmatize the idea of conflicts and manage them by:

- **Providing participants with good information about conflicts early in the process**, explaining that conflicts were a normal and necessary part of doing participatory work, and that many strategies were available for addressing them.
- **Giving participants time to prepare to disclose their conflicts and hands-on support and guidance throughout the process**, including by providing a personalized set of recommendations to help them manage each conflict and consulting with them to make sure they were comfortable with the advice.
- **Offering transparency to the full group about the mitigation measures we applied for each potential or real conflict of interest.**

### Recommended Practices

**Encourage participants to participate in overlapping roles at different stages of your funding process**

For example, invite participants who are part of a participatory design phase or who serve as nominators to join the group of decision makers. Proactively manage any potential conflicts of interest that might arise.

**Seek out participants with lived expertise and extensive networks who are active in their communities**

Consider these ties and connections assets rather than liabilities.

**Early on in the process, provide all participants with good information about the nature of conflicts of interest and how to manage them with transparency**

Work proactively with participants to manage conflicts of interest in ways that feel relevant to them. Have an organized process for managing conflicts that gives participants confidence and offer them ongoing support in this area throughout their engagement.

**Do initial work to destigmatize the notion of conflicts of interest and increase the comfort of participants**

Talk openly about the benefits of being connected to one's community, and how knowledge, experience, connection, and commitment is valuable in participatory processes, as proximity offers meaningful insights. At the same time, be mindful that some participants may have had negative experiences in the past, particularly if they have had to make decisions to support some — but not all — of their communities. Speak with participants privately about any potential conflicts and support them with appropriate mitigation strategies that maintain the integrity of the decision-making process.

## 8. Identify and Shift Administrative Risks and Burdens



### The Idea

When working with frontline, grassroots, or any type of nonconventional nonprofit or community organization, funders should take extra care to identify potential pain points in financial transactions. Grantees might not have the staff time, adequate technology, or experience with typical foundation payment systems and practices, leading to delays, or, worse, misunderstandings that could negatively impact the funder-grantee relationship. Work proactively with grantees from the start to anticipate and resolve administrative issues, listen to their feedback, and show them that you are taking action to improve. Wherever you can, shift the administrative burden away from grantees and community participants.

Despite the best intentions among ourselves and our fiscal sponsor, the process of distributing grants and honoraria in our [Participatory Climate Initiative](#) did not go smoothly for every grantee and participant. Not everyone offered an honorarium chose to receive it, and at least one participant declined to receive one, deeming the process too burdensome because of the amount of paperwork required and the number of steps needed to receive the money, which included having to set up a login and password through an online portal.

In some cases, administrative hurdles caused significant delays in distributing funding. Getting money to organizations without 501(c)(3) tax status as expenditure responsibility grants was the most complicated. For those grantees that were not 501(c)(3) or equivalent, our fiscal sponsor required evidence of legal status, tax documentation, audited financial statements, and financial and narrative reports, as well as detailed budgets documenting how grant funds would be used for charitable purposes. While we did not otherwise have reporting requirements, groups receiving expenditure responsibility grants did have financial and narrative reporting requirements.

### Recommended Practices

#### Conduct an impact risk analysis

Conduct an impact risk analysis (such as this one from [Spring Impact and Open Road Alliance](#)) to assess your organization's risk appetite. Then determine where your processes can and need to be more flexible, with the goal of shifting risk from grantees to your institution in the longer term.

#### Discuss, agree, and document general procedures and ways of working

Involve administrative staff with relevant expertise from the start of any initiative to clarify and, if needed, adjust administrative requirements during the planning stages of your project. Discuss, agree, and document general procedures and ways of working.

#### Ensure your organization is equipped to give out grants of the type that your program requires in the way that your program requires

For instance, do not plan to give out flexible general support funding if your current administrative systems do not allow you to do this. If you are not equipped, you will need to improve your systems, seek help, or adjust your plans accordingly.

#### Create a process for documenting administrative delays and hurdles when they occur

You can refer to these experiences when you are in the early stages of designing your next initiative and better predict where difficulties may occur and plan how to mitigate them.

#### Do your best to set realistic expectations for grantees about what documentation may be required and the timeline for receiving funding

Be conservative in your estimates and be communicative, transparent, and honest about any mistakes by the foundation.



## 9. See Beyond the 501(c)(3) Boundaries



### The Idea

Partnering with communities around grantmaking will mean – and should mean – being open to funding organizations that are not 501(c)(3)s, including informal groups and collectives, individuals, community development corporations, small businesses, farms, LLCs, tribes with various types of state and federal recognition, and unrecognized tribes/communities. If you currently fund only 501(c)(3)s, examine how grantmaking may be influencing how communities are resourcing and structuring their work. Are they having to develop cumbersome and unnecessary tax and financial and reporting structures simply to secure resources? To make sure your grantmaking strategies are sustainable for and beneficial to communities in the long term, consider looking beyond 501(c)(3)s.

In our *Participatory Climate Initiative*, as soon as we began to reach out to stakeholders, they urged us to design a program that would support both 501(c)(3)s and non-501(c)(3)s, and we quickly adopted the idea of including all kinds of organizations, including tribes, small businesses, and informal collectives. Reaching out to groups who were not registered as 501(c)(3)s, we encountered both enthusiasm and skepticism. While some were excited about the opportunity because funding for these structures is rare, at least one group shared that they had structured themselves as an LLC precisely to move out of potentially problematic and extractive dynamics between nonprofits and philanthropy and they were hesitant to engage. Distributing money to a variety of types of groups was challenging and in some cases imposed significant administrative burdens on grantees. We did our best to mitigate them.

While we had been open to funding individuals, the Design Team chose not to do so because of concerns around whether they could ensure that such grantees would have significant enough accountability to and buy-in from the communities they worked with. The team also observed that when philanthropy elevates and supports individuals within communities, it can be problematic and do more harm than good.

### Recommended Practices

**Develop administrative systems that will enable you to manage the risks associated with funding individuals, tribes, informal groups, and for-profit entities**

Seek support and guidance – externally if needed – about what the risks actually are. Weigh these risks against the impact risk associated with not funding organizations that are doing excellent work with community support.

**Consider the different needs that grantees with different structures might have as they engage in your grantmaking process**

For example, consider how you can prepare to discuss your requirements for expenditure responsibility grants with small farmers before you embark on a plan to fund these groups.

**When working with communities with limited experience with funders, don't assume shared language and understanding of financial and legal terminology**

For instance, “expenditure responsibility” is not terminology most are familiar with. Be prepared to talk through options and trade-offs in lay language.

**Have questions about the toolkit?  
Or want to learn more?**

Please reach out to Katy Love ([katy@fundforsharedinsight.org](mailto:katy@fundforsharedinsight.org)), the toolkit's co-author with Winifred Olliff, both consultants with experience and expertise in participatory grantmaking.



[Contact Katy](#)