

Participatory Grantmaking in Practice

**MOVING FROM
CONSULTATION TO
COMMUNITY CONTROL**



**A BOLD
VENTURES
PATHWAY**



**In the evolving
landscape of philanthropy,
the demand for a more
inclusive and participatory
approach to grantmaking
has never been stronger.**

AS WE APPROACH A CENTURY since the establishment of the philanthropic sector, it is evident that unilateral decisions about resource allocation—made without the input of the individuals and communities they are intended to serve—fall short of achieving the transformative social change that philanthropy promises. At Bold Ventures, our commitment to community engagement in grantmaking is deeply rooted in our values of respect, autonomy, and trust. We strive to create a transparent, inclusive, and reflective process that acknowledges and addresses tensions, ensuring that all voices are heard and valued. By challenging ourselves and others, we aim to cultivate a culture of accountability, continuous learning, and shared decision-making.

We have observed various actors within philanthropy exploring and implementing models of participatory grantmaking to engage their communities more meaningfully. However, without a clear set of practices or commitments defining participatory grantmaking, funders are adopting a wide range of models and methods. While trust-based approaches have emerged to reduce the burden on grantees and increase mutual accountability, participatory grantmaking asks funders to move beyond shifting relationships to shifting power. A search for “participatory grantmaking” reveals numerous stories of grantmakers incorporating the perspectives of those with lived experience and expertise into the decision-making process, in an attempt to address the inherent power imbalance between funders and grantees. However, the practices that funders are using range from merely adding new decision-makers to the mix to those that completely cede decision-making power to the communities affected by funding decisions.



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Recognizing this diversity, we wrote this article to help align donors and grantmakers across philanthropy on how to effectively integrate community engagement into the grantmaking process, embodying our commitment to a more inclusive and participatory approach. This article outlines a structured approach for philanthropic organizations to democratize their grantmaking operations, ensuring that community voices are not only heard but are central to the decision-making process. We have developed a spectrum of community engagement that includes five models of involvement through grantmaking—from ensuring communities are well-informed about grantmaking opportunities, criteria, and processes to fostering democratic participation and equity through community-driven decision-making. Grantmakers can use this spectrum to navigate the complexities of participatory grantmaking, ranging from initial consultation to full community ownership.

The Importance of Community Engagement

At its core, integrating community engagement into grantmaking practices democratizes philanthropy. It dismantles the traditional hierarchies that have long dictated the flow of resources, ensuring that those who are most affected by social issues have a seat at the table, a voice in the conversation, and a hand in crafting the solutions. Communities possess intimate knowledge of their challenges and hold the keys to their resolution. By harnessing this wisdom, philanthropy can tailor initiatives that are not only more effective but also resonate deeply with the needs and aspirations of those it seeks to support. Engagement fosters trust between philanthropic organizations and communities. This trust is the cornerstone of any impactful initiative, ensuring sustained collaboration and commitment. Further, it imbues philanthropic efforts with a legitimacy that can only come from genuine partnership and shared vision.

Community engagement also allows donors and grantmakers to shift power through grantmaking. The engagement process redefines communities from passive recipients to active partners. This shift in perspective acknowledges the agency of communities and their capacity to lead change, thereby redistributing power from the hands of a few into the many. At its heart, the move to engage communities in grantmaking is a commitment to equity and inclusion. It recognizes the disparities in power and access that have historically marginalized certain groups and seeks to rectify these through deliberate, inclusive practices that elevate all voices, especially those who have been silenced or disregarded.

The Meaning of Community

Community is a term that is often invoked in participatory grantmaking and community engagement models. But what does it mean? Community can be defined by a range of factors, such as geographic location, shared experiences, identity, interests, and more. Communities are not monolithic and can consist of multiple people, viewpoints, experiences, and politics. Community often involves a shared experience or shared identity of belonging to such communities. People can also be a part of multiple communities.

Grantmakers must understand these dynamics as they identify what communities they are seeking to engage or deepen engagement with. Trust and relationship building are also key pieces needed to effectively engage communities. Grantmakers can ask questions to interrogate which communities they want to engage.

Does your grantmaking strategy impact or seek to shift social justice issues that impact certain groups or individuals? Who?

Does your organization have existing relationships with members of the communities you are seeking to engage? How can you build relationships with these communities?



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DEFINING AND ENGAGING COMMUNITY:

Michael Reese Health Trust and the Health First Collaborative

The **Health First Collaborative (HFC)** is an incubator and amplifier of community ideas for better, more equitable health solutions. Seeded by the Michael Reese Health Trust and supported by over 20 funding collaborators, HFC invests in community-led, innovation solutions that address the root causes of racial health inequities and improve the physical, mental and social well-being of Chicagoland residents. Launched rapidly in response to the Coronavirus pandemic, the collaborative knew that community knowledge would be critical to addressing this unprecedented health crisis. Early on, the HFC took strategic steps to clearly define its community, identifying and engaging individuals and organizations that represent or care for communities who experienced divestment. By developing an infrastructure for community engagement and leadership at the outset, the HFC sought to shift mechanisms of collaboration beyond traditional relationships between funders and community partners. By harnessing its relationships with community, the HFC leveraged its community assets to generate and provide oversight on effective solutions that funders could support through development of a Community Advisory Council, a Learning Community guided by a cohort of fellows, and weekly plenary meetings open to the public.

Understand the Spectrum of Community Engagement in Grantmaking

This community engagement spectrum outlines the various models we have seen that donors and grantmakers can use to reflect and implement into their grantmaking practices. Below, we describe the objectives and activities of each model and offer reflections on how decision-making and power operate at each level. This spectrum can be used to identify where your organization's current grantmaking practices are and develop goals and strategies to more effectively engage community as you move towards a participatory grantmaking model.

We recognize and emphasize that all the steps in the process of involving the community in grantmaking are important, no matter where an organization is in its journey, and that understanding where an organization currently stands and making strides to incorporate community feedback is far more important than perfection.

The Spectrum of Community Engagement in Grantmaking

Defer to Community
(LEVEL 5)

Collaborate
(LEVEL 4)

Involve
(LEVEL 3)

Consult
(LEVEL 2)

Inform
(LEVEL 1)

Closed
(LEVEL 0)

Closed (LEVEL 0)

Objective:	Recognize situations where there is no engagement currently happening with the community.
Activities:	There are no activities to engage communities.
Decision-making:	Communities do not participate in grantmaking decision-making.
Power:	Grantmaking organization holds all the power in the grantmaking process.

Inform (LEVEL 1)

Objective:	Ensure communities are well-informed about grantmaking opportunities, criteria, and processes.
Activities:	Develop and distribute accessible and clear materials (e.g., fact sheets, videos) and host open houses or presentations.
Decision-making:	Communities do not participate in grantmaking decision-making.
Power:	Grantmaking organization provides transparency of the process. Power is not shifted.

Consult (LEVEL 2)

Objective:	Gather community input to inform grantmaking priorities and criteria.
Activities:	Conduct surveys, community forums, and focus groups to collect insights and preferences from the community.
Decision-making:	Communities can provide feedback, but feedback does not necessarily have to be incorporated. Funders have the final decision-making power.
Power:	Power is not shared in this step. Grantmakers engage communities but still hold primary decision-making roles.

Involve (LEVEL 3)

Objective:	Integrate community needs and assets into the grantmaking process, ensuring their perspectives inform planning and decision-making.
Activities:	Engage in community organizing and advocacy, facilitate interactive workshops, and include community representatives in planning meetings.
Decision-making:	Communities have more of an active role in informing decisions, but do not hold the final decision.
Power:	Communities hold power in some processes, but do not hold final decision-making power.

Collaborate (LEVEL 4)

Objective:	Ensure community members play a leadership role in the implementation of grants and related projects.
Activities:	Form MOUs with community-based organizations, establish citizen advisory committees, and engage in open planning forums.
Decision-making:	Decision-making power is shared between the grantmaking organization and communities of interest.
Power:	Power can be shared between the organization and communities to foster collaboration and mutuality.

Defer to Community (LEVEL 5)

Objective:	Foster democratic participation and equity through community-driven decision-making, fully embracing community ownership over grantmaking processes.
Activities:	Implement participatory action research and participatory budgeting, and support the establishment of cooperatives and other community-led entities.
Decision-making:	Communities completely control the decision-making of grantmaking activities. Grantmakers implement decisions.
Power:	Power is ceded to the community.



INVOLVE COMMUNITY:

We Rise Together: For an Equitable and Just Recovery

We Rise Together exemplifies how grantmaking can integrate community needs and assets, focusing on the economic revitalization of Chicago's long-disinvested communities, which are predominantly Black and Latine neighborhoods. They have adopted a community-centered approach to spur development, increase quality employment, and strengthen local businesses. Since September 2021, We Rise Together has awarded some \$47 million in targeted neighborhoods, including support for real estate developments worth more than \$564 million. This significant investment is made possible through pooled contributions to the We Rise Together Fund, emphasizing the importance of collective effort and community vision alignment.

The grantmaking process involves close collaboration with community members, ensuring that the projects supported are those already vetted by the communities themselves. By integrating community needs into their grantmaking process, We Rise Together empowers communities, giving them an active role in decision-making. While the final decision-making power does not rest with the communities, their involvement significantly influences the planning and execution of projects, showcasing a balanced approach to shared power and responsibility in driving economic growth and equity.



COLLABORATE WITH COMMUNITY:

Illinois Children's Healthcare Foundation

Illinois Children's Healthcare Foundation (ILCHF) has a single vision: that every child in Illinois grows up healthy. Working through grantee partners across the state, ILCHF focuses its grantmaking on identifying and funding solutions to the barriers that prevent children from accessing the ongoing health care they need, with a primary focus on children's oral health and children's mental health. Since 2010, ILCHF has invested \$11.27 million across four grantee communities, and \$915,000 in a cross-site evaluation through its Children's Mental Health Initiative (CMHI), Building Systems of Care, and Community by Community Initiative. Each of the four grantee communities received approximately \$2.85 million over eight years (one planning year, six implementation years, one mentoring year, and two years of advocacy technical assistance funding). With this ILCHF grant funding, the four CMHI teams significantly shifted community culture and practices surrounding children's mental

health. CMHI has shown that empowering communities through an investment in their unique visions and capabilities enables providers to align their organizational plans and operations in order to more effectively serve children with a community-wide strategy. ILCHF was committed to learning from and sharing the successes, challenges, and failures of each unique CMHI 1.0 project. To that end, each community wrote a manual describing its efforts, including problems, solutions, and strategies. The manuals are a rich resource of information about the extraordinary work in each community; the manuals are available from ILCHF at www.ilchf.org.

DEFER TO COMMUNITY: **Shift Health Accelerator Collaborative Fund**

In 2022, with funding from Blue Cross of California Foundation and fiscal management support from the Willamette Partnership, the **Shift Health Accelerator Collaborative Fund** was established to increase access to funding for vulnerable communities through a participatory grantmaking process. This process was driven by the experience and leadership of the communities it aimed to serve. The pilot project was designed by a self-selected decision-making body that partnered with community members who had direct experience working within the communities served by the Fund. Together, they held decision-making power over all aspects of the Fund, including principles, values, goals, and expected outcomes.

The Fund's work was guided by a commitment to transparency in distributing funds and creating a system of accountability rooted in the expertise of the communities they collaborated with. Ultimately, the Fund took risks in funding innovative practices, supported creative solutions to achieve justice and equity, and prioritized learning and listening to build strong and inclusive collaborations and partnerships.

Using the Community Engagement Spectrum

To use the community engagement spectrum, donors and grantmakers can use the following steps to identify their current position and develop goals for implementation.

1. Identify Current Position

Evaluate where you, your institution, or initiative currently stands on the spectrum in its grantmaking processes. This involves assessing whether your strategies lean towards closed, informing, consulting, involving, collaborating with, or fully deferring to community ownership.

Your evaluation process can include grantmaking staff, leadership, and possibly a facilitator. This evaluation process can be used for an individual grantmaking strategy and/or to evaluate a whole organization or collective's grantmaking strategy.

Reflection questions to help identify your current position:

- Which stage of the spectrum does your current work align with?
- Across the grantmaking portfolio, are programs/initiatives at different spectrum levels?
- Are any challenges or barriers preventing the organization from moving further along the spectrum? Are there levers of change to address these barriers?

2. Set Aspirational Goals

Define where you want to be on the spectrum. The ultimate goal is to move towards community ownership where communities have a significant say and control over grantmaking decisions.

Reflection questions:

- Where on the spectrum you want your strategy to advance to in the next year?
- What changes would you like to implement in your strategy?
- Does your organization have the expertise in house that can do the work? If not, who are the external consultants or groups you can partner with?
- What resources are needed to make these changes? Internal? External?
- Is there an ideal date or time frame for these changes to be implemented?

- How much power is your organization willing to share? How does that inform what stage of the spectrum you want to be on?
- How will you measure progress as you implement goals and objectives?
- What is needed to make the shift to your desired spectrum position sustainable?

3. Prioritize Accountability and Feedback Mechanisms

After your organization has set goals and implemented strategies to engage community in grantmaking, the organization should implement accountability and feedback mechanisms. Accountability is important to ensure that changes are reflective of and responsive to the community's needs and desires. Obtaining feedback from community members, staff, and other relevant stakeholders can help organizations fine-tune initiatives and ensure that their community engagement is sustainable and impactful.

An organization can use the following steps:

- Regularly revisit and reflect on the organization's values and how they align with the engagement process.
- Establish clear, accessible channels for both giving and receiving feedback on the grantmaking process.
- Invest in building the community's capacity to participate meaningfully in grantmaking, including leadership development, technical assistance, and resource mobilization.

Conclusion

The imperative to embed community engagement within the philanthropic process is clear. It's a journey towards a more equitable, effective, and empathetic practice of giving. Integrating community into grantmaking provides a transformative path to a more democratic and inclusive approach to philanthropy. Donors and grantmakers can use this article to reflect on their current practices, create goals and strategies to engage community, and implement accountability mechanisms. With these actions, there is also the opportunity for those across philanthropy to share the learnings of their work across the community engagement spectrum. This can facilitate more transparency and alignment on what participatory approaches in philanthropy look like and promote a culture within the field that values and centers community engagement.

Acknowledgments

Bold Ventures is a strategic advisory firm that supports individuals, families, foundations, and donor communities who are committed to eliminating disparities through relationship, repair, and the redistribution of wealth. This guide was prepared by the Bold Ventures team, with contributions from Graduate Fellow Seyram Dodor.

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