FOSTERING PARTICIPATORY LEARNING APPROACHES IN PHILANTHROPY

A GUIDE FOR THE CURIOUS

engage R+D

WELCOME LETTER

Dear Colleagues,

We are thrilled to introduce this field guide on participatory learning approaches in philanthropy, developed by Engage R+D with the support of our organizations. The guide is based upon the collective expertise of diverse foundations and reflects a range of experiences with such approaches. It aims to be an essential resource for foundation program, learning and evaluation, and executive leaders curious about or actively engaging in participatory practices within their organizations.

This guide champions the cause of making philanthropic work more impactful by broadening who participates in and benefits from learning. With it, we invite you to co-imagine what a transformative approach to learning could look like, one that embraces inclusive, participatory, and equitable practices involving grantees, community leaders, and funders. We acknowledge the unique journeys of each foundation in weaving participatory approaches into their organizational fabric. Whether you are beginning to explore or looking to deepen your participatory learning practices, this guide is equipped with tools, examples, and insights to support you on this path.

As you open this guide, we invite you to first consider where your own curiosity lies in participatory learning. As you delve more deeply into the resources contained within, we invite you to revisit your initial reflection and consider how your curiosity may have shifted, and what action you might commit to beyond curiosity.

We are grateful for the knowledge and experiences shared by all the contributors who made this resource possible, and we hope it inspires others in their journey toward more inclusive and effective philanthropic practices.

Warm regards,

Sarah Smith, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation
Gina Martinez and Stephanie Teleki, California Health Care Foundation
Erin McCarthy and Eundria Hill-Joseph, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation
Kim Ammann-Howard, James Irvine Foundation
Chhaya Kolavalli and Dan Tesfay, Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation
Matthew Carr, Walton Family Foundation

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WHY FOCUS ON PARTICIPATORY LEARNING?

Imagine you are part of a foundation focused on healthy eating and active living that has pledged to enhance equity and inclusion in its grantmaking and learning. As you sift through past evaluation reports, you notice a pattern in the foundation's grantmaking and learning efforts, suggesting an inward focus with these activities. For example, the foundation implemented a recent initiative to create community gardens near schoolyards, with the goal of fostering environmental stewardship, community engagement, and healthy living among students. While the initiative aligned with the foundation's mission, you notice that the strategy itself, as well as subsequent learning and evaluation activities, were carried out with minimal input from the school communities it aimed to benefit. Learning and evaluation activities subsequently revealed that the initiative did not have the impact the foundation had hoped for on its larger goals, due to challenges with maintaining the gardens and incorporating them into the schools' educational curricula.

This leads you to be curious as to why the foundation's grantmaking and learning efforts were designed with minimal community participation in the past. You are also curious to understand the necessary conditions that would support a more inclusive approach in the future. Overall, you share the foundation's commitment to equity and inclusion. You also sense that a different approach to learning could achieve better results for communities and the foundation's mission. However, you are unsure where to begin with supporting a different path. What questions should you be asking to assess your foundation's readiness to engage in more participatory practices? How can you garner support from others for more participatory approaches? How can you draw upon lessons from others to develop new practices that are actionable and aligned with your context?

If this scenario, or one like it, sounds familiar, then this guide is for you.

Notes on Methods

Methods that Informed this Guide

Participatory learning within philanthropy can take many forms. To gather a range of perspectives on this topic, Engage R+D drew upon the following sources to inform this guide:

A literature review on how participatory research is approached in different fields and contexts.

Interviews with staff members at foundations engaged in participatory learning and evaluation approaches.

A survey of grantees experienced in partnering with funders on participatory learning approaches and evaluation activities.
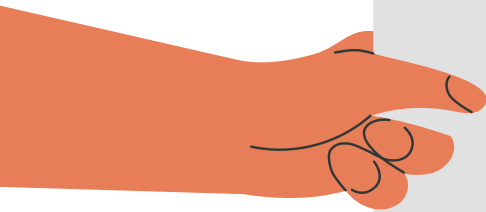
Focus groups with Equitable Evaluation Initiative (EEI) practice partners.

Learning sessions and input from project funders as well as project advisors with expertise in participatory and equity-focused evaluation.

For more detail on the methods that informed this guide, please see the Appendix.

Why Participatory Learning Now?

Participatory learning represents a critical evolution in philanthropy. It is grounded in the belief that those most affected by social issues hold invaluable insights into creating effective solutions. This guide, developed by tapping into the rich experiences of funders, grantees, and learning consultants, defines participatory learning as *the deliberate inclusion of grantees and community members in the learning activities of projects or programs*. This approach not only aims to gather firsthand perspectives to deepen understanding and challenge unconscious assumptions, but it also strives *to share and shift decision-making power to those traditionally on the periphery of such processe*s.

> "We've seen the power of supporting local grassroots actors and organizations to be the ones who are designing, implementing, and making use of the research themselves through participatory methodologies."
>
> – STRATEGIC LEARNING, RESEARCH, AND EVALUATION TEAM MEMBERS AT AMERICAN JEWISH WORLD SERVICE

In recent years, the philanthropic sector has faced increasing calls for transparency, inclusivity, and equity, prompting a reevaluation of how foundations engage with their communities. Participatory learning emerges as a response to these calls, offering a pathway to more culturally responsive and equitable approaches. By integrating grantee and community input more meaningfully, and addressing the limitations in traditional feedback loops, foundations can better align their work with the lived realities of those they aim to serve.

This guide equips foundation staff with the knowledge and tools necessary for embracing participatory learning, from assessing organizational readiness to implementing strategies and sustaining momentum. It highlights the benefits of this approach for both foundations and grantees, addresses common concerns, and provides practical examples and tips for success. It contributes to a growing body of resources designed to increase community participation and power within philanthropy, including recent resources shared by Candid, Fund for Shared Insight, and Community Wealth Partners.[1,2,3] Informed by a rich history of equity-driven research approaches, such as participatory action research and the Equitable Evaluation Framework™ (EEF), it offers actionable insights for those working in contexts where such approaches are just gaining traction.[4,5] It is particularly relevant for those working in the U.S., as such inclusive practices are more established internationally.

[1] Gibson, C., & Bokoff, J. (2018). *Deciding together: Shifting power and resources through participatory grantmaking*. Candid. https://learningforfunders.candid.org/content/guides/deciding-together.

[2] Fund for Shared Insight. (2023). *Participatory philanthropy toolkit*. https://fundforsharedinsight.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/FSI-PGI-Toolkit-060323-1.pdf.

[3] Community Wealth Partners. (2023). *Sharing power with communities: A field guide*. https://communitywealth.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Sharing-Power-with-Communities-Field-Guide-v5.pdf.

[4] Venkateswaran, N., Feldman, J., Hawkins, S., Lewis, M. A., Armstrong-Brown, J., Comfort, M., Lowe, A., & Pineda, D. (2023). *Bringing an equity-centered framework to research: Transforming the researcher, research content, and practice of research*. RTI Press. RTI Press Occasional Paper (No. OP-0085-2301). https://doi.org/10.3768/rtipress.2023.op.0085.2301.

[5] Equitable Evaluation Initiative. (2023). Equitable Evaluation Framework™ (EEF). www.equitableeval.org/framework.

This glossary contains key terms relevant to participatory learning efforts in philanthropy.

Community

Drawing upon work by Community Wealth Partners, *community* refers to **individuals with lived expertise relevant to a specific program or project**. This may encompass all residents of a specific geography if that is the project's focus, or a particular subgroup within the area, such as school-age children and their parents. It may also include staff of grantee organizations in addition to those they serve.[6] Communities are not homogenous nor static; they contain a multitude of perspectives and are always evolving.[7] In this guide, many stories illustrate grantees, predominantly nonprofits, as primary participants in the learning process. Broadening participation to include other community members can enhance learning by reflecting a wider range of experiences and needs.[8]

Learning

Grantmakers for Effective Organizations describes *learning* as the process of **"advancing our knowledge and understanding of what's working, what's not, and how to improve performance over time."**[9] This concept underscores that gaining insight into addressing societal problems can lead to greater social impact. This guide prioritizes learning over evaluation in this context, acknowledging that while evaluation is one method of learning, it is not the sole approach.

Lived Expertise

Lived expertise is the **deep, personal knowledge and insights individuals acquire through their experiences, especially in contexts of social issues, health conditions, or other life challenges.** Distinct from expertise gained through formal education or professional training, *lived expertise* highlights the importance and authority of firsthand experiences. Both nonprofit and foundation staff may possess lived expertise pertinent to specific projects or programs, in addition to community residents.

Participation

Defined within the scope of participatory learning, *participation* is the **active engagement of grantees, community members, and other partners in the learning process, where they hold decision-making power**. True participation extends beyond just gathering community feedback through meetings, surveys, or interviews. It encompasses more profound engagement, such as involving members in shaping research questions, methods, analysis, and the application of findings.[10] This collaborative approach ensures that research is conducted with or by participants, allowing their voices to meaningfully influence learning approaches, outcomes, and actions.

Participatory Learning

Participatory learning is the **process of involving grantees or community members with lived expertise in foundation-supported learning activities, aimed at shifting decision-making power to these individuals**.[11] While "participatory" is a recognized term, its limitations are acknowledged. The EEI suggests the term "reciprocity" instead to highlight the mutual benefits of relationships among grantees, communities, and funders. Despite the potential of the term "reciprocal learning" to highlight this mutually-beneficial relationship, we use the term "participatory learning" due to its wider recognition and accessibility.

Power

Power refers to the **capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events**. In the context of participatory learning in philanthropy, it emphasizes the shifting or sharing of decision-making authority and resources among community members, grantees, and funders. Acknowledging and addressing power dynamics is crucial for ensuring those with lived expertise are not only valued and heard but that they also significantly impact and guide the direction of philanthropic efforts.

[6] Community Wealth Partners. (2023). Sharing power with communities: A field guide. https://communitywealth.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Sharing-Power-with-Communities-Field-Guide-v5.pdf.

[7] Every Child Thrives, W.K. Kellogg Foundation. (2021). *Doing evaluation in service of racial equity*. https://everychildthrives.com/doing-evaluation-in-service-of-racial-equity/.

[8] Aside from grantees and community members, participatory learning may also include other parties who can contribute to learning that shifts power to grantees and community members, including academics, policymakers, organizational development consultants, etc.

[9] Grantmakers for Effective Organizations. (n.d.). *Learning in philanthropy: A guidebook*. https://measureresults.issuelab.org/resources/34950/34950.pdf.

[10] González, R. (2020). Spectrum of community engagement to ownership. *Facilitating Power*. https://movementstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/The-Spectrum-of-Community-Engagement-to-Ownership.pdf.

[11] This definition is based on our scan of existing literature, and conversations with funders and advisors. It also builds upon the definition of participatory philanthropy the Fund for Shared Insight recently offered: https://fundforsharedinsight.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/FSI-PGI-Toolkit-060323-1.pdf.

HOW READY IS MY FOUNDATION FOR PARTICIPATORY LEARNING?

A foundation's readiness for participatory learning can be influenced by several factors, including:

- the degree to which staff and leaders recognize the importance of community input in advancing equity and learning,
- available mechanisms for integrating community perspectives into decision-making[12], and
- a commitment to adaptability and resilience when it comes to evolving practice.

Readiness matters because participatory approaches are not universally suitable. In some cases, a foundation's structure and culture may not be ready to support such approaches. Implemented without adequate community trust, resources, or skills, the approaches could potentially cause harm.

By taking a closer look at key readiness factors, foundations can identify both strengths and challenges, and identify next steps for fostering these practices. To make a quick assessment of your foundation as a whole or to determine whether a potential project presents a ripe opportunity for showing the value of such practices, follow these steps when completing the assessment on the following page:

STEP 1: Rate your foundation. Using the four-point rating scale below, add a rating to the right of each factor on the assessment. If you are interested in assessing the readiness of the foundation as a whole for participatory learning approaches, consider each factor as it relates to the organization. If you are interested in readiness for a project for participatory learning approaches, consider each factor as it relates to that project.

STEP 2: Score your assessment. Add up your rating numbers for each section and write them in the designated box. Then, add up the four section scores to get your total score. Record it in the box at the bottom of the assessment.

STEP 3: Reflect and learn. Read on after the assessment to make sense of your scores and learn how to turn them into action. Consider inviting others at your organization to engage in this assessment as a way to open up dialogue on fostering these practices more broadly.

Rating Scale

0 points = This factor is **not yet** happening.

1 point = This factor is just **emerging**.

2 points = This factor is present to a **moderate** extent.

3 points = This factor is present to a **strong** extent.

12 Supportive systems include having the infrastructure to listen to, understand, and act upon community feedback.

Participatory Learning Readiness Factor	Rating
Authorizing environment that supports equity Foundation leadership and decision-makers…	
Foster a culture that invites critical examination of philanthropy's role in racial equity, power, and historical dynamics in working with community members.	
Allocate sufficient time and resources for learning efforts overall.	
Regularly apply lessons from learning efforts to inform grantmaking strategy and foundation priorities.	
Have identified where they are willing to cede decision-making power and what the parameters will be.[13]	
Invite the co-creation of strategic plans and shared decision-making with community members.	
Section score	
Culture of learning Learning efforts…	
Invite opportunities for community members to provide feedback and insights throughout an engagement.	
Go beyond technical approaches, such as data collection, analysis, and reporting, to center community inclusion and relationships.	
Use expanded definitions of rigor, validity, and objectivity that draw on multiple ways of knowing and sources of expertise.	
Are oriented toward participant ownership by sharing in the process, engagement, data, and learnings with participants.	
Include opportunities to work with consultants and learning partners who are experienced in applying equity-focused learning practices.	
Section score	
Staff interest and influence Program officers…	
Value and prioritize participatory approaches.	
Have the ability to customize the learning approach to ensure participation is meaningful and not unduly burdensome.	
Can recognize and challenge common orthodoxies at the foundation that may appear in the work, such as who is considered to have expertise, what type of data is viewed as valid, and time and budget constraints.	
See opportunities to start small and build toward larger, deeper efforts.	
Have access to information, tools, and peer support to grow their approach to participatory learning.	
Section score	
Partner connection and capacity Together, the foundation, grantees, community members, and other partners…	
Have pre-existing relationships and trust, or will have time to focus on developing these before embarking on a participatory effort.	
Share a culture of reflection, noticing, and surfacing needs together and working through conflict.	
Have had opportunities to work collaboratively, including on funding decisions, strategy, planning, and implementation.	
Receive support to build and/or sustain their capacity for dedicated learning activities.	
Have both shared and individual learning needs and interests.	
Section score	
Total score	

Rating Scale

0 points = This factor is **not yet** happening.

1 point = This factor is just **emerging**.

2 points = This factor is present to a **moderate** extent.

3 points = This factor is present to a **strong** extent.

[13] For additional thinking on power and participatory philanthropy more broadly, see Fund for Shared Insight's Participatory Philanthropy Toolkit.

Learning from Your Readiness Assessment

What your scores tell you

Total Score	What It Means
Up to 31 points	**Ready to Lay Groundwork**
	Your score suggests that you are in the early growth stages, and we are glad you are here! Get ready to work with community members by considering the time and resources necessary to do the work well and how you might communicate clearly, limit burden on participants, ensure participants benefit from the process, responsively honor participants' input, and provide inclusive and equitable facilitation. Asking community members to take part in learning can undermine trust and cause other harm if the funder is not prepared. The good news: There are many ways that you can help lay groundwork for future participatory learning approaches. Read the *Taking Next Steps* section below for ideas.
32-49 points	**Ready to Try Participatory Practices**
	Your mid-range score suggests that it is a good time to consider introducing participatory practices that may be well received by those around you or that may allow you to showcase the benefits of participatory learning. Consider which aspects of participatory learning are a good fit for specific projects or the foundation overall. At the same time, look at which readiness factors have room for improvement so you can work on shoring them up to foster more participatory learning over the longer term. Read below for ideas on next steps to take.
50 or more points	**Ready to Normalize Participatory Learning Approaches**
	Your high score suggests you are ready to embrace participatory approaches across your work! You have a supportive, equity-focused organizational culture and solid community relationships that favor participatory learning. You are well-positioned to meaningfully share power with communities and advance equity. Even in these circumstances, of course, participatory practices demand mindful planning and an expectation of process adjustments along the way. Consider how to integrate best practices into your organization's ways of working and how you could share your experiences and strategies with peer funders to spread the learning.

Taking Next Steps

Your section scores and individual factor ratings on the readiness assessment can reveal opportunities and guide your next steps in fostering a practice of participatory learning. Do your section scores differ from one another? Lower section scores may indicate an area to focus on. Look back at where you gave ratings of 0. What could be an entry point for getting started on these? Thinking about colleagues within and outside of your foundation, who could offer thought partnership about taking introductory actions? Look also at where you gave ratings of 1 on the assessment. What leverage do you have to nurture emerging change? Specific ideas corresponding to the sections in the assessment can suggest a starting place:

- To encourage an **authorizing environment that supports equity**, look for opportunities to demonstrate the value of participatory learning approaches with foundation leaders and decision-makers. Explicitly tie the ideas you introduce to existing organizational goals and priorities. Address equity in all learning work while inviting curiosity, input, and partnership from colleagues. For more ideas on making the case to authorities for participatory learning, see *Easing Tensions in Participatory Learning Adoption* (page 16).

- To work towards a **culture of learning**, highlight with executives and program staff the benefits of participatory learning for informing foundation-wide practices and decisions. Share specific, actionable examples of how participatory approaches have strengthened your work or similar efforts at peer organizations. Facilitate ownership of learning across the organization by asking learning and evaluation staff, program staff, and other colleagues to share lessons or lead reflection sessions. When external consultants are an option, seek learning consultants committed to equity and inclusion who can move beyond traditional evaluation roles with verified abilities to be critical thought partners, practice inclusive and equitable engagement, support capacity building, offer skilled facilitation, and support foundation staff in building trust with grantees and community members.

- To develop **staff interest and influence**, make participatory learning approachable by convening learning sessions. These sessions should introduce different strategies and benefits of partnering with community members on learning. Invite staff to share experiences with participatory approaches, and allow staff to raise concerns and ideas. You might make use of the worksheet on page 15. Start small. Look for opportunities to work with colleagues who are open to participatory approaches, have trusted relationships with interested community members, and a project with flexibility to try a participatory strategy in a responsive, mindful way. Expand participatory learning skill sets through professional development. Hold listening sessions in partner communities to learn how foundation practices could better align with the community. Build broader interest gradually by sharing small successes and seeking out participatory learning champions on staff. Engage with and apply the EEF™, including designing projects to generate data useful to the community.[14] For more ideas on making the case to colleagues for participatory learning, see *Benefits of Participatory Learning* (page 11).

- To **foster partner connection and capacity**, take steps to develop trusting relationships with grantees and community members by asking about their learning needs and interests. Whenever possible, design data collection efforts to include or focus on information that will be useful for participants, share data and findings back in a user-friendly and actionable format, and invite dialogue about the learning process. Include time and resources for relationship-building in budgets. *Participatory Learning in Practice* (page 22) includes more suggestions for deepening community engagement with an emphasis on equity.

How Can I Sustain Momentum? (page 32) offers additional resources for you to draw upon when working to deepen buy-in for participatory learning across your foundation.

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATORY LEARNING

Participatory learning can be central to foundations working to strengthen the power of communities to address their priorities and needs. As Strategic Learning, Research, and Evaluation team members at American Jewish World Service remarked, *"[Participatory approaches tie] us back to our programmatic work. It's directly related to the change we seek. We're a human rights funder that supports local ideas and invests in our partners' visions and strategies. We're trying to support marginalized communities to advance and address their own human rights… It's all about supporting our staff and people within communities to deepen their understanding to adjust and improve strategy in an ongoing way."*

This introduction sets the stage to explore the benefits of participatory learning, not only for funders deeply committed to power-building, but also for those at the beginning of their journey towards more inclusive practices. Especially for foundations in the early phases of contemplating their engagement in participatory learning, this section outlines the benefits of doing so for foundations and grantees alike.
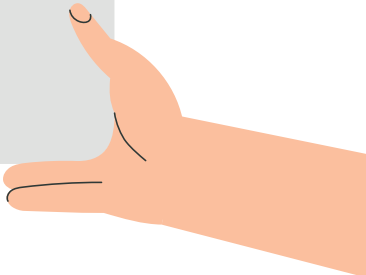
Participatory Learning Benefits Foundations

Funders, grantees, and advisors contributing to this guide shared experiences and examples of how participatory learning can benefit the foundation. For foundations, engaging in participatory learning:
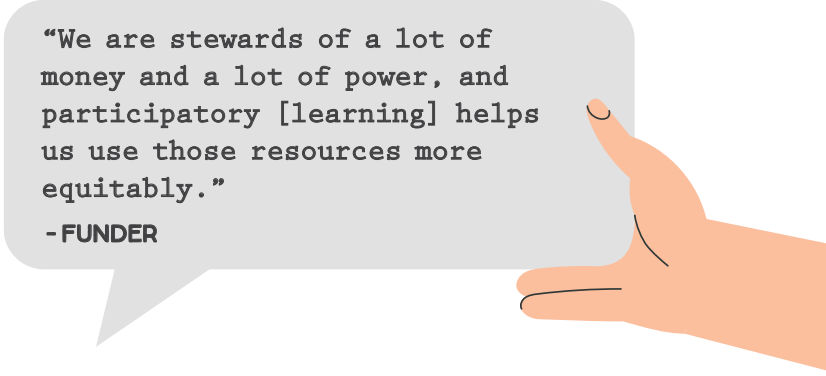
Cultivates trust and alignment. A funder can show that they truly value grantees' experiences and ideas by engaging with them as genuine partners in learning and working to mitigate power differences. Such efforts reinforce trusting relationships and increase shared ownership of funded efforts, benefiting both the funder and grantees. The Jim Joseph Foundation, for example, shared their success with participatory development of a common set of outcomes across grantees: *"There was a lot of trust that the funding wasn't tied to performance of these outcomes, that it was tied to willingness to just participate… After we did this in ten communities, [other] organizations wanted to know about it [and] have access to [the shared outcomes measurement tool]. These outcomes align with what they are trying to do. It's really grown into a tool that the field is buying into."*

> "As a funder, modeling being a learning organization—really sitting at the table with people asking questions, noticing and saying where we've made a wrong assumption, and just showing up that way—builds trust."
>
> **- JIM JOSEPH FOUNDATION**

Expresses a commitment to equity. Many foundations include equity in their stated values or principles; embracing participatory learning is one important way to live that value. As a grantee put it starkly, *"[If a foundation] does not see a value to participatory data collection, they probably aren't equity-minded."* Approaching learning from the perspective that communities hold a wealth of knowledge and expertise is a starting point that challenges the conventional stance that funders and their consultants know better. Foundations can benefit from recognizing the range of experiences in communities and proactively asking who is not yet in the room. When foundations share the power to decide what information is important for community change, the process of data collection can move beyond extraction. *"We care about [learning] with equity at the center,"* stated a Ford Foundation interview participant, *"and that for us means necessarily involving those who are on the front lines doing the work —— our grantee partners."*

> "We are stewards of a lot of money and a lot of power, and participatory [learning] helps us use those resources more equitably."
>
> – FUNDER

Enhances foundation adaptability and learning. By engaging in participatory learning, foundations invest in a process that enriches their own strategic adaptability and responsiveness to changing conditions. This investment encourages a culture of open dialogue with grantees, through which foundations can gain insights into the effectiveness of their strategies and operations and potential areas for improvement. Reflecting on the value of this approach, one funder shared, *"We're able to be transparent about the journey we took… There's some discussion about what we got wrong and what we should focus on going forward, which wouldn't have happened if we weren't able to take a fairly participatory approach."* This perspective underscores how participatory learning can help foundations uncover and act on opportunities for change, thereby enhancing their impact and relevance in an ever-changing environment.

Transforms data collection into strategic insight. Many foundations seek to minimize the reporting burden on grantees, recognizing that time spent on data collection could be redirected toward programming and community engagement. Participatory learning approaches not only respect grantees' time but also turn data collection into an opportunity for foundations to gain actionable insights. By involving grantees in the learning process and tailoring data collection to meet both parties' needs, foundations can ensure the information gathered directly informs strategic planning and impact assessment. An interview participant from the Hartford Foundation noted, *"We have to be pretty thoughtful about making sure participation is actually of value to the individual or community that is involved, and that we're doing it in a way that will meaningfully influence us or benefit the community… and not letting it go into the black box of the foundation."* This approach not only strengthens buy-in from grantees but also equips foundations with deeper, community-informed perspectives that can guide more effective grantmaking.

Illuminates causal pathways. Participatory learning enhances understanding of causal pathways, offering foundations a nuanced view of how change unfolds in complex, dynamic systems. This approach, which values diverse perspectives from grantees and community leaders, helps in mapping out the actual sequence of events leading to change, often revealing unexpected insights divergent from initial predictions. By incorporating these real-world observations into strategy development and implementation, foundations can make more evidence-informed decisions, acknowledging that change is unpredictable, non-linear, and perceived differently across various participants. This insight, arising from participatory methods like outcomes harvesting and most significant change analysis, challenges the conventional preference for methodologies traditionally seen as more rigorous (i.e., randomized control trials and quasi-experimental designs), enabling foundations to adapt their strategies for more effective and impactful grantmaking.[15]

Participatory Learning Benefits Grantees

Funders and grantees also shared how grantees benefit from taking part in participatory learning. For grantees, engaging in participatory learning efforts:

Strengthens grantee-funder trust and collaboration. Participatory learning deepens the mutual understanding and trust between grantees and funders, fostering a collaborative partnership where resources and expertise are shared to achieve common goals. This approach allows grantees to contribute their unique insights, which in turn helps funders make more informed decisions. A grantee highlighted the value of this trust-building process, noting that participatory learning *"sets up all parties for a constructive learning process,"* ensuring that collaboration is based on genuine partnership rather than mere transactional interactions.

Makes learning more impactful and less burdensome. When grantees become decision-makers on what success looks like, the types of information needed to drive change, and the implications of findings, the learning process is far more likely to result in insights that are directly applicable and beneficial to their work. Although the time spent participating in this learning can still be burdensome on grantees, it has the potential to be more worthwhile to them. Oregon Community Foundation emphasized the importance of making learning *"relevant to the folks that were engaged,"* ensuring that the process is not just a formality but a meaningful contribution to their mission.

Provides essential resources for reflection and growth. Participatory learning recognizes the challenges community-based organizations face in dedicating time and resources to reflective practices. By integrating these approaches into grantmaking,

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15   Lynn, J., Stachowiak, S., & Coffman, J. (2021). Lost causal: Debunking myths about causal analysis in philanthropy. The Foundation Review, 13(3). https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1576

foundations offer vital support that enables grantees to engage in thoughtful analysis and adaptation. A grantee observed, *"You cannot rush through participatory approaches and still authentically engage,"* emphasizing the need for adequate resources to ensure meaningful participation and to unlock the transformative potential of these practices.

Expands data capacity and ownership. In conventional learning approaches, data collected about grantees and interpreted by funders may miss what grantees see as key perspectives or nuances, and may provide limited value to the community. *"One of the main reasons why we believe in a participatory approach to learning is to deepen trust in the data that is collected and analyzed,"* the San Francisco Foundation shared. Participatory learning, by involving grantees in creating data collection strategies, shifts the dynamic from evaluation of grantees to collaborative learning and empowerment. This approach not only counters data distrust but it also reinforces data as a communal asset, enhancing organizations' ability to reflect on and improve their work. Indeed, data can play a powerfully positive role in helping community organizations gauge successes and challenges and inform next steps. When shared across a grantee cohort, data can reveal collective wins and help organizations problem-solve.

Facilitates networking and community building. Participatory learning creates opportunities for grantees to connect, share experiences, and discover common ground, potentially leading to new collaborations and enhanced support networks. Through shared learning sessions and feedback mechanisms, organizations can uncover synergies and build relationships that extend beyond individual projects. WomenStrong International pointed out the importance of evaluating their impact through the lens of grantees' experiences, stating, *"When we evaluate ourselves, it's all about our value to [grantees]. That's the metric of success: What are they learning? What social connections are they getting?"* This perspective underscores the role of participatory learning in not just achieving programmatic goals but also in weaving a stronger fabric of community and mutual support among grantees.

In considering the many benefits of participatory learning for both foundations and grantees, engaging in these practices can be seen as not merely a choice but a strategic imperative for those committed to meaningful, impactful philanthropy. The insights shared by funders, grantees, and advisors underscore the potential of participatory approaches in cultivating trust, enhancing adaptability, and fostering deeper collaboration. To further explore how these concepts can be applied within your foundation, we invite you to delve into the worksheet *How Participatory Approaches Can Improve Learning* on page 15 to visualize how participatory learning approaches can apply to a hypothetical situation. The worksheet can be used as an exercise with colleagues, grantees, or community members who are together learning how participatory practices could be useful.

This worksheet offers an exercise for foundation staff to think through the value of participatory learning approaches. The worksheet uses a hypothetical scenario to illustrate how such approaches can help a foundation to address community priorities, as well as its own goals. Schedule a time to review and discuss this exercise as a group, and reflect on implications for your work together. Consider doing it alongside grantees or community members.

COMMUNITY GARDEN SCENARIO

Problem: The schoolyard of a local elementary school includes a sizeable weedy area that has not been used for any purpose in many years. At the same time, the school community has expressed a desire for a more robust nutrition education program for its students and ways to increase access to healthy foods during the school day. The school lacks funds for developing a new program.

Attempted fix: A local foundation provides funding to the school to transform the lot into a garden. The goal of the funding is to get a garden up and running for use by the school. The funds are to be used for garden infrastructure and supplies as well as the labor to build garden beds ready for planting.

Outcomes: The school uses the grant to build garden beds in the formerly weedy area. Several teachers take their classes out to plant seeds in September and the school reports to the funder that teachers, students, and other staff love having access to the garden. However, as cold weather sets in over the fall and winter, the garden is used less and less. A few classes try planting again in the spring, but the school year ends before anything is ready to harvest. By the following year, the garden is underutilized and has deteriorated. Although the funder is disappointed with these outcomes, they remain unaware of a crucial oversight: the grant failed to meet the school's primary needs, which were nutrition education programming and more access to healthy foods.

Reader Reflections

- What participatory actions could the foundation have taken to better inform this work and future work?

- What questions does this scenario raise about equity, and what is missed by not having participatory connections?

- How does the scenario fall short in serving the community? In serving the funder?

- How might the lessons in this scenario apply to my own foundation's work?

Ready to Dig In?

Foundations are at different points in their use of participatory learning approaches and have opportunities to evolve from where they are. The following examples revisit the community garden scenario to illustrate early steps and take participatory practice further.

Prune your existing plants. A foundation just getting started with participatory approaches might circle back to the above scenario by engaging community members in participatory learning after the grant to explore how and why the initial setup of the garden did not lead to the funder's intended results or meet the school community's needs.
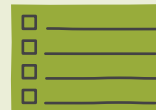
Sow new seeds. A foundation getting more involved in participatory approaches could gather community input both before and after the grant (including from school program leadership, students, teachers, administrators, and others) on their goals and needed support. Collaborative data collection design and equity considerations could benefit community members and inform the foundation's future efforts.

Water and nurture. A funder ready to take on more immersive or even transformative participatory approaches might redesign the grant and associated learning activities around community-generated priorities. Foundation staff or consultants with trusted relationships in the community could build in time for listening sessions that surface the school's ideas on how to meet their nutrition education and healthy food priorities, as well as pros and cons of implementing different strategies.

Discussion Cues

- What are the pros and cons of each example for the community? For the funder?

- How might each approach advance equity?

EASING TENSIONS IN PARTICIPATORY LEARNING ADOPTION

You may find yourself and your team ready to integrate participatory learning approaches into your work, but lacking the resources and explicit buy-in from your organization to do so. The extent to which learning and evaluation teams, as well as program staff, can cultivate participatory, community-focused practices relies largely on their organization's learning culture and commitment to equity. What can you do to get others in your organization on board? Through our interviews with numerous funders, we identified common challenges, approaches, and strategies that prevailed.

Addressing multiple perspectives and interests

Funders shared insights into how their organizations have adopted participatory practices, highlighting the value of these approaches for both the community and to the foundation. They also identified barriers to implementing these practices, with the most significant ones being the need for broad buy-in and committed resources in a philanthropic environment that historically has not embraced power sharing. The following outlines common tensions or challenges, along with funder-tested strategies and recommendations for addressing them. It acknowledges that being aware of and managing these tensions can sometimes be a more realistic or desirable goal than resolving them.

The worksheet *How Participatory Approaches Can Improve Learning* on page 15 illustrates the application of participatory learning approaches using a hypothetical scenario. The worksheet can be used as an exercise with colleagues or community members who are together learning about the usefulness of participatory practices.
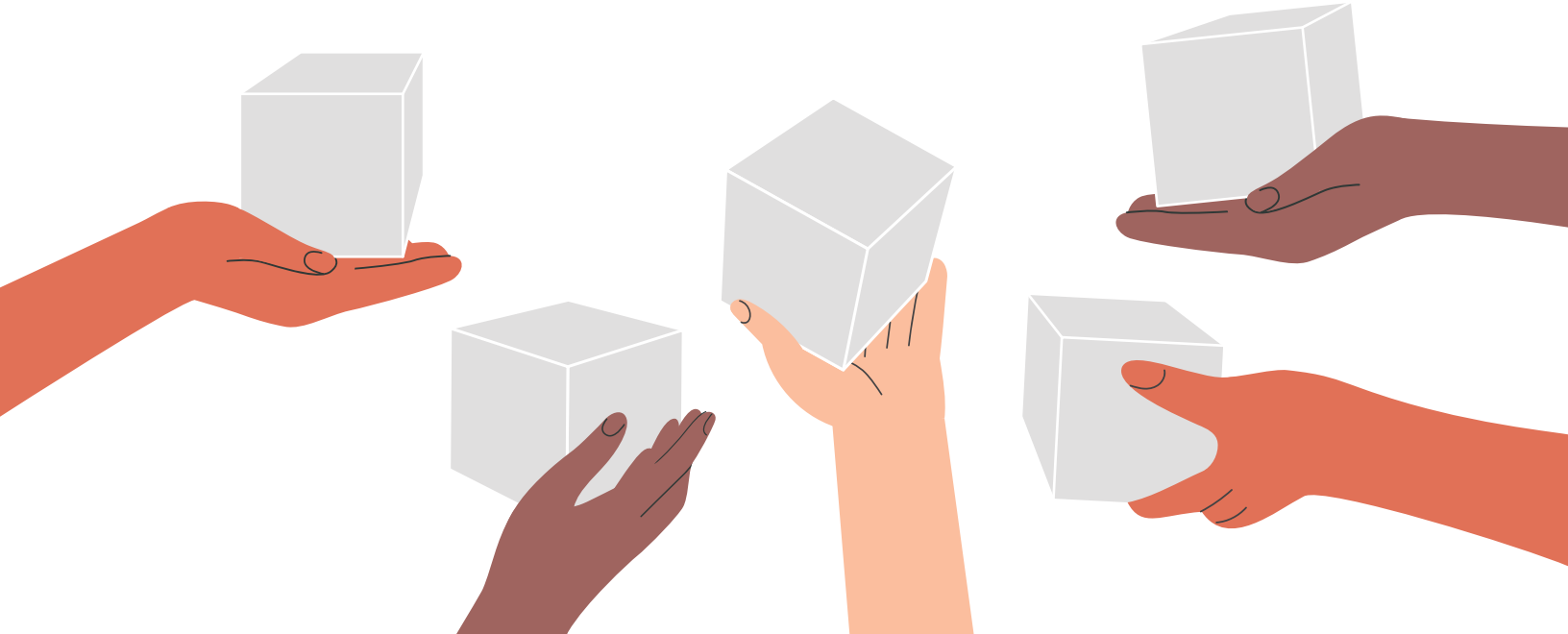
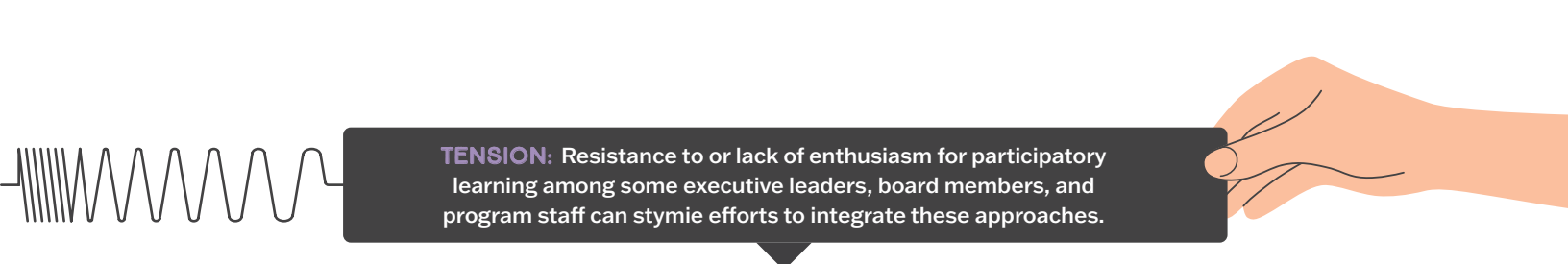> *"What does it really mean to say that you're challenging power when, in some ways, by your very nature [of existing as a foundation] you are reinforcing power dynamics?"*

How you can ease this tension

Historically, philanthropy relied on professional staff making what were viewed as expert decisions on behalf of communities.[16] However, this past model of philanthropy does not have to be a barrier to partnering more equally with communities and sharing power today. As societal norms shift and our understanding of inequity and social challenges deepens, an increasing number of foundations are adapting their approaches to be more community-focused. Below are some strategies you can implement:

- **Encourage reflection.** Look for opportunities to open conversation about conventional philanthropy's assumptions and biases and examine the inclination for funders to hold the power when it comes to defining success, developing strategy, and measuring progress. Consider which communities the foundation aims to serve and whether participatory learning approaches would help or harm your mission. As the San Francisco Foundation characterizes its stance, *"As funders, it's important to acknowledge and honor the perspectives of community. We want to make sure not to insert ourselves in ways that are natural for so many funders to want to do."*

- **Emphasize mission alignment.** Contrary to fears of diminished control, sharing power with grantees and communities amplifies your foundation's impact. *"We're more powerful—not less—when we bring more voices into our conversations and our work,"* shared Interact for Health, underlining that participatory learning is not a zero-sum game but a strategy for mutual enrichment. Participatory learning can offer new ideas, more effective solutions, and stronger community buy-in by listening to those who have direct knowledge and experience—with the potential to achieve the mission better. In addition, it can be helpful to highlight how participatory learning approaches align with racial equity values and other existing frameworks or models the foundation may employ (such as trust-based philanthropy, community capacity building, or the EEF).

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[16] Gibson, C.M., Cowan, L.P., & Rainey, J. (2024, February). *Philanthropy needs to trust the real experts—the people it supports.* Nonprofit Quarterly. https://nonprofitquarterly.org/philanthropy-needs-to-trust-the-real-experts/.

> "Some folks on the program side see evaluation and learning as being unnecessarily burdensome and have felt the need to protect their grantees from participating. That's changing but has been a bit of a barrier."

How you can ease this tension

Securing buy-in across all levels of the organization is crucial for embedding participatory learning into the fabric of your foundation's operations. Even in the absence of unanimous support, several proactive measures can help cultivate a more receptive environment:

- **Bridge participatory learning with strategic objectives.** Demonstrate how participatory practices align with, and can enhance, the foundation's overarching goals. Tailor your approach to resonate with the specific interests and concerns of leaders and board members, emphasizing that power-sharing enriches decision-making and strategy development rather than compromising the foundation's direction. Illustrate how these practices can lead to more effective and sustainable outcomes by drawing parallels to the foundation's mission and long-term vision.

- **Introduce incrementally.** Begin with small-scale initiatives that showcase the tangible benefits of participatory learning. Utilize success stories from within your foundation or others in the field to illustrate the positive impact of these approaches. A phased introduction allows skeptics to see firsthand the value of participatory practices without overwhelming them with a complete cultural shift at once. Be sure to use the readiness assessment on page 7 to identify projects that might be a good fit for this approach.

- **Organize training and reflection.** Conduct workshops and host discussion forums to familiarize staff with the principles and benefits of participatory learning. Use these sessions not just as educational opportunities but as forums for open dialogue, where staff can voice concerns, share insights, and collaboratively explore how participatory methods can be tailored to fit your foundation's unique context.

- **Recruit champions.** Identify champions of participatory approaches on staff and collaborate with them on messaging, sharing experiences, and taking steps toward fostering buy-in. Consistently recognize teams and staff who use or foster participatory learning by sharing their lessons and success stories. If executive leaders are on board, ask them to explicitly endorse participatory practices as part of a culture of learning.

- **Pilot diverse applications.** Launch a pilot project that applies participatory learning across different program areas, including those not traditionally associated with participatory methods. This demonstrates the versatility of participatory approaches and their potential to enhance various aspects of the foundation's work, from policy investments to narrative change efforts. By documenting and sharing the outcomes and lessons learned from these pilots, you can provide compelling evidence to support broader adoption.

- **Showcase impact and build momentum.** Regularly share the successes and learnings from participatory initiatives within your foundation. Highlight how these practices have led to deeper insights, stronger community relationships, and more impactful outcomes. Celebrate achievements and use them as a springboard for further exploration and integration of participatory learning practices.
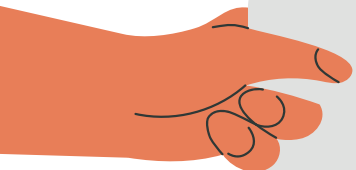
> **TENSION:** Leadership does not always support the cost and time needed to commission and implement participatory work, nor are they always built into projects.

> "There's been a lot of thinking around how the grantmaking practices create barriers and challenges for this kind of work. One of the ones we talk about is the timeline in terms of enough time and valuing the relationship building."

How you can ease this tension

Start by recognizing that, because foundations set their own guidelines about cost and timelines, they have flexibility to change. As an interview participant from the MacArthur Foundation put it, *"Yes, these things take time and money, but in philanthropy, if anywhere, that shouldn't be an issue. If we choose to, we can be solution-oriented around time and money."* To advocate for and implement this change, consider the following:

- **Secure commitment for realistic resourcing.** Proposing participatory learning approaches without having adequate time or budget risks poor implementation and potential harm to all involved (i.e., the foundation, grantees, and the broader community). For that reason, encourage learning and program staff to map out and budget for the time and resources required to meaningfully engage grantees and community members in participatory work and adapt based on their engagement. Include time and costs that are often invisible, such as the work needed to build relationships and trust and appropriately compensate participants. Communicate with executive leadership about the benefits of community participation as well as the requirements of time and resources.

> If you don't have the broader framework and institutional buy-in, you're putting the cart before the horse. Participatory learning is a net positive when you have that infrastructure. If you don't, you run the risk of setting up this beautiful aspiration that you can't follow through on and that causes profound damage to the relationships at the heart of the [learning] process."
>
> **- SAN FRANCISCO FOUNDATION**

- **Benchmark against best practices.** Identify and connect with peer foundations that have successfully integrated participatory approaches into their grantmaking. By examining their budgeting and scheduling models, your foundation can adopt proven strategies that balance the demands of participatory work with organizational capacity. This benchmarking can also provide valuable insights into how to structure projects for success from the outset.

- **Champion flexibility and adaptability.** Cultivate an organizational culture that values flexibility in project planning and execution. Encourage your colleagues to view timelines and budgets as dynamic tools that can be adjusted to better serve the goals of participatory engagement. Highlight instances where planning rigidity has hindered project outcomes, using these as teachable moments to advocate for a more adaptable approach.

- **Illustrate the value of participatory work.** Draw on specific examples from your foundation or the wider philanthropic community to demonstrate the tangible benefits of participatory approaches. Showcase how these practices have led to more impactful outcomes, deeper community engagement, and enhanced learning for the foundation itself. Contrasting these successes with the missed opportunities of more traditional approaches underscores the critical importance of investing in participatory work.

- **Emphasize the cost of inaction.** Reflect on the broader implications of not adopting participatory methods, including the potential for misaligned initiatives and the failure to fully grasp community needs and solutions. As an interview participant from the San Francisco Foundation shared, *"We can ask ourselves what it costs to do this particular thing, but then the implicit question that's often not asked is, 'What does it cost not to do it? What does it cost not to really know what our grantees find important and want us to be measuring and taking action on?'"* Use real-life scenarios to vividly illustrate how a lack of participatory engagement can result in less effective grantmaking and missed chances to foster meaningful change.

In navigating the path towards more participatory learning practices, it is essential for foundations to not only consider the strategies shared but also to engage deeply with the critical questions that lie ahead. The questions below, in the box titled *Navigating Towards Participatory Learning*, are designed to help you reflect on alignment between your organizational values and participatory learning, the benefits for grantees and community members, and the potential for reshaping power dynamics. This process of reflection and questioning can help you identify actionable steps for shifting culture and practice. We encourage you to use these questions as a starting point for discussions within your organization, paving the way for a more inclusive, engaged, and transformative approach to philanthropy.

Reader Reflections

Questions about value and power of participatory learning approaches:

- Where is there alignment between our organizational values and participatory learning approaches? Do our current practices align with our values around equity?

- How could participatory learning approaches benefit our grantee and community partners while also aligning with our strategies and values?

- What are some of our blind spots in how we partner and share power with grantees and community members in learning? How might sharing power deepen our overall impact or otherwise benefit us? What new opportunities may surface from working in a more inclusive and participatory way?

- What is the cost of not engaging with grantees and community members in learning? What would we not be able to see?

Questions about advancing participatory learning approaches:

- What would decision-makers and implementers in my foundation need to be on board with to promote participatory learning approaches? What factors drive their decisions and how can I align my case making with that, starting by understanding where they are coming from?

- How have we engaged grantees and community members in learning and evaluation in the past? What are the successes and lessons learned that can inform future participatory work?

- Who on staff can share their experience and help advocate for this work?

- As we engage with grantees and community members and share power in our learning and evaluation practice, are we ready and able to honor their recommendations, even if they depart from our expectations?

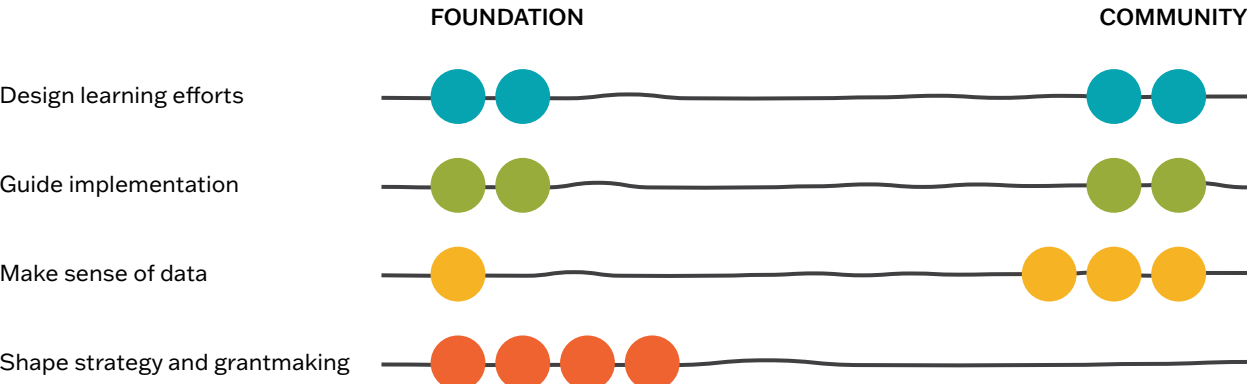- How can we continue to share and learn about our participatory practice internally?

PARTICIPATORY LEARNING IN PRACTICE: STRATEGIES, EXAMPLES, AND TIPS

As foundations evolve from traditional to more participatory learning approaches, it's crucial to consider various elements, such as including entry points for shifting practice, who to involve and how, resources and compensation needs, and creating mutual value. As one funder shared, *"We just couldn't do our work without a mutual learning element with our grantee partners… it's a symbiotic relationship, in fact."* This section explores participatory learning strategies, illustrating through examples how funders have collaborated with grantees and community members in design, implementation, and sensemaking, alongside tips for managing successful participatory projects.

Shifting Toward Participatory Learning Approaches

Transitioning to participatory learning requires assessing current learning practices and identifying ways to share and shift decision-making power. Below, we employ an abacus metaphor to visually represent how power can be distributed between funders and grantees across different stages of a learning process, such as design, implementation oversight, and data interpretation (Exhibit 1). The abacus beads move along a continuum, symbolizing the dynamic nature of participatory learning and the potential for varying degrees of community involvement and decision-making power. Consider where your foundation's activities fall on a spectrum from conventional to participatory learning, and potential opportunities to more effectively share or redistribute power during different phases of a given learning process.

Exhibit 1: Shifting Power: An Abacus Model of Participatory Learning Phases

FOUNDATION   COMMUNITY

- Design learning efforts
- Guide implementation
- Make sense of data
- Shape strategy and grantmaking

To illustrate the model further, let's think back to the vignette shared in the opening chapter of this guide about the foundation focused on healthy eating and active living. Imagine that the foundation has openly reflected on missed opportunities in the past and expressed its interest in applying a more participatory approach moving forward. There's openness to a new approach on the part of school leaders and internal foundation staff. The program and evaluation teams use both internal and external input to think through how best to distribute power in ways that will be effective for grantees and the foundation. Ultimately, it lands on an approach where:

- It shares power equally when it comes to designing the learning effort, working closely with grantees to develop learning questions, identify key outcomes to measure, and select an evaluation consultant.

- It creates an advisory committee comprised of grantees and foundation staff to guide implementation, including advising which methods would be most valuable and least burdensome.

- It distributes greater power to the advisory committee when it comes to making sense of findings and their implications given grantees' proximity to community and the work taking place.

- However, it retains power when it comes to shaping future strategies and grantmaking, recognizing that there are internal structures within the foundation that govern strategy and resource allocation decisions.
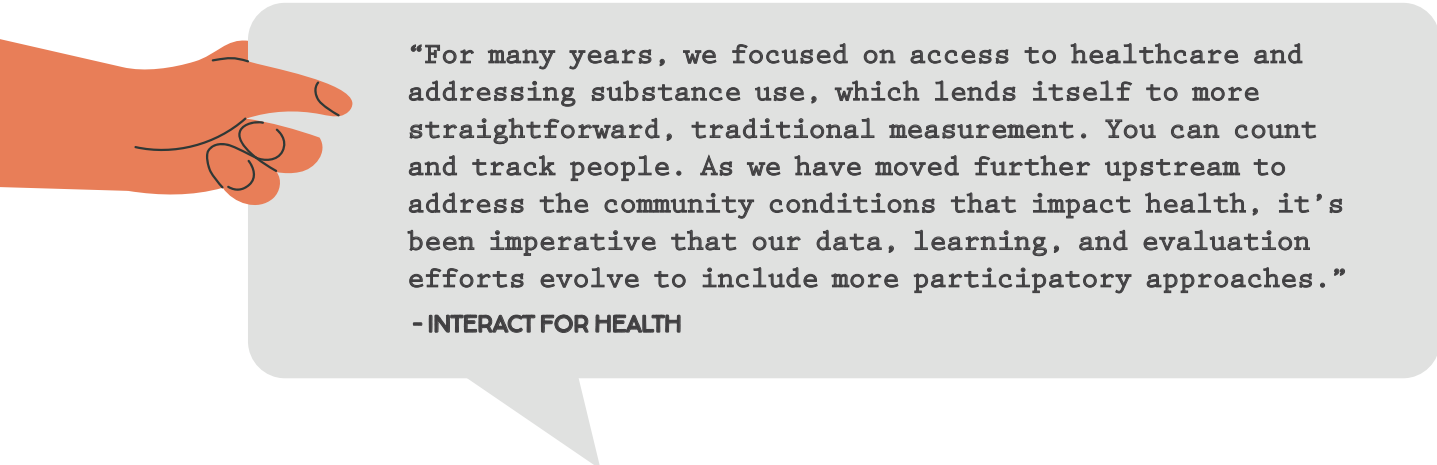
Overall, this approach represents a shift from past practice. It feels like a good fit in terms of where the foundation is comfortable distributing power, and where grantees have the time and appetite to be involved. As the project goes on and demonstrates the benefits of successful collaboration, the foundation realizes that their team would benefit from grantee ideas about future strategy and grantmaking. While not originally planned, it decides to share its early thinking on this front and gathers some helpful feedback that results in some refinements to its approach, represented in the abacus graphic below with one bead moving further to the right (Exhibit 2). Moving beyond this hypothetical example, the following section further illuminates various paths foundations have taken to embed participatory practices into their learning processes.

Exhibit 2: A Power Shift on the Abacus as Strategy & Grantmaking Become More Participatory

FOUNDATION   COMMUNITY

Shape strategy and grantmaking

Participatory Learning in Action: Experiences and Examples

Foundations have adopted participatory learning in varied ways, tailored to their context and goals. Some start small by incorporating sensemaking conversations with grantees to gather community-based perspectives on findings and experiences. Some implement deeper engagement approaches such as co-designing evaluation frameworks and tools with grantees, or assembling community-based advisory committees. Real-life examples from funders show how various participatory learning approaches work in practice (Exhibit 3).

"For many years, we focused on access to healthcare and addressing substance use, which lends itself to more straightforward, traditional measurement. You can count and track people. As we have moved further upstream to address the community conditions that impact health, it's been imperative that our data, learning, and evaluation efforts evolve to include more participatory approaches."

– INTERACT FOR HEALTH

Exhibit 3: Participatory Learning Practices: Funder Examples

Practice	Funder Examples
Participatory Design Grantees and community members can be involved in the overall design of a learning effort or, on a smaller scale, contribute to the design of specific elements, such as data collection tools, like surveys. Participation around design can help ensure that measures of success and data collection processes meet grantee needs and learning interests while limiting burden. It can also support community buy-in in the learning process and use of findings.	**The Chan Zuckerberg Initiative** sought to strengthen the design of a program's evaluation framework by inviting grantees to **workshop the logic model**, or "theory of transformation". The new model recognized that *"[partners hold] different theories of change for how they see their role in shaping and moving conversation over the long term."* The group collaboratively identified an overarching framework where partners defined their vision for achieving success. The design process **identified priority indicators** to be included in a dashboard for grantees to access, reflect on, and share.[17] **WomenStrong International** worked closely with a grantee cohort to design a learning process that aligns with their unrestricted funding model. Instead of having grantees help determine indicators to track, they shifted to co-designing a set of evaluative learning questions. Based on the participatory design process, the funder and grantees have learning calls every six months: *"[Grantees] talk about what they're learning. They get feedback and give feedback to each other. WomenStrong International is the facilitator. We create those spaces and give them guiding questions and activities, but it's the grantee partners that choose what is important in terms of what they measure and report back."*
Implementation Oversight Advisory groups comprised of community members can guide various aspects of the learning process. This type of participation can infuse a project's operations with community expertise about practical challenges and solutions, considerations of equity, and shared ownership of strategy or design decisions that arise.	**The San Francisco Foundation** uses an **advisory committee model** in multiple ways, including convening campaign leaders to advise on a community-generated data collection tool. In addition, they recently formed an advisory committee to develop a learning framework based on the core outcome areas that should be uplifted across their grantmaking portfolios to conduct a cross-portfolio evaluation. The foundation shared that their partners are the *"real experts in the field. They provide insights on what's important for the community, because they're on the ground leading the work."* They noted further that, *"by authentically engaging our partners in our process, it really helps us understand their story and helps them feel like they can share their own truths."*

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[17] For further information on the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative's participatory design approach to learning, see Avruch, R. (2023). *CZI's emergent Approach to Narrative Investments*. Chan Zuckerberg Initiative. https://chanzuckerberg.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/23_11_08_CZI_HousingPDF-3-1.pdf.

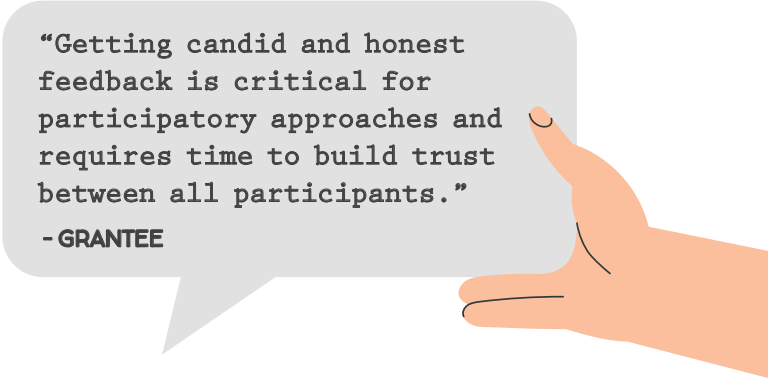| Practice	Funder Examples
Sensemaking Engaging grantees and community members in sensemaking—reflecting on and interpreting findings—can be a key part of the learning process, enriching understandings about the how and why behind findings and implications for the future. Partners may also have ideas about how best to share findings and lessons.	**The Ford Foundation** commissions external strategy evaluations to learn and share lessons from its grantmaking programs. As part of this process, the foundation has sought the **feedback and interpretation of findings from grantee partners** before reports are finalized: *"What I think we've started to do better is have grantees come in and engage with the findings. It started with making space to share findings with our grantees at a webinar, to shifting to also include discussions where grantees share what resonates and what doesn't from their vantage point."* **Oregon Community Foundation** engages grantees in sensemaking conversations to **help inform learning reports and share findings** with the board: *"Sensemaking is one of the best opportunities to do things that are participatory. That was a way for us to be transparent, to engage them in crafting considerations to make sure we weren't forgetting anything."* These engagements have also allowed grantees to **recommend important pivots** for the funder to consider when sharing findings: *"We're going to have a report now that's more useful as a result. They've pointed out the need for us to use our voice to share their story a little bit more externally than we were planning to do. That's a thing that now we have to do in order to honor their engagement."*
Shaping Strategy Collaborating with community members and grantees to determine the strategic direction of foundation initiatives based on insights gained through learning can be a powerful practice. This process acknowledges the expertise of community members and grantees, positioning them as key partners in setting priorities, designing programs, and allocating resources.	**The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving** created an advisory group comprised of artists of color from the local community to provide guidance on the foundation's arts-related grantmaking in the Greater Hartford Region. The group's role was to make recommendations for how the foundation should engage in grantmaking in order to promote equity and inclusion in the arts sector in the region. This partnership allowed the foundation to *"explore new ways of doing grantmaking in the arts"* that were aligned with its new strategic focus and community priorities. **Interact for Health**, during their last strategic planning process, as a team embarked on a journey to transform from conventional philanthropy that centers its own expertise to one that is grantee- and community-driven, trust-based, and equity-focused. Engaging diverse voices during the strategy process took the form of surveys with grantees; focus groups and conversations with community members; and interviews with key partners to understand their needs and priorities as well as provide feedback on their experience working the foundation. The foundation incorporated the feedback into its new strategic plan, using it to reimagine bodies of work and develop new values. Throughout the process, the foundation also conducted quarterly webinars to share updates on how the feedback was influencing its thinking and strategy development. *"One of the values that emerged recognizes that those closest to the problem are closest to the solution. How do we have the humility to acknowledge our privilege as a funder and live this out on multiple levels? We'll get it wrong a lot on our journey to get better. It starts with listening."*

Tips for Successful Participatory Learning

Funders, advisors, and grantees who contributed to this guide shared their lessons for how funders can make participatory learning successful.

Dedicate ample time and resources. Though meaningfully engaging grantees and community members requires adequate time and funding, it is an investment that, when done well, yields long-term benefits. Carefully plan and budget appropriately for relationship and trust development, allocate sufficient time for meaningful participant input, maintain transparent communication throughout, and ensure flexibility to adjust course based on that input. The Ford Foundation underscored that *"participatory [learning] approaches take time. Creating space for meaningful feedback requires shifts in philanthropy's expectations of what constitutes learning and what it takes, including the amount of time needed."*

> "Getting candid and honest feedback is critical for participatory approaches and requires time to build trust between all participants."
>
> – GRANTEE
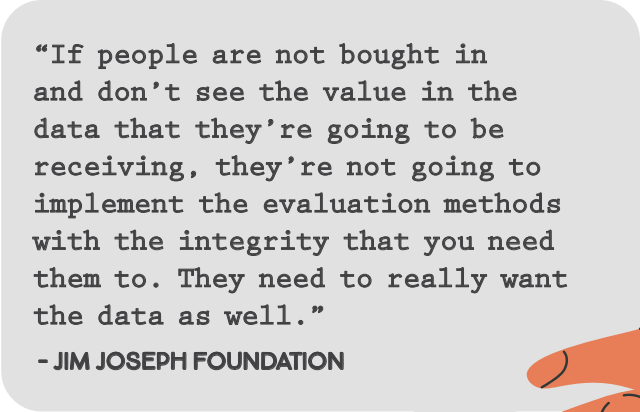
Know your community. As you plan to engage grantees and community members, consider the right level of engagement given the goals of the project and reflect on a clear rationale for engagement from the community's perspective. Meet with community contacts ahead of time to understand what is realistic for participation. The Hartford Foundation stressed the importance of *"recognizing that other people have things going on and really respecting that."* Understand the nuances of your community, knowing that grantees and community members are not all alike and may have varying ideas or motivations for engaging in learning. Be aware that identifying representatives to include in participatory work will likely exclude other voices. Consider the following planning questions:

- Do we have open dialogue with community members who can inform the process for community benefit and challenge our assumptions? Within the foundation and the community, who can communicate and advocate for this work while listening to community input?

- How are we addressing the power dynamics between the funder, evaluation consultant, grantee(s), and community members? To what extent is participation voluntary? Who is not at the table and why?

- How can we maximize the community benefits of engagement while minimizing burden? What do grantees and community members consider to be a reasonable use of their time on data collection, analysis, and sensemaking activities? What level of involvement would they consider to be burdensome?

- What are potential risks for harm and how might we avoid these?

Prioritize adding value for grantees and community members by inviting input on process and goals. To ensure that the learning effort is worthwhile for participants—which can greatly influence their willingness to participate—listen to their needs and priorities and, if called for, shift the direction of plans in response to their input. A grantee commented, *"Organizations are more likely to commit to and execute participatory approaches when they see the value and benefit in them."* This participatory planning can also benefit the funder. By meeting grantees' needs, the funder can support them in generating a richness of data that may otherwise be unavailable. This closer partnership with grantees can likewise help funders gain deeper insights into grantees' work. Finally, funders expressed the importance of compensating participants for their time and related costs (see the checklist tool, *How to Compensate Participants Fairly*, at the end of this section).
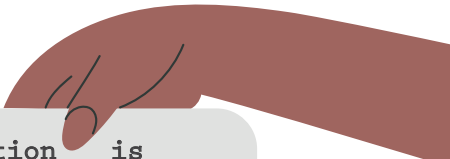
> "If people are not bought in and don't see the value in the data that they're going to be receiving, they're not going to implement the evaluation methods with the integrity that you need them to. They need to really want the data as well."
>
> – JIM JOSEPH FOUNDATION

Embrace multiple ideas of evidence and rigor. Knowledge is power when it is defined and owned by more than one voice. Participatory learning approaches welcome multiple voices and truths, including what signifies progress and success. Funders who engage in participatory learning must consider what it means for community members to help define and own learning and knowledge. What counts as meaningful data may diverge from existing assumptions and may emerge on a timeline that cannot be dictated, for example, by when a board meeting is scheduled. Multiple funders who shared their experiences for this guide emphasized setting aside pre-conceived ideas about metrics and timeframe. One said, *"For organizations that are serious about doing racial justice work, it's important to really interrogate what we mean by rigor and evidence and data and who that serves and who it silences."* A great starting place is familiarizing yourself with the orthodoxies identified in the EEF.[18]

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[18] Equitable Evaluation Initiative. (2023). Equitable Evaluation Framework™ (EEF). www.equitableeval.org/framework.
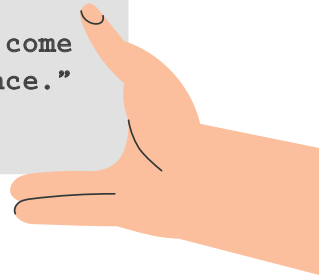
Be responsive to the results of the process. A funder's commitment to participatory learning must include applying the lessons that come out of it. When asked on a survey how funders could support successful participatory learning approaches, 75% of grantees identified that a funder must have flexibility to address whatever emerges. If a participatory planning effort reveals that community members highly value qualitative information, for example, a funder that then continues with the plan to track quantitative metrics will undermine the trust that the participatory effort relied upon. Likewise, a participatory sensemaking effort will lose value if a project's reporting does not reflect the insights from the sensemaking session. In other words, engaging in participatory learning means being open to a shift in power and revising initial plans and concepts to be more responsive to and driven by community members.

> "The biggest frustration is when [participation] is done to 'check a box.' This, coupled with the administrative burden can lead to grantees not applying for funds and, at worst, burnout."
>
> **– GRANTEE**

Start small and scale over time. Because participatory learning can be time-intensive to implement, some funders shared that it is easier to lead this type of work with a smaller grantee cohort. Indeed, scaling participatory approaches can be challenging without the foundation embracing a shift away from the status quo. As one funder remarked, *"Folks get afraid that diving into participatory [learning] means going headfirst into the deep end of the pool when we haven't tested out if we can swim yet. In fact, …you have to decide as a particular foundation in a particular community with particular partners, which [practices are] right for you."* Specifically, funders recommended starting small— for example, applying participatory practices to a defined part of a project or with a small group of grantees or community members—and testing your organization's approach to participatory practice. A small-scale effort allows for reflection on overall readiness and opportunity to build understanding about what is feasible for your foundation, grantees, and community members. It also can build grantee champions of participatory work who can help communicate its utility to others.

> "Short-term metrics are seen in philanthropy as what matters, like in a year a grantee should be able to show X, Y, or Z… Really, it takes a longer time to show change in community, and that change won't necessarily come in the form of quantitative evidence."
>
> **– HARTFORD FOUNDATION FOR PUBLIC GIVING**

Consider timing in planning participatory learning. Reflecting on when to engage in participatory learning is as crucial as how it is done. Timing influences not only the feasibility of participatory approaches but also their impact and alignment with equity values. Before embarking on a participatory grantmaking or learning initiative, consider the stage of your project or strategy where participatory input would be most valuable. Early involvement in planning can ensure that initiatives are grounded in community needs and perspectives, while later engagement might focus on refining and evaluating outcomes. Ask reflective questions to determine the most strategic moments for participatory engagement, such as:

- At what points in our project lifecycle can participatory learning add the most value for us and community members?

- How does the timing of participatory efforts align with our organizational goals and equity values?

- What preparatory steps are needed to ensure that community members are ready and able to participate meaningfully at these times?

Intentional timing ensures that participatory efforts are not merely tokenistic but instead are strategically positioned to influence decision-making and strategy development. This consideration is critical for planning how participatory learning unfolds, ensuring that it is deeply integrated into the fabric of your foundation's work and truly reflects a commitment to equity and shared power.

There is a growing consensus in philanthropy that when grantees and community members contribute their expertise to initiatives supported by foundations—whether through learning and evaluation, or other forms of engagement—they should receive fair monetary compensation for their time. The following guidance can help to support fair and equitable compensation for participants in learning and evaluation activities.

Budget intentionally. Ensure you have funds available to equitably compensate community members for their time and expertise by creating a line item for community compensation in a project, department, or evaluation and learning budget, or by creating a standing community compensation fund. The most feasible options may be to include compensation funding in grants to community organizations or in evaluation contracts.

Support holistically. In addition to providing monetary compensation, acknowledge community members' efforts and knowledge by facilitating connections to other resources, funders, or partners; supporting participants' skill-building and professional development; supporting participant-identified community organizations and groups; and providing organizational services such as website or fundraising consulting.

Minimize administrative burden. When compensating community members, individually or through grassroots organizations, minimize reporting requirements and administrative hurdles. As the funder, ensure that the payment process will be streamlined and timely. Especially if working through local organizations, confirm process for payment and check for any impacts on taxes, benefits, or employment agreements. Communicate early about documentation required from individuals or organizations to facilitate compensation. Throughout the engagement, talk with participants about compensation timelines, structures, and details, providing opportunities for feedback and adjustment.

Scale compensation to the ask. Compensate community members appropriately based on their level of engagement. In an insight paper based on interviews with their community, Leap Ambassadors shared various funder approaches to compensating nonprofit partners and community participants including: $50-100 gift cards for one-time interviews; $300 honoraria plus food, travel, and accommodation expenses for speaking at foundation events or conferences; $1,000 honoraria for a site visit to an organization; and, $250-500 hourly "professional-level" compensation to community or nonprofit leaders for ongoing project work in line with external consultant fees.[19] Guidance from the Urban Institute underscores that "while compensation rates and amounts will vary by context and project, …the compensation package for community members should compare favorably with those of other project members who are providing similar project support."[20]

Document as you go. As decisions are made about compensation amounts and processes, document all relevant background information that could be useful later in the project or in other future work. To build organizational knowledge and norms around how to manage compensation moving forward, draft and centralize the following, along with any other relevant documents:

☐ A collection of organizational charts on internal personnel, departments, and systems involved in processing compensation;

☐ Landscape scans of market wages for similar roles, tax and benefit considerations, and opportunities for non-monetary compensation; and

☐ Justification for compensation levels and structures (e.g., one-time honoraria, consulting agreements, and part- or full-time employees).

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[19] Leap Ambassadors. (2022, May). *In practice: How foundations can compensate stakeholders for their time*. www.leapambassadors.org/ambassador-insights/in-practice-how-foundations-can-compensate-stakeholders-for-their-time/.

[20] Langness, M., Morgan, J., Cedano, S., & Falkenburger, E. (2023, July). *Equitable compensation for community engagement guidebook*. Urban Institute. www.urban.org/research/publication/equitable-compensation-community-engagement-guidebook.

HOW CAN I SUSTAIN MOMENTUM?

Coming Around Full Circle: Learning from Experiences with Participatory Learning Approaches

Fostering participatory practices is an iterative process. After trying a new strategy or approach, reflect internally and with community participants about the experience. The process of identifying what worked well and what needs adjustment clarifies what next steps to take. Although reflection takes time, fostering this kind of learning in your routine practice propels the work forward by considering and sharing lessons learned and planning to apply them.

The following questions offer you a starting point for discussion. Choose or adapt the questions that resonate most with your situation and consider if there are additional reflection questions you would like to raise.

Exhibit 4: Questions for Reflection on Experiences with Participatory Learning

Questions for the Funder	Questions for Grantees and Community Members
• What were our goals for this participatory action? Was there an expectation around equity? • What happened? Did the action meet our goals, including around equity? • What worked well and why? • What did not work well and why? • What would we do differently next time? • What ideas from this guide or other resources can inform our next steps? • What specific next steps can we take to apply what we have learned? When will these occur and who is responsible for moving them forward? • Is it time to revisit the readiness assessment in this guide to gauge how we have changed? • What lessons would be useful to share with our colleagues or partners?	• What were our goals for this participatory action? • What actually happened? Did the action meet our goals? • What worked well and why? • What did not work well and why? • What would we do differently next time? • What would we want the funder to do differently next time? • Overall, how interested are we in future opportunities for participatory learning?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

APPENDIX

Additional Detail on Methods

To inform the design of this project, we conducted a literature review on how participatory research is approached in different fields and contexts. This helped us to identify existing practices and gaps when considering their application within philanthropy.

We then conducted interviews with staff members at 14 foundations engaged in participatory E&L approaches. We identified foundations to include in interviews through broad outreach to close to 400 foundations. Through this outreach, we identified close to 70 foundations with relevant experience. Staff members at 51 of these foundations replied to a screener survey describing their relevant experience with participatory learning approaches and evaluation projects. Using a rating tool that evaluated grantees' and community members' depth of engagement in the foundation's participatory learning work, initiative outcomes, and the projects' recency, the Engage R+D team selected 14 foundations for inclusion in the interviews. The interview participants represented the 14 foundations listed below.

- American Jewish World Service
- Chan Zuckerberg Initiative
- Ford Foundation
- Hartford Foundation for Public Giving
- Interact for Health
- Jim Joseph Foundation
- Lumina Foundation
- MacArthur Foundation
- Oregon Community Foundation
- Porticus
- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
- San Francisco Foundation
- Silicon Valley Community Foundation
- WomenStrong International

Through the interviews, we explored how each foundation employed participatory practices, their successes and challenges in doing so, tips for others on how to carry out such practices and avoid common pitfalls, and recommendations for what they believed would be most useful to foundations interested in applying these approaches.

We supplemented these interviews with a survey of grantees who had experience with participatory E&L approaches at the funder organizations we interviewed. The survey asked grantees how, if at all, these experiences had benefited their organizations and what they thought contributed to successful partnerships between funders and grantees on participatory E&L projects. We included specific examples and quotes from funder interviews and the grantee survey throughout the guide to add depth and context to what we have shared.

We also conducted two focus groups with practice partners from the EEF to explore initial findings from our funder interviews and to explore how participatory E&L approaches align with the practice of the EEF. In addition, we gathered input from the six funders supporting this effort and four project advisors, who brought expertise in participatory learning and evaluation in both U.S.-based and international contexts (see Acknowledgments section). Lastly, we drew from our firm's own extensive experience partnering with foundation and nonprofit leaders to support participatory learning practices.

There are a couple of caveats to keep in mind when reviewing the guide. First, our data sources and, subsequently, the recommendations in this guide, are largely informed by the work of U.S.-based foundations and are not reflective of a broader global perspective. All but one of the foundations we included in interviews were based in the U.S., and only five of the 14 foundations supported international work. Second, this guide focuses mainly on funder perspectives on participatory learning. While we conducted a brief survey with grantees, most of our data gathering focused on understanding the funder landscape in this area and providing guidance to funders interested in shifting towards more participatory learning approaches. We fully recognize the equal importance of gathering grantee and community member perspectives on participatory learning, and that doing so could fill another guide.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

This guide to fostering participatory learning in philanthropy is a starting point meant to open conversations and suggest next steps in developing new practices. It also acknowledges the complexity of considerations around implementation. The following resources offer valuable further knowledge and guidance relevant to participatory learning approaches.

Benitez, L., Cancel, Y., Marx, M., Milway, K.S. (2021, June). **Building Equitable Evidence of Social Impact**. MilwayPLUS and Pace Center for Girls.

> *Report that describes the benefits of participatory measurement and the importance of blending participatory methods with empirical measures to build more equitable, robust evidence of program impact.*

Community Wealth Partners. 2023. **Sharing Power with Communities: A Field Guide**.

> *A guide for nonprofits and foundations to engage and share power with communities in their work.*

Grantcraft. (2007). **Participatory Action Research: Involving "All the Players" in Evaluation and Change**.

> *Practical insights for grantmakers that wish to incorporate Participatory Action Research as a tool for evaluation; includes definitions, case studies and answers to common questions.*

Equitable Evaluation Initiative. 2023. **The Equitable Evaluation Framework™ (EEF)**.

> *The EEF is a set of principles, orthodoxies, mindsets, tensions, and sticking points.*

Dover, G. (2008). **Participatory Research: Power and Problems**.

> *Article that outlines the stages and modes of participation in the research process and discusses potential concerns about where power is situated.*

Fund for Shared Insight. (2023). **Participatory Philanthropy Toolkit**.

> *An online resource that includes insights and recommendations, a funder readiness assessment, and sample documents and templates for funders to use in participatory work.*

Gibson C. (2018). **Deciding Together: Shifting Power and Resources Through Participatory Grantmaking**. GrantCraft, The Foundation Center.

> *A guide to participatory grantmaking with a section on evaluation.*

Krenn, H. (2021, December). **Doing evaluation in service of racial equity**. W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

> *A three-part series of practice guides that show how to incorporate racial equity as a core value into evaluation.*

Langness, M., Morgan, J.W., Cedano, S., Falkenburger, E. (2023, August). **Equitable Compensation for Community Engagement Guidebook**. Urban Institute.

> *A toolkit of practical guidance and approaches for creating an equitable compensation plan for community-partnered research.*

Tamarack Institute. (2023). **Participatory Evaluation Resource Library**.

> *A compilation of resources on participatory evaluation and community engagement.*

We All Count. **The Data Equity Framework**.

> *Detailed equity considerations for each step of research and working with data.*