

SPRING 2020

LEARNING TOGETHER

Reflections on a Participatory Grantmaking Project
Shortened Brief



About the Document

This document serves as a shortened brief of a longer report, illustrating recent efforts by United Way of King County (UWKC) in co-creating and facilitating a participatory grantmaking process. The following pages summarize reflections and insights gained, and aims to be a resource for other funders and community based organizations interested in alternative funding models.

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Gratitude

Thank you to the leadership of the seven executive directors who guided this process.

Thank you to the Stolte Family Foundation for their generous support, racial equity focus, innovative spirit, and their partnership that allowed to make this possible.

About the Organizations

Congolese Integration Network works to integrate new refugees in South King County into the American society by providing critical resources to empower them. Services offered include early learning and development (ParentChild+), youth development (SSPP & youth mentoring), employment training and placement, English as a Second Language, family counseling and CCT.

Horn of Africa Services serves East African immigrants and refugees in Seattle and King County by empowering through education, social servicing and advocacy. Services offered include after school programs, ParentChild+, Kaleidoscope, social services, job readiness, family management and system navigation, and naturalization.

Intercultural Children and Family Services addresses racial disproportionality in the child welfare system by providing early intervention services in Seattle, King County and Pierce County. Services offered include early learning, parent education/PCIT, ParentChild+, Parents As Teachers, and in-home counseling services.

Iraqi Community Center of Washington works to promote community empowerment, leadership development, self-reliance and health promotion for newcomers in Washington State to achieve self-sufficiency and economic independence through direct assistance and capacity-building. They provide culturally and linguistically competent social services to Iraqi refugees.

Southeast Youth and Family Services works to assist children and families in King County and south Seattle achieve safe, stable and sustainable lives. Services offered include behavioral health, youth development, and early childhood education.

Voices of Tomorrow works to preserve immigrant and refugee children's identity through culturally responsive child-focused programming in Seattle and South King County. Services Offered include ParentChild+ provider support, (advocacy, capacity, leadership), dual language preschool programs, and parent and family education.

West African Community Council works statewide to educate, support, and empower West African community members while preserving cultural heritage. Services offered include immigration legal program, labor standards, preschool, ParentChild+ and community empowerment (youth committee, BSK ECT).

PARTICIPATORY GRANTMAKING

“cedes decision-making power about funding—including the strategy and criteria behind those decisions—to the very communities that funders aim to serve” [1].

It is a values-driven process that seeks to:

- **Center and uplift community voice—“nothing about us, without us!”**
- **Make better funding decisions—those directly impacted know what they need best**
- **Transform power dynamics—from ‘power over’ to ‘power with’**

PARTICIPATORY GRANTMAKING AT UNITED WAY OF KING COUNTY

In fall 2019, United Way of King County (UWKC) co-created a participatory grantmaking process with seven executive directors from grassroots, communities of color-based organizations.

Communities of color-based organizations

- Founded or transitioned to serve the needs of a specific community of color
- Led by majority people of color (staff and board)
- Serve majority communities of color
- Provide services in areas where communities of color reside

The intention behind this approach was to begin to transform power dynamics inherent within traditional philanthropic models—moving from “power over” to “power with” by shifting decision-making authority to community leaders of color.

UWKC granted over \$900,000 to provide organizational support to grassroots organizational partners with ParentChild+ programs in King County over the course of four years .

For more information on ParentChild+, please go to:
<https://www.uwkc.org/helping-students-graduate/parent-child-plus/>

In seeking to address racial disparities and underfunding for communities of color, a participatory funding model was used as a more equitable approach to distributing funds. Seven of 17 organizations (as represented by their executive directors) were invited to participate as decision-makers in the participatory process based on the following criteria:

- Annual organizational budget of \$900,000 or less
- Communities of color-based organizations and
- Organizations primarily focused on South King County

All seven of the organizations invited to participate responded enthusiastically, including: Congolese Integration Network, Horn of Africa Services, InterCultural Children & Family Services, Iraqi Community Center of Washington, Southeast Youth & Family Services, Voices of Tomorrow, and West African Community Council.

The purpose of funding was:

- 1) To address organizational resource inequities by providing additional funds to supplement ParentChild+ grantees so they can provide the best service possible to families of color.
- 2) To acknowledge the expertise of communities of color in knowing the issues and solutions facing their communities by elevating the voice of communities of color.
- 3) To acknowledge power differentials and use a more transparent process that attempts to redistribute power.
- 4) Promote collaboration among communities of color.
- 5) For UWKC to learn from the community, how to be accountable and how we can best support community-driven efforts.

OVERVIEW OF OUR PROCESS

Planning for the process took time. We drew inspiration from other models and crafted a unique approach alongside community partners in which we aimed to maximize participants' autonomy around decision-making. In a series of four meetings (approximately three hours each), participating organizations collectively determined the final structure and distribution of funds. Meetings were scheduled at dates, times and locations conducive to participants. The entire process took place over the course of three months.

This format was unique in that the seven executive directors were "grantees" but also decision-makers with complete control in deciding how to use and divide the funds (within the scope of supporting their respective organizations and ParentChild+ programs).

A Note on Representation & Power

As our aim was to center communities of color and acknowledge power differentials in the funding process, we thought it was important that the meetings were a people of color (POC)-only space. Furthermore, while UWKC staff attended the first few meetings, considering the power dynamics inherent to our position as funders we also recognized the importance of offering to “step out of the room” completely as the group process progressed. This proved vital for building and demonstrating trust.

Decisions for Stipends

During our planning process, we identified a concern around how much time we were asking of the executive directors. Participatory processes take time, and too often people of color are not adequately compensated for their time and expertise. Considering this tension, we presented the idea of taking part of the total funding available to use for stipends—so that no matter how the group decided to split the funds, we could be sure that each executive director was adequately compensated for their time participating in the process. Ultimately, the group collectively agreed to put aside \$1,725 to each executive director from the larger pot, for either individual use or for their respective organizations.

OUTCOMES & ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Initial outcomes of this participatory funding process included:

- Formation of the Emerging Alliance of Communities of Color (EACC). The seven executive directors committed to building deeper relationships, sharing information, and working in partnership to identify a shared vision, strategic plan, and goals for the four-year project.
- Distribution of funds to each of the seven organizations to address organizational capacity activities such as: fundraising, grant writing, skills-building, communication/marketing, IT support, data/evaluation support and training, facilities maintenance, programming support, long-term planning and shared visioning.
- Increased capacity building through strengthened relationships. The participatory funding process served as a forum to build trust and develop relationships as executive directors worked to decide how to distribute the

funds. They developed a conflict resolution process to work through misunderstandings. Knowing each other as individuals and as a team of professionals allowed not only support for each other's organizations and caring for each person. They would work into the weekends/evenings for partnership related activities because they enjoyed working together. The strong and supportive relationships that emerged resulted in the *sharing of information, resources, and partnership building*. For example, after spending more time together through the participatory funding process, two organizations decided to partner together on a separate grant-process that would support future collaborative programming. The support network developed from these relationships will have an ongoing and lasting impact on organizational capacity. The EACC Team learned and practices the "Three Ts" principle that was discussed in their meetings with Baker Consulting. The three Ts are Truth, Trust, and Transparency and the EACC Team values the three Ts and practices them in everything that they do.

- Increased empowerment of community partners. In this process executive directors felt increased empowerment, leadership, as well as more valued and trusted by funders. By giving up decision-making power, UWKC acknowledged and supported executive directors in seeing themselves as the *experts of their own community and organizational needs*. This leadership translated into other aspects of the work/partnership, with everyone stepping up to do everything, recognizing they all have different strengths/capacities.

"Now we feel ownership because this happened...I walked away feeling valued and appreciated. Many times for minority nonprofits, you don't feel valued, you don't feel appreciated...and I feel this from UWKC. You [UWKC] do care, you want to see nonprofits be successful, you want to see them grow, and ask 'what do you need to do that?'"

- Shared Resources. Organizations used \$7,200 of the funds to hire a consultant, Baker Consulting, with expertise in coalition building. Baker Consulting worked with EACC to identify goals, shared vision and develop a multi-year strategic plan, and worked with each individual organization to identify and address at least one organizational support. Additionally, EACC hired a Development Specialist to identify diversified revenue streams and IT professionals to increase online capacity. With the consultant's help, EACC was able to apply for additional PC+ funding.

EACC collectively applied and secured \$375,000 in emergency funds from UWKC's Emergency Food and Shelter Program and Seattle Foundation's COVID-19 fund to combat impacts on families, with other applications submitted and pending decisions. EACC continues to actively seek out opportunities to apply for funding collectively.

- Community Impact. Through shared resources, EACC has been able to not only sustain but grow supports for the community:
 1. Providing nutritional supports, basic needs and cleaning supplies, paying rent and utilities payments, and the distribution of technology equipment for families in need of virtual access to school and work.
 2. Gift cards for families to purchase food and cleaning supplies.
 3. Hiring several new Early Learning Specialists and were able to grow PC+ offerings by 50% serving close to 40 families, meaning more children are now kindergarten ready.
 4. Provide ongoing bi-weekly pick up of life essentials (diapers, organic food-bags, protection equipment, school supplies, baby formula and strollers) for PC+ families.
 5. Protect staff physically and economically by offering health insurance stipends and online professional development to foster employment retention.
 6. Increased online capacity to provide home visits, unemployment application and utility assistance virtually.
 7. Added employment opportunities by hiring a consultant to help build organizational culture and capacity, a Development Specialist and IT professionals.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PROCESS

This was a value-driven process and was about more than money. Central to the process were underlying values of sharing power, strengthening relationships, developing trust, and uplifting community wisdom and voice.

Reflections from conversations with both executive directors and UWKC staff demonstrate the power of utilizing a participatory approach.

“When I saw the [participatory funding] team, all the team were kind of advocates for their work, and for the staff, and for the community. It's not advocates for the money—everybody needs the money—but number one, what they put was the community.”

INSIGHTS FROM COMMUNITY PARTNERS

On Sharing Power: All executive directors shared appreciation for this approach to funding, stressed its importance, and wanted to see the approach replicated. At the heart of this support was the value of sharing power with community, which contributed to executive directors feeling listened to, valued, and trusted by funders.

“[For UWKC] to say here it is, and we’re going to trust you to do something with it, that’s empowering. That’s also redistributing power. Not saying we need 20 families in Seattle and 10 families in South King County to be served...that’s the typical way that power has been exercised on us.”

“I saw that we are getting back the power...It really strengthened the trust we have towards our partners, our funder as well.”

“Being able to think about what our agency needs individually as well as what we can do as a group is eye-opening...it’s going to let us do things that we’ve not been able to do before.”

On Coming Together: All of the executive directors talked about the value of coming together to find solutions. Many saw the group as a space to learn together and were excited by the possibility of innovation, creativity, and “dreaming together.” Some specifically talked about the value of being in a group of peers—it was affirming to be with other POC leaders of grassroots organizations, where they were “mirrors” of each other’s struggles and sources of support.

Several spoke directly about the role of funders in providing a supportive platform to make collaboration possible, instead of a traditional process in which communities compete against each other for funding. Some executive directors described having a similar idea or wanting to come together before, but just not having the resources to do so.

"Usually we are competing for the same thing. But this undertaking to come together as a group and as a team to pursue other funding that we all need to prevail...I think this is the right direction that most funders should head. Because it pretty much eliminates the idea of competition. We can all work together as a team and get what we need. Rather than pushing each other off to the side to get most of the funding."

INSIGHTS FROM UWKC STAFF

On Sharing Power: UWKC staff firmly believed in the values underlying this approach, but also talked about the challenge of letting go of control and the personal work that accompanies a participatory process. Staff were excited by this new approach to funding, and also working to balance different responsibilities and commitments, providing support and stepping back, and reflecting on how this model fit or was in tension with existing policies of the larger organization.

"As a funder, it is a bigger exercise of faith or of letting go. It feels different at different levels, and kinda like the responsibility you feel you have to other funders, to your board, to the donors, how are you going to explain this? But the most important thing to remind ourselves is that in order to really have equitable giving, equitable funding, we cannot do this without the communities that are most affected...they hold the knowledge. And so...how are we facilitators for that to happen? And sometimes the best way for us to do that is for us to not be in the room."

Recognizing Community Wisdom: UWKC staff strongly felt that the executive directors knew best about their own communities and organizational needs. Staff talked about being surprised and impressed by the ideas generated by the collective, as well as feeling increased confidence that the funding would be used where it was truly needed. Staff also talked about the group's decision would likely be more impactful than any decision that would have been determined by UWKC staff—underscoring the idea that funders will have better results when those directly impacted by an issue are given the space to come up with the solutions.

"The concept of ceding power to the organizations doing the work is central to this...moving decision-making actions or the decision-making work to the place that has the expertise on it."

LESSONS LEARNED

Deciding to use a participatory approach was a new milestone for UWKC. For us, participatory grantmaking is about living into the values of centering racial equity and decolonizing decision-making. We see participatory grantmaking as an opportunity to strengthen trust and credibility with the community by acknowledging and shifting power. Furthermore, in recognizing the wisdom of community members who are closer to the issue, taking a participatory grantmaking approach was also about making better funding decisions.

Through this process, we learned:

- ***It is possible and worth coming together to reimagine funding processes.***

While new for everyone involved, the feedback from participants and staff on this participatory funding process was overwhelmingly positive. All emphasized the social justice values underlying this approach and saw it as a more equitable way of distributing funding. Participants came away feeling valued, trusted, and empowered. Funders expressed that by centering community voice and expertise, they had increased confidence in achieving meaningful outcomes and greater collective impact.

- **Funders do have a role.**

While it is vital for funders to develop awareness of their own positionality and power, it doesn't mean that they should step back completely and are absent in participatory approaches. Funders can play important roles in supporting participatory processes by helping to create a "supportive platform" for participants. Beyond financial support, funders can help with administrative and logistical elements that are essential to successful participation and collaboration.

- **Flexible and multiple-year funding is essential for this work.**

Stipends help to ensure the process is not extractive but actually honors participants' time and expertise.

- **It is impossible to avoid power dynamics.**

Constant reflection, open conversations around power, and transparency are essential for building relationships based on trust

In the words of one executive director, participatory grantmaking requires a "mind-shift" from what we know to what we believe is possible. It is our hope that by sharing some of the lessons we learned along the way through this early report, we can spark conversation and inspire others to reimagine more equitable approaches to funding.

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