Curated Knowledge Repository on Trust-Based and Unrestricted Funding

An Annotated Resource Base for Funders and Practitioners

Center for Grantmaking Research

Curated Knowledge Repository: Introduction

This annotated bibliography brings together key readings, frameworks, and case studies to support funders in understanding and implementing unrestricted and trust-based funding practices. It is designed as a living reference, a resource to return to at different stages of your grantmaking journey, whether you are just beginning to question current practices or are already deep into redesigning them.

The literature is organised around a set of interconnected themes. It opens with the structural context that makes rethinking funding practices urgent: the nonprofit starvation cycle, the costs of compliance-heavy grantmaking, and the short-lived flexibility many funders embraced during the COVID-19 pandemic. From there, it moves into the principles and common misconceptions of trust-based philanthropy, before turning to the concrete practices through which trust is operationalised — from core and multi-year funding to participatory decision-making and learning-oriented accountability.

The bibliography draws on a range of source types: peer-reviewed research, practitioner guides, foundation reflections, critical essays, and illustrative case studies. Together, they offer both the evidence base and the practical grounding needed to make a compelling internal case for change, to design better funding relationships, and to navigate the real tensions that arise along the way.

No single source tells the whole story. The value of this collection lies in reading across it, noticing where perspectives converge, where they challenge one another, and where the gaps in current knowledge still remain.

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1. Context: Why Rethinking Funding Practices

1.1 The Nonprofit Starvation Cycle and the Limits of Project Funding

Gregory, A. G., & Howard, D. (2009). The Nonprofit Starvation Cycle. Stanford Social Innovation Review. Link to Report.

Summary: This source examines the "non-profit starvation cycle," a harmful process in which organizations systematically underinvest in their own infrastructure and staff. This phenomenon arises because donors and funders hold unrealistic expectations about how low the overhead costs of a healthy organization should be. To meet these pressures, non-profits misreport figures and cut back on essentials such as technology or training, which undermines their ability to create social impact. The authors argue that funders must take the lead in breaking this cycle by focusing on outcomes rather than costs. In addition, non-profits need to be transparent about their needs to remain healthy and effective in the long term.

Unique Points: This source introduces the unique concept of the "Nonprofit Starvation Cycle," a vicious circle in which unrealistic expectations from funders lead to a chronic lack of investment in essential infrastructure. A particularly distinguishing element is the comparison with the commercial sector; whereas funders of non-profits often cap overhead costs at 10% to 15%, comparable commercial service providers report overhead percentages of at least 20%, demonstrating how skewed the current norms in the non-profit sector have become.

Relevance: This source is essential for funders because they hold the power to break this destructive cycle by shifting their focus from cost control to social impact. The source offers them practical tools, such as providing general operational support and engaging in an honest dialogue about the true costs involved, since a healthy infrastructure, including IT and trained staff, is an absolute prerequisite for achieving the desired outcomes for beneficiaries.

Humentum (2022). Breaking the Starvation Cycle. Link to report

Summary: This Humentum report examines the financial vulnerability of national NGOs trapped in a funding "starvation cycle." Research across ten countries shows that international donors rarely cover full administrative costs, leaving critical functions like HR, IT, and security underfunded. The authors argue that a lack of unrestricted reserves limits organisational resilience, and call on funders to shift toward fairer reimbursement rates, invest in partner financial capacity, and embrace greater transparency to safeguard long-term sustainability.

Unique Points: The uniqueness of this resource lies in the development of three systematic assessment frameworks for financial health, income quality, and cost coverage practices, enabling NGOs to be objectively compared for the first time using a standardized 4-point scale. A distinguishing aspect is the in-depth analysis of "missing costs", the hidden costs of vital functions such as safeguarding and IT systems that are frequently omitted from budgets as a survival strategy within the starvation cycle. In addition, the research offers a unique methodology for cost categorization specifically applied to the context of national NGOs across ten different countries outside the United States.

Relevance: The relevance for funders translates into a concrete action plan with three core recommendations for breaking the starvation cycle: fully covering administrative costs, directly investing in the financial capacity of partners, and systematically collecting data on cost coverage. The resource provides directly applicable grant-making options, such as funding actual indirect costs, providing flexible project grants, or adding general operational support. Furthermore, the report serves as a tool for greater accountability and transparency, encouraging funders to share data to prevent free-riding and achieve a fairer distribution of overhead costs across different donors.

Center for Effective Philanthropy (2020). New Attitudes, Old Practices: The Provision of Multiyear General Operating Support. Link to report.

Summary: This source from the Center for Effective Philanthropy examines the deep gap between the needs of non-profit organizations and the actual funding practices of foundations. Although multi-year general operating support is essential for organizational stability and long-term planning, the research shows that such flexible grants remain rare in practice. The text highlights a striking contradiction between the positive attitudes of foundation directors and the lack of change in their actual grant-making policies. In addition to in-depth analyses, the document offers practical guides and case studies to encourage the sector to respond more effectively to societal crises. Through surveys and interviews, the call for strategic reforms within philanthropy is amplified in order to strengthen the impact of civil society organizations.

Unique Points: A unique aspect of this research is that it exposes a sobering gap between the positive attitudes of foundation directors and the actual practices within their organizations, as well as the experiences of non-profits in the field. The resource further distinguishes itself through the combination of quantitative and qualitative data, based on surveys among hundreds of leaders from both foundations and non-profits, supplemented by in-depth interviews with organizations at the forefront of providing multi-year general operating support.

Relevance: This resource is crucial for funders because it demonstrates how multi-year general operating support (GOS) provides non-profits with the flexibility and sustainability needed to fulfill their mission over the long term. Funders can use the accompanying Making It Happen: A Conversation Guide and practice profiles from other foundations as a concrete action plan to facilitate internal conversations and improve their own grant-making practices.

OECD (2024). No strings attached? Making sense of flexible financing in philanthropy. Link to report.

Summary: This report by the OECD explores the growing shift within the philanthropic sector from supporting specific, time-bound projects to providing untied general support, also known as flexible financing. The text specifically examines "trust-based philanthropy" and core budget support to understand why these unearmarked funding models are being increasingly advocated for, as well as why some remain skeptical. By analyzing grant-making as a contractual dynamic, the report assesses the various advantages and disadvantages of flexible funding for both the donors and the grantee organizations.

Unique Points: A unique aspect of this research is its deep empirical foundation, drawing on the OECD database on Private Philanthropy for Development. The analysis includes evidence from more than 180 private philanthropic donors across 32 countries, as well as the historical annual giving data of 20 large foundations. Additionally, the study distinguishes itself by utilizing Bayesian statistics to identify the specific factors that influence philanthropic financing decisions.

Relevance: This resource is essential for both funders and non-profit organizations because it provides a data-driven perspective on a frequently debated topic. By shedding light on the implications of flexible funding for different types of grantees, the report helps the sector move beyond anecdotal evidence. It serves as a guide for funders looking to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of their financing practices through more informed decision-making.

IVAR (2021). The Holy Grail of Funding: Why and how foundations give unrestricted. Link to report.

Summary: The provided sources document a significant shift in the philanthropic sector away from restrictive, time-bound project funding toward flexible, multiyear, and unrestricted support, often termed "enterprise capital" or the "holy grail of funding". This movement is central to "trust-based philanthropy," an approach that seeks to rebalance power dynamics by treating grantees as expert partners and reducing administrative burdens. The research evaluates the benefits of these unearmarked models, such as enhanced organizational agility, financial resilience, and the ability for nonprofits to pivot during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, while also addressing common funder skepticism regarding impact measurement and risk.

Unique Points: A unique aspect of this collective research is its strong empirical foundation, moving the discussion beyond anecdotal success stories. Key evidence includes a three-year study by the Center for Effective Philanthropy of over 800 MacKenzie Scott grantees, as well as a comprehensive evaluation of the Ford Foundation's $1.85 billion BUILD initiative. Furthermore, the analysis includes a deep-dive qualitative study into 20 grantees of the Dutch Charity Lotteries, exploring how long-term unrestricted funding specifically fosters innovation, allows for the pursuit of "unpopular causes," and provides a "buffer" for organizational sustainability.

Relevance: This information is essential for both funders and nonprofit leaders as it provides data-driven evidence that unrestricted funding effectively strengthens a nonprofit's long-term financial health without creating negative consequences. By demonstrating how flexible capital allows organizations to tackle the root causes of social challenges rather than just symptoms, the sources serve as a roadmap for making enterprise capital the industry standard. It helps the sector transition toward more equitable and sustainable financing practices by grounding decision-making in proven results rather than traditional "command and control" oversight.

Bridgespan Group. Accelerating the Movement Toward Funding Practices That Strengthen Nonprofits. Link to report.

Summary: The sources address the "nonprofit starvation cycle," a systemic issue where funders provide restricted grants that fail to cover the actual indirect costs—such as leadership, IT, and strategic planning—necessary for an organization to function. While many foundations historically capped indirect cost reimbursement at 15 percent or less, research indicates that true indirect costs typically range from 30 percent to 40 percent. This discrepancy creates a significant financial gap, leaving many nonprofits in a state of chronic instability. The COVID-19 pandemic served as a major catalyst for change, leading nearly 800 foundations to sign a pledge to loosen grant restrictions and adopt more flexible, trust-based funding practices.

Unique Points: Even foundations without flat-rate caps often underfund grantees, paying only 83–88 cents per dollar of actual project costs. Among well-known nonprofits, 53 percent run chronic budget deficits and 40 percent hold less than three months of cash reserves. The research also exposes a stark racial inequity: Black-led organisations hold 76 percent fewer unrestricted net assets than white-led peers. A persistent power imbalance between funders and grantees compounds these issues, discouraging honest conversations about true operational costs — particularly for leaders of colour.

Relevance: This text is highly relevant as it provides a data-driven argument for a "pay-what-it-takes" approach to philanthropy. It advocates replacing restrictive, short-term grants with flexible, multiyear funding that covers the full cost of achieving results. By highlighting the successful shift toward flexibility during the pandemic, the authors suggest the sector has reached a tipping point where it can move away from counterproductive habits and toward more equitable and effective partnerships.

1.2 Reporting, Control, and Compliance Culture

Packard Foundation (2024). Fostering Equitable Grantmaking Through Indirect Cost Coverage. Link to report.

Summary: The David and Lucile Packard Foundation is refining its grantmaking approach to ensure that nonprofit organizations are financially resilient and can focus on their missions rather than basic survival. Building on its 2019 commitment to remove indirect cost caps, the Foundation has introduced a new tiered indirect cost rate system designed to cover the essential "costs of doing business" that are not tied to specific projects. This initiative is part of a broader effort through the Funders for Real Cost, Real Change (FRC) collaborative to end funding practices that inadvertently undermine the organizational health of grantees.

Unique Points: A significant finding for the Foundation was that simply removing caps was insufficient, as many grantees continued to downplay their indirect costs because they feared the persistent myth that low overhead indicates a more efficient organization. To address this and reduce the administrative burden on partners, the Foundation established mandatory minimum rates based on budget size: 25% for organizations with budgets under $5 million, 20% for those between $5 million and $50 million, and 15% for those over $50 million. This tiered structure is specifically designed to provide equitable support for smaller organizations, which often have less access to unrestricted funding and lower financial reserves, by ensuring proposals reflect accurate costs without requiring additional requests from the grantee.

Relevance: This shift is highly relevant as it demonstrates how a major funder can embed equity into its core grantmaking processes by investing in the infrastructure and people behind the projects, not just the projects themselves. By proactively addressing the chronic underinvestment in nonprofit infrastructure, the Foundation aims to move toward more sustainable partnerships and a more just world. This model provides a practical framework for other foundations looking to evolve their operations to better support the long-term health and impact of their grantee partners.

Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR). #FlexibleFunders – Open and Trusting Grant-Making. Link to report.

Summary: The IVAR "Open and Trusting" initiative is a learning community of over 140 trusts and foundations committed to transforming grant-making practices to better support charities. Developed in partnership with both charities and funders, the approach is built on eight core commitments designed to reduce administrative burdens and foster more effective partnerships. These commitments include not wasting applicants' time, asking only relevant questions, accepting a fair share of risk, acting with urgency, being transparent about decisions, enabling flexibility through unrestricted funding, communicating with clear purpose, and ensuring reporting requirements are proportionate to the grant size.

Unique Points: A distinctive aspect of this initiative is its deliberate flexibility, allowing funders to adapt the eight commitments to their specific constraints and contexts. The program actively seeks to "flip grant reporting on its head" by putting charities in the driving seat through a biennial accountability process. Practical implementations among various members include innovative measures such as compensating rejected invited applicants for their time, introducing "delegated authority" to drastically speed up small grant decisions, and making unrestricted "core" funding the default to empower organizations to set their own objectives. Furthermore, the community emphasizes a culture of "failing forward," where things not going to plan are viewed as valuable learning opportunities rather than failures.

Relevance: The "Open and Trusting" framework is highly relevant because it directly addresses the power imbalance in philanthropy by encouraging mutual honesty and deep integrity. By shifting the focus from rigid administrative processes to relationships based on knowledge and trust, foundations enable charities to focus more on their primary missions and beneficiaries. This collective effort provides a practical roadmap for systemic reform, demonstrating that human-centric grant management can lead to greater social impact in an increasingly unstable climate.

Center for Disaster Philanthropy (2023). Trust-based philanthropy and the pitfalls of quantitative metrics in effective disaster philanthropy. Link to blog.

Summary: The sources critique traditional, funder-driven evaluation methods that rely heavily on top-down quantitative metrics, particularly within the field of disaster philanthropy. It is argued that these "industry standard" approaches are often extractive, focusing on narrow, project-specific outcomes that do not reflect the true complexity of community recovery. Instead, the text advocates for trust-based philanthropy, where donors prioritize the expertise of nonprofits and move away from compliance-heavy reporting toward flexible, collaborative partnerships. By adopting a more holistic and long-term approach, funders can ensure that their support actually meets the evolving needs of those impacted by crises.

Unique Points: Overemphasis on statistical data risks turning the funding relationship into a compliance exercise, diverting resources from actual recovery work. Pressure for "quick and tangible" results pushes nonprofits toward short-term projects at the expense of sustainability. Quantitative metrics also miss essential qualitative dimensions of humanitarian aid — community solidarity, survivor well-being, and local leadership. The source calls on funders to adopt a "participant mindset" by simplifying administrative burdens and providing unrestricted, multi-year funding that centres human connection over numbers.

Relevance: This text is highly relevant because it provides a critical framework for reforming philanthropic strategy in high-stakes environments like disaster relief. It challenges the prevailing myth that low overhead or strict quantitative data are the only indicators of effectiveness, arguing instead for a redistribution of power and a focus on systemic equity. For funders ready to change, it offers a practical roadmap to becoming more equitable partners by valuing qualitative impact and trusting the on-the-ground knowledge of the organizations they fund.

1.3 Pandemic Pledges and Their Legacy

Center for Effective Philanthropy (2020). Foundations Respond to Crisis: Toward Greater Flexibility and Responsiveness. Link to report

Summary: The report, "Foundations Respond to Crisis," is the final installment of a three-part series by the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) that examines how foundations changed their practices in response to the massive challenges of 2020. The study finds that foundations have increasingly loosened grant restrictions, provided more unrestricted funding, and reduced the administrative burdens placed on their grantees. While these changes were initiated during a time of global crisis, the report specifically investigates whether these shifts represent a temporary fix or a substantive, long-term transformation in how foundations operate.

Unique Points: The research is uniquely grounded in data from 236 foundations, including 170 that signed a formal pledge to act urgently during the pandemic and 66 that did not, supplemented by 41 in-depth interviews with foundation leaders. A key finding is that while foundations generally plan to continue their more flexible and responsive practices, they expect to do so to a lesser degree than they did during the height of the pandemic response. This highlights a potential tension between the desire for permanent change and a return to traditional, more rigid funding structures. Furthermore, the report contextualizes these shifts as an accelerated response to long-standing calls from the nonprofit sector for more trusting relationships and reduced reporting requirements.

Relevance: This report is highly relevant for both funders and nonprofits as it provides empirical evidence on the state of philanthropic reform during and after a major crisis. It offers a critical look at whether the sector is truly moving toward a more trust-based and flexible model or if the progress made during 2020 is at risk of being rolled back. For organizations seeking systemic change, the report serves as a benchmark for evaluating foundation behavior and holding the sector accountable to the goals of greater responsiveness and equity.

2. Trust-Based Philanthropy: Definitions, Principles, and Misconceptions

Carazzone, C. (2018). Two Myths to Dispel to Avoid the Agony of the Third Sector. Stanford Social Innovation Review. Link to report.

Summary: The sources describe the Trust-Based Philanthropy Project, a movement designed to transform the philanthropic sector by fostering mutual accountability and trust between funders and nonprofits. It highlights six core grantmaking practices, such as providing multi-year unrestricted funding and streamlining paperwork, which allow organizations to focus on impact rather than compliance. This approach aims to create a system where philanthropy is more strategic and rewarding, ultimately reflecting the genuine needs and dreams of communities. By offering tools and facilitating networking, the project works to make equitable grantmaking the standard of practice for effective philanthropy.

Unique Points: A primary unique element of this source is the tangible six-practice framework, which provides a specific, actionable guide for funders to move from abstract theory to real-world implementation. It specifically distinguishes itself by placing the burden of "doing the homework" on the funder, which requires the foundation to learn about issues and organizations independently to save nonprofits valuable time during the vetting process.

Relevance: Funders should read this to learn how to move away from restrictive control-based models and instead mobilize money to nurture community possibilities through trust-based collaboration. By adopting these strategies, funders can more effectively bolster organizational health and provide the non-monetary support necessary to strengthen the leadership and capacity of their grantee partners.

Trust-Based Philanthropy Project (2021). Grantmaking Practices – Resource Hub. Link to report.

Summary: Trust-based philanthropy is a strategic approach to correcting power imbalances between funders, nonprofits, and the communities they serve across systemic, organizational, and interpersonal levels. It fosters a healthier nonprofit ecosystem through six core practices: multi-year unrestricted funding, proactively researching grantees to reduce their administrative burden, streamlined applications and reporting, transparency and responsiveness, acting on feedback, and non-monetary support. Ultimately, it reimagines the funder-grantee relationship — from transactional to an authentic partnership rooted in service.

Unique points: What distinguishes this framework is its holistic nature, challenging funders to integrate trust-based values into their internal culture and structures — not just grantmaking. A defining characteristic is the explicit focus on racial equity, urging funders to confront how racism and patriarchy have historically shaped philanthropy and influenced who is deemed "trustworthy." The approach also "flips the script" on traditional vetting by making it the funder's responsibility to get to know prospective partners before a proposal is submitted. Finally, it promotes "support beyond the check", mentorship, introductions to other funders, and emotional support, to bolster organizational health without being prescriptive.

Relevance: The relevance of trust-based philanthropy lies in its potential to remove the barriers that traditional foundation requirements often place in the way of nonprofit innovation and growth. This shift is urgent for addressing racial disparities, as data shows that organizations led by Black leaders possess 76% fewer net unrestricted assets than those led by white leaders. By shifting to multi-year, unrestricted grants, funders allow nonprofits the flexibility to respond to unpredictable challenges and build long-term sustainability. This practice creates a more inclusive environment where the expertise of those closest to social issues is prioritized, ensuring that resources are used more effectively to drive systemic change.

Trust-Based Philanthropy Project. Tools and Practical Resources. Link to Report.

Summary: The Trust-Based Philanthropy Project is a collaborative effort to establish equitable grantmaking and community accountability as the standard for effective philanthropy. The framework focuses on shifting conventional norms by sharing power, centering relationships, and fostering mutual accountability across four key dimensions: culture, structures, leadership, and grantmaking practices. To operationalize these values, the project provides a comprehensive suite of resources, including six core grantmaking practices, such as offering multi-year unrestricted funding and simplifying reporting requirements. These tools are designed to help funders transition from a compliance-heavy mindset to one of partnership and service.

Unique points: The sources are uniquely practical, offering a wide range of templates and samples, such as values-informed job descriptions, streamlined grant agreements, and trust-based decision-making tools. A distinctive feature is the concept of "doing the homework," which places the responsibility for researching a nonprofit's track record on the funder rather than the applicant. Furthermore, the materials explore deep connections between trust and racial equity, as well as decolonial and feminist models in global philanthropy. It introduces the concept of "relational accountability," which prioritizes reciprocity and trust in the funder-grantee relationship over traditional top-down oversight.

Relevance: This documentation is highly relevant for funders seeking to overcome institutional barriers and debunk common myths about flexible funding. By providing evidence-based research, such as five-year impact reports and extensive grantmaker surveys, the project proves that trust-based practices lead to greater organizational sustainability and more effective community-led change. In times of uncertainty or societal upheaval, these resources offer a framework for high-quality listening and adaptability, allowing nonprofits to focus their energy on their mission rather than administrative burdens. Ultimately, these tools help funders maximize their social impact by building resilient and trusting partnerships.

Alliance Magazine (2022). We're Here to Clear the Air on What Trust-Based Philanthropy Is and Isn't. Link to Report.

Summary: This article, written by leaders of the Trust-Based Philanthropy Project, clarifies the definition and practice of trust-based philanthropy (TBP). TBP is presented as a strategic approach to rebalance the inherent power dynamics between grantmakers and nonprofit organizations by prioritizing long-term relationships and mutual accountability over strict transactional control. Beyond merely providing flexible, unrestricted funding, the model emphasizes transparency, equity, and a commitment to reducing administrative burdens, allowing nonprofits to innovate and respond effectively to emergent needs.

Unique Points: A key unique aspect of TBP highlighted in the text is its explicit focus on dismantling "white-dominant" norms that traditionally define "trustworthiness" through exclusionary metrics like specific financial data or academic prestige. Unlike traditional philanthropy, which often operates from a starting point of distrust, TBP encourages funders to "do their homework" by researching prospective grantees through public records and community stakeholders rather than demanding excessive, antiquated paperwork. Additionally, the authors clarify that TBP is a global movement with established initiatives in the UK, Canada, and various other regions, refuting the misconception that it is a localized U.S. phenomenon.

Relevance: The article is highly relevant for philanthropy practitioners and nonprofit leaders seeking to foster a more resilient and equitable social sector. It provides a necessary rebuttal to common criticisms by explaining that trust-based approaches do not imply "naïve" or unconditional trust, but rather a more rigorous and collaborative form of due diligence. By shifting focus to those most "proximate to the issues," TBP offers a framework for foundations to ethically steward funds while empowering grassroots and historically excluded organizations to achieve a more just and connected society.

Center for Effective Philanthropy (2020). The Urgency of Trust-Based Philanthropy. Link to Report.

Summary: The source highlights the critical necessity for a transition toward "Trust-Based Philanthropy," emphasizing the discrepancy between philanthropic rhetoric and the actual experiences of nonprofit leaders. While the sector frequently discusses more flexible funding, research indicates that foundational practices remain largely unchanged, often relying on old frameworks that prioritize control and result in nonprofit burnout. The author calls for an end to overly theoretical discourse that keeps the pain and frustration of nonprofit partners at a distance, urging foundations instead to act decisively and adopt a spirit of true partnership and service.

Unique points: One of the most striking aspects of the text is the proposal for radical structural experiments, such as suspending board grant dockets for two years to eliminate traditional gatekeeping roles and doubling grantmaking budgets for a single year to challenge the concept of organizational perpetuity. Additionally, the author champions the idea of foundations adopting a defined lifespan, or "spending out," to act more forcefully in the present moment, a perspective informed by The Whitman Institute's own decision to spend out its assets. The movement also uniquely centers human values like humility, vulnerability, and kindness as the foundational elements for building a culture of equity and effective grantmaking.

Relevance: This material is highly relevant for grantmakers and individual donors seeking to address modern systemic inequities and complex societal challenges by rethinking their basic assumptions about power and impact. By advocating for increased multiyear unrestricted grants and the reduction of administrative burdens, the source provides a practical framework for building resilience and responsiveness within the nonprofit sector. Ultimately, it challenges philanthropy to model a new way of working that prioritizes trust and genuine collaboration, which is seen as essential for achieving long-term transformation during times of crisis.

Wong, N., & McGrath, A. (2020). Building a Trust-Based Philanthropy to Shift Power Back to Communities. Stanford Social Innovation Review. Link to Report.

Summary: The source argues that for philanthropy to achieve deep systemic change, it must undergo a fundamental reorganization that centers on a trust-based culture and shifts power back to communities. This transformation requires foundations to invest heavily in community leadership, enhance capacity-building, and create more transparent decision-making and information-sharing structures. While recent years have seen significant financial commitments toward racial justice and pandemic recovery, the authors contend that simply deploying more money only addresses surface-level symptoms rather than the root power imbalances inherent in the philanthropic sector.

Unique points: A distinctive element of this text is its call for foundations to conduct an internal "reckoning" regarding their own institutional power and the imbalances they inadvertently create with the very people they intend to serve. The Heron Foundation is cited as a specific example of this shift; they realized that they could not fulfill their mission of helping communities help themselves without moving away from merely "extracting" community knowledge to inform their own goals. This emphasizes a shift in perspective where foundations prioritize deep listening and community-led innovation over traditional top-down funding models.

Relevance: This approach is highly relevant to the contemporary American landscape, particularly in response to urgent demands for racial justice and systemic reform following global crises. It provides a critical framework for any public or private institution aiming to address deep-seated inequities at their source rather than providing superficial, temporary fixes. By advocating for structural changes that empower community leaders, the source offers a strategic pathway for philanthropy to move beyond wealth distribution toward a model of genuine partnership and lasting social impact.

Open Global Rights (2019). Giving with Trust: How Philanthropy Can Transform Power Relations. Link to Report.

Summary: The article argues that philanthropy must move beyond transactional relations to become transformative by sharing decision-making power and trust with recipients rather than just providing money. The organization Dreilinden exemplifies this shift by providing 90% unrestricted long-term funding to LGBTIQ movements worldwide, which minimizes bureaucracy and allows grassroots groups to follow their own agendas. This approach fosters a "nurturing cycle" where the integrity and internal stability gained by the organizations through flexible funding eventually attract further support from other donors.

Unique Points: A distinctive feature of this model is the redefinition of risk as the potential failure to achieve maximum social impact, rather than focusing solely on institutional or reputational concerns. Dreilinden also utilizes participatory risk assessment, where potential challenges are weighed and discussed jointly with the grantee to ensure transparency. Furthermore, the authors highlight the role of the "donor-activist," who uses their inherent privilege and access to decision-making tables to create space and public recognition for marginalized groups.

Relevance: This source is highly relevant for discussions regarding the decolonization of wealth and dismantling "Philanthropic Colonialism," a state where donors maintain all agenda-setting power. The effectiveness of this trust-based model is backed by data, with 82% of grantees reporting power shifts in their communities and 93% experiencing lasting institutional strengthening. It serves as a practical case study for foundations looking to move away from restricted project funding toward more sustainable and equitable support for human rights.

Villanueva, E. (2020). Decolonizing Wealth. Penguin Random House. Link to Report.

Summary: This source is a review of Edgar Villanueva's book Decolonizing Wealth, which critiques the modern philanthropic sector for being infected by a "colonizer virus" rooted in control and exploitation. Drawing on his Indigenous heritage, Villanueva argues that philanthropy currently functions through a culture of separation and division, often excluding those most impacted by economic injustice. He proposes a paradigm shift where money is viewed as "medicine"—a tool used to restore balance and harmony—by redistributing wealth back to the communities from which it was originally stolen or exploited.

Unique Points: A compelling aspect of the book is Villanueva's distinction between "immigrants" and "settlers," noting that settlers create their own laws rather than obeying existing ones, which fundamentally shaped the "settler colonialism" found in the U.S.. The text also provides stark statistics on the lack of diversity in the sector, such as the fact that 85% of foundation board members are white and only 4% of institutions are led by Black CEOs. Furthermore, it introduces a "both/and" approach derived from Native American philosophy, suggesting that healing involves evolving the system by keeping what works and abandoning what prevents growth, rather than simply destroying it.

Relevance: The source is highly relevant for professionals and activists seeking to move beyond superficial diversity and address actual access to power and ownership within institutions. It provides a roadmap for the "decolonization of wealth" through a seven-step healing process focused on connection and belonging rather than hierarchy. By framing wealth redistribution as a collective healing process, it offers a transformative perspective for the nonprofit sector to move away from "ivory tower" structures toward equitable funding pathways that prioritize those who helped create that wealth in the first place.

Bosch, I., Eisfeld, J., & Bollwinkel, C. (2018). Transformative Philanthropy: Giving with Trust. Dreilinden. Link to Report.

Summary: Giving with Trust by Ise Bosch, Justus Eisfeld, and Claudia Bollwinkel explores how the power of money can be redistributed to empower the many and foster more humane societies. The book follows Ise Bosch's personal journey of transforming her inheritance into a political tool, alongside an analysis of the Dreilinden fund's ten-year impact on global social movements. It specifically focuses on how trust-based funding supports LGBTIQ rights, aiming to dismantle strictly binary and hierarchical gender roles to alter global power relationships.

Unique Points: A central concept in the book is "horizontal giving," which defines solidarity as a voluntary feeling of unity where respectful giving and taking create a special kind of collective power. The text emphasizes that trust acts as a vital bridge between individuals, institutions, and movements, moving away from traditional top-down philanthropy. Additionally, it combines visionary thinking with "thoughtful risk-taking" and practical guidance, showing how a philanthropist can work collaboratively rather than just as a distant donor.

Relevance: This source is highly relevant for those interested in social justice and international human rights, as it highlights the decisive impact philanthropy can have when focusing on frequently ignored issues. It provides a critical and reflective roadmap for "enlightened giving" that challenges the idea of philanthropy as a way to exonerate the state of its duties. Ultimately, it serves as a guide for anyone looking to achieve truly transformative philanthropy by prioritizing connection, belonging, and the empowerment of marginalized communities.

Stanford Social Innovation Review (2024). The Strategic Value of Trust-Based Philanthropy. Link to Report.

Summary: This article addresses the perceived conflict between "strategic philanthropy", defined by result-oriented, evidence-based goals, and "trust-based philanthropy," which focuses on shifting power for justice and equity. The authors argue that these two approaches are not mutually exclusive; rather, trust-based practices can lead to increased resource efficiency and significant social impact. By moving away from top-down donor control, this model allows for a more effective and collaborative way to achieve long-term social goals.

Unique Points: The source identifies a "false dichotomy" in the sector, where trust-based philanthropy is often incorrectly labeled as "un-strategic" or incompatible with rigorous, evidence-based adjustments. A unique insight is that trust-based practices actually provide multiple pathways to enhance effectiveness, suggesting that the very act of alleviating burdens on nonprofit leaders is a strategic move that improves outcomes. It reframes trust not just as a moral choice, but as a practical tool for more successful philanthropy.

Relevance: This article is highly relevant for donors and foundation leaders who want to modernize their approach without sacrificing accountability or "rigor." It provides a framework for integrating equity-focused power shifts with strategic effectiveness, making it a crucial read for those navigating the evolving landscape of social innovation. By bridging the gap between traditional results-oriented giving and transformative trust-based models, it offers a path forward for more sustainable and impactful funding.

3. Funding Practices that Operationalize Trust

3.1 Core Funding and Flexible Support

Oak Foundation (2024). What Evidence Is There on the Impact of Core Funding? Link to Blog.

Summary: Core funding gives nonprofits the flexibility to focus on their mission rather than project-specific requirements. In 2023, it represented 43 percent of Oak Foundation's total funding. Evaluations — including studies of MacKenzie Scott's unrestricted giving — confirm that this model leads to greater impact, stronger strategic performance, and increased financial resilience for civil society organisations.

Unique points: The source highlights several specific advantages of core funding, such as providing leaders with the "mental space" and bandwidth to innovate and take risks, which is often impossible under restrictive grants. It also emphasizes that the duration of funding is a critical factor; strategic benefits often require at least five years to fully materialize, as shorter grants may only provide a temporary respite from fundraising. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that core funding fosters a deeper level of trust between funders and grantees, although it notes that subtle power imbalances can still exist and must be managed through clear communication.

Relevance: This information is highly relevant for both funders and non-profit organizations seeking to maximize social impact and build a more resilient sector. By addressing common concerns, such as the perceived risk of losing control or the difficulty of measuring direct attribution, the source provides a balanced view that encourages a shift toward more flexible funding models. Additionally, it highlights an important equity dimension, noting that organizations led by Black, Indigenous, and people of color have historically had less access to unrestricted funds, making it a crucial consideration for future equitable grant-making.

Oak Foundation (2021). Hedging Against Unpredictability: A Case for General Support. Link to Blog.

Summary: Core funding, also known as unrestricted funding or general operating support, provides non-profit organizations with the flexibility and autonomy to focus on their primary missions rather than being restricted by project-specific requirements. In 2023, core support represented approximately 43 percent of the Oak Foundation's total funding, reflecting a belief that this model reduces administrative burdens and allows partners to address their most pressing needs. Recent evaluations, including studies of large-scale initiatives like MacKenzie Scott's unrestricted giving, confirm that this type of funding leads to greater impact, improved strategic performance, and increased financial resilience for civil society organizations.

Unique points: The source highlights several specific advantages of core funding, such as providing leaders with the "mental space" and bandwidth to innovate and take risks, which is often impossible under restrictive grants. It also emphasizes that the duration of funding is a critical factor; strategic benefits often require at least five years to fully materialize, as shorter grants may only provide a temporary respite from fundraising. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that core funding fosters a deeper level of trust between funders and grantees, although it notes that subtle power imbalances can still exist and must be managed through clear communication.

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Foundation. BUILD Program. Link to Website.

Summary: The Building Institutions and Networks (BUILD) initiative is a strategic grantmaking program by the Ford Foundation designed to strengthen social justice organizations tackling inequality. Instead of project-based grants, BUILD provides five years of flexible general operating support combined with targeted assistance for organizational development. This approach is intended to provide these institutions with the strategic clarity, resources, and leadership necessary to achieve long-term impact and advance systemic change over many years.

Unique points: A defining characteristic of the BUILD program is its commitment to long-term predictability, offering five-year grants to allow organizations to plan beyond immediate challenges. The program specifically focuses on fostering resilience across four key dimensions: people, strategy, financing, and systems. By investing in essential operations rather than just programs, the initiative enables leaders to build internal capacity—such as diversity programs or long-term financial plans—and grants them the flexibility to respond quickly to unexpected opportunities or crises.

Relevance: The BUILD model is highly relevant as it addresses a critical gap in traditional philanthropy where organizations often struggle with short-term, restrictive funding. By providing robust and sustainable support, the Ford Foundation helps social justice institutions build a "sturdy foundation" that is durable enough to survive shifting political or social landscapes. This shift towards larger, longer, and more flexible grants is described by grantees as a way to "reimagine philanthropy," prioritizing the health and survival of the organizations that are essential for making lasting progress in the fight against inequality.

IVAR (2023). Time to end the dominance of short-term grants: The evidence for multi-year funding. Link to Report.

Summary: The IVAR report argues for a fundamental shift in the philanthropic sector to end the dominance of short-term grants, as 92% of surveyed charities identify multi-year funding as a top priority for their stability. Currently, the funding landscape is dominated by single-year grants, with 77% of grants lasting one year or less and only 13% extending to three years or more. The report advocates for making multi-year funding the default position for grantmakers to reduce the significant "wasted time, effort, and stress" associated with constant fundraising cycles. By adopting this approach, funders can better support the long-term work and missions of the organizations they fund.

Unique points: The research identifies six core benefits of multi-year funding, including increased efficiency for both charities and funders, as well as the ability to provide certainty and stability for future planning. Specifically, it highlights that small and medium-sized charities often spend more than a third of their grant income simply on the cost of making applications. Furthermore, multi-year commitments allow organizations to build capacity by offering permanent staff contracts and investing in professional development. The report also uniquely addresses internal funder barriers, such as trustee risk-aversion, suggesting that boards should reframe their role as "custodians of the mission" rather than just "custodians of the money".

Relevance: This source is highly relevant for the Open and Trusting Grant-making community, which consists of over 125 funders working to create more equitable and enabling funding relationships. It provides a critical evidence base for why short-term funding is often inappropriate for complex social and systems change, which typically requires a minimum of three years to show meaningful results. By offering practical questions for funders to interrogate their own practices, the report serves as a roadmap for foundations to align their grant-making durations with their strategic aspirations for long-term social benefit.

CEP (2023). Making the Case: Foundation Leaders on the Importance of Multiyear General Operating Support. Link to Report.

Summary: This source serves as a companion piece to the research report "New Attitudes, Old Practices," focusing specifically on the implementation of multiyear general operating support (GOS). It features detailed profiles of five diverse foundations, the California Wellness Foundation, the Claneil Foundation, Foundation for a Just Society, the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, which have all been identified as leaders in providing this type of flexible funding. These foundations either provide a higher proportion of multiyear GOS than is typical in the sector or have significantly increased such support in recent years.

Unique points: A unique aspect of this source is that it captures the perspectives of foundation leaders in their own words, explaining the specific rationale behind their commitment to multiyear GOS. The profiles provide rare insight into how equity considerations are directly woven into the decision-making process regarding which grantees receive long-term support. Furthermore, the source functions as a practical mentorship tool, offering specific advice and examples for peer foundations that are considering a shift toward or an expansion of multiyear unrestricted grants.

Relevance: The source is highly relevant because it utilizes data from over 300 foundations that have participated in the Grantee Perception Report (GPR) to benchmark and identify effective funding practices. By showcasing foundations of various sizes and geographic focuses, the sources demonstrate that multiyear GOS is a viable and necessary strategy for a wide range of philanthropic organizations. This practical evidence is intended to encourage a broader sector-wide move toward funding models that prioritize grantee stability and long-term impact.

3.2 Organisational Development Funding

Laudes Foundation et al. (2020). Funding Organisational Development: A Smart Investment to Multiply Impact. Link to Report.

Summary: This report, co-authored by five foundations—Laudes, MAVA, Mercator Switzerland, Oak, and PeaceNexus, promotes Organisational Development (OD) as a strategic tool to multiply social impact. Unlike narrow capacity building, OD takes a holistic view of an organization and its context to improve its long-term health, resilience, and sustainability. The document outlines a standardized OD process consisting of four main phases: assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation, all aimed at helping partners better achieve their missions. Ultimately, the foundations argue that OD is not a goal in itself but a crucial means to achieve systemic social progress.

Unique points: A unique focus of this source is the emphasis on a partner's "readiness for change" as the primary precondition for success, noting that the willingness to address internal weaknesses is more important than the specific technical need. The report also candidly addresses the asymmetric power dynamic between funders and grantees, suggesting that foundations should use external consultants as a neutral layer to foster openness and trust. Furthermore, it highlights different institutional approaches to OD, ranging from stand-alone interventions to blended grants where OD is integrated into programmatic or core funding.

Relevance: The source is highly relevant for philanthropic organizations that want to ensure their impact is not jeopardized by the internal collapse of their partners. It provides a practical roadmap for funders, including a decision-making tree to identify the right type of support for each partner. The report is particularly significant for foundations planning an "exit strategy," as it demonstrates how OD can ensure partners remain robust and financially autonomous after a funder's closure. By sharing these collective insights, the authors aim to build a learning community that moves the sector toward more authentic and balanced partnerships.

3.3 Reporting, Learning, and Accountability

Center for Evaluation Innovation (2023). Equitable Evaluation Framework. Link to Report.

Summary: The Equitable Evaluation Framework™ Framing Paper argues that evaluation is often the last organizational function to be revamped through an equity lens, which puts philanthropic success at risk by potentially reinforcing the very inequities foundations seek to address. It posits that evaluators have a moral imperative to contribute to equity, ensuring that every aspect of the evaluative process—from the questions asked to the methods used—aligns with the values of social justice. The paper calls for a fundamental shift where evaluation is not just a tool for donor accountability but is explicitly in service of equity.

Unique points: A unique contribution of this source is the identification of "evaluation orthodoxies": deeply held, often invisible beliefs that act as a "drag" on equity efforts, such as the idea that the foundation alone defines success or that evaluators are purely objective. The framework challenges the extractive role of external experts and the traditional hierarchy that prizes quantitative dashboards over qualitative "stories". Instead, it introduces three core principles: evaluation must advance progress toward equity, be multiculturally valid and oriented toward participant ownership, and must answer critical questions about the historical and structural drivers of inequity.

Relevance: This source is highly relevant for foundations and nonprofits that have committed to an equity stance but find that their measurement and learning practices are still rooted in traditional, non-equitable models. It provides a roadmap for moving beyond simple diversity and inclusion toward "comprehensive change," where equity principles are reflected in policies, practices, and people. By centering the insights of those most affected by inequities, the framework helps funders shift power imbalances and ensure that evaluation findings offer real value to the communities they serve.

4. Listening, Feedback, and Speaking Truth to Power

Center for Effective Philanthropy. Grantee Perception Report.
Link to Report.

Summary: The Grantee Perception Report (GPR) is a specialized assessment tool offered by the Center for Effective Philanthropy designed to provide foundations with candid and reliable feedback from their grantee partners. Through the use of an easy-to-implement and confidential online survey, the report allows funders to gather vital perspectives that can be used to drive organizational improvement and better understand their overall impact within the philanthropic sector.

Unique points: One defining characteristic of the GPR is that it is the only grantee survey that places a funder's results into a comparative context by benchmarking them against peer organizations. Additionally, for funders with open application processes, the GPR can be uniquely combined with the Applicant Perception Report (APR) to provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of both successful grantees and declined applicants regarding the foundation's interactions and processes.

Relevance: Funders should engage with this source because it provides actionable insights into critical performance areas such as their impact on communities, their understanding of beneficiary challenges, and their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts. By reading these reports and repeating assessments over time, foundations can streamline their application and reporting processes, identify areas for better communication, and track their progress toward meeting public commitments and improving their effectiveness as a partner.

EFC / IssueLab (2019). Smarter Grantmaking for Grantee Organisations. Link to Report.

Summary: Smarter Grantmaking for Grantee Organizations is a toolkit published in June 2019 by the Transparency and Accountability Initiative to facilitate better communication between funders and the organizations they support. The guide recognizes that grantmaking practices are most effective when informed by grantee experience, yet various factors often block the necessary feedback loops between these two groups. To address this, the source provides a series of illustrative questions and conversation starters designed to convert traditional communication barriers into a productive two-way dialogue. It covers topics like strategic alignment, reporting requirements, and organizational support to nurture a healthier funder-grantee relationship.

Unique points: A unique aspect of this source is its specific focus on empowering grantseekers to take the lead in advocating for their own needs and seeking clarity from prospective or current funders. Rather than being a top-down set of instructions for foundations, it offers practical, ready-to-use questions that help grantees navigate power dynamics by treating program officers as human beings and thought partners. Another unique element is the inclusion of specific advice on how to handle "big news" or setbacks, providing a framework for vulnerability and transparency during difficult organizational transitions or project failures.

Relevance: This source is highly relevant to funders because it provides a roadmap for adopting smarter grantmaking practices that can significantly improve collective impact and organizational learning. Funders can use the guide to understand how to streamline burdensome processes, such as by aligning reporting schedules with a grantee's existing cycles or accepting annual reports as narrative submissions. By engaging with the questions presented, program officers can transition into the role of an ally who offers technical support for diversity and equity initiatives or connects grantees with peer networking opportunities.

GrantAdvisor. Anonymous Feedback on Funder Practice. Link to Website.

Summary: GrantAdvisor is an online platform that allows grantseekers to read and write candid reviews of foundations to help colleagues and improve the grantmaking process. The site aims to close the feedback loop between grantmakers and nonprofits, ensuring both parties can succeed in their charitable missions. It provides a database of funder profiles categorized by state, allowing users to see ratings and detailed feedback from survey respondents

Unique points: A distinctive feature of the source is the #FixTheForm initiative, which identifies specific technical hurdles like surprise pop-up questions or the inability to save application progress. Additionally, it provides a public percentage rating for funders based on the consensus of survey respondents, offering a transparent view of organizational performance. These reviews often include direct advice for other applicants, such as attending specific webinars or contacting grant officers beforehand.

Relevance: Funders can utilize this source as a vital listening tool to identify inadvertently cumbersome applications or broken contact links that might otherwise go unaddressed. By reviewing their public profiles, foundations can understand how small adjustments—such as eliminating word limits—can significantly reduce burnout for nonprofit staff and improve equitable access to funding.

Nonprofit AF (2021). How Strategic Philanthropy Has Harmed Our Sector. Link to Report

Summary: This article provides a sharp critique of "strategic philanthropy," arguing that funder-driven priorities often harm the nonprofit sector by overriding the expertise of those actually doing the work,. The author asserts that foundations create "delusions of omniscience" when they force grantees to align with strategies created by program officers who lack lived experience or close community ties. Ultimately, the source calls for a radical shift where funders stop setting strategies and instead provide multi-year general operating support to follow the lead of the communities they serve.

Unique points: A unique element of this source is its blunt exposure of the power dynamics in philanthropy, specifically the claim that grantees frequently feel forced to lie to funders about the effectiveness of funder-led models to avoid jeopardizing their survival. It also uniquely identifies the "need to be special" among privileged donors as a primary driver of harmful, top-down strategic planning that ignores community input. The text stands out by using provocative analogies, comparing the persistent and destructive nature of strategic philanthropy to the wildfires caused by gender reveal parties.

Relevance: Funders should read this source to understand how their well-intentioned strategies may be inadvertently creating "cycles of delusion" and wasting the valuable time and energy of their grantees, It offers a direct challenge for foundations to reflect on whether they possess the "moral authority" to set priorities or if they should instead focus on providing the autonomy and resources necessary for nonprofits to lead. By adopting the suggested "MYGOD" (Multi-Year General Operating Dollars) approach, funders can transition from being prescriptive "auteurs" to becoming genuine partners in addressing systemic injustice.

5. Participatory Grantmaking and Shared Decision-Making

GrantCraft (2018). Deciding Together: Shifting Power and Resources Through Participatory Grantmaking. Link to Report.

Summary: This guide, titled "Deciding Together," serves as a comprehensive resource for foundations interested in shifting decision-making power to the communities they aim to serve through participatory grantmaking. It explores the core values, benefits, and challenges of this approach while providing practical models and mechanics used by diverse funders globally. By highlighting pioneering leadership from the bottom up, the source aims to help funders move from traditional top-down paradigms toward more accountable and collaborative processes.

Unique points: A standout feature of this source is its deliberate focus on lifting up "bottom-up" leadership from smaller, place-based foundations, which sets it apart from typical guides that focus on traditional, top-down philanthropic standards. Furthermore, the guide is unique because it was produced using a participatory methodology itself, incorporating the feedback and insights of a steering committee composed of organizations with deep experience in the field.

Relevance: Funders can use this resource as a roadmap to improve the quality of their grantmaking by leveraging the lived expertise of community members to make more informed and strategic investment decisions. The source provides practical tools and specific mechanics that help foundations navigate the complex process of ceding control and embedding a participatory ethos into their internal structures.

Participatory Grantmaking Community. Resources Hub. Link to Website.

Summary: The Participatory Grantmaking Resources hub is a comprehensive database designed to help funders understand and implement participatory grantmaking by shifting decision-making authority to the communities they serve. It provides a curated collection of foundational theories, practical "how-to" guides, and historical references that explore the transformation of power dynamics within the philanthropic sector. By centralizing these diverse materials, the platform assists organizations in expanding participation beyond grantmaking into governance, operations, and finance.

Unique points: This source is unique because it offers a dedicated PGM Resource Database that connects historical milestones, such as the 1969 "Ladder of Citizen Participation," to modern-day practical implementation initiatives. It also distinguishes itself by mapping the intersections between participatory grantmaking and adjacent movements like Trust-Based Philanthropy and Community-Centric Fundraising, providing a holistic view of equitable change.

Relevance: Funders should utilize this resource to gain actionable insights into ceding decision-making power, including the strategy and criteria behind funding decisions, to those most affected by their work. The database allows foundations to identify flexible funding practices and collaborative processes that can disrupt the "non-profit starvation cycle" and foster mutual accountability.

Candid. Participatory Grantmaking Collection. Link to Repository.

Summary: The Candid Participatory Grantmaking Special Collection is a curated digital repository that aggregates diverse models, methods, and insights centered on shifting decision-making power to communities. This collection builds upon the foundational wisdom of the "Deciding Together" guide to provide a broad look at how funders practically cede authority. It encompasses a wide range of materials, including case studies, storytelling, and evidence-based reports from global philanthropic initiatives.

Unique points: This source is unique because it serves as a dynamic hub featuring twenty-eight distinct results that cover a vast spectrum of contexts, such as family philanthropy and Indigenous-led grantmaking. It distinguishes itself by providing international perspectives, like youth-led initiatives in Sierra Leone, and by offering multi-language resources such as the Spanish translation of core participatory guides. The collection also integrates specific storytelling from funds like the Indigenous Women's Flow Fund to provide a narrative-driven understanding of power shifts.

Relevance: Funders should engage with this collection to access a wealth of evidence and practical recommendations that demonstrate the effectiveness of participatory approaches. By exploring the diverse case studies, foundations can identify specific mechanics for incorporating community voices into their own giving strategies and governance.

Stanford Social Innovation Review (Podcast) (2022). Participatory Grantmaking: A Shared Approach to Effective Change. Link to Podcast.

Summary: This podcast features a collaborative discussion between philanthropic leaders about the practical implementation and core ethos of participatory grantmaking. The participants define this approach as ceding decision-making power directly to the communities impacted by grants to enhance institutional accountability and transparency. By sharing experiences from both a long-standing social justice foundation and a large family foundation, the source explores how this strategy works in diverse organizational contexts.

Unique points: A unique aspect of this source is the contrast it provides between a foundation where community-led grantmaking is "baked into the DNA" and a larger institution navigating the specific bureaucratic hurdles of testing such models. Furthermore, it offers rare, concrete insights into the intensive administrative demands of participation, such as the mention of volunteers dedicating over 100 hours of their time to a single project. These perspectives provide a balanced view of the practical "barriers" alongside the aspirational goals of the model.

Relevance: Funders should listen to this podcast to gain a realistic understanding of the time, flexibility, and trust-building required to authentically engage communities in decision-making. It provides a roadmap for shifting from a prescriptive donor model to a partnership model that leverages the expertise of those closest to social problems. Finally, the podcast highlights how aligning internal processes with community needs can increase a funder's institutional credibility and overall impact.

Fund Shared Insight. Participatory Philanthropy Toolkit. Link to Toolkit.

Summary: The Fund for Shared Insight website provides a comprehensive introduction to participatory philanthropy, centering on the belief that high-quality listening must be rooted in a commitment to equity. It offers a robust suite of resources, including a Participatory Philanthropy Toolkit, designed to help foundations shift power from traditional donors to the people most affected by their decisions. The site serves as a hub for tools, research, and case studies that demonstrate how centering community voices can lead to more effective and equitable philanthropic outcomes.

Unique points: A standout feature of this source is the Funder Readiness Assessment, which allows organizations to evaluate their internal motivations and capabilities before adopting participatory practices. It also uniquely provides a Participatory Philanthropy Primer that clarifies the specific distinctions between simply consulting communities and actually ceding decision-making power to them. Additionally, the site includes a Glossary of Terms and instructional videos to ensure that funders and communities are operating from a shared understanding of complex concepts like consensus and participatory design.

Relevance: Funders should engage with this source to transition from traditional, top-down funding models to a partnership-based approach that leverages the firsthand knowledge of community leaders. By using the Funder Listening Action Menu and various assessment tools, foundations can practically identify ways to integrate community participation into governance, strategy, and evaluation. Ultimately, these resources help grantmakers build trust and transparency, ensuring their strategies are grounded in the actual needs and aspirations of those they aim to serve.

6. Funding Systems Change and Transformative Philanthropy

Ashoka. Embracing Complexity: Towards a Shared Understanding of Funding Systems Change. Link to Report.

Summary: "Embracing Complexity" is a comprehensive report co-created by Ashoka, McKinsey & Company, and a collaborative of global partners to define a shared approach for funding systems change. It presents five foundational principles designed to help funders transition from short-term, project-based giving toward supporting transformative solutions that address root causes. This guide is grounded in extensive research, distilling insights from over 110 systems change leaders and 60 in-depth interviews with practitioners and intermediaries.

Unique points: This source is unique because it represents a deliberate collaboration between funders, intermediaries, and systems change leaders, ensuring the proposed strategies reflect the needs of all stakeholders. It also distinguishes itself by using quantitative evidence to validate its principles, such as highlighting the disconnect between the long timelines required for systemic change and current short-term funding cycles. Finally, the report offers a "systemic funder" archetype that serves as an aspirational model for organizations to align their internal culture and DNA with their mission.

Relevance: Funders should read this report to access practical, field-tested recommendations for streamlining applications and building trust-based relationships with partners. By implementing the provided roadmap, foundations can identify and remove internal barriers that hinder long-term engagement and collective impact. Ultimately, this resource empowers grantmakers to move beyond their own organizational boundaries and lead a collaborative ecosystem that is better equipped to solve humanity's most pressing challenges.

Ashoka. Systems Change Crash Course. Link to Report.

Summary: Ashoka's Systems Change Crash Course is a video-led, hands-on journey designed to help changemakers add systems thinking to their toolbox for tackling social problems. Rooted in three decades of experience supporting social entrepreneurs, the course provides a step-by-step process for identifying root causes and crafting strategies for lasting systemic impact. It guides users through three distinct modules focused on pinpointing a systems focus, planning for indirect impact, and developing the leadership skills necessary to move beyond traditional "lone hero" models.

Unique points: This source distinguishes itself through its interactive, "hands-on" pedagogical approach, which prioritizes practice over perfection via a series of worksheets and a recommended peer-partner model for deeper reflection. Additionally, it uniquely integrates an "inner transformation" component using tools like the "Let Go Radar," which helps leaders recognize and overcome personal barriers to sharing power and fostering collective impact.

Relevance: Funders can utilize this course to deepen their understanding of the "3 Levels of Impact," allowing them to distinguish between immediate direct services and the long-term, indirect shifts required for true systems change. By engaging with these frameworks, grantmakers can better assess the strategic goals of applicants and identify opportunities to fund "tipping point" impacts that trigger irreversible systemic shifts.

Funding For Real Change. Case Study Synthesis Report. Link to Report.

Summary: The Case Study: Synthesis report from Funding For Real Change provides a detailed overview of how diverse foundations have successfully increased indirect cost coverage in project grants to combat the "nonprofit starvation cycle". It synthesizes data and interviews from both funders and nonprofits to explore various policies, implementation strategies, and key trends like the impact of COVID-19 and the role of identity in philanthropy. The report emphasizes that there is no one-size-fits-all solution, as each funder's journey toward equitable support is unique to their specific context and goals.

Unique points: One unique element of this source is its comparative analysis of distinct policy models, such as the MacArthur Foundation's 29 percent flat rate based on financial health benchmarks versus the Oak Foundation's flexible approach that uses no set minimum or maximum. The source also distinguishes itself by detailing specific, often-ignored costs, including those related to safety and security—such as kidnap insurance, security intelligence, and specialized communications—that are critical for grassroots organizations operating in high-risk regions.

Relevance: Funders can utilize this source to benchmark their internal practices against peers and implement more effective, data-driven indirect cost policies that support grantee resilience. The report offers practical methods for streamlining grantmaking, such as eliminating calculation burdens for grantees or adopting user-friendly standardized templates. By reading this, foundations can learn how to shift power dynamics and build trust-based partnerships that ensure the core organizational functions of their grantees are fully resourced.

Scharmer, O (2023). Philanthropy 4.0: Giving in Times of Disruption. Link to Report.

Summary: This article by Otto Scharmer explores how philanthropy can effectively respond to the modern "polycrisis" and increasing hypercomplexity through an emerging model called Philanthropy 4.0. It defines this new approach as a shift toward transformative systems change that addresses the deep-seated root causes of societal issues rather than just treating symptoms. The text emphasizes moving from an "egosystem" perspective to an "ecosystem" view to foster flourishing and prosperity for the entire planet.

Unique points: A defining feature of this source is its categorization of complexity into three distinct types—dynamic, social, and emerging—to help funders select the most appropriate methodology for their specific challenges. It also introduces a unique evolutionary matrix that tracks philanthropy from traditional 1.0 charity to 4.0 transformative giving, mapping each stage to its respective blind spots and power dynamics. This framework provides a clear vocabulary for discussing the awareness and mindsets that guide philanthropic activity.

Relevance: Funders should engage with this source to evaluate whether their current "operating system" is efficient or if it is like trying to "get to the moon using a donkey cart" when faced with complex disruptions. The article offers a practical roadmap for shifting focus "upstream" to transform mindsets and build the institutional infrastructures necessary for collective action. By adopting the trust-based, long-term approach described, foundations can realign their intentions with actions that generate lasting systemic impact.

7. Emblematic Case Studies

7.1 Trust-based and Unrestricted Funding

MacKenzie Scott / Yield Giving. Large-scale unrestricted and trust-based funding. Link to Report.

Summary: Yield Giving utilizes two primary pathways, "Quiet Research" and "Open Calls," to identify and fund organizations that advance opportunities for people in underserved communities. The "Quiet Research" process is conducted anonymously to minimize the administrative burden on nonprofits, focusing on indicators of high potential such as stable finances and experienced leadership. This source also details a searchable database of gift recipients that can be filtered by focus areas like education and health or by specific geographies.

Unique elements: The source is unique for its commitment to "Quiet Research," where candidate organizations are identified and evaluated privately without their prior knowledge to prevent them from being distracted by the application process. Furthermore, it stands out by providing immediate gifts that are completely unrestricted, allowing the recipients to use the funds however they choose to best serve their mission.

Relevance: Funders can use this source as a blueprint for "trust-based" giving, illustrating how to identify high-impact partners without requiring burdensome applications. It also provides a practical directory of vetted nonprofit organizations that have already demonstrated a strong track record and leadership within their respective communities.

Center for Effective Philanthropy (2025). Transformative Gifts: Inside Organizations Received MacKenzie Scott Grants. Link to report.

Summary: This companion report to the Center for Effective Philanthropy's three-year study features in-depth profiles of seven nonprofit organizations that received large, unrestricted grants from MacKenzie Scott. The document highlights the diverse experiences of these recipients, which range across various sizes and types, including organizations in East Texas and northern Tanzania. By focusing on individual narratives, the report illustrates the transformational impact these gifts have had on organizational capacity, community service, and leadership development.

Unique elements: A key unique feature of this source is its focus on qualitative, on-the-ground impact, moving beyond the broader statistical data found in the primary "Breaking the Mold" study. Additionally, it uniquely showcases a vast variety of nonprofit types and sizes across different geographical contexts to demonstrate that the transformational effects of large gifts are not limited to one specific sector or region.

Relevance: Funders can use these profiles to better understand how trust-based philanthropy and unrestricted funding can empower diverse organizations to achieve their missions more effectively. Reading this source allows funders to gain practical insights into the tangible outcomes of "big gifts" and provides a model for how they might rethink their own grant-making strategies to be more impactful.

Center of Effective Philanthropy (2023). Emerging Impacts: The Effects of MacKenzie Scott's Large, Unrestricted Gifts. Link to Report.

Summary: This report from the Center for Effective Philanthropy presents results from the second year of a longitudinal study examining the impact of MacKenzie Scott's massive, unrestricted grants. Drawing on surveys from 632 recipient nonprofits and interviews with 37 funders, the study tracks how these gifts influence organizational capacity, programmatic innovation, and efforts toward equity. The findings suggest that these "trust-based" gifts have been transformational for recipients, leading to improved staff morale and expanded services while revealing a significant disconnect between funder fears and actual nonprofit experiences.

Unique elements: This source is unique because it provides a rare, large-scale comparative analysis between the self-reported successes of grant recipients and the specific concerns held by traditional foundation leaders regarding such large gifts. Additionally, it offers a distinct multi-year perspective on a giving model that is unprecedented in philanthropy for its total lack of use restrictions and minimal reporting requirements.

Relevance: Funders should read this source to gain evidence-based insights into how unrestricted funding can empower nonprofits to take risks and pursue systemic change without the administrative burdens of traditional grant-making. It offers a practical framework for funders to reconsider their own risk assessments, as the data shows that recipient organizations are successfully planning for long-term sustainability rather than facing the "financial cliffs" many peers predicted.

7.2 Core Funding and Organisational Development

Oak Foundation. People-centred flexible grantmaking and core funding. Link to Report.

Summary: This source outlines the Oak Foundation's people-centred approach to grant-making, which prioritizes community needs in environmental and climate initiatives. It details the foundation's shift toward supporting those most impacted by ecological decisions to ensure long-term sustainability and systemic change. The text reflects an evolution in strategy based on deep listening and a recognition of the value of indigenous and local knowledge.

Unique elements: The source is unique for its transparent discussion of past strategic failures, such as conservation efforts that unintentionally limited traditional fishing access and livelihoods. It also features a specific focus on correcting power imbalances by intentionally funding and elevating networks led by people in the Global South.

Relevance: Funders can use this document as a model for moving toward participatory grant-making that empowers historically marginalized and under-resourced communities. It illustrates how to shift from top-down decision-making to a model that integrates first-hand experience and community organizing into the design of projects. By reading this, funders can learn to embed learning practices that allow them to adapt their funding strategies in real time based on both successes and failures.

Mava Foundation. Be an octopus funder – Reflection from engaged donors. Link to Report.

Summary: This booklet shares the MAVA Foundation's 27-year journey toward becoming an "engaged donor" that provides more than just financial support to its partners. It defines engagement as the strategic use of a donor's unique capabilities—such as networking and convening power—across four key areas: project design, organizational support, individual leadership, and system connectivity. The source aims to inspire other philanthropists to move beyond traditional project funding to maximize their collective social and environmental impact.

Unique elements: A standout feature is the "octopus" metaphor, which illustrates how a donor should adapt to its environment and use multiple organizational "arms" simultaneously to solve problems. Additionally, the text is remarkably candid about the risks of over-engagement, offering specific "lessons learnt" on managing human emotions and avoiding the pitfalls of micromanagement within partnerships.

Relevance: This source is highly relevant to funders seeking to increase their effectiveness by adopting a more participatory and system-oriented approach to grant-making. It provides actionable "tips" on handling complex issues like financial dependency, decision-making independence, and planning a respectful exit from partnerships. By reading this, donors can learn how to leverage their unique "superpowers" to build more resilient partners and a better-connected stakeholder ecosystem.

7.3 Participatory Grantmaking and Power Shift

Headwaters Foundation for Justice (2018). Trust-based and participatory grantmaking approach. Link to Report.

Summary: Headwaters Foundation defines trust-based philanthropy as a collaborative model designed to dismantle traditional power imbalances between funders and grantees through active listening and mutual learning. This approach significantly reduces the administrative burden on non-profits by replacing lengthy applications and reports with direct dialogue and foundation-led research. Ultimately, it aims to provide streamlined, unrestricted, and multi-year funding so that organizations can focus on their mission-driven work rather than complex compliance.

Unique elements: A standout feature of this source is its explicit stance that the "onus of due diligence" and the heavy lifting of the grant process belong squarely to the funder rather than the grantee. Furthermore, it is unique in its open acceptance that achieving long-term goals requires taking risks and that grantees are not expected to be perfect as long as they communicate openly about challenges.

Relevance: This source serves as a roadmap for funders looking to increase their community impact by simplifying their internal grantmaking processes and accelerating the distribution of resources. It illustrates how providing unrestricted operational support allows grantees to think more strategically and innovate rather than constantly managing immediate financial crises.

Two Ridings Community Foundation. Putting people closest to the issues in the centre of funding decision making. Link to Website.

Summary: The source outlines how the Two Ridings Community Foundation implements participatory grant-making by involving people with lived experience in collective decision-making. It focuses on the Deciding Together Fund in York, which allowed a diverse cohort to allocate £218,000 to twenty different community projects. This approach is designed to shift power dynamics, foster stronger relationships, and use collective intelligence to identify local needs.

Unique elements: A standout feature of this source is its use of detailed personal profiles, such as that of a panel member named Miles, to demonstrate exactly how lived experience informs the grant-making process. Additionally, the source is uniquely candid about the foundation's evolution, openly sharing that they made mistakes while learning how to facilitate these funds over several years.

Relevance: Funders can utilize this source as a practical guide for making their own funding processes more accessible and informed by the perspectives of those closest to the issues. It provides evidence of the benefits of devolving power and offers a direct point of contact for funders interested in transitioning toward more inclusive grant-making models.

ECFI (2025). Deciding Together York: trusting communities to lead change through participatory grantmaking. Link to Blog.

Summary: The source describes a 2021 experiment in participatory grant-making where the York Multiple & Complex Needs Network and Two Ridings Community Foundation collaborated to distribute £250,000. A working group of 20 individuals with lived and professional experience was tasked with co-deciding the fund's name, criteria, and final award recipients over a nine-month period. This approach was designed to challenge traditional top-down grant-making by shifting power to those directly affected by issues like homelessness and addiction. The project emphasized a culture of radical trust and trauma-informed facilitation to manage the inherent complexities of collective decision-making.

Unique elements: One unique feature is the specific focus on the "groan zone," which describes the uncomfortable but transformative middle phase of group development where ideas clash and roles shift. Additionally, the source is uniquely critical of its own process, openly acknowledging limitations in ethnic representativeness and the negative impact of providing insufficient financial compensation for participants.

Relevance: Funders can use this source as a practical template for navigating the tensions between participatory inspiration and the operational realities of legal or governance constraints. It provides evidence that participatory grant-making builds long-term civic capacity by training local residents who can then apply these leadership methods to other local governance roles. By reading this, funders learn that participation is a transformative culture shift that requires a willingness to relinquish control to achieve stronger social systems.

7.4 Feminist Funds and Movement-Centered Funding

Mama Cash. Feminist, trust-based, and participatory grantmaking. Link to Report.

Summary: Mama Cash is an international organization that supports women, girls, trans, and intersex people in their global struggle for human rights and bodily autonomy. For over forty years, the fund has focused on moving resources to feminist movements to create sustainable impact and challenge oppressive social norms. The source also highlights their role as an effective intermediary in specific areas such as climate justice and local community adaptation finance.

Unique elements: The most distinctive aspect of this source is the organization's commitment to sharing power, where all grantmaking decisions are made by feminist activists instead of internal staff. This participatory model ensures that funding is directed by those with lived experience in the movements they are supporting, rather than traditional philanthropic administrators.

Relevance: Funders should read this to understand how to move "more and better money" to grassroots movements through collaborative and transparent methods. It provides actionable insights into how donors can effectively shift finance to local communities and implement more equitable power-sharing strategies in their own grantmaking.

Fenomenal Funds (2025). Reimagining Power to Build Resilience. Link to Report.

Summary: Fenomenal Funds is a feminist funder collaborative that utilizes a shared governance model and participatory grantmaking to bolster the resilience of women's funds worldwide. The Resilience Grants program focuses on resourcing organizational infrastructure and internal capacities, such as staff salaries, financial reserves, and wellness, across 44 diverse women's funds. This approach aims to move beyond traditional funding by trusting these organizations to invest in themselves so they can better navigate global polycrises.

Unique elements: The source highlights a non-competitive grants process designed by the funds themselves, which levels the playing field and fosters collaboration over competition. It is also distinguished by its focus on disrupting traditional power relationships in philanthropy through a model of shared governance and "power with" decision-making between private foundations and funded partners.

Relevance: Funders should read this to understand how shared power and trust-based investments in infrastructure can create a more resilient and adaptable social change ecosystem. The source provides a practical roadmap for transformative funding that prioritizes the long-term health and safety of movements over short-term project outcomes.

7.5 Participatory and Learning-Oriented Reporting

Oak Foundation. Learning-oriented and dialogic reporting. Link to Report.

Summary: The Oak Foundation provides grants to non-profit organizations globally to foster a safer, fairer, and more sustainable world. They primarily offer multi-year core and project support, emphasizing that grantee partners are best positioned to direct their own work. While the process is mainly invitation-only, the foundation also accepts unsolicited letters of enquiry and works in partnership with applicants through a rigorous, six-step due diligence process.

Unique element: A distinct feature of this approach is the explicit encouragement for project applicants to request "true costs," including overhead, to ensure financial health. Additionally, the foundation maintains specific funding caps—generally no more than 50 percent of a project or 20 percent of an organization's budget—specifically to promote long-term resiliency through diverse funding sources.

Relevance: Funders can use this source as a template for structuring a transparent, partnership-based application timeline that balances due diligence with grantee support. It also illustrates a strategic rationale for limiting funding percentages to prevent grantee over-reliance on a single source of income. Finally, it offers a model for integrating discretionary grants alongside traditional program-based funding.

Laudes Foundation. Learning-oriented reporting with partners.
Link to Report.

Summary: The Laudes Foundation is an organization dedicated to transitioning the global economy into one that values all people, nature, and the climate by supporting actions that challenge current industry standards. They work across key sectors such as fashion, food, and finance, providing partners with both financial grants and strategic support that extends "beyond grantmaking" to ensure systemic success. Their efforts focus on fostering deep collaboration and measuring impact, which is then shared transparently through public databases, news stories, and detailed annual reports.

Unique elements: A primary unique feature of this source is the foundation's explicit "beyond grantmaking" philosophy, which prioritizes providing non-financial resources and fostering collaboration to maximize the long-term potential of their partners. Furthermore, the foundation distinguishes itself from similar organizations by actively seeking to design a specialized philanthropic knowledge hub and utilizing regular Partner Perception Reports to critically evaluate and improve its own internal effectiveness.

Relevance: Funders should read this source to understand how to effectively integrate social justice and climate action into a unified strategy for systemic change, particularly regarding making a "just transition" attractive to capital markets. Additionally, the source offers actionable insights into advanced evaluation methods and collaborative partnership frameworks that other funders can adopt to enhance the efficacy of their own philanthropic initiatives.

Porticus. Participation, learning, and accountability. Link to Source.

Summary: This source provides an overview of Porticus, a philanthropic organization dedicated to fostering a just and sustainable future centered on human dignity. It outlines their collaborative approach, working with local and global partners to drive systemic changes across diverse sectors including education, environmental sustainability, and social equity. The document also showcases various initiatives and personal stories, such as those involving regenerative agriculture in Latin America and the support of displaced children in the Middle East and Africa.

Unique elements: One unique aspect of this source is its heavy emphasis on "systems change" rather than just immediate relief, aiming for long-term benefits for people today and for generations to come. Additionally, it uniquely integrates faith and philanthropy with highly specific, human-centric narratives to illustrate the practical impact of their global programs.

Relevance: Funders should read this source to understand how to effectively implement a partner-led strategy that prioritizes human dignity while tackling complex global issues. It offers valuable insights into specific tools, such as the INVEST toolkit for SME banking, and provides a framework for scaling impact through meaningful participation and rigorous safeguarding guidelines.

Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP). Grantee Perception Report. Link to Report.

Summary: This source describes the Grantee Perception Report (GPR) and Applicant Perception Report (APR) offered by the Center for Effective Philanthropy to help funders gather candid feedback,. It outlines key survey themes such as impact, communication, and diversity while highlighting how foundations use this data to improve their effectiveness and partnership strategies,. The source also points to various resources and case studies that demonstrate how listening to grantees leads to actionable insights and organizational growth.

Unique elements: The GPR is distinguished as the only grantee survey that places a funder's results into a comparative context with their peers. Additionally, the option to combine this feedback with the APR provides a uniquely comprehensive view by capturing the perspectives of declined applicants alongside successful grantees.

Relevance: Funders can use this information to benchmark their performance and identify specific areas for improvement in their grant-making and reporting processes,. By participating in these assessments, they can build stronger relationships with grantees and ensure their strategies are effectively addressing the needs of their intended beneficiaries.

8. To watch

UnCharitable (documentary). Link to Video.

Summary: The film "UnCharitable" challenges traditional beliefs about charitable giving by arguing that nonprofits should be granted the same operational freedoms as businesses to effectively change the world. Inspired by Dan Pallotta's influential TED Talk, the documentary features insights from leaders of major foundations and global nonprofits, including the Ford Foundation and the Nature Conservancy. It serves as a powerful call-to-action to move away from restrictive "sack-cloth-and-ashes" constraints that often hamper the potential impact of charitable organizations.

Unique elements: This source is unique because it is a "first of its kind movie" that directly challenges the cultural "saints and sinners" narrative surrounding nonprofit spending and institutional constraints. Unlike standard academic reports, it leverages a cinematic format and high-profile voices like Edward Norton to reframe how society views the economic potential and growth of the social sector.

Relevance: Funders should engage with this source to understand why traditional restrictions on nonprofit overhead and administrative costs may be preventing the very systemic change they aim to achieve. By watching the film, funders can reconsider their beliefs about giving and join a movement to empower their partners with the financial flexibility needed to scale their impact.

Everyone Deserves a Fair Slice (video). Link to Video

Summary: This source uses a satirical pizza shop analogy to illustrate the dysfunctional relationship between nonprofit human service providers and their institutional funders. It depicts a series of funders who demand high-quality, specialized services while refusing to cover the actual costs of production or essential overhead like rent and salaries. The transcript highlights the extreme administrative burdens placed on these organizations, including complex paperwork, delayed payments, and arbitrary shifting requirements that distract from their core mission.

Unique elements: The source is unique because it employs humor and metaphor to translate complex philanthropic power dynamics into a relatable, everyday business scenario. By using the pizza shop imagery, it effectively exposes the absurdity of common funding practices, such as refusing to pay for "boxes" or demanding "falafel" from a pizza place, in a way that traditional policy reports cannot.

Relevance: Funders should engage with this source to recognize how restrictive funding and excessive administrative hurdles can inadvertently undermine the sustainability of the organizations they support. It provides a clear argument for shifting toward trust-based philanthropy, where funders pay the full cost of services and eliminate "hoops" that prevent nonprofits from making a meaningful difference.

9. Closing Reflections: Towards a More Trusting Sector

The sources gathered in this repository converge on a single, urgent proposition: the dominant model of philanthropic funding — short-term, project-restricted, compliance-heavy, and built on structural mistrust — is not a neutral default. It is an active choice, and one with measurable costs. It starves organisations of the infrastructure they need to survive. It redirects scarce staff time from mission to administration. It deepens racial and geographic inequities. And it does so while often producing less impact than more flexible, trust-based alternatives would allow.

What is striking, reading across this literature, is how much consensus already exists. Practitioners, researchers, evaluators, and grantees largely agree on what needs to change: longer grant cycles, unrestricted or core funding, simplified reporting, meaningful feedback loops, and a genuine redistribution of decision-making power toward communities and organisations closest to the issues. The barriers are less intellectual than institutional — embedded habits, board risk aversion, legacy systems, and the inertia of sector-wide norms that have persisted far longer than the evidence warrants.

Trust-based philanthropy is not a rejection of rigour. It is a redefinition of it. Rather than measuring trust through compliance checklists and overhead ratios, it asks funders to invest in relationships, to conduct their own due diligence, and to hold themselves accountable to the communities they claim to serve — not just the boards and donors they report to. Several of the case studies in this collection demonstrate that this shift is already underway, in feminist funds, community foundations, large international funders, and individual philanthropists. Their experiences show that trust, when extended genuinely, tends to be well-placed.

This bibliography is intended as a resource, not a blueprint. No single approach fits every funder, every context, or every moment. What the literature makes clear, however, is that doing nothing — continuing to fund in ways that are known to undermine organisational health — is itself a decision with consequences. The question is not whether to change, but where to start, and how far to go.

We hope this collection supports those conversations — within funding teams, between funders and grantees, and across the sector as a whole.

10. Questions to Carry Forward

As you engage with the sources in this collection, the following questions may serve as useful provocations for internal reflection and organisational dialogue:

→ What proportion of our current grants are multi-year and unrestricted, and what is stopping us from increasing this?

→ How much time do our grantees spend on reporting requirements that primarily serve our internal needs rather than their learning?

→ Do the organisations closest to the issues we fund have meaningful influence over our funding decisions?

→ Are we covering the real costs, including indirect and infrastructure costs, of the work we say we value?

→ What would it mean to treat our grantees as genuine partners rather than service providers?

→ Where in our current practices do we extend trust — and where do we default to control?

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About this Repository

This repository was compiled as a living reference to support funders at any stage of their journey toward more equitable, trust-based grantmaking. It is intended to be returned to, expanded, and shared. Readers are encouraged to suggest additions, flag gaps, and adapt the material for use in internal workshops, board presentations, and partner dialogues.

Version: April 2026. This document may be updated as the field develops.