



Elevate Children
Funders Group

Participatory Philanthropy: Six Foundations' Journeys

In September 2020, ECFG Executive Director Heather Hamilton interviewed six members of the network about their journey towards participatory philanthropy, particularly engaging children and youth. Here's what they said:

**Emma Stevenson, Senior Investment Partner
- Comic Relief UK**

**Kristen Woolf, Vice President of
Programs - EMPOWER**

**Nina Blackwell, Executive Director - Firelight
Foundation**

**Indhira Prego-Raveneau, Learning &
Assessment Manager - Fund for Global
Human Rights**

Dennis Arends, Senior Analyst - Porticus

**Purity Kagwiria, Director - With and For
Girls/Global Resilience Fund**

Kristin, how did EMpower begin your journey in participation - what prompted you to look at this issue?

Our President and staff have been interested in increasing participation for a while and recently included a strategic priority to move toward participation in our latest strategic plan.

Participation was lifted as a priority in strategic planning when we looked at the internal and external interviews and the benchmarking our consultants did against five similar organizations. It had also been raised by our grantees in the 2019 Grantee Perception Survey we conduct every 3 years, administered by the Center for Effective Philanthropy.

One of the biggest drivers was the success of our work in India, where we have had a Girls Advisory Council for 8 years. It has never been a body that has dispersed funds, but they have really driven our strategic decisions for India. Recently, we supported some of the girls to advise on grantmaking decisions for Girls First (Geneva Global)

We're replicating what was done in India to take program planning and design to a higher level. Our next step is a pilot with those partners who are interested and ready to go on this journey with us, to do some participatory grantmaking in this FY. Some of our grantee partners already have or are strongly positioned to have young people (program participants or program alumni) who are ready to be meaningfully engaged.

Nina, Firelight has had a really interesting journey in increasing participation - can you talk a bit about how your understanding of participation has changed over the years?

We began funding community-based organizations for children made vulnerable by HIV. For 15 years we thought we were a “participatory” funder. And indeed we were, to a degree... but not fully. We were definitely a flexible and open funder - for example, we sometimes didn’t do site visits because we trusted our grantees so deeply. And we listened very closely to community leaders and community-based organizations. But we weren’t truly participatory.

Since then we have really listened and learned so much. I think a lot of people might say: “but you fund community-based organizations – how is that NOT participatory?” This is true - we have always believed (and indeed now have extensive evidence) that true community-born and raised organizations are the most effective at systems change for children, BUT just funding them is not *truly participatory*.

For example, we were still sitting in Santa Cruz, in California. We were still deciding what the “problem” was that we were going to tackle, and we were still writing “action” plans to our donors and then finding CBOs who might want to take that action. We were still giving one-year grants (even though we ended up funding organizations for many years). We were still requesting beneficiary data in Global North terms, and were proposing things like capacity building and technical training without really asking our grantees what they wanted or needed.

Real participatory philanthropy begins with the people who are most affected by or closest to the challenge or opportunity. Grantees MUST NOT be seen as “grantees” or “implementers” or “project partners” – they need to be seen as the CORE of all decisions. Communities themselves cannot be seen as beneficiaries or participants – they must be the DRIVERS.

What do we mean by seeing them as DRIVERS at the CORE of all decisions and action? They (CBOS, communities, and children) should define the problems or opportunities that are the greatest for them. They should be given time and support to understand that problem deeply in their own way. They need to decide if and how they are going to tackle the problem. They get to decide what the “change” or “impact” will be and what activities they and others need to do to get there. They should decide what should be measured in order to ensure whether the impact/change has been achieved.

This might sound radical and hard – but it’s not. Instead of making decisions amongst ourselves, we are collecting first-person, original information from communities and children about where THEY think the problems and opportunities are the greatest. (We are currently doing this in TZ, ZAM, and MAL). When a challenge or opportunity has been identified, instead of contracting an outside academic institution or consultant to gather baseline data, we support our grantees to take the FIRST YEAR of our grant to take a participatory baseline WITH their community. Instead of Firelight staff supporting proposed actions or drafting theories of change and log frames, we support our grantees to agree on action WITH their community and to agree on success measures WITH their community. Instead of deciding what WE want to measure, we support our grantees to explore and suggest indicators WITH their community. By the end of the first year, you have: a community that is aware and engaged; a true baseline of beliefs; a driven community and an achievable set of proposed actions; a community-driven set of indicators; and

community buy-in, ownership and action from the start. It gets even easier as we go along. Our grantees choose their own organizational and technical capacity needs, mentor each other, and choose how they want to engage systems stakeholders such as governments and other policy makers.

Finally, it's really successful! In fact, in initial assessments, we have seen so much more lasting, system-wide community action in our programs that were structured to put COMMUNITY at the center of everything from the beginning, compared to our programs that were pre-determined by Firelight.

That said, the one thing we don't do is participatory **grantmaking** – i.e. - our grantees don't get to choose their fellow grantees. We do everything but participatory grantmaking. At Firelight, we believe that it isn't enough just to do participatory **grantmaking**. First of all – true participation is NOT just in the grantmaking. And while many foundations often think about it in those terms, it is not enough just to be participatory once you get to awarding grants – you need to start much earlier in the process of philanthropy (i.e. - in identifying problems or opportunities, in deciding on actions or definitions of success or impact). Secondly, we believe you need to do much more than just participatory grantmaking – participation needs to be THROUGHOUT the process. Lastly, we need to ask deep questions about power and privilege in philanthropy and be open to asking, is participation ALONE enough? Today, Firelight is also going through a process of de-colonizing so that we can place African voices, leaders, lives, and realities at the center of our decision-making and our vision and strategy – right at the very center of power.

Yes, one of the reasons that we're looking at participation in this member series is because so many people brought it up in my initial get-to-know-you listening tour. When I first started thinking about a session on the topic of participatory grantmaking, it was definitely within the context of participatory grantmaking, but it's clear that participation goes much further than that. Emma, you mentioned that Comic Relief UK has recently asked itself in a review what participation means more broadly. Can you talk about that and lessons learned from the review?

We'd been doing participation in an informal way for a while, especially in our storytelling. Four years ago, I came from a job driving forward participation and was interested in how we could formalize more participation at Comic Relief across all our activities, storytelling, and funding, as well as for staff and our own culture. Now, we have a participation lead in our new social change strategy, giving agency to people with lived experience in storytelling and grantmaking. Deliberate strategic direction.

However, we soon discovered that the issue was too big for one person. We were trying to run before we could walk. So, we stepped back and did a really in-depth review of what participation meant for us and what we were already doing and not doing; was it just grantmaking and giving people a platform to tell stories, or how we work as an organization? Through a review of both our own approach and evidence of best practice used by other organizations, we identified a number of ways we could promote and support effective participation in our work and day to day practice. That includes using more in-country local film makers for our content gathering and we are working with a number of organizations driving forward this approach.

For our funding, we are committed to shifting power to grassroots and community organizations, so that decision making isn't always held by us in our London-centric environment. We established a kind of 'menu' of participation options, from engaging with people with lived and learnt experience or 'experts' by experience to inform our program design, to bringing together an advisory group of people to oversee the whole funding process from beginning to end.

In our global mental health program, we created an advisory panel, from across our focus countries, of people with lived or learned experiences around mental ill-health. While it had a lot of positives - like hearing from diverse voices what's important to people - we weren't able to give enough training and support, so learned that good participation always takes more time and resources than you think. It's essential that it's properly supported.

We took these lessons learned in another program for young people from particularly disadvantaged backgrounds and created a dedicated post just around managing that program and the process - working with them, giving them power and autonomy to make decisions and input into grantmaking, shortlisting and assessment. One of the key things we learned here was the importance of improving access so not everyone has to be in the same room. For example, many young people submitted their thoughts using video.

Two questions we are asking now are: did the outcome change, and what's the added value? They are important questions, especially when finances are so tight across the sector. Effective participation requires a lot of resources - both human and financial. To get Trustees on board we need to be able to clearly evidence and articulate the significant benefits and how much the process of centering and hearing diverse voices and opinions matters. We still have a long way to go, but effective participation and 'shifting power' is a key objective at Comic Relief, and we are committed to embedding it in our practice as effectively as we can.

Dennis, this is one of the themes that came up in our conversation: what is the purpose of participation? Can you tell me a little bit about Porticus' exploration of this?

We're very much at the beginning of our journey. In our current 10-year strategy, and to the delight of many staff, one of our two daring goals concerns the promotion of participation. I'm currently heading a group of nine colleagues who have taken up the task, as a working group, to make Porticus' work and partnerships more participatory. Very interesting work because Porticus is completely new to participation. Porticus hasn't been engaged in this way in the past, so the new 2020-2030 strategy offers a very nice opportunity.

Our working group is quite ambitious. We want to break open the mold of how we look at this daring goal, moving beyond "end-beneficiaries" and grant-making only. We intend to work on participation more broadly. Of course, how fast and how much we can do will depend on how well we convince our colleagues, our senior management, and trustees to move in that direction. The working group has been tasked to establish an operational framework for meaningful participation. We thus want to look at the

entire philanthropic cycle, from strategy development to program design to fund allocation and monitoring and evaluation.

The question of the purpose of participation is really key. I previously did some work on participation in evaluation. I interviewed 30 people, foundations, and consultants, and always asked, "why is this important." If you ask about why participation is important, most come up with reasons of effectiveness. I was so shocked and surprised that people didn't mention participation as a human right as the very first reason. That, to me, should be the starting point of this conversation. Therefore, one of the things we're doing as a working group is trying to unpack this distinction between the intrinsic value of participation versus effectiveness, or the bureaucratic/technocratic reasons versus the desire for transformative participation.

Kristin, you mentioned that a recent report found that programs designed by girls or with girls are the most effective, but had a different reaction when I asked about intrinsic versus efficacy motivations for participation.

That's right - in our report on the involvement of very young girls in Latin America, there was desk review with partners and the girls themselves. One of the main findings was that the most successful programs are those that are designed with significant input from girls. A growing number of our grantee partners include a planning phase now and this is carried out to listen to and learn from girls or young people before program implantation begins.

It's very much a theory of change question - the change we want to see for girls and young people is not possible unless they are actively involved in designing the solutions, but you also do it because you think you will have a better impact.

This question of how we bring along the stakeholders and leaders of our organizations and really move from tokenistic participation to shifts in power came up a lot in our conversations. Dennis, could you talk a bit about the process you're undertaking to come back to the board with an ambitious proposal that goes beyond just engaging beneficiaries?

We have a working group of nine staff members who volunteered to work on this issue. We're working in two groups of two pairs each interviewing a lot of people. We're not just talking to other foundations and experts. We need to know what our colleagues, senior management, and trustees are thinking. We started a conversation with the trustees recently and have developed a simple survey asking what they consider participation, why it is important, and what barriers they see ahead of us. We will soon follow up this survey with an online interactive conversational meeting.

One of the working group's sub-groups is also looking for existing examples within our organization's grantees -- within partners we are funding. We are super new to participation. We have to find out that maybe we funded organizations with a participatory approach that we may not have known about --

maybe we do have partners who are fantastic in that. We're doing a lot of homework first before going to the trustees with proposals for the operational framework.

In parallel, we are working on an engagement plan to bring the colleagues along with us, on the journey to achieving our 10-year daring goal on participation.

Shifting back to the nuts and bolts of participation, let's dive in a little more deeply to some lessons learned in participatory grantmaking. Purity, at Purposeful, you host the With and For Girls Collective and the new Resilience Fund, both of which use participatory approaches to making decisions about grants. Can you tell us a bit about these funds and what have you learned?

With and For Girls Collective is a collaboration between 11 funders that, since 2014, has recognized extraordinary girl-led and girl-centered groups and organizations around the world through an annual awards process that offers flexible funding alongside opportunities for collaboration, mentorship, accompaniment, and profile-raising.

The Global Resilience Fund is a newer partnership that started in April of this year in response to the covid-19 pandemic. It's a partnership between 30 social justice funders committed to resourcing girls' and young women's activism through the COVID-19 crisis. It provides fully flexible rapid response grants of up to \$5,000.

For With and For Girls awards, the collective members previously nominated organizations for the awards. The groups would submit their application and it was reviewed by the donors first, who created a shortlist. We would then constitute a girls panel in each region, and the girls would make the final decision on which organizations receive the award. We're changing that process because we think it's problematic that, if funders have the first say in who ends up in the pool of possible award winners, it's not truly a girl led process. We want our process to be truly girl led. Moving forward, we will have two to three panels of girls looking at initial applications and shortlisting, and a third panel making the final recommendations.

With the Resilience Fund, the girls and young women panel make all the decisions on who gets the funding. We've simplified the application process and have received applications via WhatsApp and in the form of songs. We have also removed the reference checks for groups led by girls under 19 years old. All the groups we've funded are led by girls and young women under 30, and most of them are unregistered and have not received funding before. We have used our networks of funders and actors on the ground to do the reference checks and this has lowered the barriers of access to funding for girls and young women. We have also been very deliberate about reaching groups of people living with disabilities and we are planning to have a round of funding purely focused on groups led by or serving people living with disabilities.

A key learning is that we have to think about what's in it for the girls themselves. In the past, girls on the panels were from an organization that won an award previously, and it brought prestige to that organization to say their girls are shortlisting the next award winners. The organization got funds to

cover their admin costs. We have been thinking a lot about how we create space for girls and compensate them for their time. So, for the first time this year through the Resilience Fund, we are giving a stipend directly to the girls and young women who participate in the panels.

We have also learnt about building trust in the process of funding girls. As funders, we must allow ourselves to unlearn a few things about grantmaking and allow ourselves to go on a journey of discovery to learn what it really means to fund girls and put them at the center. This can only happen if we trust the girls and listen to what they are saying they need.

We've also found that participation requires resources - finding the girls groups sometimes requires a bit more ground work than is needed for other groups. Then, once you've found the girls groups, project funding is not the only thing they need. Your grant will go further if you are willing to build the capacity of the girls so that they can participate meaningfully in the processes that are in their spaces or concern them.

One final learning is that reaching girls and young women is harder than reaching young men based on the social construct and gate keeping that happens around girls and young women. Young men are online, connected, have godfathers who quite often connect them to relevant spaces. Parents and guardians are not very worried about what young men are doing with their free time but this is a key concern where girls are concerned. To be effective in reaching girls and young women, you have to really understand the context of a country, use the mechanism that works in that country to reach girls. You might have to go to a local church or mosque to find them. If you have a very feminist message, you also have to think about how to repackage it to meet people where they are.

Indhira, you mentioned that the Fund for Global Human Rights recently partnered with Purposeful on a participatory grantmaking pilot, and it's your first time sharing the power of actual grantmaking decisions. I was interested that you said that this pilot and participation more generally is a big part of your learning agenda, and you have a joint working group and framework on learning with Purposeful. Can you tell me a bit about what you've learned?

In September 2019, the FGHR, in partnership with Purposeful, piloted a participatory grantmaking model that places young people at the center of our children's rights grantmaking, program implementation, and learning - with the goal of learning both from the process of participatory grantmaking, as well as its impact at the individual, organizational, and community level. From the outset, we co-developed a learning and assessment framework, and engaged a consultant (iWords) to carry out an external, independent evaluation of the project.

One of the key lines of inquiry in our framework focuses on our collaboration with Purposeful. So, we included questions like: What are we learning together and from each other on this project? What were some challenges and how did we overcome them? What were some gains? Setting up a working group with key staff from both organizations has been quite valuable. With periodic ongoing meetings, we have been engaging and documenting our work.

We took steps to ensure diversity among the young people participating, including gender, economic status, location, and not limiting participation to young people from Freetown. We did this by using a range of outlets to call for applications to be on the panel -- social media, WhatsApp, a UNICEF messaging tool, radio spots, as well as outreach through partners. We ended up with 600 applications for a panel of ten young people from across all five regions of Sierra Leone. We also made it possible for them to apply by sending WhatsApp video or audio recordings; and most of the applications came via WhatsApp.

One interesting learning was that it's not enough to ensure there were young women on the panel. While young women constituted the majority of the panel (seven out of ten) - we found we also needed to address gender dynamics in the workshops and activities to ensure an equal level of participation. Girls weren't speaking up in the sessions. We now know that this needs to be part of the initial orientation and training for the young participants, including creating girl-only sessions to give them an opportunity to gain greater confidence when engaging with others.

We engaged young people in the external evaluation as youth co-evaluators, so that they helped design the data collection tools and activities; and, to create a sense of inclusiveness in collecting information, we invited young people to report in a series of audio clips and are looking at doing qualitative data coding to ID trends and themes. Finding creative ways to approach things is key. Finally, in working with young people, we constantly reviewed and adapted our safeguarding protocols to respond to emerging needs and realities. For example, because the panel created included 14-19 year olds, we built in the role of chaperones.

Thank you all for your insightful comments and lessons-learned.