PARTICIPATORY GRANT MAKING – JUST FACT ACTION LEARNING GRANTS

Contents

Introduction

This document explains the motivation, design process and learning behind the 'Just FACT action learning grants.' Its purpose is to help others to learn from both the successes and challenges of the participatory grantmaking approach we developed as part of the Just Food and Climate Transition (Just FACT) programme in 2023. We hope that our learning can encourage wider adoption of participatory approaches to grantmaking, leading to more equitable and impactful distribution of funds.

Why did we choose a participatory approach?

We believe local people are best-placed to understand which projects will have the most impact and what will work for their community. That is why we wanted an approach where community members could shape priorities and help us decide which projects received Just FACT grants.

We also believe that a participatory grantmaking process can help more resources flow to projects led by disabled people, racialised, migrant and or low-income groups, and others who face barriers to funding. These groups often know best what is needed to create a fairer future but are frequently excluded from traditional funding processes.

Summary of recommendations

- Co-design the grantmaking process and grant priorities with community representatives/ people who reflect those who your fund is trying to reach

- Consider all the choice points in the grant making process, forks in the road where some paths replicate the status quo and other paths open opportunities for equity and inclusion. These include:

- How people hear about the fund

- How language is used and how issues are framed

- How people apply

- How people are supported once funds awarded

- Consider how you can meaningfully shift decision-making power from funders to communities through community-led panels or open collective models

- Recognize the different types of knowledge and expertise needed for decision-making but also recognise the power balance on grant panels, and what needs to be done to put people on an equal footing

- Ensure participatory approaches are sufficiently resourced. Costs include staff time for outreach and one-to-one support, as well as paying community representatives for their time

About the Just FACT programme

Just FACT is a 5-year partnership programme led by Wen (Women's Environmental Network) with community research from Platform London. It is made up of a network of 26 people and projects in Tower Hamlets and is funded by The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF)'s Climate Action Fund.

Our vision is to create an environmentally sustainable and socially just food system in Tower Hamlets. In other words, we want to see a food and land system that gives people the right to healthy, culturally appropriate food produced through socially just and ecologically sound methods.

Designing the participatory grantmaking process

In the run up to spring 2023, Wen worked with TNLCF to enter a legal agreement whereby Wen could award grants from the Just FACT programme budget (an External Delegation Agreement). Unallocated funds for new projects were in the original programme budget, so the programme could support new ideas and new groups emerging from the community across the 5 years.

We decided that the foundation of the process needed to be about inclusivity and accessibility, and about shifting power from institutions to local people. To do this well, it was important we involved local people and groups in shaping the grant process itself.

The 'Just FACT Action Learning Grants' were developed by the Just FACT team with input from project partners (already delivering funded work) and the Blueprint Architect group (made up of community members).

Just FACT partners were consulted on the types of grants and process for assessing, awarding and monitoring grants. This consultation led us to consider how we:

- build in capacity to support first time grant makers

- find solutions for small unconstituted groups

- prioritise, value and engage groups who are working in a much harder context

- make sure community voices aren't overshadowed by strategic partners on the decision-making panels, though strategic partners all important because of grant making experience and broad reach within the borough

- support community representatives on panels to put forward their perspectives and opinions

We also held a 'Shaping the grants criteria' workshop with the Blueprint Architects group. This led to important adjustments in the language used. For example

- Changing wording to reduce jargon (eg. dialogue to conversations)

- Taking out the word 'diverse' of the sentence 'involves representation from the local community' (it was felt if there was genuine representation it would be diverse, and this didn't need to be stated).

Three members of the Blueprint Architect group then worked with us more closely to review the grant guidance, providing detailed feedback.

Grant application process

It was identified that replicating traditional application processes had the potential to exclude applicants if access to technology and proficiency in written English was necessary to apply. To counter this we offered

- an alternative application process where an applicant could meet with a member of the team to explain their proposal in conversation and the team member would write it up

- One-to-one support with the application process for people who are applying for funding for the first time, for who English is a second language, who have a sensory impairment (visual, auditory), who are neurodiverse (dyslexia, dyscalculia, autism etc).

We received a couple of enquiries for one-to-one support, but no applicants followed through on this request. We reflected in retrospect that more proactive outreach was

needed to get interest from applicants who might require one-to-one support. We did not have capacity to do the community mapping and outreach that would have led to even more diverse groups applying.

To note, we also considered video applications as an offer but ultimately decided it was too hard to compare applications and were concerned about the potential for bias towards different personalities. With more time, we could have researched and developed an equitable process for this.

We made sure that paper leaflets about the grants were shared with local community centres, cultural centers and cafes. Some applicants reported that they found out about the grants through seeing a leaflet in these places. We also provided an opportunity for potential applicants both online and in person to discuss the grants with the team. The online space was most popular, talking through the criteria and making the requirements as clear as possible.

Perhaps more impactful than adjustments to the application process was that our eligibility criteria included non-constituted groups and offered the potential for a host organisation to host funds. Three unconstituted groups were supported to enter a hosting agreement with a constituted charity of their choice who they had a prior relationship with. Wen provided a template agreement and hosting guidance to help this process.

Finally, we made sure the information requested in the application process was proportionate to the amount applied for, with more information needed for the higher grants.

Decision-making process

We considered different decision processes that would work for different levels of grant making.

1. Community Lab grants

The aim of the higher grants - Community Labs (up to 40k) - was to support particularly in-depth interventions, where there was potential of making significant carbon reductions and creating a replicable long-term model. We anticipated most applications would be from more established and potentially specialised groups. For the Lab decision process there was an acknowledgement that different types of

expertise would be beneficial, and that more time would be needed to robustly assess applications against the criteria.

We decided to bring together a panel, made up of 4 community representatives (from the Blueprint Architect group) – who had both local knowledge and were passionate about local food system issues, and 3 other strategic partners – who had relevant knowledge and expertise. This included knowledge about grant making (East End Community Foundation), wider food system issues (Sustain) and resources that might help projects (Poplar HARCA Communities and Neighbourhoods Team). There were 4 community representatives because we wanted to avoid the 'professional' panel members having more sway.

We ran a simple self-nomination process for community representatives who wanted to join the panel. We provided training and clear guidance and one-to-one support (if needed) to support panel members to fulfil their role and in particular to ensure everyone felt on an equal footing. It was important to get all panelists together on the training call so they could make an initial positive connection.

We felt it was important that the decision-making meeting was in person, to improve communication (e.g body language) and enable people to better connect. The chair has an important role in validating different viewpoints and making sure each panelist had an equal chance to have their voice heard.

All the community representatives were paid on an hourly basis.

Quotes:

"The guide to assessors that you have produced was very useful when scoring each individual bid. I liked the way that you have summarised the comments of the different panel members for each project."

"I found the instructions and process clear and well organised and thought through, with adequate time to do everything so I didn't feel rushed."

"I think the chance to meet in person and talk through all the applications worked really well, as did the chance to debate and vote."

Learnings from Community Labs process

- Less accessibility and participation compared to Hub grants: The limitations were the grant criteria meant it was only accessible to experienced or

established groups, and only a few community representatives could participate in the decision-making.

- Rich and well-rounded assessment: The assessment was richer and more well-rounded than it would have been without community representatives. They were able to give important insights on what would work locally, and helped the panel better consider the experiences of racialised, migrant and or low-income groups.

"It was useful to see a wide variety of opinions, (both the ones similar to mine and those that are not). This shows the range of perspectives of the people in the panel which makes the assessment even richer. "

"Also that there was diversity of people in room helped to really reflect the community and where money should go instead of it being in a vacuum making decision."

- Geographic spread and representation: Decisions by the panel could have better considered the geographic spread of projects and collective representation of under-represented groups across the partnership. Applicants for lab grants were assessed as individual projects for representation from the local community, and there was some bunching of projects in certain locations. That said, some consideration of the food system as a whole in the borough emerged in collective panel discussions in spite of this not being formally built into the process. For example, one of the panel members wanted to support an application from a homelessness project to ensure the voices of homeless people were included.

- Funding projects that fully met the criteria: The intention for the labs was that they modelled a new system that could reduce carbon emissions. Some of the chosen projects chosen by the panel were less focused on this, which made us reflect that Wen could have provided more framing/clarity for panelists around the criteria/ conditions of the funding. However, it could be that the criteria were too ambitious for the grant size, and the fact we were operating in a small geographical area. Also, some of the criteria contained jargon that wasn't familiar to assessors (eg just transition) - more could have been done to build understanding around this.

- Ensuring confidence of panelists: We could have delivered more training on certain aspects where panellists felt less confident. For example some people were unsure about how to assess whether something was value for money.

  Quote: *'Also the costings, I don't know if what they are asking for is fair, for example, the tunnel, I felt like oh do I look that up (I didn't) as I still wouldn't know if it was a bargain or not.'*

- The challenge of equitable resourcing: Other challenges in this process was that payments for panelists were considered necessary but also added significant costs to the process. Payments felt essential to meet our commitment to valuing community knowledge and trust-building. Community representatives were paid £20/hour for their participation. Sustain and Poplar HARCA panelists had a higher fee for participating, with the organisations invoicing Wen (note: the fee went to the organisations not to the individuals). For a more equitable process all panelists would be reimbursed at the same rate.

2. Community Hub grants

The smaller grants - Community Hubs (£1k-£10k) - was to support a wider range of more experimental ideas, more focused on community-based learning and action – resourcing the skills and knowledge that is already there.

We wanted to trial a grant making process where more local people could be involved in the decision-making. We wanted a simple process, that wouldn't demand too much of people's time. We decided a way this could work was an open collective model which allowed all interested parties to participate in decision making – including grant applicants. We liked the idea that as well as applying, applicants would have a say in which other projects got funding, and that this provided an opportunity for learning about different approaches and what else is happening in the borough. Participating in the collective voting was a prerequisite to receiving the funding.

People could vote on an online page (Password: timetovote). A summary and photo were given for each project, as we didn't expect every voter would have time to read

the more detailed project descriptions. However the redacted application forms were also linked, in case people did want to read more. Voters also could leave other organisations feedback, which Wen shared with applicants afterwards.

Wen had done an initial screening to ensure all projects were eligible prior to voting. Once the deadline for voting passed, Wen would then add up the budgets of projects in rank order to decide where to draw the line for each funding round.

Learnings from Community Hubs process

- Shifting power to communities: A strength of the process is that people felt there to be a genuine shift in power from funders to communities through this process. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive.

- Breadth of groups applying: We did get small groups and collectives applying for the hub funding, but the majority of people applying were organisations known to Wen. Mostly this comes from working in a very small geographical area. However, to get a broader range of groups applying, it might have been worth arranging meetings with a more diverse range of groups to explain the grant offer to them in person, for example faith groups in Tower Hamlets. More groundwork and proactivity would be required to get applications from less experienced non-typical groups. This includes finding people in the community who have good ideas then building up their confidence and skills to apply.

- Lack of depth to the assessments: There was a trade off as people weren't paid to assess the applications, so the process was quick and easy based on a snapshot look at the range of projects, but the assessment may in some ways have been superficial and subject to bias as many applicants knew each other.

- Managing number of applications: With 19 projects to vote on, the Wen team have reflected that there was a lot of choice for voters, and providing feedback on projects was optional. One unsuccessful project only received only one comment from voters as feedback, which they said was little help in understanding how their proposal could be improved. Another unsuccessful project said missing out felt a 'bit like Eurovision'. Those seeking to replicate the process could consider a screening process where fewer projects were voted on and brief feedback was mandatory for each applicant.

Other references

- [Shift Design](#) for Trust for London
- [Black Food Fund](#)
- Thrive LDN's '[Right to Thrive fund](#)' based on Participatory Action Research
- [FRIDA Young Feminist Fund](#)
- [Ashden awards](#)