

# What is Participatory Grantmaking: Part One

09.10.19 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



In *Philanthropy Thought Leaders: Hot Topics* (June 24, 2019), we included Rhodri Davies, a leading commentator on philanthropy, whose [recent article](#) for the World Economic Forum begins: “[Philanthropy is at a crossroads...](#)”

There are huge “challenges,” he points out, “..., including global climate change...,” technological advancement and disruptions, “shifting demographics and social trends [that] are changing our notions of community, society and nationhood beyond recognition.” And the “concept of philanthropy” itself is “coming under attack” for reasons including “whether it can remain legitimate within a democratic society.”

Davies takes the [issue to some extent](#) with philanthropy critics like Anand Giridharandas, author of [Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World](#), who focus on the “structural inequality in society” that includes, many assert, the philanthropy sector. “For these critics,” Davies argues, “philanthropy is only ever part of the problem rather than part of the solution, and it provides [an unhelpful distraction](#) from the real work to be done in driving structural change.”

Rather than “...abandoning philanthropy altogether,” he joins “...plenty working to craft approaches to it that can deliver genuine structural reform.” Among them is “democratizing philanthropy” which, done properly, “finds ways to give away [not only money, but also power.](#)”

## *Participatory Philanthropy*

This reflects the recent school of thought best described as “participatory philanthropy.” New Zealander Lani Evans wrote an excellent essay and report in 2015. In her “[Participatory Philanthropy: An Overview](#),” she explains that her deep interest in philanthropy compels her to consider “whether or not philanthropy hinders social change.” She asks if “our decision making practices and our decision makers themselves [are] restricting our thinking and therefore our ability to make meaningful change.”

A research fellowship allowed Ms. Evans to travel to North America and the United Kingdom, connecting with a “wide range of intelligent thinkers, radical philanthropists, and participatory practitioners.” It gave her the time and resources to consider whether – accepting the premise that philanthropy as currently structured and practiced “hinders social change” – if “participatory practices and modifications in funder behavior help to alter that.” Her answer is a resounding “yes.” Participatory philanthropy actively “engag[es] people on the ground” and “values” them and their input.

Ms. Evans begins her analysis with an insightful quote from Peter H. Pennekamp, author of [Philanthropy and the Regeneration of Community Democracy](#) (2013) that wonderfully sums up the premise of this concept. “The most intractable obstacle to the proposition that modern, organized philanthropy can become a lively actor in a vibrant democracy,” explains Mr. Pennekamp,

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*“is the culture-laden belief, often unconscious but seldom questioned, that possession of a greater material wealth or professional expertise is necessarily accompanied by superior skills to make things better no matter what the circumstance. It’s simply assumed that people with these assets know more. This top-down cultural presumption extends to narrow beliefs about the identification, measurement, and evaluation of effective philanthropic practice.”*

From start to finish, Ms. Evans’s *Participatory Philanthropy: An Overview* is well worth the read for its contributions to this theory along with the many examples of early efforts of this innovation that she highlights.

#### ***Participatory Grantmaking***

“Some see participatory grantmaking as [one of many types of participatory philanthropy](#),” explains Cynthia M. Gibson, in an important new article published in July 2019 in *The Nonprofit Quarterly*: [Moving beyond Feedback: The Promise of Participatory Grantmaking](#). She points out, though, that “others see it as distinct, because it moves decision making about money to the people most affected by the issues donors are trying to address.”

Ms. Gibson, who [helped design one of the first national participatory grantmaking initiatives](#) with the Case Foundation, explains that “participatory philanthropy” can and does properly include wide-ranging activities and applications that can be – and are already – “used by funders at different points in their process.” More particularly, “participatory grantmaking draws on broader participatory philanthropy approaches but zeroes in on how funding decisions get made. Why? Because money is power, and power dynamics are ubiquitous in philanthropy.”

She aptly describes the concept of participatory grantmaking, which goes beyond mere “listening and feedback” approaches which are now believed to be “necessary but insufficient for breaking

down power imbalances” many of which are “deeply entrenched” and a “hallmark of institutional philanthropy.”

In her article, Ms. Gibson presents the perceived pros and cons of participatory grantmaking (including resistance efforts and arguments sometimes presented) and highlights recent examples of this more democratized form of philanthropy in practice.

### **Conclusion**

Ruth McCambridge, editor-in-chief of *The Nonprofit Quarterly*, considers Cynthia Gibson’s essay so critical that she sent a letter last month to readers urging them to read it and share it with colleagues. Back in 2015, Lani Evans concluded her pioneering work on participatory philanthropy with a timely question: “Philanthropy was always supposed to be the radical disruptor, able to take risks to innovate solutions. **What are we waiting for?**”

In Part Two, we dive more deeply into Ms. Gibson’s article and other references and resources about participatory grantmaking. And, in a surprise twist that took the staff at *The Nonprofit Quarterly* a bit by surprise, there were certain rebuttals offered up quickly. We’ll cite and take a look at those, too.