How does one cultivate the capacity to embrace solidarity-centered grantmaking?

*continuous learning, dialogue, and action*

The Reimagining Philanthropy learning journey is guided by an overarching theoretical framework that views learning as a social process with transformative potential that situates organizational leadership, philanthropic staff, and grantees within a broader power analysis. The goal of Reimagining Philanthropy is to support organizations both vertically and horizontally to embrace solidarity-centered grantmaking strategies as a long-term commitment to social change.

Background

In 2020, the global uprisings against racism and anti-Black violence, reinvigorated by the mass response to the extrajudicial murder of George Floyd (U.S.) and racialized health disparities experienced during the global COVID-19 pandemic, galvanized the philanthropic sector to pursue racial equity as field-wide objective. As organizations paused to consider the role of race and racism in shaping the sector, public critique of philanthropy reached a fever pitch as grassroots approaches to solidarity superseded the reach and vision of traditional forms of philanthropy. Mutual aid funds and social movement-based funds, supported by grassroots individuals and groups, demonstrated how social problems are experienced by local constituencies. In addition, these people-powered funds offered a snapshot of how grassroots constituencies have and continue to create and seed local solutions to local needs. We believe that through education, dialogue, and action, traditional philanthropy can work in solidarity with such localized fund approaches to redressing the most pressing global social problems. We developed **Reimagining Philanthropy** as a transformative learning approach that fosters the adoption of solidarity-centered grantmaking practices.

A Theoretical Framework

Reimagining Philanthropy is an inclusive, supportive, and liberating approach to grantmaking. At its core, this approach acknowledges that
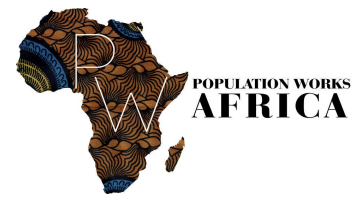
everyone has the wisdom to solve problems. Our approach is guided by precepts of community of practice theory, as established by Lave and Wenger [1] (1991); a framework associated with a broader body of scholarship; and movement-based action that evidences learning as a social process. We also engage critical integrative tenets drawn from Black feminist theory[2], critical pedagogy[3], and anticolonial social theory and action[4].

Our framework is anchored by three predominant pillars which include antiracism, decolonization, and intersectionality. These pillars, alongside the community of practice theory, form the basis of our educational model. A community of practice (CoP) is a learning community that forms on the basis of a common interest area and the desire to improve knowledge and action in this area through communal interaction. There are three basic concepts associated with a CoP:

- **Domain** CoP members are identified through a shared domain of committed interest.
- **Community** CoP members pursue interactions and activities that support continuous learning of their domain of interest. Central to this effort is the building of a community, where information is gathered and shared among members and co-learning is emphasized.
- **Practice** A CoP is composed of members who are practitioners. Through co-learning experiences, a CoP develops communal resources and knowledge resulting in a shared repertoire of practice.

Wenger and Wenger explain, "The term community of practice was coined to refer to the community that acts as a living curriculum for the apprentice"[5]. Through **Reimagining Philanthropy** we have developed this living curriculum specifically responsive to both national trends and standards of

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[1] Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.

[2] Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299. See also, Collins, P. H. (2002). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge.

[3] Ransby, B. (2003). A freirian teacher, a gramscian intellectual, and a radical humanist: Ella Baker's legacy. In *Ella Baker & the black freedom movement: A radical democratic vision* (pp. 357-374). The University of North Carolina Press.

[4] Smith, L.T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples* (2nd edition). Zed Books. See also, Fanon, F. (1963). *The wretched of the earth*. Grove Press.

[5] Wenger-Traynor, E., & Wenger-Traynor, B. (2015). *Introduction to communities of practice: A brief overview of the concept and its uses*. **https://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/**
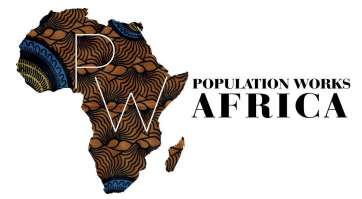
racial equity in grantmaking strategies, the global antiracism uprisings, and constituency-defined goals and priorities. It supports organizations committed to hacking new solidarity-centered grantmaking strategies and dismantling modalities of colonialism. Our learning approach brings together individuals who gather together based on a shared learning need/interest (domain), through a guided adaptable learning journey (community), which produces a communal set of resources and strategies for forward action (practice).

Our adaptation of community of practice theory is augmented by critical integrative tenets drawn from Black feminist theory, critical pedagogy, and anticolonial social theory and action. At a glance, defining features of the three pillars include:

☐ **Antiracism**[6]. We believe that antiracism requires an action-oriented stance that results from a conscious decision to make frequent, consistent, equitable choices daily.

☐ **Decolonization**[7]. We understand decolonization as a process of accumulated practices that center Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and action, while simultaneously dismantling colonial ideologies and the practices they support within philanthropic structures and beyond.

☐ **Intersectionality**[8]. We recognize and acknowledge the intersectional and overlapping nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, as they apply to a given individual/group and impact their lived experiences and needs.

This holistic theoretical framework informs what we term **solidarity-centered grantmaking strategies**, a transformative approach to international development and philanthropy. The following describes how we apply this framework through our highly adaptable learning journey practice.

Solidarity-Centered Grant Making Strategies: A Methodological and Curricular Approach

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[6] See, Kendi, I. X. (2019). *How to be an antiracist*. One World.
[7] See, Tuck, E., & Yang, W. (2012). Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1(1), 1-40.
[8] Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. Stanford Law Review, 43(6), 1241–1299.
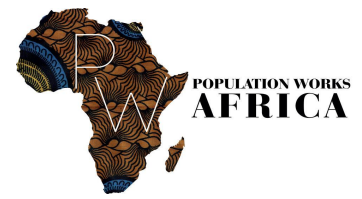
We believe that solidarity is the basis of transformative grantmaking approaches. Our approach supports organizations and teams to deepen their understanding of how sharing power and responsibility with grantees, from the point of application to reporting and evaluation, can lead to more effective outcomes. Funders and grantees can arrive at a shared understanding of goals and outcomes through shifting power to grantees and the communities they serve through solidarity-centered strategies. Our methodology is our curriculum and is structured via our pillars of antiracism, decolonization, and intersectionality.

Our curriculum model is highly adaptable and includes curricular activities such as the following:

- Facilitated workshops defining and providing practitioner feedback on pillars of solidarity-centered grantmaking strategies: antiracism, decolonization, and intersectionality
- Live curated panel discussions with industry and grassroots-level leaders in transformative grantmaking
- Curricular e-resources and visuals to support continuous learning
- Cafe hours to hone in on micro-challenges and opportunities when adopting transformative approaches
- Individualized meetings to support members from different backgrounds and learning stages
- Advisory groups to provide session feedback, inform future sessions, and build team momentum

Upon completion of the learning journey, participants will be able to:

- Place solidarity-centered grantmaking strategies within their current institutional practices
- Integrate core pillars of solidarity-centered grantmaking (antiracism, decolonization, intersectionality) into design and discussions on grantmaking
- Access a shared repertoire of practice (resources, pieces of knowledge, experiences, and global perspectives) to support innovation in the field

In the past two years, we have worked with organizations and teams through tailored learning journeys based on our curricular model. Participants have
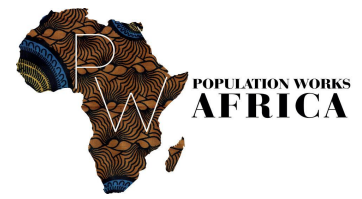
deepened their understanding and recognition of solidarity-centered grantmaking theory and strategy. Key learnings of these journeys, categorized by our model's pillars, include:

Antiracism Learning participants developed an understanding of antiracism as a global movement and identified their role in creating new policies and practices that support grantee efforts to actualize global racial equity.

- **Antiracism is action-based**. Antiracism is manifested through conscious actions that seek to disrupt patterns of racial inequity while building new policies, practices, and cultures that support global racial equity.
- **Antiracism is an institutionalized commitment**. Actively embodying antiracism as an institution requires identifying internal and external practices that perpetuate racial inequity. This requires institutions to openly and aggressively review how mission objectives and goals are informed by ideas that produce self-interested outcomes perpetuating power dynamics that reproduce racial inequality and power hierarchy.
- **Antiracism transforms philanthropic logic structures**. Institutions adopt a change-agent approach where the dichotomy between the funder's conception of a problem/goal and the grantee's conception of a problem/goal is rejected. Institutions recognize, acknowledge, and honor grantees' experience of the reality of a problem and the needs espoused by grantees through the sharing of power in grantmaking.

Decolonization Learning participants explored how the architecture of colonialism is embedded within wealth accumulation and philanthropic structures, thereby developing a toolkit of strategies/tactics/hacks to disrupt and dismantle modalities of colonialism shaping grantee relationships and workplace culture.

- **Decolonization is a historical imperative**. Colonialism is a historical political-economic phenomenon characterized by a relation of domination and exploitation of one group by another group. Decolonization requires the dismantling of modern-day modalities of colonialism.
- **Decolonization requires the centering of Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and action**. Prioritizing the right and ability of Indigenous
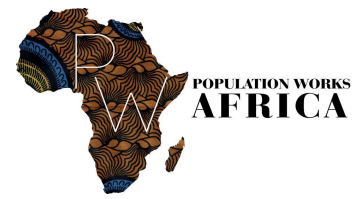
people to practice self-determination over their land, cultures, and political-economic systems requires institutional commitment to creating systems that combat erasure, resource extraction, and oppression.

- **Decolonization is a collective movement**. Centering logics of decolonization ensures institutions are working in proximity to global and localized decolonial efforts.

Intersectionality Learning participants examined how oppression operates across multiple and intersecting social/identity categories, resulting in compounding effects of marginalization and oppression, to then identify and reflect upon how adopting an intersectionality standpoint can shift power dynamics both internally and externally.

- **Intersectionality inverts the colonial gaze**. Modalities of colonialism in philanthropic structures support the implicit preference of values consistent with the white dominant middle-class culture. Adopting an intersectional framework empowers a critical understanding of how intersecting and overlapping oppression in the lived realities of individuals/groups shapes how grantees and their constituencies experience daily life and inform their needs.
- **Intersectionality informs tactics applicable at all levels of an institution**. Intersectionality can inform the application of tactics in the workplace among colleagues, horizontally and vertically, disrupting power hierarchies. Prioritizing deep exploration of intersectional identities and experiences of both staff and grantees seeds the development of structures of support, and access responsive to differential needs and capacities.
- **Intersectionality establishes and reinforces power-sharing**. Acknowledging and institutionally integrating the expertise of grantees and their constituencies into the conceptualization of social problems and solutions fosters shared responsibility, accountability, and power.

Exploration and critical discussion of these pillars, and accompanying data points, key literature, and engagement with industry leaders in transformative grantmaking, also led to the following learnings that support solidarity-centered strategies:

- **Leadership development/Incorporate racial equity work at the Board level**. Transformative grantmaking approaches must be legitimized at all levels of the organization, particularly at the Board and leadership level, to support and encourage junior staff's desire to work in solidarity with grantees and communities.
- **Support staff in rethinking practices and policies that privilege the dominant culture and disadvantage grantees' intersectional identities**. Modalities of colonialism shape all phases of the grantmaking process, but adopting an intersectionality lens supports staff in unpacking how intersectional identities shape how grantees conceptualize social problems and develop/frame solutions.
- **Having more time/Work in partnership with grantees to co-create new structures and definitions**. Organization change is challenging, but working in solidarity to share power with grantees can be achieved through consistently practicing collaboration with grantees and their constituencies.
- **Psychological safety/Recognize and honor the intersectional identities of staff**. Traditional philanthropic structures continue to predominantly reflect global North priorities, preferences, and social identity backgrounds that create a workplace where staff from non-dominant identity backgrounds are dismissed when contributing ideas that challenge the status quo.

Conclusion

A cursory review of CoP-informed learning communities in the philanthropic sector demonstrates the utility of this model for supporting staff in identifying, discussing, and interpreting questions that impact their daily activities[9]. Moreover, learning communities also benefit from the unique expertise provided by external practitioners to supplement and rejuvenate the knowledge base of the whole institution[10]. Partnering with PopWorks Africa's **Reimagining Philanthropy** will provide an effective approach to empower a commitment to identifying new knowledge needed, and

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[9] Grantmakers for Effective Organizations & NYU Center for Leadership in Action. (2012). Executive summary - The Power of learning: How learning communities amplify the work of nonprofits and grantmakers, p.7.
[10] Grantmakers for Effective Organizations & NYU Center for Leadership in Action. (2012). Executive summary - The Power of learning: How learning communities amplify the work of nonprofits and grantmakers, p.9.
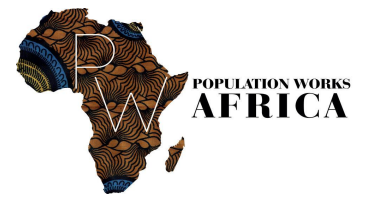
integrating this new knowledge into the vision, mission, and daily practices of the organization. Workplace teams become a community of practice through a curated learning journey, building a mutually beneficial and sustainable network. Collaborative partnerships allow us to work with you to co-create a supportive environment for cultivating potential tactics, actions, and commitments that move organizations towards short and long-term change.