



THE SOLUTIONS PROJECT

2021 Evaluation Report

BY FRONTLINE SOLUTIONS

FOREWORD FROM THE SOLUTIONS PROJECT

The Solutions Project has been going through a transformative period in the last couple of years since I've taken the helm. We've continued to grow and stabilize so we can scale our mission for impact and show up in the best way for our grantee partners. We are in a different moment than when we were founded. The demarcation of 2020 both symbolized and created a new moment for us as a domestic and global society—a racial reckoning and a global pandemic underscored the need to radically build a new future that's safe and equitable for all people.

Frontline communities are building that future and leading the fight for social, racial, economic, and climate justice. Given the historic and current disinvestment and underinvestment in these communities, it's imperative for us to continuously strive to do better. This means committing to equity and justice by practicing accountability and transparency, moving money quickly, and demonstrating solidarity with grassroots leaders and the climate justice movement.

We're also ensuring that learning and evaluation is regenerative, in response to observations by some of our grantees about the philanthropic sector as a whole: that the funders-grantee can be exploitative and tokenistic. To that end, this evaluation report is to improve our grantmaking program by listening and learning. Together with our grantee partners, we are disrupting the status quo of philanthropy and shifting the national dialogue on climate justice solutions created by women and immigrants as well as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC).

Climate justice is another priority; our 2021 Impact Report highlights how we are scaling solutions, funding, and influence toward this end: we increased grants by fivefold, tripled the number of organizations we support, and co-created three innovative funds. Fast Company named us one of the most innovative companies in the world. As we celebrate the progress we've made in the last year, we are thankful for our grantee partners' continued support and encouragement.

We also value the feedback of those partners: 80-90 percent of our grantees are highly satisfied with the grant process, communications, and grant sizes; 82 percent indicate that The Solutions Project prioritizes mutual trust; and at least 75 percent of grantee partners agree that we demonstrate a relationship model that prioritizes equity, power building, and transparency. We are proud and honored to be a trusted partner to each of them.

And there's always room for growth, and we aspire to be an even better partner for the grassroots. We recognize many of our grantee partners are looking at us to continue supporting them in defining their impact—organizational, collective, and cumulative—given that none of this work is done alone. Given that success would not be possible without that of our grantees, we look forward to collaborating with them to ensure their impact is clear and their voices are heard and centered as we progress toward 100 percent equitable practices.



We are dedicated to improving our transparency and increasing our capacity to cultivate more meaningful relationships with grantee partners. This commitment is precisely what led The Solutions Project to innovate and practice Solidarity Philanthropy: addressing power and building equity in the sector—and moving beyond the transactional to the transformative aspect of the work. Part of the practice of Solidarity Philanthropy is accountability and responsiveness to the needs of grantees.

We have already started responding, and in partnership with them, we co-created three ecosystem funds: Justice40 Accelerator, which increases access to federal funding for grassroots groups; Fund for Frontline Power, a space where grassroots leaders govern the flow of capital; and Communicating Our Power, which strengthens organizational narrative and communications capacity.

In 2023, we are gearing up to expand beyond the grant offerings: introducing more wellness offerings (launched this year), organizational development, and leadership coaching. The feedback from our grantee partners in this evaluation report provides a critical foundation for these new programs.

It is an exciting time to demonstrate our commitment to the success of frontline communities and the climate justice movement. Join forces with us—let’s dream and build what’s possible, together.

In Solidarity,

Gloria Walton

Gloria Walton
President and CEO
The Solutions Project



INTRODUCTION

2021 marked considerable growth for The Solutions Project (TSP), as the year the organization underwent a monumental leadership transition, with former grantee partner and board member Gloria Walton taking the helm as the new CEO. Under Gloria's leadership, 2021 also marked a fivefold increase in grantmaking and a tripling of grantee communications capacity building. Further organizational growth resulted from an initial scaling of investments in TSP, most notably a Bezos Earth Fund commitment of \$43 million over three years.

It was also a year of amplifying and scaling grassroots climate justice solutions spearheaded by organizations with leaders who are immigrants, women and/or Black, Indigenous or People of Color (BIPOC) across the U.S. and Puerto Rico. This included expanding solidarity-driven funding partnerships such as the Justice 40 Accelerator, Fund for Frontline Power, and Communicating Our Power. TSP also continued deepening the work to shift the conversation on climate change toward equity, by investing in narrative capacity-building through access to training, marketing, and media platforms.

Through all this, TSP went in one year from funding 30 to 127 grantees. The organization also began making targeted investments in climate justice organizations in the Southeastern U.S. and other underfunded, climate-impacted regions. This rapid growth, combined with a focus on building and deepening relationships with partners, created an invitation for the TSP team to step back and examine how it is showing up as a funder and partner within the movement.

In this year of scaled impact, TSP partnered with Frontline Solutions to craft an evaluation of The Project's investments and related programming for its frontline grantee partners. Frontline structured this learning effort as a process evaluation to gain insight into the successes, strengths, gaps, and areas for improvement in TSP's grantmaking and capacity-building programming.

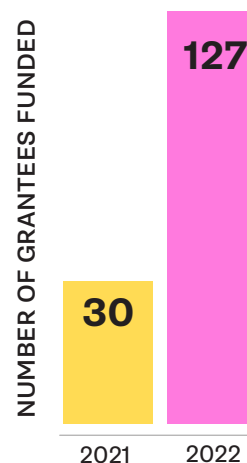
2021 MILESTONES



5x
Increase in Grantmaking



3x
Increase in Grantee Communications





METHODOLOGY & BACKGROUND

We collected retrospective data in spring of 2022, primarily through surveys and interviews with TSP staff, leadership, and board members as well as with grantee and philanthropic partners. As part of the interview process, we conducted one-on-one interviews with 20 grantees, 4 funder partners, and 8 staff/leadership/board members. We administered the survey to 127 grantees, with a response rate of 51 percent. In addition, we administered a staff survey, which had a 100 percent response rate.

The survey was anonymous, and we conducted the interviews confidentially. The analysis shares themes and trends in the aggregate, to protect the identity of the participants. However, for the survey in particular, we outline a few details about the background of respondents.

Out of the 65 survey responses we received, 77 percent reported as independent nonprofit organizations, and 25 percent were fiscally sponsored. A smaller percentage were for profit, but it's important to note that respondents could select more than one business designation.

Of respondents, 85 percent reported having a staff size less than 20 people, and more than half of this group have more than 6 staff members. In terms of budget size, 48 percent have an annual budget between \$50K and 500K, and 33 percent have a budget of more than \$1 million. Geographically, 65 percent are in the South and Southeast, with balanced coverage in other parts of the country. Some 50 respondents reported serving urban geographies, 37 serve rural geographic areas, and 22 are suburban. These statistics and surveys do not reflect the makeup of organizations resourced through TSP's three independently governed funds.

Data collection and analysis focused on five pillars of TSP's work, including: partnership, grantmaking, beyond grant support, communications, and learning and evaluation. Accordingly, this report presents findings and recommendations within these pillars as well.

We organized the evaluation framework around the following research questions:

- 1 Partnership:** How does TSP show up in relationship with its grantees?
- 2 Grantmaking:** How does TSP financially support its grantees, and by extension, the economic and climate justice movements?
- 3 Beyond Grant Support:** How does TSP support its grantees and the broader movement ecosystem, beyond funding?
- 4 Communications:** How does TSP support communications capacity specifically and movement narratives as a transformational strategy?
- 5 Learning and Evaluation:** How is TSP the best learning partner it can be with its grantees?



FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

We drew our findings from grantee and partner feedback on surveys and in interviews, and have organized those findings around the five research questions cited above.

Grantmaking

Nearly 100 percent of interviewees appreciated that TSP has no formal application process, and found the process to be quick and easy. Only one interviewee said they found the process to be too slow, having first come into relationship with TSP years earlier, and felt they hadn't received an answer over the years about funding.

Survey respondents indicated high satisfaction with TSP's grantmaking process, with reported rates of 80–90 percent satisfaction with the grant process, communications, and grant sizes. One survey respondent requested larger grant sizes.

Of survey respondents, 80 percent reported feeling comfortable sharing a negative outcome of a grant-funded activity, and 77 percent agreed that TSP welcomes feedback from its grantees. A total of 4 respondents (6 percent) disagreed that TSP welcomes feedback.

“The way they [TSP] show up in this work sets the bar for philanthropy to be in relationships with frontline organizations. They are a partner, not a funder.”

Multiple grantees expressed uncertainty about how TSP staff made grantmaking decisions and indicated they would benefit from clearer communication on the overall process, including deadlines and whether, for example, TSP is able to offer multi-year support. “We continue to make the recommendation made in 2020 to continue reinforcing the importance of longer-term and larger scale investments in intermediaries like The Solutions Project who in turn must continue to improve communications with grantee partners so renewal processes, multi year commitments, funding levels, and future grant cycles are clear and consistent.” Our 2020 evaluation offered the following recommendation, which we believe still applies: “Uncertainty about its own funding streams has made it difficult for The Solutions Project to assert whether, when, and at what rate grants with current grantee partners will be renewed. Now that The Solutions Project has a clearer and larger budget for the next three years, grantee partners would benefit from knowing whether their grant will be renewed, how much funding they can expect, and when future grant cycles will occur.”

In 2021, frontline leaders of the climate justice movement asked TSP to help co-develop three innovative funds in 2021: the Justice40 Accelerator, Fund for Frontline Power, and Communicating Our Power. In addition to grantee interviews, Frontline Solutions conducted interviews with partners in each of these independent funds and found that overwhelmingly partners were grateful for TSP's contributions and collaboration. As one partner shared, “The way they [TSP] show up in this work sets the bar for philanthropy to be in relationships with frontline organizations. They are a partner, not a funder.” Partners appreciated TSP's communication expertise, strategic support, and the efficient processing of grant dollars. They described TSP staff as accessible, committed, and operating with the utmost of integrity. The partners with whom we spoke expressed interest in continuing and/or expanding their partnership with TSP moving forward.



Several recommendations for deepening impact in these partnerships emerged as well. First, there is a desire to tell the story of the impact of these partnerships while also creating space for organizations to tell their own stories. There is a fear that the successes of these programs could overshadow the continued barriers that frontline organizations also face. Telling the story of impact while also highlighting the ongoing barriers is a shared task that partner organizations and grantees can tackle together.

Partnership

TSP grantees overwhelmingly echoed the sentiment that the Project is an exemplary movement funder. Nearly all grantee interview participants could name elements of TSP's grantmaking approach that they felt aligned with the concept of **solidarity funding**. An external partner termed TSP as being "in solidarity with the frontlines," which reflects the sentiments of other interviewees. Another anecdote centered on how TSP continues to prioritize funding to smaller community-based organizations (CBOs), which many grantmaking intermediaries will often dismiss or perceive as risky investments.

Most grantees with whom we spoke were appreciative of how TSP shows up as a funding partner, and had an emerging understanding of "Solidarity Philanthropy." Solidarity Philanthropy is a style of grantmaking that is rooted in the baseline standards of Trust-Based Philanthropy and seeks to build meaningful connections with grantee partners and move in solidarity with the movements that TSP supports. Grantees shared the perspective that solidarity funding goes beyond monetary resources and ensures grantees' work is amplified and connected to other funders. As the practice of Solidarity Philanthropy continues to evolve, TSP might consider speaking with other funders about how they are practicing these principles and how philanthropy in general can move toward more equitable and relationship-centered philanthropic approaches.

Survey data revealed that, on average, at least 75 percent TSP grantees agree or strongly agree that TSP demonstrates a relationship model for funders and grantees that prioritizes equity, power-building, transparency, and mutual trust. Of the respondents, 82 percent indicated that TSP prioritizes mutual trust.

The area with the greatest opportunity for improvement is transparency, with 27 percent of respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that TSP prioritizes transparency. Most grantee interviews felt that TSP was a good partner, but many indicated they knew very little about the Project as a funder and wished to understand more about its work and goals. Grantees stated a desire for more communication on TSP's involvement in different communities, and several respondents suggested that they were not aware of TSP's offerings for grantees and wanted to hear more about its priorities and vision. A couple of respondents requested more touch points with TSP staff to discuss funding opportunities, get feedback, and build deeper relationships.

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TSP staff expressed an overall desire to continue prioritizing relationships with grantees and listening deeply to their experiences, needs, and feedback. In a related finding, staff were aware of the need to maintain transparency with grantees and have avenues for ongoing feedback. Staff respondents offered ideas such as an anonymous feedback form for grantees and mechanisms that make clear to grantees the cadence of funding streams and timelines. Several staff respondents celebrated TSP's intentions around responsiveness to its grantees and also recognized there is more to do to make clear and readily available the Project's expectations and information about its programs, offerings, and grant processes.

To improve TSP's communication to grantees about its own work, the organization can consider offering:

- 1** introductory webinars for new and established grantees to learn about the TSP team and areas of focus;
- 2** town halls to connect with TSP about how the organization is supporting important climate justice initiatives; and
- 3** more regular communication with grantees that will establish more open and communicative relationships that center on mutual understanding and trust.

Beyond the Grant Support

Given the large increase in the number of TSP grantees over the past two years, it is unsurprising that there have been differing levels of communication about TSP's grantee programming offerings. Grantees we interviewed had several suggestions on how TSP can improve its support, beyond the grants themselves:

Take cues from grantees, and devise interventions and design programming that is innovative rather than onerous

There was an overall desire from grantees to connect with one another, and grantee interviewees had mixed feedback on how TSP might facilitate better connections between and among its grantees. On the one hand are several that indicated they already worked with other grantees of TSP, and/or that the potentially most useful connections were not necessarily current TSP grantees but other local or state-based organizations. On the other hand are TSP grantees that said they are excited about meeting and working with peer grantees to build connections, learn from others' best practices, and solidify the work of the climate justice movement.

We offered survey respondents the option to identify what (beyond grant support) they would like to see from TSP. The top three requests included: a) support on organizational strategy b) support on programming, and c) introductions to other funders. Grantees further elaborated to express interest in the following areas:

General interest in services tailored to each organization. Grantees requested access to coaches and/or capacity-building support that is customized to their needs.

Specific interest in more comms-related technical assistance (TA), including customized communications strategies, public relations training/support, films/filming, and more outreach on communications opportunities.

Specific organizational management TA requests, including setting up 501c3/c4s, tax preparation, and development planning.

However, more dialogue is needed with grantees to unpack and tailor these to meet organizational needs.



In response to previous grantee feedback, TSP has focused efforts on listening to grantee needs, designing programming to be responsive to those needs, and communicating what TSP offers. Grantee interviewees recommended that TSP continue to deepen the practice of developing programming ideas in partnership with grantee partners, to be sure its offerings align with grantee needs. There is an interest in tailored programming, but grantees also mentioned that obstacles to taking part in programming included lack of staff capacity and the sense that grantees may already be getting similar resources from other sources. TSP staff echoed the need to make program offerings clearer and to continue having honest, open communication with grantees about additional resources needed to support frontline organizations.

Another recommendation is to also focus on grantees' immediate needs, which often include better training, better access to resources such as HR or finance software, and simply more funding. Often, some grantee interviewees indicated, these items take precedence over optional programming. For example, TSP may consider developing a “skills bank” of partners/consultants who can offer in-kind support to grantee partners to support organizational health. Organizations such as [RoadMap Consulting](#), [Vision Change Win](#), [Fun With Financials](#), and [BDO FMA](#) (formerly Fiscal Management Associates) are well-versed in working with nonprofit partners and frontline organizations. TSP may consider supporting one or more of these organizations, or ones like them, to help provide capacity and training to its grantee partners.

Provide access to the TSP funder and celebrity network

A [2017 report](#) from the Center on Effective Philanthropy notes that a top priority for building strong relationships with grantees is making introductions to other funders. Grantee interviewees echoed this as a way that TSP can deepen its support for its grantees. In response to previous feedback, TSP aims to be intentional in facilitating introductions to funders and celebrities who are champions for climate justice. Grantees shared that they appreciate these introductions and would like more connection to TSP's network. There's an awareness among grantees that TSP has relationships with other potential climate justice champions and that access to those relationships could amplify the work and profile of grantees.

Relatedly, some external interviewees recommended that TSP capitalize on its unique and supportive relationships with grantees as an opportunity to teach other donors and foundations how to be in solidarity with grantees and movement partners; in essence, some interviewees thought that TSP is an under-the-radar funder whose work the field of philanthropy should more readily recognize. This could take the form of: greater participation in philanthropic-focused conferences, including presentations on TSP's model; more publications in philanthropic-focused outlets and journals; and TSP-led funder learning opportunities such as webinars.

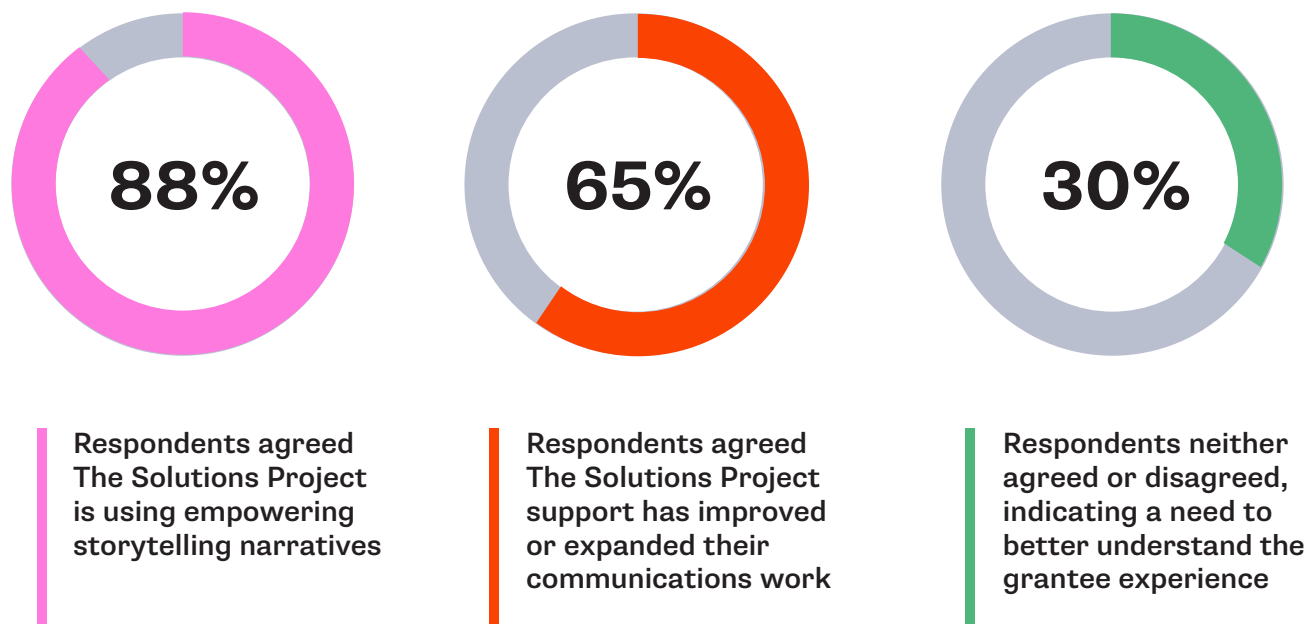




Communications Support

Feedback from grantee interviewees regarding TSP's communications support was inconsistent, because given the growth in TSP's portfolio, not all TSP grantees receive the same communications support. However, external partners and some grantee partners were able to point to TSP's communications work as unique and effective.

Grantee Survey Responses Regarding Communications Efficacy



Of survey respondents, 88 percent agreed that TSP is using empowering storytelling narratives, and 65 percent of respondents indicated that TSP support has improved or expanded their communications work. Of respondents, 30 percent neither agreed nor disagreed, indicating a need for further inquiry to better understand the grantee experience. It is likely these organizations are not receiving communications support; however, ongoing conversations between program staff and a grantee is necessary to build an ongoing understanding of that grantee's experience with communications support.



Of the communications and media support grantees reported receiving from TSP, the top three include: social media amplification; social media templates and toolkits; and digital, communications, and narrative strategy planning.

Grantee Top Communications Requests

Social Media Amplification

01

02

Social Media Templates and Toolkits

Digital, Communications, and Narrative Strategy Planning

03

There was wide variation in terms of the types of communications support grantees would like to receive from TSP moving forward, ranging from:

- 1 Digital, communications, and narrative strategies
- 2 Website content and strategy
- 3 PR and earned media tactical support
- 4 Social media amplification
- 5 Celebrity or corporate relationships for amplification
- 6 Panel or event opportunities to influence key audiences



“Media hub models allow funders to support a centralized communications “shop” or “hub” that provides both standardized and tailored support at scale, within and beyond grantee cohorts.”

The following suggestions may help TSP to improve upon its existing communications programming for grantees:

Clarify the process by which grantees receive media support.

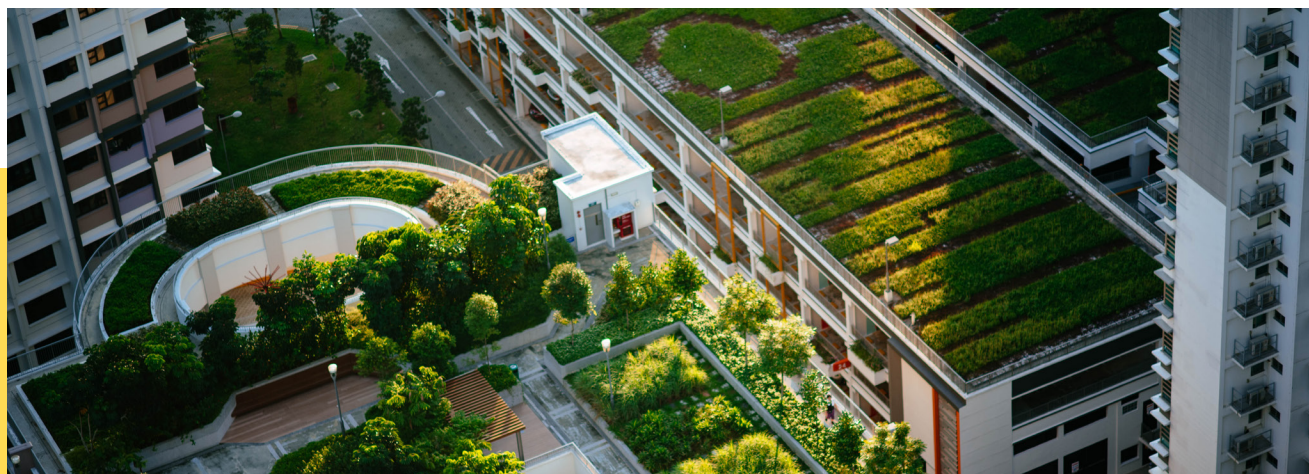
As part of our recommendation to clarify the grant application process, TSP should consider streamlining communication to grantees on how it offers media support, on what timeline, etc. We understand that, given that TSP has dramatically increased its grantmaking of late, communications support may not be available for all grantees, but it should clarify this with each organization.

Create a menu of options that is scalable for different needs.

Similar to our recommendations about following a grantee’s lead on programming efforts, TSP should consider creating a menu of communications options that is scalable for the different needs of various grantees and takes into consideration differing levels of capacity. For example, some grantee organizations may not have sufficient staff that can dedicate time to more time-intensive offerings like trainings and may benefit instead from lighter-touch offerings. Other organizations may have basic in-house communications support and could take advantage of more (or more complicated) programming and capacity-building. This is also important for TSP’s funders and climate philanthropy more broadly to consider: increased investments in the communications capacity, production, and strategies of frontline organizations.

Explore a “media hub” model that includes tailored programming.

Some funders have had success partnering with media and communications shops to curate communications training and amplification programming for their grantees. Such partner organizations include [ReThink Media](#) and [ReFrame](#). Media hub models allow funders to support a centralized communications “shop” or “hub” that provides both standardized and tailored support at scale, within and beyond grantee cohorts. In this model, some organizations have capacity to support services like tracking daily media clips and writing tailored op-eds for the larger field. Drawbacks of these models include the appearance of undue influence from funders and the risk of splintered messaging due to differing opinions, values, and stances within a grantee cohort and/or the larger movement.





Learning and Evaluation

Learning and evaluation can simultaneously be a space for profound learning and growth as well as a source of tension and angst. Historically, funder-led evaluation endeavors are fraught with power dynamics, historical oppression, exploitation, tokenism, distractions, and quantitative supremacy. Grantees and partners we interviewed underscored these trends and highlighted that learning and evaluation is a space that requires more attention and thought-partnership. Partners were eager for TSP's leadership in this area, and grantees also expressed a desire for more support in this area.

As TSP grapples with questions facing other intermediaries—such as how to measure and communicate its own impact, given its unique funding model—we suggest that the team join philanthropic learning communities such as [PEAK Grantmaking](#), where these types of conversations are commonplace.

As TSP determines how to understand and tell the story of impact, there is an opportunity to convene grantees to learn more about how they define impact, how to co-construct the narrative about implementation, and what capacity supports or even grassroots infrastructure grantees want or need in terms of data, to collect, analyze, and make sense of their impact. Of grantees, 85 percent reported using mixed-methods approaches to learning and evaluation, indicating a high level of alignment among grantees and an opportunity for cross-organizational learning.

TSP staff also identified the opportunity for funders to work together to align on a systemwide evaluation framework that they co-design with grantees. This would allow funders to demonstrate impacts across networks and align the field on key metrics for success.

In addition, TSP should continue its practice of proactively following grantees' activities through social media, traditional media monitoring, attendance at grantee events, and more. Some grantee interviewees mentioned that they appreciate this practice because it saved them time and effort, and allowed them to focus squarely on their work rather than spend additional time communicating with another funder (TSP) about their respective organization's impact.





Additional Staff Insights

Consider more program staffing to meet demands.

TSP has a small team leading a breadth of work. TSP staff unanimously expressed excitement about TSP's grantmaking approaches, including honesty, boldness, trust, authenticity, and prioritizing staff that bring on-the-ground experience. Staff also appreciate that TSP prioritizes being in relationship with partners and each other. This values-aligned approach to movement funding sets TSP apart from other funders and inspires staff and grantees alike.

This approach is transformative and can require time to build and maintain relationships. Staff acknowledged that TSP operates a small team and that, as the organization grows and learns, so will the capacity of the organization. As one staff respondent put it, there is a balance between resources and the organization's vision, so that TSP can grow with capacity and creativity to meet the urgency of the moment. As TSP evolves, the organization can consider what capacity is needed to build on and expand relationships with funders and partners alike. There may be an emerging need for additional support and collaboration with grantees around telling a story regarding impact. More staffing would allow TSP to be more responsive and consistent in its communications with grantees and also to maintain a higher quality of service while supporting a sustainable workflow. While interviewees did not mention staff burnout and turnover in our conversations, we have seen small foundations as well as organization and frontline partners struggle with these realities.

Dreaming of the Future Together

TSP staff and grantees offered a vision for the future that includes long-term capacity-building grants, a network of national grantees that support and celebrate one another, and a team that operates from a place of wellness, resilience, and love. Respondents see a role for TSP to influence the field of philanthropy broadly, to liberate capital and create a space for radical change inside of the climate justice movement and beyond.

Conclusion

The past year was one of growth and evolution for TSP team and its partners. As the organization continues to evolve in its role as a solidarity funder, 2021 offers both reasons to celebrate and opportunities to deepen the organization's commitments and relationships with its funders and grantees. TSP remains a beacon in the philanthropic space for supporting frontline organizations in the fight for climate justice.



“Respondents see a role for TSP to influence the field of philanthropy broadly, to liberate capital and create a space for radical change inside of the climate justice movement and beyond.”



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