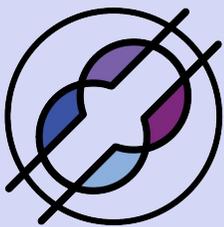




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# MacArthur Foundation

## John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's Evaluation for the Equitable Recovery Initiative

Executive Summary

June 2023

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## Executive Summary

Between September 2020 and October 2021, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's Equitable Recovery Initiative (EqR) awarded a total of 128 grants to 124 organizations. Most of the support went to entities led by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)-led and/or BIPOC-centered organizations. Some grantees received more than one grant. MacArthur's strong credit rating and robust financial health enabled it to issue \$125 million in social bonds to support grantees engaging in work related to (a) combating anti-Blackness, (b) COVID-19 mitigation/recovery, (c) public health equity, (d) democracy and voting rights, (e) self-determination of Indigenous Peoples, and (f) equitable housing.

The purpose of the EqR was to support U.S. and international grantees, including those in India, and Nigeria, respond to their communities' needs and strengthen their communities' resiliency to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the social, economic, and health inequities, and structural racism the pandemic exposed and exacerbated. EqR funding also was intended to help grantees sustain operations in response to an anticipated decrease in philanthropic giving during the pandemic.



Additionally, MacArthur wanted to address and dismantle inequitable grantmaking practices in the philanthropic sector by being an exemplar for engaging and centering equity in its own grantmaking practices. Although the grantmaking occurred on an abbreviated timeline, MacArthur wanted to be intentional about incorporating the values of its Just Imperative<sup>1</sup>, engage in participatory practices such as soliciting internal and external feedback, and reduce grantees' burden throughout the Initiative.

As the learning and evaluation partner for the Equitable Recovery Initiative, Creative Research Solutions, LLC (CRS)<sup>2</sup> worked with the MacArthur Evaluation and Learning team as an independent evaluator to examine the conceptualization, development, and implementation of the Initiative as well as identify and document progress made toward the Initiative's goals. Demographic survey data collected by the MacArthur Foundation and data from MacArthur's Grants Management System (GMS) also were included in the analysis to provide context on grantees that received funding through the Initiative.

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<sup>1</sup> John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. (2023). *The Just Imperative*. <https://www.macfound.org/about/how-we-work/just-imperative>

<sup>2</sup> During the first year of CRS' partnership with the MacArthur Foundation, BECOME, an innovative movement-building, nonprofit organization based in Chicago, supported our learning and evaluation work and served as a thought partner. See the Foreword for details on this partnership.

Through interviews and focus groups with various contributors and collaborators,<sup>3</sup> including MacArthur Staff, External Advisors, and Board Members, this evaluation gleaned important learnings and insights that MacArthur can use for future initiatives and grantmaking strategies. The findings from this evaluation also can be extended to consider how the broader philanthropic sector can engage in equitable and participatory grantmaking practices, especially in emergency grantmaking.

## Conceptualizing Change



With the intention of disrupting the status quo and guided by the values of the Just Imperative, MacArthur centered equity in its work in many different ways. The overarching goal was to “reinvent systems that create a more just, equitable, and resilient world.”<sup>4</sup> For example, MacArthur took time to understand the socio-economic landscapes internationally, in the U.S. and Chicago, where MacArthur is headquartered, to ensure that MacArthur had a deep understanding of how the values of the Just Imperative could be applied to its full portfolio of grantees and throughout this Initiative’s grantmaking process. MacArthur also engaged in participatory and responsive grantmaking practices with all the collaborators and contributors in the Initiative (e.g., awarding grants to BIPOC-led, BIPOC-serving, and BIPOC-centered grantee organizations; recognizing the value of distributing grants quickly during the COVID-19 pandemic; providing general operating support to grantees; changing and reducing reporting requirements for grantees; and engaging MacArthur Staff in the grantmaking process).

## Doing the Work

**Grantees’ Perspectives.** MacArthur’s unique approach to equitable grantmaking largely benefited grantee organizations that received funding through the Equitable Recovery Initiative. Specifically, the funding allowed grantees to continue their ongoing work and take on additional work. Grantees also were able to meet their communities’ urgent needs, especially for community members working on the

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<sup>3</sup> We use the terms “contributors” and “collaborators” to shift toward non-stigmatizing language that reflects and speaks to the needs of those who are the audience of focus. Please see [https://www.cdc.gov/healthcommunication/Preferred\\_Terms.html](https://www.cdc.gov/healthcommunication/Preferred_Terms.html) for more information.

<sup>4</sup> John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. (2020). *Five foundations commit \$1.7+ billion to nonprofit organizations in wake of pandemic.* <https://www.macfound.org/press/press-releases/five-foundations-commit-18-billion-nonprofit-organizations-wake-pandemic>

front lines during COVID-19 and engaging in activism and outreach. Furthermore, the funding helped grantees sustain their general operations, increase their staff's capacity, and address unforeseen challenges such as staff turnover and pivoting to virtual spaces. Grantees also noted an increase in their credibility and visibility across their communities and network as a result of being a MacArthur grantee.

The majority of grantees also mentioned that the revised application and reporting process reduced staff workload by waiving the two requirements to develop additional proposals for the application and create a written narrative for reporting requirements.

However, international grantees had to engage in additional steps such as completing an equivalency determination questionnaire<sup>5</sup> during the application process to receive funding. The few grantees that completed the additional steps noted that they were burdensome.

Nevertheless, overall, grantees were appreciative of MacArthur's equitable approach in its grantmaking.

**External Advisors Perspectives.** A diverse group of External Advisors with expertise and experience in systemic oppression and racial equity played a key role in the grantmaking. They provided input on the grantmaking approach and made suggestions about participatory aspects of the grantmaking (e.g., recommending grantee organizations and sharing input from community members).

Overall, the External Advisors had a positive experience participating in the Initiative. Several External Advisors mentioned that trust and synergy existed throughout their work with MacArthur. They also noted that they felt heard during authentic and transparent conversations with MacArthur Staff. As a result, External Advisors and MacArthur Staff were able to learn from each other. The External Advisors also were impressed with MacArthur's decision to include individuals unaffiliated with MacArthur to provide input on the Initiative's grantmaking.

**MacArthur Staff Perspectives.** MacArthur Staff noted that the Initiative afforded them the unique opportunity to collaborate across departments within MacArthur. Staff who had not been part of the

**MacArthur Staff and EqR Grantees shared important reflections on the findings during their sensemaking sessions:**

**The Grantees encouraged MacArthur to:**

- continue exploring ways to engage in grantmaking practices that increase grantee sustainability.
- engage in conversations with its grantees as experts and thought partners to allow for collaborative learning and innovation.
- document grantee outcomes and impacts and showcase these on MacArthur's website for wider consumption by the philanthropic sector.

**The MacArthur Staff encouraged MacArthur to:**

- continue to reflect on new and additional ways to further simplify the grantmaking process while still providing flexible support to grantees.
- reflect on ways to further facilitate ongoing cross-collaboration across MacArthur Staff while taking into account the timing, workload, and burden on Staff.
- leverage existing resources and partnerships with grantees to learn about new ways that MacArthur can further integrate promising practices in grantmaking.

<sup>5</sup> NGOsource. (2021). *What is equivalency determination?*

<https://www.ngosource.org/how-it-works/what-is-equivalency-determination>

grantmaking process at MacArthur also were able to participate in grantmaking. This resulted in several Staff members feeling an increased level of trust from MacArthur leaders. Staff also reported recognizing their own capacity to be part of the grantmaking, which led to a higher level of self-questioning (i.e. Staff's increased level of awareness about their ability to engage in several aspects related to grantmaking) and a sense of responsibility. On the whole, MacArthur Staff largely commended the Initiative and the approach taken and saw opportunities to build on its successes and learnings.

While the majority of the Staff enjoyed participating in the grantmaking overall, a few Staff noted that more communication and clarity about how grantmaking decisions were made could have improved their experience. Additionally, Staff noted that the diverse perspectives and experiences were important and contributed to their overall experience.

Considering the findings from the diverse perspectives noted above, overall, the MacArthur Foundation's Equitable Recovery Initiative was a success. Although some challenges were identified, the fulfilling experiences of the grantees, External Advisors, and MacArthur Staff—particularly supporting grantees in a new way and engaging more intentionally in participatory grantmaking—exceeded those challenges.

## Looking Forward

Since MacArthur has concluded funding the Equitable Recovery Initiative, it is important to reflect on the entire Initiative and identify learnings and potential areas for growth. We offer considerations related to the grantmaking process, such as ways MacArthur can continue cross-collaboration among its Staff without creating burnout; efforts MacArthur can utilize to create a shared understanding of how Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion are defined and operationalized at MacArthur; and how MacArthur can stay attuned to inherent power dynamics. Considerations noted in this report were developed to support the MacArthur Foundation on its equity journey and to enhance its efforts to disrupt the status quo. Some considerations MacArthur may wish to reflect upon in light of the findings include:

	<p><b>Ensure cross-collaboration and communication across and within MacArthur's departments</b> to ensure that the vision, goals, and efforts are consistently understood. Given the various levels of previous experience with grantmaking, continued solicitation from the diverse Staff across MacArthur's departments could improve understandability throughout the organization while yielding creative solutions to complex problems.</p>
	<p><b>Identify and articulate decision-makers and decision-making processes.</b> Specifying and sharing information about who the decision-makers are and the decision-making process can increase the likelihood that MacArthur Staff and External Advisors feel a part of the full lifecycle of the work and in turn, ensure continued buy-in from Staff.</p>
	<p><b>Document efforts and processes</b> to support communication, learning, and the evaluation process, which often take the form of data collection. Before implementing data collection, have a</p>

	conversation with organizations/grantees about what information and data are feasible to collect and/or report to minimize the burden of that work.
	<b>Explore ways to decrease the burden on MacArthur Staff while maintaining a reduced burden on grantees.</b> Discuss and brainstorm with the Staff on how to maintain a reduced grantee burden while minimizing the burden on Staff may be critical.
	<b>Check-in throughout the grantmaking process</b> to help refine and improve processes moving forward. This also will ensure that MacArthur is intentional about hearing Staff feedback on the processes and is collaborating to refine or create new processes.
	<b>Ensure that all Staff understands and aligns with how MacArthur defines and operationalizes Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion</b> in its grantmaking. It may be important to have ongoing conversations and engagement with Staff about how MacArthur defines and operationalizes Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. It may be equally important for MacArthur to take the time to understand how Staff members experience those values in their daily lives. Those steps would ultimately align the meaning of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for the organization and individual Staff members.
	<b>Stay attuned to power dynamics</b> between grantees and MacArthur Staff and across the organization. While MacArthur took steps to mitigate the power imbalance by including: (a) an independent evaluator to solicit feedback and (b) Staff historically outside the grant decision-making in the planning and implementation of the EqR, the power dynamics should be assessed continuously.

Advancing equity and inclusion is ever-evolving and requires constant reflection and responsiveness, and joint efforts. The MacArthur Foundation can serve as a leader in the philanthropic field by sharing important learnings from this evaluation. MacArthur also can consider how to engage with other like-minded organizations throughout philanthropy to collectively move it toward more equitable grantmaking. An example of this occurred in 2020 when MacArthur and four other philanthropic organizations made the first public-facing announcement to increase their grantmaking to “stabilize and sustain a nonprofit sector facing devastating economic effects due to the global pandemic and the epidemic of social injustice,”<sup>6</sup> which eventually became the Equitable Recovery grantmaking. With this step and others, the philanthropic sector can make progress toward building a more equitable and just future in partnership with communities of color.

<sup>6</sup> John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. (2020). Five foundations commit \$1.7+ billion to nonprofit organizations in wake of pandemic. <https://www.macfound.org/press/press-releases/five-foundations-commit-18-billion-nonprofit-organizations-wake-pandemic>