2024 LEARNING CONVERSATIONS

Digital Democracy Portfolio | JULY 2024

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Background

As part of its ongoing learning process, the Digital Democracy Portfolio (DDP) team engaged ORS Impact, its external evaluation partner, to facilitate a set of virtual learning conversations with DDP grantees. These 90-minute conversations sought to better understand grantee perceptions of the media and tech policy field and philanthropy's role within that field.

In particular, the DDP team prioritized their focus on three key areas:

- Grantee perceptions on the **infrastructure needs of the field** and how **Democracy Fund and other funders can support** them

- How **philanthropy's focus (and pivots) on a particular issue affects grantees** and the field writ large

- Understanding the work of local organizing action fund (LOAF) grantees and the **relationship between LOAF grantees and national actors**[*]

Ultimately, ORS Impact facilitated six learning conversation groups in March and April 2024, including two conversations that consisted only of LOAF grantees. This deck summarizes our findings across the learning conversations.

*Note that this area was only used in the LOAF-specific grantee learning conversations to inform our data collection among these grantees.

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Key Findings From This Year's Conversations

Intro to this section

One goal of this year's learning conversations was to understand grantee perspectives on the infrastructure supporting individuals and organizations in the media and technology policy field. For national grantees, we looked at the field more generally, and for LOAF grantees, we focused on the community they focus on (e.gf., city, state, region).

In this section, grantees share the different elements they consider when defining field infrastructure, how flexible and sustained funding enables grantees to document the impacts of DDP's grantmaking strategy, and suggest the infrastructure roles that Democracy Fund and other funders are best suited to support. Additionally, grantees pointed to where they see gaps or needs in their work.

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Grantees generally agreed with Democracy Fund's definition of field infrastructure, adding emphasis, nuance, or additional elements to the definition.

To ground learning conversation participants in a common understanding of field infrastructure, we shared the following definition of how the DDP team thinks about infrastructure in their grantmaking:

Flexible, responsive, and sustained funding, but also things like (a) space to create a joint agenda; (b) capacity to organize and mobilize constituents; (c) campaign decision making and implementation structure; and (d) message development and communications.

When asked if they agreed with this definition and/or if it was missing additional elements, **no grantees disagreed with the definition, but some emphasized the importance of particular elements, provided additional nuance to different pieces, or added additional elements that they considered necessary** when considering field infrastructure.

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Grantees emphasized the importance of sustained funding and want to work beyond a joint agenda.

Flexible, responsive, and ***sustained funding,*** *but also things like* ***(a) space to create a joint agenda***; *(b) capacity to organize and mobilize constituents; (c) campaign decision making and implementation structure; and (d) message development and communications.*

Points of Emphasis

Grantees in two learning conversations emphasized **the importance of sustained or *"generational"* funding** as a necessary component of long-term infrastructure. Doing so provides assurance that the infrastructure will have been built and be well-developed when grantees need to access it. This also shields grantees from having to scramble or constantly re-build relationships, structures, and processes over time. As one grantee put it, *"I do think the sustained part … is the most critical part of the definition."*

Additional Nuance

Grantees from two learning conversations provided additional nuance to the joint agenda element.

One learning conversation focused on how **creating a *strategic* joint agenda was essential and went beyond simply creating an agenda**. For these grantees, that looked like mapping and understanding the different strengths of organizations in the field and coordinating in ways that play to those strengths.

For grantees in the second learning conversation, the term "*agenda*" felt too short-term and tied to a particular point in time (e.g., an administration, a budget cycle, a legislative session), and noted the **importance of working toward a joint vision and end goal, which is different from *"a list of things to do."***

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Staff and leadership development, crisis support, and physical infrastructure were also included in the definition.

*Flexible, responsive, and sustained funding, but also things like (a) space to create a joint agenda; (b) capacity to organize and mobilize constituents; (c) campaign decision making and implementation structure; (d) message development and communications; **(e) staff and leadership development; (f) crisis support; and (g) physical infrastructure.***

Grantees across learning conversations provided additional elements to their definition of infrastructure. **Notably, these additions to the definition were also named as infrastructure *needs* that grantees identified for themselves or the field.**

Staff and leadership development: Grantees from three learning conversations wanted to add an element to the definition that included staff or leadership development. For two of these groups, the focus was on intentional investment in **creating a *"pipeline of organizers, from entry level to senior leadership."*** For another group, the emphasis was on **executive leadership support or peer coaching among leaders** in similar organizations. For all three, there was a need to call out the importance of support for people working in the field.

Crisis support: Grantees from two learning conversations advocated for adding **crisis support** to the definition, which could mean **legal support from lawsuits or congressional subpoenas, crisis communications support for when these events occur, or the privacy security of grantees** themselves.

Physical infrastructure: Both of the LOAF-specific learning conversations highlighted **the importance of physical infrastructure for their organizations and communities**. One learning conversation highlighted the importance of meeting spaces to build and organize community. Another emphasized the need for broadband access in their communities, noting, *"Physical infrastructure resonates with us. All of the physical assets that get us online to be able to be citizens in this day and age. That's the piece of infrastructure that floats through my head."*

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Flexible funding creates space for grantees to be
more strategic, responsive, and creative.

When asked what flexible and sustained funding makes possible, grantees often shared examples of how it enabled them to be more effective at their jobs and in different ways:

- Sustained funding allows organizations, particularly leadership, to trade focusing on *"consistent resource acquisition"* for *"engaging in deeper strategy work with the wider field."* Or, as another grantee put it, **sustained and flexible funding *"can be a gateway for expansiveness."***

- Flexible funding allows grantees to **pivot strategically, be more opportunistic when a window opens, and ultimately be more responsive to the communities they serve**. Grantees can *"put [their] brain toward thinking about how we're going to support our partners on the ground."*

- Grantees called out how flexible and sustained funding provides them **space to be creative and innovative**. Project-based funding is often provided for proven or existing programs. But flexible and sustained funding *"makes it easier for folks to experiment. When it comes to shorter term grants a lot of folks are hesitant to put their entire funding structure at risk to try something new."* Grantees felt that with flexible and sustained funding, they also felt *"more open to taking the risk"* of experimenting.

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One way that grantees felt Democracy Fund can best support field infrastructure is by organizing and influencing other funders in this space.

Grantees in two conversations noted that **a key way for Democracy Fund to support field infrastructure would be to consider its role in coordinating other funders in the space**. Participants in one learning conversation recognized that funders can often be duplicative in their efforts to support or fill needs for grantees, and that a more efficient way to support field infrastructure would be for a funder to *"play a coordinating role among the field that is funding this sector."* One way this could work is for foundations to pull together a directory of different supports, people, and organizations that grantees could call on for capacity-building support (e.g., strategic planning, communications support, legal advice).

Another area of support that grantees identified could become more effective was funder convenings. Grantees in this space recognize a "*convening season*" among media and tech policy funders, where they attend different convenings with overlapping sets of organizations for the various funders in this space. One grantee noted that it has *"never found it to be a space where you're forging shared agendas or developing new campaigns."* Coordinating convenings among funders and digging deep into a particular thematic issue or goal could help reduce grantee burden and result in increased alignment.

Additionally, one grantee also saw an opportunity for Democracy Fund to lead in the *"democracy funder sector"* because it *"is ahead in terms of focus on technology and the internet"* relative to others.

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In many ways, grantees see themselves as providing infrastructure support for the field.

Many grantees acknowledge that their work is in service of developing the infrastructure of the field, and one way for Democracy Fund to support the infrastructure of the field is to continue to support their work. One grantee acknowledged that when they think about their own role in developing the field's infrastructure, they see themselves as filling in the gaps: *"I think kind of filling the gaps is another key thing for our organization that we think of when we think of providing infrastructure. There's too much work for any of us to do it alone and we don't need to be doing duplicative work."*

Grantees in one LOAF-specific learning conversation recognized the role that they played in building the capacity of others in their local communities as well: ***"So one of the reasons why it's important to invest in local communities, infrastructure of groups like [us], is because it means that we're actually building the capacity of groups to completely reshape how that terrain is described and organized."***

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Grantees felt Democracy Fund could support a variety of other infrastructure needs, though no clear themes emerged.

Other infrastructure supports that grantees felt Democracy Fund could provide include:

- Communications and messaging support

- Support for anti-racism training

- Crisis and legal support

- HR or operations technical assistance

If Democracy Fund or other funders opted to provide support in any of these areas, grantees encouraged them to provide a range of options to ensure the different needs of grantees can be met. Grantees in one learning conversation lamented that when funders have provided communications support in the past, they typically offered the support of one specific firm, which they felt was unable to meet the needs of those who operated from justice-oriented frames. While the intention is helpful, grantees recommended *"diversifying the service space"* and *"being super mindful of the type of folks that we have access to in terms of offering those because ... we don't all fit in the same bucket anymore."*

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The Impact of Philanthropic Pivots

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Intro to this section

In past years' learning conversations, grantees have shared that shifts in philanthropy's focus can have big impacts on the work of grantees and the media and tech policy field more broadly. This year, we asked what those impacts were more explicitly to understand and document these effects.

In this section, grantees share what happens to them and the field when philanthropy decides a particular issue is important, and how funders and grantees can guard against negative impacts.

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Funder-driven shifts create disruption for grantees, lead to a loss of strategic agency, and incentivize chasing funding.

ORS asked grantees how it impacts **them and their organization** when philanthropy decides a particular topic is important. The following themes arose across learning conversations:

- **Mission drift and loss of strategic focus:** When funders prioritize a new topic, grantees often feel pressure to shift their work to align with that area, even if it diverges from their core mission and strategic priorities, leading to mission drift over time.

- **Resources and funding risks:** Organizations may gain funding by pivoting to the trendy topic area, but if they don't they risk losing existing funding. This precarity and constant need to reshape work around funder priorities is destabilizing, especially for smaller organizations.

- **Burden of retrofitting language and narratives:** Reframing existing work using new buzzwords and narratives, even if the underlying substance hasn't changed much, imposes an administrative burden.

- **Distraction from deeper systemic issues:** The focus on new, shiny topics is often surface-level and can distract from tackling deeper, longer-term systemic issues that may be more impactful but less glamorous.

- **Power imbalances and lack of transparency:** Grantees feel there is an inherent power imbalance where funders unilaterally decide priorities with little transparency or input from grantees embedded in the work. There is frustration around having priorities dictated top-down.

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Funder-driven shifts *can* be beneficial to an organization when they align with its existing work and priorities.

While the prevailing sentiment among grantees was that the downsides of funder-driven pivots seem to outweigh the benefits, a few shared a possibility of upsides when the pivot is well-aligned. As one grantee explained, *"If you're already doing this type of work or thinking through it or you have folks or staff or resources dedicated to a topic, having a pivot by funders to continue to grow this work, it's great. It's great to be in that spot and then to continue digging deeper because you now have additional support."*

Simply put, when the funder-driven pivot genuinely aligns with an organization's existing work, **it can provide greater resources and visibility and open up new collaboration opportunities.**

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Funder-driven shifts bring increased energy and new players to the broader field.

ORS also asked grantees how it impacts **the broader field** when philanthropy decides a particular topic is important. Grantee perceptions were more mixed than around the impact on their own organizations—seeing both upsides and downsides.

Grantees see the following **upsides** for the field:

- **Potential for helpful collaboration:** A couple of grantees mentioned how funder-driven pivots could allow for more collaboration as different groups convene around the same issue from their unique perspectives and constituencies. Viewing the "*headwinds in the same direction*" enables collective efforts.

- **Influx of new players:** It was noted that trendy topics attract new organizations and players to the space. It can be positive by bringing more hands, but it is also challenging if they lack deep expertise and context. Proper field-building and orienting of the new entrants are important.

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Yet, funder-driven shifts can also create competition and instability in the broader field, too.

Balancing these, grantees also see the risk of the following **downsides**:

- **Increased competition and territoriality:** Multiple grantees noted that funder-driven pivots lead to organizations competing for the same resources and "*staking out territory*" around being seen as the leader on that topic. There can be a rush to be the first or "*seed-funded*" group to define the strategy.

- **Instability and lack of strategic focus:** There was a sense that rapidly pivoting to funder-driven priorities creates instability in the field's strategic focus, described as "*lurching from one direction to another*" in an "*antithesis of strategy*."

- **Need for expanded resources:** While new interest can drive more funding, a couple of grantees highlighted that there still often isn't enough new money, as the demands and workstreams also rapidly expand with each new priority area.

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When shifts do happen, foundations can provide
transparency and transition support.

Knowing that philanthropic strategies will continue to change, grantees reflected on what foundations can do to leverage the possibilities and guard against the negative impacts of philanthropic shifts. **Grantees most frequently called for funders to provide transparency and advance notice of strategy shifts to allow them to plan accordingly.** They also suggested offering *"tie-off"* grants to provide funding runways during transition periods, and facilitating connections between grantees and other funders that might remain aligned when the existing funder's priorities shift.

Individual grantees also provided other one-off suggestions for funders, including sharing internal knowledge/playbooks to help grantees navigate the philanthropic landscape; bringing grantees directly into strategy development conversations; anchoring strategies at the board/president level for longer-term consistency; and exploring more flexible, radical funding vehicles beyond traditional institutional philanthropy (e.g., collaborative funds like Borealis Philanthropy does).

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Grantees brainstormed ways to mitigate the impact of shifts.

Grantees also reflected on what they could do themselves to leverage the possibilities and guard against the negative impacts of philanthropic shifts. **No clear themes emerged, but individual grantees suggested they could:**

- Develop strategies to diversify funding streams through individual donors, earned revenue models, etc.

- Build financial reserves and runways to weather disruptions from funding shifts.

- Stay firm in their core mission/priorities while adapting language/framing to funding shifts (i.e., not entire workstreams)

Thinking **more proactively**, individual grantees also reflected that it would serve them to cultivate relationships and pipelines into philanthropic institutions to influence future hires, push for more transparency around funders' priorities and decision-making, and leverage coalitions/networks to provide a unified voice pushing back on funder pivots disconnected from field realities.

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Intro to this section

In two learning conversations, we spoke to six LOAF grantees who work across states/contexts. Given this, their perspectives, experiences, and contexts differed dramatically. From these conversations, we highlight themes where possible, but in cases where no clear themes arose, we have compiled individual grantee reflections. Our hope is that seeing these individual reflections might spark new thinking for the Democracy Fund and/or lead to new/different conversations with LOAF grantees about their work.

In this section, LOAF grantees share the enablers and inhibitors of their local work, how they experience working with national organizations and funders, and the ways in which they feel funders can better support those relationships.

LOAF grantees identified enablers to local work.

Individual LOAF grantees named the following things that enable or facilitate their work:

- **Leveraging existing trusted relationships** that community members have—like with local schools, health clinics, and community organizations — to raise awareness about tech/media issues impacting them.

- **Facilitating a visioning process** where community groups articulate what technology should look like in their *"liberated world"* and use that to drive campaigns.

- **Using art**, exhibitions, and poetry as vehicles to push back on dominant narratives and build critical analysis.

- **Making interconnections visible** between issues like surveillance, foreclosures, broadband access, and water shutoffs to show compounded impacts on certain neighborhoods.

- **Legal/policy groups that take direction from community organizing**, not the other way around.

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LOAF grantees also identified inhibitors to local work.

Individual LOAF grantees named the following things that hinder or get in the way of their work:

- **Well-funded opposition campaigns** pushing false narratives that drown out community voices.

- **Dominant narratives** that have been ingrained for decades, like framing Detroit as a place of crime/blight rather than disinvestment.

- **Community members being overwhelmed** by daily survival struggles, making it hard to prioritize tech/media justice issues.

- **Lack of resources and organizational capacity** for community groups to incorporate tech/media assessments into their existing issue fights.

- **Siloed nature of activism**, with a lack of coordinated national progressive/left infrastructure to align efforts.

- **National policy groups operating in an isolated field** that is disconnected from grassroots community vision and needs.

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LOAF grantees generally agree that national groups do not have strong or sufficient connections to state or local groups.

One grantee explained that **national policy actors don't have deep or authentic relationships with organized communities**: *"They sometimes have relationships three or four quarters of connection away [,] like a housing group is working with this local coalition and that local coalition is mostly the legal aid folks, but they have this one Renters United organization in it, but that group hasn't talked to their members yet about this issue."*

Another grantee explained that it's difficult to get national groups to provide briefings about what a specific executive order or Office of Management and Budget (OMB) memo means so that other organizations and groups can decide if they need to pay attention to it or address it. The grantee seemed to understand that national groups are juggling many competing priorities though, saying *"...these groups are so pushed to produce and they also are working without clarity on what to cut..."*

One grantee who previously worked at the national level and now works locally described the **benefit of being able to leverage learning and connections from their national work**, saying, *"I'll use an example when we really started increasing our resistance to police use of facial recognition in the city, I was able to call on AI ethicists and I was able to call on policymakers and others who were thinking similarly to come and prove—because they wanted to hear from a certain level of expertise at the city council meeting, at the board of police commissioners meeting, in townhalls, etc., because unfortunately community experience just isn't enough unless you've been arrested."*

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Tribal nations experience coordination differently.

One Indigenous-led grantee organization experiences coordination within and among tribal nations more smoothly than how other LOAF grantees described their version of local-national coordination. The grantee highlighted regional tribal consortiums, saying, *"They work together to provide food assistance programs, Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF) programs, and things like that as a group to their regions so they've been very strong and very active in this space... build strength in numbers and sort of coalesce around issues. So, they are very valuable, and they have a voice federally. They have a voice regionally and locally."* The relationship between local/regional and federal tribal entities described by this one grantee indicates better coordination and communication than non-Indigenous grantees experience.

Less consistently strong, though, is the relationship between tribal and state governments. The grantee explained that 1) tribal land often spans multiple states, meaning tribes fall under the jurisdiction of those states, and 2) the relationship between a specific tribe and the state(s) it interacts with depends on the specific state government. In some states, the state and tribal governments are in a genuine relationship; in some, it depends on the administration at a given point in time, and in some, it's *"an absolute battle."* They also explained that while some federal funding opportunities require states to talk with tribes, *"they have done that obligation but it's only to check the box... [The federal government] typically throw[s] money at a state and trickle[s] it through the state, which never ends up in the tribe space so that whole state relationship is tough for tribes."*

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Two LOAF grantees provided advice to funders about how to support coordination between national and local groups.

One LOAF grantee each suggested the following ideas for how funders can support coordination between national and local groups:

- **Support national organizations to build the capacity needed to be genuinely accountable to local communities:** *"We haven't built the general support for national organizations to be able to focus their capacity long term on the listening and accompaniment necessary to generate true accountable relationships with the communities that they purport to be fighting for, and sometimes even to represent."*

- **Support skill development:** *"I think more investment in coaching and storytelling and how to do things with public comment and write to government officials and challenge policies in ways that affect the community, resourcing those sorts of things … have always been but are really in this next iteration going to be tremendously important, and trying to hold on to our critical thinking skills in the age of generative AI."*

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LOAF grantees are interested in knowing who/what else is out there.

We asked two LOAF grantees in one learning conversation what they want to learn about with/from one another. They were clear that, at this stage, they need to better understand what else is out there. **The learning conversations happened before the May 2024 Democracy Fund grantee convening, but the two grantees saw that as an opportunity to fill this need.** One said, *"I'm looking forward to the upcoming retreat, so I understand what everybody's doing better. I know some of the grantees so I'm already familiar with their work, but I think having that time together to connect is going to give me a better sense of the landscape and how we could do some collaborative work or skill share or those types of things."* Democracy Fund might consider informally checking in with LOAF grantees to see what else, if anything, would be helpful following the convening to encourage more/deeper connections and collaborations.

Another grantee emphasized the importance of **policy-focused national organizations and intermediaries (e.g., those who do narrative work) connecting with local groups**. They explained that those groups *"think they're telling the right story but without actually knowing what local people care about probably just honestly aren't."*

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Reflecting on DDP's Learning Questions

Intro to this section

In this section, ORS Impact considers three of the Digital Democracy Portfolio's learning questions:

1. When and how should we support network building and capacity building among and for our grantees outside of grantmaking that is not additive and superfluous?

2. What are we learning about our choice to prioritize long-term grantmaking and the balance of ensuring nimbleness for our grantees and our organization? Do advocates have the flexibility to pivot as contexts shift?

3. What are the challenges grantees face locally, and what are their priorities? What do our LOAF grantees want to learn from each other?

For each question, we offer our reflections, ideas, and suggestions for Democracy Fund and the DDP team based on the data and findings in this deck.

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Reflections on Learning Question #1

When and how should we support network building and capacity building among and for our grantees outside of grantmaking that is not additive and superfluous?

- **Facilitate connections and/or host convenings for local grantees and new staff at legacy organizations** to get to know the field and other actors/partners, including connecting national organizations to local grantees. In doing this, consider:
  - Naming the purpose of connecting/onboarding new staff and/or local grantees explicitly to increase interest among legacy organizations/leaders (i.e., folks who have been around are burnt out on convenings but *are* committed to the success of new staff, local staff, and the field generally).
  - Keeping it targeted and specific so participants know what they're getting into and who's the right person to send.
- **Build the capacity of the next generation of organizers** to invest in the pipeline of people committed to and skilled in this work.
- **Map the ecosystem** so grantees are aware of trusted partners who can help or support in different areas.
- **Offer options when providing support/capacity building** so grantees can choose the right partner/opportunity for their work, style, and context.

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Reflections on Learning Question #2

What are we learning about our choice to prioritize long-term grantmaking and the balance of ensuring nimbleness for our grantees and our organization? Do advocates have the flexibility to pivot as contexts shift?

Grantees across learning conversations were clear that they much prefer long-term, flexible funding because it allows them to be more responsive, opportunistic, and creative. As they continue working in this way:

- **Consider a separate pot for "rapid response" grants** to support grantees responding to crises when they emerge that is additive to their general operating support.

- **Ensure that if a grantee plans to sub-grant, there aren't restrictions to who/what they can then fund** (e.g., sub-grants can also be used for general operating support).

- **Be as transparent as possible** about the foundation's strategy and what any shifts/evolutions mean for grantees.

- If the foundation decides to shift away from certain grantees or topic areas:
  - **Share information and specifics** about the timing of the shift as early as possible so grantees can plan accordingly.
  - **Offer "tie-off"" grants** to provide a funding runway.
  - **Facilitate connections** between grantees and other funders that might be interested in their work.

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Reflections on Learning Question #3

What are the challenges grantees face locally, and what are their priorities?
What do our LOAF grantees want to learn from each other?

- **Map the current set of LOAF grantees** and then create/host space for grantees to connect with one another/identify opportunities to collaborate (Democracy Fund could even offer collaboration grants).

- **Fund or support physical infrastructure investments** in local communities and regions, such as broadband access, meeting space, etc.

- Encourage, if not require, that **national organizations build, maintain, and sustain deep relationships with local organizations** and grantees. Again, this could take many forms, including adding reporting requirements for national organizations to share how they connected/incorporated feedback from local organizations, organizing/hosting convenings or shared tables to build relationships, offering multi-year collaboration grants between national and local organizations, etc.

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Reflections on Learning Question #3

What are the challenges grantees face locally, and what are their priorities?
What do our LOAF grantees want to learn from each other?

The ORS team noticed that this LOAF-specific learning question had a different orientation than the previous two questions, in that it felt answerable and does not necessarily have a *"now what"* component to it. This makes sense given the newness of the LOAF portfolio. However, as Democracy Fund continues to add additional grantees to the LOAF portfolio and deepen existing relationships with current grantees, **the DDP team might consider amending this question or adding an additional, forward-focused learning question related to the LOAF portfolio**. For instance, given the theme that emerged about relationships between local and national actors, one such question could be:

How can Democracy Fund best support collaboration and relationship-building between LOAF and national grantees?

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Evaluator Observations

Intro to this section

In this section, ORS Impact shares our observations about the findings. We offer our perspective, identify common links between sections, and pose questions for DDP staff as they continue working with grantees.

It is important to note that the ORS Impact team has brought our own lenses and experiences to bear in this section—both from personal experience and having worked with other organizations engaged in similar endeavors. As evaluators, we are often assumed to be neutral and objective purveyors of information. ORS Impact does not think objectivity is possible, as everyone interprets information through their own racial and cultural lens, and we do not believe that neutrality is helpful, particularly regarding issues of equity and power.

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Collaboration criteria shared by a Digital Security & Care grantee could offer helpful direction for how to facilitate national-local connections.

Earlier in 2024, ORS Impact conducted a learning conversation with four grantees of Democracy's Fund Digital Security & Care (DSC) portfolio. While the areas of inquiry for that conversation were different, when reflecting on how LOAF grantees experienced working with national organizations, we found the following collaboration criteria shared by a DSC grantee particularly relevant:

- *"Regardless of size, but especially if they're larger, does it **share credit**? Do you see it doing that? Especially with smaller orgs? Is it crediting or just extracting?*

- *Do they **sub-grant,** pay stipends, or offer any kind of honoraria or compensation? Particularly for women and women of color who are doing the work.*

- *Are all the people who work on the team of exactly the same **demographic**? Racially, rural vs. city, etc. If everyone on a team looks the same, it's telling. Especially if you look at their wider team of consultants too.*

- *Are people **driven by crises**? Because there are always going to be more. Focusing on the latest crisis or fad can yank us away from what we were carefully building.*

- *What kind of **relationship** are they in with organizations when it comes to collaborations? Ask other organizations they've worked with."*

If Democracy Fund considers how to facilitate connections and relationships between national organizations and LOAF grantees, these criteria could be a helpful guide for how to do so.

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Grantees called on funders to organize and coordinate more effectively, highlighting a few ways that Democracy Fund could do so.

Throughout the learning conversations, grantees shared roles in which they felt that Democracy Fund was well-suited to support their work and the field, many of which included **how Democracy Fund could influence or model promising practices to other funders**. Some examples include:

- Continuing to model flexible and sustainable funding

- Making connections between grantees and other funders in the media and tech policy or democracy funder ecosystem

- Coordinating convenings or infrastructure support efforts with other funders

One grantee also recognized that the broader field is moving toward the language of *"polarization"* but that this language can feel *"like it's defanging and then reburying I feel like the real issues of like White supremacy, racism."* This grantee **appreciated the DDP team's explicit focus on racial justice and encouraged them to "*hold the line*" in naming and working for an inclusive, multi-racial democracy.**

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The DDP team might consider whether there are specific elements of field-building it is well-positioned to support.

We found The Bridgespan Group's Field-Building for Population-Level Change report a useful and helpful way to consider the roles that funders can play to support or strengthen particular aspects of a field. In their framework, Bridgespan identifies five characteristics of most fields: **a knowledge base, field actors, a field-level agenda, infrastructure, and resources.**

Some of the specific strategies included in this framework to build fields were infrastructure needs or roles that grantees called for, like investing in leadership development, supporting coordination among related actors (namely among national and local actors), and mobilizing peer funders.

Going forward, the DDP team could focus on funding certain elements of field-building, or work to organize and coordinate with other funders on how funders can strategically support the field.

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Conclusion

In our 2024 Learning Conversations, the DDP team prioritized their focus on three key areas:

- Grantee perceptions on the **infrastructure needs of the field** and how Democracy Fund and other funders can support them

- How **philanthropy's focus on a particular issue affects grantees** and the field writ large

- Understanding the work of local organizing action fund (LOAF) grantees and the **relationship between LOAF grantees and national actors**.

When thinking about the **infrastructure needs of the field**, grantees shared how flexible and sustained funding supported their work and infrastructure sustainability. However, they still identified infrastructure needs and encouraged funders to coordinate among themselves to help support those needs.

Grantees described challenges to their capacity and strategic focus when reflecting on the **impacts of philanthropic pivots,** and offered ways that funders can mitigate those impacts, including transparency and transition support.

LOAF grantees reflected on their work, sharing facilitators and inhibitors to their local work, while describing strained relationships with some larger, national organizations.

We hope that these findings are helpful to the DDP team as they continue to work toward a public square where Black, Indigenous, and people of color create, access, and enjoy media and technology that fully and equitably represents their needs, concerns, and dreams.

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Appendix |
Participant List

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List of Learning Conversation Participants

Claire Atkin, Check My Ads Institute

K.J. Bagchi, The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights

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Saqib Bhatti, Action Center on Race & the Economy (ACRE)

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