

ONE FOUNDATION'S JOURNEY TOWARD CENTERING COMMUNITY-LED WORK

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Abstract

For decades, the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors have been trying to solve issues in communities that have been harmed for hundreds of years by the impacts of colonization, capitalism, and other isms. One thing has become abundantly clear: if nonprofits and foundations continue determining solutions, the changes in communities will be mostly slow and unsustainable. Embracing this truth, Mortenson Family Foundation has been working to share power with communities for decisions about how and where resources should be allocated. We are doing this because people in and close to communities are best situated to define and implement solutions in the most meaningful, relevant, and sustainable ways. This article highlights some of our learnings as we embrace our emergent journey to build a more equitable partnership among our foundation, the nonprofits we partner with, and the communities we all care about.

Keywords: Foundation, Philanthropy, Community Engagement, Trust-based philanthropy, Decolonizing Philanthropy, Community Development

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Modern grantmaking was founded on the large-scale donations of several individuals and families who made their wealth during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the steel, oil, railroad, telegraph, and automobile industries. Since the late 1800s the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors have been trying to solve issues in communities that have been harmed for hundreds of years by the impacts of colonization, capitalism, and other -isms. In the words of Martin Luther King, “Philanthropy is commendable, but it must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the circumstances of economic injustice, which make philanthropy necessary” (*Strength to Love*, 1963). Two things have become abundantly clear: first, philanthropy needs to move from a charity mindset to a justice mindset, and second, if nonprofits and foundations continue determining solutions, the changes in communities will be mostly slow and unsustainable.

Embracing this truth, Mortenson Family Foundation has been working to share power with communities for decisions about how and where resources should be allocated. We are doing this because people in and close to communities are best situated to define and implement solutions in the most meaningful, relevant, and sustainable ways. This article highlights some of our learnings as we embrace an emergent journey that strives to build a more equitable partnership among our Foundation, the nonprofits we partner with, and the communities we all care about. We believe that centering community voices in our work creates greater opportunities for long-term sustainable solutions to systemic problems. We share our history and our equity journey to shed light on what is possible when we commit to decolonizing wealth and centering community voices.

ABOUT MORTENSON FAMILY FOUNDATION

In 1999, the initial contributions to the Foundation were provided by individual family members and M. A. Mortenson Company, a national engineering and construction company. While related to M. A. Mortenson Company through family connections and

Company contributions, the Foundation intends to be an independent entity governed by the family to express its values.

Alice and Mort Mortenson created Mortenson Family Foundation as an expression of gratitude for the privilege of living and working in a vital and vibrant community in Minnesota, and for the great joy their family brings to their lives. The Foundation has three major areas of focus: Sustaining Environmental Systems (environment), Expanding Opportunities for Youth and Families (education), and Strengthening Developing Communities (international). Because of its size and capacity, the Foundation historically operated like many other foundations: in a transactional way. For example, while two of the programs (Expanding Opportunities and Sustaining Environment Systems) had an open application process, the third program (Strengthening Developing Communities) only accepts applications by invitations. Nonprofits applied for grants, staff made recommendations to the Foundation's board, and the board approved grants; the nonprofits were required to submit written reports on their grants instead of a verbal recording or interview option. Often, transactional relationships like these exacerbate power dynamics and prevent leaders of nonprofit from asking for what they really need, prevents communities from being elevated in the ways they should, and perpetuates the lack of accountability to the very people it is working to support from being called out.

OUR JOURNEY

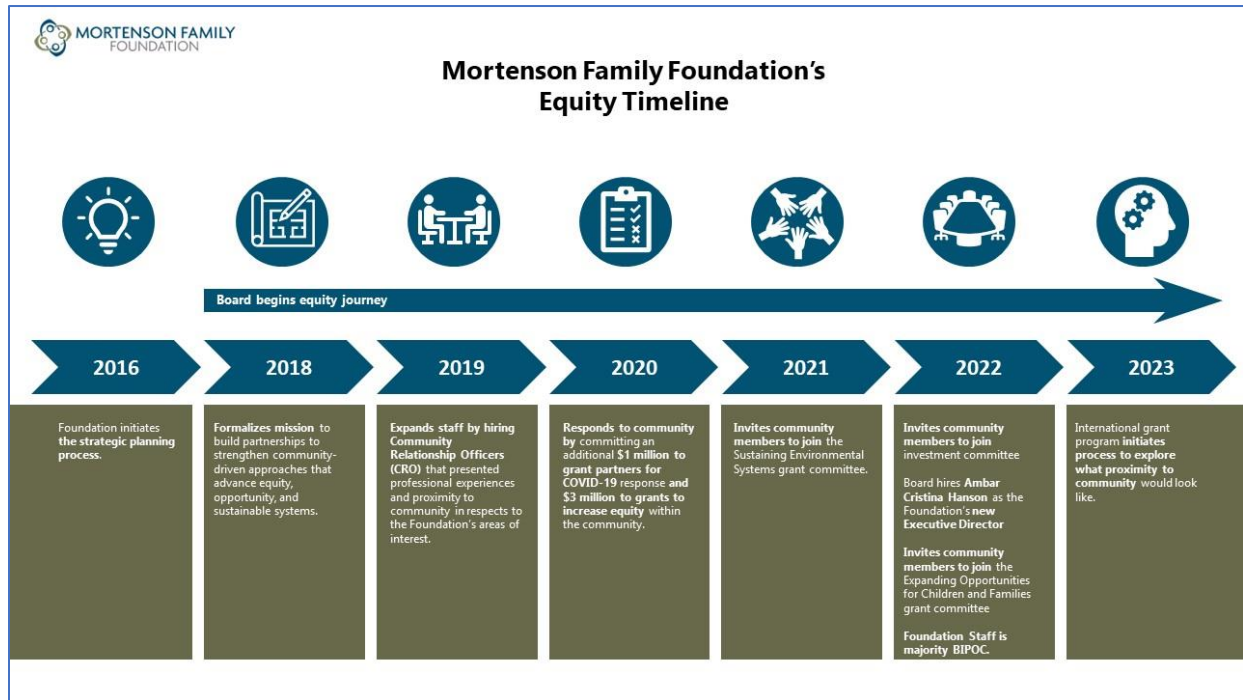
In 2018, the Foundation established its mission to build partnerships to strengthen community-driven approaches that advance equity, opportunity, and sustainable systems. To live up to our mission, we knew we needed to center equity and community voices, and work to dismantle the harms that are often perpetuated by the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors. We began embedding equity trainings into our board agendas, exploring the way we interact with grant partners, refining our

grantmaking processes through an equity lens, listening to our partners intently, and responding in relevant ways.

Our efforts to share decision making are reflected in our international work through aspirations to support more work that is community led. The Movement for Community-Led Development defines community-led development as “the process of working together to create and achieve locally owned visions and goals” (<https://mcldev.org/2018/03/05/community-led-development-and-its-rationale/>, 2018). In this framework, outside assistance is most useful when it supports and/or enhances structures and capacities already in place, enabling communities to build human and physical infrastructure for the long term. At its core, community-led development requires centering community voices, leadership, and action. For many of us, it requires rethinking our approaches to international development aid and grantmaking.

Mortenson Family Foundation had been working since 2018 on changing the way we advance equity. Like many other foundations, our rethinking began coming to fruition in 2020 with the start of the pandemic and the murder of George Floyd, which happened in our home city of Minneapolis. 2020 was a catalyst for our board to make eight firm commitments to change, ranging from increasing grant support for more organizations led by and for communities to inviting community members with lived and learned skills to join our grantmaking committees. These racial equity commitments, as we refer to them, are the first of their kind for our board, and responded to the urgent demands of 2020. The ongoing implementation of the racial equity commitments responds to the demands of making lasting change. Figure 1 shows a timeline of our Foundation’s equity journey.

Figure 1: Mortenson Family Foundation's Equity Timeline



Mortenson Family Foundation doesn't have absolute wisdom on advancing equity; we are still learning as we implement change. In fact, as we go through this process, we are learning that even within our organization there are different ways to achieve our goal of centering community. We see this as an approach, not a model. Below are some lessons we have learned, especially in our processes of inviting community members onto our grantmaking committees, facilitating our committees, doing collective grantmaking, and what centering community looks like in an international context.

LESSONS LEARNED

Lead with our Commitments

Leading with our racial equity commitments and using them to frame the conversations, both internally and externally, has been a way for us to live into and model our accountability to the commitments. In addition, it has been an important way to orient

people about where we are coming from, where we are trying to go, and how we are holding ourselves accountable.

Have Goals and Be Open to Emergence

We initiated a community engagement process to gather input on our guidelines and meet community members who might eventually serve on our grantmaking committees. This worked well for our Expanding Opportunities for Youth and Families program and for our Sustaining Environmental Systems grant programs. When we were ready to engage the community in the international grant program, it was useful to have the clear goal of inviting individuals to serve on our grantmaking committees, but it was also important to be open to expanding, modifying, or even discarding our goals as we moved forward. This flexibility allowed our board to live into and ultimately own the full process of community engagement that eventually led to inviting community members to join our committees. As the initial committee members, who are all Mortenson family members involved with the family Foundation, have moved into owning the work, their goals have become even more ambitious.

Choose a Common Project

Our community engagement processes helped us expand our knowledge on how to better align our program focus, language, and guidelines with our racial equity commitments. This opportunity to work together on our program guidelines as a common project was central to building relationships, creating connections and trust, and creating ownership of a co-created body of work.

Strengthen Committee Participation

Having our board members participate in every step of our community engagement processes was critical. Not just to be there, but to participate, engage, ask questions, and answer questions, some of them challenging. This openness was appreciated by community participants and went a long way to building trust in the Foundation and

the work. It also created a tone for diving deep on real issues. Board participation also demonstrated to community participants our seriousness about making lasting change.

Be Intentional and Consistent in Relationship Building

From reaching out to share information about our community engagement process, to inviting people to participate in the process, and all the way into inviting people onto our committees and answering questions about the committees, we treated all interactions as relationship-building opportunities. This meant slowing down to make phone calls rather than sending emails, and taking time at beginnings and endings of meetings to intentionally hear all voices, answer questions, and purposefully offer opportunities for connection.

Attend to Participants' Self-Interest

Participants enjoyed our community engagement processes because there were opportunities to connect with other people doing great work. After each process was over, many participants connected with one another independently. In reaching out with invitations to join committees, we asked prospective committee members their aspirations for the experience and how we could help them grow and achieve their own goals. Once they joined the committees, we asked for their feedback on the committee position descriptions and agreements. We consistently looked for as many opportunities for co-creation as possible. It was important to pay people. More than half of the participants in the community engagement processes took no money directly, but instead had it donated to their own organization or another organization. People appreciated the gesture of reciprocity.

Modify the Program Officer Role

While a traditional program officer may be a subject matter specialist and/or connector between the Foundation and the community, a program officer working with a committee that includes community members with skilled and lived experiences plays more the role of facilitator of the group's strategies. Rather than coming to the group

with answers, the program officer's job is to help the group to mine their own expertise. The program officer's goal is to support the creation of a committee that can make decisions and solve problems together. The program officer also supports committee members in other ways: training, capacity building, leadership development, connecting with one another, connecting with other resources, etc. Each committee member may want and need something different.

REMAINING QUESTIONS

While we have learned a lot, we still find ourselves with plenty of questions as we move into implementation.

Should We Change the Way We Do Our Work?

Through the process of inviting community members onto our committees, we have been clear that we are not inviting people to a table that is already set, but rather, to one we will set together. This means that all our previous practices and processes have been open to change, and in fact they all have changed. Our guidelines were rewritten in one grant program and refined in another; our application and review processes have been recreated. In many ways, having community members on our grantmaking committees has changed the way Mortenson Family Foundation does business.

How Do We Engage the Committees?

For Mortenson Family Foundation, trust had to be built both among the community members and between the community members and staff and board members. Key components that have been important to building trust include:

Transparency. The program officers worked to support the committee members in understanding where there were opportunities for change and where we were

restricted from making changes based on legal and/or other constraints, such as honoring the feedback we received from the community listening sessions.

Clarity. It was important for everyone on each committee to be clear about the decision-making process and timeline. The committees' role was to finalize the application questions, rubric, and guidelines for each program area, and make decisions on the grant amounts and the review process.

Naming and Addressing Power Dynamics. Both the board members and the community members needed to be clear about the power dynamics and be open to learning from each other, challenging each other, and accepting the decision of the majority. We are learning that during meetings it is important to recognize and honor the individual identities of the committee members and to be mindful of who is speaking first, who gets the last word, and who is speaking the most. Using meeting agreements and facilitation prompts to redistribute the power in the room is important.

Relationships. Allowing time in each meeting to get to know each other more deeply is important. This helps with the discomfort that might arise later when tensions emerge during decision making.

Constant Learning. Because this is an emerging process, humility, grace, and patience need to be at the forefront. Things may not go as expected, and opportunities for reflection and learning are essential to iterate and do better next time.

Leveraging the Assets of the Committees. Committee members have a wide range of assets, including professional and lived experiences, connections to communities, and cultural knowledge, that will increase the reach of the grant program and the quality of the process. We always need to remember and intentionally identify and elevate these assets.

INTERNATIONAL LEARNING

We have learned that inviting community members onto the Strengthening Developing Communities Committee (international grantmaking committee) may not be the best option for centering community voices in our international program. In our environmental and education committees, our community committee members are contributing to building a new grantmaking infrastructure within the state of Minnesota. Because we would not necessarily have representation from every country we support, serving on the international committee would not necessarily contribute to increased infrastructure in one's home community or country. We've heard from some of our partners that asking individuals to do work that in the end won't necessarily benefit their own community or country risks being extractive. Others may feel differently.

While we do not yet know what the ultimate definition of proximity to community in the context of international grantmaking will look like, we are committed to continuing to explore this question with our partner communities. When we initiated this work, we knew it would be most sustainable and equitable to approach it by centering community voices. Since starting this work, we have learned that this approach is more challenging, but also more fun than adhering to the status quo and perpetuating some of the oppressive practices we are trying to eliminate.

CONCLUSION

To shift our behaviors and practices in a way that better aligns with our mission and commitment to equity has taken great humility, courage, and time. Humility to accept we don't have all the answers, courage to embrace the unknown, and time to explore new ways of doing the work can lead to greater impact when there is trust in the people most affected by the issues we care about most. We hope that by sharing what we have

learned on this journey so far, other funders and nonprofits will see the value in sharing decision-making power with communities and shifting from funder-driven solutions to community-driven solutions.

Maryan Abdinur grew up in a farming and camel nomadic community in East Africa known to her and her people as Arlaadi (“our lands/the lands”). Maryan’s work is influenced by the knowledge and memories of the Arlaadi, its people, and the teachings of her grandparents. Most recently, Maryan led Hope Community Inc.’s Food, Land and Community program. As part of her role at Hope, Maryan was a member of the City of Minneapolis’s Green Zones Policy Recommendations Design Team and has served two terms on the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency’s (MPCA) Environmental Justice Advisory Group. Maryan currently serves on the boards of Philadelphia Community Farm in Osceola Wisconsin, A Somali women wellness collective in Minneapolis, and an energy research organization based in Kenya and Somalia. Maryan lives in the suburbs of St. Paul with her family, where they enjoy growing food, hiking, cooking, reading, and storytelling together.

Camille Gonzalez has a diverse range of disciplines that comprise her research and training background. She has conducted research to identify inclusive and equitable practices within donor advancement, the classroom, and the faculty and staff at St. Olaf College. Through these experiences, Camille became even more passionate about promoting inclusive and equitable practices within the nonprofit sector and through graphic design. She now brings these experiences and passions to the Mortenson Family Foundation, working as its Grants and Program Coordinator. Camille holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Art History, Anthropology, and concentration in Asian Studies from St. Olaf College that includes coursework at the University of Oslo (Universitetet i Oslo) and National Taiwan University (國立臺灣大) and is currently a student of Master of Arts in Graphic and Web Design at Minneapolis College of Art and Design. Camille grew up and lives in St. Paul and loves to find new cafes and restaurants within the Twin Cities to visit with friends and family.

Ambar Hanson moved to Minnesota from the Dominican Republic in 1997. Since moving to the U.S., Ambar has been committed to working with and for immigrant communities and communities of color to have equal opportunity and access to higher education, jobs that provide livable wages, health, housing, and safety. After serving in the role of Community Relationship Officer at the Foundation since 2019, Ambar moved into the role of Executive Director in July of 2022. She holds a master’s degree in public administration from UC Denver and a bachelor’s degree in Latin American studies from UW-Eau Claire.

Ambar lives with her partner and two children in South Minneapolis, where they enjoy dancing, hosting gatherings, and taking music lessons together.

Rabya Hassen grew up in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia surrounded by a community of folks who poured much wisdom and love into her. A community that inspired her learning about herself, how interconnected we are to each other but also to everything around us and more importantly what it means to truly witness and serve humanity. Rabya has spent much of her career as a Youth Worker- supporting, walking alongside and co-creating with BIPOC youth and young adults in different capacities. In the past several years Rabya has been walking alongside youth and young adults experiencing homelessness. Most recently she served as the Youth Policy Specialist and Homeless Program Grants Administrator at the Minnesota Department of Human Services, overseeing various homeless program grants, working on policies that impact youth experiencing homelessness and providing technical assistance to youth providers across the state of Minnesota. Rabya lives in St. Paul and enjoys spending quality time with friends and family cooking, drinking Ethiopian coffee, and having a good laugh.

Danyelle O'Hara has worked throughout her career with a range of U.S. and international organizations to help build capacity in issues related to community economic development, natural resources management, and community change. At its core, her interest is in helping communities and community-based organizations develop visions for their aspirations and practical plans for achieving them in the most inclusive ways possible. Danyelle carries this focus with her in supporting the Mortenson Family Foundation's Strengthening Developing Communities and Sustaining Environmental Systems program areas. Danyelle holds a master's degree in international development education and a bachelor's degree in anthropology, both from Stanford University. Danyelle lives in Saint Paul with her husband, dog, and young adult children when they are home from college and other pursuits in the world.

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