



“Sister, brother – or just someone who cares”

How Giving Circles celebrate the power of giving and reclaim what it means to be a donor



Contents

3	Introduction
4	A Giving Circle . . .
5	Giving Circles: The basics
7	Why Giving Circles?
13	Giving Circles: Beyond money
16	What is the role for institutional donors in supporting Giving Circles?
18	What works? Top tips from the field
19	Contributors
20	Giving Circles resources and further reading

Cover image

Dalia Association, Palestine

Introduction

Generosity, impact, social connections, and fun: Giving Circles offer a winning blend. They are also playing an increasingly important role in helping to strengthen and contribute to the growing field of community philanthropy around the world.

The growth of Giving Circles is happening within a larger global shift towards an appreciation of the power and potential of everyday generosity, made possible by new technology (through online platforms such as [GlobalGiving](#) and [GoFundMe](#) etc.), and framed as a form civic participation and collective organizing (by, for example, the [Giving Tuesday](#) movement and [The Funding Network](#)).

The [Global Fund for Community Foundations](#) (GFCF) is a Johannesburg-based grassroots grantmaker that works to support and grow community philanthropy as a set of institutions, practices and theory, and as a strategy for durable development around the world. Within the GFCF's global network – which comprises a diverse range of community philanthropy and civil society organizations including community foundations, women's funds, socio-environmental funds and grassroots grantmakers – there has been a steady growth in the adoption and adaptation of Giving Circles as one of the strategies they use to promote grassroots philanthropy.

This study explores how a simple idea, which involves bringing people together with the sole purpose of giving – and giving together – has been shaped and adapted to fit in different

countries and cultures. It draws on a series of conversations with Giving Circle organizers and practitioners from across the GFCF's global network and beyond, and includes perspectives from Belgium, Brazil, Hungary, Palestine, Russia, Romania, South Africa, United States and Vietnam. Some of these Giving Circles have emerged organically, while others have benefited from external mentorship and support.*

Despite the diversity of contexts, of communities, of the specific strategies and purposes behind them, the study shows how, regardless of their location, Giving Circles are about building connections, trust and understanding between people. Giving Circles bring together different members of a community: whether as “givers”, as “doers”, or as both. In that sense, they are about more than money. In fact, while the simple idea of Giving Circles is built around giving, in several instances they also involve a more explicit, political framing which – either implicitly or explicitly – rejects the power of “big philanthropy.”

Beyond “doing good” by supporting important issues or underfunded causes, Giving Circles promote the idea of collective wisdom and impact, offer networking opportunities, build social connections between like-minded individuals, and motivate people to care about the key issues that are affecting their communities. Most recently, as the world has faced the unprecedented global crisis in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic, Giving Circles have continued to play a critical role in responding swiftly to the challenges faced by the communities they seek to serve.

*The Funding Network, for example, has played a significant role in spreading the Giving Circle model internationally. A U.K.-based network that equips civil society organizations with the skills, resources and confidence to run their own live giving circle events, it has provided direct assistance and support to a number of the organizations mentioned in this paper, including those from Belgium, Brazil, Hungary, Palestine and Russia.

A Giving Circle . . .

- Brings people together (normally, in person) to give and to decide how to distribute the resources raised.
- Is a social event – often informal and fun – and is as much about building a sense of community as it is about raising money.
- Is a way to connect people – the doers and the givers – in a conversation about their community and the issues affecting it.
- Is about participation, in decision-making as to how resource decisions are made, and/or the administration and leadership of the group.
- Builds on the idea of a community and the collective assets (money, people, connections, ideas) it possesses.



Dalia Association, Palestine



Ferencváros Community Foundation, Hungary

Giving Circles: The basics

“A Giving Circle is a group of like-minded individuals who come together to create collective change in their communities and they leverage all their resources – not just finances but their time, talent, testimony and treasure. Simply put, as ordinary citizens attempting to solve their own community problems through giving and volunteering.”

Marsha Morgan, Former Chairperson of the Community Investment Network in North Carolina, United States

While they share some core features and values, Giving Circles work best when they are designed to fit into their local context. And that

starts with the language used to describe them. Organizations consulted for this study use a variety of terms to describe their own versions. In Palestine, for example, the Dalia Association has its “Social Change Auction”, where local community initiatives are “sold” (pitched) and individual givers support initiatives of their choice through live crowdfunding. Meanwhile, in Brazil, the ICOM – Instituto Comunitário Grande Florianópolis’ “Community Fund for Social Justice” uses the methodology of a Giving Circle, in Russia the Arkhangelsk Centre of Social Technologies Garant has its “Circle of Funders”, and the Ferencváros Community Foundation in Hungary runs “Live Crowdfunding” events.



Ferencváros Community Foundation, Hungary



Ferencváros Community Foundation, Hungary



ICOM – Instituto Comunitário Grande Florianópolis, Brazil

What does a Giving Circle look like?

Peter Temesvary, Board Member of the Ferencváros Community Foundation describes their Giving Circle in the following way:

“Once a year, our donor community can get to know and support three social projects during the Live Crowdfunding Night. It is a two to three-hour event where selected NGOs present the project they want to implement to 80–100 guests in six minutes each. After that, they get an additional six minutes to answer guests’ questions. Subsequently, the project representatives leave the room and people start making offers. Going through the particular projects one-by-one, guests can make their financial and other type of offers (voluntary work, service, material contribution, etc.) to support the implementation of the projects they find sympathetic. Together we follow how much has been raised, so that everyone can see whether it is enough to implement the project. When the pledges have all been made, the project representatives come back to the room to hear how much they have been offered. Following the event, the foundation collects the pledges and then draws up grant agreements with individual organizations so that they can implement the projects. The role of the foundation is also to monitor the implementation of the projects and to report on them back to the ‘guests-turned-donors.’”

The format described in Hungary was similar to others interviewed for the study, although lockdowns imposed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic had prompted everyone to suspend face-to-face meetings and to shift to online gatherings (more on this below).

Orsolya Polyacsó, Project Coordinator at the Ferencváros Community Foundation, explained how they used Crowdcaster, a live video platform designed to connect with a live audience to host their online event: “Though the event now happens online, the choreography of the event is the same as the offline one. It still includes bringing together participating organizations, their projects and the audience, who get a chance to ask questions in the chat box online. Guests make their pledges in the chat, indicating the amount that they want to offer for a specific project.”

With the transition to the virtual space, the foundation raised 6.2 million forints (around US \$20,671) for three projects, a figure much higher than in previous years (in 2019, 3.2 million forints, approximately US \$10,570, was raised).

“The benefits of the online space were that more people could participate than in the physical space we are used to. Also, the two-week online campaigning preceding the event (which we normally do not have), contributed to the success of raising more money for the projects,” Orsolya further elaborated.

Why Giving Circles?

Greater than the sum of their parts

Managing a Giving Circle effectively requires the smooth management of many moving parts – the guests (givers), the partners (grant recipients), the meeting, the atmosphere, the contributions themselves – and the amount of money actually raised might in the end not be very big. So why are they a worthwhile endeavour, and what are they really about? For some of those consulted in this study, the purpose of Giving Circles is to get “ordinary” people to acknowledge and engage with the challenges in their communities, and to realize their own agency in being able to do something about it by normalizing the idea of giving. As Ioana Traistă, Co-Founder of the Brussels Donors Circle explained: “It is the idea of acknowledging that there is a problem in our community and we want to solve it, regardless of the size of our wallets.” For Darryl Lester, Founder of the Community Investment Network in North Carolina: “Giving Circles are not about

relief giving, they are about giving that brings about reform. I can give somebody a fish one day but I want to invest in them so that one day they can go and find their own fish – or they may not even like fish, but something else.”

It is the idea of acknowledging that there is a problem in our community and we want to solve it, regardless of the size of our wallets.

Reclaiming and reviving culture and history

For others, Giving Circles play an essential role in reclaiming historic traditions of solidarity and self-help based on the idea that, culturally, many communities have deep and historic traditions of community-mindedness. In these communities, giving reflects the importance of connections and relationships, and the impulse to care for those around them. “Giving Circles really honoured the fact that black people have always been giving in the United States and reminded people that there is a heritage that people need to respect,” explained Darryl.

He further noted: “Giving Circles raised the visibility of an old tradition that allowed more people to be able to participate, versus one or two people seen as the holders of philanthropic funds. In 2003, we received a grant from the Ford Foundation and worked with young African American adults in the South to focus on how they engage and give back to their communities. For many of them, their intellectual and financial capital was undervalued but we organized them into Giving Circles to strategically invest their time, talent and treasures back into their communities.”



Brussels Donor Circle, Belgium

Building awareness and constituencies for local issues – and local civil society organizations

Giving Circles can provide an effective way to open up a community level dialogue around equity and trust – while also offering a practical route for direct action and engagement. Darryl commented: “When you look at issues of race, equity and class – when a Giving Circle is giving to some people that feel they are somehow ‘lesser’ than them, the real change comes when there is some rich interaction between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots.’” This is very important as there are otherwise few opportunities for this kind of engagement to happen. This interaction could work as an ingredient for real change beyond just putting money on the table, as Giving Circle participants are able to be part of a larger effort to effect social change, regardless of what they contribute. According to Ioana: “Organizations that receive small grants from Giving Circles have a constituency, as they have

I love Giving Circles because they keep me in a conversation and help me understand how people are thinking about their giving, about their voice and leadership in their community.

several individual donors supporting them. Imagine if you have 200 individual donors, it means that you have 200 ambassadors! However, when an organization has one big donor, it means they only have one person behind them.”

In-person connection

Giving Circles capitalize on the community-building appeal by providing opportunities for members to socialize, network, and learn together. One participant of this study simply said: “I love Giving Circles because they keep me in a conversation and help me understand how people are thinking about their giving, about their voice and leadership in their community.”

Food and drink often feature prominently at live Giving Circles – from potluck events to grand dinners or family barbecues. In many cases, local specialities and delicacies are served – another strong incentive for people to attend. Tatiana Burieva, Deputy Director for Development at the Arkhangelsk Centre of Social Technologies Garant in Russia, further explained how a glass of wine helps people to relax in each other’s company (and often, to give more): “We try to make the event very informal. We serve wine and provide entertainment to keep people engaged. It is very important to organize a very emotional and entertaining event because the culture of philanthropy and charity is relatively new in Russia.”



Arkhangelsk Centre of Social Technologies Garant, Russia

Who is the “donor” in Giving Circles?

In philanthropy generally, the term donor is often associated only with the very wealthy. However, consistently across this study, donors to Giving Circles were emphatically described as something else: everyday givers, grassroots givers, local people, ordinary people, local business people, family members and friends who contribute local resources to develop their communities. As a result of the fallacy that comes with the word “donor”, Darryl Lester of the Community Investment Network explained how African Americans often tended to downplay their giving: “They would often say, ‘I don’t have enough, I don’t think what I have can make a difference.’ Their minds were telling them that their giving is not good enough.” Similarly, Beulah Fredericks, Director of the Community Development Foundation Western Cape in South Africa, explained how ordinary people tend to be apologetic when they are giving: “When one is giving, they often say, ‘I am sorry, I only have this little.’ However, acknowledging the power of local giving is far more important than the actual amount.”

In the United States, Giving Circles date back to the 1990s when the practice was first re-adopted and institutionalized by a new generation of young leaders concerned about equity and justice. Linetta Gilbert, an early champion of, and advocate for, Giving Circles among African American communities in

the United States also agreed that people should not be preoccupied with titles and should instead regularize the idea that everyone is giving: “You don’t need to worry about what you call yourself, call yourself a sister, a

When one is giving, they often say, ‘I am sorry, I only have this little.’ However, acknowledging the power of local giving is far more important than the actual amount.



Community Development Foundation Western Cape, South Africa

brother or just somebody who cares. Don’t get sucked into the world of ‘big donor’ and ‘small donor.’ This idea of perception is critical in a Giving Circle: a grassroots giver can be sitting next to a big giver but they each have one vote and decide together. The final impact is the same and it is theirs equally.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the different levels of familiarity with the Giving Circle idea – and the extent to which local philanthropy is established in a particular context or not – practices vary as to who attends and what is asked of them.

Back in Hungary, Peter Temesvary of the Ferencváros Community Foundation explained the process of mobilizing donors for their Giving Circle:

“The agreement with the participating projects is that they invite half of the guests / donors and we invite the other half, relying on our respective networks. We have recurring guests, who come to the event every year (they are usually close friends of our foundation), but each year the new projects invite new guests. And, obviously, we are working hard on expanding our network and invite new people. Normally we have about

100 guests, that's about the maximum that the room at the hotel can take. Sometimes we have foreign-born guests, who are connected either to the district or the projects, and we provide translation for them. Luckily, we have two interpreter friends who provide the interpretation as volunteers. In our invitations, we emphasize the spirit of solidarity, diversity and acceptance, and the sharing of the joy of giving and improving people's lives. We try to convey the sense of a new kind of philanthropy."

Other Giving Circles have a fixed number of members (between, say, 20 and 40). They might agree that each member contributes US \$1 a day – which translates to US \$365 each by the end of the year – or else ask each donor to give a minimum of US \$5 at the event itself (the logic of that specific amount being that it equates to the cost of a cup of coffee). Whatever the specifics of the strategy, the overarching idea – across the different contexts – is to create an entire “ecosystem” of individual donors, each giving small amounts which, together, can contribute to a collective effort to advance social change. The level of giving across circles is highly variable when it comes to amounts and causes supported.

Peter revealed how their grants from Giving Circles are not only for fixed and already formalized organizations, but also informal



Ferencváros Community Foundation, Hungary

groups too: “We support Neighbourhood Associations or any informal groups of people who come together wanting to make a difference in their communities. We support several recurring themes that include addressing migration and disabled persons rights. These are groups which are at the fringes of the society and have difficulty getting funding from traditional sources, and especially government.” The Ferencváros Community Foundation has supported a shelter that organizes and helps migrants and foreigners with integration into the wider community. They have also supported a theatre company providing coaching to, and performing plays with, disabled actors.

In Palestine, the Dalia Association sets a target of US \$1,000 for their live giving event. Though they describe it as small they stress that it is sufficient to support local initiatives. Rasha Sansur, Dalia’s Communication and Resource Mobilization Officer, stated: “We ask for a minimum donation of about US \$5. We usually exceed our target, even raising US \$8,000.” One initiative supported by Dalia included a youth-led project aimed at educating communities throughout Palestine about astronomy by manufacturing telescopes.

Meanwhile, through the Brussels Donors Circle, diaspora Romanians living in Belgium who want to maintain a strong connection with their homeland are supporting activities that are changing systems and mentalities back home. They do not support purely “charitable” projects, preferring to focus on issues that might be harder to sell to local donors back home, such as promoting independence of the press, community organizing and minorities’ rights.

Democratizing philanthropy by doing and deciding differently

While Giving Circles come in many shapes and sizes, one key attribute is the focus on working horizontally and in participatory ways. This may involve members deciding on which organizations they want to support collectively, engaging each other in discussions and decision-making, as well as taking direct responsibility for grantmaking. Valaida Fullwood, author of *Giving Back*, a book profiling stories of philanthropy among African Americans said: “Most Giving Circles are structured in ways that break down those previous barriers and those toxic dynamics that exist when groups are not conscious of power (top-down perspectives or patriarchal colonial perspectives). Giving Circles defy many of those principles and offer a bright example of how mainstream philanthropic institutions can and should shift to build more trusting relationships and more mutually beneficial relationships with communities.”

In Palestine, meanwhile, the Dalia Association provides grants to grassroots organizations and individuals that are beyond the reach of most institutional funders. “In our context, for

any idea to get funding, it has to go through a formal application, which makes it difficult for some organizations to apply,” explained Rasha. “The process is highly competitive, and some organizations fail to present a good proposal. There is also the issue of hierarchy within the aid system, where priority is given to specific thematic areas while others do not get attention. However, through our auction fund, we allow for the submission of project ideas in video format. At first, applicants were asked to submit a written application but we noticed that not many people were able to express themselves in this way, and so we came up with the idea of having video submissions.” This is a strategy that allows “mere” ideas to flourish and enables good initiatives to receive funding without limitations.

In Russia, through the use of Giving Circles, the Arkhangelsk Centre of Social Technologies Garant provides an opportunity for individuals, civil society, local businesspeople and corporates to work collectively in addressing community issues and to learn about philanthropy and social change. “More



New Generation of African American Philanthropists, © Alvin C. Jacobs Jr., photo courtesy of Valaida Fullwood

people are now aware of the needs of socially disadvantaged groups and they are able to find different ways of supporting them through Giving Circles,” commented Tatiana Burieva. “Communities now know that their projects can be funded by local resources, not by foreign or state grants only.” This strategy emphasizes collaboration across groups and sectors, and is aimed at deliberately building trust and fostering relationships amongst different parts of the community who might not normally interact with each other.

In Brazil, Mariane Maier Nunes, Executive Director of ICOM – Instituto Comunitário Grande Florianópolis, explained how their “Community Fund for Social Justice” (“Fundo de Impacto para Justiça Social”) serves as an essential source of flexible funding from local givers who are familiar with the specific and urgent challenges facing a community. During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, well before external funders were able to offer support (or, in some cases, to permit use of their funds for emergency response), the 25 members of ICOM’s Community Fund, which includes both businesses and individuals, quickly agreed to redirect their giving for COVID-19 response. The support was rapidly disbursed, as ICOM already had the infrastructure for giving in place and didn’t need to wait for outside support. Through this process, at an organizational level, ICOM gained more experience in working with vulnerable groups and was able to extend its work to reach new municipalities and areas. “Community based organizations that benefited from this Giving Circle in 2020 also feel more prepared to respond to emergency crises and some of them are now promoting community development, going beyond their initial purpose,”

noted Mariane. “This also strengthened community philanthropy, as a record number of donors have started to support ICOM: 1,300 in 2020, a number which is 10 times higher than in 2019.”

The ability of local people to quickly respond to local challenges is best summed up by Linetta Gilbert: “Everyone needs to understand what I learned when I first got into the field of philanthropy, and that is that by the time some of these foundations notice what is needed in a particular community, the issues would have gotten worse or gone away.”

Local donors’ knowledge of their community – including fast-changing local dynamics and circumstances – is both a resource and an asset itself. For the Community Development Foundation Western Cape in South Africa, that has meant building in an element of flexibility and autonomy into the decisions they make, with the foundation playing a supportive rather than a constraining role. “We allow the groups to be flexible without putting any controls.

If you look at township communities – there is control by gangs, control by drug lords, control by political parties – there are many controlling mechanisms which sometimes take power away and dignity. So, we keep it loose and flexible,” explained Beulah Fredericks.

Everyone needs to understand what I learned when I first got into the field of philanthropy, and that is that by the time some of these foundations notice what is needed in a particular community, the issues would have gotten worse or gone away.

Giving Circles: Beyond money

A community – near and far

The idea of community – whether it is defined by place or a sense of “home” is a powerful one and Giving Circles also provide an opportunity to recreate that feeling for those further afield. This includes diaspora within a country or outside it. In South Africa, “diaspora” often describes people who have moved from townships to more affluent suburbs and who want to give back and support local projects where they originally came from. In Belgium, on the other hand, a group of Romanians living in Brussels has created their own Giving Circle – the Brussels Donors Circle – as a way to build diaspora philanthropy and work together as a community, while also staying connected to their home country 2,000 km away. Ioana Traistă helped set up the Giving Circle in 2017 with the aim of bringing together fellow

Romanians living in Brussels to support projects back home. “Knowing that I am far away from home but still actively contributing to solving problems in my home country is fulfilling,” she said. Before COVID-19 put an end to face-to-face meetings, project leaders from Romania often travelled all the way to Brussels from Romania to participate at Giving Circle events: in this way, communities that would never have met were connected. “It is amazing to feel that we are a community of Romanians living in Brussels who share the same values and want to go in the same direction,” said Ioana. “For the individuals here in Brussels they are always amazed by projects they hear about at the events. They are always saying ‘we didn’t know that there are organizations doing this kind of work back home.’”



Brussels Donor Circle, Belgium

Beyond fixed borders

In Palestine, the Dalia Association is redefining community beyond fixed borders through its Social Change Auction. With Palestinian communities in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem cut off from each other and travel between them a constant challenge, Rasha Sansur explained how Dalia had sought to break away from imposed borders by allowing projects from different communities to participate in the Social Change Auction via video conferencing. “This is a powerful way of reuniting Palestinians. The excitement that fills the room once people from Gaza or a different community go live on screen is incredible.” An initiative to screen movies within the Palestinian refugee camps in the central governorate of the Gaza Strip received support from the Social Change Auction in 2018. The project included showing cartoons to younger audiences that helped to raise awareness on topics such as human rights, while also promoting the concepts of Al Ouneh (indigenous Palestinian solidarity system) and community participation.



Dalia Association, Palestine

Building trust between civil society and citizens

In Russia, the Arkhangelsk Centre of Social Technologies Garant uses Giving Circles to build trust between the citizens and civil society organizations and to overcome the perception that NGOs are somehow “enemies.” “For us, it is a tool to attract the attention of local people and encourage them to work with NGOs,” explained Tatiana Burieva. Through encounters at events, Giving Circle members network with civil society which helps build trust and to forge long-term relationships. This also creates room for Giving Circle members to volunteer with local organizations. According to Tatiana: “One of the biggest hopes of civil society leaders as they engage with a Giving Circle is that, beyond receiving financial support, they may find the opportunity to engage the circle members as possible new individual donors, volunteers, and eventual leaders in their work.”

In Russia, the Arkhangelsk
Centre of Social Technologies
Garant uses Giving Circles to
build trust between the citizens
and civil society organizations
and to overcome the perception
that NGOs are somehow
“enemies.”



Arkhangelsk Centre of Social Technologies Garant, Russia

Restoring dignity

In the United States, Giving Circles among African American communities have been an important tool with which to reinstate a sense of dignity and ownership among historically marginalized communities. They have also served as a way to build a pipeline for political leadership and engagement, validating the idea that meaningful change in communities can be nurtured through Black giving. Members of one Giving Circle – the Birmingham Change Fund, in Alabama – picked education as their key issue, funding individual schools and even participating in the selection of a new superintendent. Some members went on to become activists or run for office, one becoming the chair of a school

board and another one became the Mayor of Birmingham. “The democracy that is coming forth means that voices that would not typically be heard are now being heard. Giving Circles are allowing for the engagement of individuals that would not traditionally fit the usual look of a leader in the city,” explained Terry Love, Chairperson of the Community Investment Network. Marsha Morgan, the Network’s former Chairperson, further emphasized the point about leadership, saying: “It is not always a grant that is needed but a conversation with community leaders to bring about the change. We understand that it takes more than dollars to dismantle issues in communities.”



New Generation of African American Philanthropists, photos courtesy of Valaida Fullwood

What is the role for institutional donors in supporting Giving Circles?

Giving Circles emphasize the importance of local and individual giving and of building from the bottom-up, but that does not mean that institutional donors do not have a supportive role to play. Helping to raise awareness of Giving Circles and their manifold benefits offer one starting point. Further along, matching funding and resources for capacity building can also play a valuable role. Another area in which donor funding can play an important role is in support for administrative costs. Some Giving Circles have low recurring expenses because their participants are volunteers who donate all work and materials. However, when Giving Circles are managed from within organizations – such as community foundations – and involve paid professional staff who invest time and effort in their coordination, costs are inevitably incurred. Furthermore, Giving Circles organizers are often highly sensitive to the fact that members want their donations to go directly to projects rather than to administrative overheads.

At a higher level, Giving Circles offer a way for donors to re-think and to invest in community engagement through a mechanism that is

deeply rooted in the local context. Rather than channelling funding to organizations that are not rooted in local communities, donors can provide incentives to Giving Circles that promote philanthropy at the grassroots level, and that are more aware of issues that are important to their specific communities. “It is really important for institutional donors to recognize the rise, growth and benefits of Giving Circles,” observed Valaida Fullwood, author of *Giving Back*. “Some humility is needed all around – particularly with institutional donors recognizing the depth of knowledge that exists within Giving Circles. Institutional donors that want to support Giving Circles can be overbearing, but what is important is for them to create spaces for circles to emerge.”

Ensuring that any external donor funding leverages and builds on the power of a Giving Circle – and that it certainly does not undermine its

**Giving Circles offer a way
for donors to re-think and
to invest in community
engagement through a
mechanism that is deeply
rooted in the local context.**



Brussels Donor Circle, Belgium

independence – was mentioned by several of those interviewed. In the United States, support to a Giving Circle in Birmingham, Alabama from the Ford Foundation was offered as a match to individual gifts. This incentivized members to keep giving and helped prompt the emergence of many other Giving Circles too. According to Marsha Morgan, who was formerly with the Community Investment Network: “If funders are willing to fund a Giving Circle, they should allow the Giving Circle to distribute the funds independently. Let members of the circle dictate who they are and how they will engage. Funders should not try to do a top-down approach but give power to the people who understand their root causes. Regarding the issue of measurement, a conversation has to happen so

that funders understand that, not everything fits in ‘boxes’ or ‘indicators.’”

Supporting the engagement and participation of young people in Giving Circles is key in promoting sustainable philanthropy and may also be an interesting aspect of the model that institutional donors can support. According to Linetta Gilbert, young people’s involvement provides them with the ability to make decisions that impact their lives, their communities, and society as a whole: “Giving Circles can help with developing life skills such as decision-making, collaboration and, more importantly, empowering youth as leaders in their communities.”

What works?

Top tips from the field

- ✓ Make it fun! Although there is an underlying seriousness, Giving Circles work best when they engage hearts and minds: provide entertainment and do not make the event overly formal.
- ✓ Get organizing online! While the in-person dimension of Giving Circles is important as a way to contribute to a sense of community and togetherness, it's not always possible, whether due to limited space, physical distance between members and, more recently, as a result of COVID-19 restrictions.
- ✓ Money should not be seen as the key focus of a Giving Circle.
- ✓ Communication is key! Share progress reports or impact stories to keep donors engaged and as strategy for motivating others to give. This also creates room for building trust and long-term relationships.
- ✓ Have a pre-campaign strategy to create more awareness about participating projects before the main event.
- ✓ Select projects that are dynamic, inspiring and easy to "sell."
- ✓ Celebrate wins! Celebrate success of the grant recipients, fundraising benchmarks, or any new milestones crossed.
- ✓ Think about timing. If you host more than one Giving Circle in a year, be sure to time them strategically.

Contributors

Tatiana Burieva

Deputy Director for Development, [Arkhangelsk Centre of Social Technologies Garant](#) (Russia)

Beulah Fredericks

Director, [Community Development Foundation Western Cape](#) (South Africa)

Valaida Fullwood

Author of “Giving Back” (United States)

Linetta Gilbert

Former Senior Programme Officer, [Ford Foundation](#) (United States)

Thao Lam

Chief Executive Officer, [LIN Center for Community Development](#) (Vietnam)

Darryl Lester

Founder, [Community Investment Network](#) (United States)

Terry Love

Chairperson, [Community Investment Network](#) (United States)

Marsha Morgan

Former Chairperson, [Community Investment Network](#) (United States)

Mariane Maier Nunes

Executive Director, [ICOM – Instituto Comunitário Grande Florianópolis](#) (Brazil)

Orsolya Polyacskó

Project Coordinator, [Ferencváros Community Foundation](#) (Hungary)

Rasha Sansur

Communications and Resource Mobilization Officer, [Dalia Association](#) (Palestine)

Peter Temesvary

Board Member, [Ferencváros Community Foundation](#) (Hungary)

Ioana Traistă

Co-Founder, [Brussels Donors Circle](#) (Belgium)

Sue-Ann Zerf

Former Project Coordinator, [Community Development Foundation Western Cape](#) (South Africa)

Giving Circles resources and further reading

"2,000 Kilometres from home, Romanian expats build giving community in Belgium." *Global Fund for Community Foundations*. 13 Dec. 2017. <<https://globalfundcommunityfoundations.org/news/2000-kilometres-from-home-romanian-expats-build-giving-community-in-belgium/>>

Barclay, A., Fullwood V. & Webb T. "The Sweetness of Circles." 2019. <www.blackbenefactors.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Sweetness-of-Circles.pdf>

"COVID-19 Resources for Giving Circles." *Philanthropy Together*. 2020. <<https://philanthropytogether.org/covid-19-resources-for-giving-circles/>>

Eikenberry, A. M. (2017). "Who Benefits From Giving Circles in the U.S. and the U.K.?" *The Foundation Review*, 9(3). <<https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1374>>

Eley-Carr, N. & Okai, N. "The Legacy of Black Giving." *Ford Foundation*. 21 Aug. 2020. <<https://www.fordfoundation.org/just-matters/just-matters/posts/the-legacy-of-black-giving/>>

Franklin, J. "Giving More by Giving Together." *Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy*. 15 Jan. 2018. <<https://johnsoncenter.org/blog/giving-more-by-giving-together/>>

Fullwood, V. *Giving Back*. John F. Blair Publishing, 2011.

"Giving Circle Toolkit." *Community Development Foundation Western Cape*. 2020.

Layton, M. "Giving Circles: A Way Forward for Democratizing Philanthropy." *Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy*. 20 Apr. 2021. <<https://johnsoncenter.org/blog/giving-circles-a-way-forward-for-democratizing-philanthropy/>>

Maier Nunes, M. "COVID-19 is a Social Justice Issue: How one Brazilian Community Foundation is Responding." *Global Fund for Community Foundations*. 29 Apr. 2020. <<https://globalfundcommunityfoundations.org/news/covid-19-is-a-social-justice-issue-how-one-brazilian-community-foundation-is-responding/>>

Reid, M. "This Little Known Fact About Black Giving Might Be Surprising." *Forbes*. 30 Oct. 2019. <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/maryannreid/2019/10/30/this-little-known-fact-about-black-giving-might-be-surprising/?sh=3784138c3335>>

Titova, V. "From Pies to a Giving Circle: Changing the Life of a Karelian Village in Russia." *Global Fund for Community Foundations*. 2 Oct. 2019. <<https://globalfundcommunityfoundations.org/news/from-pies-to-a-giving-circle-changing-the-life-of-a-karelian-village-in-russia/>>

"What is a Giving Circle?" *Candid*. <<https://learning.candid.org/resources/knowledge-base/giving-circles/>>



The GFCF works to strengthen, harness and demonstrate the value of community philanthropy as an essential element of community-led development and as a strategy for shifting power. Through small grants, technical support, peer exchange and evidence-based learning, the GFCF helps to strengthen community philanthropy institutions around the world, so that they can fulfill their potential as vehicles for locally-led development, and as part of the larger global infrastructure for progressive social change.

Published October 2021

About the author

Tarisai Jangara is a development communications specialist having worked as a journalist, editor and public relations officer. She holds a Masters in Communication for Development from the University of Zambia and a Bachelor of Arts in English and Communication from Midlands State University in Zimbabwe. From 2016–20 she was the Communications Specialist at the Zambian Governance Foundation. She currently works with the same title at the GFCF.

Global Fund for Community Foundations

Workshop 17 Firestation, 11th floor
16 Baker Street
Rosebank
Johannesburg 2196
South Africa

www.globalfundcf.org
info@globalfundcf.org

A company limited by guarantee. Registered in Northern Ireland No. NI073343

Registered charity number XT18816

Section 21 Company (South Africa):
2010/000806/08

Published by the Global Fund for Community Foundations. All rights reserved.