Environmental Justice Fund

BY ACTIVISTS • FOR ACTIVISTS

PARTICIPATORY GRANTEE SELECTION





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Introduction

Every year, the Environmental Justice Fund (EJF) receives proposals from a wide range of community-based organisations (CBOs) ranging from long-established groups with years of campaigning experience to newly formed collectives sending their first proposal to a funder, sometimes handwritten and often in their second language. Many funders would see the newer groups as too risky to fund and would find it difficult to assess them from a written proposal alone.

Since it started in 2022, EJF has supported this wide range of CBOs with both funding and accompaniment support. Throughout this experience, we have been deliberate in documenting and reflecting on our journey to improve the grant-making practice and share lessons we've learnt.

This report, which is the sixth publication in our Learning Series where we capture these reflections, looks at how we choose which organisations to fund and examines the value of **proximity** to the communities that we serve, as well as a **participatory approach**, in that decision-making.

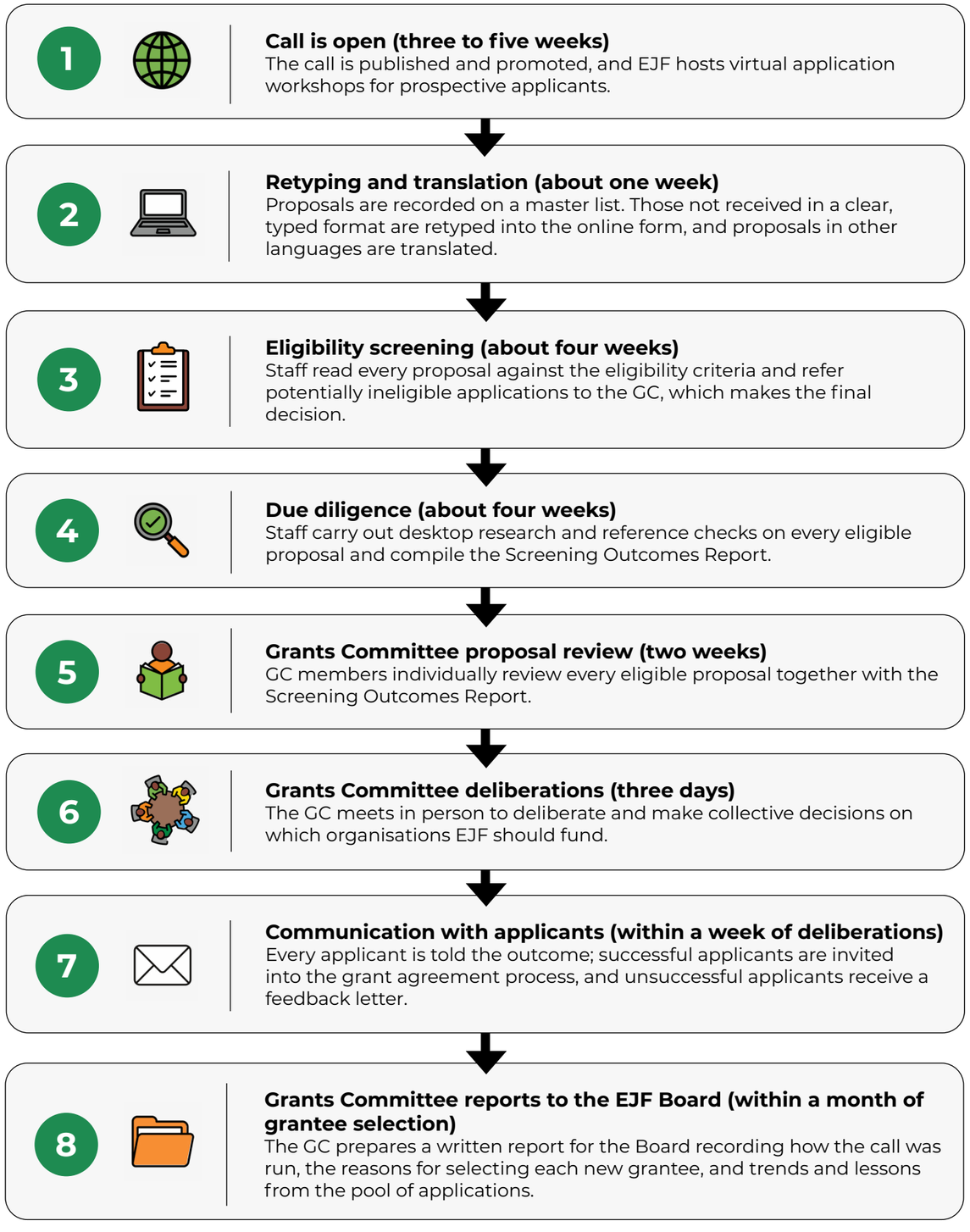
Drawing on five years of running funding calls, this report walks through the rigorous process of how we select the grantees, from designing a call for proposals to telling applicants the outcome, which includes due diligence conducted by a team of staff members and then actual decision-making by a participatory body called the Grants Committee (GC).

Section 2 gives an overview of the grantee selection process and the typical time each stage takes. Section 3 looks at how we design calls for proposals and application processes that are accessible and fair. Section 4 describes our screening and due diligence processes, including how the GC decides on eligibility. Section 5 explains how our participatory GC is constituted, governed and held accountable, and how it reaches its decisions. Section 6 draws together themes that run across the work of staff and the GC: proximity to the movement, conflicts of interest, human judgement and sustaining GC members. Section 7 considers how we communicate decisions and remain accountable to applicants. Section 8 reflects on what we have learned over five years of calls and draws these experiences together into lessons for philanthropies looking to explore or deepen participatory grantee selection. Section 9 concludes the report.

EJF's grant-making experience has shown that **accessible, accountable, community-centred grant-making is not just possible but impactful.** We hope this report offers other funders both encouragement and practical ideas that they can adapt to their own contexts.

The grantee selection process at a glance

Each call for proposals moves through the same stages. Typically, the entire process takes **about four months from start to finish**. The time each stage takes varies from call to call, depending on the number of proposals received, but the graphic on the page that follows gives a typical picture.



Designing the call for proposals

1. Open, thematic and strategically prioritised calls

EJF began its grant-making through open calls for proposals. As a new fund seeking to support CBOs across South Africa, EJF wanted to cast the net wide, reaching organisations beyond established funding networks. We also wanted to learn directly from communities about the environmental injustices they were facing and the work they needed support for. The open calls gave CBOs space to describe environmental justice in their own terms, grounded in their lived realities. They surfaced concerns and approaches that EJF may not otherwise have anticipated and provided a valuable picture of the environmental justice movement across South Africa, including where organisations were working, which issues were most pressing, the strategies they were using to intervene and the support they needed.

Open calls were also important for accessibility and credibility. They signalled openness to organisations regardless of whether they had an existing relationship with EJF or were connected to established environmental justice networks. For a new fund seeking to become a trusted ally within the movement, this was particularly important.

Our experience with open calls has also revealed some limitations. A very broad call can generate many proposals that sit at the edges of, or beyond, EJF's environmental justice mandate. Open calls can also result in some important environmental justice issues and geographical areas remaining underrepresented.

In our 2024 open call, EJF observed that water justice had not emerged strongly as the primary focus of many proposals. This was striking given the scale of South Africa's water crisis and the centrality of water to struggles over service delivery, pollution, mining, agriculture, food sovereignty and climate change, among others. Water was present in many applications, but often as a secondary or indirect component of proposals focused on other concerns. In response, EJF issued its first thematic call in 2025, focusing specifically on water justice. The purpose was to draw attention to this gap, encourage CBOs to articulate the water justice areas of their work, and build a stronger cohort working on water justice.

The call received almost 100 eligible applications, confirming that water justice organising was taking place across the country even though it had not always been foregrounded in previous applications. The proposals demonstrated the range and diversity of this work and produced rich, grounded knowledge about how communities understand and work towards water justice.

However, a thematic call also showed us its challenges. The GC had expected that assessing a smaller pool addressing a common theme would be easier than deliberating over the larger, more diverse pools generated by open calls. Instead, members found it difficult to distinguish between proposals because their framing and activities were often similar.

This reminded us that **the design and wording of a funding call shape the proposals received**. A thematic call can help applicants recognise and articulate aspects of their work that have been under-explored, and it can also narrow the range of ideas put forward or encourage organisations to frame their work according to what they believe the funder wants to hear. The examples and guidance in an application form can have a similar effect, unintentionally leading applicants towards activities or language. For example, our proposal form



has used workshops as an illustration when asking applicants to describe their activities, and workshops featured prominently in a large share of the proposals we received.

In 2026, EJF returned to an open call while prioritising two areas in which gaps had become visible: gender-responsive environmental justice work and applications from the Northern Cape, Free State and North West. These provinces had remained underrepresented in previous application rounds despite facing significant environmental justice challenges related to mining, industrial pollution, water scarcity, land, agriculture, rural livelihoods and large energy developments. Many affected communities in these provinces are geographically dispersed and distant from established environmental justice networks and funding channels. Their low visibility in the previous open calls indicated that EJF needed to reach more intentionally into these areas.

EJF also found that the gender intersections of environmental justice were often underdeveloped in proposals. As a feminist organisation, EJF aims to centre gender justice within an intersectional understanding of environmental justice and to support women-led and women-centred organisations. Naming gender-responsive work as a priority was intended to foreground these connections.

This approach had a tangible effect in two of the three priority provinces. The Free State's share of eligible applications rose **from 6% in 2024 and 7% in 2025 to 13% in 2026**, **while the Northern Cape increased from 3 – 4% in the previous two years to 7%. The proportion from the North West remained at 4%**. This suggests that naming geographic priorities can broaden the applicant pool, while this signalling alone cannot overcome all the barriers facing organisations in underrepresented areas.

Many proposals still framed the gender focus of their work mainly in terms of women's participation. This may indicate opportunities to deepen ecofeminist analysis, but it may also reflect the terminology and questions used in the call. Organisations may already be undertaking work grounded in women's experiences and leadership without describing it in these terms. This reinforced the insight that the wording of a call shapes what becomes visible in the proposals. **EJF's experience suggests that open, thematic and strategically prioritised calls each have value, and that moving adaptively between these approaches is an important way to remain responsive to changing phases and contexts.**

2. Designing for accessibility and fairness

An open call can invite applications from every corner of the country and still exclude many of the organisations it hopes to reach if applying has barriers like needing a reliable internet connection, a laptop, fluency in written English or formal registration. From the outset, EJF has therefore **treated the design of the application process as a question of justice**. The principles that guide our grantee selection include accessibility, diversity, fairness and integrity, transparency, and accountability to the environmental justice movement. These principles have guided every call since EJF began, and with each round we have learned more about how to put them into practice. Several of these principles shape the practical design choices described in this section.

In practice, this means removing as many barriers to entry as we can. Applicants do not need to be formally registered, and they do not need a bank account to apply.[1] Supporting documents are optional, since the form allows applicants to explain their work in as much detail as they wish. The call is written in plain language and sets out exactly who is eligible, what EJF funds, who makes the decisions and what the GC looks for in a proposal. It is accompanied by an infographic summarising the process, available in seven of South Africa's twelve official languages, and by EJF's Granting Framework, which contains the full decision-making criteria and is publicly available on our website in the same seven languages. Each call also lists a named staff member, an email address and a phone number that applicants can call or WhatsApp with questions while they prepare their proposals.

We also host a virtual application workshop for prospective applicants before each call closes. The workshop explains who EJF is and how decisions are made, works through the eligibility criteria, and offers practical "dos and don'ts" for proposal writing, such as telling the story, being specific about activities, making sure the budget matches the activities and objectives, and not over-promising. It also includes a "myth-busting" session addressing common misconceptions that can discourage organisations from applying, for example, that an organisation must be registered or that disclosing funding from other funders counts against an application.

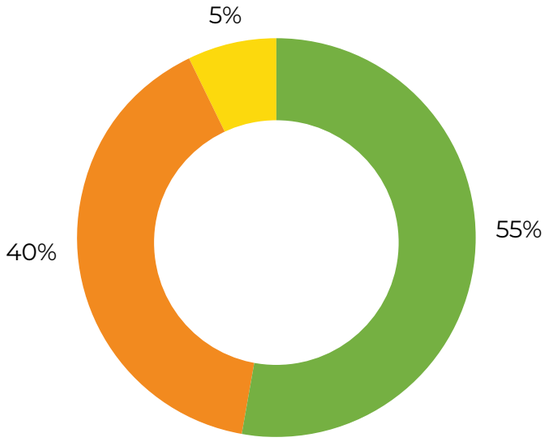
In terms of fairness, applicants should be confident that they will be considered on the substance of their work, and not on how polished their application looks, which format it arrived in, which language it is written in or whom they know. Applicants can apply online, by email or by sending photographs of a handwritten form on WhatsApp. This is why proposals that are not clearly typed are retyped into the same format before they reach the GC, why proposals are grouped into clusters so that organisations are compared with others doing similar work and why the criteria against which proposals are assessed are published in advance.

Application formats

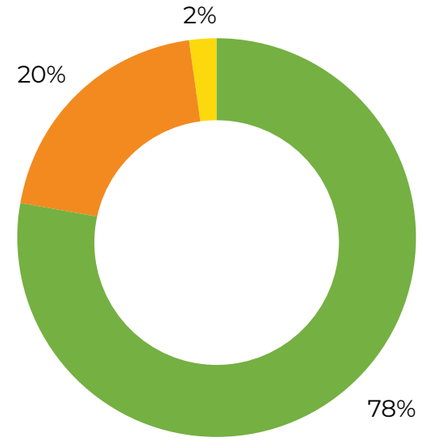
EJF accepts proposals in three ways. Applicants can complete the form online on our website, download the form and email it to us, or WhatsApp clear photographs of a completed (including handwritten) form. Across our first four calls (2022 to 2025), just over half of all proposals were submitted online (between 52% and 59% each year), around 40% by email and between 3% and 7% by WhatsApp. In 2026, online website submissions rose to 78%, with 20% by email and 2% by WhatsApp. The proportion of WhatsApp submissions has always been small, but this option matters. It means that an organisation doing vitally important work advancing environmental rights but without a computer, a printer or reliable data can still apply, using a phone and a pen.

Feedback gathered from our grantees has confirmed the value of this flexibility. Several organisations chose to download the form so that they could work on it offline, take time to discuss their answers as a collective and review the proposal thoroughly before submitting it. One organisation explained that it had chosen the downloadable form because of difficulties experienced with other funders' online systems. Another commented that the WhatsApp option "works in favour of the grassroots". Taken together, the responses suggest that multiple ways to apply level the playing field for under-resourced communities. At the same time, it can also present a fairness challenge – a proposal submitted through the website arrives neatly typed whereas a proposal submitted as photographs of handwritten pages, a scanned PDF or a document with unusual formatting can be more difficult to read. Without intervention, the format could subtly influence how a proposal is received. Unconscious bias might mean that reviewers reading many proposals in a short time could be more drawn to those that are easiest to read.

To guard against this, the staff team **retypes every proposal that is not received in a clear, typed format** into the standard EJF template on our website. Staff transcribe what the applicant has written without correcting, improving or summarising it, so that the GC reads the applicant's own words. Retyping is time-consuming, and it falls in the busiest weeks of the process, almost immediately after the call closes. But it is one of the simplest and most concrete ways we have found to ensure that no applicant is disadvantaged by the tools available to them.



Average proportion of application formats submitted in 2022 to 2025



Average proportion of application formats submitted in 2026

Online form Email WhatsApp

[1] *Where a selected organisation does not have its own bank account, EJF enters into a three-way agreement with the grantee and a fiscal agent—a registered organisation that agrees to receive the grant on the grantee's behalf. The fiscal agent holds the funds in trust for the grantee, releases them on the grantee's request in line with the grant agreement between the grantee and EJF, and keeps expenditure records to support the grantee's reporting. The grantee remains responsible for delivering its activities and for all financial and narrative reporting to EJF.*



Language and translation

The people leading CBOs speak many of South Africa's languages. For most applicants, English is a second or third language. EJF therefore invites applicants to submit proposals in any official South African language, and makes key materials, including the open call and the infographic summarising the application process, available in several languages. Proposals submitted in a language other than English are translated before screening, so that the screening team and the GC can read every proposal in full. Translation also continues beyond the selection process as grant agreements are also translated for grantees where necessary.

Despite this, the overwhelming majority of proposals continue to be written in English. In every call since 2023, at least 97% of proposals have been written in English, with the remainder in Afrikaans, isiZulu and isiXhosa. We do not think this means that applicants are comfortable writing in English. It is more likely to reflect a widespread assumption that funders expect and prefer English. Some applicants may also worry that a proposal in another language will be read less carefully or will lose meaning in translation.

This has taught us that **offering a choice of language is not the same as applicants feeling free to use it**. Publicly communicating that applicants may apply in any official language in the call is necessary, but it is not enough on its own. We need to encourage it more often, in workshops, in WhatsApp groups and through partners, and to reassure applicants that, whether a proposal arrives in English or is translated, the screening team and the GC read for the substance of what an organisation is doing, not how well they have described it.

Key takeaways from the call for proposals design

Selecting the call design approach: An open call casts the net wide and surfaces diverse issues, while a thematic call focuses attention on a specific gap, such as water justice. A strategically prioritised call keeps the theme open while naming priority issues or regions.

Drafting the call and application materials: Write in plain language, clearly explaining eligibility, what is funded and how decisions are made. Publish criteria in advance and include examples carefully so they guide applicants without being prescriptive.

Designing for accessibility: Remove barriers, such as unnecessary supporting documents. Provide multiple submission methods. Share guidance materials in several languages. Provide contact details for questions. Host a virtual application workshop.

Designing for fairness: Assess proposals on the substance of the work, not the presentation. Retype handwritten proposals into a standard form. Do not improve or summarise the applicant's words. Group proposals into comparable clusters.

Promoting language accessibility: Accept proposals in any official language and reassure applicants all are considered with equal care. Translate proposals into a common language before screening. Translate grant agreements where needed.

Learning and adapting: Review what the call design revealed. Note how wording shaped the proposals received. Identify whether priorities broadened the applicant pool. Use the lessons to refine the next call for proposals.

Screening and due diligence

Once a call closes, EJF's staff team begins an eligibility screening and due diligence process that usually takes two to three months. This process has two purposes: the first is to make sure that the GC, whose members read every eligible proposal in full, spends its time on proposals that fall within EJF's mandate, and the second is to give the GC information that it cannot get from the proposals alone. This includes whether an organisation exists and is active, how it is governed, how it is regarded by its peers and community, and anything else the GC should know before making decisions. Before screening begins, all proposals are recorded on a master list and, where needed, retyped or translated.

The proposals we receive are not written by professional proposal writers, so our due diligence looks beyond the proposal itself. We confirm what an applicant tells us against other sources: what we can find online, what people who know the organisation say about it, and what we already know through our involvement in the environmental justice movement.

Who does the screening

Screening and due diligence is carried out by the staff team rather than by a single person. Typically, the staff screening team consists of about five people. Every member of the screening team comes from the environmental justice movement or from closely related struggles. Between them, they bring experience and expertise on community organising, legal advocacy, mining-affected community networks, waste and water management, and environmental education, among others.



1. Eligibility screening of applicants

EJF has three eligibility criteria, which are published in our Granting Framework and in every call. These are that applicants must be:

- organisations or networks that are based in, and part of, the communities they serve;
- working on environmental justice; and
- based in South Africa.

The eligibility screening process

Eligibility screening moves through several stages outlined in the graphic below.

1 

Individual staff review: Each member of the screening team reads the applications allocated to them and records a motivated view of whether each application meets the eligibility criteria. Staff record their assessments independently before any group discussion, so that each person forms their own view first.

2 

Collective staff review: The staff team meets to discuss every application flagged as potentially ineligible by at least one person. Where views differ, the team talks the application through until it reaches a shared position.

3 

Referral to the Grants Committee: The team prepares a report listing each potentially ineligible application, the eligibility criterion implicated and the reasons and sends it to the GC with copies of the applications.

4 

Grants Committee review: The GC considers each referred application and may agree with the staff assessment, ask for more information or, where it disagrees with the staff outcome, return the application to the eligible pool.

In-depth consideration of eligibility

A key feature of this process is that **staff do not have the final say on eligibility**. In 2026 for example, the staff screening team referred 56 applications to the GC as potentially ineligible. The GC returned four of these applications to the eligible pool, and 132 proposals went forward to in-depth screening and deliberation.

How the Grants Committee decides eligibility

The GC meets to consider each referred potentially ineligible application. Where it requests further information, staff may need to investigate further through speaking to the organisation or to the references identified in the application. The GC makes the final decision, and the reasons for exclusions are recorded.

Some decisions are relatively straightforward. EJF does not fund private companies, schools, government entities or established NGOs, as its mandate is to support grassroots CBOs. Other cases require more careful consideration. An organisation may be newly established or constituted in a way that does not fit easily into conventional organisational categories. Similarly, while some proposals clearly fall outside of the scope of environmental justice, for others, the connection between proposed activities and environmental justice may be there but poorly articulated.

EJF takes a broad approach to environmental justice, while requiring a meaningful connection between the organisation's work and environmental justice. A school feeding programme or food garden focused only on meeting immediate food needs may fall outside the criteria. A community food-growing initiative grounded in food sovereignty, agroecology, environmental learning or contributing to broader mobilising for systems change may form part of an environmental justice response. The GC considers the purpose, framing and wider community context of the work rather than applying blanket exclusions to categories such as food gardens.

These nuanced interpretations of eligibility have been developed through careful engagement and discussion within the GC to help EJF apply its eligibility criteria consistently while remaining responsive to the realities of grassroots organising. They also allow the GC to test and refine its collective understanding of where the boundaries of EJF's mandate lie.

How collective review strengthens robustness and fairness

Disagreement happens at two levels in this process, and both are signs that the system is working. Within the screening team, staff members may reach different conclusions about the same application. One person might read a proposal as a clear environmental justice initiative while another sees no environmental justice framing at all. These differences are talked through in the eligibility discussion rather than settled by any one person. The GC, in turn, sometimes reaches a different view from the staff team. Having so many people look at each proposal means that every eligibility decision is carefully considered and can be clearly justified. This is an important way in which fairness is built into the system as applications are not excluded through either the operation of mechanical AI-driven systems, or the subjective views of a single individual. For a fund like EJF which is committed to both fairness and accessibility, this is key.

2. Digital footprint of community-based organisations

Once the pool of eligible applications is determined, the process then proceeds to the due diligence stage. The first aspect of EJF's due diligence process is a digital footprint scan in which every application is researched online. The staff team visits the CBO's website and social media accounts, if it has any, and conducts a wider internet search for news coverage, partner organisations' posts and other references to the organisation.

The desktop research helps us answer several questions:

- **Does the organisation exist, and is it active?**

  Recent posts, photographs of activities and mentions by other organisations help to show that an organisation is doing the work it describes.

- **Is its online presence consistent with its proposal?**

  Staff look at whether the issues and activities an organisation documents publicly match what it describes in its application. This gives us a sense of whether the history, experience and priorities it shows publicly match those described in its proposal, even if the organisation is only starting out in its environmental justice activism.

- **How is it connected to the wider environmental justice movement?**

  Social media often shows which networks, campaigns and coalitions an organisation takes part in. Belonging to a network is not a requirement, and organisations that work independently are given equal consideration in the deliberation process. Knowing an organisation's connections helps us identify people we can speak to as part of our due diligence and, if the organisation is selected, partners we could work alongside to support it.

Desktop research also includes checking EJF's own records to see whether an organisation has applied before and what was said about it then, whether it has received a Rapid Response Grant and whether it has submitted the reports required for that grant. Having applied before is never held against an organisation. We encourage unsuccessful applicants to apply again in later calls, and several of our grantees were selected after applying more than once. Rather, this kind of investigation can also help us guard against instances where a single individual submits multiple similar proposals under different organisational names.

The limitations of an online footprint

Although online presence is part of our due diligence process, we know that many of the organisations EJF supports have little or no online presence. An organisation of women farmers in a remote rural village, or a group of fisherwomen in a small coastal town, may be deeply rooted in its community and doing important work without ever having had a website or a social media page. In every call, a substantial number of eligible applicants have no online presence that we can find. Others have a Facebook page that is rarely updated or has been dormant for months.



The absence of an online footprint is therefore never treated as evidence that an organisation does not exist or is not credible. To do so would systematically favour urban, better-resourced and digitally connected organisations, which is the opposite of what EJF is trying to achieve. Where desktop research isn't fruitful, staff note that in the Screening Outcomes Report and rely more heavily on reference checks and on the knowledge of trusted contacts in EJF's networks.

3. Reference checks of eligible applicants

After the desktop research, the screening team phones the references listed in each application. The proposal form asks applicants for two references from outside their organisation, preferably people from other environmental justice organisations or networks. Staff use these calls to confirm that the organisation exists, to find out more about its work and history, and to understand how the organisation and its leaders are regarded by their peers and their community. Where it is useful, staff also contact members of the organisation's governance structure, such as its board, to understand how decisions are made.

Most reference calls confirm that applicants are credible organisations doing the work they describe. In the rare cases where something is not right, reference calls are also one of the most effective ways of identifying concerns. Over the years, reference calls have occasionally revealed, for example, that people listed as leaders of an organisation did not know that they had been named in the application, or that a reference's phone number was the same as the applicant's.

Challenges with reference checks

Reference checking with CBOs is not straightforward. In every granting cycle, staff are unable to reach the references for a number of applications. In some cases, phone numbers do not work or calls go unanswered. Some applicants provide no references at all, or list people within their own organisation. Others list government officials, such as municipal councillors or officials from government departments, who can be difficult to reach.

As with the online footprint, an unreachable reference is recorded honestly but is not treated as a reason for rejection, since many of the reasons a call fails reflect the conditions in which grassroots organisations work rather than anything about the organisation. Where the listed references are unreachable or unhelpful, staff may instead contact trusted people in EJF's networks who know the organisation or its area.



4. Compilation of the Screening Outcomes Report

The findings of the screening process are compiled into a comprehensive Screening Outcomes Report, often more than 100 pages long, which is sent to the GC together with the full set of eligible proposals.

Clustering

Before the Screening Outcomes Report is written, eligible proposals are thematically clustered. For example, in open calls in which applicants may submit proposals which address any environmental justice issue of concern in their community, proposals might be organised into clusters like energy, climate and air quality; agroecology; waste and recycling; water and the blue economy; biodiversity stewardship; and land and mining. **Clustering is a deliberate fairness measure**. It means that organisations are considered alongside others doing similar work, so that an organisation proposing a community recycling initiative is compared with other waste and recycling proposals, rather than with a water justice campaign or a land rights struggle. It also allows the GC to work through the proposals systematically, one cluster at a time.

What the report contains

For each eligible organisation, the Screening Outcomes Report sets out:

- the organisation's town and province, its year of establishment and its legal registration status;
- an overview of the organisation, its history and its objectives;
- its governance structure and how it makes decisions;
- a summary of the proposed activities, what they seek to achieve and the amount requested;
- feedback from the reference checks;
- feedback from the internet and social media search; and
- additional comments, where staff record further context, such as previous applications, Rapid Response Grants, networks and any concerns.

Staff are careful to distinguish between what they have verified, what they have been told and what they suspect, and to explain the basis for their observations. Potential red flags are recorded here, such as unclear governance, family members filling both board and staff positions, inconsistencies between an application and what references say, or signs that an organisation exists mainly on paper.

Under EJF's Screening Process Guideline, the internal guide that sets out how staff carry out and record screening, a red flag does not mean that an organisation should not be funded. Some of the organisations EJF is committed to supporting are young, informal and still building their systems. The purpose of the report is to make sure that the GC has the full picture.

Staff do not score, rank or recommend proposals. The report describes and contextualises, and the GC makes the final decisions.

Participatory decision-making

The GC is central to EJF's participatory grant-making model. Once applications have been processed and screened by the staff team, the GC meets to deliberate over which proposals EJF will support. Its members are drawn from the environmental justice movement and bring varied forms of activist experience, contextual knowledge (both in terms of thematic areas of work and in terms of regional contexts) and organisational expertise to the process. As of 2026, the GC also includes its first 'grantee alumnus' as a member, allowing for enhanced understanding of the perspectives of applicants and grantees. The GC works within a clear governance and accountability framework, while creating space for disagreement, deliberation and collective judgement. This enables funding decisions to be informed in nuanced ways by grounded understandings of community-based environmental justice work.

1. Why a participatory Grants Committee

Participatory grant-making seeks to shift decision-making power in philanthropy towards the people and communities most affected by and familiar with the issues a fund addresses. For EJF, this means that decisions about funding grassroots environmental justice work should not be made by people who are far removed from the contexts in which that work takes place. The GC is composed of people with direct experience of environmental justice activism and community organising, who bring knowledge of different places, issues, movements and organisational realities.

The GC is participatory because **activists play a substantive role** in assessing proposals, deliberating over difficult choices and deciding which organisations should receive support. Their involvement is not limited to being consulted or invited to comment on decisions made elsewhere. This model recognises lived experience, relationships and knowledge developed through activism as important forms of expertise.

This matters because proposals that are written by CBOs, possibly applying for funding of this kind for the first time, may not use language that is familiar to funders. GC members' knowledge of environmental justice struggles enables them to recognise the significance of an issue, understand the conditions in which an organisation is working, and read between the lines of an application. They may also know whether an organisation is rooted in its community, connected to wider movement networks, or responding to an emerging threat that is not yet widely understood.

2. Composition and selection of Grants Committee members

The composition of the GC is fundamental to the quality and credibility of EJF's participatory grant-making model. The GC's composition is governed by its Terms of Reference, which EJF reviews every two years. It may comprise between four and seven members and currently has seven. **More than half of its members must be community representatives** drawn from CBOs, community networks or other community structures. The remaining members are allied activists who may work in NGOs, public-interest law clinics, universities or other parts of the environmental justice sector in solidarity with communities.

The GC must be diverse in terms of race, gender and age, and as demographically representative as possible. It should also bring together knowledge from different parts of the environmental justice movement. The current GC holds experience in water justice, agroecology, climate justice and the Just Transition, mining-affected communities, biodiversity and indigenous knowledge, coasts and oceans, and the connections between air quality, pollution and health. Members bring knowledge of different provinces, urban and rural contexts, and varied organisational settings, including CBOs, NGOs, networks, Community Advice Offices and universities.

No individual member can have detailed knowledge of every place, issue or organisation represented in the applications. The collective composition enables members to contribute different forms of contextual knowledge, question one another's assumptions and recognise aspects of a proposal that others may have overlooked. It therefore directly affects the depth and quality of the GC's deliberations.

EJF's Executive Director serves as an ex officio member with the same voting rights as other members, but no other EJF staff member may sit on the GC. Apart from the Executive Director, GC members may not simultaneously serve on the EJF Board. This maintains a distinction between the GC, staff and Board while ensuring that the GC remains connected to EJF's organisational context.

When a vacancy on the GC arises, EJF issues an open call for applications through its website, social media platforms and networks. Applications are typically screened by the staff, after which candidates are shortlisted and selected by the GC. Selection considers the experience and perspective a candidate would bring and how these would complement the GC's existing composition.

Members serve two-year terms. A term may be extended with the unanimous consent of the GC and the approval of the Board, but no member may serve for more than six years in total. Turnover is staggered to retain institutional memory and provide stability while allowing new members to bring fresh





perspectives, relationships and areas of knowledge. The GC elects its own leadership. The Chairperson is elected from among the members for a rotating term, and a Deputy Chairperson may also be elected. The GC is chaired by a community-based activist rather than EJF's Executive Director. This separation helps distribute authority and reinforces that the GC's deliberations are led by activists themselves.

Attention to power dynamics has been explicit in the GC's design. Members understand that they are there because of the lived experience, activist knowledge and contextual understanding they bring. These forms of knowledge are openly recognised as central to sound decision-making, helping to ensure that community-based experience carries equal weight alongside legal, academic or NGO expertise.

3. Governance and accountability

The GC operates within a formal accountability framework. Its responsibilities and ways of working are governed by its Terms of Reference and EJF's Granting Framework, and the GC is accountable to the EJF Board. The Granting Framework is developed and revised by the Board in consultation with the GC and EJF staff. It contains the criteria against which applications must be evaluated, and these criteria are made publicly available in accessible ways, including through detailed guidelines for applicants. The Board therefore establishes the framework within which the GC exercises its decision-making authority, although the GC makes the final decisions about which applicants receive funding.

The Terms of Reference also provide mechanisms through which individual GC members are held accountable. Serious breaches may be referred to the Board, which may issue a warning, remove a member from a leadership position, suspend them pending further investigation or remove them from the GC. This includes the negligent or intentional failure to disclose a conflict of interest.

4. How the Grants Committee makes decisions

The GC makes decisions at two stages of the process. First, it decides on applications that the screening team has identified as potentially ineligible. It then deliberates on the full pool of eligible proposals and selects the organisations that EJF will support.

Selecting among the eligible proposals

At the outset of the grantee selection process, EJF's Executive Director (ex officio member of the GC) communicates to the GC how many new grantees EJF can realistically support in that funding round. This number is determined by the funding available and by the staff team's capacity to accompany and support an expanded group of grantees. The GC therefore deliberates within a clear limit.
Before the GC meets for its three days of deliberations, every member commits to reading all the eligible proposals. Members assess each proposal guided by the Granting Framework.

Completing these assessments individually before the deliberations allows each member to apply their own mind to the proposals first without being influenced by the views of the group. The collective process that follows then enables members to test their assessments against other perspectives, reconsider or confirm their reasoning and reach well-informed choices.

Holding the main deliberations in person over three days is also important. It gives members time to listen, explain their reasoning and revisit proposals, reducing the likelihood that decisions will be dominated by the quickest or loudest voices, or by those with the most reliable internet connection. These arrangements do not remove power dynamics entirely, but they create stronger conditions for equitable participation and collective decision-making.

At the start of the in-person deliberations, the GC reviews all declared conflicts of interest (more on this below). A member who has been recused from considering a particular application does not participate in evaluating it.

Members then share their individual assessments. At this stage, some proposals on which there is clear consensus are eliminated. The GC works through one thematic cluster at a time, discussing each of the proposals in detail. Here, reference to the Screening Outcomes Report prepared by the staff, as well as a full re-reading of the proposal in question, is carried out collectively.

With the target number of new grantees to be selected in mind, the GC identifies the strongest few proposals in each cluster. These form a 'long shortlist', often comprising approximately 15 to 20 applications. Guided by the Granting Framework, this shortlisting process considers criteria to assess individual proposals as well as criteria applied to the proposals collectively. On its own merits, each proposal is assessed according to how it advances environmental justice and may benefit the community; whether its activities, objectives and budget are clear and coherent; whether it addresses a pressing or under-recognised issue or offers a creative response; the organisation's democratic accountability; the leadership and participation of women and young people; and its relationships within the wider environmental justice movement. **No single criterion determines the outcome**, as the GC takes a holistic approach.

The GC then considers the shortlist collectively as a potential cohort. EJF seeks a thematic spread so that its funding supports organisations working across different dimensions of environmental justice rather than becoming concentrated in one field as this strengthens cross-sectoral peer learning. Geographic spread is also important because EJF aims to support organising across South Africa, including in remote areas that are often overlooked. The GC also seeks a balance between established and newer or more

isolated CBOs. Established organisations bring experience, structure and a track record that support effective implementation, while funding emerging or less well-connected organisations helps expand and diversify the movement. The GC also considers gender, the composition of EJF's existing grantee group and any strategic priorities identified for that round. This may mean that an excellent proposal is not selected because several similarly strong organisations already represent the same province or thematic area. Members discuss the shortlisted applicants at length and vote again for their strongest choices. This voting is carried out through an open process, so that choices are transparent and can be defended or justified through further deliberation. The process moves gradually from a long shortlist to a shorter shortlist and, finally, to the agreed group of new grantees. Conflict-of-interest restrictions remain in place during each voting and deliberation stage.

Where the GC is leaning towards supporting an organisation but has outstanding questions, it can ask staff to conduct a site visit before making a final decision. Site visits at this stage are kept to a minimum, partly because of the capacity of EJF's small team, and to avoid raising an organisation's expectations through a visit, only for it to be unsuccessful.

As the pool narrows, the decisions become more difficult. The GC is no longer choosing between clearly stronger and weaker proposals. It is deciding between several deserving organisations addressing significant environmental justice issues, while knowing that EJF cannot support all of them. At this stage, the GC is often tired and emotionally drained by the intensity of the deliberations, by having to make really difficult decisions, and by the inevitable disappointment when favoured proposals get outvoted. Finally, consensus is reached on the final list of successful applicants, who will become EJF's newest cohort of grantees. This final list of successful applicants, as well as thorough discussion of the reasons for selection, is recorded and shared with the Board in a GC Report. However, **the final decision on the selection of grantees sits with the GC**.



Key takeaways from participatory decision-making

Ensuring diverse and equitable representation: The GC brings together community representatives and allied activists with diverse backgrounds, expertise and geographical knowledge. Collective deliberation helps balance power dynamics.

Balancing participation with accountability: Clear governance structures, transparent selection criteria and conflict-of-interest procedures safeguard the integrity of funding decisions.

Prioritising collective deliberation and human judgement: Members look beyond polished proposals to consider community legitimacy, local context and potential impact. This nuanced judgement cannot be replaced by rigid scoring systems or automated assessments.

Recognising the labour of participation: Participatory decision-making requires significant time, emotional energy and responsibility, particularly when choosing between deserving organisations. Sustaining participation means valuing activist knowledge.

Strengthening learning, relationships and the movement: Serving on the GC creates opportunities for shared learning, professional recognition and stronger relationships across the environmental justice movement.

Shifting decision-making power: Participatory grant-making places decisions in the hands of people with direct experience of environmental justice struggles. The GC draws on community relationships and contextual knowledge to make informed decisions.

Proximity and conflicts of interest

Several features of EJF's grantee selection apply equally to the staff who screen applications and to the GC members who decide on them. This section brings these together: the value of proximity to the environmental justice movement, how conflicts of interest are managed at every stage, why human judgement matters and how the people involved are sustained.

1. Proximity and movement knowledge

The composition of the staff screening team is one of the most important features of EJF's screening process. Because staff are embedded in activist networks across different provinces and issues, they often bring context to a proposal that would be invisible to someone outside of activism or social justice. During screening discussions, a staff member might know that an applicant's leader had recently left another movement to start a new organisation, recognise that an "organisation" was in practice a branch of a larger network, or remember an organisation from a Rapid Response Grant application. Debate within the team is often lively, as different staff members bring different readings of the same application. These discussions frequently produce a more accurate and nuanced picture than any individual or artificial intelligence (AI) would reach alone.

The same principle shapes the GC, whose members bring their own movement knowledge and lived experience to decision-making. The GC's proximity to the movement introduces relationships and perspectives that may introduce some conflicts of interest, and therefore must be managed transparently, but it is also one of the model's central strengths. Through collective deliberation, members question one another's interpretations and take shared responsibility for difficult decisions. In this way, EJF's commitment to being "by activists, for activists" is expressed.

2. Managing conflicts of interest

Managing conflicts of interest is a particularly important part of EJF's accountability framework. The same networks that give staff valuable context and knowledge also create potential conflicts of interest. Before screening begins, every staff member involved completes a written conflict-of-interest declaration, listing any applicant organisation they belong to, serve on the board of, are listed as a reference for, share a network or coalition with, or otherwise have a close relationship with. Staff are encouraged to "over-declare" if in doubt. EJF's Executive Director then decides whether each declared relationship is serious enough to require the staff member to step back from screening that application. Conflicted staff are recorded in writing and recused from assessing the applications concerned.

GC members follow a parallel declaration and recusal process. GC members are selected because they are active in, and have substantial knowledge of, the environmental justice movement. It is therefore inevitable that they will know some (many) applicant organisations or their members. They may have worked alongside them in campaigns, coalitions, networks or learning processes, or encountered them through their own organisations.

These relationships are not automatically treated as disqualifying. They may provide valuable contextual knowledge about an organisation, its community and its work. However, EJF recognises that they can create actual or perceived conflicts of interest and must be handled transparently, for the protection of the GC member, for the legitimacy and credibility of EJF, and for fairness in the grantee selection process.

EJF uses a three-part conflict-declaration system:

- Applicants are required to declare any potential conflicts of interest involving GC members in their proposals.
- GC members must declare in writing any potential conflicts involving applicants before eligibility screening and selection deliberations begin.
- Where an organisation has applied previously, EJF staff check the declarations made in earlier years and add any relevant information to the conflict-declaration record considered by the GC.

In the actual deliberations, the first item on the agenda is always to discuss potential conflicts of interest. GC members can choose to voluntarily recuse themselves. Otherwise, they share with the GC the nature of their relationship with the applicant in question. They then leave the room, and the remainder of the GC discusses and decides whether this case warrants recusal of the GC member, or not. Potential conflicts are discussed collectively, with attention to the closeness and recency of the relationship and whether it could reasonably affect, or appear to affect, a member's ability to participate fairly in the decision. Some conflicts result in automatic recusal, including where a GC member is an employee, member or board member of an applicant organisation. Other relationships are considered case by case. Knowledge of an organisation or occasional participation in the same meetings does not necessarily create a conflict. The question is whether the relationship could compromise the member's independence or create a reasonable perception of bias. Where members voluntarily recuse themselves, or where the rest of the GC decides that recusal is necessary, the member does not participate in the relevant discussion or decision related to that application.



Conflict-of-interest declarations and the decisions taken in response are documented in the GC's reports. These reports include the reasons for the GC's funding decisions and are submitted to the EJF Board.

The approach recognises that **proximity and accountability need to be held together**. Attempting to eliminate every prior relationship would exclude many of the people whose knowledge makes participatory grant-making meaningful, particularly in an interconnected movement. Ignoring those relationships would undermine confidence in the fairness of the process. Transparent disclosure, collective assessment, appropriate recusal and clear documentation allow EJF to draw on movement knowledge while safeguarding the integrity of its decisions.

3. Why human judgement matters

Clear eligibility and selection criteria are essential to a fair grant-making process, but criteria cannot interpret and decide between proposals on their own.

To understand why human judgement matters, it is important to picture the organisations applying to EJF. Many are grassroots organisations working in townships, informal settlements or remote rural villages. They are often run largely by volunteers and may have no office, limited access to reliable internet and little or no dedicated fundraising capacity. An application may be written on a mobile phone, in a language that is not the applicant's first language, while the organisation is simultaneously responding to urgent environmental injustices in its community. For some, this is their first application to a funder.

This is very different from the context in which many philanthropic organisations usually receive proposals: from established organisations with full-time staff, reliable technology and access to professional proposal writers or consultants. The clarity and polish of an application therefore cannot be treated as a reliable measure of the importance of the work, the organisation's knowledge or its capacity to bring about change. An application may be unclear or unevenly written but come from an organisation with deep community legitimacy and a strong response to significant local challenges. GC members draw on their experience of grassroots organising to read beyond the quality of the writing and consider the organisation's history, context, community relationships and existing work. This helps EJF recognise strong environmental justice organising that may not be expressed in conventional funding language.

The GC's rigorous deliberation process can only take place through sustained conversation between committed people, in a room together. GC members revisit applications, explain and test their reasoning, contribute relevant contextual knowledge and challenge one another's interpretations. The combination of independent preparation, conflict-of-interest safeguards, repeated rounds of voting, and sustained collective deliberation enables the GC to narrow the pool systematically, without reducing the final decision to a rigid scoring or ranking process.

Personal experience and movement knowledge help members recognise connections that a more standardised process may miss. A proposed activity may appear modest when considered in isolation but hold strategic importance because of an emerging environmental threat, an under-supported region or constituency, or its potential to strengthen wider organising. Different members may see different strengths or risks in the same proposal. Deliberation creates space for these interpretations to be expressed, questioned and reconsidered.

This form of judgement cannot be replaced by a tick-box process, an automated ranking system or AI screening. AI systems are not neutral: they are shaped by the data on which they are trained, which often disproportionately reflects global North languages, institutional contexts and ways of communicating. Such systems may favour applications written in polished, professional or familiar funding language with all the right keywords. They cannot reliably assess community legitimacy, interpret what has been left unsaid, understand relationships within movements, or take ethical responsibility for a difficult decision.

Human judgement is not automatically fair or free from bias. The selection process is therefore made collective and accountable through diverse membership, declared conflicts of interest, sustained debate, and documented reasons for decisions.

4. Sustaining the Grants Committee

Participatory grant-making asks a great deal of GC members. Reading large numbers of proposals, collectively deliberating over them in depth, and making difficult choices between deserving organisations in contexts of profound injustice requires substantial time, care and emotional energy. This needs to be acknowledged and reciprocated, through taking steps to care for and sustain the GC members.

EJF did not initially pay GC members an honorarium. As the model developed, however, it became clear how much work the role required. EJF came to recognise that expecting this labour without payment was unfair and risked exploiting the commitment of activists whose time and knowledge are central to the process. EJF therefore changed its practice. GC members now receive a fixed honorarium in recognition of their service, with the amount determined and reviewed by the Board. EJF also covers reasonable travel and data costs associated with GC meetings and other gatherings. The introduction of honoraria was an important course correction and a reminder that participatory grant-making requires funders to value community-based knowledge materially, as well as in principle. Building a participatory model is an ongoing learning process, and being willing to acknowledge and change practices that reproduce inequity is part of that work.

The intensive deliberation meetings are also carefully hosted, with comfortable venues, shared meals and plenty of snacks. Space is created for members to reflect, connect and recover during the process, including through informal conversations, walks on the beach and time together outside the meeting room. At times, EJF has worked with social-process facilitators to help the GC debrief and work through the more difficult emotional and relational aspects of its role.

It is important that GC members participate in the joyful and meaningful parts of EJF's work. GC members are invited to grantee convenings and other shared spaces, where they can meet the organisations selected and experience what grows from the difficult work of deliberation. These opportunities sustain members' connection to EJF's wider purpose and allow them to share in the relationships, learning and movement-building made possible through the grants.



Remaining accountable

The relationship between EJF and an applicant does not end when the GC makes its decisions. Applicants invest considerable time, energy and hope in their proposals, often while dealing with urgent environmental injustices in their communities. Accountability in participatory grant-making runs in more than one direction. EJF staff account to the GC, and the GC accounts to the Board, but EJF also has a responsibility to the organisations that apply to it. How we communicate decisions, what we explain and what we keep confidential all shape whether EJF is trusted by the environmental justice movement it exists to serve.

1. Communicating outcomes to applicants

Every applicant receives a response from EJF, whether its application was late, ineligible, unsuccessful or successful. In our call for proposals and application workshop, as well as in our social media communication, we tell applicants when they can expect to hear from us. Once the GC concludes its deliberations, outcome letters are prepared for every applicant.

Many of the organisations applying to EJF have experienced funders who never respond, or who take months longer than promised. Feedback from our grantees has confirmed how much a reply on the date promised means to applicants. One grantee told us that EJF was "prompt on [its] word", for example by getting back to them when promised. **Small acts of reliability like this help to build trust** in the process**.**

Successful applicants are contacted and invited into the next stage of the process. EJF staff then visit each new grantee on a site visit to learn more about their context and community, discuss their support needs and sign a grant agreement, translated where necessary.

2. Feedback to unsuccessful applicants

Applicants who are not selected understandably want to know why. EJF's Granting Framework commits us to providing feedback where possible, while acknowledging that this depends on how many proposals we receive. While we would love to be able to provide personalised feedback on each application, because we typically receive hundreds of applications every round and have only a small team, this is just not possible. Instead, EJF sends every unsuccessful applicant a detailed collective feedback letter, usually around four pages long, which tries to give as much generalised feedback as we can in a single document.

This letter has itself been through a process of learning. Over successive calls, EJF has made its feedback more detailed and more practical, in response to what we learned about applicants' needs. The feedback reflects EJF's understanding of the application process as a learning process. Writing a proposal can strengthen an organisation's thinking about its own work, even when the proposal is unsuccessful. Our previous Learning Series Report on proposals found that four of the eleven successful applicants in 2024 were organisations that had refined and resubmitted unsuccessful applications from earlier rounds. The letter covers four areas:

- **Why so few proposals were selected**: The letter explains that this reflects EJF's limited resources and our commitment to accompanying grantees beyond funding, which is a resource-intensive exercise. It also emphasises that an unsuccessful application does not mean that a proposal was poor or that an organisation's work is unimportant.
- **Eligibility criteria:** The letter restates the eligibility criteria, and the reasons proposals are commonly found to be ineligible, such as being an established NGO or a private company, or the absence of a link between the proposed activities and environmental justice.
- **Collective considerations:** The letter explains that the GC considers the spread of grantees across provinces, themes and types of organisations. It includes a table showing where applications came from, so that applicants can see why a good proposal may lose out to a proposal from an underrepresented province, or why a newer organisation might be supported instead of a more established one.
- **Ways to improve:** The letter draws on the trends the GC observed across all the proposals in that particular year. For example, it might encourage applicants to show how women and gender-diverse people are differently affected by environmental challenges, rather than simply noting that half of the participants in their activities will be women; to use artificial intelligence, if at all, as a writing aid rather than a source of ideas; to be bold and innovative; or to make sure that activities, objectives and budget are clearly aligned.

3. Transparency, confidentiality and trust

Trust is perhaps the most valuable resource a participatory fund has. Applicants need to trust that the process is fair, references need to trust that what they share will be treated with discretion, and GC members need to trust that they will not be exposed to undue pressure. EJF's approach has been to be as transparent as possible about how decisions are made, while protecting the confidentiality of the people involved in making them.



What we make public

EJF publishes its **Granting Framework**, including the eligibility and decision-making criteria and its approach to managing conflicts of interest, in multiple languages. The **call for proposals** also explains who decides on applications. The **application workshop** walks applicants through the whole process. **Outcome letters** share statistics about the applications received, and EJF's **Learning Series Reports**, including this one, describe how the process works and what we have learned.

This transparency has a practical purpose as well as a principled one. When the criteria and the process are public, applicants can better understand why they were or were not selected, and anyone who knows a GC or staff member can see that this gives them no special advantage. Being able to point to clear, publicly available procedures also helps protect GC members from the pressures that come with being associated with a funder.

What we keep confidential

Some information is kept confidential. The contents of individual applications, the Screening Outcomes Report and the discussions during the GC's deliberations are not shared beyond the people involved in those processes. The Screening Outcomes Report contains candid observations from references, information about governance concerns and other red flags, and personal information about applicants and their leaders. References speak openly because they trust that their views will be treated with discretion, and applicants share personal information on the understanding that it will be used only to assess their applications. EJF also has legal obligations under South Africa's Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA).

The GC's deliberations are confidential so that members can speak frankly, engage robustly, disagree and change their minds, and so that individual members are not singled out for blame or pressure by disappointed applicants. Decisions are made collectively and are communicated by EJF as an organisation.

Holding both together

Transparency about the process and confidentiality about individuals are not in tension. Together, they make up EJF's approach to building trust. Trust is not built by any single decision. It is built over successive rounds, as applicants see that EJF does what it says it will do, responds when it says it will respond, explains its decisions honestly and treats everyone who applies equally.

Reflections and learning

1. Reflections on our grantee selection process

Looking back on five years of calls, we reflect below on what we have learned about selecting grantees. These reflections cover the process as a whole, from screening by staff through to deliberation and decision-making by the GC. They draw on staff experience of running the process and on a focused reflection amongst GC members about what they have valued, what they have found challenging and what they have learned. It is easy to think of grantee selection as a set of administrative and decision-making steps, but our experience shows that it is much more than that.

Proximity is an asset, as well as a responsibility and a source of pressure

Earlier sections of this report describe how the movement knowledge of staff and GC members strengthens grantee selection, and how the conflicts of interest it can create are managed. Our experience has also shown that proximity asks something of individuals: to separate what one knows about an organisation or its leaders from what one feels about them.

Proximity also brings pressure. Staff and GC members are often embedded in the movement, so people they have previously related to as peers can begin to treat them differently because of their association with EJF. GC members described receiving phone calls, being approached at gatherings and being treated with a new level of deference by people who had previously regarded them as equals. One newer member of the GC reflected on the unexpected attention he received after EJF published a social media post introducing him as a member of the GC. He was unsure whether this was genuine respect or an attempt to win his favour and felt uncomfortable with the assumption that he now had access to money. This points to the care that needs to be taken with the timing and tone of public communication about the people involved in grantee selection.

These pressures can extend into people's own organisations and networks. One GC member described how colleagues assumed that having a representative on the GC would make it easier for their own organisation to access EJF funding, and the pressure became uncomfortable enough that the member stepped back from an organisational leadership role. Staff, many of whom remain active in movement networks, face similar expectations from people who assume that knowing someone at EJF will help an application.

There is an important tension at play. Transparency about who is involved in screening and decision-making is essential to EJF's accountability and credibility, and it protects staff and GC members, who can refer applicants to clear and publicly available procedures for our grant-making. Yet greater visibility can also increase the pressure on individuals. This highlights the importance of communicating, at every appropriate opportunity and in accessible ways, how EJF's collective process works and why knowing a staff or GC member does not serve as an advantage.

Applicants seeking to build relationships with staff or GC members are not necessarily acting inappropriately. Community organisations are often encouraged to network, build relationships with funders and make themselves known to potential supporters, and for organisations struggling to sustain their work, securing funding is often a matter of survival. The aim is therefore not to discourage these interactions, but to establish and communicate clear boundaries that protect staff, GC members, applicants and the integrity of the process.

The weight of the work

Grantee selection is demanding at every stage. Screening hundreds of applications takes a small staff team two to three months, and EJF's other work does not stop during this time. GC members then face intense weeks before deliberations, reading large numbers of proposals while continuing to meet their other organisational and personal responsibilities. We are proud of the rigour of our process, but there is a real tension between the depth of review we aspire to and the capacity of the people who carry it out.

The work also carries an emotional weight. Staff spend weeks reading about the struggles communities face, speaking to activists on the phone and getting to know organisations through their applications, knowing that

only a small proportion of applicants can be funded. Similarly, for GC members, unsuccessful applications continue to weigh on their minds long after the decisions are made. These pressures do not necessarily diminish over time. However, longer-serving GC members reflected that they had become better able to manage them as they gained experience. They have developed greater confidence in explaining the collective nature of the decision-making process, maintaining appropriate boundaries and accepting that difficult decisions will continue to carry emotional weight. Becoming more experienced in the role involves learning how to carry the responsibility without being overwhelmed by it.

EJF's approach to recognising and responding to these pressures has also developed and strengthened over time. As the organisation has learned more about the demands placed on GC members, it has introduced honoraria, psychosocial and debriefing support, more detailed feedback to unsuccessful applicants to make the decision-making process more transparent, and opportunities for GC members to participate in grantee convenings and other meaningful parts of EJF's work. These measures do not remove the pressure, but they help ensure that individual members are not left to manage it alone.

EJF staff experience many of the same pressures, so support for the people involved in participatory grant-making needs to include staff as well as GC members.

These realities should be made explicit during the recruitment and induction of new GC and staff members. New members need practical guidance on conflicts of interest, confidentiality, boundaries and responding to approaches from applicants. They also need opportunities to learn from more experienced members and reassurance that discomfort and emotional strain are recognised parts of taking on a participatory grant-making role.

A space of learning, recognition and movement-building

Alongside these challenges, members spoke warmly about the extraordinary learning that comes from serving on the GC. Reading applications from across the country, engaging with the different issues and strategies they describe, and deliberating with people who bring different areas of expertise have considerably deepened members' understanding of South Africa's environmental justice movement.

This understanding extends beyond environmental justice issues and organisations to what community-based organisations need and the different ways in which they organise and respond to injustice. One member described how, within their own area of work, it can sometimes feel as though their organisation is alone in facing particular challenges. Reading proposals from across the country had opened their eyes to the enormous resilience and creativity of environmental justice activism.

This learning is deepened by the diversity of knowledge and experience within the GC. Members bring particular expertise in different environmental justice struggles, geographic contexts and forms of organising. Through deliberation, they share this knowledge, challenge one another's interpretations and develop a more nuanced collective understanding of the movement.

The learning also extends beyond the GC itself. Members described how their experience informs their wider work in community organisations, NGOs, activism and research. One member explained how the issues and needs encountered through the grant-making process had influenced the research topics they now encourage and supervise. Others reflected on how their experience had helped them identify opportunities for organisational development, accompaniment and learning within their own networks.

Members also reflected on the value of serving on the GC for their own professional development and recognition. Several appreciated being able to include their GC membership on their CVs, recognising that the role enhances their professional profiles and can create opportunities in their wider work and careers. This is a meaningful benefit of participation, particularly for community-based activists whose extensive knowledge, leadership and experience are not always formally recognised or valued within professional and philanthropic spaces.

The discussion also raised an important question about what happens to this knowledge and expertise when members complete their terms on the GC. Members suggested that EJF and the wider movement should find ways to continue drawing on this expertise, even after their terms on the GC come to an end.

This points to an important, and perhaps less anticipated, contribution of participatory grant-making. The GC is **a space of collective learning**, relationship-building and movement strengthening, generating knowledge and capacities that GC members carry into their wider work within the movement.

Rigorous due diligence is possible with informal organisations

A common assumption in philanthropy is that small, informal and unregistered organisations cannot be properly vetted, and that funding them is therefore too risky. **Our experience suggests otherwise**. Each proposal goes through several layers of review: individual staff reading, collective staff eligibility review, GC eligibility review, desktop research, checks of EJF's own records, reference and governance calls, individual GC member review and finally the GC's collective deliberations. Together, these steps have proved effective at verifying organisations and identifying concerns, without requiring the documents that many funders use as a proxy for credibility, such as registration certificates, audited financial statements or a track record of previous funding. The rigour comes from the number of checks, the knowledge of the people carrying them out and the fact that the process is collective and transparent.

Institutional memory is one of our strongest tools

Some of the most important findings of our screening processes have come from comparing applications with EJF's own records: previous applications, Rapid Response Grant files, reporting histories and mapping data. As EJF grows, this memory becomes more valuable, but also more difficult to hold in people's heads. This requires us to examine the tools and software that we use in order to strengthen future screening processes.

A chain of accountability

Looking at the process as a whole, we see it as a chain of accountability. At every stage, the people who carry out a piece of work give an account of it:

- staff and GC members each declare potential conflicts of interest in writing;
- staff refer all potentially ineligible applications, with reasons, to the GC, which makes the final eligibility decision;
- staff submit the Screening Outcomes Report to the GC, which can question it, ask for more information or request a site visit;
- the GC records its decisions and reasoning, including conflict-of-interest decisions, in a GC Report submitted to the EJF Board;
- EJF staff communicate the outcome to every applicant; and
- EJF publishes its criteria and its learning publicly.

No single person or body controls the process from beginning to end, and **no decision is made without being recorded**.

2. Encouragement for philanthropies looking to explore or deepen participatory practice

1. 
   Open calls are themselves a form of participation

2. 
   How calls and application templates are designed shapes the kinds of proposals received

3. 
   Different kinds of calls (i.e. open vs thematic) have different strategic value

4. 
   Accessible application systems are possible

5. 
   Rigorous due diligence is possible with CBOs, and a local fund's proximity to the movement is a real asset when combined with conflict-of-interest processes

6. 
   Collective deliberation strengthens decision-making

7. 
   Human judgement cannot be replaced by a tick-box process or AI screening, which tends to reflect global North languages and ways of communicating

8. 
   Transparency builds trust

9. 
   Participatory grant-making asks a lot of the people involved, and care must be taken to sustain them, for example through honoraria, psychosocial support, debriefing and opportunities to come together

10. 
    Participatory grant-making works

11. 
    Given the pressures involved, it is important to factor these realities into recruitment so that participatory structures are filled with strong leaders of integrity

12. 
    Administering an open call can take about four months in total and requires an extensive investment of time and expertise. Not all funders have the ability to do this, but they don't need to. **Funding is an ecosystem** and different types of funders can work together to make use of the funding infrastructure that already exists in proximity to the communities where the money is needed.

Conclusion

EJF began with the belief that decisions about funding grassroots environmental justice work should be made by people who are closest to that work. This report has traced what that belief requires in practice, from the wording of a call for proposals to the letter an unsuccessful applicant receives.

A few lessons stand out across every stage. Accessibility has to be designed deliberately: accepting proposals by WhatsApp, retyping handwritten applications and inviting proposals in any official language all help to ensure that applicants are considered on the substance of their work rather than on the tools available to them. Rigorous due diligence is possible without demanding documents that grassroots organisations do not have. Closeness to the movement is a form of expertise, as long as it is matched by transparent conflict-of-interest processes. And collective human judgement, exercised by people who understand and care about the consequences of their decisions, cannot be replaced by a rigid scoring system or by AI.

We have also tried to be honest about the costs. Administering an open call takes about four months and an extensive investment of time and expertise. Screening places heavy demands on a small staff team, and GC members carry real pressures within their own networks, as well as the emotional weight of turning down deserving organisations. Some of our most important lessons have come from changing course: introducing honoraria for GC members, moving from a single screener to a team-based screening process, and making our feedback to unsuccessful applicants more detailed and practical. Participatory grant-making is an ongoing process of experimentation, not a finished model.

EJF's experience shows that participatory grant-making works—it reaches organisations that might otherwise remain invisible to funders, it produces well-reasoned and accountable decisions, and it strengthens the movement it serves. **Proximity to CBOs and a participatory approach are not alternatives to rigour. They are part of what makes our due diligence process rigorous, and they allow us to identify strategically which organisations to support**.

We offer these reflections as part of our own ongoing learning journey and in the hope that other funders will find encouragement and ideas that might be applicable to their own funding practice.







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