

Rethinking Civic Science Funding to Better Support Community Engagement

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<https://doi.org/10.38126/JSPG230204>

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Keywords: civic science; community engagement; funding; grantmaking; philanthropy

Executive Summary: Civic science funders and grantmakers play a key role in supporting community engagement efforts. However, current funding policies are often misaligned with the realities of community engagement. Collaboration with community partners moves at the speed of trust, and trust requires time, relationship-building, and persistence. Yet, many civic science grants have short timelines, burdensome reporting requirements, and are focused on quantitative outcomes. To realize the goals of civic science, grantmakers need to shift their practices to provide more flexible and long-term funding. This means extending funding periods from one year to multiple years, creating open communication channels to streamline and reduce reporting requirements and frequency, and valuing relationship-building as an important outcome.

I. Introduction

Community engagement is essential for advancing civic science. Community engagement allows scientists and researchers to center a specific audience's needs through listening sessions, in-depth interviews, and partnerships that elevate community insights and expertise (Han et al. 2021; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) 2022.). It also allows researchers and scientists to center community assets — knowledge, resources, and life stories — to address community concerns (Penn State 2023; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) 2022; UNC Greensboro, n.d.). These actions help bridge existing gaps between science and society and redefine who is welcomed in the scientific enterprise, thus promoting civic science values.

Building relationships is at the core of community engagement (Lansing et al. 2023; Jayaraman 2023; University of Minnesota Extension 2022). Cultivating relationships is foundational for understanding the intended audience or partners, their context and realities, centering community

voices and insights, and ensuring equity (Jayaraman 2023). But building relationships with partners, especially as an outsider — i.e., someone who doesn't belong to the community or share identities with them — is not a straightforward process. Collaboration with community partners moves at the speed of trust, and trust requires time, relationship-building, and persistence (Fleming, Abril, and Bradach 2023; Jayaraman 2023; Lansing et al. 2023; University of Minnesota Extension 2022).

When engaging with communities, civic science researchers and practitioners must acknowledge communities' histories, experiences, and the harms inflicted by science and those who represent it. For example, the birth control trials in Puerto Rico and the Tuskegee Syphilis Study are just two of the countless instances when scientists have actively caused harm to Latine and Black communities that were already marginalized and vulnerable (Brownlee 2020; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). Racism, sexism, colonialism, ableism, delayed responses to natural disasters, and barriers to accessible education, to name a few,

also erode trust in institutions, science, and researchers. As civic science researchers and practitioners build partnerships with different communities, we must recognize that we sometimes work within a context of harm, mistrust, and abuse. Such recognition is a challenging but essential undertaking that should be at the core of our civic science work and not an afterthought.

Funders play an essential role in supporting and facilitating community-engaged work. Both private and public funders have recognized the value of community-facing work and have increasingly directed their funding towards community engagement efforts (Civic Science Fellows 2023; NIH National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute 2020). Yet, many grantmaking policies in both the private and public sectors continue to be misaligned with the realities of community engagement. (Fleming, Abril, and Bradach 2023; Jayaraman 2023). They have short timelines, burdensome reporting requirements, and unrealistic evaluation expectations (Jayaraman 2023; Reid C and Salehi S 2022).

Funding opportunities tend to focus on deliverables and outputs, not accounting for the time needed to gain community buy-in, co-create projects, and iterate on community insights (Jayaraman 2023; Trust-Based Philanthropy Project, n.d.). This means that a project that ideally requires 3 years of funding (and time) for relationship building, project development, and implementation is expected to be completed within 18 months. This type of misalignment between funders' timelines, requirements, and expectations and the needs of communities limits the success of projects and hinders learning opportunities and continued collaborations with partners. Beyond providing money for projects, funders and grantmakers must adjust current funding policies to properly support community engagement. Adopting financial support models that center the realities of community engagement is crucial for advancing civic science.

In this opinion piece, we reflect on our experiences working in Ciencia Puerto Rico's community-engaged project, Aquí Nos Cuidamos, and how the initiative benefitted from flexible

funding policies that were attuned to community and local circumstances. We offer recommendations for grantmakers and funders to support civic science in ways that center the needs and priorities of communities.

II. Longer funding timelines effectively support community engagement

Limited funding and timelines are a major barrier to building trust and cultivating relationships, which are central to effective community engagement (Christopher et al. 2008; Lansing et al. 2023). Providing additional funding would both allow for time and the necessary resources to engage community partners in a more selfless way (Christopher et al. 2008).

Some funders have begun to implement changes to their grantmaking policies to allow grantees enough time, money, and flexibility to center community perspectives and be responsive to community priorities and realities. For example, Chicago Beyond, a philanthropy that describes its work as being "healing-centered" (Chicago Public Schools 2021), has transitioned to providing longer funding terms. They argue that financial support over multiple years allows space to build trust, sustain and cultivate relationships, and ensure that participants feel fully seen and heard (Jayaraman 2023). Such long-term funding models enable researchers and practitioners to engage with actors with different areas of expertise, which can promote inclusion and representation to bridge gaps between science and society.

Another example of a group adopting long-term funding is the Trust-Based Philanthropy Project. This coalition of funders advocates for equity and humility while centering the value and quality of the relationships with their grantees (Trust-Based Philanthropy Project). Their approach includes multi-year, unrestricted funding to not only ensure the stability of grantees but also encourage more strategic investments, innovation, and risk-taking (Trust-Based Philanthropy Project). Adopting flexible, extended funding policies helps grantees promote deeper connections with communities and establish meaningful relationships to support their needs.

Chicago Beyond and the Trust-Based Philanthropy Project offer models for civic science funders to adapt their funding policies to provide grantees the time and space to center trust and relationship building.

i. Case study: Aquí Nos Cuidamos, A community-centered multimedia and engagement project

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the nonprofit Ciencia Puerto Rico (CienciaPR) created Aquí Nos Cuidamos (ANC; translates to “here, we take care of each other”), a community-centered project to promote COVID-19 prevention, vaccination, and mental health among marginalized communities in Puerto Rico through culturally relevant multimedia education and public engagement (Aquí Nos Cuidamos 2023).

One of our intended audiences was the Deaf community. Based on previous multimedia work done by members of the project team, we planned to caption educational videos for accessibility purposes. However, by engaging with sign language interpreters early during the project’s design phase, we learned that to make content truly accessible, captions would be insufficient, and instead, interpreters would be necessary. This required significant adjustments in our budget (because sign language interpreters are more costly than captions) and changes to our workflow and project timeline (having interpreters required additional levels of coordination that we had not anticipated). However, making these shifts was key to the project’s success and allowed us to build a strong foundation for equity, inclusion, and long-term collaborations beyond the scope of ANC. As of January 2024, ANC has created 5 public service campaigns that include more than 200 multimedia pieces, such as videos in Spanish and sign language, audio, images, and guides. Between February 2021 and December 2023, ANC’s website, aquinoscuidamos.org, had over 87,000 unique visitors. Through community engagement activities, such as an ambassadors program for community leaders, ANC has supported local efforts such as educational events and vaccination clinics, among others. We estimate that the project has reached over 250,000 people in Puerto Rico alone.

CienciaPR’s experience with Aquí Nos Cuidamos exemplifies how following the lead of community partners is critical for the success of civic science. For ANC, this meant abandoning rigid project timelines and ambitious deliverables in favor of slower and more responsive work. Such adjustments were supported with some flexibility to reallocate funds. Having additional time to complete the project allowed ANC to better align our strategies to the needs and priorities of our partners. As mentioned above, being able to adjust our budget and workflow to include sign language interpreters was essential to properly serve our Deaf partners. Extended and flexible funding practices were key to the project’s success. For example, being granted a no-cost extension allowed our team to complete ANC’s fourth campaign, “Salud mental es plenitud” (Mental health is plenitude), created in response to communities’ input and concerns. Additional time and funding flexibility allowed us to collaborate with associations of mental health professionals to ensure content was accurate, sensible, and culturally responsive. To date, mental health content is the most popular on ANC’s website. “Salud mental es plenitud” became the first campaign where we created videos exclusively in sign language for the Deaf community.

III. Policy recommendations

To advance civic science, particularly community engagement, we recommend that funders and grantmakers adopt flexible and longer funding timeframes. This means extending funding periods from a single year to multiple years and valuing relationship-building as an important outcome of the projects they support instead of only focusing on quantifiable deliverables (e.g., number of participants or people reached).

We recognize that grantmakers face barriers to making these shifts, like funding limitations, bureaucracy, lack of direct contact with communities, etc. However, we believe these changes in funding policies are essential to advance civic science better. We encourage civic science funders to adopt longer-term investment strategies that center communities and prioritize relationship-building instead of focusing mostly on

immediate deliverables or outputs. Grantmakers can start by:

- collaborating with existing grantees to hear more about their experiences and what policy changes would better support community-engaged work,
- hiring staff experienced in community work or consulting with community engagement experts through the grant-making and evaluation process, and
- allocating part of their funding portfolios to test longer-term funding models.

Shifting towards more flexible, extended funding will allow for honest, respectful collaborations rooted in trust (Fleming, Abril, and Bradach 2023; Jayaraman 2023). This will, in turn, enable civic science researchers and practitioners to prioritize community insights. It will also allow for time to cultivate long-standing relationships that incorporate the lived experiences of audiences and partners, which can generate community buy-in.

IV. Conclusion

Community engagement does not follow a fixed formula or timeline. It varies significantly based on

the community, their context and realities, the goals of the engagement, and who the civic science researchers and practitioners are, among other factors. But underlying all community-based work is trust. Civic science funders must acknowledge that generating trust is neither straightforward nor fast (Lansing et al. 2023; University of Minnesota Extension 2022). It demands consistent commitment and engagement and requires persistence and iteration.

Funders must translate their stated support for community engagement into concrete changes to their grantmaking policies. For funders to adequately support civic science endeavors that center community voices, existing funding mechanisms must be reevaluated, and project timelines must be extended. Recent efforts by funders such as Chicago Beyond and the Trust-Based Philanthropy Project are promising models for other funders to emulate. By making this transition, funders can continue to support civic science and promote a better future where science is no longer disconnected from community needs but is rather an essential component of society and community work.

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