



## Community Philanthropy as Practice: A Case Study of Thousand Currents

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The authors propose Community Philanthropy (CP) as an alternative to the imbalanced power dynamics of traditional models of philanthropy. Instead, recommending prioritising community interests and needs by amplifying community voices, building relationships of solidarity and trust and working to encourage public foundations to move towards using long-term unrestricted/flexible funding.

What can we learn from the foundation Thousand Currents about the practice of CP, as well as their experience of scaling this approach and advocating for and teaching peers in the sector?

This article is useful as it not only grasps the fundamentals of philanthropy's context and gives a clear, manageable description of CP, but also shows how this can be walked out for public foundations and grant making organisations. It does so by unpacking examples from strategic leadership issues to daily operational habits of staff. It even goes beyond the model of CP and shows what we can learn from Thousand Currents as a beacon of progressive thought leadership.

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### Background

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### Context



- CP is based in some **fundamental criticisms of traditional philanthropy**: That it is **undemocratic, top down and rife with power imbalance**. That it is a system that does not question its own existence (How did we come to exist? And what does this show us about our society?). Nor is it keen to learn from its own practices by hearing the voices of those that it is supposedly serving.
- One of the concepts that is shared from Thousand Currents is their focus on “**Movement Ecosystems**” - not just viewing what is happening to an organisation they fund in isolation. Instead, it acknowledges the **complex map of all types of other organisations impacting a grassroots partner, as well as the ever-evolving context that the organisation is in**.
- The concept of CP is **founded on values of trust, solidarity, self-determination** (meaning a community can choose and decide what they need). While CP is gaining attention and is often viewed positively, there is **limited practical guidance on putting CP to work**. At its root, **it is grounded on a “funder as learner” model**. One example of what this might look like is long-term flexible funding and offering non-monetary forms of support, such as links to other funders.
- Thousand currents serves as a **real-life case study of a Social Justice funder, looking to intentionally give up some power to empower those they are designed to serve**, understanding that this can lead to more authentic and lasting impacts on those communities.

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## Take aways & Learnings



- This study was done by **reviewing documents that showed the work of staff and board members**, as well as conducting **ten interviews with a mixture of stakeholders**: staff, board, grassroots partners (those we would traditionally call beneficiaries) and funders of the foundation's work.
- Confronting power looks like **adopting a “funder as learner” approach**. Thousand Currents encourage peer learning through their academy **to teach others about practices based in trust and solidarity centred philanthropy**. Advocating for this and teaching others may even go beyond the regular model of CP.
- Building trust and accountability starts **by building strong relationships between funder and grassroots partner**. This requires **listening and learning** actively and intentionally, as well as genuinely **acting on partner feedback** and keeping up this track record, both for integrity's sake and as a tool for building ongoing trust.
- Self-determination and solidarity are fostered through **long-term, flexible funding and by actively responding to evolving contexts**. This can only be done by implementing the other areas, as there is **trust and honesty underpinning daily interactions as well as larger strategic decisions**.
- Additional to its commitment to CP, Thousand Currents works to make sure **their values are aligned with those they work with**. They also seek to **hire a diverse staff and board members**. Ultimately CP is an ideal but TC displays and models the practical living out of this practice exceptionally.

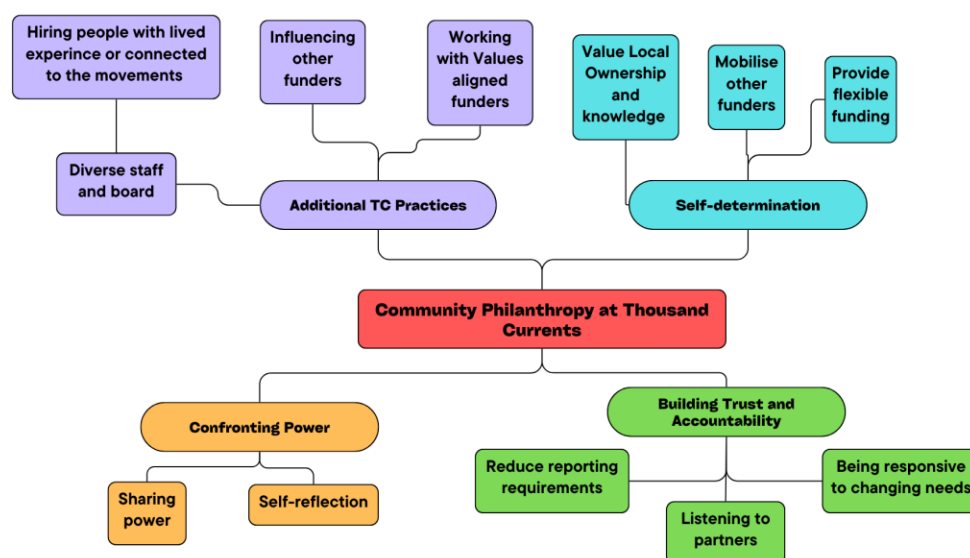


Figure: The Community Philanthropy Approach at Thousand Currents

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