Making and measuring change in the food system:
The perspectives of funders

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Abstract
Given the centrality of philanthropic funding to
the work of nonprofit food access and food
justice organizations, it is surprising how little we
know about how foundations conceptualize and
assess their grant-making across the food system.
Based on an analysis of interviews with program
officers at foundations that support food system
interventions in New England, this paper
describes foundations' initial (and evolving)
motivations for grant-making, the outcomes that
they expect from investments, and the kinds of
information that they see as convincing evidence
for such outcomes. At the same time, it explores
how program officers' experiences of responding
to the COVID-19 pandemic and to
contemporaneous calls to redress systemic racism
have shaped their practices. This paper points to
opportunities for new relationships between
community-based organizations and foundations,
especially as program officers experiment with
practices of trust-based philanthropy. It also
highlights, however, the challenges posed by
philanthropic board members' assumptions about
quantifiable program outcomes and concerns
about supporting overtly "political" work.

Keywords
food access, food justice, philanthropy, program
evaluation, trust

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Introduction

Given the centrality of philanthropic funding to the work of food access and food justice organizations, it is surprising how little we know about how foundations conceptualize and assess their grant-making across the food system. Studies of the nonprofit sector, in general, have found that while foundation funding supports the provision of essential health and social services, it also acts through a variety of mechanisms to impede meaningful social change (Francis, 2019; Gilmore, 2007/2017; Kohl-Arenas, 2016; Munshi & Willse, 2007/2017). In order to better understand the consequences of private philanthropy for the challenges and possibilities of transforming the food system, this study examines the perspectives and practices of program officers at foundations that support food system interventions in New England.

The few studies that have considered the role of program officers at foundations describe them as "skillful brokers, constantly negotiating flows of capital between grassroots organizing concerns and the philanthropic exigencies of different historical eras" (Kohl-Arenas, 2017, p. 679). Especially at more progressive foundations, program officers may have experience working in grassroots organizations and seek to "actively represent grantees and serve as important potential allies to social movement organizations" (Ostrander et al., 2005, p. 280). Even as they intend to serve as allies, however, program officers are tasked with translating "the experiences and concerns of poor and marginalized communities of color into the dominant narratives popular in philanthropic boardrooms" (Kohl-Arenas, 2017, p. 679). It is through this process of speaking "at once to the needs within the poor communities they visit and the institutions in which they work" that program officers create "an open channel of capital to community struggles" which nonetheless leaves intact "the highly unequal profit-making structures of neoliberal capitalism" (Kohl-Arenas, 2017, p. 679; see also Kohl-Arenas, 2016).

The process of "getting money out the door to poor and marginalized communities" requires that program officers must "convince foundation leadership to trust" (Kohl-Arenas, 2017, p. 679) grantee organizations. Since the 1970s, quantitative audit practices—including performance measurement, benchmarks, metrics, rankings, ratings, etc.—have been a principle means of generating "trust" in nonprofit organizations, that is, by providing evidence they responsibly use resources to achieve programmatic goals (Ebrahim, 2005). Following the adoption of neoliberal, "new public management" strategies in the 1990s, funders have leveraged outcome evaluation, in particular, "not only as a way to improve cost efficiency and government planning but also *as a way to demonstrate accountability to external actors*" (Barman, 2016, pp. 44-45, emphasis added).

Especially in small nonprofit organizations, for which "resource dependence and accountability to donors are tightly coupled," outcome evaluation tends to focus on "upward accountability"—that is, accountability to donors, foundations, and governments—at the expense of accountability to the communities that the organization serves (Kohl-Arenas, 2016; Perez & Sisters in Action for Power, 2007/2017) or to the organization itself (e.g., its staff and mission) (Ebrahim 2005, pp. 58-60). A robust literature describes how centering donors' priorities in outcome evaluation can "shape people's ideas of what the task before them is" (Krause, 2014, p. 76), often with deleterious consequences (Power et al., 2002). For example, outcome evaluation tends to lead to "a valuation of short-term goals over long-term purposes" (Muller, 2018, p. 20), as short-term and tangible products are more "easily measurable and quantifiable" as compared to "more ambiguous and less tangible change in social and political processes" (Ebrahim, 2005, p. 64).

Studies of varied components of the food system—including food banks (Fisher, 2017), farmers markets (Mino et al., 2018), and food policy councils (Webb et al., 1998)—suggest that insofar as the "high levels of reporting and accountability" required by funders require significant investments of staff time and resources, they may limit organizational "'bandwidth' to attempt projects of a more preventative nature … such as policy advocacy" (Fisher, 2017, p. 67). Research on quantitative outcome evaluation in urban agriculture, in particular, finds that it has created a "rhetoric of effects" that prioritizes individual behavior change (Cairns,

2018, pp. 517–519) and acts as a "constraint on urban agriculture activists who are focused on advancing social justice" (Reynolds & Cohen, 2016, p. 107).

Recent efforts to center racial equity in philanthropy also have highlighted the barriers created by practices of upward accountability. For example, in 2021, a prominent report on racial equities in philanthropic funding identified evaluation as one of "four key barriers to capital facing leaders of color" (Dorsey et al., 2021, p. 12). The authors advised that funders should be willing to learn from community-based organizations, especially those led by people of color, as "funders often lack understanding of culturally relevant approaches, leading them to over rely on specific forms of evaluation and strategies with which they are familiar" (Dorsey et al., 2021, p. 12). The report further recommended that funders "actively build knowledge of, connection to, and *mutual trust* with communities most impacted by the social change issues you seek to address" (Dorsey et al., 2021, p. 18, emphasis added).

Relatedly, trust-based philanthropy has emerged as a strategy for acknowledging and addressing how "philanthropy, like other public and private institutions, needs to reckon with its own power and the imbalances it creates with the very people it strives to serve" (McGrath & Wong, 2020, para. 1). Trust-based philanthropy aims to reimagine "the funder-grantee relationship by addressing the inherent power imbalance between foundations and grantees" (Voss, 2021, 5:01). The core values of trust-based philanthropy include leading with trust, centering relationships, collaborating with humility and curiosity, redistributing power, and working for systemic equity (McGrath & Wong, 2020). As a set of practices, trust-based philanthropy asks funders to make multiyear unrestricted grants; take the initiative in getting to know organizations; simplify and streamline paperwork (e.g., replacing reports with dialogue and learning); encourage and model open, honest, and transparent communication; solicit and act on feedback; and offer holistic support to grantees (i.e., beyond writing a check) (Trust-Based Philanthropy Project, n.d.). Across these practices, trust-based philanthropy emphasizes that funders must take respon-

sibility for the work of learning from, understanding, and supporting grantees—and the communities they represent—rather than enforcing grantee "accountability."

There is limited information about how food system funders view such calls for transformations in their relationships with grantees. A recent study of funders who invest in local food, sustainable agriculture, and food access suggests that they value "local knowledge" and "look to grantees or practitioners to gather ideas and evidence" in making decisions about their grant-making (Hoey et al., 2023, pp. 24-25). In addition, a majority of the funders who participated in this study reported that they no longer require formal program evaluations; among the minority requiring evaluations, there was a strong preference for "qualitative data (e.g., case studies, interviews, focus groups, storytelling, etc.) to measure community impacts, as opposed to quantitative data" (Hoey et al., 2023, p. 25). While these intriguing findings suggest that food system funders are open to alternative evaluation strategies, the focus of the study—that is, how funders use research published in academic journals to make funding decisions—meant that broader questions about the relationships between foundations and grantees remain unanswered. This analysis begins to address such questions, from the perspective of program officers at foundations that fund food system interventions in New England.

Data and Methods

This study emerged from an earlier research project with urban agriculture (UA) organizations in Massachusetts which had identified their shared interests in (1) creating common metrics, both to make evaluation less time-consuming (e.g., if each of their funders did not require a different set of measures) and to enable identification of the collective impacts of their work; (2) developing interim indicators for progress toward their long-term goals, which include food justice, racial equity, community health, and environmental sustainability; (3) using qualitative data to lift up the stories and perspectives of their communities; and (4) establishing more collaborative relationships with philanthropic funders that would honor the expertise of UA practitioners and of community mem-

bers, making clear that they are the "agents of the work" and not "objects of the work" (Shostak, 2022, p. 961; see also Fink Shapiro et al., 2021, and Hoey et al., 2017). Together, these findings raised questions about whether, or to what extent, the foundations supporting these organizations would be open to such changes.

Consequently, this study was designed to explore the following broad questions:

1. How do program officers at foundations that fund food access and food justice organizations think about making and measuring change in the food system?
2. In what ways, if any, are program officers open to considering new kinds of relationships with the organizations and communities supported by their grant-making?

To answer these questions, in the fall of 2021, I interviewed individuals who work at philanthropies that fund food system interventions in New England.[1] Because the original motivation for this research came from prior work with UA organizations, the sample of participants was constructed first, by inviting funders of the UA organizations that had participated in the previous study (Shostak, 2022). Via snowball sampling, the sample grew to include program officers at philanthropies with portfolios that include not only UA but also community gardens, food pantries, food hubs, land trusts, preservation of historic agricultural buildings and rural farmland, advocacy for farmworkers, and coalition work to support regional food system development. Indeed, the norm among the foundations in this sample is to support multiple food system initiatives. In the year before the interviews were conducted (i.e., based on data from 2020 annual reports), 85% of the foundations in the sample (12 of 14) had made grants to more than

one kind of food system intervention, while two primarily supported UA organizations. In addition to their investments in the food system, the foundations represented in this study make grants in the areas of civic engagement, education, the environment, healthcare access, and social services.

Of the 18 individuals invited to participate in an interview, 14 accepted, for a response rate of 78%. The 11 women and 3 men interviewed work at 14 different private philanthropies, including family, regional, and corporate foundations, all of which make grants to nonprofit organizations. The sample includes individuals with the titles of program officer, program associate, executive director, director of grants initiatives, director of community partnerships, and philanthropic advisor; many respondents had worked at more than one philanthropy, and some currently serve as advisors and consultants to networks of philanthropic funders.[2] To maintain confidentiality while making visible the range of voices in this report, each interview is referred to by a number.[3]

Due to restrictions on in-person research during the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted via Zoom. Interviews ranged in length from 37 to 98 minutes with an average of 61 minutes. Each interview included open-ended questions about how the philanthropy began funding food system interventions; whether (and if so, how) its food-focused funding initiatives have changed over time; how the philanthropy assesses the outcomes of its grant-making; whether and/or how they had made any recent changes in their practices, including in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and/or to calls to center racial equity and justice in their work; and openness to alternative relationships between funders and nonprofit organizations. The interviews also included questions tailored to the specific grant-making foci and programs of each funder, often

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[1] The Brandeis University IRB reviewed the protocol for this research and determined it to be exempt (#21173R-E).

[2] In the interest of preserving confidentiality, I refer to all study participants as "program officers" in the analysis. Given this decision, I should note that one person whom I interviewed explicitly criticized this title (and, also the title "grant officer") as an expression of the power dynamics embedded in philanthropic relationships, saying that the "title in and of itself has such a power, such a role of power" [10].

[3] Although only 18 program officers were invited to participate in the study, the numbers assigned to interviews range from 1-20. This is because at two foundations, there were two potential respondents; when one accepted the invitation to participate in an interview, I did not invite the second.

based on materials available on their website (e.g., annual reports, program descriptions, application forms, etc.).

All of the interviews were de-identified, professionally transcribed, and then entered into Atlas.ti, a software program that supports analysis of qualitative data. The code book for the study was created via two parallel processes. First, codes were assigned to each question in the interview guide; coding each response to a question ensured that all answers were accounted for in the analysis, as well as providing a clear structure for comparison. Second, codes were created inductively, according to the principles of constructivist grounded theory; this "open coding" provided a means of identifying emergent patterns and themes in the data (Charmaz, 2006). Together, these iterative coding strategies provided a powerful means of delineating the perspectives and lived experiences of those interviewed, as well as generating initial insights as to "how things have been organized so that speakers have the experiences that they speak about as they do" (Kim & Campbell, 2013, p. 187). This analytic approach is appropriate to a small, exploratory study that aims neither to test a hypothesis nor to make broad generalizations, but to learn about people's perspectives and experiences, as they understand them, and provide a basis for further inquiry.

Results

As described below, the foundations represented in this study vary in their histories and motivations for engaging in food system work. Nonetheless, there was wide agreement among program officers in regard to the strengths and weaknesses of current practices of program evaluation and the importance of developing new approaches to meet the ongoing and emerging challenges faced by food access and food justice organizations and their communities.

Why Fund Food System Interventions?

Philanthropies in the Northeast fund food system interventions toward a variety of ends. Broadly, the goals identified by the program officers interviewed in this study include preventing hunger, reducing the prevalence of childhood obesity, addressing environmental challenges and advancing environmental justice, and preserving agricultural land and/or buildings.

Several foundations entered "the food space" with the goal of preventing hunger. Their goals include immediate hunger relief [06] and "more systematic" approaches, such as urban agriculture: "there's a whole lot of food pantries and programs in the region which do amazing work on an emergency level. There's also a whole lot of funders that fund that. So we thought … how can we look at the problem a little more systemically?" [14].

Similarly, foundations with the end goal of reducing the prevalence of childhood obesity see funding food system interventions as "a real way of making a difference" [07]. About 25% of the program officers interviewed identified obesity prevention as a primary motivation of their grant-making in regard to the food system. Some noted that after years of grant-making focused on individual behavior change—especially related to "physical education and food"—they had shifted their focus to urban agriculture and other community-level interventions; in part, this was because they realized that "kids don't always have jurisdiction over how they get their food," and in part, because they had come to realize that it was important "to make sure that families and communities were at the center of this work" [07].

A different group of funders became engaged with food system interventions as an extension of their grant-making to address environmental issues. For some, becoming involved in the food system emerged from a broad focus on sustainability [14] and environmental preservation [05, 09]. However, several clearly identified their food systems initiatives as an expression of their commitment to advancing environmental justice. Often, this began with "a toxics portfolio" and an awareness of racial inequities in exposure to environmental hazards, but then expanded as program officers learned from "the work at that time being spearheaded by people of color [that] was happening more at a local level" [20]. As one program officer described, "funding environmental justice" raised awareness about "how it was very difficult to be healthy" in neighborhoods that not only have "significant problems environmentally" but also "in the sense

that the access, literally access to food was threatened" [11]. Another described how "just by being there and doing the work, we started … realizing that it wasn't just about growing food and teaching kids how to cook" but, more fundamentally, about "social justice and system change" [01].

Lastly, a few philanthropies became engaged with the food system insofar as it is linked to their primary focus on preserving historic agricultural buildings and/or farmland. One program officer recounted that "what we realized was to save family farms, you needed to protect the land. The buildings are no good without the land" [18]. Another described this in terms of a growing awareness of "the difference between conserving land and conserving the way of life on the land," noting that "you can have beautiful pastures, but if the dairy industry is tanking, then you haven't really preserved agriculture. You may have preserved some open fields … but it's not a working landscape…" [12]. To support "working farmers" and preserve "smaller scale, family size" agriculture, these philanthropies became involved with sustaining "regional food systems" [18].

It was striking that so few program officers mentioned "food justice" as a motivation for their grant-making, given that this is how many of the organizations that they fund understand their missions (Shostak, 2022). That said, program officers are clearly open to innovative approaches to assessing the consequences of their grant-making, which could create space for lifting up organizations' commitments to racial justice, health equity, and other dimensions of transformative social change.

How to Measure the Consequences of Grant-making?

Like their grantees, program officers are very aware of the strengths and limitations of quantitative metrics, express interest in qualitative and mixed methods approaches to understanding the outcomes of grant-making, and recognize the challenges involved in assessing long-term structural change, including in regard to health equity and racial justice. They also share with grantees an interest in measures of collective impact and in strategies to reduce the burdens of reporting.

Program officers report relying on data from quantitative program evaluation even as they are cognizant of the challenges of "measuring the right things" and not only the things that are easy to measure [11]. Quantitative measures offer a "shorthand for reach and impact," described one program officer; for example, it can be useful to know "quantitatively about how much land young people are connected to [and] how many young people are engaged" [01]. Another program officer noted the utility of quantitative measures for "showing progress towards … targets" that are identified by the organization(s) as priorities. Related, a program officer commented that "it's always really nice when grantees are able to have some quantitative results," especially when they "match" the objectives set forward in a grant [05]. As such, "quantitative metrics" are seen as one way of demonstrating "the efficacy of their work" [09], even if the numbers themselves may not "have a lot of meaning" [05].

Recognizing that the numbers alone may not tell the full story of the work, program officers report great interest in both qualitative data and mixed-methods approaches to evaluation. As one program officer commented,

> [I] understand the limitations of quantitative data. It does not tell the full story. These organizations can say they served three households, but to understand how those people felt and what it meant to them and how it helped them and what it might have changed for them is sometimes more important. [06]

She was one of several participants who stated that they valued receiving a combination of qualitative and quantitative data as a means of understanding different aspects of progress in the overall work.

For several program officers, qualitative data seemed especially useful insofar as it offered insights into not only outcomes but processes, including how small, local organizations "are doing ultimately big work. They're transforming the food environments in the communities that they're serving. And that's a story in every single location, in terms of how they do it" [07]. For example, storytelling provides organizations with a way to explain

not only program outcomes but how they were accomplished: "a lot of it comes in the form of storytelling about experiences over the course of the grant or new relationships formed, connections made, projects that have come from that and stuff like that" [09]. In a related manner, storytelling can help program officers better understand "the evolution of the project":

> Yes, what went well, how did you succeed, obviously we want some numbers around people served and that kind of stuff. But really for me, it's most helpful to understand what did you learn, what went wrong, how did you pivot? So, we can look at our funding—was this actually something that makes sense to fund again? And if it is, how can we frame it differently or how can we help the next person actually do it better, or avoid some of the challenges that come up? [13]

Importantly, this focus on process includes projects that may have not met their stated goals:

> I still feel like it's good practice if you say your goals, your plans are to accomplish a certain number of things. …When you come back, in the report, it's fine to say you didn't do those things, but just tell me why, because that's going to help me understand the challenges, the opportunities, the issues that you face, the barriers in your community, or how the context for the work has changed [05].

Stories also appeared to offer more insights into the "models" being used by organizations that might be replicable and/or scalable [06, 20]. Program officers also emphasized the importance of learning from the organizations about their "process of discovery" about how to transform the food system: "That, to me ... [is success]. If you're learning more about the system that you're trying to change and you're understanding better where the intervention points are or what leverage you do have, then you're succeeding" [12].

Irrespective of preferences regarding different kinds of data, there was broad recognition that the long-term outcomes and impacts of grant-making are difficult to assess in the timelines dictated by program evaluation. "Health outcomes" were mentioned repeatedly as among the most challenging to measure, as this program officer noted: "By trying to just infuse those communities with more food, we were hoping that better health would be an outcome. But we were never able to be able to evaluate that. That's just way beyond …" [07]. Another program officer recounted a conversation with a grantee that had proposed "changes in blood pressure" as an outcome; she encouraged the grantee to "take that out" of the proposal, since it would be extremely difficult for the organization to measure blood pressure: "We want people to be successful, we also want to figure out how they can measure the work they're doing in a real way" [13].

"Social change" and "social justice" were also identified, by multiple respondents, as "what's missing" in program evaluation [07, 09, 10]. Some program officers articulated this challenge in terms of a gap in understanding the relationship between food systems and broader structures shaping equity and justice: "we're a little behind in terms of our understanding around how food and how a lot of other systems impact social justice and racial justice and what that means for equity and change long term from a systemic standpoint" [06]. For other program officers, the challenge is in making clear the long arc of empowering young people to become agents of social change in their communities, a process that may result in specific policy outcomes but also goes beyond them [11]. Because "we can't ask someone to measure something five years out when the grant's over …" [13], such long-term and sustained impacts of grant-making, and their implications in terms of justice and equity, are often not documented.

Among the program officers interviewed, there was significant enthusiasm for the possibility of measures of collective impact—that is, for developing evaluation strategies that would focus not individual programs or organizations, but their combined effects. They see a collective assessment approach as more attuned to how change actually happens [12]. Some program officers proposed focusing on systemic change within regions: "a regional approach to me assessing what a level of success is or a level of kind of systemic change

would be amazing" [06]. Others suggested a multiscalar approach that would include "the local to the state, to the regional, to the national" [10]. Still others suggested that policy changes, which often happen via coalition work, offer a clear focus for collective impact assessment [12, 13].

There was also broad interest in strategies for reducing the burdens of evaluation and reporting. Program officers offered a wide variety of strategies they had implemented, mostly during the COVID pandemic, to "reduce the burden on grantees," including "make the reports shorter and the applications easier and rely more on phone calls" [05]. In addition, several recounted meeting with grantees to encourage them to simplify their evaluation plans, to set more realistic or easy to measure outcomes [13], and/or to leverage data that they are already collecting [01]. Consistent with the practices of trust-based philanthropy [05, 10], respondents mentioned that they were moving toward having regular "conversations" in place of "exhaustive reports" as a way of sharing the responsibility for understanding the outcomes of grant-making:

> It's not good for them to have to stop doing what it is they do, feeding people or protecting land, so that they can fill out a report for us. It's a lot easier for them to get on a call with us or have a lunch together outside on a picnic table. And they can just tell us what's going on and I can take notes. … I would say … for accountability, the burden shouldn't have to be on the grantee. It can be split. [18]

As one program officer commented, their goal is that "there's hardly anything ever in a report that I don't already know, because I've been talking to them" [12].

Meeting this Moment in History
Across interviews, it was clear that the recent changes that program officers had made—both to meet the urgent challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and to respond to calls for racial equity and justice—had created a context in which they were actively experimenting with new practices, including those aligned with trust-based philanthropy.

Therefore, before turning to their visions for new relationships between foundations and grantees, I briefly describe their accounts of how their organizations were engaging this moment in history.

COVID-19
The individuals who participated in this study reported a wide variety of ways that funders sought to support grantees in the context of the profound challenges created by the pandemic. To begin, multiple program officers reported "giving more" [01] to support responses to COVID: "We granted above and beyond our normal payout during COVID to help with what we thought was a critical need" [18]. This increased support varied, both in overall amount and in the proportion of grant-making portfolios, but most program officers described what they saw as very significant increases, especially in regard to funding to address the "real emergency" of rising rates of food insecurity [06]:

> When we talked to our partners … what they said was, "We have all these new folks who all of a sudden can't feed their families, and we can't use volunteers, and we can't take donated food." … There were … all these brand new barriers, plus an influx of new folks. So, we put a lot of money into that, because it felt like it was such an immediate need. [13]

These grants included investments in "organizations that seemed like key infrastructure and that were in turn providing services that were pandemic response" [09].

Several of the changes made in response to the challenges of the pandemic align with the practices of trust-based philanthropy. For example, several program officers noted the importance of providing general operating support to community-based organizations during this time: "During COVID we told them they could use the money for anything they needed to use the money for because we wanted to see them at the end strong and still there and not having lost all their staff and having to start over again" [11]. As noted above, funders also sought to "adjust" expectations about grant proposals, outcomes, and other "deliverables" during

the pandemic, as this program officer described:

> There's an understanding [that] there's the world, and then there's our grantees, and it's not a fair fight. So where can we adjust our grant-making?...You just relax a lot of your requirements because these are people, and the world's just gone crazy. So, you don't keep expecting your deliverables when the world's on fire. [12]

Another program officer described the pandemic as leading to an ethos of "flexibility and trust and giving more":

> Grant makers need to provide flexibility, they need to provide support with no strings attached in times of crisis like that. A lot of funders, including us, adapted timelines and we gave renewal grants too; we gave away probably like a million dollars in renewal grants with basically no application, just like, "Here's a one-year renewal. Let's pick this up in 12 months, talk about it then. This is not the time to be the thinking about a three-year grant proposal. Let's just kick it down the road." So, yeah. Flexibility and trust and giving more. [05]

Program officers anticipated that many of the changes they made in response to the COVID-19 pandemic would be enduring, given the "lessons learned" from the crisis [18].

Racial Equity and Justice
At the same time that they sought to meet the multiple challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, philanthropies in the Northeast were grappling with issues of racial equity and justice. In different ways, each spoke to the importance of "really examining power, really looking at what power means at all levels of the work of a foundation, the power of the board, the power of the money" [10]. In an effort to address these challenges, program officers reported participating in "racial equity trainings" [11], establishing "racial

and ethnic disparities work group[s]" [13], talking frankly about the often "all white" composition of their boards and (mostly female) staff [05, 06], and implementing strategies to change the power dynamics that are characteristic of contemporary philanthropy. Such strategies included actively confronting the history of their own organizations and advancing new approaches to grant-making that would center equity and justice.

Multiple program officers reported "reckoning with … the origins of foundations" [16], asking questions such as: "Where did our money come from? What is the harm that has happened?" [10]. Several offered detailed accountings of the research they had done on the histories of specific endowments and their connections to racial injustice, militarism, and environmental harms [10, 11, 18]. All of the program officers who had excavated such histories were in favor of "reparations," though their approaches to this varied. For example, one program officer spoke of the importance of moving part of an endowment directly into the hands of the community, "to be managed" [18] by those whose ancestors had been harmed by the philanthropy's historic ties to slavery. Another reported that she was pushing the organization's board to more actively consider "how we can face our legacy and what we're going to do about it?" [11].[4] Several also reported proposing setting aside a proportion of their allocations to communities harmed by racism:

> Can we put 40% of our grants portfolio [in]to marginalized communities? I won't even only say 'people of color' because I do think it's important to also support marginalized white communities. … Their marginalization is part of the same systems that have supported racism. And with the white-led groups, also political education to promote solidarity with BIPOC led movements. [20]

Even absent specific historical analyses, however, program officers reported a growing focus on "equity" in their work [07]. Program officers

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[4] She acknowledged that the strategies that she had in mind would cause the founder of the endowment to "turn over in his grave," and noted that "we would consider that a resounding success" [11].

described looking for opportunities "to find the entry points for our work that align with equity and justice work in the food system" [09]. Some reported adding measures of racial equity to the dashboards used for program evaluation [06], while others put "an emphasis on funding BIPOC-led organizations" [01, 11] and/or setting up processes "that enable more funding of people of color in the food system because they're grossly underrepresented" [20]. They characterized these changes as "overdue," noting that "it's not acceptable" that "for 20 years" we've been "working with the same populations," which "shouldn't still be true" if philanthropies were "meeting the needs and actually making change happen" [16].

For many program officers, centering racial equity meant using a broader lens to understand their food-focused funding and "acknowledging the kind of multifaceted ways that a lot of things intersect with food systems work" [09]. For example, they talked about the intersections of food justice with housing and anti-displacement work, education, immigration, the preservation and celebration of cultural heritage, and support for queer and trans youth [01, 06, 09, 11, 16]. As well, many were looking toward the impacts of climate change, noting that they are increasingly focused on "the effects that climate change will have on the people of the region, particularly marginalized groups who will be more heavily affected" [09]. Similarly, they were asking questions about overcoming economic and political barriers that would "enable not just Black farmers and their communities to thrive, but for the emergence of just a broader, more regenerative economy for everyone, for the planet" [20].

Program officers also described funding policy and advocacy work as "an increasing area of support" [10] that seems to promise some of "the greatest levers for change" [09]. For some, the transition to supporting policy and advocacy came from seeing the profound changes made possible by successful campaigns to change public policy [11]. For others, this was driven by the goals and priorities of grantees: "you can't really ignore the importance of policy. … This is the direction where a lot of our grantees' work is going and we're happy to support them in that direction"

[09]. Another observed that not all organizations have the "time or capacity" to orient to policy-making processes, but nonetheless "are doing the most amazing education with young people and are really deeply focused on transformative work in their own neighborhood community"; as such, some were interested, as well, in how to fund "movement building work" [01].

Envisioning a New Philanthropy
Perhaps as a consequence of the manifold changes they had initiated in the previous year, program officers reported significant interest in the possibility of new practices within philanthropy. These included, but were not limited to, practices of trust-based philanthropy that seek to establish new kinds of relationships between foundations and grantee organizations.

To begin, program officers talked about the possibility of either "spending down" or "increasing payout" [10], that is, the amount of grant funding that a philanthropy pays to nonprofit organizations each year. One expressed frustration that efforts to establish a federal mandate to increase payout levels (from 5% to 10% of net investment assets) had not been successful, commenting that "that's not even enough, 10%. There should be way more of a higher expectation of those dollars going out the door" [11]. Alongside increasing payout levels, program officers noted the importance of incorporating "equity … across all of the aspects of our grant-making" [09].

Several program officers highlighted the importance of emerging practices of trust-based philanthropy, beginning with the recognition that "if you really believe in this work, then you should not be in charge of deciding what the work looks like" [01]. Similarly, this respondent emphasized the importance of honoring the expertise of grantees: "we have a lot of respect for them because they're the ones doing the work. They're the ones who matter. We're putting gas in the tank" [18].

As this program officer put it, trust-based philanthropy must begin with the questions: "how do we center community voice? How do we have our grant processes be reflective of the needs of the community?" [09]. Another program officer described how,

there's this role for philanthropy to push themselves to be more trusting, to support community-led groups more, to be a little more hands-off, to continue to push towards general support and also to use regranters, which will really then allow a more participatory model than a lot of funders can handle or are comfortable with, or have the cultural competency to manage [05].

Alongside using regranting processes, which engage community members as decision-makers about the allocation of funding, program officers also talked about offering "community innovation grants," with the goals defined by the organization rather than the funder [13]. Even respondents who reported that they "have a long way to go" in regard to more participatory approaches to philanthropy stated that "our experience is that we make better grants when we involve people who know more than we do. So, we do that and we will continue to do that" [18].

Program officers clearly recognized that trust-based philanthropy has implications for evaluation practices as well, as this respondent put it: "What does success look like for the program you're funding? Then that is what your grantees should inform you, not you inform them" [16]. Another program officer described moving away from "accountability and compliance models" that required that they "to make sure that all of our grantees are following by the regulations" and, instead, partnering with communities:

> … and as a partner … that means to me it's about trust. It's about relationship. It's about listening. … It's about empathy, and it really steps away from kind of the accountability and compliance models that exist so much in philanthropy, and really come out of corporate and banking structures. … And obviously those structures have informed so much of philanthropy's structures and processes. [10]

Even as program officers expressed support for the idea that "the real impact is transformative social change, not just the volume of produce or the number of people fed" [20], they also explained how philanthropy's structures and processes pose challenges to this understanding of the work of grantees. Many of these comments focused on the role of boards of trustees. As one program officer commented, "it feels like the elephant in the room is philanthropy is full of white folks and especially family philanthropies, it's very few of them who are like, 'Yeah, let's break up our board power and bring in a bunch of community members'" [05]. Consequently, program officers understand their role as "translators for our trustees of the work" [01]. For example, one program officer explained that "our job in reporting to a board … is we do this work of translating to them what a grantee gives to us. … We translate to our board who then approve the grants" [12]. In this context, focusing on specific projects with measurable outcomes is one way of making it clear that "it's not as like, oh, we're just giving this organization money to do whatever" [09]. Program officers also noted the difficulty of getting board members "to support work that is not quite as clean and sort of satisfying as like, 'Oh, acres and pounds and community and farm store and youth' … and all that's really easy to kind of wrap your head around" as compared to "policy work [that] is so often beating your head against the wall for years and lots of proposals and denials and committee meetings" [05].

Program officers also spoke about the challenges of convincing trustees to support work that "might be branded as political" [09]. One commented, for example, that the ways that urban agriculture organizations challenge structural racism is something she recognizes, deeply values, and thinks about "all the time," but has not "fully figured out how to translate … to the trustees" [01].

All of the program officers who participated in this study reported that they are "absolutely" [05] interested in talking with grantee organizations about the possibility of new relationships, decision-making processes, and evaluation practices. Many pointed to similar conversations in which they had previously participated, whether in the context of regional and topic-focused networks, and commented that they would be interested in supporting additional convenings [01, 06, 07, 09, 10, 11, 20].

Discussion and Conclusions

While there is a robust literature on program evaluation, accountability, and relationships with donors from the standpoint of nonprofit organizations, the perspectives of program officers—and the philanthropies they represent—are much less often studied (Kohl-Arenas, 2017). In recent years, food access and food justice organizations have raised important questions about the constraining expectations of their funders, especially in regard to quantitative outcome evaluation; similarly, they have asked whether there might be space to imagine new relationships between philanthropies and the organizations and communities supported by their grant-making (Shostak, 2022). Following the lead of practitioners, this study set out to explore these questions—about making and measuring change in the food system, on the one hand, and the possibility of new kinds of relationships, on the other—from the perspectives of program officers who work for foundations that fund food system interventions in New England.

Broadly, this study finds that while philanthropies invest in the food system for a wide array of reasons, program officers see quantitative program evaluation as a limited means of assessing the outcomes of their grant-making. They are deeply interested in alternative practices for telling the story of the work of the organizations that they support and are enthusiastic about strategies for reducing the burdens of reporting for grantees. As a consequence of their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing efforts to reckon with racial inequities, program officers also report growing recognition of the importance of centering equity, social change, and social justice in their grant-making, including by providing support for policy advocacy and movement-building focused on the food system (and its intersections with other critical social issues). This study further suggests that program officers are not only open to but actively interested in the kinds of new relationships that practitioners have identified as a priority (Shostak, 2022), many of which are aligned with practices of trust-based philanthropy. At the same time, it identifies the challenge of translating the work of food justice to board members, in part due to their assumptions about the importance of quantifiable and apolitical program outcomes, as a barrier facing the emergence of these new approaches.

To be sure, this study is limited by its small sample size. Future research should not only include more foundations, but create a large enough sample to consider variation across kinds of foundations (e.g., of different sizes, foci, composition, location), the kinds of organizations that they support, and the mechanisms they use to do so (e.g., grants, loans, training programs). It is also, of course, important to move beyond the testimonies of program officers, and look at the actual grant-making of the foundations they represent (Ramirez et al., 2022); this includes asking questions about which organizations are being funded, how grants are being made (e.g., project based or operating support? For a single year or multiple years?), and whether the changes initiated in 2020 have been sustained over time. As well, the perspectives of grantee organizations are vital to understanding whether trust-based philanthropy is actually making a difference in their relationships with funders and their ability to pursue their missions (e.g., by honoring their expertise and/or reducing the burden of reporting requirements).

Despite these limitations, this study offers insights into the perspectives and practices of program officers at foundations that have supported food system interventions in New England during a time of significant changes and challenges. Based on their accounts, it suggests that this is a critical and hopeful time for practitioners and program officers to develop new practices and relationships to advance a more just, equitable, healthy, and sustainable food system.

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