



Building Power Through Culture

The Thriving Cultures Mid-Strategy Review Report

Prepared by **RISE Research & Evaluation**
Dr. Tenah Hunt, *Senior Research Associate*
Julie Kendig, M.A., *Director of Inquiry*

July 2026

About the **Surdna Foundation**

The Surdna Foundation seeks to foster sustainable communities in the United States—communities guided by principles of social justice and distinguished by healthy environments, inclusive economies, and thriving cultures.

For over five generations, the foundation has been governed largely by descendants of John Andrus and has developed a tradition of innovative service for those in need of help or opportunity. Learn more: surdna.org

About **RISE Research & Evaluation**

RISE Research & Evaluation (RISE) is a matriarchal collective of Queer, Black, Indigenous, Women of Color researchers, data storytellers, radical justice thinkers, and scholar-activists whose purpose is to steward and produce knowledge at the confluence of culture, equity and wellness. Our research paradigm is rooted in an interconnected worldview, constructivist theory, critical

analysis, decolonizing methodologies and relational axiology. We hold expertise in many realms of social science, including theory generation, mixed-methods studies, quantitative and qualitative analysis, and instrument development. Across our 50 years of combined research experience, and along with our lived experiences in bodies that are marginalized, we alchemize scholarly and somatic wisdom.

Acknowledgements

This report would not have been possible without the generous participation and unwavering commitment of the entire Thriving Cultures community. We extend deep gratitude to Robert Smith III, Sarian Sankoh, and Elizabeth Cahill whose guidance, passion, expertise, and deep commitment to this work

lit our path and buoyed our spirits; to the estimable grantees whose care, insight, and contributions to this work are worth more than gold and continue the legacy of racial justice organizing and liberation-building. Thank you for the honor of documenting this journey.

Table of Contents

Foreword.....	XX
Introduction	XX
The Mid-Strategy Review	XX
Purpose and Scope	XX
Guiding Questions	XX
The Lens We Bring.....	XX
Methods.....	XX
Limitations of this Mid-Strategy Review	XX
Key Findings and Recommendations.....	XX
Part 1. General Findings	XX
Finding 1: The RIRJ strategy evolved into a clearer, more responsive, and more effective model.....	XX
Finding 2: Strong, trust-based relationships with program staff are a cornerstone of the Thriving Cultures Program.	XX
Finding 3: Grantees are advancing racial justice by addressing root causes, influencing policy, and holding politicians accountable.	XX
Finding 4: Thriving Cultures has improved the health, wealth and self-determination of grantees and their communities	XX
Finding 5: Organizational issues, underfunding, and an increasingly harsh political context are among the greatest barriers for grantees’ capacity.	XX
Finding 6: Grantees dedicated much time, energy, and resources to strengthening their organizations and their communities, as well as deepening solidarity networks beyond their local contexts.	XX

Radical Imagination for Racial Justice Boston



Table of Contents Continued

Part 2. Findings by Intervention

Create: Artist Regranting

Create: Art x Tech

Create: Place-Based Exemplars

Connect: Narrative Change

Connect: Policy Advocacy & Movement Convenings

Connect: Philanthropic Influence

Clarify: Participatory Action Research

Art x Economy

Part 3. Rethinking Strategy: From Proving a Thesis to Being a Steward of Dreams

Part 4. Closing

XX

XX

XX

XX

XX

XX

XX

XX

XX

XX

XX

Full appendices, including survey instruments and quantitative results, are available upon request.

Twenty43 Ventures, Grantmakers in the Arts, 2022



Foreword

By Robert Smith III

Senior Program Officer, Thriving Cultures, Surdna Foundation

This is a story about the beating heart of social change—the artists, storytellers, and cultural workers who make people feel why a different world is necessary and within reach and who form the connective tissue of communities and social movements. It's about philanthropy's role as a partner and long-term investor in the project of imagining and building a racially just future, and what we've learned along the way.

My part in this story begins when I arrived at the Surdna Foundation in March 2019, fresh off a leadership role at a small museum in the Midwest. At the museum, I did everything from getting coffee for community engagement meetings to fundraising from major foundations. That experience, helping build an institution with limited resources and large ambitions, has guided me throughout my seven years as a program officer for the Thriving Cultures program at Surdna. In this role, the resources and relationships we steward support more than fifty grantee partners. Day in and day out, often with little material reward, our grantees do

extraordinary work to build cultural institutions that make communities vibrant and dynamic.

I joined the foundation alongside Director F. Javier Torres-Campos and Program Associate Sinéad López, charged with implementing the Radical Imagination for Racial Justice strategy. It was a bold vision for resourcing artists, cultural workers, and organizers who helped us envision, test, and build a just future for all—from transitional housing prototypes for formerly incarcerated people to new platforms for intersectional storytelling. When Sarian Sankoh succeeded Sinéad as Senior Program Associate and Javier left the foundation, Sarian and I carried that work forward, putting the vision into practice across the program.

Not everything worked out as planned. We listened to grantee feedback, learned from colleagues across the philanthropic, cultural, and social movement ecosystems, and pivoted amid the COVID pandemic, a new administration in Washington, D.C., and fleeting



support for art, culture, and explicit racial justice efforts. The result has been an evolving implementation approach that honors the north star of the Radical Imagination for Racial Justice strategy while making room for experimentation amid changing conditions.

The current conditions are daunting: the dismantling of democratic infrastructure, threats to social justice movements, attacks on trans people, increasing unaffordability of daily life, and significant stress on the economic models of the arts and culture ecosystem, among others. To gird myself, I look back, and I look forward. I look back and gather hope from my enslaved ancestors, who endured, organized, and passed on culture despite bleak circumstances, and from Indigenous ancestors, who passed down the practice of working for the seventh generation.

I look forward to seeing the seeds planted by this strategy—artists, organizations,

relationships, collaborations, moments of joy—blossom into infrastructure for justice. I look forward to witnessing our contribution to replacing today's failing systems with something more just. Together.

The report that follows is a reflection on five years of our Radical Imagination for Racial Justice strategy. It documents grantee experiences, reviews our evolving philanthropic practice, and makes recommendations for our future work.

Sarian and I want to thank Dr. Tenah Hunt, Julie Kendig, M.A., and Lorain Rihan, of RISE Research and Evaluation for the depth and care they brought to this research; the grantee partners who gave their time, insight, and trust to make this report possible; and Ash-Lee Woodard-Henderson for always reminding us of our role as funders in the liberation of all people. Their voices are the heart of what follows.



Thriving Cultures Staff with BlackStar

Introduction





The Black radical imagination does not stand still; it lives and breathes and moves with people. The best we can do is catch a glimpse of how people in motion have envisioned the future and what they did to try to realize or enact that future. But every freedom dream shares a common desire to find better ways of being together without hierarchy and exclusion, without violence and domination, but with love, compassion, care, and friendship.

—Robin D.G. Kelley



Introduction

The Surdna Foundation launched its formalized arts program in 1997, renaming it Thriving Cultures in 2009. From 2011 to 2017, then program director Judilee Reed aligned the Thriving Cultures portfolio with Surdna's social justice mission, formally announced in 2014.

In 2018, the foundation placed racial justice at the heart of all its program strategies, recognizing that thriving cultures, inclusive economies, and sustainable environments are not possible without directly addressing structural racism and discrimination.

That same year, F. Javier Torres-Campos joined Surdna as Director, Thriving Cultures and led a four-month strategy refinement process in consultation with board members, peer funders, grantee partners, and field experts. That fall, the board approved the program's refined strategy: Radical Imagination for Racial Justice. Senior Program Officer Robert Smith III and Senior Program Associate Sarian Sankoh have evolved the grantmaking portfolio in close partnership with grantee partners.

Highlander Research & Education Center



The Strategy

Launched in 2019, the Radical Imagination for Racial Justice strategy addresses the stark reality that communities of color represent 39% of the U.S. population but receive only 4% of arts foundation funding. The strategy uses arts, culture, and design as drivers for substantive policy change that advances racial justice.

Working through a “Create—Clarify—Connect” approach, the program supports artists and creators to radically imagine new visions of justice, translates these ideas through documentation and research, and then connects them to policy implementation and narrative change.

The three interconnected grantmaking approaches are:

- **Create** invests in artists of color working with their communities to imagine and build racially just systems at a local scale. This includes funding through 10 regranting organizations, up to three place-based exemplars demonstrating institutional collaboration, and immersive tech platforms with original content.
- **Clarify** invests in researchers and cultural critics of color to interpret and disseminate knowledge about artists’ work while building a more equitable research and criticism infrastructure.
- **Connect** advances the role of artists and communities of color in shaping public policy, narrative change, and philanthropic practices that advance racial justice.



From the outset, Surdna viewed this as high-risk work, where the greatest leverage comes from artists imagining and influencing the future rather than fixing existing inequitable systems.

The first five years of this strategy unfolded during extraordinary circumstances: a global pandemic, an unprecedented surge in racial justice organizing following George Floyd’s murder in 2020, and subsequent backlash against race-conscious programs.

Why Radical Imagination for Racial Justice

To think about imagination is to honor people of the global majority¹ as futurists and architects of possibility. It is to recognize that dreams are not escapist but deeply grounded in harsh realities that need to be improved. Scholars working in radical imagination teach us that love and imagination are among the most revolutionary impulses available to us. Centering imagination is a radical act. It tells the world that oppressed people are here not only to outlast injustice but to dream a more just future into reality.

Historical Movements Powered by Radical Imagination

Scholars and movement intellectuals such as Robin D.G. Kelley,² Mariame Kaba,³ Kelly Hayes,⁴ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor,⁵ and Ruha Benjamin⁶ each illuminate the radical imagination as a transformative force for collective liberation. Robin D.G. Kelley, in *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, teaches that envisioning new worlds is a political act—a refusal to accept the limits imposed by capitalism and white supremacy. Mariame Kaba and Kelly Hayes extend this framework, showing that the work of imagination is inseparable from building new systems of care, accountability, and mutual aid in place of prisons and policing. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor connects radical

imagination to structural analysis, reminding us that movements for housing, labor, and racial justice require not only critique but the courage to design alternative futures grounded in solidarity and redistribution. Ruha Benjamin brings a critical lens to technology and science, teaching that imagination itself is a contested terrain where power shapes whose futures are deemed possible. Together, these thinkers (and many others) urge us to treat imagination as a disciplined practice of freedom—an active, collective process through which communities most impacted by oppression create the conditions for justice.

Sarian Sankoh with partners at Funding Forward, 2023



- 1 People of the global majority refers to people who are Black, Brown, Asian, Arab, mixed-heritage, and Indigenous groups who collectively represent the majority of the world's population. It recognizes the significance of non-white populations in shaping the global landscape, and is offered in contrast to the term "people of color," which positions whiteness as the norm.
- 2 Kelley, R. D. G. (2002). *Freedom dreams: The Black radical imagination*. Beacon Press.
- 3 Kaba, M. (2021). *We do this 'til we free us: Abolitionist organizing and transforming justice*. Haymarket Books.
- 4 Hayes, K., & Kaba, M. (2022). *Let this radicalize you: Organizing and the revolution of reciprocal care*. Haymarket Books.
- 5 Taylor, K.-Y. (2016). *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black liberation*. Haymarket Books.
- 6 Benjamin, R. (2019). *Race after technology: Abolitionist tools for the new Jim Code*. Polity Press.

Imagination is not a luxury—it is the engine of systemic transformation. Some of the United States' most enduring social movements have been powered by imagination. The Black Liberation movement was fueled by dreams of everyday people and articulated by leaders like Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr. Their movements imagined a country where the fullness of Black humanity was recognized in schools, workplaces, banks, public spaces, and voting booths. The Black Panther Party extended this imagination into community care and self-determination, establishing free breakfast programs and health clinics that still inform today's mutual aid models and abolitionist organizing. Contemporary movements like the Movement for Black Lives continue to carry that dream forward, using digital platforms and policy advocacy to reimagine safety, justice, and collective thriving.

Labor and immigrant rights movements have likewise been propelled by collective dreaming of dignity and belonging. From Dolores Huerta's leadership in the United Farm Workers to the "Dreamer" movement led by undocumented youth after 2001, these struggles fused economic justice with imaginative visions of community and citizenship. Huerta and United Farm Workers organized boycotts that redefined labor solidarity across racial lines, while young undocumented organizers reframed "illegality" itself as a political construct to be challenged. Today, movements like Mijente and United We Dream build on this imaginative legacy, envisioning futures where migration is treated as a human right, particularly in a time of climate crisis, and labor is recognized as dignified and sacred.

Indigenous sovereignty movements have viewed imagination as a regenerative source. From the 1969 occupation of Alcatraz to Standing Rock in 2016, Indigenous activists have imagined futures rooted in land, language, and kinship. Leaders like Wilma Mankiller and Winona LaDuke outlined and practiced self-determination and cross-tribal solidarity. LGBTQ+ liberation, championed by figures such as Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, Audre Lorde, and contemporary Black and brown trans activists, such as Raquel Willis and María José have similarly envisioned a world where gender and love are celebrated. In the wake of 9/11, Muslim and Arab American organizers imagined new forms of solidarity through movements against Islamophobia, connecting racial justice to collective liberation. Together, these movements are a reminder that progress in the U.S. has always been propelled by imagination—the courage to dream beyond survival toward collective liberation.



Why Racial Justice Demands Imagination and Power

Radical imagination is a counterweight to despair, anger, disassociation and apathy. It is a blueprint for action and a pathway to transform critique into creation. It is more than hope—it is a political, social, collective and interpersonal force. Radical imagination is not just about what we can dream of. It is also about building power for dreamers to actualize their vision and bring as many people along as possible. Without a discipline of building, we will miss the opportunity to create tools, practice what we dream of, make mistakes and corrections, and establish a foundation on which to sustainably cultivate a liberated future.



Maria Fund

Racial justice in the United States is essential because centuries of structural racism continue to shape every major system that determines well-being and opportunity. The legacies of slavery, the forced removal of Indigenous people, Jim Crow segregation, and discriminatory immigration and labor laws have produced deep and persistent inequities that remain visible today. Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) experience shorter life expectancies and higher rates of chronic illness due to environmental racism, limited healthcare access, and the cumulative stress of discrimination. Employment and education gaps persist, with workers of color concentrated in lower-wage sectors and students of color attending underfunded schools that restrict long-term mobility. Housing discrimination—rooted in redlining and exclusionary zoning—has locked families out of wealth accumulation for generations, contributing to the racial wealth gap that endures as one of the most glaring indicators of inequality. Addressing racial justice is therefore not about isolated reforms but about confronting an interlocking system of disadvantage that constrains BIPOC people's potential.

Without confronting and transforming entrenched racial hierarchies, imagination risks becoming detached from the material realities of power, privilege, and oppression. Racial injustice has long defined the boundaries of who gets to dream freely and whose visions are dismissed, criminalized, and erased. For centuries BIPOC communities have practiced radical imagination—envisioning freedom while living within systems designed to deny it. When imagination is focused on racial justice, it becomes a collective tool for liberation. It becomes a coalescing force to imagine and build futures where safety, belonging, and self-determination are accessible to all.

Thriving Cultures: Radical Imagination in Practice

Five years after Surdna's Thriving Cultures team launched the Radical Imagination for Racial Justice strategy, the importance of radical imagination is more important than ever. TC grantee partners embody embody this very practice of radical imagination in motion. Across the country, these artists, organizers, and community-rooted organizations are transforming the theoretical into the tangible—building models of racial justice through culture, creativity, and collective care. Their work spans filmmaking, performance, community archiving, mutual aid, and policy advocacy. Yet what unites them is a shared conviction that imagination is infrastructure—the groundwork upon which more just societies are built. From the Highlander Center's training of grassroots organizers in the U.S. South, to Ashé Cultural Arts Center's celebration of Black creativity as a tool for healing and power, to organizations like Open Television (OTV) and the María Fund that use media and philanthropy to shift narratives and redistribute resources, the Thriving Cultures network reflects the breadth of imagination's possibilities. These grantees remind us that racial justice is not only an aspiration but an ongoing creative process—one sustained by the courage to envision, to organize, and to build the worlds that justice requires.



Mississippi Center for Cultural Production

This mid-strategy review surfaced a collection of lessons, drawn from overarching takeaways across a multitude of data sources, explained in depth later in this report. Together, they point to the following thesis on radical imagination for racial justice:

It is possible even in a long dark.

It requires care to birth the new and hospice the old.

It is everything for everyone when rooted in love.

It needs every means, every angle, every level, every approach.

It is inevitable when we stay committed to each other.





The Mid-Strategy Review

Purpose and Scope

This mid-strategy review was designed to help the Surdna Foundation better understand and reflect on **the first five years (2019-2024)** of the implementation of Thriving Cultures Program's Radical Imagination for Racial Justice (RIRJ) Strategy.

The mid-strategy review serves three main purposes:

- ▶ **Documenting grantee experiences.** What has it been like for grantees to partner with Thriving Cultures? The review explores the strengths and challenges of the funder-grantee relationship.
- ▶ **Reviewing the journey.** How do grantees define racial justice, and what innovations and barriers have they encountered in advancing it? The review highlights their progress and lessons learned.
- ▶ **Informing the future.** The review offers lessons and recommendations for refreshing the program for the second half of the ten-year strategy.

Momentum Organizing



Guiding Questions

The following questions guided the Thriving Cultures Program mid-strategy review:

1. **To what extent is the RIRJ strategy being implemented as intended?**
 - a. What have been the grantees' successes, innovations and barriers over the last five years?
 - b. How have grantees experienced the Thriving Cultures Program, including the ways Surdna's funding and support have influenced their capacity and trajectory?
2. **What are the ways in which this strategy has shifted and evolved over time?**
 - a. How do shifting socio-political conditions influence the implementation of the strategy?
 - b. How have the shifting socio-political conditions influenced grantees' experience of the strategy?
3. **How do grantee experiences and outcomes compare to national data on economic conditions, and what differences or similarities emerge?**



Designing Justice + Designing Spaces

The Lens We Bring

Our mid-strategy review approach is rooted in critical, liberatory, and Indigenous ways of knowing that honor culture as both a guide and a source of healing. As a collective of Queer, Black, Indigenous, and Women of Color researchers, we bring both professional expertise and personal understanding of the communities this work serves.

Our relational, equity-driven processes help ensure that the mid-strategy review is not extractive but rather amplifies the voices and visions of those most impacted, creating knowledge that is both rigorous and liberatory.



Design Studio for Social Intervention

Methods

Data Collection.

To answer the guiding mid-strategy review questions, we used a mixed-methods approach that combined qualitative and quantitative data sources. This design allowed us to better understand both the depth of grantees' experiences and broader patterns across the field. Our data sources included:

- ▶ **Focus groups and one-on-one interviews** with a sample of grantee partners, Thriving Culture program staff, and Surdna Foundation leadership to gather stories of success, innovation, challenge, and adaptation.
- ▶ **Secondary data analysis** that examined persistent racial disparities in arts philanthropy and positioned grantees' experiences within the national context of arts and culture organizations.
- ▶ **Thriving Cultures Grantees Survey** administered through an online platform to organizations who had participated in the Thriving Cultures Program at any point from 2019-2024. The survey invited grantees to share about their organization, their experiences working with Surdna, the work they've supported or carried out in their community, and how their work is responding to and shaping broader field-level shifts.
- ▶ **Review of Surdna memos and Grantee reports (via Fluxx grants management system)** to understand the foundation's evolving strategy and collect feedback on their experiences in the program and working toward racial justice.
- ▶ **Advisory sessions with movement experts** to situate grantees' experiences in broader national and cultural contexts.
- ▶ **Guiding Council** discourse, where a self-selected group of 8 participants from the Thriving Cultures cohort offered direction for the strategy evaluation moving forward.



Analysis.

Qualitative materials (i.e., focus groups, documents, reports, survey open-ended questions) were analyzed for patterns and descriptive quotes. We blended deductive and inductive approaches in our qualitative data analysis, using a process that allowed us to listen to the data and ask direct questions of it. For deductive coding, we developed a set of codes that was guided by the mid-strategy review questions, the Thriving Cultures grantees and Thriving Cultures program staff at Surdna. We used these predetermined codes to review and categorize data.

We also ran inductive analysis, which means we allowed new codes to emerge directly from the data. Quantitative data (i.e., national secondary data sets, grantee survey) were analyzed to identify descriptive information (e.g., averages, ranges) of arts organizations across the U.S. as well as grantee data. Cross-analysis of sources enabled us to put multiple data sources in conversation with each other, triangulate findings and facilitate a well-rounded interpretation.



Limitations of this Mid-Strategy Review

As with any mid-strategy review, there are important limitations to keep in mind. First, this report is a high-level synthesis of the Thriving Cultures Program over the last five years. While the findings highlight progress, innovations, and challenges, they do not reflect an exhaustive documentation of the Thriving Cultures Program's activities and outputs. This mid-strategy review does not attempt to measure every outcome or impact. Instead, it emphasizes depth over breadth, centering grantee voices, stories, and ideologies to understand how radical imagination is advancing racial justice.

Second, much of the data relied on retrospective reports from grantees and Thriving Cultures Program staff. While these perspectives are essential to our mid-strategy review, they may reflect more recent experiences, more so than the events that occurred toward the beginning of the RIRJ strategy.

Next, although this mid-strategy review includes data from focus groups and a survey of Thriving Cultures grantees, those findings reflect the perspectives of a subsample—those who self-selected to participate. As such, the results cannot be generalized to represent the experiences of all grantees in the program. To strengthen these insights, we supplemented the primary data with a national-level review of the field and an examination of the literature focused on arts funding and philanthropy in the U.S.

These limitations suggest that the findings should be read as a reflective learning tool, rather than a comprehensive or final assessment of impact.



Just Tech Fellow, Tawana Petty



Key Findings & Recommendations

Part 1. General Findings

Finding 1: The Radical Imagination for Racial Justice strategy evolved into a clearer, more responsive, and more effective model.



Program staff reflected that the first phase of the RIRJ strategy was highly structured, with prescriptive projects and complex reporting requirements. **Grantees recalled that close oversight and heavy reporting requirements created unnecessary administrative burdens and made the relationship feel top-down.**

“The TC strategy started with a very top-down design... staff asked grantees to collect and report data that felt intrusive, which eroded trust between Surdna and its grantee partners.”

The Clarify component of RIRJ represented another key evolution of the strategy. Clarify was designed to embed participatory action research (PAR) into regranteeing work, but it proved challenging in practice. While the idea

was ambitious and intended to democratize knowledge production, **grantees often felt it was imposed rather than co-created, and partnerships between research institutions and community-based organizations struggled to align.** Differences in approaches, timelines, and institutional cultures led to confusion, tensions, and ultimately fragmentation of the effort. Over time, staff and participants recognized that the Clarify approach created more burden than benefit, and it was eventually phased out of the strategy.

“There was some resistance among grantees to work with [PAR researchers] because it just felt like these people were coming in and evaluating them. Kind of looking over their shoulder the whole time.”



Design Studio for Social Intervention

Over the years, staff and grantees described a significant shift in how the Thriving Cultures Program strategy was implemented. The program **moved away from trying to “do everything” and enforce rigid plans, toward a more intentional, responsive, and simplified approach.** Program staff emphasized trusting grantees to define their own paths and aligning support with their specific practices.

“We actually need to be responsive to what the grantees want to do...or what is popping up as important. Because the first few years were so much like round peg, square hole.”

Grantees expressed gratitude for this trust-based, relational approach and some specifically named this mid-strategy review as a demonstration of trust. They noted that few funders invite this level of open reflection, and they saw the process as a sign of Surdna’s commitment to learning, growing, and authentic relationship-building.

Another pivotal moment in the Thriving Cultures evolution was when the program team began to see **that radical imagination could spark vision but could not, on its own, sustain transformation.** As one staff mentioned:

“One of the big assumptions of the strategy that we’ve talked about is that we’re going to generate all of these really great ideas and projects and prototypes within our artistry granting work. And then if they just exist or we like, put them in front of policy makers, those ideas are gonna be adopted and the world is gonna change.”

Through guidance from policy, arts, and movement organizations, the Thriving Cultures Program staff reached a big turning point—that **there needs to be “organizing or political infrastructure” in place to facilitate the success and broader impact of artists’ radically-imagined innovations.** This learning has prompted staff to think and invest more in projects that intentionally incorporate art with movement and policy.



Center for Cultural Power

“A really big way that things have evolved [is] now we are thinking a lot more intentionally about what does it mean to train artists as organizers.”

Over the past five years the RIRJ strategy has evolved for the better. However, **grantees and staff still expressed a need for clearer communication about Thriving Cultures’ priorities, evaluation goals, and definitions of success.** In interviews with grantees, some mentioned being “confused about the strategy.” In the grantee survey we administered, 20 self-identified as belonging to Thriving Cultures’ artist regranting intervention, yet according to Surdna records, only 6 of the survey respondents belonged to the artist regranting intervention. It was clear that many grantees did not know of or agree with their prescribed role within the Thriving Cultures Program.

Both foundation and program staff acknowledged that the Thriving Cultures strategy has at times been difficult to translate for non-arts audiences, including members of Surdna’s board. They stated that Thriving Cultures remains the least understood program among Surdna’s board and staff due to the complexity of measuring and describing the role of culture and its potential as a force for change. As one staff member noted, “Thriving Cultures is our most complex program—and yet its ideas are deeply elegant. We just have to make them easier for others to grasp.”



Vu Le & Robert Smith III, Grantmakers in the Arts 2023

At its core, the RIRJ strategy recognizes that culture is one of the most powerful tools communities have to envision and enact new possibilities and achieve systems change.

We recommend that Surdna:

1

- ▶ **Share decision-making power around ongoing strategy evolution with grantees. Grantees recommended more visibility into Surdna’s evolving goals and decision-making processes.** They suggested “opportunities for direct engagement with leadership—such as conversations with the president or board members” to better align expectations and deepen mutual understanding. Tactics to meet this need include:
 - ▶ Convening a guiding council of grantees to work with Thriving Cultures staff to hear updates on the strategy, problem-solve challenges in real time, and be involved in decision making around how the strategy continues to evolve.
 - ▶ Adopt a Developmental evaluation approach. Because Thriving Cultures itself has evolved—and will continue to do so—evaluation must remain flexible. Surdna should adopt a developmental evaluation approach that allows questions, indicators, and methods to shift in response to program changes and emerging contexts. This means building in regular reflection checkpoints staff and the advisory guiding council adjust the as needed.

These touchpoints allow the program to make on-the-ground adjustments when things aren’t working, reflecting the reality that adaptive learning and flexibility are essential when working in complex systems and pursuing radical change.

2

- **Tighten the message of what RIRJ is and why it is important.**
Create clear communication of RIRJ's core purpose that describes the power and potency arts & culture possesses as a force that influences our world and informs our future, and do this in ways that reach broad audiences.

3

- **Engage Surdna Board in cultural work**
 Grantees feel their capacity to advance the goals of the Thriving Cultures Program is often constrained to what funders deem worthy and important to fund. To ensure board members understand the depth of radical imagining for racial justice, Surdna should shift from one-way presentations to reciprocal learning spaces between the board, staff, and grantees, so that board members can experience firsthand the power of cultural work. These could include structured dialogues, grantee storytelling, and participation in events, workshops, and convenings that grantees invite the board to. The foundation can track board participation and reflection as indicators of meaningful engagement. Over time, such practices will help strengthen the board's understanding of culture as a central driver of systemic change. Ultimately, this can strengthen the internal political power of Thriving Cultures.

4

- **Follow through on the realization of needing organizing infrastructure within this work by sustaining and platforming artists and culture workers committed to power building**
 as core partners in the struggle for racial justice. These artists bridge creative practice and civic action, mobilizing communities, engaging policymakers, and reshaping narratives. To advance systemic change, philanthropy must invest not only in visionary ideas but also in the infrastructure and organizing power that make those visions durable. Surdna can lead by example by funding artists and cultural workers engaged in the core activities that link creativity to change: capacity building, coalition organizing, and leadership pipelines rooted in community power. Doing so will help ensure that radical imagination becomes a sustained driver of racial justice and structural transformation.

Finding 2: Strong, trust-based relationships with program staff are a cornerstone of the Thriving Cultures Program.

Grantees consistently emphasized the trust, responsiveness, and authenticity of the Thriving Cultures team—particularly **the fairness, comfortability, and responsiveness demonstrated by Robert Smith III and Sarian Sankoh** (see Figure 1). Grantees described these relationships as rare among funders, noting that Surdna staff are approachable, empathetic, and proactive in supporting grantee success.

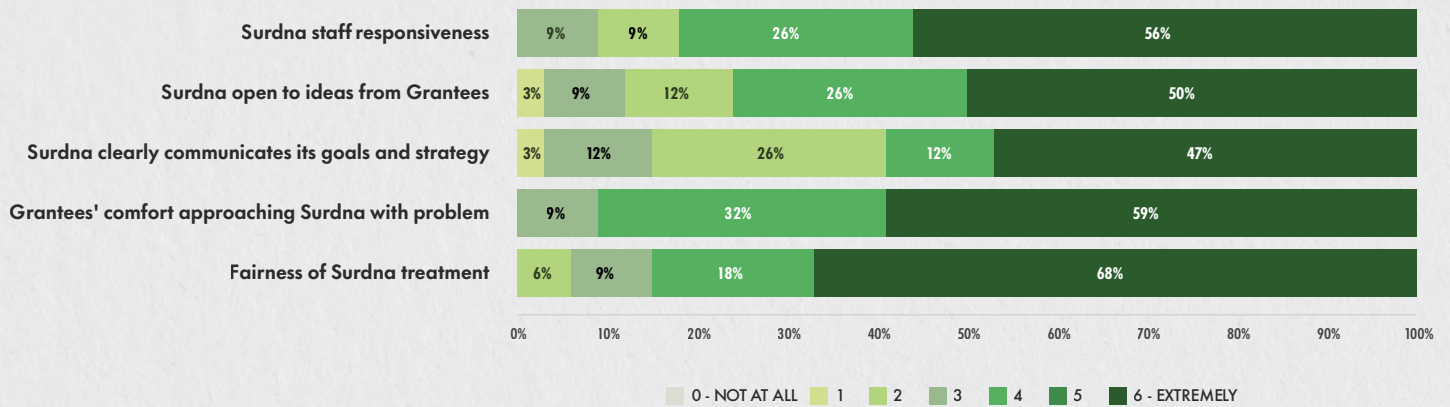
“Working with Surdna, working with Robert, working with the whole team has been one of the most enriching experiences.”

“It's a very trust-based relationship. Sarian is extremely available, and we've had a number of challenges and attacks that I felt very comfortable coming to that team with, letting them know our anxieties and letting them understand how challenging it is to be a black female-led immigrant organization and what does that mean? And I don't have that same level of access with other funders. So this has been extremely enriching, and I would love to keep fine tuning it as we live out our grant.”

Design Studio for Social Intervention



Figure 1. Grantees' ratings of their experience with Surdna



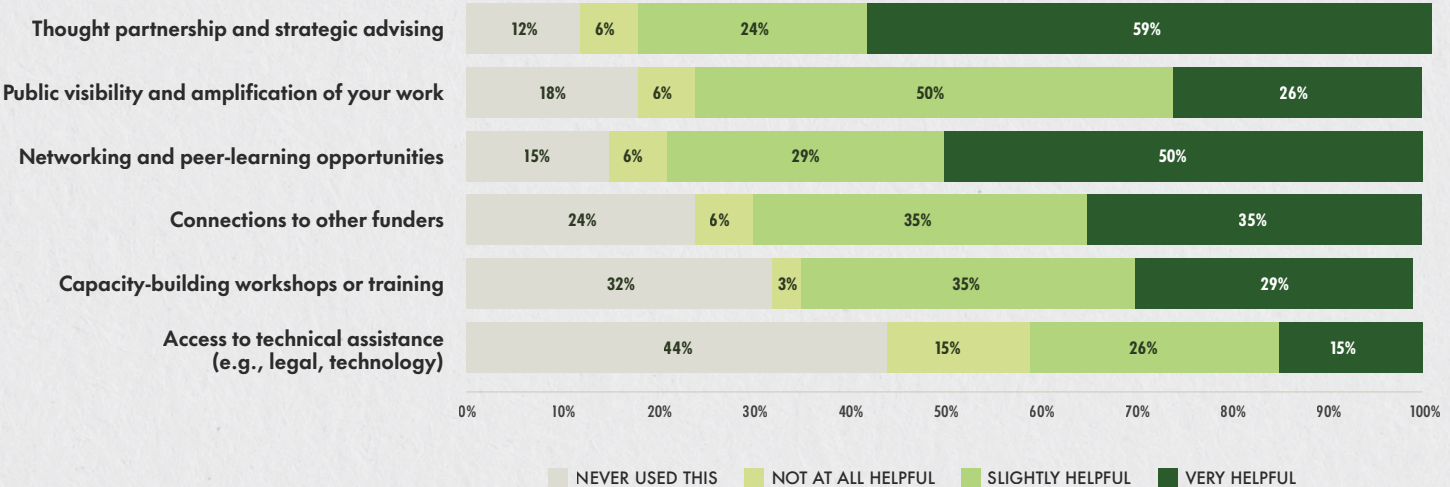
Program staff were praised not only for their compassion but also for their thought partnership (see Figure 2). Grantees described staff as people who listen, encourage experimentation, and show up in meaningful ways, such as attending grantees' events. As one participant noted,

“Robert and Sarian have been fantastic... they were really great partners helping us imagine and reach out to other funders. That’s a great innovation and should be more common among funders.”

Grantees also expressed that Surdna “sees” them in the full expression of their missions—not as isolated projects, but as integral parts of a broader movement for equity and justice.

“We feel seen in our full expression of our mission... Surdna understands our work as part of a larger movement to bring equity, dignity, and justice for all people and the planet.”

Figure 2. Grantees' ratings of how helpful Surdna's resources have been



We recommend that Surdna:

- **Continue to invest in and document the relationship-based model that makes Thriving Cultures distinct.** Grantees see Surdna's staff as true partners who listen, co-create, and connect them to broader networks. Preserving and strengthening this trust-centered approach, while sharing it internally as a model, can deepen impact across all of Surdna's programs. Trust-based philanthropy is a process; it requires commitment to ongoing unlearning traditional hierarchy-based philanthropy practices and the learning of new models of engagement based on relational, power-shifting practices. This is not a value that can be "completed" but rather is a north star to continue to strive toward. Routinely gathering grantee feedback around the consistency and integrity of Surdna efforts will be a must.

The Laundromat Project



Finding 3: Grantees are advancing racial justice by addressing root causes, influencing policy, and holding politicians accountable.

Grantees showed that racial justice requires confronting the root causes of inequity and redistributing power to BIPOC communities. **Their work integrates advocacy, cultural practice, and narrative change to build more just and liberated systems.** As one grantee shared, **“The discipline of radical imagination requires us to look at the root causes and the history... to leverage that to think about better possibilities in the future.”**

Across their efforts, grantees are making progress on all three goals of the Thriving Cultures strategy (see Figure 1), and especially in areas of policy and advocacy. Roughly 26% of grantee survey respondents reported that over the past five years, their work has had an extremely positive impact in shaping policy. Some grantee organizations described their legislative and regulatory victories at multiple levels, including from passing local housing trust bills and state-level guaranteed income pilots, to contributing to national wins such as the Inflation Reduction Act and reproductive freedom protections. Most other grantees leveraged cultural narrative change strategies and storytelling to influence institutional practices, public opinion, and the broader policy climate. As one grantee commented in the survey, **“Policy influence efforts are the result of years of consistent relationship building and coalition work. While not always direct, our organizing has helped**

establish frameworks that later inform policy decisions.”

“[Our project], through its Public School Strong campaign, has partnered with local and regional groups to protect public schools and oppose anti-equity legislation, with legislative wins in Georgia, Kentucky, and Tennessee in the past year.”

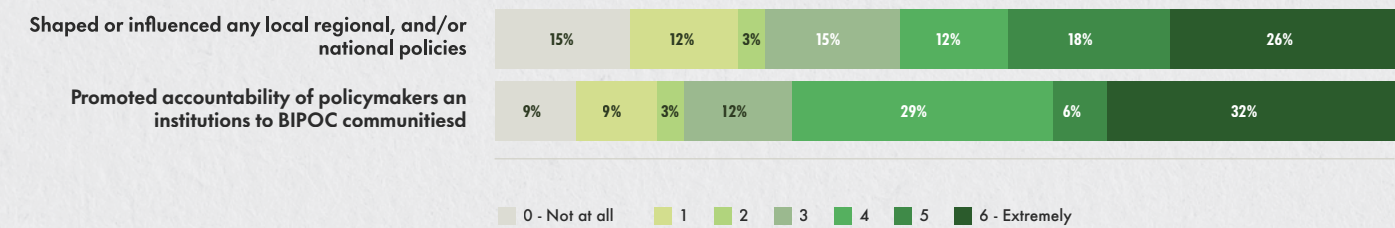
Naydja Cojoe, Ashe Cultural Arts Center



About 32% of surveyed grantees reported that their work has been having an extremely positive impact in promoting accountability of policymakers and institutions to BIPOC communities over the past five years. Again, some focused on direct policy advocacy, such as training community members to engage policymakers, while others leveraged narrative change, media, and cultural strategies to expose systemic injustices, call out harmful rhetoric, and shift institutional practices. Many also emphasized philanthropic accountability, pushing funders to align resources more equitably with community needs.

“[Our organization] has held policymakers and institutions accountable through high-impact public actions like the Marcha del Sol in 2019 and 2021, mobilizing thousands in support of energy justice. These efforts directly challenged government inaction and promoted community-driven solutions.”

Figure 1. The extent to which Grantees have been able to have a positive impact on Thriving Culture's shared goals



Highlander Center

Public policy is a key location of social change and has potential to be the harbinger of racial justice. In this political moment—marked by deep polarization, rising authoritarian tendencies, and a constricted judicial landscape—continuing to fund policy advocacy remains a vital and strategic investment for any major foundation committed to racial justice. Yet it should not be viewed as a singular strategy.

We recommend that Surdna:

1

- ▶ **Increase investments** in strategic, defensive, and infrastructure-building work, such as community organizing and narrative change, that sustains movements through repressive conditions and positions them to advance transformative policy when the tide shifts, especially now in a political landscape dominated by an administration openly hostile to racial equity.

2

- ▶ **Shift the Thriving Cultures policy goal** from passing reforms to holding the line, fortifying democratic institutions, and sustaining the people and networks who will be ready to govern differently once the political weather changes.

3

- ▶ **Continue to offer trainings**, convenings, and other learning spaces for artists to center their work on political power building. Artists are key to influencing civic life because they translate complex social realities into forms that move people emotionally and politically, helping communities imagine, organize, and act together toward systemic change.



Finding 4: Thriving Cultures has improved the health, wealth and self-determination of grantees and their communities

Most grantees reported that their work had a positive impact in advancing the health, wealth, and self-determination of BIPOC communities. These efforts included creating healing-centered spaces, using arts as a tool for wellness, and developing projects that normalize conversations around mental health. Grantees framed this work as essential in addressing trauma, supporting resilience, and helping communities thrive in the face of systemic inequities. **Organizations often took a multifaceted approach to health, using culture and healing to address not only physical care, but also emotional, cultural, and spiritual well-being.**

Organizations have cultivated practices that support healing. For example, one grantee mentioned, “We’ve really given ourselves a lot of rest time. We take paid time off for the summer solstice and the winter solstice. That stuff really matters right now.” Another grantee shared, **“We create vital spaces and opportunities for our community members to experience rest and restoration without fear or financial burden.”**

Several organizations described their work to **expand wealth and economic stability through direct investment in BIPOC communities**. This included moving large amounts of funding directly to artists, leaders, and organizations of color, often through participatory grantmaking practices. Grantees highlighted that this redistribution of resources provided both short-term support and long-term opportunities for stability and growth. Some grantees described these efforts as part of a broader commitment to economic justice, challenging inequities in who has access to money and decision-making power.

A strong theme across responses was the advancement of self-determination by ensuring that BIPOC communities have the resources and platforms to lead their own work. **Many organizations invested in leadership development programs, community-driven research, and opportunities for artists to shape narratives about their communities.** These investments were described as foundational and transformative, creating long-lasting change in how communities engage with systems and assert their agency.

Grantees have used this strategy to challenge inequitable structures, restore cultural practices, and build health, wealth and wellbeing in BIPOC communities. In fact, 89% of survey participants reported that they were able to have a positive impact on the health, wealth and self-determination of their communities.

We recommend that Surdna:

1

- **Explicitly acknowledge health and healing as central to radical imagination.** By treating healing as a form of cultural infrastructure—essential to the sustainability and imagination of BIPOC communities—Surdna can model a philanthropic approach that understands justice not only as resistance to harm, but as the ongoing creation of conditions where people can thrive. This work is vital because health and healing are the foundation upon which artists and communities build the capacity to imagine and create. For BIPOC artists and cultural organizations working toward racial justice, healing is not peripheral to creativity. Generations of systemic racism, economic exploitation, and cultural erasure have left deep collective wounds that limit both personal well-being and communal possibility. Healing-centered cultural practices—restorative arts, collective care spaces, rituals of remembrance, and storytelling—allow artists and communities to process trauma, sustain resilience, and envision new worlds from a place of wholeness.

2

- **Strengthen pathways for community ownership and wealth retention.** Beyond direct regranteeing, Surdna can help grantees move toward collective asset ownership—such as community land trusts for artists and cultural spaces, cooperative production studios, and endowments for BIPOC organizations. Supporting shared financial tools, technical assistance, and peer learning around cooperative economics would allow grantees to translate wealth redistribution into durable community wealth.

3

- **Catalyze cooperative funding models to build permanent infrastructure for BIPOC arts ecosystems.** The long-term self-determination of artists of color should not depend solely on their individual resilience or ingenuity—it requires durable, systemic investment in the infrastructure that sustains their creative and economic lives. Surdna is well-positioned to play a catalytic role in this effort by convening and co-designing cooperative funding models with peer foundations, public agencies, and mission-aligned investors. This could include establishing pooled funds or regional consortia dedicated to building and maintaining community-owned cultural spaces, endowments, and financing vehicles that support artist housing, studios, and land stewardship. Surdna can also lead by embedding shared accountability structures—ensuring that BIPOC cultural leaders help shape the design, governance, and distribution strategies of these funds.



Open Television Co-Founder Elijah McKinnon awarded “Storyteller in Residence” at the 2023 Clinton Global Initiative

Finding 5: Organizational issues, underfunding, and an increasingly harsh political context are among the greatest barriers for grantees' capacity.

Grantees shared that their **ability to fully engage with the Thriving Cultures Program is shaped by forces both within their organizations and in the broader political and economic environment.**

Grantees continue to experience entrenched issues, such as burnout, staff layoffs, internal organizational flux and constrained internal capacity. Challenges like these have at times made it more difficult for grantees to carry out their Thriving Cultures projects as planned. "We have had a handful of staff who have led and developed our current project with Surdna that are no longer with the organization, taking with them valuable historical context."

Due to the chronic underfunding of BIPOC-led organizations, Black leaders, in particular, reported carrying disproportionate burdens of care, advocacy, and unpaid labor.

One grantee reported that conditions like these, "push Black women and femmes and marginalized leaders into servant leadership. And so then you give, give, give, but you have nothing left for yourself."

Over the last year, challenges have become even more pronounced. **Thriving Cultures grantees have been managing internal organization challenges while also facing shrinking public funding and growing aggression toward racial equity work** (see Figure 2). Grantees noted that fewer organizations are continuing diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI) and justice work, while funders have stepped away from racial justice commitments in the face of political pressure. One grantee noted, "We have experienced the tangible impact of this hostile environment, including the revocation of over \$2 million in federal funding, explicitly attributed to "DEI" initiatives."



This climate has created real threats to personal and organizational safety, forcing groups to invest in security, legal protections, and defensive strategies to safeguard their people and missions.

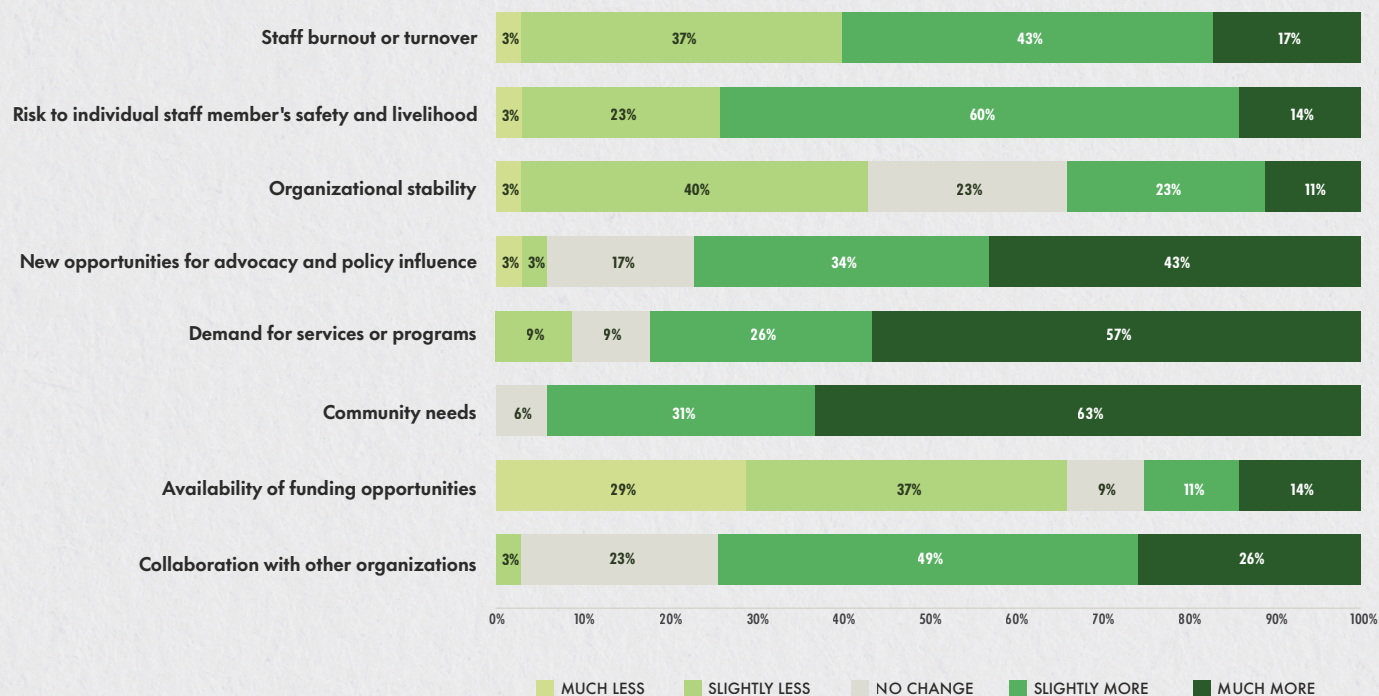
“We have been forced to significantly increase our security efforts to ensure the safety and protection of all our staff and guests on the land.”

“There’s a lot of real concerns around safety—being exposed to TSA, ICE [and other] institutions.”

“The field is stretched thin, resources are tight, the context in which programming is deployed is shifting and changing to meet the immediate needs, sometimes emergency needs of community.”

Figure 2. Grantee survey responses about the impacts of the current landscape

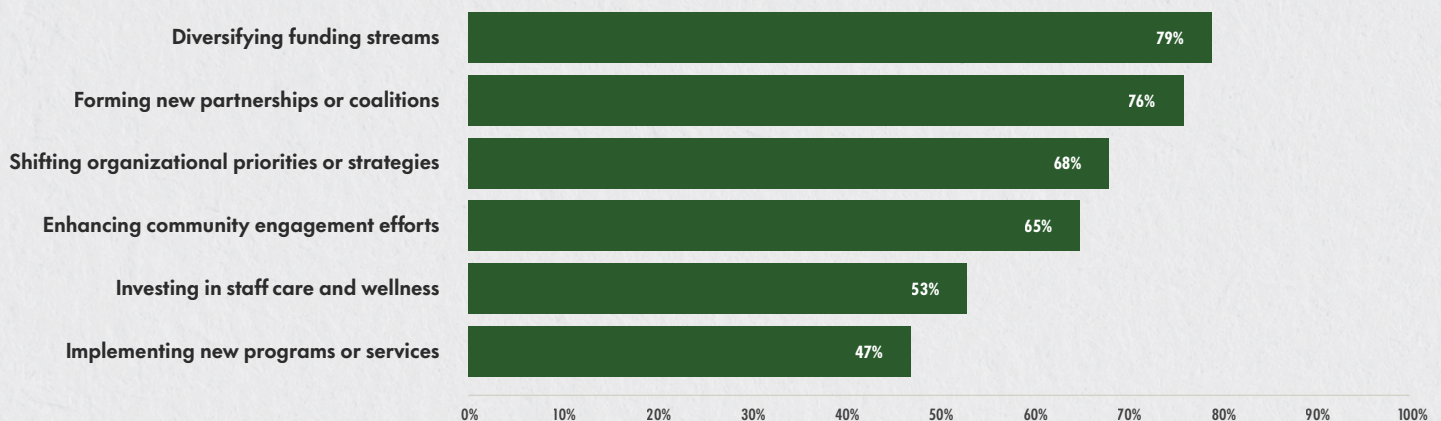
Current socio-political landscape leading to less funding but more community needs and demand for services



Over the course of the Thriving Cultures project, grantees were able to evolve their tactics and practices to weather changes in the external environment. Grantees demonstrated adaptability and creativity in building sustainable connections and resisting harmful pressures in response to changing socio-political conditions (Figure 3). **Grantees underscored that thriving internally is essential to sustaining external commitments.**

The most common way they did this was through diversifying funding streams. The arts and culture sector has long talked about revenue diversification, but these grantees put it into practice.

Figure 3. Adaptations Grantees are making to respond to changing socio-political landscape



Still despite these nimble efforts, we cannot ignore the current climate of rising political backlash against racial equity. Now more than ever, Surdna should expand its support beyond programmatic funding to include **defensive infrastructure that safeguards the people and missions of BIPOC arts organizations.** This includes providing flexible resources for legal counsel, crisis

communications, and physical and digital security, as well as establishing partnerships with trusted intermediaries who can offer rapid-response support when organizations face threats, harassment, or funding revocations. The political, economic, and cultural conditions surrounding BIPOC artists and organizations directly shape how they experience safety, partnership, capacity, and impact.

We recommend that Surdna:

1

- **Provide resources for organizations to develop safety plans** both in the workplace and beyond. Know Your Rights trainings can be a key feature of the safety plan, but organizations should also develop policies for how to respond to on-site and off-site threats to personal and organizational safety, such as ICE raids, subpoenas, lawsuits, or doxxing. Surdna can strengthen this work by funding peer learning cohorts or technical assistance providers who specialize in digital, legal, and physical security for BIPOC arts organizations—helping grantees adapt safety protocols that reflect their specific risks and community contexts.

2

- **Strengthen collective protection for BIPOC organizations** operating in hostile political environments by establishing partnerships with trusted intermediaries who can offer swift-action support when organizations face threats, harassment, or funding revocations. Surdna also can advocate within philanthropy for collective protection measures, such as pooled legal defense funds and coordinated rapid-response systems, to ensure that when one organization is targeted for their racial justice work, others can mobilize in solidarity and support.

Firelight Media



Finding 6: Grantees dedicated much time, energy, and resources to strengthening their organizations and their communities, as well as deepening solidarity networks beyond their local contexts.

According to the data, strengthening organization capacity often meant cultivating new forms of sustainability. Grantees diversified funding sources, created new business entities outside of the 501(c)3 structure, and built permanent, revenue-generating assets, such as purchasing real estate, building studio space, and developing curriculum that can be sold on-demand.

At the community level, several grantees described how intergenerational participation and sovereignty-building efforts were keys to generating community strength. One grantee said, “We are growing the next generation of organizers, activists, political educators, and we are growing good food and teaching people how to feed themselves.” Another commented, “Tactics we have used have been [bilingual] popular education and participatory design methods... talking about radically imagining what a vacant lot can look like.”

Grantees also described the importance of building networks to counter isolation. One grantee spoke about how their organization has been strategizing on how to “solidify and activate their network” in order to be better resourced in their racial justice efforts.

Another mentioned, “For us at [our organization]... we’re really focusing on... the need for more connectivity across the movements, across our groups, even within our own Indigenous communities.”



Surdna staff at Hammer & Hope’s Winter Issue 2025 release gathering

Finding 6 reminds us that **the success of the Thriving Cultures Program is not only about protecting people, communities and networks, but it is also about strengthening them.** For Surdna, recognizing and responding to this two-pronged approach through long-term investments and unrestricted funding will be critical to the survivability and durability of the organizations and their success that move us toward a racially just society.

We recommend that Surdna:

1

- **Continue to prioritize general operating, multi-year support as the default funding model.** Grantees affirmed that unrestricted, long-term funding is the most effective way to sustain their community-building work, especially in volatile political and economic environments. Rather than relying on short-term project grants, Surdna should continue to provide decades-long, unrestricted general operating support for Thriving Cultures. This reliable source of income would allow organizations to plan strategically, invest in their staff and communities, and respond flexibly to opportunities and threats as they arise.

2

- **Dedicate space and resources for grantees to build solidarity with each other and aligned organizations.** Grantees rated peer learning and networking opportunities as one of the most valuable resources offered by the Thriving Cultures Program and emphasized that these activities were more important now than ever. By creating spaces for grantees to cross-pollinate and strategize, the foundation can amplify the scale and impact of grantee work, thereby strengthening communities locally, regionally and nationally. Surdna should maintain a consistent cadence of virtual and in-person gatherings in which the agenda is extremely light and grantees have ample time to share their work and build intentional relationships. Surdna should allocate funding to sponsor collaborative efforts that emerge from these gatherings.

Part 2. Findings by Intervention

The Thriving Cultures Program carries out its Radical Imagination for Racial Justice strategy through eight interventions. While each intervention stands on its own, they are all connected by a shared belief that **culture and arts are powerful tools for building stronger, more just communities**. The summaries that follow highlight major accomplishments and challenges across these eight interventions over the past five years.

Create: Artist Regranting

OVERVIEW

The Artist Regranting intervention was designed to get resources directly into the hands of BIPOC artists and culture bearers through trusted intermediary organizations. This intervention aimed to strengthen local arts ecosystems and position artists as essential leaders in healing, organizing, and reimagining just futures.

PROGRESS AND OUTCOMES

Regranting organizations described a wide range of ripple effects from their supported artists and projects. At the individual level, many artists experienced significant career advancement, including national recognition, fellowships, and industry placements, which in turn helped elevate the visibility of BIPOC stories. Several noted that these opportunities catalyzed their confidence and made them feel validated as cultural producers and social change agents.

“Several artists have premiered work at Sundance, signed with top agencies, and secured development deals with leading media institutions such as Netflix, HBO, and Hulu.”

“Artist reports describe strengthening cultural identity, reconnection to ancestral homelands, and increased opportunities to collaborate. For example, projects deepened literary work and led to invitations to curate new public cultural programs.”



At the community level, the ripple effects included stronger networks, new spaces for convening, and healing-centered practices that reinforced cultural identity and belonging. Projects often sparked dialogue on pressing issues such as housing displacement, environmental justice, and health equity, while also fostering solidarity and resilience in under-resourced communities. Many grantees emphasized that these outcomes extended to collective infrastructures—worker-owned models, publishing houses, grassroots collectives, and cultural convenings—that continue to expand the reach and impact of their work.

“Artists are central to the national economic justice movement for guaranteed income and other safety net protections. Artists supported with guaranteed income are creating more work that is specifically for the benefit of their own communities vs. driven by funder or market demands.”

CHALLENGES

Despite major successes, grantees surfaced several structural tensions. Most notably, the regranting model exposed sustainability challenges. Grantees emphasized that multi-year, unrestricted funding is essential to sustain grassroots organizations and that regranting alone is not enough—artists and groups also need mentorship, peer networks, and healing-centered support.

“One of the biggest challenges has been securing additional funding to support admin/staff costs that align with program needs, plus securing additional funds for grantee development.”

“Among the challenges is how to support artists in sustaining their lives while creating art, and how to balance our creative work with providing administrative and fiscal scaffolding.”

Others pointed to the importance of transparency, trust, and respect in funding relationships, while also acknowledging the need to address burnout, adapt to shifting political climates, and build resilience in under-resourced communities.

“Affirmation that artists deeply appreciate their creative autonomy. Respect and trust-based philanthropy is the gift that keeps giving. The challenge: how to stay involved and connected in the work while navigating power dynamics of funder and grantee relationships.”



Black Trans Fund

IMPLICATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The Artist Regranting intervention demonstrated that when artists are resourced to lead, they transform not only their own trajectories but they also activate new systems of belonging, resilience, and racial justice.

- ▶ Supporting BIPOC artists is key to radical imagining for racial justice. Therefore, it makes sense that the artist regranting intervention represents the largest component of the overall strategy. The recommendation is to keep it this way. Protecting artists and their artistic and cultural freedom, especially amidst political backlash, should remain a key intervention within the Thriving Cultures strategy. Protections should include capital investments that go beyond supporting artists' basic needs to honoring their labor as dream-holders and world-builders. As well, artists and the organizations that support them need legal protections that allow them to "stay close to the edge without falling off."



Create: Art x Tech

OVERVIEW

The Art x Tech intervention supports artists, innovators, and cultural organizations working at the intersection of technology, equity, and creative expression. Because technology shapes how people experience culture, work, and democracy, the goal is to ensure that technological systems reflect values of racial justice and collective well-being. Grantees within this portfolio expose bias in emerging technologies, build creative digital infrastructure, and reimagine how technology can serve communities rather than harm them.

PROGRESS AND OUTCOMES

Grantees described their work spanning digital storytelling, research, and advocacy to challenge the racialized impacts of data collection, surveillance, and artificial intelligence (AI). One grantee commented, “We are resisting the development of AI systems that exhibit racial bias in housing, hiring, and the economy through advocacy, advisory, and shareholder activism.” Through apprenticeship and ambassador programs, artists have trained participants who then become teachers and mentors themselves.

“We train individuals in immersive storytelling and education, and then they go out and train others to build the ecosystem... now that might go from me training one person to this other person training twenty.”

“We would like to end up being an organization that defies the idea that AI has taken all the entry-level jobs... and be positioned to prove the business case for a racially just AI system.”

These programs have had tangible economic impact. Several grantees shared examples of participants whose hourly rates more than doubled after completing training. Others highlighted international collaborations, including work with Amnesty International and Mozilla, which helped center BIPOC perspectives in global conversations on AI and justice.

“We’ve been working with Mozilla on an initiative that’s about bias and surveillance. It’s not just about art—it’s about protecting our communities and making sure we’re represented in technology spaces.”

One organization described an impressive evolution from federal-level policy advocacy to directly influencing major technology companies. Through advisory roles and shareholder activism, they have advanced accountability mechanisms within the private sector, including at leading social media and AI firms.

CHALLENGES

Grantees described infrastructure and sustainability challenges that limited the scale of their impact. Grantees identified the challenge of balancing visionary work with internal capacity-building. The rapid shifts in the tech landscape demand nimble strategy, but organizational systems—finance, staffing, evaluation—often lag behind.

Many grantees expressed the need for strategic mentorship and operational support, noting that capacity was a primary barrier. “You get so in the trenches doing the work... a call, an introduction, or strategic advice could have doubled the value of what we already had.”

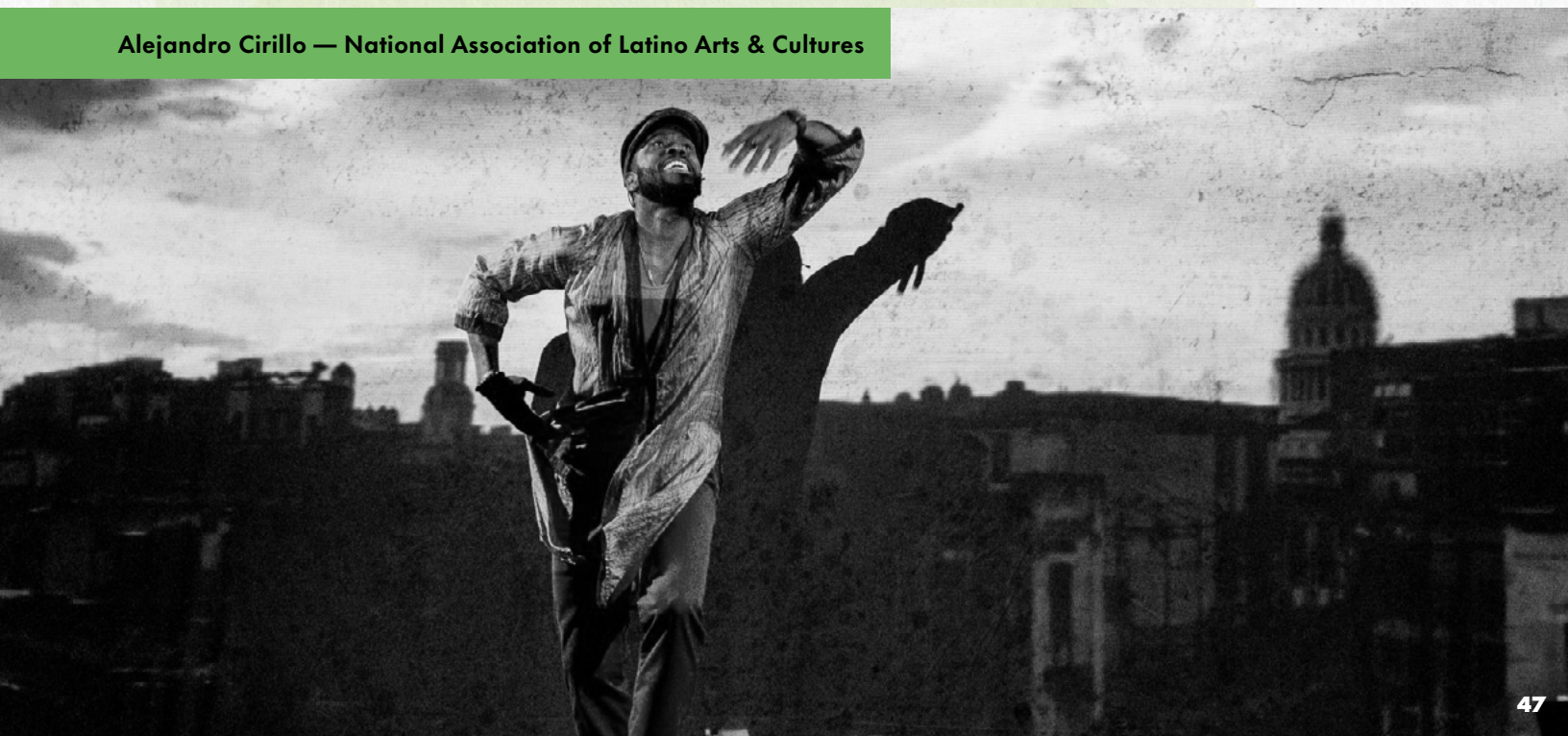
Grantees also emphasized the need for ongoing systems-building support, particularly to navigate rapid technological change and maintain equipment and software. One commented, **“the tech is always evolving, and we’re trying to keep up while still centering people and storytelling. We need help thinking about sustainability, not just projects.”**

IMPLICATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Grantees suggested that Surdna could help strengthen infrastructure and peer connection across the Art x Tech field.

- ▶ Provide strategic advising and convenings focused on sharing learning among organizations. “We don’t need more rules—we need more relationships. Having a space where Art x Tech folks can speak with one another and share what’s working would make a big difference.”
- ▶ Enable the building and maintenance of technological systems, such as data storage, staffing, and technology infrastructure either through direct financial support to organizations or collective purchasing/sharing agreements across the Thriving Cultures grantees.

Alejandro Cirillo — National Association of Latino Arts & Cultures



Create: Place-Based Exemplars

OVERVIEW

The Place-Based Exemplars grantees are those that embody all three approaches of the Radical Imagination for Racial Justice strategy: Create, Clarify, and Connect.

PROGRESS AND OUTCOMES

Place-based partners have used Surdna's flexible support to stabilize, imagine, and sustain local cultural ecosystems. Grantees described their partnership with Surdna as "one of our most valuable," emphasizing its trust-based, relationship-centered approach that encouraged reflection and long-term visioning.

"This is a moment when, after the hurricane, Puerto Rico is no longer the flavor of the month. While others packed up, Surdna stayed. That long-term approach allowed us to do place-based work most funders don't stay in for."

Organizations reported that general operating support allowed them to strengthen staff wellbeing, restructure compensation toward "thriving wages," and invest in physical and social infrastructure from deferred maintenance to cultural district planning. One grantee convened local partners to create a coalition for cultural protection in the face of gentrification, ensuring that "the people who live here have the resources and support they need to thrive and remain in their communities."

Another grantee leveraged flexible funding to establish a Leadership and Infrastructure Fund that supports both organizations and their leaders' wellbeing—recognizing that resilience requires rest, healing, and sustainable infrastructure. One grantee mentioned using Surdna support to expand health and economic justice initiatives, advancing their vision of moving "from despair to dignity."

Art.Coop



Our vision is to prioritize imagination in times of creative, emotional, spiritual and political uncertainty.
Our mission is to pursue authenticity, interaction, identity, with whomever is seeking creative, emotional, spiritual, and political clarity.
Our art (performance / visual / multi-media) is grounded in a rigorous ensemble aesthetic unfolded in dream, imagery, metaphor, mystery and symbolism.

Our work (cultural / economic / organizational / personal / political) is created and sustained within an open, honest meaningful, relevant shared experience.
We call this 'Living Culture'.
Our dedication is to face isolation and erasure; to face despair and pain that can translate into personal incapacity and political paralysis. TO UPLIFT.
We call this 'Art Justice'.

CHALLENGES

Grantees emphasized that place-based work is deeply shaped by external systems and political realities—from colonial governance in Puerto Rico to climate disasters in New Orleans to displacement in Brooklyn.

“We are in a permanent disaster cycle... while philanthropies disinvest, we have to fight just to be included.”

“Before Katrina, New Orleans was 82% Black. Now it’s 58%. Even with Black leaders, state power keeps siphoning local control.”

The conversation revealed how colonial and racialized policies, climate change, and gentrification collectively threaten cultural continuity. These forces demand long-term commitments and flexible resources that match the scale and timespan of systemic change. As one grantee noted, “It just takes a long time—deep, system-changing work doesn’t happen in traditional grant cycles.”

Despite these challenges, participants highlighted the power of connection across places, identifying shared struggles between island, southern, and urban contexts: “So much of our work is rooted in place, but so much of what impacts us has nothing to do with our place. The importance is that our places connect.”

IMPLICATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Grantees’ reflections position the Place-Based Exemplars as living models of self-determined community power. Grantees understand that local contexts are fractals—there is self-similarity at local, regional and national levels.

- The forces of oppression behave similarly, no matter the local context. Because of this, the strategies for overcoming oppression can be shared and replicated. Therefore, it is crucial that there be a plethora of opportunities for Thriving Cultures’ grantees to gather with each other, share stories of triumph, and build a solidarity network.



Frederick “Wood” Delahoussaye &
Sha’Condria “Icon” Sibley, Ashe MAAFA

Connect: Narrative Change

OVERVIEW

The Narrative Change intervention supports artists, media producers, and cultural strategists who use storytelling, journalism, and creative media to reshape the dominant narratives about race, gender, and power in the United States. Grantees in this portfolio work across film, journalism, and digital platforms to center BIPOC voices, affirm queer and trans lives, and shift cultural understanding toward liberation and belonging. The intervention builds on the recognition that culture drives policy: before systems change, narratives must change.

PROGRESS AND OUTCOMES

Grantees reported that the Narrative Change initiative has been instrumental in reframing public conversations around racial justice, democracy, and collective liberation. They have created films, digital content, podcasts, and artistic convenings that make visible lived experiences of historically excluded communities while expanding public empathy and understanding.

“We tell stories to remind people of the humanity of trans and gender-expansive people in a moment when that’s being systematically erased. Every story we tell is a refusal to be silenced.”

Several grantees described using cultural festivals, digital storytelling platforms, and creative networks to generate new spaces for connection and artistic development. These efforts led to collaborations among artists, producers, and organizers who would not otherwise have met, resulting in new works and strengthened cultural ecosystems.

“Attending these programs encouraged people to develop their own practices as artists and gave them access to networks that have changed the trajectory of their work.”

Grantees also emphasized the power of narrative as a civic and organizing tool, noting that storytelling shapes what communities believe is possible.

“We understand narrative as infrastructure—it’s what makes democracy possible. When we shift the story about who belongs, we shift what policies become imaginable.”

Narrative Change organizations reported measurable outcomes such as increased visibility for BIPOC and queer artists, broader audience engagement, and more equitable representation in national media. One grantee mentioned, “Our work has helped move significant resources to artists of color while expanding audiences and visibility for Black and queer creative voices.”

CHALLENGES

Grantees described the narrative change field as under-resourced. Sustaining narrative efforts amid political hostility and misinformation requires long-term commitment, yet funders often treat cultural and media work as secondary to policy or advocacy.

“Narrative change is slow—it’s like water shaping stone. Funders need to stay for the long haul because backlash is part of the process.”

Participants spoke candidly about the emotional toll of visibility and representation, describing burnout from continuously producing, defending, and contextualizing their stories within hostile environments.

“We’re constantly explaining why our existence is worthy of art, why our stories matter. That’s not just creative labor—it’s emotional labor too.”

IMPLICATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Grantees offered several recommendations for how to deepen the impact and sustainability of narrative change work:

- ▶ Recognize storytelling as structural work—a critical form of infrastructure that sustains the imagination, courage, and cohesion needed for social movements to thrive. Encourage archiving, documentation, oral history, and intergenerational knowledge transfer within grantee organizations. Support narrative strategists, cultural memory workers, and community archivists as essential staff.
- ▶ Build bridges between artists, organizers, and policymakers. Convenings that bring together creative and movement leaders help align cultural narratives with structural advocacy goals.

Casa Pueblo



Connect: Policy Advocacy & Movement Convenings

OVERVIEW

The Policy Advocacy and Movement Convenings intervention uplifts organizations working at the intersection of culture, policy, and social movements to advance racial justice. The work recognizes that systemic change requires both cultural and structural transformation through shifting mindsets, redistributing governing power, and sustaining movement ecosystems.

PROGRESS AND OUTCOMES

Grantees have leveraged Surdna funding to expand national networks and deepen influence across policy and culture fields. One grantee has sustained a network of over 400 jurisdictions committed to racial equity, even as others have lost capacity or retracted public commitments. They identified this persistence as a key win, describing it as “holding the line” on racial justice when many others could not and emphasized their organization’s work to help community members hold positions of decision making power.

“We think about, ‘what does governing power mean?’... It means a fundamental change in how institutions, particularly public institutions operate in this country. If we don't change the way that our government operates and is built then, power will just be the same, right? [The status quo] is that communities will be consulted, communities will be brought in when it's useful, but not a fundamental part of anything that informs our material conditions.”

Another grantee described offering artists tangible ways to build collaboration, fight repression, and imagine anti-authoritarian futures, emphasizing that creative practice is both resistance and rehearsal for liberation.

“We can change policies and laws, but we can’t change how this country operates without shifting mindsets and the narratives we tell ourselves—especially around race and who we are centering.”



Firelight Media at BlackStar Film Festival

CHALLENGES

Similar to other intervention areas within the Thriving Cultures strategy, grantees described working under mounting political repression, where racial equity leaders face job loss, censorship, and institutional fear. Although these conditions are not unique to those working in policy advocacy and movement convenings, this is the data that emerged through focus groups and survey findings.

“People are changing their titles, removing race from websites, rebranding positions. The problem is different now—and so the way we think about power and resistance has to shift too.”

This climate of fear, isolation, and shrinking resources has forced organizations to adapt their strategies for safety and sustainability. One grantee established a 501(c)(4) arm to protect its advocacy work and began convening funders to coordinate responses to rising anti-equity legislation. Another grantee, operating with a small team, focused on cultivating community resilience through projects like its healing-centered program built from grief and loss, designed to keep people connected amid political repression.

Both organizations underscored that internal organizational culture is foundational to external impact. As one leader explained:

“The lack of psychological safety has undergirded nonprofits forever. It’s neoliberal to blame everything on Trump—people left because workplace culture was broken long before that.”

They emphasized the urgent need for healing-centered leadership and capacity support, especially for Black women and femme leaders who shoulder disproportionate emotional and organizational labor.

“It’s a crisis. Leaders are paying out of pocket for coaching because they can’t get it funded... There’s not enough healing-centered support for leaders trying to keep organizations alive.”

IMPLICATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Grantees identified several pathways for sustaining policy advocacy and movement-based work:

- ▶ Fund internal culture as a measure of success. Evaluation and grantmaking should recognize team development, rest, and organizational strengthening as legitimate racial justice outcomes—not separate from the work itself.
- ▶ Invest in healing-centered organizational development. Regularly resource leadership coaching, wellness support, and time for strategy reflection. As one leader noted, “You can’t just leave when the going gets tough—the only way to it is through it.”
- ▶ Sustain flexible, long-term funding. General operating support allowed groups to pivot, respond to crises, and maintain critical networks. Grantees credited Surdna’s flexibility as essential for survival in this volatile moment.
- ▶ Support coordination among funders. Participate in “funder tables” that promote alignment and shared risk-taking in defending racial justice work collectively.

Connect: Philanthropic Influence

OVERVIEW

The Philanthropic Influence intervention invests in organizations that aim to transform the culture and practice of philanthropy itself. These partners work to shift narratives, norms, and decision-making structures within the philanthropic sector to make it more accountable to BIPOC communities.

PROGRESS AND OUTCOMES

Grantees described significant progress in shifting discourse within the field of philanthropy toward greater equity and relational accountability. They viewed culture as a lever for transformation to move funders out of scarcity mindsets. Through the support of Surdna's Thriving Cultures Program, grantees launched new multi-platform strategies to model this shift. One organization developed a podcast series that brought philanthropic leaders into open, reflective conversation about power and imagination:

“Our podcast guests, who are most often well-known foundation CEOs, are usually nervous to talk with us. They are taking the invitation to freedom dreaming seriously... They are listening to what their peers are offering and trying to meet it.”

Grantees in this intervention describe encouraging funders to develop shared language and frameworks. As one grantee explained, “We are looking at take-up in the language we are using—freedom dreaming, radical imagination—as evidence of influence.”

Sustaining this language ecosystem helps normalize justice-oriented discourse across the philanthropic sector.

Grantees took pride in events such as cross-generational, pro-Black and pro-queer convenings that served as tangible spaces for joy, reflection, and collective imagination. Participants described these experiences as “electric,” “needed,” and illustrating early signs of cultural change in philanthropy’s approach to racial justice and belonging.

“We are on to something when it comes to advancing self-determination for Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities, and we are just getting started.”

“Our work is a cultural change strategy for philanthropy. We have promising early returns based on our podcast, in-person salons, and growing following on social media.”

These activities positioned grantees as trusted cultural strategists within the philanthropic ecosystem, helping funders engage more deeply with racial justice language and practice. Their work reflected a belief that transformation happens through consistent relational influence.

“We do not have a policy ‘big P’ strategy, and that is by design. We work toward reciprocity between philanthropy and the communities that it seeks to serve.”

CHALLENGES

Grantees in this intervention acknowledged that influencing philanthropy is a slow, nonlinear process—one that involves navigating institutional fear, turnover, and the limits of funder imagination. They emphasized that philanthropy often resists its own transformation, especially amid political backlash and internal uncertainty.

Leaders also described the challenge of maintaining relationship continuity amid staff transitions within funding institutions. While participants expressed appreciation for Surdna's staff (noting that "Sarian generously worked with us so that we could host our first in-person salon at Surdna Foundation"), they also noted moments of disappointment when communication gaps with Surdna leadership limited visibility and momentum for shared goals.

Despite these challenges, grantees reported that the relationship with Thriving Cultures staff remained trust-based and generative, offering both credibility and flexibility as they tested new approaches to culture change.

IMPLICATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Grantees working within this intervention offered clear insights for sustaining and expanding philanthropic influence work:

- ▶ Resource culture change as a long-term strategy. Transformation within philanthropy requires patience, reflection, and imagination. Funders should invest beyond single projects to sustain narrative and relational shifts over time.
- ▶ Create consistent engagement between grantees and Surdna leadership. Opportunities for direct exchange with the foundation's President and Board can strengthen mutual understanding and visibility of this work's systemic significance.
- ▶ Invest in convenings that model new philanthropic culture. Grantees demonstrated that bringing funders, artists, and movement leaders into the same joyful, reflective space accelerates learning and trust-building.



Clarify: Participatory Action Research

OVERVIEW

The Participatory Action Research (PAR) intervention aimed to embed community-driven research methods within Surdna's regranting work, supporting artists, organizers, and researchers in generating knowledge for racial justice. PAR was intended to democratize knowledge production by pairing cultural organizations with research institutions. Over time, however, this structure evolved as grantees and staff sought more authentic, community-defined approaches to inquiry and learning.

PROGRESS AND OUTCOMES

Grantees described the PAR initiative as originally being a "dream" opportunity to deepen community-led research and cultural organizing.

"It was a dream... the work being funded in such a generous way to just do that beautiful work that we've been doing for decades was incredible."

Grantees' PAR fellows designed projects grounded in community ownership of data, cultural mapping, and storytelling as resistance. Grantees emphasized the long-term potential of participatory research to build power when done with alignment and trust.

"PAR takes time... you're building with people, building trust, and that takes time. We move at the speed of trust."

"Neighbors trained as researchers—knowledge, data analysis, data ownership stays in the community."

The PAR process yielded creative, community-rooted models such as "folk-life PAR," blending oral history and cultural mapping with social science methods. Grantee examples included Tucson's participatory food sovereignty research—where community dialogue about recipes evolved into a campaign for collective land ownership—and "Somos Les" in San Francisco, which secured NIH funding for its community wellness research: "Such a huge institution legitimized community research as viable scientific data."



CHALLENGES

While PAR's intent was transformational, implementation revealed deep challenges and tensions. Some grantees found that Clarify's design—pairing community-based organizations with research partners created more friction than synergy. Differences in institutional culture, timelines, and methods led to misalignment and confusion.

“There was some resistance among grantees to work with [PAR researchers] because it just felt like, you know, like these people were coming in and evaluating them. Kind of looking over their shoulder the whole time.”

Grantees and staff also reflected that the top-down framing of PAR within Clarify made it difficult for participants to feel full ownership of the process. Grantees shared they wished they had been able to choose the organizations they partnered with. To make things worse, grantees shared how they felt the least included and valued out of all of the Thriving Cultures interventions.

“I always felt like we were kind of an afterthought... everybody spoke highly of PAR, but when it actually came to practice, I didn't see that reflected.”

Thriving Cultures Program staff met with PAR grantees and agreed about the shortcomings of the Clarify model. As one Thriving Cultures Program staff member shared:

“We tried to force something written in the [RIRJ] strategy papers, but the partnerships didn't align and communities questioned whether research practices would cause more harm than good.”

Over time, these challenges contributed to the phasing out of the Clarify component.

IMPLICATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

These lessons emphasize that PAR's strength lies in its process: when communities design and lead the work, participatory research becomes a catalyst for both healing and structural change. Grantees offered clear reflections for Surdna's future learning and strategy design:

- ▶ Surdna should champion and educate around the value of PAR. There was consensus that PAR is functional to community-driven radical imagination for racial justice. “People didn't fully believe that PAR builds power... we needed more of a champion for PAR.” Although PAR has been eliminated as a specific category within the funding strategy, we recommend that Surdna consider integrating PAR into its convening/professional learning offerings for grantees.
- ▶ Avoid prescriptive partnerships and prioritize community readiness. Grantees suggested that PAR—and similar efforts—should be community-led rather than designed at the strategy level, ensuring that partnerships form organically rather than by mandate.



ALOK from Pop Culture Collaborative's Pluralist Visionaries Program

Art x Economy

OVERVIEW

Though Art x Economy was not present in the initial conception of the RIRJ strategy, it emerged as a necessary area of focus. This intervention supports artists and organizations building alternative economic systems that center culture, community wealth, and self-determination. Art x Economy efforts explore the intersections of creativity, equity, and ownership—investing in artists and cultural innovators who are designing cooperative, solidarity-based models that challenge extractive economic norms.

PROGRESS AND OUTCOMES

Grantees under this portfolio have sought to reimagine how capital, power, and ownership flow within communities, positioning artists as critical agents of economic justice and systemic repair. They described deep progress in advancing health, wealth, and self-determination within BIPOC communities. Several initiatives, particularly those centered on guaranteed income for artists, have demonstrated that direct, no-strings-attached investment in cultural workers catalyzes both creative and economic transformation.

“Artists supported with guaranteed income are creating more work that is specifically for the benefit of their own communities vs. driven by funder or market demands.”

These artist-centered economic models have also contributed to policy influence at local and state levels, including efforts to cap

predatory lending rates, pilot guaranteed income programs, and reform healthcare access for working artists.

Other grantees within this intervention have worked to shift funder and institutional behavior, advocating for accountability to communities rather than the reverse. Their work has initiated dialogue across philanthropy about the role of culture in economic systems, contributing to greater visibility and legitimacy for solidarity-based economic models.

“Conversations about cultural expression and self-determination now intersect with ideas of community ownership, governance, and wealth-building.”

These investments have helped elevate community-led ownership efforts, such as land reclamation projects, artist cooperatives, and mutual aid networks. As one grantee reflected, their work has inspired others to replicate models that build local power and cultural resilience.

Grantees emphasized that failure and iteration are part of the learning process. Several initiatives that did not sustain financially still contributed essential field knowledge, advancing understanding of cooperative models, shared ownership, and artist-driven entrepreneurship.

CHALLENGES

Grantees noted several challenges that limit sustainability and alignment.

- ▶ Funders' short grant timelines (2–4 years) often conflict with the long-term nature of building new economic systems.
- ▶ The complexity of world-building work makes traditional impact measurement difficult; outcomes often emerge over many years.
- ▶ The broader political and economic climate, including inflation, disinvestment in arts, and attacks on racial justice infrastructure, continues to strain the capacity of movement-aligned organizations.

IMPLICATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Artists are designing new paradigms of community wealth, yet their work is often undervalued. Grantees offered several insights for Surdna and the broader field:

- ▶ Support infrastructure for learning and adaptation. Fund resource knowledge-sharing and legal/technical assistance for artist-driven cooperative and ownership-based models.
- ▶ Promote cross-program collaboration within philanthropy. Integrating culture and economy across program areas can amplify systemic impact and avoid siloing transformative work.



Former TC program director F. Javier Torres at Black Star Film Festival with partners Crux and GRX Immersive Labs

Part 3. Rethinking Strategy: From Proving a Thesis to Being a Steward of Dreams

Over the past several years, the *Thriving Cultures* strategy has advanced a bold and necessary vision: to resource BIPOC arts and culture organizations that are working at the intersections of racial justice, housing, economic empowerment, and climate resilience (to name a few). This commitment—to fund unrestricted, community-rooted, imagination-driven work—is a significant contribution to the field of philanthropy. It signals a belief that culture is not peripheral to justice but foundational to it.

Yet within this powerful orientation lies a conceptual tension. In its effort to make the strategy legible and communicable, Surdna has organized its portfolio into three categories—Create, Clarify, and Connect—each corresponding to key domains of influence such as narrative change, policy advocacy, or philanthropic transformation. These categories were developed to help the foundation describe how imagination animates systems change and to align learning across a diverse cohort of grantees. However, as the strategy has matured, it has become increasingly clear that this structure—while elegant on paper—can risk constraining the very imagination it seeks to elevate.

The Tension Between Clarity and Complexity

Grantees' work does not fall neatly into discrete boxes. Organizations that “create” also “connect”; those that “clarify” through research or advocacy often simultaneously generate new cultural forms and relationships. These intersections are not incidental—they are the point. Radical imagination in practice is fluid, iterative, and relational. It thrives and emerges in the spaces between categories, not within them.



When a philanthropic framework classifies grantees primarily by type of impact, it may inadvertently flatten the multidimensional nature of their work. Over time, the classification can evolve from a descriptive tool into a prescriptive one, potentially shaping how some organizations understand themselves and what they report. The risk is that groups begin performing to fit categories rather than evolving in response to community need. In such cases, the foundation's categories—initially designed to reflect the field—may start to shape it.

Given Surdna's status as a leading voice in racial equity philanthropy, other foundations often look to its strategies as benchmarks of best practice. While this influence can help shift the field toward justice, it also creates risk: if the current categorical framework is adopted uncritically, it could unintentionally perpetuate reductive approaches to BIPOC organizations. A rigid or overly standardized model may encourage funders to value alignment with framework language over alignment with community realities. Surdna's next phase can therefore emphasize transparency about its own learning process, explicitly naming the framework as a *living tool* rather than a fixed design—thereby modeling a form of leadership that resists replication and instead encourages reflexivity across the field.



The issue is not that the Create–Clarify–Connect framework is misguided. It has proven to be a useful sense-making device for internal alignment and communication. The issue is that these categories have been applied as buckets rather than lenses. When categories become identity markers, they can obscure the dynamic ecosystems of practice that make racial justice work powerful. They risk turning living, emergent cultural work into a taxonomy of “exemplary cases,” rather than an evolving story of collective transformation.

Toward Simplicity

Simplifying this framework does not require collapsing categories or replacing them with new ones. Instead, potency can come from *de-centering the framework itself*. Rather than asking, *Which bucket does this organization fit into?*, the guiding question could become, **How do the forces of creation, clarification, and connection manifest through this organization's practice over time?**

This reframing positions the categories as interpretive lenses that can be rotated, overlapped, or temporarily set aside, depending on what the work reveals. It acknowledges that organizations move dynamically among them, sometimes inhabiting all three

simultaneously. Such flexibility honors the lived complexity of grantee practice while still providing a structure for collective reflection.

In this model, Surdna does not need to demonstrate that each grantee exemplifies one category perfectly. Instead, the foundation can focus on understanding how these orientations toward imagination interact across the portfolio. Potency arises not from sharper categorization, but from a more porous and relational way of seeing.

From Proof to Stewardship

The foundation's strategy emerged from a genuine desire to articulate how imagination drives systems change. That desire remains valid—and vital. But the next phase of the Thriving Cultures strategy can lean into a different form of rigor: one rooted in field witnessing rather than field testing.

Rigor here means staying close to the truth of what is unfolding on the ground, even when it defies neat explanation. It means allowing the framework to breathe and evolve in conversation with the organizations it was built to support. Surdna can still trace patterns and communicate impact, but the narrative it tells will be one of emergent coherence, not categorical proof.

Ultimately, the question is not whether the Create–Clarify–Connect framework holds up, but whether Surdna can hold the work—and hold it lightly enough that it can keep growing. Rather than asking grantees to demonstrate alignment with Surdna's strategic categories, the foundation can position itself as a listener and amplifier—curating how the diverse practices of its partners collectively illuminate new architectures of justice. By doing so, Surdna evolves from proving a thesis to stewarding a field of practice—one that reveals, in motion, how imagination becomes infrastructure for a more just world.

This reframing keeps the analytical precision funders need. Traditional analysis looks for proof that each grantee produces quantifiable outcomes aligned with a theory of change. Stewardship reframes precision as *pattern recognition*: tracing how imagination, collaboration, and justice-building unfold across contexts. Yet it also can affirm the relational, imaginative, and emergent realities that grantees inhabit. It gives Surdna a role worthy of its values: not to categorize imagination, but to help the world recognize it as a force already transforming what justice can look like.

Mississippi Center for Cultural Production



Part 4. Closing

The political terrain in the United States shifted dramatically after the 2024 election. Bright Line Watch's April 2025 expert survey concludes that U.S. democracy is deteriorating sharply since Trump's second term began, with political scientists reporting steep declines in protections for free speech/press and judicial independence and judging recent and proposed federal actions—using agencies to punish opponents, targeting ActBlue, restricting and defunding universities, deportation abuses, denaturalizations, and even sending U.S. citizens to foreign prisons—as serious or extraordinary threats.¹

The return of Trump to the White House has emboldened authoritarian and fascist agendas, intensifying efforts to erase cultures of color,² criminalize racial justice organizing and political opposition,³ and roll back hard-won gains for LGBTQ communities.⁴ The administration's DEI purge and push for "patriotic education" work in tandem to erase cultures of color by stripping DEI offices, guidance, and funding while privileging ideologically framed history/civics over inclusive curricula. Simultaneously, it has targeted opposition and movement organizing (e.g., the ActBlue investigation and other punitive proposals flagged by experts) and rolled back LGBTQ protections by restoring Title IX enforcement "on the basis of biological sex" alongside an order to "restore biological truth."

For arts and culture leaders who are from queer, Black, Indigenous, and communities of color, these conditions are not merely political headwinds but existential threats. The recommendations drawn from our mid-strategy review data remain vital, yet the urgency of this moment requires that Thriving Cultures adopt a more expansive, anti-authoritarian strategy to sustain radical imagination for racial justice.



¹ <https://brightlinewatch.org/threats-to-democracy-and-academic-freedom-after-trumps-second-first-100-days/>

² <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-radical-and-wasteful-government-dei-programs-and-preferencing/>

³ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/04/investigation-into-unlawful-straw-donor-and-foreign-contributions-in-american-elections/>

⁴ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/defending-women-from-gender-ideology-extremism-and-restoring-biological-truth-to-the-federal-government/>

The lesson is clear: philanthropy cannot continue to operate as though this is a normal policy cycle. It must pivot from traditional program support toward strategies that actively block authoritarian consolidation while strengthening the long arc of liberation. This means investing not only in cultural production but in infrastructure for resistance: think tanks, legal defense networks, mutual aid systems, and cross-movement solidarity.

Philanthropic partners and cultural funders must recognize that we are no longer working in an environment of incremental progress but under conditions of authoritarian threat. The very survival of BIPOC-led arts organizations—and the radical imagination they carry—is at stake. This moment demands courage from funders to resist political pressures that sanitize or erase commitments to equity, to double down on investments in communities most under attack, and to align resources not just with art-making but with the infrastructure of resistance. Anything less risks abdicating the sector's responsibility in this era.

Philanthropy has long underfunded BIPOC arts and cultural organizations, yet these communities remain the vessels of freedom dreams and radical imagination. Funders must act decisively to create shields for grassroots organizations that are bearing the brunt of repression. This includes sustaining intermediaries who can absorb the political risks of public-facing compliance while protecting local groups engaged in radical practice. It means financing long-term capacity, not just short-term projects, so that organizations can weather surveillance, censorship, and financial precarity.

Finally, partners must understand that this is a time to abandon neutrality. Fascism thrives when institutions hesitate or equivocate. Thriving Cultures invites funders, allies, and civic partners to stand unambiguously on the side of racial justice, to invest in collective survival, and to help expand the “big we.” The arts are not peripheral to this fight—they are the vessel through which people imagine freedom, sustain solidarity, and mobilize against erasure. The call to action is clear: resource courageously, protect fiercely, and dream unapologetically.

BLIS Collective Reclamation Day 2026





July 2026

www.riseresearch.io