

Foundation of Greater Montréal



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Principle 3



We're hoping to change the culture of philanthropy and, like any cultural shift, it starts slowly and takes time.

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About the Foundation of Greater Montréal

The [Foundation of Greater Montréal \(FGM\)](#) is a community foundation committed to serving and listening to its community and dedicated to its collective well-being. In collaboration with its partners, it mobilises philanthropic resources, disseminates knowledge and sparks initiatives, all to build a community that is free of poverty and discrimination, where all can realise their potential and live in a healthy environment, now and in the future.

What was the challenge?

Philanthropy in Canada has often focused on making short-term grants to charities, hospitals and health institutions, universities, larger community centres and arts organisations. [Most Canadians donate to religious organisations or to causes that focus on health and social services.](#) This is largely in line with how Canadian foundations tend to approach grantmaking, with the exception of [swapping religious organisations for organisations that focus on education causes.](#) Though Canadian foundations, which are more place-based in their grantmaking, focus on their immediate communities and “[are more interested in the smaller charities working in the areas of social inclusion, reconciliation, youth development, immigrant integration, urban environments and climate change strategies and protection of the environment](#)”, when it comes to what they choose to fund, philanthropy in Canada has focused on more traditional causes.

In 2020 and 2021, FGM's traditional grantmaking was halted by the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on communities and the needs that emerged. The pandemic brought about great uncertainty and challenges for the Montréal community, including a spike in the unemployment rate, a rise in the demand for food aid, and an increase in the number of people temporarily experiencing poverty. FGM realised it needed to rethink its approach to philanthropic giving in order to provide faster, simpler, and more effective support. FGM recognised that its grantmaking was falling short of addressing the realities of the pandemic and that it needed to shift priorities to focus on the systemic issues its communities were facing. It became more apparent that the Foundation also needed to move with a sense of urgency to ensure that funds reached communities quickly so their needs could be addressed.

What was the response?

As a first response to this crisis, FGM adopted an emergency approach. At the height of the pandemic in 2020, and as a result of the priorities that needed to be focused on, FGM administered more than \$12 million via two emergency funds: the [COVID-19 Collective Fund](#), which the Foundation created at the start of the crisis and, shortly after that, the [Emergency Community Support Fund \(ECSF\)](#), established by the federal government and distributed by community foundations, the Red Cross and Centraide/United Way.

FGM engaged in an extensive and rigorous community consultation to identify the pressing needs of the communities and the best approach to support them. It organised workshops involving dozens of partners from the philanthropic and community sectors, reaching nearly 700 people; conducted individual interviews; and a 360-degree overview of its philanthropic giving and grantmaking approach. This process resulted in the development of the Foundation's new five-year [strategic plan](#), covering the 2022–2026 period. The FGM team recognised that its biggest challenge was the systemic issues their communities were facing, such as social equity, climate change, diversity and inclusion, and Indigenous rights.

As a result of this consultation process, FGM decided to be more intentional about using every tool at its disposal to support the organisations that combat systemic problems within their communities. This transformation was also reflected in the new strategic plan, which focused on the principles of trust-based philanthropy – an approach aimed at transforming how philanthropy is practised to make it more inclusive and democratic. It also decided to run its endowment differently by committing to managing 100 percent of it along the same set of values that underpin the entire organisation. As a community foundation, FGM aims to mobilise philanthropic funds, to play a catalytic role in the community, and document or amplify community voices. The new strategic plan emphasised FGM’s commitment to impact philanthropy and ensured that all the financial resources they mobilise have an impact from the moment funds are received until they are granted to community organisations.

The new strategic plan underlines the Foundation’s commitment to promoting justice, equity, and diversity and inclusion, which resulted in FGM’s decision to focus its interventions in six key areas: culture, health, education, social equity, diversity and inclusion, and ecological transition, as they work to further the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) in Greater Montréal. This shift has led to the creation of the [Collective Fund for Social Equity](#), the [Women’s Impact Montréal Collective Fund](#), the [Fund to Support Indigenous Initiatives](#), and the [Collective Fund for Climate and Ecological Transition](#).

The FGM board prioritised maintaining a donor-centric approach in this transition process. With a clear vision provided by its leadership and a staff who felt enabled and empowered to make the shift a reality, FGM’s team and board were ready to make this transformation. They recognised that an aspect of their added value to donors was that they understood the needs of the community and could amplify the impact of their philanthropy.

Simultaneously, in an effort to address the systemic barriers that many community organisations face – such as not having a charity status or philanthropic connections, being part of minority groups that have historically been invisible to funders, working for causes such as the environment that receive very little support, and the power imbalance that exists in top-down philanthropic practices – the Foundation also redefined its grantmaking process in line with community feedback.

The labour-intensive granting process, which required organisations to have a legal status and to have existed for a minimum amount of time, was acting as a barrier for many communities in need. In response, in the first year of the Collective Fund for Social Equity and the Collective Fund for Climate and Ecological Transition, FGM took a different approach and started integrating the principles of trust-based philanthropy into their grantmaking process; such as mutual respect, equity, humility, openness, the redistribution of power, building sincere relationships, and adopting a collaborative approach rooted in trust and knowledge sharing.

This transition towards a trust-based philanthropy approach began as a result of the reflections prompted by the pandemic and social justice movement of 2020, as well as an internal organisational shift that materialised in 2022. FGM created an entirely new philanthropic development team, a related committee on the Board of Directors, and a philanthropic development plan. Under new leadership, the Foundation was able to diversify its network and started developing connections and supporting philanthropy in Black communities. To develop a better understanding of the needs of the community organisations they aimed to support, FGM staff delved into the research provided by the affected communities. As part of their transition to trust-based grantmaking, FGM started sharing power with the communities working on the ground to solve the problems. They have made changes in their grantmaking approach by establishing multiyear unrestricted funding parameters, streamlining funding applications and reporting processes, soliciting and considering opinions and feedback, and providing support beyond grants. In the second edition of the Collective Fund for Social Equity distributed in early 2024, because it was longer-term funding with a larger budget, FGM started offering some grantees additional support for capacity building. Priority was given to emerging grassroots organisations and those with no other financial support. Additionally, a more participatory and conversation-based evaluation method was introduced, composed of an advisory committee whose members were drawn from the communities supported by the Fund.

As FGM deepened its engagement with social equity and social issues, and as it worked to develop its networks – especially within Indigenous and Black communities in Montréal – it recognised that some social organisations were not formally involved in philanthropy. As it came across these new networks, it was able to observe the grassroots philanthropic work that was taking place. In 2022, [new legislation](#) was adopted by Parliament permitting granting to ‘non-qualified’ organisations in Canada and internationally that engage in charitable activities but do not have registered charity status. With the new legislation and its revised grantmaking approach, FGM decided to increase its focus on community engagement and advocacy initiatives to support and amplify the voices of groups and citizens who have less access to funds.

This transformation in adopting a trust-based philanthropy approach has led FGM to design and implement a support mechanism that goes ‘beyond the check’. To ensure they internalise the values of trust-based philanthropy, the Foundation reflected on how to be a better partner, the type of non-financial support it could give communities, and how it can create an inclusive network for grantees. Through this process, the Foundation started building trust-based relationships with communities, redistributed power, and supported local agency. This process also resulted in some community members participating in the FGM’s grantmaking committees.

FGM has taken a catalytic role in Montréal’s philanthropic sector by introducing its approach to other foundations and sharing its experiences. These exchanges enable it to pool funds with other funders interested in supporting these initiatives. Through this collaborative approach, a [fund](#) that initially began with \$300,000 has grown to \$3.5 million through the support of other foundations who believe in FGM’s vision and mission to practice trust-based philanthropy.

What have they learned?

- ✓ **Mindset shifts in philanthropy take time and require commitment from the whole organisation.** FGM has significantly changed its grantmaking approach with its new strategic plan. They knew they would need the commitment and ownership from the entire organisation to challenge traditional thinking and approaches to philanthropy and grantmaking and to implement this plan. This has been an ongoing learning and experimentation process for the Foundation, which involved its board, staff, committees and the communities they worked with. FGM recognises that transformation takes a long time and is committed to continuing to experiment with new ways of practising philanthropy and engaging in conversations with internal and external stakeholders to ensure alignment and long-term impact.
- ✓ **Prioritise playing a catalytic role and take risks.** FGM may be small when it comes to the size of the endowment it manages compared to its peers, but it has grown to have a catalytic role in the community by leaning into supporting initiatives and developing practices that have traditionally been deemed risky by the philanthropic sector. FGM prioritises listening to and learning directly from communities, as well as taking action. While initially seen as risky, this orientation has led FGM to become an early adopter of trust-based approaches and to collaborate with other foundations in developing pooled funds to support communities.
- ✓ **Be accountable to the communities you support.** FGM uses several tools and methods to be transparent and accountable to the communities it supports and involves them in various organisational processes. Foundation staff regularly check in with community partners to ensure their grant programmes reflect their needs and concerns. This strengthens trust between the Foundation and community organisations. Additionally, FGM participates in various community events and consultations with community groups and activists. It also conducts ongoing check-ins with grantees and maintains connections with organisations it has connected with, but has not yet been able to fund.

What have they learned?

- ✓ **Focus on root causes and adopt an intersectional approach to grantmaking.** Rather than seeing each grant as a separate entity and allocating resources in an attempt to address the symptoms of social or environmental problems, FGM uses an intersectional approach in its support of organisations that work to address the root causes of climate change and social justice.
- ✓ **Ensure diversity and representation of different groups and communities within your organisation.** FGM initially held community consultations with whoever chose to participate. Following an internal staff change and new leadership from diverse backgrounds, FGM was able to reach out to new audiences and develop new networks in Black majority communities. This enabled FGM to tap into new resources that were previously not accessible. FGM prioritises having a diverse team that is representative of the communities it serves.
- ✓ **Recognise and support different types of philanthropy.** Although grassroots philanthropic and community work is prevalent in many communities across Montréal, it is usually overlooked by foundations. FGM has recently started to shift its approach to accessing and collaborating with such networks. It plans to increase and diversify its communication efforts to bring more awareness to different types of philanthropy and ways to engage with them.

Key outcomes and impact indicators

New collective funds

Four new collective funds reflecting FGM's new focus areas have been created since 2021. In 2023–2024, more than \$5 million was granted to 83 projects.

Increase in discretionary funds

Raising the share of its discretionary funds allocated to organisations serving six historically marginalised groups, as prioritised by FGM. In 2023, discretionary funds exceeded 75%.

Access to new community organisations

In 2023, between 50% and 70% of the organisations and groups that applied for FGM funding did so for the first time.

Increase in support for grassroots organisations

In 2023 and 2024, between 30% and 80% of organisations that received funding from the FGM's discretionary funds were grassroots or emerging organisations.

Increase in support for advocacy and community mobilisation

An increasing number of grant programmes include a funding stream dedicated to advocacy and community mobilisation. In 2023, 14% of grants from the Collective Fund for Social Equity were directed towards advocacy projects, and an additional 26% towards community empowerment and mobilisation. In 2024, 100% of the grants from the Collective Fund for Climate and Ecological Transition were directed towards community mobilisation activities and advocacy.

Growing multiplier effect

In 2022 and 2023, FGM leveraged its budget and generated 3.3 and 3.5 times additional funding for its own collective funds, creating funding for social equity, climate change and ecological transition initiatives that would not have otherwise existed.