

Building Community Philanthropy in the American South

“People deserve to have change in their lifetimes,” says Linetta Gilbert, former Senior Program Officer at the Ford Foundation.

Over the past decade, Gilbert championed the development of philanthropy in Southern communities of color through the Ford Foundation’s Community Philanthropy, Race and Equity in the American South (CPREAS) initiative. It employed three strategies: moving the needle on social, racial, and economic equity within the larger field of philanthropy; transforming existing foundations to walk their talk regarding those issues; and creating new models of philanthropy led by or engaging donors of color.

Three CPREAS partners highlight how these strategies worked in building community philanthropy.

- Established in 1990, the Foundation for the Mid South (FMS) is a regional community foundation that addresses long-standing disparities in the Mississippi Delta communities of Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. With Ford’s assistance, FMS took bold steps to shift the foundation’s balance of power to local partners, including diversifying its board and staff, focusing grantmaking on local public institutions like schools and libraries with diverse constituencies, and asking community leaders for their visions of the Delta. The result was a new level of engagement for the foundation with citizens and a new cohort of racially and economically diverse decision-makers.
- The Black Belt Community Foundation (BBCF) is the creation of local leaders who envisioned a community foundation that would serve the 12 counties called Alabama’s “Black Belt” region. Those leaders held town hall meetings in difference counties to hear residents’ ideas about how the community foundation should operate and what it should fund. Exemplifying its mission of “taking what we have to make what we need,” the foundation enlisted 100 Community Associates, who recruit volunteers, build awareness of the foundation’s work, raise and give money, identify new grantees, and “are recreating philanthropy by defining it for themselves,” Gilbert says.
- The Community Investment Network (CIN) identifies and recruits leaders from communities of color in the U.S. South to form giving circles. During Gilbert’s tenure, CIN launched 12 giving circles, in the process not only upending the conventional image of the well-heeled philanthropist but also expanding

philanthropy's influence to build grassroots change. They're showing, Gilbert says, that philanthropy "can open doors for all people, not just wealthy donors."

Says Gilbert about these and other groups participating in the CPREAS initiative, "it's about what the leadership of a fund can do when it has the commitment and knowledge of what people of color bring to the table themselves."