

PLOT YOUR OWN COURSE

An Evaluation of the
Power of Pop Fund Pilot
By Eva Didier



POWER OF
POP FUND



UNBOUND



THE
LINBURY
TRUST



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FOREWORD

Welcome

Thank you for taking the time to read our End of Pilot Report - Plot Your Own Course.

Developing the Power of Pop Fund over the last few years has been an absolute labour of love; an authentic approach to philanthropy, grounded in a commitment to community and humanity. Ultimately, at the Power of Pop Fund, we really believe in the possibility of a socially, economically and environmentally just world. Our collective societal values are a critical foundation towards that. The most exciting element of cultural strategy begins there, really understanding how our collective values are formed through narratives, and seeding healthier deep narratives for a thriving society.

A dynamic and insightful community of people have fed into this report and the work itself. We take this opportunity to thank everyone for your contributions and support. We hope this report - and the programme - honours our community of practice and the legacy of those who pursued justice before us.

In the wise words of Claudia Jones - 'A People's Art is the Genesis of Their Freedom'. Long may our art and entertainment enlighten towards social change, justice and expression.



With immense gratitude,

Maxine Thomas-Asante

Power of Pop Fund Lead

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Three Years of POP Fund at a Glance

The Power of Pop (POP) Fund is a pooled fund supporting organisations using pop culture and creativity to advance justice in the UK. The POP Fund has a particular focus on migration and racial justice, while acknowledging the deep interwoven causes of climate justice, gender justice, economic justice and democracy.

Collectively, our funded partners use storytelling and cultural methods to amplify the experiences of racialised communities with a view to making society more equitable. We champion community leaders, support organisations and foster the development of the cultural strategy field.

We support organisations who think outside the box, developing innovative interventions to achieve profound impact.

At its core, the work of the work of the POP Fund is rooted in an analysis of power relations: who gets to create cultural content, in what contexts, and who gets represented. The evaluation found evidence that over its three-year pilot from April 2022 to May 2025, the POP Fund and funded partner organisations made a significant contribution to the pop culture for social justice ecosystem in the UK.



1.1. Impact Summary

The POP Fund is shifting power across four core outcome areas



Panellists and audience members at POP Fund Igniting Impact event July 2025

Outcome area 1 Cultivating Community Leadership

We found significant evidence that the POP Fund cultivates community leadership by shifting power in a number of material ways - ultimately **reshaping what constitutes leadership**. The POP Fund has:

- Led to **progressive governance practice** by centring power and moving from inclusion to decision-making - this is evident in particular through the Community Council constitution and its communal practice of leadership.
- Prompted a **cultural shift** by applying a systemic lens on obstacles facing racialised creatives. Both the POP Fund - through its approach to grant-making - and its funded partners apply a strength-based vision designed to enable self-realisation for culture makers.
- Set new standards when it comes to **organisational leadership**. Both the POP Fund and some funded partners model care-centred work cultures, and embed intergenerational thinking into their operations in order to build lasting legacies.

Outcome area 2 Strengthening Organisations

This is the outcome where there is the strongest body of evidence of the positive impact of the POP Fund on its funded partners. The POP Fund has built **scaffolding for success** for its partners in a number of ways:

- Over the course of the pilot, the POP Fund's **core funding** and its **Funder+ support** have been instrumental in developing and strengthening partners' organisational capacity (operations, systems and governance) and expertise.
- By building and disseminating accessible tools and resources across the cultural strategy ecosystem, the POP Fund's also contributes to building up the cultural strategy field in the UK.
- By facilitating a mindset shift from survival to transformational mode amongst funded partners: the POP Fund's also enables partners to invest in their own structures, build organisational resilience and trial new approaches.
- By funding and reinforcing organisational systems, the POP Fund has enabled funded partners to develop and share their skills, confidence, and approaches so that their unique contributions to social justice have been amplified.

Outcome area 3

Building Infrastructure



The POP Fund has prioritised a relational approach designed to **share in power**. The evidence shows that at the end of the pilot's three years, new and existing relationships are being forged and reinforced, with some room for progress to reach the maximum potential of the approach developed in the Funder+ model:

- Investing time and resources into supporting and fostering networks and connections at the speed of trust - both for funded partners and wider community of industry and funder allies - is significant in a context where community organising is systematically underprioritised and underfunded.
- By supporting the economy of collaborations, providing physical spaces and event opportunities for organisations to meet up and skill share, the POP Fund is also encouraging autonomy, sustainability and trustworthiness amongst partners, without mediating relationships.
- To fully seize upon the opportunities developed by the POP Fund approach, it is crucial that all funded partners are convinced of the utility and are able to take advantage of the collective learning events and other support offered through the Funder+ model.

Outcome area 4

Engaging Philanthropy



In setting up the POP Fund as a pooled fund, one aim was to expand **potential and impact** for co-funders, by facilitating learning on how to shift the public understanding on migration and racial justice narratives, and in doing so, encourage new funders to join in. This vision is beginning to materialise although there is more work to be done to engage new funders around the power and potential of cultural strategy to create change. Some valuable learnings have emerged to encourage greater philanthropic engagement:

- Rallying funders around a clear, explicit and unified purpose is key to promoting cultural strategy as an approach.
- Contributing thought-leadership to the UK field can be additive by targeting research interest at two key levels:
 1. Building powerful **case studies** unpicking the mechanics of how content shifts audience perceptions;
 2. Investing in research pitched at **long-term outcomes** i.e. what mobilises audiences to advocate and act; how to advocate for inclusivity and marginalised talent; how authentic creations that drive social and environmental change can reach the masses.

1.2. Lessons Learned

The orchestra needs to play not just the brass

Looking ahead, there are key opportunities for **growth and strategic alignment** across the **POP Fund community** (the core team and funders, funded partners and collaborators) as the POP Fund embarks on its post-pilot era - involving **all stakeholders**:



Power of Pop Collective Learning Event - July 2025

POP Fund organisation	POP Fund community	POP Fund in the UK cultural strategy ecosystem
Governance Structure Reflecting on the POP Fund post-pilot governance structure, balancing the advantages between the Comic Relief host (reputation, endorsement and financial and operational bolstering) with the opportunities presented by the POP Fund being independent (own voice and more freedom to experiment).	Reviewing the Grassroots Strategy With the multi-year core grant having provided the opportunity for scaling up for funded partner organisations, there is a question mark on whether to consolidate this approach with future cohorts by continuing to award grants to grassroots organisations or to prioritise bigger, medium-sized organisations.	Clarifying the Contribution of the POP Fund There is an opportunity to build the POP Fund brand and develop its cultural strategy expertise so it is seen as a credible and legitimate expert in the pop culture for social justice field.
Clarifying the POP Fund's North Star Communicating more clearly and loudly a unified purpose and vision is key to galvanise partners and stakeholders.	Scalability Anticipating challenges as the POP Fund continues growing and onboarding more partners, as it will put pressure on operational capacity for the core team and the Community Council.	Sharing the Impact Learning Responsibility Comprehensive audience research studies tracking viewing preferences, beliefs and behaviours are costly. This calls for more cross-sector and industry partnerships to fund exciting research opportunities, a better coordinated and pooling effort (financing, skills, deliverables) to deliver additive research that will spark excitement and advocacy for the cultural strategy for social justice ecosystem in the UK.
Refine the POP Fund's Focus The current oscillation between a dual thematic (migration and racial justice) and an innovative approach (cultural strategy) was helpful during the pilot as it allowed for more flexibility in approaching funders. However, this open-endedness might now hinder efforts when approaching potential funders.	Strategic Framework Alignment Recognising that not all funded partners see themselves in the POP Fund strategic framework, especially in terms of the ambition to move from subculture to pop culture, reflect on how each type of funded partner might play a different role for the ecosystem and assess the downsides.	

1.3. Recommendations

Plot your own course



Power of Pop Mixer - April 2024

At the end of its pilot, the POP Fund is on track to deliver on its four core outcomes, and is in a good place - with enough time and practice - to reflect on its internal structure and refine some of its focus in terms of vision, approach and scaling ambition. There is now an opportunity for the POP Fund to **'plot its own course'** collaborating and learning with peer organisations whilst

confidently and distinctively embracing its own voice in order to fully embrace its potential and contribute to shaping **equitable futures** in the UK. This will require navigating competing priorities and intentional alignment amongst key stakeholders and developing the POP Fund's public presence:

01

Be Loud and Proud
About Your Vision

02

Lead with an
Intersectional Lens

03

Align on
Scaling Ambition

04

Prioritise Additive Research
Relevant Across Sectors

05

Put Pop Culture
in the Centre



Be Loud and Proud About Your Vision

The current vision developed in 2024 around **equitable futures** needs to guide the POP Fund's purpose, and be more deeply embedded within strategy and communications of the POP Fund, or be revised to be fit for purpose.

In particular, it needs to hail Fund's communications and be distilled across the Theory of Change.



Lead with an Intersectional Lens

Migration and racial justice are essential lenses for the POP Fund that address systemic issues: i.e. the lack of representation of racialised creatives within entertainment and cultural industries, and the lack of or misrepresentation of stories about people of colour and migrants. Yet, these two core areas represent only a small drop of funding available in the UK and the adverse political context is inviting cautiousness in funders and their trustees. There is a risk that by being thematic-focused first, the POP Fund is limiting its reach and ability to fundraise more widely across the philanthropic network in the UK. It is worth considering leading with the vision of equitable futures, underpinned by an intersectional lens and covering more cause areas (highlighting racism and migration justice as core areas wherever relevant).



Align on Scaling Ambition

Decide whether, based on the POP Fund's internal capacities and impact ambition, it is possible and desirable to onboard new partners that are grassroots organisations or if there is a need to shift towards medium-sized organisations. Additionally, if the course set out in the strategic framework holds for internal stakeholders (from subculture to pop culture and mainstream culture), it is important to align on selection criteria (ie. appetite and capacity for funded partners in reaching audiences outside of lived experience). It is key to navigate friction between the POP Fund's ethics (respecting funded partners' autonomy), and expectations linked to the Funder+ model with intentionality during the selection process, to not create a two-tiered involvement model for partners long-term.



Prioritise Additive Research Relevant Across Sectors

There is a lot of available research across geographies and sectors. There is a need to focus and target research to align with the bigger (and more complex) questions most relevant for our stakeholders and in line with our theory of change: what mobilises audiences to engage, advocate and act for social and environmental justice ; what content drives social and environmental change at a large scale; and what successfully shifts the entertainment industry towards more inclusivity for marginalised talent. There is an opportunity to mobilise this interest and pool research costs and capacities across sectors and industries.



Put Pop Culture in the Centre

Pop culture for social justice is a formidable force and this is an exciting time in the UK. Numerous creative outputs have captured the hearts and minds of audiences, creating cultural moments and conversations that have caused ripples across our social, legal and political systems. This has shown how cultural power can be wielded for good. In this context, it's key for the POP Fund to be bold and keep reimagining how cultural strategy must thrive at the intersections of philanthropy and corporate, to bridge these two worlds and harness the strengths of each in order to amplify the POP Fund's impact.

2. METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES

2.1. Evaluation Key Considerations and Approach

We were guided by four core considerations:

- **Pragmatism:** The current Strategy and Strategic Framework only came into effect during 2024, whilst the POP Fund has been running since 2022. We adopted a pragmatic approach, **prioritising insights gathered in most recent reports and through 1-to-1 evaluation interviews** to plug in knowledge gaps.
- **Contribution-focused:** The majority of the POP Fund activity is dedicated to grantmaking; with a percentage of the POP Fund's activity focused on influencing and advocacy across the philanthropic field, alongside a Funder+ model of organisational strengthening. The evaluation scope needed to be **pitched at the right contribution level**, between the POP Fund's sphere of control and its sphere of influence.
- **Contextualised:** Three years is a short time-span for social and cultural change. We supplemented partners' findings with **external interviews of key actors in the wider ecosystem of pop culture for social change**.
- **Additive:** For our pilot evaluation, we built an **operational theory of change and causal change pathways** with the core team to identify knowledge gaps in our evaluation review, to understand what works, and which hypotheses have not proved right. Our aim was to provide a clear analysis of where the specific contribution of the POP Fund is and how it links to material conditions for impact delivery.

Our approach

We wanted to learn from what worked as well as what did not to inform the POP Fund's future strategy, as well as to model accountability and transparency. We used **contribution analysis** for the evaluative design, a theory-based evaluation which can be described as

Making a good theory of change, identifying key assumptions, and focusing monitoring and evaluation and research on these key assumptions. The result of a contribution analysis is a nuanced, evidence-based narrative about how an intervention contributes to outcomes¹.

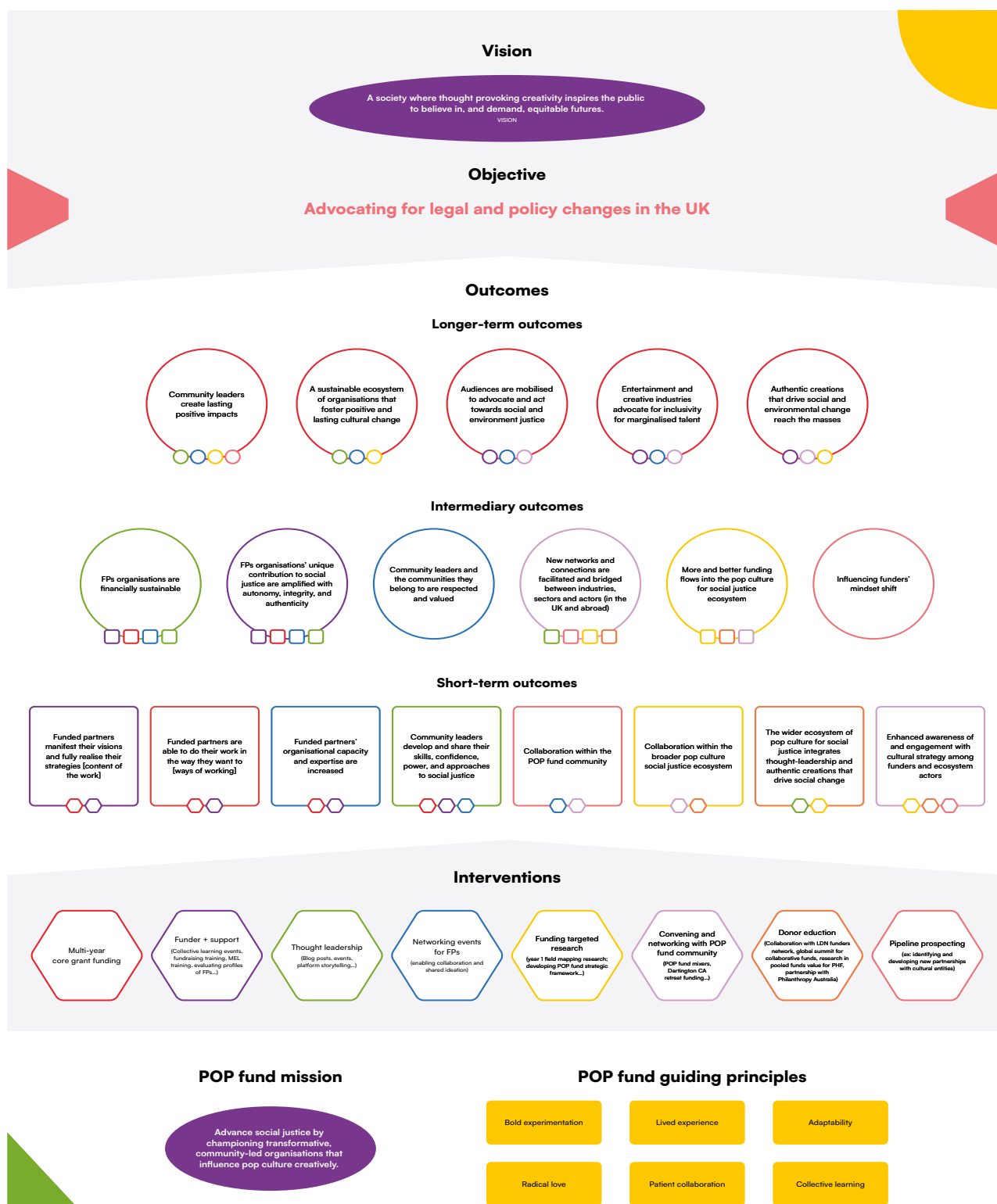
- Full approach, including limitations, detailed in the Appendix I

¹ [Contribution analysis - Institute of Development Studies](#)

2.2. Building a Theory of Change for the Evaluation

As part of our contribution analysis approach, a **causal** Theory of Change was developed with the core team through a facilitated process. The aim of this **operational** ToC was to facilitate learning for the evaluation, by making the **key assumptions explicit** - i.e. how the POP Fund team envisages change happening- in

order to test, learn and evaluate **how** change actually happened. This TOC is set to be an evolving product - something to ground us and evaluate against. Due to time and resources constraints, this evaluation focuses on four core intermediary outcomes.

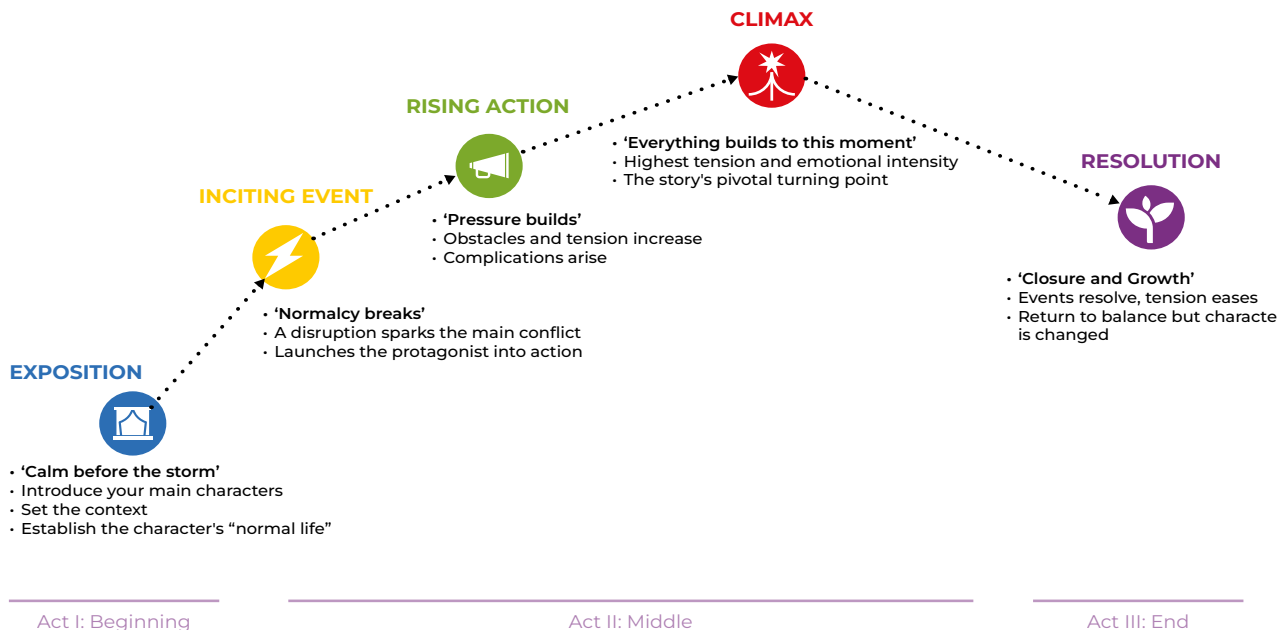


2.3. Using Plot Design to Narrate the POP Fund pilot impact

In telling the impact story of the 3-year pilot of the POP Fund, we wanted to honour the skills of writers and film-makers amongst our partners and play with, so we made the choice to use a classic storytelling plot structure. In keeping with the storytelling metaphor, we have also

brought to life **Stories of Change** collected during the most recent Collective Learning Event in July 2025 with the POP Fund core team and funded partners **using the plot structure** described above. These stories of change can be found throughout the report.

Story of change: Plot Structure



3. BEGINNINGS

INTRODUCTION TO THE POWER OF POP FUND

The **POP Fund** is a pooled fund supporting organisations using pop culture and creativity to advance justice in the UK. The POP Fund has a particular focus on migration and racial justice, while acknowledging the deep interwoven causes of climate justice, gender justice, economic justice and democracy.

Collectively, our funded partners use storytelling and cultural methods to amplify the experiences of racialised communities with a view to making society more equitable. We champion community leaders, support organisations and foster the development of the field. We support organisations who think outside the box, developing innovative interventions to achieve profound impact.

3.1. Three Years of POP Fund at a Glance



In the space of the three year pilot, from April 2022 to May 2025, the POP Fund total programme budget increased **from £1.16 million to £4.7 million in funds raised**. This is a major accomplishment. The impressive growth spurt also paves the way for what more could be, as stakeholders' interviews shed light on funding priorities and potential blind spots in the UK philanthropic ecosystem when it comes to

narrative change and cultural strategy. With this report, we highlight the significant and multilayered contributions of the POP Fund to the pop culture for social justice ecosystem in the UK. This is a call to funders in the UK and beyond to hear us **roar and join forces** with the POP Fund and partners in using the power of stories and deep narratives to change hearts and minds.

3.2. A Tale Of Two Funds

Reflecting over the past three years, key stakeholders have emphasised that there has been a before and an after for the POP Fund, with a critical **turning point** when the Community Council joined the operation in January 2024. In some ways, the pilot story is split between these two versions of the POP Fund, and we trace back the origins, but this report focuses on the current iteration of the POP Fund since the Council joined.

3.2.1. Prelude: The Origin story

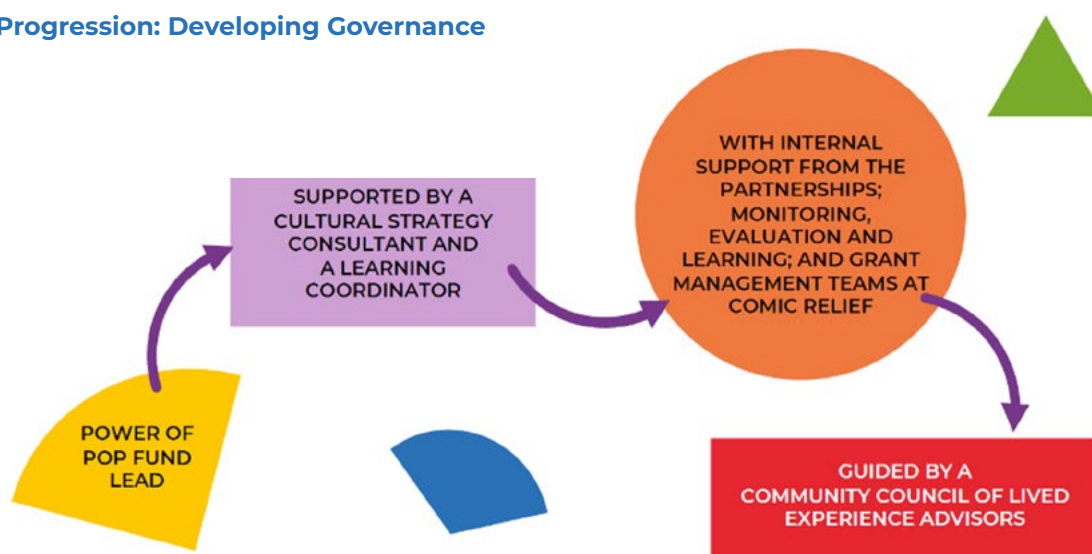
In 2016, Unbound Philanthropy funded an exploratory piece of research, considering the potential of developing the pop culture for social change field in the UK². The research was inspired by work in the US to establish the Pop Culture Collaborative, of which Unbound is a founding Managing Partner. Subsequent research in 2021, conducted by Alice Sachrajda and Marzena Zukowska, found that there was indeed potential and appetite for such a fund to exist in the UK, with a focus on racial and migrant justice³. This was the beginning of the POP Fund, with a few individuals and a

set of co-funders setting out to turn this vision into a reality.

The POP fund started out (and continues to function) as a pooled fund, with five initial co-funders (Comic Relief, Unbound Philanthropy, Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and Oak Foundation) in April 2022. The pilot concluded in May 2025, with four out of five co-funders currently reinvesting into its next phase, and one new funder (Linbury Trust) joining.

The POP Fund has been hosted by Comic Relief since its inception, which manages logistical support for the grants. In its initial iteration, the POP Fund was largely managed by a Portfolio Manager, a Strategy Consultant and a Learning Coordinator, with input through co-funders working in partnership. However, as the POP Fund evolved, a promotion to Programme Lead in January 2025, and the onboarding of a lived experience advisory board, the Community Council, in January 2024 led to an alternative structure. These governance and staffing evolutions mark a significant turn in the POP Fund, with a series of strategic pivots as well as foundational work taking place thereafter.

3.2.2. Progression: Developing Governance



² https://counterpointsarts.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Riding-the-waves-Oct-2017_0.pdf

³ <https://popchange.co.uk/2021/03/16/new-brave-world-the-power-opportunities-and-potential-of-pop-culture-for-social-change-in-the-uk/>



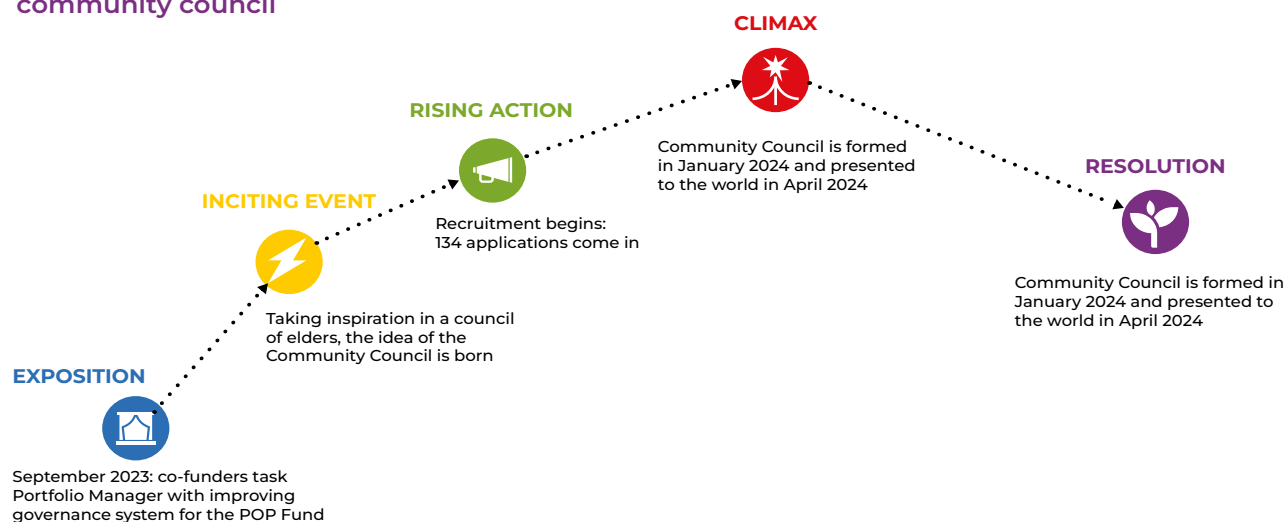
The POP Fund Community Council at their first meeting - January 2024

Governance was further strengthened with the onboarding of the Community Council in January 2024, with a strong inflexion towards the decision-making power of the Community Council in grant-making strategy, intentionally embracing a participatory ethos and centring lived experience and expertise.

**Community Council
of Advisors with Lived
Experience**



Story of change: Recruiting the community council



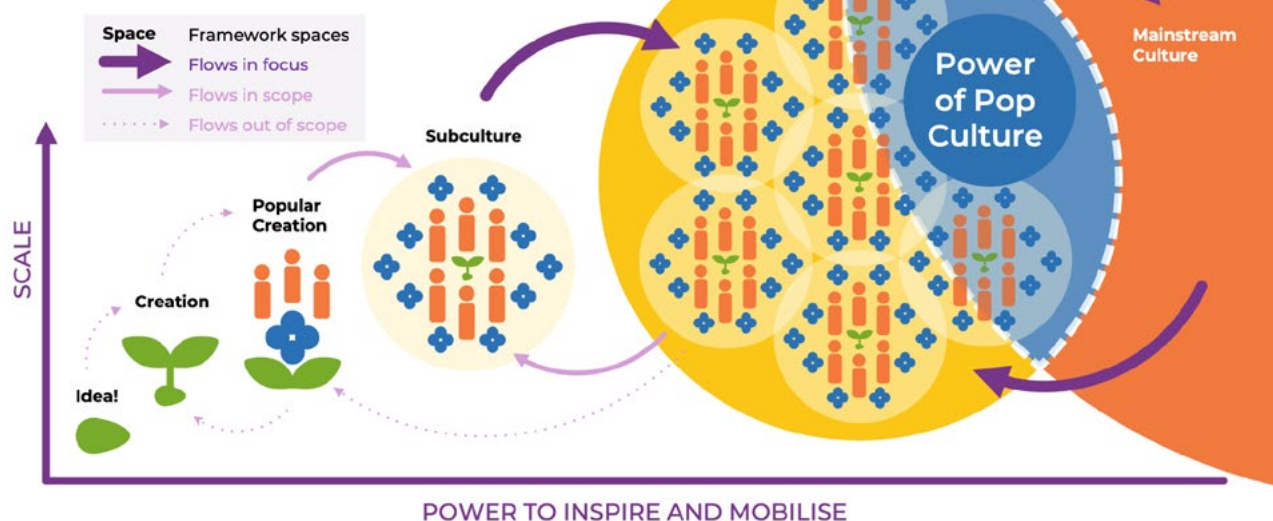
3.2.3. Build Up: Defining the Foundations

With the new Fund Manager and the Community Council onboard, there was a shared belief in the exciting potential to develop a greater conceptual alignment across the field for strategic clarity. This was echoed in the Impact Storytelling report from AKO which set out the need to 'create alignment in terms and methods'⁴.

Developing the strategic framework: In February 2024, the POP Fund commissioned Radicle Development to produce Pop Culture for Social Justice: A Foundational Framework. The purpose of the Framework was to better understand how strategic funding interventions could advance pop culture as a tool used for social justice. Creation of the framework was commissioned to underpin the POP Fund's future work and capture current understanding of spaces and flows influencing change in the field of pop culture for social justice. The framework also establishes common definitions for key terms (e.g. the use of 'pop culture' vs 'popular culture' vs 'mainstream culture').

⁴ [Impact Storytelling: the Ecosystem, the Evidence and Possible Futures](#)

FRAMEWORK OF POP CULTURE AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE



Adopting a new strategy for 2025-2028: The 2025-2028 strategy was developed by the Programme Lead and the Community Council through a collaborative and rigorous writing process, based on funded partner input from the Collective Learning Events. The strategy sets out the POP Fund's vision, mission, and **three strategic goals** and guiding principles, alongside an outline of the programme beyond the pilot.

From Power of Pop strategy 2025-2028

Vision

We envision a society where thought provoking creativity inspires the public to believe in and demand equitable futures. We encourage ambitious and radical approaches to racial and migrant justice grounded in the values of love, care and shared humanity.

Mission

Our mission is to advance social justice by championing transformative, community-led organisations that influence pop culture creatively. We provide funding and organisational support to improve their reach, sustainability and impact.

Goal 1: Cultivate Community Leadership

We fund organisations led by people from systemically marginalised communities, with an understanding that there is power in who gets to create and influence culture. By supporting community leadership, we hope to leave positive imprints and lasting legacies.

Goal 2: Strengthen Organisations

We fund organisations who have identified their unique contribution to social justice and champion their autonomy, integrity, and authenticity. We offer wrap around support to facilitate healthy organisational life spans, in the belief that sustained interventions are essential for systemic change.

Goal 3: Build Infrastructure

We work to strengthen the pop culture for social justice ecosystem by facilitating networks and bridging new connections between industries, sectors and actors. As part of this, we encourage connections beyond borders, bringing our funded partners into relationship with diverse collaborators.

The new framework, strategy and lived experience governance model have ushered the POP Fund into **a new era**. Since then, the POP Fund has been 'in a start-up mode' as one Community Council member put it. The last 18 months of the pilot have seen a new team settling in and learning to work together, developing critical tools for the field and getting through their first grant-making round together (cohort 3 of funded partners).

3.2.4. Development: POP Fund funded Partners

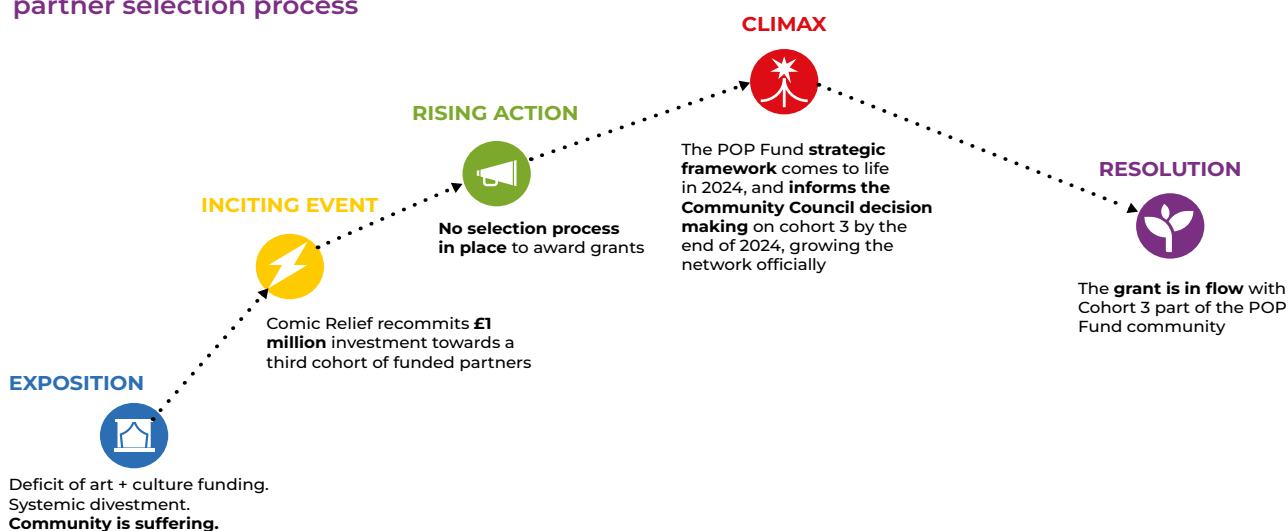
Over the pilot's three-year course, the POP Fund has awarded grants to nine partners, split across 3 cohorts (the most recent one joining at the end of 2024). All funded partners work at the intersection of popular culture and social change, with a particular focus on migration and racial justice.

To find out more about individual partners - see [Annex II](#).



Counterpoints Arts Film Screening

Story of change: Establishing a partner selection process



4. JOURNEY

AN IMPACT STORY IN FOUR ACTS

Crescendo - Changing the Narrative is More Urgent than Ever

With an historic low in voter turnout in the 2024 UK general election⁵ (it fell to just 60%) and increasing youth disengagement in young voters under 35⁶; researchers have linked the **growing disenfranchisement of the public** to the **saturation of negative narratives in the media space**. News avoidance is on the rise as individuals seek to escape the constant stream of negative information; made worse by mistrust in media, contributing to further disengagement. This media landscape saturated with negative narratives characterises the context in which the POP Fund operates.

Another key contextual dimension that impacts the work of the POP Fund has been the noticeable **increase in negative coverage** on **racial and migration justice issues** in UK news over the past several years, with a proliferation of anti-immigration rhetoric in the press and amongst politicians amplified by the consolidation of right-wing media and a hostile policy environment, as documented by NGOs⁷, media studies⁸ and academic research.

As a result, the work of the POP Fund is under increased pressure whilst it is more needed than ever - and it also highlights **a critical gap in terms of the amount of funding invested in the narrative field in the UK**⁹. Across the board, our interviewees aligned on the specific challenges this context presents:

Key Contextual Opportunities

Audiences	Content	Industry
The combination of shrinking civic spaces on one hand, and anti-migrant sentiment fueled by racist discourses around migrants and refugees in mainstream media, have tangible, real-life consequences.	There is an atomisation of the shared communal nature of pop culture, as it's operating in smaller silos, amplified by technology and algorithms.	The difficulty of the current economic context for the arts and entertainment sector in the UK, with shifting roles for long-term broadcaster institutions and newer streamers.
The 'race riots' in 2024 and the steady rise in islamophobia have disappointingly generated minimal concrete changes by the current Labour government.	The unchecked influence of technology and the fast spread of misinformation are linked to a growing bed of authoritarianism.	Industry gatekeeping is still an obstacle.
	Populist movements have been investing in long-term narrative work at scale for decades.	The flickers of an anti-'preachyness' sentiment around entertainment make some people nervous, with a fear it might move audiences further away.

⁵ <https://www.youngfoundation.org/insights/features/a-low-participation-election/>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/jun/16/apathy-and-economic-insecurity-among-young-uk-voters-fuelling-growth-of-smaller-parties>

⁷ A hostile environment: Language, race, politics and the media, Runnymede Trust report 2025

⁸ Structural racism in UK Newsrooms - Ethical Journalism Network 2023

⁹ By contrast, narrative change and cultural strategy practitioners have highlighted that populist and anti-rights narratives have benefitted from a high level of consolidation, organisation and funding over the past decades. In the UK, at least £1 million has been committed already by think tanks associated with Reform, with an ambitious goal of £25 million by 2029 to systematically counter progressive narratives in the UK.

“We’ve got to be transparent about what we’re doing, how it’s rooted in universal human values and clear about the benefits... and probably be prepared for critique”

POP Fund co-funder

This context presents a tension, as on the one hand it calls for **urgent action**, yet in practice it has also pushed the philanthropic sector towards **cautiousness**, with concerns around the potential public backlash for funders, given the visibility of entertainment and creative artefacts. As current and new funders walk the tightrope, the current context calls for **bravery** from the philanthropic community. Yet, this context also offers some strong opportunities for the POP Fund:



POP Fund Funder Plus Event with Ellen E Jones - October 2024

Key Contextual Opportunities

Audiences	Content	Industry
<p>Democratisation of access and inclusivity of content sped up by streamers, with more language inclusivity (international foreign language content) and access (to foreign productions) changing tastes and broadening audience expectations</p> <p>Audiences engage! Adolescence, Mr Bates vs The Post Office show how stories anchored in social issues can be commercial successes reaching the mainstream, snowballing from years of effort from activists and practitioners</p>	<p>New gatekeepers emerge in the form of tech platforms: as social media has somewhat democratised access to producing content online and removed access barriers - shifting not just the centres of content production but the way stories are being written and received -, there is growing concern around the invisible reach and biases of the algorithm, and there is an opportunity to work more intentionally on digital content pipelines.</p> <p>Increasing demand from UK industry for input and lead from people with lived experience of cultural context of new stories and content being made.</p>	<p>The UK presents a relatively concentrated entertainment industry from an infrastructure perspective (ie. with few identifiable key decision-makers) which means strong opportunities in accessing and influencing key industry gatekeepers</p> <p>A hypothesis from ecosystem experts that for now there is not the same level of attack and erosion of DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) in the UK as seen in the US.</p>

“It’s a much smaller, more focused scale in the UK. A lot of people know each other well, and the ways in which content is produced are quite focused. As a result, it offers different opportunities for influencing writers’ rooms and decision making in the UK versus the US.

Jake Lee, Unbound Philanthropy Deputy Director, UK Program

Entertainment is entertainment: to shift culture on a big scale is not going to come through lecturing, or academic arguments, or through logic. When you can make people feel emotionally, and when you can entertain people, that is quite powerful. Stories like Mr. Bates and Adolescence are interesting in that they are large scale pieces of entertainment that have something deeper going on that can strike a national conversation.

Samir Patel, CEO Comic Relief

Slowly but surely, more funders in the UK are awakening to the potential and opportunity presented by using pop culture to advance social justice, through specific arguments that can be leveraged for unlocking further funding streams:

- **A necessary and complementary funding strategy:** funding frontline services organisations alone is a drop in the ocean from a funding perspective. Shifting public discourse around specific programmatic issues funders have been targeting through grantmaking is crucial to be met with positive reception from the public and government authorities.
- **Responsibility to support and shield our movements:** be it activists, individual leaders, grassroots or bigger third sector organisations, the backlash from anti-rights forces has been ferocious, backed by a steady and sized-up flow of cash into harmful narratives.
- **Building infrastructure for transition towards desired futures:** to win, we can't simply adopt a defensive stance, so we need to invest in and imagine future alternatives that we can rally behind as a society.

As a funder, it has made us think about the work we support, and seeing the impact of public discourse around social justice and frontline services. We don't have the capacity to shift that perception ourselves, but we can see how it shapes the work that many frontline services have to react to. (...) How do we do something that's bigger, more strategic, more at scale, and Power of Pop had all those kind of ingredients

Stuart Holey, The Linbury Trust, POP Fund funder

You can't do organising without narratives, and narratives need organisers for mobilising change. Those two are interdependent.

Husna Mortuza, Joseph Rowntree Foundation Associate Director for Public Engagement

In this context, how has the POP Fund strategically engaged with and responded to shifting challenges and opportunities over the past three years?

Peak - Exploring the impact of the POP Fund

We have examined, unpacked and evidenced the impact of the POP Fund during its pilot phase from April 2022 to May 2025 by focusing on **four intermediary outcomes**, co-developed in a theory of change with the core team. The first three outcomes are informed by the three Strategic Goals established in the Strategy, and the fourth one is informed by the wider remit of the POP Fund on shifting philanthropic perceptions around cultural strategy for social justice.

We'll present findings using these outcomes as our four narrative 'acts':

- **Act I - Cultivate Community Leadership:** Examining how the POP Fund supports and nurtures community leadership, and whether it is effectively able to leave positive imprints and lasting legacies.
- **Act II - Strengthen Organisations:** Understanding how the POP Fund works with funded partners in identifying what ideal operations look like for them, and whether its current support structure effectively delivers strengthening.
- **Act III - Build Infrastructure:** Unveiling how the POP Fund strengthens the pop culture for social justice ecosystem and what are the gaps.
- **Act IV - Engage Philanthropy:** Exploring how the philanthropic ecosystem has been receptive to cultural strategy for social justice work and the current obstacles and opportunities.

4.1. Act I - Cultivate Community Leadership: Shifting Power in a Material Way

Outcome: **Community Leaders and the communities they belong to are respected and valued.** Assumption: if community leadership is cultivated, then community power is strengthened and channelled.

We found strong and significant evidence that the POP Fund shifts power when it comes to community leadership¹⁰, and that it amplifies the leadership of individual funded partners¹¹ under specific conditions. By centring power where it belongs and embodying a cultural shift - the POP Fund changes perceptions around what constitutes leadership.

How we can dismantle the old systems, and put them back together in a way that really works for us and our communities.

Hood Futures Studio, POP Fund funded partner

Centring power where it belongs: from inclusion to decision-making

- The POP Fund, through the Community Council in particular, embodies and redefines leadership - by modelling **authenticity, clout and generosity**. The **decision-making capacity** entrusted to the Council is critical and stands out: beyond mere advisory capacity, the Council is an organ actively shifting power.

Not needing to code switch has been really powerful. (...) There is power in being able to take up space (...) to be in a room where the laughter is welcomed, the shouting, the slang, the mother tongue (...) it is critical to the efficiency and the trust piece.

POP Fund Community Council Member

I've never experienced an all global majority board. To step into a role where you don't have to represent the entirety of all minority voices, it has helped not feeling reluctance to speak up and it helps things to go a lot faster, [as we are] more comfortable asking questions and challenging things, knowing that everyone in the room's opinion is their own opinion from their lived experience, not a crafted thing to represent all of diversity into one person.

POP Fund Community Council Member

- Amongst all POP Fund stakeholders, there is a shared belief that the Community Council successfully embodies a **communal and participatory practice of leadership**. This has enabled generative and thought-provoking disagreement without stagnating the operation of the POP Fund. The **diversity of skills and experience** within the Community Council is also perceived to lead to better informed decision-making by freeing them to trust each other's expertise.

There were other things that interested us (...) the Community Council and how that works, how they really centre people who have authentic and lived experience, how people are leaders in the change they're trying to affect and it's not really for us as a funder to make the grant decisions.

POP Fund Funder

That model with the Community Council is unique: they do a lot more on the POP Fund than a traditional fund reference group. They hold a different role: they're much more supportive of the POP Fund, they'll go and speak at events on our behalf, they'll promote the POP Fund.

POP Fund Funder

¹⁰ Community, as defined by the POP Fund, is an expansive concept, including demographic, geographic and lived experience categories depending on context..

¹¹ Defined here as the ability for organisational heads to make decisions in partnership and in alignment with core organisational values and strategic mission

Cultural shift: enabling self-realisation

- The POP Fund and its funded partners manifest their vision of community leadership through **how** they get the work done. In other words, they 'walk the talk'. In practice, this means that rather than working from the assumption of a 'lack of self-confidence' in either the communities or the individuals they work with, both the POP Fund and its partners work from the **systemic point of view** that there is a need to dismantle obstacles that stand in the way of people self-actualising and leading with authenticity (even if that is not always made explicit by individual partners). This is the **core of community organising**: moving away from simply 'supporting' communities to recognising their power, autonomy and expertise.

The most common misconception around community work is that it assumes the community as devoid of power. It's work that's trying to make a community healthier or happier or safer... but it's not talking about how that community builds power and takes on power.

Mohammed Afridi, Civic Power Fund

When we say self-confidence, it suggests a lack. But what it's really about is getting our participants to draw out all the noise that tells them who they can be and who they can't be (...) It's getting them to their intentional self. Having the confidence to do the thing that they want to do, know that what they want to contribute is right, valuable, important, and that they should be able to contribute.

The TV Collective, POP Fund funded partner

Leadership in action: setting new standards

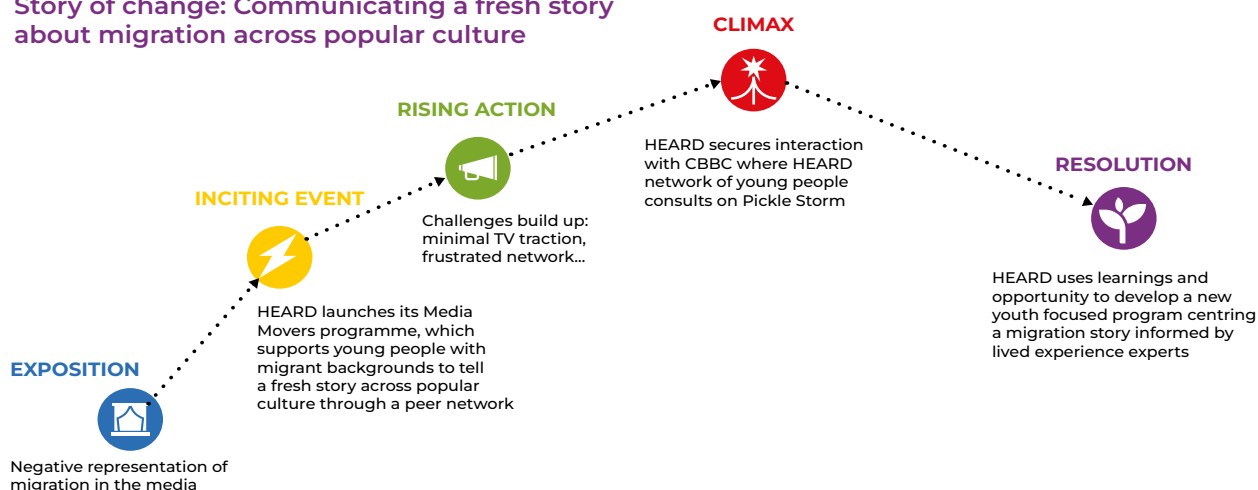
- **Building healthier, care-centred working cultures:** this is an area where funded partners take the lead, with a strong body of evidence of partners becoming **thought-leaders in their leadership practice**: from Skin Deep innovating with a rotating leadership model through role cards ; or Heard trialling a 4-day working week. The POP Fund's own practice of participatory leadership with a lived experience board is also inspiring and influencing funded partners to review and innovate within their own internal structures. There is also evidence that these new models of leadership are **cross-pollinating** other working cultures, through funded partners' collaborators taking what they've experienced into new working environments.

Our managing editor (...) often works in places like the New York Times, or for The Guardian, she's often said that the kind of care and work culture that we create within our organisation has impacted how she conducts herself within more mainstream spaces, how she works as an editor with other writers in those mainstream spaces.

POP Fund funded partner

- **Legitimacy and expertise:** there are several examples of the POP Fund and its partners intervening within gatekeeping cultural institutions, to **co-design and shape the agenda**, a sign that their expertise is being recognised - from the POP Fund core team inputting directly into the agenda of the TedxLondon Festival of ideas in 2024 to partners curating events at the British Library.

Story of change: Communicating a fresh story about migration across popular culture



- **Legacy building:** many funded partners think of community leadership through an **intergenerational lens:** both learning from elders, and building the stepping stones for tomorrow's generations. A key manifestation of this is the drive to ensure future-proofed thinking is embedded into each step of the internal organisational process and of investment decision-making. The intergenerational conception of leadership is mirrored in the POP Fund's intention to support leaders to create 'lasting legacies' such that the impact lives on beyond individual programmes.

What are we leaving, what does it mean to be a good ancestor, and the importance of having that intergenerational conversation too. So not only like who's here physically now, but who is this for?

Hood Futures Studio, POP Fund funded partner

Amplifying funded partners' leadership

The evidence of the POP Fund amplifying the leadership of funded partners is mixed and points at different patterns in place:

The POP Fund functions as an accelerator for some funded partners by enabling them to set up profile-raising events through its grants (OKRE Summit, Dartington Retreat). This is true especially with cohort 2 funded partners where organisations are structured around a core mission of networking and facilitating connections across sectors and industries, so building their profile, visibility and recognition is key to their delivery and built into their operational set-up.

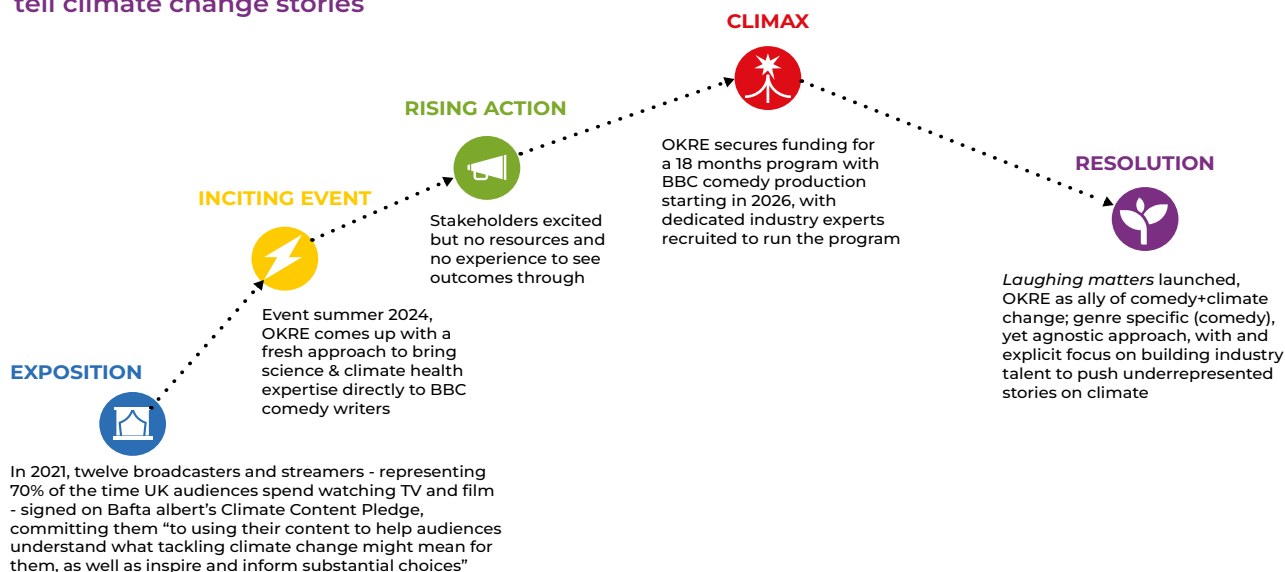
Working with the POP fund has been a great support for us to put on the OKRE summit and to develop it in a way that draws upon all the different things we do at OKRE - it has become a real showcase event.

OKRE, POP Fund funded partner



OKRE Summit - April 2024

Story of change: Using comedy to tell climate change stories



However, although there is anecdotal evidence around partners from other cohorts using funding to raise their profile, there is currently no unified strategy in terms of promotion and elevating funded partners' profiles. This is important to address more intentionally in order to better promote community leadership, as individual partners may not have the resources necessary for promotion and to keep funders aware of the challenges that Global Majority creatives face.

What struck me at Dartington was learning about the fertility of creatives within marginalised groups and racial justice groups, and the sheer battle they have to access places and the stories of misuse, almost betrayal, of representation.

POP Fund funder

In some cases, even though the POP Fund did not directly amplify community leadership of its partners, the selection of funded partners demonstrates an ability to identify key influential leadership, from individuals who have steadily built and gained visibility and influence across the entertainment sector¹².

Elevating the POP Fund's profile



POP Fund's Maxine Thomas-Asante and Alice Sachrajda alongside AKO Storytelling Institute's Francesca Panetta and Frameworks US' Ishita Srivastava at the Cultural Strategy Roundtable - January 2025

Post Office vs Mr Bates
with AKOSI Storytelling
Institute



OKRE Summit - April 2024

- **Building reputation and thought-leadership for POP Fund cross industry:** is a work in progress. There are some positive signs of reputation-building within the third sector (with multiple public speaking engagements in philanthropy for the POP Fund Programme Lead), but this is less true within the corporate entertainment industry, which can be a limit on the influence of the POP fund, and its ability to convene key corporate players. The POP Fund presence and participation in industry high-visibility events such as the OKRE Summit represents a step in the right direction. However, many of the funded partners of the POP Fund have directly established thriving relationships within the sector, so the challenge for the POP Fund is to identify where it could benefit from being **more strongly connected within the corporate sector directly**, and to achieve which goals. This is particularly important in terms of mapping key stakeholders for the POP fund beyond the usual suspects - by interrogating who's missing in the rooms we convene, who holds power beyond funders when it comes to content creation and industry leads - including digital key players.

It's really important for me to build my peer network, which the POP Fund has been a great part of. I left Dartington feeling so engaged and enthused and so excited to be part of the Power of Pop Fund].

POP Fund funded partner

Dartington Retreat 2024
by Counterpoint Arts: In
Praise of Collective Joy



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Some examples of the heightened visibility of community leaders within our funded partner organisations, include, [2 POCC](#); [Counterpoints Arts](#); [Skin Deep](#).

- **Speaking in its own voice:** to elevate the POP Fund's unique identity and mission, a prominent recommendation is to seize the strategic opportunity to develop an independent digital presence, including a dedicated website and social media channels for the POP Fund. This would allow a culture-focused organisation like the POP Fund to raise its profile cross-sector and to speak in its own voice, as most of its communications are currently relayed by others (Community Council or co-funders). Additionally, to ensure the POP Fund can effectively respond to and participate in national conversations, it is important for Comic Relief and the POP Fund to have alignment in messaging across pertinent issues or the POP Fund to have autonomy to communicate its own position. This will allow the work of the POP Fund to align more closely and speak in a united voice with partners to strengthen collective impact.

Ultimately we're a small organisation. It's difficult for us to take the lead on the national conversation, without the bigger organisations doing it first. When the riots happened, we knew exactly what we wanted to say, but it felt quite weird that we were doing it first. (...) Comic Relief works with so many celebrities, if it were just able to have a united front when things happen, to have a big call to action so it is actually relevant and effective.

POP Fund funded partner

Summary: Community Leadership

Cultivate Community Leadership: Shifting Power In a Material Way

We are celebrating	Challenges we are learning from	We are reflecting on how to
<p>Centring power where it belongs: from inclusion to decision-making through the Community Council embodying communal and participatory leadership practice</p> <p>Cultural shift: the POP Fund enables the self-realisation of funded partners through a systemic lens around oppressive practices and recognising expertise of lived experience</p> <p>Leadership in action: the POP Fund funded partners manifest their visions and realise their strategies by setting new standards, especially around care-centred models, breaking through cultural gatekeeping institutions and actively building legacies for their communities</p>	<p>Amplifying funded partners' leadership: the POP fund has amplified the convening power of some of its funded partners (the cross-sector connectors)</p> <p>No unified strategy to raise the profile of the ensemble of funded partners, a missed opportunity to support profile-building for these organisations</p> <p>Building reputation and thought-leadership for the POP Fund cross industry is work in progress - connections with the corporate entertainment sector especially and digital presence for the POP Fund should be amplified</p>	<p>Embrace the POP Fund's own community leadership through acting as a connector in the ecosystem connecting with amazing organisations beyond our funded partners which we haven't been able to fund (making them benefit of Funder+ model when current funded partners don't get involved)</p> <p>Continue to raise the POP Fund profile (especially with corporate sector)</p> <p>Organising a festival end of 2025 which will include key stakeholders across the pop culture for social justice ecosystem</p> <p>Fix our absence from social media to have our own voice within the cultural landscape</p>

RESOURCES

Community Council
of Advisors with Lived
Experience



TedxLondon Festival of
ideas February 2025



Dartington Retreat 2024
by Counterpoint Arts: In
Praise of Collective Joy



OKRE Summit 2024



POP FUND public speaking engagement

POP Fund Program Lead Maxine Thomas-Asante thought-leadership at various forums:

Philanthropy Together
– Narrative Harm to
Narrative Power



Post Office vs Mr Bates
with AKO Storytelling
Institute



Philanthropy Australia
Learning Exchange



OKRE Summit Discussion -
How do we shift storytelling
with audiences?



London Funders Festival of
Learning - Redistributing
power



4.2. Act II - Strengthening Organisations: Scaffolding For Success

Outcome: **Funded Partners' organisations are financially sustainable and their unique contributions to social justice are amplified with autonomy, integrity, and authenticity.**

Assumption: *if partners' capacities are developed and they can demonstrate their impact then the(ir) use of cultural approaches will have more credibility and organisations will be in a stronger position to attract funding and generate revenue.*

This is the outcome where there is the strongest body of evidence of the positive impact of the POP Fund on its funded partners. Over the course of the pilot, the POP Fund's core funding and its Funder+ support especially have been instrumental in developing and strengthening partners' organisational capacity and expertise. By funding and reinforcing organisational systems, the POP Fund has enabled funded partners to develop and share their skills, confidence, and approaches to social justice.

Everybody wants to fund the food on the table. But without the table, there's no meal.

Heard, POP Fund funded partner

Core funding is critical: better operations, systems and governance

- There is a wealth of evidence that both the grant and the funder+ model have successfully helped funded partners **equip themselves with stronger organisational infrastructure**, especially when it comes to **internal policies** (recruitment, safeguarding, conflict resolution), **operational set up** (accountancy and financial literacy) and general **governance**.
- Beyond core funding, the POP Fund adopts a **Funder+ model** - with a three part focus on collective learning, organisational strengthening (tailored MEL support and fundraising support), and storytelling. So far, the majority of the Funder+ support has focused on Collective Learning, which skews towards forging new connections but the more practical organisational strengthening element had also been initiated by the end of the pilot.

Over the past year, we've been through an important period of growth and internal development, made possible in part by the POP Fund's support. Having this core funding gave us the time and stability to restructure our team to meet growing demands on our work, stay responsive to the needs of our communities, and continue delivering and developing our programme plans. It's also allowed us to consolidate our work and take a more intentional, strategic approach to planning for the future.

Stuart Hall Foundation, POP Fund funded partner

Building field capacity

- The POP Fund invested in **developing accessible tools and resources to build the field capacities**. This is starting to pay off, as one funded partner (Heard) has also proactively used the toolkit developed by the POP Fund to initiate an internal impact review and come up with its own system for measuring and tracking change, inspired by the [POP Fund MEL toolkit](#).

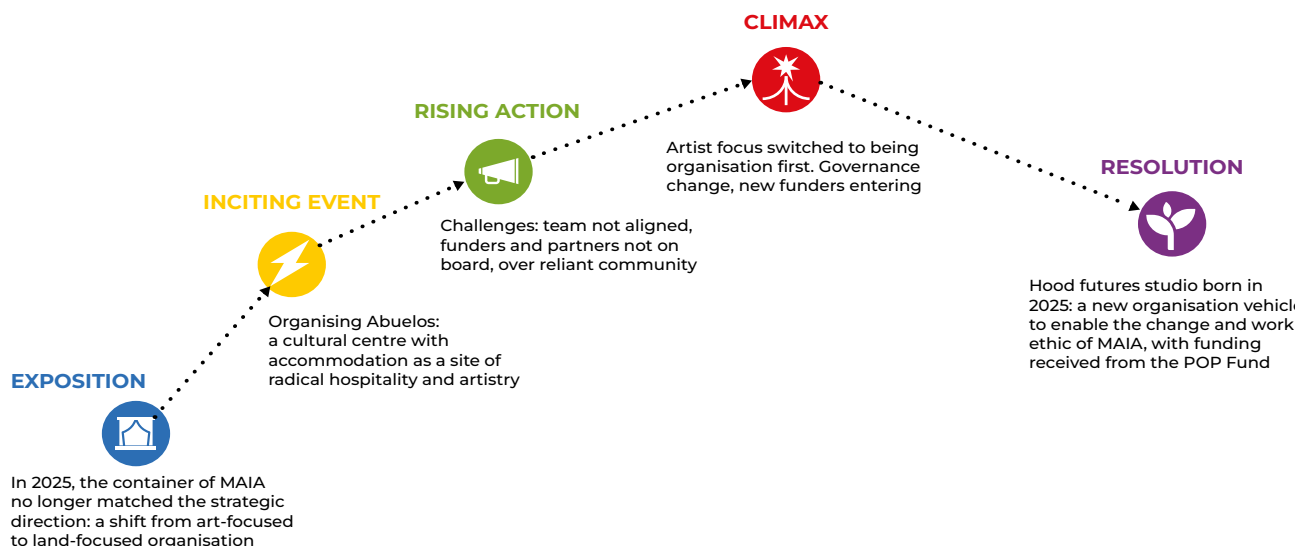
We used the POP Fund MEL toolkit as a starting point for our impact review, [...] and it brought up really interesting conversations (...) to help us answer 'what are we doing to achieve success?'

Heard, POP Fund funded partner

POP Fund Monitoring and evaluating impact in the pop culture for social change field: a toolkit for UK organisations



Story of change: New governance



Daring to invest within our structures and ourselves

- Investing more in systems and policies has allowed all funded partners to embrace **a more experimental and daring approach** to the work through the provision of a safety net. At a fundamental level, it has allowed current employees to extend working hours (going from part-time to full time or adding more days) or recruit new staff.
- It has also built **organisational resilience** when people need to take time off or move on from the organisations. Most funded partners operate with small teams of two to three core members, where any staffing gap is felt acutely and risks threatening the whole of the operation. The POP Fund grant ensures a level of **continuity of care** and operational smoothness for partners.

The POP Fund core funding helps cover our rent, supports some of our staff costs, and contributes to our care budget. It means we can continue offering these vital things to our team, and that's really important to us.

Hood Futures Studio, POP Fund funded partner

Mindset shift: from survival mode to transformation mode

- Being able to access **multi-year core support** is groundbreaking for funded partners and it has enabled them to reach some level of

financial stability in the mid-term. This has allowed partners to deliver critical projects which would not have been achievable without POP Fund support.

- This core funding was further bolstered by **emergency funding** provided in August 2024 following the UK race riots, whereby each funded partner received an additional £15,000 grant, to support those tackling injustices suffered by racially minoritised and migrant communities in the UK.

The emergency funding allowed us to strengthen our Peer Network Monthly Forum, offering a regular, supportive space where creative and intellectual practitioners can discuss their work, seek feedback, and share challenges. Many of our network members actively contribute to public discourse, sharing their research, creative practices, and activism within their communities and on national platforms. We also used these funds to commission an artistic video piece and to create more sociable and connective spaces for community dialogue at our Annual Public Conversation. This support helped us deepen relationships with our communities - bringing together artists, academics, and activists to reflect on the current moment, share insights, and consider how we might resist.

The Stuart Hall Foundation, POP Fund funded partner

Building full engagement with the Funder+ model would benefit everyone

/// This [Funder+ support] will directly benefit the way we tell our impact story and put together proposals for other funders. It will be particularly useful in thinking through how we share our impact story with funders who are newer or unfamiliar with pop culture for change work.

HEARD, POP Fund funded partner

- Getting involved in the Funder+ model is not conditional on the grant for funded partners. In practice, this means that attendance to the Collective Learning Events or participation in the strengthening modules (Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning, or fundraising) is left to the discretion of funded partners. On the one hand, this is beneficial as the programme operates from a **place of trust** and **partners' autonomy**. It also reflects an understanding on behalf of the POP Fund around partners' **time scarcity** and a concern of not burdening them.
- However, it is clear that this poses a challenge to implementing the POP Fund's strategy according to plan, and to reach desired outcomes when the programme can't be implemented with high fidelity. There is a **loss for the collective** when some funded partners do not participate within the Funder+ model, as the whole ensemble does not benefit from

knowledge, skills and resources that individual partners hold as a result. It also **risks creating different dynamics** with funded partners who consistently show up.

- Overall, the lack of participation from some funded partners seems to stem from a **lack of time and capacity** rather than willingness. This raises a question for the POP Fund in terms of assessing current and future partners' capacity for getting involved in the opportunities offered by the Funder+ model. By making peace with how much participation and involvement in the Funder+ model is a priority for the POP Fund, it should lead to a **stronger clarity in communicating expectations** and involvement for future funded partners during the selection process.

/// It would be in our interest to have a clearer framework in place about what we want to say yes to, when we feel like it's clear that some things aren't right or it's not a fit.

POP Fund Community Council member

/// We are designing things, whilst sometimes people just want the money, they don't want to go through all of that, and so when you offer tools that are supposed to build cohesiveness, I get a bit suspicious of that.

POP Fund External collaborator

Summary: Strengthening Organisations Strengthen Organisation: Scaffolding For Success

We are celebrating	Challenges we are learning from	We are reflecting on how to
<p>The POP Fund core funding is critical: it has strengthened operations, systems and governance across funded partners</p> <p>The POP Fund investment in building tools and resources for the field is starting to pay off with one partner making use of the tools within their own organisational structure.</p> <p>We see a mindset shift amongst funded partners, from survival to transformation mode: they dare to invest within their own structures, building organisational resilience and trialing new approaches</p>	<p>Funded partners not fully taking advantage of Funder+ model (extra support beyond core grant funding, involving training and upskilling as well as networking events) is a lost opportunity for the collective</p> <p>It prevents the programme to be fully implemented, and it risks creating a model running at two different speeds between funded partners who participate vs. those who don't</p>	<p>Align internally on how much of a priority participation in the Funder+ model is for current and future partners</p> <p>Communicate expectations clearly regarding Funder+ participation during the selection process for new funded partners</p>

4.3. Act III - Build Infrastructure: Sharing in Power

Outcome: **New networks and connections are facilitated and bridged between industries, sectors and actors in the UK and abroad .**

Assumption: IF opportunities for knowledge exchange and networking exist THEN peer support and overall mesh of the ecosystem will be enriched, with new relationships and ideas forming and spreading.

The POP Fund has prioritised a relational approach, and the evidence shows that at the end of the pilot's three years, new and existing relationships are being forged and reinforced. Investing time and resources into supporting and fostering networks and connections - both for funded partners and wider community of industry and funders allies - is significant in a context where community organising is systematically underprioritised and underfunded.

How we can share those resources for peer organisations, but also organisations that are coming up to save people time, energy, work. What do we have that we can share to strengthen our ecology, so that our relationships are not competitive, but symbiotic.

POP Fund funded partner

Forging relationships at the speed of trust

- Through their recognition and prioritisation of building personal relationships and dialogue with funded partners, the POP fund core team is widely praised for their ability to build and sustain connections based on trust. This takes **critical skill, time and finesse** and the role of the Programme Lead and Strategic Consultant in deploying these skills for the POP Fund must be celebrated.

- The Programme Lead and Strategic Consultant have also been instrumental in **forging trust** across the wider POP Fund community of funders and with the Community Council. This helped the Council members to tune in quickly and learnt how to collaborate fast, co-developing the new strategy in that same year that they joined.
- The POP Fund set up **a series of unique events to gather, inspire and stimulate its community**: from mixers, to dinners to Collective Learning Events for its funded partners to funding bigger industry gatherings organised by funded partners (Dartington retreat by Counterpoints Arts and the OKRE Summit by OKRE) - these different scales and formats have brought familiar and new faces together in what is still **an emergent field of practice**, priming people for the next phase of collaboration, and generously leveraging the network and relationships of the POP Fund core team.

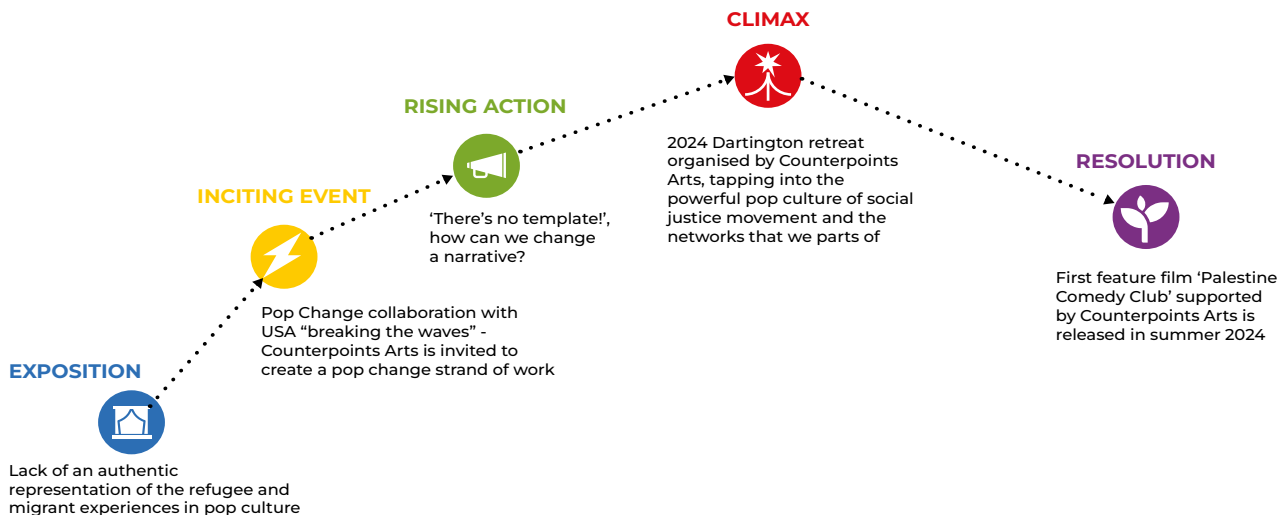


POPCreativity Does Good Dinner special guest Julie Ann Crommett - June 2025

OKRE Summit 2024



Story of change: Using the power of the network



The [Dartington] retreats are able to happen because of the POP fund and it has meant that we were able to build the infrastructure of an ecosystem of bringing together about 50 different organisations. It has led to massive, big partnerships, like with Climate Spring. Off the back of [them attending the retreat], we've just launched a fund with them to fund the development of two films or TV shows that explore the intersection of migration and climate. And that feels like a very tangible thing that has happened as a result of the infrastructure that was built.

Counterpoints Arts, POP Fund funded partner

Supporting the economy of collaborations

- Evidence shows two patterns in which the POP Fund fosters collaboration amongst funded partners and the broader pop culture for social justice ecosystem:
 - It **amplifies preexisting relationships** between partners that pre-dated POP fund membership.
 - It invites and facilitates organisational **skill share** - including amongst Fund member partners who have not collaborated previously. In so doing, the POP Fund is strategically **levelling the economic playing field** for collaborations to take place as partners are more likely to build a project together with the reassurance

that each organisation is funded and can contribute to the overall costs.

- Another key success mechanism facilitated by the POP Fund here is the provision of **a space and an occasion** for partners to meet up regularly; and, in actively sharing what everyone has been up to, inspiring partners to reach out and learn from each other.

The early stages of conversation are eased by knowing there is funding; that we can maximise both our support and resources; and that also means we can free funds to support other organisations in their collaborations that are unsupported; live our politics.

POP Fund funded partner

Building a resilient ecosystem

- Evidence collated across different stakeholders shows that by strengthening existing relationships and pollinating new ones through its Funder+ model, the POP Fund has **expanded the infrastructure of pop culture for social justice in the UK** and makes it more sustainable and resilient in a context where public funding for the arts is severely cut down.
- It also encourages and stimulates ideas for **generating new revenue streams** for organisations, due to the different sizes and focus areas, inviting a mindset shift from a competitive to a more symbiotic mindset.

/// The Funder+ model [...] is about what else we can do to support those organisations, to make them more resilient, ensure that they're sustainable, (...) that they have the right structures in place (...) thinking around their future sustainability and getting funding from other sources.

POP Fund funder

Amplifying cross-industry respect and solidarities

- The evaluation suggests that more work is needed for the POP Fund to **act as an effective bridge** across different sectors and to increase its influence - building on the incredible work and relationships of funded partners across **the creative industries, the charitable sector and academia**.
- There is also a question raised by collaborators on future-proofing the strategy, and building relationships with key **digital players**, which have growing power and influence in producing content and capturing audiences.

/// People are on Tiktok. We need to be smart about how we use some of those people, how you get messages curated, and it's really important that we start thinking about how we use other mediums as well and not just broadcast.

POP Fund external collaborator

/// Even though we've grown, it's still a small fund. There are things that we haven't managed to tap into, like tech, which I think is very relevant. I see a lot online of how young people don't distinguish between pop and politics, it's all encompassed into one for them.

POP Fund Community Council member

Digging into untapped international partnerships

/// Generally speaking when people start to talk about pop culture, they're thinking of Hollywood, when people say 'let's work with screenwriters' they're not thinking, let's work with Bollywood screenwriters. So, when we have conversations about how the industry works, people will default to norms that are norms in America and apply that to other places.

POP Fund external collaborator

- Across the POP Fund community - particularly the core team and funded partners - there is shared agreement that there is an **opportunity to work more internationally**. Collaborations could extend beyond peer funds in the US and beyond Hollywood, to look into global majority country entertainment industries, leveraging the POP Fund's remit around migration and racial justice.

/// A lot of us who are from the global majority, have connections back home. There's a lot of money in Africa at the moment, there's a 2 billion US fund that has just been released to help the creative economy, there's a lot of activity. Given our diasporic communities, I'm really interested in this direction to see how UK producers feed into it.

The TV Collective, POP Fund funded partner

Summary: Building Infrastructure

Building Infrastructure: Sharing In Power

We are celebrating	Challenges we are learning from	We are reflecting on how to
<p>Forging relationships at the speed of trust: senior leadership investing in relationships is paying off.</p> <p>Supporting the economy of collaborations: providing spaces and opportunities to meet up and skill share.</p> <p>Building a resilient ecosystem: expanding the pop culture for social justice UK infrastructure.</p>	<p>Amplifying cross-industry respect and solidarities.</p> <p>Digging into untapped international partnerships: leverage in particular existing relationship with US POP Culture Collaborative.</p>	<p>Build stronger and more diverse connections especially with the entertainment sector and open new avenues with key digital players.</p> <p>Explore new opportunities for partnerships with the entertainment sector in global majority countries.</p>

RESOURCES

Moving at the speed of trust blog



Collective learning events: Embracing collective resonance



Three days in Dartington: provocations to shift entertainment narratives



Industry dinners: Creativity Does Good: Breaking bread and barriers



The Power of Pop mixer



4.4. Act IV - Engaging Philanthropy With Cultural Strategy: Expanding Potential And Impact

Outcome: **Influencing philanthropy towards more and better funding flowing into the pop culture for social justice ecosystem.**

Assumption: IF the power and potential of pop culture for social justice is truly understood THEN funders will engage, advocate for this work and invest in it.

In setting up the POP Fund as a pooled fund, the aim for co-funders was to understand, learn and shift the public understanding on key migration and racial justice narratives, and in doing so, encourage new funders to join in. This vision has not quite materialised as the number of funders investing in this field in the UK remains small. However, there are some valuable learnings to unpack - from the functioning of a pooled fund, to obstacles to overcome to encourage greater philanthropy engagement.



Power of Pop Fund at Cheltenham House 2024 - credit Carmen Valino

/// We need serious funding. That's the biggest point.

POP Fund external collaborator

A unified purpose for funders

- Co-funders are all united by a shared interest in investing in the POP Fund: wanting to **shift the public understanding on harmful narratives around social justice** - migration and racial narratives particularly.
- However, they tend to come at this work through **different pathways**, depending on internal strategies and organisational structure. Some funders entered via a more **thematic-led focus** on racial justice or migration justice, with an overlap into other focus areas (closure of civic spaces; unhealthy information spheres). Others take a more **narrative/cultural-led approach** or a social justice lens more broadly.

- The differing entry points reflect the width and variety in which pop culture for social justice appeals to funders and also a challenge for the POP Fund on whether to lead through **thematics** (migration and / or racial justice) or **innovative approach** (pop culture for social justice).

/// Over the last few years, we've increasingly seen the value of working in partnership with other organisations to deliver work we're really interested in but couldn't do ourselves (...). A lot of what the Power of Pop talks about is triumphant and affirming, and the counterpoint to a lot of negative messaging which spreads so quickly.

POP Fund funder

POP Fund thought leadership and philanthropy blindspots

- The contribution of the POP Fund to the field in terms of **research and through-leadership output** is praised by funders. However, there is limited evidence that this body of research has attracted more funding to the field as a result. To contextualise this finding, it is also key to emphasise that some cultural strategy practitioners go as far to say that no more research is needed to prove the value add of cultural strategy as an effective strategy to positively impact social change. This is based on the argument that there is already a **significant body of evidence backed by rigorous research** that cultural strategy works, as argued in the Impact Storytelling Ecosystem report by the AKO Storytelling Institute: 'As we've explored, some voices go so far as to say that, at this point, the ecosystem does not need more evidence that storytelling leads to social change. We already see that it does and how it does. What we need now is investment in large-scale action, incorporating the arts, community organisers, strategic comms specialists and the media.'¹³

- **The need for additive research** is emphasised across different stakeholders - with overlapping interests from funders to funded partners to external collaborators at two key levels:
 - Building powerful **case studies** unpicking the mechanics of how content shifts audiences' perceptions;
 - Investing in research pitched at **long-term outcomes** level (ie. what mobilises audiences to advocate and act; how to bring entertainment and creative industries to advocate for inclusivity for marginalised talent; how authentic creations drive social and environmental change can reach the masses).

It's going to be tough for pop culture projects to convince funders that they should be investing in a YouTube influencer or a BBC series, as opposed to putting their money into providing affordable housing, or supporting groups that are trying to keep trans people alive... People who are operating in this realm of pop culture are going to have to come up with different rationales and ways of operating that are contributing to the immediate material needs that people have, or at the very least, have a sharper analysis around what the precise contributions are that they're seeking to make to those material conditions.

POP Fund external collaborator

Further harnessing POP Fund funders as advocates for the work is key, especially at a moment where a minority of external collaborators to the POP Fund express concerns around philanthropy appetite more generally for this approach, and the need to look outside for other sources of revenue.

This is a time when a lot of similar initiatives are struggling, and there is an opportunity to look at the autonomous resourcing structures that should exist for this work (...) they [POP fund and funded partners] need some degree of autonomous resourcing themselves if they're going to get outside of the frame of whoever the donors are that are currently funding them or might fund them in the future.

POP Fund external collaborator

Addressing the logistical challenges of a pooled fund

- Pooled funds are still new in the UK philanthropic field and the evidence of the POP Fund shows that there were clear advantages for the pilot. Being a pooled fund holds a key appeal for some funders in terms of **scaling up impact** and **mitigating risk**, which is important in the context of a field that remains significantly underfunded.
- However the logistical challenges can also act as a **deterrent**: aligning on individual investments, long term strategy (dependent on individual funders shifting strategy internally), aligning on quantity of funds each funder contributes, length of funding and for each one to have slightly different aspirations for the POP Fund.

A challenge probably has been the collaborative nature in some respects of the funding. From a practical point of view, having five or six funders involved is obviously great, but they've all come on in at different times with different commitments, and their own point of view of what they want to get out of it.

POP Fund funder

Summary: Influencing philanthropy

We are celebrating	Challenges we are learning from	We are reflecting on how to
<p>Rallying funders around unified purpose: to understand, learn how to and shift public understanding of harmful narratives around social justice broadly, racial or migration justice specifically.</p> <p>The POP Fund has contributed thought leadership to the UK field.</p>	<p>Unclear evidence on whether current research produced is leading to further investment in the field (for POP Culture or other organisations involved in cultural strategy / narrative change in the UK).</p> <p>Addressing the logistical challenges of a pooled fund: focusing on scaling impact and mitigating risks and ensuring strategic alignment between funders to ride logistical growing pains.</p>	<p>Further harnessing co-funders as advocates.</p> <p>Future research to be targeted and socialised beyond philanthropy to reach new stakeholder audiences (corporates, entertainment, digital...).</p>

RESOURCES

<p>Shifting Power: Exploring the value of pooled funds in the UK funding landscape</p> 	<p>Building narrative and cultural change infrastructure in the UK: Learning from inspirational work in the US</p> 
<p>New Brave World: The power, opportunities and potential of pop culture for social change in the UK</p> 	

5. AFTERMATH

LESSONS LEARNED AND LOOKING AHEAD

Beyond the grant-making impact of the POP Fund, other elements relevant to the strategic direction of the POP Fund were raised by

stakeholders during the evaluation which we tackle in this section.

5.1. POP Fund Organisation

→ Governance structure in review

Being hosted by Comic Relief presents undeniable advantages for the POP Fund, in particular for prospective funders, as it provides **endorsement and reassurance** around cultural strategy for social justice, an approach still seen as 'risky' in philanthropy.

- This goes both ways as the POP Fund also embodies for some funders the recent shift in strategy from Comic Relief towards a more participatory ethos, centring lived experiences.
- However some stakeholders raise the question on whether this is the right structure for the POP Fund moving forward, something to consider now that the POP Fund has entered its post-pilot era.

It's currently hosted at Comic Relief, but is that a long term solution or might it be better if it was independently hosted, so that a conscious decision is made on it now that [the POP Fund] has moved beyond this pilot phase into its next phase of operating and grant making.

POP Fund funder

→ Clarifying the POP Fund's North Star

There was a sense amongst internal and external POP Fund stakeholders that the 'North Star' - the ultimate mission of the POP Fund could be further clarified.

[Other comparable pooled funds have] a very clear goal. There's a number attached to it, there's an audience, and there's a very specific creative and behavioural outcome associated with it. That's the level of clarity that the Power of Pop Fund needs to have, and that is the purpose that will drive it.

POP Fund external collaborator

A first step was made in this direction by developing an operational theory of change for this evaluation but more importantly, there is an opportunity to **leverage the assets developed in the strategy in 2024**, through communications and impact building.

Vision

We envision a society where thought provoking creativity inspires the public to believe in and demand equitable futures. We encourage ambitious and radical approaches to racial and migrant justice grounded in the values of love, care and shared humanity.

Mission

Our mission is to advance social justice by championing transformative, community-led organisations that influence pop culture creatively. We provide funding and organisational support to improve their reach, sustainability and impact.

The vision clearly sets **equitable futures** as the long-term goal but this does not seem widely embraced or appropriated yet by the core team or the Community Council. If this north star is still fit for purpose, how does it translate from an audience, industry and content perspective moving forward?

→ Expanding through an intersectional lens

The POP Fund currently straddles both a **thematic focus** (migration and racial justice) and an **innovative approach to social change** (pop culture for social justice). Whilst the dual focus is compatible in theory, in practice it can obscure and dilute the effectiveness of communicating what the POP Fund is actually about for prospective funders. Some stakeholders recommend **leading with a wider range of cause areas**, to help unlock new funding opportunities. The intersectional lens is currently acknowledged by the POP Fund but its intentional openness risks diluting its effectiveness ('The POP Fund has a particular focus on migration and racial justice, while acknowledging the deep interwoven causes of climate justice, gender justice, economic justice and democracy.').

We don't want to water down the importance of [racial and migration justice issues] and how pop culture can really make a difference, but there's so much potential. (...) It's interlinked with the climate justice piece, there's real opportunity to hear the voices of people directly kind of affected by climate change.

POP Fund funder

There are opportunities in adjacent areas which could be complementary, be it on gender or climate justice. Thinking through what that might mean for the POP fund and whether that might create a broader lens for funding opportunities as well, will be worth thinking through in this next period.

POP Fund funder

It is key for internal stakeholders to **retain the focus on racial and migration justice** as there is systemic underinvestment in racialised creatives, so how can the POP Fund expand without negating this essential power dynamic? Could the North Star of 'equitable futures' help in embracing a more agnostic thematic approach whilst being clearly anchored in a racial justice lens?



Panellists and audience members at POP Fund Igniting Impact event July 2025

5.2. POP Fund Community

→ Reviewing the grassroots funding strategy

I'm very clear that philanthropy has no business in starting movements. What we can do is make movements more effective by giving them the infrastructure, giving them networks, giving them the voice, the visibility, but it has to come from the people, which is why grassroots funding works.

POP Fund external collaborator

Integrating grassroots organisations within 'the POP Fund's three-year pilot' made sense strategically as it began to build the infrastructure of the pop culture for social justice ecosystem in the UK, a nascent field. Some of the funded partners' organisations are **grassroots organisations which hold a significant and influential place in the network** of organisations doing cultural strategy for social change in the UK (either through pioneering practices and/or individual leaders).

While multi-year core grants have provided the opportunity of scaling up for these organisations, there is a question mark on whether to consolidate this approach with future cohorts by continuing to award grants to grassroots organisations or to prioritise bigger, middle-sized organisations as the POP Fund moves past its pilot. This is a particularly relevant question in a context where not all funded partners' organisations have the same desire to grow or scale up. The strategic framework clearly visualises a certain trajectory for change for the field (from subculture, into pop culture, into mainstream culture) but not all funded partners identify with this flow of change, so some misalignment may remain. It should be **further refined and aligned as part of the selection criteria** for new funded partners.

We need to step back and think, where's the popular culture side of it, and what are we ultimately trying to do? Because this same money could go to developing 10 projects, with the goal of one of them going big, to have a much bigger impact.

POP Fund external collaborator

→ Scalability

The POP Fund size has quadrupled in 3 years, starting at about £1.16 million to reach £4.7 million by the end of the pilot in August 2025. There is a sense amongst ecosystem actors (other key actors involved in the pop culture for social justice field in the UK) that the field is still massively undersupported by funders, especially as the wider philanthropy sector often considers narrative change or cultural strategy an experimental approach¹⁴. There seems to be a mindset amongst funders of 'invest small, and see where it goes' which clashes with what we know to be massive far-right investments in narrative change spanning multiple decades. This is a missed opportunity for practitioners closer to the UK field, as the tight concentration of the entertainment industry in the UK presents a **real opportunity to reach audiences en masse and have a major impact** if more significant investment were brought into the field.

Collaborators also set guardrails around ideal Fund size and capacity as the POP Fund continues growing and onboarding more partners will put more **pressure on operational capacity** for the core team and the Community Council.

Operationally, the POP Fund is a small team with less than five core members and a further 5 Community Council members. With another three funded partners set to join by 2025, bringing the total number to 12 funded partners, the POP Fund will be faced with a familiar challenge for organisations scaling up: do you go broader or deeper? The challenge will be to ensure that operations and systems remain lean whilst allowing for the relationship building and aftercare with partners included in the Funder+ model, on top of the grant-making.

We are still at the beginning of the amount of money that can be organised for this, and a very compelling argument can be made for it. I also want to say that it doesn't need to be a huge fund. It just needs to be strategic and be supportive of overall goals.

POP Fund external collaborator

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As a comparison, The Pop Culture Collaborative raised more than \$25 million in the pilot's first five years, surpassing the goal set by its initial founders, and made upwards of 200 grants, ranging from \$10,000 to \$200,000, in rapid response, project-based, and long-term general operating grants. However, this is to contextualise within the US philanthropic sector, much bigger than the UK; and with the entertainment industry sector size in the US. Additionally, the backlash against racial justice work (one of the core tenets of the POP Fund in the UK) has also been much more prominent over the course of this pilot.

→ Using the strategic framework as a compass

The strategic framework was the product of internal collaboration between the POP Fund core team, the Community Council and some of the funded partners. Stakeholders align on the strategic framework capturing a **collaborative ecosystem vision** where each organisation can thrive alongside and with one another. From a funders' perspective, the strategic framework represents core foundational, definitional work, clarifying the vision and allowing it to be communicated to wider funders' audiences.

I would rather see something that centres subculture or creation (...). There's always a relationship with pop culture, because we encounter it every day, but it's just that sense that we also create our own sort of popular cultures within our own networks, and we're not outside of this big thing, but actually we're part of it and and, you know, against it at certain times.

POP Fund funded partner

However, **not all funded partners across cohorts necessarily align with the framework**, or see their work or role in the ecosystem reflected in the trajectory set by the framework. The framework tends to make the most sense for funded partners who work more closely with the entertainment industry, as there is a clear objective around maximising audiences for their output.

We're far more interested in what is the big mainstream version of all our ideas, which is how we've originated things like the refugee week film program. It's been shown in schools up and down the country, which means that we are getting to people on a mass scale.

Counterpoints Arts, POP Fund funded partner

This tension around the framework is important to highlight as it invites us to reflect on how crucial alignment is to the mission delivery of the POP Fund; and **what role could be played by the partner organisations which do not have the ambition to see their ideas and work enter the mainstream** inside the POP Fund community.

Can we accommodate this tension moving forward recognising that each type of funded partner might play a different role, important for the ecosystem, and assess the downsides? This is echoing tensions and conversations within the broader field of practice¹⁵, where some recommend to push for greater formalisation and consistency across terms, practices and methodology whilst others prioritise flexibility in not forcing alignment.

It's an ecosystem model, which is very different to a program. They're not delivering a program together with shared outcomes, we need to be respectful of it.

POP Fund funder

5.3. POP Fund In The UK Cultural Strategy Ecosystem

→ Clarifying the contribution of the POP Fund

Some of the external collaborators raise questions around the positioning of the POP Fund in the wider cultural strategy ecosystem in the UK. Contrary to the Pop Culture Collaborative in the US which has been anchored within the film industry from inception, the POP Fund was born as a third sector initiative in the UK. Clarifying where the POP Fund stands will be helpful in making its contribution more readable across philanthropy and industry. At an operational level, there is also an opportunity in refining the Theory of Change of the POP Fund to articulate how the POP Fund sees its contributions and how it conceptualises change.

If we're going to talk about the popular culture side of this, I almost feel like, in a way, that's what's missing, because everything is actually niche. Everything is sitting within a certain sector, and the research is also within a sectoral context and so forth. (...) I think if we really thought about the popular culture side of this and what we're trying to achieve, then we might think of it slightly differently.

POP Fund external collaborator

¹⁵ [Impact Storytelling: the Ecosystem, the Evidence and Possible Futures](#)

This evaluation found that there is appetite across stakeholders for developing the profile of the POP Fund especially with **corporate and industry partners**; while continuing to maintain connections with academic partners and philanthropy. Being part of the conversation around what makes content impactful - some POP Fund funded partners such as Heard have reflected around the Adolescence moment¹⁶ - and continue to increase the POP Fund visibility in general will be important in **building the POP Fund brand** moving forward. Alongside showcasing funded partners' expertise, the POP Fund needs to get more hands on with narrative change and cultural strategy expertise **in its own name** to be seen as **a credible and legitimate expert** in the field. This will expand the POP Fund influence and capacity to deliver its strategic mission.

Talking about Mr. Bates and obviously, we're not funding any of that work, but it raises the question: how do the grants sit within this mode, and have we done enough to really unpack the question of capabilities, where are the gaps in the field that the grant making could help fill? It is a very big landscape, and I don't expect the grant making to cover all of it, but I know that I will always be asked by our trustees, you know, what impact did the money have on social change?

POP Fund funder

→ Sharing the impact learning responsibility

It is widely acknowledged around the field that measuring impact for narrative change and cultural strategy for social justice is hard, although there is a blossoming set of evidence, tools and methodologies for doing it¹⁷.

During its first three years of existence, the POP Fund has been in 'start up mode' and with this report and moving forward, the intention is to create a clearer impact story rooted in the POP Fund's strategy. This challenge has been shared by funded partners, but there are some burgeoning examples showing how adopting a **pragmatic approach**, in dialogue with the evidence generated by other actors in the ecosystem, and focusing on **spheres of control and influence** can deliver exciting results when it comes to measuring impact.

[the AKO Storytelling Institute report] It's basically all the evidence and literature behind the power of storytelling.(...) so we know that if we do those three things really well, the evidence literally shows that this leads to narrative change.

Heard, POP Fund funded partner

Tracking more macro shifts at audience, industry or content creation levels must be **a shared responsibility between the POP Fund and funders**, as this type of study requires **significant and long-term dedicated investment** - and ambitiously even beyond the philanthropic sector. As shows like *Adolescence* and *Mr Bates vs The Post Office* capture audiences' attention, broadcasters and streamers are also invested in unpacking success metrics and understanding what makes audiences engage, what content resonates and there is an opportunity to mobilise this interest and **pool research costs and capacities**.

RESOURCES

TedxLondon Festival of ideas February 2025



¹⁶ TEDxLondon Storytellers discussed the viral TV hit 'Adolescence'

¹⁷ *Impact Storytelling: the Ecosystem, the Evidence and Possible Futures*; 'There's a trend towards collective, pragmatic evidence gathering. Recent evolutions in the ecosystem, including the development of innovative new measurement frameworks and cross- thematic research and trackers, suggest that there is an increasing focus on tracking practical infrastructure-building indicators as proxies for overall impact, and of measuring contribution rather than direct, individual attribution'.

6. DENOUEMENT

6.1. Concluding Thoughts

Over the past three years, the POP Fund has scaled up from £1.16 million to £4.7 million, it has increased from three funded partners to nine and is expected to onboard three more by the end of 2025. The POP Fund has also secured widespread renewal from its initial group of co-funders and onboarded one new funder. These achievements are to be celebrated, but it is also contended that out of the nine funded partners, not all have yet been benefiting from the wrap around support of the POP Fund (besides its grant-making) to fully realise the potential level of benefit that our strategic framework would like to achieve. As the Funder+ support is expected to ramp up post pilot from late 2025 (with additional tailored fundraising and MEL support), it will be important to keep track of uptake and impact for funded partners.

More time is needed to reach a tipping point where the POP Fund can fully plot its own course. A depth of expertise, connections and partnerships have been developed over the past three years - among funded partners, with strategic partnership across the UK and the US and the organisation of field-building

events. The POP Fund is finding its stride as its infrastructure building work has been critical to expand cultural strategy for social justice in the UK. Yet, there is room to grow and build the public profile of the POP Fund further. This will be made possible through a two-fold approach, with each of these propositions interconnected:

- **Internally, by refining the POP Fund's vision;** refining selection criteria; deciding on a longer-term governance model in regard to Comic Relief and anticipating operational capacities needed as the POP Fund keeps growing and onboards new funded partners.
- Externally, this will require **consolidating our thought-leadership** by coordinating and/or leading further additive research for the field; reinforcing and developing ties with the entertainment and media industry; and building the POP Fund brand and public profile.



Power of Pop Mixer - April 2024

For the POP Fund to plot its own course in the coming years, there are five core recommendations:



Be Loud and Proud About Your Vision

The current vision developed in 2024 around **equitable futures** needs to guide the POP Fund's purpose, and be more deeply embedded within strategy and communications of the POP Fund, or be revised to be fit for purpose.

In particular, it needs to hail Fund's communications and be distilled across the Theory of Change.



Lead with an Intersectional Lens

Migration and racial justice are essential lenses for the POP Fund that address systemic issues: i.e. the lack of representation of racialised creatives within entertainment and cultural industries, and the lack of or misrepresentation of stories about people of colour and migrants. Yet, these two core areas represent only a small drop of funding available in the UK and the adverse political context is inviting cautiousness in funders and their trustees. There is a risk that by being thematic-focused first, the POP Fund is limiting its reach and ability to fundraise more widely across the philanthropic network in the UK. It is worth considering leading with the vision of equitable futures, underpinned by an intersectional lens and covering more cause areas (highlighting racism and migration justice as core areas wherever relevant).



Align on Scaling Ambition

Decide whether, based on the POP Fund's internal capacities and impact ambition, it is possible and desirable to onboard new partners that are grassroots organisations or if there is a need to shift towards medium-sized organisations. Additionally, if the course set out in the strategic framework holds for internal stakeholders (from subculture to pop culture and mainstream culture), it is important to align on selection criteria (ie. appetite and capacity for funded partners in reaching audiences outside of lived experience). It is key to navigate friction between the POP Fund's ethics (respecting funded partners' autonomy), and expectations linked to the Funder+ model with intentionality during the selection process, to not create a two-tiered involvement model for partners long-term.



Prioritise Additive Research Relevant Across Sectors

There is a lot of available research across geographies and sectors. There is a need to focus and target research to align with the bigger (and more complex) questions most relevant for our stakeholders and in line with our theory of change: what mobilises audiences to engage, advocate and act for social and environmental justice ; what content drives social and environmental change at a large scale; and what successfully shifts the entertainment industry towards more inclusivity for marginalised talent. There is an opportunity to mobilise this interest and pool research costs and capacities across sectors and industries.



Put Pop Culture in the Centre

Pop culture for social justice is a formidable force and this is an exciting time in the UK. Numerous creative outputs have captured the hearts and minds of audiences, creating cultural moments and conversations that have caused ripples across our social, legal and political systems. This has shown how cultural power can be wielded for good. In this context, it's key for the POP Fund to be bold and keep reimagining how cultural strategy must thrive at the intersections of philanthropy and corporate, to bridge these two worlds and harness the strengths of each in order to amplify the POP Fund's impact.

Finally, the field of cultural strategy still has plenty of room to grow in the UK and the majority of stakeholders who participated in this evaluation raised the need for more investment, with urgency. As the POP Fund looks to further grow in the next coming years, there is an opportunity to think creatively about

how to build a community of practice with key actors sitting at the intersections of this work, across philanthropy, academia and corporate - including digital and technology gatekeepers - with a future-proofed vision for shifting audiences, content and industry.



Attendees and speakers at the Igniting Impact Event – July 2025

APPENDIX I

METHODOLOGY

Evaluation Key Considerations

We prioritised four core principles for the evaluation, presented as follows:

PRAGMATISM: the current [Strategy](#) and [Strategic framework](#) only came into effect during 2024, whilst the POP Fund has been running since 2022. Funded partners' monitoring forms (the 6 months and annual reports) were updated in line with revised frameworks by the end of 2024, so one of the key sources for evidence was limited. Faced with retrofitting strategic priorities and learning questions, we adopted a pragmatic approach, **prioritising insights gathered in most recent reports and through 1-to-1 evaluation interviews** to plug in knowledge gaps.

CONTRIBUTION-FOCUSED: The majority of the POP fund activity is dedicated to grantmaking; with a percentage of the POP Fund's activity focused on influencing and advocacy across the philanthropic field, alongside a Funder+ model of organisational strengthening, which this evaluation also assessed. The evaluation scope needed to be **pitched at the right contribution level**, between the POP Fund's sphere of control and its sphere of influence, in line with last year's evaluation recommendation¹⁸: *'The POP Fund should ensure it communicates clearly the direct impact it can have, and what is beyond the POP Fund's remit.'*

CONTEXTUALISED: three years is a short time-span for social and cultural change. Trying to understand macro shifts within audience, content and industry by only looking at funded partners' activities would have been misdirected as it would not provide access to the bigger contextual picture. We chose to supplement partners' findings with **external interviews of key actors in the wider ecosystem of pop culture for social change**. These additional insights allowed us to interpret, draw conclusions and build deeper learning: not just focusing on the 'what', but unearthing insights on the 'why' and 'how'; while acknowledging the influence of other contributing factors beyond the POP Fund's direct impact.

ADDITIVE: a lot of ground had already been covered in [the 2024 annual insights report](#) which spanned the first two years of the POP Fund. We intentionally set another course for this pilot evaluation: building **an operational theory of change and causal change pathways** with the core team to identify knowledge gaps in our evaluation review, to understand what works, and which hypotheses have not proved right. Our aim was to provide a clear analysis of where the specific contribution of the POP fund is and how it links to material conditions for impact delivery.

Our Approach: contribution analysis

We wanted to learn from what worked as well as what did not to inform the POP Fund's future strategy, as well as to model accountability and transparency. We used **contribution analysis** for the evaluative design, a theory-based evaluation.

Contribution analysis is about *"making a good theory of change, identifying key assumptions, and focusing monitoring and evaluation and research on these key assumptions. The result of a contribution analysis is a nuanced, evidence-based narrative about how an intervention contributes to outcomes"*¹⁹ The Impact Storytelling report from UAL describes contribution analysis as *'a non-experimental impact evaluation method, contribution analysis is a process-oriented evaluation methodology, which acknowledges that many factors influence a given outcome. Rather than trying to prove attribution, contribution analysis seeks to identify the contribution of the main intervention to the impact/outcome, while also giving credit to other influencing factors. The credibility of its findings emerges from the thoroughness of how a theory of change is described, tested and revised over multiple iterations, and the rigour with which an evaluation team identifies, tests and validates contribution claims. This makes it a good fit for complex initiatives, including narrative change.'*²⁰

¹⁸ [POP Fund Annual insights report 2024](#)

¹⁹ [Contribution analysis - Institute of Development Studies](#)

²⁰ [Impact Storytelling: the Ecosystem, the Evidence and Possible Futures](#)

Contribution analysis is particularly indicated when programmes have multiple objectives and activities; when interventions have a restricted sphere of influence but evaluative thinking about effectiveness is still necessary. Under contribution analysis, we used **methodological bricolage**, a combination of different methodologies that best served our evaluative design.

We used elements of:

- **Realist Evaluation:** A realist evaluation is a type of evaluation that seeks to understand how and why a program or intervention works, rather than just whether it works. It focuses on identifying the specific mechanisms and contextual factors that contribute to outcomes, acknowledging that interventions don't have the same effect on everyone or in every situation²¹. Realist Evaluation is interested in answering 'how, for whom, under what conditions and why does a program work?'
- **Outcome Harvesting:**²² Outcome Harvesting collects ("harvests") evidence of what has changed ("outcomes") and, working backwards, determines whether and how an intervention has contributed to these changes. An outcome is an observable and significant change in a social actors' behaviour, relationships, activities, policies or practices, influenced by a project, initiative or intervention
- **Process Tracing:** Process Tracing is a within-case, theory-based method. At the heart of the method is the idea of tracing "causal mechanisms" that link causes with their effects, to explain the how and the why change happens. This helps to update confidence in hypotheses with new information. Whilst Process Tracing is neutral on *con* tools/sources, understanding context is critical to assessing the strength of evidence and potential biases. Commonly, evidence is categorised as helping to confirm or disconfirm contribution claims.
- **Most Significant Change:**²³ An evaluation method designed to gather stories of change or impact and collectively decide which stories are particularly significant. It consists of a few steps, first deciding the types of

stories that should be collected (stories about what - for example, about industry practice or audiences' mindset changes). Then, collecting the stories and determining which stories are the most significant. Finally, sharing the stories and discussing values with stakeholders and contributors so that learning happens about what is valued.

Specifically, we conducted:

- **Core Power of Pop Fund Power of Pop Fund team learnings:** 3 x 3h small group learning sessions (one on building causal ToC; one on revising causal assumptions; one on gathering learnings for the past 3 years)
- **Community Council members learnings:** 1 x 2h focus group – geared at assessing the influence of the POP Fund over the philanthropic and entertainment industry sectors.
- **Funded partners learnings:** a combination of monitoring reports [six months reports and annual reports] ; 8 x 90mins diagnosis individual sessions ; and one joint collective learning event.
- **Co-funders learnings:** 7 x 1h interviews with POP Fund funders.
- **External collaborators learnings:** 6 x 30-60mins interviews with key actors in the pop culture for social justice ecosystem (UK and global).
- **Wider document review:** analysis of key POP Fund and wider pop culture for social justice ecosystem materials, reports and articles.

Some partners were at a more mature stage of POP Fund funding than others over the evaluation of the pilot, largely those who were awarded funding for the full three years (although for a few this related to some of the challenges we raised). This means that some partners were in a better position to submit a wider range and quantity of evidence. However all nine partners were able to contribute to this evaluation and we are grateful to them for their input into this evaluation.

²¹ [Realist Evaluation](#)

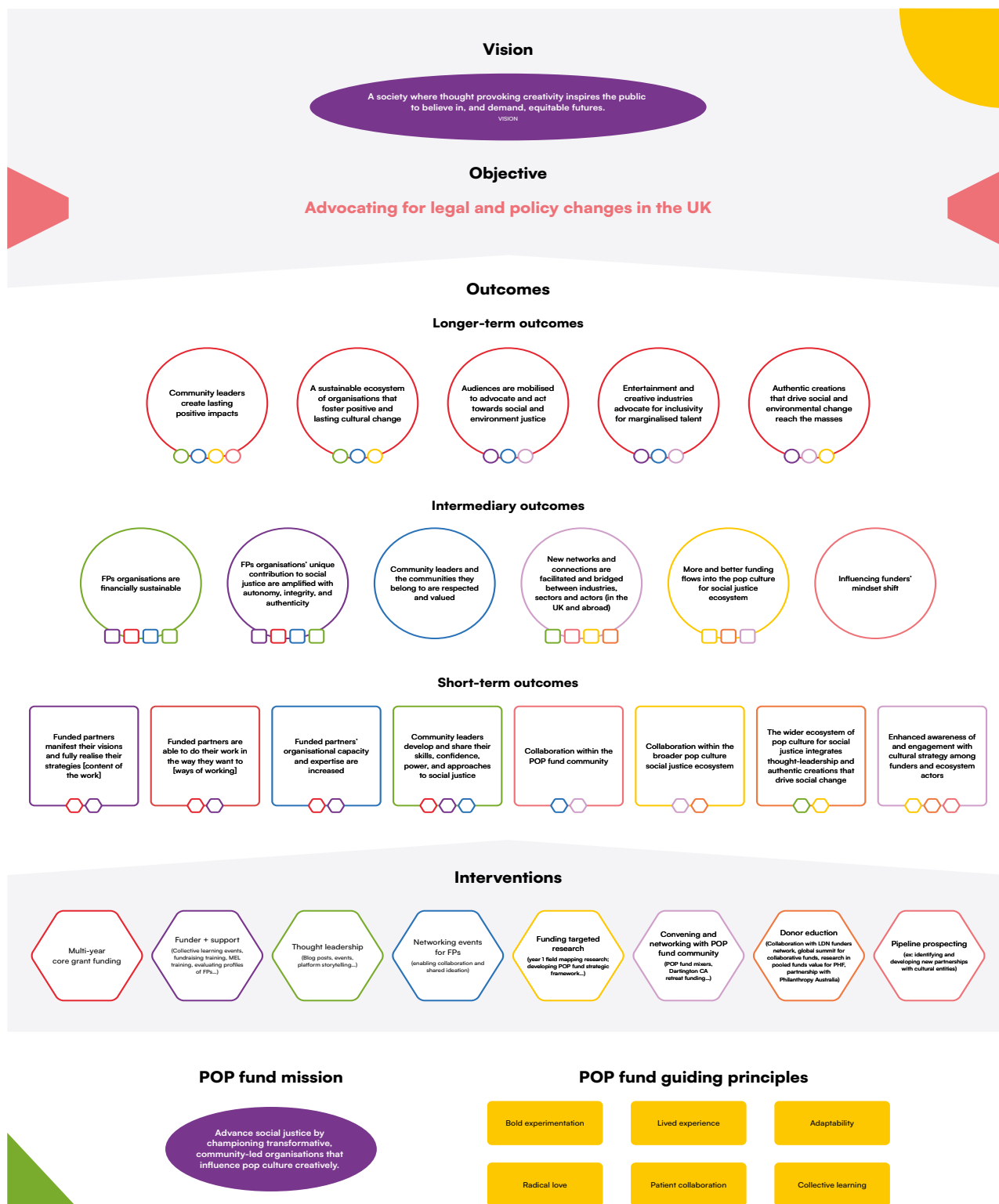
²² [Outcome Harvesting definition](#)

²³ [Most Significant Change definition](#)

Building a Theory of Change for the Evaluation

As part of our contribution analysis approach, a **causal** Theory of Change was developed with the core team through a facilitated process. The aim of this **operational** ToC was to facilitate learning for the evaluation, by making the **key assumptions explicit** - i.e. how the POP Fund

team envisages change happening- in order to test, learn and evaluate **how** change actually happened. This ToC is set to be an evolving product - something to ground us and evaluate against - but which will go through another set of iterations post this evaluation.



Limitations

- **Systematic tracking:** there is a wide variety across POP Fund funded partners in terms of focus area, core activities and MEL (Monitoring Evaluation Learning) set-up. Not only do funded partners track differently (when they have the infrastructure to do so), there is no harmonisation of indicators, tools and joint outcomes. While this impedes building a joint ensemble picture across funded partners, we are still able to build an individual diagnosis of how each partner has progressed over the course of the POP fund grant, and how it's made a difference. Taken together, the collection of individual insights builds a pattern significant enough to assess the POP Fund impact.
- **Put a number on it:** we hear and understand the calls for quantitative evidence to be attached to narrative change work. There is an expansive body of research that highlights the merits and limitations of quantitative approaches for this body of work²⁴. For this evaluation report specifically, we drew from input sources available to us, without conducting extra primary research due to time and finance limitations (POP Fund core team and funded partners). Given how quantitative methods can prove a significant drain on resources - we also had to prioritise a qualitative approach. We gather that the interest for quantifying this work is around long-term, macro shifts, requiring a dedicated budget and a research question to be worthy of the endeavour.
- **Broader changes in audiences' belief, attitudes and behaviours:** relatedly, there is big appetite from the philanthropic community in particular in better understanding how the work of the POP Fund can abound to broader change (across audiences, content, industry or policy). This report offers to take stock of what the direct contribution of the POP fund is based on our mid-term outcomes after three years of pilot. To track macro shifts, there is a need to work together with the field, especially with other partners involved in migration and racial justice to track mindset evolution around migration and or race within British society. To tie this specifically to the POP fund and its funded partners, it would require to identify a case study (a film or installation...) produced by one of the POP fund partners and work with audiences longitudinally to assess mindset change over a period of time and exploring how specific messaging or deep narrative shaped that mindset change.

APPENDIX II

PROGRAMME STAKEHOLDERS

Funded Partners

Cohort 1 (onboarded in April 2022):

Skin Deep: Skin Deep develops digital and physical spaces for Black, people of colour (POC), migrant, refugee and marginalised creatives to work towards justice through cultural production – in print, online and at live events. Across its programmes, Skin Deep explores how to globally build towards racial justice. See [case study](#)

We Are Bridge: WAB builds a bridge between emerging talent and the industry, supporting contribution in the pop culture space from marginalised groups who may otherwise have limited access to further career development opportunities and/or training. See [case study](#)

2POCC: 2POCC: The not-for-profit arm of People of Culture Collective (POCC). It exists to positively improve the lived experiences of creative professionals of colour for now and future generations. See [case study](#)

Cohort 2 (onboarded in May 2023):

Opening Knowledge across Research and Entertainment: OKRE works strategically to break down barriers and support people to work together, creating fresh and impactful projects. It believes that stories – the ones that create real, social change – are inspired by lived experience, informed by research and driven by entertainment expertise.

Counterpoints Arts: aims to amplify the arts by and about migrants and refugees, seeking to ensure that their contributions are recognised and welcomed within British arts, history and culture

Heard: works with people and the media to inspire content that changes hearts and minds. They connect media professionals with people who have direct experience of an issue; it supports people to get the best out of media engagements; and it uses insights from research to help storytellers land their message and engage audiences

Cohort 3 (onboarded in July 2024):

Stuart Hall Foundation: The Foundation's work is directed toward achieving a more racially and socially just society through public education. We are committed to equipping a wider public

with the intellectual tools to intervene in national and international debates on race and class by facilitating a combination of artistic and intellectual interventions.

The TV Collective: We are dedicated to promoting equity and inclusion for Black, Asian, and Global Majority professionals in the screen industries.

Hood Futures Studio: an artist-led cultural organisation; a platform for creative practice, critical thinking and social change. The core of our work is building infrastructure, relationships and platforms to support sustainable creativity in cities. We connect artists to resources, which help them harness their talents to develop their environment.

Funders

Comic Relief: Comic Relief is a major charity based in the UK, with a vision of a just world, free from poverty. Our goal is to drive positive change through the power of entertainment.

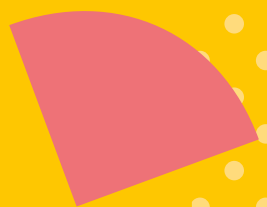
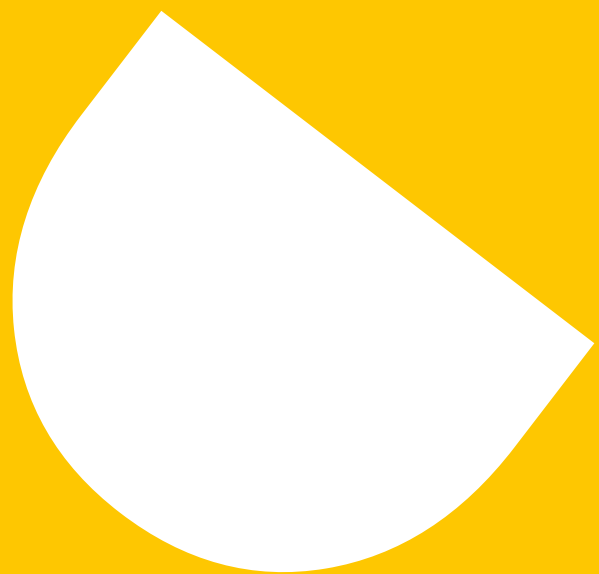
Unbound Philanthropy: Unbound Philanthropy aims for a welcoming society and just immigration, investing in climate and migrant justice, and partners with leaders in the US and UK

Paul Hamlyn Foundation: Paul Hamlyn Foundation is based in the UK and works towards a just future in which everyone, especially young people, can realise their full potential and enjoy fulfilling and creative lives.

Esmée Fairbairn Foundation: Esmée Fairbairn Foundation aims to improve our natural world, secure a fairer future and strengthen the bonds in communities in the UK.

OAK Foundation: Oak Foundation has seven global and four country programmes to support others to make the world a safer, fairer, and more sustainable place to live.

The Linbury Trust: The Linbury Trust is a UK-based grant-making foundation, with a core focus on public engagement with culture, and work at the intersections of the environment and climate, people experiencing disadvantage and inequality, including homelessness, and refugees and asylum seekers and supporting older people to live well.



PLOT YOUR OWN COURSE

An Evaluation of the Power of Pop Fund Pilot

By Eva Didier