A Foundation's Guide to Paper Prototyping

An Emerging Approach to Surfacing Innovation

February 2016

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Purpose

The purpose of this guide is to introduce a promising approach to surfacing insights and supporting innovative thinking within a field in order to explore new and better paths to impact.

Why Innovate?

For The Rockefeller Foundation, "innovations" are products, processes, services, organizations and markets that yield new avenues for solving acute problems. They represent a break from previous practice, often occurring when different points of view or existing practices are framed, imagined, or combined in novel ways.

Innovation succeeds when it creates new pathways for solving entrenched social and environmental problems, resulting in lasting transformation of the systems that most affect vulnerable populations. Our definition recognizes that innovation is an inherently collaborative and social process. Putting innovations into practice invariably involves cutting across organizational, sectoral, or disciplinary boundaries. Innovation thrives where there is a cross-pollination of ideas and a mix of actors.

At The Rockefeller Foundation, we look for breakthrough ideas and organizations that will catalyze lasting change on the world's most pressing problems. As a result, we often find ourselves exploring somewhat new spaces, seeking to simultaneously develop relationships with existing actors and surface promising innovations. Towards that end, this guide describes an approach we have developed that we call Paper Prototyping — a design effort that brings together diverse actors to devise and test new solutions using a facilitated and iterative process.

Paper Prototyping convenes experts and practitioners with deep understanding of a given problem, supports them to think big about novel solutions, and creates the space for them to test their ideas with stakeholders and each other. Importantly, this approach relies on the experiences and ideas from those closest to the problem. We have found it to be a powerful way to support innovation and deepen knowledge, and therefore wanted to share what we have learned with other funders. Paper Prototyping also builds the capacity of organizations to identify, catalyze or seize opportunities to innovate as they seek to achieve greater and lasting social and environmental change.

Like any new approach, Paper Prototyping is a work in progress. We welcome questions, feedback, and advice from other funders experimenting with new ways to help solve long-standing problems.

Sincerely,
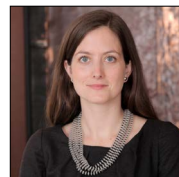
Caroline Kronley
Strategy Team
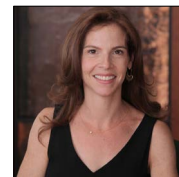
Kippy Joseph
Innovation Team

The ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION

Prototyping: A Method for Innovation

In developing new strategies for intervention, The Rockefeller Foundation places particular emphasis on innovative solutions that push the boundaries of current practice to achieve greater impact. Learning from across disciplines reinforces the value of using **an iterative approach to designing, testing, refining, and ultimately scaling the most promising innovations.**

Drawing from the field of design, one of the ways we enact this experimental approach is through the use of a prototyping process. Through prototyping and other innovative approaches, the Foundation seeks to surface more solutions more quickly while collaboratively engaging external experts and practitioners.

We use "prototype" to refer to an early model of a potential solution, i.e., the intended product of the prototyping process. Prototypes describe, initially at a high level, the core innovation or innovations around which we could build our work. "Paper Prototypes", the deliverables being requested in this case, are early-stage prototypes. They are the expression of the main ideas and features, and the means by which to test or validate them. They are not yet field-tested solutions, but rather well-developed conceptual designs, supported where possible by learning, analysis, and emerging evidence.

Paper Prototyping Grants

Over the last two years, we've experimented with Paper Prototyping grants as a way to better inform investment decisions of the Foundation.

These grants provide funding, advising, and other resources to a handful of implementing NGOs so that in parallel they can develop, test, and refine different approaches to a common problem space.

While working independently for the most part, the approach brings grantees together to convene as a cohort along the way, providing valuable peer feedback and relationship-building opportunities.

The most promising concepts from these grants have the potential to be developed into strategic options or directions for The Rockefeller Foundation.

IMPLEMENTING NGOS

THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION

PROTOTYPING PROCESS

SHARED UNDERSTANDING
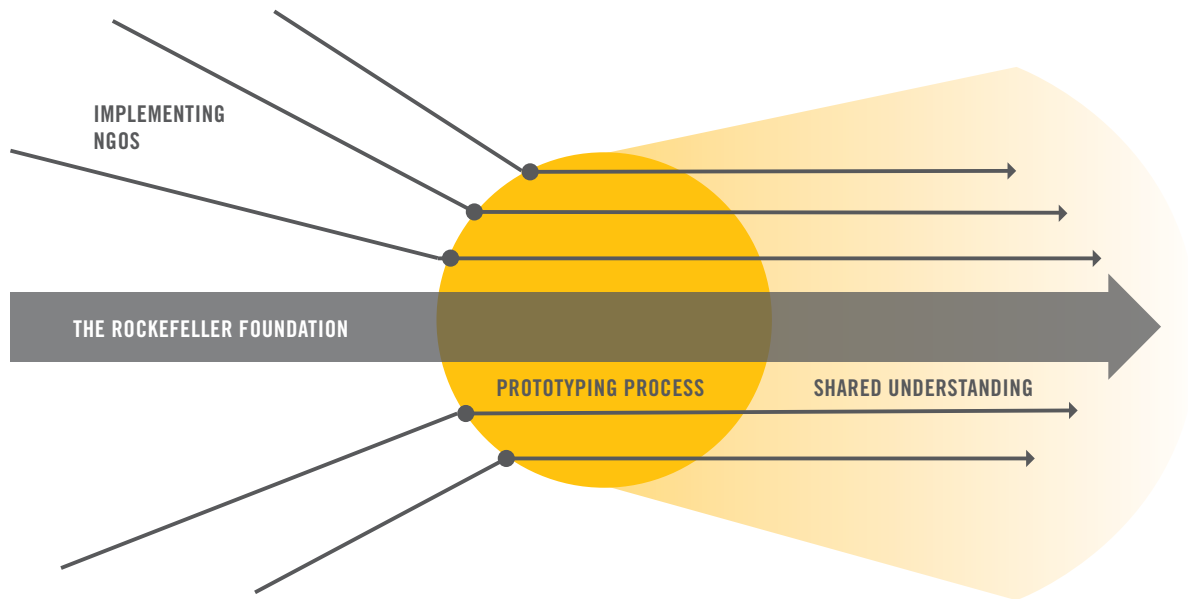
Bringing leaders together to share and provide feedback on ideas helps to amplify overall understanding of the space—**pushing the thinking of both the Foundation, and even more importantly, the field as a whole.**

In awarding these grants, we wanted to:

- Get up the learning curve faster in a complex, cross-disciplinary problem space with no easy answers

- Ensure that the voices and perspectives of users—especially poor and marginalized communities affected by a particular problem space—are integrated into the process

- Collaboratively engage external experts in strategy development

- Surface and test more solutions, more quickly

- Explore new ways of working that align with the our perspective on innovation

Emerging Outcomes

"This was one of the more productive processes we've participated in."

- Grantee Representative

"We've learned more than we would have in just traditional research-focused grants."

- The Rockefeller Foundation Team Member

Though findings are still emerging from this new approach, the following outcomes have begun to surface from the Paper Prototyping process to date:

- **Innovative Concepts**
  Through this process, both the grantees and The Rockefeller Foundation evolved more innovative concepts with the potential to achieve transformative impact for the poor and vulnerable people whom we're ultimately serving.

- **Rapid Learning**
  We gained a much deeper understanding of each opportunity space in a short period of time. Meanwhile, grantees were encouraged to quickly test their ideas and assumptions through gathering direct feedback from people affected by the problem and other stakeholders.

- **Meaningful Relationships**
  Grantees, The Rockefeller Foundation, and other organizations that were engaged in the process built stronger relationships with each other through this process—either by deepening existing relationships or by sparking new ones. We believe that building the capacity to innovate across individuals and organizations will strengthen the field to solve problems together in new ways.

It's our hope that bringing together different actors with implementing capacity to think and learn together will yield better solutions for the field, now and in the future.

Value of the Approach

For Grantees

- Providing Paper Prototyping grants gives organizations that are already strong leaders in the space the support to stretch their thinking even further.

- By asking grantees to put their ideas out into the world before they are fully baked, get feedback, and iterate more quickly, the process increases the likelihood of reaching more effective solutions faster.

- This cohort-oriented process helps build and strengthen meaningful relationships between grantees and other current and potential partners (e.g. the Foundation, other grantees, strategic advisors, etc.)

For Funders and the Field

- Funders gain a better understanding of where they can have the greatest impact because they learn directly from on-the-ground actors and surface voices and perspectives that are different from theirs.

- Provides a way for funders new to a space to rapidly accelerate their learning when considering future investments.

- Testing early ideas gives more realistic insight into the needs and considerations required for achieving impact.

"This process has been incredible for the intensity, focus, and resources."

- Grantee Representative

"This grant process is helping us gain a deeper understanding of the space."

- The Rockefeller Foundation Team Member

How It Works

Integrating prototyping into the Foundation's strategic process began with the desire to innovate in challenging problem spaces in order to achieve impact at scale. Based on our experiments with prototyping, the following framework, principles, and key components are critical for a productive Paper Prototyping grant.

VISION

THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION'S PAPER PROTOTYPING APPROACH AIMS TO ACCELERATE LEARNING, SURFACE AND TEST NEW IDEAS, AND BUILD RELATIONSHIPS.

PRINCIPLES

VALUING EXPERTISE
Learn from the leading organizations already working on the problem on-the-ground, and take on the biggest challenges together.

DIVERSE STRENGTHS
Bring together people and organizations with unique perspectives to inform a shared understanding and strengthen outcomes moving forward.

ROOM TO INNOVATE
Provide the financial resources, flexible scope, and exemplary thought partners that allow teams to more deeply explore challenges and opportunities, take risks, and think big.

RAPID ITERATION
Make efficient use of resources and encourage rough, rapid, and iterative prototyping to accelerate thinking, learning, and concept development.

VOICES ON-THE-GROUND
Bring the voices that matter most into strategy sooner. Learn from those already in the field, encourage them to push ideas further, and test concepts and assumptions with real people to evolve aspirations grounded in reality.

SHARED LEARNING
Share prototypes to learn from each other and benefit from peer critique, building and establishing relationships for future opportunities to collaborate.

COMPONENTS

1 THE PEOPLE
GRANTEES

THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION

EXTERNAL PARTNERS

2 THE STRUCTURE
SCOPE + SELECTION

RESOURCES + FUNDING

TIMELINE

3 THE ACTIVITIES
CONVENINGS

FIELD VISITS

DELIVERABLES

The People

Grantees

The
Rockefeller
Foundation

External
Advisory
Partners

The People | The Structure | The Activities

Grantees

What We Did

- We brought together five grantee organizations with long-time commitments in the problem area, implementing capacity, and diverse approaches to address a single challenge related to the new initiative space.

Why We Did It

- To provide a richer understanding of a focus area by engaging a diverse set of grantees with existing 'on-the ground' expertise

Key Considerations

- Diverse approaches, geographies, and expertise led to deeper insights and collaboration over the course of the Paper Prototyping grant.

- As the nature of the problem space was highly technical, it was important to ensure that partners had a solid foundation of expertise.

- We encouraged grantees to take risks and push the boundaries not just in relation to their own work, but that of the field at large.

- Grantees needed to be comfortable with ambiguity and open and flexible to evolving their ideas.

- Grantee organizations selected also demonstrated they would be able to handle the level of commitment and work being asked for.

Next Explorations

- How might we give grantees even more opportunities to collaborate with their cohort?

- At what point do we achieve diminishing returns on collaboration in a process like this?

- What is the right balance of diversity among the grantees?

"The process strengthened an obvious connection with another team."

- Grantee Representative

The People   The Structure   The Activities

The Rockefeller Foundation

What We Did

- The Foundation formed a team of program officers with distinctive capabilities: including subject matter expertise, program management, innovation, and strategy. One team member was dedicated full time to the initiative.

Why We Did It

- To provide sufficient coaching and resource support for grantees while ensuring a range of colleagues had exposure to the work.

Key Considerations

- Engaging external experts as strategic partners was key to providing consistent coaching and the right level of support to grantees.

- Having at least one internal team member with existing expertise in the problem space proved to be invaluable.

- It was also important to have a full-time team member dedicated to reviewing deliverables, synthesizing, and making recommendations to the wider team.

- Having a relatively small, nimble internal team was very useful in moving an emergent process forward productively and efficiently.

Next Explorations

- How could prototyping support other types of work—both grant-making and operational—at The Rockefeller Foundation?

"We need that type of grant…which is one-on-one, actively engaged with grantee partners."

– The Rockefeller Foundation Team Member

The People | The Structure | The Activities

External Advisory Partners

What We Did

- We invited external partners to join in the process in various capacities:

  » **Strategic Advisors:** This team provided one-on-one coaching to each grantee, managed the grant process, and helped clarify content and process understanding between the Foundation and the grantees.

  » **Academic Partner:** This partner's deep technical knowledge supported the thinking across teams.

  » **Prototyping Advisors:** This team helped guide grantees in developing and evolving their prototypes.

Why We Did It

- To provide grantees with expert guidance and thought partnership to elevate learnings.

Key Considerations

- Engaging strategic advisors to oversee the grant process kept the grantees moving forward quickly and provided valuable hands-on time to complement the engagement of Foundation staff.

- Providing extended capacity made the process more credible in the eyes of grantees.

- Having strategic advisors help facilitate communication between grantees and the Foundation allowed us to better respond to problems and shift parts of the process as needed.

- The process was customized to the needs of the grantees and the concepts they were developing.

- It's critical to the openness and constructive nature of the process to bring in advisory partners who are seen as reputable by the grantees and who are strong collaborators and thought partners with both the grantees and the Foundation.

Next Explorations

- Could a more standardized menu of advising support for grantees (e.g., weekly calls, field visits) raise the quality of thinking across teams in a nimble way while still supporting the unique needs of grantees?

- How can we continue to improve the way we bring grantees and other external advising partners up to speed about prototyping to help align expectations and outputs sooner?

- Are there other types of tools or external partners that we could offer that might offer additional support to our grantees?

"It was helpful to have resources to bounce ideas off who could provide case studies and experience."
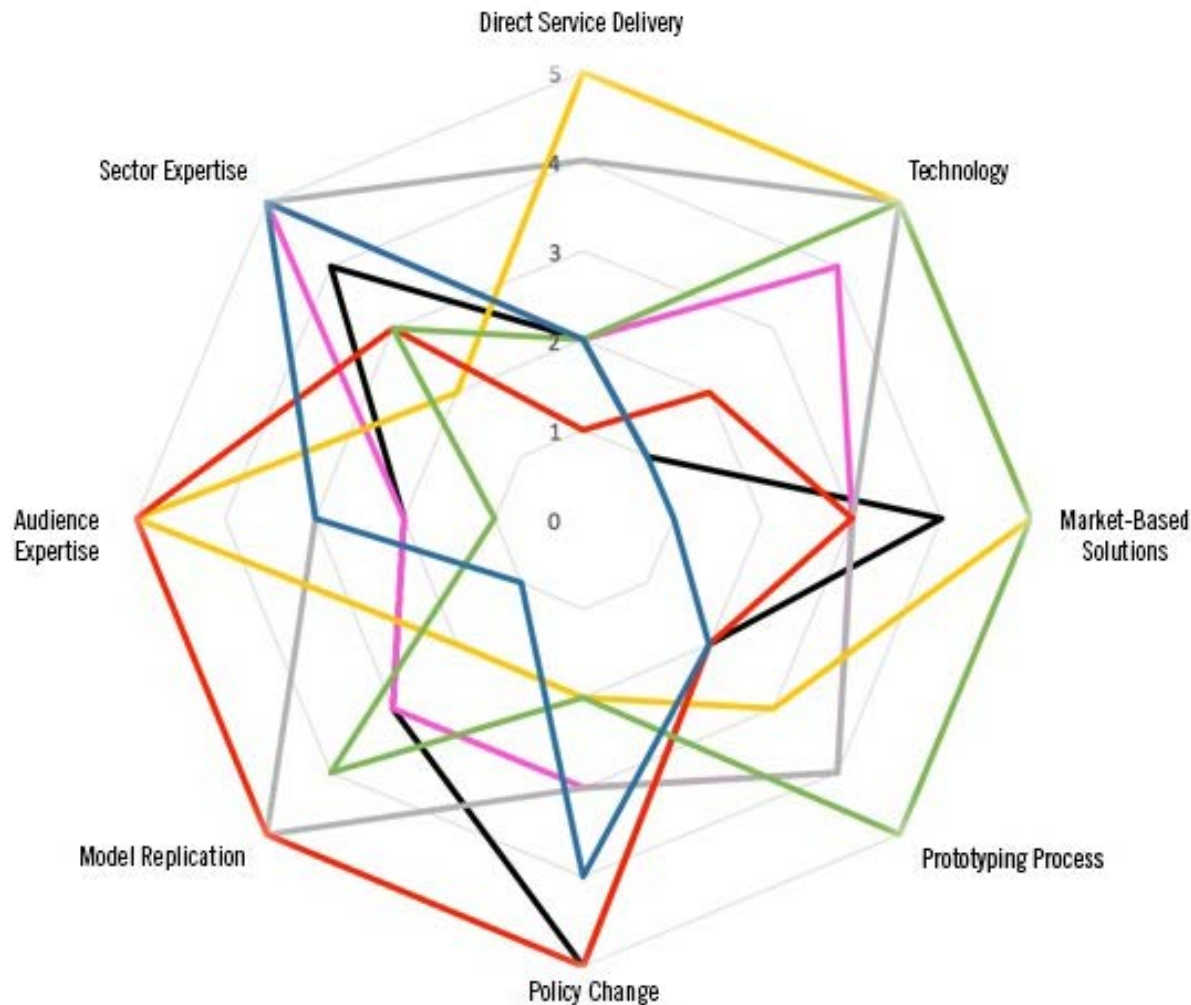
- Grantee Representative

Example of Organizational Expertise of Grant Cohort for a Given Problem Space

This graph represents the diversity of expertise that the five prototyping grantees brought to the problem space.

(1= limited expertise, 5 = deep expertise)

— GRANTEE 1

— GRANTEE 2

— GRANTEE 3

— GRANTEE 4

— GRANTEE 5

— EXTERNAL ADVISING PARTNERS

— THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION

The Structure

Scope +
Selection

Resources +
Funding

Timeline

The People | **The Structure** | The Activities

Scope + Selection

What We Did

- The Foundation clearly defined what success looks like and the criteria for assessment.

- The grantee characteristics we selected for were:

  » **Expertise:** Deep knowledge across dimensions (e.g., social, geographic, economic, political)

  » **Research Capability:** Ability to support targeted analysis of solutions and inform scoping decisions

  » **Field Experience and Implementation Access:** Ability to quickly, creatively explore and test ideas in relevant settings

  » **Openness to Innovation**: Willingness to develop new or improve existing solutions, where current approaches fall short

  » **Ability to Move Fast, Iteratively, and Openly:** Can work in close collaboration with the Foundation and its other partners

  » **Flexibility:** Willingness to evolve, shape, and change perspectives based on what emerges

Why We Did It

- To encourage participation from implementing NGO's with an openness to the flexible nature of the prototyping process and a desire to innovate.

Key Considerations

- The Foundation quickly recognized the need to set clear expectations about what the intensity of the engagement would mean for grantees.

- Being explicit that prototyping grantees were not guaranteed follow-on funding after the term of the grant helped filter out applicants simply looking for funding to execute on their existing ideas, but less willing to evolve their thinking based on learning from the prototyping process.

- Clearly framing the problem up front was important to help grantees to get better insights and contextual understanding of the space at the end of the process.

Next Explorations

- What problem spaces does this process work best for? When is it not a useful approach?

- How do we best communicate the process to grantees and set the clear expectations around an emergent process?

"We were pushed very far out of our comfort zone, but that's not a bad thing."

- Grantee Representative

The People | **The Structure** | The Activities

Resources + Funding

What We Did

- The Foundation provided significantly more than financial support to enable innovation.

- Overall support included:

  » **Flexible Funding**: Financial support could be used as helpful in exploring new ideas (e.g., hiring new team members, field visits)

  » **Ongoing Coaching:** Advisory support from both the Foundation and external partners.

  » **Alternative Support:** Grantees were able to use funds to seek outside guidance, for example, legal and policy input.

Why We Did It

- To give grantees the freedom to take risks and explore innovative paths forward, while being responsive to the needs of each idea.

Key Considerations

- Having a flexible resource and funding structure was crucial for the success of this grant process.

- Many grantees felt they would not have been able to make the faster timeline work without the extra financial support of the grant to hire additional resources and the capacity support of the advisors.

- The coaching and technical support provided equally as much value to grantees as the financial support.

- We recognized the need to bring in an external strategic partner to help provide consistent coaching and credible technical support to help grantees successfully complete the grant.

- Where appropriate as the grant reached completion, we either provided additional funding or helped connect grantees to other sources of funding to move ideas forward.

Next Explorations

- What are the ultimate cost-benefits for all the actors involved?

- What resources are most helpful?

- How flexible should funding be to support the exploration of new ideas and understanding?

"The Rockefeller Foundation put more into it than most funders— resources, outside experts, collaboration."

- Grantee Representative

| The People | **The Structure** | The Activities |

Timeline

What We Did

- We asked grantees to do a lot in a very short amount of time—test, learn, and iterate on a concept in just six months.

- Grantees were expected to jump into the beginning of the grant period less than two weeks following the grant approval.

Why We Did It

- To encourage grantees and The Rockefeller Foundation to rapidly advance ideas and understanding by articulating and testing early and imperfect ideas with real users and other stakeholders, and then quickly iterating on them—with a focus on learning and insights rather than perfection at each stage.

Key Considerations

- Although the fast pace presented challenges for grantee organizations, they rose to the occasion and found it invigorating and valuable.

- Overall, there was a need to find the right balance between providing adequate time to produce quality work and driving organizations to surface useful insights and understanding faster.

- Many grantees felt the strain was hardest at the very beginning between grant approval and the beginning of the grant period. They struggled to form their teams, clear schedules, and create dedicated time with such a quick turnaround.

- Having all the grantees on the same timeline was important for creating shared learning experiences.
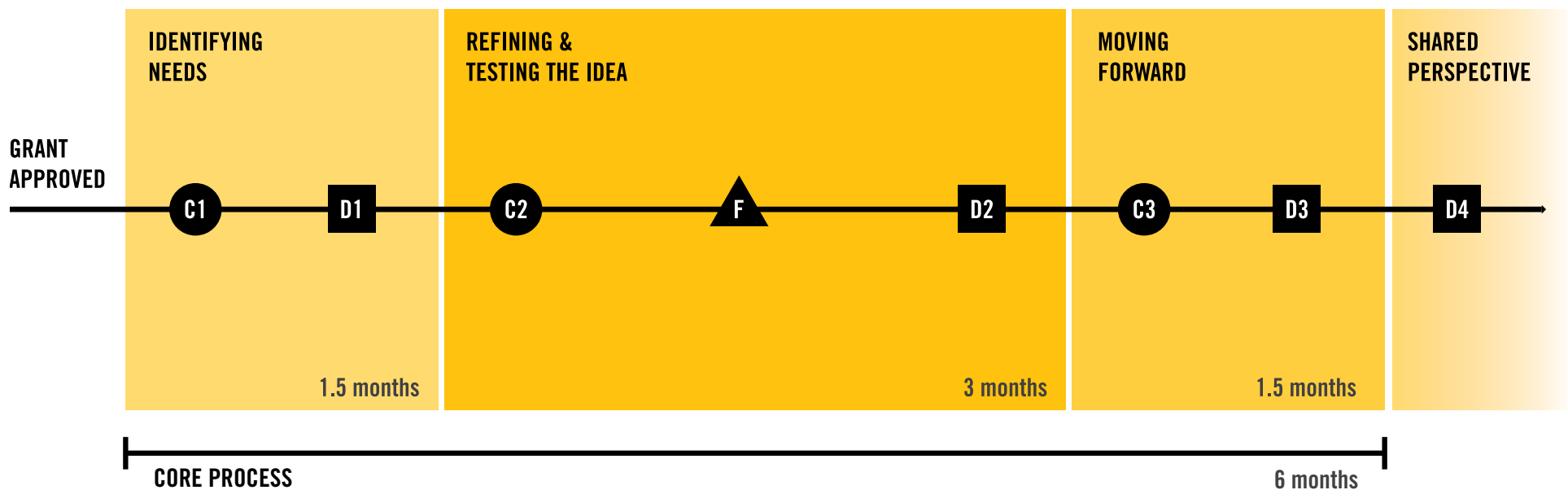
Next Explorations

- What is the right balance on how quickly we can advance through the process and still support quality thinking?

- How might the process work if grantee organizations were on personalized rather than synchronized timelines?

"The fast timeline helped progress ideas quickly."

- Grantee Representative

Paper Prototyping Grant Timeline

CONVENING Grantees were invited to a common location for shares and feedback discussions.

FIELD VISIT Grantees invited the Foundation or strategic partners to come experience and better understand their work.

DELIVERABLE Grantees prepared iterative articulations of their concept, incorporating new learnings over time.

IDENTIFYING NEEDS

REFINING & TESTING THE IDEA

MOVING FORWARD

SHARED PERSPECTIVE

GRANT APPROVED

C1 — D1 — C2 — F — D2 — C3 — D3 — D4

1.5 months

3 months

1.5 months

CORE PROCESS

6 months

RESOURCES + FUNDING

COACHING + FEEDBACK

The Activities

Convenings   Field Visits   Deliverables

The People | The Structure | **The Activities**

Convenings

What We Did

- We brought representatives from each grantee organization, the Rockefeller team, and external partners together for a series of three two-day, in-person convenings.

  » **Convening 1:** Kick-off

  » **Convening 2:** Interim sharing and feedback sessions

  » **Convening 3:** Final sharing and reflections

- Convening activities included in-person, closed advising sessions, open peer-critiques, and shared cohort discussions on broader learnings and recommendations.

Why We Did It

- To cross-pollinate ideas and encourage more thought-sharing between grantees.

Key Considerations

- Convenings were highly valued by grantees. They appreciated the time and space to give and receive feedback with their peers.

- Peer critiques were structured so that all teams had a chance to present their concept in its current state, share what they had been learning, and detail how that was influencing their next iterations. Peer teams then provided feedback on what they liked about the concept, what questions it surfaced, and how they might suggest building on the concept in future explorations.

- Office hours during the convening provided teams with expert one-on-one coaching and advising for teams in a more private setting.

- Grantees appreciated having the time and space for both large group discussions and one-on-one feedback during convenings.

Next Explorations

- How can we make the convenings even more useful for the grantees and The Rockefeller Foundation?

- How would the process work without the cohort model?

- What would be lost from not having convenings?

- Are there ways to bring even more of the grantees' internal team into these collaborative settings?

- Would it be helpful to hold some of the convenings in different locations (e.g., on-site near one of the grantee's field locations for shared contextual learning)?

"It's not usual to have the luxury of all the same sector experts in one room."

– Grantee Representative

The People   The Structure   **The Activities**

Field Visits

What We Did

- Field visits were an optional activity for grantees and included either a Foundation team member or external partner joining grantees on contextual learning visits.

Why We Did It

- To reveal deeper understanding of the problem space and the communities affected.

- To provide grounded feedback from potential users and stakeholders to help grantees better evolve their ideas.

Key Considerations

- Field visits provided benefit to both grantees and the Rockefeller team because they enabled mutual learning about the field context and deeper engagement with the prototypes.

- One major concern of grantees was being respectful of the stakeholder relationships they were building and setting clear expectations that their concepts may or may not get built.

- Field visits ranged in how immersive they were. Even small visits could provide useful findings and inspiration.

Next Explorations

- How might we build in more field visits without increasing the time or planning burden on the grantees?

- How can we best support grantees in seeking valuable and realistic feedback from stakeholders, while respecting their need to navigate and nurture those trusted relationships?

- How might field visits to other industries and related contexts help provide outside inspiration for new ideas?

- How can we build in components to the field visits that support storytelling?

"Going into the field shifted our assumptions of the problem."

- Strategic Advisor

The People   **The Structure**   **The Activities**

Deliverables

What We Did

- We asked grantees to submit four deliverables:
  - » **Deliverable 1:** Define the problem space, geography, stakeholder map, what change is needed, and how the idea will solve for it.
  - » **Deliverable 2:** Describe the prototype details, learnings, and if the idea and level of confidence has shifted.
  - » **Deliverable 3:** Detail feedback received, thoughts on scalability, and the "no regrets" POV of how they would move the idea forward with additional funding and resources.
  - » **Deliverable 4 (as a cohort):** Publicly share learnings for the field at large.

Why We Did It

- To capture grantee's evolving thinking and facilitate feedback and support.

Key Considerations

- In each deliverable we asked grantees to detail the engagement they had with people experiencing the problem, especially the poor or vulnerable. Deliverable 1 included a detailed stakeholder map to ensure a comprehensive and inclusive approach to engagement.

- Deliverables were intended to build on one another and highlight shifts in thinking.

- Advisors helped grantees prioritize and focus on the most interesting directions as they moved their ideas forward in order to leverage their energy most effectively.

- Paper prototype deliverables served as low-fidelity versions of the concepts teams could quickly test with stakeholders to evolve the concepts. If taken further, these ideas would be refined to higher levels of resolution.

Next Explorations

- How can we make deliverables useful for grantees, while still getting the information that the Foundation needs?

- How might more formal peer reviews of deliverables work for grantees?

- What if we invited grantees to go beyond paper prototypes and produce more tangible prototypes? How much more might they do and learn?

"There's pain doing the deliverable, but it's worth it for the process of thinking through the problem and the outcome."

- Grantee Representative

Executive Summary

We expect each partner to commit to expanding their own thinking and assumptions, rather than simply "building on what has come before."

Purpose

The Rockefeller Foundation has been experimenting with **Paper Prototyping Grants** as a way to surface innovative thinking and improve the way the Foundation uncovers insights to inform how they focus their large-scale funding and support of initiatives.

Paper prototypes are conceptual, early ideas articulated on paper, rather than built out physical prototypes, in order to gather initial feedback from the people affected by the problem and evolve ideas.

Emerging Outcomes

- Innovative Concepts
- Rapid Learning
- Meaningful Relationships

For More Information

CKronley@rockfound.org or
JJoseph@rockfound.org

Paper Prototyping Grant Framework

VISION

THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION'S PAPER PROTOTYPING APPROACH AIMS TO ACCELERATE LEARNING, SURFACE AND TEST NEW IDEAS, AND BUILD RELATIONSHIPS.

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DIVERSE STRENGTHS
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RAPID ITERATION
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VOICES ON-THE-GROUND
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SHARED LEARNING
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COMPONENTS

1
THE PEOPLE
GRANTEES
THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION
EXTERNAL PARTNERS

2
THE STRUCTURE
SCOPE + SELECTION
RESOURCES + FUNDING
TIMELINE

3
THE ACTIVITIES
CONVENINGS
FIELD VISITS
DELIVERABLES