

# Key Findings and Recommendations from Imaginable Futures 2025 Grantee Perception Report

Prepared by The Center for Effective Philanthropy

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*In September and October of 2025, the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) surveyed Imaginable Futures (“IF”) grantees. The memo below outlines CEP’s summary of key strengths and future opportunities.*

*This memo accompanies the comprehensive survey results from 65 grantees (a 59 percent response rate) available in Imaginable Futures’ interactive online report and in the downloadable online materials, including respondents’ written comments, analysis, and methods.<sup>1</sup>*

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## Overview

- ▶ Since Imaginable Futures’ 2022 Grantee Perception Report (GPR), IF has encountered major milestones, including an updated vision and mission, the launch of a refreshed website and evolved visual identity, and the development and launch of its Systems and Impact framework. This framework also guides its updated measurement and learning processes with grantees.
- ▶ Grantees’ perceptions of many of these changes – and lack of changes when it comes to IF’s core values – show up in Imaginable Futures’ 2025 report.
  - Since 2022, ratings have significantly improved for most survey measures related to IF’s communications and processes, and grantees see Imaginable Futures’ actions as aligned with its new mission and vision.
  - Despite a shift in interaction patterns, high-quality engagement with staff and strong understanding remain a top strength for Imaginable Futures.
  - Grantees share their appreciation for Imaginable Futures’ continued commitment to multi-year, unrestricted, large grants that support long-term systems change, and feedback suggests it will be particularly crucial to practice flexibility – in funding and beyond – as grantees face challenges associated with the current political and policy contexts in their regions.
- ▶ In analysis to understand gaps in experiences between grantees, differences emerged in ratings by region. Ratings from Kenya grantees trend lower on nearly half of the core survey measures, including those related to Imaginable Futures’ impact, understanding, relationships and communications.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this summary, Imaginable Futures’ ratings are defined as higher than typical when it is rated above the 65th percentile in CEP’s overall dataset, lower than typical when it is rated below the 35th percentile, and typical when ratings fall in between those thresholds. Ratings described as “significantly” higher or lower reflect statistically significant differences at a P-value less than or equal to 0.1.

## Rooted in Collaboration

### Trusting, Understanding, and Strong Relationships

- ▶ Similar to 2022, grantees highlight strong relationships characterized by trust and understanding as the bedrock of their work with Imaginable Futures. In written comments, grantees generally describe their partnerships as one “where we feel respected and valued” and describe their engagement with staff as “refreshing...as we were developing a mutually beneficial and trusting partnership.”
- ▶ Mirroring written feedback, grantees provide higher than typical ratings for the majority of survey measures related to interactions. Specifically, grantees provide ratings that are in the top 20 percent for how comfortable they feel approaching Imaginable Futures if a problem arises, and they place IF in the top 10 percent of CEP’s dataset for the extent to which Imaginable Futures exhibits trust in their staff and compassion for those affected by their work.
  - Moreover, grantee feedback continues to be extremely positive for the extent to which Imaginable Futures exhibits its values of being “Compassionate Changemakers,” “Grateful Celebrators,” and “Authentic Communicators,” rating, on average, above a 6 on a 7-point scale.
- ▶ In addition, grantees’ perceptions of Imaginable Futures’ understanding – a predictor of strong relationships based on CEP’s broader research – are more positive than typical across multiple dimensions, including IF’s understanding of grantees’ local contexts, fields, organizations, and the needs of the people and communities they serve.

### Drop in Contact Frequency with Variation by Region

- ▶ IF’s contact frequency with grantees has decreased since 2022, now with about a fifth of grantees reporting monthly contact compared to nearly half in 2022. This shift places IF closer in line with the typical funder in CEP’s overall dataset.
  - In addition, contact frequency varies widely by country. For example, about a quarter of Brazil and Kenya grantees compared to no U.S. grantees report contact yearly or less often.
  - Data show that this variation is meaningful: grantee ratings for Imaginable Futures’ responsiveness have declined since 2022 and are now lower than typical. This drop is driven by grantees outside of the U.S., who rate significantly lower than grantees in the U.S. for IF’s responsiveness.
- ▶ Perhaps relatedly, there is also variation by country for whether grantees receive site visits. Grantees outside of the U.S. are significantly more likely than grantees in the U.S. to have received a site visit – about 70 percent of grantees in Brazil and Kenya compared to about 30 percent for U.S. grantees.
  - Grantees who report receiving a site visit (either in person or virtual) rate significantly higher for measures related to impact, understanding, assistance beyond the grant, relationships, and IF’s learning processes.
- ▶ Interestingly, as meaningful as site visits are, they alone may not be sufficient for maintaining strong relationships from grantees’ perspective. When asked for IF can improve, all 10 suggestions involving

requests for more contact, timely and actionable feedback on their work, and more information during changes in primary contact or strategy are from grantees located outside of the U.S.



*“We deeply appreciate the collaborative and trust-based approach to philanthropy that Imaginable Futures has used since the beginning of our relationship. Across frequent conversations, and in our written exchanges, it has been clear that program staff at the foundation are truly thought partners ... Foundation staff are accessible and responsive, and our conversations with the foundation are truly occasions that we look forward to.”*



*“It would be great to hold quarterly meetings so that discussions can be had about progress made to date, impact of the work funded by Imaginable Futures, and challenges that come up.”*

## Supporting Strong Fields and First Movers

- ▶ Since its last survey, Imaginable Futures has committed to taking a more active approach to strengthening its efforts around collaboration, such as seeking opportunities to align funding or partners on shared initiatives through regional or field-building efforts. Feedback suggests grantees may already be experiencing this evolution.
  - Grantees provide higher than typical ratings for Imaginable Futures’ effect on public policy, and ratings continue to be typical for Imaginable Futures’ impact on their fields and for its advancement of knowledge.
  - In the words of one grantee, but echoed by many, “Imaginable Futures’ impact goes beyond financial support by fostering community connections and building strong partnerships. Their collaborative approach strengthens both individual organizations and the broader field.”
- ▶ For grantees, this field-building work is largely supported with IF’s assistance beyond the grant, with 81 percent of grantees receiving at least one form of assistance. The largest proportions of Imaginable Futures grantees indicate receiving opportunities for shared learning (48 percent), field-building assistance (45 percent), and fundraising and development assistance (41 percent), though there is some variation by country in types of assistance received.
  - When asked about elements that define a successful funding partnership, the largest proportions of grantees selected forms of new partnerships, with nearly 90 percent of grantees selecting ‘tapping into new funders’ networks and over 70 percent selecting ‘facilitation of partnerships with key stakeholders’. Another two-thirds select ‘access to convenings and/or communities of practice’.
- ▶ To build on this momentum, feedback indicates opportunities for IF to refine the quality of the supports focused on field-building and collaboration.
  - While grantees rate similar to typical for the extent to which assistance beyond the grant met an important need, perceptions are less positive than typical for the extent to which the assistance was a worthwhile use of grantees’ time and for the extent to which IF would be open to feedback about the assistance provided.

- Additionally, as a “First Mover,” grantees look to IF to further embrace risk. Nearly 70 percent of grantees – the third largest proportion – selected “top-up grants to test new programs and/or implementation approaches” as an important element of successful funding partnership. In written comments, one grantee asks Imaginable Futures to consider resourcing “early, risk-tolerant investments” in addition to its core programming, and another asks that Imaginable Futures “Please take more risks with you[r] grantees.”
- ▶ Grantees’ written suggestions for how Imaginable Futures can improve align closely with these themes. The largest category of requests asks Imaginable Futures for more assistance beyond the grant, including the facilitation of more convening and connection of grantees, more trainings and information sharing, and connections to other funders.



*“Imaginable Futures has a unique and powerful influence in early childhood and education. By centering equity, long-term systems change, and trust-based philanthropy, IF sets a standard for how funders can both catalyze innovation and sustain the organizations leading it. Beyond direct funding, IF’s thought partnership and credibility elevate conversations in the field, opening doors and legitimizing bold ideas that might otherwise struggle to find traction. Their convening power and emphasis on collaboration help align stakeholders across philanthropy, policy, and practice, strengthening the overall ecosystem in which we and our peers operate.”*

## Imaginable Futures’ Systems and Impact Framework

### Communication

- ▶ Since the last GPR, Imaginable Futures launched its new Systems and Impact framework, and that appears to have made a difference for grantees’ experiences with IF’s communications.
- ▶ Specifically, grantees now provide significantly higher ratings than in 2022 for IF’s consistency of communications, as well as higher than typical ratings for IF’s candor, transparency, and for their understanding of how their work fits into IF’s broader efforts. Ratings for how clearly Imaginable Futures has communicated its goals and strategies have remained typical and are now right in line with the typical funder in IF’s custom cohort.
  - There is some variation by country, with ratings from grantees in the U.S and Kenya trending much lower on three of the four core survey measures about communications.
- ▶ Grantees also rate Imaginable Futures significantly higher than in 2022 – now placing IF higher than the typical funder – for its explicit commitment to and clear communications about what justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion (JEDI) means for its work.
  - Grantee ratings for IF’s exhibition of its “Inclusive Collaborators” and “Justice Seekers” values have also increased since 2022. As one grantee shared, “We...always admire the consistent defense of JEDI values. This has always inspired us to seek greater effectiveness in implementing JEDI policies in our organization.”

## Learning Processes

- ▶ IF's systems and impact framework also sets the foundation for IF's measurement process that aims to fuel learning, build trust, and drive collective progress. In 2025, these changes to processes do not appear to have added to grantees' level of burden, which remain at typical levels and result in a larger than typical monetary return of about \$11K for each hour of grantees' time.
  - Another measure where ratings have not changed – but are lower than typical – is IF's clarity and transparency about the criteria used to decide whether a proposal would be funded or declined. A few grantees echo this in written comments, asking for “increased clarity around grant making deadlines and reporting requirements.”
- ▶ In contrast, grantees' perceptions of the quality of Imaginable Futures' processes have changed since 2022.
  - When it comes to the approval process, grantees now provide higher than typical ratings for the clarity and transparency of the requirements and timelines, as well as its helpfulness. Additionally, grantees feel significantly less pressure than in 2022, and now less pressure than is typical, to modify their priorities in order to create a grant proposal that was likely to receive funding.
- ▶ When it comes to the reporting process, grantees find it to be significantly more helpful for reflection and learning than in 2022, and ratings for its straightforwardness, adaptability, and relevance place IF near the top 5 percent of CEP's dataset.<sup>2</sup>



*“The process with Imaginable Future is impressively thorough. They ask all the right questions, which we found incredibly useful for our own growth. It prompted meaningful reflection in ways that really mattered.”*

## Looking Below the Surface and Embracing Change

- ▶ In line with its commitment to take “a long view” and to seek to “create more durable change,” Imaginable Futures continues to support grantees with grants that are larger, longer, and less restricted relative to other funders in CEP's dataset.

	Median Grant Size	Proportion of Multi-Year Support	Proportion of Unrestricted Support
<b>Imaginable Futures 2025</b>	<b>\$360K</b>	<b>81%</b>	<b>58%</b>
Percentile	83rd	83rd	82nd

<sup>2</sup> In the survey, CEP asked grantees to characterize various Imaginable Futures activities (i.e., Story Survey, Systems and Impact Conversations, Final and Interim Grant Reports/Financials) as reporting and/or evaluation. Generally, there is discrepancy among grantees of how they characterize these activities and results vary by country. Detailed data can be found in the online report.

- Half of Imaginable Futures grants are multi-year and unrestricted, placing Imaginable Futures in the top 10 percent of CEP’s dataset. These grantees rate significantly higher across the survey, including for IF’s impact and understanding.
- ▶ Perhaps given IF’s clear commitment to create systems level change, some grantees ask for longer-term funding in their suggestions for improvements. Grantees, for example, emphasize the importance of longer-term partnerships to ensure deeper impact [that is] measurable over time” and welcome the “stability and predictability” of a long-term approach [that] supports programs and institutions....”
- ▶ Stability is particularly important as nonprofits globally face challenges related to the current political and policy environment.
  - While IF grantees located in the U.S. are less likely to face funding disruptions compared to grantees at other U.S.-based funders, over 40 percent of grantees have had to reduce the services they provide and/or their staffing, even at a time when 74 percent report an increased demand for their services.
  - Additionally, nearly 80 percent of grantees report concerns about the well-being and safety of those their organizations seek to help, and at least 50 percent of IF grantees report facing legal challenges related to the people or issues affected by their work, backlash or opposition to their missions, and pressure to meaningfully reframe how they publicly describe their work. All of these concerns are more common for IF grantees than for grantees at other U.S. funders CEP has worked with this year.
  - Grantees outside of the U.S. are similarly facing an increase in demand for services, and their primary challenges are related to the well-being and safety of those their organizations seek to help (64 percent) and their staff and board (54 percent). Experiences vary between grantees in Kenya and Brazil, indicating tailored supports may be necessary.
- ▶ Furthermore, this rapidly evolving context suggests there is room for improvement for Imaginable Futures to further demonstrate its commitment to embracing change and supporting grantees in the face of new challenges.
  - Compared to 2022, grantee perceptions are less positive for Imaginable Futures’ awareness of their challenges and significantly less positive for IF’s openness to ideas about its strategy. On both measures, ratings are in line with the typical funder.
  - In a custom question about the extent to which dialogue and ongoing exchanges with Imaginable Futures have helped grantees prioritize their core activities during unexpected situations, grantees provide an average rating of 5.2, down from an average rating of 5.6 in 2022.



*“By providing flexible and multi-year funding, IF supports the long-term advancement of nonprofits in this field.”*



*“[The current policy environment] heightens demand for our services, destabilizes the funding environment for ventures we support and partner with, and places disproportionate emotional and professional strain on staff, even as we remain committed to advancing equity and opportunity for young children and families.”*

## CEP Recommendations

Based on its grantees' feedback, CEP recommends that Imaginable Futures consider the following areas in order to build on its strengths and address potential areas for improvement:

- ▶ Celebrate the successful roll-out of changes to Imaginable Futures' mission, orientation towards collaboration, and new Systems and Impact Framework, as demonstrated by vastly stronger ratings for IF's communications, processes, and leadership in the field. Build on this momentum by continuing to refine IF's approach to assistance beyond the grant, and where relevant, addresses inconsistencies in grantees' understanding of IF's strategy.
  - Given its new emphasis on collaboration, work with grantees to design a structure to track and distribute non-monetary support that feels most valuable for their time and allows for ongoing adjustments based on their feedback.
- ▶ Identify assumptions and intentional choices, if any, that may be contributing to shifts in contact frequency, differences in frequency of site visits by country, and grantee perceptions of IF's responsiveness and openness. With that context in mind, determine how to modify engagement practices, particularly with grantees outside of the U.S., to build more durable and effective relationships.
- ▶ Relatedly, given the rapidly evolving context and declining ratings for IF's awareness of grantees' challenges, discuss whether IF is interested in pursuing temporary changes – to grant awards, to processes, or to interactions – that would more frequently assess and be more responsive to grantees' shifting needs.

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