



Funder-Practitioner Lab

Together honing our craft by exploring the intersection of bridging, organizing, and participatory governance

Bringing people together to have conversations across divides; organizing and advocating for policies that reflect the will of the people; transforming how governments engage citizens ... With all of the impactful work that is happening, why is it that collectively these efforts still seem to be missing the mark? Bridgers, organizers, and democracy innovators seem to each hold a critical piece of the puzzle. What can become possible if we bring together the best from each of these approaches? To explore that question, the SHIFT Action Lab (an uncommon combination of leading practitioners from these often-siloed fields) is **inviting funders to join a year-long learning and exchange experience.**

Why join this Funder-Practitioner Lab?

- Participate in dialogue, action, and reflection with funders and practitioners in an open reflection about what is and isn't working.
- Gain a more nuanced understanding of the strengths and limitations of these different approaches, increasing your ability to navigate complexity.
- Observe and engage with a place-based pilot project, which will bring together bridging, organizing, and local democracy in Parkersburg, WV.
- Leverage SHIFT's investment, relationship-building, and research.

Who: A combination of national and place-based funders & practitioners from the [SHIFT Action Lab](#)

When: a one-year period, estimated to start in early 2025.

What: Quarterly virtual meetings and an in-person gathering in Parkersburg, WV (to witness and experience the work in practice on the ground).

Investment:

Funder participants would be invited to join SHIFT in contributing insights and questions, as well as funding to support the Lab activities, building on the \$375k+ that SHIFT has already invested.

Building on 3 years of groundwork:

Starting with a year of research and 150+ conversations in 2021-2022, we connected with organizations bringing people together across lines and modeling a more participatory politics. We met bridgers who are holding dialogues that invite people to see each other's humanity; we met organizers who are reaching "beyond the choir," creating people's platforms, and electing new leaders; and we met democracy innovators who are enacting reforms and new models for how we govern together.

We noticed that many were naming challenges that others were potentially well positioned to address. To explore this, we designed an in-person Convening in the hills of eastern Kentucky in 2022 to bring curious and visionary practitioners from the bridging, organizing, and governance fields together. Glimpsing the potential at the intersections of their work, participants called for our support to continue exploring together. Their guidance led to the launch of the Action Lab in 2023.

We then convened the Action Lab (a cohort of [ten practitioners](#)), kicking off with biweekly online sessions starting in March 2023, to support the participants' desire to learn about each other's approaches and explore whether collaboration could be more impactful than continuing to work separately. We made \$150k in funds available for the Lab members to invest in collaborative projects (a portion of the \$375k we invested to-date in this exploration). The Action Lab participants have decided to proceed with funding the following three projects, which are being implemented in 2024-2025:

- **A Place-based Pilot** to measure whether there are indeed synergies unlocked when bringing together the bridging, organizing, and governance approaches. The Lab selected Parkersburg, WV as the site for the pilot.
- **Funder Engagement** to invite more funders to learn alongside us, including by joining this Funder-Practitioner Lab.
- **[Resource Hub](#) & Training Fund**: to make the best tools from the many democracy-related fields more accessible and enable Lab members to engage in inter-field training and observation opportunities.

Experimenting with innovative philanthropy in the process:

Through the Action Lab, we have been working to model a culture of shared power, responsiveness, and innovation. We would intend to carry forward those approaches, and add new intentions as we invite funders to join us in our learning and action.

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