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The Foundation Review

A publication of the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University

THE PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL OF PHILANTHROPY

Democracy, Equity, and Power

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15th Anniversary Celebration Partners

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The Foundation Review

A publication of the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University

The Foundation Review is the first peer-reviewed journal of philanthropy, written by and for foundation staff and boards and those who work with them implementing programs. Each quarterly issue of *The Foundation Review* provides peer-reviewed reports about the field of philanthropy, including reports by foundations on their own work.

Our Mission: To share evaluation results, tools, and knowledge about the philanthropic sector in order to improve the practice of grantmaking, yielding greater impact and innovation.

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Editor Introduction

Philanthropy, long known for its boldness and innovation, is at a pivotal moment where it must reassess its role in promoting genuine inclusivity for communities to determine their own futures. Recent developments, particularly the legal settlement of a pioneering initiative to support women of color entrepreneurs, have ignited fervent discussions about equity, access, and the implications for philanthropic practices. As the sector confronts the intricate challenges of social justice and funding disparities, the stark reality of historically marginalized communities struggling for vital resources comes into sharp focus.

The complex legal landscape has heightened awareness of the systemic barriers that stifle the growth of diverse communities, emphasizing the need for intentional funding strategies. This situation raises a crucial question: how can philanthropy not only rectify historical inequities but also equip communities to foster sustainable structural change?

In this special 15th anniversary issue of *The Foundation Review* on Democracy, Equity, and Power, we explore the implications of the current climate at the intersection of philanthropy, social justice, and nonprofit support. We invited scholars, practitioners, and advocates to reflect on their research and experiences, illuminating innovative pathways toward a more equitable philanthropic ecosystem that champions social change. The authors delve into three interconnected themes:

Equity and Power Sharing: Authors, including Reed et al., Salehi and Infante, Jacobs et al. Easterling et al., and Dean-Coffey and Casey, underscore the urgency of equitable practices and power-sharing in philanthropy. They advocate for a 'power with' mindset, urging funders to dismantle unequal power dynamics and genuinely engage with those most affected by systemic issues. Salehi et al. highlight the necessity of long-term, flexible funding for POC-led nonprofits, moving away from short-term models that perpetuate inequity. Building supportive partnerships with community organizations is essential for fostering power-sharing and enhancing responsiveness to community needs. Advocacy and activism emerge as vital tools for advancing democracy, connecting citizens to civic engagement while challenging entrenched norms.

Democratic Engagement and Accountability: Ralph, Shalehi and Infante, Murray et al., Darling and Pankaj, Easterling et al., Dean-Coffey and Casey, and Apgar et al. emphasize the critical role of participatory practices and accountability in creating equitable philanthropic frameworks. Ralph encourages viewing organizational tensions as a healthy reflection of democratic complexities, while Shalehi and Infante highlight the importance of relational accountability between funders and nonprofits. Centering marginalized voices and building grassroots movements are essential for achieving lasting equity and democratic engagement. Transparency in decision-making fosters trust and collective understanding, vital for promoting

democracy and equity. Inclusive grantmaking practices that involve diverse voices enhance a democratic approach to philanthropy and bolster equity. Foundations are urged to support institutional leaders committed to equity, as their influence can drive meaningful change.

Systems Thinking and Transformation: Patton and Richardson, Darling and Pankaj, Apgar et al, Patawaran, Salehi and Infante, Murray et al., Easterling et al., Jacobs et al, Reed et al., and Dean-Coffey and Casey, advocate for transformative approaches and systems thinking to tackle complex social issues and advance equity within philanthropy. They argue that philanthropy must evolve beyond traditional grant-making to address interconnected crises, fostering collective action and alliances for power-sharing. Patawaran emphasizes the need for multistakeholder innovations that challenge assumptions and enrich public discourse. Darling and Pankaj argue that emergent learning practices facilitate authentic conversations that disrupt the status quo, break down silos, and build trust—essential elements for equity and democracy. Apgar et al. stress that evaluations of systems transformation initiatives should be contextually designed and culturally responsive. Ultimately, Jacobs et al assert that achieving transformational change necessitates adapting organizational practices and funding strategies to support long-term power-building efforts.

This second 15th-anniversary issue proudly marks the inaugural support of the Ricardo Millett Equity Fund. In December 2023, we lost a remarkable philanthropic and evaluation leader, Dr. Ricardo Millett, whose ability to build relationships and direct resources was transformative. In his honor, the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy has established the Ricardo Millett Equity Fund, aimed at advancing our commitment to racial equity and diversity in philanthropic research. Supported by Dr. Millett's family, this fund seeks to amplify diverse voices and perspectives, enriching our understanding and equity practices in philanthropy. We celebrate Dr. Millett's legacy and work toward a future where every voice is valued.

Through this curated collection of insights from leading thinkers and researchers in philanthropy, we aim to inspire you, our readers, to engage in meaningful dialogue, debate, and action. Let us broaden our understanding of equity and interrogate the governing structures that frees philanthropy and communities alike to shape their own democratic practices and self-determination.

Hanh Cao Yu

Hanh Cao Yu, Ph.D.
Editor-in-Chief of Special Issues

SECTOR

13 A Philanthropic Theory of Systems Transformation for Advancing Equity in the Polycrisis

Michael Quinn Patton, Ph.D., Utilization-Focused Evaluation, and Ruth Richardson, M.Sc., Accelerator for Systemic Risk Analysis

The term "polycrisis" captures the urgent convergence of interconnected crises — climate change, growing inequalities, disinformation, pandemic threats, armed conflict, and environmental degradation — that disproportionately affect marginalized populations. In this article, the authors challenge readers to reconsider philanthropic strategies in light of these escalating risks. The authors examine the evolution of philanthropic program design over the last 25 years and propose a transformative theory that addresses the complexities of the polycrisis. By embracing integrated theories of change and promoting collective action through philanthropic alliances, we can pave the way for meaningful systems transformation. This perspective serves as both a reflection on philanthropy's journey and a call to action for its future. The authors present four key premises and corresponding questions to spark dialogue about philanthropy's role in effectively responding to these pressing challenges to create a more proactive approach to creating impactful change.

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29 Forest for the Trees: Collective Accountability and Trust as Groundwork for Systems Change

Shaady Salehi, M.S., and Pia Infante, M.A., Trust-Based Philanthropy Project

Since 2020, trust-based philanthropy has emerged as a powerful strategy to address the inherent power imbalances between funders, nonprofits, and the communities they serve. By implementing practices such as multiyear unrestricted funding and streamlined processes, this approach empowers nonprofits to define their own impact goals. At its heart, trust-based philanthropy fosters collaboration, shifting the focus from one-way transactional accountability to mutual, relational accountability. This creates a strong ecosystem where funders and nonprofits work together toward shared commitments to their communities. This article shares insights and stories from social-sector leaders to demonstrate how adopting trust-based practices makes philanthropy more strategic and effective. The authors highlight concrete examples of systemic change achieved through partnerships grounded in trust and collective accountability, reimagining philanthropy as a catalyst for meaningful social impact.

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REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

44 Resourcing Transformational Strategies: How Funding With the Right Timescales, Places, and Relationships Can Advance Multiracial Feminist Democracy

Lauren Jacobs, B.A., and Elly Matsumura, A.B., PowerSwitch Action; Rachel Rosner, M.P.A., independent evaluator; and Eric Wat, M.A., independent evaluator

This article examines how philanthropy can empower movement organizations focused on long-term power building to reshape who holds governing power. Drawing on insights from PowerSwitch Action, a network of influential advocacy groups in the U.S., the authors share key learnings from a recent evaluation, aiming to benefit both movement organizations and their philanthropic supporters. The authors present three key recommendations for funders: 1) Invest in long-term strategies for shifting governing power instead of expecting quick wins; 2) Recognize the interplay between local, state, and national efforts, and support both grassroots organizations and cross-regional networks; and 3) Prioritize relationships and structures that enhance collaboration and collective success. Philanthropy plays a vital role in these initiatives. This analysis seeks to illuminate the collaborative efforts required among organizers, advocates, and funders to create an economy that serves everyone. As the U.S. faces multiple crises, the need for these transformative approaches is more urgent than ever, and with the right support, meaningful change remains within reach.

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59 Seeding Impact: Shifting From Orchestration to Emergence

Marilyn Darling, M.A., The Emergent Learning Community Project, and Veena Pankaj, M.A., Eval4Learning

The 2016 Foundation Review article "Emergent Learning: A Framework for Whole-System Strategy, Learning and Adaptation" introduced the concept of emergent strategy, which aims to create synergy greater than the sum of its parts. This article examines whether that vision has been realized, drawing insights from interviews with members of the Emergent Learning Community about the practical application and results of this approach. The authors identify key principles that have emerged from community practices and launched a 2022 inquiry to explore how Emergent Learning integrates into practitioners' work, including factors that facilitate or hinder this process. Through 24 interviews and sensemaking sessions, impact is defined in terms of "micromoves"—small, observable actions that lead to significant changes. This article also shares stories of how practitioners foster change within their organizations and enhance collaboration with external partners. The authors challenge readers to shift from a chess-player mentality to a cohesive soccer team approach, emphasizing collective action over individual expertise. This emergent strategy has become central to the practice of Emergent Learning, showcasing how collaboration can drive meaningful change.

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TOOLS

71 What Practices for Shifting Power Are Core to Advancing Racial Equity?

Kantahyanee W. Murray, Ph.D., Lift Every Voice Evaluation, Research, and Strategy; Ji Won Shon, M.S.P.H., Independent Consultant, Ashley Barnes, M.P.A., Lift Every Voice Evaluation, Research, and Strategy; Natalia Ibanez, M.A., Blue Shield of California Foundation; Karuna Sridharan Chibber, Dr.PH., David and Lucile Packard Foundation; Janelle Armstrong-Brown, Ph.D., RTI International; and Elvis Fraser, Ph.D., Sankofa Consulting

Power-shifting approaches are emerging as effective strategies for funders to amplify the voices and agency of historically marginalized and under-resourced communities. This article, informed by an extensive literature reviews and interviews with funders and thought leaders, identifies four key practices for redistributing power to promote equity: integrating a racial equity lens into decision-making; demonstrating authentic commitment to communities; empowering grant partners to define success; and fostering a culture of systems change. It explores the essential capabilities, mindsets, and resources needed for successful implementation, recommending a learning framework to encourage shared practices across organizations. By adopting these strategies, foundations and communities can work together to create more inclusive and racially equitable solutions, empowering communities to lead their own change.

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86 Strategy for Now

Jara Dean-Coffey, M.P.H., and Jill Casey, B.S., jdcPARTNERSHIPS

We are at a pivotal moment in understanding our identity as a society, both past and present. To thrive, we must rethink the structures and systems that limit us all, moving away from control, competition, and certainty. While there's a growing push towards equity and complexity in our practices, traditional business concepts still dominate strategy discussions in philanthropy and nonprofits. These often overlook the essential truth that change begins with us — humans. For the past three decades, the authors have explored an approach that nurtures both individual and collective curiosity, transforming it into capacity and competence. By redefining strategy, the authors create space for meaningful evaluative inquiry that recognizes learning as an ongoing responsibility within complex systems. This article redefines strategy, integrates it with evaluative inquiry, shares insights from practitioners, and offers fresh considerations for a future-oriented approach to strategy.

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100 Raising the Bar: Improving How to Assess Evidence Quality in Evaluating Systems-Change Efforts

Marina Apgar, Ph.D., Institute of Development Studies; Thomas Aston, Ph.D., independent consultant; Mieke Snijder, Ph.D., Institute of Development Studies, and Tom Zwollo, M.Sc., Save the Children Netherlands

Facing the great scale of societal challenges, philanthropic organizations are increasingly calling for systems change. Evaluating systems change requires innovative approaches that respond to the complexities of such change in ways that support equity and multiracial democracy rather than undermining them. However, traditional notions of rigor — often tied to independence, objectivity, and experimental methods — often clash with the complexities of equity-focused evaluations. Many funders worry that moving away from these conventional standards means losing all standards. This article contends that it is possible to establish more appropriate, flexible, inclusive standards for assessing evidence quality in systems-change efforts. Drawing on a review of existing evidence standards, insights from causal pathways and inclusive rigor networks, and the evaluation of the CLARISSA program, it presents principles and tools to help philanthropic organizations effectively assess evidence quality in their systems-change evaluations.

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RESULTS

114 The Weight of Power: Reframing Evaluation in Philanthropy to Amplify the Voices of Communities of Color

Martena Reed, M.S.W., Reflective Evaluation; Blanca Flor Guillen-Woods, M.A., Strategic Learning Partners for Innovation; Kantahyanee W. Murray, Ph.D., Michigan Public Health Institute; Dabney Brice, M.P.A., Echoing Green; Ashley Barnes, M.P.A., Michigan Public Health Institute; and Liza Mueller, B.A., Echoing Green

This article explores the complexities of philanthropy's engagement with people of color (POC)-led organizations through evaluation and reporting practices. By analyzing these practices, it reveals the root causes of disparities and offers pathways toward equity and justice. Based on research with nonprofit leaders and foundation staff, the article outlines four strategies to redefine funders' measurement and evaluation practices, fostering equity and inclusivity. These strategies encourage funders to adopt methods that genuinely respect the unique perspectives of POC-led organizations. By strengthening evaluation infrastructure for these nonprofits, funders benefit from more accurate data, while organizations gain tools for strategic decision-making, ultimately enhancing the nonprofit ecosystem as a whole.

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128 Advocacy and Bridging Strategies Are Failing on Their Own; Multifaith Nonprofits Embody Six Solutions for a Pluralistic Democracy

Allison K. Ralph, Ph.D., Cohesion Strategy LLC

This article clarifies a strategic dilemma between bridging difference or advocacy strategies for funders and their grantees seeking social change in the context of polarization, putting it in conversation with social science research on intergroup contact theory, on which bridging strategies are based, and advocacy. Based on a set of interviews and surveys, this article posits that multifaith organizations embody six practices that avoid the false dichotomy of bridging and advocacy strategies: "dual-identity" contact, tolerating disagreement, shattering typical binaries, managing shifting constellations of partners, developing local relationships, and possessing extensive reach. In short, they are a micromodel of our society, weathering the hardest of differences, showing the way toward reduced animosity and real improvement in our politics. The article offers recommendations for how funders can better support these organizations to promote a pluralistic democracy.

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145 Enticing Institutions to Become More Inclusive and Responsive: Lessons From The Colorado Health Foundation's Locally Focused Work

Douglas Easterling, Ph.D., Wake Forest University School of Medicine; Jehan Benton-Clark, M.S.S.A., Impact Practice Advisors; Scott Downes, B.A., and Phillip Chung, Ph.D., The Colorado Health Foundation

Equity-focused foundations have typically aimed to transform institutions through advocacy and community organizing. This article presents a compelling alternative: directly engaging with institutions to enhance their diversity, inclusivity, and responsiveness to the communities they serve. The Colorado Health Foundation's Locally Focused Work (LFW) initiative, launched in 2017, engages in this strategy. Program officers actively build relationships with a range of community organizations aligned with health equity. In nine LFW communities, they've connected with local officials and leaders from over 70 agencies and nonprofits. While fewer than half submitted equity-related proposals, most received funding, with varying levels of institutional change across projects. The authors argue that the "enticing institutions" strategy is crucial for advancing equity but should be complemented by more activist approaches that push institutions to take action. They also note how LFW has guided the foundation's own journey from health equity to a focus on racial justice.

DOI: 10.9707/1944-5660.1715

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A Systems and Innovation Approach to Attune Grantmaking for Early Childhood to What Matters Most at the Point of Service

Wally Patawaran, M.P.H., The JPB Foundation

This article highlights how a U.S. private foundation has transformed its strategy for early childhood health equity through multistakeholder innovations. Over the past decade, its coordinated grantmaking and cross-sector partnerships have reshaped the science and public discourse on early life stress. By building trusted relationships, the JPB Foundation has developed a new care paradigm that unites stakeholders to tackle challenges hindering progress. Acting as champions and thought partners, they promote collaborative, tailored care, making high-quality services more broadly accessible. This shift reflects a deeper change in JPB's beliefs, driving an ambitious vision for equity and performance across populations. Early results from proof-of-concept studies show that integrating feedback loops enhances decision-making among stakeholders. Furthermore, new information flows reconcile aggregate performance metrics with personalized care, enabling the public, private, and social sectors to improve equity and performance together. Foundations looking to challenge existing assumptions and expand their impact will find valuable lessons in this case study.

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Special thanks to our reviewers for Volume 16!

We'd like to thank our peer reviewers for Volume 16 of *The Foundation Review* for their time, expertise, and guidance. The peer-review process is essential in ensuring the quality of our content.

Thank you for your contributions to building the field of philanthropy!

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A Philanthropic Theory of Systems Transformation for Advancing Equity in the Polycrisis

Michael Quinn Patton, Ph.D., Utilization-Focused Evaluation, and Ruth Richardson, M.Sc., Accelerator for Systemic Risk Analysis

Keywords: *Equity, evaluation, principles, systems transformation, theory of change, theory of philanthropy, theory of philanthropic alliance, theory of transformation*

Introduction

Economic inequities are built into economic systems. Social inequities are built into social systems. Power inequities are built into political systems. Health inequities are built into health systems. Educational inequities are built into education systems. You see the pattern.

What is less visible is that these systemic inequities are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. The various crises in economics, politics, geopolitics, and the environment are feeding into each other, exacerbating already difficult circumstances (World Economic Forum, 2023a). The interdependent and interacting nature of these inequities constitute what has come to be called the polycrisis. What are its implications for philanthropy?

Let's go right to the bottom line. Humans are using the Earth's resources at levels, scales, and rates that are changing Earth's ecological systems and, in so doing, warming, polluting, and degrading the environment at a level that threatens the future survival of humanity (Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change, 2023). The premise is that climate change and related social and economic trends already manifest in the polycrisis, if not reversed, threaten humanity with all-encompassing catastrophe (Bostrom & Cirkivoc, 2011; Homer-Dixon, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2024). These intersecting crises that, together, constitute interacting and intensifying dimensions of the polycrisis include climate change, increasing global inequities, present and future pandemic

Key Points

- The term "polycrisis" calls attention to overlapping, mutually reinforcing, and potentially disastrous trends and crises that are interconnected, like climate change, increasing global inequities, widespread disinformation, pandemic dangers, the ravages of war, and pollution of land, air, and water. Vulnerable and marginalized populations are most directly affected by the intensifying problems that are manifested in the polycrisis.
- This article, on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of *The Foundation Review,* invites readers to ponder the risks posed by the polycrisis and how philanthropy might look beyond business as usual to respond to those risks. We review the evolution of philanthropic program design and evaluation over the last quarter century to arrive at a philanthropic theory of systems transformation that might be one potential response to the challenges of the polycrisis.
- Multiple, integrated theories of change implemented through collective action and philanthropic alliances offer potential pathways to systems transformation. We offer this version of and perspective on the evolution of philanthropic engagement to stimulate dialogue about where philanthropy has come from, where it is now, and what the future may hold. To stimulate that dialogue, we offer four premises to ponder about the implications of the polycrisis and raise four corresponding questions to address going forward.

[I]ntervening to mitigate and reverse the effects of the polycrisis challenges change agents, program designers, foundations, and evaluators to move beyond traditional project-level thinking and autonomous foundation grantmaking to engage in collaborative, principles-driven systems transformation.

effects, increasing violence within and between countries, unpredictable and destabilizing economic turbulence, widespread misinformation and disinformation, ever-growing global population, and increasing world hunger and food insecurity. (See Figure 1.) Other systemic risks identified in the World Economic Forum (2024) *Global Risks Report 2024* include pollution of land, air, and water; species extinction, including dying coral reefs; ever more severe weather; biodiversity loss; millions of displaced people; cyberterrorism; financial instability, including inflation; increased nuclear dangers; deepening societal polarization; rising white supremacy movements; and genocide. Together, these overlapping and mutually reinforcing trends constitute the polycrisis.

In this article we examine the premise that intervening to mitigate and reverse the effects of the polycrisis challenges change agents, program designers, foundations, and evaluators to move beyond traditional project-level thinking and autonomous foundation grantmaking to engage in collaborative, principles-driven systems transformation. In so doing, we recognize that there are diverse perspectives about the polycrisis premise and contrasting views on the way forward. Some note that every historical era has its doomsdayers, yet humanity prevails (Drezner, 2023). Some accept the threats illuminated by the polycrisis analysis but express confidence that human creativity will rise to occasion and reverse the negative trends. An example is *New York Times* columnist Nicolas Kristof (2024), who regularly writes about problems of global poverty, oppression, racism, despotisms, war, genocide, ignorance, and inequities of all kinds, at all levels, in places near and far. Yet he professes "a long view of hope …, struck by how many advances the world has made."

Most people appear to us not to want to think about the polycrisis at all. But think about it we should, for we know that what increases risk as much as anything is ignoring risks and proceeding as if nothing is happening. This article, then, on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of *The Foundation Review,* invites readers to ponder the risks posed by the polycrisis and how philanthropy might respond to those risks beyond business as usual.

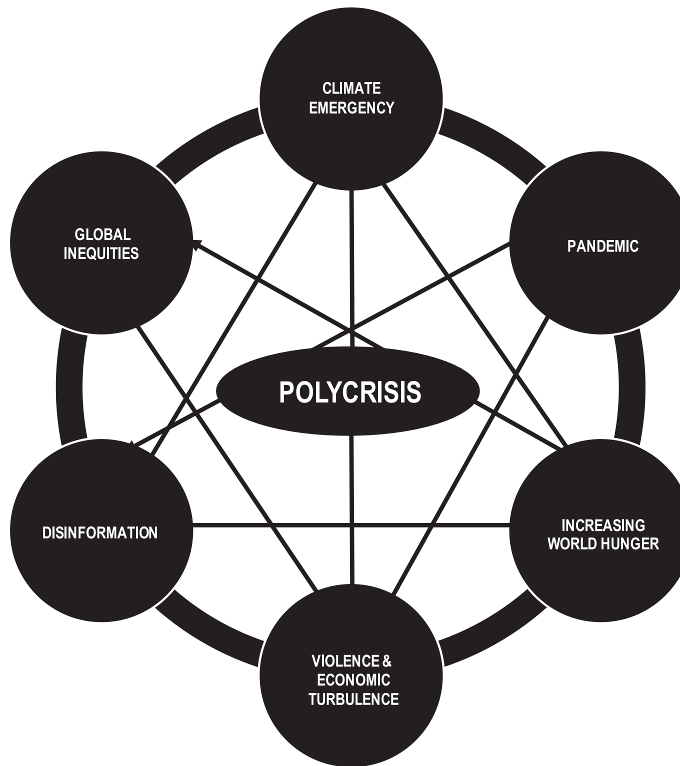
Polycrisis Momentum

Let's begin with the momentum building around the concept of the polycrisis.

Understanding its significance and implications has been expanding for a quarter century. French complexity theorist Edgar Morin and co-author Anne Brigitte Kern introduced the concept in their 1999 book *Homeland Earth* as they looked ahead to the challenges of the new millennium (Morin & Kern, 1999). South African sustainability theorist Mark Swilling (2013) has shown the importance of the polycrisis as a way of conceptualizing and addressing multiple interconnected crises from a Global South perspective. The Resilience Funders Network, started in 2016, has organized the Omega collaboration of global partners to focus on the challenges of the polycrisis.

The Canadian Cascade Institute has emerged as a leader in analyzing the implications of converging environmental, economic, political, technological, and health crises (Lawrence et al., 2022). The institute has created a guide to the polycrisis that offers definitions and analytical frameworks with particular relevance to how

FIGURE 1 Polycrisis: Intersecting Crises



the polycrisis changes risk assessment (Lawrence et al., 2024). The Accelerator for Systemic Risk Assessment, created in 2023, has mobilized a diverse, global network of risk professionals and thought leaders radically rethinking risk assessment and risk responses under conditions of polycrisis to address sustainability and equity. On Earth Day in 2024, following the Fourth Conference on Evaluating Environment and Development, a network of global evaluators endorsed a declaration calling for all evaluations to address contextually appropriate criteria for sustainability and equity in the face of the polycrisis (International Development Evaluation Association, 2024).

Historian Adam Tooze, speaking on a World Economic Forum (2023b) *Radio Davos* podcast, succinctly summarized the value of the polycrisis concept: "The polycrisis term has a real utility descriptively, because it's arm-waving. It's going, 'Look, there's a lot of stuff happening here all at once.' And that precisely is what we're trying to wrap our minds around."

Systems Transformation in the Context of the Polycrisis

"Transformation" has become the clarion call on the global stage. One major strategy for advancing equity in the context of the polycrisis involves collaborating across traditional grantmaking program areas to address environmental, social, economic, and technological stressors on society in a more integrated and coordinated manner. For foundations, dealing with inequities piecemeal in program silos and autonomous grants can contribute to incremental change for targeted populations, can help solve specific problems, or can narrowly contribute to progress on focused issues, but such efforts do not transform systems. Instead, significantly advancing equity may require collective action across diverse foundation strategic priorities. To understand the significance of

SMART goals and logic models remain dominant tools in grantmaking. They work well for projects aimed at achieving specific results in a typical grant period, say three years. They don't work so well for conceptualizing and tackling systems transformation.

foundations collaborating for systems transformation, here's a brief look at the evolution of program design and evaluation, as we've seen and experienced it over the last 15 years, as part of this anniversary of *The Foundation Review*.

Evolution of Philanthropic Program Design and Evaluation

Program proposals from the beginning have emphasized achieving goals and, correspondingly, conducting evaluations to measure goal attainment. The guiding framework was SMART goals: specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timebound. Measuring goal attainment led naturally and logically to asking if changes in goals could be attributed to the program. Answering that question meant conceptualizing the "program" as an intervention, and that led to logic models. The notion was basically this: To fund a program, it should be clearly conceptualized as some identifiable set of inputs and activities that are expected to lead to some identifiable outputs and outcomes. The linkage between those inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes should be both logical and testable. SMART goals and logic models remain dominant tools in grantmaking. They work well for projects aimed at achieving specific results in a typical grant period, say three years. They don't work so well for conceptualizing and tackling systems transformation (Patton & Campbell-Patton, 2022).

Logic models describe the steps to goal attainment but don't explain why those steps work. To become a model for others to adopt, a grant needed not only a logic model, but also a theory of change. Carol H. Weiss, an evaluation pioneer and thought leader across five decades, brought attention to the fundamental role and importance of theory in conceptualizing, implementing, and evaluating change efforts of all kinds. At a 1995 Aspen Institute convening of foundations engaged in community-based anti-poverty initiatives, she articulated the premise that "nothing is as practical as a good theory" (Weiss, 1995). She was alarmed that foundations were developing major grant initiatives without much attention to social science knowledge and theory about how community change occurs.

She had a profound and lasting influence on philanthropy generally, and evaluation specifically, in demonstrating that gaining clarity about a theory of change means those engaged in change must "make their assumptions explicit and … reach consensus with their colleagues about what they are trying to do and why" (Weiss, 1995, p. 69). Not only did grant proposals begin articulating theories of change, but foundations did, too.

From Theory of Change to Theory of Philanthropy

The notion that change initiatives should be undergirded by a theory of change has become widely accepted. A good theory encapsulates what is known about a problem, explains why solutions are expected to work, and hypothesizes what still needs to be tested and learned. Attention to the importance of theory in guiding action — what is now generally appreciated as the theory–practice interconnection — led to the idea that philanthropic endeavors should be undergirded by a theory of philanthropy distinct from a theory of change (Patton et al., 2015).

> A theory of change hypothesizes how change occurs in the world. A theory of philanthropy articulates a foundation's role in supporting change. Operating foundations engaged in direct changemaking efforts would appropriately have a theory of change. Foundations involved only

> in grantmaking would more appropriately have a theory of philanthropy to articulate how their resources would support grantees' theories of change. (Patton & Richardson, 2023, p. 20)

The theory-of-philanthropy approach aims to help foundations align their strategies, governance, operating and accountability procedures, and grantmaking profile and policies with their resources and mission. *The Foundation Review* article that described how to construct a theory of philanthropy included some 30 elements that can feed into a comprehensive theory of philanthropy as a customizable tool for exploring the issues philanthropic foundations face (Patton et al., 2015). A foundation can use the tool to gather data and perspectives about specific aspects of its heritage and approach; what is learned in addressing the elements can then be synthesized into a succinct and coherent theory of philanthropy. A foundation acting alone, following its own theory of philanthropy, can have focused impacts through its grants portfolio, but systems transformation takes more than any single foundation can achieve on its own. That led to conceptualizing of a theory of philanthropic alliance.

Theory of Philanthropic Alliance

A theory of philanthropic alliance explains and hypothesizes how several foundations and multiple grantees working together can have greater collective impact than they could working separately. It posits that no single entity, foundation, or grantee will have sufficient resources, capacity, positioning, connections, knowledge, or experience to single-handedly bring about lasting systems change. *The Foundation Review* article on a theory of philanthropic alliance showed how collective and coordinated action by a philanthropic alliance can enhance effectiveness in addressing a complex systems-change issue like food and agriculture (Patton & Richardson, 2023).

A possible next stage in the evolution of philanthropy would be a philanthropic theory of transformation which expands the vision and impact of a philanthropic alliance from focusing on change in a single system, like education, health, or climate, to addressing systems transformation across polycrisis arenas. A philanthropic theory of transformation takes the theory of philanthropic alliance to a whole new game-changing level: creating and working together through interorganizational networks to support major systems transformation.

A philanthropic theory of transformation takes the theory of philanthropic alliance to a whole new game-changing level: creating and working together through interorganizational networks to support major systems transformation.

Before going into greater depth about a philanthropic theory of transformation, let's do a quick review. Program design and evaluation began with a focus on goal attainment (i.e., SMART goals). That led to logic models to show how goals were to be achieved. Next came theories of change that identified causal linkages and could explain why following the steps in the logic model would lead to the desired goals. Theories of change worked well for elucidating individual grants, but a theory of philanthropy was more useful to identify the funding priorities of a whole foundation. That led to articulation of a theory of philanthropic alliance that explains and hypothesizes how several foundations and multiple grantees working together can have greater collective impact on a particular system than they could working separately. The next stage in this grantmaking evolution could be articulating, funding, and implementing a philanthropic theory of systems transformation to mitigate and reverse the downward spiraling trends of the polycrisis. (See Table 1.)

TABLE 1 Evolution of Program Design and Evaluation

Stages of Conceptual Evolution	Purpose	Program Design	Evaluation Questions	Strengths	Weaknesses
1. Goal attainment (Patton, 2008, pp. 231–270)	Determine if goals have been attained.	SMART goals (clear, measurable, achievable, relevant, timebound)	How does actual goal attainment compare to aspirations and targets?	Simple, clear focus, definitive results	Doesn't explain how or why goals are attained or not attained
2. Logic models (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004)	Show steps in how goals are to be attained.	Linear, sequential steps: inputs to activities to outputs to outcomes	Are the steps logical and sequential? Is each step fully implemented?	Supports articulating clearly what the program model is	Shows how goals are to be attained but not why (causal attribution missing)
3. Theories of change (Funnell & Rogers, 2011)	Identify causal mechanisms that explain why the model works.	Make explicit social science knowledge on which the program is based.	To what extent do the causal hypotheses in the theory of change explain actual outcomes?	Makes causal assumptions explicit: evaluation enhances the value of the program as a demonstration for potential dissemination and scaling.	Treats the intervention as a closed linear system, doesn't deal systematically with system dynamics and complexity
4. Theory of philanthropy (Patton et al., 2015).	Identify a particular foundation's philanthropic approach and niche.	Describe and explain what theories of change the foundation wants to fund strategically.	To what extent and in what ways does the grant portfolio represent the foundation's priorities? What lessons are learned about the theories of change funded?	Clarity about foundation priorities: alignment of vision, mission, programs, staffing, administration, and relationships with grantees; discourages ad hoc grantmaking	Takes time, training, and discipline to articulate and follow a theory of philanthropy and systematically extract lessons
5. Theory of philanthropic alliance (Patton & Richardson, 2023)	Explain and hypothesize how several foundations and multiple grantees working together can have greater collective impact on a particular systems problem than they could working separately.	Identify mechanisms for building and supporting an alliance of foundations.	To what extent do alliance members engage with and contribute to the alliance? What is the collective impact of the alliance?	Increased aggregate impact when several foundations and multiple grantees work together in alignment to support systems change	Challenging to manage and identify an appropriate division of labor and to support ongoing collaboration

(table continued on next page)

TABLE 1 Evolution of Program Design and Evaluation (continued)

Stages of Conceptual Evolution	Purpose	Program Design	Evaluation Questions	Strengths	Weaknesses
6. Theory of transformation (Patton, 2020, pp. 153–199)	Focus on integrating multiple theories of change and diverse initiatives by an integrated network of foundations to contribute to major, significant systems transformation; build on systems thinking and complexity theory.	Integrate multiple theories of change with diverse foundations and grantees sharing values (equity and sustainability) and resources; articulate shared principles to guide collective action toward authentic transformation.	To what extent and in what ways have multiple theories of change and diverse actors integrated and coordinated for collective impact? What are the trajectories toward systems transformation that can be monitored to determine progress toward transformation? Are shared principles meaningful, adhered to, and, if so, effective in progressing toward systems transformation?	Vision and principles driven; integrates and aligns both multiple theories of change and diverse changemakers toward major systems transformation; an appropriate response to the challenges of the polycrisis	Systems transformation eludes operational definition but must be defined contextually and interorg-anizationally. Challenging to maintain momentum and collective effort in the face of uncertainties, contextual turbulence, dynamic and turbulent conditions, resistance from those who benefit from the current system, and difficult to evaluate success along the way
7. Principles-focused systems transformation collaboration (ASRA, 2024 and this article)	Principles provide guidance for navigating and adapting in complex dynamic systems.	Identify shared principles that can and will (a) guide collective action, (b) inform decisions as the theory of transformation is implemented, (c) inspire based on shared values, (d) support agile adaptation, and (e) be evaluable to illuminate progress to towards systems transformation.	To what extent have principles been articulated that are meaningful to those engaged in collective action? To what extent are the principles followed in practice? If followed, to what extent do the principles support progress toward systems transformation?	Principles provide guidance for navigating complex dynamic systems. support a sense of shared commitment and values, and anchor the work under conditions of uncertainty and turbulence.	Following principles collectively requires time and discipline to use the principles for decision-making and ongoing evaluation. It is easy to give lip service to shared principles guiding collaboration, but historically foundations have not made good partners. The inclination and incentives in philanthropy support acting autonomously. The principle of acting autonomously is difficult to overcome.

Each stage of this evolution has built on and incorporates previous stages. A philanthropic theory of transformation would incorporate what has been learned through these evolutionary stages and breaks through into new territory consistent with the challenges of the polycrisis.

Theory of Systems Transformation

As noted in introducing this article, the language of transformation is now heard across the globe wherever people convene to contemplate and foster deep, meaningful, and substantial systems change. Vulnerable and marginalized populations are most directly affected by the intensifying problems that are manifest in the polycrisis. Advancing equity means dealing with polycrisis dimensions and trends in multiple and diverse ways. SMART goals and logic models will not suffice. Multiple, integrated theories of change implemented through collective action and philanthropic alliances offer pathways to systems transformation. Transformative trajectories conceptualize those pathways toward large-scale systems impact. Incorporating and integrating multiple theories of change with diverse change agents operating at many levels can be knitted together. Transformation operates across silos, sectors, and specialized interests, connecting local efforts with global initiatives and nurturing systems regeneration and resilience for a more equitable and sustainable world. Reflecting the multiple dimensions of the polycrisis (see Figure 1), a comprehensive philanthropic theory of transformation would include educational interventions; initiatives to change policies and reform incentives that perpetuate inequalities; working together on social, health, and housing disparities; coordinating environmental initiatives with economic and social reforms; and advocating for a shared narrative that values an equitable and sustainable world.

Systems transformation may sound abstract. The language and concepts may come across as academic and jargon-heavy. The vision may seem far away and daunting. The downward spiral of polycrisis indicators portray a picture of gloom, even doom. But systems transformations have occurred. Patterns of and lessons for systems transformation emerge from studying major transformations of the past and examining current challenges and patterns that portend future possibilities. Instructive transformations include the end of legal slavery; the transition out of colonialism (still underway through decolonization, Chilisa & Bowman, 2023); the end of apartheid; the fall of the Berlin Wall; women getting the right to vote; turning back the AIDS epidemic; global connectivity through the internet; the #MeToo movement; and, at this moment, social media. None of these quite different transformations occurred due to a centrally conceptualized, controlled, and implemented strategic plan or massive intervention by a single entity. These transformations occurred when multiple and diverse initiatives collaborated through interorganizational networks to create momentum, critical mass, and, ultimately, systemic tipping points (Hage, 2020; Hage et al., 2024; Westley et al., 2006).

The diversity of and variations in historical systems transformation raises the question of operationally defining transformation. "Transformation" means deep, meaningful, and substantial systems change. A transformative trajectory conceptualizes the pathway to large-scale impact. But there can be no single, universal definition or operational specification of what constitutes transformation. Transformation is ultimately contextual and emergent. Therefore, what is meant by transformation must be defined by those engaged in such an effort, expressing a vision of the changed system (or systems) they aspire to and making the case that their initiative constitutes a potential trajectory toward that aspiration. Those conceptualizing and undertaking what they hope to be a transformational initiative must engage consistent with the magnitude, direction, and speed of transformation needed for positive systems change in a contextually sensitive manner, acknowledging the significance of historical context and the prevailing paradigm of human domination over and exploitation of Earth's ecological systems and each other. Evaluation of systems transformation initiatives will, correspondingly, have to be contextually designed and culturally responsive. (See Figure 2.)

FIGURE 2 Guidance for Evaluating Systems Transformation in the Context of the Polycrisis: Excerpts from the Earth Day Evaluation Declaration

Evaluators' Role

Given the overwhelming evidence that the climate emergency, loss of biodiversity, soil degradation, and pollution of water, air, and land threaten the future of humanity and all life on Earth …, we commit to introducing context-specific criteria for environmental, social, and economic sustainability and regeneration into all evaluations, recognizing that these three domains are intertwined.

Role of Commissioners of Evaluation

We call on those who commission, fund, and use evaluations to include and support context-specific criteria for environmental, social, and economic sustainability and regeneration in all evaluations, and engage a wide range of researchers and scientists in the evaluation teams.

Elaboration, Implications, and Implementation Guidance

- *Scope.* Taking the polycrisis seriously means including appropriate and relevant sustainability and regeneration criteria in all approaches to evaluation for all types of interventions and change efforts, and across all sectors — public, private, nongovernmental, academic — in whatever ways are relevant and feasible.
- *Level.* The universality of the multifaceted environmental and related crises means developing and applying context-specific environmental, social, and economic sustainability and regeneration criteria at all levels, local and indigenous, regional and national, Global North and Global South, international and global, within formal institutions and informal networks, and in so doing, take into account the mutually reinforcing interrelationships across levels.
- *Interconnectedness.* We reiterate the interconnectedness of environmental, social, economic, political, and cultural systems. Our focus is on the mutually reinforcing and dynamic interrelationships among environmental sustainability and regeneration; equitable, inclusive, and resilient social systems; and economic justice to make clear that these are not conflicting ideals to be pitted against each other, but rather interdependent systems that need to be examined, understood, and evaluated together.
- *Nexus perspective.* Evaluating at the nexus where environmental, social, and economic actions interconnect and intertwine means applying a complex systems framework in evaluation, seeking restorative and regenerative solutions that endure resiliently, and documenting both positive and negative patterns, intended and unintended, and planned, adapted, and emergent pathways toward transformation.
- *Context.* Sustainability-inclusive evaluations include recognition of the historical patterns of exploitation, extraction, expropriation, colonialism, oppression, human dominance over nature, and greed that have created the climate crisis.
- *Uses.* Evaluation for sustainability and regeneration should be designed and implemented to improve and enhance sustainability-inclusive initiatives; support informed, strategic and democratic decision-making through processes and procedures that are fair and just; and strengthen community voice in evaluations and interventions. To do so, sustainability-inclusive evaluations will build and facilitate collaborations with those who commission, fund, implement, and are meant to benefit from evaluation processes and results.

Source: International Development Evaluation Association (2024)

The Centrality of Systemic Interorganizational Collaboration

Central to a philanthropic theory of transformation is systemic interorganizational and cross-foundation collaboration. Connecting networks to support systems transformation is fully articulated, empirically supported, and theoretically unpacked in *Saving Societies From Within: Innovation and Equity Through Inter-Organizational Networks* (Hage et al., 2024). This

book summarizes and synthesizes more than a century of social science scholarship and evaluation findings on how system transformation occurs. It then provides an in-depth case study illustrating the theory of transformation, which states: Systems transformation occurs through systemic, coordinated interorganizational networks.

The systemic component means bringing together in partnership diverse organizations knowledgeable about and engaged with the different interdependent systems being transformed. Such a partnership would collaborate through a designated leadership group that can integrate different perspectives, resolve conflicts, and nurture good relationships among the organizations that participate in the network. Systemic coordination facilitates quick responses to new challenges and opportunities as they appear.

The idea is that systemic coordination among diverse foundations will bring together expertise and place-based knowledge that can catalyze major systems transformations collectively. This includes learning together, adapting promising approaches, and generating innovations collectively. Bottom line: Successful transformation flows from interorganizational diversity, facilitated creativity, and aligned engagement, all integrated through a strongly connected and coordinated systemic network (Hage et al., 2024).

Networks as a means of mobilizing for transformation require go well beyond sharing information to in-depth collective action. In *Organizations Working Together,* Alter and Hage (1993) open with this observation:

> New mechanisms for coordinating and controlling different sectors of the economy are emerging, and it is the systemic network that offers the greatest competitive advantage in a global economy … . Systemic networks — clusters of organizations that make decisions jointly and integrate their efforts … — provide more creative solutions in the process. (pp.1–2)

Steve Waddell's (2011) *Global Action Networks* concludes that global action networks are "critical for bending the curve into the future in the direction of flourishing world for all" (p. 238). Holley's *Network Weaver Handbook* (2012) is subtitled *A Guide to Transformational Networks,* which spotlights the potential transformational impact of networks. The guide supports transformation aimed at the shared interests of the network members. Three highly experienced network specialists and activists, Peter Plastrik, Madeleine Taylor, and John Cleveland (2014) state their premise in their book's title: *Connecting to Change the World: Harnessing the Power of Networks for Social Impact.* They offer insights about network building that emphasize the dynamic, evolutionary, and adaptive characteristics of networks. The implication for evaluating networks is that evaluation must also be dynamic, evolutionary, and adaptive. Fixed, static designs will distort, not illuminate.

Networks take a variety of forms. Networks can connect individuals, organizations, communities, communities of practice, collaborations, businesses, schools — indeed, all kinds of entities, including networks. A philanthropic theory of transformation moves to that next level: philanthropic-driven networks of networks.

A philanthropic theory of transformation will incorporate and integrate multiple theories of change operating at different interconnected levels that are knitted together through interorganizational collective engagement. They align and synthesize the overarching transformational vision and integrate the actions of network members. This metaphor of "theory knitting" is one approach to creating a theory of transformation that involves integrating distinct theories of change, thereby reducing theoretical segregation while increasing the chances of synthesis (Leeuw & Donaldson, 2015). Other metaphors are layering theories, theory ladders, and nesting theories into a theory hierarchy. The metaphors vary — knitting, nesting, layering, laddering — but what they have in common is integrating multiple theories of change into a cohesive framework that can explain and guide

transformation (Patton, 2020). That integration among collaborating network members constitutes a comprehensive philanthropic theory of transformation. Interorganization networks are especially effective in working toward an ambitious vision with uncertain technologies in the turbulent and fragile environments characterized by the polycrisis (Hage et al., 2024).

Integrated Philanthropic Theory of Transformation

An example of a framework for systems transformation is conceptualized in *The Water of Systems Change* model (Kania et al., 2018), which calls for collaborative engagement to change policies, practices, resource flows, power dynamics, social relationships, and mental models — the elements of a systems-transformation design. Policies inform practices, and practices influence policy formulation. Resources are essential to implement both policies and practices. Relationships are the connecting tissue of systems, and those relationships are subject to power dynamics. Mental models tell why the theory of transformation matters with a narrative explaining and illuminating trajectories toward transformation.

This is an example of how diverse elements with multiple collaborators can coalesce around and catalyze a theory of philanthropic transformation that propels the vision of enhancing and sustaining more equitable systems. Realizing the vision expressed by the theory of philanthropic transformation will require multiple actors working in diverse sectors, each operating within one or more particular strategies. Aligning, catalyzing, and propelling those strategies — theories of change — into a transformational trajectory will be any given network's challenge in engaging with and learning from an integrated theory of transformation.

Principles to Guide Transformation

The question then arises: What guides implementation of the collaborative initiatives of a philanthropic theory of transformation? The answer is principles. In complex dynamic systems characterized by uncertainty, turbulence, and lack of control, working collaboratively toward systems transformation will require adaptability, agility, and the capacity to pivot quickly to get past barriers and seize new opportunities. A vision of systems transformation, like advancing equity, cannot be reduced to a set of steps to follow. There's no recipe, standardized procedures, or logic model to implement. Rather, a theory of philanthropic transformation is guided by principles.

A principles-based approach contrasts with prescriptive models that, like recipes, provide standardized directions that must be followed precisely, regardless of context, to achieve the desired outcome. Goals-based grantmaking prescribes operationalizing clear, specific, and measurable goals to be attained by following the steps in a logic model. In contrast, guiding principles for systems transformation provide direction, but must be interpreted and adapted to context and situation. An example is this principle: Prioritize equity in all grantmaking. What that means in practice will depend on the focus of the grantmaking, the nature of the systems to be transformed, and the capacity of grantees.

Principles are derived from experience, expertise, values, and research. Effectiveness principles inform choices about what actions are appropriate for what purposes in which contexts, helping to navigate the treacherous terrain of conflicting guidance and competing advice. A guiding principle, then, is a statement that provides direction on how to think or behave toward in working toward a transformational vision based on norms, values, beliefs, experience, and knowledge.

Principles are then evaluated by their meaningfulness to those expected to adhere to them, actual adherence, and, if adhered to, the results of adherence. A set of principles can be examined for potential conflicts between specific principles. For example, principles in philanthropy often commit to being both "relationship based" and "lean and efficient." These may be in conflict with each other. Evaluating how principles

TABLE 2 Examples of Contrasting Principles

Principle Contrasts	ASRA Principles	Contrasting Principles (non-ASRA, not desirable)
Overarching Principle **Mainstream vs. Specialized Expertise**	**Mainstream Systemic Risk Assessment and Response Principle** Build, nurture, enhance, and embed the capacity to understand, apply, and use systemic risk assessment and to design, communicate, and support the implementation of responses adapted to diverse cultural, political, societal, ecological, and economic contexts to be used wherever engagement with and decisions about the future of human and nonhuman life on Earth are occurring.	**Specialized Systemic Risk Assessment and Response** Treat the capacity to understand, apply, and use systemic risk assessment as an area of specialized knowledge manageable only by specially trained experts.
Stance Toward the Vulnerable **Equity Aspiration vs. Inevitable Inequity**	**Justice Principle** Incorporate the values of human rights, justice, and equity into systemic risk assessment and response and take into account the particular risks experienced by vulnerable communities.	**Poverty Is the Natural Order of Things** Poverty and inequity are inevitable results of how humans organize themselves and distribute scarce resources. Human rights, justice, and equity are laudable goals but too hard to achieve or assess, and thus should remain outside the remit of risk assessment.

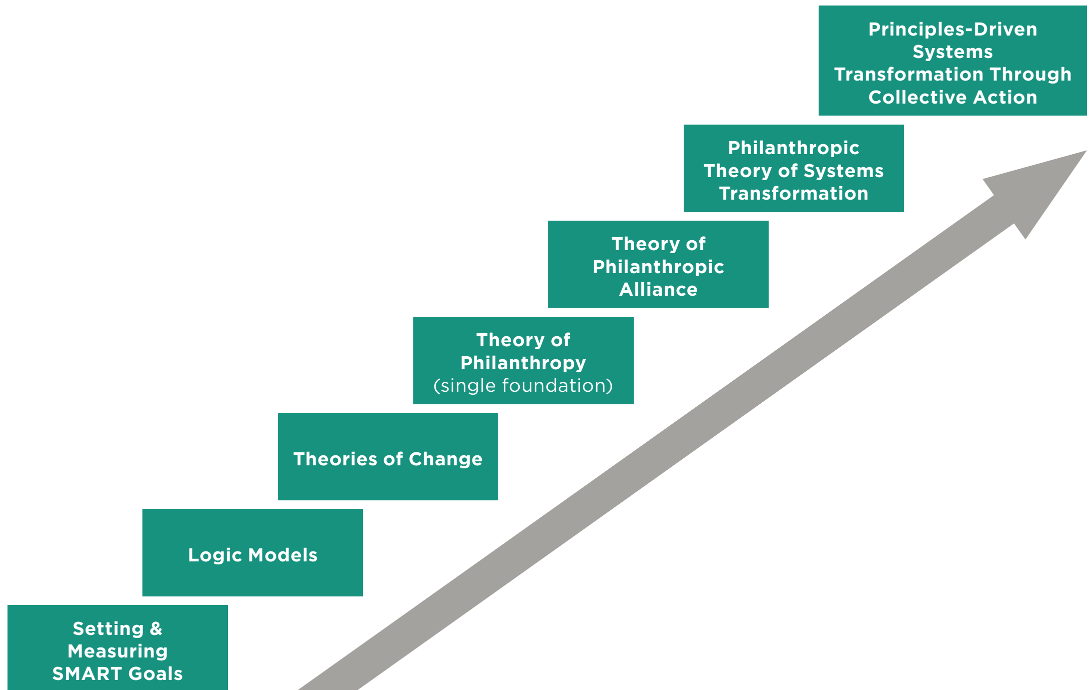
are used and adhered to is part of being engaged in principles-driven systems transformation.[1]

As noted in the introduction, the Accelerator for Systemic Risk Assessment mobilizes a diverse, global network of risk professionals and thought leaders aiming to catalyze the science and practice of systemic risk assessment and strengthen systemic risk response capacities, especially among and decision- and policymakers at global, national, and subnational scales. An independent, not-for-profit initiative hosted by the United Nations Foundation, ASRA's mission is to accelerate transformative action that protects the Earth's ecological systems and humanity from the threats of escalating systemic risks like growing inequality globally and the increasing risks of climate change for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged populations. From its earliest inception, those involved in establishing ASRA were committed to ensuring that it be grounded in a set of principles to guide its work in fulfilling its transformational mission and vision. These principles offer an example of how principles can inform a philanthropic theory of transformation (ASRA, 2024).

Principles-focused evaluation distinguishes overarching from operating principles. This is like the distinction between goals and objectives. Goals are broader; objectives are narrower. Overarching principles provide broad guidance while operating principles provide more specific implementation guidance. The Accelerator for Systemic Risk Assessment has one overarching principle and 10 operating principles. The set of principles constitutes a whole in that they are interdependent, complementary, cross-referenced, and mutually reinforcing. Ideally, the set of principles facilitates dialogue on options,

[1] For guidance on developing and evaluating principles, see Patton, 2018.

FIGURE 3 Conceptual Evolution of Philanthropic Engagement for Advancing Equity Over the Last Quarter Century



trade-offs, and choices. One way to illuminate the clarity and meaningfulness of a principle is to articulate its opposite or identify contrary principles. (See Table 2).

Summary and Conclusion

This article, on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of *The Foundation Review,* invites readers to ponder the risks posed by the polycrisis and how philanthropy might respond to those risks beyond business as usual. To encourage and support such reflection, this article has provided an overview perspective on the evolution of program design and evaluation in philanthropy over the last quarter century. (See Figure 3.) Traditional philanthropy has, and still does, fund grants aimed at solving particular problems guided by SMART goals and logic models. Then, to demonstrate that a project is worthy of being scaled for greater impact and adopted by others, interventions began to be conceptualized as a theory of change that identifies and validates causal attribution. Evaluating a theory of change answers the question whether results can be attributed to the intervention.

The severity and dangers of the polycrisis challenge this traditional form of autonomous, goal-oriented, narrowly focused grantmaking. The term "polycrisis" calls attention to overlapping, mutually reinforcing, and potentially disastrous trends and crises that are interconnected. Vulnerable and marginalized populations are most directly affected by the intensifying problems that are manifested in the polycrisis. Systems-change initiatives tend to approach systems change one system at a time. But because they are interconnected and interdependent, systems transformation offers an integrated approach aimed at generating critical mass and tipping points for major change. Multiple, integrated theories of change implemented through collective action and philanthropic alliances offer pathways to systems transformation. Transformation requires operating across silos, sectors, and specialized interests, connecting local efforts with global

initiatives, and nurturing systems regeneration and resilience for a more equitable and sustainable world. Navigating the uncertainties and turbulence of complex, dynamic polycrisis systems requires principles-focused engagement. A vision of systems transformation, like advancing equity, cannot be reduced to a set of steps to follow. There's no recipe, standardized procedures, or logic model to implement. Rather, a philanthropic theory of transformation is guided by principles.

Others may and will see the evolution of philanthropy differently, adding stages, deleting or reframing others. We offer this version of and perspective on the evolution of philanthropic engagement to stimulate dialogue about where philanthropy has come from, where it is now, and what the future may hold. To stimulate that dialogue, we offer, in closing, four premises to ponder and raise four corresponding questions to address as we proceed:

Premises to Ponder	Corresponding Strategic Questions for Philanthropy
1. The trends manifest in the polycrisis potentially threaten the survival of humanity and all living things on Earth.	1. What are the implications of the polycrisis for philanthropy? How should philanthropy assess and respond to the potential systemic risks posed by the realities of the polycrisis? (ASRA, 2024)
2. Going about business as usual makes philanthropy part of the problem rather than part of the solution.	2. How, if at all, should philanthropy adapt to the realities of the polycrisis? What options should be considered?
3. One major theory of transformation posits that systemic coordination and collaboration among diverse foundations and organizations, each bringing substantive and place-based expertise to the transformation process, can catalyze major systems transformation collectively.	3. Given that foundations have a deep and distinguished history of acting largely autonomously, can philanthropic alliances be created that undertake collective impact strategies toward major systems transformation? Should such collective action be undertaken?
4. Principles for undertaking a theory of transformation aimed at advancing equity can provide guidance for navigating the uncertainties, dynamics, and turbulence of complex, dynamic systems change.	4. What principles and theory of transformation should guide the next generation of philanthropic engagement, where the stakes may well be the future of humanity and life on Earth?

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Forest for the Trees: Collective Accountability and Trust as Groundwork for Systems Change

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Keywords: *Trust-based philanthropy, accountability, systems change, philanthropy, social impact, listening, community-driven philanthropy, equity, equitable practices, flexible funding, grantmaking*

Introduction

In the spring of 2017, Sebastian Africano took the helm at Trees, Water & People (TWP).[1] It was a full-circle moment, bringing him back to the organization where he had interned 12 years prior. After receiving his MBA and building his career, he returned to his roots to take the nonprofit to the next level as its first Latino executive director.

At the time, TWP was a grantmaker focused on reforestation. A key part of Africano's job was to get to know the work of community partners to better understand their strategies for reforestation and conservation. Another core part was to secure funding to redistribute to conservation groups in communities vulnerable to deforestation and climate change.

But early on in his tenure, he noticed a profound tension: What funders wanted as evidence of impact was at odds with community partners' vision for forest stewardship. "Our funders wanted regular reports on how many trees were planted and how many survived," he remembers. "They were asking for transactional data like the rate of tree growth and the circumference of tree trunks."

Meanwhile, one of TWP's community partners in Honduras — the Ecological Committee of the Aldea de Suyapa, or COEAS — had a different vision. While planting trees was a part of its work, the granular measurement requirements were so time-consuming that it was becoming untenable for COEAS to deliver on the terms

[1] See https://treeswaterpeople.org

Key Points

- Since 2020, trust-based philanthropy has gained momentum as a strategy to alleviate inherent power imbalances between funders, nonprofits, and the communities they serve. The cornerstone of the approach is a set of grantmaking practices, such as multiyear unrestricted funding and streamlined paperwork, that support nonprofit self-determination toward achieving impact goals.
- At a deeper level, trust-based philanthropy is driven by core values that position funders as collaborators and supporters working alongside nonprofits to advance a more just and equitable society. This requires a radically different stance on accountability from conventional philanthropic norms. Rather than reinforcing a sense of one-way transactional accountability, which is common in conventional and "strategic" philanthropy, trust-based philanthropy prioritizes mutuality between funders and nonprofits — relational accountability — toward a shared sense of commitment to the communities being served — collective accountability. This fosters a strong ecosystem of relationships and accountability that allows for social impact in ways that otherwise would not be possible.
- Through insights, analysis, and stories from social-sector leaders, this article argues that philanthropy is inherently more strategic and effective when funders embrace trust-based practices and collaborate with nonprofits with a spirit of collective accountability. It also provides concrete examples of systems change that has been possible as a result of trust-based philanthropic partnerships rooted in relational and collective accountability.

of TWP's support. "They told me that the work they were focused on was about protecting the entire ecosystem, not counting individual trees," Africano says. "That's when I realized that our funders literally weren't seeing the forest for the trees, and that it was our responsibility to correct this."

Africano was caught up in a dynamic not unfamiliar to many nonprofit leaders: Reflecting his funders' demands was inhibiting the mission-critical work of his organization. "I was creating an undue burden on a community that was focused on protecting their land and just getting through the next day," he recalls.

With a deep sense of accountability to TWP's mission and the communities it was supporting, Africano went back to the funder that had been driving the measurement requests and explained that, based on community feedback, TWP would not be proceeding with those requests and if this was a problem he would return the funding.

Africano was fully aware that he was potentially cutting off a source of revenue to his organization. But he believed in COEAS's holistic vision and was more invested in deepening that collaboration than thwarting it. Fortunately, the funder did not request the money back, and Africano sought out even more resources to enable an ongoing relationship with COEAS. This enabled TWP to deepen its work with the organization through multiyear partnership, flexible funding, and mutual learning.

The long-term collaboration has paid off. Nearly seven years after Africano had that frank discussion with his funder, COEAS achieved a major milestone: the organization got a vote passed by Honduras' National Congress declaring its 12,600-acre forest a national wildlife refuge, granting it permanent legal protection from further development or exploitation of the area .

The Trust-Based Approach

This success story is one of many that demonstrate the power and potential of collective accountability in social impact work. When funders and nonprofits work together in service of the vision and goals of the people closest to the issues, in essence trusting their vision for impact, it can produce tremendous results.

Moreover, this trust-based approach fosters a sense of relational accountability between funders and nonprofits to produce more fruitful partnerships, more informed decision-making, and greater impact for communities.

The Origins of Trust-Based Philanthropy

The roots of trust-based philanthropy trace back to the Whitman Institute, a foundation based in San Francisco, California, that sunsetted in 2022. The foundation's co-executive directors, John Esterle and Pia Infante, saw their role as supporters and amplifiers of leaders deeply experienced in the issues they were working on. They focused their energies on building deep relationships with their partners, listening to their needs, and serving as thought partners and co-conspirators in realizing their missions. Multiyear, unrestricted support became a pillar of their approach, as did restorative retreats, dialogic learning exchanges in place of written reports, and holistic support for nonprofit leaders.

Responding to feedback from their grantee partners, Esterle and Infante focused a significant portion of their final 10 years inviting funders to interrogate power imbalances in their philanthropy. Knowing they would benefit from a name and frame to ground their peer organizing, they coined the approach "trust-based philanthropy" — inspired directly from grantee input about the importance of trusting relationships (Trust-Based Philanthropy Project, 2023). Esterle and Infante's early organizing planted the seeds for what would eventually become the Trust-Based Philanthropy Project, a dedicated community of practice supporting the adoption of trust-based philanthropy sectorwide (Daniels, 2020). Since then, a growing number of funders have embraced the approach, recognizing that the path to social impact is smoother and more effective when nonprofits have the support and flexibility to respond to their communities' needs.

Unpacking Accountability

This article is a deep exploration of trust-based philanthropy as a strategy to alleviate inherent power imbalances and advance systemic change. Our analysis is informed by our own experiences as philanthropic and nonprofit practitioners, as well as insights from articles, reports, and direct interviews with foundation and nonprofit leaders.[2] Our goal is to demonstrate that trust-based philanthropy is an effective strategy for social impact because it a) alleviates burdens on nonprofits through practices such as multiyear unrestricted funding and streamlined paperwork, b) facilitates learning and responsiveness to communities' needs, and c) creates conditions for learning, mutuality, and transparency — all of which are essential to our collective ability to tackle complex issues. As we demonstrate through stories and examples, trust-based philanthropy is rooted in an orientation of collective accountability that positions funders as collaborators and supporters of nonprofits' work — ultimately in service of improving our communities and advancing a more just and equitable society.

We also assert that trust-based philanthropy operates in stark contrast to conventional philanthropy. One of the key distinctions can be understood in its radically different stance on accountability. Conventional structures perpetuate one-sided transactional accountability, wherein nonprofits are expected to conform to funder-driven demands and expectations. In addition to perpetuating harmful power dynamics, this transactional accountability significantly inhibits the potential for sustained social impact.

Trust-based philanthropy's stance on accountability, however, prioritizes mutuality between funders and nonprofits — relational accountability — toward a shared sense of commitment to the communities being served — collective accountability. In a holistic, trust-based approach, these stances on accountability operate hand in hand as a strategy for social impact.

Our goal is to demonstrate that trust-based philanthropy is an effective strategy for social impact because it a) alleviates burdens on nonprofits through practices such as multiyear unrestricted funding and streamlined paperwork, b) facilitates learning and responsiveness to communities' needs, and c) creates conditions for learning, mutuality, and transparency — all of which are essential to our collective ability to tackle complex issues.

Throughout this article, we offer examples and stories from social-sector leaders who have embraced relational and collective accountability in their efforts to advance more just and equitable systems and structures. As you'll see, there are many pathways to achieving social impact, with a shared sense of accountability as the common denominator.

Conventional Philanthropy's Systematization of Transactional Accountability

For the purposes of this article, we are taking a deeper exploration of the notion of accountability in the context of the relationships between key actors in philanthropic social sector work: funders, nonprofits, and the communities that are served by nonprofits. We interpret

[2] Special thanks to our interviewees: Sebastian Africano, John Brothers, Shona Chakravarty, Sonya Childress, Shruti Jayaraman, Jamaal Kinard, Jill Miller, Dominic Moulden, Meredith Shockley-Smith, Erin Switalski, and Melinda Tuan.

From competitive requests for proposals that favor nonprofits willing to implement funder-driven strategies to renewal grants tied to funder-set metrics, the structures of conventional philanthropy consistently perpetuate funders' needs over those of nonprofits and communities.

accountability as multidirectional and relational, operating within a complex web of relationships. Fundamentally, our stance on accountability is defined by an ongoing commitment to aligning efforts toward a shared goal — through consistent and transparent communication about needs, barriers, and opportunities.

By contrast, conventional philanthropy takes a top-down stance on accountability, typically focusing its lens on the transactional relationship between funders — disbursing grants — and fund recipients — producing outputs. We refer to this as transactional accountability. In this context, the onus of accountability is on nonprofits to demonstrate to funders that they are worthy of receiving and maintaining financial support. This requires grant recipients to demonstrate their trustworthiness, share how they will turn dollars into outcomes, and generally — and consistently — "make their case." This unidirectional nonprofit-to-funder accountability has persisted for decades, especially as many funders perceive it as a necessary part of stewarding funds responsibly. Ironically, the legal responsibilities of foundations are minimal compared to the often-exhaustive ways that funders ask their grantee partners to "account" for grants made (Bolduc, 2024).

Transactional Practices in Conventional Philanthropy

Many of the practices in conventional philanthropy are rooted in this notion of transactional accountability. The terms of the relationship are entirely set by funders. On the flip side, nonprofits must conform to funders' demands and requirements. In practice, transactional accountability manifests in a set of practices that reinforce transaction over relationship, such as

- stringent and lengthy application processes;
- little to no transparency about how grant decisions are made;
- grants that have significant restrictions in how funds can be used;
- extensive financial reporting, including documentation of all receipts; and
- detailed narrative reports demonstrating impact, often based on funder-defined measures.

While many funders see transactional accountability as a part of their fiduciary responsibilities, critics have pointed out that these practices do little more than put funders at ease (Le, 2024). They also tend to reinforce a false assumption that social change can be attributed to one single grant. Most significantly, transactional accountability practices divert the focus of nonprofits to prioritize funders' needs over those of the people and communities they serve. From competitive requests for proposals that favor nonprofits willing to implement funder-driven strategies to renewal grants tied to funder-set metrics, the structures of conventional philanthropy consistently perpetuate funders' needs over those of nonprofits and communities. And many nonprofits have had to adapt to these transactional dynamics at the expense of their own missions (Le, 2017).

One of the most prominent examples of transactional accountability has been embodied in "strategic" philanthropy, a donor-centric philosophy that positions funders as the lead actors

in envisioning, defining, and achieving their intended impact through grantmaking. Strategic philanthropy operates on the belief that funders should define and oversee how impact is understood and measured, and thus favors nonprofits that can prove their ability to meet those funder-defined metrics. While some practitioners of strategic philanthropy may occasionally incorporate community feedback into their processes, the approach minimizes the voice and expertise of nonprofit organizations, positioning them as supplicants in helping funders achieve their own goals (Barkan, 2013).

Most significantly, strategic philanthropy has not lived up to its promise of improving society. In fact, former proponents have emerged as vocal critics of strategic philanthropy, pointing to problematic power dynamics and worsening environmental and social problems despite the rise in strategic philanthropy (Harvey, 2016; Kramer & Phillips, 2024). Mark Kramer, a longtime philanthropist and trustee, and Steve Phillips, a former advisor at the consulting firm FSG, claim that the failure of strategic philanthropy "is rooted in a set of assumptions that originated more than a century ago and still shape our nonprofit sector today: that the beneficiaries of philanthropic support are incapable of solving their own problems" (Kramer & Phillips, 2024, p. 28). They argue that the complex issues of today cannot be solved by philanthropy in a silo, especially not without the self-determination and self-actualization of those who are closest to those very issues.

Trust-Based Philanthropy as a Response to Conventional Norms

In response to many of the limitations of conventional and strategic philanthropy, trust-based philanthropy offers a radically different approach. Rather than taking a command-and-control stance, it positions funders as collaborators working alongside nonprofits to advance social, environmental, economic, and racial equity. It is rooted in the basic premise that nonprofits are experts in their own work, and that they are best positioned to determine how they spend their money and measure their success. It also takes a proactive

Rather than taking a command-and-control stance, [trust-based philanthropy] positions funders as collaborators working alongside nonprofits[.]

stance on acknowledging and correcting power imbalances between funders and nonprofits, in the form of six core grantmaking practices that support nonprofit self-determination toward achieving their goals:

1. Multiyear unrestricted funding supports the long-term and often unpredictable nature of social-sector work.

2. Funders do the homework on prospective and current grantees to understand and keep up with their work, rather than the other way around.

3. Simplified and streamlined paperwork requirements ease burdens on nonprofits while creating more opportunities for conversation and mutual learning between funders and grantees.

4. Transparent and responsive communication fosters open and honest dialogue and helps alleviate power imbalances.

5. Soliciting and acting on feedback from grantees helps funders inform and improve their work.

6. Support beyond the check encourages funders to leverage their connections, knowledge, thought partnership, and other nonmonetary resources to bolster nonprofits' success.

Underlying these core grantmaking practices is a values-driven ethos that reimagines the role of funders as generative and supportive partners working in collaboration with nonprofits to

In a trust-based framework, funders strive to establish relationships that foster a sense of relational accountability, wherein both the funder and the funded partner are in a reciprocal relationship of trust and transparency.

shape a more equitable and democratic society. With intrinsic values of redistributing power and working for systemic equity, trust-based philanthropy embodies faithfulness and trustworthiness to nonprofits — and by association, the communities they serve.

In a trust-based context, the conventional notion that grantee partners must transactionally "account" for the financial relationship is replaced by relational accountability between funders and nonprofits. This is fostered through consistent dialogue, collaboration, and mutual learning. This relational accountability is further cemented by a shared sense of accountability to communities — that is, *collective* accountability. Together, these nuanced and multidimensional forms of accountability work hand in hand as essential components of achieving long-term social impact.

Relational Accountability: Trust and Mutuality Between Funders and Nonprofits

"Most people do not want informational accountability; they want relational accountability. For example, they do not want to know the test scores, teacher salaries, and graduation rates at their local high school; they want to know the principal and have confidence in her values."

– Peter Levine, Tufts University (Rourke, 2014)

In a trust-based framework, funders strive to establish relationships that foster a sense of relational accountability, wherein both the funder and the funded partner are in a reciprocal relationship of trust and transparency. Given that funders are at the top of the power hierarchy in this relationship, trust-based philanthropy proponents put the onus on funders to initiate a tone of mutuality. This includes showing up with humility and curiosity and demonstrating a deep commitment to their partners' success. In turn, these behaviors cultivate mutuality, wherein funded partners feel comfortable and compelled to be transparent and communicative about their work, their successes, and any perceived barriers along the way. As a result, the partnership becomes stronger over time, and funders have better access to information and learnings that can inform how they support that particular organization, as well as larger grantmaking decisions about their funding areas.

Jill Miller, CEO of bi3 in Cincinnati, Ohio, has seen the benefits of increased trust and relational accountability over time:

> As a trust-based funder, you come to the table with an open mindset and a willingness to trust and be transparent [with a new nonprofit partner]. But trust builds over time. And at bi3 we've found that the more trust you build, the more risk we're willing to take together — because we've built that trust.

A grantmaking organization launched by the health care corporation Bethesda, Inc., bi3 initially awarded grants in a relatively conventional way but shifted its approaches to better align with trust-based philanthropy, thus facilitating better relationships in the community. As they've embraced trust-based philanthropy, Miller and her colleagues have been able to cultivate long-term relational accountability through multiyear grants and hands-on support beyond the check.

One of bi3's most fruitful relationships has been with the nonprofit Cradle Cincinnati, which shares the foundation's mission of improving health outcomes for Black babies and mothers

throughout the city. Miller reflects that bi3's first grant to Cradle Cincinnati started out as more transactional. But as the two organizations got to know one another and build trust over time, they were able to cultivate a much deeper partnership. That has led to new investments that many funders would typically avoid because they didn't come with a predetermined set of activities and outcomes.

For example, when Cradle Cincinnati's executive director, Meredith Shockley-Smith, came to bi3 with a vision for building a community-led support system for Black mothers, she didn't know exactly what the work would look like. Nor did she know what the outcomes were going to be. But because bi3 and Cradle Cincinnati had built a trust-based relationship rooted in relational accountability, bi3 was fully behind Shockley-Smith's vision. "Because we had already built trust, we knew that the worst-case scenario would be that we were going to learn from it," Miller recalls.

Fostering this type of trust and relational accountability requires funders to take initiative in establishing transparency and mutuality in the relationship. In fact, many trust-based funders hold themselves accountable to this ethos, recognizing that the inherent power imbalance behooves them to take responsibility for alleviating it (Fair Allen et al., 2024). In fact, many of the funders we interviewed have established formal structures for receiving and incorporating input and feedback from nonprofits and communities, both for self-assessment and self-improvement, as well as to inform grantmaking strategies. Of course, this sense of self-reflection and relational accountability also requires funders to recognize that this is not without tension or difficulty, even if it is a necessary part of the job of maintaining relational accountability. As Lorrie Fair Allen, Ashlee George, and Charlize Theron point out, "reimagining accountability requires self-examination, humility, curiosity, and a willingness to change" (Fair Allen et al., 2024, p. 6).

Sonya Childress, co-director of the intermediary grantmaking organization Color Congress, understands the nuances of relational accountability, both as a grantseeker and funder. The grantmaker was founded in 2022 to resource and strengthen the existing, yet underrecognized, ecosystem of documentary organizations led by people of color. As longtime leaders in the documentary world, Childress and her co-director, Sahar Driver, have taken a deliberate effort to prioritize a sense of accountability toward their grantees and members — through rigorous transparency, constant opportunities for feedback, and a perpetual sense of responsiveness to their network.

"We're still really new in our grantmaking process, but we are seeing the impacts already," says Childress:

> We've noticed that our grantees feel very comfortable coming to us with questions, requests, and admissions when they're struggling. [These are things] I didn't do as a grantseeker with any of my funders prior to my role at Color Congress. I wouldn't have come to them with challenges. And I wouldn't really even have come to them with more requests. My orientation was to be grateful for what you work really hard to get and hope that it comes back again.

What Childress is pointing to is reflective of the typical experience of many grantseekers, who are beholden to structures that keep them focused on how to keep money flowing rather than maintaining an honest relationship with their funders. "In most instances," point out Ford Foundation Vice President Hilary Pennington and Girls Inc. Executive Director Stephanie Hull, a Ford grantee:

> grantees become vehicles for enacting grant makers' visions. They may not understand the foundations' questions, concerns, or uncertainties, or have access to the resources they are using to make decisions. Without this mutual understanding, grant-making relationships quickly become self-limiting. (Hull & Pennington, 2023, para. 10)

As Pennington and Hull point out, when the financial transaction is the centerpiece of the relationship, a true sense of relational accountability is nearly impossible.

A key factor in maintaining relational accountability between funders and nonprofits is their shared sense of accountability toward communities — the ultimate beneficiaries of their collective efforts. We refer to this as collective accountability.

On the flip side, when the funder–grantee relationship is rooted in relational accountability, it creates a healthier and more productive relationship that supports the learning and growth of both funders and nonprofits, which ultimately helps achieve progress. As many trust-based funders have observed, this type of relational accountability is essential to advancing complex social change (bi3, 2022), which relies on the active coordination of many aligned players.

Collective Accountability: A Shared Commitment Between Funders and Grantees

A key factor in maintaining relational accountability between funders and nonprofits is their shared sense of accountability toward communities — the ultimate beneficiaries of their collective efforts. We refer to this as collective accountability. In this context, the "community" can vary depending on the focus of the work, but for our purposes we are generally referring to those who are most impacted by the systemic issues that organizations are working on. With Trees, Water & People, for example, its communities are the people who live in environmentally vulnerable areas that are threatened by deforestation and climate change. For bi3's birth equity work, its community is mothers and babies experiencing health disparities in the Cincinnati area.

Having a shared sense of accountability that goes beyond the one-to-one relationship reinforces a commitment to a vision that is greater than the sum of its parts. This focus on collective accountability provides solid ground for the funder-grantee relationship and enables bigger conversations about the needs and realities of the ecosystem within which they are working. This inevitably relies on listening to and understanding the circumstances of those who are experiencing the challenges or opportunities in question.

Many of the leaders we interviewed emphasized that trust-based philanthropy only works when funders apply a power analysis and actively work to address how the least-served community members are impacted by, and included in, funders' decision-making. As Shruti Jayaraman from Chicago Beyond, a family foundation, points out:

> To bring what is left out of the picture into view, boards and staff [of grantmaking institutions] need to integrate the missing perspectives of people with firsthand experience of social problems into the knowledge they use to make decisions. Meaningful integration [of community perspectives] builds the capacity of funders to recognize undervalued impact, enhance the agency of others, and work from a more whole picture in their day-to-day processes. (Jayaraman, 2023, para. 15)

This is true regardless of whether a funder is place-based and dedicated to general support for a geographic area or whether they are an issue-based funder focused on systemic issues, such as health care or education.

Collective accountability also requires funders to challenge their assumptions about how to achieve and measure impact while being open to resourcing relationship-building, planning, and other less quantifiable activities that are often a necessary part of advancing systemic change. For example, in 2015 when John Brothers stepped up to lead T. Rowe Price Foundation (the philanthropic arm of the financial service corporation based in Baltimore, Maryland), he arrived with a mandate to help the city rebuild after 25-year-old Freddie Gray was killed by city

police officers. Rather than working internally at the corporation to establish an outside-in strategy, Brothers turned to the community first. He and his team attended and listened to 150 community conversations across all different neighborhoods around the city. While the T. Rowe Price Foundation team initially assumed their priority would be to address blight and crime, those conversations revealed a different need: improved access to healthy food in neighborhoods that had been deemed food deserts.

As a result, the foundation made its very first hyperlocal investment: a multiyear, $1.3 million commitment to West Baltimore explicitly focused on building up the capacity of community leaders and organizations in that neighborhood to address the pressing needs of the city's most vulnerable residents. They were able to demonstrate collective accountability to the residents of West Baltimore by investing in existing leaders and organizations, rather than setting up new programs. The foundation also established systems for regular feedback loops from community leaders to ensure that the investment continues to support the community's vision.

This points to another critical aspect of collective accountability — it is scaffolded by a series of relationships that uphold a sense of fidelity to shared goals. For that reason, trust-based philanthropy encourages funders to get to know and build relationships with a range of organizations and stakeholders that are part of the greater ecosystem. This allows for accountability to be distributed within a network, wherein any breaches in trust or fidelity will reveal themselves relatively quickly.

For example, the Headwaters Foundation in Montana is a place-based foundation focused on the health and well-being of western Montanans. Its model has been designed with a deep sense of collective accountability to children and families of western Montana, and staff spend the majority of their time in the community, building relationships with organizations, tribal leaders, and stakeholders throughout the foundation's large geographic region. One program that has facilitated this

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broad relationship-building is its GO! Grants program, which provides unrestricted funding (with very minimal paperwork requirements) for organizations aligned with Headwaters' mission. While the foundation's experience with GO! Grants has been mostly positive, there have been a handful of times where it has learned after making a grant that the organization wasn't serving the community in the way it had been portrayed. Given Headwaters' strong network of community relationships, it has been able to learn about and confirm these instances relatively quickly and taken action to ensure its resources continue to support the community in the way that is intended.

Washington, D.C.-based Hill-Snowdon Foundation (HSF) is another example of a funder that builds relationships with a shared sense of collective accountability. Given the 65-year-old family foundation's mission of creating a more fair and just society, it supports organizations that are working to shift systems and policies that directly benefit low-income families. According to Director of Grantmaking Shona Chakravarty, HSF seeks out grantee partners that are "constituency-led," meaning that their leadership and decision-making structures are representative of the people who are being organized. (For example, Family and Friends

of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children works to improve systems for low-income families across Louisiana; its staff are all friends or family members of people who have interfaced with the juvenile justice system.) For HSF, representative leadership is a key factor that helps reinforce a sense of collective accountability, because it can trust that the organizations it funds have a deep commitment to improving outcomes for people who share similar experiences and circumstances.

Chakravarty also points out that when funding for systems change, outcomes should not be measured by the month, but rather by up to a decade. Hill-Snowdon Foundation grants to member-led organizing groups in cycles of eight years at a time, and in lieu of requiring regular reports, it creates opportunities for learning conversations. This contrasts with conventional norms of measurement and evaluation, wherein grant disbursements are often tied to regular impact reports. As Chakravarty notes,

> Organizing takes time, so we want to make significant commitments to enable groups to focus more on how to be accountable to and take the lead from their members rather than having to chase funds by creating programs that are not core to member priorities.

Case Studies: Trust-Based Philanthropy as a Strategy for Systems Change

Many funders are committed to using their philanthropy to change and improve social systems and structures for the betterment of humanity. Still, there isn't necessarily a standard approach to getting there. In conventional philanthropy, it is not uncommon for foundations to set their own strategies and theories of change, and then subsequently fund projects that fulfill their vision for change. The limitation of this, of course, is that this approach to "strategic philanthropy" is often designed with a business-like return-on-investment mindset, and rarely if ever incorporates a sense of perspective or accountability to the communities being served (Fulton, 2018).

In contrast to conventional philanthropy's funder-centric norms, trust-based philanthropy's philosophy is that changing and improving systems for the betterment of humanity requires a sense of accountability to those who have been historically marginalized and excluded from the systemic power structures (Wong & McGrath, 2020). The following case studies demonstrate how funders and nonprofits have leveraged trust-based relationships and a shared sense of collective accountability to advance profound systemic change.

Case Study No. 1: Historic Advancements in Maternal and Infant Health in Cincinnati

In Cincinnati, bi3 was the first funder to invest in Cradle Cincinnati's community-centric approach to understanding the barriers facing Black mothers when accessing prenatal care and health services. Cradle Cincinnati's executive director, Meredith Shockley-Smith, had an intuitive sense that the first step toward addressing the severe health disparities in the city was to listen to Black mothers.

> In order to take that leap — to follow the lead of our community — we needed to establish trust: trust between the Cradle Cincinnati team and community members, trust between health professionals and moms, and trust between funders and Cradle Cincinnati leadership. (Cradle Cincinnati, n.d., para. 4)

Understanding that vision, bi3 has invested millions in Cradle Cincinnati's responsive approach since 2012. This has led to a series of positive impacts for Black babies and mothers across Hamilton County. Shockley-Smith points out that this type of trust-based support was critical in getting this work off the ground, especially since no other funders in the region were willing to fund exploratory work that wasn't tied to specific outcomes that could be promised within a 12-month time frame.

On a systemic level, this multiyear investment in Cradle Cincinnati's community-accountable approach has contributed to significant systemic changes. Between 2012 and 2019, the county observed a 24% decrease in Black

infant mortality, a record low for the region (Cincinnati Children's, 2020).

Recognizing that there is still much work to be done to achieve birth equity in their city, bi3 and Cradle Cincinnati have continued to rely on the wisdom and perspectives of Black mothers to inform future strategies. When they asked Black women what would improve their birthing experiences, many pointed to the lack of information available for them to make a good decision about where to give birth. Cradle Cincinnati and bi3 took this information back to the health care systems across Cincinnati and began to explore the idea of a certification process that could provide better birthing and equity information for expectant families in the region. Compelled by a shared vision for better health outcomes for the entire community, all four hospital systems with birthing facilities in Cincinnati have signed on to publicize their maternal and infant health data and equity-related improvement plans through a first-of-its-kind certification program called Mama Certified. "This is systems change," Shockley-Smith affirms.

Case Study No. 2: Uprooting Poverty in a North Carolina Neighborhood

The Lakeview Neighborhood Alliance is a nonprofit organization that works on addressing concentrated poverty in the Lakeview neighborhood of Charlotte, North Carolina. Executive Director Jamaal Kinard leads the organization with a deep sense of collective accountability. As Kinard recounts,

> [Lakeview residents historically] don't get to define their own problems, don't have a say in the services set up to solve those problems, don't hire the people providing the services, and don't get to evaluate whether the services are working. If the [outside] system has all the power to do all of those things, is it any coincidence that things aren't progressing for our community?

Lakeview Neighborhood Alliance takes a community-conscious approach to everything it does, with a focus on engaging, educating, and empowering residents to take control of their own circumstances. As a resident of the neighborhood, Kinard has spent years getting to know the community, talking to them about their needs and dreams, and taking in the wisdom of elders who have lived in the community their whole lives. As a result, the community has co-created a strategic plan for a self-sustainable economic ecosystem in Lakeview that includes a worker-owned cooperative, affordable housing, a supermarket, and other services that are all designed to meet the community where they are.

The alliance's community-centric approach is producing tremendous results. The quality of life in the neighborhood has significantly improved — with a community farm share that provides healthy fresh vegetables from a local farm, increased levels of civic engagement, and a stronger sense of possibility among residents. According to Kinard, trust-based philanthropy and mutually accountable relationships have played a big part in making that happen. One of LNA's major funders, the United Way of Greater Charlotte, provided flexible funding and hands-on support to the organization for several years, helping strengthen its plans and attract additional funding for the work. This would not have been possible if the United Way did not share that sense of collective accountability. In fact, the United Way grant program that has supported LNA's work is driven by a belief that "those closest to the issues are best equipped to advance solutions . . . to help drive revitalization efforts" (United Way of Greater Charlotte, 2021, para. 3).

This progress emboldened Kinard to see his role as an advocate for the community, not just in his day-to-day work, but also in his interactions with funders: "Sometimes [funders] are interested in doing specific programs or have ideas on what they think needs to happen. If it's not what the community wants, I let them know."

Case Study No. 3: Low-Cost Housing in the District of Columbia

"Here's a system-change story that goes back 20 years," reflects Dominic Moulden, former resource organizer with ONE DC. "There's a

building above the Metro station in the Shaw district, which is one of the most gentrified neighborhoods in America. As the neighborhood gentrified, many residents in that building were at risk of eviction, with nowhere else to go."

Moulden, a District of Columbia resident and longtime community leader, has been at the core of ONE DC's shared leadership and power building model for decades. The Hill-Snowdon Foundation team connected with him after they learned that very little funding was going to local organizing and power building for marginalized communities. With a strong sense of conviction that systems change requires collective accountability, they approached power-building organizations in the region with a proposal to support them with no time restrictions. ONE DC was one of them.

"Because of Hill-Snowdon Foundation's long-term funding commitment, our member volunteers were able to work with tenants to secure their housing," Moulden says. "Another 200 new low-cost housing units mainly for Black and brown women will be built."

When Moulden first met Hill-Snowdon Executive Director Nat Chioke Williams, he was struck by Williams' approach. Instead of coming to Moulden with a pre-set agenda, Williams approached him proactively to collaborate on ensuring the long-term viability of ONE DC's work. He sought to learn how the foundation might listen to and align its funding strategy with the work already underway. What emerged was a long-term, mutually accountable partnership rooted in a sense of collective accountability to the district's low-income residents.

Moulden describes his organization's 20-year partnership with HSF as a combination of bravery, respect, and commitment to building the political strength of district residents. When their work first got off the ground two decades ago, it had been nearly impossible to get foundation funding because ONE DC's volunteer- and resident-led structure didn't fit the traditional mold sought by many foundations. As a result of the long-term, trust-based investment from HSF and other supporters, ONE DC has since been able to achieve a number of systemic wins for low-income residents across Washington, D.C. — including establishing the nation's only community-controlled and debt-free Black worker and wellness center, in Anacostia.

Case Study No. 4: Infrastructure Built for Arts Organizations in Baltimore

In Baltimore, where artists and makers are a concentrated and higher percentage of the population than many other cities, T. Rowe Price Foundation noticed a decline in the city's ability to support these creatives to remain viable contributors. In 2018, the foundation partnered with Impact Hub Baltimore to assess the resources available to individual artists and makers living in Baltimore. They convened arts-serving organizations, artists, funders, and arts agencies to facilitate conversations about systems interventions that could address some of the mounting challenges for the arts community. One of the key insights that emerged was the notion that the city's artists are entrepreneurs who require scaffolding, resources, and support in similar ways that small businesses and grassroots organizations might. This was a light bulb for many of the stakeholders involved, and it prompted them to shift out of the silo of supporting individual arts programs and into the financial realities for arts entrepreneurs and community-based arts organizations.

One of the most significant systemic issues they revealed was that hundreds of Black- and brown-led arts organizations were flailing due to the recent collapse of one of Baltimore's arts-oriented fiscal sponsors. Recognizing the importance of establishing a strong, stable infrastructure to support these organizations, the foundation teamed up with several key stakeholders to create the Uplift Alliance, a dedicated fiscal sponsor providing fiduciary oversight and financial management, as well as educational and research support, for Baltimore artists, startups, and emerging nonprofits. With a sense of collective accountability to Baltimore's independent arts community, the foundation thought creatively and expansively about how it could meet a need in the community — and

in this case it went well beyond giving a grant. Moreover, it provided flexible funding and prioritized relationship-building with the local artists and nonprofits as a way to continue to learn and support their work.

Today, the city of Baltimore has a solid infrastructure to enable artists, creatives, visionaries, and other mission-driven community members to establish a more stable foundation for their work in the long run. This would not have been possible without the flexibility, trust, and collective accountability of T. Rowe Price Foundation, Impact Hub, and the other community groups who partnered on those initial community conversations.

Conclusion

Today, philanthropy has a stronger understanding than ever before around the deeply rooted power imbalances it operates within and helps maintain. Funders are changing, and yet there is so much further for us to go to truly make this shift seismic.

As the number of trust-based funders grows, there is an opening and opportunity to challenge one of philanthropy's stickiest and most invisible challenges: moving away from funder-centric accountability. We've shared stories from colleagues in the field who are already rejecting transactional philanthropy and are taking bold steps to replace it with relational and collective accountability.

Key Factors and Behaviors to Foster Collective Accountability

While there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to modeling relational and collective accountability in trust-based philanthropy, a few key themes emerged from our conversations about the key factors and behaviors that funders can consider to advance a vision for community-centric systems change:

- *Listen and respond to the community:* Funders who model a sense of accountability inherently understand that their work begins by listening to those who are most impacted by the issues they hope to address. Melinda Tuan of Fund for Shared Insight goes further to emphasize the importance of listening to those who are least consulted by philanthropy, since they are often the most harmed by systemic power imbalances.
- *Invest in the long term:* As many of the examples in this article have demonstrated, systemic change takes time, and part of that is the time required to build trust and relationships with nonprofits and communities who are most affected by the issues at hand. Funders who want to advance systems change will be much more successful if they invest in certain issues and organizations over the long run, while constantly using a learning mindset to pivot and refine as needed.
- *Seek out representative leadership:* One recurring theme among many of the funders interviewed for this article was the importance of funding organizations that are representative of the community being served. While representation does not automatically translate to accountability, it tends to come with a more innate understanding of the needs and priorities of the community.
- *Bring an intersectional analysis:* One universal byproduct of listening deeply to communities most impacted by structural inequities is that they feel the effects of injustice in more than one way. For instance, a family living on the poverty line are easier targets for police violence, inadequate health and nutrition, failing schools, and climate change. To truly account for such a family, funders often bust out of siloed funding and provide resources for many different kinds of change work.
- *Be aware of pervasive power dynamics:* Funders may not realize that even within a long-term, trust-based relationship, there is still a power dynamic present. Tuan, who leads efforts for funders and nonprofits to collect and respond to community feedback via Fund for Shared Insight, cautions that the context matters, and that even when listening or asking for input, funders should always be mindful of being as nonextractive as possible. Also, it is important to be aware of the right time to ask for feedback and to be respectful even when listening.

Trust-based philanthropy — with its focus on flexibility, responsiveness, learning, and collective accountability — is a pathway to more effective changemaking.

We can imagine a future when funders do not dictate how budgets are spent or how success is defined. In that future, funders are working with communities and nonprofits to understand what is needed and how they can creatively and expansively leverage their assets to advance positive change. This is a future wherein accountability is distributed, and a vision for change is shared within an entire ecosystem.

Trust-based philanthropy — with its focus on flexibility, responsiveness, learning, and collective accountability — is a pathway to more effective changemaking. It is also more democratic. It's where community members in Charlotte get to define and build their own pathways out of concentrated poverty; where pregnant women in Cincinnati get to choose where to give birth based on the information they want most; and where Indigenous communities in Honduras have legislative support to protect their ancestral lands from deforestation. It's where funders, nonprofits, and communities to work together — in relationship — to tackle complexity together, learn from the process, and create a better world for us all.

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Resourcing Transformational Strategies: How Funding With the Right Timescales, Places, and Relationships Can Advance Multiracial Feminist Democracy

Lauren Jacobs, B.A., and Elly Matsumura, A.B., PowerSwitch Action; Rachel Rosner, M.P.A., independent evaluator; and Eric Wat, M.A., independent evaluator

Keywords: *Community, labor, organizing, coalitions, relationships, networks, power building, movement*

Introduction

When Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus in 1955, it wasn't an impromptu choice — nor was the ensuing bus boycott a spontaneous reaction. A diverse community–labor coalition, including civil rights organizers, church leaders, college professors, students, and leaders of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters labor union, had been considering a boycott for months. Parks had been trained in organizing at the Highlander Folk School (Slate, 2022). The night she was arrested, organizers mimeographed tens of thousands of flyers announcing the boycott, with information on how to take part.

Compared to the history we're taught in school, this telling of the Montgomery bus boycott holds important lessons for organizations and philanthropy fighting for justice today (Payne, 2007). It's a story that celebrates both the face on the newspaper photo and the hundreds of people working behind the scenes. It positions a moment of action within a longer campaign arc that eventually won victories for civil rights that were hard to imagine in 1955. And it illustrates how a local campaign can light a spark that draws national attention and changes what's possible at higher levels of government.

As the United States faces surging authoritarianism, extreme inequality, and the existential threat of climate change, our movements need to heed these lessons to sharpen our strategies. Our task must be to not merely reduce harm or win tweaks on the margins, but to

Key Points

- This article explores how philanthropy can support movement organizations and networks organizing for long-term power building that transforms who holds governing power. PowerSwitch Action, a network of influential regional advocacy and organizing groups in the U.S., draws on a recent evaluation that laid out key elements of its approach to the work to share learnings in hopes that they will benefit both other movement organizations and the philanthropic sector that provides critical backing to the field.
- Specifically, the article identifies three recommendations for funders: 1) support long-term efforts to shift governing power rather than expecting quick victories; 2) recognize how local, state, and national strategies can reinforce — or undermine — each other and fund both on-the-ground organizations and networks that operate across geographies; and 3) understand that relationships and structures are essential to building the scale and scope of collaboration and fund in ways that support collective success.
- Philanthropy is a crucial ally in the success of these approaches. This reflective analysis seeks to "lift the veil" on what it takes from organizers, advocates, and philanthropic partners to work — and manage resources — in networked and aligned ways that will lead to an economy that works for all. Achieving transformational change requires movement organizations to adapt to new ways of operating and funders to adjust the ways they fuel such long-term power-building work. Even when multiple crises have pushed the U.S. to an inflection point, this work is still possible, and even more necessary.

fundamentally shift governing power away from extractive corporate interests and the antidemocratic political allies they prop up, and toward our communities — working families, people of color, immigrants, gender-oppressed folks, and others who carry our society but have been cut out of decision-making.

Achieving that kind of transformational change requires adapting how we operate as movement organizations. In turn, funders can adjust to fuel such long-term power-building work. In this article, written by leaders at PowerSwitch Action along with two external evaluators who have reported on our strategies after embedding with us over the past several years (Rosner & Wat, 2023), we lay out three major evolutions in how our network of local organizing groups approaches our work, and corresponding suggestions for funders and the philanthropic sector.

PowerSwitch Action: A Background Story

PowerSwitch Action is a network of 21 of the most influential local- and state-level organizing and advocacy groups in the U.S. Our affiliates weave strategic alliances among labor, neighborhood, housing, racial justice, faith, ethnic-based, and environmental organizations to switch governing power from corporations to everyday people. The network was founded in the early 2000s when four local labor–community alliance organizations in California — the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy; Working Partnerships USA, in Silicon Valley; the East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy; and the Center on Policy Initiatives, in San Diego — identified a need for strategic coordination. Initially known as the California Partnership for Working Families, the network quickly expanded to include affiliates in Boston; Seattle, Washington; Atlanta, Georgia; Denver, Colorado, and other cities, and became the Partnership for Working Families in 2006.

Initially, our network focused on ways to use municipal public policy and community organizing to contest the dominance of business interests (such as real estate developers and big chain retailers) at most city halls. We won some of the first campaigns to set local living wage standards and popularized community benefits agreements as a tool to make developers include good jobs, affordable housing, child care, and other local needs in their projects.

Yet, while our work improved the lives of millions of people, corporate greed has turned the neoliberalism of the 1990s into the overlapping crises our communities face today. Megacorporations are extracting from all aspects of our lives, creating conditions that force entire industries to follow their leads: demanding we work harder for lower pay, raising rents far higher than most people can afford, pumping pollution into our air and water. And to maintain their power and profits, certain corporate interests have been exposed as funding and allying with political forces that are assaulting the fundamentals of democracy and pushing the country toward authoritarianism (Montgomery et al., 2024).

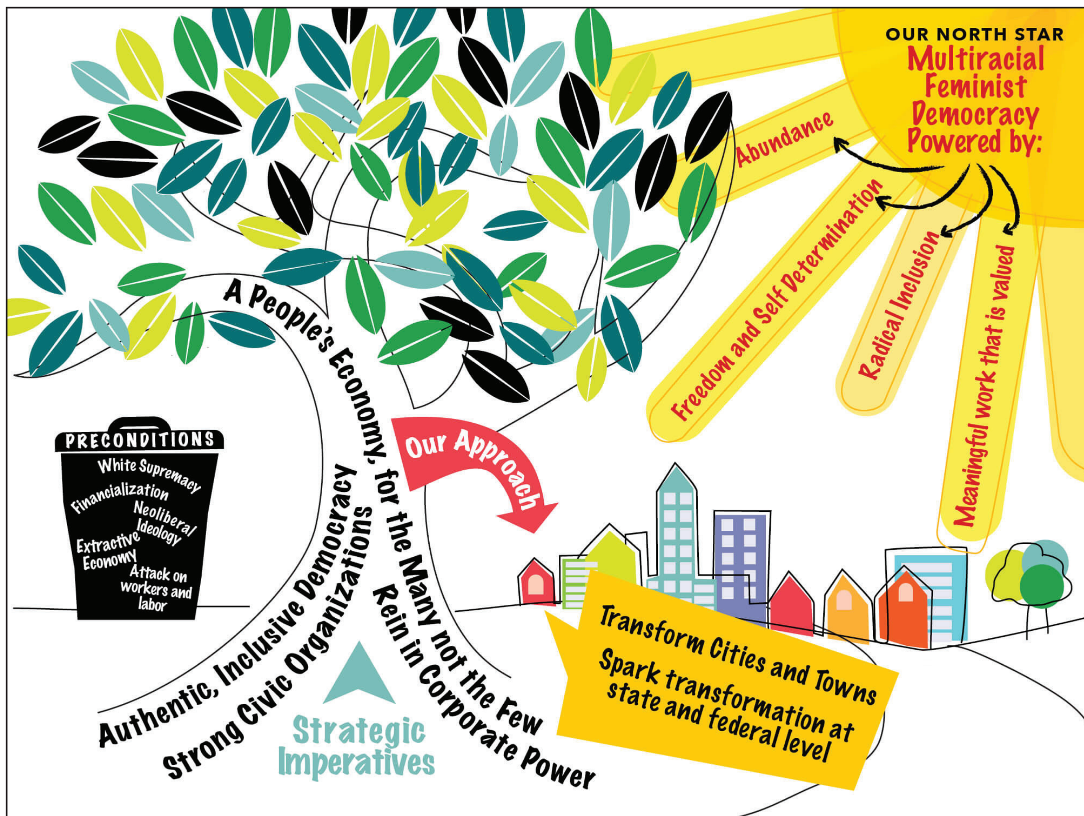
We realized we needed to shift our approach to be able to meaningfully contest corporate dominance. In 2017, we brought together leaders from across the network in a multiyear strategic planning process to examine the shifting economic and political context and to reflect on what was working and what needed to change. These leaders developed a vision for a multiracial feminist democracy and economy and identified the key strategies to get us there. We laid out this thinking in a long-term agenda and rebranded as PowerSwitch Action to better reflect our sharpened focus. (See Figure 1.)

The long-term agenda is built around four strategies we see as necessary to achieve multiracial feminist democracy:

1. *Shaping a people's economy:* Today's economy is built to extract profits from people and our planet. We need to set new rules so our shared resources should serve the public good.

2. *Building authentic democracy:* Everyday people should have the power to collectively decide

FIGURE 1 PowerSwitch Action's Long-Term Agenda for Multiracial Feminist Democracy



how goods are made, wealth produced, and communities kept safe. Participating in our democracy doesn't just mean voting, but extends to governing our workplaces, power grids, and city budgets.

3. *Growing civic organizations:* In order to advance authentic democracy and shape a people's economy, we need more people organized in structures that can support and sustain collective action, like unions, tenant associations, and neighborhood groups.

4. *Reining in corporate power:* We need to take the fight to the corporations that are ultimately responsible for so many of the crises we face. That means exposing their role in harming our communities and undermining our democracy and confronting them directly — particularly when they hide behind industry groups and political allies.

Since adopting this long-term agenda, we've been refining our existing strengths and experimenting with new approaches. Here, we share some of what we've learned in hopes that it will benefit both other movement organizations and the philanthropic sector that provides critical backing to the field. We aim to "lift the veil" on how we allocate resources among organizations to forge strong relationships that have worked for our movement leaders, organizers, and advocates. We describe how our philanthropic partners can work with us to better align and manage resources equitably in moving toward our shared vision of an economy and democracy for all.

We offer our perspective in the context of many ongoing, decades-long debates about philanthropy's role in perpetuating or reversing the power imbalances in our society. We recognize that by its nature, philanthropy embodies power

imbalance in the form of concentrated wealth, especially from corporations' extractive practices, which can block it from becoming a force for shifting power. We also recognize, however, that some of our philanthropic allies have found ways to navigate grantmaking and relationship-building strategies creatively and innovatively to facilitate and align with our work on the ground. We believe that sharing our lessons can inspire and equip people to overcome these limitations.

Resourcing on the Right Time Scale

Over the years, we at PowerSwitch have learned that one-off policy or legislative campaigns are not enough to shift governing power to the people and communities who have long been excluded or marginalized. Focusing only on what's winnable today can improve people's lives, but too often constrains our thinking and keeps us from doing the type of organizing and campaigning that leads to transformational change. And without sustained attention, even high-impact policy wins can be rendered toothless in implementation. Instead of focusing only on short-term gains, we have to play the long game.

This is why PowerSwitch shifted to working from a long-term agenda: it provides a North Star to guide us in selecting and shaping our campaigns. We see our campaigns as building blocks, both addressing people's urgent needs and growing the people power to set up bigger and bolder fights tomorrow. For example, this approach has guided the evolution of our work to rein in Amazon's abusive practices that harm workers, small businesses, communities of color, our environment, and much more. Our network first took on Amazon in 2017, when the corporation held a national competition to pick the location of "HQ2," a second headquarters besides its home base in Seattle.

Our affiliates stepped in as Amazon asked cities to bid against each other by offering the most subsidies and tax breaks. Drawing on our community benefits fights that challenged irresponsible developer subsidies, we brought together local and national coalitions and wrote

Focusing only on what's winnable today can improve people's lives, but too often constrains our thinking and keeps us from doing the type of organizing and campaigning that leads to transformational change.

our own set of expectations for Amazon. If the corporation wanted to come to our cities, it would need to pay its taxes, commit to sustainable practices, pay its workers well, and more. We told our elected leaders that public resources must be used for public good, not to line Jeff Bezos's pockets. This organizing helped change the narrative of the HQ2 competition — softball stories about cities putting on goofy stunts to woo Amazon gave way to critiques of how the competition was bad for taxpayers and communities (Taylor & Garfield, 2018). In New York City, intense local opposition forced Amazon to abandon plans to build a huge campus in Long Island City, keeping $3 billion in public dollars from going to the company.

It was an inspiring win, but it was also clear that far more organizing would be needed to win the expectations we'd laid out for Amazon. With this long-term analysis in mind, we joined with a host of other groups — from small-business advocates fighting against monopolistic practices and racial justice groups pushing back on over-policing and surveillance enabled by Amazon's Ring cameras and police partnerships (Haskins, 2019; Puig, 2023) to unions and worker centers organizing to improve backbreaking conditions in warehouses — to co-found Athena, a broad alliance to break Amazon's grip over our society and economy.

Our long-term agenda continues to guide our campaigning with Athena and our affiliates. Knowing we need more people in this fight,

PowerSwitch's vision of a mulitracial feminist democracy, where people govern and steward labor and land toward a regenerative economy for the many, not the few, is bold and takes time. Both organizing and funding need to be committed for the long haul.

we've supported workers to shut down Amazon warehouses in order to win pay raises and protections from blazing heat and unsafe speed quotas. To demonstrate that it is possible to take on a mega-corporation and win, we've connected workers with community groups fighting against the air pollution caused by the constant stream of planes and trucks who together dissuaded city councils lured by Amazon's false promises to limit new warehouse construction. To challenge Amazon's market dominance, Athena members have pushed for congressional investigations and a Federal Trade Commission complaint over Amazon's antitrust behavior. While we still have a long way to go to rein in Amazon, these fights, on multiple and coordinated fronts, are the stepping stones to get us there.

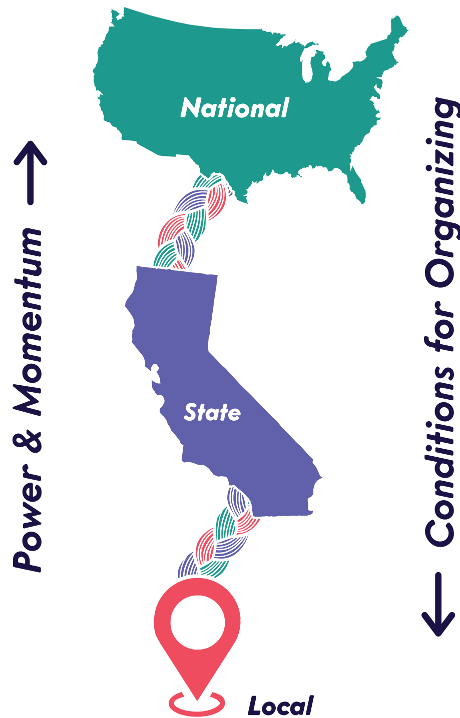
Approaching campaigns as stepping stones toward a bigger vision challenges common assumptions about immediate wins as the most desired outcome. We advocate that shorter term actions and experimentation be in service of advancing the long-term agenda.[1] We continue to ask and learn from our affiliates about how our campaigns can build long-term power beyond the passage of a policy or law. This power-building framing has implications for the pace of the campaigns, how resources should be distributed, and when to push harder and more boldly, especially when our targets are dangling a small, quick, sure win instead of a big, tough, uncertain one. PowerSwitch's vision of a mulitracial feminist democracy, where people govern and steward labor and land toward a regenerative economy for the many, not the few, is bold and takes time. Both organizing and funding need to be committed for the long haul.

Funders often look for campaigns that are "shovel ready" and expect a steady stream of "wins." For the reasons discussed above, this expectation can be shortsighted. It is important that funders see wins (and sometimes losses) in the larger context of the longer-term vision of building community power (Pastor & Ortiz, 2009). It is difficult enough for organizers to stay disciplined and grounded in the long view and to be deliberate when being pulled in many directions. When resources are limited and require hard choices, staying focused on a long-term strategy can become even more difficult.

Perhaps counterintuitively, when we're trying to do big, complex, unprecedented things in the long term, we don't sketch out a step-by-step, 10-year plan. If you spend a great deal of time building out the perfect strategy, you may be reluctant to make shifts when unforeseen opportunities arise or uncharted obstacles appear (Bhargava & Luce, 2023). Moreover, it will take even more time to create a new plan. We need to experiment, fail, and pivot fast — and we need funding approaches that allow for, and even embrace, this nimbleness. We need philanthropic partners to invest in the learning that comes from this experimentation in ever-changing contexts. Alignment with a long-term agenda, not necessarily specific actions or campaigns, helps networked movements take collective action when the moment is right. Conditions are fluid, and exponentially so when you're looking at multiple geographies. We need to be ready (and well-resourced) to strike because windows of opportunity often do not stay open for long.

[1] Our thinking about the role of experimentation, evaluation, and learning in our broader strategy has been heavily influenced by the Cynefin framework for leading in complex conditions; see Snowden & Boone (2007).

FIGURE 2 The Braided Strategies Approach



Resourcing at the Right Geographic Levels

To drive transformational change across the country, we need to connect campaigns across different geographic scales to build on each other's strengths, advance common narratives, and generate virtuous feedback loops.

Our network began by focusing locally, where people can most tangibly see the impact of organizing on their daily lives (think homes, parks, schools, buses, etc.). Over time, we've found that effecting local change often requires engaging with higher levels of government as well. State and federal agencies are often the source of vital resources for local projects, such as funding for transit systems and green infrastructure. And increasingly, we've seen that when local communities pass strong local policies (such as protections against big rent hikes or workplace safety standards like paid sick days), corporations get their allies in the state legislatures to pass preemption laws that ban those local policies from taking effect.

At the same time, top-down strategies set by movement organizations or coalitions at the state or national level which dictate specific local action also run into challenges. For example, efforts that say "everyone pass this specific policy in your city/state at the same time" often fail to account for different local dynamics: some places may have already built significant power and could pass something stronger, others may need to do a lot of organizing to lay the groundwork for a successful fight, and in another city that policy may sap momentum and engagement from another issue that might be more salient.

These experiences have led us to adapt our approach to incorporate what we call "braided strategies." (See Figure 2.) Local campaigns can bring people in, draw attention to an issue, and demonstrate that solutions are achievable.

The braid is strongest not only when funding is adequate at all levels, but when funders design their strategies to support the strands to come together.

This builds power and momentum for action at higher levels of government. In turn, state and federal campaigns can make conditions more favorable for local action. For example, having a National Labor Relations Board that assertively defends workers' freedom to organize has been an important factor in the wave of unionization campaigns over the past several years. Like a braid, weaving together campaigns at multiple levels makes the combination stronger than any individual strand.

The braided strategies approach is evident in our housing and renters' rights work. At the local level, our affiliates have been working with tenants facing untenable rent hikes and landlords who refuse to make basic repairs. Through helping renters establish tenant unions and raise concerns to the media and local policymakers, our affiliates have built an organized base, shone a spotlight on the need to rein in abusive landlords, and won local policies like more frequent inspections and legal counsel for tenants facing eviction.

In turn, these local campaigns create opportunities at the state level. In many states, local policymaking is constrained by corporate-backed state laws that ban critical protections like rent stabilization. Even when local action is not preempted, statewide conditions define the terrain for what's achievable locally. That's led affiliates like United for a New Economy in Colorado to channel the power they've built locally into state-level advocacy. Tenants who first came to a meeting in a neighbor's apartment rallied at the state capital. They shared their stories of unfair evictions with statewide reporters. This year, that organizing led the state legislature to pass a strong law prohibiting landlords from evicting tenants without a good reason. This victory will not only protect renters, but it will also shape conditions for future power building, as landlords will not be able to evict tenants in retaliation for taking part in organizing and advocacy.

In parallel to these local and state campaigns, our network is working nationally to shape the terrain for the next generation of housing work: shifting housing into community control. We recently brought a delegation of network leaders, local policymakers, and organizers from across the U.S. to Vienna, Austria, and Berlin, Germany, to learn about social housing models and campaigns to shift land from corporate hands back to community stewardship. Work like this delegation is shifting the conversation, inspiring new projects, and connecting campaigners across cities — creating space for local organizers to be bolder in the next fights they take on.

The braid is strongest not only when funding is adequate at all levels, but when funders design their strategies to support the strands to come together. Our work advances when funders:

- Make direct grants to affiliates for their local and organizational power building. If local groups are able to drive their own coherent strategy to build power, rather than only when it makes sense for the network or other geographies, they will be ready to bring that power to bear when the time comes to align and break through. Direct relationships will also strengthen funders' understanding of the field and therefore of the network.

- Fund staff and systems to support the network and bring it together through convenings, narrative development, legal support, capacity building, leadership development, research, communications, and more. Though other sources can also provide technical assistance and capacity building, those coming from network staff are calibrated for affiliates and their respective growth and

effectiveness in achieving collective power and impact. Network systems and staff also help accelerate the spread of learning and innovation across the affiliates. Finally, it is the function of these shared systems and staff to organize affiliates: to identify and develop the strategies through which the network can win change together and drive work forward at the state and national levels toward creating openings for transformational change.

- Include resources for the network to make subgrants targeting the local work that is most critical to broader strategy. Adopting a shared campaign or strategy is merely a theoretical exercise if the network lacks resources at the ready to take timely action on it. Direct support to affiliates is critical to their ability to build the power that they will contribute to a shared strategy, but focusing and mobilizing that power for a specific networked campaign entails additional costs; the network is best positioned to deploy nimble resources for these needs.

Organizations operate and succeed (or don't) in complex, multilevel ecosystems. Funders can best direct their impact when they understand and are intentional about how their funding lands in and reverberates through that ecosystem.

Resourcing in Right Relationship

Achieving transformational victories that shift governing power to those most impacted requires forging powerful and lasting alliances among communities, organizations, and sectors. In turn, making those alliances sustainable and high-impact requires a deep and intentional focus on relationships and structures to keep people aligned when the going gets tough.

Over our network's history, we've found that coalitions that fail to equitably manage power dynamics and consider the interests and strengths of diverse member groups often fall victim to internal conflicts, mistrustful relationships, poor strategy, and short-lived success. In response, we've developed an approach that draws from the work of feminist thinkers and systems-leadership scholars (Senge et al., 2014). To borrow a term from Cindy Wiesner of the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance and many others, we need to be in "right relationship" with our partners to work effectively over the long haul. In an interview earlier this year, Wiesner described how a feminist economy is one focused on providing what we all need to live well, and where relationships are built on an understanding that we are all interdependent with each other and our planet (Wiesner & Jacobs, 2024).[2] We take a similar stance in thinking about how we are in relationship with our movement partners.

This approach helps coalitions consider how to handle disagreements that can tear groups apart, such as around funding or strategy. We intentionally set up processes to manage these concerns, such as agreements around how diverse interests will be made visible or decisions will be made. We emphasize authentic relationships with coalition partners where people can have difficult conversations while grounding groups in shared values. And we recognize that leadership comes in many forms and that the work

[L]eadership comes in many forms and that the work done behind the scenes (often by marginalized people) to sustain movements is just as critical as leading marches or giving speeches.

[2] In this blog entry, Wiesner states, "A feminist analysis of the economy raises the question of how we measure success. What are the standards for how we're living? From an extractive, capitalist sense, the measure of success is based on profit, the stock market, and competition. When you think about that question from a feminist point of view, the measure is whether we are in right relationship with ourselves, other people, and nature. The feminist economy urges us to re-examine how we think about what we need to survive and relate to each other" (para. 9).

done behind the scenes (often by marginalized people) to sustain movements is just as critical as leading marches or giving speeches.

PowerSwitch has designed our governance structures to support a bottom-up network, guided by organizers on the front lines. Our board of directors is entirely made up of leaders from our affiliate organizations, to ensure that our national team is accountable to experienced organizers who in turn are accountable to the local communities whose power we aim to grow. We have taken steps to diversify our board by encouraging affiliates to assign senior leaders of color in their organizations to represent them. We've paired these steps with a comprehensive approach to leadership development, so everyone on our board feels prepared and supported to approach difficult questions with care, rigor, and a values-based orientation toward our collective goals. We adopted Resource Sharing Principles, described further in the next section, to make sure that our fundraising and budget allocations cohere with these other measures to create the right power relationships in our governance.

We are not alone in seeing how power dynamics around resource sharing can threaten coalitions and have brought lessons from our own practices to multiple collaborations with other networks and organizations. In California, we took this approach in the merging of two statewide worker alliances into a deep, broad, and durable collaboration. Those outside the state often view California as a promised land of pro-worker policy, but the reality of working conditions — from wage theft and physically dangerous conditions to sexual harassment and retaliation against those who speak out — tells a different story. Changing this story requires shifting the balance of power between people and their bosses across the diversity of the world's fifth-largest economy. No entity has the reach to drive this shift single-handedly, nor can a series of short-lived tactical alliances string together a coherent arc of interventions to bring about such a sea change. It requires a tremendously diverse, long-lasting coalition united by a long-term agenda and shared analysis of what accomplishing that agenda will take.

Recognizing this need, two worker alliances joined forces in the early days of the pandemic to create the California Coalition for Worker Power. The coalition spans vast geographies and industries and boasts diverse member organizations, among them worker centers, major unions, and research institutions. Sustaining this broad group requires deeply considered and living, evolving protocols. We developed our equity-oriented Resource Sharing Principles based on our core narrative values: abundance, interdependence, and collective action and power. With the bulk of the coalition's staffing provided by member organizations, putting in place clear expectations and equity-adjusted funding levels for different organizational roles (including additional funding for smaller organizations) has fostered greater accountability and transparency — as has a process, new in 2024, for the full coordinating committee to evaluate the four-member leadership team. The coalition has also tried various approaches to conflict, including support from a conflict facilitator and training for the coordinating committee on principled struggle.[3] Over the past four years, this approach has helped the coalition weather big shifts in the landscape and win significant victories in California, such as $80 million to fund community organizations that educate workers about their rights and protections on the job, and a landmark new law that protects workers who speak out about wage theft and pay inequity.

Similarly, establishing systems to support right relationships have been vital to the founding and continued success of Athena. The sprawling impact of Amazon's U.S. and global practices — on issues as varied as worker rights, climate change, water supply, surveillance of Black and

[3] See Vision Change Win, *Transforming Conflict: A Workbook for Liberatory Mediation in Movement Organizations,* https://visionchangewin.org/conflict/. A copy of the framework can be found in adrienne maree brown's *Holding Change: The Way of Emergent Strategy Facilitation and Mediation* (AK Press, 2021).

immigrant communities, military technology services, small-business competition, entertainment, forays into housing and health care — means that the corporation cannot be challenged by a single institution or on a single front. Only a collaborative approach can get beneath the surface to the shared root of these impacts; however, the diversity of the stakeholders and vast resources of the corporation could easily threaten cohesion.

Athena co-founders pushed their shared analysis and vision to levels of depth and clarity that they believed could keep member organizations aligned when strategic conflicts arose. We agreed that no organization would advance any major policy proposal or reach any agreement with Amazon before discussing with the coordinating committee. These principles ensure that members shortchange neither each other (by accepting a deal that helps some while harming others) nor their own futures (by settling for a small win now instead of a bigger win later). Athena co-founders had explicit conversations about how race, gender, and organizational competition shape coalition dynamics, especially around fundraising. We had all been part of coalitions where funders' biases and relationships led coastal, white- and male-led organizations to have more money and capacity and therefore more power to set the coalition's direction. Athena committed to fundraise collectively and to foreground groups led and driven by people of color (particularly those based in Black and immigrant communities). We agreed to share credit and air time in funder meetings with the breadth of organizations, not implying that one or a few are the conveners.

Over the last few years, building on this strong foundation of intentional relationships, the Athena coalition has shaped the antitrust and labor priorities of the current federal administration, resulting in several high profile Amazon cases; established new worker rights over technology in several states, and built a model policy at the national level; supported communities in New Jersey to organize for higher labor and climate standards and ultimately reject Amazon's airport hub deal; and pushed Amazon to pull back police contracts that enabled warrantless surveillance.

Philanthropy can reinforce unequal — and often racialized and gendered — power dynamics among grantees when funders and media gravitate toward the same set of leaders, favoring, anointing, and resourcing those who are more public-facing or charismatic in larger, more established organizations.

Philanthropy can reinforce unequal — and often racialized and gendered — power dynamics among grantees when funders and media gravitate toward the same set of leaders, favoring, anointing, and resourcing those who are more public-facing or charismatic in larger, more established organizations. Sometimes it may not be as evident who is doing the work behind the scenes, who is a respected and trusted leader, and which organizations are doing the heavy lifting. This is especially true with networked organizing where there can be many actors, agendas, and moving parts. Leaders and groups that serve as the glue may be less visible. With collaboration, sometimes showing up means stepping back to make room for others and other times means stepping up to infuse voices that are missing. The qualities of these relationships in a collaborative will limit — or turbo charge — its durability, innovation, and the breadth and depth of power that participants bring to it.

It is an art to know how to best do this in support of the greater whole, and it is helpful when funders understand these nuances. This means valuing nontraditional and shared leadership (not only those who are getting headlines or

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speaking on panels) and appreciating different ways leaders can show up. To support right relationship in a network and to ensure equitable distribution of resources, philanthropic partners must be clear on what the collective success looks like and how the collaborative's approach to relationships drives toward that success — in other words, philanthropic partners need to understand whether and how a network is resourcing participating organizations to build and align relationships toward those ends. Funders' access to information to learn about these dynamics will be proportional to the trust they've earned from grantees; the extent to which they themselves have moved into right relationship with the networks they fund.

Walking the Talk: How PowerSwitch Action Shares Resources

Raising and sharing resources has been core to PowerSwitch Action's model since our founding, so as we've sharpened our approach to campaigning, we've also evolved how we structure a cohesive national force rooted in and accountable to local, grassroots power.

To implement our theory that local organizing sparks national transformation, PowerSwitch concentrates more than 90% of our network resources in the field with our affiliates and commits a minimum of 50% of our budget to subgrants and other direct capacity support to our affiliates. These subgrants serve a variety of functions, following the multifaceted nature of long-term strategies and braiding together work at multiple geographic levels:

- Subgrants for new experiments and breakthroughs target resources to campaigns and interventions that have arrived at moments within the longer arc of our strategy when an opportunity opens for an advance beyond the incremental. We prioritize work poised for a leap with network- or movementwide reverberations beyond one affiliate's own geography and scope.
- Subgrants for local power-building ensure that affiliates are waging ongoing campaigns to induce such "forward leap" moments and have the power in place to meet them when they come. Turning these moments into real change requires years and decades of base building, narrative work, research, policy fights, cultivation of inside-outside partnerships and more.
- Capacity-building and leadership development subgrants aim to grow organizations and their leaders and make them stronger over the long term. Our wins aim not just to change policy and practices, but also to build power for future fights; it is within these organizations and people that growing power resides. Capacity support also opens up organizations' and leaders' time, attention, and tolerance for uncertainty to focus on experimentation and learning, rather than the day-to-day necessities of organizational survival.

Across their range of functions, subgrants serve a key purpose for PowerSwitch Action as a network: they put weight behind our strategic alignment. When affiliates reach a decision about how to achieve greater impact together, having subgrants at the ready and within the purview of the network — not pending months or years of fundraising while the alignment and the analysis of the moment expire — carries affiliates from being in alignment philosophically to being in formation to act together. They bring commitment, honesty, and rigor to the

alignment process when partners know that it will result in real action and real resources.

Underpinning these practices are the Resource Sharing Principles that our board adopted in 2017.[4] These principles move us into right relationship as we raise and share resources. In developing them, affiliates drew from their experiences of networks' resources being managed in ways that eroded relationships, cohesion, and member organizations, and they tailored our principles to be an antidote to such dynamics. These principles codified our commitment of half or more of our budget to subgrants, ensuring that the national entity is not raising money off of local work without braiding the strands together. To keep each strand of the braid strong, the principles also name a preference for affiliates to have direct relationships with the funders who wield much power in our landscape, not to have those relationships only mediated by PowerSwitch.

A centerpiece principle is that funding follows strategy. Through this prescription, we infuse our strategic approaches — such as working from a long-term agenda and braiding campaigns at multiple levels — into our funding allocations. This principle also functions as a theory: that our effectiveness in devising and delivering on strategy (not our ability to compete for the spotlight) will attract the funds that we need. We advantage substance, not bravado. Subgranting and resource allocation decisions are not based on who has the biggest budget, loudest voice, or most media hits. Rather, we prioritize campaigns and projects that are ripe both to capitalize on local opportunities and to shape narratives and build power more broadly (part of the braided strategies approach). These decisions require rigor, honesty, and mutual accountability. We cultivate intentional spaces — in our board meetings and retreats, campaign cohorts, trainings and panels, site visits, and staff exchanges between affiliates — for affiliates to share with each other their best practices

[W]e prioritize campaigns and projects that are ripe both to capitalize on local opportunities and to shape narratives and build power more broadly[.]

and lessons learned. When we invest in such substantive engagement early on, continuously and transparently, it gives affiliates confidence in resource decisions.

Equity is an explicit goal of our principles, and the substantive engagement that we foster also promotes equity by giving staff a good grasp of affiliates' innovations and challenges, allowing smarter and more equitable subgranting decisions that don't privilege the brashness of positioning over intentional strategies. It also minimizes the amount of information we request from affiliates to justify these decisions, streamlining processes that can be barriers to equity. The Resource Sharing Principles give primacy to equity not just as a matter of values, but of network strength. Achieving equity requires us to target underinvested regions and leaders, thereby boosting the effectiveness of the network as a whole.

Sharing power within a national network is by no means an easy feat. It requires clear roles and responsibilities. In our case, affiliates and PowerSwitch staff collaborate to set strategy and weigh in on the translation of strategy to funding criteria, while staff alone decide funding allocations to each affiliate based on the shared strategy and criteria. The board gives direction on high-level strategy, approves the total annual amount for subgrants across all affiliates and program areas, and sits above the executive director, who has final sign-off on all allocations.

[4] Our principles also draw heavily from Robin Katcher, *Raising and Distributing Money in Networks: Moving Through and Beyond the Prickly Parts,* Change Elemental (November 11, 2015). https://staging.changeelemental.org/resources/raising-and-distributing-resources-networks/

Without naming power dynamics, we will be in the dark as we pursue our equity goal.

Different stakeholders have different roles and mechanisms of accountability to each other, distributing power throughout the system.

The responsibilities named in the principles aim to synergize individual and collective interests. Through the principles, the board affirmed its fiduciary responsibility to protect the fiscal health, viability, and funder relationships of the network as a whole — a collective interest in stewarding the sustainability of this commons rather than overgrazing it in a subgrants feeding frenzy. By naming these board responsibilities, we also create a framework for affiliates to say when they are taking their board "hats" off to talk about individual organizational interests, a perspective that is crucial to shaping strategy that does not bring more damage than benefit to these interests. The principles also mandate that participants in resource sharing name and unpack power dynamics, which form the crux of the melding of individual and collective interest, and PowerSwitch Action supports affiliates' capacity to do so across many of our learning spaces. Analyzing power dynamics in society, the economy, and the social-change sector facilitates the recognition of similar dynamics within our own institutions and interpersonal connections. Being effective in raising the issues that we recognize within our own spaces requires additional capacity. The relationships that we foster within the network are a key piece of this capacity, helping to keep shared values and goals at the center of conversations about power dynamics.[5]

Without naming power dynamics, we will be in the dark as we pursue our equity goal. All of these responsibilities support the broad principle of transparency as a foundation of mutual accountability and shared leadership; they also require staff transparency around fundraising and decision-making.

Our network created these Resource Sharing Principles after years of work in shifting to a board comprised of affiliates, growing racial diversity on the board, and investing in leadership development to ensure that our leaders would have the capacity for the kind of hard strategic and relational work that the principles demand. Years of work writing our long-term agenda and deepening campaign alignment have followed. Hardly a dusty document on a shelf, our Resource Sharing Principles are alive, well, and frequently referenced by the parties in our multiple rounds of subgranting each year. The framers of the principles envisioned that their faithful implementation would not only result from right relationship, but also result in it. We can debate and disagree, while our relationships and commitment to what we are building together endure and grow.

Conclusion

As we reflect on our key elements and approaches, we have grown to understand how they can require different ways to obtain and organize resources. We need our philanthropic partners alongside us: through grantmaking and relationship-building strategies that help us promote nimble and effective strategies across multiple geographies and in the long-term and reinforce effective and equitable investment and resource distribution. Specifically, along with our philanthropic partners and movement allies, we need to resource on the right time scale, at the right geographic levels, and in right relationship.

[5] Another key piece is the skill set for courageous conversations, which PowerSwitch Action offers to affiliate staff via its leadership development programming. Readers may be interested in *Turning Towards Each Other: A Conflict Workbook* by Weyam Ghadbian and Jovida Ross, available at https://movementstrategy.org/resources/turning-towards-each-other-a-conflict-workbook/.

As many leaders have organized from both inside and outside of philanthropy to bring the sector's principles, policies, and practices in greater alignment with what our movements require to meet the existential challenges of our time, PowerSwitch Action has benefitted from a number of our funders modeling these approaches:

- grant deliverables that empower us to make nimble decisions grounded in our long-term agenda about campaigns and how to resource and align affiliates;
- funding strategies that support our network infrastructure, our subgrants, and our affiliates directly;
- deep and ecosystemwide relationships, learning, and investment over years that facilitate funders' understanding of the work and the relationships that underpin it;
- naming power dynamics, understanding the nature and limits of their power as funders, and holding power accountably, which both models right relationship and creates a conducive environment for others.

As we lean into the strategic imperatives of our long-term agenda, we clearly see the need for complementary, multilevel funding approaches and nuanced and flexible metrics that capture progress as part of a longer arc. Instead of focusing too much on tactical wins, we need to value and celebrate transformative ones: developing a multiracial feminist leadership pipeline, collaboration that aligns and connects across multiple policy levels and geographies, and the capacity needed with fast-paced campaigns to make corporations accountable. Sometimes, these indicators of success can be harder to measure, especially in the short term, but they are critical to moving towards an economy, democracy, and society that works for everyone. Even when multiple crises have pushed the U.S. to greater divisiveness and uncertainties, this work is both still possible and even more necessary.

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Seeding Impact: Shifting From Orchestration to Emergence

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Keywords: *Emergent Learning, Emergent Learning Community; foundation learning; impact; systems change*

Introduction

The field of philanthropy has long recognized that entrenched power, shifting political landscapes, economic pressures, and other system-buffeting dynamics make the work of change more complex than any single organization can "mastermind," regardless of the resources they have to deploy (Coffman et al., 2023; Kramer et al., 2014; Patton, 2011). Whatever a foundation's strategic orientation or theory of change, making sustainable change happen in these dynamic environments requires the thoughtful and active engagement of diverse actors across the system who can view the problem from different vantage points and bring their perspective, experience, and ideas to the table, experiment with different approaches, and learn together about what works, when, and where.

But that poses another challenge: There are many actors in the systems we are trying to influence — grantees, community advocates, policymakers, public-sector institutions, journalists, and our own internal leaders, teams, and boards. The diversity of these actors and their valuable, yet different, vantage points means that they all have their own story about what is unfolding and how change happens, and they have the agency to make decisions and act independently. As Tanya Beer (2019) observes, operating in this type of "dynamic and emergent" context requires "ongoing navigation and sensing of what's happening ..., getting feedback from partners and other actors in the system, and adjusting accordingly" (p. 6). And that requires that foundations take a very intentional approach to learning with this diverse set of actors.

Key Points

- The 2016 *Foundation Review* article "Emergent Learning: A Framework for Whole-System Strategy, Learning and Adaptation" talked about what an emergent strategy promises — to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Has this prediction played out in practice? Since it appeared in 2016, what has the growing community of Emergent Learning practitioners learned about what it takes to seed and grow impact?
- This article addresses those questions, drawing on interviews with Emergent Learning Community members to illustrate what EL looks like in practice and how it is producing results that are emergent in nature. It describes insights that have surfaced since 2016, including the articulation of a set of principles that underlie Emergent Learning practices. These principles emerged from the community's practice, but they also inform that practice.
- In the fall of 2022, the authors partnered to launch a learning inquiry designed to explore how Emergent Learning becomes integrated into practitioners' work, factors that contribute to and detract from integrating this approach, and what impact it is having. As we collected examples of practitioners creating the conditions that make it possible for other things to happen that they could not necessarily orchestrate in advance, we defined impact in a very local and immediate way as observable changes or results that could be attributed to a particular, often very small, action — a "micromove." Twenty-four interviews gathered data around these

(continued on next page)

But foundation culture is famously not conducive to learning, starting with the relationship between foundation staff and their boards. "What happens in that space tends to disincentivize things like sharing uncertainties or disappointing results, or being clear about how thinking is beginning to transform" (Beer, 2019, p. 1). As a result, many foundations have gotten into the practice of making predictions about how the strategies they fund will lead to the results that are desired (Coffman et al., 2023). Staff get rewarded based on their ability to predict and hit their desired targets. This disincentivizes learning and adapting strategy along the way.

Given the growing complexity of what philanthropy is attempting to tackle — systems change, changing narratives, centering on equity, building power among marginalized populations — what will it take for the many diverse actors within a system to learn together in a way that supports tangible impact?

The Purpose Behind the 2016 Article on Emergent Learning

The goal for the 2016 *Foundation Review* article on Emergent Learning was quite simply to give people in the social sector an overview of this nascent body of work. It described Emergent Learning as a way to "expand agency, support rapid experimentation, and enable the whole system — including funders — to learn from one another's experiments" (Darling et al., 2016, p. 64). The authors of that article described their hypothesis about how this work contributes to creating emergent results and impact, and shared a few clear, simple core practices to encourage the kind of learning that is called for to support emergence.

The 2016 article gained traction among *The Foundation Review* readers and readership continues to grow, perhaps for the simple reason that the second half of the article "gave away the store," so that people could practice on their own. This was deliberate on the authors' part. Emergent Learning is not and should not be proprietary. Because the intention of Emergent Learning is to grow agency and learning across whole and diverse systems of actors, offering a simple set of practices and a shared language that can be used across boundaries was essential.

But it is the first half of the article that forecasted what has happened since. It made the case for distinguishing between adaptive and emergent strategy,[1] which the authors likened to the distinction between thinking and acting like a chess player or like a member of a soccer team:

> In a chess game, there are only two agents: the chess players. The chess pieces don't get a vote. In a team sport like football or soccer, there are many agents on the field. While their goal is to work

Key Points (continued)

questions and explored key themes through three sensemaking sessions with EL Community members. In addition, a set of small stories of impact from community members were collected to illustrate how practitioners are working to make change within their own organizations — not only in the way they engage with each other and make decisions, but also in ways that create the potential to have impacts both across their own organizations and in their relationships with external partners as they tackle complex social change goals and work in cultures that are often not conducive to learning.

- What does it take to shift from thinking and acting like chess players to acting like part of a dynamic soccer team — to succeed together; to shift from seeing ourselves as outside of the system we are trying to influence to seeing ourselves as part of that system? What does it take to hold a more emergent stance, where success is measured not by our individual expertise, but instead by our ability to work together to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts? This idea has become foundational to the practice of Emergent Learning today.

[1] Readers are encouraged to read adrienne maree brown's 2017 book, *Emergent Strategy,* for a deeper exploration of how exploring our human relationship to change can help us shape the futures we want to live.

> toward a shared outcome, each player has a point of view and is capable of making decisions of their own volition, based on what they are seeing in the unfolding environment. (Darling et al., 2016, p. 61)

But what does it take to shift from thinking like a chess player to recognizing the complexity these many actors face and preparing a whole team — or ecosystem — to succeed together; to shift from seeing ourselves as outside of the system we are trying to influence to seeing ourselves as part of that system? What does it take to hold a more emergent stance, where success is measured not by our individual expertise, but instead by our ability to work together to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts? This idea has become foundational to the practice of Emergent Learning today.

Since then, the number of trained EL practitioners has been growing and forming as a community. In 2016, the nascent community consisted of 55 practitioners. As of 2024, the EL Community consists of nearly 500 practitioners and is supported by a nonprofit project.[2] Roughly 43% of community members work for foundations. Of that, 28% describe themselves as program officers, 39% work in learning and evaluation, and 6% work in operations. Community members meet regularly to share what they are learning around social sector challenges through their successes and failures. In the process, as this article illustrates, they have created a whole that is greater than its parts. One community member noted that while the training they received gave them a foundation in Emergent Learning, it has been interacting with other practitioners that has deepened their practice and opened their eyes about what's possible.

This article explores what has been learned since 2016, drawing on interviews with EL Community members to illustrate what Emergent Learning looks like in practice and how it is producing results that are emergent in nature. It describes insights that have surfaced since 2016 and how Emergent Learning has evolved, and offers some practical steps foundations can take to create the conditions for this quality of thinking and learning within their walls and in relationship with their grantees and other external partners. (See Sidebar 1.)

SIDEBAR 1

Leading With the Principles of Emergent Learning

One of the biggest changes since 2016 is the articulation of a set of principles that underlie Emergent Learning practices. These principles emerged from the community's practice, but they also inform that practice:

- Strengthening Line of Sight
- Making Thinking Visible
- Asking Powerful Questions
- Maximizing Freedom to Experiment
- Keeping Work at the Center
- Inviting Diverse Voices to the Table
- Holding Expertise in Equal Measure
- Stewarding Learning Through Time
- Returning Learning to the System

These principles speak to creating the conditions that nurture a learning culture. Many EL practitioners find it easier to gain support by asking people to "make our thinking visible so that we can have more freedom to experiment" than by asking people to buy into a practice (e.g., "let's do a BAR.") Practitioners talk about focusing first on the principles and intent of Emergent Learning and holding the practices lightly. This helps practitioners and teams center their work and stay focused on learning and creating cultures that support learning, rather than asking them to commit to a framework and set of tools.

Over 60 community members recently came together to create a Guide to the Principles of Emergent Learning — a material example of what can happen when we bring these ideas to life.

[2] The Emergent Learning Community Project is a project of Global Philanthropy Partnership.

SIDEBAR 2

An Emergent Learning Hypothesis

If foundation staff embrace a more emergent approach — creating the conditions to unleash the agency and experimentation of everyone in the system rather than relying on their own expertise and measurement against predetermined outcomes, they can create results beyond what could be designed or anticipated — a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. In the process, the ripples created by these micromoves made within their own spheres of influence will begin to shift foundation culture to support learning and adaptation.

Seeding Impact: A Learning Inquiry

In the fall of 2022, the authors partnered to launch a learning inquiry designed to explore how Emergent Learning becomes integrated into practitioners' work, factors that contribute to and detract from integrating this approach, and what impact it is having. Our interest was in looking for examples of practitioners creating the conditions that make it possible for other things to happen that they could not necessarily orchestrate in advance. We defined impact, therefore, in a very local and immediate way as observable changes or results — small ripples — that could be attributed to a particular, often very small, action. We called these "micromoves." As part of this learning inquiry, we conducted 24 interviews between November 2022 and May 2023 to gather data around these questions and explored key themes through three sensemaking sessions with EL Community members. We also collected and published 26 small stories of impact from community members and continue to add to this library of stories.

The 2016 article described how living by the idea of emergence creates the potential for impacts practitioners could not have predicted or planned, and at a pace they could not have achieved by linear, chess-like orchestration. It likened this emergence to what has made mobile phone technology so powerful — the ecosystem of developers and users who, together, have created a vital marketplace in which they continue to discover ever more creative uses for it. This suggests that an Emergent Learning approach should produce results that go beyond anything practitioners were explicitly trained to do. (See Sidebar 2.)

Has this prediction played out in practice? As part of our learning inquiry, we gathered stories from many practitioners about the micromoves they have made — small EL-informed actions, what they observed happened as a result, and what insights they draw from this.

These micromoves are often seemingly small first steps — seeds that hold the potential to create transformative impact, both inside and outside of the foundation. But they are producing cascading results. Practitioners report, for example, that using Emergent Learning practices has led to more authentic, creative learning conversations that challenge the status quo, begin to break down silos, challenge power dynamics that impede equity, and build trust; they have resulted in faster-cycle learning, brought more voices to the table, and grounded conversations in their communities' work. Importantly, they are contributing to a wide range of situations — strengthening strategic thinking and grantmaking decisions, energizing external partnerships, improving utilization of evaluation data, growing the agency of marginalized communities, informing better board conversations, and nourishing the learning culture in practitioners' organizations.

These results were not orchestrated. Practitioners receive no instruction within Emergent Learning training programs about how to address any of these situations directly. These expanding results are happening because a community of practitioners experiment in their own work and come together on a regular basis to "Return Learning to the System" — a principle of Emergent Learning — by sharing and reflecting on their experiences. In so doing, they have created a marketplace of insights and ideas (akin to what happened in the mobile phone industry)

that is accelerating their collective learning about how to change their cultures and improve their results.

Examples of Practice

We offer a few examples that illustrate the range of applications practitioners have made using EL principles and practices. They illustrate practitioners working to make change within their own organizations — not only in the way they engage with each other and make decisions, but also in ways that create the potential to have impacts both across their own organizations and in their relationships with external partners.

Caring for Denver Foundation

Rebecca Ochtera of Caring for Denver Foundation was conducting monthly After Action Reviews[3] with individual teams to support them in sharing what they were doing and learning with the full staff. For a while, staff was engaged in these full-team sharing conversations, but eventually it lost momentum. She started to recognize that this exercise helped teams understand the "what" of their work, but not how each team's work was contributing to a larger whole: "We needed to move from information sharing to co-constructing strategy." Rebecca started using Emergent Learning to facilitate Line of Sight conversations[4] where diverse staff and leaders came together to co-create a vision for organizational initiatives. Developing a shared, visible line of sight has helped them leverage the knowledge, experience, and thinking of everyone involved around a common objective.

This line of sight is helping foundation staff hold each other more accountable and helping the foundation evolve its grantmaking. When challenges or differences of opinion arise, the team can draw on the Line of Sight work to slow down, connect the strategy to the larger vision, gather more data, and unpack their thinking to come up with a solution that is effective and sustainable. This approach is helping them to tell a systems-level story to the board and the community.

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McGregor Fund

Vanessa Samuelson of the McGregor Fund draws on the principles of Emergent Learning, along with the principles of trust-based philanthropy and other frameworks, to evolve their learning and reporting approach to center the experience and wisdom of grant partners and their communities. This started as an internal reflection process, which aimed to authentically meet grantee partners in the fullness of their work. Using Before and After Action Reviews and the principles of making thinking visible and holding expertise in equal measure helped provide a throughline that sustained the momentum of this internal work.

Over time, this has shifted the level of trust and the quality of conversations they have with their grantee partners. Vanessa observed,

[3] Before Action Reviews and After Action Reviews (BARs and AARs) are sets of simple questions asked before and after a piece of work to help teams to clarify their thinking, reflect on their results, and adjust their thinking for next time.

[4] Practitioners use EL questions to help teams make visible and keep in mind the connection between what they are doing and their larger goals.

> It doesn't happen all at once and focuses on shifting how we engage with our grantee partners over time. We think of it as a reciprocal exchange where we make our thinking visible to them and they make their thinking visible to us.

Those exchanges inform how the McGregor Fund evolves its work. Grant partners reach out to Fund staff when they want to talk through their ideas. "They don't feel like they have to have it all baked before they engage with us…," Vanessa said. "It's much more of an exchange of ideas and questions than formal reporting." The deepened relationships with grant partners have allowed McGregor to evolve its work in a way that's relevant and aligned with the knowledge and needs of the community.

McKnight Foundation

Neeraj Mehta joined McKnight Foundation as their inaugural director of learning during a period of significant transformation. He was able to place learning at the center of the foundation's work at an institutional level from the start, introducing EL Tables[5] to help staff develop the habit of making their thinking for each strategy visible during a strategy review. These conversations led to more thoughtful grantmaking, being able to make their case to stakeholders, and staff asking EL questions of each other to critique and contest their strategies and sharpen their thinking about how to create change. Neeraj remarked:

> Making our thinking visible hasn't always been easy, but it helped us break through our fuzzy language and sharpen our thinking. It made it possible for us to really wrestle with questions like, what do these hypotheses say about how we believe change happens?

This helped them pave the way to creating a learning and accountability framework at an institutional level. He continued,

> I think people at McKnight see EL Tables as a really useful way to make their thinking visible. I think they also see them as a way to help make the case for their idea to stakeholders who are not as involved in the work as they are, or to ask for consultation and advice from peers internally and externally. It also helps them get ahead of the questions they know people will ask.

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Monica Hall, a program associate with the Leadership for Better Health focus area at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, has used EL Tables to help strategic workgroups pause within and after a body of work or grant to reflect on what they have learned and think through where they might go in the future. The structure of EL Tables encourages participants to share their stories, Monica said:

> It's like telling a really strong story grounded in learning. Program staff can talk — I mean really talk — around a question. It also requires us to keep the work at the center and really focus our thinking to shape the types of generative conversations we want to have.

The impact of these conversations has been substantial and noticeable. Deborah Bae, managing director of Leadership for Better Health, described how these conversations help program officers give better feedback to grantees, especially about negative decisions, which is a huge challenge. "I think the No. 1 reason why our program officers have a hard time turning someone down is because it feels arbitrary or they don't have a good reason," Deborah said. These conversations have also helped other people understand a grant they were not involved in. She observed that before the EL Table was introduced, strategy conversations had been flat:

> None of our documents say "write a story." I think program officers like being able to tell a story that really encompasses what that grant was able to achieve. … We're really siloed and I think the learning table has helped people feel more connected across program officers and the grants they oversee.

[5] An EL Table starts with a framing question ("What will it take to …?") and invites people to compare relevant data and stories, tease out insights, think forward, and express their best thinking about how to address this question in the work ahead. EL Tables can be done explicitly or used informally to guide a learning conversation.

And because it is being supported by program associates, Deborah said, it has lessened the work of program officers, which has contributed to "making it sticky."

Together, these stories offer just a taste of the range of ways Emergent Learning has planted seeds and started to shift foundation culture. Rebecca's work to strengthen line of sight at Caring for Denver has created the potential for greater impact through leveraging the knowledge and resources of the entire foundation in ways that would not have been possible through the siloed funding strategies it employed previously. The work Vanessa supports at McGregor Fund is unleashing the agency and experimentation of its grantees.

Neeraj was able to take advantage of an opportunity to kickstart culture change at McKnight Foundation. The EL Tables he seeded into the foundation's strategy review process not only helped program staff test their thinking, but they also contributed to returning learning to the system. Monica's EL Tables transformed "flat" strategy conversations at Robert Wood Johnson Foundation into more generative interactions that created many unpredictable, noticeable ripples — more focused thinking, better feedback to grantees, more connection and understanding across programs.

Each of these stories was shared with much humility, and they continue to unfold. Over time, we anticipate that they will produce results far greater than could have been orchestrated. In the process, these small shifts are creating a culture for team members to learn and engage with each other; to break through the perfectionism that binds so many foundations to their status quo assumptions.

Growing Impact in the Face of Cultural Challenges

The argument we are making here is that it is not possible for one program officer or team or foundation to know enough in advance to orchestrate a sustainable result a priori in a complex system, despite board expectations. And by trying to do so, they leave many other potential but unpredictable results on the table. It takes shifting from seeing the world like a chess player — seeing ourselves outside of the systems we hope to change — to recognizing what's possible when we unleash the wisdom and agency of everyone on the team to begin to shift complex social environments, as Rebecca Ochtera did by helping Caring for Denver Foundation staff co-create their line of sight or as Vanessa Samuelson and her McGregor Fund colleagues did in helping to shift the nature of the funder–grantee conversation. As these examples illustrate, the proliferation of results we discovered in a range of situations within the EL Community illustrates what this shift makes possible — by planting small seeds and focusing on creating the conditions for them to grow and ripple out.

[I]t is not possible for one program officer or team or foundation to know enough in advance to orchestrate a sustainable result a priori in a complex system, despite board expectations.

As described above, foundation culture is famously not conducive to learning, starting with the relationship between foundation staff and their boards and shaping the relationship funders have with their grantee partners. Many of the EL practitioners interviewed as part of our learning inquiry experienced their cultures as driven by a sense of urgency and a focus on meeting funding targets. They experienced their cultures as under-prioritizing learning and over-prioritizing expertise and expecting staff to have polished answers a priori. They experienced this as being at odds with the idea of experimentation, testing multiple pathways to sharpen strategy over time and the pauses needed to reflect. They described how learning gets perceived as an add-on. Not all practitioners

[I]n keeping with the notion of emergence, we observed that EL practitioners and their partners were able to make micromoves that began to plant the seeds for a learning culture to emerge, even within constraints.

reported being able to break through these cultural barriers. Others, like Rebecca, felt like they were failing at times, because change is slow and doesn't happen in a straight line.

What have our practitioners learned about what it takes for them and the foundations they work for to change this deeply entrenched way of working? To shift from thinking like a chess player to preparing a whole team to succeed together?

Start Small

Too often, in service of "fixing" flaws in the philanthropic culture, the message foundations receive is that they need to commit to a radical transformation. We believe that it is unrealistic (and chess-player like) to expect foundations to radically transform from the top down how they think about strategy and decision-making in order to begin to encourage learning, adaptation, and emergence. Rather, in keeping with the notion of emergence, we observed that EL practitioners and their partners were able to make micromoves that began to plant the seeds for a learning culture to emerge, even within constraints.

Kelley Adcock of Interact for Health shared how when she first started practicing Emergent Learning, the foundation's more traditional leadership style did not create the right conditions for foundationwide learning. She started by experimenting with a specific team. In retrospect, she highlighted the importance of building trust and strengthening relationships. This provided a test case for the value of the EL approach. When the foundation went through a significant change in leadership, values, and strategy, the window of opportunity to bring EL practices organizationwide emerged. "Even under these more fruitful conditions," Kelley reflected, "incorporating EL requires intentionally fostering a learning culture, meeting people where they are, and integrating it into existing practices and processes."

Practitioners can keep their eye out for these windows of opportunity. Occasionally, opportunities to bake in Emergent Learning more broadly exist within a practitioner's own sphere of control and influence, as was the case with Neeraj Mehta's "greenfield" opportunity. In other cases, as Monica Hall shared, the opening comes from a felt need or gap within a larger system. Rebecca Ochtera started by holding monthly AARs with individual teams. That helped her recognize how siloed individual teams were and created the opportunity to do foundationwide Line of Sight work.

Ask a Question

Having identified an opportunity to make a micromove, practitioners can start by thinking with partners about what's possible and then asking everyone to think about what it will take to achieve it. It could start with something as simple as a single meeting: What will it take to engage everyone's best thinking around what we are trying to accomplish today? Or some aspect of an existing program: What will it take to turn this one-stop shop for services into a place where we (the community it is meant to serve) can bring our needs, our ideas, our whole selves to creating our best future?[6] Or focusing on how we approach our work: What will it take to create a brave space where we can talk honestly about power and racial equity?

[6] A 2018 case study of the East Scarborough Storefront describes how a grantee used an emergent approach to turn a prescriptive funder-driven initiative into a sustainable, community-driven neighborhood center. (Darling, et al., 2018).

One question can completely transform our approach to solving a complex problem. Connie Stewart of California Polytechnic State University at Humboldt helped local hospitals and county staff to reframe a mental health crisis by offering a better framing question. Instead of asking, "How do we get behavioral health people out of the emergency room?" — a question that was leading the hospital and the county to adopt a heavy-handed solution that she knew would not stick, she proposed that they ask: "How do we address families in acute crisis with dignity?" This question inspired everyone involved to identify and fund a more community-centered, organic, and sustainable solution. Her takeaway: "A good framing question can ignite community support."

One practice that helped grow impact was practitioners staying focused on stewarding one learning question over time. Doing so helped them step back and notice small ripples and act on them. EL practitioner Malia Xie of Women of the World Endowment described the results of a culture survey that led her to take on the question: What will it take for people in this organization to understand their roles and contributions? They were able to develop a clear, unobstructed line of sight toward their shared goals for different areas of their work, which led to more productive strategy discussions between the CEO and staff and helped staff better understand their contribution. The next year, Malia was able to take on a new question: What will it take to simplify our strategy and be more disciplined about it? By simply holding these learning questions in mind and noticing opportunities to experiment and what happened as a result, she could observe and nurture these small seeds she planted.

Keep the Work at the Center

A number of foundation-based EL Community members serve in roles that have learning in their title. It is easy for these practitioners and the people to whom they report to get caught in a chess-player mental model trap. If learning is viewed as a function to manage, asking for an institutional learning plan or agenda as the first task is a natural request intended to serve the reporting structure and to mitigate risk, especially when learning is a new function and role. But, depending on how it is framed, this top-down orientation can silo learning and create a bind for EL practitioners that impedes their ability to support emergence.

Practitioners have reflected that for a learning plan or agenda to be relevant, it needs to be connected to the work itself; it needs to reflect questions that matter to the people who are being asked to do the learning.

Practitioners have reflected that for a learning plan or agenda to be relevant, it needs to be connected to the work itself; it needs to reflect questions that matter to the people who are being asked to do the learning. And it needs to be able to evolve and keep pace with strategy and what's emerging. When learning is seen as its own activity — essentially centering on itself, rather than centering on the work at hand — it becomes something people have to set aside their work to engage in. Jeffrey Poirier of the Annie E. Casey Foundation observed that

> When we try to learn about something that's not integral to what a group does, it can sometimes be challenging because of time constraints, competing priorities, or an expert culture where participants are hesitant to show vulnerability. Learning topics that are more central to the actual role/work of individuals, though, can accelerate learning.

In Emergent Learning, learning is viewed as a means to an end, not an end in itself. During our learning inquiry, Tanya Beer reflected that

> when I'm successful with a group in keeping work at the center, it lets them focus on what really

A board member recently reflected that he saw and felt our shift toward an adaptive strategy, after foundation staff and leadership had spent significant time over the course of a year making the thinking behind our strategies visible to one another.

> matters, much faster and in more depth than when I'm overly wedded to a technocratic idea about a product or a solution. The attention to keeping what you're trying to make happen at the center helps to peel away our tendency to get lost in technique or process.

Make Results Visible

Being able to notice and make results visible also helped nurture these seeds, which is hard to do if we don't notice that they are sprouting. Because learning practitioners were getting caught on the same flywheel as everyone else in their organizations, some have found it helpful to track their results using a learning log to record what is happening and look back over time to see what has changed. "It was just good to remind me of the things I did and the results of what I did, so I wouldn't keep repeating the same thing over and over," observed Tracy Costigan of Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. "I would know when and how to tweak [my approach]."

An even more powerful reinforcement for investing in learning came from people outside of the immediate team noticing and talking about a visible difference in how people on the team were thinking and talking about their work.

As Kelley Adcock observed,

> A board member recently reflected that he saw and felt our shift toward an adaptive strategy, after foundation staff and leadership had spent significant time over the course of a year making the thinking behind our strategies visible to one another. It helped us hold up strategies as hypotheses to be tested, rather than rigid strategies to implement and changed how we show up in our work and with each other.

This kind of shift opens the door to break through the board–staff focus on meeting predetermined targets that disincentivize learning and adaptation. It suggests that one path to changing board behavior might be to first change our own way of working.

Create the Conditions

Change does not happen in the abstract. It happens in this moment and the next and the one after that, which is why we attend to micro-moves and the ripples they create. Any large transformational vision that involves human beings needs to recognize that it is the actors on the ground adapting in the moment to what is in front of them that will make that vision come to life. The locus of agency in Emergent Learning is in the moment and place that you find yourself. "We don't have to understand the whole thing. We don't have to have all the answers," observed Marian Urquilla of Strategy Lift. "We can allow the system to reveal itself through our work."

Creating the conditions for change to ripple out is about leading by example, so that those around you start to imagine what's possible in their own sphere of control and influence. This is how staff members, regardless of their positional authority, can become agents of change in teams willing to experiment, as illustrated by how Monica Hall shifted her team's practices by focusing on program strategy conversations. Emergent Learning practitioners in a variety of roles have learned how modeling new behaviors — asking powerful questions and making their own thinking visible — helps others see what difference it makes and become curious about what difference they might be able to make in their own contexts.

Practitioners have described how having Emergent Learning "in your bones" — which

comes from practice — helps them know what questions to ask and why when opportunities present themselves, rather than just pulling out a prescribed tool or process to use when they have been taught to do them.[7] This, paired with holding a learning question over time, helps them bring Emergent Learning into time-constrained environments in a just-in-time and fit-for-purpose way. Experienced practitioners often adamantly describe Emergent Learning as an attitude; a mindset — a "way of being," as Cheryl Francisconi observed. As madeleine kennedy-macfoy describes it, "same conference, same colleagues, different me" (Smith & Foster, 2023, p. 78).

The 2016 article proposed that if foundation staff shifted from trying to orchestrate change to thinking of the whole ecosystem of actors as a soccer team — growing agency and encouraging experimentation, learning, and adaptation, then they could create results that are far greater than what they could have anticipated in advance. In our learning inquiry, our practitioners told us that starting small by focusing on and keeping the work at the center helped build support for learning through small but meaningful wins. Asking questions engaged the creative energy of the whole team. Making results visible both made it possible to learn from disappointments and be encouraged by growing success. Modeling what's possible in their own spheres of control and influence created ripples of change. All of these together contributed to planting the seeds for shifting foundation culture and growing impact.

Conclusion

Though some foundations have made significant changes to how they think about change as a result of their Emergent Learning practice, this article is not another call for foundations to radically transform their fundamental grantmaking approach. It is a call for creating the space and the conditions for emergence. Practitioners in foundations large and small have been using Emergent Learning to make change where change wants to happen; to introduce very simple, practical practices where learning is called for and needed. In the process, the seeds they have planted have helped their organizations and external partners begin to develop cultures that support learning and adaptation.

[M]odeling new behaviors — asking powerful questions and making their own thinking visible — helps others see what difference it makes and become curious about what difference they might be able to make in their own contexts.

In this article, we have shared just a few examples since the publication of the 2016 Foundation Review article of the actions EL practitioners have taken to seed and nurture learning and impact inside of foundations and with external partners. It is our hope that, as we continue to experiment and share what we are learning as a community, these small seeds of impact will become more visible and continue to grow and expand beyond foundation walls, as Vanessa Samuelson's story illustrates. But these larger shifts will take time.

As we said at the beginning of this article, the practices of Emergent Learning are deliberately simple and intended to be shared across ecosystems. Since 2016, a growing number of nonprofits and external consultants have also been planting seeds in the larger ecosystem. We propose that all of these small shifts inside and between organizations and the ripples they are creating will begin to become visible in the larger ecosystem, creating more space for

[7] Members of the EL Community have begun to distinguish between "tool" and "practice" and to refer to methods like BARs, AARs, and EL Tables as practices that require practice in order to build our skills at using them, rather than pulling them out of a toolbox to use in a prescribed way.

thinking together, experimenting together, and adapting strategies to match the challenges we face together.

The EL Community will continue to track and make visible the results that are being created. We hope that what we can report in another few years validates this hypothesis.

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What Practices for Shifting Power Are Core to Advancing Racial Equity?

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Introduction

In both the U.S. and global contexts, there is a growing demand for practical solutions to disrupt power imbalances that exist in the relationship between foundations and the organizations and communities they serve, especially those that have historically been under-resourced, excluded, or marginalized. Many foundations focus their grantmaking on mitigating the effects of racially inequitable policies, practices, and structures in the broader society. However, the philanthropic sector often undermines its own goals by replicating those same inequitable policies, practices, and structures within their institutions.

One example are practices and policies, fueled by bias, that provide greater access for white-led organizations compared to those let by people of color, resulting in significant funding disparities (Azenabor et al., 2003; The Black Social Change Funders Network, 2017). Calls to action in philanthropy to address institutionally perpetuated inequities emphasize disrupting deeply rooted power imbalances between funders and the organizations and communities they serve. Funders perpetuate unequal power dynamics when they have a "power over" orientation, maintaining rules that enable them to control access to resources, information, social networks, and decision-making (Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2022; National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, 2018). These power imbalances constrain the agency of communities and the nonprofits serving them — i.e., their assets, relationships, and expertise — to create and lead on strategies for meaningful community change.

Key Points

- Power-shifting approaches are increasingly being recognized as practical solutions funders can employ to amplify the voice and agency of grant partners and communities, especially those historically under-resourced and marginalized.
- Informed by a literature review and interviews with funders, grant partners, and thought leaders, this article describes four common practices for shifting power to advance equity: embed a racial equity lens into the process to shift power; demonstrate a genuine commitment to communities; give grant partners the power to define success; and embrace an internal systems change orientation.
- This article explores the capabilities, mindsets, policies, skills, and resource considerations needed for effective implementation of these common practices and recommends a learning framework to enable shared practice across teams and at all organizational levels. Implementation of common practices and a shared learning agenda positions foundations, grant partners, and communities for collective success towards adopting more inclusive and racially equitable approaches to address inequities as well as enable communities to drive solutions.

Instead, when funders employ a "power with" orientation toward grant partners and

[W]hen funders employ a "power with" orientation toward grant partners and communities, they acknowledge and seek to dismantle the unequal power dynamics created by their control over resources, knowledge, and decision-making.

communities, they acknowledge and seek to dismantle the unequal power dynamics created by their control over resources, knowledge, and decision-making. This orientation values and amplifies the power of communities in how they do their work; and funders, together with grant partners and communities, use their collective power to build responsive, equitable partnerships (Just Associates, 2006; Fund for Shared Insight, 2022). This notion of funders exercising "power with" is the essence of how we define shifting power in this article, facilitated by a foundation's implementation of power-shifting approaches.

A wide range of power-shifting approaches are in use to varying degrees within philanthropic funding organizations; among the most common are participatory grantmaking, power-building grantmaking, and multiyear general operating support. (See Table 1.) A diverse set of approaches allows funders different entry points for seeding and expanding strategies to shift power with grant partners and communities. Ultimately, the foundation's unique context (e.g., history, organizational culture, mission, core strategies, assets/budget) will shape how the organization shifts power, including the approaches implemented. Our prior research on shifting power in philanthropy describes considerations for adopting particular power-shifting approaches based on foundation context and other factors (Murray et al., 2023a).

In the power-shifting approaches discourse, a common assertion is the act of shifting power in the relationship between funder and grant partner is an important end unto itself, irrespective of achieving the desired outcomes in the grant partner's funded work. That is, when funders address power imbalances in this relationship, they lift up the power, voice, and agency of the nonprofits and communities they support, begin to rectify past harms, and help to make shifts in power at a societal level.

An emerging body of evidence shows the impact of power-shifting on process and relationships between grant partners, communities served, and funders, and, albeit more limited, achieving desired outcomes. The evaluation of the Fund for Shared Insight's Participatory Climate Initiative, for example, finds that a power-shifting approach shifted power by giving climate and environmental justice organizations agency in (a) designing the initiative's purpose and making recommendations for the grantmaking process, and (b) making decisions on how funding would be allocated using a consensus approach. Evaluation findings show that participants experienced a greater sense of solidarity, trust, and improved connections among partners engaged in design and grantmaking. In addition, participants in the grantmaking phase reported an improved understanding of grantmaking including learning ways to build group consensus and engage in deeper analysis to find more equitable solutions (e.g., not just equally dividing grant dollars among all applicants), while funders gained improved understanding of the work, impact, and challenges of climate and environmental justice grassroots organizations (Fund for Shared Insight, 2024a).

Being aware of the power-shifting approaches and the growing body of evidence supporting their use does little good unless staff have the resources and tools to implement the approaches and address knowledge gaps. However, it is equally important to understand how to navigate the difficulties inherent in making

fundamental changes to shift power within an organization with the added complexity of differential implementation of approaches across units and teams. Recognizing this challenge, we sought to generate insights that would help overcome these organizational change barriers to facilitate the seeding and scaling of power-shifting approaches within foundations.

Our hypothesis is that if foundations embrace a set of common practices for shifting power that are core to advancing racial equity, they will be able to implement any number of power-shifting approaches effectively. Driven by practices rather than individual approaches, foundations will invest in the appropriate capacity building so their staff have the skills, resources, protocols, and broader enabling environment that supports effective implementation irrespective of the chosen power-shifting approach. Further, a focus on common practices facilitates the development of a learning agenda for shifting power that can be shared across the organization regardless of whether units or teams implement different approaches. Learning questions and learning activities can be oriented to the common practices using a racial equity lens, a framework that aims to address racial disparities and inequities through intentional actions, policies, and practices (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014).

In this article, we present four common practices identified through a secondary analysis of data gathered through our landscape research of power-shifting approaches in philanthropy. This research included a review of over 120 articles, reports, and other materials (e.g., website blogs and tools) and 25 interviews with philanthropic funders, nonprofit leaders, and thought leaders in the philanthropic sector (Murray et al., 2023a). We identified 24 power-shifting approaches for staff and leaders in philanthropy to shift power. Similar power-shifting approaches were organized into one of three categories representing the main entry points for shifting power: grantmaking approaches, power-building and capacity-strengthening approaches, and strategy and structural-shift approaches. (See Table 1.)

TABLE 1 Power-Shifting Approaches Organized by Main Entry Points for Shifting Power

Grantmaking Approaches
• Multiyear general operating support • Multiyear support • Unrestricted support or core support • General operating support • Funding and shifting power to intermediaries and grant partners that are proximate to and advised by local communities • Prioritizing funding organizations historically and currently experiencing barriers to equitable funding • Funding consulting firms/organizations whose staff reflect and/or represent the communities served
Power-Building and Capacity-Strengthening Approaches
• Power building • Culturally responsive evaluation • Culturally responsive and equitable evaluation • Participatory evaluation • Rural participatory appraisal
Strategy and Structural-Shift Approaches
• Participatory grantmaking • Co-creation of strategies • Co-creation of outcomes • Trust-based philanthropy • Use of influence and leadership to catalyze shifting power in the field • Use of foundation's financial capital to shift power • Locally led, locally owned development and localization • Decolonizing development, aid, and peacebuilding efforts • Community philanthropy • Asset-based approaches • People-centered development

(Murray et al., 2023a)

This article focuses on the results of a thematic analysis that revealed the practices common[1] across the power-shifting approaches examined. Applying a racial equity lens, we further refined the practices to articulate how they advance racial equity. This process resulted in the identification of four common practices core to advancing racial equity. (See Table 2.) This guidance can be used to strengthen foundationwide capacity — that is, the abilities and resources available to staff and leadership and the structures and culture of the organization to achieve power-shifting aims. For instance, staff can engage in skill-building and related activities together (instead of siloed efforts) and build collective capacity to improve and grow their power-shifting strategies. Shifting power is fundamentally about addressing power imbalances in the relationships among funders, grant partners, and community[2] members. Thus, a connecting thread through each of the common practices is centering the voice and agency of grant partners and community members.

Practice 1: Embed a Racial Equity Lens Into the Process to Shift Power

One common practice across the power-shifting approaches is embedding a racial equity lens into everything a foundation does: understanding how potential partners/grant partners work, interacting with them, setting goals, evaluating progress, making decisions, etc. For many funders on a path to shift power, the goal of this journey is to achieve racial equity or equity broadly. Just as racially inequitable structures have acted as a blueprint for creating other structures of oppression, the same values, approaches, and analyses that underlie efforts to achieve racial equity are blueprints for addressing other forms of oppression. In addition to viewing racial equity (or equity) as an end goal, it is equally important to apply a racial equity lens as a means for shifting power. Given the pervasiveness of racism in the fabric of systems and structures, using a racial equity lens in the process to shift power is paramount to the transformation of inequitable policies, practices, systems, and structures that impact marginalized communities. The journey to dismantling inequities and achieving racial equity outcomes does and will take significant time. Thus, focusing on the process along the way is a way to embody racial equity in what we do and how we do it, powerful medicine in the here and now to help communities heal and flourish amid protracted inequities. Implementing this practice involves two key strategies.

Invest in Capacity Strengthening to Embed a Racial Equity Lens

An important starting point is capacity strengthening for leadership and staff on topics such as understanding racial equity and inclusion principles, including valuing the lived experience, voice, and meaningful inclusion of grant partners and community members. To ensure meaningful inclusion, key actions include reimagining and restructuring the decision-making table around an agenda, priorities, and goals co-created and/or led by grant partners and community members along with skill building and processes to ensure their full participation.

Another key capacity strengthening topic is learning how to recognize and dismantle biases that emerge in engaging community members and grant partners in co-creation processes, strategy development, grantmaking, hiring, and other foundation activities that impact the pursuit of racial equity.

Utilizing Resources and Tools for Analysis and Application

Our literature scan revealed a number of resources and tools that can support foundations in applying assessments and analyses to embed a racial equity lens in their processes to shift

[1] The common elements approach is a related concept that has been utilized in the implementation science research field. Implementation processes across similar interventions are narrowed down to those processes — the common elements — most likely to contribute to positive outcomes (Engell et al., 2023).

[2] The notion of community includes specific geographical areas, people impacted by a particular issue area, people with a shared social identity, and cultural, ethnic, religious or racialized groups.

TABLE 2 Four Core Practices: Examples, Tools, and Resources

Core Practice	Examples	Tools & Resources
Practice 1: Embed a racial equity lens into the process to shift power.	• Train and create spaces for staff, leadership, and board to understand and discuss racial equity, structural racism, and power; identify biases and assumptions on both the individual and organizational level; and apply a racial equity tool to grantmaking and capacity-strengthening work. • To surface and understand potential bias, collect and analyze disaggregated data on grant partners' funding experience (e.g., funding levels, access to flexible, multiyear funding). • To surface and understand internal diversity, inclusion, and equity efforts, collect, disaggregate, and use foundation staff, leadership, and board composition demographic data.	• Sen & Villarosa (2019) • PEAK Grantmaking (2020) • Annie E. Casey Foundation (2014) • Race Forward (2009)
Practice 2: Demonstrate a genuine commitment to communities.	• Use site visits as opportunities to get to know and deepen connections with staff of grant partner organizations to build trust. • Host co-created listening sessions with grant partners to understand their culture, history, context, strengths, and priorities. Solicit feedback on foundation's strategies, approaches, or practices. • Provide grant partners and/or community members agency to participate in foundation decision-making (e.g., participatory grantmaking, participatory strategy co-creation).	• Exponent Philanthropy (2018) • Kasriel (2022) • Fund for Shared Insight (2024b)
Practice 3: Give grant partners and communities the power to define success.	• Co-create theories of change and measures of progress and success with grant partners. • Engage grant partners in learning strategies focused on the foundation as evaluand. • Facilitate grant partners' agency in defining success by providing ◦ multiyear general operating support or other flexible, reliable funding. ◦ funding for solidarity economy efforts that prioritize community self-determination, collective and democratic ownership, and nonextractive investment terms (e.g., cooperatives, community-controlled loan funds).	• Murray et al. (2023b) • Krenn & Community Science (2024) • Equitable Evaluation Initiative & Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (2021) • Justice Funders (2023)
Practice 4: Embrace an internal systems-change orientation.	• Review grant application, contracting, and selection processes to recognize any bias and restructure procedures to root out conscious and unconscious bias. • Allow grant partners to apply for grants and report on activities in modes that reduce burdens and are culturally responsive (e.g., video submissions, phone conversations for grant reporting). • Task the foundation's investment team and/or investment committee to establish a portfolio of social impact investments focused on the communities served. • Use existing staff and board meeting spaces to conduct and reflect on results of self-assessments around internal power dynamics and organizational culture. • Surface and acknowledge the source of the foundation's wealth to support understanding internal power dynamics and identify power-shifting strategies directly relevant to the communities most impacted historically.	• Trust-Based Philanthropy Project (2024) • National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (2018) • NCRP (2024) • Murray et al. (2023a)

Prioritizing relationship building goes beyond the grantmaking process; it's about engaging grant partners and the community where they can have a more pivotal role within the foundation's work.

power and advance racial equity goals. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2014) *Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide* is one such tool. The steps in this guide can be used to chart a course for embedding a racial equity lens into everything the foundation does. Key actions include collecting data and information that help to identify inequities — for example, data disaggregated by race/ethnicity to identify disparities in grantmaking along with staff survey and grantee perception report data regarding grant partner and community engagement in strategy, evaluation, and learning.

Another tool, root causes analysis, helps to move beyond identifying disparities and other indicators of inequities to obtaining an in depth understanding of the underlying systemic factors contributing to the inequities. A root causes analysis also lays the foundation for ensuring racial equity and inclusion focused strategies and resources address the root causes of inequities.

A racial equity impact analysis using a resource such as the *Racial Equity Impact Assessment* guide from Race Forward (2009) is conducted in collaboration with grant partners to identify and implement solutions with a racial equity lens. One funder we interviewed discussed the importance of acknowledging actions of the foundation that caused harm, such as excessive compliance measures which negatively impact staff well-being and organizational health, particularly for under-resourced organizations.

Practice 2: Demonstrate a Genuine Commitment to Communities

One imperative in shifting power is the investment and prioritization of relational work and making sure that outreach and relationship building are paramount within the communities the foundation supports. Key to this relational work is cultivating new relationships and deepening existing relationships, especially in communities that have been historically overlooked. Too often, relationships are sidelined as a by-product of a grantmaking transaction. Prioritizing relationship building goes beyond the grantmaking process; it's about engaging grant partners and the community where they can have a more pivotal role within the foundation's work. By demonstrating this genuine commitment to communities, funders pave the way for more effective trust-based philanthropy and participatory grantmaking, among other power-shifting approaches. By investing in making more and deeper connections with grant partners and communities, funders can foster robust feedback loops, trust, collaboration, and ultimately, more impactful outcomes for all involved. Demonstrating a genuine commitment to communities is not merely a buzzword — it is a transformative practice that underpins meaningful change:

- *Invest time and resources.* Funders create avenues for staff to dedicate more time to fostering connections and trust with grant partners, other interested parties, and communities. This involves planning, support, and investment in ongoing participation and community and grant partner engagement activities, such as changing processes and steps in grantmaking strategy development to enable time for site visits that are co-design, shadowing opportunities for both parties, and co-creation at other stages (e.g., strategy and theory of change development).

- *Understand culture, history, context, needs, and assets of grant partners and community members.* Effective, respectful inclusion of organizations and people who represent the spectrum of lived experience, viewpoints, and

expertise starts with understanding who they are in a comprehensive way. Power dynamics are a key aspect of culture, history, and context within the communities the foundation serves and can shape whose priorities and interests are heard and best understood. This can influence who the foundation ultimately perceives as representing "community." To avoid marginalizing and excluding particular individuals or organizations, funders should seek to understand the power dynamics that exist across their grant partners/potential grant partners and the communities the foundation serves to ensure diverse needs and perspectives are addressed. Steps to improve understanding also serve to build bridges with grant partners and the community instead of being transactional or extractive in interactions.

- *Strengthen staff capacity to develop and deepen relationships.* Leadership and staff receive training and support aimed at understanding the significance of and building skills for relationship cultivation oriented to improving the quality of connections with potential and current grant partners. Building skills around understanding and recognizing unconscious bias is likely to enable disproportionately underserved and under-resourced communities and nonprofits to have easier and more equitable access to resources. Staff can also be supported through the development of new or more staff roles that are focused on fostering and sustaining strong relationships in the community.

- *Develop diversity and inclusion strategies.* Organizations develop targeted strategies to expand diversity and inclusion within their board, leadership, and staff. Recognizing the importance of diverse perspectives — especially the perspectives of those with shared lived experience with the communities served — contributes to building stronger relationships with partners and community members. Nonprofit leaders of color we interviewed mentioned that program officers with lived experience in their community facilitated relationship building and trust in ways they had not experienced with other program officers. The benefits of diversity are best realized when inclusion is fostered. For example, when community or nonprofit leaders are asked to serve on the board, it is important to provide capacity strengthening to all members to ensure meaningful, active participation. Part of this journey should include introspection at the personal and foundation level to recognize bias and privilege that they hold and how that impacts their work and relationship with the community, and then using this reflection to inform diversity and inclusion strategies.

- *Engage in deep listening.* Funders actively listen to the perspectives and experiences of grant partners and communities. This involves understanding power imbalances, structural racism, and strategies for effecting change. To create connections, staff may hold listening tours or community conversations as a way to learn about the needs and priorities of these organizations and the communities they serve. Funders can also convene joint meetings with intermediaries and their grant partners to collaboratively determine priorities and budgets (Hewlett Foundation, 2022).

- *Embrace and provide transparency.* Disrupting ways funders control access to knowledge and information can be helpful for building stronger relationships with nonprofits. When funders provide transparency in the grantmaking process, they are open and honest about what support is available and what current and potential grant recipients can expect from the funding process. Other examples include the sharing of clear expectations within a process of strategy co-creation or timely, candid information regarding resources available when a funder is spending down its endowment. Power dynamics are at play when funders engage with existing and potential grantees; internal organizational power processes and dynamics may limit what staff knows and/or is able to disclose. To support trust building, it is important to

[G]iving grant partners the power to define success … is a common thread across the power shifting approaches.

acknowledge these dynamics and be open about limitations around transparency.

Practice 3: Give Grant Partners and Communities the Power to Define Success

Strong, trusting relationships provide a firm foundation for the collaborative work to shift power with grant partners and other organizations and individuals in the communities served. Our research has revealed that one overarching focus of this collaborative work — giving grant partners the power to define success — is a common thread across the power shifting approaches. This ranged from collaborating with funders to define success to ceding power to defining success to grant partners or community members. Traditional notions of defining success are largely grounded in corporate oriented, return-on-investment models of measuring success, which elevate the institution in defining success and objectifies communities served (e.g., investments described as "big bets"). Consequently, measures of success have often focused on achieving impacts within specified, often unrealistic time frames. Moreover, processes driving measures of success are oriented to align with the cadence of the funder's board meetings or other internal processes. Giving grant partners and community members the power to define success means that they are seen as experts, and funders recognize that those closest to the work are well suited to identify and co-create how success is defined. It means that funders recognize that success can be defined in a multitude of ways and can shift as new information and learning is digested (with grant partners/community) and new strategies are developed — for example, defining success as those implementation experiences and process results that nonprofit organizations view as contributors to the ultimate change they and the community seek. Implementing this practice includes a range of intentional actions:

- *Ensure meaningful inclusion of grant partners in decision-making to define success.* Identify ways to include grant partners in decision-making processes where success is defined and measures are determined. Engage staff and leaders in capacity strengthening focused on the design and implementation of inclusive participatory processes, including topics such as navigating power dynamics, elevating diverse voices, and how to avoid tokenization and other harms. This capacity strengthening can also include guidance on how to use tools and resources that ensure the full participation of grant partners and community members to define success in ways that are equity-oriented and fluid. One example particularly relevant in the Global South and regions with immigrant communities is language interpretation services at every phase of collaboration and grantmaking, which can support greater ability for local communities to define success and also lead and own the work.

- *Adopt measurement strategies that are oriented to learning for both the foundation and the grant partner.* Funders elevate the importance of process outcomes, which are equally if not more important than impact outcomes. Also, funders co-create metrics with grant partners to measure progress and success and provide space for continuous reflection and learning, including learning from new information and mistakes (Cole et al., 2016). Creating a framework that allows grant partners to hold funders accountable is key. Funders and grant partners agree to determine what success looks like for the funder in their role — for example, foundation and grant partners co-create measures on the effectiveness of the foundation's approaches or co-lead an evaluation of the foundation's role in the power-shifting efforts (Murray et al., 2023b).

- *Pilot new strategies and cultivate a culture that views failures as a growth opportunity.* This may involve incentivizing the testing of new,

innovative strategies and not penalizing staff and grantees when anticipated outcomes are not achieved. Funders commit to staying the course with a strategy that may be slow to show early success based on traditional metrics by using data and learning conversations with grant partners and community to refine the approach and/or try new ideas.

- *Use grantmaking strategies that facilitate grant partners' agency in defining success.* Flexible and reliable forms of support, such as multiyear general operating support or unrestricted grant support, can provide nonprofits with autonomy over how resources are deployed in the organization. One nonprofit leader described how multiyear general operating support allowed their organization to be responsive to pressing and emergent community needs, funding work that normally would not be funded. This kind of freedom with flexible support can translate into a greater ability to implement efforts and measure those efforts in ways that best align with how the organization defines success. Program officers should ensure that their communications and interactions do not undermine their grant partners' agency.

Practice 4: Embrace an Internal Systems-Change Orientation

A commitment to internal systems change is important for seeding and institutionalizing power-shifting efforts and equipping the foundation to influence external systems change more effectively. As described in FSG's *The Water of Systems Change:* "Any organizations' ability to create change externally is constrained by its own internal policies, practices, and resources, its relationships and power imbalances, and the tacit assumptions of its board and staff" (Kania et al., 2018, p. 20). Embedding strategies to shift power in organizational culture and design involves engaging operations, administration, compliance, human resources, facilities management, and capacity-building units (e.g., evaluation, learning, performance management) to act in support of programmatic efforts to shift power. Foundation leaders play a key role in this:

- *Ensure that every unit in the organization has a defined role in shifting power.* This includes leadership giving units the ability to develop and implement strategies in support of power shifting. Leadership buy-in and direction to staff are critical to ensuring that staff have the inspiration, guidance, incentive mechanisms, and authority to create and refine a set of policies and processes that undergird the work of power shifting. Leaders can review formal and informal policies that provide incentives and disincentives for shifting power, especially around how success and failure are defined, transforming these policies to promote risk taking, testing, and experimentation with an explicit goal to focus on learning from those experiences, rather than penalizing or disincentivizing for power shifting efforts.

- *Enact institution-level policies and processes to facilitate shifting power.* Facilitative policies and processes are an important driver in a foundation's efforts to implement power shifting. Our research showed that particular policy and process changes are relevant across the range of power-shifting approaches. These policies and practices broadly include ensuring a role for all foundation functions to support power shifting through policy and process design, such as responsive grant processes and budget processes aligned with the aims of power shifting. For example, in order to move the needle on reducing bias in grantmaking, policy and process shifts are needed to expand the pool of potential applicants and increase funding opportunities. Examples of solutions include providing technical assistance for the application process, introducing low-barrier ways to apply for resources (e.g., streamlined applications, video applications), blinded application reviews, and participatory grantmaking processes. A range of functions within the foundation are engaged to develop and implement new/modified policies and processes in concert.

- *Develop budget policies and processes that enable the foundation to fully resource*

The often missing and critical step in a foundation's efforts to share and shift power is a commitment to track their progress and hold themselves accountable to partners (particularly grant partners), peers, and self to ensure continuous improvement.

power-shifting strategies before engaging with grant partners and community members. This involves ensuring adequate resources are available to provide staff training and hire/contract with skilled facilitators who can support relationship building and navigating the power dynamics. When grant partners and community members are invited to collaborate with foundation staff on a participatory grantmaking committee, ensure equitable compensation for participating partners as well as capacity-strengthening opportunities to promote meaningful inclusion and participation of grant partners and community members. Conducting a landscape analysis and talking to peer funders also engaged in participatory grantmaking to identify a compensation scheme that is equitable can be useful. Another example is ensuring the foundation's budget can sustain funding if a multiyear funding strategy inclusive of cost-of-living adjustments is pursued.

- *Ensure timelines allow for new ways of working.* Implementing a power-shifting approach does not necessarily mean that the work will take longer than traditional ways of working with grant partners and community. However, because the ways the foundation does its work changes, ideally engaging functions across the foundation, using a power-shifting approach will have an impact on time horizons. Staff should account for all the types of skills, capabilities, information gathering, and resources that are necessary for effective implementation in order to establish realistic timelines. For example, time horizons may need adjustment if a foundation's strategies to fund and support more under-resourced organizations include offering technical assistance to support the application process, technical assistance during the grant, and funding more planning grants.

- *Recognize internal inequities and work on practices to shift power internally.* Foundations need the courage and space to reflect on their own norms, values, and long-standing practices that cultivate and perpetuate inequities internally. For instance, foundations that uphold norms of white supremacy culture in how they do their work reinforce the exact power dynamics that are barriers to shifting power (GEO, 2021). An intentional reflective practice of identifying internal inequities and their root causes as well as piloting ways to address these is crucial groundwork for ultimately enhancing a foundation's ability to support systems change externally. A commitment to systems change that addresses internal inequities and shifts power internally involves capacity strengthening for leadership and staff to facilitate understanding of the applicability racial equity and inclusion principles to areas such as hiring and norms for collaboration across the foundation including repairing fractured relationships. Acknowledging and understanding power dynamics across units, positions, and among staff, leadership, and board is an essential process that can begin with acknowledging the source of the foundation's wealth and reflecting on how this history has shaped internal power dynamics. Funders can also explore application of power-shifting practices and approaches used with grant partners for their internal practice — for example, principles and approaches in the liberatory leadership space that lift up cooperation, democracy, healing, and freedom (Liberatory Leadership Partnership, 2021; Robert Sterling Clark Foundation, 2022).

Introducing the Learning Framework

A foundationwide learning agenda that is grounded in the four common practices described above supports learning, progress toward deepening implementation of the common practices, and, ultimately, effective implementation of power-shifting approaches. The often missing and critical step in a foundation's efforts to share and shift power is a commitment to track their progress and hold themselves accountable to partners (particularly grant partners), peers, and self to ensure continuous improvement.

Philanthropic organizations commonly use learning agendas to implement organizationwide shifts in practice. Learning agendas provide a road map for learning from work and are grounded in questions that matter to the organization and teams within the organization. They are especially useful when staff embark on work that is important, complex, and high-stakes as well as when there is a need to understand progress and adjust over time. Although learning agendas vary by organization and even teams within an organization, they generally include at minimum these details (Darling & Eenigenburg, 2023):

- who is doing the work;
- goals and indicators of progress;
- framing questions;
- opportunities (i.e., activities and events that make up the work); and
- reflection and sensemaking cadence.

More detailed learning agendas should also include a starting hypothesis and potential data sources as well as reporting and knowledge sharing expectations.

In addition to these core components of learning agendas, we offer two key steps that strive to shift power in the learning agenda development process.

Co-Create a Learning Agenda

Co-create learning questions across organizational functions that value the voice of all staff and lived experience of grant partners. While learning and evaluation staff tend to lead the development of learning agendas, an organizationwide learning agenda grounded in applying equity in the process should be co-created with staff from different functions within a foundation as well as grant partners.

A racial equity impact assessment used to ensure a racial equity lens is applied to guide planning and implementation of learning agenda processes (Race Forward, 2009). Given the complexity in balancing multiple internal and external voices, leveraging decision-making tools such as a Recommend, Agree, Perform, Input, and Decide — RAPID — framework may help define the "what, who, how, and when" in decision-making and help move the process along (Bain & Company, 2023, para. 1).

Here are some examples of learning questions to hold racial equity as an outcome and a process:

- To what extent have grantmaking cycles, from nuts to bolts, emphasized furthering racial equity?
- What are the opportunities, innovations, and barriers to advancing racial equity in our grant portfolio?
- How can we better support the unique priorities and needs of grant partners led by people of color?
- How have our funding practices (i.e., who is funded, how, with how much, and to do what) shifted since our use of the four common practices?

When Developing Learning Questions, Center the Community

Demonstrate a genuine commitment to the community in learning questions development. Ensure that the learning questions center communities the organization is seeking to serve and include ways to get community input.

Although some organizational functions may be more distal to working with grant partners and/or communities (e.g., public affairs and financial teams), when developing learning questions all functions should keep the communities being served at the center of the question.

Creating layered learning agendas that articulate high-level macrolearning questions and are broken down to more granular microlearning questions may be useful in showing the connection between macro, organizationwide learning questions and their connection with community. In the development of microlearning questions, it is key to keep them action oriented, forward focused, and answerable by grantees and/or community members.

For example, a foundation that wants to incorporate into its learning agenda questions about its strategies to give grant partners and communities the power to define success would develop a macro-level learning question that is relevant across all functions (e.g., What are the enabling conditions — policies, processes, resources, strategies, etc. — that facilitate giving grant partners and communities the power to define success? A micro-level learning question for the communications function might be, How do our internal communications protocols support grant partners ability to define success? A micro-learning question for a programmatic unit might be, What strategies show the best promise for defining success for an initiative in collaboration with grant partners and community members?

Creating a foundationwide learning agenda presents an opportunity and space to work with staff and leaders across the organization and dialogue about internal power imbalances and their impact on work with grant partners. Moreover, these cross-foundation spaces allow staff to raise questions about internal strategies, policies, and processes that require ongoing cross-foundation collaboration to answer and plan refinements that support greater effectiveness in advancing power shifting across the foundation.

Where Do We Go From Here?

This article demonstrates how implementing the four common practices and establishing a shared learning agenda go hand in hand. The foundation's journey to shift power should include ample opportunities for staff and leadership to study the common practices implemented and their results as well as have data-informed processes that guide decision-making on refinements, strategies that should be jettisoned, and new ideas and innovations. When lack of progress or failure are viewed as a growth opportunity, the foundationwide learning process becomes generative.

Even as foundation staff and leadership staff pursue goals to shift power with a learning and growth mindset, it is important to acknowledge the inherent challenge of eliminating power imbalances. The funder's positionality confers authority that grant partners and community members do not have regarding decision-making and influence (e.g., which grant partners are selected to drive a participatory grantmaking initiative). Foundation staff and leadership must ensure that their learning processes also include reflection on the implications of the durability of particular power dynamics even as they seek to dismantle power imbalances.

Although we view implementing the four common practices and shared learning agenda in conjunction as a strength, we also acknowledge the limitations of this article. First, because we did not have a question about common practices in our landscape research literature review and interview protocols, it primarily relies on a secondary data analysis focused on identifying themes in the existing data. Related to this, we do not have data from the existing body of research supporting the efficacy of this common practices approach.

Future research and evaluation are needed to delve into this notion of common practices for shifting power and include assessments of foundations' progress and successes using this approach to build implementation effectiveness across the organization. We acknowledge that shifting power has inherent value and benefits

to grant partners and communities as an end to itself, particularly when there is intentionality to embed equitable processes along the journey. At the same time, significantly more evaluations of power-shifting efforts are needed to establish efficacy more firmly. More evaluations will help to further the case for using power–shifting approaches. Areas to evaluate not only include outcomes, but also the process of implementation — including how results during that process contribute to progress and longer-term outcomes.

Progress and impacts for both the grant partner and the funder are key. Funders are almost never included as the evaluand, but the context of power shifting, especially as it relates to defining success, calls for funders to also be the center of learning in a data-based way. A more robust body of research — including both successes and shortcomings — will support collective learning across the sector that can ensure that the communities philanthropy serves most optimally benefit from the work of philanthropy.

More research is also needed to amplify the voices of grant partners and community members that have been involved in efforts to shift power. Understanding their experiences and perspectives — in particular, strategies to implement power-shifting practices well — will help to tell a more complete story of what it takes to shift power in philanthropy.

This article serves to call attention to the many pathways for philanthropy to shift power in relationships with grant partners and communities. At the same time, we underscore that awareness is insufficient to reap the benefits of expanded adoption and scale across the sector. Amid an ever-growing knowledge base on shifting power in philanthropy, this article addresses a crucial gap regarding how foundations can support capacity strengthening and learning for a diverse set of power-shifting approaches being implemented across an organization. Understanding how to seed, scale, and spread the effective implementation of power-shifting efforts facilitates collective progress in the journey to shift power globally. Implementation of common practices and the development of a shared learning agenda across an organization positions a foundation, its grant partners, and the communities they serve to realize their collective visions for success.

Understanding how to seed, scale, and spread the effective implementation of power-shifting efforts facilitates collective progress in the journey to shift power globally.

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Strategy for Now

Jara Dean-Coffey, M.P.H., and Jill Casey, B.S., jdcPARTNERSHIPS

Keywords: *Strategy, evaluative inquiry, emergence, complexity*

strategy (n.) 1810, "the art of a general, …" from French *stratégie* (16c.) and directly from … Greek strategia "office or command of a general," from *strategos* "general, commander of an army," also the title of various civil officials and magistrates, from *stratos* "multitude, … army, … expedition, encamped army" … and meaning etymologically "that which is spread out" (… from root **stere-* "to spread"). With Greek agos "leader," from *agein* "to lead" (from PIE root **ag-* "to drive, draw out or forth, move"). … In non-military use from 1887. (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.a)

Key Points

- We are in a profound period of understanding who we are as a people, past and present. This applies to practices held as core to how society operates. If we are to thrive as a species, the present and future necessitate reimagining the structures, systems, and conventions that limit some and thus us all. This includes not defaulting to control, competition, and certainty as we navigate circumstances we created.
- Amid growing desires to integrate and embody practices aligned with equity, emergence, and complexity, concepts and points of view that dominate business continue to lead conversations about strategy formation in philanthropy and nonprofits. These are frequently coupled with approaches to learning, defined as an organizational function, which insufficiently acknowledges that we, the humans, are what changes.
- For the last three decades in the U.S. philanthropic ecosystem, the authors have experimented with an approach that fosters conditions and individual and collective curiosities that can become capacities and competencies. When we approach strategy differently, there is an opportunity for meaningful evaluative inquiry and sense-making that acknowledges learning is an ongoing responsibility that supports how we understand and move within complex systems.
- This article reintroduces a multifaceted definition of strategy, summarizes an approach in which strategy and evaluative inquiry are integrated, shares experiences of those who engaged in the approach, and offers considerations for strategy grounded in the now and the future.

Introduction

History is a reference point for understanding the people, places, politics, and purposes that inform present day beliefs and approaches, which may or may not be explicit. These United States of America, birthed on stolen land from Indigenous peoples with wealth created by stolen and enslaved African bodies commodified as property, necessitates that we pay close attention to what we hold tightly. By looking at what underpins these beliefs and approaches, we can determine if what and how we do what we do now serves our aims and values. The experience of unprecedented temperatures around the globe, increasing fascism (in the U.S. and abroad), and reversals of human rights for many because of the rising tide of exclusionary and divisive ideologies requires that what we hold as default/norm and best practice no longer be assumed.

Strategy[1] is one of those things.

Strategy is particularly important as we more frequently (if not reluctantly) acknowledge the

[1] For purposes of this article, the term "strategy" is for that of nonprofits and philanthropy. We do so acknowledging that within these (institutional and individual) there is a vast range of variants: maturity, geographic range, focus, asset size, staffing, and structure.

complexity of the world in which we live. For those engaged in efforts around democracy, equity, justice, and/or liberation, the means are as important as the ends. The former shapes the latter.

We wish to open a conversation in which the approach to strategy embeds evaluative inquiry.[2] With complexity and emergence often referenced as central to how organizations and movements are now considering their work (Kania et al., 2014; Darling et al., 2016; brown, 2017), evaluative inquiry (Preskill & Torres, 1999b) becomes an essential capacity.

Much has been written about the relationship between nonprofits and philanthropy (Hammack & Anheier, 2011; Hall, 2006). A common theme from the onset has been a focus on the individual and the desire to meet a need (sometimes defined as an issue) of some kind. "Need" is deficit framing, leading to a solve/fix formula. Given that the predominantly Christian early colonizers of what came to be known as the United States of America had an implicit belief about who is worthier, smarter, stronger, etc. (Muldoon, 2004), it is easy to understand how those with (as opposed to without) often deem themselves the arbiters of what should happen, how, to whom, and when.

Many of the early philanthropists were industrialists and scientists. The former operate in a capitalist marketplace where the goal of profit is achieved by securing a significant share of consumer interest and money. This is frequently accomplished by meeting (or creating) a need and then outperforming others with a similar or different offering — the competitors. Scientists are also driven by need, be it biological, botanical, environmental, etc. They define a need or an issue and through hypothesis and testing in controlled environments and determine how to address it. In recent times social entrepreneurs and venture capitalists have become philanthropists; their beginnings are slightly different, but the concepts of market, need, and return on investment remain relevant.

As this piece is being written, ideas about how philanthropy should approach its work are reactivated.[3,4,5] Interesting points are made and yet the tones and voices are similar and familiar. A few deeply embedded and often unstated orientations continue to influence the predominant approaches to philanthropic efforts.

1. *Focus on winning or a problem/fix.* Strategy's etymology has its origins in the military — a zero-sum game of winner takes all. The concepts of business strategy and ideas of competitive edge legitimize scarcity, leading to false constraints. The problem/fix suggests that something is "wrong" and there is a solution, often singular with a tendency toward simplicity.

2. *Causation, not contribution.* The effectiveness of the allocation of public dollars (Preskill & Russ-Eft, 2015; Shadish et al., 1991) is core to the early purpose and use of evaluation. The methods of scientific research — including controlling and isolating for contributing and confounding factors, controlled environments, and questions of dose — became central, regardless of foci, context, and population. Randomized controlled trials became the standard of evidence to determine

[2] Preskill and Torres (1999a) drawing on Schwandt (1992) define Evaluative Inquiry as "a kind of public philosophy whereby organization members engage in dialogue with clients and other stakeholders about the meaning of what they do and how they do it. In this dialogue they pay particular attention to the historical, political and sociological aspects of the objects of inquiry" (p. 44). Sense making from evaluative inquiry informs learning, change, and decision-making.

[3] See Brothers, J. (2024, June). *Next week's SSIR will come out with a lead on how strategic philanthropy has failed, almost exactly a decade after. LinkedIn.* Retrieved June 17, 2024, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/drjohnbrothers_next-weeks-ssir-will-come-out-with-a-lead-activity-7199434121348014082-iCyV?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop

[4] See Buchanan, P. (2024, June 14). *Here we go again (and again and again): Let's stop looking for the one 'new approach' to philanthropy.* Center for Effective Philanthropy. https://cep.org/here-we-go-again-and-again-and-again-lets-stop-looking-for-the-one-new-approach-to-philanthropy/

[5] See Kramer, M., & Phillips, S. (2024). Where strategic philanthropy went wrong. *Stanford Social Innovation Review, 22*(3), 28–37. https://doi.org/10.48558/J9QB-AB63

effectiveness (Hogan, 2007). Because evaluation sought definable and observable changes, strategy became an exercise in predictability and linearity.

3. *Risk aversion.* When risk is defined by what we can predict to occur in a short time frame, we forget the long game and the big picture. Relationships and human connection become afterthoughts preventing new and different norms, conditions, and possibilities. Ultimately, we bypass or undervalue how philanthropic strategy is uniquely able to open space for creativity, emergence, and complexity and to live into the etymology of "philanthropy" — "love of humankind" (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.b, para. 1).

4. *The human element ignored.* There is a tendency to conceptualize strategy as a "thing" as opposed to a "way," with little recognition that how it comes to life depends on the heads and hearts of humans. Functional roles, titles, and training can only do so much if the humans cannot find a way to make sense of both internal and external dynamics in ways that are aligned and moving toward something shared.

Strategy should have sufficient clarity that inquiry anticipates the inevitable shifts. It should enable understanding ourselves in relationship to the larger whole and as one actor in an ecosystem. This is a peek into a strategy formation methodology in which the co-design of the engagement is in and of itself a practice in strategy and evaluative inquiry. Through attention to culture and context — cultivating relationships and paying attention to curiosities that arise — comfort with complexity and engaging in strategy and evaluative inquiry is bolstered.

In this article, we:

- Reintroduce a multifaceted definition of strategy.
- Summarize an approach in which strategy and evaluative inquiry are integrated.
- Share experiences of those who engaged in the approach.
- Offer considerations for strategy grounded in the now and the future.

Our Point of View

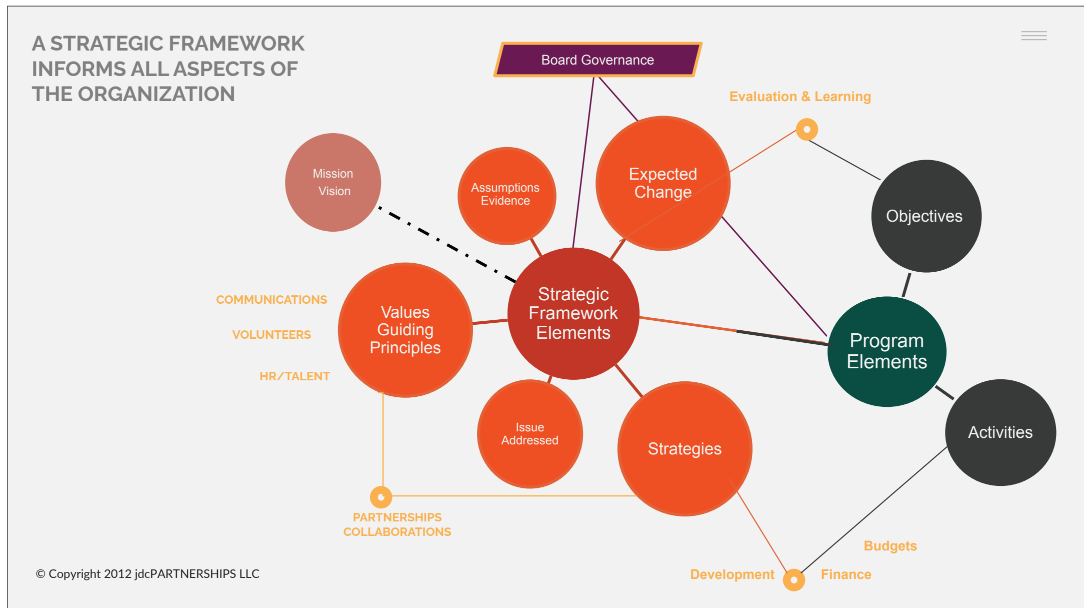
For almost 20 years, the authors have worked together in the U.S. settler-created philanthropic industrial complex (Rodríguez, 2017; K. Archie, personal communication, May 26, 2020).[6] We have engaged hundreds of organizations either through consulting or teaching — across the social sector ecosystem — in what we refer to as strategy formation and planning integrating evaluative inquiry. Our entry into this practice was founded on a mix of frustration and possibility.

In my role as an evaluator, I, Jara Dean-Coffey, would follow a strategic planning process that rarely left behind a sense of who the client was (their identity) and how they hoped the world would be different through their efforts. It happened repeatedly and was incredibly frustrating. I could not understand why, after what was often more than a yearlong engagement, there was an absence of clarity on the "to what end" — the soul of the organization (how it hoped to be in the world) and how it understood itself and its unique contributions in the ecosystem.

After eight years in an internal learning and evaluation role with a mid-sized nonprofit organization, I, Jill Casey, was naive in thinking that the integrated and integral role of evaluative inquiry through which my professional practices developed was the norm. Around the time Jara and I began working together, I was engaged in research into the ways in which logic models and theories of change were being used by partnership-driven, large-scale, multi-institutional STEM efforts and by the evaluation field writ

[6] The authors acknowledge that their work experience is within a particular context, one that is place based (the U.S). and informed by people with mindsets that reinforce an orientation towards labor and the production of things within philanthropy, primarily institutional.

FIGURE 1 Linking the Elements of a Theory of Change to Ways in Which They Show Up as Part of a Strategic Framework



large. This experience illuminated how these models and associated processes and practices benefit ongoing design and decision-making in complex and emergent contexts.

Together we believed there was a way to bridge the disconnect between strategy and what folks often referred to as evaluation — the latter often being understood as something one did for someone else or episodically and with the bulk of effort on collecting and reporting data. Little energy was spent on defining areas of curiosity, crafting questions, and determining what types of information were necessary and from whom. Sense-making rarely happened, and when it did there was little attention to context. When change occurred — which it did — organizations were paralyzed by the fear of not doing the "right thing perfectly" or frantically "doing all the things." Executive leadership rarely had a cohesive reference point to steady and motivate either board or staff and navigate the external environment while holding a shared internal culture with intention and some ease.

A differentiator in how we feel and think about strategy is that perpetuity[7] of the effort is not assumed or even desired because changes in direction or focus of an effort may in fact be an indication that the strategy is successful.[8] If the purpose of your effort is to alter the current course of the planet and humanity, to be no longer necessary may be the best evidence of the success of your efforts.

An Entry Point: Integrating Strategy and Evaluative Inquiry

In 2008, we began working with CompassPoint to design an evaluation approach for an anchor program and then a newer program. In the course of being in relationship and grounding each initiative in a program model, the potential of working at the organizational level became apparent. To us a theory of change could reflect the larger values, strategies, and purpose of an

[7] See Online Etymology Dictionary (n.d.), Perpetuity, at https://www.etymonline.com/word/perpetuity

[8] See Online Etymology Dictionary (n.d.), Success, at https://www.etymonline.com/word/success

organization and a program/logic model could describe how these manifested in more discrete efforts. (See Figure 1.)

There was a recent executive director change and a newly added practice director, so the timing was right to get clear on intentions, desired cultural norms, and how existing collective efforts, as well as potentially new ones, aligned. There was also discussion and ideas in the field around what strategy should entail and to what end for both nonprofits (Collins, 2005; LaPiana, 2008) and foundations (Porter & Kramer, 1999; Fleishman, 2007; Buteau et al., 2009; Tierney & Fleishman, 2011; Brest, 2012). These conditions, along with CompassPoint's organizational commitment to the ToC development process —including growing trust with board and staff — were ingredients for designing a different approach to strategy: one which could serve as an entry point for evaluative inquiry, institutional alignment, and a sense of organizational identity that could withstand the realities of our time. It is in this context that a multiyear engagement in which early versions of the components of a strategic framework and process — now named Clarity Not Certainty Effect™ — began to blossom.

Strategy Is More Than One Thing

The philanthropic sector selectively borrows ideas (Brest, 2018) from the for-profit sector (e.g., return on investment, shared value, and competitive advantage), so it felt appropriate to reintroduce the definition of strategy offered by Henry Mintzberg (1987), whose work was in the field of strategic management: "The word [strategy] has long been used implicitly in different ways even if it has traditionally been defined formally in only one" (p. 11).

Mintzberg proposed five definitions of strategy, clarifying and nuanced, which serve as reference points for intentional inquiry:

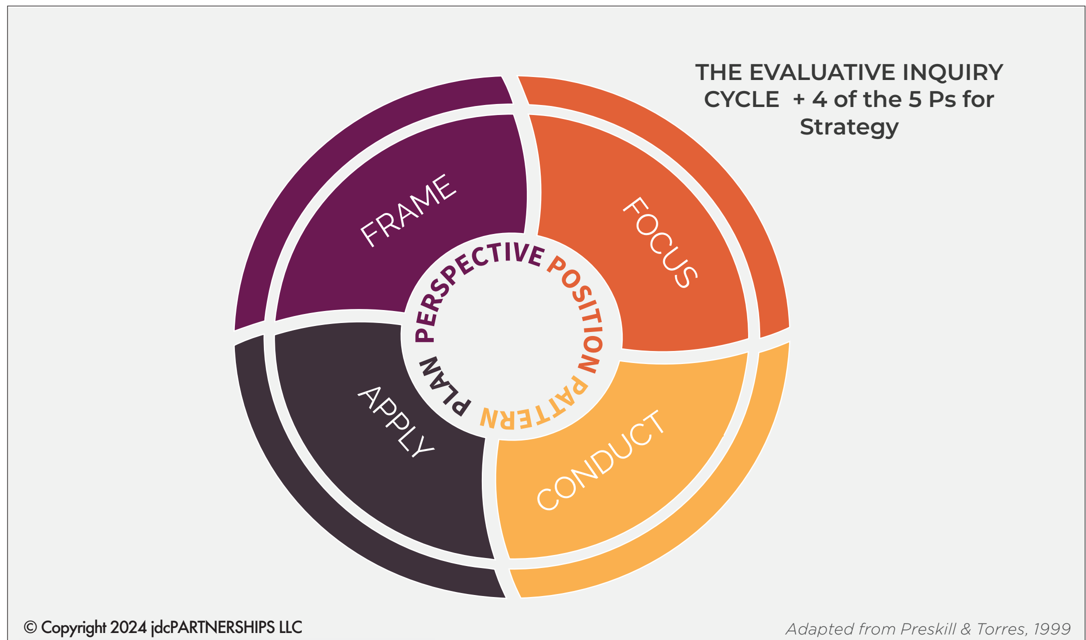
1. *Strategy as Perspective:* a way in which the world (larger than the ecosystem) is understood; a point of view, the personality of the organization/effort;
2. *Strategy as Position:* an understanding of organizational "niche" within the ecosystem in which it finds itself and how it moves within it;
3. *Strategy as Pattern:* a consistency in behavior, intended or unintended;
4. *Strategy as Plan:* a consciously intended set of actions designed to achieve an end goal/state; and
5. *Strategy as Ploy:* a version of Plan intended to confuse or distract an opponent or competitor.

Mintzberg notes that although distinct, there is a clear relationship between and among these definitions. Strategy as Plan (No. 4) tends to be the predominant definition of strategy with a focus on achieving end goal/state. To us, Perspective, Position, and Pattern (Nos. 1–3) lay a foundation for Plan(ning) that supports complexity and emergence. Evaluative inquiry becomes an organizational capacity and part of what is understood as integral to being strategic. Perspective and Position are critical in the crowded marketplaces where the resources of time, money, attention, and heart are constantly being pulled in competing directions. They offer a world view as well as an understanding of the unique offering within it.

New Directions in Evaluation: Evaluating Strategy (Patrizi & Patton, 2010) shared the value of Mintzberg's 5Ps as an important contribution during the early days of strategic philanthropy, offering numerous examples of its usefulness through case studies. With strategy as the evaluand, the distinctions offered by the 5Ps make clear the various entry points to evaluation based on whether the focus of strategy was Perspective, Position, Pattern, Plan, or Ploy (Patton & Patrizi, 2010).

Our contribution is that we invite evaluative inquiry into the co-creation of the various types of strategy. This strengthens evaluative culture from the onset as a natural and important element of strategy (or being strategic), which

FIGURE 2 Evaluative Inquiry Cycle Plus 4 of the 5 Ps for Strategy



supports the ongoing understanding of how strategies are manifesting in real time, indications of progress towards stated ends, and what insights might inform shifts.

Our Approach

Six questions are explored in the Clarity Not Certainty Effect™ approach:

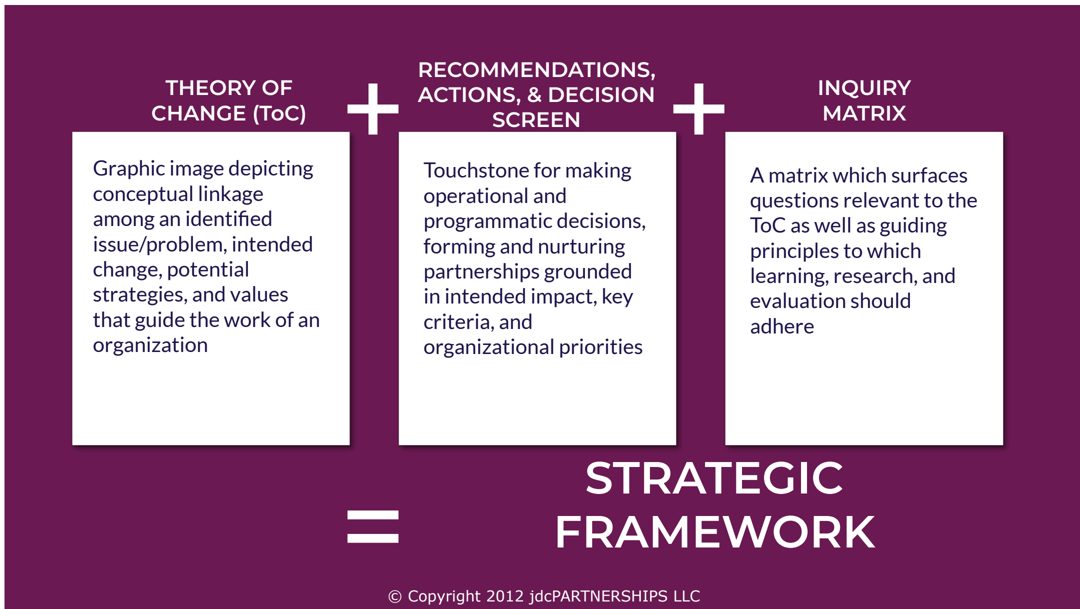
- What difference do you seek to make?
- What is your unique contribution to the issue you seek to address?
- How are you working (or should consider working) with/in the larger system to make sustainable change?
- What are you learning in your work?
- How are you sharing/applying your learnings internally and externally?
- What will increase the likelihood of demonstrable progress toward stated aims?

This is not about certainty, but instead, clarity. Clarity affords organizations and the people within them the freedom to move, respond, and react (Pattern) in ways to the internal and external environment (Position) that are more aligned and remain in service of something they collectively define and share (Perspective) — all of which support tactical decisions and resource allocation (Plan). Evaluative inquiry becomes essential to how an organization holds itself to its commitments within its Perspective and Position so that as commitments and realities shift, there's a durable core to the inquiry. (See Figure 2.)

A theory of change is a core component of this clarity, complemented by recommendations, actions, and decision screen and an inquiry matrix. Together they constitute a strategic framework. (See Figure 3.)

A framework provides a foundation for inquiry (Schlager, 2007) and a set of assumptions, concepts, values, and practices (Binder et al., 2013). Combined, this supports adaptability in complexity and what to foreground and background

FIGURE 3 Strategic Framework Components



(Currie & Walsh, 2019). They become a reference point for the people/organization across roles and responsibilities, creating cohesion that allows choices more likely to maintain shared ways of being as well as a focus on desired end, all within the container of the larger ecosystem.

What Happens?

In partnership with a core team typically composed of the executive, two board members, and others, we choreograph an experience bringing together the full board and staff, with perhaps a few other key advisors and partners. Over three sessions, we collectively draft the initial language for the first component of the strategic framework, the theory of change.

We describe the theory of change as the identity of the organization, and through its development Perspective, Position, and Pattern emerge. It includes the following elements: problem/issue statement, values/guiding principles, assumptions, context, evidence, outcomes, and strategies. Each is explored independently with the core team offering back draft language to the whole group for continued refinement. Areas of clarity, uncertainty, and tension are shared. That practice of making feeling and thinking transparent as well as naming questions is part of the intersection of being strategic and evaluative. It norms where we are clear and where we are less so, if it matters, and how and when one might address. Graphic recording, written and video reflection materials, and a combination of individual and group activities are all part of the choreography. We appreciate and recognize that humans process information in a variety of ways and there are multiple ways of knowing.[9] The movement in and out of activities nurtures relationships and different understandings begin to form.

The inquiry matrix is populated with questions raised through this process of articulation and refinement. It holds questions relevant across an organization shaped by the theory of change and organized to surface what is pertinent to Perspective (e.g., where and in what ways are

[9] See Perry, E. S. and Duncan, A. C. (2017, April 27). Multiple ways of knowing: Expanding how we know. *Nonprofit Quarterly*. https://nonprofitquarterly.org/multiple-ways-knowing-expanding-know/

our values showing up?), Position (e.g., how are we shifting/adapting to support alignment with our ToC and where are these opportunities for stronger alignment?), and Pattern (e.g., what have we learned so far, and how are we sharing this and in what ways toward the strength of our ecosystem?) It is holistic and designed to be integrated over time, reflecting evaluative inquiry held by the organization — not by an individual or a function.

The recommendations, actions. and decision screen, the final element of the strategic framework, becomes a collective consciousness for the organization. It makes robustly transparent a shared set of considerations from alignment with the theory of change to those around capacity, competency, and political and social context. All these influence whether and how an organization chooses to move (Pattern) in any given situation, given how it says it wants to be in the world (Position), and how it understands and describes the world (Perspective).

Inviting the practices of evaluative inquiry, the working ToC is explored for resonance internally and externally. The learnings inform communications, potential language refinements, and considerations for operations (Plan). This process affirms that the pursuit of the organization's Position is ongoing. Vigilance and ease are necessary as context shifts, assumptions change, and additional evidence emerges that shapes how our energies may be best directed — all while finding alignment with Perspective.

Organizations Amid 21st-Century Complexity

When strategy is co-created for clarity instead of certainty, evaluative inquiry is a natural partner. It encourages curiosity and sense-making that continuously assesses who we say we are: Has our place in the ecosystem shifted and has (or should) our understanding of the world change?

We reached out to a small group of former client partners, whose experiences span the earliest iteration of this approach to those who completed the process as recently as 2023, to share their reflections as well as inform our evolving practices. After a few conversations, several similar contextual things stood out at engagement onset, and how, in the months or years following, both the process and the products remain vital.

Demystifying and Distributing Evaluative Inquiry as Core to Strategy

If an organization is to hold its values toward its purpose, evaluative inquiry as an organizational capacity and staff competency is essential. Its importance is seeded during the development of the theory of change — through the rigorous practice of dialogue and reflection around a series of questions. No element is fully realized during its designated conversation. Each holds open space for what will emerge in the next, with the goal of clarity of concepts and connections over certainty of language. The inquiry matrix includes questions with immediate relevance toward internal alignment with the ToC and questions with a longer view on the organization's contribution to the change it seeks. The full organization is invited into a rigorous practice of inquiry not to arrive at certainty, but instead to continuously move toward clarity — even if we are not clear or in agreement on this.

Adriana Rocha,[10] project director at Moore Philanthropy, Giving Infrastructure Fund, observed:

> You really wanted us to be able to do this [evaluative inquiry] on our own. It felt really empowering to be like, this is how we gather information and how we understand the story of our impact, understand what we need to shift and change, and tell the story of that shift and change. It felt doable and removed a lot of mystique, power, and gatekeeping behind evaluation. To own the knowledge gathering, the data, the meaning-making, the storytelling is powerful. If this is our work, then we should have this level of closeness and understanding.

[10] CompassPoint Nonprofit Services practice director, 2009–2015; Neighborhood Funders Group president, 2020–2022, and vice president of programs, 2017–2020.

With a strong frame and focus for inquiry via the ToC, curiosities find their collective mooring as questions once held by an individual or a program are viewed in relation to what the organization as whole is endeavoring to make real in this world.

Client and partner Jeanne Bell, co-founder and CEO of JustOrg Design,[11] said the theory of change "became our guide and our accountability source in (re)designing programming for our clients and stakeholders." She continued:

> This matters because our field, like so many, was in the process of unlearning and reimagining its core disciplines. ... We could no longer rely on the so called "best practices" out there — many of which we had created or contributed to in fact. We needed our people to rethink and redesign. The ToC was both a "call to action" and a guide for that reimagination.

In this approach an organization's curiosities deepen and grow in relation to their theory of change. They move beyond collecting data because they can or think they should, and they reorient to questions and sense-making that support their learning about Perspective, Position, and Pattern. It becomes part of how they Plan and an integrated element of being strategic. Conversations around evaluation and the bigger question of "how we know what we know" are not only more inclusive, but also more valid and rigorous. As such they can inform and be more relevant to the complexity and multiplicity of our current realities and the efforts in which many are engaged. Indigenous evaluation frameworks (LaFrance & Nichols, 2008; Waapalaneexkweew & Dodge-Francis, 2015), culturally responsive evaluation (Hood et al., 2005; Hopson, 2009; Kirkhart, 2010), and critical systems heuristics (Gates, 2017; Gates et al., 2022) bring forward important considerations and guide us toward approaches that encourage us to question, reimagine, and repair. The Equitable Evaluation Framework™ (Equitable Evaluation Initiative, 2023) is a useful reference for understanding what is at play in and around an organization and the likelihood that the Patterns often associated with evaluative inquiry align with Position and Perspective.

With a strong frame and focus for inquiry via the ToC, curiosities find their collective mooring as questions once held by an individual or a program are viewed in relation to what the organization as whole is endeavoring to make real in this world. To foster this, inquiry that speaks to how the ToC is already showing up or becoming more present in the organization is the starting place to quickly make visible the link between inquiry and strategy. Within a matter of weeks organizations have useful information and more confidence in having the skills and the time continue to engage in inquiry.

Over time, the inquiry matrix asks organizations to consider where and with whom sense-making can happen, making this an explicit part of evaluative inquiry and opening the door to reciprocal ways of learning alongside systems partners. Sense-making includes questions of "What can we celebrate?" Building celebration into the practice of inquiry is one way of honoring the human element in work that extends beyond our lifetime. It opens us to possibilities we couldn't imagine prior.

Energizing and Clarifying During Leadership Transitions

These engagements commonly begin with new leadership — often following a founder or other long-tenured leadership. But it is interesting that these incoming leaders were willing, as Jeanne Bell stated, to "confront rather than avoid those

[11] CompassPoint NonProfit Services president, March 2007–March 2018.

fundamental questions of organizational identity and purpose":

> We had a staff with widely varying tenures and approaches to the work — some very attached to existing methods and others energized to reimagine the work. I was in the latter group, and I needed a process that stayed at the "why, for whom, and how" level so that people could not niche out into existing program-planning or tactical goal-setting.

This approach is not about justifying existing efforts, but also clarifying and affirming given Position and Perspective. This is one reason why the final conversation is about the cross-cutting ways an organization will work toward the change it seeks. The focus on cross-cutting descriptions is critical, as they are larger than any single program, initiative, or investment area. They are stated in ways that allow an organization's values to do the heavy lift on what this work looks and feels like. Values and the change an organization seeks in the world invite us to be thoughtful about how we are doing our work (Position).

Situating these elements within the shared analysis at which an organization arrives through articulation of the other theory of change elements (problem, context, evidence, assumptions) brings clarity and flexibility to see oneself and the organization beyond the bounds of existing efforts (Perspective). Throughout the process an organization gains framing, practices formative discussions, and explores and deepens ways of being in relationship. These support the organization as it grapples with decisions about the highest and best use of its resources (in the broadest sense). Coherence around a shared purpose is critical: one that may emanate from the organization's founding but holds an aspiration larger than that of any one person and larger than the progress already attained.

Maricela Rios-Faust, CEO of Human Options, recalled,

> It was the biggest thing that helped the organization move from a founder identity to an identity that I believe the organization holds on its own and can live on its own. It became a catalyst for organizing and getting the board and staff and everybody really behind this vision and organizational identity. … And it's something that we still strive to live into.

Coherence around a shared purpose is critical: one that may emanate from the organization's founding but holds an aspiration larger than that of any one person and larger than the progress already attained.

With Emergence and Complexity, 'The Whole Thing Is Strategic'

How does "being strategic" in the means and ends of a process like this support an organization to move more effectively within complex and emergent conditions? By involving all staff and board and in some instances close partners, organizations engage in dialogue and reflection centered around the questions that will continue to guide decision-making across roles. "We are not leaving the real strategic thinking to a few people on the team," Bell noted. "Everyone is left more capable of strategic thinking and dialogue."

In the words of other client partners:

> Your approach to developing theory of change is very much about relational organizing. … It's not going to come from like one, two, to three people. You engage people in it. You also articulated how the process can be leadership development for the folks involved.
>
> — *Marissa Tirona, executive director, Grantmakers Concerned With Immigrants and Refugees*

> We were having the right conversations. We were really coming together and not spinning our wheels or having a repeat of the same

> conversation. I saw staff align to the bigger picture. Rather than everybody in their own programs, it became, "What are we trying to make happen together?"
>
> — *Adriana Rocha*

> The environment and the configuration of people [during the development of the theory of change] allowed us to think bigger, broader, better. The question of whether we were state- or nationally focused quickly became a both/and. When the question came up again during our name change, it passed quickly. Insisting on full board participation in the process meant the determinations we made couldn't later be undermined.
>
> — *Sandra Henriquez, CEO, and David Lee, deputy director, ValorUS*

> How we went about the theory of change just fundamentally became how we go about most significant changes in the organization, when we did a full rebrand and it was the same process of bringing in staff and leadership.
>
> — *Maricela Rios-Faust*

Even as language lands for each theory of change element, words alone are not a magic fix during difficult or heightened decisions. We introduce the recommendations, actions, and decisions screen, and encourage testing and playing with it immediately after completing the working theory of change. This component of the strategic framework nurtures an organization's collective consciousness. It centers a series of questions which support dialogue and reflection toward understanding the ways in which an opportunity (defined in myriad ways depending on the type of organization is or isn't aligned with their theory of change (Position). It includes consideration of additional factors such as operational capacity, partnerships, resources, and influence or reputation that are of significance for any organization. By naming that which is often not apparent, transparency is increased and reference points for decisions are grounded in collective agreements or understandings (Pattern).

> The decision screen is fundamental. It's a very real-life application, often at the most heightened time …, moments where everything feels so important, tense, and where there are multiple points of view. You can use the decision screen to ground "What is it we're trying to do and does this decision make sense within the direction we've set?"
>
> — *Adriana Rocha*

> The focus was not on a plan, but decisions: being able to focus on our decisions, being really nimble and taking advantage of opportunities because we know our direction.
>
> — *Sandra Henriquez and David Lee*

The co-created elements of the theory of change shifts energy away from stagnant or circular questions within an organization. This is not about perfection or precision. It is a container to explore what, if anything, might shift to support greater alignment, and a memory of what was considered as a determination was made. Emergence and complexity are welcomed in these conversations. They exist in the theory of change so that an organization can place itself within the larger systems in play while holding a clear view of their values and purpose (Position).

An Offering

For organizations to remain viable and relevant, strategy warrants both rigor and nuance. We have a responsibility to embrace complexity in how we understand the world (Perspective), define our roles within it (Position), and wish for our efforts to unfold (Pattern and Plan). To not do so contributes to believing that individuals and organizations are separate from the context and conditions in which we are trying to bring about change. Strategy formation and articulation that is as nuanced as the world around us can mitigate that tendency. In our experience and through the reflections of client partners, these core components can improve your organizational capacity to move within emergence and complexity.

- *Co-creation and contribution beyond any one organization is vital.* If your purpose requires acknowledgement of and being in relationship with others with shared aims and values (Perspective), then your approach to strategy should mirror that. Co-creating a shared

understanding of the issue (and problem to be addressed), context, possibilities, evidence (empirical and experiential), and assumptions stimulates a more robust and rigorous understanding of the ecosystem, the actors, and the role one might play. The organizational niche (Position) becomes clearer. It is easier to determine what and how to activate what is uniquely yours to contribute. All this frames your evaluative inquiry.

- *Define the problem; root in values and purpose.* It's not an easy place to begin. Yet, each client partner recalled how critical beginning with defining the problem was as the starting point to developing their theory of change (Perspective and Position) and how it remains a beacon of clarity in ongoing strategic thinking and decision-making (Pattern and Plan). By carving out Perspective and Pattern, evaluative inquiry is focused, and one is better able to discern what is important to pay attention to and for what reasons as the effort unfolds and the context changes. Learning is grounded in relevance to the moment.

- *Curiosity, not certitude.* When people's inquisitive natures are activated, they ask questions that clarify and broaden their understanding. There are fewer implicit assumptions. They reflect a point of view around the world that they are willing to explore and challenge (Perspective). They are more able to find points of commonality with their colleagues to find ways of moving in concert toward shared aims (Pattern). The questions are deeper and more appropriate to ask, given the moment, of specific people and for specific reasons. They seek information and engage in sense-making that is more inclusive, contextualized, and thus more rigorous and valid. Their evaluative muscles are engaged.

- *Organizations are people.* Lastly, and most importantly, efforts and enterprises are composed of human beings. Humans are multidimensional, becoming even more so as we move with greater fluidity through our various identities. Humans also have origins influenced by their histories and experiences. They have emotions, characteristics, qualities, and skills as individuals. When together there is interplay between and among them which is sometimes unpredictable. A plan does not have a heartbeat or a soul. It is not real. At best it is an aspiration to what one hopes will happen (Position) or how one will be (Pattern). No matter how well conceived a strategy, if the humans are not interested, equipped, or supported to bring it to life, it will not come to be.

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Raising the Bar: Improving How to Assess Evidence Quality in Evaluating Systems-Change Efforts

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Introduction

There is a long-standing debate regarding what counts as rigorous and credible evidence for evaluation (Donaldson et al., 2008; Mosley et al., 2024). Yet, there is less discussion on how best to assess rigorous evidence related to complex programming contexts, and what might constitute relevant criteria for such an assessment (Preskill & Lynn, 2016; Schwandt & Gates, 2021; Aston et al., 2021; Aston & Apgar, 2022). Rigor has often been reduced to a discussion of evidence hierarchies, usually focused on the supposed "gold standard" of randomized control trials and the "what works" agenda, couched within evidence clearing houses (Boruch & Turner, 2023). As Howard White (2019) explains, this agenda has dominated what "counts" as valid knowledge and rigorous evidence, fusing assessment of evaluation methods with assessment of evidence.

However, evidence hierarchies have been critiqued as misleading (Nutley et al., 2013). Randomized control trials (RCTs) are not always appropriate, feasible, or even ethical (Befani et al., 2015; Schwandt & Gates, 2021). They are designed with assumptions about control, stability, and fidelity which rarely hold in complex intervention contexts or at scale. It is argued, therefore, that RCTs are inappropriate to assess systems change (Bicket et al., 2020; Lynn et al., 2021). On the other hand, there have been several efforts to debunk myths about the supposed lack of rigor of nonexperimental evaluation approaches (Lynn et al., 2021; Raimondo, 2023). Lynn and colleagues demonstrate that experimental and quasi-experimental methods are not the only ways to assess cause-and-effect relationships and argue that philanthropy needs

Key Points

- Facing the great scale of societal challenges, philanthropic organizations are increasingly calling for systems change. Evaluating systems change requires innovative approaches that respond to the complexities of such change in ways that support equity and multiracial democracy rather than undermining them.
- A key concern in evaluating systems change is how to do so rigorously. Rigor has traditionally been equated with evaluative criteria such as independence and objectivity, and experimental methods and evidence hierarchies which sit uncomfortably with both complexity and equity. Yet when taking an alternative approach, many philanthropic organizations fear that without these standards, there are no standards at all.
- Establishing means to assess evidence standards is a key challenge for complexity-informed evaluation. This article argues that more appropriate, flexible, and inclusive standards for assessing evidence quality in systems-change efforts are achievable. Based on a review of evidence standards, learning from the causal pathways and inclusive rigor networks, and using the example of evaluation of the CLARISSA program, it lays out a set of principles and tools to guide assessment by philanthropic organizations of evidence quality in systems-change evaluation.

to examine causal relationships through a growing suite of methodological approaches as relevant to different systems-change strategies.[1] Despite these trends, philanthropic evaluation tends to still rely on descriptive measurement and analysis, such as the performance measurement approach recently proposed by Brown and Rosser (2023).

Lynn and Coffman (2024) usefully distinguish two mental models of systems change: system emergence and system dynamics. In the first, strategies informed by complexity theory assume that it is impossible to predict the type of change that might emerge in a system, requiring evaluation to look back once change has emerged to retrospectively explore and learn from causal pathways, considering relevant factors that together have created change in a system. In these conditions, most traditional pre- and post-evaluation designs would be inappropriate. Approaches that map system dynamics and identify leverage points for strategic interventions, on the other hand, may predefine some system domains as the focus of evaluation while still being open to dynamic interactions in the system. Approaches that focus on discrete parts of the system can assume greater predictability and could be served by evaluation approaches that theorize the intended pathways at the outset and empirically test if and how change unfolds. Both approaches call for the use of causal methodologies that open up the "black box" of systems-change strategies. Some philanthropic organizations argue that communities themselves also need to play a role in explaining these strategies (Carr & Morariu, 2023). For this, philanthropy requires a more inclusive understanding of rigor that gives space for plural perspectives to inform more useful evaluation approaches.

In this article, we build on thinking emerging from several communities of practice considering alternative approaches to rigor to show how more appropriate, flexible, and inclusive standards for assessing evidence quality in systems-change efforts are achievable. The Inclusive Rigor Co-Lab, funded by Humanity United, built on the work of Robert Chambers (2015), who reframed rigor as inclusive to embrace complexity. His seven canons (eclectic methodological pluralism; improvisation and innovation; adaptive iteration; triangulation; plural perspectives; optimal ignorance; and appropriate imprecision — being open, alert, and inquisitive) stem from a participatory epistemology that underpins inclusive methods. From this perspective we should be attentive to context, appreciate participatory and iterative evaluation co-design, and consider the roles of evaluators as reflexive facilitators rather than objective judgers (Aston et al., 2021; Apgar et al., 2024a).

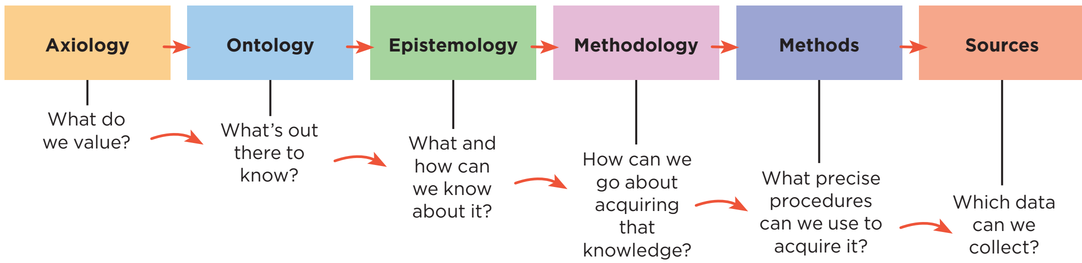
Notions of "adaptive rigor" have also recently evolved in response to complexity-aware evaluation that aims to harness actionable learning (Preskill & Lynn, 2016; Wild & Buffardi, 2019; Aston & Apgar, 2022). The Causal Pathways Initiative, launched by the Walton Family Foundation, builds on both "inclusive" and "adaptive" approaches to rigor as it seeks to support philanthropy to build awareness, will, and skills to use evaluation approaches that can make sense of causal relationships while paying attention to equity. Among the complementary aims of these communities is understanding what "good" looks like for more complexity-aware approaches, and how to raise the bar. Before assessing what is "good," however, it is necessary to re-center evaluation in values as the starting point for redefining rigor.

Values and Evidence Standards

Values are making a comeback in evaluation. Thomas Schwandt and Emily Gates (2021) define valuing as a "kind of practice that involves identifying, naming, considering, and holding or respecting something … as important, beneficial, right to do, good to be" (p. vii); and they define evaluating as a "particular kind of empirical investigation … appraising, weighing up, assessing, calculating, gauging, rating, and ranking" (p. vii). At the heart of both valuing and evaluation is criteria — principles or standards

[1] See Lynn & Apgar (2024), which explores several approaches to this.

FIGURE 1 Sequencing Questions to Define Rigor in Ways that Align with Underpinning Values



that different stakeholders value. Before assessing or rating, we must first establish what we value — most. Evaluators and foundations need to make choices about what they value and critically engage with the socially constructed notions of meaning in different contexts.

As Brown and Dueñas (2020) illustrate, we first need to understand what we value (axiology) before addressing what there is to know (ontology), how we can know about it (epistemology), and how to collect evidence to better understand what we aim to know better (methodology, methods, sources). (See Figure 1.) The Equitable Evaluation Framework™ espouses a similar axiological and epistemic perspective related to how values inform what can be known and what counts as rigor (Chilisa, 2019; Lowther & McKegg, 2023; Coné & Dean-Coffey, 2024).

There are several applications of this thinking. Gates and colleagues (2024), for example, provide a framework that supports explicit criteria specification, based on a combination of deliberative democratic and critical approaches that focus on the need to deliberate between plural values, while navigating power to ensure inclusion.

Our starting proposition, therefore, is that values are the basis upon which foundations can establish the criteria that matter most, rather than simply using existing criteria without critically examining what underpins them. The Campbellian validity framework of statistical conclusion, internal, construct, and external validity, for example, was based on validity criteria appropriate for quantitative methods, yet remains dominant today and often is applied generically (Lund, 2021). A review by Downes and Gullickson (2022) on what "valid" means in evaluation found 40 different conceptualizations in use, showing that validity is more contested and multifaceted than assumed. If foundations champion equity or community participation, for example, and make these values explicit, then there are several relevant quality criteria they may wish to consider, such as multicultural validity, responsiveness, and transferability (Kirkhart, 2010; Aston et al., 2021).

The turn to values is aligned with a call for evaluation to be geared toward questions and criteria, rather than driven by particular method or data preferences (Stern et al. 2012; Gates et al., 2024). Schwandt and Gates (2021) point out that "choosing criteria commits the evaluator to look for certain kinds of evidence and to appeal to certain kinds of warrants … to justify resulting evaluative claims" (p. 2). A central point here is that evidence is not good or bad a priori, but rather depends on what that evidence is supposed to prove — i.e., its potential probative value (Schwandt, 2008). This should be defined by the users themselves, rather than be driven by methodological choice alone. In the context of evaluation that centers equity, the starting point, we argue, must be an expanded view of users, which invites us to first consider the question of whose values count (Chambers, 2015).

What Values Matter to Whom?

We have had numerous discussions about criteria used to assess the quality of evidence with a range of evaluation practitioners, researchers, commissioners, and programmers from diverse

TABLE 1 Synthesis of Criteria Commonly Used to Judge the Quality of Evidence

Ranking	Training on Contribution Analysis	Training on Assessing Strength of Evidence	Frequency	Symposium with U.S. Philanthropic Audience
Highest	Transparency	Utilization	Highest	Credibility/ Triangulation/ Utilization
	Triangulation	Transparency		Participatory
	Replicability	Independence/ Triangulation/ Uniqueness		Equitability
	Reliability	Responsiveness/ Transferability/ Ethics		Reliability
Lowest	Utilization	Plausibility	Lowest	Novelty

contexts, through a series of trainings we deliver and work within our own communities of practice (Centre for Development Impact, Inclusive Rigour Co-Lab, and Causal Pathways Initiative). In this section, we reflect across these conversations to shed light on the question of which criteria matter to whom, illustrating the diverse entry points different producers and users of evidence might have, and how that then defines what criteria might be appropriate for any given evaluation.

A plethora of evidence assessment frameworks and critical appraisal tools are used by government departments, universities, think tanks, and research and evaluation consultancy firms, yet rarely by foundations (e.g., Puttick & Ludlow, 2013; Specialist Unit for Review Evidence, 2018). Across these we find similar criteria used for the evidence produced by nonexperimental methods (see Aston & Apgar, 2023): transparency, triangulation, ethics, plausibility, uniqueness, independence, responsiveness, and transferability. We have taken these common criteria as a starting point for audiences in different sessions to gauge which criteria they use explicitly or implicitly to judge the quality of evidence. (See Table 1.)

The first two engagements (columns 1 and 2) were attended by 30 and 20 participants respectively, from a largely U.K. evaluation audience. They were asked to rank which criteria they felt were most important in their work. Most participants held research or evaluation roles within U.K. government ministries, while others worked within academic institutions and evaluation consultancy firms; and in each iteration, only two participants worked at philanthropic foundations. The third engagement was during an online session on how to select methods with participants either working in or with U.S. philanthropic evaluation, with 30 participants who were asked to share the criteria they are using. (Therefore, the data from this engagement is about frequency of use rather than a ranking of importance.)

Across the three engagements triangulation is a common criterion, and transparency was ranked as high by the two engagements with U.K. evaluation audiences. It is perhaps unsurprising that these two criteria, which are more easily understood and widely used in qualitative research assessments, are more commonly valued. We see different levels of valuing of utilization, which was ranked as lowest by the first group of participants and highest by the second two. This might be explained by the context of the first group being a training on a particular theory-based evaluation approach and participants

holding research and government roles, where we might expect the focus to be more on quality within the methodological approach being discussed rather than use.

However, other criteria, such as credibility, are more multifaceted and contested (Donaldson et al., 2008). Credibility, which was named more by the third group, is more open to distinct interpretations. Often, part of the interpretation is the idea of finding evidence that links the intervention (or set of interventions) to an outcome in a specific way — otherwise referred to as uniqueness, which was ranked at the same level as triangulation by the second group. Another multifaceted criterion often considered part of credibility is plausibility; this was mentioned only by the second group and was ranked as the lowest.

What is most striking about the different ways in which criteria were valued among these three groups is the explicit mention of participatory and equitability by the third group. This aligns with the focus on equity in philanthropic strategy, and, in particular, in the U.S. Further, valuing independence and replicability by the two first groups reflects British government policy perspectives. We also find that the emphasis from these groups is more on issues related to internal rather than external validity (i.e., transferability). One likely reason for this is that external validity is particularly challenging in the context of complexity.

Our findings from across these conversations underscore the need to initiate a process of defining evidence quality in order to support evaluative judgements through first surfacing values that might otherwise remain hidden. Depending on the specific evaluation use and the diversity of users involved, the right set of criteria to define "good" in this context could differ significantly.

Using Rubrics to Navigate Complexity and Systems Change

While foundations need the flexibility to choose what they value most, they also need some degree of structure to build confidence in how to assess evidence systematically. Checklists are often used to appraise quality, based on the presence or absence of particular characteristics, but the binary categories they create are often too restrictive. In our experience, we have found that rubrics offer a more satisfactory alternative, particularly for complex change processes where the boundaries are fuzzy and where discussion about the boundaries of different criteria, levels, and descriptions is seen as beneficial by evaluation stakeholders. Rubrics are a form of qualitative scale that include the following:

- *criteria,* the aspects of quality or performance of interest (e.g., credibility);
- *standards,* the level of performance or quality for each criterion (e.g., poor/adequate/good); and
- *descriptors,* descriptions or examples of what each standard looks like for each criterion (Green, 2019).

Which criteria, and how many criteria one ought to choose, depends on evaluation purposes expressed by different stakeholders. While criteria such as triangulation, for example, may seem to have a uniform definition, as rubrics are multifaceted, different stakeholders may prefer to focus on different types of triangulation (e.g., data, source, method). Rubrics entail levels of performance or quality for each criterion chosen (e.g., poor/adequate/good). There is no right answer on how many levels are appropriate under all circumstances. However, there are certain rules of thumb for developing rubrics in general which also apply to evidence rubrics (i.e., adding levels only where distinctions are meaningful).

Ultimately, rubrics are a means to determine "what matters rather than what is easy to measure" (Haldrup, 2023, para. 8). They provide an architecture for a deliberative process to discuss, debate, and define what success looks like (King, 2023). Rubrics are increasingly seen to offer an alternative to understanding the multiplicity of factors that make up systems change (Loveridge, 2023). Deliberation is important for assessing

evidence of systems change because such change cannot be predefined, and consequently neither can the specific (usually qualitative) evidence that allows for a nuanced causal explanation of how that change came about.

To illustrate how to use rubrics to assess evidence quality when evaluating a systems-change initiative, we present a case study of the Child Labour Action-Research-Innovation in South and South-Eastern Asia — CLARISSA — program, with which two of the authors have been involved.

Case Study in Using Strength of Evidence Rubrics

The CLARISSA program was a five-year systemic action research program focused on the worst forms of child labor. It was funded by the U.K. Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office, led by the Institute of Development Studies, and implemented through a consortium of international partners including Terre des Hommes, Child Hope, the Consortium for Street Children, and in-country partners in Nepal and Bangladesh.

The starting assumption of the program was that children end up as laborers because of many and often hidden interactions between multiple actors and multiple factors within households, communities, and labor systems. These complex dynamics lead to unpredictable outcomes for children and other sector stakeholders. Knowing when and how to intervene requires a systemic approach to uncover hidden dynamics and identify leverage points for action, yet most interventions continue to focus on predefined solutions of protection and rescue alone or on specific thematic responses such as education instead of work, and, critically, do not include the lived experience of children and other system actors.

The CLARISSA program responded through adopting systemic action research (Burns, 2007) as an implementation modality. The method is a form of participatory action research that aims to understand and intervene in the underlying system dynamics that lead to patterns of exclusion and exploitation of marginalized groups. It is informed by complexity theory and posits that when the system actors themselves make sense of their own experiences and build their own systemic understanding, they become motivated to identify leverage points for action and, as a result, take more effective actions. It is systemic in two ways: (1) it starts from developing an understanding of the causal dynamics that drive system behaviors, and (2) it works with multiple actors across the system in participatory ways.

The Programmatic Approach to Evaluation and Evidence

Given the complexity of child labor, the learning orientation of the program, and the value placed on lived experience and agency of stakeholders to explore and define their own pathways to systems change, evaluation in CLARISSA was not concerned with measuring predefined indicators. Rather, it was designed to understand and analyze causal pathways. The causal pathways were expected to emerge from three levels of engagement:

- micro level, with system actors on specific issues through action research;
- meso level, through influence on dynamics in the supply chains; and
- macro level, through potential shifts in how others in the child labor programming system responded to the systemic evidence CLARISSA would produce and use.

Contribution analysis (Mayne, 2008) was chosen as an overarching approach for its ability to provide both structure and flexibility in how causal theories of change are nested and explored at multiple levels of engagement. It emphasizes the iterative use of causal theories of change as the program evolves and adapts and acknowledges multiple perspectives as central to the causal analysis required for the exploration of potential pathways, as well as retrospective discovery of how pathways actually took shape (Apgar et al.,

2020). The program's modular evaluation design identified several causal hotspots,[2] and combinations of appropriate methods were selected to respond to each.[3]

The funder was involved in lengthy discussions on the program's overarching approach to evaluation, in particular during the inception period as the partnership was solidifying and the program was taking shape on the ground. During this initial period, differences in assumptions held by partners around what counts as a "rigorous" evaluation design were surfaced, creating some tensions. The evaluation team worked with the program management team to facilitate debate among partners and the funder on these tensions. This led to agreement on the appropriateness of contribution analysis. Given these different starting positions, the evaluation team made explicit the program's approach to evidence as plural in the MEL framework — valuing and using multiple forms, including lived experience and practitioner learning alongside formal research evidence (CLARISSA, 2018). This plural approach, which was agreed to by the funder, and the mix of methods used meant that there were no predefined criteria to define the quality of evidence for the program. Given that what counts as rigorous and credible evidence is contested (Donaldson et al., 2008), the program recognized a multitude of possible criteria could be used.

The evaluation team made its quality criteria explicit, and developed a set of evidence rubrics that could be applied throughout the evaluation as evidence was gathered on emergent pathways to systems change. The team facilitated a deliberative process working across program stakeholders, including in-country CLARISSA staff (facilitating the participatory interventions) and the thematic research team (building evidence on child labor through participatory and qualitative research). At this stage, the funder was not involved in detailed deliberations, having agreed to the broad approach. The evaluation team initiated the process by reviewing all possible criteria based on Downes & Gullickson (2022) and Aston & Apgar (2022), and proposed a set of criteria to the program team. In this first proposal, the team excluded "independence" and "generalizability" as inappropriate, given that the evaluation was to be conducted internally and aimed to provide nuanced responses to causal questions, paying particular attention to how processes worked in context.

Evaluation and thematic research teams deliberated on what criteria were appropriate for all forms of evidence emerging from the program, and where distinct criteria were needed for making causal inferences (evaluation research). Three core criteria were agreed across all forms of evidence produced by the program:

- *Transparency*. Given that most of CLARISSA's evaluation and research methods were qualitative and focused on uncovering hidden dynamics in supply chains and systems, making explicit the processes through which data were collected and analysis was undertaken, and by whom, was a foundational criterion.
- *Representativeness*. This criterion centers the program's participatory methods. For CLARISSA, higher-quality evidence would include system actors not only providing their perspectives, but also engaging directly in analysis and drawing conclusions about how change was emerging in the system.
- *Triangulation*. Building on common standards in qualitative research and including the need to understand systems dynamics, triangulation was considered an important way to look across the different methods to explore phenomena from various perspectives and build a robust narrative for how change was emerging and for whom.

Deliberation surfaced different perspectives on using the term "representativeness" to codify

[2] See Apgar and Snijder (2021) for an explanation of the causal hotspot practice as a way to zoom in and unpack specific causal packages to prioritize where evaluation can add most value.

[3] See Apgar et al. (2024b) for more on the findings from the evaluation.

the central principle of meaningful participation. Some colleagues felt the term would be misunderstood to suggest the use of a representative sample. As a result, greater attention was placed on contextualizing all criteria to fit the program's values on participation and complexity (CLARISSA, 2023). Two further criteria were agreed as appropriate for quality in evaluative judgements that would result from the contribution analysis design:

- *Plausibility.* The design called for careful attention to causal pathways that could explain how and why change was emerging and for whom. Plausible contribution claims depend on a clear and logical explanation of the causal steps between the participatory intervention and observed outcomes.
- *Uniqueness.* This was interpreted within the contribution analysis approach as the specificity with which a causal explanation included the effect of the CLARISSA intervention on the broader process of change. A higher-quality explanation would allow more nuanced contribution claims to be built from the evidence.

For each of the criteria, the team then discussed the levels (from 1 to 5). As with any rubric, these became qualitative descriptors of what performance on each level would look like, worded in a way that the levels would be clearly distinct. For the transparency, triangulation, plausibility, and uniqueness rubrics, we adapted the wording from previously developed rubrics by Aston (2020) to fit within the context of CLARISSA. Given there was no previously available rubric for representativeness, as a team we developed and refined what this might look like at each level and developed the descriptors for the criteria. As an example, for the representativeness rubric, the distinction between the levels was based on the extent to which the participants were involved in data collection and analysis processes and how much agency they had in the process. The difference between Level 3 and Level 4 was that participants needed to be involved in the analysis process to reach Level 4. The difference between Levels 4 and 5 was that there needed to be high levels of agency among participants throughout the whole research process, where they had ownership over certain parts of the data collection and analysis to reach Level 5. Furthermore, given participants were not a homogeneous group, we also included that the highest level (5) would be rated if the evidence contained contradictory views, as this way it would truly reflect the heterogeneous nature of the participants and the system itself, whereas in Level 4, the viewpoints would be more aggregated rather than unique.

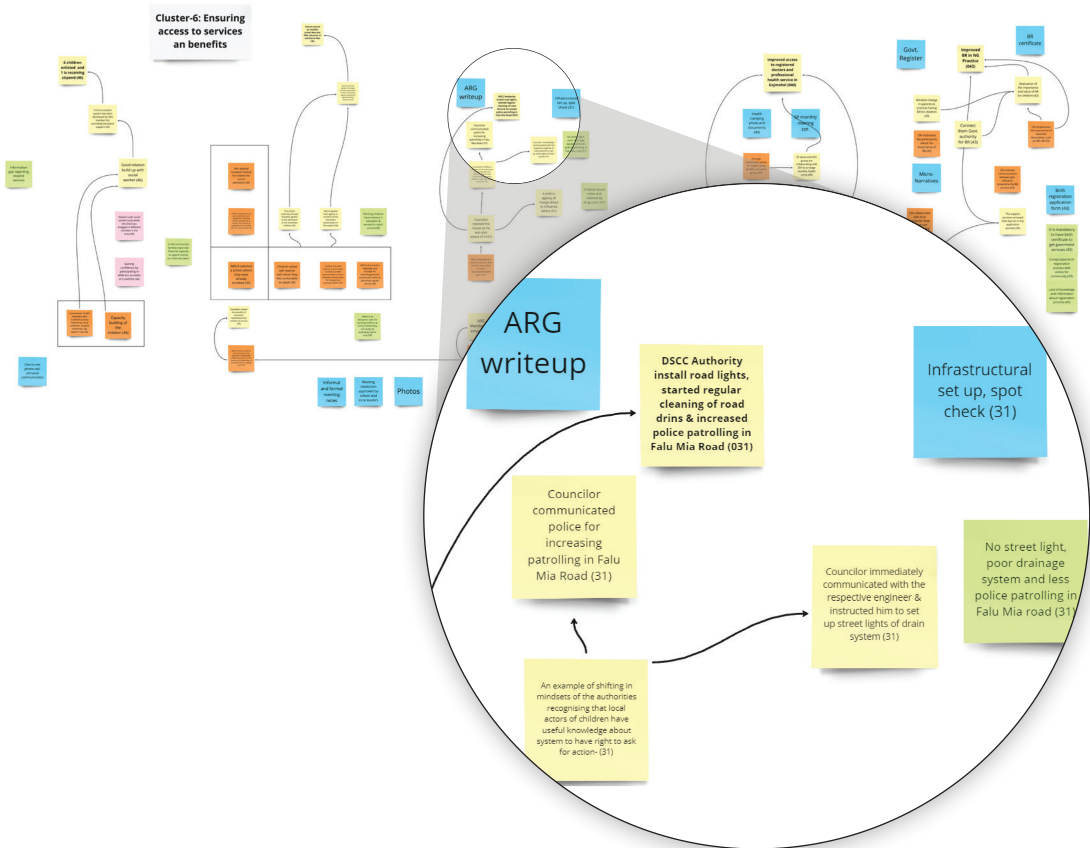
The final rubrics were published to build transparency in the way in which each performance level was contextualized and described for each of the criteria (CLARISSA, 2023).

Application of Evidence Rubrics Within Evaluation of Systems Change

The rubrics were applied in two moments of the evaluation process to assess the quality of evidence related to the causal hotspots. First, they were used within an adaptation of outcome harvesting, which was intended to document and explore how change emerged from the various systemic action research activities on the ground, including synergistic effects. The outcome evidence method used (Paz-Ybarnegaray & Douthwaite, 2017) went beyond the standard outcome harvesting practice (per Wilson-Grau, 2018) by specifically evidencing "trajectories of change" — in other words, detecting outcome patterns rather than documenting and evidencing single occurrences of outcomes in specific behaviors. As a participatory method, the program's evaluation team facilitated the generation and documentation of outcome descriptions in two rounds, in response to this question: What outcomes are emerging in system actors and domains, and what evidence do we have of how the program has contributed to them?

All collected outcomes were analyzed by the implementation team in collective analysis workshops during which outcomes were clustered by theme, location, and level of change — individual, participatory action research group, or system level — using the Water of System Change framework by Kania et al. (2018).

FIGURE 2 A Pathway Leading to Services and Benefits in Bangladesh



Collective analysis resulted in causal mapping of outcome pathways which told the contribution story and identified where program evidence backed specific causal claims. During analysis, the evidence rubrics were applied to intentionally reflect on how strong the existing evidence was in explaining the causal pathway and where gaps existed, and to design the substantiation step, during which external evaluators were commissioned to seek additional evidence and verify the program's contribution claims.

One Example

In Bangladesh, one of the pathways that led to the outcome of ensuring access to services and benefits was the result of five outcome descriptions. (See Figure 2.)

To summarize the narrative of the pathway shown in Figure 2: the local community has become well-informed about a diverse range of government and nongovernment services and benefits as a result of collaborative efforts among various system actors (reconfiguring relationships in the system), such as community groups and service providers (e.g., the partnership with the local health service provider and an advocacy initiative with the school authority). Notably, a significant shift occurred in the information flow to decision-makers in the system, driven by the active involvement of children. As a consequence of these initiatives, there has been a noticeable change in the community's mindset, fostering an increased willingness to access available services. This shift has significantly contributed to an overall improvement in the living conditions of the community. Working children now have greater educational opportunities, community members benefit from improved health care services, and the community as a whole experiences heightened

TABLE 2 Evidence Rubrics Final Assessment

Dimension	Rating	Reasoning for Rating
Transparency is about being open about where evidence for the change narrative comes from. Openness refers to who collected the data, who they were collected from and how, and how this was driven by a robust evaluation design.	5	How the data were collected and who was involved in collection and analysis is described in detail. Methodological publications discuss the development of the tools and how they were used and adapted throughout.
Triangulation relates to the use of multiple methods to build a nuanced understanding of change in complex systems; theoretical triangulation by working with multiple theories and using data from different sources and lines of evidence.	5	Evidence comes from documentation of meetings, facilitator journaling, interviews with action research group members, and their own evaluations and reflections. The implementation team was involved in making sense of the data and external evaluator substantiating, thus strengthening analyst triangulation.
Representativeness is defined based on CLARISSA's participatory ethos. It refers to the extent to which the voices of those affected by an issue are central in the evidence that is presented, and how they have participated in different parts of the process that has generated the evidence (design, data gathering, analysis, presenting).	4	Evidence is generated through participatory processes with documentation of the process. It directly includes participants making sense of their experiences through ongoing reflection sessions. Children and business owners were not involved in the final analysis of the data that informed findings in this report.
Uniqueness is about the level of confidence we have in our proposed narrative of the actual contribution of the program. It requires detailed and nuanced explanation of the link between the intervention and the outcome, identifying if there is distinctiveness of effect and by trying to rule out other factors that may have caused the outcome.	5	Evidence underpinning the causal claims made about how systemic action research generates innovative actions to tackle the worst forms of child labor is highly specific to the intervention and the outcome. It is not plausible that the actions that were generated were the result of another intervention or another process taking place at the same time as most children and business owners were not involved in other, comparable processes.
Plausibility is about the narrative of change described in the evaluation providing a clear and logical thread that follows the data.	5	Through the detailed evidence gathering in the realist evaluation, together with other methods, we have been able to develop a highly convincing account with clearly and logically signposted steps on how innovative actions were taken and influenced system dynamics.

Adapted from Apgar et al., 2024b

safety and security, thanks to robust municipal support.

As shown in Figure 2, blue stickies represent existing evidence (from the action research group writeups and a spot check on the actual infrastructure improved). Green stickies represent contextual conditions influencing the process of change.

The quality of evidence rubrics were applied to this pathway, which includes multiple system dynamics, through a facilitated process led by the evaluation team members. The purpose was for the systemic action research team to critically reflect on the quality of the existing programmatic evidence. The result illustrated that while the pathway was strong in terms of triangulation and representation, there were some weaknesses — in particular, in the plausibility of the causal explanation between the CLARISSA activities and the outcomes. This led to the development of a substantiation plan that allowed further exploration of the causal

pathway through speaking to specific system actors who shed light on the how and why of this process of change in different system dynamics.

Application of Evidence Rubrics to Final Contribution Claims

The evidence rubrics were also applied when the final contribution claims were developed along the program's multiple pathways through synthesis across the bricolage of methods. The evaluation team held sessions to deliberate and agree final scores and the reasoning for each, and the results are included in the final evaluation report (Apgar et al., 2024b). Using the original rubrics, a discussion was facilitated between team members to agree the collective reasoning for each level.

This allowed for the final assessment of all evidence presented in response to the evaluation question: How, for whom, and under what conditions did the program's systemic action research generate innovative solutions to tackle the drivers of worst forms of child labor, and what outcomes are emerging in system actors and domains? (See Table 2.)

Regarding representativeness, the team scored its performance at Level 4 and the reasoning makes explicit that participants were not involved in the final analysis, thus not fully achieving the descriptor in the original rubric of "high levels of participants' agency in the research process, analysis, and resulting actions," which would have justified a scoring of 5. In this way, the initial rubrics served as a guide for discussion and deliberation across the team, allowing critical reflection on the quality of the evidence underpinning the findings.

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

This case illustrates how more appropriate, flexible, and inclusive standards for assessing the strength of evidence in system-change efforts are achievable. Complexity-aware approaches to systems change require a greater degree of flexibility, and evaluation processes and methods need to reflect this.

The "values turn" in evaluation is an important step to re-center evaluation in what really matters for systems change. With foundations addressing ever more complex challenges, such as climate change and social and racial justice, they should more explicitly define what values should shape evaluations which help to define specifically what "quality" means in the evidence that is sought, recognizing the potential need for diversity.

The choices of methods and kinds of evidence in systems-change evaluation should be based on context specific and flexible criteria. These should be adapted to the values and questions of an evaluation. We ought not to assume that evaluators can predefine all desired outcomes. Instead, as our case study shows, assessment needs to be iterative and provide the scope to redefine boundaries as the nature of the system becomes clearer. Indeed, some criteria, such as evaluator independence or even uniqueness of contributions, may not always be appropriate, depending on what foundations are working on and the kind of changes they seek to evaluate. In the example, the choice of contribution analysis as an overarching design and the internal nature of the evaluation led to excluding independence and generalizability which are often assumed to be common standards.

While foundations need flexibility to choose what they value most, they also need some degree of structure for sensemaking. Rubrics have increasingly been seen as a useful and adaptable tool to facilitate discussion on what foundations value and how to contribute to systems change. Our case study illustrates how rubrics provide a practical architecture for a deliberative process to discuss, debate, and define what success looks like with the main evaluation stakeholders. It demonstrates the benefits of developing and applying critical appraisal tools in a participatory way with program staff centering explicitly shared values. The funder was involved early on in debating what appropriate questions and designs would be, setting up an enabling environment for the development and use of rubrics to operationalize these collective choices. In the case of

CLARISSA, given the participatory nature of the intervention itself, inclusion of community experiences was integrated through the action research processes on the ground. The specific framing of the representativeness criterion, expressing the underpinning value of inclusion, allowed the evaluation and program team to together reflect on how the participatory intention was playing out in practice. In this sense, application of the rubrics supported reflexivity of the implementation team, creating space to safely critique internal evidence and the extent to which it had been co-produced with system actors. We see this as an important step on the journey to inviting other stakeholders into an evaluation process, recognizing the complexities and power relationships that need to be navigated as we shift toward even more inclusive practice.

The case further shows that some flexibility in the rubrics used was important because it enabled the evaluation stakeholders to have robust and open conversations about quality in the face of complexity and unpredictability of causal pathways. This invites us to consider at what point in a collaborative evaluation process of complex change should the specific descriptors in rubrics become fixed, to safeguard against the risk of making the standards fit the evidence emerging allowing evaluation stakeholders to game the system. These questions are driving ongoing reflections within the communities of practice of which we are a part, enabled by foundations opening up their internal processes to actively build the field of systems-change evaluation.

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The Weight of Power: Reframing Evaluation in Philanthropy to Amplify the Voices of Communities of Color

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Introduction

Philanthropic social change efforts often encounter systemic barriers that undermine their potential impact. Traditional funding practices have historically perpetuated inequities, particularly for organizations led by people of color and those focused on advancing social justice.[1] These inequities manifest in various ways, from closed funding networks that limit access to funding opportunities to explicitly or implicitly biased evaluation criteria and reporting standards.

Addressing these disparities requires a critical examination of philanthropy's role in and influence on nonprofits and grassroots organizations, with a particular focus on how metrics and evaluation practices disproportionately affect those led by people of color.

Inequity and the History of Philanthropy

To understand the current state of inequity within U.S. philanthropy, it is essential to examine its historical trajectory. Modern philanthropy traces its roots to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, an era marked by the rise of industrial capitalism and the consolidation of wealth among the elite, including predominately white-led institutions. During this period,

[1] Social justice, as defined in the Encyclopedia Britannica (Duignan, 2024), requires fundamental changes that reposition social groups in relation to power and resources and emphasizes transformative solutions that impact multiple systems leading to equitable outcomes. The justice described looks to account for systemic inequalities.

Key Points

- Philanthropy's current structure and practices perpetuate a relationship with nonprofits led by people of color that can keep foundations removed from the work and keep these nonprofits fighting to stay effective and sustainable. When equitable and responsive strategies to support grant partners are implemented, however, relationships and power begin to shift.
- This article explores the complexities of philanthropy's relationship with POC-led nonprofit and grassroots organizations as mediated by evaluation and reporting practices. By critically analyzing these practices and power dynamics within philanthropy, it aims to uncover the root causes of disparities and establish a basis for creating pathways toward greater equity and justice. The analysis is informed by research conducted with leaders of nonprofit and grassroots organizations (grant partners) and individuals working in a variety of private foundations (funders or funding partners).
- Informed by this research, this article outlines four key strategies for redefining funders' measurement and evaluation practices in ways that foster equity and inclusivity. These strategies are designed to complement each other, transforming traditional frameworks and motivating funders to embrace evaluation methodologies that genuinely appreciate and amplify the distinct perspectives and experiences of organizations led by people of color.

(continued on next page)

philanthropy became a vehicle for wealthy individuals and foundations to address social issues.

Race and racism, however, have played major roles in shaping philanthropy. The origins of philanthropic wealth, for example, can be traced back to the extraction and exploitation of POC communities, their resources, and their land (Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2021; Justice Funders, 2024). The concentration of assets within a small group of virtually all white donors and white-led foundations limited the diversity of perspectives and approaches within the philanthropic sector, perpetuating a cycle of inequity. This structure of institutional philanthropy — often characterized by top-down approaches — produced decisions about funding priorities and initiatives made by a privileged few who were largely disconnected from the communities they sought to serve.

As philanthropy evolved, the interconnected growth and adaptation of the philanthropic and evaluation fields further entrenched existing power[2] imbalances between funders and the communities that were grantees. As described by Dean-Coffey (2018) and Hogan (2007), evaluation has its foundations in the public sector and behavioral sciences and by the late 20th century, effectiveness and efficiency in using public dollars were key values shaping innovation and practice in the evaluation field. In particular, the use of quantitative measures and methodologies (e.g., randomized controlled trials) were esteemed and prioritized. The resulting emphasis on metrics, accountability,[3] and outcomes measurement resonated with early proponents of evaluation in philanthropy. As evaluation use in philanthropy expanded, increasing collaboration with and investment from funders helped to catalyze the evaluation field's rapid growth and a future marked by mutual, bidirectional influence.

Key Points (continued)

- The strategies highlight the importance of adopting transformative funding approaches that prioritize equity, collaboration, and self-reflection within the philanthropic sector. And they underscore the reality that support for POC-led nonprofits to strengthen their evaluation infrastructure benefits both funders and their grant partners: Funders gain access to more accurate and relevant data, and organizations are equipped with tools for strategic decision-making and action — ultimately strengthening the nonprofit ecosystem.

Measurement and Power in Philanthropy

In its adoption of values and methods centered on metrics, accountability, and outcomes measurement, philanthropy became increasingly more focused on demonstrating effectiveness of grants made (Ostrower, 2006; Ostrower, 2007), specifically focusing on effectiveness of "the performance of grant recipients" (Dillman & Christie, 2017, p. 61). An example of this focus is the return-on-investment approach in philanthropy whereby social returns are characterized in financial terms and measured by quantitative outcome metrics. Such developments have led to the adoption of evaluation practices that prioritize quantitative data and standardized indicators, often at the expense of qualitative insights and community-driven visions of success.

Race and racism have played a central role in the evolution of the evaluation field and the high emphasis on quantitative data, outcome metrics, and standardized indicators. The early thought leaders, proponents, and decision-makers in the evaluation field and philanthropy were small groups of white males — and, in the case of philanthropy, wealthy white males

[2] The general definition of power is agency, authority, or influence over others (Crenshaw, 1991). Philanthropic funders have the power to use their wealth and privilege to set and change the rules regarding control of access to resources, information, social networks, and decision-making (Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2022; National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, 2018).

[3] Accountability is the acceptance of responsibility or being answerable for a task, goal, or assignment (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In philanthropy, this often refers to funders holding grant partners responsible for achieving outcomes or results when receiving funds.

(Dean-Coffey, 2018). In addition, the evaluation field has historically given little attention to understanding how racial biases shape evaluation norms and fuel inequities by advancing, and not combating, racial framing and by developing strategies to mitigate and redress racial biases to ensure evaluations advance racial equity and justice (House, 2017). Dean-Coffey (2018) and colleagues with the Equitable Evaluation Initiative (EEI) have discussed the need for evaluation to be conducted in service to equity to achieve equity and justice goals and truly transform how philanthropy engages with grant partners and the communities it serves. Yet, many evaluation standards and criteria used in philanthropy continue to be based on white and western-dominant norms around effectiveness, rigor, and validity and/or standards shaped by predominately white-led institutions, further marginalizing community-driven approaches (EEI, 2021).

The concentration of power and emphasis on accountability and outcomes in philanthropy have had profound implications for systematically marginalized communities, POC-led organizations that serve them, and those working to advance social justice. Donors imposing standardized metrics and evaluation criteria have often failed to capture the nuanced impacts of social justice work, leading to the undervaluation of community-based approaches and grassroots initiatives. These evaluation practices and the resulting undervaluation of community-based and grassroots efforts have led to organizations, particularly those led by POC, facing barriers to accessing funding, navigating funder-imposed evaluation requirements, and meeting stringent reporting requirements. For example, within Echoing Green's applicant pool, Black-led organizations have 24% less revenue and 76% fewer unrestricted assets than those of their white-led counterparts (Dorsey et al., 2020). This disparity not only limits the capacity of POC-led organizations to scale their impact, but it also perpetuates systemic inequities within the philanthropic sector.

The death of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and subsequent acquittal of George Zimmerman reignited a national conversation on racism, justice, and policing in the United States. This tragic event, the public outcry that followed, and the ongoing deaths of POC at the hands of police brought heightened attention to the issues of racial profiling and systemic injustice. The racial and social uprisings following the death of George Floyd and compounded tensions arising from the COVID-19 pandemic have served as critical inflection points for philanthropic practitioners and institutions. To help respond to racial inequities, they increasingly turned to innovative measurement and evaluation approaches that prioritize equity, trust, and collaboration. Some funders set internal diversity, equity, and inclusion goals that laid the foundation for prioritizing equitable evaluation approaches. For example, a growing number of funders are using the Equitable Evaluation Initiative's Equitable Evaluation Framework™ to center evaluation in service to equity and develop equity-focused evaluation strategies (EEI, 2021). Some funders also provided support to grant partners through webinars and group or cohort meetings that serve to strengthen capacity around evaluation and learning. However, the adoption and implementation of such equitable and responsive funding strategies varies across the philanthropic landscape.

Research Methods

This article explores the complexities of philanthropy's relationship with nonprofit and grassroots organizations as mediated by evaluation and reporting practices. By critically analyzing evaluation practices and power dynamics within philanthropy, we aim to uncover the root causes of disparities and establish a basis for identifying pathways toward greater equity and justice.

Our analysis of philanthropy's evaluation practices is informed by research conducted with leaders of nonprofit and grassroots organizations (grant partners) and individuals working in a variety of private foundations (funders or funding partners). Although 23% of funders that participated in the research provide global funding, the questions were not designed to explore nuances that emerge in global philanthropy.

The research began with a literature review of 65 articles on the use of metrics in philanthropy and the challenges faced by POC-led organizations. The findings from the literature review informed the design for a larger mixed-method study, including interviews and a survey. A total of 22 interviews were conducted with grant partners and funders, and responses were analyzed to identify trends. Survey instruments were drafted by the research team and finalized with input from an advisory council to further explore findings from the literature review and gather feedback from a larger, more representative sample. A total of 409 survey responses[4] were provided by grant partners and funders from February to May 2023.

The survey findings were cross-referenced with the interview responses and literature review to identify common themes, all of which were compiled in *The Weight of Power: The Role of Metrics & Evaluation at the Intersection of Social Justice* (Murray et al., 2023). The quantitative data in this article are drawn primarily from the 366 grant-partner surveys due to the small (43) sample size of funders. Both funders and grant partners most commonly addressed the themes of health and health care, education, and community improvement/development. Most grant partners (86%) were nonprofit organizations, a majority serving their local communities within their states (59%) with annual budgets of less than $500,000 (54%).

By interrogating existing evaluation practices in philanthropy and their relation to power dynamics, we identify opportunities for moving toward practices that genuinely support equity and social justice. Through this exploration, we aim to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of philanthropy's influence on social change efforts led by POC and catalyze meaningful action toward a more just and equitable future.

The fundamental barrier to equitable evaluation practices in philanthropy is divergent perspectives on the purpose of evaluation: traditionally, funders prioritize accountability while grant partners view evaluation as a means for narrating their impact and uplifting community perspectives.

Challenges to Equitable Evaluation Practices in Philanthropy

The fundamental barrier to equitable evaluation practices in philanthropy is divergent perspectives on the purpose of evaluation: traditionally, funders prioritize accountability while grant partners view evaluation as a means for narrating their impact and uplifting community perspectives. While some funders are moving away from a focus on accountability, it remains the norm and continues to affect the sector. In fact, evaluations that result in useful lessons for grant partners is a persistent challenge noted by between 69% and 82% of foundations in each of the last three surveys of foundation evaluation practices by the Center for Evaluation Innovation (2016, 2020, 2023).

This basic tension between funders and nonprofits results in a cascade of challenges. Funders insist on immediate, quantifiable outcomes, setting unrealistic time frames for change. The emphasis on accountability leads to a one-size-fits-all approach that disregards the unique contexts and objectives of different programs. Instead of fostering an environment

[4] Survey invitations were sent to a Candid directory of grant partners and funders, with a response rate of 1%. Some participants received gift cards as incentives for completing the survey. Due to the opt-in nature of the survey, we acknowledge the limited sample and potential bias in the data set.

FIGURE 1 Funder Support for Evaluation Infrastructure Is Lacking

Challenges Identified by POC Leaders in My Network	POC-Led Nonprofits (n=160)	Other Nonprofits (n=192)
Lack of data infrastructure	49%	27%
Lack of evaluation staff or consultants	45%	25%
Not enough time given to demonstrate impact	38%	23%
Lack of technical assistance	46%	23%

where nonprofits can learn from their experiences, adapt their strategies, and share their stories of change, the focus on accountability over learning places them in a perpetual cycle of compliance.

Unrealistic Time Frames for Evidence of Change

Funders' quest for accountability often leads them to demand evidence of change within time frames that do not align with the progression of social initiatives. Fully implementing a program or intervention can take an organization at least two to four years (Active Implementation Research Network, 2024), but most grants are not multiyear.

More than half of the leaders we surveyed said there was inadequate time to demonstrate the impact of their funded work. Yet, nonprofit leaders assume that evaluation is a natural part of the funding package, either because it is required by a current funder or because it is seen as necessary for securing new funding (Carman, 2011).

Failure to Consider Organizational Infrastructure

Reaching full and stable implementation of a program or intervention so that it is ready for evaluation also requires an organization with strong infrastructure — staff, systems, and leadership (Active Implementation Research Network, 2024). Many organizations lack the infrastructure to support comprehensive evaluation efforts, relying more heavily on basic data-storage methods and quantitative practices for data collection (Morariu et al., 2016). Our survey data show POC-led organizations, in particular, face a lack of data infrastructure, evaluation staff, or evaluation technical assistance. (See Figure 1.)

Additionally, the inconsistency of metrics across foundations complicates the evaluation process for grant partners, diverting attention from program implementation to compliance with varied funder requests (Goldman Sachs Philanthropy Fund, 2020).

Perspectives of Those Closest to the Issues Often Excluded

Despite the well-documented benefits of participatory methods, foundations still engage grant partners and community members in tokenistic ways rather than in ways that share decision-making power (Gibson, 2018). In a 2020 survey of more than 500 large private and community foundations, most of them consulted or involved either grant partners or affected community members in their grantmaking process — where decisions about what gets measured typically take place — but fewer than 10% actually shifted any decision-making power to partners and communities; even in post-grant evaluation, where there is typically a judgment about whether the grant was successful, grant partners are often consulted or involved but very rarely engaged in decision-making (Husted et al., 2021).

The complexity of social change work requires listening to those most affected by the issues and incorporating their insights into the decisions about what to measure and what is deemed as success. Philanthropy's limited engagement of leaders and community members is evident: 85% of foundations struggle with developing

measures that capture the complexity of the work being funded (CEI, 2023).

The traditional use of grant evaluation by foundations as a means of accountability often leads to success being focused on impact and narrowly defined by the foundation and its board, not by the grant partners (Scherer, 2016). Funder-imposed definitions of success can counter one of their common intents for evaluation — to improve performance of grant partners — as impact metrics de-emphasize lessons learned from the program implementation process, which are crucial for grant partners to refine and improve their programs (Kelly et al., 2019).

Recent initiatives by prominent philanthropists like Melinda French Gates demonstrate a shift toward equitable grantee-led funding. Her commitment of $1 billion to advance women's power globally includes a $240 million allocation to partnerships with 12 diverse global leaders, each distributing $20 million to organizations whose mission is improving women's health worldwide (Pivotal Ventures, 2024). This approach underscores the importance of amplifying community-driven solutions, setting a precedent for other funders to prioritize similar equitable practices.

Accountability in Philanthropy Is Unilateral

Foundations often require performance assessments of grant partners, but struggle with assessing their own due to lack of competitive pressures, quantified goals, and well-defined measures (Buchanan et al., 2005). Further complicating the imbalance, many funders lack transparency in their data sharing, which is essential for accountability (Holley & Parkhurst, 2019). While public commitments to investing in racial equity have increased since the COVID-19 pandemic, this lack of transparency makes it difficult to hold funders accountable for their equity commitments. Detailed equity goals, staff and beneficiary demographics, and evaluation data are often not disclosed. Foundations should answer to those affected by inequities, including clear commitments to behaviors for accountability and establishing robust mechanisms for oversight (Beer et al., 2021), and communities should be equipped to critique and influence funders, especially considering the minimal support for racial equity and justice in philanthropy (Devich Cyril et al., 2020).

While public commitments to investing in racial equity have increased since the COVID-19 pandemic, this lack of transparency makes it difficult to hold funders accountable for their equity commitments. Detailed equity goals, staff and beneficiary demographics, and evaluation data are often not disclosed.

It is becoming clearer that the emphasis on grant-partner accountability is also not working so well for foundations. They recognize a need to develop more robust strategies and better utilize data and evaluation to inform decision-making (Fine et al., 2017), but struggle to do so within the existing accountability framework. When funders emphasize accountability only, the design of accountability systems frequently overlooks the need for adaptability and learning (Holley & Parkhurst, 2019). Foundations consider themselves active participants and learners in the sector, and those that do participate in evaluative practices recognize the importance of evaluating their effectiveness and capacity for achieving greater community impact (Fine et al., 2017).

Four Strategies for Promoting Equity in Evaluation Practices

To address these challenges to equitable measurement and evaluation practices in philanthropy, this article outlines four key strategies for redefining funders' practices in ways that foster equity and inclusivity. These strategies

By synchronizing evaluation practices with the realistic timelines of social change efforts, funders can foster a more supportive and productive relationship with grant partners.

are designed to complement each other, transforming traditional frameworks and motivating funders to embrace evaluation methodologies that genuinely appreciate and amplify the distinct perspectives and experiences of organizations led by people of color.

Strategy 1: Align Expectations With the Length of the Grant Term and the Maturity of the Program

Funders should recalibrate their evaluation expectations to align with the duration of their grant terms and the developmental stage of the programs they support. These adjustments can involve adopting developmental evaluation methods for newer or evolving initiatives, where the focus is on real-time learning and adaptation, rather than premature judgments of outcome or impact (Preskill & Beer, 2012). For newer programs, performance measurement involves co-creating realistic goals together with grant partners, emphasizing short-term outputs and outcomes. This approach provides ongoing insights into progress and can offer a more nuanced understanding of the work over time.

By synchronizing evaluation practices with the realistic timelines of social change efforts, funders can foster a more supportive and productive relationship with grant partners. This approach acknowledges the complexity and time required for deep, systemic changes to take root and flourish. It also shifts the emphasis from accountability in the narrow sense to a broader perspective on learning and improvement, encouraging nonprofits to engage in reflective practices that enhance their work's effectiveness and sustainability. As one funder observed,

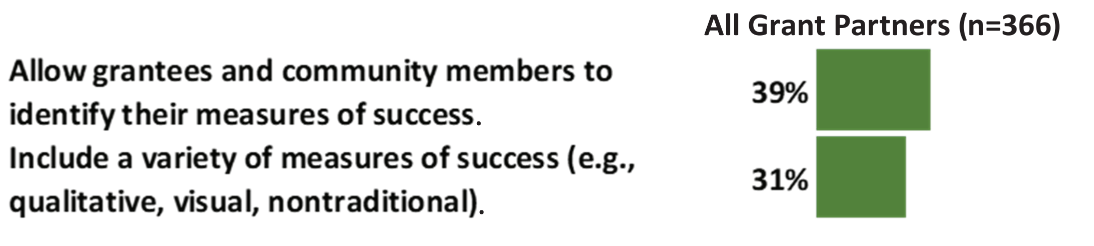
> We're talking about deep impact, and some of these problems are generational, right? They're not something that's gonna be solved in a three year or . . . one-year grant cycle. These are entrenched issues, systemic, that are generational. We really need to . . . unburden ourselves from trying to show progress in a year and certainly relieve the burden [on] portfolio partners.

In practical terms, funders can start by engaging in open dialogues with grant partners about the most appropriate and constructive evaluation strategies for their specific context. This collaborative approach to determining evaluation methods reinforces mutual trust and ensures that evaluation serves as a tool for learning and improvement, rather than merely an obligation. Ultimately, by aligning evaluation expectations with the actual timelines and stages of program development, funders can contribute more effectively to the long-term success and impact of the initiatives they support, thereby advancing their mission to address society's most pressing challenges.

Strategy 2: Allow Partners to Identify and Provide Different Metrics of Success

Participatory evaluation can be a transformative approach where funders refrain from setting predetermined success measures and allow grant partners and community members to identify their own measures of success. Participatory evaluation methods ensure that the evaluation's guiding questions and metrics are relevant, improves data quality, and aligns recommendations with the values and priorities of partners and the community (Newhouse, 2020). This, however, requires funders to relinquish power and share it with those who are closest to the issue. More than a third of nonprofit leaders we surveyed identified shifting the decision-making power from funders to grant partners when identifying success measures as a strategy for strengthening equity in philanthropic evaluation. (See Figure 2.) Only 34%, however, reported that their funding

FIGURE 2 Strategies Identified as Most Effective at Creating More Equitable Funding for Leaders of Color



partners have at least somewhat implemented this strategy.

Yielding power to grant partners and community members to define success measures acknowledges the significant, though hard-to-quantify, contributions nonprofit organizations make toward building trust, confidence, and rapport with the communities they serve (Mosley et al., 2018). It also challenges the conventional reliance on quantifiable indicators as the sole evidence of success. By engaging grant partners in the process of defining success and embracing a broader spectrum of evidence — including both quantitative data and qualitative insights like personal experiences and stories — foundations can foster more innovation and risk-taking among grassroots leaders (Scherer, 2016; Mosley et al., 2018). Some innovative foundations have adopted a "community-first" perspective, utilizing journalism, social media, and visual storytelling to articulate their journey and impact (Braff-Guajardo et al., 2018), aligning with the perspective of one funder who emphasized the importance of engaging community members in defining measures. A funder argued:

> The outcomes, if they are not developed by the community — who are we to say that should be what's important to them? Just because you have a billionaire that says, "Hey, this is what I think we should be working on," where is their expertise actually coming from? You can be a billionaire that has been successful at creating computers, right? That doesn't mean that you are successful in creating social change, and you shouldn't . . . be able to direct funds in that manner without community say-so, right?

The approach to measurement and evaluation is also shaped by the nature of the grant itself. Multiyear general operating support allows grant partners greater autonomy in determining their success criteria, thus encouraging innovation and mitigating the risk-averse tendencies that narrow definitions of success can foster (GEO, 2014). A nonprofit leader discussed this:

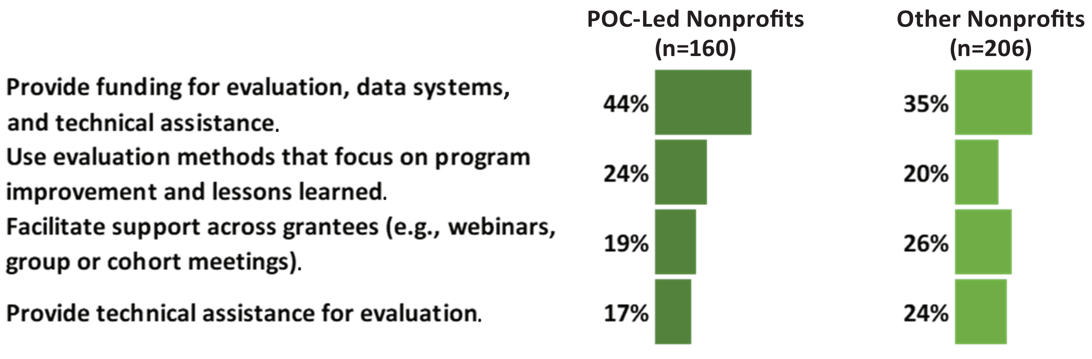
> Equitable funding is general operating . . . and funding that is multiyear — I mean, five to 10 years multiyear, not two or three. Funding that works with us to get more funding to build on it, to help with sustainability, and funding that is flexible. We want community members that we work with to have self-sustaining funding, some sort of an economic engine for them. Finding a way that helps us to do that really well so that the community will also be successful is key.

Traditional approaches to measurement, evaluation, and learning must evolve as funders scale multiyear general operating support. Foundations can instead develop clear and participatory evaluation practices that better align with the perspectives of POC leaders and the communities they serve (Bledsoe et al., 2022).

Strategy 3: Provide Technical Assistance and Support

To enhance grant partners' ability to evaluate their work, funders can offer two things: funding for evaluation-related staffing and activities, and technical assistance to strengthen evaluation capacity. While funders expect detailed evaluation outcomes, they often fail to provide adequate financial support for these activities, underscoring the need for dedicated resources to bolster evaluation efforts (Boris & Kopczynski

FIGURE 3 Strategies Identified as Most Effective at Creating More Equitable Funding for Black, Indigenous, and Other Leaders of Color (n=366), by Leader Demographics



Winkler, 2013). Among the POC leaders we surveyed, nearly half of them identified a lack of technical assistance as a challenge with metrics that their funders request, compared to less than a quarter of organizations not led by POC — even though it is identified as one of the most effective strategies for creating more equitable funding. (See Figure 3).

Addressing common challenges such as limited staff time and financial constraints, funders can utilize multiyear general operating support for essential staffing and infrastructure for evaluation (GEO, 2014) and provide targeted technical assistance, aiming for sustainable evaluation practices that give organizations tools to apply findings to decision-making and action (Preskill & Boyle, 2008). Technical assistance might involve funding for data systems, coaching, and training to build evaluation skills, ensuring these efforts are tailored to the strengths and needs of grant partners (Hollod, 2017; GEO, 2015). Additionally, funders can offer nonfinancial support, such as recommending evaluators or assisting in recruitment efforts, to further enhance evaluation capabilities.

In our survey, grant partners said that only 23% of their funders offered some level of technical assistance for evaluation, and just 13% provided funding for evaluation, data systems, and technical assistance. Such comprehensive support could greatly enhance the evaluation capabilities of grant partners, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and informed decision-making. Overall, an emphasis on support for evaluation capacity is beneficial for the sustainability of the nonprofit ecosystem. It not only improves the effectiveness of funded initiatives, but also solidifies funders' roles as collaborative partners, thereby strengthening relationships and bolstering their standing within the philanthropic sector. Likewise, enhanced evaluation infrastructure can underscore the credibility of grant partners and appeal to other potential funders. Doing this would remove a significant burden from grant partners and allow them to focus on other important aspects of their work.

Strategy 4: Focus Evaluation on Funders and Increase Transparency

A foundation's impact is more than the sum of its grants. Funders must also scrutinize how they fulfill their roles in selecting partners, attracting other funders, building capabilities, and advancing knowledge (Porter & Kramer, 1999; Buchanan et al., 2005). To realign funders' grantmaking strategies with the goal of promoting racial equity, 21% of grant partners surveyed recommend a reflective and self-evaluative approach in which foundations set their internal DEI goals.

By adopting performance measurement and evaluation systems, individual foundations can assess their own strategies, service, and impact. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the

TABLE 1 Cross-Cutting Benefits to Strategies for Promoting Equity in Evaluation Practices

Benefits	Implications
Strengthening Relationships and Trust	• Build stronger and more collaborative relationships. • Shift power dynamic and foster trust. • Demonstrate commitment to collaborative learning. • Demonstrate commitment to transparency and accountability.
Sustainability and Effectiveness of the Nonprofit Ecosystem	• Enable organizations to plan strategically for the long term. • Enhance the quality of evaluations and position grant partners as active contributors. • Promote innovation and risk-taking. • Ensure organizations can navigate increasing demands for data and evaluation. • Reflect a commitment to learning and adapting. • Enhance the overall effectiveness of the philanthropic sector.

William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and, more recently, the Lumina Foundation have performance measurement systems or surveys to examine such areas as program strategy, service to grant partners, and impact against key program objectives (Giudice & Bolduc, 2004; Buchanan et al., 2005). Equally, foundations should establish clear, measurable equity goals that focus on organization size and the demographics of leadership and communities served (Allen, 2020). This would hold program officers accountable to support more grassroots and POC leaders.

Adopting a reflective, self-evaluative approach in grantmaking that focuses on transparency, accountability, and equity benefits both funders and grant partners. For funders, it means improved impact through better understanding and more responsive adjustment of strategies, the credibility gained from being open about goals and outcomes, enhanced decision-making from using data and feedback, and stronger relationships with grant partners through shared learning and adaptation. This approach also positions funders as leaders in promoting racial equity.

Grant partners benefit from greater awareness of funders' goals, leading to more effective collaboration. They receive enhanced support, including technical assistance and expertise, boosting their capacity for impact — especially crucial for grassroots and POC-led organizations.

Embracing These Strategies, What Would Change?

The path to an equitable philanthropic landscape lies in adopting transformative funding strategies that extend beyond traditional approaches. These strategies embody a commitment to a more inclusive, responsive, and impactful ecosystem. In 2020, the Center for Effective Philanthropy (2020) indicated that 21% of respondents to its Grantee Perception Report survey reported receiving general operating support in the prior 10 years. Similarly, 2019 Candid data indicated 23% of grant dollars funded by U.S. private and community foundations went to general operating support (Sato & Dayal, 2023). Post-pandemic data suggest only a slight increase, with 30% of grant partners reporting receiving unrestricted funding (CEP, 2024). This trend indicates a broader shift within philanthropy toward more equitable and responsive funding practices, driven by a recognition of the need to center community voices and priorities.

Multifaceted challenges faced by nonprofits, particularly those led by POC, necessitate a departure from traditional, short-term funding approaches. Strategies that emphasize long-term, flexible support play a crucial role in fostering the stability and resilience of these

organizations. In turn, this contributes to building a more robust and equitable nonprofit ecosystem. By examining the interplay of the solutions above, we uncovered an array of reinforcing benefits that support the potential for lasting impact. (See Table 1.)

Strengthening Relationships and Trust

At the heart of these strategies lies an effort to build stronger and more collaborative relationships between funders and grant partners.

- Right-sized evaluation approaches — Strategy 1 — can alleviate undue stress on grant partners and open the door for more meaningful conversations around organizational learning.
- Allowing partners to identify and provide different metrics of success — Strategy 2 — shifts the power dynamic, fostering trust by acknowledging the expertise of grant partners in defining success criteria.
- Providing evaluation technical assistance and support — Strategy 3 — demonstrates a commitment to collaborative learning, signaling to grant partners that their challenges are acknowledged and addressed.
- Asking funders to be reflective by turning the evaluation mandate on themselves — Strategy 4 — demonstrates a commitment to transparency and accountability.

Sustainability and Effectiveness of the Nonprofit Ecosystem

These strategies also enhance sustainability and effectiveness of the nonprofit and grassroots organization ecosystem, with collaboration playing a crucial role.

- Applying developmental and dynamic evaluation approaches — Strategy 1 — supports and learns from innovative social change strategies that address entrenched societal issues.
- Allowing partners to identify and provide different metrics of success — Strategy 2 — promotes innovation and risk-taking, enhancing the quality of evaluations, and positions grant partners as active contributors in the decision-making process.
- Providing evaluation technical assistance and support — Strategy 3— represents a collaborative effort to address related challenges and ensures that organizations, particularly those with limited resources, can navigate the increasing demands for data and evaluation.
- Funders turning the evaluation lens on themselves — Strategy 4 — reflects a shared commitment to learning and adapting, enhancing the overall effectiveness of the philanthropic sector and creating an environment where funders and grant partners can learn together, thrive, and collectively contribute to social change.

Beyond financial support, fostering relationships that enable grant partners to define success metrics and actively participate in the evaluation process ensures a more inclusive and effective approach. By acknowledging the expertise of grant partners and integrating their insights into the evaluation framework, a shift towards equitable practices takes root.

Gaps and Research Opportunities

Research on the effectiveness and compatibility of the strategies discussed will address an important research gap. Understanding scalability for broader application of these strategies is another key opportunity for future research. Also, the long-term effects of these strategies on grant-partner capacity, particularly through multiyear general operating support and participatory evaluations, merit investigation. Finally, incorporating global perspectives may enhance understanding of these strategies' applicability and alignment within different sociopolitical, cultural, and legal contexts.

Moving Toward Systemic Change

The call for systemic change in philanthropy demands an acknowledgment of power dynamics and a commitment to dismantling inequitable structures. Systemic change involves transparency, accountability, and adaptability

on the part of funders. It requires an ongoing dialogue between funders and grant partners, recognizing the evolving nature of community needs and the dynamic challenges faced by nonprofit organizations.

Advocating for practices that genuinely support equity and social justice requires a departure from top-down approaches in which power is concentrated in foundations. It involves a recognition of the unique strengths and challenges within communities, as well as an acknowledgment that the path to social change is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor. Equitable evaluation practices in philanthropy involve actively engaging with communities, understanding their needs, and co-creating approaches and measures of success that are both culturally responsive and contextually relevant.

As we reflect on the transformative potential of these evaluation strategies, it is evident that the journey toward equity in philanthropy is ongoing. The strategies outlined are a call for philanthropy to evolve from a transactional relationship to a partnership built on trust, collaboration, and a shared commitment to social justice. They are intended to serve as catalysts for change, but their true impact lies in their integration into the broader philanthropic ecosystem.

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Advocacy and Bridging Strategies Are Failing on Their Own. Multifaith Nonprofits Embody Six Solutions for a Pluralistic Democracy

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Keywords: *Pluralism, multifaith, intergroup contact theory, activism, polarization*

Introduction

Amid ongoing social and environmental crises and rising political polarization, nonprofits and their funders seeking social and cultural change in a diverse democracy can feel forced into narrow, and ultimately insufficient, strategies for change.

In spring 2023, the Statement on Philanthropic Pluralism and the reaction to it threw the dilemma of nonprofit actors into sharp relief (Dill et al., 2023). The statement's calls for civility and bridging were met with frustration about its "erroneous premise" (Le, 2023, para. 6), and the argument that "politeness has never served the cause of social justice" (Villanueva, 2023, para. 5).

It appeared that grantmakers supporting social change had just two, mutually exclusive options:

1. Make friends and forgive grievances.

2. Get no justice, give no peace.

In fact, those phrases epitomize the two most common strategies for social and cultural change:

1. Intergroup contact strategies aim to reduce bias and violence via human connection and influence wider bridging and collaboration projects.

2. Activism and advocacy strategies aim to change institutions and policies by organizing people.

Key Points

- This article clarifies a strategic dilemma between bridging difference or advocacy strategies for funders and their grantees seeking social change in the context of polarization, putting it in conversation with social science research on intergroup contact theory, on which bridging strategies are based, and advocacy. Based on a set of interviews and surveys, this article explores how multifaith organizations embody strategies that navigate the contact/advocacy divide.
- This article posits that multifaith organizations — those intentionally formed of people or institutions with different faith identities — embody six practices that avoid the false dichotomy of bridging and advocacy strategies: "dual identity" contact, tolerating disagreement, shattering typical binaries, managing shifting constellations of partners, developing local relationships, and possessing extensive reach. In short, they are a micromodel of our society, weathering the hardest of differences, showing the way toward reduced animosity and real improvement in our politics.
- Without attention to long-term bridging strategies, the creative ideas produced by activists are unlikely to find their way into acceptance across political divides. Multifaith organizations offer a way out of this dilemma as both models and potential partners for funders. The article offers recommendations for how funders can better support these organizations to promote a pluralistic democracy.

Each set of strategies is insufficient to create lasting change in a diverse democracy. Contact interventions can change bias levels, but they can also damage social justice movements (Saguy et al., 2017). Meanwhile, activism and advocacy can force policy change, but prioritizing short-term wins over long-term culture shifts stokes backlash, overwhelming initial gains (Braunstein, 2021; Idriss & Kleinfeld, 2023). High levels of affective polarization create the feeling that the strategies are mutually exclusive, leading strategists to double down on their approach and increasing the risk of failure. Policy swings risk democratic breakdown. Real progress stalls. Both nonprofits and philanthropy perpetuate these cycles (Kleinfeld, 2018; Masters, 2022).

To cultivate lasting change in a peaceful, just, and diverse democracy, grantmakers need to promote both creative activism and bridging movements where new ideas can be integrated across divides and democratic practices of negotiation maintained. Multifaith organizations provide successful models for social change while avoiding polarization. They can also be strong partners for grantmakers, other nonprofits, and governments working on everything from climate change to hate crime reduction. They are intentionally comprised of, partner with, and convene institutions and individuals that differ in their theologies, traditions, and cultures.[1] Multifaith organizations often contain some level of ideological diversity within their membership as well.

Internal diversity encourages MFOs to live out six solutions to the failures of contact and advocacy strategies. They practice "dual identity" contact, tolerate disagreement, shatter typical binaries, manage shifting constellations of partners, develop local relationships, and have extensive reach. In short, MFOs are a micromodel of our society, weathering the hardest of our political and identitarian differences, showing the way toward reduced animosity and real improvement in our politics. These ways of being make them both great models for other nonprofit organizations seeking lasting change and excellent partners for funders where goals align.

In short, MFOs are a micromodel of our society, weathering the hardest of our political and identitarian differences, showing the way toward reduced animosity and real To cultivate lasting change in a peaceful, just, and diverse democracy, grantmakers need to promote both creative activism and bridging movements where new ideas can be integrated across divides and democratic practices of negotiation maintained. Multifaith organizations provide successful models for social change while avoiding polarization. improvement in our politics.

At the moment, there is some evidence to suggest that funders underutilize faith-based partners across the nonprofit sector (Eckhart

[1] Multifaith organizations use a variety of terms for their work, including multifaith, interfaith, interreligious, ecumenical, bridge-building, broad-based, and open to all. For ease, this article includes in this designation organizations that are explicitly monofaith but ecumenical within that — many traditions are split among a diverse array of denominations. Work across these divides can be just as hard as work across religious lines.

FIGURE 1 Participating Multifaith Organizations

1. DOCC: Downtown Outreach Churches' Collegium (Pat Stromsta)
2. Interfaith Action of SW Michigan (Vicki Schroeder)
3. Interfaith Clergy Association of Greater Lansing (Betsy Aho)
4. Interfaith Photovoice (Roman Williams)
5. Interfaith Round Table of Washtenaw County (Tasneem Sultan)
6. International Campus Ministry at Western Michigan University (Laura Osborne)
7. ISAAC: Interfaith Strategy for Advocacy & Action in the Community (Pat Stromsta)
8. Kaufman Interfaith Institute (Douglas Kindschi and Kyle Kooyers)
9. Michigan Interfaith Power & Light (Leah Wiste)
10. Michigan Religious Leaders for Justice (Vicki Schroeder)
11. Momentum Center (Barbara Lee VanHorssen)
12. Mother's Trust Mother's Place (Sandra Bier)
13. My Oasis Center (Doug Mantha)
14. Northern Michigan Interfaith Common Ground (Doug Mantha)
15. Reformed Church in America (Laura Osborne)
16. Together West Michigan (Allison McCulley)

Queenan et al., 2021). Of funding that does go to religion-related grantees, MFOs get about a sixth of those funds. A study of 33 funders that were known to fund in religion-related areas gave at least $10.8 million in 2018 and 2019 of the at least $67.8 million that went toward a set of religion-related funding areas (Inclusive America Project et al., 2020; Ralph, 2021). Interviews with funders who do partner with MFOs to discover best practices for working with this class of organization lie outside the scope of this article. However, this area of inquiry would be an excellent target for additional fieldwork.

Methods and Data

This study analyzes 16 multifaith organizations[2] represented by 13 staff members working in local contexts in Michigan. (See Figure 1.) These organizations appear in this study because they attended a convening[3] held by the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University on Aug. 28–29, 2023; they are not a random sample. In preparation for the convening, which was held to harvest learnings on best practices and explore potential partnerships, the organizations were required to fill out an online survey. (See Appendix 1.) In addition, they were asked to participate in a one-on-one interview with the author. (See Appendix 2.) Because most participants were invited due to their connection with a particular organization, four additional connections to separate organizations were discovered later: in one case during the survey and in three cases during the interview process. One organization had two interviewees. Thirteen of 16 organizations completed the survey. Leaders of all 16 organizations were interviewed.

Using 12 interviews conducted over July and August 2023, results of the online survey, additional internet searching, and conversations during a convening, this article explores how

[2] All the participating organizations are nonprofits except for Interfaith Photovoice, whose foci include environmental protection and climate policy, gun violence reduction, health and human services, mental health, public transportation, interfaith dialogue, and interfaith worship.

[3] The convening took place at and was funded by the Fetzer Institute. The author served as a consultant to the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University in contributing to the agenda for and co-facilitating the convening of participants, and in producing this article as a result. Other than approving their own quotations, the Kaufman Interfaith Institute did not control the content of this article.

MFOs embody strategies that navigate the contact/advocacy divide. As data collection took place with the promise of anonymity, all quotations have been approved by the interviewees or anonymized. The data are not otherwise available due to ethical concerns.

Partnership Data

An initial hypothesis for this study was that explicitly multifaith organizations would have formal members or partners. The findings were somewhat more complex.

Every organization was invited to share lists of members or partners, however they defined these terms. Definitions varied widely: Some organizations had formal, paid members; others listed only board members and their affiliations as "partners." Some had partner lists comprised of organizations that had signed on to a pledge, regularly collaborated on programming, or sat on advising councils.

Ten of the 16 organizations submitted a membership or partner list. Others reported that although many folks from their communities participated in programming, their organization did not have any formal partnership, membership, or collaboration with them. One organization declined to share a partner list because they considered their partners more like clients for certain types of services.

Shared Themes

The author reviewed all the data collected prior to the convening, marking shared themes that were then categorized as

- whether and how to tackle the deepest divisions internally or externally,
- challenges specific to working across lines of race and ethnicity,
- best practices for relationship building, and
- issues of organizational structure and strategy.

These four themes were then filtered through the active discussion of the convening itself, which was shaped by the additional context of research on nonprofit contact and advocacy strategies. The resulting five solutions plus the findings of the organizations' reach constitute the six solutions presented here.

Intergroup Contact Theory

Intergroup contact theory grounds bridging and dialogue strategies to address polarization, bias, and incidence of violence on the basis that "contact between individuals who belong to different groups can foster the development of more positive out-group attitudes" (Vezzali & Stathi, 2017, p. 1).

Contact interventions include formal one-to-one dialogues, public lectures about minorities, or shared meals and can be used in combination to address racial (Be the Bridge, 2023); religious (Multi-Faith Neighbors Network, 2024); or political divides (Braver Angels, 2024). Some strategies have secondary aims to incite participants to support policy changes. All contact strategies work by creating a sense of "in-groupness," which can be developed by common-identity programs that emphasize a single superordinate identity, or by dual-identity programs that encourage participants to maintain subgroup identities.

Intergroup contact shows mixed results. Positive contact in real-life and lab settings has reduced bias and violence on the part of advantaged community members toward the disadvantaged and increased willingness of the advantaged to use their resources for the benefit of the disadvantaged. But degrees of change in bias are dismally small (Saguy et al., 2017). A metastudy of 418 contact interventions found a long-term change in feeling "five times smaller than the positive shift in feelings from cool to warm observed toward gay individuals in the United States in the past two decades" (Paluck et al., 2021, p. 554). Worse, common-identity programming can be harmful through the "Irony of Harmony" effect, by undermining collective action, and by fostering the "principle-implementation gap."

- *"Irony of Harmony"* is an effect where disadvantaged people come to under-perceive bias against themselves, reducing their willingness to protest. One study showed that Black South Africans who had more positive contact with whites were less supportive of reparative policies (Saguy et al., 2017).

- *Collective action* requires a strong sense of subgroup identity and strict group boundaries (Saguy et al., 2017). The boundary-blurring effects of common-identity contact also reduce attachment to subgroups, thus actively undermining social justice organizing.

- *The "principle-implementation gap"* describes the failure of positive feelings to spur positive action. In one study, post-contact observation showed that advantaged group members had positive feelings about their disadvantaged counterparts but still behaved unfairly. Another study showed that advantaged participants perceived less bias and were less willing to stand up against it (Saguy et al., 2017). Common-identity programming made the resulting participant community less equitable, not more.

It is not all bad news. Contact programs that encourage participants to maintain strong subgroup and common identities — dual-identity contact — have more positive and fewer negative effects. One of the studies just mentioned also showed that dual-identity contact led the advantaged to perceive and try to correct bias against the disadvantaged (Saguy et al., 2017). Research in the tradition of embedded intergroup relations — that is, how identitarian subgroups function within organizations — supports these findings (van Knippenberg, 2008).

Still, the research on intergroup contact theory validates activists' distrust about bridging and pluralism projects; Edgar Villanueva (2023) is right in his pushback against the Statement on Philanthropic Pluralism: "If philanthropy chooses to prioritize pluralism to the detriment of equity, it aids and abets the oppression of those who have always struggled to be heard" (para. 11).

Advocacy and Activism Theory

Advocacy and activism serve as hubs for incredible creativity in shaping public discourse and concepts of community and politics even when unsuccessful at policy change (Atkinson, 2017). Even though they are different tactics, the terms activism and advocacy are used together in this article because they share similar goals. Both strategies are creatively transformative, empowering individuals to challenge existing norms and introduce new ideas or ways of coexisting (Harrebye, 2016). The fringes of social networks, where actors are less bound to traditional norms, hold substantial potential for driving social change more effectively than top-down policy (Centola, 2021).

For clarity, advocacy and activism are:

- democratizing strategies connecting large numbers of people to civic engagement and ways to disrupt existing concepts of community and politics (this article uses the shorthand "institutions and policies");

- necessary mediators of popular experience, knowledge, and ideas into other cultural discourses and politics;

- protected by the First Amendment rights of free speech, press, petition for redress of grievances, and assembly; and

- used by liberal, conservative, and libertarian movements (see, e.g., Braunstein, 2017).

Activist and advocacy organizations are often grounded in the prophetic tradition epitomized by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. He emphasized that every person is made in the image of God and placed himself in the tradition of Old Testament prophets crying out against injustice. King's prophetic imagery still inspires members of nondominant groups, including people of color, women, the LGBTQIA+ community, and other marginalized peoples to "embrace a prophetic stance in order to sustain confidence in their humanity and right to be heard" (Braunstein, 2019, p. 7).

Unfortunately, progressive social change tends to spark conservative backlash. Famously coined to describe the white response to the civil rights movement, the concept has become "a constraint on modern liberalism," quashing new ideas for fear of the response (Glickman, 2020, para. 22). Yet backlash can also be studied as a measurable social response to change, which sociologist Ruth Braunstein (2021) has recently done based on reactions to the religious right's "brand of politicized conservative religion" (p. 2). The religious right spearheaded a hugely successful movement to maintain institutional and legal structures during historically significant demographic change. By the year 2000, it "was the most powerful interest group in the GOP" (Williams, 2010, p. 3).

Braunstein teases out two unintended outcomes — backlash — against the religious right's strategies. First, she names the mass disaffiliation from institutional religion as "broad" backlash. A second, "counter" backlash followed because

> the experience of being the object of political backlash appears to be … leading to purification processes that push weak adherents out and strengthen commitment to the ingroup among those who remain, as well as fewer internal checks on radical ideas. (Braunstein, 2021, pp. 21–22)

The result is a dramatically smaller and more radical religious right movement that has abandoned many of the theologically conservative values with which it began — hardly the success the movement at first envisioned (Bass, 2021; Nadeem, 2022).

Braunstein's work shifts "backlash" out of its typical context and attending value judgment. She shows that the dynamics of purification, strengthening in-group commitment, and resulting broad and narrow backlash have long-term, unintended effects worth attending to if long-term change is the goal. Progressive social movements, including those for abortion rights, norming LGBTQIA+ identities, and racial equity, are now having to once again contest policies and norms they thought had been settled (see, e.g., Students for Fair Admissions

The lesson for strategists of long-term success is not that prophetic voices should be silenced. On the contrary, a functioning democracy needs the creative ferment and multiple channels for engagement in politics and civil society that activism provides.

Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2023; Cox, 2022; Zaremberg et al., 2021). It is not a stretch to suggest that the recent losses and increasing stridency on the left are markers of similar backlash and counter-backlash effects.

The lesson for strategists of long-term success is not that prophetic voices should be silenced. On the contrary, a functioning democracy needs the creative ferment and multiple channels for engagement in politics and civil society that activism provides. Building movements from the people up; designing with, not for; and centering marginalized voices are imperative to successful change (e.g., brown, 2017; Brown & Wyatt, 2010; Duong et al., 2023). The lesson is that successful movements for social change are almost certainly going to be accompanied by unintended social backlash effects, wherever they originate on the political spectrum. So, there must also be bridging movements, where creative ideas can be iterated and integrated across divides, relationships strengthened, and the practices of democratic negotiation and community maintained (Kleinfeld, 2023). That is where MFOs can lead.

Results and Discussion: Six Solutions From Multifaith Organizations

Multifaith organizations can join the best of both strategies and avoid their pitfalls. They are

Because their internal diversity is their strength, MFOs are less likely to be pulled into cycles of purification and radicalization that lead to backlash and reverses in policies. They are constantly navigating the deepest social divisions, practicing the skills and competencies of real democratic engagement in a pluralistic society.

intentionally internally diverse in theology, tradition, culture, and — often — political stance.

Because their internal diversity is their strength, MFOs are less likely to be pulled into cycles of purification and radicalization that lead to backlash and reverses in policies. They are constantly navigating the deepest social divisions, practicing the skills and competencies of real democratic engagement in a pluralistic society. They embody the five principles of social cohesion laid out in *A Funder's Guide to Building Social Cohesion* (Democracy Funders Network, 2022).

Multifaith organizations are themselves very diverse, their programs ranging from contact interventions to activism and advocacy. Many mix or marry these strategies in creative ways or serve different roles in a mutually beneficial ecosystem. Different types of MFOs reach across different types of differences, offering a variety of solutions. They model six solutions for a peaceful, just, and diverse democracy:

1. *Dual-Identity Contact:* Participants or partners are invited to maintain separate religious or cultural identities and to form a new common identity.

2. *Tolerating Disagreement:* Diverse viewpoints among partners are held in tension, allowing divergence on some issues to reach consensus on others.

3. *Shifting Constellations:* Partnerships can change flexibly issue by issue.

4. *Shattering Binaries:* Organizations with diverse members can abandon left/right binaries to create unique solutions.

5. *Local Organizations/Local Relationships:* Local relationships and cultural competencies are indispensable for change.

6. *Reach:* Organizations that partner with congregations have extensive numerical reach for their size and can cut across multiple types of diversity.

Dual-Identity Contact

Interfaith dialogue organizations typically work on the premise that participants should maintain their unique religious and cultural identities. Eboo Patel (2022), founder of Interfaith America and one of the best-recognized multifaith leaders, speaks about this as the pluralistic interfaith "potluck" where everyone brings their own, unique contribution. Importantly, he says, this is not a melting pot. Rather, religious believers are encouraged to maintain their own exclusive truth claims while they learn about and connect with people of other traditions. This is textbook dual-identity contact (Frisch et al., 2023; Saguy et al., 2017).

Seven of the 16 organizations interviewed for this article focused their efforts on contact more than advocacy.[4] Five of these volunteered that

[4] Private discussions with the author: Barbara Lee VanHorssen, Momentum Center; Kyle Kooyers and Doug Kindschi, Kaufman Interfaith Institute; Betsy Aho, Interfaith Clergy Association of Greater Lansing; Tasneem Sultan, Interfaith Round Table of Washtenaw County; Sandra Bier, Mother's Trust Mother's Place; and Doug Mantha, My Oasis Center and Northern Michigan Interfaith Common Ground.

their programming encourages participants to maintain their established identities, rather than emphasizing superordinate ones. And Roman Williams, founder of Interfaith Photovoice, said his organization strives to create environments where "there is a plurality of views in the room. So, for example, a Muslim person showing a photo of prayer might lead to interesting conversations and learning across difference."

Although multifaith activist and advocacy organizations rarely provide programming for contact itself, contact is part of their very existence. Their strength is drawn from the diversity of voices they can gather, not their sheer numbers.

Tolerating Disagreement

Different faith communities align idiosyncratically around different issues. Further, minority faith communities do not necessarily align with progressive political positions. For example, the membership of an advocacy organization might include an Ismaili Muslim mosque, a Southern Baptist church, an AME church, a Reform synagogue, and a Jain temple. The theologies of this imagined group would align in different constellations around different social issues of gender, reproductive rights, racial justice, and so on, so this organization would have to constantly practice the democratic skills of listening, negotiation, and deliberation. This dynamic is a particular challenge for these organizations, but it is also by far their greatest strength and results in two solutions to the dilemma laid out above: skills to tolerate disagreement and manage shifting constellations of partners.

The social dynamics of purification in left- and right-leaning movements for change push out in-group moderates and tie disparate policy positions together in all-or-nothing stances. On the left, for example, the all-or-nothing dynamic can be seen in how "tolerating difference" has come to signify unacceptably tolerating injustice. This drives purification in the movement by pushing out those who disagree on some issues. In contrast, MFOs necessitate some level of toleration of diversity of theology, community practices, and ideological stances. The strength of these organizations lies in their ability to muster divergent opinions toward a single position, demonstrating broad support for it. They differ in how far they lean into those tensions.

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Broad-based organizations explicitly avoid taking positions on some of the most divisive issues, building actions on more universal concerns. Together West Michigan connects communities for policy change in mental health care, child care, housing, and immigrant/refugee well-being. This organization acknowledges there are issues they will never work on because, they say, "that would break apart the organization" and "there are things that we can do together that are important."[5] The avoidance of hot-button issues creates a level of tension within their

[5] Several organizations noted it was not domestic political issues that were most likely to break the cooperative work; instead, it was geopolitical disagreements over such issues as Israel and Palestine.

[T]hose organizations that explicitly acknowledge irreconcilable differences among their constituents can clearly identify those areas where they can empower collaboration for the common good, maintain broader support for their goals, and ensure longer-term success.

membership, but that tension is not seen as a negative. "We strive purposefully to occupy the both/and of policy and relationships," as TWM's lead organizer, Allison McCulley, put it. "There is tension when you work with real people who have real differences," she said. "But that's democracy at its best. And really, most of life happens in the middle — in the tension."

There is plenty of tension. Eight organizations interviewed volunteered that they get pulled toward bolder policy positions and programming by community partners or members.[6] This pull signifies levels of affective polarization in the community. As one interviewee stated simply: "As we've gotten more political in our messaging with a clearer power analysis, we've gotten a higher level of engagement."

Such tensions could contribute to the purification and radicalization of nonprofits and their movements. That in turn would narrow their power base, and though it might lead to greater short-term success, it would also be harder to maintain those wins over time. On the other hand, those organizations that explicitly acknowledge irreconcilable differences among their constituents can clearly identify those areas where they can empower collaboration for the common good, maintain broader support for their goals, and ensure longer-term success.

Shifting Constellations

A related theme is the need to constantly manage shifting constellations of partners. Many multifaith advocacy organizations hold a "partner where you can" outlook, which is a hallmark of the most successful strategies for long-term change. Rather than requiring an all-or-nothing connection, these organizations are flexible, hold disagreements in tension, and seek stable but significant progress.

Interfaith Action of Southwest Michigan holds a center-left platform of environment, migration, dignity and justice, peacemaking, and pluralistic democracy that is broad enough to attract interest from religious communities that do not fall neatly into either political camp, said team member Vicki Schroeder. To maintain those connections, the group allows its partners to opt out of actions that would violate their beliefs. The organization also maintains a board diverse in race and religion, ensuring a rigorous review process. Member congregations uncomfortable with some decisions often come along because their religious or racial identity is represented in the process.

The "partner where you can" attitude was also expressed by Michigan Interfaith Power and Light, which both helps individual congregations become more energy efficient and helps congregations engage in advocacy for affordable clean energy. In recent years, the group has moved toward more statewide advocacy efforts that are less palatable to theologically and socially conservative member congregations, creating some tension with these members. However, executive director Leah Wiste said the organization has maintained these relationships by continuing to support their moves toward energy-efficient buildings.

[5] In discussion with the author: Allison McCulley, Together West Michigan; Betsy Aho; Tasneem Sultan; Vicki Schroeder, Interfaith Action of SW Michigan; Leah Wiste, Michigan Interfaith Power & Light; Pat Stromsta, DOCC and ISAAC; and Doug Kindschi and Kyle Kooyers.

As one principle of broad-based community organizing goes, "there are no permanent enemies, and no permanent allies"; and this is exactly the kind of creative, goal-oriented bridge building recommended by polarization and political violence expert Rachel Kleinfeld (2023) as a buttress for democratic processes.

Shattering Binaries

Though demonstrably false, left/right binaries continue to shape common expectations about politics and communities (Montanaro, 2021; Stone, 2023). Many MFOs can join otherwise-unlikely partners in ways that creatively shatter these structures.

Some, for example, connect conservative Muslims and evangelical Christians over shared religious-freedom concerns (e.g., Uddin, 2021). The Muslim-Jewish Advisory Council (n.d.) addresses antisemitism and Islamophobia in the United States. In 2015, Utah's legislature passed an antidiscrimination bill protecting both LGBTQIA+ rights and religious freedom that was supported by a gay rights coalition and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Goodstein, 2015). The Black-led (&) organization connects racially diverse, theologically conservative Christians in efforts like the "whole life" campaign, which ties traditionally conservative anti-abortion rights advocacy with traditionally liberal advocacy on issues particularly relevant to women, such as wages, health care, and child care (AND Campaign, n.d.). All these organizations simply shatter current political binaries.

Cross-racial organizing can be particularly tricky, a point that Michigander interviewees raised repeatedly about their local contexts. Histories of structural racism and oppression and well-meaning white charity directed at Black and Indigenous neighbors have made communities of color wary of any partnerships with white-led or white-majority organizations.[7] Separately, some Black Christian communities also tend to theological conservatism on sex and gender issues. Differences there add an additional element of distrust. An interviewee who sought anonymity invited a contact from a neighboring Black church to a shared action on gun control but was turned down because the action was at a church with a gay pride flag, which made members of the invitee's church uncomfortable. This interviewee emphasized the effort her organization now invests to support action led by the Black community, too — a best practice for centering marginalized voices in organizing work.

Black conservative communities can sometimes partner more easily with other White conservative religious communities. Those partnerships can be fertile ground for building relationships across racial divides — ground that is otherwise hard to find. In the Greater Lansing area, for example, three associations connect local clergy. The Interfaith Clergy Association of Greater Lansing connects to a wider diversity of religious partners in an informal but politically and theologically liberal network, while Christians of Greater Lansing Network (2021) connects racially diverse Christians in a more formalized and more politically and theologically conservative organization. The third, Greater Lansing Clergy Forum, connects Black religious leaders. All three organizations cross different kinds of boundaries, each creating connective tissue across divisions that could pull communities apart.[8]

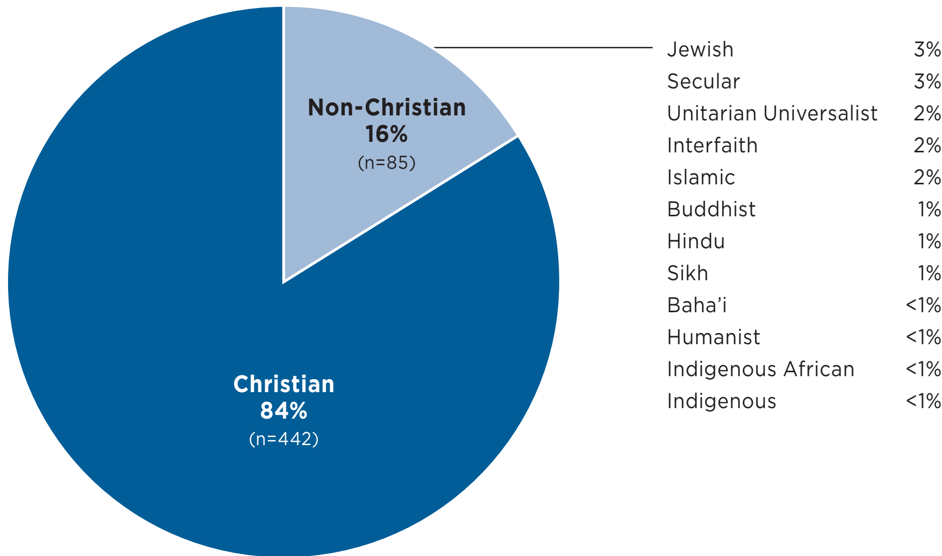
Local Organizations/Local Relationships

We all know that the most effective solutions to any problem are built by and with the end users, not for them, and that those processes require deep listening and trust (Brown & Wyatt, 2010). Multifaith organizations have extensive networks reaching deep into communities and can serve as the local connection to scale programs or change culture.

[7] In discussion with the author: Vicki Schroeder; Kyle Kooyers and Douglas Kindschi; Allison McCulley; Doug Mantha; and Pat Stromsta.

[8] Betsy Aho, in discussion with the author.

FIGURE 2 Pie Chart 1



For example, the coordinator for interreligious relations at the Reformed Church in America confirmed that denominational programs like hers cannot always reach into local congregations without strong local partners with cultural competencies. Her project works closely with churches across the country to connect them to their neighbors, especially ones from a different faith tradition, to build trust and peace. Churches of the same denomination in Iowa and New York, she said, are going to operate differently, so having real local relationships can make a big difference.

Relatedly, two leaders of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University discussed their long-term relationships with some of the more conservative Christian communities as part of their broader work of relationship building in Grand Rapids, Michigan. They believe their work has "kept the temperature down," which is why Grand Rapids has not had the "pushback against minority communities, for example, against the building of mosques, that so many other conservative communities have had."[9] On a more personal level, their work has led the congregations of local mosques, churches, and synagogues to build sustained relationships, and they have shown up for one another in moments of crisis when hate crimes have impacted their communities.

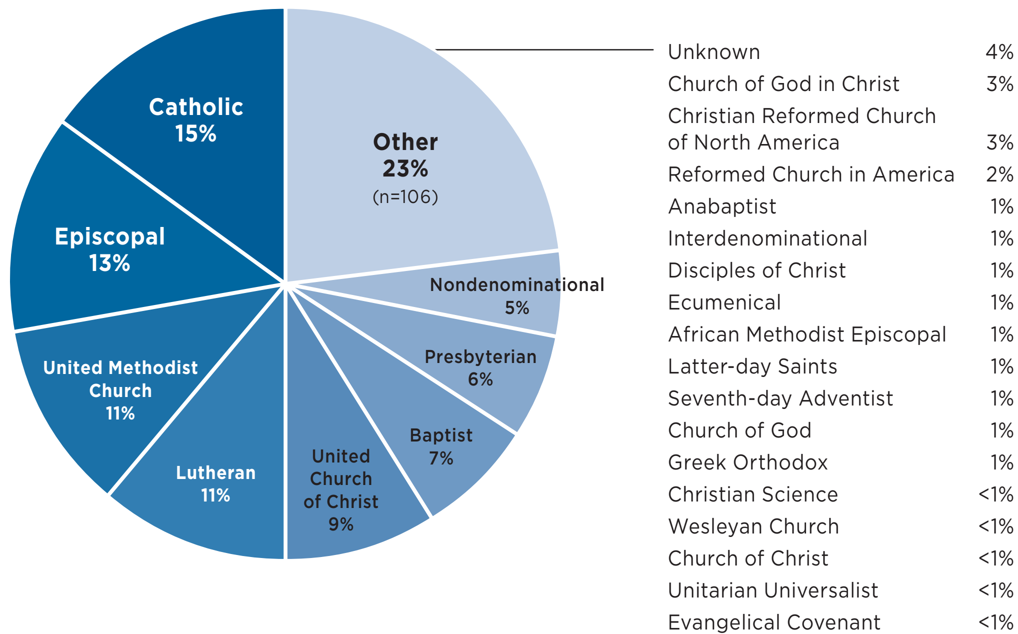
Reach

However the participants defined a partnership, multifaith organizations have an extensive reach due to their relationships with congregations and denominational institutions. Ten of the organizations interviewed had a total of 527 institutional partners, 491 of which are congregations, almost all in the state of Michigan. The average size of an American congregation in 2020 was 65, meaning that a rough estimate of numbers reached through partners would be 31,915 people (Earls, 2021). Several of these partner organizations have two or even three relationships with MFOs, making for a total of 574 partner relationships. (See Figure 2.)

These partnerships represent significant diversity across religious and ideological lines. Even

[9] Kyle Kooyers and Douglas Kindschi, in discussion with the author.

FIGURE 3 Pie Chart 2



though 83.9% of all partner organizations and 86.4% of the congregations are Christian, they are more diverse than the state as a whole. In comparison, 96.52% of congregations in Michigan were Christian in 2020 (Association of Religion Data Archives, 2024). The difference shows how MFOs have a greater depth of diversity than the general population — reaching communities of color, immigrants, and people of minority faiths.

Identifying the majority ethnicity of every partner congregation is outside the scope of this article. However, studies of minority ethnic and racial communities broadly show that they tend to score higher on personal religiosity and to have higher levels of trust in faith-based community organizations (Wood & Fulton, 2015). Faith-based community organizations, therefore, give better opportunities to engage with these populations than secular external organizations.

Multifaith organizations engage with multiple partnerships and their connected populations at once, offering another way to center marginalized communities.

There is also great ideological diversity in this group, best seen by breaking out the Christian organizations by denomination.[10] (See Figure 3.) For example, the Latter-day Saints, Christian Reformed Church in North America, and Church of God in Christ all hold conservative theologies on sex and gender, while denominations like the Episcopal Church and United Church of Christ hold progressive theologies on those issues.

For funders and issue-based community organizations, partnering with MFOs can offer relationships with and insights into an unusually wide swath of society.

[10] There are limits here. This article could not identify the subdenominational affiliation of all the Lutheran churches as Evangelical Lutheran Church in America or Missouri Synod, which hold widely divergent views on issues of sex and gender. Terms like "nondenominational" obscure extreme difference as well.

Conclusion

The pushback against the pluralism statement seemed to offer two mutually exclusive alternatives: make friends and forgive grievances, or get no justice, give no peace.

This is a false dichotomy.

Complex social problems require the creative ferment of activist strategies. Forcing creatives whose work is imagining new paradigms to do the bridging work themselves put limits on their creativity. And activists and advocates are for good reason often skeptical of bridging work — participation here actively undermines their success.

Yet relying only on activist strategies is detrimental in the long run, too. With a nearly 50% split among likely voters and with so many voters having opted out, who and what wins in politics will swing — upsetting even long-established decisions like Roe v. Wade. Without attention to long-term bridging strategies, the creative ideas produced by activists are unlikely to find their way into acceptance across political divides.

Multifaith organizations offer a way out of this dilemma as both models and potential partners for funders. They can embody both creativity and bridging. They can revel in prophetic traditions of justice. They can get out of existing binaries and find productive partnerships that create new ways of being together. They can be strong amplifiers for minoritized voices. They can show how to navigate the beautiful and dangerous edges of the religiously, racially, and culturally diverse society we inhabit. What a gift! In addition to taking up the habits embodied by these organizations, how can grantmakers support them?

- Be willing to partner with multifaith and faith-based organizations where goals align (Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement, 2023). Religious ideas and communities affect every part of our society. Successful strategists will have to attend to that reality.
- Support both the creative ferment of activist and advocacy strategies and bridging and contact work. These strategies exist together in innately pluralistic organizations. But they can also be at odds between organizations; be prepared to hold them in tension in a portfolio.
- Realize that every nonprofit, and especially multifaith nonprofits embodying diversity, are pulled internally and externally by the dynamics of affective polarization and purification. Do not add to that pressure by pushing for purity in partners and for bold politics not organic to the communities they serve.
- If a multifaith organization is having the impact you seek, trust their relationships with their partners even if some of the partners among the group lie outside your immediate comfort zone. If you have specific concerns, voice them going in to get clear on expectations (Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement, 2023; Ralph, 2021).
- Consider the dynamics of affective polarization and the purification of social movements and their potential long-term effects on the outcomes you seek.

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APPENDIX 1 Survey

"Filling out this survey will help us tailor the programming to our participants and more clearly reflect back any shared challenges. Questions with asterisks are required.

1. Organization name *
2. Your Name*
3. Your role*
4. Official Mission Statement (short answer)
5. Official Vision Statement (short answer)
6. Official Values Statement (short answer)
7. Locality or area of operation/concern (short answer) *
8. How does your organization describe its cross-religious work? (check all that apply): *
    a. Interfaith
    b. Multifaith
    c. Bridge-building
    d. Interreligious
    e. Ecumenical
    f. Other (fill in the blank)
9. Number of paid staff? (number field) *
10. Number of volunteers, monthly, on average? (number field)
11. How many organizations show up to your programming, on average? (number field)
12. How many people show up to your programming, on average? (number field)
13. Website *

APPENDIX 2 Interview

Interviews were completed after participants had filled out the survey. One-on-one interviews with the author were semistructured and based on the following question format. For those interviewees who represented more than one organization, questions were repeated for each.

1. Are your organizational mission, vision, or values changing?
2. Are there members/partners your organization that have been unsuccessful in forging alliances?
3. On effectiveness:
    a. What would you say your wins or success stories are?
    b. How do you measure success?
    c. What have you yet to achieve?
4. Relatedly, what are your organization's central challenges?
5. How do you manage (or struggle to manage) any member misalignment on theological and social issues?
6. Does your organization have interest in joining a statewide multifaith organization and, if so, what should its purpose(s) be?

Enticing Institutions to Become More Inclusive and Responsive: Lessons From The Colorado Health Foundation's Locally Focused Work

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Keywords: *Place-based philanthropy; cultivation model; health equity; diversity, equity, and inclusion; racial justice; institutional change; Colorado Health Foundation*

Introduction

Over the past two decades, a growing number of health foundations have narrowed their strategic focus from improving health to advancing health equity (GrantCraft, 2007; Grantmakers in Health, 2012; Young et al., 2017; Sen & Villarosa, 2019; James, 2021). This means paying attention not only to the overall health of a population, but also to the disparities that exist within that population.

In explaining what it will take to advance health equity, Paula Braveman and her colleagues make the following argument:

> If we are serious about eliminating unfair, preventable differences in health outcomes, we must eliminate the unfair social conditions that give rise to them. This will require meaningful changes not only in programs and individuals' attitudes and practices, but in policies, laws, systems, and institutional practices that keep social inequities in place, leading to health inequities. (Braveman et al., 2017, p. 7)

The World Health Organization (WHO) (2010) explicitly called out racism and entrenched disparities in wealth and power as major drivers of racial and ethnic disparities in health. WHO urges action that will change the political, social, and economic structures that determine which people have genuine access to opportunities and resources.

Key Points

- Equity-focused foundations have generally sought to change institutions, systems, and structures through advocacy, policy change, and community organizing — either on their own or by supporting activist organizations. This article examines an alternative philanthropic strategy: directly engaging and supporting the institutions that need to become more diverse, inclusive, and responsive to the communities they should be serving.
- The Colorado Health Foundation has "enticed institutions" as one element of its Locally Focused Work effort, launched in four Colorado communities in 2017. With LFW, program officers actively seek to build supportive relationships with a wide range of community-based organizations and actors who are aligned, or potentially aligned, with the foundation's interest in health equity.
- Across the nine LFW communities, program officers have reached out to many of the local elected officials and the leaders of more than 70 government agencies, large nonprofit service providers, local funders, and established coalitions. They have encountered varying levels of receptivity; fewer than half submitted equity-related proposals, most of which were funded. The actual level of institutional change varied considerably across projects.

(continued on next page)

How Can Foundations Promote More Equitable Institutions?

An increasing number of foundations have accepted this challenge and have adopted strategies to create more equitable institutions, systems, and structures. Their approaches typically involve changing the policies that govern how institutions and systems operate, who they serve, the nature of the services they provide, and how those services are financed. Foundations have done this by providing funding and other support to groups that work toward policy change — through strategies such as advocacy, policy analysis, public opinion research, issue education, community organizing, and narrative change (Easterling et al., 2022). In addition, a growing number of foundations are engaging directly in activities such as issue education and advocacy to support the enactment and enforcement of policies that advance equity (Farrow et al., 2020).

These two strategies are called out explicitly in the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy's Power Moves framework (NCRP, 2018). The first strategy is referred to as building the power of individuals and groups that are committed to equity and social justice. The second strategy involves the foundation wielding its power by calling for changes in policies and systems.[1] "Wielding power" was defined as "informing, raising awareness and advocating by using reputation and expertise to bring visibility to critical issues and amplify the voices of the most marginalized" (NCRP, 2018, p. 48).

The National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy emphasizes that foundations can wield their power either by being out in front advocating for more progressive policies or by operating strategically behind the scenes, playing more of a facilitative role. Foundations often facilitate in the context of coalitions. Because they distribute money, foundations are well-positioned to convene nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and community leaders to strategize and take action on specific forms of disparities and injustices. Convening stakeholders for equity is called out specifically in the revised model of collective impact (Kania et al., 2022).

Key Points (continued)

- We conclude that the "enticing institutions" strategy can be one important strand in a foundation's strategy to advance equity, but it needs to be complemented by more activist approaches that raise the heat on institutions to take action.
- We also describe how LFW has promoted the foundation's own journey from health equity to racial justice.

In this article we consider the merits of another way in which foundations can wield their influence to advance equity, namely by directly encouraging institutions to shift their programming, policies, and organizational structure. Government agencies, elected bodies, health systems, school systems, community colleges, and large nonprofit service-providing agencies can advance equity by diversifying their staff and board and by being inclusive and responsive to all segments of the community. Foundations can encourage institutions in this direction through strategies such as:

- prescribing that grant funding can only be used for specific forms of work that support diversity, equity, and inclusion;
- issuing a request for proposals for work that advances the foundation's DEI goals;
- asking for concrete evidence of the organization's commitment to DEI (e.g., letter of affirmation from the CEO and board; official DEI policies);

[1] The third pillar in the Power Moves framework — "sharing power" — is a principle aimed at making foundations themselves more inclusive and equity-focused institutions.

- challenging applicants to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of their board and/or staff; and
- funding projects that are co-developed by the institution and community members who have previously been underserved by the institution.

These strategies reflect the premise that foundations can use their power as grantmakers to entice people and organizations to take steps they would not otherwise take (Easterling & Gesell, 2020; Easterling & Benton-Clark, 2020).

While DEI-related grantmaking sends a clear signal of a foundation's values, it has a limited practical effect on organizations that are not already inclined to focus on equity. Institutions that are funded primarily through tax revenues and/or payments for service tend to pursue foundation funding only for opportunities that fit directly with their mission and existing strategy. Thus, equity-related grantmaking is unlikely to reach institutions that have the most room for improvement.

The Colorado Health Foundation sought to expand the number of institutions pursuing equity work through a place-based strategy that emphasizes in-depth relationship-building. Rather than seeking to influence institutions solely through funding opportunities, CHF's program officers reach out to leaders of mainstream institutions to encourage new and deeper equity work tailored to the interests and readiness of each institution. This approach was nested within the foundation's Locally Focused Work (LFW) approach, which is described in the subsequent section. This strategy has resulted in some successes, as well as a number of lessons about what it takes to create more equitable communities. These lessons relate to when and how to engage institutions in equity work, as well as how to simultaneously support grassroots groups. We also describe how the innovation, experimentation, and learning that have occurred under LFW have stimulated and informed the foundation as it has moved more deliberately in centering racial justice as a defining principle.

While DEI-related grantmaking sends a clear signal of a foundation's values, it has a limited practical effect on organizations that are not already inclined to focus on equity.

Case Study

The Colorado Health Foundation is a statewide health funder established in 1995 as the result of joint venture between Hospital Corporation of America and Denver's largest nonprofit health system, HealthOne. When CHF sold its 50% stake in HealthOne in 2016, its assets grew to over $2 billion, making it the largest health foundation in Colorado and the second largest health conversion foundation in the United States.[2]

The foundation committed to health equity as a core principle in 2015 after Dr. Karen McNeil-Miller became the CEO. This commitment is expressed within one of the foundation's cornerstone principles: "We do everything with the intent of creating health equity." The foundation defines health equity as follows: "Health equity exists when there are no unnecessary, avoidable, unfair, unjust or systematically caused differences in health status."

This commitment to health equity was adopted as a core principle of CHF's grantmaking strategy in 2016, with the assumption that it would focus its resources specifically on reducing the disparities experienced by communities of color, low-income groups, and rural communities

[2] With approximately $2.8 billion in assets, CHF is now the third largest health conversion foundation after The California Endowment and Mother Cabrini Health Foundation.

(Benton-Clark et al., 2020). At the heart of CHF's equity orientation lies a deep commitment to community engagement, which has two components: 1) listening to and learning from the communities it serves, and 2) ensuring that its actions and initiatives are grounded in the realities and needs of these communities. In particular, staff are expected to develop a nuanced understanding of the specific contexts that exist within communities and forge meaningful relationships with a range of local actors.

One of McNeil-Miller's first substantive efforts to advance health equity within CHF involved hiring Jehan Benton-Clark as a portfolio director and charging her with developing a new, more engaged way of working in specific Colorado communities. McNeil-Miller was previously the CEO at the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust and Benton-Clark served as a program officer there. Both were deeply involved in the Trust's place-based initiative, Healthy Places North Carolina, which deployed program officers as activating agents and ongoing supporters of community-driven work that would address critical health issues (Easterling et al., 2023).

McNeil-Miller envisioned a similar approach in Colorado, although with a much sharper focus on addressing racial and ethnic disparities in health. Benton-Clark designed the foundation's LFW approach by replicating key features of Healthy Places North Carolina while also directly addressing the question of how program officers need to act in order to achieve real progress on health equity. She also developed the IMPACT "practice model" (CHF, 2017), which laid out the functions that program officers are expected to use in implementing LFW and the competencies required to do so.

In 2017, Round 1 of the LFW approach was launched in four communities across Colorado (Alamosa, Eagle, and Morgan counties and the city of Pueblo). Round 2 was initiated in late 2019 when five more communities were added (Crowley, Otero, Montrose, and Rio Grande counties and the East Colfax Corridor, which spans the cities of Aurora and Denver).

As described in more detail later in this article, the foundation's orientation around health equity evolved considerably in conjunction with the implementation of Locally Focused Work. As program officers carried out the intensive community engagement required under LFW, they gained insights which were introduced to others within the foundation. As a result, the foundation was able to develop specific principles and models for operationalizing diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice, as well as quantitative metrics for assessing progress and demonstrating accountability. In the process, CHF has transitioned from "having a health equity orientation" to framing itself as "advancing health equity through racial justice."

The Model for Locally Focused Work

The long-term goal of LFW is to improve health and health outcomes across the participating communities, especially among people who have been historically underserved and disenfranchised. The foundation's theory of change assumes that this will occur if the following three "community change" outcomes are achieved:

- Community members use their power to engage, lead, and take action.
- Strong, responsive, and inclusive institutions enact policies and systems that promote health.
- Community members (people, organizations, and networks) work together to address health-related challenges.

The LFW approach begins with the foundation selecting the communities where it wants to cultivate new and deeper equity-centered work. Once a community has been identified, the program officer engages in an extensive process of learning and relationship-building. The foundation's program officers are based in the Denver metro area, but they spend four to six days per month in their LFW community when they meet with a range of local stakeholders — some of whom are directly aligned with the foundation's focus on health equity and others

who have a more general interest in improving the health of the community.

Locally Focused Work is grounded in the cultivation model of place-based philanthropy (Easterling & Gesell, 2019; Easterling et al., 2019; Easterling et al., 2023). Cultivation is the process through which the foundation draws a wide range of people, organizations, and networks into the more intentional planning and implementation that are required to translate promising ideas into tangible and effective work.

In LFW, this process often begins by reaching out to current and former grantees, but quickly extends to other people who come to the attention of the program officer, either through referrals or unplanned meetings (e.g., in coffee shops, restaurants). Conversations provide the program officer with information about the work that local groups are doing, the issues they are addressing, larger contextual issues in the community, visions for health and equity, and concrete ideas for new projects and initiatives. In addition to meeting with local stakeholders, the program officer also reviews published statistics and background materials to learn about the community's issues, history, people, and organizations. This discovery process allows the program officer to determine what issues and ideas should be the focus of the foundation's strategy for the community, as well as which people and organizations are the foundation's potential partners.

In carrying out the cultivation process, program officers have been joined by Community Learning and Development Partners, who bring expertise in facilitation, planning, program development, and organizational development. These partners have provided technical assistance, training, and capacity-building support to groups identified as good prospects for important work on health improvement and health equity. Civic Canopy was selected in 2017 to provide the CDLP function.

The foundation also sponsors "Leadership on the Ground" training sessions within each LFW community. This program is conducted by the

One of the most important features of LFW is that program officers seek to engage local institutions in equity-focused work, including institutions that might currently be exacerbating disparities in health and well-being.

Center for Creative Leadership and includes sessions focused on DEI and boundary-spanning leadership, as well as individualized executive-level coaching. For each LOG program, the program officer selects 25 to 30 emerging and established leaders from the community who are involved in efforts to promote community health, especially those who are poised to serve as equity champions within their own institution. Program officers attend the LOG sessions in order to build relationships, help participants think about exercising their power, and understand the dynamics occurring within the community.

Cultivating Institutions

One of the most important features of LFW is that program officers seek to engage local institutions in equity-focused work, including institutions that might currently be exacerbating disparities in health and well-being. Dr. McNeil-Miller has been quite explicit that, as the state's largest health foundation, CHF has an important opportunity and responsibility to promote its equity values to institutions through direct engagement, while also supporting advocacy and community organizing approaches that place pressure on institutions to become more diverse, inclusive, and responsive. This strategic orientation means that program officers in LFW communities reach out to a broad mix of stakeholders and organizations, some of which are large and established, while others are smaller and more activist.

[P]rogram officers are sensitive to the language they use. Rather than asking explicitly about an institution's equity orientation, the program officer often asks more general questions about equity-related issues directly relevant to the local context.

In the first year of LFW, program officers documented that they had communicated with 182 individuals representing 114 organizations across the four Round 1 communities. Depending on the community, approximately one-third to one-half of these organizations fit CHF's definition of an "established institution." Many of the institutional leaders contacted by program officers were local elected officials or city/county managers. In addition, program officers reached out to leaders within the following "institutional" entities:

- local government agencies, especially health departments, social service agencies, housing authorities, planning departments, law enforcement, and economic development agencies;
- universities and community colleges;
- health systems and area health education centers;
- behavioral health agencies (government and nonprofit);
- local funders (community foundations, United Way);
- large, established nonprofits involved in youth development, recreation, housing, food systems, etc.; and
- coalitions comprised of institutions and large nonprofits.

The data system for tracking program officers' contacts was not maintained in subsequent years so we do not have specific numbers over time. However, we are confident that within each LFW community, program officers have reached out to 10 to 50 institutional leaders representing five to 25 distinct entities. Given the differential starting dates, there have been more contacts in Round 1 communities than in Round 2 communities. Across all nine communities, program officers have connected with leaders of more than 70 institutions.

Initial conversations with institutional leaders occur in a variety of ways. The most common approach involves the program officer reaching out to schedule a get-acquainted meeting. Some institutions will have received funding from CHF in the past, while others have no prior relationship with the foundation. In addition, program officers make connections with institutional representatives through the LOG program.

Program officers discuss the topic of health equity and CHF's interest in health equity in an invitational manner, with the intent of assessing how the concept resonates with the leader and more broadly throughout the institution. At the same time, program officers are sensitive to the language they use. Rather than asking explicitly about an institution's equity orientation, the program officer often asks more general questions about equity-related issues directly relevant to the local context. Program officers also recognize that the term "equity" has very different connotations depending on a person's background, especially for individuals involved in financial management and investments. As such, they make situation-specific choices about when to raise and how to discuss the principles that underlie CHF's philosophy around equity.

Program officers have different preferences in their approach. Some have been very direct and upfront in raising CHF's equity interests, while others have allowed the early conversations to

be more exploratory and relationship-oriented before getting directly into the topic of equity. In all cases however, program officers make it clear that LFW funding is reserved for projects that advance equity, while also appreciating that the project needs to be relevant to the local context.

Assuming that the institutional leader expresses at least some interest in equity-related topics, the program officer will stay in touch and circle back for further discussion. The leader may also point the program officer to others within the organization who are more directly involved in equity work. Depending on the institution, the program officer may engage more frequently either with the CEO or with a program director or mid-level manager who is developing a line of equity-related work.

Receptivity Among Institutions

Based on the reports of program officers and interviews with local stakeholders conducted by the outside evaluator, Ross Strategic, it was clear that institutional leaders varied considerably in their receptivity to the program officers' overtures. A typology capturing this variation was developed in the process of writing this article. It specifies six levels of receptivity to equity overtures:

1. *Racial justice is central to mission and strategy.* Institutions at this level have done extensive analysis and discernment to assess how their programming and practices either enhance or detract from changing the conditions that produce racial disparities, and then have made concrete changes in hiring, training, policy, and program content and delivery to remedy their deficiencies. Metrics are used to assess progress and demonstrate accountability. Board and staff have done intensive exploratory and reflective work to understand and address their biases.

2. *DEI orientation informs work.* There is not as much commitment as in Level 1, but the institution's leadership had already been pursuing efforts to become more diverse, inclusive, equitable, and/or responsive to all segments of the community. The overture from the program officer is welcomed and opens the door to deeper conversation about additional steps that the institution might take along these lines.

3. *Smattering of DEI work.* There isn't yet a full commitment to organizationwide DEI work, but there are one or more people within the institution who are developing or implementing equity-related projects. The institutional leader invites the program officer to connect with those equity champions, possibly leading to CHF funding for the project(s).

4. *Contemplation.* The institution has an interest in equity (possibly incorporated into its values statement), but it hasn't yet translated that interest into action or specific project ideas. The initial conversation resonates with the institutional leader, but no concrete actions emerge in the short term. The leader and program officer agree to continue discussions.

5. *Precontemplation.* The conversation with the program officer is the first time that the leader had seriously considered what it means for the institution to shift to a more equitable orientation. No commitments are made at the meeting, but the leader is willing to continue the conversation.

6. *Resistance.* The institutional leader is resistant to the equity-related ideas presented by the program officer but might be interested in receiving CHF funding for nonequity projects.

Because the typology was not in place at the front end of LFW, it was not possible to categorize and capture each institution's receptivity in real time. However, we believe it is safe to say that the vast majority of institutions were at Level 3, 4, or 5. Program officers did not find any local institutions with a core commitment to racial justice (Level 1). A small handful were at Level 2, including a large educational institution with a well-staffed, highly visible DEI office. A few leaders expressed outright resistance to DEI concepts (Level 6), in which case the

Rather than simply dismissing unfunded proposals with a formal rejection letter, LFW program officers talk with these applicants by phone or in person to explain what the foundation was looking for and to explore other project ideas that might better meet those expectations.

program officer generally did not pursue further conversation.

Virtually all the institutions that fell into Levels 2 and 3 developed grant proposals for equity-oriented projects and submitted them to CHF for consideration. Proposals were less likely for Level 4 and were rarely submitted by institutions at Level 5 or 6.

Developing, Submitting, and Reviewing Equity-Oriented Proposals

The Colorado Health Foundation encourages agencies to bring their project ideas to program officers for discussion prior to actually submitting a proposal. When an organization approaches the program officer with an idea, there is often a back-and-forth conversation where the program officer makes suggestions based on what has worked (and not worked) in other circumstances. Program officers do not impose their own project ideas, but rather provide guidance to strengthen the applicant's ideas and to increase the prospects that the proposal will be approved. In addition, both the program officer and Community Learning and Development Partners often facilitate conversations between the institution and the people it should be engaging in order to develop effective work, including clients and grassroots groups.

It is important to point out that program officers explicitly discourage applicants from submitting project ideas that fail to measure up CHF's standards for rigor or inclusivity. The intent is not to block agencies from applying for funding, but rather to provide a clear assessment of how the idea will be received within the foundation and to encourage a more ambitious project.

Proposals from applicant communities are reviewed by the program team that is implementing LFW (one of three such teams at CHF). The grantmaking process includes a rigorous due-diligence phase that takes into account information from a variety of sources beyond the proposal itself, which provide a fuller assessment of community context and organizational dynamics. Program officers probe and challenge one another to discern the applicant's true intent and readiness for the proposed work. Because program officers have spent so much time in community settings interacting with a broad range of stakeholders (including critics of local institutions), they are generally well-informed about the context behind the proposal and the possibility that the applicant is trying to "game" the foundation. Proposals are denied when the review team detects that the applicant is not fully committed to equity or has a weak understanding of what the proposed project requires.

Rather than simply dismissing unfunded proposals with a formal rejection letter, LFW program officers talk with these applicants by phone or in person to explain what the foundation was looking for and to explore other project ideas that might better meet those expectations. In CHF vernacular, this referred to as a "strategic declination" or "strategic no" — signifying an openness to continue the conversation and strengthen the relationship. Sometimes the applicant understands the decision, but in other cases they are surprised and even angry. Some have complained directly to the foundation's CEO or another executive officer or board member, especially if they view their institution to be a peer of the foundation. These complaints were not surprising to program officers, as they occur from time to time across all of CHF's grantmaking. More importantly, none of these

complaints have changed any grant decisions. But they can raise the heat between CHF and local institutions. Even when this happens, program officers are instructed to try to continue to stay engaged with the institution going forward.

Equity-Oriented Projects

As of December 2023, the foundation had awarded grants to 25 institutions in LFW communities for equity-related projects. These projects fell into two major categories. First, there were ambitious organizational-change initiatives designed to increase the diversity of the institution's staff and board and/or to shift organizational policies, practices, culture, etc. These initiatives were generally developed by institutions that already had at least an espoused commitment to equity.

The second category, which was much more common, involved more narrowly construed programmatic projects intended to better serve communities of color and immigrant populations. Examples of these discrete projects include:

- physical and behavioral health services aimed specifically for low-income and Spanish-speaking populations;
- bilingual navigation programs to assist Spanish-speaking residents in accessing health care, behavioral health services, health insurance, etc.;
- leadership development and youth development programs designed to build power and voice among low-income and Latinx residents;
- the construction of playgrounds and recreational facilities within low-income neighborhoods;
- projects aimed at increasing access to healthy foods among low-income residents;
- strategic planning and analysis to support the creation of plans for more affordable housing; and
- community organizing efforts within low-income communities.

To some extent, institutions were more likely to propose discrete projects because it was easier to consider how equity would be advanced in the context of a specific program or service than it was to envision a major overhaul in structure or governance. In addition, some of the proposals for discrete projects were submitted in response to CHF's strategic priorities, many of which focus on specific health issues (e.g., physical activity) or populations (e.g., youth).

How Were the Projects Supported, and How Much Progress Was Seen?

Locally Focused Work grants to institutions have ranged from $25,000 to $1 million, with the vast majority in the $100,000 to $300,000 range. Most have been multiyear and many of the funded institutions have received multiple grants. In 2020 and 2021, CHF also offered most of its grantees targeted donations for COVID-related relief efforts and capacity building. A few institutions have received program-related investments in addition to grants. Beyond the funding, institutions have also received ongoing advising and coaching from the program officer and Community Learning and Development Partners.

Program officers sustained — and indeed deepened — their relationships with institutional leaders once projects were funded. Because many of these projects were designed to stretch the institution into new territory, situations often arose that called for more organizational change than leaders had intended. Program officers encourage grantees to talk openly about the challenges they face. Milestones and timetables in the grant agreement are sometimes revised to allow the grantee to adapt to the challenges that arise. In one instance, the program officer went so far as to allow the organization to propose an alternative project when unanticipated consequences arose.

The institutions supported by CHF for equity work have made variable progress in shifting their orientation, structure, and policies. Some

institutions moved forward ambitiously and others more hesitantly. Likewise, some institutions met their challenges head on, while others backed off when challenges arose. This variability in progress is typical whenever organizations are encouraged to adopt a new innovation (Kaminski, 2011). It is also important to point out that there are different expectations for progress for organizational-transformation initiatives than for discrete equity projects.

Efforts at Institutional Transformation

Eleven of the 25 institutions receiving grant funding were proposing to engage in work that would lead to organizationwide shifts in staffing, programming, and/or culture.[3] A small portion of these institutions progressed in important ways. One of the more successful projects involved a large municipal agency that oversees the recreation district of a mountain county by managing recreation centers, pools, athletic fields, etc., and by running programs and services for residents. The agency received over $300,000 from CHF in 2020 to support staff training and a transformation of the organization's culture in order to better serve the Latinx community. After three years, the agency had taken a number of steps to make recreation services and facilities more available, accessible, and welcoming to Latinx residents.

A second, longer-term success involves a relatively new community foundation where the board and staff were interested in equity prior to engaging with the CHF program officer. During the initial conversations, the program officer offered advice for DEI training opportunities and served as an advisor to the director of programs. Years later, when the community foundation's CEO left the organization, the program officer helped to pave the way for the hiring of a Latina woman who had led a different group funded by CHF. Both the program officer and CLDP provided her with coaching and advising as she stepped into the CEO position and established a strategy focused on better serving the Latinx community. The Colorado Health Foundation has continued to support the community foundation during this next phase of development, including grant funding for a training program for Latinx entrepreneurs.

Other institutions that received funding for organizational transformation have made more limited progress. One example is a nonprofit organization with a board representing local health care and educational institutions, government agencies, and United Way. This organization had served as the backbone organization for a collective impact process focused on affordable housing. The foundation funded the organization initially to facilitate the creation of a new housing plan for the city. During that grant, it became evident that the organization needed to build its capacity to engage a broader range of stakeholders. A subsequent grant focused specifically on this form of inclusion, but the organization made very little progress. As a result, CHF denied additional grant requests and the executive director left the organization.

Discrete Equity-Related Projects

The variation in outcome was somewhat different among the 14 institutions that received grants for more discrete equity projects focused on specific programs and services. Based on input from the program officers and the evaluation firm, we created a rating rubric with four levels of progress among these discrete projects:

1. The institution successfully carried out the project and built on that success to pursue additional equity-related work that is transforming the institution's programming, structure, culture, etc.

2. The immediate project was largely successful, but there was little payoff in the form of larger institutional transformation. This typically occurred in cases where the project leaders were much more committed to equity than were the CEO and board.

[3] Nine of these 11 institutions received additional CHF grants that had a more discrete focus on incorporating equity into specific programs or services.

3. The institution encountered challenges in actually completing the project, but it continues to show an interest in pursuing its equity journey.

4. Challenges arose and the institution pulled back on its commitment to equity.

At the high end of this scale are institutions that succeeded in adding the proposed program or service, and then used this as a point of departure for a broader exploration of the institution's orientation, culture, and programming. One positive example of this involves a large health education center that received grant funding from CHF in 2019 for a program to increase resiliency and power for Latinx youth. The program officer and the executive director had been engaged in frequent conversations around equity-related issues and how the institution might better serve communities of color. Progress on the initially funded programs fostered a deeper commitment to equity and an expansion in equity-related programming. The organization now serves as a co-lead in a local health equity coalition aimed at influencing health care and service-delivery organizations throughout the region.

This level of success was achieved in only a small number of instances. Many of the equity-oriented projects supported by CHF encountered challenges. Moreover, these challenges were often unforeseen because the new work stretched the institution beyond its traditional ways of operating. For example, a social services agency proposed a resource center for Latinx child care providers. As this center was rolled out, it had the unintended effect of making visible providers who were either undocumented immigrants or operating their service without a license. Because the grantee was a government agency, the center invited scrutiny by local law enforcement. The project was scrapped when this complication emerged. The foundation was flexible with the grant contract and allowed the agency to pivot to another project that would advance the same general goal of becoming more authentically connected to the Latinx community. Agency leaders have struggled to find an equivalent project, but have maintained their overriding interest in being more inclusive and equitable.

Many of the equity-oriented projects supported by CHF encountered challenges. Moreover, these challenges were often unforeseen because the new work stretched the institution beyond its traditional ways of operating.

Even when a discrete equity project was successful, the payoff for institutional transformation was often modest. This was particularly true in the case of government agencies because the equity projects were generally led by mid-level program directors and involved only a small fraction of the agency's employees. Moreover, in a number of instances the person who led these equity projects left the agency once the project was complete.

In a small number of cases, the project ran into challenges and the institution actually retreated from its excursion into equity work. This occurred for a community college that had agreed to implement an entrepreneurship-training program for Spanish-speaking and Somali residents. That program was designed by a coalition of local organizations concerned with the interests of local immigrant communities. The local community college was recruited to deliver the program and to hire appropriate instructors who were connected to these immigrant communities. The coalition transitioned to being an advisory committee with oversight over the program. Tensions between the community college and the advisory committee caused the president of the college, who was new to the community when the project began,

to terminate the grant and return the unspent money.

While it would be ideal from an evaluation standpoint to report on the number of institutions that achieved these different levels of progress, this has proved challenging to do in practice. The major obstacle is the dynamic nature of equity work within any given institution. What might initially look like a failure can shift dramatically at a later point in time, especially if there is a change in organizational leadership. Likewise, early successes can stall or move backward when an institution experiences new leadership, a loss of funding, or a change in the local political landscape.

Lessons From LFW

This case study appears to be the first published report assessing whether foundations can use grantmaking and beyond-grantmaking strategies to entice institutions further along on their equity journey. Using a cultivation approach, the program officers were able to encourage the leaders of at least five institutions in each of the first-round LFW communities to submit proposals for equity-oriented work. Only a small fraction of these institutions had sought funding for DEI projects prior to Locally Focused Work.

With support from CHF, these institutions made variable progress. A few were ambitious in pursuing organizational change. Others carried out discrete equity-oriented projects, some of which achieved their goals and others of which did not. Regardless of the degree of progress, it is important to recognize that CHF-supported projects are isolated experiences within an institution's long-term equity journey. When these grants were "completed," some of the organizations continued to go deeper on DEI issues, while others moved on to different priorities. The foundation learned that it can play a useful role in prompting institutions to focus more explicitly and seriously on equity, but it does not have the power to force institutions further down an equity path. That is ultimately up to the leaders of the institution, not outside funders.

The following sections provide a number of more specific lessons that have emerged from LFW with regard to enticing institutions to do more serious equity work.

Readiness for Change

The institutions that moved the furthest on their equity journey were the ones where the CEO and board had already endorsed equity as a value. One of CHF's program officers, Rose Green, reflected on this point:

> Most institutions will only go as far as their leaders support and allow them to go in terms of equity. It is much more impactful to partner with leaders who are committed to equity on some level (even if they are still hesitant, need more education, or are risk-averse) than to try to pressure leaders who are wholly resistant or skeptical.

Another program officer, Monique Johnson, describes the nuance involved in judging an institution's commitment to equity:

> I notice the seriousness when they partner in an authentic way with community and conversations around equity are happening when we are not in room. They don't use always words like equity or racial equity to describe the work or purpose, so being able to dissect the meaning of words is another key sign for openness.

It was also important for the institution's leaders and boards to show curiosity and flexibility in adapting to what they learned along the way, as opposed to expecting that they could predict and control the process of organizational change. True equity work involves structural, strategic, and cultural change, which means letting go of existing ways of operating and opening up to alternative points of view. Institutional leaders and their boards need to be prepared for this and to feel a sense of urgency around becoming an organization that is more authentically connected to everyone it is supposed to be serving.

Program officers sometimes played a role in building readiness by raising essential questions, validating the importance of equity, and helping leaders anticipate how their projects might play out. "This has been easier for me because of

the public mission of the foundation," Johnson observed. "Folks don't think I am coming out of nowhere to have these conversations."

For institutions that showed little to no readiness for equity work, the program officer generally let go of further attempts at cultivation, at least for the time being. One of CHF's equity principles is to not dismiss stakeholders once and for all, but rather to hold off engaging them until there is at least some receptivity.

Supporting Institutional Change

While grant funding was certainly helpful to institutions in carrying out the equity work they proposed, other forms of support from CHF appeared to exert a greater effect on organizational change.

One of the most important of these was the ongoing advising offered by program officers. Especially because CHF was also an institution undergoing its own equity journey, the program officers could speak directly about the intra- and interpersonal challenges that arise when employees and board members work through topics like privilege, power dynamics, and white fragility. Rose Green reported that "equity-focused leaders in primarily white, rural areas often feel like they are all alone; we can help them feel like they are part of a broader community doing this work."

Another critical contribution from CHF involved bringing communities of color directly into an institution's orbit as advisors, employees, leaders, and/or board members. Once an institution decides to diversify its staff and board or to create more inclusive programming, it may discover that it is isolated from the people it needs to engage. Because CHF's cultivation process is communitywide, program officers often have trusting relationships with the groups that institutions are seeking to reach. To move the process forward, program officers sometimes broker connections between institutions and grassroots groups. However, program officers do this only when they are convinced that the institution is genuinely committed to transforming itself. In addition, CHF sometimes provides training and coaching to grassroots groups so that they are prepared to exercise their power when stepping into leadership roles or board positions within institutions.

The Nature of the Relationship

One of the most important things that program officers have learned with LFW is how to balance prodding with nurturing when encouraging institutions to pursue equity-related work. On the one hand, most institutions need some form of intervention in order to shift out of their traditional way of operating. As such, program officers point out gaps in who is being reached, how services are delivered, and who is benefiting, and then they challenge leaders to stretch into unfamiliar territory. At the same time, CHF is an outside entity and thus has no intrinsic authority over the institution. This means that the program officer needs to be seen as bringing knowledge, resources, and support that add value to the institution. For this to happen, program officers need to be skilled at active listening and identifying opportunities for organizational change that will resonate with leaders.

These contrasting orientations can place the program officer into complex relationships with institutional leaders. Program officers sometimes have a "yin" orientation where they are receptive to whatever issues and interests are expressed by the leader. Other times the orientation is "yang," and the program officer is actively advocating for the foundation's equity principles (Easterling et al., 2022). Likewise, program officers sometimes serve as a peer advisor/counselor and other times the institution's conscience. Program officers need to feel comfortable playing all these roles and navigating the emotions and community dynamics that arise as conversations move back and forth. The ability to toggle, as needed, between multiple orientations and roles is central to how program officers operate within Locally Focused Work.

Discrete Projects Versus Initiatives to Transform the Institution

We presented two examples of institutions that pursued large-scale initiatives to transform their

organizations with regard to programming, strategy, staffing, policy, and culture. But these were atypical. Most of the equity work that the foundation has supported within LFW involves discrete projects developed by a program director within the institution. This occurred largely because the equity champions within an institution were often operating at a middle level of leadership.

The foundation supported these smaller projects under the assumption that they represented important steps that could set the stage for more fundamental organizational-change efforts. However this scaling up from discrete projects occurred less than half the time, and was even less likely to occur within government agencies. One obstacle was that these projects often involved only a small portion of the institution's staff, so whatever learning and development occurred didn't necessarily extend to the institution more generally. While the specific project might have been highly successful, it was often treated by the agency's leaders as a one-off experiment and failed to translate into more fundamental organizational transformation.

The failure to scale up discrete projects also reflected the fact that the people leading these projects often had only limited power within the institution. If the institution failed to shift, the project's leader sometimes left the institution, which further limited the influence of the project.

The Long View

While many of the institutions supported by CHF made only incremental progress, it is important to recognize that the journey toward equity has many stages. Moreover, progress isn't always linear. Even when an equity project encountered challenges or failed to translate to larger organizational change, it may still have affected the organization and brought new insights to the staff and board. Especially when the challenges involved previously unseen dynamics regarding racism, immigration policy, entrenched power dynamics, etc., those within the institution may have come away with a fuller view as to what equity is and why it is important. People throughout the institution (and throughout the community more generally) may be engaging in conversations that would not have occurred before the project. Eventually these conversations raise the heat to the point that disparities and racism are difficult to ignore. This may set the stage for leaders to leave the institution and new opportunities to emerge. The immediate next steps might not be clear, but readiness for change will have increased.

Taking the long view is equally important when institutions are successful in their immediate equity project. Success in one project sets the stage for the next level of work and for the next iteration of foundation support. This was illustrated in the case where the program officer engaged with representatives of a community foundation that was just beginning to delve into equity issues. The foundation's initial support was in the form of ongoing advice and encouragement to the staff of the community foundation regarding what it meant to be more diverse, equitable and inclusive. As the community foundation moved further along its journey, CHF assisted in hiring a Latina leader as the CEO and then provided a variety of supports to the strategies she took the lead in developing. Grant funding was only one aspect of a much more comprehensive cultivation strategy and was reserved until the institution had reached the point that this would actually add value to its work.

The overarching point is that program officers need to be prepared to deliver different forms of support at different points in time as initial efforts run their course and transition into whatever needs to happen next. This doesn't mean that program officers need to stay in touch continually with all the institutions they are trying to influence, but rather to build relationships that are strong enough that it is natural for either the program officer or an institutional leader to pick back when new issues or opportunities arise.

Program officers also need to have the situational intelligence to assess where an institution

is in its equity journey and to know what forms of support and intervention will be effective. This is particularly important when a funded institution fails to fully carry out their proposed work or make the intended changes in organizational policy or practice. This occurred repeatedly in LFW and in many of these cases the institution came back to CHF for additional funding to continue the project. The foundation typically rejects these secondary requests, but program officers know that these are critical times for the institution; walking away might undermine whatever momentum is building inside the institution. Program officers need to have the skills and wherewithal to maintain a productive working relationship with the institution's leaders, even while delivering unwelcome news.

Work at Multiple Levels for Institutional Change

Supporting institutions on their equity journey is only one strand of CHF's strategy for advancing equity. Equally important (if not more so) is the program officer's cultivation of historically disenfranchised groups so that they can raise the heat on institutions that are not as inclusive and responsive as they should be. The foundation does this by providing grant support, leadership development training, technical assistance, coaching, and informal advising to groups that do community organizing, advocacy, and other community change work. Program officers and CLDP have also provided coaching to grassroots groups so that they are better prepared to exercise their power when stepping into leadership roles or board positions within institutions.

When grassroots groups have more power, they are also in a position to help institutions move forward on their equity journey. This occurs when institutional leaders want to do more, but do not have the knowledge to design and carry out the right initiatives.

How Has CHF Evolved?

In addition to promoting more equitable institutions and communities across Colorado, Locally Focused Work has also played a major role in CHF's organizational journey around equity and racial justice. While it had a firm commitment to health equity in 2017 when it launched LFW, the foundation's philosophy, structure, policies, practices, and accountability metrics have evolved considerably since then. Staff and board have engaged in intensive exploratory and deliberative processes, both internally and through national events such as Race Forward's Facing Race conferences and PolicyLink's Equity Summit. These experiences brought deeper levels of awareness around the structural determinants of health inequities and the role of racial justice, which has strengthened the foundation's commitment to lead social change at statewide and local levels.

The foundation's deeper commitment and analysis around equity are reflected in its new funding priorities and in more precise statements about the role of racism and racial injustice. The following language now appears on the CHF website: "We prioritize communities of color in all that we do, and we advocate for and invest in solutions and policies that drive health equity racial justice."[4] In addition, the board, CEO, and other leaders have made a number of concrete changes in practice, strategy, and policy, while also diversifying the racial/ethnic composition of the staff and board. (See Table 1.)

The foundation has also created a public dashboard for "holding ourselves accountable."[5] It shows that since 2021, CHF has met ambitious goals with regard to factors such as the diversity of the board, the proportion of grant funding that is supporting organizations that are led by and accountable to people of color, and the proportion of the investment portfolio that is managed by firms with women or people of color in leadership or ownership roles.

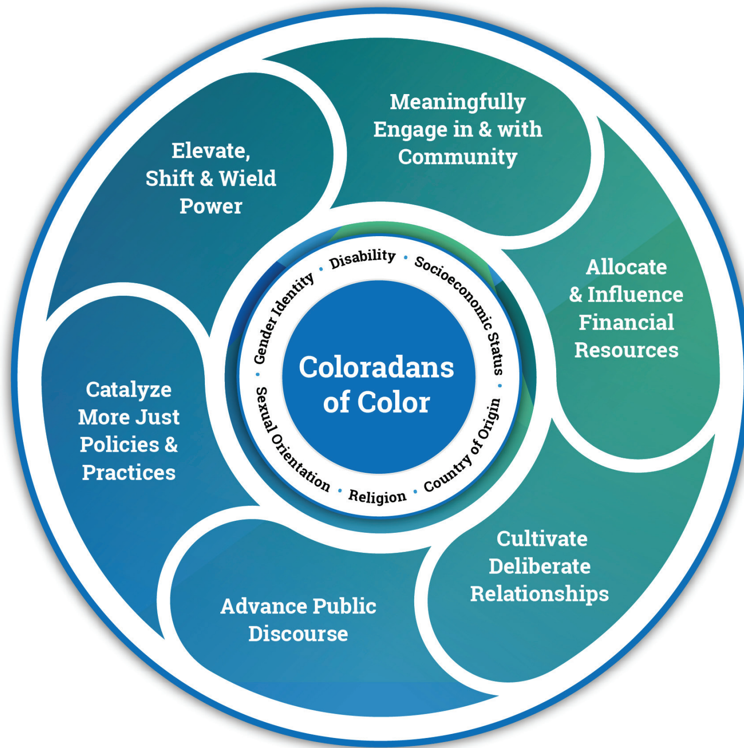
[4] https://coloradohealth.org/equity-justice

[5] https://coloradohealth.org/about-us/holding-ourselves-accountable

TABLE 1 Examples of Actions and Approaches Stemming From the Centering Race Framework

Domain	Action or Approach
Grant Funding, Donations, Sponsorships, and PRIs	Equity Collective — 15 transformational grants ($750K - $1.2M) to organizations led by people of color and focused on racial justice, plus smaller grants ($100,000) to additional 21 organizations to support capacity building
	Power and Resiliency Funding Opportunity — funding to support 17 organizations led by and centered on people of color to support power-building and resiliency work
	Legal Advocacy — funding to support four organizations around issue identification, impact litigation, strategy litigation, systems reform, regulatory advocacy actions, and other legal advocacy approaches focused on health equity challenges affecting communities of color
	Impact Investing — ensuring that beneficiaries reflect racially defined under-resourced communities and populations — $10M partnership with Ute Mountain Ute Tribe to address housing, food, behavioral health, and broadband needs
Application Process	— ongoing updates to streamline and to improve accessibility — Spanish language applications upon request (currently exploring other languages) — more broadly, grant application element as part of new strategy focused on meaningful engagement with Spanish speakers
Equity-Oriented Initiatives	Vaccine Equity project — targeted messaging, resources to specific, underserved populations — conducted research to understand mindsets of Coloradans of color; then developed and tested messaging to build their confidence in COVID-19 vaccine — to ensure research was connected to, informed by field of communicators and organizers, convened diverse advisory committee which offered to oversee research from conception to implementation
Staff Recruitment and Hiring	— HR expanded and diversified where positions were posted — interview questions focus on equity — selection criteria value lived experience as form of expertise and consider who adds value to CHF's equity journey
Vendor and Consultant Diversity	— multiple departments explicitly sought out mission-aligned, POC-led, women-led vendors/contractors (e.g., caterers, building managers, communication consultants, evaluators) — vendors and contractors required to complete demographic survey of their company — vendor diversity portal developed — IT/facilities ensure vendors pay fair wages, are free from discrimination
Learning and Evaluation	— adopted Equitable Evaluation Framework™ — published several blogs describing framework, how equity shows up in department's work
	— several evaluations focused on role and impact of power on strategy — e.g., interrogating power dynamics around primary care to home in on actual possibilities for change; power-mapping in affordable housing to support redevelopment — power built more into processes and ownership around evaluations, incorporated into strategy team conversations
Board Development	— shift from specific oversight to policy governance, allowing deeper deliberations around health, health equity, racial justice — DEI training in 2019 — multiple facilitated discussions, board retreats focusing on topics such as white fragility, board members showing up — concept of racial justice discussed at 2019 board retreat, adopted as an official principle in 2020 — composition has changed; majority are now people of color

FIGURE 1 Centering Race Framework



The conceptual reference point for CHF's equity journey is its Centering Race Framework, which specifies the six "levers for disruption" that set the stage for systems change. (See Figure 1.) The foundation launched CRF in 2021 as an internal tool to assist staff in understanding the foundation's philosophy for achieving health equity, as well as the distinct responsibilities and opportunities of each employee. In keeping with Sen and Villarosa (2019), the Centering Race Framework explicitly positions racial justice as an essential pathway to achieving health equity.

In many ways, LFW served as the front line in the foundation's organizational change process. Many of the equity-related principles and practices eventually adopted by the foundation were developed and tested in the context of the LFW approach. In addition, the staff members involved in LFW have played leadership roles in clarifying these principles and then translating them into new strategies and new expectations within the various functions that exist within CHF (e.g., program, evaluation, grants management, communication, policy).

One specific event from LFW that affected the foundation's larger deliberations was the 2018 meeting of the LFW advisory committee. As part of a conversation about the mix of organizations that were receiving grant funding from CHF, Marc Philpart, then at PolicyLink, raised the question, "Who is the foundation actually for?" He was specifically concerned with the possibility that although CHF was claiming a focus on health equity, it was continuing to provide grants to large institutions, sometimes without clear expectations as to how those institutions would change their practices or further engage the communities they were supposed to serve.

This question prompted a clearer articulation of CHF's commitment to increasing opportunities for people of color, people with low incomes, immigrants, and others who have historically not had the same opportunities to live a healthy life. It also highlighted the fact that program

officers will find themselves in situations where powerful actors with their own agenda will be pushing for the foundation to do things that run counter to equity. When this insight was raised into CHF's larger conversations around equity, it stimulated reflections around the competing motivations and instincts that all foundation staff encounter when carrying out work that has the potential to either enhance or undermine equity.

Conclusion

The conversation and learning that occurred around Marc Philpart's question points to the complexity and nuance that accompanies equity work. Program officers were sometimes able to induce institutional change, but this is often a slow, nonlinear process. Along the way, program officers need to maintain their vigilance in encouraging organizational change while also appreciating the constraints that these institutions face. Balancing these two imperatives requires skills in strategic and situational analysis, along with strong, respectful relationships that create the opportunity for influence.

Even when program officers operate sensitively and strategically, their influence over institutions may be limited. One of the most profound lessons from LFW is that it is extremely difficult to bring along institutions to adopt a foundation's perspective on equity or racial justice. Even when a foundation is able to make large grants, this opportunity is only one of many factors that compete for the attention of institutional leaders. Ultimately the impetus for organizational change must be intrinsic and sustained.

Given this limitation, the "enticing institutions" strategy should be viewed as only one strand in a broader portfolio that foundations can use to promote equity. Other complementary strategies include funding and capacity building for activist groups, creating the conditions where equity-oriented coalitions can convene and strategize, publicizing disparities and their root causes, promoting equity-oriented policies, and taking legal action when institutions fail to meet their obligations.

Perhaps most importantly, LFW demonstrated that foundations need an outward-facing focus and sensitivity if they are to have any real influence in advancing equity and racial justice. The internal work that CHF's staff and board have pursued to understand and align on the issues of equity, inclusion, engagement, justice, and power has been crucial in developing a solid philosophy, but this is only background work. Ultimately, foundations gain their influence over disparities and injustice not by what they say, but what they do.

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A Systems and Innovation Approach to Attune Grantmaking for Early Childhood to What Matters Most at the Point of Service

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Keywords: *Foundation strategy, health equity, early childhood, systems thinking, multistakeholder innovation, multistakeholder developmental grantmaking*

Introduction

The JPB Foundation was established in 2011 with a commitment to catalyze impact on pressing societal issues in the United States. From the outset, it pursued a multistakeholder path, combining support for medical research, a healthy environment, and the transformation of social systems that underlie and reinforce poverty. This article discusses how and why JPB promoted the pursuit and application of multistakeholder innovations as it evolved its strategy for early childhood health equity to help families burdened by poverty and hardship.

As used here, 'multistakeholder innovation' refers to the use and development of new technical, technological, or organizational capabilities to create public and private value benefiting participating stakeholders through the transformation of existing economic constraints that determine trade-offs between equity, quality, cost efficiency, and other domains of performance (Lazonick, 2002; Mazzucato, 2018).

Such innovations enabled JPB's cross-sector partnerships over the past decade to shift the science, clinical practice, and public discourse on early life stress. These successes — and the obstacles encountered — led JPB and its partners to identify a path toward a reimagined paradigm of care beyond the traditional top-down view of quality improvement, which omits the subjective perspectives of individual parents and providers. With investments in staff capacity and the addition of subject matter experts, JPB came to reimagine quality improvement as a function of the care continuum's incentives, abilities, and

Key Points

- This article discusses how and why The JPB Foundation, a nationally focused private philanthropy in the United States, promoted multistakeholder innovations as it evolved its strategy for early childhood health equity. Through coordinated grantmaking, its cross-sector partnerships over the past decade shifted the science, clinical practice, and public discourse on early life stress.
- Building on field learning and trusted relationships, JPB and its partners paved the way for a reimagined paradigm of care that brings ecosystem stakeholders together to overcome competing frictions inhibiting their mutual flourishing. Working collaboratively with grantees as their champion and thought partner, JPB formulated an agenda to facilitate stakeholders' codependent functioning to make tailored care of higher quality feasible at a greater scale and scope than currently exists. This change in working with grantees resulted from a shift in JPB's beliefs and thinking, which led to a more ambitious attempt to transform both equity and performance at the scale of full populations.
- Promising results from proof-of-concept studies show that feedback loops built into the new paradigm of care can support more enlightened decision-making by stakeholders, including foundations and evaluators. New, explicit information flows can, moreover, dissolve the tension between the management of aggregate performance benchmarks and uniquely tailored care for

(continued on next page)

decision-making workflows. This led it to shift its focus from the pursuit of "point solutions" to the design of an ecosystem to support "what matters most" to and for the family. In this paradigm, the experiences of individual families and providers motivate the design, funding, and governance of programs and services. The ecosystem is positioned to overcome challenges by learning-to-learn to make custom, individualized care of higher quality feasible at a greater scale and scope than currently exists.

Initially, however, the notion of tailored care for the individual child and family had not been formally codified and implemented as an ecosystemwide quality improvement and health equity strategy. To achieve this, JPB took stock of insights from prior whole-of-community efforts on poverty and stress. Alongside partners, it formulated a new agenda to facilitate stakeholders' codependent functioning and to build collective intelligence from the experiences of individual families and providers at the point of service. Through the author, JPB contributed expertise in health policy and management, systems and innovation thinking, and human-centered design.

As a starting point, this new agenda explored (1) how POS care objectives could be jointly determined and (2) how the measurement of progress could be embedded in new workflows to catalyze improvement. By presenting the evolution of JPB's strategy, the author hopes to encourage grantmakers to integrate systems and innovation thinking not only to overcome poverty and inequity, but also to transcend adversarial polarization and elevate the standard of human flourishing.

Introduction and Background

With fundamental commitments to inclusive diversity, social justice, and interdependence at its core, JPB sought from its origin to enable future generations to flourish. This mission led it early in its history to join emerging work on the interrelated issues of adverse childhood experiences and toxic stress as a strategy to prevent future illness, reduced life expectancy,

Key Points (continued)

the individual family. These new flows also position the public, private, and social sectors to push and enable one another to improve equity and performance simultaneously.

- Foundations seeking to apply systems, innovation, and design thinking to challenge existing assumptions about the scope of their learning and impact will benefit from this case study.

and sacrificed educational and professional attainment.

Landmark epidemiological research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente in the 1990s had established a strong association between ACEs (i.e., severe traumatic events, such as abuse and neglect, where caregiving fails to buffer stress) and poor health outcomes in adulthood, including cancer, chronic disease, mental and behavioral disorders, and substance use (Felitti et al., 1998). It also showed that ACEs occur widely, regardless of income or geography. Subsequent studies estimated that ACEs affected nearly 35 million children nationwide (Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative, 2013).

Adverse childhood experiences can harm optimal child development and lifelong health through the chronic activation of stress hormones in the body and the brain (Center on the Developing Child, 2020). When JPB entered this field, several challenges impeded the implementation of clinical, community, and public policy interventions to address toxic stress. First, public awareness lagged behind other health priorities; only a few states at the time conducted ACEs surveillance and reporting. Second, the task of clinical identification was complicated by age, exposure, and individual child; babies, school-age children, and adolescents all presented differently. Third, clinicians lacked the technical means to measure excessive stress activation. Fourth, the evidence base to specify tailored intervention had yet to be developed through

Although challenges remain, JPB's support of constructive risk-taking as a funder, champion, connector, and strategy consultant has improved the child life course trajectory.

scientific research. These challenges called for philanthropic commitment.

Coordinated Grantmaking for Cross-Sector Mobilization

To equip clinical and service providers to target ACEs and toxic stress, JPB initiated funding in 2013 to develop and diffuse new technical, technological, and organizational capabilities focused on populationwide developmental promotion and early detection, as well as on individual risk assessment, intervention, and treatment. With stakeholders, JPB co-designed a diversified portfolio of projects to generate synergies between scientific research, clinical practice, service referral and linkage, and payment reform. It disbursed consecutive multiyear grants to enable basic and translational research, public communications and grassroots engagement, early childhood system building, and workforce training and retooling. Its partners included local, regional, and national stakeholder networks organized through the American Academy of Pediatrics, Center for the Study of Social Policy, Center for Youth Wellness, Chapin Hall, Connecticut Children's Medical Center, Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child, Help Me Grow National Center, MLPB, and Tufts Medical Center. By facilitating cross-disciplinary learning and cross-pollinated strategy, JPB promoted synergistic collaboration.

As reported below, JPB's cross-sector partnerships successfully advanced (1) scientific and public understanding of the biology of adversity, resilience, and developmental plasticity; (2) pediatric practice, public health surveillance, and whole-of-community care; and (3) public policy discussions on payer coverage and reimbursement. Although challenges remain, JPB's support of constructive risk-taking as a funder, champion, connector, and strategy consultant has improved the child life course trajectory.

In California, for instance, ACEs screening became standard patient care, incentivized by the state's investment in practice and payment reform (Underwood, 2020). Nationally, greater awareness of toxic stress led to calls for trauma-informed teams, integrated medical and behavioral health, and coordinated services (Garner et al., 2022). Public health surveillance also grew; since 2014, 21 states began reporting ACEs to the CDC (2020). By 2020, 27 states had enacted ACEs-related legislation and at least 37 planned statewide community-based collaboratives for trauma-informed policy and practice (Novoa, 2020).

On the scientific front, a battery of biomarkers of stress activation, developed with state-of-the-art techniques, is being validated to strengthen measurement capacity in pediatric primary care (Shonkoff et al., 2021). These measures will enable early identification of relative risk at the individual, rather than population, level. They will also lay the groundwork for individualized guidance for parents and care tailored to their child's specific needs. Additionally, laboratory and clinical studies are expanding the field's understanding of the reversibility of stress effects as well as what treatments work best for whom, why, and in what contexts (Shonkoff et al., 2021). These technical innovations will provide a fuller, more biologically informed explanation of how individual children respond differently to adversity, how excessive stress activation may vary by age and sex, and ultimately how early life stress can increase risk for long-term health impairments (Shonkoff et al., 2022). Simply stated, neither "nature" nor "nurture" alone determines life outcomes.

Altogether, these advances have set the stage for a future of individualized care to improve

outcomes stemming from the complex interactions between poverty, hardship, and stress-related disease. However, while therapeutic innovations are essential, foundations are also obliged to counterbalance the limitations of "medicalizing" poverty (Shepherd & Fretwell, 2018; Tyler & Teitelbaum, 2019) by dismantling the socially determined roots of adversity, which leave lasting biological effects on future generations.

Systemic Constraints on Philanthropic Impact

As these projects approached their sixth year, JPB's board asked staff and leadership to assess results and consider future options. JPB had by this time hired more subject matter experts (including the author) with cross-functional and cross-sector experience who could conduct a holistic evaluation. Despite satisfaction with its partners' early adoption and diffusion of innovations, JPB found its impact constrained by ecosystem-design issues which hindered comprehensive practice transformation.

To identify the actors and factors involved, JPB conducted site visits, broad literature reviews, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions. Insights from these accounts pointed to three interrelated constraints on advancing both equity and performance: (1) the fragmentation of programs and services; (2) the coordination and compatibility of public and private funder agendas; and (3) the reliance on aggregate measures of quality for payment and accountability.

First, fragmented care gave rise to gaps and unnecessary duplicated effort, as well as access and coordination pain-points for families and providers. Prevailing workflows and protocols were byproducts of a complex web of local funding and governance, where state agencies manage different programs and services operated by a range of public and private actors (Dichter, 2015). Piecemeal policy directives and siloed payment mechanisms (Kauerz & Kagan, 2012) compounded the fragmentation by offering weak incentives to link services or to integrate POS feedback in the design and governance of the care continuum. Despite improved cross-sector coordination over the past two decades, the care continuum remained cumbersome and inadequate for families with complex health and health-related social needs such as housing, food, employment, and financial stability (RTI International, 2021).

Second, against this backdrop, uncoordinated and incompatible public- and private-funder agendas exacerbated the challenges faced by families and providers while stifling nascent innovations reliant on effective coordination. However well-meaning, individual philanthropic goals that omit consideration of the systemic effects of single interventions can lead to indirect contests among stakeholders while reinforcing antiquated paradigms of care. Strategic adaptations to piecemeal public policies or siloed public budgeting have the potential, moreover, to sow unintentional discord among stakeholders when select groups are privileged over others. For instance, a proposed funding increase for the child care workforce may engender resistance from threatened stakeholders and their allied donors.

Third, within the care continuum, workflows and protocols favored families with routine cases anticipated by service delivery. The reliance on aggregate measures of quality, which assess average case outcomes and effects to manage accountability and to optimize payment and reimbursement, sidelined families with exceptional or statistically atypical care needs and priorities. Apart from inducing "cherry picking," static optimization of cost and quality obscured how families and their providers might inform the development of higher standards of both equity and performance.

As an example, payment and policy concerns about population-based risks and deficits dictate the choice of items prioritized by conventional health and health-related social needs intake-screening. Such protocols count people as being at risk of hunger, eviction, physical violence, and so on; no space is made for personal aspirations or for personal trade-offs to avoid "bad" states. As such, a family that eats nothing

FIGURE 1 What Matters Most?

Multiple siloed perspectives, such as those represented at left, may exist regarding "what matters most" to and for the beneficiary of care. A new, shared perspective may arise if and when one enters into the world of the other — in this case, the patient's — as a trusted partner, although they may not be of that world.

Source: Illustrations © Mona Chiang

but instant noodles to avoid hunger is considered fed. They are left out, even though they would prefer and benefit from a better diet. Unless the provider has both the means and the authority to exercise discretionary power, families with an uncommon agenda could be sidelined.

The Problem of Goal-Discordance

A further constraint identified by JPB's analysis arose endogenously from routinized POS protocols and inflexible service workflows, which had the potential to cause waste and harm through oversight and inattention to the family's perceived "goals of care" — for example, where siloed health providers struggle to ascertain "what matters most" from their patient's perspective. (See Figure 1.) As used here, the term GOC refers to the desired state of biopsychosocial functioning that defines the purpose and intention of service or therapy.

Disparate perspectives between the parent and the provider may arise regarding what matters most to and for the family, given both sides' unique roles and lived experiences. Poverty and stress may impose on families conflicting or ambiguous demands, which complicate how GOC are formulated, by whom, and for what reasons. Point-of-service providers then risk faulty assumptions and false predictions about care objectives, service needs and utilization, and a family's desire and ability to engage or follow through on recommendations.

Unless harmonized, these disparate perspectives may produce goal-discordant care. For example, a single parent balancing multiple obligations may lack the time and means to navigate care, explore service options, or deal with multiple referrals, especially if gated by terms that outweigh benefits. Barriers such as child care and public transportation could interfere with care recommendations by rendering participation unworkable.

For philanthropy, goal-discordance across the care continuum poses a systemic minefield. Grantmaking by separate foundations may produce mutually incompatible goals when linear mechanical theories of change target single reforms and point-solutions. Collectively, such grantmaking may unknowingly mask pain-points, reinforce the risk of waste and harm, or compound the choices made by payers, professional societies, and other stakeholders that indirectly aggravate goal-discordance.

For example, a grant that adapts to the design of eligibility rules for food and other needs-based

programs may overlook a family's preferred objectives, such as a diet superior to supplemental food access; or, conversely, overlook painful trade-offs that deny the family access, such as an inferior diet maintained to avoid hunger. Similarly, a grant that adapts to existing measures of program-effectiveness may define "success" antithetical to goal attainment. Organizational pay-for-performance and volume-driven reimbursement tied to recruitment, retention, or model-adherence may favor enrollment of families with slower progress, while families who progressed too quickly are "failures." Unless averted, goal discordance may distort resource allocation by public and private actors, conceal gaps in care, or subordinate the family's agenda.

Internal Shifts in Thinking

These findings, combined with further insights across JPB's programs and portfolios, led staff and leadership to seek deeper impact through a more active and inclusive style of grantmaking. Although untested and risky, we sought to identify partners willing and able to co-create interdependent EC strategies. While some grantees exited, a critical core continued forward with new stakeholders.

Concurrent with these discussions, JPB refined its own capabilities and awareness. Staff tutorials on Trust-Based Philanthropy (Trust-Based Philanthropy Project, 2024), an internal task force on diversity, equity, and inclusion, and a regular teach-in series on topics such as narrative storytelling and feedback loops to capture stakeholder experiences, all contributed to a shift in beliefs and thinking. Additionally, contemplative techniques such as mindfulness and compassion were introduced as resources to reframe relational perspectives, to cultivate empathy and interdependent awareness, and to establish conditions for "psychological safety" and "authentic, transformational leadership." (These techniques were subsequently expanded into a program manual called Embodied Leadership for Innovation™ and disseminated by the author.)

As JPB came to recognize, the foundation's role in this conception is not to be a "savior," a "cheerleader," or a "bystander," but rather to be a "catalytic ally," whose care, skill, judgment, patience, and wisdom invite co-created boundaries and practices with and among the ecosystem's multiple stakeholders to manifest anew. From this standpoint, problems and their solutions are jointly "owned."

These internal investments helped inspire JPB's idea to initiate and institutionalize a similar shift in the early childhood ecosystem: namely, to tackle underperformance by embodying DEI principles in feedback loops to give value and voice to the family, the provider, and all who supported the child's well-being. As JPB came to recognize, the foundation's role in this conception is not to be a "savior," a "cheerleader," or a "bystander," but rather to be a "catalytic ally," whose care, skill, judgment, patience, and wisdom invite co-created boundaries and practices with and among the ecosystem's multiple stakeholders to manifest anew. From this standpoint, problems and their solutions are jointly "owned." For philanthropy to succeed — and graduate to more evolved, complex challenges — it would first have to help stakeholders transcend old patterns of cyclical, insular struggles for access, quality, or cost efficiency.

JPB thus prioritized the construction of deeper, more sophisticated feedback loops to manifest and cultivate the functional interdependence and interrelatedness of quality improvement,

JPB formulated the practice to verify and enable prospective partners' incentives and abilities to participate in multistakeholder developmental grantmaking, and to trust front-line decision-making based on a first-hand knowledge of risks and opportunities.

foundation learning, philanthropic strategy writ large, macro- and microinnovation, agency performance, and individual family goals. JPB also recognized the need for such feedback loops to help disparate stakeholders expand their circles of care and empathy for one another as a necessary precondition to "give and receive" each other's time, talent, ties, resources, and connections. By jointly establishing reciprocal commitments, one may then challenge and enable the other to cultivate capacities for mutual benefit. Only then could the conventional preoccupation with narrow, self-interested power imbalances be overcome to enact a more holistic vision where foundations and stakeholders together refine new patterns of thinking, acting, and doing.

Given JPB's prior experience and sunk costs in the early childhood sector, its board and leadership agreed to pursue an experimental approach where it formulated developmental grantmaking through the lens of multistakeholder perspectives. It would incentivize and enable grantees to work with their stakeholders to take constructive risks to transform the technical, economic, and relational constraints that hinder progress on equity and performance at greater scale than currently feasible.

This approach to "multistakeholder developmental grantmaking" required JPB to work closely with grantees to co-create new patterns for themselves and their partners, including public payers and private funders. It also required JPB to elicit and negotiate calibrated priorities with safety and harm avoidance as equally paramount concerns. For example, JPB took care to understand the incentives and abilities not just to implement new agency practices, but also to transition safely away from antiquated practices.

To further operationalize its approach, JPB transformed testing, psychometrics, and methodology practices to overcome fragmented decision-making within an evolving interdependent ecosystem. JPB formulated the practice to verify and enable prospective partners' incentives and abilities to participate in multistakeholder developmental grantmaking, and to trust front-line decision-making based on a first-hand knowledge of risks and opportunities. As part of this commitment to verify, enable, and trust, or 'VET,' JPB provided technical assistance to grantees and encouraged them to tailor their partners' TA according to their unique developmental baselines and to staff-up or hire consultants they deemed the best fit. This flexible but more expensive option contradicted conventional prescriptions to capture known economies of scale by centralizing and outsourcing group TA. Such flexibility proved valuable during the COVID-19 pandemic and instrumental to the productivity of multiple field experiments with uncertain outcomes.

A Compass for Ecosystem Design and Resilience

As JPB discovered, foundations needed to do more than improve access, utilization, and service coordination within the ecosystem to help parents buffer early life stress. The more ambitious vision is to catalyze a co-designed care continuum with the capacity to respond to challenges by learning-to-learn to make custom, individualized care of higher quality feasible at a greater scale than currently exists. In a rapidly changing world with natural, technological, and socioeconomic shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic, to cultivate ecosystem resilience is to innovate continuously.

Various case studies reinforced the idea to support this strategy by enabling mutually self-directed, cross-sector learning, where feedback loops traverse multiple nested systems operating at higher levels of governance, management, and control (Marshall, 2008; Human Learning Systems Collaborative, 2021). Integrated connectivity along these lines has been shown to amplify learning across disciplines and boundaries, and to enhance multilevel stakeholder responses to upstream as well as downstream health and social determinants (Carroll & Rudolph, 2006; Rechel et al., 2018; Aragón & Garcia, 2015).

This strategy also requires the ecosystem to push and enable stakeholders to evolve codependently with goal concordance and goal attainment as the moral and practical compass. For philanthropy, the paradigm of goal-concordant care invites stakeholders to rethink systemically how, why, and where to set the fulcrum of planning and decision-making to assure collective inclusion as well as improved buy-in, efficiency, and effectiveness.

While goal-concordant care arose for high-need, high-cost adult patient care (National Committee for Quality Assurance, 2018), it had yet to be formally codified and implemented throughout the early childhood ecosystem as a quality improvement and health equity strategy. To achieve this, JPB convened partners and stakeholders and contributed the author's expertise on GCC workflows. Collectively, it became apparent that new routines needed to be built, as current pediatrics guidelines offered limited advice beyond soliciting "questions and concerns" about learning, development, and behavior (Hagan et al., 2017). New POS decision-making workflows were necessary to elicit preferences and explore care objectives, while encouraging emergent insights and information.

As a promising sign for foundations and evaluators, anecdotal reports from JPB's partnerships indicate that the new informational capabilities deriving from the construction of GCC feedback loops can support more enlightened decision-making by stakeholders. The joint determination, documentation, monitoring, and measurement of goals of care, including the analysis of feasibility and goal attainment, can yield new insights about causal chains and causal mechanisms linking outcomes to the ecosystem's functioning.

Through the use of "process-tracing" techniques (Beach & Pedersen, 2019), management and governance decision-makers can address how and where gaps in goal-attainment appear and discern how desired GOC can be made more feasible and attainable for more families at a greater scale and scope than currently exists. Insights from these techniques can guide more precise reforms in governance, regulation, and financing, and more robust, collective engagement of the public, private, and social sectors. As documented in the example below from a pediatric system, these techniques can illuminate the need for new capabilities, which foundations should support to make feasible the pursuit of new, superior outcomes, as judged by all involved.

Grantmakers and program designers also have more tools to facilitate trusted relations, beginning at the point of service. Systematic analysis of the conduct of shared goal-setting and goal-monitoring can inform operational checks and balances to assure participants' satisfaction and to mitigate bias and infra-humanization,[1] which arise from differences in class, racial, or economic privilege. Provider teams must be trained, for example, to engage families in ways that demonstrate that both sides matter to and for each other.[2] Similar structured interactions have been shown to defeat stigma and discrimination associated with poverty, health, and marginalization (Capozza et al., 2016; Ling et al., 2020).

[1] Infra-humanization by in-group members attributes a lower human status to out-group members; in-group members deny that out-group members share common experiences of human feelings or emotions (Leyens et al., 2007).

[2] Mattering refers to the psychological experience of feeling valued and adding value (Flett, 2018).

These frameworks are transformed by adding collective accountability for goal-attainment onto their agendas and by integrating process-tracing techniques into their methodologies to assess and redesign stakeholders' relational interactions (e.g., through improved workflows).

Moreover, by introducing reciprocal commitments in service of the other's role as a parent or as a provider, the process transforms role-positional differences into a resource that overcomes a preoccupation with transactional POS power imbalances. That is, care can be more than either "family driven" or "provider driven" (Osher & Osher, 2002) when both sides collaborate interdependently for mutual benefit. These relational insights apply equally to foundation practices.

GOC Transform System Approaches for Quality Improvement

With JPB's technical assistance in the areas of systems evaluation and health informatics, collaborating partners learned how to apply new informational capabilities to transform "system approaches," such as collective impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011) and targeted universalism (Help Me Grow National Center, 2022; Othering & Belonging Institute, 2023), into dynamically innovative equivalents. In their original forms, both frameworks rely on commercial inputs to pursue their agendas but may not necessarily seek to influence how these inputs may be better developed and produced to enable new, superior agendas to emerge.

These frameworks omit the development of new, superior capabilities to reshape a program's quality and cost efficiency and to involve new actors, roles, and functions to improve social welfare at the individual and population levels. New workflows and health-information technologies can, for example, produce higher quality, more efficient information routing at a larger scale and scope than previously possible. Additionally, these frameworks omit new capabilities for endogenous reorganization, where operations, governance, and planning evolve to attain GOC defined by parents' aspirations rather than their needs or deficits.

These frameworks are transformed by adding collective accountability for goal-attainment onto their agendas and by integrating process-tracing techniques into their methodologies to assess and redesign stakeholders' relational interactions (e.g., through improved workflows). With these elements, top-down and bottom-up planning dissolves the tension between the management of aggregate performance benchmarks and uniquely tailored care for the individual family, however statistically routine or atypical.

In their fully dynamic equivalents, the ecosystem's collective engagement improves quality and cost-efficiency standards by shaping and responding to the interaction of public and corporate governance. Commercial, firm-led innovations (e.g., information technology) are required throughout the ecosystem to equip targeted and universal programs to tailor care for individual families. A greater diversity of families benefits from the cultivation of a more resilient, sophisticated ecosystem.

A Grantmaking Agenda to Attune to What Matters Most

To attune POS-care to "what matters most," JPB co-formulated a new agenda drawing on human-centered design principles. This agenda sought to explore how GOC could be jointly determined and how the measurement of progress toward family goal-attainment could catalyze ecosystem improvement.

Comparative multilevel studies conducted with diverse pilot communities used observational and participatory techniques to assess a range of benefits for stakeholders through formative and developmental evaluations. As a starting point, four broad domains of progress were chosen: (1) enhanced equity and inclusion in decision-making, (2) refined resource use and allocation, (3) coordinated management and governance, and (4) ecosystemwide learning.

To elucidate causal chains and causal processes, JPB partners conducted interviews with families, providers, program administrators, and other key informants to map out their experiences and interactions, showing how POS care reflects the strengths and limitations of the care continuum itself. Case studies analyzed the effects of process changes, such as devolving authority to parents and providers, on (1) the subsequent use and deployment of resources, (2) intraagency and interagency cooperation and information sharing, (3) collective accountability for progress toward goal attainment, and (4) further quality and performance improvement.

Promising early results show that families participate in shared goal-setting and affirm its purpose and principles, providers experience greater satisfaction and feelings of effectiveness when utilizing GCC practices, and caregivers experience higher rates of linkage to community-based services, improved responsiveness on referral and intervention, and greater service continuity when engaging with an ecosystem led by goal-concordant care. Moreover, these studies documented how POS information led a regional pediatric health system's management and governance to invest in workforce training and retooling, more sophisticated workflows, new data collection protocols, and more agile, centralized care-coordination routines.

Future proof-of-concept studies will assess other benefits, such as the quality of bottom-up and top-down learning, and its effects on strengthening the individual contributions of organizations as well as the synergies between organizations that contribute to goal attainment.

Philanthropy Reflected and Embodied in the Care Continuum

As reported in this article, JPB's contributions to the early childhood ecosystem were made possible through interdependent partnerships and strategic decision-making. To meet shared challenges, the portfolio enabled and incentivized constructive risk-taking as well as the quality of learning and failure. Moreover, JPB invited and expected dissenting views as a path to clarify priorities and improve buy-in, alignment, and coordination. JPB positioned itself and its grantees to learn from and alongside one another; to cultivate and challenge the ecosystem to make superior family GOC feasible and attainable; and to apply foundation grantmaking, convening, and evaluation and monitoring to help realize a superior standard of health equity.

That the ecosystem itself might one day stimulate and advance multistakeholder innovations through productive cross-sector collaboration may depend, however, on the emergence of an interconnected philanthropy that recognizes the need for systems change at the scale of markets and populations. Philanthropy writ large, however, has been molded by a sociopolitical and economic paradigm that excludes stakeholder leadership and participation in the creation or discovery of new capabilities to overcome the constraints on prevailing standards of equity and organizational performance. Philanthropy's own fragmentation can, furthermore, undermine itself through uncoordinated decision-making that puts ecosystem stakeholders at odds collectively with one another, as demonstrated by the tension between population and individual impact manifesting as POS goal discordance. Earnest, well-meaning attempts by foundations and other institutions seeking to solve poverty and health inequity by "balancing" stakeholder interests fail to recognize the dynamic stasis left intact when the cycling of new rules, regulations, and cultural norms preserves the underlying trade-offs inhibiting greater flourishing for more groups and individuals. The intended beneficiaries might reasonably come to see their frustrations weaponized by philanthropy.

The shared human experience of climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and countless social injustices is a reminder that foundations, as individual agents, are all bound together and implicated as members of the social systems that produce such effects.

The goal-concordant care paradigm described here offers philanthropy a path to reverse these dysfunctions while simultaneously enhancing ecosystem resilience: specifically, by establishing intentional workflows and feedback loops to learn from the most marginalized families, who lack the clout, means, or resources as individuals or as a group to wield sanctions or barter for gains. By including their perspectives and experiences in the design and reform of the care continuum, the ecosystem as a whole confronts opportunities for further innovation to address more complex challenges.

The manner and quality of philanthropy's interdependent functioning can either impede or advance systemic, multistakeholder innovation to overcome poverty and health inequities. The latter requires sustained commitment across two distinct, interrelated spheres of improvement: job-related skills and mindsets, and relational trust and collaborative engagement. The first, more familiar, approach leverages conventional grantmaking. The second, less utilized, approach facilitates the co-creation of systematic feedback loops to link cross-sector stakeholders to enlarge their focal view of concerns and opportunities, and to expand the ecosystem's collective intelligence and depth of strategic consensus and coordination. Both are necessary to help the care continuum evolve to fulfill its purpose and mission for individual families and for the ecosystem.

The shared human experience of climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and countless social injustices is a reminder that foundations, as individual agents, are all bound together and implicated as members of the social systems that produce such effects. Society as a whole creates and enacts its own realities. This reminder invites foundations to re-envision how cross-sector stakeholders might "connect, understand, relate, and engage" with one another. Foundations can do more than seek to maintain human survival or repair and attenuate human injury; they can also confer a legacy of ever-higher standards of child and family flourishing.

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