

How Can Grantmakers Support Movements?

Today, many grantmakers recognize the role of social movements in advancing opportunity, well-being and justice for all people. And more grantmakers are making a shift from solely supporting individual organizations and programs to supporting the multiple organizations and intersecting networks that make up movements. Supporting movements — as investors, brokers, connectors, learners and influencers — is a key way grantmakers can collaborate with others and facilitate grantee collaboration to tackle pressing social problems.

Grantmaker Roles in Supporting Movements

Grantmakers support movements in diverse and often interconnecting ways, from providing decades-long general operating grants to conducting public opinion research to offering community leadership development fellowships.

A movement is generally understood as collective action with a common frame and long-term vision for social change, characterized by grassroots mobilization that works to address a power imbalance. The people most affected by the issues drive movements, but the resources and partnerships of philanthropy provide important fuel for their work. GEO found that funders who support movement building identify with one or more of the following roles:

(1) Investor

Philanthropy's traditional role as a one directional source of funding should transition into that of an investor, one who commits flexible financial resources not only to program support but also to build the infrastructure of critical movement institutions and the knowledge and skills of leaders who drive movements.

For more on this topic, see [*Many Hands, More Impact: Philanthropy's Role in Supporting Movement*](#) (Washington, D.C.: Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2013).

- *Give flexible grants and in-kind support* — Perhaps more than anything, movement organizations need flexible funding. This usually translates to general operating grants for multiyear periods, but it also means deep and responsive relationships with grantees, as well as a flexibility that acknowledges the complex nature of movement building. Aware that our grantees' needs do not remain constant during movement building, experienced funders remain as flexible and as focused on the long-term vision as possible. Movement-supporting funders are also willing to make grants for capacity building in many forms, offer in-kind support, and almost universally support not just single nonprofits but also networks of organizations and the collaborations and coordination between those multiple entities.
- *Offer technical assistance* — Funders working with movement organizations prioritize investment of time and expertise, in addition to grant funds. This could mean helping grantees with everything from writing grant applications and developing strategic communications plans to identifying the best technology platforms for facilitating cross-movement planning and planning.
- *Develop leaders* — Since leadership is critical for social movements, directing investment to leadership development is an important role for funders. Movement leaders and network weavers have different development needs than leaders of individual organizations, so some funders take nontraditional approaches to supporting them, such as sabbatical programs or training opportunities focused on managing the power dynamics of different coalitions and communication across different priorities.
- *Support evaluation* — Another vital area for funder investment is in developing evaluation models that both advance understanding of the movement-building process itself and help assess movement outcomes. Experienced grantmakers know that movement building, like most social change goals, is slow and may take many years to achieve, and that outcomes from this work can be less obvious and harder to measure than those of direct service programs. Funders should be careful, however, not to seek campaign metrics (for example, the number of people registered for the new insurance exchanges as part of the Affordable Care Act) when movement metrics (the number of leaders developed through mobilization around health care as a human right) are more appropriate. Additionally, grantmakers need to engage grantees and other partners in the work of developing evaluation models, and involve stakeholders in the work of understanding results and impact.

Movement-Building Role

Select Grantmaker Activities

Investor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give flexible grants and in-kind support • Offer technical assistance • Develop leaders • Support evaluation
Broker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leverage other funding • Participate in funding collaboratives
Connector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustain movement clusters • Help build trust and relationships • Host or support convenings
Learner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct or support original research and identify trends • Support research on strategic communications and public opinion • Focus on organizational learning
Influencer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fund or conduct policy advocacy • Influence peers • Model movement principles

(2) Broker

Movement-supporting grantmakers serve as brokers by leveraging other resources toward the work of grantees', including the creation of and participation in strategic co-funding efforts.

Leverage other funding — Since most movement grantmakers fund both individual organizations and the networks advancing the movement, serving as brokers for additional funding or participating in collaboratives takes on greater importance. Grantmakers can invest in, and bring peers to the table to also fund, not only the key organizations working on a primary issue, but also their key allies. Funders can support partnership and coordination among many aligned organizations.¹ This more unified approach to funding helps boost nonprofit collaborative capacity and leads to less siloed, stronger efforts. Brokers have the opportunity to not just leverage more money but to leverage more efficient money through streamlined application and reporting. Plus, funders need to model what we are asking of grantees: increase partnership and coordination in service of a shared mission.

¹ Cassandra Shaylor, "Ecosystem Grantmaking," Akonadi Foundation, 2011.

(3) Connector

Next to funding, perhaps the most important things a grantmaker can provide to support movements are connections that lead to meaningful relationships. Grantmakers with significant movement experience emphasize the importance of serving as the “glue” or “connective tissue” between organizations and networks advancing a movement’s vision. The networks have a range of needs funders can address, from building trust and developing relationships for newer coalitions to supporting peer learning, communications planning and advocacy for more mature networks.

Help build trust and relationships — Funders can serve as intermediaries, thought partners and identifiers of new partners for movement networks. Funders’ leadership development efforts can go beyond funding programs or consultants to include connecting leaders to networks. Critical to movement building is also ensuring that constituencies previously excluded from leadership roles have a place at the network table, and funders have the opportunity to apply both funding and influence to that effort.

Host or support convenings — Funders can convene or support convenings of networks to facilitate peer learning and long-term relationship building. In some cases, particularly as movement networks are just beginning to form or when they are undergoing transition, grantmakers might not only host the convenings but also provide “glue” money that enables network participants to stay connected in-person and online, or hire a neutral facilitators to lead discussions and networking. The key is that convenings are not always funder initiated or directed. Instead, it’s about financing the infrastructure and helping create the conditions where network leaders have the support necessary to participate effectively and engage the broader community.

(4) Learner

Grantmakers occupy a special learning role by conducting or underwriting original research that advances social change efforts, funding research on strategic communications and investing in our own organizational learning to inform grantmaking and the broader field.

Conduct or support original research and identify trends — Funders experienced in movement building stay informed about trends influencing the progress of social change efforts, including demographic shifts and new research findings. In addition to investing in grantees’ research, communications and learning efforts, grantmakers also initiate research that may equip specific advocates or may enhance models of movement building more generally.

Support research on strategic communications and public opinion — Strategic communications research — in other words, testing the effectiveness and framing of messaging to make real advances in a movement — is both critical and expensive. This is where funders can play a significant and collaborative role. A continuing research and development need for movements, in which many foundations invest, involves how to use existing social media platforms to mobilize and connect across organizations, causes, networks and movements.

Focus on organizational learning — Although formal research is an important tool for funders supporting movements, grantmakers also report that informal knowledge gathering, in the form of grantee conversations, relationship development and simply by keeping our eyes on the “big picture,” is just as important for being effective and flexible supporters. Grantmakers can also look to fellow foundations for the latest thinking and innovative practices.

(5) Influencer

Movements are fundamentally about changing power.² Philanthropy should have an innate understanding of power dynamics, having been a power holder for so long, and can translate those dynamics to other movement partners or to the institutions of power. In this sense, grantmakers have not only the ability but also the responsibility to use our influence beyond grants to advance social change.

Fund or conduct policy advocacy — Movement-supporting foundations can use our own advocacy capacity to help advance grantees’ movement goals. We can also support grantees’ efforts to build their advocacy capacity and, in the process, learn from their outcomes. Many resources — such as those from the Alliance for Justice’s [Bolder Advocacy](#) initiative, [Learn Foundation Law](#) and [GrantCraft](#) — can help guide foundations on funding advocacy and legally and strategically conducting their own advocacy activities.

Influence peers — Since movement-supporting funders tend to invest dollars and staff and trustee time in understanding the broader context of movements, many consider it an obligation to communicate this context to and encourage participation from other grantmakers who might join us in building movements, even if they are not seeking the exact same social change goals. The act of supporting movements may in fact be one of the greatest applications of philanthropy’s influence, since funders are some of the key players in a power structure that movements seek to address.

² Barbara Masters and Torie Osborn, “Social Movements and Philanthropy: How Foundations Can Support Movement Building,” *The Foundation Review* vol. 2, no. 2, p. 19, (2010).

Model movement principles — Although it may not seem as integral to supporting movements as funding or convening, aligning a foundation’s internal practices and culture with the principles of the movements it supports can be powerful. Grantmakers report that “being the change we want to see” creates an authenticity that staff, trustees, community partners and even the public notice.

Conclusion

Options abound for philanthropy’s involvement in building and supporting movements, among other collaborative efforts for social change, whatever form they may take. The roles described here are complex, ever shifting, long term, ego subsuming and may not be the right fit for all grantmakers. But the potential for serving as investors, brokers, connectors, learners and influencers to accelerate the pace at which we move toward a better future certainly tempts funders of all sizes and fields.