

# What is the Role of Philanthropy in Supporting Social Change Movements?

“ There’s got to be acknowledgment that if we’re going to achieve systemic change, we’ve got to reshuffle the power dynamics. We’ve got to be organizers in our sector and think like organizers.”  
—Kevin Ryan, Ford Foundation

How can the philanthropic sector most effectively support social movements? Movement leaders and funders identified values and roles that philanthropic institutions should hold and practice in order to be in genuine relationship with social change movements such as changing white supremacist and capitalist culture, addressing power imbalances, influencing peers, and considering their role in providing reparations. When funders play the role of organizers, as Kevin Ryan from the Ford Foundation urges, they can create change within their own institutions as well as the philanthropic sector as a whole.

This guide accompanies the video about how and why philanthropy must support social movements. After watching the video, follow the steps in the guide to deepen reflection and discussion, and to foster change.

*Move The Money: Practices and Values for Funding Social Movements* is a set of resources produced by the Building Movement Project.

*Move The Money* is geared towards grantmaking institutions seeking to deepen and transform their support of organizations, networks, and leaders involved with social change movements. These resources draw and build upon the wave of ongoing efforts that encourage the philanthropic sector to invest in movements.

This guide is one of four that are available along with accompanying videos at [www.buildingmovement.org](http://www.buildingmovement.org).



## Change the Culture of Philanthropy

In our interviews, funders and movement leaders alike emphasized the importance of dismantling the markers of white supremacy and capitalism that pervade philanthropy. This manifests in many ways, from time-consuming and unnecessarily complicated applications, reports, and evaluations to the perception that people of color (POC)-led groups are risky investments.

Below are experiences that two women of color directors relayed about confronting biases in philanthropy. Darakshan Raja, co-director of the Justice for Muslims Collective, explains that she has to consistently make the case for why Muslim communities deserve resources while La’Tasha Mayes, director of New Voices for Reproductive Justice, interrogates why organizations led by Black women face additional barriers.



“

I always found with every funder that was not centered on supporting our communities, I've had to prove my case of why my community is worth investing in. I hope funders don't always put the pressure on us that we have to prove our case and our humanity. I hope there is an understanding that investing in our leadership is actually going to produce wins more broadly.”

—Darakshan Raja, Justice for Muslims Collective

There is this idea that Black organizations can't manage money. Can we talk about that? That is probably the number one reason that there's a disparity between the amounts of money that Black-led organizations get compared to white, male-led organizations across the board.”

—La'Tasha Mayes, New Voices for Reproductive Justice

As a result of such experiences, it becomes harder for POC-led groups to obtain funding. They have to jump through additional hoops to prove their worthiness, educate funders about their communities and address inherent biases rooted in anti-Black racism or Islamophobia – all on top of running organizations and catalyzing movements. Changing philanthropy culture includes assessing how white dominant standards of productivity and perfectionism show up in foundations, dismantling biases that render certain organizations as risky prospects and removing barriers that prevent groups from seeking funds.

## Reflections:

- In what ways does white supremacy and capitalist culture show up in philanthropy? Who keeps these practices in place and why?
- How does your foundation dismantle practices and systems that reflect white dominant culture?
- What steps can be taken in your organization to address barriers for movement groups, especially those led by people of color? How do you create systems that are grantee focused and community-centered?
- What is the risk of not funding movement-building groups? Crystal Hayling (Libra Foundation) asks:

“

If we don't invest in these organizations right now, what will this country look like in 10, in 20 years?”

How would your foundation respond to this call to action?



## Reshuffle the Power Dynamics

There is an inherent power imbalance within philanthropy. The power to decide who gets funding places the funder-grantee relationship on an unequal footing. Movement leaders expressed that in order to continue receiving resources from foundations, they often felt tremendous pressure to continuously perform, to come across as visionaries and



charismatic spokespersons and to hide the existence of conflict and chaos that is inevitable in movements. While the relationship between a funder and a grantee is unlikely to ever be equal given the directional flow of money and resources, funders have a role to reshuffle the power dynamics to create more balance.

One way of shifting power dynamics is to follow the lead of grantees when it comes to defining movement strategy. Often, foundations influence the strategy of their grantees who adjust their goals and practices, from narrative development to policy advocacy, in order to continue receiving funding. This long arm of philanthropy has constrained organizations in their ability to experiment and to follow their own instincts about the needs of their communities—a phenomenon that scholar Megan Ming Francis refers to as “movement capture.” When philanthropic entities influence the direction, agenda and strategy of POC-led organizations and movements, they are reinforcing a paternalistic, top-down, and white dominant lens.

Dimple Abichandani explains that General Service Foundation underwent a learning process that shifted the ways in which the foundation thinks about its role and practices:

“ It’s hard to actually imagine a situation in which a strategy would be successful for people who are most impacted by whatever injustice you’re trying to solve if that strategy came out of a foundation. For us, when we clarified our values, [we asked] where should the leadership live? We recognized that if we believe that those who were most impacted by injustice should be leading efforts towards justice, then why would we be the ones to say how to do that?”

—Dimple Abichandani, General Service Foundation

Resting movement strategy in the capable hands of movement leaders is one way to reshuffle the power imbalance, to build trust with grantees and to provide groups with the space to experiment without fear of losing resources and credibility.

## Reflections:

- Assess your own institution’s dynamics with grantees. How does power show up? Is the institution imposing its own theories of change or trusting that frontline communities know the arc and evolution of what’s needed and the strategies to get there?
- Where does the leadership for social change movements “live” according to your institution’s perspective? Is it with grantees or with foundation representatives?
- What is your foundation’s “listen and learn” approach in understanding movement strategy?





## Influence Philanthropic Peers

One of the most important roles that a funder can play is organizing others in philanthropy to support movement-building organizations. This is especially helpful when organizations are just starting out and building their credibility in the field. One funder's commitment can make a huge difference and open doors previously closed. Shireen Zaman (RISE Together Fund) shares that funder-to-funder introductions are important not only to advocate for new groups, but also to counter biases within the sector.

“

Just like there is institutionalized racism within philanthropy, there is anti-Muslim bigotry that has been foundational within the philanthropy system. There is a lot of misunderstanding about who the Muslim community is, what are our values, are we truly part of the movement. Part of the work that we do is having those conversations.”

—Shireen Zaman, RISE Together Fund

One-on-one conversations, broader sessions organized by RISE Together around anti-Black and anti-Muslim bias within philanthropy, and introductions to new funders have led to changes in how philanthropic entities fund Muslim, Arab and South Asian communities and understand their connections with broader social change movements.

### *Reflections:*

- What efforts should foundations make to influence their peers?
- How could your foundation introduce grantees to new funders?
- How could your foundation address implicit biases in the philanthropic sector about particular communities?



## Consider Role in Providing Reparations

In our interviews with movement leaders, a recurring theme included considering the role of philanthropy in wealth accumulation and providing reparations. Foundations are likely at different stages of developing a reparations framework but it is important to begin the process particularly in the context of supporting movement building organizations. This might mean confronting a difficult set of facts about the role that colonization, slavery and the exploitation of Black and Brown labor played in accumulating a foundation's wealth.

Movement leaders urge philanthropic partners to be transparent about the origins and sources of their institution's resources. Charles Long (Movement for Black Lives) encourages funders to conduct an audit of their own financial records:



“

How can funders know their own history? There's some self-analysis that needs to happen on the institutional level. Institutions and foundations will ask for audits of organizations and proof of financial stability and good standing, but they will not have done those audits around their own house.”

—Charles Long, Movement for Black Lives

Once foundations have acknowledged their own histories of wealth creation and accumulation as a result of a historical audit, they can move into the phase of repair and healing. According to Edgar Villaneuva, the author of Decolonizing Wealth, foundations can take many steps including apologizing for past harm, redistributing power and resources, and refraining from hoarding and gatekeeping practices by resourcing groups with unrestricted and flexible funding.

The quotes below from Greisa Martinez Rosas (United We Dream) and Vanessa Daniel (Groundswell Fund) emphasize the importance of beginning and continuing conversations about the history and influence of wealth and power in philanthropy.

“

Philanthropy includes resources that have been built on the backs of Black and Brown workers in the US. And when we talk about fundraising and bringing in resources, we're inviting people to restore some of those rights that were taken away from undocumented people, from women, from Black folks and that it is a partnership that we're investing in.”

—Greisa Martinez Rosas, United We Dream

There's a larger conversation that we can have about our reparations framework and understanding of philanthropy, where we actually interrogate whose money this is, and the role that people who are in philanthropy are playing in the scheme of reparations and supporting a redistribution of resources to communities in many cases that built the wealth.”

—Vanessa Daniel, Groundswell Fund

## Reflections:

- Consider Charles Long's call to action above: Has your institution done an internal audit of its history? How could you begin that process if it hasn't occurred? How willing is the foundation to share the results of the audit publicly with grantees to acknowledge any past harm?
- Consider Greisa Martinez Rosas' invitation to philanthropy: What are the necessary steps to move from an acknowledgment of harm to the process of repair which would involve authentic partnerships, reparations and redistribution?
- Consider Vanessa Daniel's quote about interrogating philanthropy's origins of wealth and role in redistribution of resources: How can these conversations emerge within your own foundation?

*(continued next page)*



## Reflections: (cont.)

- Desiree Flores (Arcus Foundation) says:

“

Program officers are above all else, communicators and persuaders and figuring out different ways to get people to understand the reality of how this work happens, especially when you're funding the people who are most affected to lead.”

How does Desiree's description of program officers as communicators and persuaders resonate with your own experience? What would it mean to be a persuader or organizer within philanthropy?



