

# Influencing funders to shift power: Lessons from the Giving for Change initiative

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Efforts to “shift power” in philanthropy and development have gained momentum in recent years, but real change in donor practice has been slow and inconsistent. It is thus critical for the sector to understand how donors are influenced to shift their mindsets, systems, and practices.

This report contributes to that discussion by examining the recent work of the Giving for Change (GfC) initiative, particularly under Domain 3, which has aimed to influence international donors, (private foundations, bilaterals, and INGOs) to support community philanthropy and move power closer to the ground. The key research questions

explored in this study are: **What strategies did GfC partners used to influence donors?** and **What achievements, challenges, and impacts have resulted?** The analysis draws on GfC partners' perspectives, as well as reflections from donors and others in the sector.

## Findings

GfC partners use a range of individual and collective **strategies** to influence donors, grounded in the relational nature of systems change and mindset change work:

- **Accompaniment** through relationships and thought partnerships
- Facilitating and supporting opportunities for shared learning and practice
- **Resources and advocacy**
- **Amplifying community voices** and Global South voices
- Mobilizing **stronger local power** - leading to shifts in power dynamics

Reported **effects on donor organizations** included:

- Being supported to **think differently and try new things**
- **Learning in community** - from and with others; and **experiencing spaces where power is shared** and local civil society actors can set the agenda
- **Experimenting with power-shifting approaches** in grantmaking
- Having **resources and tools** to support organizational change
- **Deeper understanding** when they **hear directly** from Global South leaders and communities

Despite its limited timeframe and structure, Giving for Change has also contributed to **shifts in the sector** by:

- Fostering **real conversations** around shifting power and community philanthropy
- Catalyzing shifts in the **understanding and approach** of philanthropy as a sector
- **Building power at the 'base'**, which helped to shift power dynamics
- Serving as a **microsystem** of more equitable relationships

Giving for Change adds value by serving as the connective tissue between individual partners, amplifying the work of partners, and linking their collective efforts to the broader movement for systemic change.

## Insights and approaches that enable shifts in donor practice

From the study's findings, we are able to draw out key insights and approaches that are particularly influential in influencing donor behaviour and advancing community-led change:

- 1 Meaningful influence happens withing **relationships** grounded in trust, safety, and reciprocity.
- 2 **Listening directly to local voices** has a profound effect on funders' understandings and mindsets.
- 3 **Experiential and collective learning** allows donors to personally and directly experience equitable power relations, and learn in community. Real change requires working with the **whole donor organization** - not just program staff but also board, leadership, and finance and compliance staff.
- 4 **'Bottom-up' demand** creates pressure and incentive for funders to adapt their systems and practices.
- 5 **Normative pressures** can be leveraged to foster sector-wide change and collective accountability.
- 6 **Donors' desires for evidence and tools can be used strategically** to steer them towards better practice.
- 7 **Systemic change** requires more strategy, more organizing, and a generational perspective - beyond donor funding cycles and frameworks.
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The GfC initiative demonstrates that shifting donor mindsets, systems, and practices requires sustained effort at multiple levels - funders and INGOs, civil society actors, and ecosystem catalysts each have distinct and interconnected roles to play.

### Concluding note

GfC demonstrated the potential and challenges of shifting power in philanthropy. It showed that real change can emerge from patient, relational, and strategic work.

Much of the initiative's influence on philanthropy emerged from individual GfC partners' long-standing relationships with donors. As well, as a collective, GfC added connective value, capacity, and energy - linking actors across geographies, amplifying Global South voices, and embedding this work within a wider ecosystem of movements for change.

Systems change work requires trusted relationships, direct connections and shared learning across sectors and levels, working with the whole donor organization, and continued organizing with a long-term view. Together, these efforts can shift individual donor practices as well as the broader culture of philanthropy and development toward more equitable, accountable, and community-led approaches.

[Read the full report here:](#)

[Influencing funders to shift power: Lessons from the Giving for Change initiative.](#)