

From rhetoric to practice: What it takes for international funders to shift power to communities

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In light of growing demands to shift power, why has change among funders been so limited?
What can be done to help funders meaningfully shift power?

Our research study answers these questions by exploring

- Why and how funders are beginning to shift power,
- The barriers and enablers that shape their journeys, and
- Strategies that are effective in helping them make progress.

The findings are grounded in interviews with funders, civil society organizations, and sector practitioners, as well as a rapid review of the literature.

How funders approach shifting power in philanthropy

- Many funders express **organizational commitments** to shifting power and/or supporting local agency, grounded either in long-standing values or in more recent changes in institutional beliefs.
- Some funders are **uncomfortable talking about systems of power and oppression**, and avoid using the term 'shifting power'.

- **Within relationships and thought partnerships** - particularly those that are long-term and trust-based
- **Through direct engagement** with local civil society leaders and practitioners from the Global South
- **From experience**, including strategic initiatives and pilots that they try out

In addition, funders' learning about shifting power must:

Funders **learn** about shifting power:

- **In community** and shared spaces - such as convenings, workshops, communities of practice, and working groups.

- **Be organization-wide**, engaging boards, leadership, and operational teams
- **Include ongoing reflection and intentional work** around positionality, bias, solidarity, and accountability

Funders are **operationalizing** shifts in power by:

- **Implementing strategic initiatives or piloting new approaches** that allow for experimentation and organizational learning;
- **Changing funding practices** by simplifying systems, increasing flexibility, and integrating local actors' input into decision-making;
- **Shifting relational dynamics with grantee-partners** - emphasizing humility, trust, openness to feedback, and mutual accountability;
- **Partnerships and allyship with Global South civil society organizations** and networks;
- **Working with and through progressive intermediaries**, particularly those who are rooted in Global South contexts and demonstrate a strong commitment to local agency; and
- **Influencing other funders**, as systemic transformation requires widespread shifts in values and practice across the philanthropic ecosystem.

What helps and hinders funders to shift power

Organizational factors that are deeply implicated in funders' efforts to shift power include:

- Alignment between the organization's ethos/values and principles of local agency and community-led change;
- Support from Boards and governance structures;
- Endorsement and commitment from senior leadership;
- Internal norms and systems for direction-setting, decision-making, and control; and
- Operational and compliance systems.

Staff-related factors are also essential to the organization's progress in shifting power, as they are the ones putting ideas of shifting power into practice:

- Staff mindsets and beliefs around power, control, trust, and risk;
- Staff time and capacity to internalize and operationalize;
- Staff roles or teams dedicated to strategy, learning, and improvement; and
- Staff having direct lived or professional experience of the issues and efforts being supported.

Funders are also affected by **external influences** and trends, such as:

- Sector-wide research, resources, and tools that help justify and operationalize shifting power;
- Networks and other forms of philanthropic infrastructure that consolidate knowledge and create spaces for funders to learn from one another and from civil society;

- "Bottom-up" demand from local organizations and communities for less burdensome and more enabling practices; and
- Broader contextual factors - such as political and legal frameworks, global crises like COVID-19, and socio-political-economic conditions.

Funders' efforts to shift power are also shaped by underlying **paradigms and frameworks** that shape how an organization and team thinks, feels, and operates. These include:

- Paradigms of **charity and benevolence** rather than justice and solidarity
- Implicit beliefs about **expertise and control**
- Ideas about **change, impact, and measurement**
- Desire for traditional **data** and short-term **evidence**
- Tendency to '**projectize**' and **package** transformation into guidelines and toolkits
- Assumptions about local organizations' **capacity** and '**riskiness**'

Systems change reflections

Funders' journeys to shift power are embedded in broader, entrenched systems of philanthropy, aid, and global development:

- Systems change is inherently **complex** and takes **time**;
- Systems change work is **relational** and requires **collaborating** with everyone involved;
- Systems change work requires **strategy** and **infra structure** - and **ecosystem catalysts** play important roles in supporting these.
- **Power dynamics** within the current system are deeply entrenched. True transformation may depend on **strengthening Global South civil society and movements**, and **building alternative systems**. Philanthropy has an important role to play - and not play - in this work.

Insights and approaches that enable shifts in donor practice

- 1 Relationships grounded in trust, safety, and reciprocity are essential to helping funders think differently.
- 2 Transformative change requires confronting systems of power, inequity, and oppression, and the paradigms that sustain them.
- 3 Listening directly to local voices has a profound effect on funders' understandings and mindsets.
- 4 Experiential and collective learning allows funders to personally and directly experience equitable power relations.
- 5 Real change requires working with the whole organization. It is important to foster mindset and practice shifts beyond program staff - in boards and senior leadership, as well as in compliance, finance, risk, and legal staff who often determine what is possible.
- 6 Organizational change requires time, resourcing, and capacity.
- 7 'Bottom-up' demand from communities and civil society can drive funder adaptation.
- 8 Normative pressure and peer influence can shape funder behaviour. Funders take cues from one another, often adopting approaches that become visible sector norms.
- 9 Funders' tendencies (e.g., desire for data or inclination towards toolkits) can be used strategically to steer them towards better practice.
- 10 Systemic change requires more strategy, more organizing, and a long-term perspective.

Read the full report here:

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