From rhetoric to practice:

What it takes for international funders to shift power to communities

Giving for Change Alliance, November 2025

Front matter

Authorship and contributions

This report was written by Sadaf Shallwani and commissioned by the Giving for Change initiative. Research support was provided by Ronald Kimambo. The research was conducted in close collaboration with Giving for Change Alliance partners, as well as other funders, civil society organizations, and sector practitioners.

About Giving for Change

The Giving for Change initiative (2020-2025) has aimed to strengthen community philanthropy and shift power in the international development and philanthropy sectors. With partners across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe, Giving for Change has worked to support community-led development, influence donor practices, and amplify Global South leadership within global systems of aid and philanthropy.

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Disclaimer

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of Giving for Change or its partners.

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Executive summary

Background

Despite growing demands and growing awareness about the importance of shifting power, progress has been slow, particularly among international organizations such as foundations, bilateral agencies, and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). These institutions continue to control the majority of capital - determining where resources flow, under what conditions, and through which systems and processes. This raises critical questions:

- 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?

This research study contributes to answering these questions by exploring: why and how funders begin to shift power, the barriers and enablers that shape their journeys, and strategies that are effective in helping them make progress. The research was grounded in consultations and interviews with 17 respondents from funder organizations, 10 respondents from Global South civil society organizations, and 4 sector practitioners, and was supported by a rapid review of the literature.

The findings from this study are highly relevant for those who are actively working to shift funder mindsets and practices, including foundation leaders and staff, civil society leaders, philanthropic support organizations and funder networks, consultants, and philanthropic advisors.

Findings

1. 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. However, some funders are uncomfortable talking about systems of power and oppression, and avoid using the term 'shifting power'.

Funders *learn* about shifting power -
- In community and shared spaces - such as convenings, workshops, communities of practice, and working groups.
- 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 -
- 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.

2. What helps and hinders funders to shift power

Funders' journeys to shift power are shaped by internal organizational and staff-related factors, external influences and trends, and underlying sectoral paradigms and frameworks.

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'

3. Systems change reflections

Funders' journeys to shift power are embedded in broader, entrenched systems of philanthropy, aid, and global development. As such, insights on what it will take for funders to shift power reflect broader reflections on how systems change happens:
- 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 infrastructure - 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

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

1. Relationships grounded in trust, safety, and reciprocity are essential to helping funders think differently. Funders often shift through accompaniment, conversation, feedback, and reflection within long-term relationships with trusted partners.

2. Transformative change requires reckoning with systems of power, inequity, and oppression, and the paradigms that sustain them. Many funders remain hesitant to engage explicitly with questions of power, and hold deep implicit beliefs that perpetuate systems of inequity and harm. Transformative change requires challenging and helping funders to confront systems and biases, and reconceptualize and reframe their perspective and role.

3. Listening directly to local voices has a profound effect on funders' understandings and mindsets. Hearing directly from community leaders and local organizations helps funders grasp critical aspects such as locally-led decision-making, long-term flexible grants, and risk sharing.

4. Experiential and collective learning allows funders to personally and directly experience equitable power relations. This helps them appreciate that other systems and ways of working are actually possible and can be quite transformative.

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. Staff need time and support to learn and unlearn, to establish new systems and practices, and to work in more relational and collaborative ways.

7. 'Bottom-up' demand from communities and civil society can drive funder adaptation. As community organizations strengthen their voice, agency, and organizing power, they generate pressure for funders to improve their systems and practices.

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 can be used strategically to steer them towards better practice. Funders' desire for data and evidence can be harnessed to build the case for community-led approaches. Funders' inclination towards frameworks and toolkits can also be used to promote approaches and practices that share power and advance community leadership and agency.

10. Systemic change requires more strategy, more organizing, and a long-term perspective. In addition to pushing funders towards longer-term and unrestricted funding support, civil society and ecosystem actors need to plan and organize beyond funder timelines and priorities - building movements that sustain pressure and innovation over decades.

Changing mindsets, systems, and practices to shift power in philanthropy 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 - How can we support funders to shift power?

Real change in philanthropy requires relationships, experiential learning, and accountability that make new ways of working possible, compelling, and necessary.

- Funders need spaces and relationships of trust where they can reflect on - and begin to shift - the paradigms and assumptions underlying their systems and practices.
- Funders' learning is more tangible, personal, and profound when they hear directly from local leaders, when they learn from experience, and when they learn in community.
- Organizational transformation requires investment in people, time, and systems across the organization, so that shifts in mindsets can be integrated into structures and processes.
- Continued organizing and collective pressure are essential. Ecosystem connectors and civil society alliances play a critical role in maintaining momentum and in shifting the norms of what is considered and expected as 'good practice'.

Helping funders shift power involves creating the conditions, relationships, and accountability structures that make shifting power to local communities feasible, desired, and expected. This work requires patience, investment, relationships, strategic organizing, and normative change across a diverse ecosystem, in which funders, civil society, and communities collectively learn and evolve toward a more just, inclusive, and impactful philanthropic and development sector.

1. Introduction and background

1.1. The movement to shift power in global development

Over the last few decades, critiques of the international development and philanthropy sector have been growing. Concerns about top-down and externally imposed agendas and strategies, white saviourism, short-termism, and the persistence of racism and inequity have been raised both within organizations and across the sector.[1,2,3] Much of this critique highlights how prevailing concepts, frameworks, and practices are rooted in colonial, imperial, and neoliberal paradigms.[4,5]

In response, diverse movements, initiatives, and approaches have emerged - to *shift power* and disrupt the traditional top-down and restrictive approaches that dominate philanthropy and development. While each has different entry points and objectives, they share some common goals:

- to place more power and control of resources and decision-making into the hands of local actors;
- to build more equitable and accountable relationships between funders and communities; and
- to enable longer-term systemic change.

Examples of efforts to shift power in international philanthropy and development

- ➢ "Localization" efforts or support for "locally-led development"
- ➢ Pushes to "decolonize" aid, development, and philanthropy
- ➢ Support for community-led approaches
- ➢ Partnering with progressive intermediaries - who are demonstrably committed to shifting power and supporting local agency
- ➢ Networks and collaborations among Global South civil society organizations for collective advocacy and action
- ➢ INGOs shifting their roles and increasing their accountability to local constituents
- ➢ Supporting social movements
- ➢ Grantmaking practices that put more power and control in the hands of affected communities - such as flexible and core funding, long-term

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[1] Webinar discussion: *How to be anti-racist in aid*. Aid Re-imagined. Available at https://medium.com/aidreimagined/video-how-to-be-anti-racist-in-aid-a6eaebc54d3e

[2] Peace Direct (2021). *Time to decolonise aid*. Author. Available at https://www.peacedirect.org/time-to-decolonise-aid

[3] Khan, T., Dickson, K., & Sondarjee, M. (Eds.). (2023). *White Saviorism in International Development: Theories, Practices and Lived Experiences*. Daraja Press.

[4] Baguis, A. (2024). *Resisting coloniality in systems thinking*. Aid Re-imagined. Available at https://medium.com/aidreimagined/resisting-coloniality-in-systems-thinking-63d7c3a7cfdb

[5] Blackwell, N. & Naylor, N. (2024). *The supremacy of whiteness in international philanthropy*. Handbook of Critical Whiteness pp. 1171-1206.

	funding partnerships, trust-based philanthropy, and participatory grantmaking

It is important to note that these above efforts have been critiqued as incremental shifts in some practices, while still maintaining overarching, pervasively inequitable and harmful systems. From this perspective, tweaks or reforms to inherently harmful systems are insufficient, and what is required rather is a fundamental dismantling of the existing systems, and co-creation of alternative, just, and generative systems. Nonetheless, many in the sector believe that both approaches are needed - working on improvements to the current system which currently controls and moves billions of dollars in aid and development each year, as well as creating and practicing alternative ways of visioning, relating, and operating. (See the Two Loop Model proposed by the Berkana Institute.[6])

Despite growing demands and growing awareness about the importance of shifting power, progress has been slow, particularly among international organizations such as foundations, bilateral agencies, and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). These institutions continue to control the majority of capital - determining where resources flow, under what conditions, and through which systems and processes. This raises critical questions:

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?

This report contributes to answering these questions by sharing findings from a research study that examines why and how funders begin to shift power. It explores the internal and external barriers and enablers they encounter, as well as strategies that have been successful in helping them make progress. The report offers recommendations to funders, civil society organizations, and ecosystem catalysts and connectors around how to effectively support funders to shift power closer to communities through their positionality, stance, systems, practices, and relationships.

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[6] The Two Loop Model, developed by the Berkana Institute, describes how an older established system begins to decline while a newer emergent system rises and eventually takes over. A helpful overview by Visible Networks Lab can be reviewed here: https://visiblenetworklabs.com/2024/08/16/what-is-the-two-loops-model/

1.2 Research study: What helps and hinders international funders in their journeys to shift power?

This research study was commissioned by the Giving for Change initiative (2021-2025) which promoted local voice and participation through community philanthropy at the local level, along with deliberate pushes at national and international levels to shift power dynamics towards citizens and communities. A key objective of the initiative was to influence international funders and INGOs to shift power to local communities and people.

This research study explored the following -
1. How do funders feel about and engage with concepts of shifting power?
2. How do funders learn about why and how to shift power?
3. How do they actually implement changes in their own organizations and in their interactions and others?
4. What are some of the barriers and areas of resistance funders face when it comes to shifting power?
5. What are some of the enablers and supports funders have benefited from in their journey to shift power?
6. How can we as an ecosystem better support funders to shift power in meaningful and transformative ways?

The research was grounded in consultations and interviews with civil society organizations in the Global South, funders, sector support organizations, and thought leaders. Interview transcripts were reviewed in detail to identify and draw out themes responding to each key research question. Cross-cutting themes and additional insights beyond the key research questions were also drawn out and synthesized. Further detail on the methodology is provided in Annex 1 - Methodology.

Contributors to the research study included -

➤ 17 respondents from 10 funder organizations
➤ 10 respondents from 7 Global South civil society organizations
➤ 4 sector practitioners (consultants and sector support organizations)

Some limitations must be acknowledged: Findings were based on a small number of interviews with funders already inclined toward shifting power, meaning that traditional funders' perspectives are not represented. As well, grantees of the funder organizations were not separately included (unless they were civil society organizations being interviewed as part of the Giving for Change initiative), so it was not possible to fully assess how reported shifts were experienced by those receiving funds. Despite these limitations, the study still allows us to identify emerging patterns in how funders conceptualize and practice power-shifting, the barriers they face, and the kinds of strategies and approaches that seem to be effective in supporting their journeys to shift power.

The findings from this study are highly relevant for those who are actively working to shift funder mindsets and practices, including foundation leaders and staff, civil society leaders, philanthropic support organizations and funder networks, consultants, and philanthropic advisors.

1.3 Report structure and terminology

This report reviews the findings and insights that emerged from this research study, structured as follows -

- Findings - This section reviews key themes that emerged from the interviews, illustrated by example quotes from contributors. The section is organized as follows:

  - How funders approach shifting power in philanthropy
    - How funders feel about shifting power
    - How funders learn about shifting power
    - How funders are operationalizing shifting power

  - What helps and hinders funders to shift power
    - Organizational characteristics
    - Staff-related factors
    - External influences
    - Paradigms and frameworks

  - Systems change reflections that emerged from the study

- Insights and Recommendations - This section reviews:

  - Emerging insights and approaches that help funders shift power, and pr
  - Detailed recommendations for different sector actors:
    - Funders and INGOs,
    - Civil society organizations, and
    - Ecosystem catalysts and connectors.

Some notes on terminology used in this report -

1. In this study, contributors generally used the term "funders" to refer to different international or Global North entities that make grants to civil society organizations in the Global South. This primarily refers to private foundations and bilateral donors, but

sometimes also referred to intermediary funds and/or international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). Where intermediaries or INGOs were specifically called out by a respondent, this is clearly indicated. But otherwise, they are grouped together under the broader category of 'funders'.

2. There are important distinctions between concepts of "shifting power", "trust-based philanthropy", "locally-led development", "localization", "participatory approaches", "inclusion", etc. However, in this study, contributors generally felt that these approaches seek to, in some way or another, shift power closer to local organizations and communities. Thus, for the purpose of this report, the above different approaches are assumed to fall generally within the concept and movement of 'shifting power'.

2. Findings - Funders' journeys to shift power

In this section, we review insights from funders' and others' responses around how funders engage with concepts of shifting power, how they operationalize power shifts in practice, and the barriers and enablers that hinder or support them. These findings are organized as follows -

- How funders feel about, learn about, and operationalize shifting power in philanthropy
  - How funders feel about shifting power
  - How funders learn about shifting power
  - How funders operationalize shifting power

- Enablers and barriers that affect their organizational efforts to shift power
  - Internal factors - organizational characteristics
  - Internal factors - staff-related factors
  - External influences
  - Paradigms and frameworks

- Reflections shared around what it takes to really shift power in a complex and entrenched system like philanthropy

2.1 How funders approach shifting power in philanthropy

In this section, we review the perspectives of funders (and some civil society actors who work closely with funders) on their feelings and motivations, methods of learning, and ways of operationalizing concepts of shifting power. It is important to note that for many funders, their motivations, learning and realizations, and changes in practice are deeply interwoven. Motivations often lead to both learning and change, learning and realizations lead to changes in motivations and practice, and changes in practice also result in experiential learning and transformative shifts in motivations.

2.1.1 How funders feel about shifting power

Many funders hold an organizational commitment to ideas of shifting power and supporting local agency, either due to inherent organizational values or due to changes in their organizational attitudes and beliefs in recent years. This makes sense, as this study focused on interviewing funders who have demonstrated desire and taken steps to shift power. Despite this commitment, funders describe a number of challenges to making it happen in practice. Learn more in the section: Enablers and barriers for organizational change to shift power.

Buy-in to the concept of shifting power is very strong [at our foundation]. Almost all the staff in different departments, they're all really excited by the idea, they really think it's a good thing. But when it comes to working through the different processes and ways of working in the organization that are hindering us - being aligned to shifting power is then more complicated, and that's taking time.
- Program lead at global foundation

We believe that if development comes from the people who want to do it, or where there's a need for change, then it's much more sustainable and much more context-driven. (...) I don't know whether we manage to do it as far as we wish to, because it takes time to change people's mindsets.
- Policy officer at bilateral donor

However, some funders hold organizational ambivalence or avoidance around the use of the phrase 'shifting power'. Some prefer to use language like 'localization', 'locally-led development', 'participation', or 'inclusion of people with lived experience'. A couple simply view community involvement as a 'common-sense' part of planning and decision-making, without necessarily framing it as 'shifting power'. Along with ambivalence around concepts of 'power', a number of funder organizations are hesitant or unwilling to talk about systems of power and oppression.

We don't use progressive language like shifting power, we use language that is comfortable like participation and inclusion. Nobody can argue with inclusion, and this is how we try not to rock the boat.
- Programs/grants staff at global family foundation

It's still difficult to talk about, for example, racism or colonization, and the effects of that on our current policy. So it's still a bit sensitive, so I think there still could be more work done, but it's also difficult.
- Program lead at major funder

2.1.2 How funders learn about shifting power

Learning and unlearning are essential aspects of how funders begin to understand and operationalize what it means to shift power. In this section, we review both how funders are currently learning, as well as their thoughts and recommendations around how learning should happen. Reflections on learning can be categorized as follows -
- Funders learn in community and shared spaces;
- Funders learn within long-term and trust-based relationships;
- Funders learn through hearing directly from local organizations and leaders;
- Funders learn from experience and trying new approaches;
- Funder learning needs to be ongoing and organization-wide - including the Board, leadership, and operational staff; and

- Funder learning needs to include ongoing self-reflection and intentional work around positionality, agency, and accountability.

Each of these are described in turn below.

Funders learn in community.

Funders' learning, unlearning, and understanding often emerge from community and shared spaces - such as convenings, workshops, communities of practice, and working groups - in which different stakeholders discuss and collaborate around what it means to shift power and support locally-led development.

For example, the #ShiftThePower summits are highlighted by a number of funders as key milestone events in their learning and change processes. These summits, hosted and facilitated by the Global Fund for Community Foundations, hold space for conversations and interactions around how power imbalances shape the sector, why and how communities should lead their own change processes, and how funders need to operate differently to enable that. The December 2023 summit in Bogotá in particular aimed to help civil society actors and funders experience what it means to share power and be part of an emergent, co-created process. Although not interviewed as part of this study, Patrick Steiner-Hirth at Robert Bosch Stiftung (Foundation) describes it as follows -

> *It was Jesse Evans from Humanity United who called it - and I've quoted him a lot since then - the 'pleasure of discomfort.' That sums it up perfectly. Bogotá was simply one of the greatest learning experiences of my professional life. To be in that space, to be outnumbered, to be challenged, was really good and humbling as well. People were free to be blunt and speak their minds. It was very liberating to have conversations free of the baggage that normally goes with a potential funding relationship.*
> - Patrick Steiner-Hirth at Robert Bosch Stiftung

These kinds of events, along with other conversations and interactions, challenge funders to think critically about how power imbalances shape the sector, why and how communities need to lead their own change processes, and how funders need to operate in different ways to enable that.

Funders also note the value of being part of a longer-term community of practice with other funders who are on similar journeys - learning from each other and thinking things through together.

Donors need to come and join platforms, and do this thinking together. There isn't a one-size-fits-all. Each foundation is in a different place, with a different history, a different Board, a different context. (...) So it's important to find communities of practice and be part of them.
- Senior leader at global foundation

Comic Relief UK, a major charity and grantmaker, appreciates learnings from global movements and conversations that influenced its own shift to supporting more locally led organizations and adjusting its grantmaking practices to shift power. Learn more in [Annex 3 - Case Study: Comic Relief UK](#).

Funders learn within relationships.

Direct relationships and thought partnerships are key places of influence and learning for funders. Learning is most meaningful when these relationships are long-term and rooted in trust. Civil society partners have seen funders learn and change over time within partnerships - demonstrating the importance of consistency and patience. Funders also confirm how these longer-term relationships and thought partnerships have influenced their learning.

We have people in [Bilateral Donor] who have been 'working the account' from within. (...) We were never looking for funding from [Bilateral]. We were focused on influencing [Bilateral] itself, and actually made quite a lot of progress. For example, [one department within Bilateral] established a distinct focus on local resource mobilization and community philanthropy.
- Executive leader at global civil society organization

Our whole perspective was shaped by folks like the [global civil society organization]. They have hugely shaped how we think about locally led development, and the approach that we took.
- Program lead at global foundation

Funders learn through hearing directly from local actors.

Some of the most impactful learning for funders emerges when they engage directly with local civil society leaders and practitioners from the Global South, including but not limited to grantee-partners. Funder staff note that their leadership and boards are also more strongly compelled by hearing stories and experiences directly from local actors.

Our institution has been influenced and continues to be influenced by voices from the Global Majority. We just co-hosted an event, and our leadership was able to attend that. They were able to absorb a lot of these messages from the Global Majority community about the fact that locally-led development isn't just about shifting funding flows, it's about shifting decision-making and investing in agency.
- Program lead at global foundation

I increasingly believe that it's narrative, storytelling, and experience interacting with community members that's the most effective at the end of the day. (...) We were able to bring two of our board members to our latest convening. Spending two and a half days with our partners, talking about the challenges of their work and why flexible resources are so important, in my experience, has been the most effective.
- Program lead at global foundation

Funders learn from experience.

Funders learn from direct experience, including through trying out new approaches. Inspired by the different learning opportunities they have engaged in, funders have been trying out new grantmaking practices such as flexible grants, reducing grant reporting requirements, funding advocacy and convening efforts, and piloting participatory grantmaking. These strategic and experimental approaches are key spaces for intentional learning.

We ran a series of learning grants where we literally provided unrestricted funding to a range of local organizations … We liked the work that they were doing, and thought, 'Okay, we need to learn'. So one of the best ways to learn was just through standing alongside organizations that are working with young people, just to really see what was happening, and to give us the opportunity to understand what those organizations' challenges really were, and what they were seeing in terms of potential and what they could be doing.
- Executive leader at corporate foundation

These separate initiatives often serve as 'learning labs' which surface important learnings - and hopefully change - for the rest of the organization.

At [our foundation], and with our partners, we've been regularly having conversations about how we embed the learnings from this programme to the wider organization.
- Program lead at global foundation

Learn more in the section: "How funders are trying to operationalize shifting power".

Funders' learning must be ongoing and organization-wide.

Learning and unlearning needs to be ongoing and engage the whole funder organization - including their board, senior leadership, and operations staff such as finance and compliance

roles, in addition to program/grant management staff. Learning is most effective in supporting change when it is ongoing and iterative with action, rather than a one-time or short-term activity.

> *Working in this way requires very different skills, capacities, knowledge and experience, and many traditional grant managers struggle to implement this in practice. They may be bought into the idea, but there's so much to unlearn. If you've been a typical donor, there's so much of the standard way of doing things - even just ways of communicating - that needs to be unlearned. And I don't think there has been anywhere near enough of a comprehensive focus on supporting staff to build those capacities, and to unlearn practices and to do it. It's more like trial and error. (...) It's often up to staff to hold each other to account. But if they don't, if they're not really power aware, if they don't have the resources and tools to know how you can hold conversations differently, how you can co-create differently, how you can make decisions differently - it can be overwhelming.*
> - Program lead at global foundation

Learning and understanding at the board and leadership levels is essential to a foundation's capacity to actually shift power. Funder staff report that boards and leadership are often compelled by and influenced through direct interactions with Global Majority civil society leaders and practitioners, including but not limited to grantee-partners.

> *We continuously bring (local) partners - who are working in the field - to speak to board members, so that they can hear it. We are not the horse's mouth, we've become part of the system, they don't really believe us. (...) We've now learned who they listened to, how they engage. So it's been very useful to use that strategy.*
> - Program lead at global foundation

Operational staff - who play key roles in how grants get approved, processed, managed, and reported on - also need to be included in learning/unlearning and change processes.

> *We've been holding sessions with each department to understand what shifting power means for them and their function. We've had really interesting conversations with finance and legal and operations - who are instrumental to dictating how an organization works, but often aren't part of conversations around locally-led action and stuff like that.*
> - Program lead at global foundation

> *I am really keen on doing wide, large scale, widespread influencing on business operation staff - such as legal, risk, and finance related staff. They're not in the conversation, and they actually are - unintentionally - the blocker to a lot of change in places I've worked in. How can we support them? (...) There are operations people in different organizations who have managed to find innovative ways of doing this. How can that learning be spread?*
> - Program lead at global foundation

For a few funders who have made significant organizational progress, onboarding of new staff and board members is an important part of getting everyone on the same page.

> *We've been doing inductions for new board members, and when the shifting power content came up, they were quite engaged and interested in it. (...) We got positive feedback from them. They're on the journey. I don't think we necessarily have a board that's 100% united behind the idea, but we have enough that are.*
> - Program lead at global foundation

> *Irrespective of where you come from, you come in (to this organization) and meet this culture where we are very clear and very intentional about how we build relationships with the organizations that we're working with. (...) As we do our onboarding for every person that joins the organization - whether it's someone who's doing operations, a programme person, a grants manager, an assistant, it doesn't matter who - they get to understand what it means for us to do grantmaking in this particular manner.*
> - Grants manager at global foundation

Funders' learning must include ongoing self-reflection on positionality, agency, and accountability.

Individual and organizational self-reflection around positionality, bias, agency, solidarity, and accountability, is an important component of a funder's journey to shift power. For many funder staff, the need for self-reflection emerges from the contradictions they experience on a daily basis: On the one hand, they have the privilege and power of working in a foundation, distributing funds to organizations and movements doing critical work to improve their communities and the world. On the other hand, their power and agency is often limited due to the decision-making systems and organizational hierarchies in their foundation, the due diligence and accountability expectations, and broader structural power dynamics. In essence, they struggle with tensions between the values they hold and seek to operationalize, and the realities of the systems and practices within which they work.

> *Sometimes you have progressive individuals, but then the systems are so tight. (...) And people get tired. And then you become that person in an organization, part of the system. We don't talk about how we can also get co-opted in the system, particularly if you're in philanthropy for a long time.*
> - Program lead at global foundation

Self-reflection lays the foundation for intentional work around solidarity and accountability - how a person uses their positionality and power responsibly to move the organization and system towards change, and continues to hold themselves accountable to local partners and communities.

I'm privileged here (...) So how do I show up as an ally? (...) Because I'm in this position, it's important to analyse my own power, how I engage with partners that we support. (...) The space that we work in continuously asks you to self reflect, and to understand how the world is shaped, is moving, and needs to be shaped. It's not an easy process.
- Program lead at global foundation

In my portfolio, I support a [movement] organization. We are their first donor. We gave them a relatively small grant over three years. (...) I'm very confident that they are going to do great work, and the work is going to have long term results. (...) I've now managed to say, "You know what, we're not progressive, but we're still doing this, and I'm proud of it". So, you try to block out the noise. I am inside the system. As other people have also said, this is why we need the right people (inside the system).
- Program lead at global foundation

Some funders have been intentionally creating space for this sort of continued learning and self-reflection for individuals and for teams.

We're intentional around learning (...) to make sure that not only are we inclusive, but also, in our individuality, we are able to acknowledge the different privileges we may have. (...) It's really part of how we do everything, internally and externally, as much as possible - continuous self-interrogation of our privileges and our power.
- Program lead at global fund

2.1.3 How funders are operationalizing shifting power

Alongside learning, funders are trying to operationalize shifts in power through tangible changes in their practices. These can be categorized as follows -
- Strategic initiatives or pilots - separate programs or initiatives within the organization with space and resourcing to try new approaches;
- Changes to grantmaking and funding practices;
- Shifts in the funder's stance and approach;
- Allyship with Global Majority civil society organizations and networks;
- Using progressive intermediaries; and
- Influencing other funders and the broader philanthropic ecosystem.

Each of these are described in turn below.

Strategic initiatives and pilots

Some funders are piloting new approaches through a specific initiative, fund, or department. These strategic initiatives allow leaders and teams within the organization a bit more freedom and flexibility to experiment with approaches that were out-of-the-ordinary for the foundation, with the intent of both having an impact at the program/department level and generating learning for the rest of the organization.

As mentioned earlier ("Funders learn from experience"), these pilot or strategic initiatives serve as learning labs, surfacing important insights and holding the potential to influence change across the organization.

Examples of strategic initiatives and pilots implemented by funders to operationalize shifting power -

➢ A global foundation created a separate programme that provides flexible, long-term grants to local organizations, co-develops objectives, and enables them to make subgrants to other local partners.

➢ Another global foundation launched an executive-level initiative for cross-cutting strategic partnerships and advocacy. Despite a small budget, it has generated significant impact through direct influence and support for key civil society partners.

➢ A regionally-focused corporate foundation introduced participatory grantmaking in a specific program area, enabling community representatives to shape priorities and decisions on funding.

➢ A bilateral donor partnered with INGOs on a global program to advance equality and inclusion by directly funding rightsholder-led organizations in the Global South. Affected communities shaped project design, implementation, and decision-making to ensure relevance to their lived realities.

Comic Relief UK, a major charity and grantmaker, implemented a Shifting Power program in Malawi, Ghana, and Zambia - focused on supporting local organizations and reshaping narratives about aid. Learn more in Annex 3 - Case Study: Comic Relief UK.

Mama Cash, an intermediary feminist grantmaker, piloted and learned from participatory grantmaking in one portfolio, and then another, before rolling it out across all of its grantmaking. Learn more in Annex 4 - Case Study: Mama Cash.

Changes in funding practices

As part of their efforts to shift power and support local agency, many funders are making changes in how they fund. The aims are generally to reduce the administrative burden on grantees, and allow local organizations and communities a greater degree of control and agency to make decisions and use funds as they see fit to effect real change in their local context. These changes include adjustments to grantmaking systems, shifts towards flexible

funding, and bringing input from local actors or people with lived experience into decision-making.

Adjustments to their grantmaking systems and processes are intended to make things more streamlined and manageable for grantee partners - e.g, simplifying forms and requirements, improving turnaround times, and in the case of one funder in the study, doing away with the requirement for written narrative reports altogether.

> *(With regards to) systems, structures, and policies - we've made some really good faith efforts. We formed a subcommittee and went through our application process to look for ways that we could simplify and streamline it, specifically keeping local actors, community-based actors in mind.*
> - Program lead at global foundation

> *We constantly think about how to make grant making simpler for the organizations that we work with - agile, more responsive to the issues that they work with. Every two years, we do a survey (to get feedback from grantees). (...) Whatever comes out of that survey, we are intentional in trying to improve and build on it. We have tried to streamline our processes within the system so that we are asking for fewer things (from the grantee organization). (...) We have brought in tools that are helping us to send money out the door faster. So we consistently, over time, try to ensure that we're listening to the organizations we are supporting, and also responding.*
> - Grants manager at global foundation

More flexible funding is intended to provide organizations with the freedom and flexibility to determine where to use funds based on community and organizational priorities as well as remain flexible to changing realities. Some funders have been able to do flexible funding across all their grants, while others have only been able to do it within a particular initiative. Flexible funding also looks different for different organizations - it can involve more flexibility in the grant budget and agreement, it might allow for more core costs and institutional strengthening, and for some, it may allow for fully unrestricted funding. A few funders are also making longer-term grants to allow for organizations to engage more deeply on systemic issues.

> *What we are going into is giving general support, more flexible funding support to organizations, so that they can think through what it is they need to do within the organization and be more agile.*
> - Grants manager at global foundation

> *We actually shifted to doing flexible funding as a default. That's one big step we made in the whole organization. We fund organizations, not projects. But we've been intentionally adding in a component of organizational strengthening on top, as a top up to partners, and*

we've been developing the approach to that, and our programme's learning has fed into that quite a lot.
- Program lead at global foundation

Input from local experts and practitioners into grantmaking decisions means that decisions about who gets funded and how are informed and guided by people who understand the context and can better assess who and what will be effective. Some funders have been trying out participatory grantmaking, where people from the same or similar contexts review applications and make recommendations around who to fund. Others, especially larger and more established foundations, have been bringing in local input in other ways. For example, one global foundation has a long-standing practice of bringing together advisory groups to support decision-making relating to new initiatives and calls for proposals. Another global foundation has been trying to bring in more grantee perspectives into strategy development, as well as trying to bring people with lived experience into their Boards - though this continues to be a work in progress.

We bring together (advisory) groups of people with lived and learned experience on that issue, country, context, etc., and they help guide decision-making on that project or on that funding call. So for example, they will identify the key issues to focus on, (...) they'll say, these are the types of organizations to be prioritising. (...) Ultimately, the decision does sit with either our trustees or our internal staff group, depending on the size of the grant, but they generally do take the recommendation of the (advisory) group.
- Program lead at global foundation

Shifts in the funder's approach

Funders are shifting the stance or approach they take in their relationships with grantee-partners - moving towards greater humility, trust, openness to feedback, and accountability. Importantly, simply shifting funding flows is not enough, if other aspects of power and decision-making are not addressed.

When we say "shift power", for me, it means realizing that the community has the solutions to the challenges that they are facing, and we are coming in as enablers, as opposed to us having the solutions. So, one of the things that our foundation tries to do very intentionally is start with a trust-based conversation - that means we trust what they tell us. We will do a due diligence process with them, but we are not intrusive, and we take them at their word. We also have an accompaniment process, so we walk and build relationships to really understand. But it is clear to us that the thing we want to, the needle we want to shift - we do not have the tools, the processes, the systems to do it, and that is why we are partnering with organizations that are able to do it on the front line.
- Grants manager at global foundation

In terms of shifting funding to local actors, we have some really outstanding examples. (...) But, in terms of the mindset shift of who is deciding what the programming is, and what the outcomes should be - we still hold most, if not all, of that power. (...) When we limit our thinking about shifting power to funding flows, we really miss 90% of why it's so important. It's a struggle for "strategic philanthropy" to let go of our power to decide the what, the where, and the how much. But I genuinely think it's the only way to have sustainable change.
- Program lead at global foundation

Funders who have made significant changes in how they approach partnerships with local organizations note that it takes time and consistency to earn the trust and openness of grantee-partners.

In our conversations (with grantee-partners), we keep saying, "We are partners. We are here to support you. We are thought partners. If something is stuck (...) or not working, or an activity is supposed to have been carried out and you find it can't be, call us." But we have to work towards shifting that power. Because they are getting money from other funders, and there is a particular way those other relationships appear. So it takes time for them to be comfortable, for them to see that, "Okay, this is actually different." (...) It takes a lot of intentional conversations. It's like any relationship that you're working on. It takes a lot of work.
- Grants manager at global foundation

Allyship with Global South civil society organizations and networks

Partnerships and allyships held with key civil society organizations and networks in the Global South form a core part of many funders' work to shift power. These partnerships are often accompanied by grants, to enable the Global South civil society actors to continue to convene system stakeholders and facilitate learning and collective action. Funders also report participating and benefiting themselves from these networks and opportunities for learning.

(A major part of our work) is allyship with Global Majority partners who are making the calls for Shift The Power or locally-led development. (...) One of the ways we engage in the conversation is through our funding - we support those actors and their work. And our staff have also engaged in these direct conversations.
- Program lead at global foundation

Using progressive intermediaries

A number of funders are strategically partnering with intermediaries who are rooted in Global South contexts and have demonstrated a clear commitment to shifting power and supporting local agency. Funders often turn to intermediaries in recognition of their own limited capacity to manage numerous small grants, as well as their appreciation that intermediaries that are closer to local organizations and communities in different ways will be better able to support local

organizations. Intermediary organizations can take on different roles to support funders and local organizations - including pooled funding, subgranting, convening, capacity strengthening, advocacy, and risk management.[7]

Progressive intermediaries are recognized as having more capacity to establish trust-based relationships with local organizations and other stakeholders, better knowledge and understanding of local contexts, and the capacity to buffer and manage needs and priorities from both funders and local organizations, while also negotiating and improving power dynamics. Many intermediaries also use their unique positioning to advocate for power shifting in the sector more broadly.

> *Many feminist funds are doing great work - they are leading and shaping the narrative, influencing thinking and mindsets. So, funders know that this (shifting power) is the right thing to do, but they also know their limitations, so they ask (the intermediary) to take the money and do it.*
> - Program lead at global foundation

A case study of a progressive feminist intermediary, Mama Cash, is described in detail in Annex 4 - Case Study: Mama Cash.

At the same time, civil society leaders caution that intermediaries can risk becoming new power holders, reproducing the same hierarchies and imbalances that power-shifting efforts aim to dismantle, if they are not reflective, intentional, and accountable in their work.

Influencing other funders and the philanthropic ecosystem

For many funders, influencing other funders is a key strategic goal as it is considered necessary for genuine, lasting, systemic change. To truly shift power to local civil society and communities, all - or at least a large portion - of the funding ecosystem needs to be willing to shift attitudes and practices.

> *I think if you want this to be a sustainable model and approach moving forwards, you need to then look at the wider system around, around all of this, and you've got to build that up and strengthen it. So that's one of the reasons actually, we've pushed into really strengthening the philanthropy ecosystems.*
> - Executive leader at corporate foundation

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[7] Doane, D. (2025). *Ecosystem catalysts: Understanding funding partners and shifting power*. Rights CoLab. Available online at https://rightscolab.org/ecosystem-catalysts-understanding-funding-partners-and-shifting-power/

We have also tried to be in the frontline in terms of building the conversation around long-term, flexible funding. We have had conversations with other like-minded funders to explain what it is we think is important to do - such as supporting indirect costs.
- Grants manager at global foundation

A couple of funders note that even when they make important changes to their grantmaking practices, benefits to local civil society organizations are limited if others in the sector are still using top-down and restrictive approaches. For example, the foundation that was trying to do away with narrative reports altogether received conflicting feedback from grantee-partners who still have the burden of reporting to other funders.

The reporting one received mixed reviews, honestly. Some people said it's great (but) not all partners are asking for the reports to be taken away (...) (They say,) "This is not useful to us partners, if only X Foundation is doing it, because we still have to write reports for the rest of the funders. So here, have it." (...) You can't be progressive alone. You need to bring everyone on board, which means the onus is on us to say to everyone else, "Stop asking for reports".
- Program lead at global foundation

In his published [reflections](#) about shifting power at Robert Bosch Stiftung, Patrick Steiner-Hirth makes a similar point and shows how it can sometimes be more burdensome for grantee-partners to be dealing with different approaches from different funders.

We have had some feedback from partners saying: it's great that you're doing this, a learning relationship sounds cool theoretically, but the rest of the system is working to another logic and right now your approach feels like an extra burden. We would just like to send you the project proposal that we sent to other funders.
- [Patrick Steiner-Hirth at Robert Bosch Stiftung](#)

Civil society leaders also observe that funders are often influenced by other funders. They note that some of this is about shared learning with peers, but some of this might also simply be about jumping on a bandwagon and not wanting to be left behind in the latest trend.

I think funders influence funders. (...) The forces that influence funders are their Boards and their peers. So even the stuff around trust-based philanthropy - people want to get on a bandwagon.
- Executive leader at global civil society organization

Despite the important progress made by many funders in shifting their mindsets, approaches, systems, and practices towards shifting power, they continue to face a number of challenges. These are discussed, along with enablers, in the next section.

2.2 What helps and hinders funders to shift power

Funders' journeys to shift power are affected by different enablers and barriers. These are organized as follows -

- Fundamental aspects of the organization, including organizational ethos and values; support from the board and leadership; how decisions are made; and operational systems.
- Staff-related aspects, including staff mindsets and beliefs; staff time and capacity; and having staff roles dedicated to helping the organization think about strategy, learning, and adaptation; and staff background and lived experience.
- External influences or pushes from outside the organization - in the form of resources and tools, networks and philanthropic infrastructure, "bottom-up" demand, and the broader socio-political-economic context.
- Paradigms and frameworks that shape an organization's values and the role it sees itself playing in change efforts; how it thinks about impact, effectiveness, and results; and its assumptions around capacity and risk.

Each of these are described in turn below.

2.2.1 Organizational characteristics

A funder's capacity to shift power is shaped by fundamental aspects of the organization, including its ethos and culture, its Board and leadership, how strategy and decisions are developed and controlled, and its operational systems and accountability mechanisms. These are often interconnected.

Organisational ethos and culture

When the organization's pre-existing ethos and values are aligned with principles of funding local organizations and promoting people's agency, it is easier and clearer to move towards practices that shift power. For example, one foundation's mission and values emphasize human dignity, and because of their values-based approach to philanthropy, their board and leadership have pushed the staff team to operate in ways that are aligned with this.

> *We are always challenged by our Board. (For example, they'll ask,) "Why are we partnering with this UN agency?" Because we need to support and promote human dignity, especially for those in greater need, and we need to talk to them - we need to talk to people with lived experience to guide our work. That's a green light for us to go through a very collaborative planning process.*
> - Program lead at global foundation

Organizational culture and values - such as humility, intentionality, learning, and adaptation, especially when deeply held at Board and leadership levels - further help by implicitly guiding organizational attitudes, decisions, and practices.

> *It's a culture. (...) It has to be driven from the largest organ that makes decisions - from the board and from the leadership, but also it has to be a culture within the people themselves. It has to be something that we've inculcated into how we work. (...) This is our thrust. (..) Our work is to do grantmaking. Everything else supports grantmaking, ensuring that money goes out the door and people are doing great work. So we are clear. Yes, leadership is very critical, but it's also important that it's a cultural thing, such that even as leaders shift and move, the culture is embedded and does not shift.*
> - Grants manager at global foundation

On the flip side, organizations that are steeped in neocolonial and top-down attitudes are often most resistant to genuine change.

> *The INGOs that aren't making much progress are old fashioned institutions. (...) Very large organizations are resisting the change. They don't want to give up power. They had a financial model that saw themselves as the intermediary of choice for big donors, so they were looking upwards and not downwards. (...) The resistance and the blockers are at the board level. (...) It's most often northern white men who still see small CSOs as corrupt, that their role is to protect donors, that they don't need to decolonize and shift power.*
> - Sector practitioner and consultant

Board support

Boards and governance structures are among the most significant factors shaping a funder's commitment and ability to shift power. Support at the board level is instrumental to sustaining shifts in attitudes and practices.

> *I think as long as there is support at the leadership and governance level, these changes will be sustained. The staff are bought in. We have a Board retreat coming up where the Board takes a step back and looks across our initiatives and our strategies and makes big decisions, and that's a point at which I could see a doubling down or a shifting elsewhere.*
> - Program lead at global foundation

A lack of board support is a major hindrance to making these shifts. For example, staff at one family foundation describe how board members' conservative values, as well as current business interests and related risk concerns, shape the kinds of grants they are willing to approve and the amount of control they require foundation staff to have over how grants are managed. Civil society sector leaders also see this trend more generally across the sector including in INGOs. Much of this resistance among Boards is rooted in neocolonial and donor-driven attitudes and practices.

We struggle internally because of who [the foundation] is and where the board members sit. Because it means that there's actually no autonomy (for staff). We refer to them. If they don't like something, they're like, "No, we're not going to do this." And that's the end of it. So you can be as progressive as a programme manager, understand the context - but if it's something that the board doesn't deem necessary, or something that they deem a risk to their businesses or to their principles, they won't do it.
- Program lead at global foundation

In many INGOs, middle management sector people want change. And I would say the same for funders. (...) The resistance and the blockers are at the board level.
- Sector practitioner and consultant

Leadership commitment

Endorsement and commitment from executive leadership are essential in pushing forward and sustaining power-shifting approaches among funders. This is especially important in establishing power-shifting as an organization-wide priority.

It needs senior CEO leadership on board. I don't think it shifts without that.
- Sector practitioner and consultant

What our leadership did was to establish locally-led development as a whole-of-organization endeavour. That is important - having that level of an internal champion. Most programme staff in many large global foundations don't need to be convinced about locally-led (approaches). But it's not just about programmes, it's about grants management, it's about legal counsel, it's about risk appetite, it's all of that, and ultimately Board support and buy-in. So it has to be an entire organization.
- Senior leader at global foundation

In the same vein, when a leader who is a champion for shifting power or locally-led development is no longer with the organization, the organization's onward progress in these areas is at risk.

There have been some funders (who have really made progress). It all depends on who goes there and what they do. But if the (executive) director moves on - I mean, look what happened at [X global foundation] - it used to have a real moral authority about how it went about things, and it doesn't have that now.
- Sector practitioner and consultant

Direction-setting and decision-making

An organization's approach to direction-setting and decision-making is deeply intertwined with its willingness and capacity to change how it works. These structures and norms often determine whether power can truly shift in practice.

Funders with top-down decision-making norms - such as centralized strategy development and goal setting processes - generally approach grant partnerships with predetermined agendas. This limits their ability to genuinely support what local organizations and communities actually need and prioritize.

> We've made some progress; if you're just talking about shifting funding to local actors, we have some really outstanding examples, especially from our [thematic] portfolios. (...) But, if you talk about the mindset shift of who is deciding what the programming is and what the outcomes should be - we still hold most, if not all, of that power. (...) Within the programme department, we have very specific strategies and targets that are set every five years. There's some flexibility. But when you come in with that framework, it's hard to shift power, because you're starting from a place of, "Here's what we want done", and then you're really just looking for the appropriate partner to work with you on that…. That is probably one of the stickiest areas.
> - Program lead at global foundation

Similarly, in many foundations, final grantmaking decisions rest with the Board of Directors or Trustees. Regardless of how progressive or solidarity-driven program staff may be, ultimate authority remains with the Board. In family or corporate foundations, Board members may also hold conflicting interests or values.

Underlying these systems and practices of direction-setting and decision-making are paradigms and frameworks held by the organization, especially its leadership and governance - such as charity and benevolence, and expertise and control. These are discussed further under [Paradigms and frameworks](#).

Operational systems and accountability mechanisms

Fundamental aspects of the organization's operational systems and accountability mechanisms can be at odds with best practices of shifting power and supporting local agency. For example, grantmaking and due diligence processes can hinder a funder's ability to make long-term, flexible, and/or rapid grants.

> When it comes to the mechanics of grant making - we are not a nimble grant maker. Depending on the size of the grant, it takes four to six months to get dollars out the door. And that can be tough for folks.
> - Program lead at global foundation

Moreover, organizational systems, controls, and bureaucracies are often ingrained and established, and changing them can be difficult and take a long time.

It takes time to change internal systems. It's not always visible what we're doing, and it takes a lot of time. So I can imagine it's also very frustrating for civil society organizations, because they cannot see what we are trying to change.
- Program lead at bilateral donor

As described earlier, while many foundations may use the language of shifting power and supporting local agency, many struggle to internalize and operationalize it - and this is not just about individual institutions, but about the larger system as well. This has been observed by civil society organizations as well as funders.

(Many funders) fully understand our approach, and they are with us in our approach. But if we go back to the operational level, it's still a barrier, they still need to go back to the routine way of doing stuff. (...) At the end of the day, it's about the system. They need to go back to their calls for proposals, (their way of saying) "Do this, don't do that", and their way of interventions needing to be done the way they want them to be done. They believe [in shifting power], they believe it's the right approach. (...) But whenever it goes back to the official system, then it needs to go back to the official system. You don't have an option.
- Executive leader at national civil society organization

Interestingly, there are some examples where funders or INGOs - even large ones - have been challenged to change their operational systems and practices in response to bottom-up demand. (Learn more: [Bottom-up demand](#).)

2.2.2 Staff-related factors

A funder's ability to shift power depends largely on its staff - their mindsets, approaches, skills, and capacities - which require time and intentional investment to develop. Because this work demands reflection and deliberate effort, funders that create time and space for staff to engage meaningfully in it are more likely to achieve lasting change. As well, who one hires is important - and hiring staff with lived and professional experience in the issues and communities being served can help strengthen alignment and understanding.

Staff mindsets and beliefs

Staff mindsets and beliefs play a critical role in determining how far an organization can advance its commitment to shifting power. Staff are the people who are actually putting the principles in practice - identifying grantees, making grants, holding relationships, and addressing challenges. Staff buy-in is essential for translating intention into practice, and variations in staff commitment strongly shape the extent to which systems and practices evolve.

It's actually the thinking and mindset that can be a barrier. (...) It's very important who institutions hire.

- Program lead at global foundation

We've made some progress, in terms of shifting funding to local actors. We have some really outstanding examples, especially from our [thematic] portfolio. We are officially the largest funder of constituent-led organizations in the world (in that sector), because we really doubled down on that. In other portfolios, we see very little of that. (...) There's variation among individual programme officers and how highly they prioritize local expertise and local power.
- Program lead at global foundation

Notably, these variations extend beyond program teams. Staff in functions such as finance, legal, operations, and fundraising may not share the same priorities or may lack opportunities to engage in the organization's power-shifting journey.

The biggest issue is when there's misalignment in individual or organizational incentives and shifting power, or perceived misalignment. For example, with fundraising, their core objective is to raise money. (...) It's not that they disagree with shifting power, but they aren't necessarily incentivized to change what they're doing. (...) Similarly, with risk colleagues or legal colleagues - their incentive is to keep the organization safe. (...) (There's) a lack of understanding or not having space to think differently about these issues, where we can still manage risk, we can still ensure legal compliance, but not work in the same way necessarily. (...) And many individuals who work in that function tend to be more risk averse individuals. (...) So it's about the individual mindset, the job function, the incentives to push them to go beyond, and the space to do so.
- Program lead at a global foundation

Recognizing these dynamics, many organizations are intentionally investing time and effort to align staff mindsets across departments, embedding power-shifting as a shared organizational value rather than a programmatic initiative. (Some of these efforts are described in the section: Funders' learning must be ongoing and organization-wide.)

Staff time and capacity

Staff require time and support to internalize shifts in thinking, and to actually change systems and practices. Without adequate time, headspace, and capacity, it is much harder for staff to actualize change.

It requires a lot of head space to think differently and to change processes. And [our foundation] has gone through a lot of restructures and downsizing over the years, so it's not exactly flush with human resources. I think those are stories you'll hear in most organizations.
- Program lead at global foundation

How this was conceptualized, the whole road map - was actually quite progressive. And then (our organization) had these learning series where they were engaging with the entire global team to say, "This is what we're doing, this is why it is important to the ways that we're working". Among the thematic areas, we have one programme that is much more progressive. For that programme, (the new approach) completely made sense, and they ran with it. But other programmes are like, "Ah, this is an add-on to our work, it's just another thing [the foundation] is doing". They're like, "This is great, this is nice, but we don't have time to implement it".
- Program lead at global foundation

In addition, working with local organizations, especially in collaborative ways, can require more time and resourcing. Thus, even if staff are eager to work in enabling ways with local organizations, they often don't have the time and capacity to do so without additional investment and support from the organization.

One of the barriers we struggle with is that sometimes we want to channel a large budget, and it's difficult for us to manage multiple smaller contracts. For example, if you want to support local organizations, you'll have multiple ones, and it's difficult to manage them directly, or have contact with them directly, because [our organization] doesn't have capacity to do it. So we need an intermediary to do so for us. I think that is a reason why donors are a bit hesitant to do more on locally-led development, because they think, "Oh, it's practically not feasible", or "How should we do it?" That's also a question that comes up often. So, there is willingness, but at the same time, it's difficult to really bring it into action.
- Program lead at bilateral donor

In our experience, working in this way is more expensive because of the amount of time and investment we put into co-creation and collaboration and relationships. But we believe it has a longer-term impact.
- Program lead at global foundation

Staff focused on strategy and learning

Having staff dedicated to strategy, impact, and learning is valuable in helping funders to continuously reflect, learn, and change. Some funders have departments or teams dedicated to this function, while others have a single person. The role helps to foster an organization-wide culture of learning, reflection, and continuous improvement. By challenging institutional inertia and "business as usual," such staff challenge and help the organization to stay aligned with its values, strengthen its practices, and identify areas for change.

We have departments whose primary focus is to think and evaluate. (They hold sessions in which) our programme officers have time to really brainstorm about what is happening within the context, what is happening in the world around them, what is it that we don't have that we need to aspire to, and how can we do so?

- Grants manager at global foundation

We have [a unit focused on being more effective]. There are people in the head office and in each region, (supporting) us to be more effective and to be more impact driven. And they are the ones pushing towards new attitudes and new beliefs. They are pushing for change in our system (...) - shifts in our assumptions, shifts in our thinking. That's very powerful.
- Program lead at global foundation

Staff background and lived experience

Hiring staff with direct lived or professional experience in the issues and efforts being supported by the funders helps ensure deeper understanding and trust with local organizations and communities. Some funders have made substantial efforts to hire staff across the Global South, many moving to fully or mostly remote operating models in order to make this happen.

At the beginning, everyone was based in [Global North country], which meant that hiring people from different countries or realities was very complicated, because you had to uproot them and bring them to [Global North country]. (...) When we started being able to hire people remotely, that was a big step, because it really allowed us then to hire people that are rooted in their own realities.
- Program lead at global fund

2.2.3 External influences

A range of external influences or pushes also impact and support - and sometimes hinder - funder organizations in their journeys to shift power. These include resources and tools, "bottom-up" demand, and the broader socio-political-economic context.

Resources and tools

Research, resources, and tools developed in the sector are important catalysts for funders' learning and change processes. A number of funders have described specific research reports, toolkits, and other resources that have helped them challenge and deepen their thinking, open up conversations, justify the need for change, and actually implement change.

The Peace Direct report from a few years ago really made a big impact on [our organization]. It was really shared widely, and it also opened up the door to speak a bit more about, for example, racism within the sector, and discrimination, and also the Eurocentric gaze that we might have. (...) The Global Fund for Community Foundations has also produced a lot of research. That has been helpful when we are defending why we want to have a policy or strategy around locally-led development strategy.
- Program lead at bilateral donor

As described earlier, funders also learn in many other ways from and with civil society organizations and leaders, especially from the Global South. (Learn more: How funders learn about shifting power.)

Networks and philanthropic infrastructure

Networks and other forms of philanthropic infrastructure consolidate knowledge and help funders share with and learn from each other, as well as from civil society. Funders described either the need for, or the benefit they have experienced from, being part of networks or communities of practice.

> *[Funders need to] come and join, do this thinking jointly. There is not a one-size-fits-all here, at all. Each foundation is in a different place, with a different history, a different Board, a different context. (...) It's about finding a space (....), finding these communities of practice and being part of them.*
> - Senior leader at global foundation

In addition to providing space and opportunity for funders' thinking to be challenged and expanded, these organizations often consolidate knowledge and provide resources that funders use in their practice. For example, the Philanthropy Transformation Initiative, coordinated by WINGS, is a collective effort by a number of philanthropic actors to challenge and support the sector to transform itself to more effectively address the multitude of existential global challenges.

"Bottom-up" demand

Demand from local actors can compel funders or INGOs to shift their systems and practices. These local actors include local organizations, communities, as well as the funder or INGO's own local teams. In one INGO's situation, strong demand from local organizations and communities led to a strong push from their local office, compelling their head office to re-assess and make changes to their overall systems of decision-making and budget management.

> *The local (INGO) office said, "Yeah, we'd love to do that, but we don't get to make decisions. That's up to Headquarters." So Headquarters had to shuffle the way that they shift power in their decision making and the way budgets are held. (...) It revealed that, even if there's an intent (to shift power) at Headquarters and at the country office, the systems weren't set up for change. By triggering that demand for change from the bottom-up - that forced them to address the systems that were blocking the changes that they wanted to make. Demand is really, really, really powerful.*
> - Sector practitioner and consultant

External socio-political-economic context

Factors from the external social, political, and economic context also affect funders' journey to shifting power. These factors include policies and legal systems in the funder's country, in the grantee's country, and in the connections between them; significant global situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic; and social, political, and economic patterns.

Legal policies and financial systems can limit funders' abilities to directly fund local organizations in the Global South, and to fund in unrestricted and trust-based ways. For example, funders might be limited in who they can fund, how they can fund, and how money can move.

> *The way charities are regulated is a problem. There are these auditing procedures and requirements, and you have to prove that what you're doing is in line with your charitable purpose. Some charities are very good at doing that, making sure and fighting back when they get investigated by the [regulatory agency], which happens a lot. That's a common thing. For example, in the regulatory context in Canada (...) - there are requirements that mean that the money has to go through INGOs in Canada as the intermediary.*
> - Sector practitioner and consultant

> *The banking system is another problem, moving money between countries - who's getting money from where - this is also a big burden.*
> - Executive leader at national civil society organization

Significant global situations can also be important catalysts for change. The COVID-19 pandemic was an important inflection point in many funders' journeys. For different funders, the pandemic experience brought to light: the importance of local organizations, their own ability as a funder to respond rapidly and flexibly when needed, and the need to invest in local, national, and regional civil society infrastructure and coordination.

> *The discussions became intense after the COVID pandemic. (...) People really started to think more about, "How can we work more efficiently, more effectively? How can we support the organizations who are always there?" Because, during calamities, sometimes international organizations leave, and then the (local) first responders are left to do the most work. So that was sort of an indication that, "Oh, we should really build on that". And so then in 2021 or 2022, we [committed to] locally-led development.*
> - Program lead at bilateral donor

> *I wish that we had learned our lessons from COVID. Folks moved money so quickly and so flexibly, and I didn't hear many horror stories out of that. I realize it's not exactly the same as shifting power, but it just shows that philanthropy can do it.*
> - Program lead at global foundation

> *(During the COVID pandemic,) it wasn't just about the dollars going to service provision at the last mile. It was an opportunity to work differently, including focusing on the longer term and thinking about how to build institutions. That, you can't do this one funder at a time. And for me, it's still within the Shift the Power paradigm, as it changes the locus of decision making.*
> - Senior leader at global foundation

During this time, when the police killing of George Floyd in the USA led to global protests against systemic racism, many funders were also challenged to reckon with racism and neocolonialism in the sector, and within their own organizations.[8]

> *Just when the aid sector seemed impervious to change, an opening came. In the protests that followed last year's police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, a flurry of private foundations and international humanitarian organizations put out statements in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. That prompted calls from staff members inside those organizations to demand self-reflection. USAID, Britain's aid agency and Doctors Without Borders all faced allegations of systemic racism in their ranks.*
> - Opinion: Foreign Aid is Having a Reckoning (New York Times, Feb 2021)

Unfortunately, for many organizations, the momentum around these conversations did not result in lasting change, fizzled out after some years, and/or slid backwards in more recent years in response to increased right-wing authoritarianism in many countries around the world.

On that note, the current global context also seems like a tipping point for many in the development and philanthropic sectors. The funding ecosystem is being affected in different ways by the growing number and severity of crises across the globe, sometimes described as a 'polycrisis'[9] - including multiple wars and mass human rights violations, the rising impact of climate change especially on communities in the Global South, growing disparities and inequities in wealth and wellbeing, increased polarization, and the rise of right-wing populism and authoritarian governance.

One major impact of these colliding crises has been the reduction or withdrawal of support and funding for human rights, civil society, and global solidarity movements. The closure of USAID in early 2025 was a major shock to the sector, alongside other cuts to overseas aid in recent years. There is hope that Global South partners can use this opportunity to imagine and practice what it might look like to not be dependent on and beholden to aid funding from the Global

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[8] New York Times Editorial Board (Feb 13, 2021). *Opinion: Foreign Aid Is Having a Reckoning.* New York Times. Available at
https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/13/opinion/africa-foreign-aid-philanthropy.html
[9] Cantor, M. (Mar 5, 2025). *What is this era of calamity we're in? Some say 'polycrisis' captures it.* The Guardian. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/06/polycrisis-disasters-politics

North. However, there is also concern that the sector is reverting to traditional and competitive dynamics, to minimize risk and maintain access to funding.

> *There are multiple crises that we are facing now. (...) So, although we are trying to educate people about how change takes time, and how important it is to continue funding things even if they are not shiny right now, there's a pull towards quick results, quick fixes. In this context, it's difficult to keep people giving to what really matters. And the polarization is just out of this world right now. It's difficult to speak out sometimes.*
> - Program lead at global fund

> *What worries me is the fact that less resourcing can impact the sector in very different ways. So it may be the shift that we needed to really drive change, that breaking point for the traditional system - we have less money, so we need to use the money better, more sustainably, more community-led, etc. Or it may lead to more organizations being hyper-competitive and resorting to the most quote, unquote "value for money" ways of working.*
> - Program lead at global foundation

> *This is a tipping point that will either go one way or the other. I'm seeing folks who are trying to save the international aid ecosystem by doubling down around arguments that really will further consolidate power in the west and with INGOs (...) - which may save more budget in the short term. (...) But then I'm also seeing (the other side). The analogy I've been using is - if you had a game board and you flipped the table over, the pieces are everywhere now. So how can we make sure when they come back together, it's in a different configuration? And I think there's a lot of energy on that side to reimagine something.*
> - Program lead at global foundation

2.2.4 Paradigms and frameworks

Funders' efforts to shift power are also shaped by paradigms and ideas that shape their organizational values; how they think about their role in change efforts; how they understand concepts like effectiveness, results, and impact; and their assumptions around capacity and risk. These are both internal and external to the organization as they often reflect sectoral and even societal worldviews and paradigms. Many of these reflect the sector's colonial roots, and current alignment with imperial and neoliberal perspectives.

Paradigms of charity and benevolence

Many funders - particularly the boards of private family foundations - operate from an underlying approach of 'charity' and 'benevolence', rather than justice and solidarity. This is fundamentally at the core of an organization's values, systems, and practices, and shapes what kind of change is prioritized.

It's still more a charity mindset in philanthropy, rather than a justice and power mindset.
- Program lead at global foundation

We (donors) are co-opted to our own ways of thinking. We like to just come together and talk about how great we are. We are attached to our own goodness.
- Program lead at global foundation

A charity mindset is often rooted in implicit White saviourism. Funders who operate from a charity mindset are generally focused on alleviating suffering, helping those in need, and responding to the visible symptoms of a problem, rather than acknowledging and addressing underlying systems of injustice, inequity, and oppression - which they themselves often benefit from.

Implicit beliefs about expertise and control

Relatedly, many funders hold implicit beliefs about expertise and capacity, which are closely linked to their ability to relinquish or share control over decision-making, strategy, outcomes, and determination of effectiveness and impact. These beliefs are often rooted in colonial histories and racial hierarchies that confer some groups authority over knowledge and practice, while casting others as needing guidance.

These implicit beliefs fundamentally shape funders' willingness and comfort with genuinely sharing power. This is reflected in who is on Boards, who is in leadership positions, who is relied upon to conduct 'rigorous' research or evaluation, who is funded, who is held accountable to whom, who is featured in high-profile panel discussions that have global influence, and much more.

Examples of commonly held implicit beliefs in global philanthropy	
Who are *experts*?	Usually people from the Global North, fluent in English, trained at Global North universities and proficient with Global North frameworks and methods
Who is *neutral*?	Usually people from the Global North who work across many global contexts
Who should make *decisions*?	Usually holders of power and wealth (e.g., boards or trustees)
Who is more *trust-worthy*?	Usually people from the Global North, who speak and act in ways that feel familiar to Global North power holders

[Our organization] is recruiting someone with lived experience to be part of the Board and to challenge how our decisions are made and how the funds are funnelled as well. (...) But sometimes the Board as a structure is not ready to let go of the power of making the decision - it's a learning curve for them as well.
- Program lead at global foundation

It really begins with a mindset shift, and a willingness to really be open to that process and not be in control of that process. (...) And I know that many INGOs and donors have tried to jump on the bandwagon, so to speak, (...) they don't want it to seem like they've been left behind or that they are not part of that conversation. Yet even in their insistence to be part of it, it has been about them wanting to control the narrative.
- Program lead at global civil society organization

It's about being very humble, and stepping down or stepping away. That part is very difficult - you taking less space or less importance.
- Policy advisor at bilateral donor

Ideas about change, impact, and measurement

Funders' underlying beliefs and assumptions about impact shape how they make decisions about who they fund, what they fund, what they require from grantees, and how they measure success. For example, the norms and practices of many funders reflect assumptions that change is linear, can be logically linked from input to output to outcome, can be quantified, and can demonstrate a return on investment or 'value for money'. These assumptions lead to funding decisions and requirements that emphasize projects and services; logic models showing the direct line between inputs, outputs, and outcomes; efficiency; and short-term and measurable results. In contrast, it is longer-term, flexible, and core support that is needed to strengthen organizations, movements, leaders, and communities so that they can contribute to meaningful and lasting systems change - change that is generally not linear, often not easily measurable or quantifiable, and usually not attributable to specific inputs but rather a combination of factors.

Many foundation boards understandably want to see immediate impact. They often come from the private sector and so they're used to quarterly returns. They want to ensure that the money that they are giving is resulting in lives saved, or whatever the relevant metric might be, relatively quickly. That can make it hard to shift power in particular, which requires time to build trust and identify shared goals.
- Program lead at global foundation

How are funders going to be able to give indirect support when they are still trying to see where impact is? And the theory is that impact is based on how much money is going into activities (rather than core support). (...) The other challenge is (the funder's) strategy. It is what they have to report back on, because all this money comes from somewhere, and there's accountability towards it. So the question is, what is it that they're being held accountable for, that they'll then require the organizations that they support to actually deliver on? That rigidity of what it is we expect as outcomes or impacts can also make us really think about who it is we support, or how it is we support them. (...) So the question is, how do you reconcile the two? How do you give that flexible funding, long term funding, or

institutional strengthening funding, when the result is not the thing that you expected to come back? Also, what do you think about what the results would look like?
- Grants manager at global foundation

As alluded to in the previous quotes, many funder boards also want to see results in short timeframes, while funder staff note that actual systemic change work can take decades.

With regards to the nature of short-term grants -
It honestly feels comical to me that we think we're going to achieve social change in two to three years at the scale that we want. I think short grant making cycles are a huge barrier to sustainable change.
- Program lead at global foundation

With regards to a major foundation committed to locally-led development:
They give a great deal of funding directly to civil society actors. (...) Their (reporting) requirements aren't huge. But they'll (only) give two years (funding). And it's still project based funding, it's not long-term core funding - they haven't moved there. And their Board is still very resistant, they want to see the evidence.
- Sector practitioner and consultant

Desire for traditional data and short-term evidence

Many funders want evidence - usually in the form of traditional, Western, quantifiable evidence - that locally-led approaches work. Funder staff and civil society leaders note that this is especially needed in order to convince funder boards and other decision-makers that it is worth investing in and impactful. However, as noted above, genuine, meaningful, and long-term systemic change is often difficult to capture with traditional quantitative indicators, especially within a short funding cycle. Expectations around data and measurement can also be restrictive and burdensome on local organizations, countering the intent of shifting power and supporting locally-led approaches.

There's a need to support funders to make those cases too. Because it still comes down to, "That's great, that's great, but have you got a measurement for it?" (...) They still want us to measure it in a way that's somehow been deemed palatable by you all.
- Executive leader of global civil society organization

There's a long list of requirements. It is less 'shifting the power' or 'locally led' when you have so many demands.
- Policy advisor at bilateral donor

I'm seeing a lot of this trend now - a lot of institutional donors are interested in numbers again. (...) I think it's also helpful to have research that demonstrates why it's important to

do philanthropy in a different way, and to really try and shape it in a way that can also be understood by those who are asking for numbers.
- Program lead at global fund

While many funders and civil society organizations appreciate the inherent challenges with funders' focus on traditional, Western, quantifiable data and evidence, some also noted that it should be - and is - possible to capture data and evidence that is meaningful and appropriate for both communities and funders.

One of the biggest challenges for this type of work is a lack of data and evidence that this works, even if we believe it intuitively. What we need out of this is a measurement piece, particularly one that is fit for purpose, that reflects responsiveness to community and local priorities. I think that remains critical. (...) We're all, regardless of where we sit in the development ecosystem, still driven by a commitment to stewardship of limited funds and the desire to be effective in what we do. So that's where the evidence has to come in.
- Senior leader at global foundation

Tendency to projectize and instrumentalize concepts

Funders often fall back into 'projectizing' things or wanting them packaged neatly into guidelines and toolkits - which limits their transformation. Truly changing a system and its power dynamics is complex, involves multiple factors at different levels, takes time, and is iterative.

A critique about the whole development and aid system is that whole project cycle piece - you have to feed into that. And so when you try to put shifting power into that machine, it's forced to look like that - with key deliverables, with key outcomes. You know, most of this work is really centred around relationships and building trust. So some of these things take a longer time-frame to actually happen (...) it isn't something that can be packaged into that.
- Program lead at global civil society organization

Trying to package concepts like shifting power and supporting local agency into lists, templates, and tools risks 'projectizing' the ideas and movement, and co-opting them into donor-controlled narratives and methods, when what is actually needed first are fundamental shifts in mindset and stance.

It is challenging when people ask, "So, where has this worked?", or "How does this really work? Is it even feasible?" And the desire people have for you to give them something like a work plan - "Tell us, step by step, how we can do this" - without recognizing that it calls for a lot of mindset change. It calls for a lot of shifting of your processes and practices. And people feel frustrated that - "This is just taking too long", or "It's going to take too long", or

around, "What does this then mean for me, my job, my role?" - those kinds of conversations.
- Executive director at global civil society organization

In some conversations, there's been this immediate request for things like, "If I do these 10 things, then I have shifted power", and wanting to projectize Shift the Power and the principles and values behind it. This isn't something that you can projectize. We can't give you a silver bullet, that these five things or seven things are going to automatically make the difference within your organization.
- Program lead at global civil society organization

Along the same lines, funders and INGOs sometimes co-opt and instrumentalize the language and concepts of shifting power, without alignment on meaning or core values. For example, funders and INGOs with country offices or locally-hired staff sometimes view themselves as 'locally-led', even when many important and strategic decisions are made at a headquarters outside of the local context, often in the Global North. Similarly, many speak about community participation or co-creation in their processes, but these processes are generally about consultation and feedback rather than genuine sharing or relinquishing of power. Many also move quickly to action without genuinely and intentionally engaging in processes of reflection, collaboration, and accountability.

We've had a few interesting conversations with INGOs in recent weeks who are trying to unblock things and are stuck. One said to me that their big challenge in decolonizing and shifting power is that their country offices already see themselves as locally-led, even though many decisions are made at HQ.
Sector practitioner and consultant

With regards to [community philanthropy](#) in particular:
What worries me is the trend of foundations or organizations who want to create community funds so that they can get the money to communities. There's a concern with scaling really fast and reaching things really fast that I think overloads the process of participation and full construction, that I think is really important to sustain things in the long term. (...) And I think this weakens the movement, this distance from connectivity and from collaboration.
- Program lead at national civil society organization

Assumptions about local organizations' capacity and 'riskiness'

There are implicit assumptions among funder decision-makers that local organizations have less capacity and/or are at greater risk of fraud. This leads to hesitation and resistance around funding local organizations, burdensome due diligence and reporting hurdles for local organizations to go through to access funding, and less likelihood of the funder letting go of control and restrictions around how funds and activities are managed.

The risk management part is still something that I think donors struggle with. (...) And something that really comes up often is, "Okay, we want to support local organizations more directly. Do they have the capacity? Is there any research or any studies that have been done that show that they have the capacity? That they are able to do the work?"
- Program lead at bilateral donor

A sector practitioner shared an example of a negotiation process between a local organization and an INGO who was contracted with a bilateral. The INGO had 35+ requirements for the local organization to meet, for an amount of less than $50,000 USD. Most of these requirements were established by the INGO, not the bilateral donor. The local organization discussed and negotiated with the INGO, and was able to get it down to one requirement. This example highlights how funders' and INGOs' systems and practices reflect their concerns about risk and control, rather than what is actually required of them in terms of legal and financial regulations - and these restrictions and requirements fundamentally hinder local organizations' access to funding.

Concerns about risk are particularly heightened when it comes to local organizations working on civic engagement, democracy, and human rights issues. There are concerns about laws and regulations in the foundation's home country in the Global North, as well as concerns about reputation and accusations in the local organization's country context.

[Major INGO] was one of the first to come out with a decolonizing strategy with their board, but they're still cautious. Their CEO is still really trying to push them, because they're managing multiple accountabilities as trustees, and they're acutely aware of that. They don't want their funding to drop off - if suddenly they're only working in solidarity with what local actors think, if they're not worrying about some of the safeguarding and other risk and reputational issues, they're worried that things will disappear. They're worried about [national regulations]. They're worried about [media]. (...) So, risk aversion is very much at the board and leadership level.
- Sector practitioner and consultant

For (funders) who are doing civic engagement and government, there are those (civil society organizations) who are, for lack of a better phrase, speaking truth to power. How do you support organizations that are really out there, when there's an impact to you as the funder on how you support that organization? There are a lot of organizations that we would have wanted to support, but the organizations that are doing (this work) are quite loud or could be using aggressive tactics. And then the government of wherever (the organization) might say, "This is outside influence. These people don't have money, these people are puppets of the Western world." So, there are a lot of things that make funders restrict their money to particular activities (...) and we disassociate from these other things that the organization might be doing that were not done using our funds.
- Grants manager at global foundation

Despite funders' and INGOs' concerns, there is increasing evidence and documentation that local civil society actors partnering with international NGOs and funders are the ones who bear disproportionate security, financial, legal, and reputational risks. Even as funders transfer risk to local partners, they rarely transfer control over funding or the authority to make decisions along with that risk. For these reasons, funders and INGOs are increasingly being encouraged to think about more equitable risk sharing - ensuring that funders, INGOs, and local civil society organizations share risks fairly based on their abilities and resources, instead of pushing most risks onto local organizations.[10]	**Risks borne by local civil society organizations (CSOs) when they partner with international funders and INGOs** ● Prioritizing the agendas of external funders or INGOs can compromise local CSOs' legitimacy and trust within their communities, weakening their long-term credibility and effectiveness. ● Short-term and delayed funding arrangements create cash-flow challenges, limit strategic planning, and constrain the sustainability of local CSOs' programs and impact. ● Compliance and reporting requirements from international partners and national governments are often transferred down the chain, placing heavy administrative, legal, and financial burdens on under-resourced local CSOs, who also face the brunt of the consequences when standards are unmet. ● Local staff frequently work on the frontlines of complex, high-risk environments with limited control over resources and decision-making authority. ● When local CSOs face threats, crises, or backlash, they often receive insufficient protection, advocacy, or support from their international partners.

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[10] Nhemi, S., & Anda, A. (2024). *Rethinking risk management: towards a more equitable approach.* Humentum. Available online at https://humentum.org/blog-media/rethinking-risk-management-towards-a-more-equitable-approach/

2.3 Systems change reflections

Funders' journeys to shift power are part of a broader ecosystem of philanthropy, aid, and global development. Systems such as these are complex and entrenched. Funders and other respondents share important insights on how systems change happens, the role of ecosystem catalysts and networks, and broader reflections on the need for a new or alternative system and the systems architecture required to support that. Key insights include -

- 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 infrastructure - 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 new or alternative systems. Philanthropy has an important role to play - and not play - in this work.

Each of these is described in turn below.

2.3.1 Complexity and time

Systems change involves multiple interconnected factors at different levels and happens over decades and even generations. Entrenched systems like philanthropy have developed over decades if not longer, and are rooted in historic and current systems of power and oppression such as neocolonialism and racism. Changing such a system will take time - perhaps generations.

> *This is a sector, a system that is 100 plus years old, and was really designed never to empower in the first place. (...) It's going to take some time to turn that ship around to something that is better.*
> - Program lead at global civil society organization

> *It was the colonial structure (..) that continues to influence the way that we work, the practices we have, the way that they make decisions. (...) While funders are thinking about their own interests and reputations and having immediate results and supporting organizations individually in an isolated manner, civil society has worked collaboratively and intersectionally, and is thinking about the complex issues that are affecting their territories. (...) (And to meet funders' criteria,) you have to simplify your work way more, and you have to prove that you're better than another organization that is competing for the same resources. And it creates an environment that looks very much like capitalism, which is the system where funders thrive. (...) I do think it's a more structural issue, and that's why it's so hard to change.*
> - Program lead at national civil society organization

Moreover, as alluded to above, meaningfully shifting the sector requires long-term commitment, trust-building, and space for mindset and behavioural shifts, none of which fit neatly into conventional aid logics of short-term deliverables and measurable outputs. A long-term view of change also implies a different stance and approach to one's role in the sector and in the work.

> *This is a long-term agenda. You make different decisions today if you intend to be around in 10-20 years time. (...) If you just need to get to the finishing line, which is at the end of the three-year project - then who cares what happens after that? That you planted the wrong trees will only become evident in 15 years time. Here, philosophically, we are building to last. That has been central to how we have grown the work.*
> - Executive leader at global civil society organization

2.3.2 Relationships and collaboration

Systems operate through people and in the relationships between them, and systems change work requires us to bring together and collaborate with all the people and entities involved in or affected by the system. This means working with people from different backgrounds, working in different sectors, playing different roles. It also means listening, learning, dialoguing, and collaborating towards common goals. This is especially important in an increasingly polarized and siloed world.

> *To achieve this systems change that we're all seeking, it requires everybody within the ecosystem, not just individual champions. That's the greatest lesson I've learned from this process. No single organization can shift the system alone. So we need to collaborate, we need peer support, we need ecosystem thinking. (...) One of the failures was that we were not able to pull in non-traditional actors, like the private sector, or government…. People from a different sector see things totally differently, but are very crucial and important for us to achieve what we want to achieve.*
> - Program lead at national civil society organization

> *What will prevent some backsliding, especially with such an ever changing environment, is better coordination, better communication, professionalising our conversations a little bit. Let's push a little bit. Let's be bothered. And also what will prevent backsliding (...) is to open up for new people, historically unprivileged people, to join the conversation. (...) When we invite them to discuss quality, design, policy evaluation, they are eager to discuss that. They're also eager to discuss how philanthropy works. And once we open up for participation, for listening, there is no way back. And then our solution will avoid backlash, and backsliding.*
> - Program lead at global foundation (D003b)

2.3.3 Strategy and infrastructure

Systems change requires intentional strategy and infrastructure for collaboration and movement building. Although there are a multitude of social change movements and systems change efforts happening around the world, the sector has been critiqued for being disorganized, lacking strategy, and inadequately investing in long-term movement building.

Nina Luo argues that philanthropic systems and practices generally demonstrate a lack of understanding of how to be strategic and actually advance systemic change.[11] These ineffective philanthropic systems and practices include: shifting funder priorities; silos and duplication; aversion to risk and failure; over-reliance on metrics, short-term results, and 'best practices'; and a fundamental disconnect from large-scale grassroots mobilizing. Similarly, in a series of interviews with philanthropic leaders, disorganization is named as one of the key reasons philanthropy is not effective.[12]

Impactful and sustainable systems change work requires coordination, strategic thinking and planning, and infrastructure to enable both connections and long-term resilience.

In this context, *ecosystem catalysts and networks play an important role in supporting strategic planning, coordinated action, knowledge management, and resilient infrastructure*. Several catalysts and connectors are already actively and impactfully operating in the ecosystem.	**Ecosystem catalysts and networks create connections, spaces, and opportunities for people to:** ● Learn from each other within relationships ● Listen to and learn directly from local leaders and communities in the Global South ● Learn/unlearn, be challenged, and try out new practices within a community of learning ● Directly experience what a different system might look like in terms of power-shifting or power-sharing, productive discomfort and learning, and collaboration and co-creation

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[11] Luo, N. (Jan 16, 2025). *Left organizing is in crisis. Philanthropy is a major reason why.* The Nation. Available online at https://www.thenation.com/article/society/progressive-left-philanthropy-strategy/

[12] Knight, B. (Jan 27, 2025). *Creative but disorganised: Why philanthropy won't solve the polycrisis.* Alliance Magazine. Available online at https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/creative-but-disorganised-why-philanthropy-wont-solve-the-polycrisis/

Ecosystem catalysts are organizations and networks, and sometimes individuals, who catalyze change in the ecosystem by -
- facilitating dialogue and learning,
- modeling and driving forward alternative approaches,
- shifting values and norms around what is good practice, and
- holding sector actors accountable.

These include movements and civil society networks, funder networks, civil society organizations or leaders, and foundations - who serve as leaders or facilitators in driving sectoral change.

Ecosystem networks and other forms of philanthropic infrastructure bring people from different areas together to dialogue, learn, and collaborate; surface evidence and build knowledge; and help to organize the sector in more strategic and impactful ways. This last piece - organizing and strategy - has been described as needing strengthening.

> *There are a lot of people in this space. We need to collaborate a lot more, but time and resources for this are in short supply. (…) What's happening right now with the collapse of the aid system is all of these people are convening, and they're saying, "This is what we want." But who is listening? How are they listening? How are they coming together to say, "Okay, how do we bring that?" (…) You need to bring supply and demand together.*
> - Sector practitioner and consultant

> *How are we going to make those conversations add up to change? There needs to be a little bit more work on practical strategizing. So it's not just strengthening the demand and the voice, but also, what are the practical things? What we need going forward is narrative, demand, and also some practical work together to shift the system.*
> - Sector practitioner and consultant

2.3.4 Power and alternative systems

While it's important to push for incremental reforms within existing systems of philanthropy and global development, entrenched systems are very hard to change. Many have argued that working within the existing inequitable and harmful systems will never result in genuine transformations in power. Rather, genuine transformation depends on building alternative systems, rooted in the strength, agency, and collective power of Global South communities, civil society, and movements.

> *You can only go so far with funders because they still retreat to their governance, their systems, their structures, their bureaucracy, their accountability. (…) (Working on funders) actually isn't going to be what drives change. (…) There isn't the political momentum or will to really transform. It is only a reform.*
> - Executive leader at global civil society organization

We've spent a lot of time trying to say to donors, "Shift power, let go". I don't know if we've spent enough time around "Take power". I think that the narrative needs to be around, "Build the world we want to see", rather than wait for it to be given to us.
- Sector practitioner and consultant

Movements and alternative systems need political grounding, connections, and stable resourcing and infrastructure. They need institutions, leaders, and networks, rooted in shared intents and values, that can: facilitate political education and consciousness-raising, connect organizations and movements with each other and with the support they need, move money, provide technical infrastructure and support, strengthen transparency and accountability, support knowledge building, and facilitate collective strategy and action.

There are lots of alternatives happening all around the world. (...) But they're not connected, so they become highly vulnerable. There's an opportunity to weave these into an alternative ecosystem. (...) It's not just about reforming the existing system; it's about building the confidence of people to realize they are the makers of a new system.
- Executive leader at global civil society organization

Philanthropy can play a critical allyship role by supporting, resourcing, and being in solidarity with these movements and organizations, without seeking to define or control them. Long-term, flexible funding and support enables civil society organizations and movements to do their work while also building the infrastructure that provides them with long-term resilience and independence. At the same time, funders need to organize within philanthropy to push the sector to move towards accountability and change. Much of this aligns with the reflections and framework for Solidarity Philanthropy recently shared with the sector by Grassroots International.[13]

The role of philanthropy is to be a catalyst, a connector, and a resourcer - not a decision maker.
- Program lead at global foundation

I don't think philanthropy or the global minority should be shaping the decisions about the system and how it's remade. (...) We need to give large, multi-year general operating support grants - to intermediaries or networks that can more nimbly resource what's happening on the ground. And then we need to let folks in community make decisions.
- Program lead at global foundation

There need to be much more reciprocal processes, conversations, dialogues between the people that we support and us. (...) We need some level of accountability.
- Program lead at global foundation

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[13] Grassroots International (2025). *Solidarity Philanthropy: Redefining Philanthropy's Relationship to Social Movements*. Available at https://grassrootsonline.org/solidarity/

Framework of Solidarity Philanthropy

➢ *Key Elements: Solidarity, Internationalism, and Praxis*
   ○ Solidarity and internationalism affirm that our wellbeing and liberation are deeply connected across communities and borders, as we work towards a more just and equitable world.
   ○ Praxis emphasizes engaging in our shared efforts as an evolving dynamic process grounded in continuous reflection, learning, and change.
➢ *Conditions for Growth: Positionality and Alignment with Movements*
   ○ Recognizing our positionality within systems of power and oppression, and ensuring alignment with social movements in values, vision, analysis, and theories of change, are essential foundations for the work.
➢ *The Work: Movement Accompaniment and Donor Organizing*
   ○ Accompaniment is long-term commitments and relationships rooted in shared values, trust, and reciprocity. This includes enabling and supportive grantmaking processes, social action, and supporting movements around resource mobilization.
   ○ Donor organizing is about philanthropy becoming an alignment and organized political ally constituency - building a powerful base within philanthropy that can challenge the sector for accountability and change towards being more movement centred.

Reference: Grassroots International (2025). Solidarity Philanthropy: Redefining Philanthropy's Relationship to Social Movements.

3. Insights and recommendations

The findings from this study demonstrate that many funders are making genuine efforts to learn, reflect, reframe, and change their mindsets, systems, and practices in order to shift power closer to communities. However, progress remains uneven - as funders face a number of internal and external areas of resistance, in a system that is deeply entrenched and difficult to change. There are also a number of enablers and supports that help them make meaningful change - from long-term and trusted relationships to resources and tools, from self-reflection to normative pressure, and from leadership and board support to staff time and capacity.

Building on the findings from the research, this section draws out insights promising approaches for influencing funders, and provides recommendations for funders, civil society, and ecosystem connectors.

3.1 Insights and approaches that enable shifts in funder practice

The findings from this study indicate a set of interconnected approaches that seem to matter most when influencing funder behaviour and advancing community-led change.

1. Relationships grounded in trust, safety, and reciprocity are essential to helping funders think differently. Funders often shift when they engage in authentic dialogue and learning with trusted partners. Through accompaniment, conversation, feedback, and reflection, funders are able to understand different perspectives, explore new ideas, confront contradictions, and incrementally adapt systems and practices. Trust-based relationships create the conditions for honest exchange, experimentation, and mutual learning.

2. Transformative change requires reckoning with systems of power, inequity, and oppression, and the paradigms that sustain them. Many funders remain hesitant to engage explicitly with questions of power, preferring language that feels more neutral, such as localization or participation. They also hold deep implicit beliefs around charity, benevolence, and presumed neutrality and expertise that perpetuate systems of inequity and harm within philanthropy and more broadly. Transformative change requires challenging and helping funders to step into discomfort, name systems of power and oppression, reconceptualize ideas of expertise and capacity, and reframe their role from helping to solidarity and shared responsibility.

3. Listening directly to local voices has a profound effect on funders' understandings and mindsets. First-hand perspectives carry legitimacy and nuance that intermediaries cannot replicate. Hearing directly from community leaders and local organizations helps funders, especially leadership and Boards, grasp and internalize critical aspects of shifting power such

as locally-led decision-making, long-term and flexible grants, and risk sharing. These encounters personalize abstract concepts and deepen empathy and accountability.

4. Experiential and collective learning allows funders to personally and directly experience equitable power relations. This helps them appreciate that other systems and ways of working are actually possible and can be quite transformative. It helps them move from theory to practice. Learning in community further amplifies this effect, as funders and local actors learn together, challenge assumptions, and co-create new practices.

5. Real change requires working with the whole organization. Mindset shifts among program staff are not enough. It is important to foster mindset and attitude shifts in boards and senior leadership. Equally important is engaging the compliance, finance, risk, and legal staff who often determine what is possible. When these teams reframe how they define capacity, risk, and due diligence, they can unlock pathways for more flexible and enabling funding systems and processes.

6. Organizational change requires time, resourcing, and capacity. Staff need time and support to confront sectoral and institutional ideas of charity and saviourism, and to re-ground in values of justice and solidarity. Working in more relational and collaborative ways with local organizations also requires more time and resourcing. Program, operations, and compliance teams further need opportunities and support for shared learning, reflection, and experimentation to translate principles such as equity, flexibility, and power-sharing into tangible systems and processes.

7. 'Bottom-up' demand from communities and civil society can drive funder adaptation. As community organizations strengthen their voice, agency, and organizing power, they generate pressure for funders to improve their systems and practices. When local actors engage as equals, articulate demands, and build accountability mechanisms, funders are encouraged, sometimes even compelled, to re-examine and revise their assumptions and practices.

8. Normative pressure and peer influence can shape funder behaviour. Funders take cues from one another, often adopting approaches that become visible sector norms. This "bandwagon" effect can be strategically harnessed to advance equity and accountability. As more funders adopt long-term, flexible, and community-led practices, these approaches can shift from being exceptional to expected.

9. Funders' tendencies can be used strategically to steer them towards better practice. Funders' desire for data and evidence can be harnessed to build the case for community-led approaches by demonstrating how such approaches are impactful, effective, and sustainable. However, funder evidence cultures often privilege external or quantitative knowledge over lived, community-generated insight; transformative practice requires valuing multiple ways of knowing and reframing what counts as credible evidence.

Funders' inclination towards frameworks and toolkits can also be used to share approaches and practices that emphasize inclusive governance and decision-making, equity, power-sharing, and community leadership. By strategically shaping these products, we can both respond to funder needs and steer them toward transformative practice.

10. Systemic change requires more strategy, more organizing, and a long-term perspective. Shifting entrenched systems takes time and coordinated effort. Funders' short programmatic cycles rarely align with the long arc of systems change. In addition to pushing funders towards longer-term, unrestricted, funding support, civil society organizations and ecosystem connectors need to plan and organize beyond funder timelines and priorities - building movements and collaborations that sustain pressure and innovation over decades. Keeping a long-term horizon helps ensure that shifts in systems and practices are not isolated or reversible but embedded in enduring structures and cultures.

3.2 Recommendations

This study demonstrates that shifting funder mindsets, systems, and practices requires sustained effort at multiple levels. Funders and INGOs, civil society actors, and ecosystem catalysts each have distinct but interconnected roles to play. The recommendations below highlight how each group can contribute to systemic change.

3.2.1 Recommendations for funders and INGOs

Invest in relationships and centre local voices

1. *Invest in relationships, not just transactions and deliverables.* Systems change is relational. Long-term accompaniment, trust, and dialogue with civil society are effective spaces for learning and growth - as well as for impact. Where possible, invest in multi-year, flexible partnerships, with opportunities for funders and partners to learn together, share risks, and co-create solutions.
2. *Be part of a community that challenges and strengthens your thinking and practice.* Join and actively participate in networks and communities of practice. Share your experiences and learnings, and learn from others. Participate in the consolidation and sharing of knowledge beyond the group.
3. *Centre Global South voices and lived experience.* Direct encounters with community leaders and grassroots organizations are transformative. Funders should systematically create opportunities for boards, leadership, and staff to learn from and engage with Global South actors, recognizing these encounters as catalysts for mindset and practice change.
4. *Resource experiential and collective learning.* Support convenings, summits, and co-created learning forums where funders and civil society actors from different parts of

the world can learn in community, experience equitable power relations, and try out alternate systems of collaboration.

Reform organizational culture and systems

5. *Courageously lean into uncomfortable discussions and reflections around systems of power.* Create intentional and supported space and opportunities - such as facilitated dialogues or accompaniment, guided by skilled facilitators - for organization members to examine power, colonial histories, systemic oppression, implicit bias, and positionality and privilege - and how these impact your work and the sector. Challenge and reframe paradigms of charity and benevolence, expertise and credibility, and neutrality and rigour. Support Boards, leaders, and staff to explore what it means to commit to justice, solidarity, inclusion, and reciprocity.

6. *Grow your organization's appetite for experimentation.* Develop an organizational culture around experimentation and trying out new approaches. These become important spaces for learning and understanding, shifting internal framings, and transforming organizational systems and practices.

7. *Bring along your leaders and Board.* Boards and senior leaders need to engage with these issues directly so that power-shifting commitments are embedded in the organizational ethos and structure, not just rhetoric.

8. *Reform internal systems.* Influence is limited if funders' risk frameworks and compliance systems remain unchanged. Funders should revisit due diligence, reporting, and legal requirements so that they enable rather than constrain. This includes engaging compliance and risk staff in rethinking what "capacity" and "risk" mean.

9. *Invest in staff time and capacity for internalizing and operationalizing changes.* Staff need time, agency, and support to reflect, learn and unlearn, collaborate across departments, and change systems and practices. As well, working with local organizations in relational and collaborative ways takes more time and often more resourcing.

10. *Recruit, empower, and retain staff with lived experience and local expertise.* Diversify staff and leadership across geography, identity, and lived or professional experience in the contexts and issues being supported. Build equitable operating models that allow staff to be based across the Global South, and ensure they have real authority and institutional support to influence strategy and systems.

11. *Resist the urge to "projectize" power-shifting into templates or toolkits.* Genuine change doesn't come from simply using the right tool or checking off the right boxes. It requires deep and deliberate internal, relational, and structural work, because power shifts only become real when individuals and organizations interrogate their own practices, incentives, and assumptions; build authentic and accountable relationships with communities and local leaders; and redesign their systems so that authority, voice, and decision-making genuinely move toward those most affected.

12. *Acknowledge and share power.* Shifting power is not just about funding flows but also about who has agency and power to determine organizational strategy, govern, and make decisions. Create mechanisms for the meaningful participation of Global South

actors - particularly those from the communities you seek to serve - in your own organizational governance, leadership, and decision-making.

Normalize equitable practices and accountability

13. *Normalize practices that promote equity and create space for agency.* Flexible funding, longer timeframes, and core support should become the norm rather than the exception. These practices both strengthen organizations and signal a cultural shift in how funders value partnership and agency.
14. *Leverage accountability and peer pressure.* Funders often do not want to be "left behind" when peers adopt progressive practices. Funders can harness this dynamic by making collective commitments visible and encouraging mutual accountability through associations, platforms, and networks (e.g., WINGS, Philea). Existing peer learning groups among foundation CEOs can also be strengthened to move towards more transformative leadership practice. In addition, it would be fruitful to identify and leverage other incentives that encourage funders to transform their practices towards shifting power.

Strengthen the ecosystem

15. *Support local civil society and movements to lead system transformation on their own terms.* Resist the urge to shape agendas or direct pathways for change. Listen carefully, learn from those closest to the issues, and step back when appropriate. In some contexts, it may be more constructive not to be present at all. Enable local civil society and movements to define priorities, determine strategies, and lead efforts to transform existing systems or build new ones. Provide resources without allowing funding to translate into influence or control.
16. *Support long-term organizing.* Recognize that systemic change is generational. Provide multi-year resourcing for networks and movements, rather than trying to force transformational ambitions into short project cycles. In addition, promote more sustainable financing models that build local assets and strengthen local resourcing ecosystems, to ensure long-term resilience for civil society and movements.
17. *Support the generation of real evidence* around the effectiveness of community- and civil society-led approaches for longer-term systemic change. Provide resources, time, and support for civil society organizations to co-create learning frameworks with their communities, identify meaningful and relevant indicators and methods to track progress, and gather learnings and data over a longer period of time.
18. *Invest in inclusive and decolonizing approaches to knowledge and evidence.* Funders should resource locally-led research, evaluation, and learning initiatives that are co-created with communities, non-extractive, grounded in relationships of trust and reciprocity, and generate knowledge that benefits the communities whose insights were drawn from. Even more important is the work that funders and INGOs must do to value diverse forms of data, and reframe what counts as valid and rigorous evidence and knowledge.

19. *Invest in philanthropic and other ecosystem infrastructure*. As much as possible, provide longer-term and unrestricted funding and other forms of support (e.g., social capital) to strengthen ecosystem infrastructure over the long-term. Philanthropic infrastructure, for example, provides space for exchange and collaboration among funders, increases both the volume and effectiveness of giving, strengthens capacity and builds thought leadership, creates an enabling environment for systemic change, and helps to establish standards that improve trust and accountability.[14]

3.2.2 Recommendations for civil society actors

Build local voice and power

1. *Build and sustain power at the base.* Continue to strengthen community resource mobilization, leadership, and negotiation skills so that local actors engage with funders as co-investors rather than passive recipients. This "bottom-up" demand creates pressure for funders to shift and ensures change is sustainable.
2. *Connect with others to amplify collective voice.* Organize across movements, nationally and globally, to demand equitable systems, challenge restrictive practices, and demonstrate alternatives. Alliances enable civil society actors to amplify demands for equity and resist co-optation. Collective voice also creates counter-narratives to dominant funder framings.

Engage strategically with funders

3. *Foster and leverage long-term relationships.* Trust-based relationships with funders remain a powerful entry point for influence. Continue to nurture these connections, offering accompaniment, sharing experiences and perspectives, and engaging in shared dialogue and reflection around how power shapes systems and practices - and thus realities. It is also strategic to engage directly where possible with funder Boards and leadership, as that direct engagement can lead to transformative understanding and support.
4. *Amplify local voices.* Facilitate direct engagement between communities and funders, allowing funders to hear directly about lived realities as well as how funder systems and practices affect communities. Ensure these interactions are mutually respectful and beneficial, not transactional and extractive.
5. *Engage funders in honest dialogues about power, privilege, and control.* Challenge narratives of charity and saviourism, as well as assumptions about expertise, neutrality, and credibility. Demonstrate and advocate for alternative models, rooted in solidarity, justice, care, reciprocity and shared accountability.

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[14] Knight, B. (2018). What makes a strong ecosystem of support to philanthropy? WINGS. Available online at https://wings.issuelab.org/resource/what-makes-a-strong-ecosystem-of-support-to-philanthropy.html

6. *Document and share practices and evidence.* Stories and grounded evidence of community philanthropy and community-led change are vital to building legitimacy and influencing funder mindsets.
7. *Guard against co-optation.* As "shifting power" gains traction, civil society can ensure definitions and concepts remain rooted in community and Global South perspectives, preventing funders from diluting or instrumentalizing the agenda.

Keep a long-view on systems change

8. *Maintain a long-horizon perspective.* Systems change is long-term work. Stay strategic and organized even when short-term wins are limited, maintaining a multi-generational perspective on change. Plan beyond funder cycles. Develop strategies, narratives, and alliances that outlast external funding, ensuring that influence and agency are not dependent on funder programs.

3.2.3 Recommendations for ecosystem catalysts and connectors

Invest in the relational core of systems change

1. *Hold relational and co-created spaces.* Continue convening safe, co-owned spaces where movement leaders, local practitioners, communities, civil society, and funders can experience what equitable power relations can look like in practice, learn in community, and co-create new approaches, systems, and collaborations.
2. *Act as connectors and amplifiers.* Ecosystem actors play a critical role in bridging local and global levels, ensuring community realities influence funder conversations, and amplifying Global South thought leadership across the sector. They also strengthen solidarity across movements, regions, and sectors, fostering mutual learning and collaborative advocacy and systems change.
3. *Model alternative ways of working.* Alliances and networks can demonstrate South-South solidarity, co-leadership, co-resourcing, and mutual accountability, showing what equitable systems look like in practice.

Strategically support funders

4. *Facilitate paradigm shifts around power and justice.* Convene brave, co-owned spaces where funders, civil society, and communities can explore systems of power and privilege (including colonial legacies), disrupt narratives of charity and benevolence, question assumptions about expertise, neutrality, and credibility. Use research, communications, and convenings to shift sector narratives toward justice, solidarity, reciprocity, and mutual accountability. Normalize difficult and uncomfortable conversations that lead to transformative understanding and practice. Amplify Global South thought leadership and community knowledge. Work collectively to keep power, inclusion, and equity front and centre in conversations and processes, and to hold funders accountable to these values.

5. *Support non-program staff and leaders to learn about and operationalize practices that shift power.* Facilitate learning and change processes among peer networks of board members, executive leaders, operational staff, finance staff, and other non-program team members who influence funders' abilities to actually implement power shifting in their practice.
6. *Support normative change and collective accountability.* Use strategic narratives and collective platforms to shape and normalize good practice across the sector, leveraging peer pressure to drive wider change. Platforms and networks can highlight funder commitments, track progress, and foster accountability, making shifts more visible and harder to reverse.
7. *Strategically package evidence and learnings.* Respond to funder demand for data, frameworks, and tools by shaping products that centre equity, community leadership, and shared decision-making - without reducing them to one-size-fits-all checklists. It can also be powerful to demonstrate how funders have made transformative shifts in their systems and practices, resulting in long-term impact at local levels.

Keep a long-view on systems change

8. *Adopt a long-term perspective and sustain momentum across project cycles.* Funder-funded program cycles often undermine the complexity and long-term nature of systems change work. Ecosystem actors need to strategically mobilize and use flexible resources from diverse sources to sustain long-term organizing and momentum.
9. *Promote collaboration and solidarity across sectors, movements, and geographies.* Silos, projectization, and competitiveness have resulted in disorganized, uncoordinated, and often unstrategic approaches to systemic change. Collaboration and solidarity helps the movement be more effective and sustainable.
10. *Balance coordination with flexibility.* Strategy and coherence matter, but so does adaptability. Recognize that connectors emerge and fade depending on resources and context, and that this fluidity can be a strength.

3.3 Concluding thoughts: How can we support funders to shift power?

This study sought to answer the fundamental question of - *What can be done to help funders meaningfully shift power?*

The insights from this study show the potential and challenges of shifting power in philanthropy. The findings confirm that real change does not come from short-term projects or technical fixes, but through relationships, learning, and accountability that make new ways of working possible, compelling, and necessary.

First, funders need spaces and relationships of trust where they can reflect on - and begin to shift - the paradigms and assumptions underlying their systems, including ideas around decision-making, expertise, capacity, risk, compliance, impact, and evidence.

Second, funders' learning is more impactful when they hear directly from local leaders, when they learn from experience, and when they learn in community. These approaches lead to more profound understanding, and enable more tangible, personal, and applied connections to what is being shared.

Civil society actors and connectors can help create these spaces and opportunities by facilitating meaningful reflection and dialogue, bringing community realities into the conversation, and modelling equitable and inclusive ways of working.

Third, organizational transformation requires investment in people, time, and systems. Funders need to resource staff learning and capacity across their organization, so that shifts in mindsets can be embedded into practice.

Finally, continued organizing and collective pressure are essential. Systems change is generational work - it requires funders to stay engaged for the long term, and for others in the ecosystem to keep the conditions for learning, change, and accountability alive outside of funding cycles. Ecosystem connectors and civil society alliances play a critical role in maintaining momentum and in shifting the norms of what is considered and expected as 'good practice'.

In essence, helping funders shift power involves creating the conditions, relationships, and accountability structures that make shifting power to local communities feasible, desired, and expected. This work requires patience, investment, relationships, strategic organizing, and normative change across a diverse ecosystem, in which funders, civil society, and communities collectively learn and evolve toward a more just, inclusive, and impactful philanthropic and development sector.

Annexes

Annex 1 - Methodology

This research study was commissioned by the Giving for Change initiative (2021-2025) which promotes local voice and participation through community philanthropy at the local level, along with deliberate pushes at national and international levels to shift power dynamics towards citizens and communities. A key objective of this initiative is to influence international funders and INGOs to shift power to local communities and people.

Research objectives

The study had two major objectives, and this report focuses on the findings relating to the second, broader objective:

(1) Examine the different strategies used by Giving for Change partners to influence donors, explore achievements and challenges, and assess impacts that have resulted.

(2) How funders approach concepts of "shifting power"; the motivations, enablers, and barriers that shape their journeys to shift power; and how we can better support them to shift power.

This report focuses on findings relating to the second objective -

1. How do funders feel about and engage with concepts of shifting power?
2. How do funders learn about why and how to shift power?
3. How do they actually implement changes in their own organizations and in their interactions and others?
4. What are some of the barriers and areas of resistance funders face when it comes to shifting power?
5. What are some of the enablers and supports funders have benefited from in their journey to shift power?
6. How can we as an ecosystem better support funders to shift power in meaningful and transformative ways?

Methods

The research findings emerged from consultations and interviews, a review of public and institutional documentation, and in-depth case studies of funder organizations shifting power.

Consultations and interviews

The research was grounded in consultations and interviews with civil society organizations in the Global South, funders, sector support organizations, and thought leaders.

First, civil society and funder partners involved in the Giving for Change initiative were consulted and interviewed to learn about the different strategies they have used to influence change in international funders, and the challenges and successes they have observed. These partners were also asked to recommend international funders and sector practitioners for stakeholder

interviews. They were asked to recommend organizations and people who could speak to different aspects of philanthropy's engagement with ideas of shifting power, including the journeys of specific funder organizations.

From these recommendations, a list of 30+ names was generated for funder and sector practitioner interviews. This list was refined to ensure representation from different parts of the sector, and inclusion of funders at different stages in their journey to shift power. Final inclusion also depended on the availability of the respondent to participate in the interview.

In the end, 31 contributors participated in interviews and shared insights that led to the findings in this study. Contributors to the research study included -

➢ 14 respondents from 9 funder organizations
➢ 13 respondents from 7 Global South civil society organizations (mostly Giving for Change partners)
➢ 4 sector practitioners (consultants and sector support organizations)

See Annex 2 - Contributors who shared insights and information in the study.

Contributors were asked questions about -
● Their organization's stance on shifting power, their own feelings about the movement to shift power, and their reflections on the sector's progress or resistance around shifting power
● Areas of progress made by their own organization towards shifting power
● Where change is still needed in their own organization towards shifting power
● Enablers and barriers - and some of the underlying reasons behind these enablers and barriers - in their organizational journey to shift power
● Important influences, levers, entry points, or interventions that have contributed to their own organization's success in shifting power
● To what extent they feel changes would be sustained in the long-term, and what might support or hinder that sustainability
● What they feel is needed - within organizations and in the sector - to continue and build further progress towards shared power and local agency?

Document review

Key writings on shifting power and funder practices were also reviewed to ensure the findings are contextualized in the current discourse, build on existing knowledge, and contribute to further learning in the sector.

Case studies

Based on the learnings from the interviews, a handful of funders were identified and invited to be profiled as case studies on how international funders can overcome challenges and successfully shift their practices to support local agency and/or community philanthropy.

Information for case studies was drawn out from initial interviews, and supplemented with additional interviews if needed, based on a case study framework outlining the organization's motivations, approach, implementation, challenges and achievements, and lessons learned.

Analysis and validation

A data analysis framework, based on the research objectives, was used to analyze the themes that emerged from the interviews, while also paying attention to other unexpected themes that emerged outside of the framework.

For those organizations who agreed to serve as case studies, their data were synthesized to focus on their organizational background, rationale/motivation or perceived incentives for supporting community philanthropy/ local agency, their approach or model, their impact and outcomes, their challenges and lessons learned, and recommendations for others.

Findings were validated in different ways at different stages - including
- Immediate/ongoing checking for accuracy and understanding with interview participants during and after their interviews,
- Referring to other sources such as reports and interviews with others to triangulate findings where possible,
- Sharing draft case studies with the organizations being profiled for their review and validation, and
- Review and validation of the overall research findings by respondents as the draft report was written and revised.

Limitations

Some limitations must be acknowledged. Findings are based on a small number of interviews with funders already inclined toward shifting power, meaning traditional funders' perspectives are not represented. As well, grantees of the funder organizations were not included, so it was not possible to assess how reported shifts were experienced by those receiving funds.

Despite these limitations, the study still allows us to identify emerging patterns in how funders conceptualize and practice power-shifting, the barriers they face, and the kinds of strategies and approaches that seem to be effective in supporting their journeys to shift power.

It would be valuable for future research to include donors with a wider range of attitudes towards shifting power, as well as a wider range of civil society organizations, including those receiving grants from donors, to better understand the range of experience on the receiving end of philanthropy.

Annex 2 - Contributors who shared insights and information in the study

We would like to acknowledge and deeply appreciate the following people who generously shared their time, insights, and additional information to bring richness and depth to the findings of this study.

#	Contributor Name	*Organization*
1	Bakx, Pim	*Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs*
2	Cajegas, Lori	*Wilde Ganzen*
3	Cheung, Tania	*Comic Relief*
4	Deurloo, Peter	*Stichting Amaidhi-Hulp aan India*
5	Deurloo-Hunsche, Dilia	*Stichting Amaidhi-Hulp aan India*
6	Doane, Deborah	*Reimagining INGO movement*
7	Emerhi, Ese	*Global Fund for Community Foundations*
8	Giethoorn-Kas, Kirsten	*Friendship Foundation*
9	Hodgson, Jenny	*Global Fund for Community Foundations*
10	Horstmeier, Mirjam	*Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs*
11	Huguet, Rachel	*Hilton Foundation*
12	Isooba, Moses	*Uganda National NGO Forum*
13	Kassim-Lakha, Shaheen	*Hilton Foundation*
14	Knight, Barry	*Advisor to the Global Fund for Community Foundation*
15	Kuria, Hellen	*Kenya Community Development Foundation*
16	Lawrence, Leon S.	*Dutch Lanka Friendship Foundation*
17	Maingi, Grace	*Kenya Community Development Foundation*
18	Mapstone, Michael	*Anglo American Foundation*
19	Matarazzo, Carola	*Movimento Bem Maior*
20	Moloantoa, Nancy	*Porticus Foundation*
21	Morais, Yasmin	*Comuá Network*

#	Contributor Name	*Organization*
22	Ngule, Caesar	*Kenya Community Development Foundation*
23	Nusseibeh, Nour	*Dalia Association*
24	Ong-Alok, Gigi	*Partos*
25	Serra, Vanina	*Mama Cash*
26	Stroes, ErnstJan	*Wilde Ganzen*
27	van de Grift, Josje	*Wilde Ganzen*
28	Vandyck, Charles Kojo	*West Africa Civil Society Institute*
29	Anonymous contributor	*Bilateral Donor*
30	Anonymous contributor	*Global Private Foundation*
31	Anonymous contributor	*Global Private Foundation*

Annex 3 - Case Study: Comic Relief UK

Summary

Comic Relief UK envisions a just world, free from poverty. Established as a public-facing philanthropic organization, it mobilizes funds from the British public to address key issues of justice and human wellbeing, both within the UK and internationally. Comic Relief UK supports initiatives across more than 25 countries - prioritizing locally-led and community-driven development, racial and gender justice, climate resilience, and fundamental needs such as food security, housing, and health.

Motivated by a longstanding commitment to funding local organizations, Comic Relief UK has sought to move beyond transactional grantmaking toward relationships grounded in trust, flexibility, and shared learning. Its approach has also been shaped by engagement in global movements and dialogue with Global South civil society partners. Support from its Board of Trustees, leadership, and staff - especially advocates for power-shifting within these groups - has been instrumental. In recent years, Comic Relief UK has launched the Shifting Power Programme, a ten-year initiative co-funded with the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), focused on strengthening local civil society organizations in Ghana, Malawi, and Zambia, reshaping narratives about aid, and influencing other funders to adopt locally-led practices.

Comic Relief UK's achievements reflect tangible progress toward more equitable and locally driven philanthropy. The Shifting Power Programme has become a flagship example of trust-based, long-term funding, with all grants provided as flexible core support and managed in partnership with national anchor organizations. These anchors have taken leadership roles in defining country-specific priorities, while fostering co-creation and shared power with sub-grantees. The programme's success has inspired other Comic Relief UK portfolios to adopt similar approaches, including organizational strengthening components and flexible funding as a standard practice. Leadership participation in sectoral learning spaces - such as the Shift the Power summit - has reinforced institutional commitment and helped spread these ideas across the organization. Nonetheless, challenges persist: fundraising models reliant on the British

public require careful navigation to avoid white savior narratives, and operational concerns around risk management and compliance continue to pose obstacles to fully devolving control.

Comic Relief UK's experience highlights several key learnings for funders seeking to operationalize the shift of power to local actors. First, alignment between institutional ethos and the principles of locally-led development creates fertile ground for meaningful change. Second, leadership commitment - both executive and governance-level - is essential for sustaining reform. Third, designating dedicated spaces, such as a pilot programme, allows experimentation, reflection, and scaling of successful practices across the organization. Finally, internal transformation requires time and investment: funders must equip staff across all departments - including finance, legal, and operations - to unlearn control-oriented mindsets and adopt practices rooted in trust, mutual accountability, and humility. Comic Relief UK's journey underscores that shifting power is not a linear process but a continual practice of reflection, learning, and adaptation.

Please see the detailed case study on Comic Relief UK here:
Shifting Power Case Study - Comic Relief UK

Annex 4 - Case Study: Mama Cash

Since its inception, Mama Cash has been rooted in feminist and power-sharing values, and over the years it has continued to adjust its structures and practices to align with these values. More recently, they transitioned from more traditional grantmaking practices to participatory grantmaking in which decisions about grants are made by a committee made up of community representatives. Here we provide a high-level summary of Mama Cash's experiences, learnings, and reflections. A more detailed case study is provided via a link below.

Summary

Mama Cash supports women, girls, trans, and intersex people across the globe to advance their rights, challenge oppressive norms, and advocate for systemic justice. Its five grantmaking funds - the Resilience, Solidarity, Revolution, Radical Love, and Spark Funds - collectively provide flexible, long-term support for feminist activism across diverse contexts. Beyond financial resources, Mama Cash offers accompaniment in organizational strengthening, networking, and resource mobilization, ensuring that movements have the capacity and confidence to pursue transformative change on their own terms.

Rooted in a legacy of redistributing wealth and decision-making, Mama Cash has continually sought to align its structures and practices with feminist and power-sharing values. Over the years, it has intentionally diversified its leadership and staff to reflect global feminist perspectives and has embedded reflection on equity, anti-racism, and inclusion into its institutional culture. Most recently, Mama Cash has transitioned from more traditional grantmaking practices to participatory grantmaking, through which decision-making authority has been transferred from staff to community-based bodies. These include the ComCom (Community Committee) which leads decision-making for new grantee-partners in the Resilience Fund. This transition reflects Mama Cash's belief that those most affected by injustice are best placed to determine priorities, strategies, and the allocation of resources.

Through this transformation, Mama Cash has achieved significant successes. It has fully transitioned its five grantmaking portfolios to participatory grantmaking, ensuring that community activists lead funding choices across its global network. The organization continues to model core, flexible, and long-term support - often extending to ten years - enabling grantee partners to grow, adapt, and sustain movement-building work. Its leadership in feminist philanthropy has helped keep gender justice on the philanthropic agenda and has inspired broader shifts toward trust-based and movement-led funding. These achievements have been made possible by learning from feminist movements that practice collective decision-making, and by incorporating diverse perspectives across regions. Yet, challenges remain: donor

restrictions, compliance requirements, and regulatory barriers often limit flexibility and can inadvertently reproduce the bureaucratic burdens that participatory models seek to dismantle.

Mama Cash's experience offers several key learnings for organizations seeking to meaningfully shift power. First, transformation need not begin from scratch - building on existing knowledge and peer experience strengthens practice and avoids duplication. Second, change is most sustainable when it is gradual and iterative, allowing for experimentation and adaptation. Third, redistributing power requires trust, risk-taking, and a willingness to confront institutional discomfort. Finally, transparency and shared learning are vital: by openly documenting and reflecting on both successes and challenges, Mama Cash contributes to a growing collective effort to make participatory and movement-aligned philanthropy the norm rather than the exception.

Please see the detailed case study on Mama Cash here:
Shifting Power Case Study - Mama Cash