# Monitor Institute by **Deloitte.**



### What's Next for Philanthropy in the 2020s Edge Overview: Rethinking Philanthropy's Role

### **About this Document**

This document is a companion piece to the Monitor Institute by Deloitte's *Seeing Philanthropy in a New Light* report. It was created as part of the field-wide "What's Next for Philanthropy in the 2020s" initiative, supported by **Deloitte Tax LLP**, the **Robert Wood Johnson Foundation**, the **John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation**, the **W.K. Kellogg Foundation**, and the **McConnell Foundation**. The initiative engaged more than 200 philanthropy executives, professionals, donors, board members, experts, and grantees in a dialogue about the current state of philanthropic practice and where it might be headed in the coming years. To learn more about What's Next for Philanthropy in the 2020s, visit www.futureofphilanthropy.org.

N THE MONITOR Institute by Deloitte's Seeing Philanthropy in a New Light report, we explore how the world around philanthropy is changing, driven by a range of powerful social, economic, and political trends and forces. While foundations and donors have significant freedom to ignore many of these changes, certain "Big Shifts" around the field have proven to be inescapable.

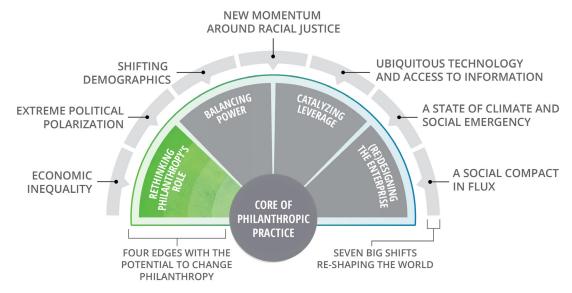
Alongside these Big Shifts—and in many cases, in response to them—people and organizations are continuously experimenting with new ideas and strategies at the edges of the field. Most of these new approaches remain small and marginal to the mainstream core of philanthropic practice. But the "Edges" that are particularly well aligned with the Big Shifts show an outsized potential to sway and reshape the core over time. They can ride the momentum of the Big Shifts to grow in a way that will allow

them to influence (or even overtake) the practices of the core over time.

Our aim is to identify promising Edges that, if scaled, could begin to challenge or change some of the core practices of the field that are no longer a good fit for today's philanthropic context. These are spaces for innovation where the Big Shifts are forcing philanthropic leaders to adjust their approaches and strategies. What these Edges will look like in the future isn't entirely clear yet, but there is an opportunity for funders, both individually and collectively, to investigate, experiment with, and invest in the potential of these promising areas of activity.

This document highlights one of these Edges: **Rethinking Philanthropy's Role**. It examines the new practices that are emerging, identifying intriguing "bright spots" emerging in the field and outlining the key implications and trade-offs that underlie the different approaches.

### SHIFTS AND EDGES CHANGING THE CORE OF PHILANTHROPIC PRACTICE



### Rethinking Philanthropy's Role

UNDERS HAVE DIFFERENT views on the scope and scale of change they are aiming to create and what they believe is needed to create that change. Depending on that viewpoint, funders can play radically different roles in the social change ecosystem. In education, for example, one funder might support local public school arts programs, while another might work to change education policy at the national or state level. While both approaches can have a meaningful positive impact, at their core, they employ different tools to achieve different aspirations.

With this in mind, our research suggests that many funders are beginning to work to deliberately reconceptualize their role in creating social and environmental change—thinking carefully about what impact they want to see in the world and getting smart about the different tools they can use to create it. The approaches can vary widely, but we identified four prominent practices that funders are using to match their strategies to fit their social impact ambitions:

- Changing systems and cultural narratives.
  Some funders are aiming to change large systems and even adopting strategies that go far beyond grantmaking to influence policy, culture, and movements.
- Getting out of the way. As some funders expand their scope of activities, others are more narrowly defining their role, finding ways to support the missions of high-quality nonprofits with as little complication as possible.

- Funding innovation to maximize impact.
  With so many pressing social needs, funders are exploring ways to embrace the upside of risk and fund projects with breakthrough potential.
- Increasing agility to respond to crises. In a rapidly changing world, some funders are finding that their grantmaking strategies need to be more nimble, intentionally building flexibility so that they can pivot when needed and adapt to respond to critical projects that may be "off-strategy."

In some respects, these different practices represent a set of larger assumptions about philanthropy's role in society. Should funders be using their unique assets and positioning to try to intervene in larger systems? To step back and simply finance the work of grantees who are closer to the issues and communities they are serving? To find and fund innovation where existing solutions are proving insufficient? To respond flexibly to the rapidly shifting realities and needs of our communities?

There is no universal right answer to these questions. Each funder will need to make its own choices about how it believes it can best create change in the world. But what's very clear is that funders will need to make sure that they are matching their methods and actions to fit their aspirations. How they align them influences every other aspect of their decision-making, from the issues they work on to what success looks like to where they operate and how they are structured.

## Edge Practice 1: Changing systems and cultural narratives

Recognizing that no single organization in isolation is likely to be able to create lasting change on the types of complex, interrelated challenges we face today, some funders have begun to shift their unit of analysis from individual grants and narrowly defined interventions to more holistic and coordinated systems change. Systems change approaches look at the interconnected web of organizations, networks, practices, power structures, and conditions that create an ecosystem that ultimately affects outcomes. Beyond funding one element in that system, like a local school in the context of education, systems change funders would look for ways to intervene in the dynamic of the whole system to improve a wider range of outcomes, considering the interplay between schools, teachers, parents, policy, and socioeconomic factors that affect the education system.

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### **CHANGING SYSTEMS "IN PLACE"**

Because systems are often large and complex, many funders pursuing a system change approach have chosen to focus in their work on a specific place, where they can know the stakeholders, get their hands around the scale of the problems, and tailor context-specific solutions. The Stanislaus Community

Foundation, for example, with the support of the James Irvine Foundation and in partnership with Open Impact Advisors, developed the New Leadership Network, a place-based initiative in California's Central Valley focused on connecting cohorts of leaders in the region and designing initiatives that improved existing systems. In one case, the network identified the fact that many first-generation community college students faced transportation challenges that hindered their education.1 Going beyond their own organizational lens, leaders from the local community college, credit union, and transportation department came together to cocreate a solution that allowed students to ride the buses for free. The Foundation helped leaders understand the key pain points, visualize the wider landscape of institutions and stakeholders, and identify interventions that helped improve the region's overall transportation system.

Efforts like Akonadi Foundation's "All In for Oakland" initiative focus deliberately on movement-building to advance racial justice. In its efforts to transform Oakland's youth justice system, Akonadi supports the work of a local "ecosystem of movement organizations" by investing in people of color-led power-building, organizing, and advocacy focused on ending the criminalization of Black youth and youth of color.2 Other funders focus more specifically on policy change. For example, Silicon Valley Community Foundation engaged legislators; appeared and testified at government hearings; funded 501(c)(3)s, 501(c)(4)s, and city government departments to conduct research and raise awareness; engaged directly in lobbying; and formed a coalition of grantee advocates against predatory payday lending, which disproportionately affects Black and Latinx people. As a result, legislators enacted laws strengthening consumer protections, stopped attempts to raise the maximum loan amount, and established a payday loan



alternative pilot.<sup>3</sup> More recently, the foundation has focused its policy work on early childhood development, affordable housing, financial security, and racial justice, including advocating for California Propositions 15 and 16.

#### SHIFTING NARRATIVES

Still other funders—recognizing that even largescale policy changes can be ephemeral, have begun to ramp up efforts and investments to support culture change and shift longer-lasting popular narratives and mindsets on a range of important issues. As Favianna Rodriguez, Founder and President of The Center for Cultural Power, explains, "Those engaged in this work believe that cultural change precedes political change." Organizations like hers and the Pop Culture Collaborative work with artists, journalists, entertainment industry leaders, cultural organizations, and social justice movements to ensure that stories of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities are told by those communities and in an accurate and authentic way. The power to proactively shape and shift these stories is especially important, as they recur in media and have the potential to become stickier cultural narratives that feed public perceptions, reinforce enduring stereotypes, and trigger consequential responses that can either accelerate or hinder social change efforts.4

### CHALLENGING PARADIGMS

A few funders are beginning to go even further upstream to reimagine some of the most fundamental paradigms and structures in our society. Several funders we interviewed expressed views similar to those of Stephen Heintz, President and CEO of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, who explained, "We are experiencing a deepening obsolescence of three core operating systems that have benefited

civilizations for 300 years: capitalism, democracy, and the nation-state. But they are all showing signs of anachronism in the 21st century." In reimagining those operating systems, there is a critical need to recognize that these constructs haven't historically benefited large parts of the population—issues of colonialism, racism, and unchecked extraction were critical bugs (or maybe features) of these systems.

Over the past few years, some funders have taken steps to try to reimagine these systems for the future. The Omidyar Network's "Reimagining Capitalism" initiative, for example, seeks to "shape a new economic paradigm" to build a better society. Specifically, the initiative has focused on building worker power and curbing monopoly power. Other funders are taking on different fundamental systems like improving democracy, moving past neoliberalism, and rethinking the international institutions developed after World War II.

### **IMPLICATIONS AND TRADE-OFFS**

As foundations and donors take a more active aspiration to change systems, narratives, and societies, they have prompted mixed feelings from many in the field. Some see these actions as a generally positive development: Funders are finally acknowledging the size and scale of the challenges we face and are stepping up to take on problems that no one else is positioned to address. They're using their power and privilege to draw attention to issues and actively taking steps to address them. To many proponents of this approach, the choice to do anything other than intervene at a systems level can feel short-sighted. "In my view, it's a cop out. It isn't tackling the larger problem nor asking tough questions," says Bruce Lourie, CEO of the Ivey Foundation, which focuses on climate change.

Critics, however, wonder if it's the place of wealthy individuals and institutions to reimagine systems on behalf of others. Even with good intentions, funders can abruptly enter a space, disrupting the existing work of activists and even "capturing" a movement and shifting its focus to something that is more in-line with the funder's own preferences. As one advocacy leader told us, "You have funders who are new to a movement or advocacy and they are confident that they know what is best and they can't be challenged because they are paying everyone. That is the worst of the worst trend."

As funders elevate their ambitions to fundamentally change systems and societies, issues of power dynamics, expertise, trust, and inclusion come to the fore. Shifting system requires buy-in from a wide range of stakeholders, and that often means balancing traditionally top-down philanthropic approaches with more bottom-up, inclusionary coalition-building and power-sharing.

## **Edge Practice 2: Getting out of the way**

"Are you the hero or the helper?" Trabian Shorters, a social entrepreneur and author of the Asset-Framing approach, asks of funders when talking about the role they play in supporting social impact. As philanthropy has become larger and more professionalized over the past couple of decades, many funders have expanded their role in creating change. Today, a common critique of funders is that they see themselves as the central character—the heroes and heroines in the story—as opposed to helpers working to support others.

However, some funders are carving out a more limited-by-design approach to philanthropy. MacKenzie Scott's decision to donate \$6 billion to approximately 500 organizations in five

months is the largest example to date. Perhaps this gift is most notable for what it doesn't include: no grant proposal process, no ongoing reporting requirements, and no naming rights. But Scott's example is just one of many ways funders are trying to support the missions of quality nonprofits with as little intervention or complication as possible. The push for funders to provide multiyear, general operating support for the organizations they fund as opposed to more restrictive project-based grants has been progressing slowly for decades.

This isn't to say that funders are writing checks and forgetting about the evolving needs of these organizations. This approach is also about listening to grantees and providing the funding that they say they need. A growing movement in the field has been to provide nonprofits with multiyear, general operating support rather than individual project grants. This type of funding allows nonprofits to use the resources in the manner that they believe will have the most impact, as opposed to meeting the preferences or dictates of funders.

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### **IMPLICATIONS AND TRADE-OFFS**

The reasons why funders are choosing to play a more limited role are varied and complex. Some believe that this kind of support—simple, less restricted, and without interference—is just the

best way to create social impact. This sort of Tocquevillian ethos is driven by the idea that nonprofit organizations are best positioned to know how to create change, and donors should be supporting a wide range of important, independent voluntary organizations without meddling much in their specific strategies. Others view this approach with a reparative lens, looking to make up for the past ways that foundations have been too patriarchal, arrogant, and dismissive, especially toward organizations led by women and people of color. And some individual donors pursue a more hands-off role simply because they feel that the value added by large, bureaucratic foundations is limited.

For many funders, though, providing general operating support and related practices have been slower to catch on. The Center for Effective Philanthropy recently conducted a study looking at the disconnect between public philanthropic support for general operating support and the experience of nonprofits. According to their Grantee Perception Reports, only 12.4% of grantees describe themselves as receiving any kind of multiyear general operating support. Strikingly, the report was unable to pinpoint why foundation leaders proclaim the need for general operating support but fail to deliver.

Our conversations with philanthropic leaders suggest several possible reasons for this disconnect. First, many foundation staff are themselves beholden to specific impact metrics and may have difficulty claiming success or attributing the precise impact of a grant if it is used for, say, employee health care benefits. Others cite the mechanics of providing general operating support don't always work. For example, if a place-based funder is supporting a national organization's work in a specific region, those grants generally need to be restricted to that certain geography. Lastly, some funders, in hushed tones, express concern about how the money will be used. One foundation executive

shared, "As someone who used to go asking for money, I'm all for general operating support. But it'll take a while before I get my board to agree with it being the right thing to do. They don't believe that nonprofits won't take you to the cleaners if you give them carte blanche!"

Over the past year, general operating support and loosening program restrictions have become increasingly common in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, as funders have looked to get money out the door and on the ground quickly. Trusting others to be in the driver's seat has been seen as a critical component to philanthropy's COVID-19 response. But what remains to be seen is whether funders will be content with their role as passenger or whether they will take back the steering wheel when the crisis abates.

# Edge Practice 3: Funding innovation to maximize impact

For many of the intractable social and environmental problems we now face, solutions are not yet known. Existing approaches are proving insufficient, and many funders have begun to explore how they can intentionally fund social innovation, driven by the need to experiment and find new strategies with the potential to create breakthrough change.

Since 2003, this type of experimentation has been at the heart of the work of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Pioneer Portfolio. The Pioneer Portfolio uses a multipronged strategy that helps it scan for emerging new ideas, source innovations, make early-stage grants to explore new fields and accelerate promising new ideas, and support emerging opportunity spaces that have the potential to produce important breakthroughs. In addition, Pioneer plays an important learning role in the

organization, introducing new thinking, insights, and approaches to the work of the broader Foundation. As RWJF associate vice president for research, evaluation, and learning Brian Quinn explains it, "Pioneer helps the foundation continuously look up and look out into the future to see potential game changers."

Other funders are taking on this challenge at a more local level. The Barra Foundation's Catalyst Fund gives grants as a way of promoting innovation in the Greater Philadelphia region. Recognizing that nonprofit organizations don't always have the capacity to test and implement new or early stage ideas, the Foundation provides risk capital, through grants and belowmarket rate investments, and "permission to fail" for experiments and innovations that nonprofit organizations believe could have an outsized impact on the area.<sup>9</sup>

And for philanthropies that may not be able to build an infrastructure for innovation from scratch, competition and challenge platforms such as Lever for Change and InnoCentive are emerging to help funders conceptualize the innovations they are looking to support, establish systems to help screen proposals, and publicize challenges and competitions to surface new ideas.

### SUPPORTING THE INFRASTRUCTURE FOR INNOVATION

A few funders of innovation have taken a significantly different approach, working to build a sort of "greenhouse" that provides the networks, infrastructure, support, and experimental space to help transformative ideas bloom. For example, in collaboration with Dark Matter Labs and MaRS, the J.W. McConnell Foundation has seeded a platform known as the Emergence Room, which envisions a democratic economy and society where governments and institutions are accountable to the health and well-being of people and planet, and for generations to come. <sup>10</sup> To do so, it encourages

collaborative mission-building of innovators from multiple domains and sectors who want to incubate and test bold initiatives in an integral, hybrid space, but are unable to in the existing confines of single-issue agencies with siloed mandates. Initiatives range from embedding participatory governance models in communities to creating finance mechanisms that can underwrite transition infrastructure fit for this age of long emergencies. Rather than just offering traditional grant dollars, the Emergence Room provides innovators and organizations with a dynamic and safe space to pursue ideas with the backing of both financial and nonfinancial resources.

### **MANAGING RISK**

At the heart of funding innovation is a different sort of calculus of risk and reward than the one that drives more traditional grantmaking. As Eric Toone, the former principal deputy director of the US Department of Energy's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA-E), has noted, "When you're doing innovation, the first question is not 'Is this going to work?' but rather, 'If it works, would it matter?"" Funders looking to fund breakthrough innovation trade a lower likelihood of success for a greater potential for social transformation.

Yet even as funders trumpet their desire to make big bets, most remain reluctant to take on much real risk. As Tim Silard, President of the Rosenberg Foundation, puts it, "If 90% of the grants we are making are succeeding, doesn't that say that we aren't being terribly risky?"

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Some funders are exploring ways to share the risk in funding innovation, opting to pool their resources to support new ideas and approaches. A number of funders jointly established the Climate Breakthrough Project.<sup>11</sup> Teams receive \$2 million to develop breakthroughs that can reduce or capture emissions by hundreds of megatons. While any individual project may have a low probability of success, by creating a portfolio of projects in partnership with several funders, they are spreading the risk to maximize long-term impact. And by combining resources, these funders are able to create a larger pool of resources for climate innovators while also spreading the cost and risk of those ideas that ultimately fail.

### **IMPLICATIONS AND TRADE-OFFS**

As the challenges philanthropy faces continue to grow larger and more complex, funding innovation offers an opportunity to find gamechanging ideas, technologies, and approaches with the potential to create outsized progress. But organizations are learning that funding innovation isn't easy. It requires them to align their internal efforts differently to allow them to effectively select, support, and scale new innovation. Funders are exploring ways to look beyond the "usual suspects" in their grantmaking to find creative thinkers; to craft measurement and evaluation systems that are nimble and flexible enough to track the pivots and evolution of emerging ideas; and to create the partnerships and funding ecosystems that can help scale innovations once they've been seeded.

Another key critique of funding innovation relates to who gets to decide what is "innovative" and who gets a chance to innovate and fail. Social entrepreneurs and smaller nonprofits, especially those led by people of color, often have difficulty finding dollars to test innovative ideas or solutions. And the challenges go beyond money. One "failed" initiative could be

the end of the road for a social entrepreneur of color or small nonprofit, and these groups seem less likely to get the benefit of the doubt early in their work when innovations are not yet proven or disproven. Innovation, as a result, at times appears to be meant for the chosen few, and those few may be chosen in a biased way by funders.

## **Edge Practice 4: Increasing agility to respond to crises**

Over just the past few years, the United States and Canada have faced a steadily growing number of natural disasters, a pandemic that has left hundreds of thousands dead, nationwide social protests over issues of inequity and racial justice, and even political violence. As one foundation executive we spoke with explained, "Regardless of where you are, crises and disasters have become the new normal, and it's getting harder and harder for funders to just continue with business as usual when they happen." As a result, many funders recognize that they need to become more agile in responding to emerging crises and disasters, whether natural or human-made.

### RESPONDING QUICKLY TO URGENT NEEDS

That challenge is seen as one of the most critical ones in the field, according to leaders from the Hong Kong Jockey Club. In 2020, soon after the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in East Asia and public health measures quickly escalated to stem the transmission of the virus, the Jockey Club established a HK\$100M (~US\$13M) COVID-19 Emergency Relief fund that supported over 200 organizations in the city with grants of up to HK\$500,000 (~US\$64K).¹² The entire process was handled digitally, from the submission of the application to the transfer of funds, with grantees receiving funds in as few as 10 days. The Jockey Club also addressed the fallout of the

pandemic on Hong Kong's education system. To ensure that children in underprivileged areas had internet access to participate in virtual learning, it negotiated with all four mobile carriers in the region to purchase data-carrying SIM cards for 100,000 students. The idea, executed from March to July 2020, was so successful that the government carried forward the effort at the start of the new school year. None of these activities were preplanned, but each level of the organization—from program staff to Board—resolved to move rapidly. "That's agility," says Leong Cheung, Executive Director of the Jockey Club: "thinking ahead, acting quickly, reprioritizing your initiatives, and mobilizing what's needed."

For funders looking to be more agile in responding to unexpected emergencies, there are a range of different possible approaches to take. Some funders are drawing from their endowments to give them greater flexibility to fund unexpected events, while others are deliberately making room in their existing budgets. The Hewlett Foundation, for instance, has established a pool of unallocated funds that allows it to maintain existing grantmaking promises without increasing its overall spend out.13 During "normal" times, these unallocated funds can be used to support other out-ofstrategy efforts, such as special initiatives. But in times of crisis, the unallocated funds are a valuable safety net to compensate for a reduced grantmaking budget due to a downsized endowment and/or to provide emergency grants to address fallout from the crisis.

### **GETTING PREPARED**

Other funders are looking at the "expected emergencies" on the horizon and building resilience to deal with them before they become major catastrophes. After living through Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010, it was clear to the Baton Rouge Area Foundation that waterways around the world were likely to be at the center of future natural and human-made disasters. The Foundation partnered with government and environmental leaders to create the Water Institute of the Gulf.14 The Institute, which received seed funding from the Foundation and other funders, focuses on research, data modeling, policy advocacy, and knowledgesharing on topics related to water management in the Gulf and around the world, including Vietnam and Argentina. With the knowledge and networks spurred by the Institute, all of South Louisiana is better prepared to adapt to rising seas and vanishing wetlands.

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But this kind of foresight isn't always the norm for funders. As Patty McIlreavy, President and CEO of the Center for Disaster Philanthropy, notes, "Funders tend to discount the harms that don't happen," leading to a tendency to respond swiftly to immediate suffering, but less attention to preventing the next emergency.

### **IMPLICATIONS AND TRADE-OFFS**

Focusing on agility allows funders to be proactive and responsive to circumstances as they happen. But jumping at every opportunity or responding to every emergency makes it more difficult for funders to thoughtfully plan ahead, offer a consistent stream of multiyear grants to grantees, or invest in broader, systemic change that requires consistent attention and focus over time. Foundations are one of the few institutions that can stick with problems and fund organizations over time, and that capacity can be diminished if funders reflexively shift attention and resources to respond to urgent, unexpected needs.

Altogether, funders are trying to strike a balance between constraining themselves with important (but sometimes rigid) strategies and responding to opportunities or emergencies as they arise. This tension, though, is a healthy one for many funders to explore and revisit over time. As Kristi Kimball, the executive director of the Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation, has explained, "A necessary piece of strategy is actually reserving some of your resources to go outside your strategy."15



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### **About Monitor Insitute by Deloitte**

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