

Facilitating Equitable Systems Change:

How Foundation Board Members and Executive Leadership Can Lead the Way



INTRODUCTION WHAT IS SYSTEMS CHANGE AND WHY SHOULD IT BE EQUITABLE? WHY EMBRACE SYSTEMS CHANGE? THE ROLE OF PHILANTHROPY LEADERS IN **ADVANCING SYSTEMS CHANGE** WHY SOME FUNDERS DON'T PRIORITIZE **SYSTEMS CHANGE** WAYS NON-SYSTEMS FUNDERS CAN **BETTER ENABLE SYSTEMS CHANGE** CONCLUSION

Introduction

The Shifting Systems Initiative, hosted by Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors with a Steering Group comprised of the Skoll Foundation, the Chandler Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and Jasmine Social Investments, promotes systems change as a way to help achieve lasting positive impact. Since 2016, the Initiative has engaged funders in learning and research about systems change, issued reports and has been hosting workshops that aim to help funders across the globe to embrace practices aligned with achieving longer-term goals and impact.

Systems change calls for long-term, collaborative, and cross-sector approaches that seek to facilitate lasting and often transformative change. By tackling problems at their root causes, systems change, particularly when it is grounded in equity, carries with it the promise of greater, enduring impact and change vis-à-vis society's most significant challenges. Growing in prominence in recent years, systems change has emerged as an important lens for guiding and viewing

More donors are aware of this imperative, particularly after the Covid-19 pandemic laid bare historic inequities, the fragility of social safety nets, public health and education systems, and fair labor practices

philanthropic practice.

across the globe. Standard philanthropic practices of the past several decades have failed to build the community resilience or conditions for individuals, households, communities and nations to

66 Most social and environmental problems require comprehensive changes in public and private systems, structures, policies, and social norms to make long term sustainable progress. This deeper, more holistic way of working has come to be known as systems change, an approach that can be defined as 'shifting the conditions

that hold a problem in place. 991

thrive. How could decades of social advancement have unraveled so quickly, funders and organizations asked themselves? What can we do to support more effective, resilient solutions? In response, growing numbers of donors have embraced systems change

concepts in their work over the past few years.

This article is for board members and executive leadership of foundations who are interested in learning more

about systems change as a means of driving moreand more sustainableimpact, and how they can be instrumental in transforming their organization's approach to embrace systems change. It addresses some of the long-held

assumptions that may impede foundations from adopting a systems-based approach, and includes examples and questions to prompt internal dialogue at your philanthropic organization.

¹John Kania and Cynthia Rayner, Systems Change: Why it Matters, Social Investor (Chandler Foundation, October 18, 2022).

²See global pledges to simplify the processes and relationships between grantee and funding partners, by London Funders and Council on Foundations, for example.

What Is Systems Change And Why Should It Be Equitable?

Some organizations are creating innovation models to drive equilibrium change—the disruption of social, economic, and political forces that enable inequality, injustice, and other thorny social and environmental problems to persist.

Under the common understanding, a system is a collection of elements, processes, or components that work together for a common purpose or cause an outcome. Regardless of whether a system is intentional or defacto, natural or human-made, tangible or theoretical, systems operate synergistically so that an outcome of the system is more than that which would be generated by the individual parts of the system.

Thus changing a system requires an analysis of those parts and how they interact. Systems change is focused on shifting mindsets, structures, ways of operating, or patterns to address root causes of

problems. These shifts are facilitated through intentional process and design, purposeful interventions, and conscious, deliberate approaches.

By focusing on systems change, foundation leaders can achieve resilient, lasting, and more effective change for grantees, frontline communities and broader societies well beyond those directly affected. This can help funders better fulfill their goals and vision. There are many ways in which systems change occurs through the efforts of funders and their grantees-structural change, transformational change, or relational change -but in order to drive true change, equity should be a

core focus of those seeking to change systems. This is because the systems that drive the need for philanthropy are themselves filled with inequities: inequities of power, of resources, of connections, of information. True change of a system can only occur when those inequities are addressed.

The chart below, which emerged out of an interactive workshop, illustrates the perspective of many funders and partners on what systems change is, and why it could be beneficial for a foundation to embrace a systems change approach.

Shifting

reconfiguring, and transforming...

Mind-sets, mental models, and paradigms

Patterns, underlying structures, and way of operating

Dynamics and relationships

³See FSG's Six Conditions of Systems Change. https://www.fsg.org/resource/water of systems change/.

In Order to

Address underlying root causes

Deal with complex, uncertain, and interconnected systems that are ever-changing

Engage in the potential of living systems

Solve big social issues

Through

intentional process and design, purposeful interventions, and conscious, deliberate approaches such as..

Taking living systems & complexity approaches

Growing the number of people who think & act systemically

Enabling & supporting leaders with the power to convene systems

Strengthening capacity & processes to engage

Strategic, multi-stakeholder approaches, coming together across systems

Having an inner awareness of the whole

With the Outcome of

creating, ensuring, and positively affecting...

Different behaviors & outcomes

Resilient, lasting, and better results

Building a bridge to a better tomorrow

Increased systems health

Positive social change

Just, sustainable, and compassionate societies

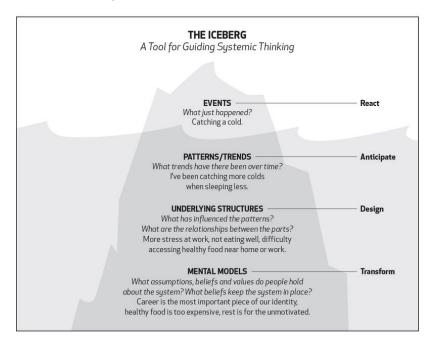
A new normal, the emergence of a new system, and a new reality

Why Embrace Systems Change?

Systems change approaches can provide tangible benefits to both funders and grantee partners by fostering deeper relationships and enabling greater impact. Whether systems change is a foundation's main strategy, or simply one of the several approaches it employs, it can help funders to:



While not every benefit above is reflected in every program that has systems change as a goal, it is clear that there are numerous benefits for philanthropy and society when challenges are viewed through, and solutions seek to address, the systems that enable them.



What systems are implicated in our work?

Do we consider ourselves or want to be a systems change funder?

What benefits do, or might, we see as a result of prioritizing systems change?

The Role of Philanthropy Leaders In Advancing Systems Change

A systems lens is 66...a view that balances part and whole and

focuses on complex interrelationships and patterns from multiple perspectives. 99 -Derek Cabrera

Foundations sit in a privileged space in relation to systems change given their freedom from, in large part, restrictions and imposed accountability. Thus they can work to effect

change in systems in a variety of ways—through advocacy; through funding disruption and innovation; through information and amplification; through building new institutions;

through changing perspectives, and more. Accordingly, philanthropy leaders have a significant role to play in driving systems change for a more equitable and just society. ⁴

Leading by Prioritizing Systems Change: External Actions

Philanthropy leaders can play a critical leadership role in driving systems change, helping to catalyze meaningful social and environmental change and create a more sustainable and just world. Systems change is complex, multifaceted, and requires deep work that can be at odds with previous types of philanthropic programming. The significance of the investment for true change cannot be overstated. When philanthropy leaders decide to make this investment, some of the strategies they can use to lead include:

Partnering with other philanthropic organizations to expand the circle of those engaged in an issue, therefore amplifying impact.

Ensuring their systems change investment aligns with their goals.

Thinking differently about connections within a system, elements of the system, influencers of those systems, feedback loops that shape the systems over time, and other aspects of systems often taken for granted.

Embracing innovation and experimentation by investing in early-stage initiatives, supporting pilots and prototypes, and creating a culture of learning.

Advocating for policy change, which can be a powerful way to drive systems change, particularly in areas where policy and regulatory barriers are hindering progress. Philanthropy leaders can wield considerable power to influence policies that shore up unfavorable systems.



Two examples of foundations where policy change was core include:

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's work to address the root causes of poor health outcomes, such as poverty, inadequate housing, and lack of access to healthy food also included advocating for policy change to address the social determinants of health.

In support of organizations that work to promote policies that address the root causes of poverty and economic insecurity, such as affordable housing, access to quality education and job training, and protections for workers' rights, the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation has advocated for policy change to address economic inequality in New York City.

Fostering cross-sector collaboration including government, the private sector, and civil society to bring together stakeholders from different sectors to work towards common goals.



The 100,000 Homes Campaign, launched by the nonprofit organization Community Solutions, was funded by The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the H. van Ameringen Foundation, The Melville Charitable Trust, Oak Foundation, Robin Hood Foundation, Skoll Foundation, and The United Way of Greater Los Angeles. Not only was the Campaign the result of collaboration among several foundations, it also brought together NGOs and the public sector in an aim to end homelessness in the United States. The campaign works to provide housing and support services to homeless individuals, identifying and priorities the most vulnerable through data drive approaches, and brings together stakeholders from the healthcare sector, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations to tackle the root causes of homelessness.

ClimateWorks Foundation is another organization engaged in cross-sector collaboration as it works to address climate change. Funded by William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and the McKnight Foundation, ClimateWorks supports initiatives that bring together stakeholders from the public sector, private sector, and civil society to develop and implement climate solutions, including renewable energy, sustainable transportation, and forest conservation.

Investing in narrative change, which has been cited as arguably the most powerful lever in systems change, by changing mental models, hearts and minds.



The Nathan Cummings Foundation has invested in narrative change initiatives that seek to promote climate justice and environmental sustainability. Nathan Cummings worked to support efforts to shift public narratives around these issues, challenge dominant narratives that perpetuate environmental degradation, and promote more sustainable and equitable approaches to environmental stewardship.

The Heinz Endowments similarly has invested in narrative change initiatives that seek to promote environmental sustainability and social justice in the Pittsburgh region. They have supported efforts to shift public narratives relating to air and water pollution, climate change, and economic inequality; to challenge dominant narratives that perpetuate environmental degradation and social injustice; and to promote more sustainable and equitable approaches to development in the region.

As noted, philanthropy leaders can push for systems change by taking a strategic and intentional approach to giving, partnering with others who share similar goals, advocating for policy change, fostering cross-sector collaboration, listening deeply to, and incorporating feedback from, program partners (especially those with lived experience), and embracing innovation and experimentation. In leading by example, by leveraging their resources, expertise, and networks, and by leaning into their powerful platform, philanthropy leaders can play a critical role in driving meaningful social and environmental change.

Key Questions for Foundation Leaders

- How might we better align our funding model to the complexity of the systems in which we work?
- How can I engage staff and partners in better analyzing the interrelationships of key systems?
- Are there additional ways we can better leverage our position to drive policy or otherwise advocate for systems change beyond our spending targets?might, we see as a result of prioritizing systems change?

Leading on Systems Change: Internal Lens

Philanthropy leaders who engage in systems work should be aware of certain approaches from an internal perspective that can further their results. A few key steps they can take to move their organizations forward in this regard include:

Articulating a clear vision: Foundation leadership can explicitly detail a clear vision for their organization's role in driving systems change, and communicate this vision effectively to stakeholders both inside and outside the organization.



Ellen Dorsey, Executive Director of the Wallace Global Fund which supports efforts to address environmental and social justice issues, has emphasized the importance of shifting the focus of philanthropy from charity to justice, and has pushed the foundation to support systemic change through advocacy and community organizing.

Robert Ross of The California Endowment, a health-focused foundation that has prioritized addressing the root causes of health disparities in California, has emphasized the importance of working collaboratively with communities to drive systemic change and has pushed the foundation to focus on issues like racism, poverty, and environmental justice.

Engaging deeply with stakeholders: For systems change, the range of necessary stakeholders can be quite large, and philanthropy leaders will need to engage with a range of stakeholders, including grantees, partners, and other philanthropic organizations, to build strong relationships and foster collaboration.



Rip Rapson, CEO of The Kresge Foundation, has emphasized the importance of engaging with grantees and other stakeholders in order to drive systems change. He has worked to build partnerships with community organizations and other funders, and focused the foundation's efforts on addressing issues like climate change, urban revitalization, and social justice.

Former Hewlett Foundation president Paul Brest was known for his commitment to engaging with grantees and other stakeholders to drive systemic change. He advocated for a more strategic approach to grant-making that focused on addressing root causes and building long-term solutions, and worked closely with grantees to develop and refine the foundation's strategies.

Aligning resources with the articulated vision:
Philanthropic CEOs and board members are critical in setting the tone for aligning a fuller spectrum of their organization's resources (funding, staff time, endowment, expertise, for example) with their vision for driving systems change.



Debra Schwartz, Managing Director of Impact Investments at The MacArthur Foundation has highlighted the importance of aligning philanthropic resources with a vision for social and environmental change. She built a portfolio of impact investments that align with the foundation's programmatic goals, and has advocated for a more strategic and collaborative approach to impact investing. She has also worked to build relationships with other investors and stakeholders to drive systemic change.

Darren Walker, President of The Ford Foundation -in addition to his work on grant-making and diversity within the foundation's staff--has emphasized the importance of aligning the foundation's investments with its vision for systems change. Among other innovations, he drove the foundation to divest from fossil fuels and other industries that contribute to social and environmental harm, and has invested in funds and companies that prioritize social and environmental responsibility.

Fostering a culture of learning and experimentation: A culture of learning and experimentation within philanthropic organizations is helpful for complex challenges, so leadership is critical to encouraging staff to try new approaches and models and learning from both successes and failures.



The Omidyar Network's Reimagining Capitalism initiative is a program that aims to transform the economic system to better serve society. The program supports experimentation and innovation by providing funding to organizations that are working to create new economic models, as well as by engaging with policymakers and thought leaders to promote new ideas and policies.

The Open Society Foundations' Justice Reform initiative aims to transform the criminal justice system to be more fair, effective, and humane. The program supports experimentation and innovation by providing funding to organizations that are working to develop new approaches to policing, sentencing, and prison reform, as well as by engaging with policymakers and stakeholders to promote systemic change.

The Racial Equity 2030 initiative is a W.K. Kellogg Foundation program that aims to promote racial equity and justice by supporting bold and innovative ideas. The program supports experimentation and innovation by providing funding to organizations that are developing new approaches to racial equity, as well as by promoting knowledge sharing and collaboration between grantees.

Measuring and evaluating impact: Philanthropic CEOs who want to engage with systems change may need to change how they monitor and evaluate success given that philanthropic funding is often tied to short term, discrete projects and liner models of change and evaluation models often reflect that focus. They will need to implement alternate evaluation models, with different priorities, for using data and evidence to inform decision-making and refine strategies over time.

Philanthropy leaders can play a critical role in driving systems change, helping to catalyze meaningful social and environmental change and create a more sustainable and just world.

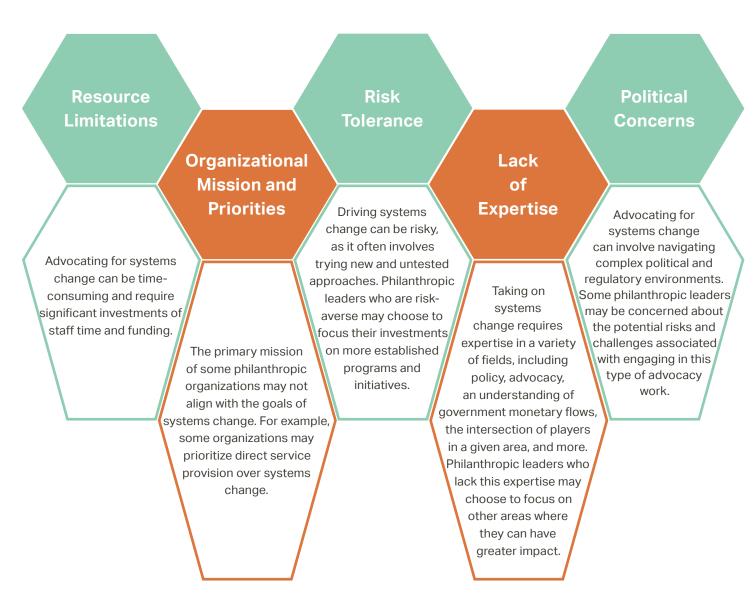
Key Questions for Foundation Leaders

- How can we, as leaders, more effectively set visionary yet realistic goals for systems change?
- As we look at our internal operations, what messages might we as leaders be sending inadvertently about the value of learning, experimentation, and risk taking that could hinder innovation?
- What would we need to change about our measurement and assessment approaches to get better insight while recognizing the need for patient assessment for systems work?

Why Some Funders Don't Prioritize Systems Change

Some funders may be hesitant to engage in systems change due to the time and resource investment needed, the complexity of the challenges, or the uncertainty about how and with whom to engage for most impact. For others, it is simply not the way they work, and they prefer a more programmatic approach.

Whether a particular philanthropy should undertake systems change as a primary focus depends on a variety of factors, including but not limited to issue area(s) in which the philanthropy works, the appetite for disruption, board and staff engagement, time horizon, operating approaches including operating archetype, existing and potential partnerships, and more. Reasons often cited include:



While many of these reasons can be overcome with the right partners, a dedication to taking on the challenge, and appropriate investments of resources and time, there are organizations that simply won't engage in systems change for valid reasons. However, even those foundation leaders who choose not to explicitly

elevate systems change as a key goal can help drive impact by prioritizing one or more systems change approaches. Those approaches can include viewing impact through a systems lens, working to change policies that enable inequitable systems through advocacy, or using funding approaches that more

effectively support grantees driving systems change. This last option in particular—adjusting practices to enable grantees and other partners who are driving systems change-can have an outsized impact on the results your philanthropy seeks to achieve.

Key Questions for Foundation Leaders

- If we are not engaging in systems change work, what are our reasons?
- How can I as a leader work to engage staff to overcome institutional barriers where systems change might be beneficial for our objectives?
- What resources can we find, deploy, or otherwise utilize to bring in expertise for helping formulate systemsbased approaches?

Ways Non-Systems Funders Can Better Enable Systems Change In Advancing Systems Change

There are several funder behaviors that are highly beneficial for systems change efforts that foundation leaders can adopt, even if they themselves are not interested in pursuing systems change. To look at those behaviors. it is important to recognize that the success of funded organizations helping to solve seemingly intractable problems rests in their ability to shift the complex systems in which those problems exist—and that in turn is influenced partly by

how they are funded.

Philanthropy leaders can adopt at least four practices relating to the funding of these organizations that go a long way in helping them to be more transformative, notably⁵:

- Establishing long-term grantee relationships and providing flexible multi-year support
- Providing general operating support (as opposed to restricted funding)
- Streamlining grantee application and reporting processes
- Pooling or creating other collaborative funding vehicles with peer philanthropies

⁵ For more insight on how funders can help grantees scale toward shifting systems, see Scaling Solutions toward Shifting Systems. https://www.rockpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/10-20-RockPA-Scaling-Solutions-02-WEB-1.pdf.

Ensuring Multi-Year Support

Long-term funding, defined here as grants of three to five years or more, is one important way to help build stability and capacity in grantee organizations. That stability provides grantees the opportunity to think more strategically about their activities and impact, and can enable them to engage in systems change efforts that require patience and tenacity. It can also help increase innovation: like venture capital for-profit entities, long-term support can allow a social purpose organization the flexibility to take advantage

of unforeseen opportunities it would normally need to pass up.

For funders, longer-term funding relationships (versus yearly grant outputs) can provide the space for donors and partners to develop more trusting relationships and to think about common longer-term goals. They can also help donors to leverage the indepth knowledge of specific issues held by grantees, reach a clearer understanding of gaps and opportunities, perhaps adjust their longterm aspirations, and respond

more quickly to nearer-term opportunities and challenges.

While many funders realize the benefits to grantees of multi-year support, hesitancy remains for many, typically under the guise of good stewardship: the desire to "test" a new relationship; a fear of creating dependency; a "results-oriented" approach; or even accounting practices at the foundation. We have found that with strong partnerships between grantees and funders, those fears are, in most cases, unfounded.



Ford Foundation's BUILD program, which "provides multi-level support through a combination of long-term commitments, flexible funding, and institutional strengthening to help grantees become more resilient and effective." ⁶ Now in its second round of five-year grants to hundreds of organizations, BUILD seeks to give grantees the flexibility and resilience needed to focus on doing their best work rather than allocating the resources needed to seek year-on-year funding. The approach has empowered grantees, with over 85 percent agreeing that BUILD support has helped them strengthen their work to become more effective.⁷

King Philanthropies' Essentials initiative has as a goal achieving "enduring, large-scale change in the lives of the world's poorest people." Their method, once they define the focus areas for impact and identify organizations aligned with that focus, is to award generous, unrestricted multi-year grants to support scaling of proven interventions. They base the decision about which organizations they will award on essential need, scalable impact, and high-performing leadership.



⁶ https://www.fordfoundation.org/the-latest/news/ford-foundation-expands-flagship-build-program-to-provide-1-billion-to-hundreds-of-organizations/.

⁷ https://www.fordfoundation.org/news-and-stories/news-and-press/news-additional-pages/faqs-build-grants/#:~:text=In%20a%20survey%20of%20130,procure%20funding%20from%20other%20sources.

⁸https://kingphilanthropies.org/king-essentials/.

Providing General Operating Support To Turbo Boost Stability And Innovation

As the organizations closest to the communities served has the most information and understanding of the community, grantees are often more aware of how funds could be best deployed. However, some funders believe that they will create more impact by restricting how grantees may use funding, thus forcing

rigor and discipline. In reality, there are significant benefits to allowing grantees working to shift systems to prioritize themselves their use of philanthropic funding. General operating grants can give them flexibility to allocate funding as the external context changes, or in response to a strategy pivot that will create more

impact. Moreover, unrestricted funding can allow a good CEO of an organization to be a better leader by being able to seize opportunities, prioritize organizational growth, and improve staff retention through stability.

One foundation that has embraced this approach is the Healthy Communities Foundation located in the U.S. state of Illinois. Committing "the majority" of its funding to unrestricted general operating support, "allows [the foundation] to invest boldly and deeply in critical, community-led pandemic response efforts beyond a public health crisis... and support an equitable recovery for our region." The leaders noted that they "firmly believe that strengthening our partner organizations from within allows them to be more adaptive, creative and values-focused to engage in sustainable and scalable systems change efforts that advance racial equity and health equity in our communities."

Similarly, The Skoll Foundation takes this further, coupling multi-year support with flexibility for enhanced results. 10 "The Skoll Award is not only three years, but also currently \$2.25m in general operating support over that period—enabling capacity building across critical organizational functions (e.g., leadership, M&E, multi-sector partnership), oft-unfunded strategic planning toward their impact north star, further innovation and R&D, and bridging to other partnerships and resources." 11

Simplifying Grants Management Processes

Foundations often seek in-depth, detailed application forms and reports, even for relatively small amounts of funding, in the belief that more rigor will surface the best organizations or force

organizations to prove their worth. However, when working to help organizations drive systems change, the time and resources spent on these efforts can be counterproductive. In fact, overly complex templates and procedures often prevent good organizations with innovative approaches and limited resources from qualifying for funding. It was shown during the age of Covid-19 that

⁹https://www.hcfdn.org/general-operating-support/.

¹⁰ More on Skoll's process scan be found here: https://skoll.org/2022/03/23/introducing-the-skoll-awards-for-social-innovation/.

¹¹ Edwin Ou, Skoll Foundation, interviewed in 2022.

unprecedented amounts of funding can be moved quickly, without complex processes, and often with outstanding results. Philanthropies can support grantees by considering aspects of the streamlined processes that can become a permanent part of general philanthropic practice.

One example of an organization that dramatically simplified the application and reporting process includes The Robert Sterling Clark Foundation, which puts trust at the core of its philosophy and

actions. Phil Li notes: "Grant seekers bring so much to the table-knowledge, boots on the ground-and if we can approach our grantees as partners in social change, we believe the outcomes will be stronger." ¹²

Pooling Funding With Other Philanthropies To Help Grantees Enhance Impact

Systems are typically made up of multiple players that engage in multiple seen and unseen ways. Given the complexity of systems, partnering with others who can help drive the system in different directions is required for true change to occur. Funders don't have to have a focus on systems change to use collaboration as a means of driving systems change.

Indeed, collaboration among donors can be an extremely effective way to increase impact and approach complex problems. Collaboration brings not only more money to the table, but also more perspectives and experience, as well as non-monetary assets, to bear for the organizations and grantees funded that are working to drive systems change.

Conclusion

Philanthropic leaders are uniquely situated in their ability to support, contribute to, and in many cases drive, systems change. With the power to influence other stakeholders, including policymakers, businesses, and other donors and nonprofits, philanthropic leaders can not only be instrumental in adopting

systems change as a priority; they can also convincingly encourage others to adopt a more holistic, collaborative approach to social change, leading to greater impact and positive social outcomes. As can be seen from the above, there are a variety of ways that philanthropy leaders can step into this potential. In

Key
Questions
for
Foundation
Leaders

- How can our organization change our application, funding, and reporting practices to deepen our relationships and increase alignment with our grantees and other partners?
- What do we have in place to collect honest feedback about our processes, that acknowledges the power dynamic?
- What more can we do to support our grantees who are deeply involved in systems change?

this post-pandemic world, an understanding of what systems change is, how using a systems change lens might be of benefit to their mission, and what they can do to support their partners and grantee efforts toward systems change by reevaluating their own practices is critical for philanthropy leaders.

 $^{^{12}\,}https://www.trustbasedphilanthropy.org/blog-1/2019/2/27/funder-spotlight-rsclark-foundation.$



About Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors

Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors (RPA) accelerates philanthropy in pursuit of a just world. Continuing the Rockefeller family's legacy of thoughtful, effective philanthropy, RPA is a global nonprofit that remains at the forefront of philanthropic growth and innovation, with a diverse team of experienced grantmakers with significant depth of knowledge across the spectrum of issue areas.

Founded in 2002, RPA has grown into one of the world's largest philanthropic service organizations and has facilitated more than \$4 billion in grantmaking to more than 70 countries. RPA currently advises on and manages more than \$500 million in annual giving by individuals, families, foundations, and corporations. RPA also serves as a fiscal sponsor for more than 100 projects, providing governance, management, and operational infrastructure to support their charitable purposes. For more information, please visit www.rockpa.org.