

**SHIFTING
SYSTEMS
INITIATIVE**



Solutions for Scaling Impact

Collaborating to BUILD Transformational Change

Executive Summary

No one person can change the deeply entrenched levers of power that guide and control our global systems. The good news: Through collaboration, relationship-building, and deep levels of trust, philanthropy has the tools to transform these systems of power.

As part of this work, Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors' Shifting Systems Initiative gathered important stakeholders on the margins of the 79th United Nations General Assembly for its latest workshop, "Collaborating to BUILD Transformational Change."

Using lessons gleaned from the Ford Foundation's BUILD initiative and its longtime leader, Kathy Reich, this workshop explored actionable pathways to accelerate systems change and shared key insights and best practices with participants. Critically, this session dove into both the what and the how of what philanthropy must do to enact change of this magnitude. Through rich conversations, the workshop surfaced a number of important themes, topics, and insights that are summarized below.

The What

Shifting to trust-based philanthropy remains paramount to overall long-term success in systems-change work. Without fully trusting grantees' ability to know what their own communities need, the philanthropic sector cannot hope to shift systems worldwide.

Philanthropy is not done in a vacuum. It is the work of collaboration, humility, and resource-sharing. A shared future involves us all. Philanthropy must forge its path together.

Philanthropy must also be flexible if it is to succeed. Shifting systems on this scale inevitably involves failure. Embrace that failure and learn from it.

Incremental changes are positive, but philanthropy is at an inflection point where it must do more. To truly improve the lives of the communities it serves, philanthropy must pivot to long-term, systemic, and transformational changes.

Systems change is complex and cross-sectoral. It involves actors from government, philanthropy, civil service, and industry working in tandem.

The How

Arts and culture have a unique way of producing systems change that other mediums lack. Art has the power to tug at society's emotional heartstrings, and humans oftentimes respond more viscerally to emotional language rather than rational appeals. To change systems, we must open our imaginations, think creatively, and speak to peoples' hearts.

Narratives and the stories society tells itself play an enormous role in creating lasting change. To effectively shift systems, philanthropy must alter some of these narratives – particularly around the inclusion of the Global South and indigenous cultures.

If philanthropy changes its tactics, it must also adopt new imaginative ways to evaluate a new view of success that incorporate the intangibility of some metrics.

Introduction

Philanthropy finds itself at a critical juncture. Systems of power remain entrenched in the hands of a few – and those hands often belong to affluent white men. To realize a transformational shift in the systems of power, we know the basics of the roadmap before us. We, as funders, must relinquish the decision-making power to grantees themselves. We must actively collaborate with one another rather than creating individual, disjointed strategies. We must embrace novel and innovative strategies both on the tactical and evaluation levels.

In short, we must change both the how and the what of philanthropy if we are to achieve a more equitable future with systems based in justice.

Led by a panel of experts in the field, the Shifting Systems Initiative's latest workshop event aimed to continue the initiative's exploration and effort to shift philanthropic mindsets and practices in support of transformational systems change. Moderated by RPA Vice President, Collaboratives, Heather Grady, a panel discussion examined and shared lessons about when, how, and why certain solutions achieve system-level shifts while exploring the complex dynamics of creating a lasting systemic impact.

Beginning with remarks from Kathy Reich, who is ending her tenure as the director of the Ford Foundation's BUILD initiative, the panel was candid and thought-provoking in its discussion. The panel's four members discussed far-ranging topics, including the need for more investment in governance and policy change from the philanthropic community to support bold initiatives from the Global South, the need for people-centered partnerships and governance shifts, and the push to defragment global climate change efforts.

Following the panel discussion, the workshop included 10 facilitated table discussions, each of which focused on a different topic under two main subject umbrellas: 1.) tackling climate change and 2.) investing in narrative change strategies as a critical component of funders' systems-change work.

Honoring Kathy Reich

Before the panel discussion began, Hilary Pennington, Executive Vice President of Programs at the Ford Foundation, commended Reich's work leading the BUILD initiative since 2016. Reich is stepping down at the end of this year from her current role leading the \$2 billion initiative that distributes five-year unrestricted grants to strengthen key institutions around the world and to fight inequality. The BUILD initiative has supported more than 450 organizations in 38 countries.

Pennington recounted several maxims that Reich used in her daily work at the Ford Foundation to guide the BUILD initiative. First, changing systems requires a long-term view. Second, we must all be realistic about what our money and expertise can accomplish. Third, no one donor can solve every big problem, but one funder *can* identify places in a system where his or her strategic intervention can make a difference. Finally, it is Reich's strength at building relationships that has made her such a tremendous success in the field of systems change. Reich's accomplishments during her time leading the BUILD initiative include developing an organizational mapping tool and subsequently translating it into almost a dozen languages and designing a collaborative evaluation tool that was co-created with grantees.

Reich spoke about the five main lessons she learned during her eight years leading the BUILD initiative.

1. **Systems are complex, but our interventions do not have to be.** The BUILD initiative provides multiyear, flexible grants and gives the grantees themselves the power to decide how they spend their funds. This simple approach has resulted in extraordinary successes.
2. **Humility is key in systems-change work.** The Ford Foundation has eliminated many requirements for rigid deadlines and specific deliverables. The BUILD initiative adapted to being merely a "dancer" in a performance of grantees and grantors rather than the sole choreographer running the show. Setting aside pride and power, the foundation has accepted a new, humble role as participant rather than director.
3. **If you're trying to change systems, it helps to know what you're good at.** Government, private sector, and civil society all have different strengths and weaknesses. Part of what has made BUILD so successful in creating systemic change has been its propensity to lean into philanthropy's strengths: its flexibility and creativity with funding, its power to innovate and take risks, its ability to convene and connect, and its investment in individuals and ideas.
4. **No one can change systems on their own.** The Ford Foundation participates in more than 100 donor collaboratives to develop shared analyses and strategies. Through evaluation, the BUILD initiative has learned its grants are most impactful when they go to organizations that center collaboration and connection. Changing systems takes a village.
5. **The road is long.** Resilience is key for long-term changes. Failures will happen; organizations must be nimble in their responses. BUILD initiative grants are for a minimum of five years, but they ideally run longer.

Panel Discussion

This energizing discussion touched on topics including the importance of cross-collaboration among organizations, incorporating the Global South in decision-making processes, and even the funeral for an iceberg. The following summary encapsulates the main takeaways from Grady's questions to the panel.

How do we shift philanthropy from charity to solidarity?

There was a consensus that philanthropy needs to develop a stronger sense of trust with its grantees and cede power to those closest to the communities it seeks to serve. Redistribution of power is critical to pulling the levers of transformative change. However, the panel underscored that it is an easy recommendation to make, yet extremely difficult in practice. In that vein, it is crucial all stakeholders be involved in these complicated shifts. The decision-making table cannot only have chairs for major donors; it must also include all stakeholders, big and small, young and old.

To achieve solidarity with grantees, one panelist said, philanthropy must not be constrained by the political and operational cultures of government and business. While the world is flooded with polycrises, our collective responses have failed to adapt. These responses do not innovate; they merely treat the symptoms of a problem and prolong their reach. Future responses to international incidents or disasters cannot remain in the status quo of system recovery, system protection, and system maintenance

How can we shift our thinking around climate systems from extractive processes to reciprocal ones?

Panelists agreed that organizations must pool resources in decisive collective action toward a shared vision. This is a fundamental change from cannibalizing otherwise complementary efforts by competing for funds. A massive pivot toward working in tandem on multiple systemic levels is required to defragment systems-change work. Engaging in this restructuring is one of the ways societies build reciprocity.

Art changes people. People change systems. How can we use these ideals as a catalyst for systems change?

Several years ago in Iceland, an organization created a piece of "artivism" by staging a "funeral" for an iceberg. There was no inclusion or discussion about greenhouse gas levels to obfuscate the image before people: The Earth is dying, and this funeral was but one example. There is not necessarily a requirement for hard facts and figures to change minds because visual representations and art can sometimes tell a far more compelling story. Harnessing the power of arts and culture on its own will not save us from climate devastation. However, *failing*

Moderator:

Heather Grady, RPA Vice President, Collaboratives

Panelists:

Kathy Reich, Outgoing Director of the Ford Foundation's BUILD initiative

Sumitra Pasupathy, Founder, KAImpact

Kumi Naidoo, Payne Distinguished Lecturer, the Centre on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law at Stanford University, Global Ambassador, Africans Rising for Justice, Peace and Dignity Co-Founder

Kirsten Dunlop, CEO at EIT Climate-KIC

to harness the power of arts and culture almost guarantees we will fail. We need the arts to help imagine futures that are yet born.

Furthermore, arts and culture emerge as a powerful vehicle for generations to express outrage, mourning, and anxiety about the current climate crisis. Today's younger generations are deeply afflicted by a mental health crisis partly spurred by the compounding effects of climate change. The arts offer a way to build community and to keep a sense of optimism because, as one panelist said, "Pessimism is not a luxury our society can afford now."

What are some of the most promising practices in people-centered partnerships we must adapt to change systems?

One panelist answered this question by positing that we, as a global society, are moving away from racial justice and equity by suggesting the complex problems of the world should be solved by "others" of a different race or nationality instead of all of us. In reality, the global crises we're experiencing are deeply interconnected and affect us all. Solutions to these problems will require collaboration between governments, businesses, and philanthropy. For example, misinformation doesn't just affect the U.S.; it affects India, Indonesia, Germany, everywhere across the globe. Our problems do not exist in isolation.

Global institutions must shift to a method of achieving ecosystem resilience by uplifting those from affected communities to tables of power and decision-making. Too often, philanthropy crowds in during a crisis while crowding out intermediaries and the actors on the ground who can be most effective in responding. People-centered partnerships take courage from those with power. Ultimately, systems change is all about relationship-building, and it will always be about relationship-building.

Table Discussions

Following the moderated panel discussion, the workshop transitioned to dynamic table discussions that spanned a variety of topics. Each of the 10 tables revealed unique insights, and many touched on similar shared themes. These included the importance of long-term, unrestricted funding; collaboration among the philanthropic sector; the critical importance of imagination; and the need to involve NextGen leadership. The following 10 subsections provide a brief summary of each table's main takeaways from their vibrant breakout discussions.

Table One: Building a Systemic Climate Action Collaborative

Repairing the climate is like building a car, this table said. When you build a car, you already have the required parts. The idea behind a climate action collaborative is to provide the capacity to put pieces together for a more rapid systems shift. Doing so, and working collaboratively, will require flexibility and imagination. First, the philanthropic community must develop a shared ability to imagine what is possible. Once it does that, philanthropy must move to granting long-term, unrestricted funds that allow grantees the space to build relationships. Only a limited amount of change can happen in one to three years. These visions and actions must be geared toward long-term outcomes.

Table Two: Reimagining Immigration: Designing Systems That Change the Story

This table's overarching question was: Do systems change stories or do stories change systems? The answer depends. In Colombia, for example, migration was once largely fueled by internal violence. Now, climate change is the primary driver of migration from the country. The conversation highlighted organizations that facilitate migration and support immigrants once they arrive. Community Sponsorship Hub (CSH), which is a fiscally sponsored project of RPA, supports refugee integration in Connecticut. CSH helps change the story of immigration in America by helping new arrivals secure housing and employment. Pop Culture Collaborative (PCC), another fiscally sponsored project at RPA, aims to transform the narrative in America around people of color, immigrants, refugees, Muslims, and Indigenous peoples. It does so, for example, by bridging the divide between Muslim and Jewish communities following the Oct. 7, 2023, attack in Israel.

Table Three: The Uses of the Imagination: Queering and Expanding our Visions for a Climate-Just Future

Imagination is the critical key to unlocking a more inclusive and equitable future for all. If we cannot imagine this future, it cannot materialize. We must be creative in our futures-focused strategies. The challenge is that many funders are risk-averse to shift to new areas beyond their current interests. Additionally, imaginative scenario-planning relies less on empirical evaluations, which funders often require. Storytelling might be an effective way to persuade donors to shift their mindsets. This table, like many others, noted the importance of developing long-term, unrestricted funding models and actively collaborating with others.

Table Four: Demystifying the Tech and Media Regulation Debate – What Funders Can Do

Technology changes quickly. Oftentimes, philanthropy fails to match that pace. For example, this table said, not many philanthropies discussed artificial intelligence three years ago. Now, it's unavoidable. What will the next innovation be and how we can prepare ourselves proactively? The financial disparity between Big Tech and civil society is vast, and it is often hard to compete with the resources of industry. Many philanthropists are tech enthusiasts or have deep ties to

the technology industry. Unsurprisingly, there exists a hesitation to regulate oneself, so funding in this area is low.

Table Five: Applying the Lessons of BUILD

This table focused on one crucial question: What would be helpful to you? One participant said the world's youth have a strong entrepreneurial spirit but lack the necessary transactional support. They need more mentorship, funding, and opportunities to network so they can align with the broader philanthropic sector. Another participant suggested the philanthropic sector needs more ecosystem incubators. The issue here is not a lack of funding but, rather, a lack of access due to a lack of trust. Geopolitics is also increasingly entangled in funding decisions. Funders often give grantees an insufficient and unrealistic timeline to create real impact.

Table Six: From Awareness to Action: The Influence of News Media in Shaping a Transition to a Green Economy

The news media struggle in how to convey climate news. Does the industry portray a more realistic gloom-and-doom situation on the ground, or does it highlight reasons for optimism while sidestepping the grim realities? How do these decisions affect our narratives? One way to avoid the dichotomy is investing in solutions-based reporting, which highlights successes and innovations while also showing the reality. However, this table noted, this approach might not matter much because of the way we consume news. Today, most people receive news through an aggregated source (Google, Facebook, YouTube). These outlets essentially choose what news their users access. Many people don't interact with the news source directly, which can dramatically affect how they view the world. The bright side to all of this is that a large portion of society seeks its climate news, specifically, from trusted sources. On this topic, traditional media outlets are trusted nearly as much as scientific journals.

Table Seven: Imagining New Infrastructure to Support Information Pluralism

Our information ecosystem is heavily polarized, which results in rampant misinformation and disinformation. Multiple sources of information are a good thing, but not when they result from political stratification. This table recommended that information systems always be run as a public good. To achieve this, we have to transform the systems in which news circulates. This group then brought the discussion to the current week at the UN General Assembly. Here, power-players make consequential decisions about different communities, but the access to information is unequal. In fact, access to these spaces (like badges for the UN General Assembly) is a significant issue, especially for indigenous communities. Continuously, those who have power get more access, and that must change. Additionally, it seems our priorities conflict with one another. We lament the decline in public radio and television, knowing it's a trusted source of information, but we continue to flood the ecosystem with snippets from social media and less-trustworthy outlets. To change the system of disinformation, we must incentivize trustworthy newsgathering.

Table Eight: Lengthening Horizons of Landscape-Level Funding Strategies

This group discussion focused on identifying strategies to integrate biodiversity and landscape management and restoration in philanthropic efforts. One participant stressed the importance of involving indigenous communities in these kind of funding decisions, as they are often the most affected. Like many tables, this group also placed a premium on providing long-term, unrestricted funding to make a positive impact. The philanthropic community has a large role in supporting bottom-up (local farmers, conservationist and indigenous-led) initiatives. This makes it especially important to trust grantees to make the best decisions rather than placing rigid evaluation metrics upon all projects. A participant at this table said this area's greatest path to

success is by pivoting away from funding individual projects to funding greater systemic change. A collaborative, co-governance model between grantors and grantees is ideal here.

Table Nine: Transformation Through a Global Movement of Activism

A lack of funding is the main obstacle to creating more spaces for activism. Art has the potential to affect people internally that other mediums lack. It is crucial to invest in this kind of storytelling with the potential to change not only minds but, also, hearts. Recent years have seen an increase in funding for activism as the world begins to see its possibilities. Even with this relative increase, a majority of the funding is still going to the Global North. One of the lingering issues in increasing funding for activism is the lack of reliable, consistent evaluation methods. Art is difficult to measure, and so we must revise our system of metrics. This table also discussed the promise of artificial intelligence in shaping future activism and the ease with which it can be distributed.

Table 10: Strengthening Ecosystems Through People-Centered Intermediary Partnerships

Overall, this group said we are still largely governed by traditional outcome-based philanthropy. The sector must embrace experimental, learning-based grantmaking. As part of that traditional approach, the current “rules” in philanthropy dictate that grantees continue to use Western language to receive funding. This suppresses authenticity and indigenous knowledge. However, breaking with other tables, this group stressed that generalizing the philanthropic sector and “lumping everything together” is problematic. Philanthropy is huge, diverse, and nuanced. This group then discussed how the concepts of trust and time do not often align. It takes time to build trust, and this often conflicts with the urgency of the pressing problems at hand. This table also expressed optimism for the NextGen leadership in philanthropy, saying this young generation takes a disruptive approach to traditional methods, unlocking potential for innovation.

Closing Thoughts and Calls to Action

Philanthropy has moved past merely defining systems change. It is now time to act in shifting what and *how* systems operate. Through candid panel and table discussions, workshop participants paved the roadmap ahead.

The philanthropic community has largely acknowledged the need to move toward long-term, unrestricted funding. It is now time for the community to act. Shifting to this practice – as Reich demonstrated is possible in her recounting of her tenure at the BUILD initiative – will require creativity, imagination, and courage on behalf of board members and organizational leadership. Philanthropy is naturally a risk-averse field, but the anecdotal evidence of trusting grantees to make the best decisions with their funding is now overwhelming.

If philanthropy is to successfully shift systems, it must embrace the power of collaboration. For far too long, individual actors have done phenomenal work – but in silos. This independent-minded form of success and strategy cannibalizes limited resources and duplicates efforts. To be most effective in shifting systems of power, philanthropic organizations must work together to alter and improve different parts of a system simultaneously.

The changes philanthropy advocates for today are so that future generations can reap the rewards of more equitable systems tomorrow. To do so most effectively, **philanthropy must involve this NextGen leadership in its decision-making.** If changes are viewed as being done “to” a generation, it is less effective than being done “with” a generation actively involved.

Finally, **the arts and culture have an immense potential to change both hearts and minds.** Art has a unique ability to appeal to a society’s emotions, and it will be a crucial tool in how this industry continues its work forward. There is hesitation to funding arts-based systems-change work because of an aversion to risk and lack of empirical analyses. Art is difficult to standardize, and its impact is often not designed to measure. This is where the power of imagination enters. Evaluation models must become more imaginative and creative. If we cannot imagine changing some of our practices, how then can we expect to imagine the more equitable world we speak of?

Panel Speaker Biographies

Kathy Reich, Building Institutions and Networks (BUILD), Director

Reich leads the Ford Foundation's BUILD initiative in the United States and in the foundation's 10 global regions. BUILD is a 12-year, \$2 billion initiative to strengthen key institutions around the world that fight inequality. Reich manages a team of 10 people, guiding Ford's efforts to support the vitality and effectiveness of institutions and networks that serve as pillars of broader social movements. To date, the BUILD program has supported more than 450 organizations in 38 countries; about half of the organizations are based in the United States.

Before joining Ford in 2016, Reich worked for 15 years at the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, most recently as Organizational Effectiveness and Philanthropy Director, where she led a cross-cutting program to help grantees around the world strengthen their strategy, leadership, and impact. Prior to that, she was policy director of a nonprofit, served as a legislative assistant on Capitol Hill, and worked for state and local elected officials in California.

Reich is a Senior Fellow of the Schusterman Family Philanthropies, and she has served on several nonprofit boards. She is currently on the board of Repair the World. Reich is a frequent writer and speaker on issues related to philanthropy and the nonprofit sector. She holds a bachelor's degree from Yale University and a master's degree in public policy from Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government.

Sumitra Pasupathy, KAImpact, Founder

Pasupathy brings nearly 30 years of global experience in innovation across the private sector and civil society, having founded, activated, and mobilized numerous innovations worldwide within organizations, as a leader in civil society and across networks. She is a seasoned social entrepreneur with deep expertise in social innovation within the realms of learning, environmental sustainability, and climate action.

Prior to KAI, she was Global Stewardship Lead at Ashoka, Innovators for the Public and held multiple roles at Random House, Bertelsmann, Procter & Gamble, and Kraft Foods. She was trained as a chemical engineer (B.A., M.A., MEng) from Cambridge University and earned an M.B.A. from INSEAD. She is a Certified Family Business Advisor (KDVI), Certified Senior Accredited Director (Singapore Institute of Directors), Certified Sustainability Course (Institute of Sustainability Cambridge), Certified Philanthropy Advisor (WMI) and Coach from University of Cape Town, Graduate School of Business.

Kumi Naidoo, Payne Distinguished Lecturer, the Centre on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law at Stanford University and Global ambassador, Africans Rising for Justice, Peace and Dignity

Naidoo is a South African human rights and environmental justice activist. He is the former Secretary-General of Amnesty International and the first person from the Global South to head Greenpeace International. Naidoo served as Head of Training at the Independent Electoral Commission, the body that oversaw South Africa's first democratic elections in April 1994 and served as one of its spokespersons. He is a senior advisor for the Community Arts Network and is active in his local community through the Yeoville Bellevue Residents' Association. He is professor of practice at Thunderbird School of Global Management at Arizona State University

and continues to serve as a global ambassador for Africans Rising for Justice, Peace and Dignity.

His family started the Riky Rick Foundation for the Promotion of Activism to build on the positive legacies left by popular South African rapper Rikhado “Riky Rick” Makhado through his music and life’s work.

Kirsten Dunlop, EIT Climate-KIC, CEO

Dunlop is Chief Executive Officer at EIT Climate-KIC, Europe's largest public-private partnership focused on climate innovation. A creative, energetic, and inspirational leader, she brings to her role a deep conviction in our capacity to learn and evolve into a climate-resilient society. She has over 30 years of experience catalyzing systemic transformations in a career spanning academia, consulting, banking, and the insurance industry, across three continents. As an expert communicator and enthusiast, she is a sought-after speaker on systems innovation, financial systems change, and societal transformation in the context of climate.

Dunlop serves on various advisory boards and is a member of the European Commission Economic and Societal Impact of Research and Innovation (ESIR) expert group. A specialist in experiential learning and cross-disciplinary practice, she holds a Ph.D. in cultural history from the University of East Anglia and a B.A. in art history from the University of Sydney. She has lived and worked in six countries and is based in Amsterdam with her husband and two teenage children.

About the Shifting Systems Initiative

In the face of increasingly complex global challenges, many philanthropic funders are reflecting on how to create transformational, systems-level impact. To help answer this question, a number of philanthropic organizations and Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors launched the Shifting Systems Initiative in 2016. Over time, its Steering Group has included the Skoll Foundation, Ford Foundation, Porticus, Chandler Foundation, Draper Richards Kaplan Foundation, and Jasmine Social Investments. The initiative’s aim is to encourage funders to place longer-term, more adaptive resources with grantee partners to scale their solutions and impact and enable sustained, positive systems change.

The Shifting Systems Initiative’s mission has remained consistent over its lifetime: To examine when, how, and why certain solutions achieve system-level shifts, and to share the lessons and recommendations from those successes.

To learn more about the initiative, please visit [Rockpa.org/project/shifting-systems/](https://rockpa.org/project/shifting-systems/). To read the Evaluation of the Shifting Systems Initiative, click [here](#).



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For more about the Shifting Systems Initiative and to read the full range of publications visit:
<https://www.rockpa.org/project/shifting-systems/>

Sign up to get alerts from our Medium page:
<https://medium.com/@shiftingsystems>

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