

Releasing the Potential of Philanthropic Collaborations

Executive Summary

By Alison Powell, Simon Morfit, and Michael John

A [new survey of collaborative giving platforms](#) reveals two striking trends: a surge in their popularity, and a significant tilt toward equity and justice, diverse leadership, and power sharing. Just as importantly, survey respondents estimate that they could increase their grantmaking to roughly \$15 billion annually—a five-fold jump from current spending—if only more funders joined.

Research on funder collaboration has found that, when executed well, collaboratives can produce significant impact. Yet, there hasn't been much examination of what seemed to be a recent trend toward more collaborative philanthropy. So the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation funded a spring 2021 survey conducted by The Bridgespan Group. Ninety-seven collaboratives responded out of nearly 200 contacted. We supplemented the survey with interviews and group discussions with roughly 100 donors and fund leaders.

The survey confirmed that the pace of establishing new collaboratives has shifted into high gear. Nearly three out of four respondents formed their collaboratives since 2010. More than half launched since 2015.

Collaboratives appeal to a new generation of wealthy individuals and families that have initiated philanthropic activities without first setting up foundations with large staffs. Collaborative giving platforms enable this lean approach because they provide the experts, due diligence, and grant-ready organizations. Pooling assets also has the ring of familiarity: Philanthropic collaboratives, in all their many forms, provide donors the same advantages that mutual funds provide investors—portfolio diversification placed in the hands of specialists.

The survey found that philanthropic collaboratives pursue impact in strikingly different ways from how institutional philanthropy tends to operate. Fifteen identified racial justice as their funding priority. By contrast, none of the top-25 institutional funders (ranked by giving in 2020) explicitly reference racial equity or racial justice in their mission statements. (To be sure, some of the top funders reference social justice goals and/or pursue racial equity in their grantmaking portfolios.)

Roughly a third of the respondents said they seek systemic change through “building fields and movements,” an approach that attracts scant support among all funders. Nearly half of the funds reported being led by people of color, compared to only 10 percent of US foundations.

The survey identified three mindsets shifts that need to take place for more funders to see philanthropic collaboration as a viable option.

Solo giving is the dominant philanthropy model, but funders shouldn't have to choose between solo giving and collaborative giving. They can do both, just as in the investment world individuals pick stocks and invest in mutual funds.

Funders prefer to support service delivery, where results can be measured. Yet field and movement building, survey respondents' top approach to pursuing impact, supports the nerve centers behind the systems change required for lasting impact. Collaboratives offer funders a place to learn about the importance of field and movement building.

Funders have traditionally preferred to maintain control over funding decisions, rather than ceding power to their grantees and community stakeholders. A number of collaboratives offer funders focused on racial equity and justice a way to shift decision making to leaders with a deep understanding of community groups and their needs.

Thus, for hesitant funders, collaborative giving platforms provide much-needed capacity in areas where funders frequently struggle: sourcing nonprofits they couldn't find alone, giving in ways that address systemic challenges, and supporting leaders with lived experience in the communities they serve.

The new momentum behind collaboratives signals the potential for things to come if more funders—both private foundations and wealthy individuals and families—engage. They are ready for the next wave of donors so they can live up to their full potential.

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