

# Releasing the Potential of Philanthropic Collaborations

The power of making collaborative giving platforms a part of every donor's portfolio

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## Table of Contents

Peering Under the Hood of Collaborative Philanthropy .....	3
Distinguishing Collaborative Philanthropy from Traditional Philanthropy .....	5
What Draws Funders to Collaborative Giving Platforms? .....	8
Smoothing Out the Path to More Collaborative Giving.....	10
The Three Mindset Shifts That Could Unlock More Funding for Philanthropic Collaborations.....	11
Getting to Know a Collaborative Giving Platform.....	11
The Future of Collaborative Giving Platforms.....	13
Research Background and Methodology.....	15

Over the past decade, philanthropic collaboration has entered a new era of popularity and ambition. Driven by institutional and high-net-worth funders seeking greater impact by acting collectively and by fund leaders challenging traditional ways of working, the number of collaborative giving platforms has grown, as has annual giving. With over \$2 billion flowing annually to collaboratives working on a range of social, economic, and environmental issues—and that’s just from the funds who responded to our survey—it’s time to shed light on the changing landscape of these philanthropic partnerships.

Our goal with this research was to learn about the growing popularity of collaborative philanthropy, the reasons current donors find it attractive, and the pathways to increased collaborative giving. What we found is that a significant number of collaboratives have charted a course that differs from traditional philanthropy: they tilt toward equity and justice, field and movement building, leaders of color, and, for some, power sharing. And, perhaps most importantly, they’re capable of much, much more.

## Peering Under the Hood of Collaborative Philanthropy

For more than a century, donors have pooled resources to create change through community foundations and organizations like the United Way and faith-based giving circles. In 2018 our research (in partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation) uncovered a set of philanthropic collaboratives<sup>1</sup> that were growing significantly. More recently, research on funder collaboration found that, when executed well, collaboratives can produce significant impact.<sup>2</sup> Yet, there hasn’t been an examination of the momentum and scale of what has seemed to be a trend toward more collaborative giving platforms.

The Gates Foundation’s Philanthropic Partnerships team, which aims to increase the quality and quantity of philanthropy, funded a 2021 survey by our team at The Bridgespan Group to better understand how the landscape of collaboratives has evolved in the past decade. For the research, we defined these collaboratives broadly as entities that either pool or channel resources from multiple donors to nonprofits. (We call them “funds,” “collaboratives,” and “platforms” in this report. They are not all pooled funds.) Ninety-seven initiatives responded out of nearly 200 contacted. (See “[Research Background and Methodology](#)” on page 15.) We supplemented the survey with interviews and group discussions with roughly 100 donors and fund leaders.

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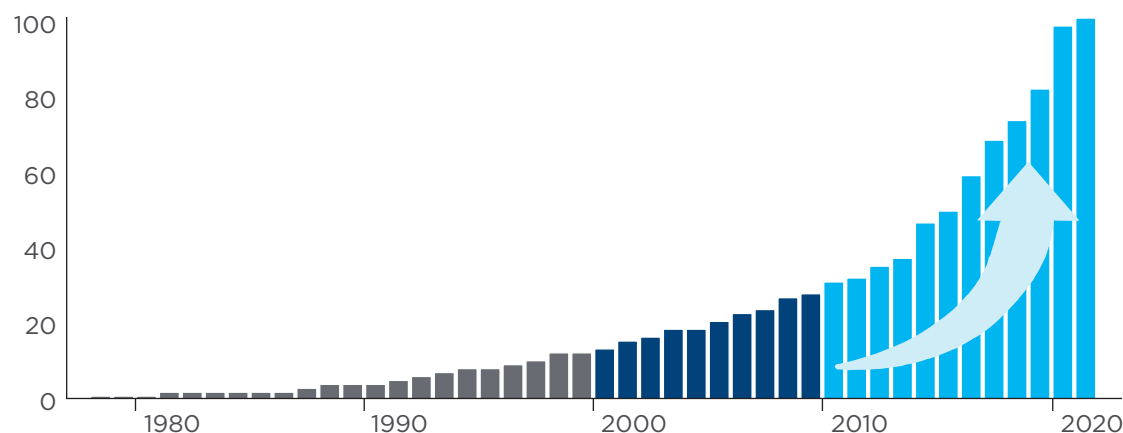
1 Susan Wolf Ditkoff, Alison Powell, and Kyle Gardner, with Tom Tierney, “[Four Pathways to Greater Giving](#),” The Bridgespan Group, November 2018.

2 Alison Powell, Susan Wolf Ditkoff, and Fay Twersky, “[How Philanthropic Collaborations Succeed, and Why They Fail](#),” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, July 10, 2019.

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 after 2015. And 16 survey respondents reported establishing their collaboratives in 2020, the highest number of organizations established in a single year. Said a senior advisor to an environmental funder about momentum in collaborative giving platforms, “I’ve never seen anything like this moment we are in.”

### Philanthropic collaboratives surge over the past decade

Cumulative number of funds among the 97 survey respondents, by year formed



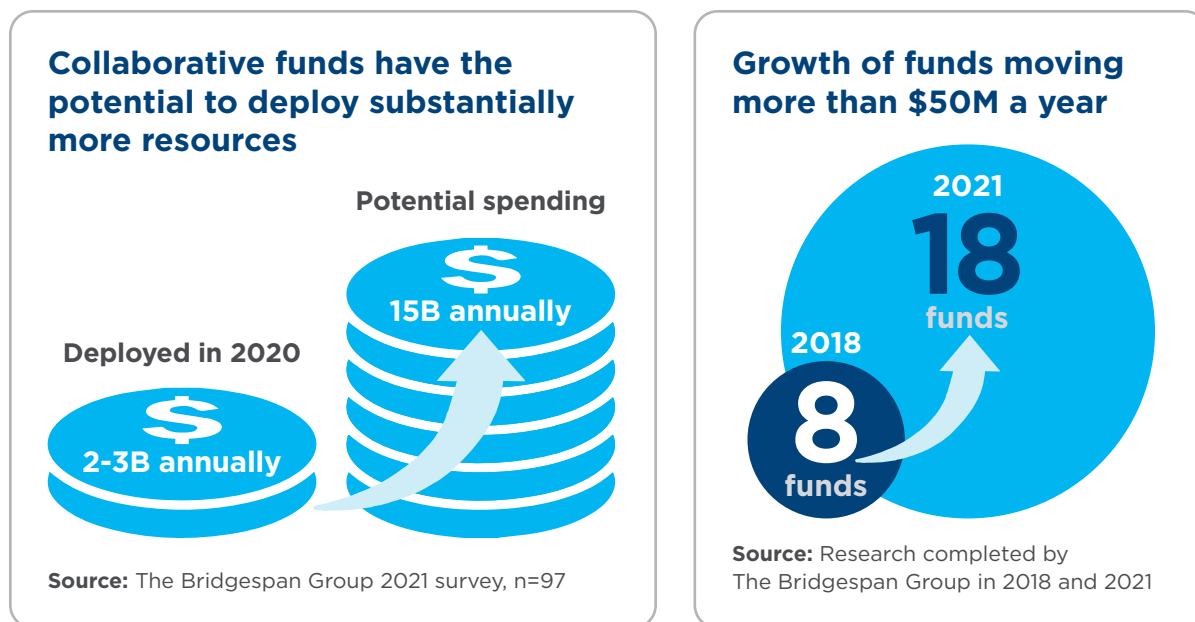
Source: The Bridgespan Group 2021 survey

Based on what we’ve seen, we attribute the recent surge in part to wealth accumulation over the past decade coupled with increasing interest in new ways of giving. Many newly wealthy individuals and families have initiated philanthropic activities without first setting up foundations with large staffs. Philanthropic giving through collaboratives already primed for grantmaking enables this lean approach. Combining assets should also sound like a familiar tactic: donor collaboratives, in all their many forms, provide donors the same advantages that mutual funds, private equity, and venture capital provide investors—portfolio diversification placed in the hands of specialists.

Such specialists—often with deep subject matter expertise and personal experience—lead collaboratives across a diverse array of organizations, including those set up to improve the lives of people in a particular location (e.g., [The Southern Reconstruction Fund](#)), those employing constituent-led decision making (e.g., [Amazon Defenders Funds](#)), efforts to galvanize and align philanthropic interests in specific topics or issues (e.g., [Media Democracy Fund](#)), and platforms to raise substantial sums of money to scale effective solutions (e.g., [Blue Meridian Partners](#)). Many of these funds weave distinctive combinations of those models.<sup>3</sup>

3 Some of the funds included in this report are current or prior Bridgespan Group clients, including The 1954 Project, Blue Meridian Partners, Co-Impact, TED’s The Audacious Project, Lever for Change, and Echoing Green.

Since their founding, the funds surveyed have facilitated roughly \$10-12 billion in investments. As a group, the respondents leading these collaboratives say they can do much more. The 97 respondents estimated their grantmaking totaled between \$2 billion and \$3 billion in 2020. On average, they made 44 grants a year, most less than \$500,000. Collectively, they estimated that they could disburse up to \$15 billion a year with minimal growth in current staffing.



The survey also revealed an increase in the number of collaboratives moving more than \$50 million in a single year. Earlier research identified just eight such funds in 2018 compared to 18 in 2020.<sup>4</sup> These big spenders accounted for more than 65 percent of all dollars distributed by survey respondents in 2020.

On the other end of the spectrum, 48 respondents gave less than \$5 million in 2020. These funds typically target specific population segments (e.g., students, immigrants, women of color, Indigenous peoples), pursue constituent-led grantmaking (e.g., youth- or community-directed organizations), or emphasize some dimension of equity (e.g., racial, gender, economic).

## Distinguishing Collaborative Philanthropy from Traditional Philanthropy

It quickly became clear from our survey that collaborative giving platforms differ from traditional funders in more ways than statistics describing their growth and giving could describe. Generally speaking, their priorities and the means by which they operate vary from more traditional philanthropy.

4 Ditkoff, Powell, Gardner, and Tierney, op. cit.

**The concentration of collaboratives focusing on racial justice stands in contrast to the prevailing emphasis of philanthropic giving.** While our survey did not track spending by category, for example, we did ask participants to identify their top funding priority from a list of 22 options, such as health, education, and human rights. Racial justice led the field, with 15 collaboratives identifying it as their primary focus. Almost all of these funds referenced racial inequities, centered Black, Indigenous, and people-of-color (BIPOC) populations, and/or challenged engrained power hierarchies when describing their change objectives. Economic mobility (nine) and climate change (eight) were the next most popular.

None of the top-25 institutional funders (ranked by giving in 2020) explicitly reference racial equity or racial justice in their mission statements.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, in a 2020 survey, equity and justice did not rank in the top-six issues listed by family foundations, according to the [National Center for Family Philanthropy](#).<sup>6</sup> In fact, overall philanthropic spending on racial equity and justice falls short of real need, concluded a 2021 report by the [Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity](#). It found “for every dollar awarded by foundations for work in the United States in 2018, only 6 cents went to racial equity work.”<sup>7</sup>

No doubt, the number of equity- and justice-focused collaboratives reflects the intense national discussion centering on race in recent years in the United States. For funders eager to support equity and justice nonprofits, equity-focused collaboratives provide a ready way to tap into expertise that reflects deep engagement with nonprofits and community leaders dedicated to improving the lives of people of color.

**How funds pursue impact is also strikingly different from how institutional philanthropy tends to operate.** Roughly a third of the respondents said they seek systemic change through “building fields and movements,”<sup>8</sup> the most favored approach among collaboratives. Our survey data put grants for fields and movements at upwards of \$540 million in 2020—about a quarter of the total giving from our sample.

By contrast, building fields and movements have historically attracted scant funding support. For example, across a 14-year period just 7 percent of “big bet” grants, those of over \$10 million, by dollar value went to field building.<sup>9</sup> Tynesha McHarris, cofounder of the global

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5 Some reference social justice goals as part of their mission and/or pursue racial equity as part of specific grantmaking portfolios.

6 National Center for Family Philanthropy, [2020 Trends](#), November 2020. The top-six listed issues were education including K-12, college access, and literacy (38 percent); poverty including hunger and homelessness (27 percent); social services including family services (25 percent); health/wellness including healthcare and nutrition (18 percent); environment including sustainability and climate (18 percent); and economic opportunity including jobs, workforce, employment and job training (18 percent).

7 Malkia Devich Cyril, Lyle Matthew Kan, Ben Francisco Maulbeck, and Lori Villarosa, [Mismatched: Philanthropy's Response to the Call for Racial Justice](#), Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity, September 2021.

8 Drawing from prior Bridgespan research, we define a “field” as a set of individuals and organizations working to address a common social issue or problem, often developing and using a common knowledge base. We define “field building” as the activities or investments that drive a field’s progress toward impact at scale. See [“Field Building for Population-Level Change,”](#) March 2020, for additional information.

9 William Foster, Gail Perreault, and Elise Tosun, [“Ten Ways to Make a Big Bet on Social Change,”](#) *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, May 10, 2017.

[Black Feminist Fund](#), attributes this neglect to a “siloe” vision among funders. “Oftentimes, our movements aren’t seen because philanthropy creates silos, and Black feminists can’t silo themselves and say, ‘racial justice here,’ ‘gender justice there.’ We want to fund movements doing the most transformative, intersectional work but getting the least resources.”<sup>10</sup>

For at least 10 respondents, the path to impact involves an approach less commonly found within mainstream philanthropy: transferring decision-making power to nonprofit leaders and community groups on the receiving end of grantmaking.<sup>11</sup> For example, the [Hive Fund for Climate and Gender Justice](#) uses “participatory advisory groups.” And the [Visionary Freedom Fund](#), a youth-led organization working to transform the youth justice system, has formed a “Power Table” where youth justice organizers collaborate with movement leaders and funders to grant awards.

**Collaboratives have more diverse leadership than institutional philanthropy.** Nearly half of the funds reported being led by people of color, compared to only 10 percent of US foundations.<sup>12</sup>

Leadership diversity makes a critical difference, explained Edgar Villanueva, founder of the [Decolonizing Wealth Project](#). “A white-dominant mindset inside the [philanthropy] field” influences who is seen as credible, he said. “There’s a direct correlation between the lived experience of the people in decision-making seats and where the money goes.”<sup>13</sup>

[Borealis Philanthropy](#), a social justice intermediary that hosts nine collaborative funds, exemplifies this principle. The organization’s director of development, Maya Berkowitz, underscores the importance of having leaders who come from the communities they are trying to help. “Borealis is staffed by those who come from the communities they are funding. That’s what makes the work so powerful,” she said.

Many institutional philanthropies are working hard to incorporate racial equity into their well-established giving practices. In fact, a 2021 [Center for Effective Philanthropy](#) report researching changes to philanthropic practice since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic noted that “three quarters of interviewed foundation leaders described thinking much more explicitly about race and racism and said they are increasingly focused on the role of race relative to their programmatic goals.”<sup>14</sup> Owing to their relative newness and powered by BIPOC leaders, some young philanthropic collaborations have the strategic freedom to explore new avenues for social change around racial equity, unencumbered by the parameters of traditional philanthropy. Given this, they represent a prime opportunity for funders to learn and grow in a way less anchored to the past.

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10 “[Meet the Black Feminist Fund Founders Out to Transform Philanthropy](#),” Ford Foundation, September 15, 2021.

11 We did not ask this as a separate survey question, but we noted when any fund cited “community-led philanthropy,” “participatory” processes, or adopting grantmaking “models to shift power” to describe how they conduct their grantmaking.

12 “[Diversity of Foundation Staff, Leadership Lags, Study Finds](#),” *Philanthropy News Digest*, October 15, 2020.

13 David Bornstein, “[A Call to Modernize American Philanthropy](#),” *The New York Times*, November 27, 2018.

14 Ellie Buteau, Ph.D., Naomi Orensten, and Satia Marotta, Ph.D., [Foundations Respond to Crisis: Lasting Change?](#) Center for Effective Philanthropy, 2021.

## What Draws Funders to Collaborative Giving Platforms?

In interviews and conversations with more than 100 survey respondents, fund leaders, and donors, we sought to understand what's driving the recent popularity of such platforms. Three compelling—and interlinked—factors emerged: efficiency, effectiveness, and engagement.

**Efficiency** emerges from outsourcing to the collaborative's staff. Similar to how investors may leave the stock-picking to fund managers, philanthropic collaborations do the research and due diligence to identify grantees, and often provide technical and capacity-building assistance to those grantees. Moreover, well-run collaboratives can provide “really strong financial systems, really good grants management systems, strong communications, and articulation of impact and learning,” said Berkowitz.

For foundations, allocating money to collaboratives is an efficient way to expand into new areas where they lack expertise. This approach also appeals to high-net-worth individuals who have lean philanthropic teams. While the largest US foundations have a median staff of 116,<sup>15</sup> only a dozen of the roughly 170 American billionaires who have signed the [Giving Pledge](#) have grantmaking organizations with more than 50 staff members. A veteran advisor to donors in the climate arena has observed the shift to lean staffing firsthand. “When I started in this space, the main players were endowed foundations,” she said. “Now, many of the largest climate funders, especially the newest entrants, are individuals with no staff, or very few staff.” Collaboratives offer a way to essentially “share” foundation staff across donors.

**Effectiveness** derives from the specialized knowledge, skills, and relationships that collaboratives bring to the table, such as expertise in complex topics like climate change mitigation or close ties with community leaders, providing insight and trust with local leaders. Those local leaders are less likely to be in the professional circles of institutional and high-net-worth funders, who may struggle to find and build rapport with those leaders.<sup>16</sup>

“If your objective is to find a pipeline of proximate organizations, which tend to be earlier stage and small, collaboratives can help you with how to reach them,” said David Weil, co-president of the [Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies](#), which works to advance racial, gender, and economic equity and to strengthen the Jewish community and Israel. “The organizations also benefit, as it may allow them to receive more funding without the stress of needing to manage the grantmaking processes of each individual funder.”

Collaboratives can also provide more specific grantee support to those organizations, which tend to have fewer financial resources,<sup>17</sup> because many funders “are not well equipped to give moderate-sized grants,” said Berkowitz of Borealis Philanthropy. “Nor are they equipped to provide the capacity building and technical assistance that smaller organizations need.”

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15 Staffing information as reported by Foundation Center data, foundation websites, and LinkedIn. Data were compiled and analyzed in October and November of 2021.

16 Cheryl Dorsey, Jeff Bradach, and Peter Kim, “[Racial Equity and Philanthropy: Disparities of Funding for Leaders of Color Leave Impact on the Table](#),” The Bridgespan Group and Echoing Green, May 2020.

17 Ibid.



The benefits of working with collaboratives also extend to funders with global ambition, explained Nick Grono, CEO of the [Freedom Fund](#), which aims to mobilize capital, will, and knowledge to combat modern slavery globally. The fund allows donors to indirectly fund grantees that they would likely never find without the Freedom Fund's efforts. "Given the small scale of the average Freedom Fund grant, and the fact that these are typically grassroots organizations working within defined geographies, it's unlikely that our funders would fund any of our grantees directly. But we have evidence to show that with the right support, [these organizations] can be highly effective in reducing rates of exploitation," he noted.

While in our survey, only 10 collaboratives were based outside the United States, additional research shows a similar rise in philanthropic collaborations operating in other nations. In India, for example, at least 18 formal collaboratives have formed over the past 18 months.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, **engagement** with peers and practitioners ranks high in the minds of funders who choose to collaborate. It allows funders to fill knowledge gaps and broaden their giving horizons—*while funding*. "Our fund allows donors to come together and not only learn about education and philanthropy, but also learn from each other and learn from the practitioners closest to the work," said Liz Thompson, founder of the [1954 Project](#), a Black-led and focused collaborative that aims to raise \$100 million to support a radical redesign of how philanthropy connects with Black leaders in education.

"More and more collaboratives are being created to help funders go on learning journeys," said Bridgit Antoinette Evans, CEO of the [Pop Culture Collaborative](#). "They are especially valuable for new and emergent areas where a pooled fund gives donors the opportunity to test the waters and understand a new ecosystem." The Pop Culture Collaborative aims to transform the narrative landscape in America around people of color, immigrants, refugees, Muslims, and Indigenous people.

What donors learn by collaborating can also sharpen how they make individual grants outside the collaborative, as well as possibly introduce them to organizations they can go on to fund directly. "I'm doing this [collaborative] to engage in a learning process with others, and that will help guide me to make other direct-grant choices," explained Weil of Schusterman.

If you add up the efficiency, effectiveness, and engagement, you find that collaborative giving platforms offer funders the opportunity to tackle problems at a greater scale than they could alone. This is a common theme that runs through the literature on funder collaboration: donors increasingly realize that making progress on complex social, economic, and climate issues "requires not only larger pools of funding, but more combined willpower and expertise," noted a Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors report.<sup>19</sup>

A few larger funder collaboratives have been able to unlock dramatically more giving to support systems change. "The recent surge in collaborative giving platforms is an incredibly promising trend in philanthropy," said Jennifer Stout, deputy director on the

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18 Forthcoming research, The Bridgespan Group.

19 [Collaborative Giving](#), Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors.

Philanthropic Partnerships team at the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#). “The subset of platforms focused on large-scale grantmaking—what we think of as ‘exponential giving platforms’—have particularly exciting potential to unlock large flows of philanthropic capital. Increasing numbers of large funders, including Giving Pledge signatories, are embracing exponential giving platforms as a means to invest at scale with experts who can move funds quickly to where they are needed most.”

Meeting this potential will require smoothing the sometimes rocky path of collaborative giving and shifting the mindsets of more potential funders.

## Smoothing Out the Path to More Collaborative Giving

Despite the recent surge, most collaboratives still struggle to attract enough funding to fulfill their potential. As our data show, the 97 survey respondents collectively could significantly increase their grantmaking to roughly \$15 billion annually—if only they had more funding. Our research suggests that the path from identifying funds to making an investment to understanding impact can be murky for some. If the steps were clearer, funds could become an asset class that is part and parcel to more donors’ philanthropic portfolios.

There’s not a lot of awareness of collaborative giving platforms in all their shapes and sizes, so more and better information on available funds is a good starting point. To assist with matchmaking, we asked each of the organizations we surveyed whether they would be willing to have their data shared publicly on Giving Compass, which curates a dataset of funds for donors. For ease of review, we also offer a summary of these responses on our website (see “[Incomplete List of Funder Collaboratives and Platforms](#)”).

Personal relationships are also important, as our survey shows: nearly one-third of respondents explicitly referenced donor relationships and introductions as critical to fueling their work. David Weil, from Schusterman, concurred, “We learn about most funds from other funders.” For donors looking to identify and select philanthropic collaborations on their own, we offer this starter set of questions to get to know a collaborative’s goals and how it functions (see “[Getting to Know a Collaborative Giving Platform](#)”).

And trusted advisors still help to get checks written. “Collaboratives make it easier for philanthropists to scale their giving, but finding them can be an obstacle,” said Jennifer Kitt, president of the [Climate Leadership Initiative](#), which exists to help new climate funders quickly get “the lay of the land” and find nongovernmental organization (NGO) and peer funding partners. “We find it helps to listen for philanthropists’ interests and advise them, so they can identify which funds to invest in. This makes collaboratives of all sizes and specialties visible, and helps donors learn as they choose their partners.” Other organizations, like Borealis Philanthropy, offer multiple funds and can help connect donors to the best funds for them.

### Resources on Collaborative Funds

Below is a partial list of resources to identify collaborative platforms:

- [Climate Leadership Initiative](#)
- [Giving Compass](#)
- [Groundswell Fund](#)
- [The Libra Foundation](#)
- [Resource Generation](#)

The intermediary nature of these funds, coupled with the facts that many are targeting systemic change and that many are under five years old, can also make it hard for funders to understand their impact potential. “If we can better articulate the many long-term returns to society of donor investments, I think people would be more willing to provide support,” said Thompson, with the 1954 Project. Further research to support fund leaders on measuring and communicating their impact is surely warranted.

### Getting to Know a Collaborative Giving Platform

Most funders don’t have experience researching philanthropic collaborations. So we’ve identified several topics for donor research to determine whether a fund is a good fit.

- 1. What does the collaborative aim to accomplish?** Identify the social impact the fund seeks to have, the rationale and strategy it is employing to attain this impact, and how it is measuring its progress (and adapting work as necessary).
- 2. How does the collaborative work with donors?** What decision rights do funders have in terms of strategy and grantmaking? How much are funders expected to contribute? And what types of donor networking, education, and engagement does the collaborative offer?
- 3. How does the collaborative operate?** Who is the leadership and staff? How do they source and support grantees? Are the leaders expert in the issues at hand, and, ideally, do they have personal experience with these issues? Also consider whether the fund solicits input and perspectives from those it seeks to support.

## The Three Mindset Shifts that Could Unlock More Funding for Philanthropic Collaborations

Even with a smoother pathway, not every donor may be ready for philanthropic collaborations. Our survey asked collaborative fund leaders what factors, in their experience, have hindered obtaining donor support. Many responses focused on donor interest in the particular issue the collaborative was working on. This makes sense, given that collaboratives tend to have a targeted focus that may not align with every donor’s giving priorities. But other responses coalesced around three mindsets that were holding donors back.



**The first mindset is interest in philanthropic collaborations as a model for giving.** Currently, solo giving is the dominant philanthropy model. Funders often derive satisfaction from getting personally involved in grantmaking, cultivating relationships with grantees, and identifying their unique “value add.” “It’s really not the norm to do this kind of [collaborative] giving—so there’s no real pressure to do things this way,” said Olivia Leland, the founder and CEO of [Co-Impact](#), a global collaborative for just and inclusive systems change.

Advocates for collaborative giving acknowledge the norm but see room for a mindset shift toward diversification. “You don’t have to pick one or the other,” said Weil of Schusterman Family Philanthropies. Consider that in the investment world, individuals might buy individual stocks as well as invest in a variety of funds. Similarly, in the philanthropy world, funders can pick individual grantees

and support collaboratives. “The question is, what’s the role of collaboratives in a portfolio that includes some direct grantee relationships and some managed relationships that are doing this work for you?” Weil added.



**The second mindset is an understanding of the importance of supporting systems change.** Survey respondents who identified field or movement building as their top priority, approximately one-third of the total, have a particularly hard time raising money because most donors favor grantees that deliver services. [Echoing Green](#), an organization supporting early-stage social innovators advancing systems-change strategies, has experienced this barrier firsthand. In the past it has had to pause or close leadership training programs when key funders ended support. The leaders [Echoing Green](#) supports often face the same challenge.

“As an organization focused on systems change, and an organization that supports emerging systems change leaders, we see the lack of support and trust from funders as an existential threat to advancing solutions,” said Liza Mueller, vice president, thought leadership. “There is often a great distance between what systems change leaders are doing—programs, services, advocacy efforts—and what funders are expecting, which is often specific social impact outcomes in short timeframes.”



**The third mindset is comfort with power sharing.** Funders have traditionally preferred to maintain control over funding decisions, rather than ceding power to their grantees and community stakeholders. Crystal Hayling is the executive director of [The Libra Foundation](#), which works toward justice and equity for those disproportionately harmed by systemic oppression. She founded the [Democracy Frontlines Fund](#), which provides funding to Black-led groups and is guided by a brain trust of accountable movement advisors. Hayling notes, however, that most funders still maintain control over funding decisions: “There’s no tsunami of people excited to share power right now.”

Many collaboratives work differently—and for good reason. Notably, funds working on racial equity and justice were the most likely to embrace a shift in grantmaking power dynamics. Vanessa Daniel, CEO of the [Groundswell Fund](#), a public foundation that supports social justice movements, made a strong case for this “different way” of funding in an open letter cosigned by 31 public fund leaders. The letter suggested: “The ‘different way’ must include a significant transfer of resources into the control of institutions where people of color, who are primarily accountable to their communities, have the ultimate decision-making power over where dollars go.”<sup>20</sup>

Of funds indicating that racial justice is their primary issue area, roughly 70 percent offered completely unrestricted support compared with about 15 percent of

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20 “An Open Letter to Philanthropy, from People of Color-led, Movement-Accountable Public Foundations,” Groundswell Fund.

remaining funds. These justice-focused funds were not among the largest; of the 18 funds reporting giving over \$50 million annually, one—the [Solidaire Network’s Black Liberation Pooled Fund](#)—gives primarily to racial justice.

Funder interest in power-sharing arrangements has yet to achieve widespread acceptance. But change is slowly coming, said Evans of the Pop Culture Collaborative. “There are some funders who are willing to share or transfer power, but that’s not the majority. Both among individual donors and institutional philanthropy, some still want to hold onto the power to decide where wealth is transmitted.”

For example, in November 2021, the Libra Foundation announced unrestricted gifts of \$10 million to a set of public intermediary funds. Alongside this announcement, Libra’s Hayling noted, “Intermediaries are catalytic to power-building because they reach across issues and geographies. ... They build strong partnerships that reflect a deep understanding of groups in the community and their needs.”<sup>21</sup>

There’s momentum toward collaborative philanthropy—but in our experience, mindsets around portfolio diversification, systems change, and power sharing likely need to change before platforms become mainstream. If more donors can learn from peers who have experience with collaboratives, it’s likely that more will participate.

## The Future of Collaborative Giving Platforms

Seven years ago, a Bridgespan report on donor collaboration concluded: “When it comes to donors working with other donors, few have advanced beyond information sharing and grant coordination. It’s unusual for donors to form joint endeavors that pool money, time, and talent to advance a shared vision with multiyear goals.”<sup>22</sup> Four years later, we posited the potential for multiple funds to unlock billions from donors.<sup>23</sup> That potential is beginning to play out.

We believe the momentum evidenced in the recent surge in collaboratives signals even greater potential if more funders—both private foundations and wealthy individuals and families—engage. The proliferation of funds offers options for any donor to find something of interest. Moreover, collaboratives provide much-needed capacity in areas where donors frequently struggle: sourcing nonprofits they couldn’t find alone, supporting leaders with lived experience in the communities they serve, and giving in ways that address systemic challenges.

Imagine a world where the wealthiest diversified their giving to include collaborative giving platforms. For instance, the wealthiest Americans currently give just over 1 percent

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21 “[Libra Foundation Approves \\$20.325 Million in Grants for Social Justice Organizations](#),” The Libra Foundation, November 21, 2021.

22 Willa Seldon, “[Donor Collaboration Can Bring Big Results, but Most Philanthropists Prefer to Go Solo](#),” *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, March 10, 2013.

23 Ditkoff, Powell, Gardner, and Tierney, op. cit.

of their net worth to philanthropy annually.<sup>24</sup> If US billionaires gave an additional one-half of 1 percent of their wealth to collaboratives, that would amount to roughly \$22 billion annually—nearly 10 times the spending of our survey respondents. Given that many of these funds are focused on issues of racial equity and are more likely to be led by a person of color, imagine the impact potential if \$22 billion more flowed to philanthropic collaborations.

We see a need for more philanthropic collaboration in the coming years to address the most pressing social, economic, and environmental issues of our time. It is still early, however, and there is much to be learned about how best to support funds in their growth and maturation. What we've learned so far is that philanthropic collaborations have proven their value to early adopters. They're ready for the next wave of donors so they can live up to their full potential.

**Alison Powell** is a partner with The Bridgespan Group's San Francisco office, where **Simon Morfit** is a manager. **Michael John** is an associate consultant in Bridgespan's Boston office. The authors thank **Sasha Dierauf**, an associate consultant in the New York office, and Editorial Director **Roger Thompson** for their research and editorial support.

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24 Ditkoff, Powell, Gardner, and Tierney, op. cit.

## Research Background and Methodology

The research featured in this report is itself a product of collaboration between The Bridgespan Group and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

The Philanthropic Partnerships Team at the Gates Foundation aims to increase awareness and use of collaborative giving platforms as a way to scale the impact of philanthropy on the world's most pressing social problems. Similarly, as a nonprofit philanthropy advisor, Bridgespan has worked with a number of collaboratives and donor platforms, in addition to leading research on the potential for collaboratives to achieve significant impact.<sup>25</sup>

Both the Gates team and Bridgespan's philanthropy practice have taken note of what appeared to be building momentum for donor collaboration—and the absence of data to verify it. To move beyond educated guesswork, Gates funded a Bridgespan research project in early 2021 to document the current landscape of philanthropic collaborations.

We sent a survey to roughly 200 collaboratives and received 97 responses, providing a unique and rich resource. We also interviewed and held group discussions with roughly 100 donors and fund leaders.

We broadly defined philanthropic collaboratives as entities that either pool or direct philanthropic giving from multiple donors to nonprofit organizations. Thus our survey sample spans large capital aggregators like Blue Meridian; organizations that do not pool resources, but instead provide a “platform” for donors to source options (like [Lever for Change](#) or [TED's The Audacious Project](#)); and organizations, sometimes called public foundations, such as the Hive Fund for Climate and Gender Justice, which depend on annual giving for their grants. In our search for examples, we sought to include funds with a racial or gender equity focus.

We did not include community foundations writ large because it is hard to determine the proportion of their giving that is donor directed through donor-advised funds, as opposed to funds pooled or influenced by the foundations. We did, however, include a small number of special-purpose community foundation funds. We did not include COVID-19 funds or other time-limited disaster relief efforts. If you are a part of a platform you believe should be included in future research, please send us an email to be added using [this form](#).

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25 Powell, Ditkoff, and Twersky, op. cit.

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