The Power Shifting Shuffle

MAPPING POWER DYNAMICS & PRACTICES *INSIDE* HUMAN RIGHTS PHILANTHROPY

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Executive Summary

Shifting the Power inside human rights philanthropy: A stock-taking

By 2024–commitments to 'Shift the Power' were being published and circulated regularly by global development and human rights donors and aid actors–in their annual reports, in industry media outlets, and in private and public fora alike. Terms like trust-based or flexible philanthropy had become unofficial prerequisites for funders if they were to be taken seriously by movements, peers, grantees, and the public. Although having become mainstream as stated organizational values, the infrastructure for and practices accompanying these declarations remained less clear. Funders shared their commitments and benchmarks, while movements & grantees globally monitored and weighed in on the variety of promises, and related institutional shifts or stagnation that accompanied them.

Between 2023-2024, the Fund for Global Human Rights (FGHR)–a human rights intermediary fund based in Washington, DC, which has partnered with or provided funding to human rights movements and defenders in more than 80 countries–commissioned a series of initiatives to, "conduct a mapping of our grantees, peers, and the wider donor community to better understand how they are thinking about and engaging with power and power shifting in their work.[1]"

> ## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO WORK IN A MULTICULTURAL SPACE WITH RACIAL EQUITY AND TIME ZONE EQUITY?

The synthesis that follows focuses on the wider donor community portion of this research. It distills key high-level findings and lessons from 25 interviews with philanthropic staff, leadership, and advisors, representing 17 organizations.

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1. Text drawn from FGHR March 2024 Request for Proposals, "A Mapping to Examine Power in philanthropy–Terms of Reference: *Looking at shifting, yielding, and wielding power responsibly.*"

While a systematic review of publicly available organizational strategies, benchmarks, evaluation reports, and evolving commitments may have provided greater depth for comparatively analyzing how, and on what terms, internal change happens alongside external declarations within and across human rights funders—the time and resources it would have required went far beyond the available scope.

Further, as those closest to the daily operational realities, mechanics, budgets, program or fundraising teams—observations from philanthropic staff and advisors provide essential context which is often missing from publicly shared strategies, evaluations, or conversations. In choosing to structure this research around insights shared by philanthropy insiders, it should be noted that centering the voices and experiences of donor staff and leadership is not passive affirmation that their views reign supreme, or more relevant, in overall power shifting plans, priorities, or practice. Rather, we prioritized learning about programmatic and communications workflows, inter-departmental processes, and staff-leadership dynamics, among other areas—from those most adjacent to them.

We hope that by democratizing a bit more information and clarity on the bureaucratic 'how', rather than the values-driven 'what', that the synthesis which follows is useful to grantees, movements, program staff, journalists, and funder leadership alike—each aiming to amplify, advocate for, or accelerate power shifts in philanthropy, albeit from different positions and in different ways.

Changing dynamics that have been produced over centuries doesn't happen in a strategy refresh or two. It is the work of decades, of struggle, and of culture shifts—which go beyond the political, legal, or institutional commitments of individual organizations or communities—philanthropy or otherwise.

What we found, and what is shared here, offers a snapshot of current efforts in light of much longer arcs of change—or stagnation. As such, our clustered findings, lessons, and insights fall under five umbrella categories:

1 Where power shifting conversations start and end—i.e. with capitalism and wealth concentration or with human resources and programmatic technical questions—and who decides.

2 Specific power-shifting and power-reinforcing organizational practices—in relation to budgets, human resources, transparency, equity & diversity in leadership and decision-making, among others—that accompany external commitments.

3 Power dynamics that emerge within organizations, between peer organizations, between funders and grantees, and between grantees or movements as power shifting processes are adopted or implemented.

4 Areas of alignment or divergence in expectations, time horizons, resource discretion, or decision-making processes—between staff and leadership, and between grantees and organizations—that influence adoption or implementation.

5 External or other factors that impact the speed, type, and modality of implementation of power shifting commitments by human rights funders.

Key questions | *What we wanted to know*

Over the course of four months between July and October 2024, we spoke with 25 people working for 17 philanthropic organizations, to try and understand:

- What power shifting commitments are most common within organizations? How do different parts of the same organizations speak about or act on them?

- When do human rights funders proactively or reactively adopt or abandon these commitments?

- Which key organizational conversations, infrastructure, and decision-making processes are most common or most absent after power shifting commitments have been adopted?

- How do staff, partners, and grantees participate in and influence agendas, decision-making authority, and stewardship of operational shifts related to these commitments?

- What institutional practices support or undermine external commitments to trust-based philanthropy, flexible funding, localization, or diversifying leadership, agenda-setting, and decision-making input?

- What are some of the more or less publicly visible ways these changes are or aren't institutionalized over time?

In answering these questions based on 25 conversations, we are the first to recognize that this is a narrow snapshot of experiences in a broad field, with many more questions arising than have been answered. The mapping that follows doesn't aim or claim to assess individual organizations or their power shifting practices. Nor does it offer definitions of power, power dynamics, or power shifting that should guide these shifts.

Rather, it aims to bring into focus the less visible or less openly discussed, everyday organizational dynamics, processes, and workflows–that underpin which commitments are pursued, on whose terms, and to what end.

Preparing for crisis and uncertainty

As human rights funders, many of whom are headquartered in the United States—face backlash, legal threats, and closing civic space amidst a surge of repeals, crackdowns, and budget cuts advanced by the new U.S. administration—many in their global networks are similarly facing the impact of abrupt funding cuts, and in some cases, similar authoritarian turns.

The sense of collective anxiety and energized alliance-building are both palpable. With decades—well, centuries—of collective experience contending with repressive, unpredictable (or predictable) abuses of power, movements are ready to lead, ready to strategize, and ready to organize.

What will funders do?

As reflected in the research that follows, moments of crisis are precisely the moments where the infrastructure for the future is formed and materialized—as the speed of decision-making, disruption of existing norms, and openness to innovation are all quite high.

Will this initiate an era of deepened strategic collaboration and power-sharing? Or will it witness the buckling of human rights funding under the weight of risk- and liability-mitigation?

These times call for doubling down on commitments to collective change and shared organizing, rather than sidelining them as secondary goals for some idealized future moment when conditions are more favorable—a moment which may never arrive unless built by these very same movements and groups.

Co-authorship & approach

Commissioned by the Fund for Global Human Rights, the vision and leadership for this research came from Clare Gibson Nangle (Director of Strategic Partnerships), and an interdepartmental advisory team which included Alison Miranda (Learning and Assessment Director) and Marianne Mollman (Director of Regional Programs).

Anna Levy and Nonso Jideofor–the consulting research team–generated a methodology, conducted interviews, completed all research for, and authored this report. They benefited enormously from several conversations and interviews with the commissioning FGHR team, especially Clare Gibson Nangle. A larger FGHR staff focus group kicked off the research in July 2024, providing some of its initial structure and approach. Early and open conversations helped frame the key questions, areas for direct and indirect commentary, provided regular guidance on navigating sensitivities and silences, and provided many essential peer contacts (in addition to our own) whose experiences and insight form the findings provided here.

We must especially acknowledge that most of the findings shared here synthesize the ideas, experiences, and insights of the 25 interviewees with whom we spoke–most, though not all of whom, opted for anonymity.

Who we spoke to & methodology notes

From July to November 2024, we held 25 semi-structured individual interviews and one group interview with employees or advisors from 17 organizations (see below). The researchers, Nonso Jideofor and Anna Levy, drew on a shared framework (see guiding research questions on p. 4) for conducting interviews and synthesizing clustered findings–including common power shifting themes, practices, and dilemmas named across most organizations represented.

While the commissioning FGHR team generously provided feedback, contacts, and soundboarding at various points over the course of the research, the findings shared below reflect an independent synthesis of what the research team heard and observed.

Our interviews included:

- **Types of funders** | Intermediary funds (6), foundations (6), donor advisory consortia (3), and independent philanthropic advisors (2).

- **Individuals & organizations** | 25 individual interviews with people representing 17 organizations.

- **Group conversations** | We held one focused co-creation group discussion with 8-FGHR staff to kick off and workshop our initial methodological approach.

- **Geographies** | 7 interviewees came from a combination of Southern geographies including Uganda, Kenya, Jamaica, Brazil, and Thailand; 5-6 interviewees were based in Europe & the UK, and the bulk, 11-12 of them, came from the United States.

- **Organizational roles** |All but two interviewees held senior leadership roles, mostly representing programmatic or grantee/partner facing positions.

Notes on outreach

We reached out to more than 35 individuals representing 25 different funders or intermediaries for interviews. Five of them declined to participate, and several did not respond. Roughly half expressed openness to participation conditional on the option of anonymity. After completing our interviews, roughly ¾ of interviewees ultimately wished to remain anonymous.

Notes on language

Use of the terms 'grantee' and 'donor' or 'funder' as the default terminology throughout this research already connotes a specific kind of relationship–reflected by dependency, need, and performance (from those receiving funds) and generosity, expertise, and authority (from those providing funds). As this research aims to unpack these very dynamics, which are baked into language as much as, if not more than, they are reflected in practice–we recognize what is implied both directly and indirectly, by using this terminology. Reliance on these terms came from the need for consistent terminology regarding actors across organizations, as a reflection of the default language used by most–though not all– interviewees, and from the desire to remain explicit in the role that money plays in shaping the relational and material power dynamics in any power shifting process.

Although most interviewees, at some point during their interviews, qualified a story or organizational practice as a likely outlier among donors–the opposite was often true.

" IT MIGHT JUST BE OUR ORGANIZATION, BUT... "

Summary takeaways

Does shifting the power mean shifting the business model?

With this guiding question, we've distilled 15 of the most common dynamics, processes, dilemmas, and questions shared by human rights philanthropy staff, leadership, and advisors, over the course of this research:

1 Philanthropic insiders are split in their focus on <u>whether power shifting conversations should focus on addressing the underlying systems that concentrate so much wealth in the first place, or alternatively, if they should focus more practically on identifying technical or political strategies for shifting some practices within those systems</u>.

2 *The what* is far more common than *the how*. Power shifting practices have been adopted at some level of operation across all the organizations that we spoke with, and clustered around four key areas: <u>trust-based philanthropy, flexible funding, localization, and diversifying leadership and decision-making. How organizations adjusted internal planning, operations, and monitoring in support of these areas, varied widely</u>.

> **"WE'RE FINDING DIVERSITY IN HOW PEOPLE DO THIS WORK. SOME STAFF WANT A DETAILED BUDGET OR REPORT. WE DON'T REALLY NEED IT, WE DON'T NEED THAT LEVEL OF DETAIL."**

3 <u>While adopting new practices (or abandoning old ones), the push-and-pull with existing organizational ways of working reproduces or reinforces other power dynamics</u>. A commonly shared example related to funders publicizing highly flexible reporting arrangements for existing grantees, while retaining invite-only processes for potential grantees.

4 Program- and grantee-facing teams are often seen as power-shifting frontliners given their proximity to and interface with movements, activists, and communities. While finance, human resources, and communications teams are less visible in external conversations, they are central to building (or slowing) related organizational and operational infrastructure.

> ❝ CONVERSATION IN PHILANTHROPY FOCUSES A GREAT DEAL ON GRANT-MAKING AND OTHER PROGRAMMATIC ASPECTS OF THE WORK, AND AS A RESULT, PEOPLE IN THE SECTOR OFTEN DON'T LOOK DEEPLY AT THE OPERATIONAL SYSTEMS OF THEIR INSTITUTIONS: FINANCE, COMPLIANCE, HUMAN RESOURCES, INVESTMENTS. IF WE ACCEPT THESE SYSTEMS AS THEY ARE, WE ARE LEAVING TRANSFORMATION OFF THE TABLE. ❞

5 More complex power shifting commitments were often described as aspirational or piecemeal, with limited support structures to balance maintenance of daily operations with the scaffolding needed for large-scale change.

6 Staff, leadership, donors, and boards—the four groups of decision-makers common across participating organizations—were described by ⅔ of interviewees as having vastly different approaches to, understandings of, and enthusiasm for power shifting within the same organizations. The remaining ⅓ of interviewees, however, reported decision-makers having high alignment on power shifting in practice within their organizations.

7 Power shifting declarations create a range of different expectations within funder organizations and between funders and grantees, surfacing the need for emergent tools or approaches for navigating the friction that emerges as a result.

8 Across organizations, <u>internal-external power dynamics (i.e. between funder and grantee) are discussed more openly and explicitly than interpersonal power dynamics within organizations</u> (i.e. at the intersection of race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, linguistic, or class dynamics in leadership-staff exchanges, internal decision-making, or organizational culture).

9 Staff within foundations and staff at intermediary funds are routinely translating between organizational and grantee needs and contexts. <u>This code-switching and operational gymnastics was described as a highly routine, though less visible and often unnamed, part of the work</u>.

> **"HERE IS SOMETHING PERVERSE THAT WHEN YOU LOOK AT FUNDRAISING TEAMS, THEY ARE HELD ACCOUNTABLE FOR HOW MUCH MONEY THEY BRING IN. IF I'M ON THE HOOK FOR $30M, I'LL DO WHAT I HAVE TO DO TO GET IT IN THE DOOR. IT CREATES WEIRD INCENTIVES."**

10 <u>According to most interviewees, donors are actively influenced by and engaged in influencing one another</u>. Peer donor pilots create narrative and normative trends around which clusters of organizations—both funders and grantees—begin to align. Reputational risks and disruption of familiar agendas were generally described as being kept at a minimum in these relationships.

11 Of the four most common power shifting commitments we heard about, localization was discussed most concretely, and in four areas: geographic relocation of offices, staff, or decision-making centers, prioritizing staff diversity, adjusted organizational ways of working, and target budget commitments. Along these lines, <u>two related localization dilemmas regularly arose: first, the risk of reducing 'localization' to nationality in ways that privilege elites, and; second, concerns that channeling related funds through intermediaries risks outsourcing—rather than shifting—power</u>.

12 When human rights funders or donors shift their approach—whether sudden or planned—entire movements or sectors feel it. Philanthropic pilots, pivots, and strategies are stress tests for power shifting commitments, values, and operational alignment. The ripple effects of these shifts across movements, partners, or peers don't currently feature as much a part of the power shifting conversation as is warranted by their prevalence.

13 While crisis periods are also power shifting stress tests, they are alternatively reported as inducing high levels of innovation, responsiveness, and adapted ways of working. A question interviewees are asking is how to sustain some of those practices, which often snap back once crises are perceived to have passed.

14 Nearly half of those we spoke to described deep rifts within their organizations over Gaza or Palestine solidarity in 2024, with staff or intermediaries experiencing formal and informal backlash, loss of funding or livelihoods, for sharing opinions or campaigns publicly. The chilling effect surrounding a human rights issue stood out as troubling and demoralizing for most people we spoke to.

> **"FOUNDATIONS ARE SILOED WHEN IT COMES TO SHARING ON THESE INTERNAL CHANGES EVEN WHILE THEY ARE OPERATING TO COORDINATE ON EXTERNAL FUNDING AREAS."**

15 Internal decision-making norms reflect a blend of investment-based approaches, risk and liability assessment, overlaid onto more abstract principles and values like social justice and solidarity—or vice versa. While maintaining that human rights philanthropy is mission- and values-driven, interviewees explained how simultaneous deployment of these two approaches often posed barriers to or undermined translating values into practice.

MAPPING POWER DYNAMICS INSIDE HUMAN RIGHTS PHILANTHROPY

Between walking the talk and business-as-usual

INSTEAD OF A PHASED PROCESS WHICH MIGHT LOOK LIKE...

PHASE I

Diversifying and regionalizing staff, leadership, and working geographies.

PHASE II

More flexible reporting process for grantees--i.e all reporting using voicenotes in grantees language of operation.

PHASE III

Prioritizing more distributed grantmaking in smaller increments to cover a wide range of organizations and groups.
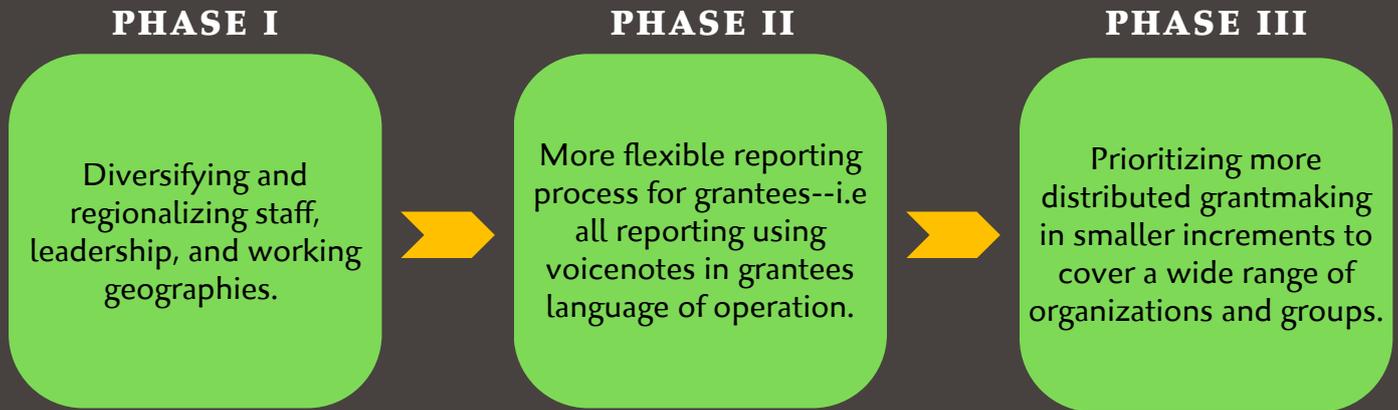
POWER-SHIFTING IN PRACTICE LOOKS MORE LIKE...

Reverting to or <u>doubling down</u> on default business-as-usual practices

<u>Walking the talk</u> on specific and practical changes in the present

<u>Virtue signaling</u> toward future aspirations
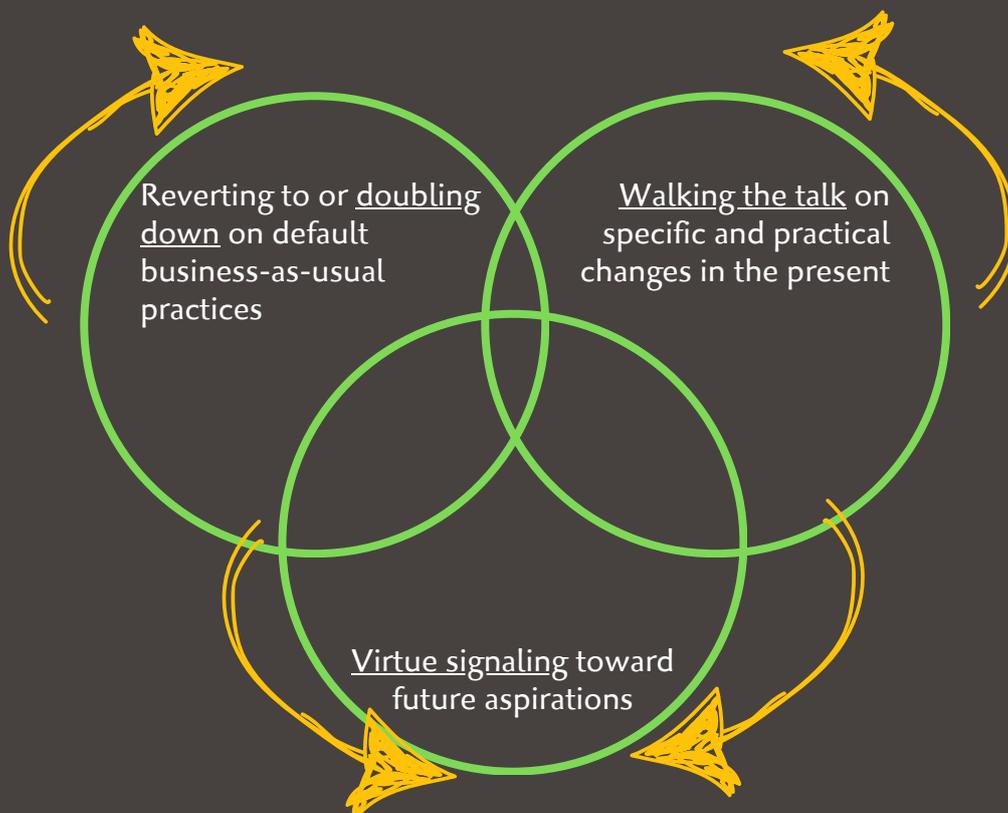
Common power shifting & power reinforcing practices

Walking the talk: *Power shifting* practices

Across the 17 organizations represented in our interviews, the most common power shifting practices described fell under four areas:

1. Adjusted organizational 'ways-of-working'
2. Increased diversity or localization in agenda-setting, advising & decision-making
3. Trust-based & flexible philanthropy
4. Context and crisis responsive donor pivoting

> **"PARTICIPATORY CHANGES A LOT WITH A GROWING STAFF–GIVEN TIME ZONE AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES. WE HAVE TO ASK WHICH CONVERSATIONS REALLY NEED TO BE PARTICIPATORY, WHICH CONVERSATIONS NEED TO BE FOR HR, WHICH FOR OPERATIONS, AND WHICH ARE FOR ME AS PROGRAM DIRECTOR."**

Adjusted organizational "ways-of-working"

- Adjusting organization-wide protocols for daily, weekly, or monthly workflows related to time zone, digital, language, and/or cultural equity.
- Using co-management power-sharing models at some or all levels of programmatic and organizational leadership and decision-making.
- Ensuring availability of two-way translation in all meeting spaces and for all administrative processes involving grantee expression, input, or reporting.
- Using local cash app platforms that enable direct cash transfers and distribution rather than primary reliance on intermediaries.
- Adoption of organizational power analysis frameworks tailored for use across departments–in decision-making, budgeting, or equity monitoring, etc.
- Including procurement processes, secondary and tertiary contracting in localization priorities.

Increased diversity/localization in agenda setting, advising, and decision-making

- Adapting human resources requirements to overcome a need for national hires to meet criteria most associated with elites (i.e. degrees from Northern universities or donor language fluency where not commonly spoken).
- Adopting multiple diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) advisory committees —each with authority to influence or change organizational processes and/or departmental strategic plans.
- Creating mobility pipelines for Southern grassroots & community organizations to influence Northern agenda-setting and decision-making spaces from within.
- Opening strategic planning and agenda-setting processes up for input from grantees, movements, and advisory partners in early, rather than later stages, of these processes.
- Piloting and pivoting toward Southern leads with Northern sub-contractors on proposals, project contracts, or strategic planning.
- Prioritizing use of intermediaries that are part of local contexts, operate in local languages, and communicate through a range of local channels (i.e. community radio beyond social media).

Trust & flexibility

- Providing fiscal sponsorship where formal registration is dangerous, too expensive, or not the priority.
- Adding a range of communications channels and modalities for grantee reporting–including use of whatsapp voice notes instead of written reports and funding for translation so grantees can work comfortably in different languages.
- Adapting donor organizational timelines to grantee timelines, even if they change regularly or unexpectedly.
- Encouraging grantees to use their existing communications and storytelling materials as donor reporting materials to minimize extra reporting for donors only.
- Fostering internal organizational cultures of transparency, in which staff can practice discussing specific organizational practices and dynamics without concern for retaliation or isolation.
- Providing a more accessible range of initial seed funding options for potential grantees without extended and costly donor courtship periods.

Context and crisis responsive donor pivoting

- Converting restricted funding from donors into [more] flexible funding for grantees, partners, or programs.
- Converting annualized donor funding into multi-year commitments to grantees.
- Maintaining rapid response funds —which don't involve pulling from other budgets—to ensure that partners can weather context-specific crises without threatening other program areas.
- Having multiple strategies and mechanisms in place for non-monetary rapid response and partner support during periods of shock or crisis.

"IF THE INTERMEDIARIES SAY THEY'RE GOING TO USE A CALL FOR PROPOSALS, 'NOPE, YOU HAVE TO BE MORE CREATIVE THAN THAT—USE COMMUNITY RADIO, USE LOCAL LANGUAGES."

Doubling down: Power reinforcing practices

Our conversations also surfaced several common power-reinforcing practices characteristic of many—though not all—interviewee organizations.

- **Invite-only defaults** | Protocols for identifying new grantees or partners remain invite-only—with invitations often limited by the networks and relationships of program officers.

- **Unilateral donor shifts** | Big announcements by donors—of exits, strategy shifts, restructuring, or wind downs that are months or years in the making—are often communicated abruptly, or with little scaffolding for grantees and partners to prepare for alternatives.

- **Interfacing on donor terms** | Donors initiate more face time with movements and activists, though in highly curated, invite-only spaces, which prohibit fundraising.

- **Metrics that distort** | Use of evaluation systems that standardize some parts of grantee-reporting for easier monitoring by boards, organizational leadership, or individual donors—but which simultaneously distort movement or grantee time horizons, arcs of impact, or ways of working.

- **Competing audiences and incentives** | Program teams choose narrative, language, and communication norms aligned with grantee or movement contexts, while communications or fundraising teams might fine-tune the same narratives to resonate with funders.

- **Vague or inconsistent application of principles have material costs for grantees** | Grantees and partners are encouraged toward working flexibly on their own terms, while consultants hired to evaluate programmatic or strategic donor portfolios use more narrowly defined frameworks that undermine, marginalize, or render the same approaches as ineffective or unsystematic.

- **Chilling effect over Gaza solidarity** | Nearly half of those we spoke to described deep rifts within their organizations over Gaza or Palestine solidarity in 2024, experiencing formal and informal backlash, loss of funding or livelihoods, for opinions or campaigns shared publicly.

- **Incomplete assessment of power dynamics in intermediary economies** | Funding commitments for smaller organizations or movements are frequently channeled through a handful of larger intermediaries capable of complying with default donor tax reporting, accounting, and financial transfer systems—creating a middle tier worthy of its own power analysis.

- **Prioritizing last mile vs. structural power shifts** | Operationalizing power shifting practices as mid-level or last-mile practices, while leaving leadership and systems-level practices intact.
- **Accountability culture that reinforces white supremacy culture** | Accountability practices that reinforce power dynamics or white supremacy culture by poorly accounting for cultural or contextual differences, or historically produced inequalities, instead framing them as inadequacies.
- **Opacity in leadership, decision-making, or spending** | Lack of transparency related to key individual funders or decision-makers within organizations, or lack of disclosure in relation to organizational spending against available endowments or budgets.
- **Lack of alignment between principle and practice is absorbed by grantees** | Funders offering flexibility in grantee approach to using distributed funds, though with expectations of reporting progress using default metrics on default donor timelines.

❝HOW MANY WIDGETS OF JUSTICE DID WE PRODUCE LAST YEAR? PLEASE DON'T ASK ME THAT.❞

MAPPING POWER DYNAMICS *INSIDE* HUMAN RIGHTS PHILANTHROPY

Six key trends & findings

Commissioned by The Fund for Global Human Rights
Anna Levy and Nonso Jideofor

While often discussed as linear and incremental, 'Shifting the Power' is a continuous push-and-pull of adapting away from and doubling down on existing organizational culture in philanthropy.

Most folks we spoke to described two concurrent processes happening within their organizations. As the adoption of operational changes aligned with power shifting commitments gained traction, their simultaneous implementation often depended on other power reinforcing processes.

> **" THE BULK OF OUR FUNDING HAS BEEN FOR GENERAL OPERATING GRANTS. WE DON'T HAVE A REPORTING TEMPLATE. GRANTEES CAN ACTUALLY CHOOSE HOW THEY WANT TO REPORT. THEY ARE WELCOME TO SUBMIT WHATEVER REPORTS THEY'VE ALREADY WRITTEN UP. WE DON'T ACCEPT PROPOSALS, IT'S BY INVITATION-ONLY. WHEN WE DO A PROPOSAL, IT'S WITH A GRANTEE THAT WE ALREADY FUND. "**

Here's what we heard:

● Where funders often project a greater commitment to unrestricted funding under the umbrella of trust-based philanthropy, respondents described a context in which restricted funding is on the rise, increasingly leaving staff to find workarounds so that partners, movements, and grantees are less impacted by the changes.

- While most respondents described high (or increased) flexibility in grantee reporting or application processes—i.e. through whatsapp voice notes, reporting in any language, or with easily adapted timelines—nearly all interviewees similarly noted that initial proposals for new grantee consideration are by invitation-only.

- Roughly half of interviewees explained that partners and grantees are still often, even if informally, expected to adapt to the norms of the donors' core ways of working over time, even as some aspects of that work are made more flexible for specific grantee contexts.

- Without the time to experiment and learn, the stated goal of offering flexibility is dead on arrival as partners and grantees default to operating under the same motivations, mechanics, and muscle memory.

- Donors desire more activist facetime—though often in invite-only, highly curated, non-fundraising spaces.

> **"ANOTHER RESISTANCE HAS COME FROM SHIFTING RESOURCES. PEOPLE ARE WONDERING WHY WE WANT TO SHIFT MORE RESOURCES TO THE PARTNERS. NOTE THAT THERE'S A CRISIS IN THE FUNDING SPACE. THE CIVIL SPACE FUNDING IS SHRINKING AND IT'S DIFFICULT TO CONVINCE WHY WE SHOULD EQUITABLY SHARE WHAT IS LEFT. THAT'S BEEN A STRUGGLE."**

Staff-leadership-donor alignment & divides shape what gets done.
Breaking down influence and decision-making

Most interviewees we spoke to discussed their respective roles as sandwiched between top-down donor leadership structures of agenda-setting and decision-making and upward advocacy, input, and influencing (reflective of grantee, movement, or public interests). Along these lines, those we spoke to regularly engage in two different informal processes which help them navigate this in-between role:

- **Decision-mapping** | Within organizations, decision-mapping includes a scan of how (and with whom) final decisions get made.
- **Influence-mapping** | Focuses on identifying the individuals, teams, or outside trends which most influence internal decision-makers.

> **" THERE ARE DIFFERENT TYPES OF POWER— POWER DYNAMICS BETWEEN GLOBAL NORTH AND GLOBAL SOUTH GRANTEES, POWER DYNAMICS AMONG GRANTEES INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE CAPITAL, BETWEEN INTERMEDIARIES AND SMALLER OR BIGGER ORGANIZATIONS. WHOSE NAME GOES ON THE REPORTS? WHO IS DOING INTERESTING WORK BUT HAS NO TIME OR RESOURCES TO PUT THEIR NAME ON IT? "**

Both of these internal processes were described as less accessible, or not accessible at all, to outsiders including grantees and partners as they rely on informal relationships and familiarity with everyday operations inside the organization. Some noted that sometimes even they weren't clear on who final decision-makers inside their own organizations were. Peer funders were frequently named as an exception in this regard—as they often held informal knowledge from close interpersonal relationships, material or strategic information sharing, and general proximity.

66EVALUATING AND MEASURING IMPACT IS SOMETHING THAT OUR BOARD HAS BEEN REALLY FOCUSED ON FOR THE LAST TWO YEARS IN A WAY THAT SIMPLY ISN'T POSSIBLE IN THE SOCIAL JUSTICE FIELD, LIKE, WHAT THE RETURN ON INVESTMENT IS, FOR EXAMPLE.99

While some interviewees spoke broadly about 'leadership' or 'donors', most eventually specified who they meant within these categories–shared below.

"Donors"	"Leaders"
Foundations with living donors	Boards
Foundations with endowments	Individual board members
Donor collaboratives	Family members in family foundations
Donor advised funds	Foundation executive teams
Intermediary funds	Influential donors within donor consortia
Small family foundations	Outside thought leaders

Beyond definitions and approaches to informal power mapping inside their organizations, several other trends related to staff-leadership-donor alignment and divides stood out:

● Across different types of organizations, power shifting approaches and practices within them frequently differ:

- Between and across departments,
- Between staff and leadership (or boards),
- Between different staff generations (i.e. those that arrived before or after current strategy phases or leadership eras.)
- Between staff across geographies or demographic differences

> **❝ NOW THE DONORS ARE A LOT MORE INVOLVED IN WHAT WE'RE DECIDING AND WHAT WE'RE FOCUSED ON. IN THE PAST, PROGRAM STAFF TENDED TOWARD SHARING POWER WITH GRANTEES, BUT THAT'S NOW SHIFTING BACK TO DONORS. ❞**

● Leadership 'hands on' approaches to grant-related decision-making are more common than 'hands-off' approaches.

- ⅔ of program staff we spoke to described an increased sense of top-down involvement in what had previously been discretionary, responsive grant-related decision-making.
- The remaining ⅓ described the opposite: highly aligned enabling environments, with support from leadership to respond, adapt, and partner as made sense within a wide scope of the designated strategy area.

● An increasing trend toward direct engagement with governments by donors—as part of strategic theories of change or as part of fundraising–elicited highly mixed responses from philanthropic staff and insiders.

- For staff coming from or directly engaged with movements, the shift to partnering with governments–formally or informally– raised a number of political and practical concerns.
- For staff considering existing or potential resource vacuums and gaps, they often expressed government partnerships as tolerable, necessary, or anticipated tradeoffs.

● Two categories of funder groups were discussed as having unique roles in the constellation of philanthropic peer-influencing and decision-making:

- **Intermediary funds** | As holding both the power dynamics of donors (in grant-making) and of grantees (in fundraising), and whose intermediary role is in increased demand *vis a viz* localization commitments.
- **Donor advised funds, consortia, or collaboratives** | As increasingly common spaces where peer-driven donor agenda influencing and trend-setting takes place–and due to their collective budgets which far exceed those of individual foundations or programs.

● While power shifting conversations focused on funder-grantee relationships is increasingly the norm, it often remains taboo to discuss interpersonal power dynamics within organizations, particularly those rooted in geography, race, class, ethnicity, ability, or gender, etc.

Intermediary organizations and grantee-facing staff are in a continuous loop of code-switching and process gymnastics to translate between movement & grantee realities and donor ways of working.

Grantee-, program- or partner-facing staff described their roles as continuous processes of absorbing the more restrictive or structured aspects of donor reporting, information requests, and grant management—so that partners, movements, and grantees could focus less on donor protocols and more on their own work.

Although not new features of their jobs, especially at intermediary funds, some interviewees shared concern that these processes are becoming increasingly unsustainable as power shifting priorities increase while dominant approaches to organizational operation or ways of working remain the same.

> **"WHEN MONEY IS RESTRICTED, WE HAVE TO ADHERE TO THOSE RESTRICTIONS, BUT WE ALSO WANT TO MATCH FUNDS WITH GROUPS THAT ARE ALIGNED WITH THE FUNDING. THAT'S A PRETTY DELICATE MATCH-MAKING DANCE."**

Here's what it looks like in practice:

● Maintaining commitments to trust and flexibility with grantees in a climate of increasingly restricted grants requires resources, information, or alternative processes that are often unavailable.

- Reconciling framing of goals, activities, or impact between more relational norms of partner communication with donor norms of counting, strategic decision-making, or measuring.

- Negotiating conflict or tension that arises amidst ambiguity or assumptions related to the speed or types of changes underway.

> **"PROPOSAL CALLS FROM INSTITUTIONAL DONORS, THE CONDITIONS AND CRITERIA FOR THE APPLICANT ARE NOT WHAT ANY LOCAL PARTNER WILL QUALIFY FOR. IT AUTOMATICALLY KICKS OUT THE LOCAL PARTNER. IT SHOULD HAVE A BUDGET IN THREE YEARS, AND PUBLISHED ACCOUNTS INTERNATIONALLY. THINGS LIKE THAT. SOME DONORS ALLOW FOR LOCAL PARTNERS TO APPLY, BUT THE CONDITIONS ARE NOT SO HIGH, SO WE SUPPORT THE LOCAL PARTNER TO GO FOR IT. WE PUT SOME COMPONENTS IN TO ALLOW THEM."**

- The core functions of intermediary funds, in particular, are designed by and around these organizational and translational gymnastics.

- Regularly exchanging, sharing, and designing informal frameworks, templates, and strategies used to navigate these shifts with peer funders.

Localization reconstitutes, rather than shifts, donor-grantee power dynamics.

While trust and flexibility can remain somewhat vague in their application across programmatic, financial, operational, relational, and political aspects of donor-grantee relationships—localization is accompanied by more concrete, specific processes. As such, interviewees reflected frequently on the structure, progress, and dilemmas of this slice of their organization's power shifting in practice.

> **WE ARE FIRST AND FOREMOST A GRANTMAKER. THE ABILITY TO GRANT MONEY HOLDS A LOT OF POWER, WE DO A LOT TO BUILD TRUST. I DON'T KNOW HOW YOU FULLY OVERCOME SHOWING UP AT THE DOOR WITH MONEY AND MINIMIZING YOUR POWER. HOW DO YOU ACKNOWLEDGE AND OVERCOME THAT?**

Among those interviewed, localization practices within their organizations included some combination of:

- Shifting physical organizational presence or leadership across more diverse global geographies,
- Adjusting human resources and procurement processes toward more streamlined recruitment of people and vendors from diverse nationalities,
- Shifting a range of daily business or reporting practices to reflect alternative cultural, operational, and normative approaches from what are highly standardized and centralized processes at present, and;
- Alongside these administrative, operational, and legal shifts, several interviewees noted that a new series of organizational risk assessments, reputational considerations, and quiet cost-benefit calculations about misappropriation had emerged.

❝ THE OTHER THING WE DID, AFTER LANGUAGE– WE MADE TOOLS AND REPORTING TEMPLATES SHORTER, ALLOWING PROGRAM OFFICERS TO ACCEPT EXISTING MATERIALS FROM GRANTEES AS REPORTING. OBVIOUSLY, WE ALSO BEGAN HIRING GRANT OFFICERS AND STAFF FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH. ❞

Localization efforts–in some capacity–were underway in nearly all organizations represented in this mapping.

Several interviewees reflected that localization is more of a reconstitution of power than a shift in power. New power dynamics emerge all the time. New organizational anxieties arise. Logistical and administrative challenges and opportunities are continuously evolving as localization plans are realized.

Here's some of what we heard along these lines:

- Organizational toggling over whether and to what extent localization involves a transfer of assets, a transfer of operations, a transformation of culture, or some combination of the three.

- Recognizing that fast or superficial localization processes tend to privilege elites–fluent in English (where not dominantly spoken), with Northern education, and from top socioeconomic backgrounds–whose networks and experiences may be far removed from or even at odds with diverse movements, grassroots, or community organizations.

● Designing and conducting power and equity analyses of funding commitments designed to expand access to smaller or more diverse groups, though which are channeled through a more concentrated tier of intermediary funds capable of meeting legal, tax reporting, and other compliance requirements of donors.

● Acknowledging that localization efforts bring both excitement and anxiety. Excitement that organizations are moving toward more democratic or equitable versions of themselves. Anxiety, as expressed by some Northern staff, about working themselves out of a job.

" WITH MEETING CULTURE IN GENERAL, PEOPLE WHO HAVE A BETTER GRASP OF ENGLISH, BETTER ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY, OR BETTER WIFI [PARTICIPATE MORE]. GOOD LUCK GETTING A WORD IN IF ANY OF THOSE AREN'T STRONG. "

Major donor shifts are stress tests for power shifting commitments and for movement infrastructure.

Over the short stretch of six months while this mapping took place, several sector-shaking announcements or ongoing transitions lingered in the background of our conversations with philanthropic staff, leadership, and affiliates. Widespread but less discussed, these seismic shifts touch the entire sector–and as such, became central to our conversations.

The four types of structural philanthropic pivots or shifts described as having major implications for trust, transparency, infrastructure, and long-term enabling environments, are:

- Organizational restructuring
- Sunsetting programs, funding streams, issue areas, or entire organizations
- Strategy refreshes or new strategies
- Crisis-induced rapid response

> **IF WE ARE ALL HEADING TO DEFUND THE MOST PREEMINENT, YOUNG, FEMINIST GROUP IN THIS SECTOR, THEN WHERE ARE WE HEADED?**

Interviewees shared that some announcements came by surprise, some with a few weeks notice, and some a few years notice. Trust that had been built over years with partners, grantees, and movements sometimes eroded very quickly when little information and few alternatives came with these announcements. Some foundations or funds offered extensive offroading support while others suddenly reversed existing agreements. Communication, even if supportive, tended to reflect one-way announcements, or updates, from donors– rather than two-way or participatory dialogues.

Although not a funder shift, the November 2024 election of an authoritarian president in the United States—where many global human rights funders are headquartered—further sent shock waves throughout the sector as less than two weeks later, legislation threatening a broad umbrella of human rights non-profits, was introduced into the U.S. Congress.

Most interviewees expressed concern about anticipated donor pivots toward liability- and risk-averse strategies, when the times ahead call for precisely the opposite—more sector-wide scaffolding alongside expanded rapid response.

> **"WHEN DECISION-MAKERS IN A PHILANTHROPIC INSTITUTION LACK A DEPTH OF KNOWLEDGE ON WHAT THEY'RE FUNDING, A STRATEGY APPROVAL PROCESS BECOMES MORE ABOUT SUPPORTING THEM TO FEEL COMFORTABLE, AND MOVING THEM THROUGH THE PARALYSIS OF THAT DISCOMFORT, RATHER THAN SHARPENING THE STRATEGY. YOU ONLY GET THE LUXURY OF CENTERING YOUR OWN COMFORT IF YOU HAVE POWER."**

Periods of rapid, large-scale, solidarity-oriented innovation and power-sharing come during and after crises. These can be long-term changes, though are often temporary.

While abrupt strategic or operational shifts by funders were frequently discussed as destabilizing or trust-eroding—one specific area stood out as an exception.

Crisis periods were described by most interviewees as times when donor rapid response mechanisms, philanthropic adoption of a wider range of operating norms, resource distribution, and reporting practices—along with new operational structures and power-sharing arrangements, were set in motion. Examples of COVID-19 induced rapid process restructuring or changes to business-as-usual operations were shared by ⅔ of interviewees. Another common example came from U.S. foundations and intermediary funds citing what the Black Lives Matter-led cultural and racial reckoning of 2020 had set in motion—as it contended with centuries of the crisis of institutional racism and related political violence. Various examples of leadership transitions, the formation of new committees, and meaningful adjustments to decision-making hierarchies, etc—along with a chorus of power shifting commitments—swiftly followed.

> **COVID-19 WAS ONE OF THOSE THINGS THAT HIT EVERYBODY, AFFECTING EVERYONE NO MATTER WHAT LEVEL YOU ARE AT—WORKING-, MIDDLE-, OR UPPER-CLASS. I THINK IT KICK-STARTED THIS SHIFT, AS ALSO HAPPENED WITH [THE MURDER OF] GEORGE FLOYD. IT HAS GONE BACK BECAUSE COVID ISN'T AFFECTING EVERYONE ANYMORE.**

Rapid response protocols and funds were cited across most interviews as some of the most celebrated funder innovations as expressed by partners and grantees. These rapid response budgets have been essential infrastructure for movements navigating political and natural disasters alike. Foundation representatives we spoke with reflected on intermediary funds as most equipped to operationalize rapid response efforts and resources during crises, although several also lamented recent reductions in these rapid response funds at their respective organizations.

More broadly, while some of the most dramatic shifts and innovations started during or in response to crises—for both grantees and donors—only some remained as permanent practice. Interviewees wondered whether and how long-term infrastructure could be leveraged from these rapid, and sometimes, radical shifts.

One question ahead for human rights philanthropy is whether these crisis periods induce temporary shifts, create invisible movement and resource distribution infrastructure that can be sustained between crises, lay the groundwork for alternative infrastructure, or whether they are merely perpetual stopgap measures.

> **THE PROCESS OF GIVING OUT MONEY HAS CHANGED. TRADITIONALLY, FUNDERS HAVE BEEN SLOW AND WITH LOADS OF HOOPS. FUNDERS ADAPTED QUICKLY DURING COVID AND WERE ABLE TO GET MONEY OUT FAST. THEY HAVE SHOWN THAT THEY CAN DO THIS, BUT WE NEED TO HAVE CONVERSATIONS ON HOW THIS CAN BE THE NORM AND NOT REVERT TO TRADITIONAL WAYS OF DOING BUSINESS.**

MAPPING POWER DYNAMICS *INSIDE* HUMAN RIGHTS PHILANTHROPY

What next?
Key collective asks
& opportunities

Commissioned by The Fund for Global Human Rights
Anna Levy and Nonso Jideofor

What next? Key collective asks & opportunities

Whether considered for future advocacy, research agendas, strategic planning, or sector-wide collective action, we've assembled a few of the key collective wants, asks, and opportunities, which stood out most most in relation to what comes next.

1   **Desire for anticipatory crisis frameworks** | As the innovations and rapid responses that triggered numerous commitments post-2020 began to hit their limits in 2024—whether due to donor fatigue or unwelcome solidarity for crises like the one in Gaza—there is a strong desire for anticipatory sector-wide crisis templates which build on movement needs and realities along with inducing greater power sharing with and transparency from funders regarding strategic and operational decisions.

2   **Demand for independent analysis and journalism** |Philanthropy insiders welcome more regular journalistic, research, or independent analysis of the less visible or less publicly discussed organizational and sector-wide dynamics related to power shifting commitments as living processes.

3   **Leverage collective voice of staff across organizations** | Deep familiarity with the everyday mechanics, influencing, and decision-making practices shaping human rights philanthropy—is concentrated across mid-level staff operating on the assumption that these trends are unique to their organization rather than reflective of sector norms.

4   **Develop strategies for influencing in emergent donor coalitions or consortia**| They have unique positions of power, trend-setting, and agenda-shaping within the sector—and are on the rise as philanthropic entities reassess their roles and strategies within a changing political, economic, and information landscape.

5 **Monitoring power shifting and power reinforcing practices** | Although a robust and practical range of power shifting templates are in use, simpler templates that take internal stock of both 'power shifting' and 'power reinforcing' practices as routine exercises can create different incentives for organizational behavior change. Alternatively, rapid internal assessments might solicit the top five power shifting bottlenecks and the top five power amplifying assets as experienced by staff, grantees, partners, or peers.

6 **Sharing internal research and/or assessments as public goods** | Internal evaluations, studies, or assessments related to power shifting commitments and practices are already conducted within organizations, with lessons relevant across the sector, though which often remain internal organizational—or even team-specific—documents.

7 **Developing *power reconstitution* vs. *power shifting* frameworks** | Most power shifting arcs or processes reconstitute, rather than transfer, power. What if all power shifting commitments or processes normalize explicitly naming new or adjusted power dynamics at each changing phase, rather than implying a linear transfer from one to the other over time?

8 **Build muscles for internal-external alliances beyond strategy or programmatic consultation** | Formal and informal cohorts have formed to champion coordinated approaches to change both at their respective organizations and across the sector. How might these groups play a more consistently public role—separate from any specific organization—in both decoding and reimagining some of the more opaque or institutionally fixed aspects of human rights philanthropy?