

# Executive Summary: Amplifying Movement Knowledge for Philanthropy



Social movements are a fundamental pathway of democratic engagement and expression and are the backbone of large-scale social and political change. Though many social movements have been building for years, current events and increasing inequality are catalyzing new waves of movement activity. This surge in movement development provides new opportunities for philanthropy to expand and critically assess its support of social movements.

However, social movements are not well understood. Funders are challenged to identify the unique movement strategies and actors that need support and to provide that support without co-opting, directing, or undermining movement activity.

With the long-term goal of enhancing philanthropic understanding and support of social movements, Innovation Network's Social Movement Learning Project team undertook research to

*develop a shared language and understanding of social movements and design practical evaluation tools and approaches.*

Conversations with 40 funders, movement-builders, and evaluators and a review of 80 articles illuminated the aspects of movements that pose particularly thorny challenges for funders. These distinct characteristics of movements require unique support, but, too often, philanthropic support falls short of what movements need.

## Research Questions

*How do social movements relate to activities such as organizing and advocacy?*

*How do you know that a movement is healthy?*

*How do you know that a movement is successful?*



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# Movements Need Unique and Diverse Philanthropic Support



## ***Movements are unique types of social change with complex ecosystems***

Social movements have long been used in the U.S. and throughout the world to affect far-reaching changes in society, the economy, politics, or culture. Movements are distinct from other types of social change and are made up of complex ecosystems of organizations, individuals, and networks that engage in long-term collective action to bring about large-scale social change. While their scale and complexity is what gives social movements their power, it makes them difficult to comprehend and poses a challenge for funders whose funding cycles, available assets, and internal grantmaking policies and procedures constrain their ability to fund movements at scale.

**Implications:** Funders generally understand that they alone are unable to fund the whole of a movement. However, funders are often challenged to differentiate movements from other types of social change; to identify the movement actors, strategies, and stages that are most in need of philanthropic support; to justify that support to their Board members and other gatekeepers; and to know how to give that support without creating competition and conflict in the ecosystem.



## ***Movements are often driven by emerging and non-traditional actors***

Just as a single funder cannot fund a whole movement, a single organization or individual is also unable to drive a movement alone. Movement success depends on the collective action and commitment of a wide range of diverse actors working together in pursuit of the movement goals. As a result, movement activity is often driven by a decentralized network of organizations and individuals, with different factions of the network rising to the fore at different points to drive specific aspects of the movement. While the actors at the forefront of movements may sometimes be well-established organizations or charismatic leaders, more often the drivers of movement activity are non-traditional actors, including new and emerging organizations, affected communities, and unaffiliated activist leaders. These actors are often better positioned to be the face and heart of a social movement and to lead disruptive and polarizing tactics.

**Implications:** Funders struggle to identify non-traditional and emerging movement actors and to overcome institutional barriers and restrictions that limit support to less established organizations and individuals.

## **...but Funding Movements is Challenging**



### ***Movements deploy diverse, sometimes unconventional strategies and tactics***

At the heart of movements is the desire to upend the status quo and challenge existing gaps in the distribution of wealth, privilege, rights, and power. Social movements create a crisis for the institutions and individuals that prop up the status quo by building widespread public awareness and support for movement demands. To do this, movements deploy a diversity of strategies and tactics to influence, build, and persuade. At its peak, a movement may employ intentionally disruptive, polarizing, and sometimes illegal mass actions to capture public attention and support. However, in later stages, movements may draw on more traditional strategies such as advocacy or civic engagement to institutionalize the movement's demands. Movements benefit from autonomy and flexibility to respond to changing conditions and to employ a diverse arsenal of strategies and tactics.

**Implications:** Too often risk aversion and internal barriers and restrictions limit funders' ability to support a wide range of movement strategies—particularly the more controversial strategies—or to provide flexible, unrestricted, long-term funding.



### ***Movement success is difficult to articulate***

Oftentimes, the success of social change initiatives is defined by whether or not the initiative resulted in direct, concrete changes, such as policies or reforms. However, movements have long time horizons and pursue an indirect path to social change. The primary focus of movements, particularly in their early stages, is building public support and awareness for the movement cause. A critical mass of public support is essential to achieving the large-scale goals that movements seek. As such, movements may go for long time periods without achieving pragmatic, concrete policies and reforms. By conventional measures of success in social change initiatives, this may make movements appear as though they are ineffective.

**Implications:** This poses a challenge for funders who face pressure from their Boards and foundation leadership to prove the effectiveness and impact of their grantmaking. These funders have a difficult time articulating the progress and success of movement activity and may cut off their support to movement actors too soon in favor of other initiatives that can deliver more immediate, concrete changes.

## What Funders Say They Need

To address the barriers and challenges that constrain philanthropic support to social movements, funders expressed the need for practical evaluation tools and approaches to better understand social movement development and impact and to identify and justify new funding strategies.

- >> Funders need better ***movement literacy*** to help them gain clarity about how movements are distinct from other types of social change and ***to understand the ecosystem of actors, strategies, and tactics*** that are typically deployed during the different stages of a movement.
- >> Funders need information about the ***spectrum of opportunities to support movements and tools and metrics to help them plan, identify, and justify support*** for a wider range of movement strategies.
- >> Too often movement success is judged by measures that do not adequately capture the unique progress and transformational gains that they have achieved. Funders need ***a new frame and measures to assess the success and progress*** of movement activity to help them justify and maintain long-term support to social movements.

In response to these needs, the Social Movement Learning Project is developing evaluation guidance and tools to enhance philanthropy's understanding of social movements. This guidance will include a tool for mapping the social movement ecosystem and corresponding funding interventions, as well as metrics and indicators to facilitate philanthropic investment in movement strategies.

## The Social Movement Learning Project



*The Social Movement Learning Project is a field-building research and evaluation project by Innovation Network. Team members include Katie Fox, Laura Lehman, Briana Rusin, and Johanna Morariu. For more information, please contact Johanna Morariu, Director, [jmorariu@innonet.org](mailto:jmorariu@innonet.org).*



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