

# Philanthropy, Power and Radical Change

## Practicing radical change in philanthropy: why we're looking at it and what it means

On 3 November 2020, Ariadne and SIX invited 23 philanthropic organisations from Europe, North America, Africa and Asia to exchange practical examples, lessons and tensions in their work funding radical, structural and deep change, and **to uncover practical, concrete examples that benchmark the possibilities to increase this work within philanthropy and civil society in local and global contexts going forwards.**

## What is (and isn't) radical - context matters (but it is not an excuse not to act)

Our context shapes what we think is or is not radical. By being exposed to funders in different contexts, we expand our understanding of what is 'radical' and reframe what is possible in our own organisations and countries. There are different ways to be radical depending on:

- **Organisation structure:** from corporate to publicly funded, to family foundation to private foundations, each context introduces different perspectives on what is radical or structural change for them.
- **The scale at which an organisation works:** For some organisations, funding grassroots, activist work is radical. For others, investing in changing the economic model upon which philanthropy sits is radical.
- **Political environments and safety:** In many unstable, hostile political environments, the risk and insecurity caused by political action — or perceived political action — can be great. Especially when there is a threat to safety, radicalness might need to be performed through actions which are quiet and under the radar.

**“What feels radical in my organisation is suggesting there are multiple ways of doing things. There are different ways to be radical.”**

## In radical work, the personal and the systemic collide.

The word 'radical' comes from the Latin, 'to root', so it is important to root our versions of 'radical' in stories from our own lives, to honestly explore what radical means within our families, in our identities, or the communities within which we live. For many, being wholly oneself is a radical act, in the ways their identities are scrutinised, challenged or oppressed by hegemonic norms and systemic discrimination. What we live out in our daily lives plays out in the systemic and vice versa.

These experiences play out within the organisations and structures in which we work. In our organisations, what seems radical at first may be confronting the barriers to doing truly transformative work in philanthropy, e.g. patriarchal culture, white saviour mentalities, roles and tensions in organisational cultures and geographies, investments and endowments, who's on the board and governance, and more.

Organisational radical action includes...

**Playing different roles in an organisation** - Knowing the terrain and how deeply orthodoxy works sets up the context of what radical action is. *Is change itself a radical concept?* Small changes *can be* radical in very bureaucratic organizations.

**Devolving power** - When making structural changes by giving more power to grantees, local communities and other organisations to make decisions, you also have to support capacity building and agency. Communities don't have all the knowledge and tools they need.

**Embracing the language of abolition** - Philanthropy is a bandaid on an oppressive economic system, built on colonialism, and we must ask what the role of philanthropy is both within and outside these economic systems. Being radical is to confront the ongoing, historical inequities and systems built on privilege, which often build our endowments, and dismantling those systems by actually leaning into the language of abolition.

**Learning and unlearning all the time** - Radical, structural or deep change looks like unlearning norms and mindsets, as well as as relearning justice-centred work — making space for reparation, healing and reconciliation.

**Paying attention to investments** - Where relevant, foundations must look not just at what they fund, but at the endowments and investment structures which sustain their work. How can these be used to structure change and not harm?

**Recognising blindspots and bias** - Funders need to widen their own fields of vision and unlearn their calculations of risk. Engaging in 'risk' typically looks like white-led innovation, while decades long, community-led, BIPOC-led, grassroots work is 'too risky'. Questioning notions of what is considered radical or risky is a crucial starting point to fund deep, structural work.

**Keeping radical proposals radical** - Often, radical proposals get watered down through bureaucratic or governance filters, like boards and trustees. The bias is to serve lowest common denominators rather than highest-order impact; yet philanthropy is the 'free money' with the fewest limits to pursue this path. Philanthropy should be able to engage in the necessary radical work that tackles the weaknesses our current crises have revealed in our system.

**Engaging with politics** - In stable political environments and geographies, the meaning of 'politics' has been reduced to political parties, erasing and oppressing the possibility for radical action. By choosing to "depoliticise", you risk not fully engaging with the politics around social and environmental issues, or the radical action required to address them.

## Inspiration - 10 practical examples of radical change within philanthropy

Funders are already applying radical change principles in their work by:

- Reframing what foundations are required to give as a minimum, not maximum, share of the value of the endowment (don't follow the herd; set standards and raise the bar)
- Devolving priorities and funds spreads risk through partners and other channels on the ground to redistribute agency and power (taking a horizontal approach)
- Using different tactics to challenge the orthodoxy from the inside out (i.e. how can you become a “trojan mouse” or an “infiltrator”?)
- Publishing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) reports, and actually using them to spur challenging conversations internally and change grant making practices
- Using the window opened by the current global pandemic to advocate relational, trust-based philanthropy as the way forward. Allowing for emergence and for people to build trust with each other and with funders
- Policy and technical change are not the only theories of change; behavioural and cultural change is important too
- Boycotting agencies if they operate from “white saviour man syndrome” or patriarchal and white supremacist power dynamics
- Confronting the painful legacy of wealth accumulation within family foundations and bringing the board along for that learning journey - learning how to apply philanthropic strategy to repair the harm that has been done
- Calling out cases of doublespeak in which the rhetoric of inclusivity is strategically and insincerely employed for gain, both within philanthropy and politics
- Giving shares rather than giving grants as a way to begin to make reparations.

### What needs further investigation

This is the beginning of a journey and exploration around the continued *practice, capacity and ways to apply learning around radical change*. We believe it is important to take people out of their comfort zones, to meet people from different contexts and inspire them with practical examples, new methods, and different ways of working. We need to support foundations to question what they are doing and find new approaches and methods to help them do radical work, rather than blindly following trends.

We need to invest in ‘third spaces’ in which philanthropic organisations from different contexts can safely and sincerely deconstruct their colonial legacies, acknowledge the ways in which their concepts of risk are deeply racialised, find new ways of distributing wealth outside of current capitalist models, and challenge groupthink around issues like spending behaviour.

Going forwards, we will create more learning exchanges for individuals in global foundations to ask big questions and to engage critically and authentically in the tensions, challenges and changes of our time.

This was a poem Kelsey Spitz-Dietrich wrote in summary of our online learning exchange.

## Radical free thinking

Freedom to break away from the herd  
And find we are not free-range,  
But accountable to the grass, the sun, the Earth  
And all the other animals and life that sustain us;

To find that we are fat on stolen land.  
How do we hold our herd accountable?  
Do we shear off our coats and stand naked  
And brave in the wind,  
Giving our wool to others for warmth?

Do we change the herd; who is counted among us?  
Or disband and reorganize?

The fields we choose to graze in,  
To lend the strength of our teeth,  
Are conservative, fenced in, controlled,  
Well-fertilized.  
We are the ones responsible for eating the grass  
To make the field's wealth look less;  
To hide the riches beneath our hooves  
And to distract from the wind-brushed scrub  
Left outside the fences.

### *Radical self-care*

We ourselves as individuals are not actually the sheep  
But the herders  
Can we throw off our cloaks and see each other  
And look out over the field at the sheep?  
Can we see them? Can we see the fences?  
Can we break the fences,  
And mend our hands,  
And break them again  
To take the herd out to the scrub  
And learn a new symbiosis  
A new relationship  
And look back to find  
The fields were just a dream?