

Philanthropy and Progressive Social and Environmental Movements



Context

Social movements play a vital role in advocating for social and environmental justice. While the complex relationships between philanthropic actors and social movements are well-documented, we know little about how these dynamics are evolving in a context marked by the rise of reactionary politics and the digitalization of activism. Focusing on the Quebec context, this [research project](#) provides an overview of the key issues shaping these relationships and highlights the challenges, tensions, and opportunities for collaboration between philanthropy and social movements.

The relationship between grantmaking foundations and social movements is marked by a fundamental tension:

Empowerment

- Financial resources
- Institutional legitimacy
- Access to decision-makers
- Organizational resilience



Control

- Agendas imposed by donors
- NGO-ization / depoliticization
- Moderation of tactics
- Resource dependence

While philanthropic actors often presents their actions as aligned with social movements, foundations can become grantees' unwitting guardian by imposing their own frameworks, governance models, and strategic priorities.

Structural Tensions

NGO-ization

The professionalization of movements and movement actors within formal NGOs risks depoliticizing them: priority is given to donor relations rather than grassroots mobilization.

Philanthrocapitalism

The focus on making philanthropy more efficient and results-driven by importing business strategies, practices, and metrics into grantmaking can conflict with social movement tactics.

Political Risks

Under conservative governments, foundations are retreating to "safe" programs—abandoning social movements just when they need them most.

Movement Fragmentation

Funding scattered across different causes creates competing interest groups, weakening the ability to form coalitions and pursue broader collective demands.

Emerging Practices

Trust-Based Philanthropy

Unconditional, multi-year funding focused on the priorities of beneficiary communities.

Participatory Grantmaking

Involvement of beneficiary organizations in decisions regarding the allocation of funds.

Decolonizing Philanthropy

Redistributing power within the funding ecosystem; challenging white saviorism.

Investment Alignment

Investment portfolios aligned with a foundation's mission; eliminating the contradiction between endowments and social objectives.

Movement Autonomy

Pooling resources, self-funding, and rejecting conditional funding to preserve the capacity for disruption.

Three Illustrative Cases of Philanthropic Engagement



Feminist Movements

From the 1970s onward, philanthropic foundations have increasingly supported feminist movements, shifting from a focus on women's rights to broader gender equality and systemic change. Since the 1990s, major foundations have provided critical funding for feminist advocacy, organizational capacity, and policy reform — even as this funding has raised concerns about donor influence and power imbalances. More recently, feminist philanthropy has emphasized addressing structural inequalities, highlighting the role of gender-inclusive approaches in strengthening democracy, peacebuilding, and social transformation.

Key resources provided by foundations: Funding for advocacy; legal defence; public education; reproductive rights; LGBTQIA+ rights; grassroots organizing; feminist infrastructure.



Racial Justice Movements

Philanthropic engagement with racial justice movements is shaped by persistent racial inequalities caused by the racial wealth gap, institutional racism, and underinvestment in racialized communities. Philanthropic foundations have helped address these injustices by mobilizing resources to support racialized communities and institutions, while also aligning their investment practices with their equity missions. Beyond grantmaking, philanthropy is increasingly called upon to reflect on its own practices, power structures, and investments to ensure alignment with racial justice goals.

Key resources provided by foundations: Support for Black-led, Indigenous-led and racialized organizations; community organizing; legal advocacy; leadership development; reparative investment.



Climate Justice Movements

The relationship between philanthropy and climate justice movements has grown in importance as the climate crisis has intensified. Philanthropic foundations had supported these movements by funding advocacy, convening diverse stakeholders, influencing environmental governance, and helping shape climate policy agendas. Foundations' ability to mobilize resources over extended periods and foster collaboration positions them as important catalysts for climate action. However, philanthropic funding has often favoured large, established organizations over grassroots movements, prompting calls for more participatory, community-led approaches that better reflect the priorities of climate justice advocates.

Key resources provided by foundations: Resources for legal defence; Indigenous land defence; public communication; community organizing; research; movement infrastructure.

Risks of Co-optation

- Professionalization
- Donor-driven agendas
- Depoliticization
- Preference for “empowerment” language over structural feminist struggle

- Moderation of anti-racist claims
- Pressure to soften race-explicit language
- Reproduction of white power structures
- Respectability politics and funder control

- Preference for technocratic or market-based climate solutions
- Avoidance of anti-extractive politics
- Contradiction between grants and foundation investments

Autonomy Strategies Developed by Movements

- Trust-based funding
- Participatory grantmaking
- Feminist funds
- Movement-led agendas
- Unrestricted support
- Intersectional organizing

- Community-controlled institutions
- Reparative funding models
- Mission-aligned investment
- Refusal of conditional funding
- Coalition building

- Divestment campaigns
- Frontline-led organizing
- Indigenous leadership
- Grassroots climate justice networks
- Movement autonomy from corporate climate agendas