

Philanthropy & Funding

How Movement-Accountable Intermediaries Can Change Philanthropy

Leaders of several intermediary organizations share how they envision their role within—and how they ultimately hope to upend—the philanthropic landscape.

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In November 2022, Mackenzie Scott announced she had given almost \$2 billion to 343 organizations, many of which are *funds*, as she calls them. In 2021, The Libra Foundation, a family foundation based in San Francisco, announced \$10 million to *community accountable intermediaries*, naming the significance of intermediaries that prioritize trusting relationships with their

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philanthropic collaborations, including those that pool or align resources from multiple donors and regrant towards a shared goal.”

Despite this recognition from large, influential funders and institutions, the roles of intermediary organizations are often opaque to those outside of them—funders and grantees alike. With only a handful of **published articles** describing their methods and impact, there are significant knowledge gaps about how and why these models exist, let alone what they could be called.

In light of that, we are sharing what this model means to us right now. We represent organizations committed to resourcing grassroots organizations led by and for those building movements for justice. We are dedicated to transforming how capital flows to communities that are disenfranchised by white supremacy, racial capitalism, colonialism, and heteropatriarchy—the communities on whose backs philanthropy has built its wealth.

We do not aim to represent every organization that plays an intermediary role. Nor do we represent a complete list of organizations that share our philosophy—there are so many more that we are and would love to be in community with. We hope to begin a conversation by shedding light on what our organizational structures are, why they are shaped that way, and our aspirations for the future. We are doing this as a group because we know that with greater collaboration our collective power will grow. All the issues we work on are interconnected—we need each other to win.

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Born *From* Movements, Not Just For

What even is an intermediary? There is no common definition because we can play many different roles and serve different purposes.

A 2017 [article](#) in Peak Grantmaking reported “Intermediaries are mission-driven organizations that aim to more effectively link donors (individuals, foundations, and corporations) with organizations and individuals delivering charitable services.” Meanwhile, a more recent essay in *Nonprofit Quarterly* on the “changing role” of intermediaries asserts that “A new generation of leaders is emerging in communities of color that asserts its autonomy from traditional organizational structures and directly challenges conventional philanthropic thinking and practices.”

In the social justice movement space, community “intermediary funds,” as we understand them, are organizations that help allocate funding to people-powered activism. These organizations came to life *from* movements, and our ultimate aim is to reduce philanthropic infrastructure. We exist because movements have asked us to help move money more effectively; to embed more equitable grantmaking practices across the sector; and, ultimately, to work philanthropy out of existence. Our organizations were not born as tax shelters or as tools to manipulate financial markets and social status. Our organizations were born from asking community leaders “*what do you need?*” before deciding whether or not we should exist.

The work we fund is led by those disproportionately impacted by systemic oppression, including, but not always limited to, Black,

underfunded identity groups. Internally, our organizations are majority Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC) with diverse lived and professional experience, and our leadership reflects the communities we serve and/or decades of experience doing values-aligned work.

For example, the **Fund for Trans Generations** (FTG, housed at Borealis Philanthropy) plays a critical role in providing resources to trans-led groups that have had limited access to national funding streams. As **Funders for LGBTQ Issues's most recent 2021 tracking report** reveals, “funding for Black trans organizations has decreased both in terms of dollars and as a share of overall LGBTQ funding” despite Black trans women and femmes experiencing alarmingly concentrated levels of violence. One of us (Aldita Gallardo), as FTG’s former program officer, witnessed the significant impact multi-year, general support grants can have on emerging, BIPOC trans-led organizations. **Acorn Center for Restoration and Freedom**, an organization supported by FTG, has been able to expand their community-led healing and care work and begun to steward a small plot of land in rural Georgia for Black trans organizers seeking sanctuary and rest. FTG supporting Acorn, and groups like it, provides support that previously did not exist in the philanthropic sector, or existed only nominally. In addition, when a funder is explicitly focused on an issue of a grantee and foundation staff share similar identities, it can interrupt traditional paternalistic “charity” dynamics with a model that’s based on mutual care.

Our organizations raise every dollar in our budgets. We have no endowments sitting in the stock market. While foundations are only required to distribute five percent of their holdings each year, we deploy between 50 and 80 percent. Much of the rest goes to additional support and programs that augment our grantmaking (more on that below). Because we believe our role is

organizations leave within the first year or two from their donation date.

Expanding Philanthropic Reach and Access

A critical mission element of movement-accountable intermediaries is to circumvent the unjust design of institutional philanthropy. Although replication in a system can be important for building resilience, in a system with such power imbalances, we try to minimize duplicative efforts and build symbiotically. We are, and ought to be, discerning about when and where philanthropic infrastructure is necessary. When possible, we guide funders to move money directly to organizations on the ground, rather than through us.

CLIMA Fund's pivotal report, *Soil to Sky: Climate Solutions that Work*, demonstrates the power, scope, and efficacy of grassroots solutions in confronting the most challenging problems of our time. Yet funders' tendency to fund what is proximate and that which reinforces their **underlying assumptions** leads to an **immense funding gap** around the transformative strategies that are commensurate with the polycrisis. Addressing biases in philanthropy that perpetuate funding inequities is critical and include:

- **Access:** Many BIPOC and caste-oppressed groups have limited relationships with people in institutional philanthropy. Structural racism has excluded these people and movements from accessing much-needed dollars and much-needed relationships, a problematic trend that is exacerbated by a word-of-mouth, networking-based culture. Philanthropy can be a closed box—too often an

- **Misconceptions about capacity and lack of trust:**
Unrestricted net assets of **Black-led organizations are 76 percent smaller than their white-led counterparts.** Despite funder misconceptions, grassroots movements have significant capacity to absorb real funding. Just the organizations of the co-authors could move billions to transformative movement work if given the resources. For example, that's why we're seeing a push for things like **endowing Black social change organizations.**
- **Negligence:** Big funders often label the issues and strategies that need the most support, like reparations, Palestinian liberation, supporting sex workers, or Indigenous land back efforts as “risky.” Yet, these are the groups that are amplifying the boldest calls to action most aligned with what is necessary for a true multiracial democracy, gender equality, and a liveable planet. Meanwhile, the majority of foundation funding continues to support work that maintains the status quo.

Funds like CLIMA, a collaboration among four public foundations that work together to provide a continuum of support to grassroots organizations, make it easy for larger philanthropies to move grants to a diversity of groups worldwide by building and holding deep relationships with those groups. They manage the administration, scoping, vetting, planning, and evaluation of thousands of grants. Larger funders, which often do not have the infrastructure and relationships to reach grassroots organizations, can invest in intermediary funds to learn from and partner with local, regional, and global movements.

Agility and Durability in Times of Crisis



intermediaries can serve as critical movement infrastructure in these moments.

Emergent Fund, a queer women of color and movement-led participatory grantmaker resources exactly this kind of rapid response and emergent organizing led by frontline Black, Indigenous, and people of color with trust-based, no-strings-attached grants. For example, Emergent Fund was among the first in the field to resource abolitionist organizing behind Stop Cop City and Defend Atlanta Forest, the popular movement to stop the destruction of a large swathe of the Weelaunee Forest and the construction of the largest police training facility in the US. The Stop Cop City movement, as a Brookings Institute report describes, is “the latest struggle in a larger movement” to combat the disproportionate and compounding harms caused by “**the relationship between place, policing, and climate.**”

In addition, Emergent Fund has fundraised and mobilized over a half million unrestricted dollars to Palestinian, Muslim, and Jewish organizers demanding #CeasefireNow. Along with funding, they hosted a **Vision Change Win** safety and security training with allied funders and they pushed to normalize courageous philanthropic support for Palestinian solidarity as an initial leading signatory of the **Funders For a Ceasefire Now** open letter and with their own “**Let Gaza Live**” statement. Philanthropy has **notoriously been silent on the issue of Palestine**, and in this time of increased pain and suffering, supporting the safety and belonging of Palestinians, Israelis, Muslims, and Jews alike matters more than ever. Intermediaries like Emergent Fund are better positioned than institutional funders, in their relationships as well as their funding mechanisms, to move capital fast when our movements need it most, with agility and durability top of mind.

We know our best resources are each other, and that's why our organizations put relationships first. We deeply value co-creation and collaboration with our grantee partners, our philanthropic peers, and each other, and that's the foundation of everything we do related to grantmaking *and* additional programs, including capacity building and technical assistance efforts. We know that resourcing movements means going above and beyond cutting a check.

Comparatively, private philanthropy too often does not invest in relationship building and has approached capacity building with a one-size-fits-all approach. In fact, many off-the-shelf capacity-building efforts in the US **have been harmful**, with examples including being inaccessible to nonprofits serving communities of color and pushing tools, workshops, and resources designed by white consultants for white-led, mainstream nonprofits. Outside the US, capacity-building grants tend to perpetuate paternalistic tendencies in restricted grantmaking and further limit the core funding grassroots groups need.

Led by two veteran women of color in the documentary sector, **Color Congress**, by contrast, operates two grant programs and a free **membership program** to people of color-led and -serving documentary organizations. An unrestricted grant program provides one-time grants to documentary organizations that provide vital resources to documentarians of color, while the second grant program is a member-driven field-building fund that resources the membership's collective needs and ambitions. In 2022, the fund allowed member organizations to shape a resource menu of **technical assistance offerings** they would benefit from the most. It is a horizontal leadership model that decenters dependency on program staff, cultivates collaboration over competition among members, and also stretches support dollars further. It also ensures that all 100+ member

this fund will be deployed to resource cultural, political, or economic interventions advanced by the members to build their collective power.

Liberation Ventures offerings also go beyond the check. In addition to mobilizing millions (they just announced their third grantmaking round, **\$3.4M to 44 Black majority reparations organizations**), they convened the **Reparations Narrative Lab**, a community of practice across the reparations and racial justice movement. The aim: supporting organizations across the reparations movement to build public support for reparations through four key pillars: to learn, create, broadcast, and immerse people with ideas that open their minds to reparations. Plus, this year alone they have stood up a steering committee of Black women to co-create a grantmaking strategy for the reparations movement, as well as sponsored a diverse array of opportunities including restorative residencies with **Windcall Institute**, a forthcoming fundraising cohort learning, stipends to attend conferences and events, and more.

Our organizations are well positioned to provide this support because our north stars are the movements we were born from. Our relationships are rooted in a shared commitment to a mutual vision—we “answer” to movements, not to trustees or market forces.

Navigating Positional Power From Gatekeeping to Gate-Opening

Are intermediaries gatekeepers? How can intermediaries avoid gatekeeping? These are essential questions with which all intermediaries invested in transparency and accountability need to contend. As “connectors” we are positioned as peers on one hand and holding power on the other. As movements build

breed scarcity and competition, and intermediaries can work to confront these dynamics by continually focusing on opening—and ultimately demolishing—philanthropy’s gates.

Gate opening involves creative action. Private philanthropy is too often concerned with acceptability, remaining silent on issues out of fear of being “too radical” or potentially upsetting its largely white, pedigreed boards. **Third Wave Fund** has been pushing the philanthropic sector on what is “acceptable” since the early 1990s by supporting BIPOC feminists on the fringes of society. In 2018, they launched the **Sex Worker Giving Circle** because sex workers are best positioned to confront and transform the oppressive conditions of their own lives.

Intermediaries have, can, and should use our positional power to fund the issues that mainstream philanthropy has ignored.

For our organizations, accountability and consideration of power are guiding principles of how we operate. Most importantly, we must operate with transparency by cultivating active communication with the movement groups we serve. There are so many ways an organization can practice these values, some examples are:

- **Relationships.** We can directly connect our movement partner with other funding opportunities and those with structural power that might support their aims.
- **Sharing speaking invites and opportunities:** When we get asked to speak or when we propose public events, we include the leaders we support, either to join us or to go instead of us. And we can pay their way.
- **Annual feedback and report-back mechanisms:** We regularly ask our community to give us feedback and we share that feedback, with a plan to address concerns. We

- **Strategy co-creation processes:** Accountable intermediaries can test their hypotheses with their movement partners and adjust based on their input. We share how and why we're going in a certain direction and what collaborations are necessary to achieve shared goals.
- **Representation in governance structures:** We engage movement partners in the governance of our organizations, including staff, board, and advisory roles. For example, [Native Voices Rising](#) engages Community Reviewers, a community of national Native leaders and activists who have decision-making power over the fund's grantmaking. These positions are compensated and they receive onboarding and training on how to meaningfully review grants. Most importantly, they operate by consensus-based decision-making, and they carry a deep sense of relational responsibility similar to how relatives help take care of each other.
- **Co-authorship:** We write articles together and incorporate examples from organizations we support. Liberation Ventures recently co-authored [this SSIR article](#) with one of their movement partners.
- **Participatory grantmaking:** We can create structures to enable movement partners to make the decisions about the how, where, and what of money flows. For example, since its inception in 2016, the Fund for Trans Generation [makes decisions through a participatory grantmaking process](#), led by a seven-member advisory committee to ensure trans community involvement and accountability.

Growing With Boldness

With our organizations sitting between the foundation and movement worlds, we serve as translators—of the contradictions



with the sectors we bridge. And, with **\$1.5 trillion dollars in US philanthropy**, we serve an important role in ensuring dollars move to the furthest reaches of our complex global movement ecosystem.

As philanthropy grows, it is up to us to take bigger risks to influence funders. We have a responsibility to give private philanthropy hard feedback—whether it’s demanding the reduction of paperwork, calling out racial bias, or refusing philanthropic manipulation of our strategies.

Our influence also comes in what we model. Movement-accountable intermediaries need to take time to build organizations that reflect our politics and values; ensure transparency in how we steward resources; and invest in a work culture that is spacious, joyful, and healing-centered.

Ultimately, our vision is not a philanthropic sector dominated by movement-accountable intermediaries. Rather, we see our work as facilitating the transformation necessary to move real money to social movements and to dismantle the way philanthropy operates today. It is in this transformation that this institution becomes obsolete—because we will have created a society in which our people live freely, with the resources, community, and love we really need.

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Read more stories by Sonya Childress, Sahar Driver, Aldita Amaru Gallardo, Jennie Goldfarb, Allistair Mallillin, Lindley



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BY Beth Bengtson

ON April 18, 2024 01:04 PM

Thank you for this article - it totally aligns with our vision of the world here at Working for Women and why we came into being. Thanks for letting us know we are not alone and that others support this direction of funding.

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