

Philanthropy & Funding

A New Model of Collaborative Philanthropy

A new effort called Co-Impact is bringing together donors from around the world to better identify, align, and support opportunities for systems-level change.

By [Olivia Leland](#) | Nov. 15, 2017

Today, all over the globe, we have a generation of remarkable social change leaders. They are proving it's possible to make progress against global challenges, at the individual and community-level, and are now pivoting to focus on solving these problems at scale in deeper partnership with government, other NGOs, and the private sector.

We also have more philanthropists with more resources than ever before, many of whom share a strong aspiration for massive and enduring impact. As the *New York Times* recently noted, “Many new philanthropists appear less interested in naming a business school after themselves than in changing the world.” The number of billionaires worldwide is increasing rapidly, and a survey by Barclays Wealth Management found that 70 percent of billionaires globally report that they are active in philanthropy. The Giving Pledge has now mobilized some 170 wealthy individuals and families from 21 countries to pledge to give away at least half their estimated net worth of more than \$800 billion.

These unprecedented assets are well poised to help drive systems change—to fundamentally address broken systems by bringing together the central actors associated with a social issue to produce significant and enduring improvements for millions of people.

Unfortunately, a critical market failure is getting in the way: There are few effective mechanisms to match leaders looking to solve social issues at scale with the philanthropists interested in providing the right size and kinds of capital, and the partners needed to succeed. Consequently, these two types of powerful assets remain relatively disconnected, causing both to fall short of their full potential for impact. As Andrew Youn, co-founder and CEO of [One Acre Fund](#), said to me:

Social change leaders are often conditioned to think small. Every year, we try to fill our organization's annual budget. But on rare occasion, visionary philanthropy challenges us

to think bigger—to envision changing the whole system. Humanity’s greatest challenges are actually solvable, when organizations with practical and scalable solutions are linked with the transformative funding required to truly pursue such work.

In recent years, I’ve spoken to hundreds of philanthropists and social change leaders around the world about this market failure. My work and experience have led me to conclude that if we are to realize our potential, we must first overcome three main barriers:

1. Most giving remains relatively small and fragmented, and not aligned with what’s required for large-scale and enduring impact.

Even the most proven social change leaders struggle to piece together the funding and support to pursue enduring impact at national, regional, or global scale, and have to spend extraordinary time and effort doing so. Most grants are **less than \$10 million**, short-term (1-2 years in duration), **often restricted in use**, and highly fragmented (with many different funders each imposing their own requirements). This behavior directly contradicts what practitioners tell us they need. It also contradicts what we are learning is required to achieve significant and enduring results at scale—in particular, flexible and coordinated investments of a **scale** and **duration** commensurate with the challenge and ambition of the work, and focused on supporting the kind of collaborative work that can achieve lasting change.

Furthermore, social change leaders lack easy access to the kinds of nonfinancial supports that can significantly accelerate systems change work. Expertise and capacity in diverse areas such as policy, law, technology, marketing, and performance management can be essential ingredients for success. Additionally, the voice, networks and convening power of donors can be extraordinary assets to the cause. Yet, relatively few philanthropists today offer this kind of holistic support—and few change leaders have the resources to secure it on their own. As one remarkable leader shared with me, “I wish that instead of saying, ‘How are you going to achieve change at scale?’, donors instead would ask, ‘How can we help you to achieve change at scale?’”

2. Investment-ready systems change efforts are rare; few social change leaders have built robust strategies, capabilities and partnerships to drive systems change, although many have the vision and ability to do so.

There are examples of visionary social change leaders and organizations driving systems change today and throughout history. **Vicky Colbert and the transformation of Colombia’s rural education system** with the Escuela Nueva model, **Evan Wolfson and the Marriage Equality movement** in the

United States, and the **Marine Stewardship Council's work to make the world's seafood markets sustainable** are a few such examples.

Yet these are still relatively few and far between, which isn't surprising given the challenges and lack of support for them in the funding marketplace described above. I've met with leaders from many proven organizations who are eager—and have already started—to develop compelling and deeply credible plans and partnerships for systems change efforts, but many need targeted support (and encouragement in the form of a realistic funding opportunity) to get their initiatives to a place where they are ready for substantial large-scale investment.

3. There aren't enough efficient mechanisms for philanthropists to find and support high-potential investments, and to connect and collaborate with one another in a deep and meaningful way, especially across borders.

Many philanthropists want to make substantial investments to help address the world's problems. However, without setting up one's own large foundation, it can be difficult to find, vet, structure, and support efforts to drive results at scale. As the CEO of a well-capitalized small family foundation lamented to me, "There are so many reports about the power of making big bets, but if I want to write such a check, I don't know where to write it. There's no one to source and build out the opportunity, or to support it over time."

In addition, when funders collaborate, they can better help convene others, encourage coalitions of actors across sectors, and bring additional capital and resources from government, multilateral, corporate, and institutional partners. They can also bring different assets and expertise, which can be particularly important when supporting complex systems change efforts. Furthermore, even the most experienced and thoughtful donors can sometimes pull grantees in opposite directions with different perspectives on strategy, and so aligning around one joint vision can be hugely helpful in driving towards large-scale results. However, with a few important exceptions, much philanthropy today remains remarkably siloed.

A New, Replicable Model of Collaborative Philanthropy

In response, today we are launching **Co-Impact**, a new effort in collaborative philanthropy that brings together donors from across the globe to drive large-scale results for millions of people across the developing world.

We believe that collaboration is critical to solving some of the world's most daunting social challenges, and that this requires new and better mechanisms to efficiently match outstanding social change leaders and committed philanthropists with one another and their peers. Our goal is to build a platform and community in which committed philanthropists from around the world give and learn alongside one another in deep and meaningful ways while driving extraordinary results. And we hope to build a strong case for more philanthropists to collaborate and drive results at scale.



Co-Impact's approach.

Co-Impact will start by investing \$500 million over the next several years in high-potential systems

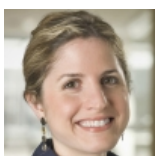
change efforts, conceived and driven by proven social

change leaders working in the areas of health, education, and economic opportunity for underserved populations across the developing world. Our core partners will collaboratively advise on strategy and select which efforts to fund; other donors will join as co-investors on particular opportunities, and our Co-Impact Network provides the chance for a broader set of individual donors to connect, learn, and engage.

Co-Impact is explicitly designed to address the three barriers articulated above: Each of our systems change grants will be for up to \$50 million and five years. Each will have a single, unified set of requirements and reporting, as well as access to a comprehensive suite of nonfinancial supports, including technical assistance for things such as strategic planning, program management, technology, policy and advocacy, government relations, measurement and evaluation, and leveraging additional funding. And each will be backed by our community of donors, bringing their voice, convening power, and expertise, and giving together in alignment around one joint vision.

We have been inspired by efforts like **Blue Meridian Partners**, which is a partnership of impact-driven philanthropists seeking to change the odds for America's children and youth living in poverty, and **Dasra**, which has been working toward building a "thriving ecosystem" that enables knowledge creation, capacity building, strategic funding, and collaboration to touch and transform the lives of 800 million Indians.

Most of all, we have been inspired by numerous impressive social change leaders from different parts of the world. We are eager to provide them the financial and nonfinancial support to drive systems change and improve the lives of millions.



Olivia Leland is the founder and CEO of **Co-Impact**, a new global collaborative for systems change. Initial core partners include Richard Chandler, Bill & Melinda Gates, Jeff Skoll, Romesh & Kathy Wadhvani, and The Rockefeller Foundation. In addition to its role as a core partner, The Rockefeller Foundation has incubated Co-Impact and will provide staff, significant operating funds, and ongoing strategic

support. The EkStep Foundation, co-founded by Rohini and Nandan Nilekani, will serve as a technical partner. Leland was the founding director of the [Giving Pledge](#). She has spent the last three years conducting research on what is needed for philanthropy to be more effective – and building Co-Impact.

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