

The New Ecology

What Does it Mean to You?

Philanthropy now takes place in a new ecology, shaped by at least seven powerful forces. Despite the great freedom that philanthropists have, they will be affected by all of it, not just the parts they like the most.

But the new ecology won't affect every giver or every issue the same way. An exercise you can do, by yourself or with a group, is to take seven pieces of paper or flipchart pages, and on each sheet brainstorm about one of the seven themes: privatization, connection, acceleration, multiplication, diversification, observation, and reflection. Think through what each theme means or how it either challenges or supports your assumptions in the arena you care about the most (an issue, a community, or even a single institution). How has the role and potential of philanthropy shifted in your area of interest? What new resources are potentially available now that were not a generation ago? What are the new challenges for philanthropists who want to make a difference?

Below, we take this exercise a step further by summarizing the meaning of the themes, especially as they begin to combine. Beside each, we illustrate the kinds of questions you might want to ask as you make sense of the themes for yourself.

Theme of the new ecology & implications for philanthropy

How will this affect you?

PRIVATIZATION

There are new responsibilities in privatization. The relative growth of private power—in citizen organizations and corporations—means that it is difficult to imagine progress without bolder and more creative leadership from private sources. Responsible professional philanthropic leaders can lead *outside* their institutions, facilitating efforts to convene various actors and to advocate for change. Individuals, too, will need to ask what new responsibilities they may have, given their resources.

In considering the issue you are interested in, what role did the government (or governments) play 20 years ago in addressing it or being responsible for its solution? Is it the same role as today? Are there more, the same number, or fewer private organizations (businesses and nonprofits) working on this issue compared to 20 years ago? What roles do you expect they will have in the years ahead?

Do you assume that government is part of your “exit strategy”? Is that a safe assumption? What is your plan if it isn't?

Who are the other private sector actors—business or nonprofit—who could play a positive, long-term role in the issue or area you care about? Which are best positioned to help galvanize government action where needed?

REFLECTION/CONNECTION

There is new opportunity in reflection and connection. Every actor in the world of philanthropy has two new opportunities in the ecology we described: the ability to reflect on nearly a century's worth of philanthropic practice (changing daily) and the ability to connect to a growing array of actors. That's why both formal and informal networks are growing so rapidly in philanthropy; they are the mechanism for connecting ideas and people. Indeed, networks may turn out to be as central to organizing this century's philanthropy as foundations were to organizing philanthropy in the last century.

What have others done on the issue or in the area you care about? What worked or didn't work, and why? Who has the most knowledge about your issue? Nonprofits, corporations, multilaterals, international NGOs, academics, or other funders? How would you connect to those that have the most or best knowledge?

What groups exist for funders interested in your issue? Can you join them? If not, can you initiate your own group?

Are there groups of funders who are creating strategies together or funding together on your issue? Can you join them? If there is not a group, could you initiate one?

MULTIPLICATION/DIVERSIFICATION

There are new resources in multiplication and diversification. More actors and more different kinds of actors could simply add to the fragmentation of effort and uncoordinated duplication in the sector. When combined with connection and reflection, however, "more" and "different" become strengths. They increase the pool of ideas, resources, and allies for anyone seeking to address an issue or support a cause. Rather than see these two forces as simply increasing the competition for attention, visibility, or impact, consider them as sources of new strength and energy.

Who else is working on the issues you care about? How does their work relate to and overlap with yours? Can you pool resources or strategize together to increase the scale or breadth of your joint interventions?

Who are your new allies, and how can you identify them? If you are funding from within an institution, how can you connect with the energy and resources among individual donors? If you are an individual, how can you ally yourself with institutional donors? If you are giving through a donor-advised fund, can you connect to, coordinate with, and share ideas with other donors?

OBSERVATION/ACCELERATION

There are new challenges in observation and acceleration. Every actor in the world of philanthropy faces at least two challenges that those in previous generations didn't. First, every actor now has to assume they will be scrutinized in their actions, perhaps even asked to justify their programs or practices, and called to account for their results. One can no longer assume a safe and quiet haven where people are given the benefit of the doubt because they are doing charitable work. Second, every actor has to cope with the accelerated pace of knowledge and action, where external events outpace or even disrupt philanthropy's traditional decision-making cycles.

What do you keep private or hidden about your giving, and why? Even if you wish to be private or anonymous, how can you share your work quickly with others?

Is there anything about your strategy or activities that you wouldn't want to see in the news?

Who or what dictates the pace of your giving? Internal needs or external needs? What could you do faster?
