



Philanthropy for Systems Change: An Exploratory Study

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The concept and practice of systems change have enjoyed increased visibility in recent years across the non-profit sector. Philanthropic organisations have also participated in systems change discourse but there are questions as to how systems change philosophy and principles have impacted philanthropic funding decisions and processes.

This study asks: *How do foundation leaders conceptualise systems change, and how do their current funding practices reflect this?*

Undertaking a qualitative study of the philanthropic sector in France, the author proposes that a number of cognitive and institutional obstacles limit the degree to which philanthropic organisations can integrate systems change approaches into their work. The author suggests that education and greater collaborative working across the philanthropic space could serve as mitigations to these obstacles.

[#SystemsChange](#) [#France](#) [#Philanthropy](#) [#SocialChange](#) [#Foundations](#)

Background

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Context



- Over the past decade, the non-profit sector has shown **growing interest in systems change**.
- System change can be understood as “**a change in the policies, processes, relationships, knowledge, power structures, values, or norms of participants within a system that affects a social issue**” (Kramer, 2017).
- Philanthropic foundations are increasingly engaging with this concept. However, there is **ongoing debate** about whether current philanthropic efforts towards systems change are **substantial or rather superficial**.
- Foundations have aimed to drive social change since the nineteenth century, but while **some efforts advanced progress, others slowed change, sometimes reinforcing unequal systems**.
- Similar critiques apply today: philanthropic foundations may be seen as **maintaining the status quo**, prioritising short-term, low-risk solutions instead of supporting the long-term commitments that systems change requires.
- Despite the growing interest in systems change, we know little about **how foundation executives actually understand this concept and how they apply this understanding to their funding practices**.
- This qualitative study examines the **French philanthropic sector** through **in-depth interviews** with the leaders of 15 long-standing grantmaking foundations, developing themes emerging from a pre-existing survey.

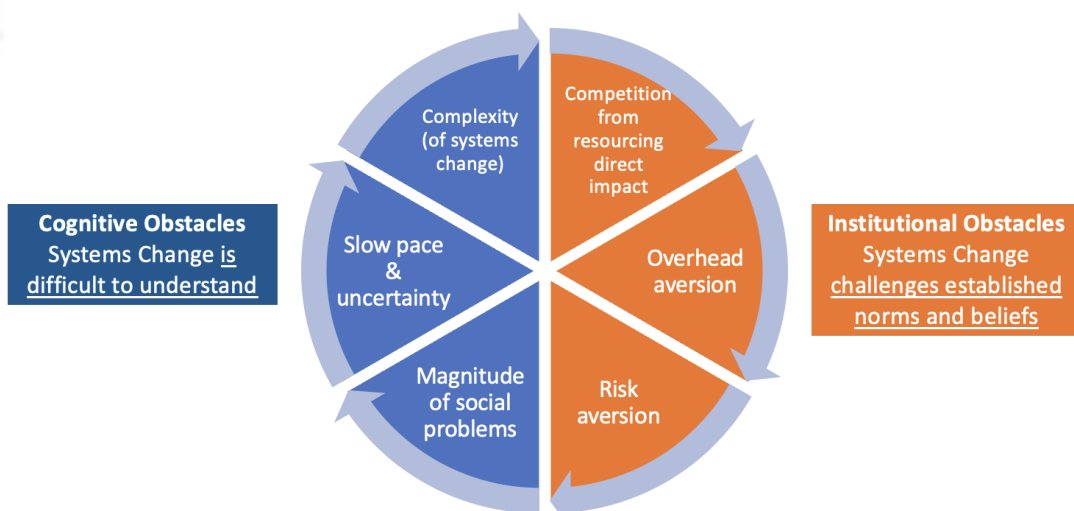
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Academic articles on philanthropy through a practitioner lens

Take aways & Learnings



- The findings show that, whilst foundation executives have some knowledge of and an interest in systems change, their funding practices do not consistently reflect this interest.
- The study shows that there were varying levels of integration of core practices associated with “funding for systems change” (Ashoka, 2020) **within foundation funding processes, with several challenges to integration**, including oversight limitations that come with unrestricted funding, resistance to long term support, capacity and knowledge constraints that limit the scope to engage with a broad range of systems change makers, the ‘messiness’ of reporting on the impact of systems change work, and limited collaboration between funders.
- The study identified **six core obstacles** to foundations integrating more systems change considerations within their funding practices:



- The findings suggest that **these obstacles could be addressed through education and awareness raising, and greater collective and collaborative working across the sector** (e.g. sharing learning about systems change amongst peer organisations more consistently).
- **“Independent” foundations (funded by endowments from a single source; do not depend on ongoing fundraising) are more likely to tackle these obstacles and fund systems change work** than corporate and fundraising foundations, due in part to lower levels of stakeholder pressure and dependence on the parent company or external donors.

ERNOP Research Notes provide easy-to-read, practice-oriented summaries of academic articles on philanthropy and are written by practitioner experts. This ERNOP Research Note 2026/10 is published in June 2026 and has been written by Tina Ajuonuma from The Better Org. More information can be found at www.ernop.eu.