



How philanthropists can support social movements - and why they must

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Introduction

We're living in an era of mass public mobilisation. From China to the US, Israel to Iran, *Fridays for Future* to *Black Lives Matter*, people are taking to the streets. [A recent study](#) estimates that the number of protest movements trebled just between 2006 to 2020.

And, despite attempts to crackdown on protest, the activists are winning. They are winning on policy: ending Covid lockdowns in China, preventing anti civil rights legislation in Georgia, pressing pause on judicial upheavals in Israel. And they are winning in changing public opinion: sowing the seeds for the European Green Deal and the Inflation Reduction Act on climate, shifting attitudes on marriage equality and forcing a cultural reset on systemic racism.

Despite all this activity and success, grassroots organisations remain underfunded, undersupported and overlooked by philanthropic funders. For example, of all the funding globally for human rights, just 3% went towards grassroots organising. This level stayed constant from 2011 to 2019, even as protests erupted around the world.

This is deeply incongruous: activist movements are key instigators of just the sort of social changes philanthropists want to see. Without them, the sort of seismic shifts in political, cultural and moral beliefs needed for systemic change are rarely seen. We believe that supporting, resourcing and encouraging them to grow could be the most effective way funders can contribute to positive social change.

The role of grassroots movements in social change

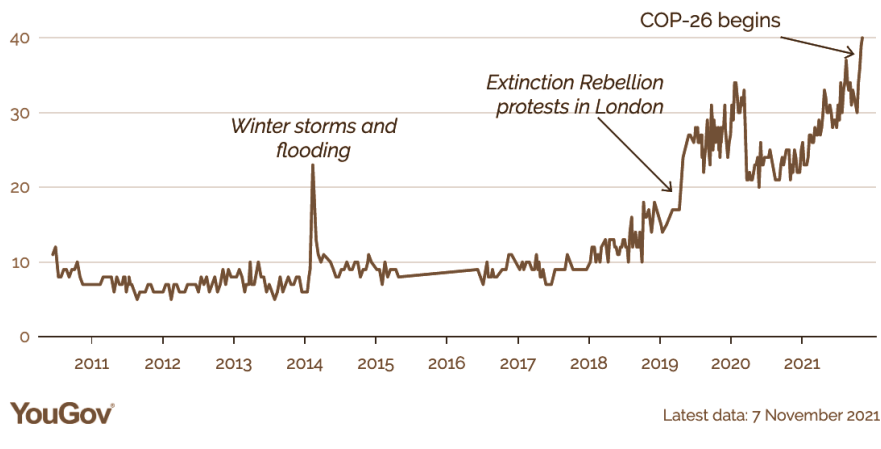
[Social movement analysts](#) describe an 'ecology' of social change, with many interacting components. Social movements can help bring about 'personal transformation', changing individual lives (e.g. housing the homeless) and point to 'alternatives' - new approaches to persistent problems (e.g. restorative justice not incarceration). And movements can try to change dominant institutions - both by '[inside game](#)' approaches, such as advocacy, political lobbying and litigation, and by 'outside game' routes, both formal (e.g. trade unions) and informal (mass public mobilisation).

Mobilisations, which include street marches, sit-ins and occupations (think US Civil Rights' lunch counter sit-ins or Greta Thunberg's Fridays for Future strikes) intend to change people's minds about what is socially, politically or morally acceptable - to shift the [Overton window](#). While insiders focus on what's practical and achievable, grassroots movements 'change the political weather'; they turn what was politically unthinkable into legitimate subject for discourse. Outsider-gamers work on social and cultural norms; inside-gamers turn the momentum into tangible policy changes. Additional contributors, particularly journalists, can enhance and amplify the work of activists.

In this framework, social movement organisations and grassroots activists are frequently undervalued because their ends are less visible, less measurable and often longer term than inside track approaches. But the [evidence](#) suggests they're crucial.

With COP-26 ongoing, the number of Britons saying the environment is a top national issue reaches record levels

Which of the following do you think are the most important issues facing the country at this time? Please tick up to three. %



Source: *Concern for environment reaches record high in YouGov top issues tracker*, YouGov, 2021

In our research at [Social Change Lab](#) we've found that protest movements can lead to significant changes in public support, policy change and public discourse. [Polling by YouGov](#) (see figure above), showed that public concern for climate increased by 10 percentage points after a period of Extinction Rebellion mass actions. This fits with our own [literature review on protest outcomes](#), which typically found a shift of 2-10% on public opinion as a result of major protests. Protests also influence public discourse - how the media, politicians and the public talk about issues; a year after Black Lives Matter protests, sustained discourse of the issues raised by the protesters (measured using Google search and news item data) was ten times greater than before the protests. In the US, BLM protests resulted in a 2% boost to the Democratic vote share according to academics at Yale and LSE. These shifts can directly affect policy; just recently a Serbian mining project was [scrapped](#) after activists mobilised to protest its environmental damages and, after citizens rose up, the Israeli government backed down on proposed changes to the judiciary.

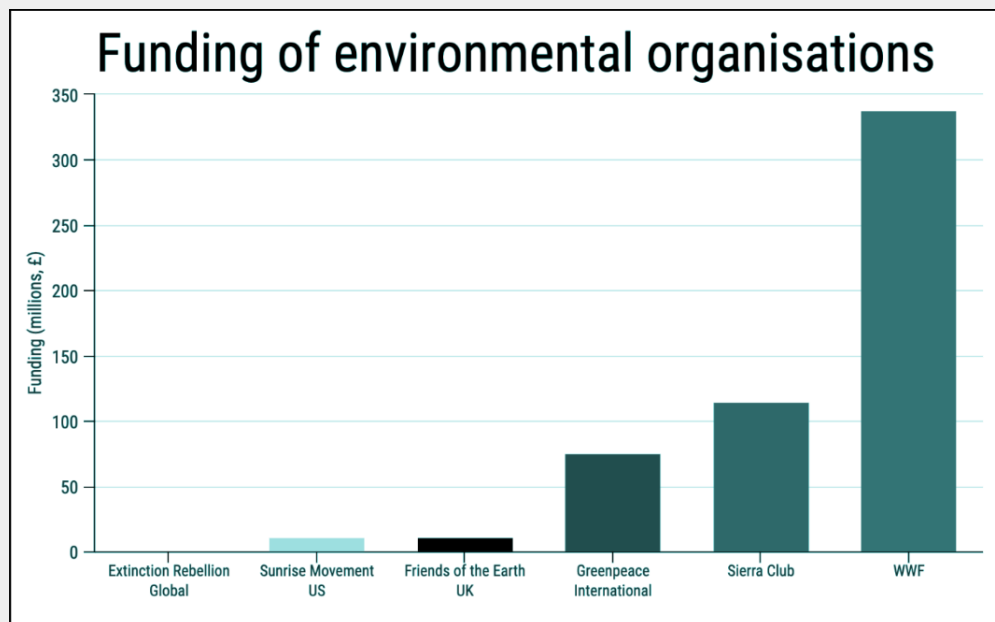
Even movements not associated with major policy wins can shape long term discourse (e.g. Occupy Wall Street changed thinking about 'the 1%'). By shifting discourse, mass movements allow others to exploit the moment: policy advocates can push for more significant changes to legislation. For example, the Extinction Rebellion UK protests were explicitly referenced in the Labour party's [declaration](#) of a climate emergency and led to their consideration of 2030 for net zero; the groundwork of climate activists likely [sowed the seeds](#) of the Inflation Reduction Act, the largest climate bill in history, and the European Green Deal. When we look back it can be easy to forget the foundational work that made these policy wins possible.

The funding gap

Despite the successes, funders have largely failed to get behind grassroots movements. In the US, of the \$64 billion given by grantmakers in 2021, [just 10%](#) went to 'advocacy, policy and system reform' - that is, the whole ecosystem of systemic change. Social movement organisations likely saw only a small fraction of that. The philanthropy data centre [Candid](#) looked at global foundation funding for human rights, some \$3.7billion. Of this, just 3%

(\$114million) went to grassroots organising. In the climate arena, [ClimateWorks](#) found that just 1% of European foundation giving went to grassroots and movement building. An [Environmental Funders Network survey](#) of UK green organisations found the one thing members most wanted apart from flexible grants was greater support for campaigning work.

Another way to think about the funding gap is to compare grassroots movement funding with NGOs working on similar issues. [Extinction Rebellion](#) (XR) is one of the best-known climate movement organisations; figures put their 2019/2020 annual income around £750,000. By comparison, the annual income for [Greenpeace International](#) was about £75 million - a hundred times as much. The US [Sunrise Movement](#) is much better funded than XR, but its income is still dwarfed by traditional environmental charities such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). The figure below illustrates the enormous funding disparity.



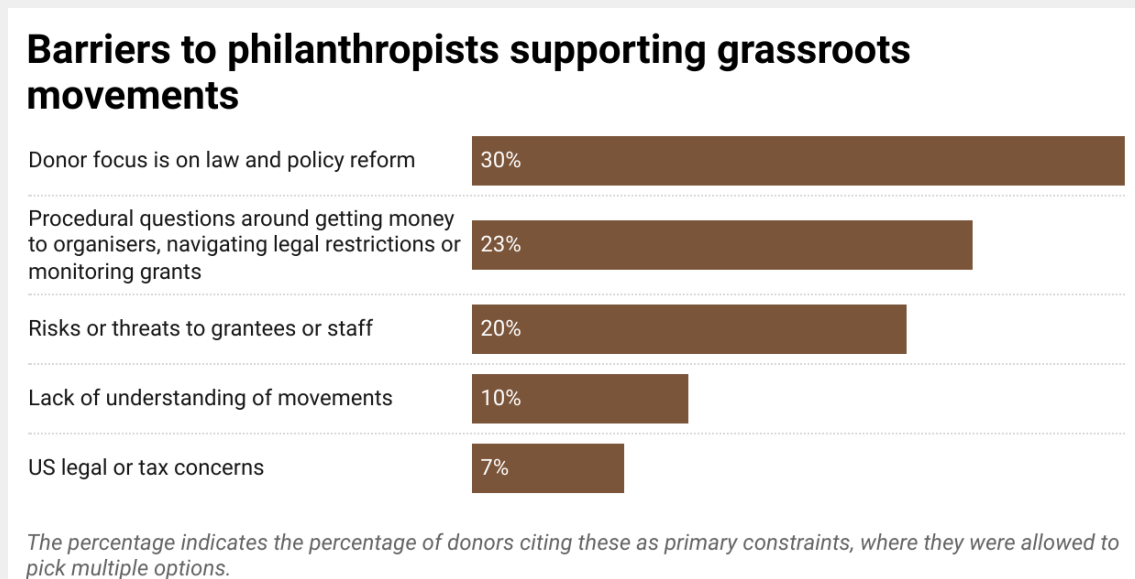
Source: [Protest movements could be more effective than the best charities](#)

Neglecting highly effective activist approaches leaves big holes in the [social change ecosystem](#). While some funders – the [Oak Foundation](#) or [Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust](#) – are already supporting grassroots movements, there remains reluctance from many funders.

Why the gap?

Grassroots movements are overlooked for several reasons. Funders often lack direct contacts within movements or they see investments as risky (for example, in terms of reputation if actions are disruptive, or in terms of risks to their charitable status). Many feel it is not their area of expertise – they are often more familiar with insider approaches through advocacy or law. There are also administrative hurdles, such as grantees being required to have the sort of formalised structures which social movement organisations often lack. A recent [survey](#) by the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC) asked 30 US funders about the barriers to them funding grassroots movements. 30% of funders said that they saw law and policy reform as their priority, suggesting a misunderstanding of the role that social movement activism plays in achieving precisely that goal. In other words, a focus on law and policy reform should be a reason **for**

philanthropic support towards grassroots activism (as shown by the [evidence](#) on activism and protest on policy change), rather than neglecting it. Other barriers funders cited were administrative and safety concerns and a lack of understanding of social movements.



Source: [ICNC survey](#) on 'Constraints on Supporting Grassroots Organizing and Social Movements'

How to fund social movement organisations

We suggest a few practical ways how funders could meaningfully support grassroots organisations:

1. Be willing to support unregistered organisations
2. Accept that large-scale social change requires some risk
3. Use appropriate frameworks to evaluate the impact of movement organisations
4. Fund through an intermediary organisation to reduce risk
5. Support movement infrastructure

1. Be willing to support unregistered organisations

Supporting unregistered, informal grassroots organisations might require grantmakers to forgo or adapt some of their usual processes. Many activist groups lack legal status and formal structures; they often emerge rapidly due to societal events, or benefit from the flexibility of being unregistered. Funders can help practically by simplifying grant applications, helping organisations with proposals and offering support to informal and unregistered groups - or even, as funders such as Joseph Rowntree have, [remove the stipulation](#) that organisations be registered altogether. Participatory grantmaking, unrestricted grants and funding long term are all important considerations that require mutual trust and patience; new movement funders the [Carmack Collective](#) show what can be done when the will is there.

2. Accept that large-scale social change requires some risk

Funders vary in their appetite for risk. For example, determining the scope of what constitutes 'charitable purposes' is not black and white. While funding can go to activities which are completely legal, such as recruitment, training, press support, education and capacity building,

some organisations do take part in illegal activities. Funders will also have different attitudes to potential criticism from the media, another potential risk. In addition, some funders seek certainty that they are having some positive impact on the world – a very reasonable goal. However, social change isn't a linear pursuit. Sometimes, years of organising bear few visible wins but then you catalyse huge change after a 'trigger event'. So, rather than focusing on having high certainty of some positive impact, funders could consider maximising expected impact, by betting on bold strategies that change what policies are acceptable within society. As Dan Stein from Giving Green neatly puts it:

“We came to the conclusion that to maximize our impact, we have to support strategies that are less measurable but can bring about grand, systematic changes”

Dan Stein, founder and director of [Giving Green](#)

3. Use appropriate frameworks to evaluate the impact of movement organisations

How can grassroots funders know whether their grantmaking is achieving its goals? There are several useful pointers to effectiveness, many of which will be familiar to funders: a well-articulated theory of change, appropriate governance and so on. However, there are also complexities in assessing grassroots organisations – easily quantifiable outcomes such as people reached don't necessarily correlate with organisational strength. For example, some research indicates that one of the most promising factors for success is the degree which there is a flexible, independent and committed base of activists. So how do we measure the depth, or power, of grassroots organisations? Here, it may be best to use specialised frameworks, such as the strategic capacity assessment developed by the P3 Lab. The American Jewish World Service has also developed a tool to help funders assess how well a social movement is achieving its goals.

4. Fund through an intermediary organisation to reduce risk

Direct funding might still feel too risky or complicated for some. In this case, funders can give to a growing number of intermediate umbrella organisations which focus on mass mobilisation and grassroots activism. Some of these give specific reassurances regarding risk; for example, the Climate Emergency Fund provides a “safe, legal and tax-deductible way” to support the climate movement (they directly address many other funder concerns [here](#)). The Movements Trust shares their charitable status with movements by offering sponsorship. Other funder networks which pool donor funds to support grassroots activism include the Climate Justice Just Transition Collaborative, Global Greengrants Fund, Human Rights Funders Network, EDGE Funders Alliance and the Solidaire Network. The Guerilla Foundation has a funders circle of donors committed to funding activism; the foundation has become something of a poster child for radical grantmaking.

“The right to protest is a core tenet of our democracy. Nonviolent disruptive activism has an important role to play in engaging the public and pressuring political and corporate leaders to act with the urgency now required to protect life on this planet.”

Aileen Getty, funder of grassroots activism through the [Climate Emergency Fund](#)

5. Support movement infrastructure

An alternative path is to support organisations that train, develop and build social movement infrastructure. Funding options here include the [Momentum Community](#), [Ayni Institute](#), [Future Matters Project](#), [Climate 2025](#), [Social Change Agency](#), [Civic Power Fund](#) and [NEON](#). Funders can also support organisations like [Pax Fauna](#) and [Social Change Lab](#) who carry out research to support the development of the broader social movement ecosystem.

When and where funding is needed

Mobilisation and participation come in waves of energy and action, often in response to ‘trigger events’ - a political scandal, a natural disaster - that compel members of the public to get politically engaged. A well-organised movement creates and works with the momentum of these trigger events. Mobilisations are easy to see when they are at their peak and people are on the streets – and this is often when funder interest is piqued. But much of the essential, incremental work is actually *beforehand* - and it's this less visible work of building the infrastructure, capacity and skills which allow the big mobilisation to happen where money is really needed. An obvious example is the [funding](#) XR received from Guerilla Foundation before their April 2019 protests, which helped them build capacity in order to quickly and greatly grow the movement.

Social movement experts, the Ayni Institute, [emphasise](#) the need to fund training (e.g. in fundraising, managing the media, escalation tactics, maintaining nonviolent discipline) and for stipends to enable key volunteers to stay active. After trigger events, ‘absorption’ funding takes the momentum from big action moments and turns it into long term engagement. Keeping key volunteers energised and motivated in times of disillusionment is essential to prevent burnout and maintain growth, as is the work needed to turn one-time participants into ongoing activists. Finally there is funding for those brave enough to escalate by dramatic actions such as risking arrest or setting up an occupation – these are like the ‘high stakes’ bets of venture capitalists.

Small investment, for example to pay modest salaries to a few trained organisers, can have a strong force multiplying effect, allowing them to train and energise hundreds of volunteers.

Reaping the rewards

Achieving social change requires a team of players acting independently but pulling in the same direction. Transformative change is hard to measure and even harder to attribute – different approaches are highly interdependent and no single player can do it all.

Throughout history, grassroots social movements have led the way in changing social, cultural and political norms. Grantmakers must invest in long-term grassroots organising and campaigning. Such work has often been a crucial path to long-lasting change. If funders remain focused only on approaches that are easy to measure, outcomes that happen in the short term and organisations already set up to prioritise measurement, they are missing one of the most powerful mechanisms for changing the world.

This research was developed in partnership with [Changing Ideas](#) with the aim of sharing with funders the potential benefits and routes to supporting social movements.