

Ford Foundation
Theory of Change



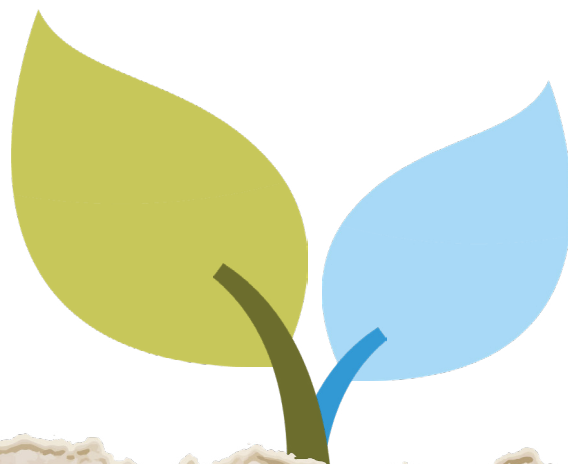


Purpose of this document

This document is a first attempt to create a common understanding of Ford's work - what we do and how and why we do it - by synthesizing the key elements that our programs hold in common. By making explicit how we assume social change happens, particularly around inequality and power, we can identify where we have strengths in our shared theory of change, as well as where we have gaps. We hope this document sparks productive conversations that allow us to further test our assumptions internally and externally.

A qualifier

While this document makes statements about how we think change happens, they are meant to be read less as assertions and more as assumptions behind our work. There are places where we have questions and see potential contradictions in our own work. We struggle, for example, with the flaws baked into the capitalist system in its present manifestation. And while many of our programs are focused on addressing these flaws, we recognize that, as a philanthropy, we are a product of this very system. We ourselves sit in an elite and privileged position, even as we advocate for a different world. For these reasons, we attempt to approach our work - and this shared theory of change - with humility, recognizing we do not have all the answers and have much to learn as we go.



Inequality and Power

At Ford, we recognize that inequality is deeply rooted in every society, borne out through political, economic, and cultural structures, with historical roots that reinforce differences and seek to preserve power for those who have it.

Entrenched inequality is the result of imbalances in power between people, communities, countries, and regions, and of historical hierarchies based on race, ethnicity, gender, LGBTQI status, ability, caste, class, religion, education, geography, and the intersections of these and other identities. Many dimensions of inequality, like the legacies of colonialism, racism, and patriarchy, are long-standing and deeply entrenched. And they are still very relevant and having an impact today.

Other more recent global trends also interact with inequality, serving as both cause and consequence of growing forms of stratification, among them:

- Rising authoritarianism, including elected autocrats, across the globe and a broader trend of shrinking civic space.
- Widening economic inequality grounded in an economic model that increases gaps and tensions within and across countries.
- A shifting world order and multilateral institutions poorly suited to address global problems and still grounded in Global North interests.
- Harmful effects of climate change that affect all, and disproportionately impact the Global South and marginalized communities in the North.
- A perceived failure of governments, including democracies, to deliver for their people on vital services.
- Increasing state capture by private and illegal actors, often exacerbating instability and potential for violence.
- Increasing toxic polarization that pits sectors of society against each other, creating a win-lose dynamic that disadvantages large portions of society.
- Rising unregulated technological power that foments divisions and increases unchecked surveillance.
- A more coordinated and resourced global anti-rights agenda grounded in misogyny and anti-gender tenets, racism, and other forms of deeply held prejudice.

At the same time, we recognize that there are signs of progress as well. Across the globe, we see instances of greater realization of rights and the advancement of justice for many communities. People continue to push for a more equitable and sustainable world.

Our focus

At Ford, we believe that disrupting inequality requires shifting away from symptoms (e.g., rates of incarceration, poverty, violence) to the deeper root causes behind them. These roots are in essence concentrations of political, economic, and cultural power that are typically held by certain identity groups against others (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, caste, ability, sexuality, religion).

We focus therefore on:

- Unequal access to and representation by government institutions, decisionmakers, and services
- Unfair rules of the economy that preserve the interests of an elite, and
- Cultural norms and beliefs that entrench inequality and reinforce persistent prejudice and discrimination

Tackling inequality and attendant power imbalances requires governments that are accountable, transparent, accessible, able to deliver critical services to people, and not beholden to elite interests. Political power needs to be representative, responsive, inclusive, and committed to transitioning to new voices and perspectives over time.

Economic power must also be regulated, accountable to the long-term interests of societies, shaped by the power of labor, and reflective of diverse leadership. Companies and their investors need to act in the interests of all stakeholders and the greater public good. This reimagining of the economic model invites greater sustainability and equality.

And cultural power must be representative and reflective of diverse voices and perspectives - positioned to value and lift up the experiences of those on the margins, ultimately shifting norms toward equality and equity.

Effective solutions for inequality and power imbalances require accountable, transparent governments, regulated economic power, and representative cultural power.

How change happens

First and foremost, Ford recognizes that transformational social change is anything but a linear process. Nor is it predictable, even as we try to get better at anticipating what might come.

We understand that progress toward justice can, in many instances, be slow and incremental, occurring over long periods of time. In other instances, it can be realized through quick and sudden shifts (e.g., through court decisions or large-scale protests). But we recognize that no progress is guaranteed to be permanent - meaningful gains can lead to backlash that further exacerbates existing inequalities.

We also recognize that change is not often easily captured by overly simplistic metrics. Understanding long-term sustainable change for good requires a nuanced understanding, both of what progress looks like, as well as the signs of trouble that may lie ahead. In moments when inequality and repression are greatest, success can often look like simply keeping fields and organizations operating until new opportunities for change emerge.

Our goals

With this in mind, Ford aims to support the following goals as steps toward disrupting inequality:

- Government policies and practices represent the interests and priorities of diverse communities, ensuring participation of and accountability to those communities.
- Communities and individuals experience safety and opportunity to thrive - regardless of one's identity or political position; as the government promotes and protects fundamental rights.
- Communities, governments, and corporations protect and sustain our natural environment.
- Powerful economic actors increasingly act in the interests of labor and broader public interests.
- Technology is designed, governed, and maintained in ways that serve the interests of the broader public, mitigates inequalities, and advances access and justice.
- Culture embraces and supports diverse perspectives and experiences, uplifting and valuing those on the margins, changing narratives, and (ultimately) reducing toxic polarization.
- Deep forms of patriarchy, racism, ableism, and other forms of fundamental prejudice and discrimination are dislodged from societal structures, helping to ensure that identity does not determine inequitable life outcomes.

Across these domains, we believe these changes are most profound and enduring when those in positions of power are themselves representative of diverse identities and experiences. Those most proximate to inequality are often best positioned to understand what is needed to make change. And the changes made with their priorities and advocacy at the center often benefit all through the creation of better and more equitable societies. We prioritize those discriminated against on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, caste, religion, LGBT status, and ability, with the goal of creating inclusive conditions for everyone to thrive.

Getting there requires building deep relationships - through organizing and mobilizing - in communities most distant from power and most proximate to the harmful effects of inequality. This is often the work of grassroots organizations and social movements that have legitimacy in communities. From this grassroots work emerge new sets of leaders who can and should shape political, economic, and cultural agendas through their own experience and proximity. The perspectives of these communities and individuals are vital to engaging political, economic, and cultural power. And, at the same time, we need to attend to the ways in which power (patriarchy, ableism, ageism, and other forms of discrimination) can also play out in the very communities and fields we support if we are not intentional.

Engagement of groups and communities far from power can at times lead to protest and contestation, with impassioned efforts to shift power. There are moments in history where this level of civil resistance can lead to dramatic changes in who makes decisions. But most social change work is more incremental, done within the bounds of existing systems, and requiring external forms of pressure as well as alliances with those in power who can help make change for good.

This, therefore, requires a social change model that interweaves multiple strands: the importance of organizing and engaging affected communities; broad alliance building, and the engagement of decision-makers who can influence change. This happens in multiple arenas, including policy advocacy, budget analysis, evidence-building, strategic litigation, and corporate engagement. And it involves working with actors within civil society, but also with the government and the private sector.

In all of this work, we assume that it is not enough to change behaviors (although behaviors are critical) unless values are also transformed. This means doing deep cultural work to root out prejudice and replace it with inclusive and uplifting alternatives. Much of this is done through shifting narratives with a focus on changing what people believe and value.

What Ford does

Disrupting inequality is not the work of any one actor. And the Ford Foundation is one (small) actor in a world filled with very significant challenges and complex structures of power.

We believe that our contribution, while relatively small, can be catalytic when strategically implemented. We invest in “3 I’s:” [Individuals, Institutions, and Ideas](#), each of which is vital to supporting change: the voices of new and established leaders combined with the support of anchor and emerging organizations provide space for new ideas that can reshape our world.

At Ford, we support work on international and U.S.-based programs. In each of our programs, we develop strategies that identify specific levers for change and articulate our assumptions for how we believe change happens. Over time, we “test” our strategies and assumptions through external evaluation and by tracking progress empirically. We use what we learn to then refine or shift strategies based on evidence and learning.

Change strategies

Our work supports partners to push for change in any of the following ways:

- Advocate and push for the implementation of new or existing public policies or to mitigate the impact of harmful laws and policies, as well as for international standards and commitments.
- Engage the private sector, faith communities, and other non state actors to embrace equity.
- Conduct research and evidence-based work that can be used by decisionmakers to combat inequality.
- Support cultural interventions and content that can help shift public perception, norms, and values that undergird inequality.
- Advance strategic litigation and advocate for policy implementation that advances equity.
- Test ideas and promote exploration, innovation, and reimagining in the fields in which we work.
- Support capacity building of individuals, institutions, and movements working to disrupt inequality.
- Connect those most proximate to inequality to national (and, where relevant, regional and global) actors.

- Build and strengthen intersecting alliances and coalitions among key stakeholders (movements, civil society, public sector, private sector) to address inequality.
- Mobilize resources by enlisting other funders and values-aligned investors to invest in addressing the root causes of inequality using good grantmaking practices.

Who we fund

As a funder committed to disrupting inequality, it is critically important to think about who we support and how we do it. On the “who” front:

- We fund organizations with strong reputations that are important to an ecosystem, or have the potential to play such a role if given support.
- We support organizations and leaders with diverse experiences and identities, with an eye toward seeding a strong “bench” of emerging leaders who have bold, transformative ideas for change.
- We seek to support organizations that are accountable to and representative of communities most impacted by inequality.

How we fund

In terms of the “how,” we make the following commitments:

- Where possible, we provide flexible, multi-year funding through general operating support grants and cover the full indirect costs of project grants.
- We seek to connect a field of actors to each other, each of whom can play unique but complementary roles in making change.
- We seek to keep burdens on grantees light, asking only for what we need for decision-making on proposals and reports, and soliciting feedback on how we can improve our grantmaking processes.
- We do not expect or require evaluations of individual grants; rather we prioritize deep reflections and learning over accountability-focused reporting on outputs or activities.
- We engage grantees in key moments of strategy development and evaluation and share what we are learning.
- We support grantees to think about their own resilience and sustainability, providing technical assistance, thought partnership, and other forms of non-monetary support when possible.
- We rely on our own networks and social capital to facilitate greater access to power and decision-makers for grantees who typically have less access.
- We implement programs like [Public Interest Technology](#), [BUILD](#), the [Ford Global Fellows](#), and the [Weaving Resilience Initiative](#) to further strengthen individuals, institutions, and ideas in the service of disrupting inequality.
- And we use a portion of our endowment to amplify the goals of our grantmaking through [mission-related investments](#).