

ADVANCING HUMAN RIGHTS



ANNUAL REVIEW OF GLOBAL FOUNDATION GRANTMAKING

2021 KEY FINDINGS

Each year, Human Rights Funders Network (HRFN) analyzes grants data to provide essential insights into the shifting priorities, gaps, and opportunities in human rights philanthropy.¹ Our **full report** offers a comprehensive look at the state of the sector in 2021—a year marked by record-breaking totals and a surge in flexible support. Yet, beneath these peaks, the data reveal a philanthropic landscape defined by acute systemic risk and persistent inequity.

Our findings point to **three core challenges** facing the human rights funding ecosystem today:

- **Systemic Financial Risk:** Driven by the extreme concentration of funding in the Global North and financial contraction accelerated by external forces.
- **Persistent Inequity:** Characterized by inconsistent funding flows and a deep-seated "trust gap" that disadvantages local movements, especially in the Global South and East.
- **Limited Intersectional Funding:** Revealed by entrenched single-issue silos and inconsistent grantmaking practices that undermine cross-movement power and long-term stability.

Writing in 2026, we can see how these challenges have come to a head, with dramatic and large-scale funding cuts defining the current landscape. Beyond highlighting the source of these vulnerabilities, we point to positive data trends that reveal clear, actionable pathways toward a more resilient and equitable funding ecosystem.



A philanthropic landscape defined by **acute systemic risk** and **persistent inequity**.



1. We conduct our **Advancing Human Rights** research in partnership with Candid, Ariadne–European Funders for Social Change and Human Rights, and Prospera International Network of Women's Funds.

Landmark Year in a Highly Concentrated Philanthropic Landscape



1 Record Funding and Unprecedented Flexible Support

Foundation human rights funding hit a record \$5.7 billion in 2021,² marking a surge in total grantmaking and flexible support.³ This growth was accelerated by a \$1.6 billion leap in grantmaking during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020 and 2021). Crucially, almost one-third (32%) of all grant dollars in 2021 were designated as flexible support, the highest level recorded since we began tracking flexible funding in 2015.



2 Geographic Concentration Creates Systemic Risk

The concentration of philanthropic funding in the Global North presents an acute source of systemic risk.⁴ Foundations in North America and Western Europe accounted for 99% of all human rights funding in our global analysis. In terms of total funding, the top 50 foundations were all based in the Global North. This centralization makes the field highly vulnerable to increasing political attacks on foundations' ability to give, which have intensified in countries like the U.S.⁵



3 Small Donor Core Drives Majority of Funding

Ecosystem stability is heavily dependent on a small core of major donors complemented by a broad network that includes both dedicated but small-scale funders and inconsistent, occasional funders. The top 12 foundations by grant dollars provided more than half (55%) of all human rights funding. The remaining 726 funders provided the other 45% and varied widely in how many human rights grants they made. Over a quarter of funders (27%) made just one or two human rights grants. This dual dynamic suggests significant untapped potential but is also a source of instability.

2. This figure excludes 335 grants totaling \$137 million awarded by foundations to other foundations included in the 2021 dataset. Generally, these awards were made to either support regranteeing programs or build the capacity of recipient foundations. These grants have been removed to avoid double counting of grant dollars.

3. We use the terms "flexible" and "unrestricted" interchangeably in this report to reflect grants that give recipients discretion over how to use the funding. This includes grants that foundations describe as general support, general operating, general mission, unrestricted charitable contribution, discretionary, and similar terms.

4. For this analysis, the Global North includes Western Europe, Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, and the United States and the Global South and East includes all other countries. We recognize that these terms are not perfect, that people use different terms to define groups and geographies (e.g., "global majority," "majority world"), and that this language is often shaped through the same unequal power dynamics that our research works to bring to light. We are considering whether and how to adjust our terminology.

5. In this report, we use the terms "funders," "foundations," "donors," and "grantmakers" interchangeably to refer to private foundations, public foundations, and donor collaboratives.

Global South Funding Expands, but the Trust Gap Persists



4 Funding for the Global South and East Sees Record Growth

Funding is shifting toward the Global South and East, but the total dollar amounts remain disproportionately small. In 2021, growth in funding for the Global South and East significantly outpaced that of the Global North, growing by 32% in our matched subset, compared to just 2% for the Global North.⁶ This marked the first time we have documented simultaneous, significant funding growth across all regions of the Global South and East. At the same time, the fact remains that almost two-thirds (64%) of human rights grant dollars are still directed exclusively to action in North America or Western Europe, a modest 7% reduction from the previous year.



5 Persistent Trust Gap Limits Direct Regional Support

A significant and persistent "trust gap" disadvantages Global South and East-based movements. In 2021, nearly all funding for the Global North was awarded directly to organizations within the beneficiary regions, yet only 57% of funding for the Global South and East directly supported groups within the regions. This is consistent with our multi-year findings of direct funding to the Global South and East, which averaged 59% across three years.



6 Funders in the Global South and East Face Financial Vulnerability

Local, national, and regional foundations in the Global South and East account for only 1% of total human rights funding, yet they make 15% of all human rights grants. These funders possess the deep local knowledge and trust essential for maximizing frontline impact. However, many rely on Global North support, leaving this crucial part of the global funding ecosystem vulnerable to funding shifts and contractions.

6. The "matched subset" refers to the 538 foundations that shared grants data in both 2020 and 2021, allowing a direct comparison between years.

Cross-Movement Funding in a Mostly Siloed Field



7 Missed Opportunities for Cross-Issue Grantmaking

Philanthropy is missing a critical opportunity to deliver holistic, cross-issue support. Of the more than 32,000 human rights grants awarded in 2021, only a quarter (27%) addressed more than one of 11 human rights issues we analyzed. At a time when issues like civic and political participation are so interwoven with freedom from violence or reproductive rights, the 73% of grants focused on one issue alone is troubling.



8 Promising Growth in Cross-Population Grantmaking

A positive trend toward cross-population funding is emerging. Among grants with specified populations, the percentage coded for two or more populations grew from 32% in 2020 to 50% in 2021. This suggests a growing commitment among funders to support cross-movement initiatives, which serves as a vital foundation for addressing the interconnected nature of oppression and supporting truly intersectional work.



9 Uneven Progress in Cross-Population Grantmaking

A handful of populations drive cross-population grantmaking, while others remain siloed. Grants focused on women and girls consistently demonstrated the highest integration, with roughly half of the grants for Indigenous peoples (52%), LGBTQI communities (49%), and children and youth (48%) also being tagged for women and girls. Conversely, funding for persons with disabilities showed the lowest integration across the board, demonstrating a need for major funding streams to explicitly embrace disability justice as a cross-cutting human rights priority.



10 Shift Toward Infrastructure Over Direct Action

Following pandemic disruptions, funders prioritized investment in core movement infrastructure, with increased funding for coalition-building (up 16%) and capacity building (up 10%), signaling a crucial commitment to long-term stability. However, this directional shift came at the expense of front-line work, as funding decreased for direct action, such as grassroots organizing (down 11%) and litigation and legal aid (down 16%). This creates vulnerability for movements heavily reliant on community mobilization and legal intervention.

Read the [full report](#) to learn more about the data and insights behind these Key Findings.