BUILDING THE INFRASTRUCTURE FOR BETTER PREPAREDNESS

What the Better Preparedness Initiative has learned about philanthropic preparedness and coordination, and the infrastructure we want to build with you.

BETTER PREPAREDNESS

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AT A GLANCE

Philanthropy is navigating a period in which crises are increasingly interconnected, transnational, and sustained. Responding effectively requires more than the ability to mobilize when a crisis breaks out. It requires relationships, shared analysis, institutional readiness, and the capacity to act collectively before they are urgently needed.

Crisis coordination and preparedness are mutually reinforcing. The **Better Preparedness Initiative**, co-hosted by **Human Rights Funders Network (HRFN)** and **Peace and Security Funders Group (PSFG)**, is building the standing capacity that makes collective action possible before, during, and across crises.

In 2026, BPI convened over 230 participants in a series of Learning Labs focused on philanthropic leadership through attacks on democracy, the impact of AI on the future of crisis, articulating risk appetite, and scenario planning. The Labs surfaced the importance of learning across contexts, building trusted relationships before crises emerge, strengthening internal coherence and risk readiness, and creating the infrastructure that enables funders to move with greater speed, courage, and coordination when conditions change.

This primer foregrounds the next phase of the Better Preparedness Initiative: building the standing capacity needed for proactive crisis readiness and field-wide preparedness.

For the Better Preparedness Initiative, the next phase is about putting true preparedness learning into practice. Alongside continued crisis coordination, BPI will work with the community to deepen shared understanding of the forces reshaping democracy and civic space, connect knowledge and experience across contexts, and create opportunities for funders to practice preparedness and strengthen their capacity to act together. The 2027 Funding Futures Festival will be an important moment in this journey: a space to apply what we are learning, strengthen relationships and collaboration, and help shape what BPI and its community build together next.

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THE BETTER PREPAREDNESS INITIATIVE

From coordination to proactive infrastructure

From Nicaragua to the United States, Turkey to India, and Sudan to Russia, intersecting economic, political, and climate crises rightfully demand rapid responses from the philanthropic sector. Over the past year and a half, the Better Preparedness Initiative (BPI) – a collaboration between Human Rights Funders Network (HRFN) and Peace and Security Funders Group (PSFG) – has convened donors to organize and respond to these intersecting crises in the United States and across their transnational nexus. Members engage in coordinated rapid response to crises not only in the United States, but also in places like Venezuela, Uganda, and beyond.

To complement BPI's continued crisis coordination, we are proactively cultivating philanthropy's operational preparedness and coordinated solidarity with the communities, organizations, and movements that are working to reimagine democracy, build durable power, and realize human rights for all. This proactive strategy extends beyond a reactive response model and aims to build durable transnational philanthropic infrastructure.

To that end, BPI convened a series of conversations in 2026. Ahead of the Learning Labs, a members-only session reflected specifically on our collective response within the U.S. to these intersecting crises. Building on that conversation, between May and July 2026, BPI convened a four-part Learning Lab series to facilitate dialogue about top-of-mind issues around preparedness. Two of the Learning Labs were open to the public and focused on philanthropy's role in defending the future of democracy and civic space globally, and on how artificial intelligence is shaping the future of crisis, respectively. The other two were closed workshops for members of BPI, HRFN, PSFG, and donor networks to articulate and expand risk appetites, and to scenario plan for better preparedness, respectively. What follows are topline reflections on what we have built over the past year and a half, where we are now, and where we are headed as a philanthropic community.

Now & Next: BPI Learning Labs

The BPI 2026 Learning Labs, a four-part series held in June and July 2026, addressed pressing issues around preparedness and offered a space to connect, take action, and prepare for future crises.

Workshop 1: Articulating and Expanding Our Risk Appetite

Workshop 2: Scenario Planning for Better Preparedness

16 & 17 June, 2026 - These two hands-on sessions created an interactive space to unpack, balance, and articulate risk appetite. The first offered a grounded introduction to organizational risk appetite to support more efficient, consistent, and risk-informed decision-making. The second used scenario-planning to examine plausible futures and prepare for their operational implications.



Leading through Attacks on Democracy: Funders' Role in Defending the Future of Civic Space Around the World

30 June, 2026 - This conversation explored philanthropy's role in defending democracy and civic space — and what it would take to move from crisis response to genuine collective preparedness: investing now in the relationships, infrastructure, and coordination needed to protect both over the long term.

SPEAKERS



Binaifer Nowrojee, President of Open Society Foundations



Stacey Abrams, Political Leader and Bestselling Author

How AI is Shaping the Future of Crisis

16 July, 2026 - This lab approached AI as a political and economic project that is accelerating authoritarianism, inequality, and instability, while also creating new tools for resistance and coordination.



Astha Kapoor, Co-Founder at Aapti Institute



Guillermo Beltrà, Europe Director at Luminate

SPEAKERS

MODERATOR



Vidushi Marda, Director of Ecosystem Building, AI Collaborative

FINDINGS

Crisis response is not preparedness

In imagining what this commitment to better preparedness looks like, we can draw on a distinction from the public health sector. Surge capacity is what a hospital can do when patients arrive all at once. That's crisis response. However essential that work is, a field organized entirely around reaction lets its opponents set both the agenda and the timeline. Standing capacity is what exists before the patients arrive – risk analyses, planning and protocols, updated inventories of available resources, clarity on services offered and those not offered, and the relationships that facilitate cooperation and mediate disagreement. Preparedness is the indispensable planning and imagination that shapes our ability to achieve the future we want in moments of comfort and convenience, as well as in moments of challenge and crisis.

For BPI, this distinction does not mean choosing preparedness over crisis response. It means investing in the capacity that makes crisis response more effective: trust-based relationships, shared analysis of what is changing, greater clarity about risk and roles, new practical tools, and the ability to act in coordination when a crisis emerges.

This document is both a reflection and a starting point. The Learning Labs gave us a space to ask what preparedness requires in a rapidly changing operating environment. What emerged was the idea of preparedness as a set of connected capacities: the ability to anticipate change, prevent risk from leading to paralysis, build relationships before they are needed in urgency, learn across contexts, and coordinate when crises emerge. Together, these capacities form the standing capacity that allows philanthropy to act with greater speed, courage, and solidarity. In these reflections, we draw on the lived experience of the BPI, peer organizing spaces, and the latest social movement and philanthropic research.



The threat has evolved

Reflecting on the past year and a half, BPI recalled the importance of the surge capacity that we have built together. We published a how-to guide for coordination during a crisis.[1] And spaces like the Block and Build Funder Coalition (BBFC) emerged to coordinate strategic defenses against authoritarian threats primarily domestically within the U.S.[2] Yet, as **Stacey Abrams**, founder of the 10 Steps Campaign, pointedly noted during one of the Learning Labs, "when [defense] becomes your whole premise, you lose." This reflection is more salient when recognizing that the crises we are combatting are not short-lived surges. They are shifts in the operating environment.

One of the most consequential shifts that BPI members reported is the routine use of national security and counterterrorism machinery against foundations and non-profits. The mechanisms are not new – they were built and tested across decades, largely against pro-Palestinian organizations. What has changed is the aperture. It has widened. Private foundations, reproductive justice organizations, and mainstream civil society groups now find themselves routinely surveilled and targeted under the same purported national security and counterterrorism frameworks.

The expanded breadth and strength of the anti-gender movement is a second clear shift. Across the Learning Labs, participants described how anti-gender and anti-trans politics function as a leading edge of anti-democratic politics. As one participant noted, the anti-gender movement offers a clear case study of patient infrastructure building, thirty years in the making: not a single-issue movement, but a transnational network of state and non-state actors aligned with far-right, ethnonationalist, techno-authoritarian, and often Christian nationalist projects, moving funding, model legislation, legal arguments, and case law across borders.

What makes these shifts structural rather than episodic is their institutional depth. Counterterrorism framing has been written into strategy documents and executive memoranda; federal agencies and departments are coordinating to investigate and indict foundations and non-profits alike; material support statutes are being used against domestic civil society; foreign agent and domestic terrorism designations advance at the state level, often without legislative backing. Anti-gender conditions now travel through foreign assistance policy – the Global Gag Rule,[3] anti-DEI rules, and gender-ideology conditions bundled in ways that are confusing

by design, with bilateral agreements replacing multilateral ones in a manner that reduces transparency and circumvents oversight. The chilling effect is real even though many U.S. government agencies and departments have been gutted of staff who implement these policies. Considering this environment, BPI members noted the importance of education to assist multilaterals and non-U.S. donors to understand the implications of these shifts, and of national and multinational advocacy where the withdrawal of cross-border funding is undermining hard-won gains, such as in response to HIV-AIDS.

These shifts matter for all of us because, as one Learning Lab participant noted, when democracy is contested at the center, it becomes more vulnerable at the margins. Alongside these shifts in the operating environment, our community has witnessed an accompanying normative shift. It is challenging for philanthropy to anchor grantmaking in shared democratic standards when the standards themselves are in dispute.

These shifts are not events to be weathered. They are our new operating environment. And we cannot rapid response our way out of changes in the environment. We need transnational infrastructure that is designed for the environment we want and customized to the environment we have. For preparedness, this means developing the capacity to recognize patterns before they fully take hold. Experiences from one context can provide insights relevant to another. Creating trusted spaces where funders and civil society actors can compare those experiences is therefore not only an exercise in solidarity. It is part of how we build collective foresight.

Such infrastructure is all the more important in an era where technological innovation in the form of artificial intelligence is achieving a scale of influence that was hard for many to imagine a decade ago. The discussion in one of the Learning Labs highlighted the fact that many countries have tied their aspirations and identity to tech and tech companies.

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In many contexts, tech companies are driving policy and politics in ways that explicitly threaten government as we know it. Moreover, narratives abound about how artificial intelligence's reach will inevitably reshape all aspects of society. For Learning Lab participants, these trends raise two questions: how can we build accountability around tech and tech companies, and what does it look like to develop countervailing power to current tech and to the new tech that is on the horizon?

Fostering collective agency around and inside tech such that it achieves more of its liberating promise is happening in two primary ways that philanthropy is already supporting. The first, as noted by one BPI member is the development of open-source alternatives to big tech tools. The second is organizing tech workers to leverage their power inside tech – especially AI companies – to act in the public interest. Two such organizations are the Association for Progressive Communications[4] and the Alliance for Principled Tech,[5] respectively. Therefore, the challenge for us is whether we are building the relationships, knowledge, and capacity to recognize how emerging technologies are reshaping power, civic space, and crisis conditions before their negative consequences become pervasive.

Pro-democracy leadership has also evolved

Just as threats to human rights have evolved, so have civic space and civic participation. As Binaifer Nowrojee, President of Open Society Foundations, noted in one of the Learning Labs, **"If we only look at who is leaving the stage of democracy, we're going to miss who is stepping onto it. Leadership has not disappeared. It's moving."**

President Nowrojee went on to say, "I see it in young Gen Z movements who are remaking politics across Africa and Asia. I see it when I visit Latin America and I meet Afro-descendant and Indigenous feminist movements. I see it in the work that we are supporting of women defying the Taliban in Afghanistan working through online efforts. I see it in the flotillas seeking to deliver essential supplies to Palestinians who are stripped of their basic rights. I see it most recently with the Vatican encyclical insisting that artificial intelligence must safeguard human dignity. And I see it in neighbors standing up between U.S. ICE agents and migrant families they live among."

A consensus emerged during the Learning Labs that we must invest in their leadership through an intersectional approach that is locally rooted, regionally connected, and transnational. Movements and their leaders are increasingly connected across borders.

But many philanthropies may not be set up for, or accustomed to supporting, such frontline defenders. To be effective in supporting them, we must follow the movements. For example, such support grounded in solidarity can entail deferring to their – not our own – risk assessments. Their assessments may surprise you.

Following the movements is critical because our support from afar is always secondary to domestic support for movement success.[6] And our grantees are likely to feel the positive and negative effects of foreign support long after grants end and donors fly home. So, support for the work of local actors is important. However, many of us have seen up close and personal how the "local" can also be a place of exclusion where hierarchies of power exist just as they do across borders. Our grantmaking should therefore be intentional about reversing and not exacerbating inequality within local communities, just as it should reverse and not exacerbate inequality across borders.

This approach to solidarity inevitably entails coordination with philanthropies we know well and those we are just getting to know. Authoritarians and their philanthropic allies have a head start, more money, better coordination, and more momentum than we do. Meanwhile, many pro-democracy donors remain siloed from each other. So, as highlighted throughout the Learning Labs, it is more important than ever that we support each other not only to strengthen our respective grantmaking but also to strengthen our collective grantmaking such that it provides flexible resources in the ways and moments that these grassroots and social movement actors have been asking for.



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Relationships of trust as infrastructure

When we think of collective grantmaking to overcome these siloes and this authoritarian edge, our first thought may be to specific organizations, networks, and pooled funds. But what serves as the foundation for effective organizations and networks? Whether formal or informal, institutional or extra-institutional, organizations and movements are built on relationships, and those relationships move at the speed of trust. So, we can imagine relationships of trust being critical infrastructure.

Yet, it is not only through reinforcing existing relationships that we build the infrastructure of the future. As the scholar, Mark Granovetter highlights in his seminal research, it is often through the development of weak relationships – acquaintances and new relationships outside of our closest collaborators – that new information flows.[7] That new information may be the perspective we never considered, or the pattern we struggled to make sense of because we'd never seen it before. For philanthropy in the U.S today, the strength of weak ties can be found in transnational relationships with donors and activists in Brazil and Hungary who have lived through and overcome strikingly similar contexts of democratic backsliding, as a BPI event in April 2025 noted.[8]

This understanding of relationships helps to expand how we think about our power to convene. Convening may look like one of the softest things philanthropy does. Yet, convening is in fact load-bearing – when it nourishes strong existing relationships while also fostering new weak relationships. It's the strong relationships that carry us when we can't carry ourselves. And it's the weak relationships that carry us further than we ever imagined. BPI's experience suggests that this relational infrastructure needs to be built deliberately, before a crisis requires it. That means creating small, trusted spaces where funders can build relationships, compare experiences across contexts, work through differences, and develop the shared analysis that makes coordination possible. HRFN's Funding Futures Festival in Johannesburg in May 2027 will not be an endpoint, but one moment in that longer process of relationship building.[9]

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Funding a bigger we

Weak ties perform an important function across political difference in contexts of democratic backsliding like the United States. And, while pundits may suggest otherwise, Americans actually want to engage across difference.[10] One big obstacle to that engagement is that they lack the civic spaces to do so.[11] As such there is a problem of supply of spaces, not a problem of demand to use them.

A growing body of research suggests that a multi-racial, cross-class, mass movement offers the best chance of stopping democratic backsliding and sustaining a democratic recovery.[12] This work has been described as building a "bigger we."[13] Such a movement – often referred to as a big tent or united front – should include both civic coalitions that foster a collective sense of belonging, agency, and power, as well as an electoral coalition that contests for power.[14]

Philanthropy can support the spaces, activities, and coalitions that foster this sense of belonging at the national level. But what would this work towards a "bigger we" look like at the transnational level? As Stacey Abrams noted, "we often see the U.S. as *sui generis* on every level," but the work we do in the U.S. is always going to be intimately tied to what happens abroad. So, one challenge for philanthropy is whether we can coordinate transnationally to foster a sense of belonging to human rights that crosses national borders, religions, and political identities?

Our session reflecting on the U.S. emphasized the centrality of fostering a sense of belonging while also identifying BPI's most unique contribution to this work. We believe our most impactful work related to the U.S. should focus on filling the gap in spaces to coordinate, learn, and act together to counter democratic backsliding in the U.S., specifically from a transnational perspective. This includes uplifting lessons U.S. civil society and philanthropy can learn from the many communities of activists and donors around the world who have lived through – and in some cases emerged from – authoritarianism. It also includes centering the historically excluded communities in the U.S. – immigrants, women, and African Americans, amongst others – who have led many of our successful movements and who hold deep knowledge, relationships, and power relevant for the present moment.[15]

For BPI, the value of working transnationally is not simply in transferring "lessons" from one country to another. It is in creating reciprocal spaces where funders and movements can identify common patterns, understand important differences, develop trust-based relationships, and expand the range of strategies available to take advantage of openings and react to deterioration in their respective operating environments.

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The key constraint is risk culture, not money

Our community has found that the most common constraint holding our philanthropic colleagues back from adapting to these realities of democratic backsliding is not financial; it's risk culture. In one of the Learning Labs, Binaifer Nowrojee reflected on the impact of this self-imposed straitjacket. "When philanthropy quietly reclassifies human rights as high risk, and moves away from funding it, that's not a neutral decision. It's actually complicity with the rollback of rights. I think that there will be a moment, looking back, where people will question what decisions they made."

As HRFN colleagues, Rachel Thomas, Director of Research Initiatives and Kellea Miller, Executive Director, noted, this complicity disproportionately harms intersectional movements: "grassroots feminist networks safeguarding reproductive freedoms, LGBTQI+ groups defending bodily autonomy, racial justice movements dismantling systemic inequality, climate activists protecting land and resource rights, and local organizers mobilizing for peace and self-determination."[16] The dark irony is that these movements are – on the one hand – central to the protection of democracy, and – on the other hand – some of the most politically contested and therefore the first to see funding severed when risk profiles are reassessed.

The harm done by philanthropy's complicity is exacerbated by what Rachel and Kellea note is "a deep structural fragility in the funding ecosystem."[17] In any given year, over half of all human rights funding has come from just 12 large foundations. And the announcements of the closure of Wellspring Philanthropic Advisors by 2028 and the winding down of Arcus Foundation by 2029 exacerbate this already fragile ecosystem. Instead of sending ripples of solidarity, these decisions collectively send a reminder of precarity.

Yet, not all philanthropies have moved away from human rights or pre-emptively constrained their grantmaking. The Marguerite Casey Foundation's board recently made a decade-long commitment to increase its giving by 50%.[18] And Wallace Global Fund recently announced that it is spending its entire endowment down to zero, deploying every dollar toward frontline organizers and movements. [19] Others have used creative ways of increasing their grantmaking. For example, the Ford Foundation issued a $1 billion bond to double its grantmaking during the COVID-19 pandemic.[20] These decisions may be presented as good math; but at their root, they were political choices grounded in risk culture. And as Deepak Bhargava, President of the Freedom Together Foundation, noted, the courage to make these kinds of choices is contagious.[21]

Risk culture operates through a simple asymmetry. The cost of acting is legible, attributable, and lands at the feet of a person inside a foundation. The cost of not acting is diffuse, deferred, and often lands squarely on people and communities outside of the foundation. Stated and unstated incentives for many philanthropic professionals reward the colleagues who reduce the risk of the foundation being targeted by the wide aperture of authoritarianism.

Under external and internal pressure this dynamic becomes dangerous. A general counsel's job tends to prioritize reducing institutional exposure. But a field of institutions each minimizing its own exposure, in aggregate, complies itself into irrelevance, conceding ground that was never demanded. Scholar Timothy Snyder calls this anticipatory obedience, and his point is an uncomfortable one. Much of the authority a backsliding government acquires is not seized.[22] It is handed over by institutions imagining what might be required of them. The chilling effect is comprehensive. An uncomfortable truth it's that a not insignificant share of the damage done over the past year and a half has occurred through complicity and acquiescence. That is a finding about us, not our opponents. Moreover, recent research found that businesses that kept DEI policies despite the U.S. administration's "go woke, go broke" threats actually thrived financially.[23] That is to say, the courage of these business leaders to maintain their independence has not been bad for business.

Throughout the Learning Labs, participants identified provocative questions to help us better understand risk, make informed decisions about which risks we will take and which ones we will not take, and where risk management capacity should sit within our foundations and within our partners. How can we foster incentive structures within foundations that encourage action in times of heightened uncertainty and risk? What incentive structures can we create that disincentivize obedience across foundations or amongst a cohort of foundations? And in what moments and spaces do our partners need our support to be more visible or less visible? Learning Lab participants agreed that this is a key unresolved tension for philanthropies.

Over the coming year, we invite philanthropies to deliberately assess and set their risk appetite, explicitly pick which programmatic and operational risks they will take, and develop coordinated risk management capacity internally and with other philanthropies. BPI's **Risk and Role Assessment Tool** is designed to facilitate this work. As one colleague noted during a Learning Lab, **compliance with a well-considered risk culture can be enabling both for an individual philanthropy and for developing new philanthropic partnerships**. Being explicit about what we do not support facilitates partnering with other philanthropies that explicitly do support those activities or people.

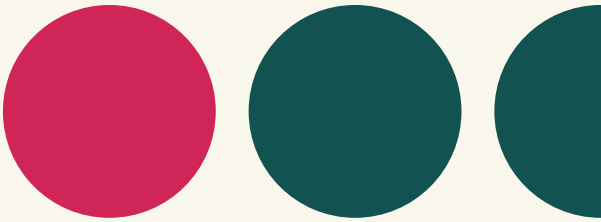
Much of the authority a backsliding government acquires is not seized. It is handed over by institutions imagining what might be required of them.

Internal coherence comes before external coordination

We cannot coordinate effectively externally when we are not aligned internally. This dynamic will be familiar to many philanthropic colleagues: program teams committing to support a new grantee, general counsels advising restraint, operations teams raising compliance concerns, and a senior executive weighing in late in the process. We often speak about institutional philanthropy suffering from thematic and geographic silos. But the functional silos described here are often just as problematic.

As discussed in the Learning Labs, at least one public charity embeds its operations teams within programmatic teams even co-locating them in the office. A private foundation included a colleague from their general counsel's office in the entire, multi-day co-creation process for a new pooled fund. While such decisions take time and energy, they are investments in trust-based relationships, in strengthening weak ties within a foundation, and in ensuring that relevant knowledge and capacity to assess risk, make decisions, and implement them are appropriately distributed amongst a foundation's relevant teams. Such infrastructure inside foundations facilitates strong infrastructure across foundations.

This point has practical implications for how preparedness is designed. **Preparedness cannot sit only with program teams. Some of the most consequential questions about whether and how funding can move sit across legal, finance, compliance, operations, security, leadership, and program teams. Bringing these functional teams into the same conversation before a crisis can reduce the need to negotiate institutional risk from scratch when the pressure is on.**



THE PATH FORWARD

Philanthropy as catalyst and as core supporter

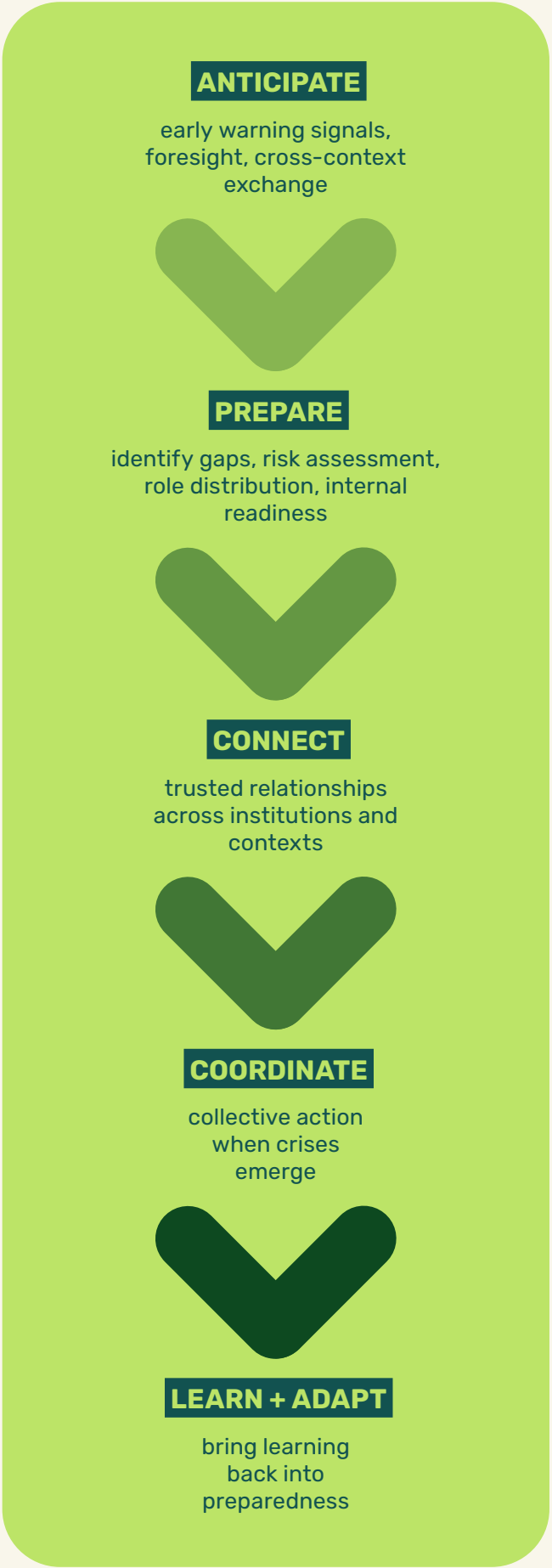
What should this infrastructure support? In one of the Learning Labs, Binaifer Nowrojee noted that, “Philanthropy is meant to catalyze and then step out.” And scholar Rob Reich notes that the distinctive contribution foundations can make to a democracy is discovery – support for democratic experimentalism with a long-time horizon.[24] This is the work that does not pay off in one electoral cycle or from one annual earnings call to the next, making government and private investment unlikely, and even inappropriate.

This role for philanthropy – to fund experimentalism and risk – is not mutually exclusive to offering long term, flexible, general operating support. And it is hard to step out if our catalytic support does not set up our grantees to carry on the work. We can overcome this challenge by using our philanthropic resources to catalyze not only ideas, but also the resourcefulness of our grantees to turn the non-financial resources they have – for example, volunteer hours and membership dues - into the power they need to make the change that they want.[25] **This is how we catalyze in a lasting way: by supporting people, by empowering innovation, and by fostering resourcefulness rather than dependency on external resources.**

Preparedness as a practice

We should not think about preparedness as a plan. Plans are useful insofar as the planning to create them is solid. So, it may be more effective to think about preparedness as a practice. We can draw on how organizers think of the practice of organizing: a set of capacities and infrastructure maintained through repetition and learning, and by people who accept responsibility for enabling others to achieve a shared purpose in the face of uncertainty. We invite you to join us in that practice.

For thirty years, HRFN has served as connective tissue, providing the virtual and in-person spaces and facilitation for philanthropies that care about human rights to collaborate, strategize, and push the field forward. In that time, our community has grown into a global network of 450 institutions across 70 countries. The network includes more than 2,600 staff, consultants, and trustees of private, corporate, and public foundations, community giving programs, women's funds, and philanthropic advocacy and support organizations. Our contribution includes convenings like the Learning Labs, **shared grantmaking principles** like those developed with Ariadne and Gender Funders CoLab, and the **Better Preparedness Playbook and Toolkits**.



Recalling the public health analogy noted at the beginning of this primer, BPI serves as philanthropy's equivalent of public health experts. BPI helps build the relationships, shared analysis, practical capacity, and coordination infrastructure that allow funders to anticipate and navigate crises together. We work to empower the entire field of human rights philanthropy. We are committed to fostering a healthy philanthropic ecosystem that resources human rights movements and civil society organizations working towards a peaceful future where rights are protected and upheld, the planet is cared for, and all people can live and love with dignity. Through the strength of HRFN, PSFG, and our peer donor networks, we are uniquely placed to be your resource and community not only across the United States, but also transnationally.

BPI in practice: Uganda



Following the passage of Uganda's Sovereignty Act in May 2026, BPI convened funders to assess the changing operating environment and identify where collective action could help sustain movement infrastructure. The coordination surfaced practical preparedness challenges, including compliance and risk assessment, access to rapid legal support, mechanisms for keeping funding flowing, and the institutional risk appetite required to use them.

This case study illustrates the relationship between preparedness and coordination. Crisis coordination helps identify gaps, relationships and mechanisms that need to exist before the next crisis, or before current conditions intensify. Building that standing capacity, in turn, makes future collective responses faster and more effective.

Implications for our collective work

What does this mean for our work together? It means that we are not forgoing crisis response in favor of preparedness. These two strands of work are mutually reinforcing. The entrenchment, breadth, and institutional depth of authoritarian networks and attacks mark a new operating environment for us and our partners. This new environment may not look and feel the same from one country to the next, but the similarities across countries are profound.

Similarly, we have learned from accompanying intersectional movements responding to intersecting crises that for our philanthropy to be relevant in this new operating environment, our support must also be intersectional. Our thematic, geographic, and functional silos may protect our fiefdoms, but continuing to do so comes at the expense of the frontline defenders and historically excluded communities whose lives cannot be split into neat silos. They may or may not tell us this in as many words. But the harm is there for everyone to see.

To meet this moment, our responses must be grounded in solidarity. And they must be locally rooted, regionally connected, and transnational. This can only be done through fostering trust-based relationships that strengthen strong ties and weak ties, and that build a sense of belonging to a bigger we. This bigger we is a collective project that is not without risk, or the perception thereof.

In the words of Binaifer Nowrojee, “Human rights are never a gift that is handed down from above. They're always won from below by people who refuse to look away, and who are willing to have courage and moral clarity and stand up.” The true measure of human rights philanthropy today is whether we muster the courage and moral clarity to stand up and stand with the organizations, communities, and movements that are on the frontlines risking everything to reimagine democracy, build durable power, and realize human rights for all.

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From learning to testing

The Learning Labs were designed to help us ask what better preparedness requires. They also helped us see where BPI can make its most useful contribution.

Over the coming months, BPI will begin putting these lessons into practice with the community, creating opportunities to deepen shared understanding, connect knowledge and experience across contexts, and practice how funders can better prepare and act together. This will include testing smaller, trusted, and practical formats that help turn these lessons into standing capacity. This could include cross-functional spaces that bring program, legal, finance, compliance, and operations together around concrete challenges to preparedness; cross-context peer exchanges that help funders recognize patterns and signals earlier; and time-bound cohorts that allow a small group of funders to work through a shared challenge over time.

BPI will also continue to activate spaces for coordination when crises emerge. These are not two separate strands of work. What we learn through crisis coordination should strengthen our standing capacity, and a stronger standing capacity should make our crisis response faster, more connected, and more effective.

HRFN's Funding Futures Festival in Johannesburg, South Africa in May 2027 will give us an opportunity to bring what we are learning into a wider conversation with funders and movements, test our assumptions, strengthen relationships across contexts, and use that learning to shape the next iteration of BPI.

We invite the BPI community to build this next phase with us: to bring the challenges your institutions are grappling with, the knowledge your contexts can offer others, and the questions we need to be prepared to answer together.

LINKS TO BPI RESOURCES

BETTER PREPAREDNESS COMMUNITY

Build relationships, exchange lessons, strengthen preparedness, and coordinate with other funders.

SUITE OF TOOLS

Practical tools for crisis analysis, risk and role assessment, internal coordination, and after-action learning.

THE CRISIS COORDINATION PLAYBOOK

A five-step guide for setting up and strengthening funder coordination in a crisis.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Learn more about what BPI offers in a crisis and how to engage with its community of funders.

ENDNOTES

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About the Better Preparedness Initiative

BPI is a growing community of over 260 funders working across the human rights, peace and security, and humanitarian sectors. Hosted by Human Rights Funders Network and Peace and Security Funders Group, BPI brings foundations together to help ensure that human rights movements and civil society organizations have the resources they need to navigate crises and operate in heavily restricted civic spaces, before, during and after crises.

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