



Philanthropy's role in genuine change

15 lessons from today's grassroots
movements and their backers

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About

The Altruist League brings together governments, businesses and philanthropists determined to create real change in our societies. The activist movements in the League's investment portfolio (**The Altruist Index™**) are working to stop climate change and reduce all forms of unfair inequality. The League's **Systemic Change-maker Score™** is designed to be the most robust reflection of an organization's contribution to positive systemic change globally. Headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, the Altruist League has regional teams in Hong Kong, Nairobi and San Francisco.



Introduction

“ *I am not advocating anything revolutionary. I am advocating action to prevent anything revolutionary.*

– Theodore Roosevelt

How should philanthropy behave so it contributes to fast systemic change in our society? This is the question we try to answer here. By systemic change, we mean stopping and reversing climate change and decisively reducing different types of unjust inequality (gender, racial, wealth).

We draw from:

1. A survey on the state of philanthropy and the world that the Altruist League conducted among its funding members (140 responses) and portfolio organizations (1,193 responses). The set spans 23 countries on five continents
2. Our everyday operations
3. The ongoing discussions in philanthropy and the broader society
4. Relevant historical literature, for reference

We distill 15 lessons on the state of the world, the nature of systemic change, as well as the type of philanthropist and nonprofit that it requires.

The survey and the writing of the text took place against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and the massive protests in the U.S. following the killing of George Floyd by the Minneapolis Police Department. This has influenced our thinking just like, no doubt, the responses.

The lessons we identify are:

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Philanthropy and the world

1. Philanthropy needs new leadership, not new theory

When asked what philanthropy needs more of today, more than seven out of ten of the respondents ticked honesty and leadership, with honesty scoring above 80%. New concepts scored less than 30%.

The basic debate around philanthropy has remained largely stagnant over the years. Proponents of the sector have claimed that philanthropy feeds the hungry, educates children, and builds hospitals. Critics have countered that it avoids taxes, circumvents the democratic process, and perpetuates the status quo.

In the meantime, we have cycled through a number of trends and much jargon. Today, the prominent topic is inclusive, systemic change; in years past, it was impact investing (2010s and ongoing), corporate social responsibility (2000s), business-style philanthropy (1990s), political (activist) giving (1960s), and so on.

Further theoretical breakthroughs are unlikely to make a difference to what is ultimately an ethical question: does the funder need to give up a bit of power so that someone else can have more? A philanthropist's response to this question defines all his/her work.

83% of those surveyed feel that philanthropy needs more honesty in its approach to improving the world.

2. The state of the society is unclear and the future is open

The state of the world today will be understood by historians thirty years from now. They will look back and criticize us for not seeing whatever is coming – coming. For us, all futures are still possible.

Trust in the government and corporations among the young is very low (Deloitte). Researchers of economic and cultural evolution (Turchin, Piketty) predict a coming peak of political instability. Newspaper headlines talk of a fragmented society and unaccountable elites.

Alarming at first glance, this is a situation we have seen many times in the past and resolved it through legislation, consensus, or lamentable but crisis-ending coercion. Moreover, in very practical ways (standard of living, health), the world is the best it has ever been (Pinker).

Our survey shows no clear signal on this topic – similar, small percentages of people predict a violent revolution as do significant systemic improvement through peaceful means. A full 60% predict continued tension and gridlock, with an unclear outcome.

Both funders and activists anticipate ever more political gridlock and tension in the coming years.

3. A revolution is unlikely, and would be a disaster

A total of 66% of our portfolio now believes that it is fine to break the law in some cases to raise awareness about a problem. This percentage has more than doubled in two years.

This law breaking usually means protesting during curfews and “occupying” public spaces – it is part of a tactical approach espoused by the likes of Erica Chenoweth of Harvard and adopted by the likes of Extinction Rebellion. There is a distance between such actions, designed for peaceful change, and violent revolutionary activity.

Citizen protests alone, even those that are law-breaking, don’t lead to a violent uprising. Of the three major preconditions for one – grassroots unrest, bickering elites, and an uncooperative repressive apparatus – only the first two can be detected to a moderate degree in Western societies (Kotkin, Goldstein). Their extent is being over-estimated because of the silence of the groups that still like the status quo. It would take far more insanity from the elites to alienate those people, and then the army. This would lead to bloodshed, the rise of tyranny, and a lost decade or two. This is the scenario the League exists to avoid.

Two thirds of activists now believe breaking unjust laws to be an acceptable tactic.



Understanding systemic change

4. It is an old phenomenon

Systemic change happens regularly. This is the reason why women can vote and LGBT people marry. The mechanism through which this happens is not a secret either – social movements, political pressure, good storytelling, advances in science and technology, evolution of public consciousness, visionary leaders. The process is merely complex and long-term, which makes it incompatible with the approaches and objectives of some donors. Others have a long relationship with it, an example being the Ford Foundation’s early and ample support of the civil rights movement.

Philanthropy has a long history of supporting systemic change.

5. It is not always progressive and liberal

The National Rifle Association (NRA) in the U.S. has been a magnificent example of grassroots organizing and systemic change for decades. It has spread its money widely, investing in local communities for years without any strings attached. At the same time, it has been enlisting loyal politicians and deterring others through its much-feared grading process. The NRA has amassed a formidable support base. In a country where up to 90% of the people support some sort of gun legislation, it has been able not only to prevent that but also to expand gun rights in many states.

Some of the most poignant examples of systemic action by organizations are non-progressive.

6. It must be political

Some 71% of the respondents have a positive view of impact investing and its derivatives. However, only 22% feel that they can lead to genuine systemic change. This perhaps offers a fresh perspective on an activity that has tended to polarize people into camps. For-profit investors evidently believe in it with increasing conviction as the ESG market grows. Skeptics are predictably seeing yet another self-serving exercise in brand/greenwashing with no clear metrics.

The sentiment coming from the survey is more nuanced. Part of the attitude is practical and positive – if unemployed Ugandans get work at a Pizza Hut and the company that made that possible receives a cut, then everyone wins.

But the community seems to find impact investing's implicit political stance inadequate. This stance assumes that existing power relationships are fair and natural and that changing the world is all about finding win-win scenarios. Both activists and philanthropists increasingly feel that real change cannot be win-win for every single group.

Only 22% of those surveyed feel impact investing-style strategies can bring about real change, even though 71% support those in general.



On the changemaker philanthropists

7. They are driven by firm belief and are in it for the long run

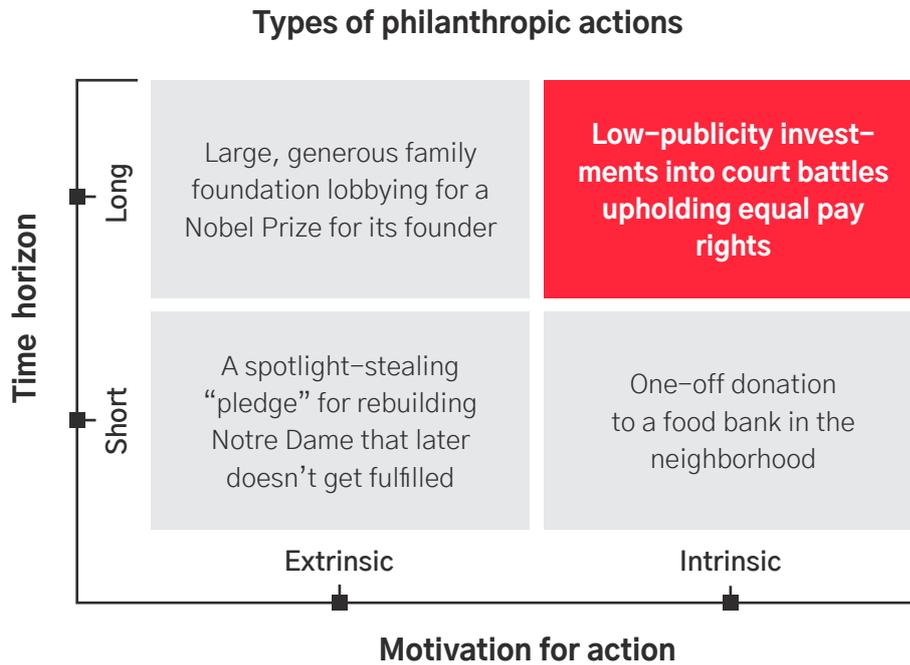
Philanthropists are motivated by the same impulses as is the general population. The majority prefers simple tasks and quick rewards. This is why more of us like uplifting press releases and gala dinners than do supporting research on criminal justice reform.

The changemaker's motivation, in contrast, is intrinsic. This can come from strong core beliefs, a lived experience of a problem, and/or a sense of accomplishment in their life and career, which reduces the need to prove points to others. Their ambition lies in the idea of solving a seemingly intractable problem and/or of building a legacy for the coming generations.

Denoting someone a belief-driven long-run investor doesn't imply anything about his/her values. The Koch brothers, fighting government in all shapes and sizes for decades, are systemic investors. Chuck Feeney, the billionaire who gave anonymously to health and education initiatives for years until he was obliged to identify himself, is one as well. So is the person living next door, consistently contributing to groups advocating for women's reproductive rights.

Changemakers are intrinsically motivated and deliberately attack seemingly intractable problems.

Actions in the changemaker mindset can be contrasted with others through the following graph:



8. They are able to add value through building alliances

Donors (77%) believe in the notion of added value. This makes sense – it is tough for anyone to feel like all that is required of them is their money. The nonprofits are not seeing the value in practice – 32% find that their donors add non-financial value. An interpretation is that some donors equate added value with unsolicited advice, oversight, and burdensome reporting requirements. The activists equate it with opening doors and providing connections.

32% of activists feel that donors add non-financial value.

If changemakers want to be hands-on, then they need to be the kind of people who can connect climate action groups with well-inclined legislators in Russia or bring three anti-femicide organizations from northern Mexico together for coordination and exposure to a new funder, and then step out of the channel to let the relationship develop.

This is a high bar to clear. Some of the hardest work in philanthropy is mapping out who is doing what and why, including the government, other philanthropists, social movements, and different international organizations with overlapping mandates, each with its own understanding of what (for example) the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) stand for and require, and each with egos to be managed.

9. They embrace complexity and diversify

Reforming the education system goes hand in hand with improving local governance, reducing corruption, and building alliances with diverse social groups in the area; otherwise it fails. More cars on the streets means both less clean air and more urban childhood obesity.

How does one act in a world where everything is interconnected? The smart financial investor responds to market complexity by buying an index fund. She rightly mistrusts her own ability to predict and control by picking individual stocks. Funds tracking broad U.S. equity indexes (e.g., the S&P 500) today have more assets by value than stock-picking ones for the first time in history.

Philanthropy should take a hint – the general funder may, for example, set aside 20% of his/her portfolio for systemic action and spend the remainder the usual way, reaping the psychological and social benefits and making it easier to live with the often thankless and frustrating job of investing in long-term systemic change. The table below is an example of portfolio allocation, loosely analogous to how a typical for-profit pension fund might be structured. The percentages will vary greatly depending on one’s risk appetite and other factors.

Profound change happens thanks to a broad group of actors. Just like a for-profit investor, a strategic philanthropist diversifies.

Table 1: A systemic portfolio for the general philanthropist

Allocation	Content	Investment analogy	Rationale
50%	Traditional investment disbursed through a personal foundation to grant seekers with traditional domain interests (health, education, arts)	“Fixed income”	Constant positive results, predictability
30%	Investment disbursed to good causes within the donor’s field of expertise, where value can be added through connections and coaching (e.g., a tech veteran improving access to immersive remote education to poorly covered regions)	“Equities”	Feeling of involvement and personal contribution
20%	Investment in a broad set of social movements, umbrella organizations, “good lobby,” and other groups pushing for climate policy	“Alternatives”	Diversification and long-term systemic change

10. They actively seek out investments, then trust in partners

Most of the work of the average foundation is in handling grant proposals, various reports, and oversight mechanisms that mediate the donor–recipient relationship.

Most of the work of the systemic investor is in actively sourcing the investment and in evaluating its effects in the real world afterward. In the meantime, the partner organization is left to do what it does best, with little oversight.

Calling the systemic approach “trust-based” would be an unfair implication that the traditional one somehow lacks trust. In fact, it only wrongly assumes that outcomes can always be predicted and conveyed through reports. Our study shows that 82% of movements feel that their investors ultimately trust them. The funders simply go too far by asking the nonprofit to shield them from uncertainty, which it can never do.

Here is a systemic approach to philanthropic investing in an organization, contrasted with the traditional:

The changemaker donates for the long-term, and then gets out of the way.

Table 2: A systemic approach to investing in a nonprofit

Activity	Traditional	Systemic
Investment sourcing	Grantee-driven	Funder-driven (or outsourced)
Commitment	Short-term	Multi-year
Tracking	Reports, supplied by grantee	Changes in the real world, measured by donor
Metrics	Actions undertaken, meetings / workshops held, people reached, awareness raised, social media stats	Membership growth, citations in Tier 1 media, legal cases won, pieces of policy influenced, sentiment changed (in %, measured by surveys) in the local population
Funding decisions	Analysts → investment committees → owners / trustees	Kept at the analyst level
Decision-making frequency	Several times per year	Ongoing
Bureaucracy	Grant solicitation and review, committee meetings, formal contracts with grantees, investment impact calculation, formal visits to check progress	N/a

Note the multi-year engagement, the delegation of decision-making to the analyst level, and the real-world evaluation metrics. Investing for change, in particular the sourcing and measuring stages, can be more time consuming than traditional philanthropy. The Altruist League does it centrally for all its members. The number of such services is likely to grow rapidly in the future.

11. They understand grassroots action

Social movements have helped change the world more than any other form of organizing. Famous examples include the International Red Cross, the civil rights movement, women's suffrage groups, and LGBT activists. Less quoted examples range from anti-tobacco groups to drunk driving awareness campaigners. Data on how much of the overall giving goes to these groups is scant and unreliable. Most estimates peg it at no more than one or two percent.

Most social movements are not worth investing into. They can be notoriously disorganized, uninspiring (pitching worn-out Marxist tropes), or downright evil (think ISIS). But the best ones are led by charismatic leaders, able to grow quickly, and exert enormous political pressure. The changemaker needs those in their portfolio. This can be made more or less complicated, depending on available resources.

To use an elaborate example: our organization employs locally embedded analysts to track 10,000+ global social movements and uses a predictive artificial intelligence (AI) algorithm for identifying investment candidates. About 1.5% of all the organizations we track make it into the portfolio, which we call the Altruist Index™.

The average systemic investor doesn't need anything near that kind of complexity. A do-it-yourself approach to civil society portfolio building is fully possible if one only focuses on a small geographic area and a narrow topic.

The general philanthropist can also benefit from embracing activist movements. This is in particular true for companies and brands looking to raise their profile in the eyes of the younger generation, many of whom are values-driven and believers in grassroots action as the heart of systemic change. This relationship can be a true win-win if the sponsor avoids the impulse to co-opt the movement's nature and image ("WeWashing").

To be seen as credible by the Millennials and the Gen Z crowd is to support activism on climate and inequality.



On the new nonprofits

12. They tilt the game in their favor and plan for the storm

For internal purposes, the League recently topic-scanned around 3,700 articles in philanthropy's leading publications in six countries (three languages) that appeared in 2019, an average year. Close to 60% of the articles were about how to attract, manage and keep donors, or about donor activities. Three percent were about building a better nonprofit operation. A handful talked about building a competitive advantage.

This paints an (exaggerated) caricature of armies of nondescript nonprofits in constant fear as they chase after money, the only thing that matters. The strategic nonprofit will refuse to play that game and instead work to even the odds by being unique in most of the following: structure, skills, funding sources, approach, narrative, data, effectiveness, and region. We explore some of those in other points below.

Management brochures aside, there's no such thing as "embracing" a crisis when it happens. The proper way is to know that one will come and build flexibility into the organization from the outset. Going partly or fully virtual, with no physical offices and flexible contracts, expands the talent pool and will be one of the lasting effects of the pandemic. Over 40% of organizations in the League's portfolio already use the virtual structure.

In 2019, in the major publications, for every article helping nonprofits operate better there were 20 about donor relations and activities.

13. They (at last) use data the right way

Meaningful data had great value even before big data and AI existed as terms, and it continues to have it for nearly all nonprofits. Much of this value can be readily reaped by low-tech solutions. Technology is best thought of as a tool for, roughly, making deductions (big data) and predictions (machine learning) where humans don't have the bandwidth.

Data collection and interpretation is only meaningful with a business question. Where will rain fall tomorrow? Which kids on the list will need after-school support? How much money should I ask for? In the absence of this, our sector has been going through the motions – studies suggest that 90% of us collect some data and five percent of us use it in all our decisions. The for-profit world is no better – up to 85% of big data and AI initiatives fail.

The smart nonprofit leader should therefore be prudent. Resources invested in hype cannot be used for improving operations. But not all is hype, of course. AI is already used routinely in nonprofits for administrative tasks and HR. Machine learning is seeing applications in image recognition and sorting. Fundraising is the next big promise, and there are startups in the market claiming to have been able to build decent models for that; to be seen.

For the few organizations for whose business it makes sense, a good machine learning dataset with predictive powers can be a source of formidable advantage. Even those should not underestimate the work that goes into cleaning up the data and training the algorithm, as well as the salaries of those involved, especially the experts. Our team can testify first-hand to the enormous work involved and the long time it takes to see results.

14. Their stories are bold and unique

For the main narrator of the Arabian Nights, storytelling was survival. Boring the king meant execution in the morning. This predicament, grotesquely cruel and inhumane, is nonetheless analogous to what awaits some nonprofits in the crisis-driven buyers' market of philanthropy.

The nonprofit story has evolved through several incarnations. It started with sensationalism (early 20th century), went through matter-of-fact accounts (ICRC

Less than 17% of respondents feel data use is bringing them a competitive advantage.

Angles of parody, counter-marketing and "confrontation" are waiting to be explored by disruptive nonprofits.

delegate updates), poverty porn (Ethiopia famine 1980s), hostage-style videos of “beneficiaries” praising donors (2000 onwards), and is still adapting to the social media era. In this era, people on the ground have a voice, and are using it, making communication directors’ jobs hard as the latter try to put in place that ultimate “viral” campaign.

The fear of offending different groups (donors) does not contribute to creativity. In the extreme example, campaigns of government-funded international organizations need to be acceptable to 190+ different political entities. The results are often bland. The corporate sector still holds a clear edge and is willing to experiment more. This can result in disasters, e.g., Pepsi’s co-opting of Black Lives Matter via the Live For Now ad. It can also result in world-changing “successes,” e.g., Keep America Beautiful’s Crying Indian commercial, which single-handedly passed the blame for plastic pollution from plastic bottle manufacturers to the citizens.

Nonprofits need more stories that use parody, (in the vein of Radi-Aid’s work); counter-marketing (e.g., the Truth Campaign, anti-tobacco); and confrontational, immersive narratives (e.g., Save the Children’s One Second a Day video). This is an immense opportunity for smaller and unconstrained organizations to draw attention to their mission. Being unexpected and provocative is simply efficient business – politically correct material involves a similar use of resources and has much lower chances for success.

15. Their support base is broad, their product an idea

The old venture capital adage says that investors like to invest the most in startups that don’t need funding. Philanthropists are no different. The most attractive non-profit will have different funding sources and a broad support base.

Individuals, people believing in the cause, are the heart of a nonprofit’s support. This is how successful social movements receive most of their funding. Technology, including the crowdfunding platforms, makes this straightforward.

Companies make good partners for some business models. They will favor nonprofits that can give them unique research, help them improve their giving while remaining ethical and looking good, pull them into networks with their peers where they can share and learn, or connect them to their key audiences.

34% of funders see the ability to inspire support as the most important characteristic of an organization, second only to ability to execute (37%).

Neither individuals nor companies will invest in a slide deck or a report, even one with meaningful numbers in it. They want to be given a vision of the world and a vision of themselves in that world. Then they will use the facts to justify their emotional decision.

The vision comes from an idea. An idea comes from a lived experience of the world and its problems. These authentic experiences and new ideas produce new ways of speaking. There is a reason why people seeking justice don't use words like challenge, framework, and beneficiary. There is a reason why those far removed do. This goes a long way in explaining why our institutions have become so inadequate that we need urgent systemic change.

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A note on methodology:

The survey was anonymous. It consisted of 20 questions and was conducted between 14 April and 2 June 2020. There were 1333 responses, 140 from the Altruist League membership organizations (a response rate of 52%) and 1193 from the groups and movements in the portfolio (a response rate of 59%). In many cases, multiple people from one organization took the survey. The survey was supplemented by fifteen unstructured interviews, each about 1 hour long. Organizations from 23 countries were represented. Further information and the response dataset are available upon request.



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