

# Strategic Resource Mobilisation for Systems Change in Africa: The 4R Framework

This article is based on insights from Sarah Mukasa's presentation to the Africa Systems Change Community of Practice in September 2024 on the topic “**Attracting New Funders for Systems Change**”.



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# Introduction

The landscape of philanthropic funding for systems change work in Africa has undergone significant transformation in recent years, characterised by increased complexity in donor relationships, evolving compliance requirements, and shifting geopolitical priorities. Traditional funding partnerships that once provided predictable support for structural transformation initiatives now face scrutiny under new frameworks emphasising short-term measurable outcomes over long-term systemic impact. This evolution has created particular challenges for African organisations whose work addresses deeply entrenched systems of inequality based on gender, race, ethnicity, and other socially constructed categories.

This article draws from a virtual learning session of the Africa Systems Change Community of Practice (CoP); an initiative of Co-Impact a global philanthropic collaborative committed to advancing just and inclusive systems change that improves the lives of millions. It was established as a platform for peer learning, knowledge sharing, and collaboration among Co-Impact's partners. These partners are engaged in systems change in a number of countries within Africa, advancing initiatives in sectors such as education, health, and economic opportunity. Busara Africa, a Pan-African leadership and organisational development firms serves as the convener of the CoP.

This paper captures the lessons and insights from one of the learning sessions of the CoP on the topic "Attracting New Funders for Systems Change" which was led by Sarah Mukasa, former Division Director of Women's Rights at Open Society Africa. With two decades of experience spanning both resource mobilisation and grant-making at senior levels, Mukasa offered a practitioner's perspective on navigating this increasingly difficult terrain. Her tenure at Open Society Africa, where she led gender justice programming and contributed to the foundation's broader systems change portfolio, provides her with unique insights into both sides of the funding relationship. The framework she presented at the learning event thus emerged from direct experience with the power dynamics that characterise North-South philanthropic relationships and the practical challenges facing organisations seeking to communicate the complexity of systems change work to potential funders.

# Understanding Systems Change in the African Context

Mukasa began by noting that approaches to systems change vary significantly in scope and methodology. Some organisations pursue what she terms "deeply political work" based on ideological frameworks that seek total transformation of existing systems. Others adopt more technical approaches, focusing on specific components or providing targeted services designed to ease the burden of inequality within existing structures. Many organisations employ hybrid strategies that combine elements of both approaches, adapting their methods based on opportunities, resources, and strategic considerations.

This diversity in approach creates challenges for funders seeking to understand and evaluate systems change work. Unlike service delivery programs with clear outputs and direct beneficiaries, systems change initiatives often work through complex networks of relationships and influence, targeting institutional practices, policy frameworks, and cultural norms that may take years or decades to shift meaningfully. The attribution of specific outcomes to particular interventions becomes complicated when multiple actors are working simultaneously on different aspects of the same systemic issues.

Furthermore, systems change work in Africa operates within power dynamics that reflect historical patterns of inequality between Northern funders and Southern organisations. These dynamics influence not only funding decisions but also the frameworks used to evaluate success, the timelines imposed for achieving results, and the types of partnerships that are considered legitimate or effective. Understanding these contextual factors is crucial for developing funding strategies that address both programmatic needs and the broader structural challenges facing the sector

# The Contemporary Philanthropic Landscape

The ecosystem of funders supporting systems change work encompasses a diverse range of actors with varying priorities, processes, and constraints. Major international foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Ford Foundation, and Rockefeller Foundation continue to represent significant sources of funding, though their strategic directions have evolved in response to changing global conditions. The recent announcement of Melinda French Gates's one-billion-dollar initiative specifically focused on gender justice demonstrates both the potential for large-scale investment and the continuing influence of individual philanthropic leaders in shaping funding priorities.

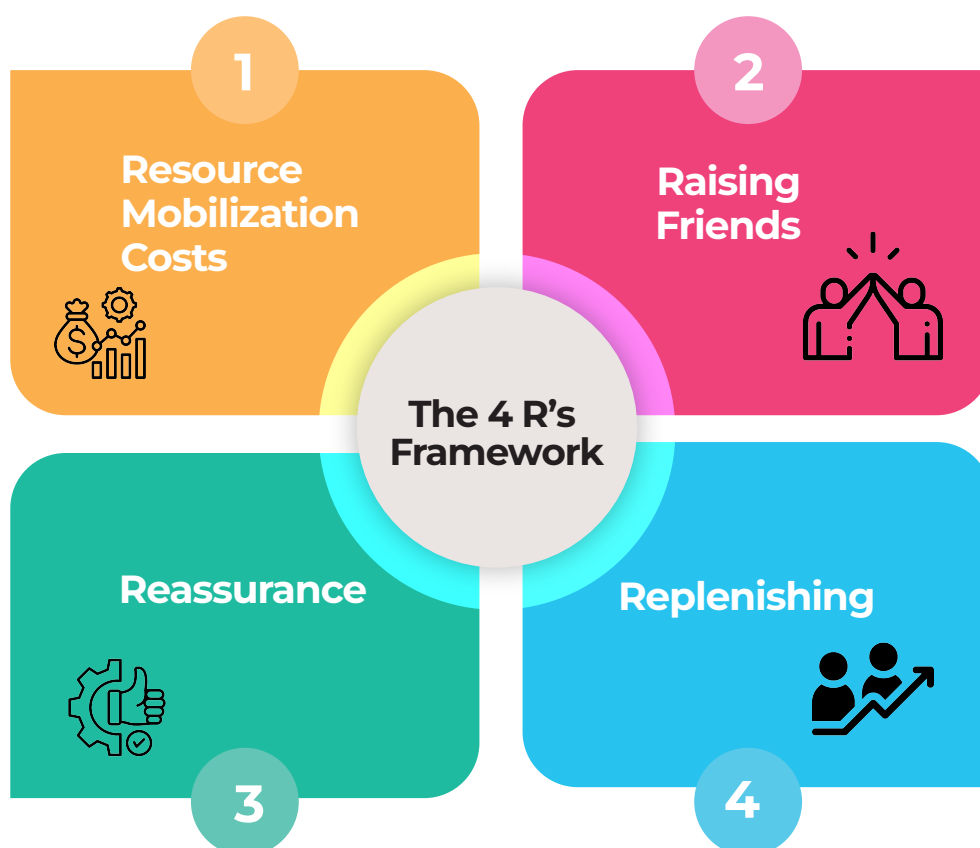
The African philanthropic landscape presents both opportunities and challenges for organisations seeking funding. Indigenous foundations such as the HigherLife Foundation, established by Strive Masiyiwa, and the Dangote Foundation represent growing sources of locally-controlled funding. Women's funds including the African Women's Development Fund, Urgent Action Fund Africa, and the emerging Black Feminist Fund provide specialised support for gender justice work. However, these organisations typically operate with smaller resource bases than their international counterparts and face their own sustainability challenges.

The emergence of corporate foundations, particularly those linked to technology and financial services companies like the MasterCard Foundation and Tony Elumelu Foundation, has introduced new actors with different priorities and processes. These organisations often emphasise economic empowerment and entrepreneurship, which may align with some aspects of systems change work while requiring different approaches to relationship building and proposal development.

Compliance requirements have become increasingly stringent across all categories of funders, driven primarily by anti-terrorism measures and regulatory changes in donor countries. These requirements create particular burdens for smaller organisations that may lack the administrative infrastructure to manage complex reporting and documentation processes. The trend toward online application systems and the potential integration of artificial intelligence in initial screening processes further complicates the relationship-building strategies that have traditionally been central to successful fundraising.

# The Four Rs Framework: A Strategic Approach to Resource Mobilisation

Mukasa introduced participant at the learning session to her “Four Rs Framework to strengthen resource mobilization. The "Four Rs" framework provides a systematic approach to resource mobilisation that addresses both the practical and relational dimensions of fundraising for systems change work. This framework emerged from her dual perspective as both a grant-maker and a fund-raiser, offering insights into the considerations that influence funding decisions while providing actionable strategies for organisations seeking support. The framework is summarized as follows:



## Resource Mobilisation Costs: Strategic Investment in Fundraising Infrastructure

# 1.

The first component of the framework challenges organisations to recognise that effective resource mobilisation requires intentional investment of time, money, and human effort. This principle contradicts the common approach of treating fundraising as an additional responsibility to be managed alongside programmatic work without dedicated resources or strategic planning.

Mukasa advocates for creating specific budget lines for fundraising activities, suggesting terms like "Sustainability Growth Fund" to frame these investments positively rather than as overhead costs. This approach requires organisations to think strategically about what they want from funders, why those resources are needed, who might provide them, and what value proposition they can offer in return. The framework emphasises that successful resource mobilisation depends on being intentional about these questions rather than pursuing opportunities reactively as they arise.

The investment in fundraising infrastructure includes both financial resources and human capacity development. Organisations must allocate staff time specifically for relationship building, proposal development, and funder engagement rather than expecting these activities to happen in addition to full programmatic responsibilities. This may require difficult decisions about resource allocation, particularly for organisations already operating with limited budgets, but Mukasa argues that failing to invest adequately in fundraising capacity ultimately limits organisational sustainability and impact.

## Raising Friends: Relationship Building as Foundation Strategy

# 2.

The second component of the framework emphasises building relationships before seeking financial support, challenging the common practice of approaching funders only when immediate funding needs arise. Mukasa describes this as developing a "raising friends strategy" that focuses on creating authentic connections with individuals who can vouch for the organisation and its work.

Strategic networking forms a central element of this approach, requiring organisations to identify and attend events where philanthropic actors gather to discuss challenges, share information, and develop strategies. These gatherings provide opportunities to position organisational leaders as experts who can influence funder thinking and contribute to the broader discourse about systems change work. Rather than approaching these events as sales opportunities, the focus should be on demonstrating expertise, sharing insights, and building recognition as thought leaders in relevant fields.

The relationship-building strategy extends beyond initial networking to ongoing engagement with program officers and other foundation staff. Mukasa emphasises that these relationships should not be purely transactional but should involve genuine efforts to support program officers in their own work. This might include sharing relevant research, providing feedback on foundation strategies, or connecting officers with other organisations and experts. The goal is to become a valued resource rather than simply another funding applicant.

For organisations with existing grants, program officers represent particularly important strategic relationships. These individuals have direct knowledge of organisational capacity and performance, and they often have networks within their own institutions and across the philanthropic sector. Mukasa suggests that organisations should proactively seek feedback from program officers about their work, ask for referrals to other potential funders, and invite officers to events and activities that showcase organisational impact.

The relationship-building approach must adapt to changes in the philanthropic sector, particularly the trend toward online application processes and reduced staff capacity for relationship management. This evolution makes strategic use of social media, thought leadership, and public visibility increasingly important for maintaining connections with potential funders. Organisations must find ways to remain visible and relevant even when face-to-face interactions become less frequent.

## Reassurance: Demonstrating Organisational Reliability and Good Governance

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# 3.

The third component addresses the increasing emphasis on organisational systems, compliance, and risk management in funding decisions. Mukasa frames this not as meeting arbitrary donor requirements but as developing internal systems that reflect the values and changes organisations seek to create in the broader world.

The compliance landscape has become more complex due to anti-terrorism measures and increased regulatory scrutiny of international funding flows. Funders have become more risk-averse and require greater assurance that partner organisations have appropriate financial management systems, governance structures, and operational policies. However, Mukasa argues that organisations should invest in these systems for their own benefit rather than solely to satisfy donor requirements.

Effective internal systems support organisational learning, accountability, and strategic decision-making regardless of external funding requirements. They provide the infrastructure necessary for scaling impact and managing growth as organisations develop. The key is to develop systems that are appropriate to organisational size and complexity rather than adopting elaborate structures that may be unnecessary or unsustainable.

Technology has made good governance more accessible for smaller organisations through online tools for financial management, board communication, and policy development. Organisations can implement professional systems without significant upfront investment while building capacity for more sophisticated approaches as they grow. The focus should be on creating systems that genuinely support organisational effectiveness rather than simply meeting compliance requirements.

The reassurance component also encompasses transparency and communication about organisational challenges and learning. Funders increasingly understand that systems change work involves experimentation and adaptation, and they may be more concerned about organisations that claim universal success than those that demonstrate honest reflection and strategic learning from both successes and failures.

## Replenishing: Demonstrating Learning and Organisational Growth \_\_\_\_\_ 4.

The fourth component shifts focus from traditional results reporting to demonstrating organisational learning and development capacity. Mukasa argues that while results matter, the ability to learn from experience and adapt strategies based on new information may be more valuable for long-term partnership building.

This approach acknowledges that systems change work operates in complex environments where outcomes may not be immediately visible or easily attributed to specific interventions. Rather than focusing exclusively on predetermined indicators, organisations can demonstrate value by showing how they analyse their work, adapt strategies based on evidence, and strengthen their capacity to achieve impact over time.

Learning documentation should include both positive and negative experiences, with clear analysis of what factors contributed to different outcomes and how those insights inform future work. This requires developing systems for reflection and analysis that go beyond simple activity reporting to examine underlying assumptions, external factors, and organisational responses to changing conditions.

The emphasis on learning creates space for honest communication about challenges and failures, which can strengthen rather than weaken funder relationships when handled appropriately. Mukasa notes that organisations with strong relationships can even approach funders to say "we haven't been able to do this, we've completely messed up on this, we take ownership" without jeopardising future support, provided they can demonstrate learning and corrective action.

Organisational growth encompasses both programmatic development and institutional strengthening. This might include expanding staff capacity, developing new partnerships, enhancing systems and processes, or deepening expertise in particular areas. The key is to show continuous development rather than static operation, demonstrating that funding investments contribute to enhanced organisational capacity for future impact.

# Contemporary Challenges and Adaptive Strategies

The current funding environment presents several specific challenges that require adaptive strategies building on the Four Rs framework. In the discussions with Mukasa, a number of the CoP partners raised some of the challenges they are facing that she addressed.

## **Communicating about systems change work to funders:**

The complexity of communicating systems change work to funders who may have limited familiarity with African contexts or long-term transformation approaches represents an ongoing obstacle for many organisations.

Storytelling for systems change requires balancing complexity with accessibility, demonstrating impact without oversimplifying the factors that contribute to change. Organisations must develop multiple ways of presenting their work to different audiences while maintaining authenticity about the challenges and uncertainties inherent in systems change. This may involve creating different communication materials for different stakeholder groups while ensuring consistency in core messages and values.

## **Core vs. project funding**

The challenge of securing core funding rather than project-specific support remains particularly acute for systems change organisations. Many funders express support for systems change while maintaining funding practices that fragment organisational capacity through short-term, restricted grants. Addressing this requires both individual advocacy with specific funders and collective efforts to demonstrate the limitations of projectised funding for long-term impact.

Engaging with high net worth individuals and private sector foundations requires different approaches than traditional institutional funders. These actors may have less familiarity with development frameworks and may respond to different types of evidence and argumentation. Building relationships with individual philanthropists often requires personal connections and extended engagement that may differ significantly from institutional grant-making processes.

## **The pressure from funders to work in consortia.**

The increasing emphasis on collaboration and collective impact creates both opportunities and challenges for individual organisations. While funders may be more interested in supporting coordinated efforts, this may also create pressure to participate in partnerships that may not align with organisational priorities or capacity. Organisations must balance the benefits of collective action with the need to maintain institutional identity and strategic focus.

# Recommendations and Future Directions

The analysis presented by Mukasa suggests several recommendations for organisations, funders, and sector intermediaries seeking to improve resource mobilisation for systems change work.

**For organisations,** the primary imperative involves systematic implementation of relationship-building strategies that extend beyond immediate funding needs to encompass long-term positioning and influence. Organisations should audit their current approaches to resource mobilisation to identify gaps in relationship building, strategic planning, and internal systems development. This assessment should inform investment decisions about fundraising infrastructure and capacity development, recognising that effective resource mobilisation requires dedicated resources and strategic attention. The development of compelling narratives about systems change work remains crucial for success with all categories of funders. Organisations should invest in communication capacity that can translate complex programmatic approaches into accessible stories while maintaining authenticity about challenges and uncertainties. This may require professional development for leadership staff and dedicated resources for content development and dissemination.

**For funders,** the analysis suggests the importance of examining their own practices and assumptions about systems change work and African organisational capacity. This includes considering the implications of compliance requirements, reporting processes, and funding structures for organisational development and impact. Funders might also explore opportunities for providing core funding and longer-term commitments that align with the realities of systems change work.

**Sector intermediaries and networks** have important roles to play in facilitating peer learning, coordinating advocacy efforts, and developing shared resources for strategic positioning. This might include creating platforms for sharing successful strategies, developing collective research on funding trends and challenges, and supporting coordinated advocacy for improved philanthropic practices.

# Conclusion

The framework presented by Sarah Mukasa offers a sophisticated approach to resource mobilisation that addresses both the practical challenges facing organisations seeking funding for systems change and the broader structural issues affecting the philanthropic sector. The emphasis on relationship building, organisational development, and strategic patience provides a foundation for sustainable funding strategies that extend beyond individual grant cycles to encompass long-term positioning and influence.

The contemporary funding environment requires organisations to balance immediate financial needs with strategic investment in relationship building and capacity development. This balance becomes particularly challenging for organisations facing resource constraints, but the analysis suggests that failing to invest in strategic positioning ultimately limits both sustainability and impact.

Perhaps most importantly, the framework challenges both organisations and funders to move beyond transactional relationships toward partnerships that recognise the complexity of systems change work and the expertise of organisations working directly on these issues. This shift requires changes in practices and expectations on both sides of the funding relationship, but it offers the potential for more effective and sustainable approaches to supporting structural transformation in Africa and beyond.

The evolution of the philanthropic landscape will likely continue to create new challenges and opportunities for organisations seeking funding for systems change work. The principles and strategies outlined in this analysis provide a foundation for navigating these changes while maintaining focus on the fundamental goal of creating more just and equitable societies. Success will require both individual organisational excellence and collective efforts to transform the systems that govern philanthropic relationships and practices.



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