EVALUATION ROUNDTABLE

Learning-Oriented Accountability: How the Ford Foundation Navigates Impact & Social Justice

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Introduction & Context

Introduction

Foundations working for social justice aim to contribute to transformational change. They seek to disrupt unjust systems, reduce inequality, and improve lives over the long term. Given the complex pathways to this kind of change, the challenge is not just about achieving intended impact, but also understanding what impact means, who gets to define it, and how foundations can meaningfully account for their role in processes that unfold across multiple actors, contexts, and time frames. The Ford Foundation's experience with its international Natural Resources and Climate Change (NRCC) program offers a window into how one foundation has wrestled with these fundamental questions of accountability for systemic impact.

When Darren Walker became president of the Ford Foundation in 2013, he reoriented the foundation around a focus on inequality and spurred the reorganization of its programs around a set of underlying drivers of inequality. He simultaneously pushed for a more trust-based approach to grantmaking while setting up a new entity internally, Ford's Office of Strategy and Learning (OSL), to support the foundation's programs to become more strategic and instill a culture of learning. The OSL team strives to promote learning-oriented accountability within the foundation, supporting program teams to revisit and question their assumptions about how social change happens. This perspective shapes how they approach evaluation and learning with Ford's program teams to understand their effects in the world and the ways and conditions under which Ford can contribute to reducing inequality in a meaningful, lasting way.

This teaching case centers on the external evaluation and refresh of Ford's international NRCC program strategy. It shares perspectives from OSL staff, NRCC team members past and present, external evaluators, and Ford leadership on what "accountability for systemic impact" looks like in the context of the Ford Foundation and this particular program strategy. present, external evaluators, and Ford leadership on what "accountability for systemic impact" looks like in the context of the Ford Foundation and this particular program strategy.

The case explores fundamental questions that emerge when foundations attempt to operationalize accountability:

- How is "impact" understood within the foundation?
- What is the scope and time frame in which desired impacts can be seen?
- How do they hold themselves accountable for working toward that impact?
- To whom are they accountable in that process?

The NRCC strategy's evaluation and refresh offer the chance to interrogate a set of issues that extend beyond this individual program:

- How to think about accountability for impact in the context of a global strategy implemented across diverse issues, countries, and communities embedded within complex systems;
- How to calibrate expectations for philanthropy's contribution toward systems change given the private and public sector resources shaping the problem;
- The challenges in understanding and tracking progress toward intended change in a strategy with uneven ownership and varied interpretations across program officers;
- How to create meaningful cohesion and a sense of working collectively toward a shared goal and impact; and
- What it means to be accountable for learning about how systems change happens.

These questions matter for the broader philanthropic sector as foundations increasingly embrace both strategic and trust-based approaches while grappling with the inherent complexities of supporting long-term social change.

A New Focus and New Ways of Working

When Darren Walker assumed leadership of the Ford Foundation in 2013, he embarked on a process to reinterpret the foundation's mission of reducing poverty and advancing human dignity, human rights, and social justice. What followed was a year-long listening and learning process, and discussions of global trends with stakeholders inside and outside the institution. This culminated in the identification of inequality as the central challenge for the foundation to address. Ford Foundation program teams conducted an analysis of the various ways that inequality manifested across regions and identified five underlying drivers that consistently contributed to inequality across the globe: 1) cultural narratives that undermine fairness, tolerance, and inclusion; 2) unequal access to government decision-making and resources; 3)

persistent prejudice and discrimination against women as well as racial, ethnic, and caste minorities; 4) rules of the economy that magnify unequal opportunity and outcomes; and 5) the failure to invest in and protect vital public goods, such as education and natural resources.

In pursuit of this new focus on inequality, Walker called on the foundation to pursue a more integrated approach for greater impact, noting that the work "has become too fragmented and diffuse—the whole is not greater than the sum of its parts."[1] To effectively address the drivers of inequality, grantmaking programs would need to be restructured and realigned. By the end of 2015, the foundation had gone from 35 initiatives to seven thematic areas (although there were still many different lines of work within them). These were further refined over the next several years, including through a process in 2018-2019 that sought to unify the work of Ford's regional offices through targeted global strategies.

In addition to shifting the foundation's focus, Walker wanted to rethink *how* the Ford Foundation did its work by bringing together elements of strategic and trust-based philanthropy. He pushed back against "a binary discourse that categorizes grantmakers as either strategic or undisciplined," arguing that the messiness of social change required a different way of thinking.

"It comes in fits and starts, through feats and defeats. It unfolds in different patterns, at different paces, in different places. And because change in complex systems is unpredictable—no matter how well-intentioned and well-reasoned the model behind it—the time has come for us to set aside our adherence to a prescriptive theology that constrains how philanthropy approaches solving complex challenges," he wrote.[2] Walker advocated for centering grantee perspectives and casting philanthropy in a supporting role, not as the protagonist in social change. While remaining focused on outcomes, he said the foundation should not be prescriptive about how grantees pursued those outcomes.

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[1] Walker, D. (2015, June 11). *What's next for the Ford Foundation?* Ford Foundation. https://www.fordfoundation.org/news-and-stories/stories/whats-next-for-the-ford-foundation/

[2] Walker, D. (Summer 2014). *Response to "Strategic Philanthropy for a Complex World."* Stanford Social Innovation Review. https://ssir.org/up_for_debate/strategic_philanthropy/darren_walker#

This emphasis linked to several concrete shifts within the foundation to more trust-based approaches. In 2016, Walker announced that the Ford Foundation would increase the overhead on project grants from 10 to 20 percent (in 2023, this increased again to a minimum of 25 percent), make general-operating support grants the default as much as possible, and invest $1 billion in a new Building Institutions and Networks (BUILD) initiative that would provide five-year grants combining core support with institutional strengthening funds.

While the BUILD initiative is a primary way that Ford puts “grantees in the driver’s seat,” Walker spurred the foundation to infuse trust-based principles and practices across the foundation. More than 80 percent of Ford's grants are now flexible and multi-year. Programs also leverage non-grant support to grantees, for example, by facilitating connections and exchanges and mobilizing additional resources for their work. Ford strives to make its proposal and reporting processes low burden; grantees report that the total number of hours spent on grant requirements dropped from 75 hours in 2012 to 50 hours in 2024. Since 2008, Ford has partnered with the Center for Effective Philanthropy to conduct a grantee perception survey as a way to receive candid feedback on its relationships with grantees and identify areas for strengthening.

OSL Enters the Picture

With much less fanfare, Walker also led the creation of a new Office of Strategy and Learning (OSL). Bess Rothenberg became OSL’s first director in 2016 and is now the foundation’s Deputy Vice President of Strategy and Impact, responsible for overseeing OSL, BUILD, and the Ford Global Fellowship. She initially reported directly to Walker, but this shifted when Hilary Pennington was promoted to the newly created role of Executive Vice President in 2018. From the start, Rothenberg has been part of Ford’s Program Leadership Team, where key program decisions are made.

In Rothenberg’s understanding, previous attempts to create an internal evaluation unit within Ford had failed because they were either too driven by metrics and measurement or too oriented around demonstrating intended impact rather than supporting learning and improvement—leading many to fear that a lack of success could make their work vulnerable. Previous versions of the unit sat under one program vice president, which meant that evaluation was seen as the purview of only one part of programs. The last iteration before OSL’s creation

was situated in a part of the organization that had a more traditional development model and, as Rothenberg put it, “wasn’t fit for purpose for social justice work.” As she recalled, OSL was tasked with bringing in “a sense of strategic philanthropy,” supporting evaluation, and fostering a learning culture.

It was a rocky start. “We were not well received,” Rothenberg said. “I started in February 2016 and they had already been through two years of strategic restructuring and were in the midst of presenting the new strategies. When I saw the presentations, I said, ‘These aren’t strategies.’ There was no theory of change, no metrics or indicators, nothing that could be tracked or evaluated. I said, ‘We have to do this all over again.’ You can imagine how unhappy people were.”

OSL’s Approach to Strategy and Evaluation

As Rothenberg likes to say, OSL is in the business of understanding how complex social change happens. The team works closely with Ford programs to better understand what it takes to reduce inequality in a meaningful and lasting way. Acknowledging that complex change will not be linear or wholly predictable, the goal is to understand the effects of Ford’s programs and the ways and conditions under which Ford can contribute to enduring social change across issues and places.

The OSL team has worked to formalize and socialize an approach to strategy throughout the foundation in which program strategies operate on a 10-year life cycle that involves two five-year cycles of strategy design, implementation, and ongoing learning, evaluation, and refresh (see Appendix 2). Once Ford’s program leadership approves the strategies, OSL works with the program teams to develop monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) plans that include indicators of progress and success for the strategy’s outcomes, as well as learning questions that help teams to test the assumptions they are making.

In 2016, Rothenberg and Subarna Mathes, hired as a Strategy and Evaluation Officer (now OSL’s Deputy Director), started supporting Ford’s programs to revamp their strategies. They helped teams develop theories of change, including problem statements replete with empirical evidence, to help them identify where Ford could play an impactful role and the specific approaches or activities Ford could support. The problem statements served as a baseline

against which programs could measure progress toward a long-term (10-year) goal and medium-term (five-year) outcomes.

Though it is now part of a standardized program strategy process within the foundation, the OSL team felt at the time that they were urging program staff to think in a new way. Rothenberg reflected, “That was our work in those early years—pushing people to use evidence, make explicit their theory of change, theory of action, and the change they wanted to see. It’s taken for granted now, in a really lovely way, throughout the institution, but that was a hard fight.”

The new approach to program strategy implied significant shifts, said Rothenberg. It continued to move the foundation away from grantmaking strategies led by individual program officers to a more collective, team-based approach. It also meant that Ford Foundation programs now had 10-year strategy commitments instead of strategies that were essentially funded for the length of an individual program officer’s term at the foundation (initially six, now eight, years).

As they near the end of the first five-year strategy cycle, all programs undergo an external strategy evaluation intended to help teams examine overall progress and achievements for a strategy; provide analysis and lessons about the strategy’s assumptions; and provide a set of strategic questions for the program to consider in its “strategy refresh”—the process through which program teams refine their strategy for the next five-year cycle.

The strategy refresh is very similar to the original strategy development process. OSL facilitates the refresh process and asks program teams to refine the strategy’s problem statement and reexamine opportunities and obstacles based on context changes. The team discusses the theory of change, any needed revisions to the 10-year goal and five-year outcomes, and identifies what Ford will do to contribute to change.

Evaluation and “Impact”

OSL describes its approach to evaluation through three distinct spheres (borrowing from outcome mapping methodology) that reflect how directly the foundation can connect its actions to results and within what time frame. The "Sphere of Control" encompasses things that Ford can directly influence—primarily, who program teams make grants to and how, but also the networks Ford helps to build and resources they help to mobilize—where they can clearly see

how their work led to specific results. These are often the changes occurring closest in time. The "Sphere of Influence" includes the outcomes outlined in program strategies, which take longer to happen and involve actors including and beyond Ford grantees. While Ford has important influence in this sphere, changes are not solely attributable to Ford. OSL names this sphere as a critical focus of evaluation. Finally, the "Sphere of Impact" centers on the ultimate motivations for Ford's work: “people- and community-level impact,” systemic or structural changes that take longer to see and are the most difficult to trace back to Ford's specific contributions. The focus here is on understanding these broader impacts while trying to identify Ford's role when possible.

Mathes and Rothenberg explained that OSL tries not to use “impact” as a shorthand, but to use it carefully and in the framework of long-term change, which means at and beyond the 10-year timeline of a program strategy. As such, the team tries to distinguish between the kinds of longer-term, systems changes that get into the “impact” category and medium-term ones, like shifts in policy, practices, or norms, that may lead to longer-term impacts. “We should be able to see indicators of progress within that 10-year time frame, but this work is never done,” Rothenberg said. She added that she thought of impact as durable, lasting change—not narrow wins that might be easily reversed.

Since 2018, Ford’s external evaluations have mainly looked at the first five-year cycle of program strategies, as none have yet reached the 10-year mark. According to OSL, these external evaluations have assessed progress toward desired change, but not necessarily impact. After 10 or 15 years, Ford may undertake an impact evaluation and contribution analysis to see what kinds of systemic changes could be traced back to Ford’s support. “Because we recognize how long it takes for impact in that definition to happen, we've really been careful about not characterizing any of our evaluations in that way,” Mathes concluded.

Kelsey Simmons, the Evaluation and Learning Officer on the OSL team, added that OSL’s hesitance around the word “impact” stems from an overfocus on it in the research and evaluation field(s)—on “impact evaluation in the traditional, randomized control trial-sense” rather than understanding it as a significant effect or influence on something at a large scale. Because of OSL’s understanding of impact as long-term, systems-level change, the team has been very intentional about how they characterize evaluations. They make clear that they are looking not at the individual grantee level but at a program level. “We’re asking about a broad

swath of the portfolio and what, collectively, our funds have been able to contribute to social change at a systems level," Simmons said.

OSL positions evaluations as a tool for learning how and under what conditions it is possible to change the systems, rules, and beliefs that perpetuate inequality. The evaluation process enables Ford to engage with different perspectives and collect empirical evidence to test programs' assumptions about how change happens. The learning from this process (and other strategic conversations) enables Ford to design and implement more effective program strategies. OSL frames programs' responsibility for learning and adapting as "learning-oriented accountability." Within this framing, evaluation is about accountability to understanding collectively how change happens. International Programs Vice President Martín Abregú echoed this orientation. Evaluations are about learning, he said, and learning is ultimately about how Ford can better contribute to impact. Ford's evaluations are not asking whether the program should continue, but learning what adjustments could be made while continuing to work toward the same ultimate goal.

Abregú elaborated on this learning orientation: "Our commitment to impact means that you need to continue learning. If you're going to have systemic, meaningful, long-term, sustainable impact, it means you're taking risks and things might not go exactly the way you expect. We need to continue to assess our work to see if we're learning enough, both about our successes and failures, to continue improving our work. It's not a problem that we fail. It's a problem if we don't learn. It may be that our problem statement wasn't the right one, the way we thought change would happen wasn't right, we didn't achieve the outcomes, or we did, but it did not secure the long-term changes we're seeking."

Origins of the NRCC Program

Background to the Natural Resources and Climate Change Program

The Ford Foundation's work on natural resources began in the 1970s through efforts to alleviate poverty, particularly in the Global South. Initially focused on the links between livelihoods and natural resource management, the foundation's grantmaking evolved to intersect with global environmental conservation and, particularly with the extractive industries boom of the 1990s, efforts to combat environmental degradation and its harmful effects on local communities.

Starting in 1996, an Assets Building and Community Development program within Ford promoted community-based management of forests, water, and other natural resources as a way to address the economic exclusion and social marginalization of poor communities and build natural assets while protecting the environment.

By the early 2000s, an internal group of Ford Foundation program officers was questioning the increasing influence of primarily Global North-based conservation organizations and raising concerns that too few foundation grants were effectively reaching grassroots communities, going instead to universities, think tanks, or government agencies. Program officers from the Mexico and Central America office were particularly vocal on these issues. They advocated for greater attention to and funding for Indigenous Peoples and local communities to strengthen their voices and agency in the governance and management of their natural resources.

David Kaimowitz, who joined Ford as a program officer for Mexico and Central America in 2006, shared this orientation, and he highlighted the important role these communities played on the frontlines of climate change. As he wrote, "Indigenous Peoples and other traditional rural communities manage a large share of the world's tropical forests and lands. But many of those communities lack formal rights to those lands, making it much harder for them to defend their forests from outsiders who seek to destroy and use them for profit. By helping these communities secure property rights and manage forests well, we can help reduce CO_2 emissions *and* remove carbon from the atmosphere—slowing climate change in two ways at once."[3]

In 2009, Kaimowitz became the director of Ford's Natural Resource and Sustainable Development program—later to become the Natural Resources and Climate Change (NRCC) program—which had a strong emphasis on community rights, including the collective rights of

[3] Kaimowitz, D. (2016, November 4). *Indigenous land rights: A cheap and effective climate change solution, just in time.* Ford Foundation. https://www.fordfoundation.org/news-and-stories/stories/indigenous-land-rights-a-cheap-and-effective-climate-change-solution-just-in-time/

rural communities, over natural resources.

Ford's Commitment Deepens Through the Climate Land Use Alliance

Kaimowitz led Ford's involvement in the Climate and Land Use Alliance (CLUA), a donor collaborative launched in 2010 that Ford spearheaded with ClimateWorks Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation. Several Ford staff credited him with successfully influencing CLUA's strategy so that it moved from a more narrow conservation approach to one centering the rights and livelihoods of Indigenous Peoples and communities and their role in mitigating climate change.

The members of CLUA, including Ford, committed to coordinating a portion of their grantmaking under the collaborative's umbrella, aligned with its strategy and target geographies: Brazil, the Andean Region, Mexico and Central America, and Indonesia.

A Global Restructure Creates a "New" International Program

OSL's strategy work with Ford's programs was well underway by 2018, when the foundation made the decision to restructure its international programs to enable more interconnected work to reduce inequality around the world. This entailed moving from more autonomous strategies driven by each of the regional offices to a more cohesive international presence anchored in a few focused program areas to increase their collective impact.

Functionally, this meant that each of the regional offices needed to align its work with one or two of these program areas. In addition, the "new" international programs would each have program staff based in Ford's New York headquarters who would be responsible for making global and global-to-national/regional grants to complement the efforts of program officers based in regional offices making national/regional-to-global grants. Rebeca Sandoval was the program associate for the Mexico and Central America office at the time and is now a global program officer based in the New York office.

She explained, “This restructuring was based on the assumption that we could share the same strategies and have a bigger impact in the work the foundation does in the Global South.”[4]

The process sought to consolidate and integrate different strands of pre-existing work from across the foundation, spanning different themes and diverse geographies. Unlike other programs, the program Kaimowitz led (which by then was known as Natural Resources and Climate Change, or NRCC) was able to maintain large aspects of its work—including the focus on Indigenous and traditional communities’ land rights and forest management and the commitment to CLUA. But the “new” NRCC program also included work in regions affected by the extraction of minerals, oil, and gas. It also incorporated work on tax evasion and illicit financial flows related to natural resources, and mechanisms for sharing the benefits from extractive industries more equitably. As such, NRCC brought together regional offices with ties to CLUA (the Andean Region, Brazil, Mexico and Central America, Indonesia) with regions primarily impacted by extractives (West Africa and Southern Africa). “Things that didn't have a home needed to find a home,” said Ximena Saskia Warnaars, a former NRCC global program officer.

Kaimowitz led the creation of the program’s 2019 strategy, and staff who were there at the time noted that the process was not a participatory one. As Sandoval described it, "The program officers were to some extent in conversations about the strategy, but it wasn't a collective design process; it was more top-down." "It wasn't even a process," Rothenberg said. With the strategy primarily written by Kaimowitz, who spoke with some program staff individually, it did not resemble the consultative and iterative approach that OSL advised.

Unlike other international programs emerging from the restructuring, NRCC didn't experience the same scrutiny or reconfiguration. "It was just grandfathered in," said Rothenberg, due to its long history, pre-existing regional office ties, and significant external commitment to CLUA.

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[4] The Ford Foundation's focus on the Global South reflects both a justice imperative—supporting those most affected by global inequalities—and a strategic approach that recognizes local leadership and knowledge as essential for systemic change. Populations in the Global South that have been historically marginalized and oppressed face multifaceted challenges rooted in colonialism, imperialism, socioeconomic structures, and patriarchy.

These factors allowed NRCC to skirt the strategy development accompaniment from OSL that other international programs received. As Rothenberg explained, "There wasn't an expectation of change for the NRCC program in the way there was for other programs." International Programs VP Abregú admitted, "It wasn't the ideal process, but it was the best we could do. We thought, let's bring the pieces together and start learning. Then we can rethink the strategy and put together something more thorough."

Ford's program leadership approved the strategy in March 2019. "Teams had to frame their work in terms of inequality," said Rothenberg. "NRCC did that in spades. Its primary focus at the time was on marginalized groups—Indigenous communities primarily, some traditional and some local communities—who did not have resource rights and needed to be centered in solutions. That was in total alignment."

Overview of the 2019 NRCC Strategy

The problem, as the NRCC strategy defined it, was that multinational companies and other powerful interests were taking advantage of weak governance and benefiting the most from natural resource exploitation, while communities where resource extraction was occurring benefited little and bore the environmental, social, and economic costs, often facing human rights violations. The root causes were identified as: the insecure land tenure of local communities; tax evasion by multinational companies and a lack of transparency in their supply chains; and a lack of capacity and political will by governments of countries rich in natural resources to negotiate fair deals with multinational companies, monitor extractive activity, enforce laws, and redistribute benefits to local communities and for the public good.

Desired change would happen through strengthened civil society actors and community-based organizations that could translate their concerns into compelling policy proposals and shift dominant narratives to be more supportive of their aims. Two complementary approaches were required: a "short route" through direct engagement by organizations with decision-makers in private companies, governments, and inter-governmental bodies; and a "long route" that entailed movement building, media coverage, grassroots mobilization, and litigation to create external pressure. Though the strategy would support both, the long route was assumed to be "more effective."

The strategy had seven outcomes, four of which were related to issues such as land rights; the use of free, prior, and informed consent; benefits sharing; and improved governance of natural resources. Three more were elevated from the strategy's approaches, deemed so central to the program's success that they were included as "process outcomes" (indicated by an asterisk in the chart below). Had NRCC gone through the standard strategy development process, OSL would have advised against adding these process outcomes, as they viewed them as a means to an end, rather than an end in themselves.

OUTCOMES	1	**Land rights**	Afro-descendants, Indigenous Peoples, and local communities in forested and extractive regions have more secure land rights that are recognized by governments and companies.	**10-Year Goal:** Government and company policies and practices related to natural resource rights, regulations, fiscal policies, and investments concerning forests and climate change, mining, and energy in the Global South to better reflect the expressed needs and aspirations of low-income rural and urban families, particularly Indigenous Peoples and other communities with collective land rights, and women and youth within them.
	2	**Investment projects**	Affected communities increasingly and freely exercise their rights to have a say over extractive projects that affect their cultures, traditions, and lands.	
	3	**Benefits**	Government and corporate policies and practices ensure the equitable distribution of benefits and compensation from extractive projects for affected communities.	
	4	**Governance**	Governments and companies instill policies and practices that explicitly reduce illicit financial flows, corruption, tax evasion, and environmental crimes related to natural resources.	
	5	**Effective agency***	Local leaders and networks have capacity to effectively influence and shape decisions and policies that affect their lands and rights.	
	6	**Narratives***	Narratives that amplify the voices of the communities are incorporated into national and international policy narratives.	
	7	**Resource mobilization***	Funder organizations and networks collectively leverage international finance toward emphasis on funding for grassroots organizations and networks.	
*Process outcomes				

NRCC program officers in each of the six regional offices (the Andean Region, Brazil, Mexico and Central America, Indonesia, West Africa, and Southern Africa) and the global office in New York were asked to make grants to achieve at least two of the four program outcomes and all three process outcomes.

The Strategy's Genesis Poses Challenges

The way the NRCC program was created—bringing together different strands of work without a rigorous strategy process—did little to bridge the issues and geographies it combined or foster a sense that team members were part of a cohesive program working collectively toward a shared goal. However, making a greater effort to consolidate the work would have entailed more changes, and many program staff were already fatigued and frustrated by the foundation-wide restructuring process.

In terms of the disconnects within the NRCC strategy, Warnaars noted that a primary focus of the strategy (and of Ford's involvement in CLUA) was investing in Indigenous Peoples' land rights to strengthen their ability to protect their forests, thereby mitigating climate change. The narrative and theory of change were very strong, she said, and it was difficult to connect the energy and extractives work to them. Though the extractives work shared a community rights framing with the work on land and forests, it lacked a climate emissions frame, making "the links to climate illegible," as Emmanuel Kuyole, an NRCC program officer based in the West Africa office, put it.

Geographic siloes compounded the disconnect. In the CLUA-related countries and regions of Indonesia, Brazil, Mexico and Central America, and to a certain extent, the Andean Region, work on land rights and forests was stronger; in West and Southern Africa, the focus was mainly on extractives and related work on transparency and tax justice. Warnaars explained that, while there was an assumption that what happens globally matters locally and vice versa, regional offices tended to focus on the national and regional levels and were not always aligned with the ways that the global team was trying to make connections. She captured the fundamental problem: "If we're siloed on our issues and on our geographies and in our scale, how are we working towards the same outcomes?"

There were also operational challenges. Unlike other international programs, which had both global and regional strategy components specifying how issues played out in each country/region and at each level as well as the connections between them, NRCC's strategy lacked regional contextual specificity and failed to make linkages between global and regional scales. Some NRCC team members thought the strategy's lack of regional specificity made a Latin American framing the default, along with the focus on "Indigenous Peoples," which was problematic since the concept translates differently, particularly in Africa. The NRCC strategy had an unwieldy seven outcomes compared to the four or five outcomes OSL recommended and created confusion by including both program and process outcomes.

Once the strategy was approved, OSL tried to support the team to develop more regional specificity by defining what indicators of success would look like in their particular contexts. Every conversation would get into existential questions about the strategy's design and what it was trying to do, OSL Deputy Director Mathes recalled. Rather than "ram" a MEL plan through, she said, the OSL team decided to bide their time. They would support the external evaluation intended to come at the strategy's midpoint followed by a strategy refresh that would help surface and address those existential questions in a more structured way.

The Right Moment to Re-assess the Strategy

In 2021, Anthony (Tony) Bebbington joined the Natural Resource and Climate Change program as its director. He recognized how Kaimowitz's particular experiences and perspective, as the first NRCC program director, had shaped the program's strategy. CLUA was central for Kaimowitz, who "really cared about Indigenous Peoples' rights and forests and the land on which forests stand and had less personal background in the extractives work," said Bebbington. Consequently, regions where extractives work was strongest, like West and Southern Africa, felt less recognition within the strategy, while CLUA-related work was more visible internally. Warnaars, who was recruited in 2016 to strengthen Ford's work on extractives and energy, agreed that Kaimowitz had "a very targeted, very kind of narrow focus" on what he wanted to achieve. She saw Bebbington's arrival as a big moment of change, noting, "He was able to work on natural resources more broadly, and he was stubborn about maintaining his horizontal and inclusive leadership style."

By 2022, several long-standing NRCC program officers had reached the end of their terms at Ford, and new ones had joined the team. The strategy was several years into implementation, and some of its more foundational tensions provided compelling reasons to move into the evaluation and refresh phase. To Bebbington, it was the right moment to re-assess the strategy. “We had a strategy that half the team had no role in developing. It was palpable that certain offices really didn’t feel a great sense of ownership, particularly Southern and West Africa. And that’s back to the narrative that this was mostly a CLUA strategy, because that was what was more visible.”

Bebbington was troubled by the lack of indicators in the strategy as well. He had observed that—in the absence of an agreed-upon set of indicators or a systematic way of collecting data for indicators—the team tended to illustrate the program’s effects by talking about progress toward two outcomes. The first was land tenure recognition and regularization, primarily for Indigenous Peoples; program officers would describe gains in communities’ land rights in aggregate or through specific cases linked to the work of particular grantees. The second was "effective agency," which sparked internal debate about its value. Since it was a “process” outcome, OSL viewed it as a means to an end. However, Bebbington noted that many program staff considered it an important outcome in itself. They used stories about Indigenous Peoples' and organizations' increased presence in national and global discussions to show progress, he said, rather than demonstrating how greater visibility led to other outcomes, as OSL thought it should.

Without indicators, the outcomes were subject to interpretation, Mathes said. More broadly, the strategy wasn't an anchoring device for the team as a whole or a document to support making choices. People used it in whatever ways felt useful to advance their grantmaking, she said. Warnaars agreed. “We had seven outcomes that New York and the six regional offices all were working towards, but that basically meant that each office and each PO would just choose which outcomes they were working towards,” she said. “There wasn’t enough of a shared understanding of how we think change happens and how we're going to measure that.”

As Bebbington saw it, “We could start an indicator process, which would be time-consuming and almost certainly painful at times, and then have a strategy refresh and then have to redo the indicators and then go through another time-consuming, painful process that wouldn’t strengthen the team.” He thought it made sense to start the evaluation sooner rather than later.

Evaluating the Strategy

The NRCC Strategy Evaluation

By 2022, OSL staff Mathes and Simmons had supported external evaluations of many US program strategies, but NRCC would be the first global program strategy to be evaluated after the restructuring of international programs. “We had a formula down, but not at this scale,” said Simmons.

Starting in the spring of 2022, Mathes and Simmons met with the NRCC team to ensure the purpose of the evaluation was clear—to generate lessons for the strategy refresh and inform the next five-year cycle of strategic grantmaking—and to frame it as a learning exercise. They worked closely with Sandoval, the NRCC team’s program associate at the time, to set expectations and ensure that program officers prioritized time for the process. Part of this was explaining that the evaluation could not go deep into each program officer’s portfolio, nor would it answer all of the team’s questions. “We had to tell them they were not going to get the exhaustive understanding of or surfacing of lessons related to their particular regional office, and yet, we couldn't have them disengage because of it,” said Mathes.

The evaluation would center on the broad lines of inquiry that all Ford strategy evaluations examine:

- First, what did Ford do based on its underlying theory of change? How did Ford support grantees to make progress toward outcomes? Where, on what, and how did the team make grants?
- Second, what was achieved at each level of work (national, regional, global)? What wasn’t achieved, and why? What went as expected, and what did not? What was Ford’s role in contributing to outcomes? How is that situated in relation to national, regional, and global sociopolitical trends?
- Third, what lessons can inform the strategy refresh about how change happens? How should progress toward outcomes be understood relative to external trends? What lessons regarding strategy design and implementation should inform future strategic grantmaking?

As program director, Bebbington reinforced that the evaluation and strategy refresh were a

reflection and learning process. He hoped that it would yield a more collective approach and greater synergies within the team, bridging the divisions between issues and geographic regions. Other team members were also eager to address the lack of coherence. Kuyole, an NRCC program officer based in the West Africa office, hoped the evaluation would help them "understand how each of the regions understood the root causes of the problems and how we were aligned or not on those different elements, and to get us to begin to align our work better." For Warnaars, it offered the chance to ask, "If I'm working on this one outcome and the other offices as well, why isn't our understanding the same, and why aren't we working towards the same thing?"

Erika Yamada, an NRCC program officer in the Brazil office, while welcoming the chance to “put new lenses to the strategy,” worried that the time period under review was too short and that it was too soon to assess implementation and effectiveness, especially given the impacts and after-effects of the pandemic. “I know that’s the process and the idea, but in practice, we were living unusual years. It felt too soon and in a very shifting context.”

Going Beyond the Usual Suspects for the Evaluation Team

Ford’s commitment to disrupting inequality also applied to the evaluation field. Particularly for the NRCC strategy, with its deep investments in the Global South, OSL and NRCC felt an imperative to ensure that evaluators had deep experience and perspectives rooted in the Global South. OSL’s approach benefited from decades of Global South-driven thinking on decolonizing evaluation, as well as culturally responsive and participatory evaluation and the more recent Equitable Evaluation Framework™ in the US. As Simmons explained, this evaluation investment sought to counter problematic dynamics in evaluation in which, too often, Global North practitioners assess work in the Global South and rely on methods more suited to scientific evaluation than complex social change.

This had several implications in how Ford sought evaluators. NRCC and OSL developed the criteria together, seeking evaluators who had subject-area expertise on NRCC-related issues and communities and were familiar with the geographies where the NRCC program worked. The criteria also included experience in equity-focused, culturally responsive, and/or feminist evaluation to ensure thoughtful engagement of the evaluation’s diverse stakeholders. OSL wanted evaluators whose methods would interrogate the notion of objectivity and recognize that

there is not one way of knowing whether something worked when it comes to complex social change, said Mathes. “We needed people with the contextual and methodological expertise to identify what constituted a success, what worked, and what didn't.”

OSL cast as wide a net as possible, asking networks and contacts to share out the request for proposals in an attempt to have as broad and diverse a field of applicants as possible. The team held a webinar to answer questions from prospective applicants and shared the recording back with them and newly interested applicants, seeking to ensure everyone had access to the same amount of information. They shared NRCC strategy documents as well as details on the evaluation’s scope of work and budget—“all the things funders don’t typically give enough information on that would allow applicants to develop a proposal and that funders use to judge them,” Mathes said. As a result, they received feedback that the level of transparency provided helped people decide whether it was worth their time to apply.

In the fall of 2022, OSL and NRCC selected the Dala Institute, an Indonesia-based research and consulting firm with expertise at the intersection of environment and society and a track record of supporting monitoring, evaluation and learning. Compared to other candidates, Dala had a broader geographic presence and base of expertise, but they still needed to recruit consultants to cover Ford’s diverse geographies. The team was deeply knowledgeable about Indonesia and had connections to experts in some of Ford’s countries and regions, but not all; they asked for OSL’s help to identify who could fill the gaps. Ultimately, the evaluation team was composed of 18 women and eight men primarily based in and from the Global South, with expertise ranging from land-use rights to extractives. Dala team’s manager Rodd Myers remembered refining the terms of reference with OSL and called this “a good starting point for decolonizing evaluation.”

A Learning Evaluation, Not a Test

Echoing OSL and Bebbington, Dala made clear in its evaluation principles that this was a learning evaluation. This meant the objective was not to test the NRCC program against a specific standard, but to understand its processes and effects. “We were fundamentally questioning the understandings and reasonings and ideas behind the program,” said Myers.

This orientation and messaging about the evaluation's purpose did not fully erase worries about evaluation as a potentially punitive act, however. "Whenever work is up for evaluation, it is a vulnerable exercise," Sandoval said. "There were different degrees of comfort with that." Some were genuinely excited and curious about what the evaluation would say about the work and how it would inform the next iteration of the strategy, she said, while others worried it would make them or their work more vulnerable.

"There's a lot of unlearning. Talking about the philosophy of evaluation and how we think about it was foundational to the conversations we were having then and for every evaluation we did," said Mathes. "We said over and over: This is not a critique of your individual grantees. This is not a critique of you. This is about the assumptions we/Ford made and how we better understand how change actually is happening relative to the hypothesis."

This applied to the grantees, too, OSL's Evaluation and Learning Officer Simmons pointed out. It was important that Ford communicate that a strategy evaluation was not an assessment of their grant or their worth, but a learning exercise across the program, she said.

Interrogating the Theory of Change

Dala's initial work entailed key document review, conversations with program officers, and interrogating the NRCC strategy's theory of change so that they could make explicit their understanding of the causal pathway and reflect it back to the program team. Since people have different understandings of the pathway to change depending on where they sit, OSL views this as an important coming-together moment, and it lays the foundation for the evaluation. In this case, it was challenging because the NRCC program had a strategy with a problem statement, a general theory of change, and outcomes but no more granularity than that, said Sandoval. "Because we didn't have our own defined ways of assessing change -– whether forward or backward—the evaluators had to think of a way of evaluating that."

In their inception report, the Dala team noted that the NRCC strategy was articulated more as "means" than "ends," with no coherent or agreed-upon vision of success and how to get there. The strategy and theory of change documents elaborated on the importance of the strategy's outcomes instead of describing how progress toward change could be monitored, assessed, and achieved. Without indicators to go with the outcomes, the assessment of results was

happening through program officers' narration and storytelling, Dala wrote. To facilitate the evaluation process, Dala created a framework that illustrated a causal pathway. They positioned the process outcomes as approaches and broke down program outcomes into intermediate outcomes and final outcomes. They also created a diagram of "contribution flow" (which mapped onto OSL's Spheres of Control, Influence, and Impact) to show how the foundation's support and grantees' actions were expected to lead to the intended outcomes.

Building from the initial questions in Ford's lines of inquiry, Dala refined the evaluation questions, formulating them along the lines of the What, the How, the Why, and the So What with related sub-questions.

Overarching EQ	Sub EQs	
EQ 1 (the *What*) What did NRCC do, and what happened?	1a	What were the assumptions on why the outcomes would work, and what was meant to happen?
	1b	What has NRCC done by region, sector, level, and approach (including on power, diversity, and equality, and incorporating voices, perspectives, and participation)?
	1c	What resulted from what NRCC has done?
EQ 2 (the *How)* How did the outcomes transpire (or not)?	2a	What factors, both internal and external to NRCC, enabled outcomes to happen (or restricted them from happening)?
	2b	What was Ford Foundation's role (through NRCC) toward progressing the outcomes, and would outcomes have happened anyway owing to external trends and activities?
EQ 3 (the *Why*) Why is NRCC employing its current approaches?	3a	Are the assumptions behind the approaches contextually valid? How so?
	3b	What can be learnt about how change happens toward the hoped for outcomes?
EQ 4 (the *So what*) What are the lessons learned from the NRCC program so far?	4a	What is, and is not, working?
	4b	What aspects could NRCC consider doing differently moving forward?

Getting a Handle on the NRCC Portfolio

Determining a methodology that could capture the depth and breadth of the NRCC portfolio was not an easy feat. Between 2019 and 2022, the NRCC program had issued 773 grants to 553 grantees, totaling about $241 million. It was such a massive range of things, such a big pool of grants and grantees, said Cininta Pertiwi, one of Dala's lead evaluators. She recalled telling Ford that they were unlikely to get to everyone or everything in the time allotted for the evaluation; it would be a matter of sampling.

Discussions of data collection landed on a mixed-methods approach. Dala proposed using an online survey to gather input from as many grantees as possible regarding the first two evaluation questions (the What and the How). "Cases" would look at the work in clusters of grants being funded for the same objectives or sharing similar contexts to answer the same questions plus the third evaluation question (the Why). The cases would provide stories and in-depth insights, while the survey data would offer a bigger-picture perspective on the portfolio. Together, these sources (along with grants data and program documents) would help answer the fourth evaluation question (the So What).

With hundreds of grantees spread across seven NRCC offices, creating a shortlist of possible cases was daunting. It involved extensive back-and-forth between Dala and NRCC team members about selection criteria. Staff proposed 35 possible cases, and Dala used purposive sampling to narrow to 20 (three from each regional office, and two from the global office), aiming for representation across different types of grantees, communities, sectors, outcomes, approaches, and scales.

Dala conducted 314 semi-structured interviews across the 20 cases, including grantee representatives, Ford staff, collaborators, and third-party observers like public officials, academics, and journalists. While using the strategy's outcomes as a guide to understand what the program intended to do, Dala was not "chasing after indicators," said Myers. "That allowed us to handle it very qualitatively and use stories for how things are happening." The grantee survey (in English, Spanish, Portuguese, and Bahasa Indonesia)—sent to 690 contacts and receiving a 40 percent response rate—covered questions about how grant-supported work addressed strategy outcomes, approaches employed, achievements, and community engagement.

Tensions About What Gets Seen and Who Gets Heard

The evaluation was meant to assess what the program as a whole was contributing toward, and Sandoval and Mathes had done their best to communicate that it was not possible—or desirable—for Dala to analyze each program officer's portfolio. This was tough because program officers wanted their day-to-day work to be seen. Especially because the team was spread globally and thematically, everyone wanted to ensure their piece was going to be covered, Simmons said, but the purpose was not to do a deep dive into each individual program officer's work. Sandoval noted that some were disappointed that they were not able to see specific parts of their work reflected in the evaluation in the ways they had hoped.

Simmons explained that Ford's global evaluations face an inherent tension between assessing big-picture strategy and capturing regional nuance, which makes evaluation more complex. "You still want a level of detail of the evidence behind the findings at the high level, but also to get specific and speak to each of the regions. It is a challenge, especially for our international programs because they're so big," she said.

Given the high-level purview of the evaluation, OSL made clear that they did not expect Dala to collect data directly from impacted communities. "It sits a bit uncomfortably with us because we really do believe in participatory processes," said Myers from the Dala team. "We got as close as we could to the ground, which meant talking to grantees, but we didn't talk to the people who were participating in the projects in their communities."

Mathes said this did not sit comfortably with the OSL team, either. Examples of participatory evaluation are often seen in place-based work, where foundations are more directly involved in the interventions, she said. "How do you operationalize that in a foundation with programming that is not working with most-impacted communities on the day-to-day, but is working through organizations that are sometimes membership organizations and sometimes not? It's hard. We constantly have to think about who the community is in this sense and how we get their perspectives."

Simmons added another perspective. "Getting to the community is a good practice in theory, when you're trying to be participatory, but the counter is: If they're not answering the questions we need answered for this evaluation, is it a performative thing? Are we wasting these

community members' time? It's not that what they say isn't important, but we're not asking about the specific project or intervention that happened in their community—we're looking across hundreds of grantees to understand what's happening at the systems level." OSL emphasized that the primary audience for the NRCC evaluation was Ford Foundation staff who would use the evaluation to inform the strategy refresh, while secondary users included Ford grantees and the social justice and climate change sectors more broadly.

Despite their best efforts, Dala recognized that a limited, non-representative number of case studies could only be indicative. Myers noted, "We were very clear on that from the beginning. You're not going to get a definitive answer to all of this stuff. What you're going to get is some indications of what's happening out there, and we will put some interpretation to it, but it doesn't mean that the same type of intervention would work better or worse in a different location. Context is the most important thing."

Dala noted that grants within the case studies operated at varying levels—local, national, regional, and global—with some connecting across scales. Giovanni Dessy Austriningrum, a Dala researcher based in Indonesia, remembered that it was a lot of work to make sense of how the findings from different scales were understood within their own team.

This was reflective of the broader challenge of making meaning from the data. Evaluator Pertiwi recalled that much of the struggle was on the higher level, in synthesizing information such that Dala could say, "This is what we found." With OSL and the NRCC team, Dala went through an iterative process of figuring out how to articulate whether there had been change or progress with the type of information they had and the level of rigor they wanted to maintain. "We got a lot of different stories and, as much as the stories were interesting, there was definitely that element of a feedback loop, of trying to figure out: How does this story actually mean something in terms of Ford's progress or contribution?" said Pertiwi.

This was further complicated because Dala had brought on consultants for the evaluation, some new to them, who had different interpretations of the data. Each region had two or three evaluators leading grantee engagement and data collection, while the core Dala team handled high-level synthesis and analysis. Because of the differing interpretations, Dala had to create a common framework to analyze the data across contexts.

Findings & Insights

What the Evaluation Found[5]

Given process limitations and the varied ways the strategy's outcomes might find expression, Dala's synthesis aimed to discern patterns of progress. Using the cases, the team looked for patterns within and across regions and examined how they connected to each of the strategy's outcomes. This approach identified several main themes regarding how the NRCC program contributed to "notable progress" toward the strategy's outcomes. These were:

- **Setting the basis for civil society and community-led grantees to advance intended change**. NRCC support enabled grantees to take important steps, such as strengthening their institutional capacity for effective action and increasing communities' knowledge of their rights and accountability mechanisms.
- **Enabling communities to advance justice claims and recognition of rights.** There were instances of grantees winning claims for justice, for example, in legal challenges to hold mining companies accountable for violations and ensure the rightful distribution of benefits to communities. In some places, grantees had gained tenure rights or the right to access and use forested land that they had historically managed.
- **Establishing spaces and platforms to amplify collective governance**. For example, grantees created collaborative spaces that brought together different partners to campaign for transparency in energy transition and taxation and built community-led funding platforms that could strengthen territorial governance.
- **Supporting narratives aimed to gain public support for collective rights**. Grantees amplified the concerns of movements and communities, tailoring their messages to specific audiences.

Noting that the evaluation reviewed a period deeply impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Dala emphasized Ford's important contribution to grantee resilience. For grantees who had to pause

[5] Dala's report on the evaluation of the NRCC strategy is available here: https://www.fordfoundation.org/work/learning/program-evaluations/evaluation-of-ford-foundations-natural-resources-and-climate-change-international-strategy/

much of their work during that time, Ford's grants enabled them to focus on survival. Similarly, amid increasing polarization, rising authoritarianism, and diminishing civic space, Ford's support enabled grantees to maintain efforts or prevent stalling or backsliding. It may have been hard to show what was accomplished in terms of progress toward outcomes, Pertiwi noted, but that did not mean that NRCC support did not have an effect.

Varying Interpretations at the Regional Level

Dala's evaluation report highlighted what many NRCC team members recognized: the importance and difficulty of establishing a global theory of change and a coherent international strategy rooted in regional and local contexts. While the NRCC strategy allowed for flexibility, Dala observed it was not always clear how grants or regional offices were contributing collectively to the strategy's outcomes. "It's one global strategy, but the program officers have a huge amount of autonomy to make decisions. The interpretation of the strategy is very different in different regions. Maybe that's fine, but it has to be acknowledged and has to be understood that—OK, in West Africa, we're doing this, and in Brazil, we're doing that, but you can see how they both feed into the strategy," Myers explained. This gap was hampering the possibility for a shared understanding of how NRCC hung together as an international program.

Dala noted that key concepts in the strategy translated differently across regions, sectors, and levels, but that this was not made explicit—for example, related to Indigenous Peoples, which were so central in the strategy's approaches and theory of change. In West Africa, Program Officer Kuyole pointed out, there is an understanding of indigeneity, but most countries and communities are not structured around the concept in the way they might be in Latin America. This means that, while communities have the right to be consulted, be informed, and give consent to projects impacting them, these rights are not absolute the way they are in Latin America, where communities can demand that extraction not take place on their lands or territories. "We needed to be clear about things like that to help us work toward particular outcomes that were achievable in our context," Kuyole concluded.

Confusion Around Outcomes

The strategy's combination of program outcomes and process outcomes and the lack of clarity about the relationship between these different types of outcomes had led to varied interpretations of what success looked like. Echoing Program Director Bebbington's earlier

observation, Dala noted that the process outcomes (to support strengthening narratives, build effective agency, and mobilize resources) were sometimes interpreted as a means to an end and sometimes as an end in and of itself; this blurring of approaches and outcomes made it difficult to understand and measure progress.

Dala also identified areas where it was unclear whether progress toward outcomes was actually getting Ford closer to the goal of reducing inequalities related to natural resources and climate change. There were cases from several countries where communities had gained formal recognition of their land rights, but it was hard to discern what effect this had had on inequality. Pertiwi, the Dala evaluator, remembered, “A lot of what we found was people saying, ‘Yes, getting the right is important, but also maintaining it is important, being able to exercise it is important.’ But that wasn’t something explicitly mentioned in the strategy or the elaboration of the outcomes.” Former Global Program Officer Warnaars was glad the evaluation highlighted this. She said: “All the work on forest and land tenure that we’d been doing for decades was hard to question, but some of us had been asking, ‘How do we really know that when Indigenous People have their land tenure secured that’s bringing us closer to a more equal society?’”

Controversy Over Framing the Collective(s)

Perhaps the most fraught findings were around NRCC’s conceptualization of community or, as Dala put it, “framing the collective(s).” The evaluation found that the program often used the notion of Indigenous Peoples and local communities as a proxy for “marginalized groups.” This shorthand could obscure different forms of inequality within those communities. The team had a strong lens on gender and indigeneity, but socioeconomic class seemed less considered, said Austriningrum from the Dala team. From the community level to the provincial and national levels, there were instances of powerful people reaping the benefits of improvements in natural resource management, instead of the broader community. The evaluation suggested that NRCC could strengthen its intersectional lens to address this.

“It was an over-romanticization or idealization of what communities are,” said NRCC Global Program Officer Sandoval. It was both an important criticism of the program and an invitation to NRCC to think about communities not as a monolith but as complex actors with potential, flaws, and power dynamics within them. “I’m simplifying,” she said, “but it’s easier to criticize an urban-

based research think tank for not being inclusive or having the right policy. When it comes to community, there's a tendency to say we should support them to do what they want, without enough healthy inquiry into how and why they do things."

The finding spurred discussion of the ways in which the NRCC program promoted narratives that romanticized Indigenous Peoples as "guardians of the forest" and "defenders of natural resources." These narratives raise the visibility of Indigenous Peoples in important ways but also close the door to those who might be protecting forests and are not Indigenous, Warnaars pointed out. More broadly, this framing did not acknowledge the range of communities engaged in collective struggles related to resource rights. Ford's historic focus on and investment in Indigenous communities' rights had made this thread of the strategy hard to question, she said. Dala's finding opened up the possibility for the NRCC team to "de-anchor from a concept rooted in identity and move toward a concept that's rooted in the relationships of people to territory or resources or land," added Sandoval.

Dala's findings challenged the romanticization of Indigenous and local communities in other ways as well. These communities are diverse, Dala observed, and their relationships with "nature" are far more complex than the narratives allow. While the strategy's central argument—that Indigenous and local communities were vital actors in preserving forests and thus fighting climate change—was backed by research, it also implied that their rights were only worth recognizing "if and when it is instrumental to climate mitigation objectives."

Was the goal for them to have more agency and autonomy to decide how to manage, use, and benefit from natural resources more broadly? Or was it only in relation to the goal of mitigating climate change? This was a tension, said Rothenberg, the Deputy VP of Strategy and Impact, and sometimes it felt like the answer was "autonomy, but only when they do with the land what we'd wish them to do," which meant not pursuing things like artisanal mining or allowing extractive industries to come in—even if communities felt that the economic benefits were worthwhile.

Looking Beyond Marginalized Communities to Build Support

The NRCC strategy's long-term goal was for policies and practices related to natural resources to better reflect the interests of poor communities, particularly Indigenous Peoples and others

with collective land rights. When it came to the strategy's assumptions, the evaluation raised questions about whether the heavy focus on these communities was sufficient without examining how they interacted with a broader landscape of actors, such as government, and building popular support. While Ford prioritized those closest to the exclusions, this approach inadvertently created backlash against historically disadvantaged communities and the idea that they were particularly entitled to influence, control, or benefit from natural resources on their lands. The backlash included counter-movements contesting community rights in the name of "development" and violent attacks on territorial leaders and rights defenders and was linked to a failure to build broad national support that viewed community gains as serving the common good.

Rothenberg elaborated, "If grantees are only accountable to marginalized communities and we are *only* funding grantees accountable to marginalized communities, the movements we support are not engaging with government or with broader national populations that need to be on board to get protections for marginalized communities." NRCC could center those communities and support them to have more power over decisions affecting their lives while recognizing what was required, in the larger country context, for others to feel in solidarity with those communities, not in opposition. Going back to the drivers of inequality, the strategy needed to conceptualize natural resources as a public good, said International Programs VP Abregú, and "public good inherently needs to go beyond a specific community."

This raised critical related questions, he continued. Can we protect natural resources and address climate change only with a grassroots perspective? To what extent can we achieve our goals if we don't have states with the capability to protect and regulate natural resources in the way we envision? "I think the evaluation gave some clarity that we have work to do in both areas. It doesn't mean we needed to forget about communities or community rights, but we needed to go beyond that," he concluded.

Some program officers, like Yamada in the Brazil office, were less convinced. "When you have groups who believe in rights and achieve formal rights and now want to implement them, you'll see backlash. We should be there sustaining the work through these difficult moments. Then let's see what comes next. It's never linear," she said. Yamada emphasized Ford's long-term, trust-based relationships with social movements in the country and the time it takes to see meaningful progress. Philanthropy's role is to provide flexible money that can support

movements working for structural change, she said.

A Muddied Relationship Between Local and Global

The relationship between local and global was one of the key things OSL wanted Dala to examine. Mathes, OSL's Deputy Director, reflected that this was a muddied part of the strategy. "A lot of it was implicit. Not a whole lot was explicit." Was it about changes happening at the local (sometimes, national or regional) level spreading beyond the regions where Ford worked? Or was it about seeking changes at the global level (for example, engaging in multilateral fora to influence rules and norm setting) that could have an effect at the local level?

Dala reinforced the need to make the interaction between levels explicit, noting that the links between local and global work and how they were meant to contribute to change were unclear. Local successes did not always translate to bigger changes. International pressure had different effects in different regions, depending on the political context, and sometimes put local environmental defenders at risk.

Refreshing the Strategy

Moving Into the Strategy Refresh

Dala concluded its evaluation report with recommendations regarding the strengths that NRCC could build upon and questions for the team to consider in the strategy refresh process. Dala reiterated the importance of Ford's flexible grantmaking, which enabled grantees to adapt to changing contexts and the trust-based, enduring partnerships NRCC had fostered. They noted grantees' appreciation of Ford's willingness to support innovative and emerging work, and to work in challenging and politically charged contexts. They also highlighted Ford's role as a catalyst and convener, bringing attention to rights issues in natural resources and climate change and spurring collaboration and connections among funders and grantees.

The questions Dala outlined for the NRCC team related to the need for a global approach that addressed different contexts and the lack of conceptual coherence in the strategy that led to varied local interpretations. They asked how NRCC might integrate a climate justice lens to strengthen the social justice dimensions of the work. More specifically, Dala suggested NRCC could reconsider the connections and trade-offs between local and global work, better articulate

their approach related to the role of the state/government as a key actor in climate justice policies and practices, and take a more intersectional view on collective/social movements. From the beginning, OSL aimed to maximize NRCC team engagement without burdening them, with regular meetings throughout the process and Dala conducting individual follow-ups for feedback. Myers was impressed by the team's participation, noting over 400 comments on the first draft of the evaluation report. Program officers commented on each other's responses and tried to clarify their own thinking. They were trying to figure out, "What do we mean when we say we want to achieve land rights? What do we mean when we say we want to use narrative to influence policy?" said Pertiwi.

OSL played a bridging role, helping Dala to understand NRCC's needs and steering Dala's academic orientation toward practical implications. Bebbington also played a crucial role in responding to findings. Simmons noted: "He was the first to accept hard truths, and he did that work skillfully." The subsequent strategy refresh was a joint, participatory endeavor co-led by Bebbington and Sandoval (NRCC) with Mathes and Rothenberg (OSL), involving weekly team meetings and a February 2024 retreat before receiving final approval in July 2024.

The Refreshed Strategy: Natural Resources and Climate Justice

The revised version of the strategy brings greater coherence and alignment to the work. It defines Ford's niche as addressing inequalities that contribute to climate change, that block progress to mitigate climate change, or that result from injustices produced by efforts to mitigate climate change. The program is now focused on two connected pathways for climate change mitigation: 1) forest governance and protection and 2) decarbonization of energy systems. The strategy notes that these two pathways will often intersect, impacting the same territories, peoples, and global and national decision-making spaces.

It also acknowledges that, in the original NRCC strategy, "the collateral benefits for climate change served primarily as a narrative frame that legitimized the case for enhanced community rights." Still driven by a commitment to natural resource justice, the refreshed strategy makes clear that climate change is both driven by and a driver of inequality, and is not just "a frame for legitimating the case for enhanced community control over natural resources." The strategy's two pathways are routes to climate justice, not only the mitigation of climate change—a recognition that led the program to change its name to "Natural Resources and Climate Justice."

The first pathway, forest governance and protection, maintains the strategy's support for the land rights of Indigenous Peoples and other local communities as contributors to forest protection and carbon emissions reduction. The second pathway, decarbonization of energy systems, builds upon Ford's existing work on extractives but brings more attention to just energy transitions (JET)—the idea that the shift away from fossil fuels to renewable energy must happen in ways that reduce poverty and inequality, include local communities in decision-making, and ensure that the benefits of clean energy are accessible to everyone. The revised strategy makes the connection between land rights and JET, acknowledging that large-scale transitions to renewable energy threaten the rights of communities whose lands may be subject to mineral extraction or the installation of sites for renewable energy generation.

"Those two interlinked pathways have a lot to do with work we supported in the past, but we're more mindful and coherent in how we talk about them," said Sandoval. "In the refresh, we were more intentional about where those things intersect and overlap, connecting the work on forests and decarbonization better." Yamada, who works in Brazil, observed that "just energy transition" offers a new framing for addressing the impacts of development projects on land rights and forests, one that can help grantees defending the rights of Indigenous and local communities to innovate, instead of "still fighting the old fight against the dams, against mining."

Recognizing "Land-Connected Peoples" and Intersectionality

The language of the refreshed strategy made a notable shift to using the term "land-connected peoples" to describe, in an inclusive way, the communities and populations that the program prioritizes. "This opens up an interesting Pandora's box," Bebbington said, noting that the shift was still in progress. While the change does not preclude the team from using terms like "Indigenous Peoples," "Afro-descendant," and "local communities" when appropriate, Yamada questioned: "How could I say we have removed 'Indigenous Peoples' and we're using 'land-connected peoples' when that's the main fight: for Indigenous Peoples to be named as Indigenous? I understand that for my colleagues "Indigenous Peoples" can be limiting and it may not reflect their work. But I don't like the risk that 'in order to include, we will exclude.'" She feared it could raise concerns about Ford's commitment to work that it had been supporting and that it fell to the team to ensure the foundation's intentions would not be misunderstood.

The program maintained its emphasis on support to community-based organizations of diverse land-connected peoples, and regional offices have room to choose which communities to center. Within this, Ford would explicitly elevate the leadership of women, young people, and people with disabilities and include socioeconomic class as a dimension of inequality, addressing Dala's critique related to intersectionality.

Sharper Strategy Outcomes and Indicators in the Works

Changes to the strategy's outcomes addressed many lingering tensions and findings of the evaluation. A new "local in the global" outcome explicitly connects local and global work by focusing on Global South organizations participating in international fora and bringing climate justice perspectives to influence the policies and commitments determined there. International Programs VP Abregú explained the rationale: "The whole idea is that the drivers of inequality are global. Going back to the question of impact—you're not going to disrupt global systems with a bunch of globalists. You need to bring new voices and perspectives into these conversations." Insights from the local level help generate a different conversation and ensure that global-level changes can eventually have an impact beyond Ford's specific regions.

The strategy's approaches also reflect the goal of creating greater alignment and coordination within the team, including between these different scales. They stipulate that 80 percent of regional office grantmaking should connect to other regions and/or to global work; likewise, 80 percent of the global grants should connect to work in the regions.

The "effective agency" outcome is now more explicitly positioned in relation to outcomes on gaining land and community rights, benefits, and more equitable economic opportunities. Sandoval reflected that this realignment was important since so much had seemed to organize around the effective agency outcome, to the point that other outcomes had less visibility and resources. "There were layers of identification with it. The evaluation challenged a core assumption that was explicit but also implicit in many ways," she said. Other process outcomes (narrative work, resource mobilization) are now incorporated into Ford's approaches and are no longer included in the outcomes.

Another new outcome, "governance and state-society synergies," responds to the recognition that there are political limits on what social movements alone can achieve and that governments

play a key role in advancing or impeding progress on climate justice. The program is increasing its focus on coalition and alliance building, and on engaging public officials, because success will only be possible if broader constituencies see the rights of land-connected communities as being in their own and the public's interest.

With support from OSL, the team is now developing indicators to provide a clearer way to track progress toward outcomes and more easily tell the story of the program's work as a whole. They are working toward a set of broad indicators, which reflect changes that can be seen across regions, coupled with indicators that are more specific to each region and ones that identify where global and local connect.

Defining Boundaries to Strengthen Ford's Contribution

In addition to clarifying NRCC's areas of focus and approaches, the strategy lays out clearly what Ford will *not* do given the enormous scope of the climate justice challenge and the limits of the foundation's resources. For example, NRCC will not work on climate adaptation, on issues like carbon market finance, or on resources other than land, forests, minerals, or energy resources.

The strategy also explains how the team will narrow its focus to certain geographies and commodities to enhance its expertise and increase the potential for cross-regional synergies in NRCC's grantmaking. Each regional program officer can pursue work in four territories (geographic regions/communities) within a country or region. Previously, some program officers were working in up to 10 places, said Rothenberg, which entailed a lot of travel and work to know the particular contexts. In addition, NRCC will focus solely on a set of commodities that are essential to success in the two mitigation pathways: commodities impacting land-connected peoples' forests and territories (such as large-scale oil palm farming) and commodities that must be phased out or whose extraction methods matter for energy transitions (like nickel, which is a key element in batteries for renewable energy storage).

Though the refreshed strategy provides more guidance and specifics about implementation, it also allows for more emergent ways of working. Program officers are asked to allocate about 80 percent of their budget to "core" work that is "wholly and fully aligned with the heart of this strategy," while the remaining 20 percent can be used for "experimentation." In this way, it is

clear what expectations are on program officers to operationalize the strategy and where there is space for them to explore, said Mathes. Though the percentage varies across programs, this is a practice across the foundation.

"This is a much more focused frame than that of being a community rights and natural resources program," Bebbington said. West Africa Program Officer Kuyole agreed. "We were spread too thin." Drawing boundaries helped the team define their outcomes and would ideally make it easier to track the program's effects. "Over time, hopefully, if we invest in these two pathways, we can look back and see the contribution that we have made," he said. "The changes become easier to see when it comes to accountability for that contribution."

As several people noted, the effect of these changes was to make the work in West and Southern Africa more visible and integrated into the strategy. This needed to happen for it to be a global strategy, said Rothenberg. It has also changed how the team functions. "In practical terms, we're doing more to find the connections in the ways that program officers are interacting with each other. We coordinate and communicate within our program about what's going on in the different regions and how the levers can be pulled globally. We were already on the track of thinking of ourselves as a program and not individual portfolios, but the strategy makes it very explicit that we have to connect better," Sandoval said.

Telling a Better Story

As NRCC Program Director Bebbington said, even though the initial NRCC strategy was meant to encompass different strands of work, what was talked about and understood as the strategy was primarily the piece related to Indigenous Peoples' land rights and forest protection. This shaped how others within the foundation understood what the strategy was trying to achieve. He noted that it was not surprising that Ford leadership might have had trouble seeing the program in its entirety, when even an external evaluator like Dala found it a struggle.

The evaluation and refresh process sought to create a shared narrative about the strategy and how it hangs together. "We looked for a far clearer, tighter story," said Bebbington. It seems to have achieved that goal, said Sandoval. "Now we can say we have this overarching vision of climate justice and two clear pathways. Some work might focus more in one area, but it all adds up to the same longer, broader goal."

But some felt a sense of loss. “The strategy initially worked as a big umbrella where everybody could fit and find very different paths to respond to that umbrella,” said Yamada. The strategy refresh tried to address those differences. “The benefit is that it can hold the program together and make it easier to tell the story to others inside and outside of the foundation. But the truth is that the realities of the countries in which we work and paths that we have made to grant in each of the different countries are very different. While I see the effects of the refreshed strategy, I used to like the big umbrella we had before,” she concluded.

Accountability & Conclusion

Ford’s Accountability for Systemic Impact

As is likely the case in many foundations, Evaluation and Learning Officer Simmons noted that people at Ford often used “impact” to describe any of the changes being sought through the strategy, when what they were talking about was “progress.” For the OSL team and International Programs VP Abregú, however, “impact” was specific: long-term, systemic, and sustainable changes that reduce inequality. Rothenberg stressed the importance of impact as lasting change, saying, “Philanthropy has fetishized short-term wins, things you can count, and not paid as much attention to the deeper, structural powers that make it impossible to get more durable wins.”

For international strategies, there are dual targets for intended impact. When Ford shifted to a focus on disrupting the drivers of inequality 10 years ago, said Abregú, “we identified specific areas of work that can have an impact and specific populations for that work, not populations in general.” The aim is to change the lives of target populations for the better (in the ways that a particular program seeks) while contributing to global-level change with farther-reaching effects. As he put it, “On the one hand, we need to be responding to people on the ground, on the other, we need to be tracking our impact at the global-systems level because that’s the only thing that will ensure we have an impact beyond those specific localities where we work.”

For both OSL and Abregú, accountability for systemic impact means supporting programs to question their assumptions and apply rigorous evidence to their theories of change. “We want to get better at understanding how change happens and where our levers are for durable change,” Rothenberg said. In addition, Ford needed to continue tracking if it was *right* about the levers for

change and whether those changes would disrupt inequality, Abregú added. Holding onto a theory of change that evidence does not support shows a lack of accountability, Rothenberg said: “I think of it as a moral duty to question our assumptions about how change happens.”

Bebbington noted that he and the team’s program officers work with a “lay notion of impact.” In informal conversation or when justifying the continuation of a grant, they assess change and attribute it to causes, but “we resist formalizing it,” he said. He suspected that “impact” was viewed as Western and quantitative by a team more comfortable with qualitative analysis and measures—and caught up in power imbalances between funders and grantees. If the team saw a trade-off between rigor in the assessment of change and rigor in the cultivation of trusting relationships, they prioritized the latter, he said. “I think people think of their primary relation as being to these movements, and not to the resources that we are entrusted with. That has real implications for how much, or in what way, one thinks about impact or accountability.”

Brazil Program Officer Yamada’s comments illustrated this point. “We actually don’t do the big work,” she said. “We support work that is being done by the field, and we have to fit the work that others do into the foundation’s structures and frames.” She was uncomfortable with what she saw as a focus on results and outcomes as opposed to relationships. “If we can be very true to ourselves in philanthropy, it’s about supporting and trusting the work of others.”

She also highlighted how different understandings of time could challenge the foundation’s timeline for assessing progress and effectiveness. “Especially working with Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendants, local communities—the idea of time can be completely different. You don’t see if something was effective or not within one to two or even five years. It’s about centuries of fights and achievements and ancestral experiences. It needs to go through generations.”

Operationalizing Accountability Within the Foundation

Stakeholders had different views on how accountability for impact and accountability generally are operationalized within the foundation. While they identified certain relationships, practices, and processes, there is not a clear, collective understanding of how accountability functions. Several staff acknowledged the confusion.

“We in philanthropy, not just in Ford, are really unclear on what we are accountable to and why.

Accountability remains a chronically unexamined issue, and so you end up with processes in which different players are working with differing ideas regarding our accountabilities, but these are not made explicit," Bebbington said. "This accountability question to me is a gray one," agreed Sandoval. "We don't have a shared institutional understanding of what we understand by 'accountability' internally. Is it about being measured against goals or objectives as a way of being held accountable? Or is it more about being transparent and to whom?"

Some on the program team viewed the evaluation and strategy refresh as an act of self-accountability. As former NRCC Global Program Officer Warnaars described it, "At that moment, there was an important need to look at each other and see what everyone else is doing, and to be accountable to each other." For Bebbington, it was a way "to give the team more material on the basis of which they could govern themselves more effectively—not for others to govern them more effectively." From an outsider's perspective, Pertiwi from the Dala team saw that the evaluation "was more of an accountability to themselves, rather than an accountability to another party."

OSL continues to build a culture of learning-oriented accountability at Ford, pressing program teams to reflect on and discuss how they are learning and applying that learning. But "that reflection-and-adaptation is an uneven process within the foundation," said Mathes, OSL's Deputy Director. "Sometimes it happens implicitly, sometimes we need to make the mechanisms and structures possible for the minimum." Over the years, OSL has tried to regularize annual strategy learning sessions in which program staff can reflect on their work and make explicit what they are learning. Thus far, this has yet to be a success with full buy-in from program staff, said Rothenberg.

Program vice presidents play a key role in pushing for greater rigor. "Martín (Abregú) was really important in challenging our thinking, saying we can't keep funding the same types of things and not seeing enough change towards our outcomes," Warnaars recalled. Program officers must explain the rationale for each grant and explain how it aligns with the program strategy in order to get approval from their director and program vice president. But in the end, program officers operate with a great deal of autonomy and trust, observed Myers from the Dala team. It made him wonder, "What's the accountability for grantmaking to the strategy when things are so decentralized?"

More broadly, Bebbington questioned whether "cultures of performativity, combined with a certain defensiveness on the part of many (defending their programs, defending their at-will jobs, etc.), get in the way of honest discussions about the varying and often conflicting accountabilities in which we are all caught up."

While the Board of Trustees is often seen as a source of accountability for Ford's program leadership, they are less present in program staff's day-to-day work. Mathes explained that the Board oversees the broad direction of the foundation's work, receives regular programmatic updates from leadership and staff, and can ask questions and push programs to reflect on their work during board meetings. But the Board does not regularly approve individual grants or strategies, although they periodically hear about evaluations or program shifts based on evaluation findings. Their trust in the process has come after years of OSL and Ford program leadership working with the Board so they understand how Ford tracks progress and learns. "The Board could see we were asking hard questions," Rothenberg said.

The Limits of Accountability to Communities

While there is a shared and principled commitment to the historically disadvantaged communities that NRCC centers in its work, there are tensions in how Ford puts accountability to those communities into practice.

As the OSL team pointed out in their discussions with Dala, the program staff are essentially a step removed from the communities that Ford purports to serve, if not more. This means that accountability is primarily operationalized through grantee partners rather than direct community engagement. With grantees serving as the proxy for community voices, the emphasis then becomes on ensuring that grantees are actually representative of communities, said Simmons from the OSL team. "That's what we're working on more now—pushing ourselves around vertical accountability," said West Africa Program Officer Kuyole. He said that this meant trying to ensure that grantees center community voices in their program design and project delivery.

With grantees as proxies, Ford's accountability to communities is then tested by the ways it incorporates grantee voices into its own program design and implementation. The external evaluation of the NRCC program was used intentionally as a moment to gather grantee perspectives and weave them with other data to help Ford figure out where it is best positioned

to contribute to change. (And this is true of external evaluations more generally at Ford.) Sharing the NRCC evaluation findings with grantees was also viewed as “one exercise in accountability that I think we agreed was very limited,” Sandoval said.

Ford invited all NRCC grantees to webinars to hear from Dala about the evaluation and discuss their reactions and questions. “It was a space to ask what resonated, how grantees are thinking about their work in the current context, and what they would want philanthropy and Ford to be thinking about,” said Mathes. Grantees commented on the novelty of this level of transparency and expressed appreciation that their viewpoints were made public through the evaluation report.

Nonetheless, there remains ambiguity around the degree to which grantees may influence or shape program strategy. Ford seeks to be participatory and collaborative, but also very transparent that “at the end of the day, we still make the decisions about where the portfolio will go,” said Simmons. Warnaars agreed but also described the discomfort around the inequality in the relationship. “There are some people who really want to open that up and be more participatory. I completely agree. But at a certain point, foundations need to kind of close the door and make decisions about the strategy, informed by their grantees. Managing that is delicate.” Bringing grantees into the process means Ford is then accountable to them, to sharing back the strategy and the rationale, she said. “I don't know how good foundations, in general, are at doing that.” Bebbington similarly pointed out that involving grantees in strategy co-creation places greater ongoing accountability expectations on them for strategy impact.

Ford has received feedback through grantee perception surveys that grantees feel they do not have enough information about Ford’s strategies. In response to the question, "How clearly has the foundation communicated its goals and strategy to you?," grantees ratings have steadily improved over the years to about 50 percent now, saying they have some idea of Ford’s goals and strategy. Though program officers select grantees based on how they can contribute to a strategy, grantees may not know which specific outcomes they are seen as advancing. In the case of the NRCC evaluation, this made it difficult for them to respond to questions related to Ford’s outcomes.

NRCC shared an external version of the refreshed strategy with grantees in late 2024, but the extent to which strategies are shared with grantees varies across Ford offices. "It's a form of

external accountability we could do more of," Simmons said, while noting a tension between the desire to share more information and the worry that organizations would feel compelled to make their work or proposals more clearly aligned with the strategy. More broadly, Sandoval noted that each regional office engages with partners differently and has its own relationship to transparency. Mathes said that Ford was trying to reduce that unevenness.

These issues speak to the tensions between strategic philanthropy and trust-based philanthropy that play out in Ford's work. As Mathes interpreted it, "In strategic philanthropy, philanthropy has a point of view and perspective on the change they want to see in the world. Social justice philanthropy—and especially trust-based philanthropy—is really decentering philanthropy and saying, 'We are so much guided by our grantee partners that we're totally stepping back.'" She noted that while the two approaches are often framed as polar opposites, Ford's work embodies elements of both. "We *do* retain control, and social justice means letting go of some of that control. The questions then become: Where does that control end? What do we want to give up or not? How do we do it?"

Ford's use of multi-year, general operating support grants is one method of riding that line. While program officers select the organizations they will fund, they entrust organizations to use the grants how they see fit with the understanding that, as Rothenberg put it, "We're funding you because we want to see this change, and we believe you are integral to making that change."

From there, being able to learn alongside grantee partners and frankly discuss progress and regress requires trust-based relationships, she said. "How honest do grantees feel like they can be with us?" This is one of the questions in a survey that regularly asks Ford grantees how they view the foundation and the grantee-funder relationship. "We don't always do great on this question," Rothenberg said, "and that is an indicator that we may not be getting the information we need to be accountable to ourselves or to find out whether those organizations are accountable to their communities."

Conclusion

The Ford Foundation's experience with the Natural Resources and Climate Change strategy evaluation offers valuable insights into what "accountability for systemic impact" means in practice and highlights the challenges in operationalizing this concept in social justice

philanthropy. It shows that meaningful accountability for intended, systemic impact requires more than tracking progress—it demands institutional willingness to question fundamental assumptions.

The NRCC strategy evaluation demonstrates how OSL's framework of learning-oriented accountability sought to move beyond the punitive overtones that can accompany evaluation and to foster engagement from program officers throughout the process. It created room for program staff to discuss areas of divergence and disagreement. The decision to seek evaluators who brought both subject-matter expertise and contextual knowledge challenged traditional, harmful dynamics in evaluation. While the process of meaning-making across the portfolio was not easy, their findings supported the NRCC program team to make important shifts in both their strategy and ways of working. The evaluation's effects on the NRCC program demonstrate how this kind of accountability process can drive institutional learning. In this case, it led to a more coherent program strategy, clearer connections between local and global work, and more systematic approaches to tracking change through indicators and defined boundaries—all of which will strengthen Ford’s ability to contribute to the long-term changes the now NRCJ program seeks.

At the same time, this case illustrates the competing ideas and confusion within the foundation about what accountability for systemic impact means: whether to communities (mediated through grantee proxies), to expectations of leadership and Board, to responsible stewardship of Ford’s resources and/or to the foundation's own learning and adaptation. This plays out as a struggle to balance a commitment to rigorous evidence and theories of change with a desire to decenter foundation control and trust grantee partners' expertise and community connections.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Case Study Interviewees

Ford Executive Leadership:

Martín Abregú, Vice President for International Programs

Office of Strategy & Learning:

Bess Rothenberg, Inaugural Director of OSL, now Deputy Vice President of Strategy & Impact

Subarna Mathes, Deputy Director

Kelsey Simmons, Evaluation and Learning Officer

International Natural Resources and Climate Change Program:

Tony Bebbington, Program Director

Rebeca Sandoval, Former Program Associate, now Global Program Officer

Ximena Saskia Warnaars, Former Global Program Officer

Emmanuel Kuyole, West Africa Program Officer

Erika Yamada, Brazil Program Officer

Dala Institute:

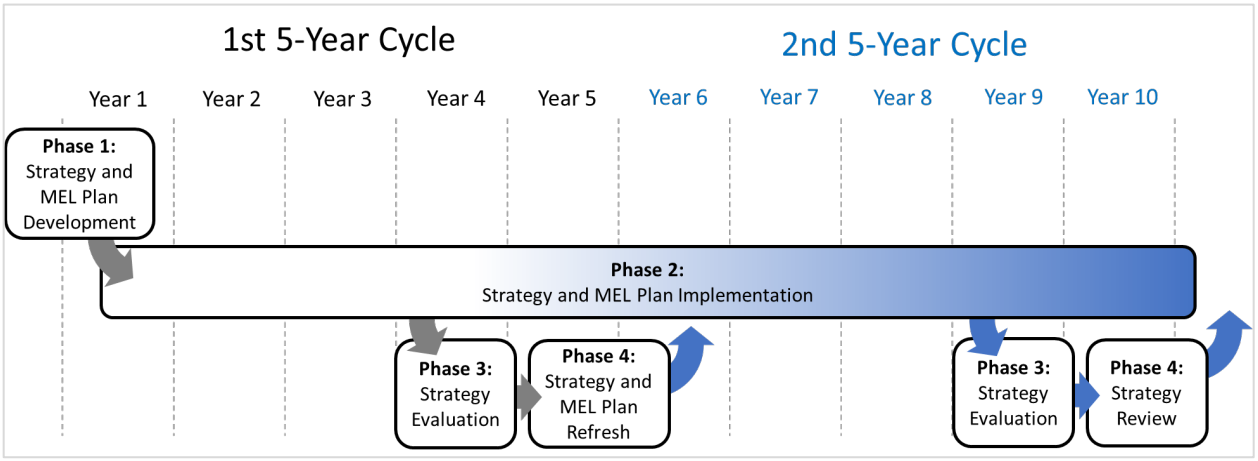
Rodd Myers, Team Lead

Cininta Pertiwi, Lead Evaluator

Giovanni Dessy Austriningrum, Researcher

Appendix 2

Ford Foundation Program Strategy Life Cycle (2021)



Appendix 3

The original and revised NRCC strategies

Original Strategy (2019)	Refreshed Strategy (2024)
10-Year Goal: Government and company policies and practices related to natural resource rights, regulations, fiscal policies, and investments concerning forests and climate change, mining, and energy in the Global South to better reflect the expressed needs and aspirations of low-income rural and urban families, particularly Indigenous Peoples and other communities with collective land rights, and women and youth within them.	**10-Year Goal:** The rights, voices, and aspirations of diverse, historically disadvantaged communities are represented and reflected in climate change policies and finance, particularly in relation to forest governance, energy transition, and community natural resource rights, and broader societal constituencies and public narratives support this representation.
2019 Strategy Outcomes	**2024 Refreshed Strategy Outcomes**
1. Land rights Afro-descendants, Indigenous Peoples, and local communities in forested and extractive regions have more secure land rights that are recognized by governments and companies. **2. Investment projects** Affected communities increasingly and freely exercise their rights to have a say over extractive projects that affect their culture, traditions, and lands. **3. Benefits** Government and corporate policies and practices ensure the equitable distribution of benefits and compensation from extractive projects for affected communities. **4. Governance** Governments and companies instill policies and practices that explicitly reduce illicit financial flows, corruption, tax evasion, and environmental crimes related to natural resources. **5. Effective agency (process outcome)** Local leaders and networks have capacity to effectively influence and shape decisions and policies that affect their land and rights. **6. Narratives (process outcome)** Narratives that amplify the voices of the communities are incorporated into national and international policy narratives. **7. Resource mobilization (process outcome)** Funder organizations and networks collectively leverage international finance toward emphasis on funding for grassroots organizations and networks.	**1. Land and community rights** Diverse groups within land-connected communities affected by investments in the agro-industrial, extractive, and energy economies have more secure rights to resources and voices because government and private companies recognize those rights. **2. Benefits and economic opportunity** Fossil fuel phase out, energy transitions, and support to Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and other community-based organizations create new and/or more equitable economic opportunities for communities and their diverse members. **3. Effective agency** Selected social movements, civil society organizations, alliances, and pockets of reform in government working on topics related to NRCC outcomes Nos. 1 and 2 develop instruments, capacities, intersectional approaches, and collaborations in advancing these outcomes. **4. Governance and state-society synergies** Coalitions among civil society, public, and state actors in support of land-connected community rights and broad-based justice in energy transitions are strengthened and become more visible in public debate. **5. Local in the global** Global South organizations participate in and bring climate justice lenses to international fora at which climate, land, and energy transition are discussed and defined, and influence the content of the policies and commitments determined at these forums.

Appendix 4

Timeline of key events

2010: Ford helps launch the Climate and Land Use Alliance.

2013: Darren Walker becomes president of the Ford Foundation.

2016: Bess Rothenberg becomes director of Ford's new Office of Strategy and Learning.

2018-2019: Ford conducts a restructuring process to consolidate international work into fewer targeted program areas.

2019: New international Natural Resources and Climate Change (NRCC) strategy approved.

2021: Tony Bebbington becomes director of Natural Resources and Climate Change international program.

2022: OSL and NRCC launch strategy evaluation process (preparatory conversations between OSL & NRCC team, evaluator team request for proposals disseminated, Dala Institute hired and discovery phase completed).

January 2023: Dala presents their inception report to NRCC & OSL.

February - September 2023: Dala conducts research, data analysis, and presents initial findings to NRCC & OSL.

December 2023: Dala finalizes the internal and external versions of their evaluation report and presents findings to Ford staff and leadership.

September - July 2024: NRCC & OSL team hold strategy refresh discussions and revise the NRCC strategy.

April 2024: Dala & NRCC share evaluation report findings with grantees through virtual dissemination sessions.

July 2024: Updated NRCC strategy finalized and approved by Ford VPs.