

# **Moving to Offense in a Time of Collapse:**

## **A Scenario Framework for the Future of Equity-Centered Philanthropy**

**Diana Scarce and Hanh Cao Yu**

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## **For inquiries, please contact:**

### **Diana Searce**

*Principal, Diana Searce Consulting*  
searce.diana@gmail.com

### **Hanh Cao Yu, Ph.D**

*Executive Director, Center for Evaluation Innovation*  
hanh@evaluationinnovation.org

# Moving to Offense in a Time of Collapse: A Scenario Framework for the Future of Equity-Centered Philanthropy

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The current onslaught of challenges to the norms and values of democracy and equity in the US is dizzying. Leaders across the philanthropic landscape are feeling paralyzed by the turbulence, forced to think defensively and worried they might be guessing rather than strategizing their way forward. It is now clear that we can no longer rely on traditional institutions and systems to navigate the chaos that threatens decades of progress for vulnerable communities.

Yet philanthropic leaders can and must think beyond the systematic dismantlement of democratic institutions to what comes next. We can and must develop a more proactive stance despite the ongoing disruption. Most importantly, we can and must find ways to lean into this period as an opening for transformation, shifting it from catastrophic to creative destruction and fostering effective resistance now to rebuild better. As [Ruedy, Glaisyer, and Reichenbach](#) argue, the preservation of the current system cannot be our goal. While we didn't choose this moment, we need to adapt and evolve to meet it.

For the Center for Evaluation Innovation (CEI), a national organization dedicated to transforming philanthropic learning, strategy, and evaluation to advance racial equity and an equitable future, the burning question has been this: "How can we be absolutely clear-eyed about what we are facing, act now, and simultaneously maintain a long-term horizon to build the systems we desire after the current period of instability?" Like many organizations, CEI is balancing an unwavering commitment to its North Star with an understanding that, in these tumultuous times, reaching that star will require new and different pathways for action, some of them yet to be discovered. The ability to see these pathways and bold possibilities hinges on building capacity to think critically—and collectively—about what future(s) may be coming. As Zen master Norma Wong reminds us, "What we cannot imagine is more difficult to create. And what cannot be created cannot become so...In transformational work, it is the crisis that opens the way for big leaps."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wong, Norma. (2024). *When No Thing Works: A Zen and Indigenous Perspective on Resilience, Shared Purpose, and Leadership in the Timeplace of Collapse*. North Atlantic Books

To build that capacity, CEI turned to [scenario thinking](#), a proven approach for understanding and managing uncertainty. The core practice of scenario thinking involves developing provocative stories of the future about the many ways the issues outside our organizations might evolve. Because scenarios are hypotheses, not predictions, they are created in sets of multiple stories, usually three or four, that capture a range of future possibilities, good and bad, expected and surprising. Once a set of scenarios is developed, organizations can rehearse what it could mean to live in those scenarios and thereby stretch their thinking about the opportunities and risks the future might hold.<sup>2</sup> Through this process, leaders can come to better understand their present context and craft strategies that will be resilient and adaptable in the face of an uncertain tomorrow.

CEI used scenario thinking to explore the nature, depth, and potential duration of the current collapse, how we might collectively respond and reemerge from it, and what philanthropic commitment to equity and justice in the U.S. over the next decade might look like. In the process of developing and using the scenarios over the past seven months, we engaged over 120 change makers and philanthropic leaders. The insights that emerged have wide relevance to leaders in philanthropy who are trying to chart a course forward, searching for pathways for action that may not yet be visible.

## **Four Scenarios for the Future of Equity-Centered Philanthropy**

Our first step was to build a set of four divergent scenarios exploring the nature of equity-centered philanthropy in the U.S. over the next 10 years. That scenario building was deeply shaped by the perspectives of the 16 leaders from across the philanthropic ecosystem that we interviewed, as well as the insights that emerged from a series of co-creative working sessions with CEI staff and board members. The four resulting scenarios are structured around two variables that stood out as particularly important and uncertain for the future of equity-centered philanthropy:

### **1. How society orients toward equity in the coming decade.**

Are there more efforts to bridge—to come together across lines of difference and form a larger, more inclusive “we”—or will we see more breaking, characterized by an environment of fear and isolation where people stick to what they know?<sup>3</sup> In futures with more “bridging,” we might see less polarization, mis/disinformation, and power hoarding, along with a cultural orientation trending toward mutuality. Whereas futures with more “breaking” could be characterized by greater polarization and mis/disinformation, more centralization of power, and a cultural orientation trending toward individualism.

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<sup>2</sup> Searce, Diana, Katherine Fulton, et al. (2004). What If? The Art of Scenario Thinking for Nonprofits.

<sup>3</sup> Our understanding of bridging and breaking builds on the [Othering and Belonging Institute's](#) groundbreaking work.

## 2. How philanthropy responds to the current chaos and positions itself over the next 10 years.

Are more and more foundations acting with boldness? Or are we seeing increasing numbers of foundations retreat and/or act in more restricted ways? In the future, foundations may be driven to act with more boldness if, for instance, the economy is less volatile, or if there is less fear of government scrutiny and recrimination. Conversely, foundations may retreat, if they are operating with shrunken or unstable endowments, or if the space for civil society is shrinking.

We then “crossed” these two variables on a 2x2 matrix, framing out four alternative environments in which today’s decisions might play out. Rather than predictions, these scenarios are four alternative futures, each designed as provocative, yet plausible thought experiments to stretch our thinking about potential opportunities and risks.



**“Heroic” Philanthropy.** This is a future defined by defense of the status quo. Public support systems and institutions are crumbling. Historically under-resourced communities turn inward to care for their own, while many funders focus their resources on elite-focused advocacy and large-scale efforts to reconstruct democratic institutions. Funders are stepping up, but they also revert to old patterns of behavior, putting themselves at the center as orchestrators of their visions for change.

**Anti-Woke Crusaders Win. Philanthropy Wimps Out.** This is a world in which the [systems collapse](#) of the mid-2020s leads to catastrophe. The Executive Office continues to consolidate power and the social safety net becomes nearly nonexistent. Outspoken equity-oriented funders and nonprofits are added to the growing terrorism watch list. Other funders hunker down, focusing their grantmaking on direct service and filling gaps left by the dismantling of public agencies. Meanwhile, an underground resistance movement quietly builds momentum, enabled by an influx of funding from international sources.

**Communities First.** In this scenario, as the world burns, kinship and connection can be found in local communities. There is little meaningful leadership at the federal level, regardless of party affiliation. Yet hyper-local spaces offer coherence, support, and sense of possibility. [Mutual aid networks](#) thrive and many local communities chart their own paths to better futures. Philanthropy, what’s left of it, tends to work in understated, quiet ways. Many funders work in close partnership with local communities, channeling unrestricted funding to their priorities.

**Rising From the Ashes Together.** In this future, destruction opens the door to radical and inclusive reimagination. Widespread backlash to White House overreach contributes to a gradual rebalancing of power and greater openness to reimagining economic systems. Many funders [shift power and control of resources to communities](#), thereby piloting sustainable and collaborative mechanisms for financing social change and community needs. Concurrently, major investments in nationwide movements and building trust in reimagined public institutions yield results.

## Using Scenarios to Catalyze Action

The four scenarios then became the centerpiece of a series of CEI-hosted convenings designed to engage philanthropic leaders in thinking collectively about how to move from defense to offense —and, critically for CEI, to explore the strategic role of learning and evaluation in advancing equity-centered philanthropy across the scenarios. Altogether, we gathered over 100 leaders in philanthropy, including executives, trustees, and learning and evaluation staff from large institutional foundations, small family philanthropies, and community foundations, as well as movement and nonprofit leaders, evaluators, and philanthropic advisors.

To catalyze action and break leaders out of a defensive posture, we invited session participants to move beyond abstract discussion and really rehearse the alternative futures. Participants didn't just analyze the scenarios; they inhabited them. Working in small groups, they immersed themselves in the scenarios, then grappled with questions about what it would look like and feel like to live in each reality. They were challenged to envision headlines from each future and define what an offensive stance for equity would demand of their own foundations and the entire philanthropic sector.

## Philanthropic Learning & Evaluation Implications by Scenario



This process helped translate “what if” questions into concrete strategic options, which is essential when the systems we’ve taken for granted are collapsing and it’s difficult to see a pathway out of the chaos. The matrix below shows how **learning can become strategy**, outlining how foundations can tailor their learning and evaluation approaches to remain resilient depending on how the future unfolds. These implications make it clear that, regardless of what the future brings, there will be ample opportunity to harness learning for timely strategic insight.

## Moving From Collapse to Transformation

In addition to the scenario-specific insights that arose from this process, opportunities for advancing equity relevant across all scenarios also emerged. Together, these opportunities suggest a set of offensive actions for funders eager to turn this time of collapse into an opening for transformation.

### 1. Reimagine and (re)build equitable systems that work for communities.

This is a moment for funders to let go of old, inequitable structures (e.g., [how philanthropic resources have historically moved](#)) and shift power and resources to the movement builders and community-led initiatives already shaping a more just future. Reimagining and rebuilding will require long-term and patient capital, coupled with resources for addressing the hard realities and urgent needs of the present and near future (e.g., safety and security for immigrant rights activists).

### 2. Think of learning as strategy.

Navigating the current (and foreseeable) chaos will require the ability to sense and respond to the shifting context while holding true to a long-term vision. Maintaining philanthropy’s [learning infrastructure](#) will be essential for cultivating capabilities and adapting together. While rapid response is and will be needed, rapid response *devoid of learning* will keep us on the defensive. Furthermore, there is ample opportunity to learn from movement builders in other [countries](#) that have advanced equity in suppressive political contexts (e.g., [South Africa’s transition from apartheid to democracy, and resistance to Bolsonaro in Brazil](#)), specifically how they have cultivated leadership, protected the resistance, and [mobilized movement resources](#).

### 3. Cultivate collaborative, trusting relationships and weave connections.

Whether it is between [funders and grantees](#), across communities and sectors, or among foundations, flexible, relational, and collaborative approaches will be winning strategies. The good news: there are many promising collaborative models already gaining momentum.

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<sup>3</sup> Our understanding of bridging and breaking builds on the [Othering and Belonging Institute’s groundbreaking work](#).

For instance, the scenarios draw attention to the potential for investing in and weaving connections across communities who are closest to the problems and solutions; the [Culture and Community Power Fund](#) offers a strong example of trans-local connection. The scenarios also highlight how foundations can take bolder action, increase their capacity, and mitigate their exposure through acting in solidarity with their peers, which aligns with the steep growth in funder collaboratives in recent years.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4. Rethink what it means to be a funder.

“Unlearning” was a common refrain in the dialogues we hosted. There was a recognition that old assumptions and mindsets may no longer apply in five, let alone 10, years. What if funders are no longer identified by their [privileged tax status](#)? What if wealth becomes less concentrated? What if the new norm becomes [funding decisions made by community members](#)? By imagining alternative futures that require different operating models, the scenarios dialogues invited us to reconsider fundamental tenets that shape many funders’ identities and decision-making. This rethinking, in turn, opens the door to investing in and experimenting with new ways that funders can show up in community.

## Cause for Optimism

Philosopher and strategist, Sun Tzu (400 BCE), advised that as a collective, leaders must “be like water” in forging through cracks and openings to find a powerful way forward, and in the process, join with other streams to form a mighty river.<sup>5</sup> Present day challenges demand that we follow Sun Tzu’s advice, as leaders, as organizations, and as members of a larger and interdependent philanthropic community, and scenario thinking offers guidance on how to do so. The principles and practices of scenario thinking provide direction for how funders can “be like water” as they manage through disruption, assess risk, and catalyze collaboration—all in service of bold action on equity. The 100+ philanthropic leaders who took part in these scenario exercises developed new muscle for looking beyond the current maelstrom and identifying myriad opportunities for action.

The system of philanthropy, how funders can contribute to equitable outcomes, and the role of learning and evaluation might all look radically different in 2035. But the work to imagine, prepare for, and proactively cultivate better futures starts now. We urge philanthropic leaders to make space for learning from the future so they can confront the present with clear-eyed optimism. As visionary science fiction writer, Octavia Butler, wrote, “The one thing that I and my main characters never do when contemplating the future is give up hope. In fact, the very act of trying to look ahead to discern possibilities and offer warnings is in itself an act of hope.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>The Gates Foundation has documented over 400 collaborative funds, over half of which have been established since 2010.

<sup>5</sup>Tzu, S. (2010). *The Art of War*. Capstone Publishing

<sup>6</sup>Butler, Octavia. (May 2000). “A Few Rules for Predicting the Future,” *Essence Magazine*.