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The Case for Funding Peacebuilding

Funding for peacebuilding and security programs make up a small percentage of total philanthropic giving, but these investments are essential to creating sustainable peace in societies, writes Catherine Thompson of the Peace and Security Funders Group.

WRITTEN BY

[Catherine Thompson](#)

PUBLISHED ON

 May 21, 2018

READ TIME

Approx. 3 minutes

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A man displays the peace signs during a rally in Times Square in New York City in support of the Palestinian people in the wake of the recent violence in the Gaza Strip [Drew Angerer/Getty Images](#)

FIFTY YEARS AGO, the assassinations of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Senator Robert F. Kennedy sent shock waves through the United States. Their deaths, growing frustration with the protracted Vietnam War and the loss of other champions like disability advocate Helen Keller, shaped 1968 into a year of discontent. The public was losing faith in its political leaders, and a moral reckoning was growing around the injustices of Jim Crow laws for racial segregation and other atrocities.

Fifty years later, new generations are taking to the streets in the U.S. and around the globe, once again demanding justice for systemic legacies of violence and inequity. Creativity blossoms in periods of great national upheaval. Add creativity

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to discontent and you get mass movements calling for freedom, equality, justice and peace.

Humans are hard-wired to make things right, no matter the cost. But that work costs money.

Who funds the risk-takers, the movement-builders? Who ensures that nonviolent movements can organize and reach communities? Who supports leaders of a movement so they may continue to buy groceries when their work for peace and justice overtakes their work that pays the bills?

Behind these mass movements for peace and justice is often a funder – or many – who took a risk, often a long-term one. Though teams of volunteers and armies of individual donors are often primary supporters of grassroots groups, some foundations have also contributed financially to causes that were not easy wins.

The National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy has documented the “Freedom Funders” who supported the civil rights movement and its advocacy over the long term. For decades, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Ploughshares Fund and others have funded strategies toward principled, global nuclear security. In the U.K., the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust continues to fund peacebuilding

in Northern Ireland, when many considered that case closed with the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. Smaller foundations have supported outsized good by targeted investments, such as Catalyst for Peace's long-term work to help transform Sierra Leone.

At the Peace and Security Funders Group, we track philanthropic giving in our Peace and Security Funding Index. Our findings show that deep investments are being made in creative peacebuilding projects, both in the U.S. and globally. The most recent data show that in 2015, \$350.7 million was given across nearly 3,000 grants for peace and security issues. This includes work from supporting the peace negotiations in Colombia and helping build Track II communications between the U.S. and Iran on nuclear security, to addressing sexual and gender-based violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

This number may seem large, but investment in peacebuilding and security makes up only 1 percent of the \$30 billion of total foundation giving in 2015, despite the fact that peaceful and stable societies are the requisite to nearly every other philanthropic goal.

In addition to investing in seemingly intractable conflicts and the long and unglamorous road to

peace, more and more funders are also taking a holistic approach to grantmaking. This includes robust capacity-building, professional development, networking facilitation and even psycho-social support for individual grantee partners alongside project funding. It is, after all, the collective efforts of brave individuals that transforms communities, societies and policies.

Whether or not our societies are actually more polarized than they were 50 years ago, the fact is this: Human capacity for resilience and innovation can take us to new places. One need only remember another groundbreaking event 50 years ago this year: when three astronauts aboard the Apollo 8 mission traveled beyond Earth's orbit for the first time and returned safely home.

Sustainable peace may seem like a moonshot, but funders who continue to invest in this work over the long term and take risks on seemingly intractable issues are helping to build the societies that we will be proud of 50 years from now. ■

The views expressed in this article belong to the author and do not necessarily reflect the editorial policy of Peacebuilding Deeply.

About the Author

Catherine Thompson

PROGRAM DIRECTOR, PEACE AND SECURITY FUNDERS GROUP

Catherine Thompson is a program director at the Peace and Security Funders Group.

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