
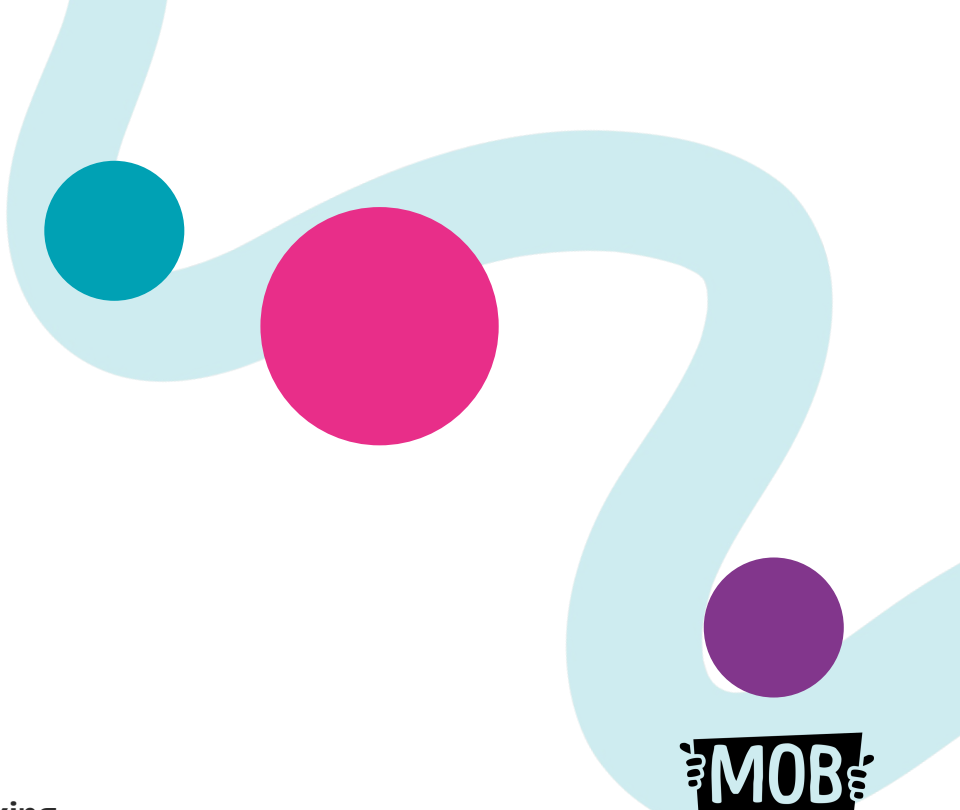


# Building Power

 Insights and recommendations from a benchmarking study of developing talent for progressive social change

April 2026



**MOB**  
**LAB**



**Intertidal Lab**

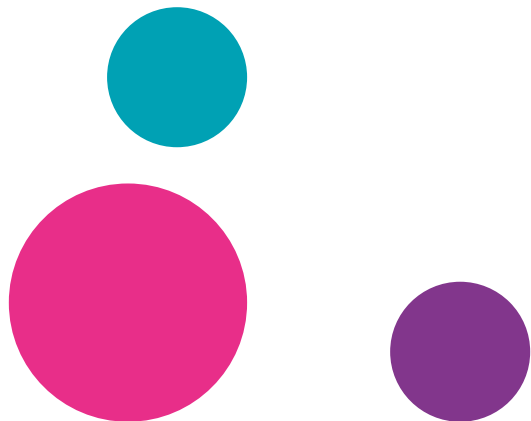
# Executive summary

We are living through overlapping and interconnected crises: ecological, political, economic and social. Old structures are failing. And the people doing the work of holding movements together are doing so with tools built for a world that no longer exists.

This is not a moment for surface-level fixes or single-issue thinking. It demands we build differently, with deeper roots, longer horizons and a genuine commitment to the people at the centre of change.

**We need strategic, long-term investment in leadership and talent development as a foundational pathway to building the power and capacity our moment requires.** This report began as a study focused on building talent and power for the climate and energy transition movements, but what it surfaced reaches far beyond that framing. The insights here are relevant to anyone working at the intersection of philanthropy, civil society and systems change. The research draws on a benchmarking survey of 119 civil society organisations, in-depth interviews with practitioners around the world, and a landscape analysis of more than 130 talent development initiatives, as well as our 15 years of experience working in this sector.

What we found is both encouraging and sobering. **Extraordinary work is already happening:** fellowships built on feminist and healing-centred pedagogies, training-of-trainer cascades reaching thousands of organisers, peer learning networks that create the belonging and solidarity sustaining people through years of difficult work. The knowledge of what works exists.





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And yet the sector is not attracting and keeping the relevant people. Not because the work is not meaningful. But because we have built a system that invests in people just long enough to get them in the door and then falls short. Short grant cycles. Issue silos. No mid-career pathway. No shared infrastructure. No aspiration.

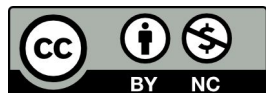
**Civil society's talent challenges are systemic, not accidental.** They are the product of decades of chronic underfunding, a preference for project delivery over capability building, and a funding architecture often organised around urgency rather than strategy. Underneath all of this is a scarcity mindset, structurally reproduced by the way philanthropy and civil society currently works, that makes it almost impossible to invest in what matters most.

The solution is an approach the far right understood decades ago. **Build pipelines. Build career ecosystems. Build belonging.** We have not, and the gap is showing.

This report sets out what it would take to move from islands of excellence to a genuine ecosystem. It is addressed to philanthropic funders and private donors with the strategic vision to invest not just in projects, but in the infrastructure of lasting change.

What gets seeded in this moment will shape what emerges next. The question is whether we are prepared to tend that ground.


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# Problem diagnosis



**The architecture of philanthropy.** The problems in civil society's talent ecosystem do not begin inside civil society organisations. They begin with the funding architecture that shapes how organisations are structured and what they can do. Several interconnected dynamics define this architecture, and each one actively works against long-term investment in people.

**Short-term thinking and urgency.** Historically, only around one percent of philanthropic grants have been designated for talent development as a category.<sup>1</sup> Most of what does flow to people development is attached to specific projects, which means it disappears when the project ends. Short grant cycles reward delivery over development. Funders respond to urgent crises rather than investing in the durable capacity that would help civil society navigate those crises.

**We fund projects, not people.** Civil society is not just underfunding talent development: it is structurally organised to make talent development fail. Short grant cycles reward delivery over development. Issue silos fragment learning and limit career mobility. Competition for funding makes sharing feel like a liability. And a culture that treats sacrifice as a given has normalised burning people out rather than building them up. These are not individual failures. They are the cumulative effects of choices by organisations, funders and the sector as a whole, about what gets valued and what gets funded.

**We train for issues, not for power.** Civil society has organised itself around issues: climate, human rights, gender, labour, democracy. And its talent development has followed suit. The result is practitioners who are deeply expert in their area but poorly equipped to build the cross-sector coalitions, shared narratives and broad-based movements that systemic change actually requires. Most curricula prioritise technical and issue-specific skills at the expense of the power-building capabilities that matter most: political economy literacy, narrative strategy, community organising and cross-ideological engagement.


**Mid-career development is missing.** Investment in talent is concentrated at the two ends of the career spectrum. Entry-level activists and senior leaders. Practitioners in the middle with 3-10 years of experience who are ready to step into strategic leadership get almost nothing. Bridgespan Group research found that only 30 percent of senior roles in the nonprofit sector are filled through internal promotion, roughly half the rate of the private sector.<sup>2,3</sup>

**We are losing people faster than we can develop them.** Civil society is experiencing what may be its most serious talent drain. The combination of funding cuts, legal restrictions on civil society actors across more than 100 countries,<sup>4,5,6</sup> and the absence of aspirational career pathways is producing a sustained outflow of experienced people to the private sector, academia and government at exactly the moment when experience is most needed. At the same time, it is getting harder to bring new people in. Civil society is not being seen as a viable long-term career choice. Without investment in making it one, the sector will keep losing the next generation to better-funded alternatives.

**We work in silos instead of ecosystems.** Civil society's talent development initiatives are not learning from each other. Competition for limited funding creates incentives for secrecy rather than sharing. The result is a field that is much less than the sum of its parts. Without shared infrastructure, shared resources and shared learning, every organisation keeps reinventing the same wheel.

**The people carrying the work are being crushed by it.** Chronic understaffing is the norm. Delivery pressure is constant and rarely eases between reporting cycles. And underneath all of this is the specific weight of emotional labour — the sustained, largely invisible work of holding other people's pain, navigating trauma and absorbing the collective grief of the communities being served.

A study of 346 human rights advocates by Columbia University's Human Rights Resilience Project found that 19 percent met criteria for PTSD, 15 percent were experiencing depression and 19 percent reported burnout, rates comparable to those found among first responders and combat veterans.<sup>7,8,9</sup> The sector's response has largely been to celebrate resilience and call for better self-care. This is not a strategy. You cannot develop people who are underwater, and you cannot retain people who are burning out.

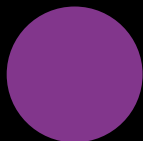
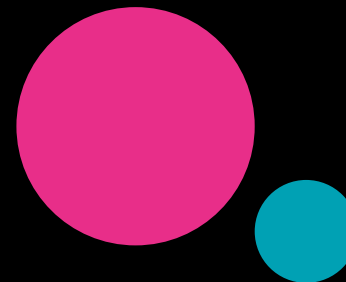


# Key Structural Failures

- ♥ Funders treat **talent development as overhead** rather than as a multiplier of every other investment.
- ♥ **Short grant cycles** make it structurally impossible to build long-term pipelines.
- ♥ Issue-based funding creates **incentives for specialist capacity** rather than cross-movement power.
- ♥ Chronic understaffing leaves **little room for development** or supporting the development of others.
- ♥ Organisations **compete for the same limited funding** rather than collaborating on shared infrastructure.
- ♥ The absence of aspirational career pathways makes civil society **unable to compete** for and hold the best people.
- ♥ Conservative and far-right ecosystems continue to grow their talent advantage while **civil society responds episodically**.

# Insights

*The sector is not starting from zero. Across our survey, interviews and landscape review, a consistent picture emerges of what effective talent development looks like in practice. These insights are drawn from the accumulated wisdom of practitioners who have been doing this work, often without adequate resources, for years.*



# Summary of Insights

The following insights are drawn from our global survey, practitioner interviews and a landscape review. They are organised across three horizons:

- big-picture strategic directions for long-term ecosystem change
- mid-term catalytic opportunities to accelerate what is needed
- and near-term actions to amplify what is already working.

## Long-term strategic direction

### Long-term investment across generations

Building power requires building people, systematically, over decades, with resources proportionate to the task.

### Move beyond knowledge and skills: create belonging

Social belonging is a more powerful engine for building political power than skills training alone. The most effective programmes build communities, not just competencies.

### Build multiple interconnected pathways

The crises we face are interconnected and so must our talent ecosystems be. Building power means connecting people across movements and issue areas, not developing them in silos.

### Become innovators in talent development

The conservative movement learned from progressive movements and then kept iterating. We need continuous learning, bold tactics, rapid response and a genuine appetite for innovation.

## Mid-term catalytic opportunities

### Youth need pathways for purpose and belonging

Talent development that creates genuine belonging and a sense of shared purpose is what brings young people in and keeps them.

### Talent development needs to be aspirational

We cannot compete for the best people if we cannot tell a compelling story about what a career in social change looks like. Recruitment needs to be an invitation into something worth building a life around.

### A major gap to fill for mid-career development

Entry-level activists get fellowships. Senior leaders get executive programmes. Practitioners in the middle get almost nothing. Closing this gap is one of the highest-return investments available.

### Training of trainers is a core strategy for scale

Training of trainers is the most cost-effective mechanism for extending reach, adapting approaches in local contexts, and foundational investment for distributed leadership.

## Near-term amplify what works

### Create connective tissue

Effective and scalable talent development builds on pre-existing infrastructure and networks. Shared infrastructure is needed to enable cross-initiative learning, adaptation and amplification.

### People-first talent development

Shifting toward integrated, people-first talent development means investing in leadership pipelines that value adaptability, interpersonal skills and holistic growth rather than delivering issue-specific training.

### Accessible entry points, then intensive experience

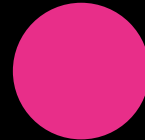
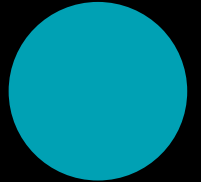
Open-access entry points can reach large numbers and then channel deeper investment toward the most committed, concentrating resources on those ready for greater responsibility.

### Extended hybrid learning journeys

Longer programmes that weave together online modules, in-person intensives, mentoring and peer exchange produce lasting transformation. The duration is what makes the impact possible.

insights

# Big picture, strategic direction...



## INSIGHT 1

# Invest long-term, across generations.



### **Skilled people multiply the impact of every other investment.**

Organisations that invest seriously in developing people are more effective, more resilient and more likely to achieve lasting change. This is not a peripheral finding, it is the central argument for treating talent development as a core strategy, not an overhead cost.

Short, one-off interventions rarely produce lasting change. What works is sustained engagement over time: formal learning combined with peer exchange, coaching, mentoring and real-world application. Over months and years rather than days.

For decades, conservative and right-wing movements have invested in building deep and enduring talent pipelines. They are playing the long game working across decades with large unrestricted or core support. **The result is well-organised, well-funded, cross-sector pipelines that repeatedly place alumni in key government, media, corporate and advocacy positions.**

Shifts in political alignment, participation and leadership come from long-term exposure to ideas, networks and real-world challenges, not quick fixes or one-off programmes.

## INSIGHT 2

# Move beyond knowledge and skills: create belonging.

The most powerful talent development programmes do not just build skills, they build communities. When people develop strong bonds with peers who share their values and face similar challenges, they are more likely to stay in the movement, support each other through hard periods and take action together over time. This is how movements sustain themselves.

Research on group and political identity shows that when people experience a strong sense of 'we', grounded in common culture, stories and norms, they are more likely to stay engaged, coordinate their actions and accept personal costs for the sake of the group.<sup>20,21</sup> Once a community creates a strong sense of belonging, members are primed to internalise its narratives and act in concert. This is a far more durable basis for power than skills training delivered in isolation.

**Belonging is not a nice-to-have. It is what keeps people in the movement when everything else is hard.**

A growing number of practitioners are refusing the model of talent development that treats people as containers for skills and ignores the cost of the work they are doing. Political leaders, frontline organisers and human rights defenders carry an immense personal burden alongside their professional responsibilities. This is not a departure from strategy. It is strategy. You cannot build movements with people who are burning out.

## INSIGHT 3

# Build multiple interconnected pathways.



**The crises we face are not separate problems.** Climate breakdown, democratic erosion, economic injustice, social fragmentation. They share roots and demand responses that cut across traditional issue boundaries. Yet civil society has organised itself, and its talent, in silos.

Building power means building relationships between people, between movements, and across the overlapping interests that connect the climate fight to the democracy fight to the struggle for racial and economic justice. Talent development has a critical role here. Not just preparing people for careers, but connecting them to each other and to a shared agenda larger than any single organisation or issue.

**The most resilient movements offer multiple ways in.** When people can enter through varied roles and entry points they are more likely to find the belonging and purpose that sustains them. This means actively embedding gender, racial and economic justice principles into how talent is identified and developed, not as add-ons, but as conditions that make climate, democratic action and social justice more effective and more widely owned.

## INSIGHT 4

# Become innovators in talent development.

The success of conservative and far-right movements in political influencing is built on lessons learned from the US civil rights and other progressive movements. And then continuous experimentation, adaptation and learning, enabled by technology, relevant to today's context, with a high appetite for risk and deep pockets.

**Conservative donors lead the way in trust-based philanthropy.** They act quickly, invest in general operating support, and fund big-picture, long-term strategies across decades with substantial flexibility. Civil society and philanthropy needs to learn from this approach. **Encourage experimentation, bold new tactics and rapid response while sharing learning for long-term success.**

Measurement of talent development impact is weak across the sector. Most organisations track completion rates and collect post-training feedback. Very few follow up at six or twelve months, track career trajectories or connect talent investment to movement-level outcomes. The absence of this kind of tracking is a choice, not an inevitability.

insights

# Mid-term catalytic opportunities...

INSIGHT 5

# Youth need pathways for purpose and belonging.

Young people are people shut out of meaningful work, public life, and decision-making creating not just economic exclusion, but a political and social risk. Without avenues for belonging and agency, youth energy can be easily channelled into polarisation or radicalisation, especially amid a shifting global order.

**Young people entering civil society are not simply looking for jobs or skills. They are looking for meaning, identity and community.** The organisations and movements that attract and retain the next generation are those that offer a genuine sense of belonging alongside professional development. Spaces where young people can see themselves reflected, build lasting relationships and connect their personal values to a shared mission.

This requires investment in the social and relational dimensions of talent development: peer networks, mentorship, shared rituals and spaces for collective reflection. These are not soft add-ons. They are the foundations of the commitment and resilience that sustained movement work demands.

## INSIGHT 6

# Talent development needs to be aspirational.

Civil society has a narrative problem. Too often, careers in this sector are framed around sacrifice, urgency and the weight of the work rather than the opportunity, meaning and agency it offers. This does not attract the best people, and it does not retain them.

The lack of clear and aspirational career pathways in civil society, coupled with repressive government laws and tactics, means that it is **becoming harder to recruit and retain talent in the sector**, particularly in the Global Majority.

Talent development needs to be reframed, not as capacity building for an under-resourced sector, but as an invitation into something worth building a life around. Successful business and governance-focused talent development initiatives often boast *individual transformation* through skills, networks, and visibility as the pathway to personal success and wider social change. They are aspirational, **promising career advancement, funding access and even political opportunity.**

If civil society cannot tell a compelling story about what a career across these interconnected struggles looks like, we will keep losing the best people to organisations that can.

## INSIGHT 7

# Fill the gap for mid-career development.

Investment in civil society talent is concentrated at the two ends of the career spectrum. Entry-level activists get fellowships and introductory training. Senior leaders get executive programmes and high-level convenings. Practitioners in the middle with three to 10 years of experience who are ready to step into strategic leadership get almost nothing.

Bridgespan research found that only 30 percent of senior roles in the nonprofit sector are filled through internal promotion, roughly half the rate of the private sector.<sup>2,3</sup> The churn this produces is not a mystery. It is the predictable result of a sector that has not built the pathways to hold its most experienced people.

**Most NGOs are too small and under-resourced to provide meaningful career development pathways,** so talented mid-career staff often leave for growth opportunities elsewhere, exacerbating churn and weakening the leadership bench.<sup>22</sup>

Closing this gap requires deliberate investment: mentoring schemes, peer leadership networks and development opportunities designed specifically for practitioners with three to 10 years of experience.

## INSIGHT 8

# Training of trainers is a core strategy for scale.

Training-of-trainers pathways are one of the most powerful ways to scale talent because they **turn experienced organisers and campaigners into multipliers**. When existing practitioners are equipped with the skills to design, facilitate and adapt training to a local context and language, each training cycle seeds a new generation of talent that reaches deeper into communities.

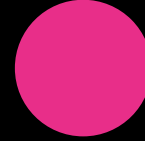
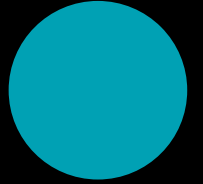
It is the most cost-effective mechanism for extending reach, the most reliable way to embed approaches in local contexts, and the foundational investment for the distributed leadership capacity that durable movements require. Without it, every other investment leaks.

We need to treat training of trainers as a strategic investment in its own right rather than a line item in programme budgets. It should be funded separately, evaluated rigorously and connected across initiatives so that trainers across different programmes learn from and strengthen each other.

Given the narrow pool of civil society talent and talent programmes, training of trainers needs to be a **core scaling strategy, not just an add on**.

insights

**Amplify what is  
already  
working...**



## INSIGHT 9

# Leverage existing initiatives and create connective tissues.



**Effective and scalable talent development programmes build upon pre-existing organisational infrastructure and networks**, adapting and amplifying what is already in place. This approach has several strategic advantages:

- Speed and cost efficiency
- Innovating and learning from diverse approaches
- Generates network effects and multipliers.

In the short term, we need to prioritise mapping, supporting and resourcing existing organisations with proven capacity and credibility, then adapt and iterate programming through those entities while building a robust ecosystem and talent pipeline.

The sector's **talent development initiatives are not learning from each other at anything approaching the rate that would be possible with shared infrastructure**. Light-touch infrastructure for convening and sense-making could support shared learning and evaluation, enable coordination between initiatives and help funders navigate the landscape.

INSIGHT 10

# People-first talent development.


A major divide between NGO and government/industry talent development approaches is the holistic cultivation of people and leadership skills.

Many funder-incubated talent programmes begin with strong foundations and demonstrate remarkable potential for scale. Because these models are designed around people's motivations, values and aspirations they tend to be adaptable and replicable across diverse geographies and contexts. Rather than being bound by institutional or cultural limits, such programmes leverage universal human drivers like purpose, belonging and the desire to contribute.

For organisations seeking to build power and broaden their impact, **shifting toward integrated, people-first talent development is critical.** This means investing in leadership pipelines that value adaptability, interpersonal skills, and holistic growth, placing greater emphasis on multi-issue, multi-context capacity building to meet the needs of diverse, multifaceted communities. Organisations should also treat wellbeing, rest and psychosocial safety as core programme elements in all serious talent development investment.

## INSIGHT 11

**Highly  
accessible  
entry point,  
followed by  
intensive  
experience.**



The most sophisticated programmes combine **radically accessible entry points with more intensive experiences**, creating a pathway from broad participation to deep talent development. By welcoming participants with baseline experience rather than elite credentials, it accelerates scale and inclusion, enabling wider mobilisation across diverse communities.

When open-access trainings are paired with targeted follow-on support for the most committed participants, **programmes can rapidly expand reach while building a strong core of locally rooted talent**. This layered approach strengthens on-the-ground impact by moving large numbers through foundational learning and then channelling additional investment into those ready to take on greater responsibility.

INSIGHT 12

# Extended hybrid learning journeys.



Longer programmes are better placed to embed skills, reinforce practice and sustain momentum than short, one-off interventions, offering participants continuity as they apply what they learn in real contexts.

The **most effective models use a blended methodology, weaving together online modules, mentoring, in person action learning and in context implementation** so that formal instruction is continuously reinforced through practice, feedback, and peer exchange. This hybrid approach balances flexibility with depth, allowing participants to integrate learning into their everyday work while still benefiting from structured reflection and guided experimentation.

# What can we learn from the far-right?

An overview of the US conservative and  
far-right talent ecosystem



# And why?

There is something uncomfortable about this section, and it is worth naming directly. The movements we examine here do not share our values. Many of their goals are ones we actively oppose. And some of the tactics they use to build power would be incompatible with the principles of equity, transparency and democratic participation that underpin our work.

So why are we looking at them?

**Because they have built something we have not.** Over the past four decades, conservative movements have constructed talent ecosystems of extraordinary depth. Pipelines that begin early, move people through progressive stages of formation, skills development and professional placement, and ultimately deliver alumni into positions of power across government, law, media and civil society. These are not accidents. They are the result of long-term, strategically coordinated investment in people. Progressive civil society, by contrast, has invested episodically. We have built islands of excellence. We have not built an ecosystem.

Looking honestly at what the right has built is not an act of admiration. It is an act of strategic intelligence. **What follows is not a blueprint to copy, it is a mirror to look into.** An argument for matching the seriousness of purpose and sustained investment that have made their approach so formidable. While doing so in ways that are consistent with who we are and what we are trying to build.

# Conservative strategy for talent development

Conservative and far-right actors have spent **several decades building a dense “talent machine”** that identifies, trains, places and supports people in roles that can reshape politics, law, culture, and education, with long-term, steady funding <sup>23, 24</sup> rather than episodic project grants.

Progressive civil society does not need to replicate the opacity or the exclusionary ideologies of these movements. But it does need the seriousness of purpose they demonstrate. Building power requires building up people, systematically, over decades, with resources proportionate to the task.

The conservative talent development system in the US operates as an integrated, multi-layered ecosystem where 12+ major organisations coordinate roles and reinforce each other's work.

**Long-term:** Organisations operate on 30 to 50 year horizons, not election cycles.

**Fully-funded:** Collectively at least US\$1.2 billion annually,<sup>25</sup> with stable conservative donor bases. Includes familiar climate deniers: Koch, Scafie, Bradley, Olin and Uihlen families.

**Coordinated:** Organisations explicitly reference each other, share staff, cross-promote.

**Vertically integrated:** From K-12 media to government placement, all layers funded and managed.

# The ecosystem is structured across four areas...<sup>10,11,12,13,23</sup>

## Narrative & Ideology Formation

**PragerU:** Produces short videos and K-12 cartoons shaping how young people understand history, economics, religion, and culture from a conservative frame.

**Heritage Foundation:** Think tank providing policy narratives and analysis that conservative leaders cite.

**Campus Reform/CNS:** Surveys and publicizes "woke" incidents on campuses, creating moral panics and narrative fuel for activism.

**Strategic outcome:** By age 14-18, many US youth have been exposed to PragerU content, Heritage analysis or campus narratives that prime them for conservative identity.

## Recruitment & Early Activation

**Young America's Foundation:** Reagan Ranch conferences, speaker tours, and campus chapters build conservative student identity and community.

**Young Republicans National Federation:** Party-aligned youth organising, feeds into GOP electoral structures.

**Turning Point USA:** Mass student organising via chapters on 1000+ campuses and 3000+ high schools, rallies, social media, church-based youth work.

**Strategic outcome:** By college age, ideologically primed youth are recruited into organised conservative networks with weekly meetings, social identity, and social rewards to participate.

## Skills Development & Professionalisation

**Leadership Institute:** 40+ training schools teaching campaign management, fundraising, media, journalism, digital strategy and placement support.

**Institute for Humane Studies:** Scholarships, reading groups, seminars identifying and tracking students headed toward policy/think tank careers.

**Campus Reform:** Media production training, investigative journalism workshops.

**Strategic outcome:** Young conservatives receive professional-quality training in organising, communications, and policy research before they enter the job market. They also build networks with peers who will become colleagues/mentors in movement organisations.

## Elite Formation & Long-Term Placement

**Heritage Foundation Academy:** Government training, policy fellowships.

**Federalist Society:** Law student and lawyer networks; shapes judicial appointments, clerkships, and legal doctrine.

**Institute for Justice:** Conservative litigation careers, public interest law track.

**Alliance Defending Freedom:** Religious-right litigation, culture war cases.

**American Moment** (emerging): Explicitly designed to staff future conservative administrations; fellowship placements in congressional offices and agencies.

**Strategic outcome:** Conservative organisers, lawyers, judges, and policy makers are positioned in courts, agencies and government. They sustain the movement through appointments and policy decisions.

# And the reach extends globally.

The US conservative talent machine does not stop at America's borders. It deliberately exports its methods, narratives, and leadership models into other regions, including the Global Majority. Through organisations including Atlas Network, Heritage Foundation partnerships and elite schools, it turns domestic infrastructure into a franchised ecosystem that trains, funds and connects aligned actors around the world.

**Atlas Network:** Trains Global Majority think tank leaders using Leadership Institute-style methods to replicate conservative models locally. Channels more than US\$10 million a year into partners worldwide with confirmed partners in Brasil, South Africa, Mexico and Indonesia among others.

**Heritage Foundation + Danube Institute partnership:** Training programs and fellowship placements for foreign leaders interested in "governance" and "policy".

**University model:** US conservative foundations fund "market-oriented" universities in Global Majority for future business leaders, bureaucrats and judges using free-market ideology.

**Legal network expansion:** Federalist Society and Alliance Defending Freedom are expanding international networks creating an international conservative legal elite aligned with US positions on culture war issues.

**Student & youth network coordination:** Students for Liberty operates globally, coordinating with TPUSA-style organising in Global Majority. The Campus Reform media training model being adapted for Global Majority campus surveillance and organising.

# Awkward lessons from the far right.

## **Start earlier, through participation not indoctrination**

The conservative ecosystem is focuses on forming identity before critical thinking fully develops. We should not replicate that and we do not need to. Investing in youth civic participation builds critical thinking and political capacity. This already exists in many countries but is chronically underfunded.

## **Remove economic barriers to movement careers**

Unpaid internships and low entry salaries structurally exclude working-class people from civil society careers. In the Global Majority this is acute: local NGO salaries often cannot compete with INGO rates draining local talent. Paying people fairly to enter the field is both values-aligned and a talent strategy.

## **Build lateral mobility as culture, not just infrastructure**

There are several nodes in the US conservative ecosystem that support placement and career progression. But there is also a shared identity strong enough that people trust and recruit each other across institutional lines. A progressive equivalent means investing in infrastructure that makes people recognisable to each other as movement peers and connects work across sectors.

### **Build pathways for the people already doing the work**

The conservative movement's smartest recent move is rejecting elite credentialing as the basis for leadership.

In many progressive sectors, hiring still favours degrees, English fluency and prior INGO experience.

We need to recognise lived experience as a qualification and build pathways that recognise community leadership, indigenous knowledge and organising track records alongside formal education.

### **Invest in narrative infrastructure that emerges from communities**

Civil society needs to resource locally rooted storytelling as serious infrastructure. Community radio, social media, oral traditions, music and theatre. Community radio stations in West Africa reach millions.<sup>26</sup>

Indigenous media networks in Latin America have sustained movements through decades of repression.<sup>27</sup> Feminist zines and podcasts across Southeast Asia have built political consciousness that no NGO campaign could replicate.<sup>28</sup>

The problem is not that this work does not exist. The problem is that it is treated as a communications add-on rather than the foundation for building power.

### **Train people to use power, not just win it**

The right trains people to campaign, fundraise and get into office. But many progressive movements that won elections then reproduced the same hierarchies they were fighting against.

The missing curriculum is how to lead with accountability. How to stay connected to the communities that put you there, how to make decisions with people rather than for them, how to hold coalitions together across real disagreements.

These are harder skills to learn, but they are what separates movements that transform power from those that merely capture it.

# A framework for action

The gap between the talent ecosystem we need and the one we have is large. But it is not unbridgeable. Effective approaches already exist. What is required is the strategic will and sustained investment to move from isolated excellence to a connected ecosystem.

The following framework organises what is needed across three time horizons with a specific set of next steps for organisations and funders who are ready to act now.



# Short term success

Amplify what  
is working and  
build  
momentum



**Strengthen and connect existing initiatives.** The fastest path to scale, adapting and amplifying what's already in place.



**Close the missing middle.** Audit where their current talent investment is actually going. Design mentoring, peer networks and development opportunities for practitioners with three to 10 years of experience.



**Extend learning journeys.** Longer programmes are better placed to embed skills, reinforce practice and sustain momentum to support implementation.








**Treat wellbeing as a baseline, not a bonus.** Treat wellbeing, rest and psychosocial safety as core programme elements, in all talent development investment.



**Start measuring longitudinally.** Six and twelve-month follow-ups with alumni build the evidence base for investment.

# Medium term

## Scale what works

-  **Recognise training of trainers as a strategic investment.** As a standalone commitment, funded separately, evaluated rigorously and connected across initiatives so trainers learn from each other.
-  **Diversify the talent pool.** Target high-potential practitioners from business, government, faith communities and political parties. People with the credibility and networks to do power-building work in ways established civil society practitioners sometimes cannot.
-  **Build cross-movement learning.** Invest in programmes to bring together practitioners across sectors. The connections between climate, democracy and economic justice are real, talent development needs to reflect this.
-  **Invest in Global Majority talent practitioners.** Locally led, in-language, contextually adapted programmes designed and owned by the communities they serve. Not as beneficiaries of approaches designed elsewhere.
-  **Build and sustain alumni networks.** One of the highest-return, most consistently underfunded investments available. Dedicated coordination, regular convenings and light-touch ongoing support is what keeps a network alive.

# Long-term

## Nurture the ecosystem



**Commit to multi-generational investment.** Ten to 30 year horizons, large unrestricted or core support, low friction management. This is how the right funds its talent infrastructure and it is the only approach that matches the scale of what we need to build.



**Build connective infrastructure.** Shared learning, evaluation and coordination capacity that no single organisation can provide alone. The ecosystem will not emerge by accident, we need to tend the connections between its parts.



**Create aspirational career pathways.** Celebrate lateral movement rather than treating departures as failure. Actively place mid-career practitioners into senior roles. Make it possible, and visible, to build a life in this work.



**Build belonging as core to power-building.** Tie people's sense of self to a shared mission, not just a set of competencies. Skills can be taught anywhere. The movements that last are the ones people feel they belong to.

# For philanthropy



**Commit multi-year, flexible capital to talent development.** And make it explicit: people development is programme expenditure, not overhead. The way grants are currently categorised is part of what makes long-term investment structurally impossible.



**Prioritise Global Majority talent infrastructure.** Especially in regions where the conservative talent export is already active. The ground is being contested and progressive civil society needs to show up with equivalent focus and resources.



**Fund shared infrastructure explicitly.** Knowledge commons, alumni network coordination, cross-initiative learning mechanisms. These are the things no individual programme can sustain alone, which is precisely why investment is needed to resource them directly.



**Require and invest in longitudinal outcome tracking.** Report publicly on the aggregate impact of talent development investment. The evidence base for this work is weak because no one has paid to build it. That is a choice, and it can be reversed.

# Implementing this framework will shift...

## FROM

## TO

A **widening talent gap** in civil society

Strong, inclusive talent pipeline in the Majority World, where NGO careers are a **viable and aspirational career pathway**

**Disconnect** between policy ambitions and on-the-ground realities

A diverse talent pipeline that **bridges policy, practice and lived experience**

**Siloed, niche** approaches to civil society talent development

**Accessible, intersectional pathways** with multiple entry points that build transferable skills and adaptable leaders

**Short-term, fragmented** capacity-building efforts

Investment in extended talent development journeys that **support retention, leadership and progression over time**

**Politically vulnerable** or project-bound funding models

Resilient, long-term investments in talent systems that can **withstand political shifts** and changing policy environments

# About us & our research

The background features abstract, organic shapes in shades of purple and pink. A large, light purple arch dominates the right side, with a smaller, darker purple arch nested within it. Two solid circles are present: a cyan one in the lower-left and a bright pink one in the lower-right, both partially overlapping the purple shapes.

# Methodology

We began with a broad review of **130 talent development initiatives** covering political education, organising and campaign training and leadership development with a focus on Global Majority countries. This was based on our network of contacts and publicly available information. We focused **beyond the climate sector** to capture diverse models and ideological approaches. We identified emerging patterns for programme approaches and common methodologies.

Reviewed  
**130**  
Talent  
initiatives

**119**  
Survey  
responses

To enhance and validate the broad review, we conducted a global survey about talent development. The survey captured perspectives on talent needs, gaps, effective models, barriers to scale, and opportunities for cross-sector learning.

**15**  
Interviews

We carried out **in-depth interviews with 15 leaders of organisations and programmes** that are national, regional and global in scope to generate richer qualitative insights, including operational practices, leadership philosophies, power-shifting strategies, and lessons for replication.

**12**  
Actionable  
insights

**Insights emerged** through the synthesis of input across these sources cross-referencing programme approaches, success factors, contextual drivers and conditions for scale in order to build a coherent picture of what works, why, and where impact is most visible and replicable.

This was accompanied by a **targeted literature review** of reports, evaluations and articles relevant to talent development, movement building, political engagement and power-shifting across diverse sectors.

# Scope of programmes reviewed

Our landscape analysis looked at programmes around the globe with a focus on programmes **building public engagement and power** and serving talent in the Global Majority.

## Talent Approaches

- Massive Online Courses (MOCs)
- Hybrid learning
- Immersive
- Workshops
- Peer learning
- Fellowships
- Conferences
- Mentoring/coaching
- Internships

## Focused on

- Individuals
- Networks
- Issues
- Specific Skills
- Projects
- Career

## Delivered by

- NGOs
- Governments
- Political orgs
- Intergovernmental
- Corporate entities
- Philanthropy
- Partnerships

# Programmes reviewed

## [AAPLOG](#)

[Active Citizens - British Council](#)  
[ACTRAV Regional Workers Academy](#)  
[Advocacy training for Human Rights House Foundation](#)  
[Africa Health Economic Transformation Initiative \(AHETI\) Leadership Program](#)  
[African Capacity Building Foundation \(ACBF\) Program](#)  
[African Capacity Building Foundation \(ACBF\) Programs](#)  
[African Coaching Network](#)  
[African Leadership Academy](#)  
[African leadership initiative](#)  
[African Union Youth Volunteer Corps](#)  
[AIESEC](#)  
[AIG Public Leaders Programme \(AIG PLP\)](#)  
[AktivAsia](#)  
[American Enterprise Institute](#)  
[American Legislative Exchange Council \(ALEC\)](#)  
[American Majority](#)  
[Apolitical](#)  
[ASEAN Women's Political Leadership programme](#)  
[ASEAN Women's Political Leadership Programme \(WFD\)](#)  
[Asia Foundation Women's Empowerment/Leadership Programs](#)  
[Asian Leadership Center](#)  
[Asuntos del Sur: Political Innovation Academy](#)  
[Atlantic Fellows](#)  
[Atlantic Fellows for Social & Economic Equity \(LSE International\)](#)  
[Atlas Network - Center for African Prosperity](#)  
[AVPN Global Leadership Academy](#)  
[AVPN Philanthropy Fellowship](#)  
[Bertha Foundation - Bertha Challenge](#)  
[Better Politics Foundation](#)  
[BRIDGE Electoral Curriculum / League of Arab States](#)  
[Cadre Political Education, China](#)  
[Cato University](#)

## [Central America Meeting of Emerging Leaders \(ECLE\)](#)

[Centro de Colaboración Cívica \(CCC\)](#)  
[Civil Society Leadership Award Durham University](#)  
[Climate Breakthrough](#)  
[Colmena Fund](#)  
[Conservative Partnership Academy](#)  
[Dejusticia](#)  
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[Emily's List](#)  
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[ERIA School of Government Leadership Fellowship](#)  
[Executive Leadership Retreat—UNDP Africa](#)  
[Fair Share for Women leaders](#)  
[Faith and freedom coalition](#)  
[Feminist Leadership Movement Building and Rights Institute](#)  
[Forward Institute](#)  
[Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom \(FNF\)](#)  
[Futurelect Public Leadership Programs](#)  
[GC Arab World - Global Campus of Human Rights \(ArMA\)](#)  
[Global Fellows in Courage](#)  
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[Latin American Leadership Academy \(LaLa\)](#)  
[Leadership Institute](#)  
[Leading Change Network](#)  
[Makes Sense](#)  
[Mandela Washington Fellowship \(YALI\)](#)  
[MENA-OECD Youth Empowerment Programme](#)  
[Mercatus Center: George Mason University](#)  
[Middle East Partnership Initiative \(MEPI\)](#)  
[MINDS Youth Programme on Elections and Governance](#)  
[Mo Ibrahim Foundation Academy Fellowship](#)  
[Moroccan Youth Action \(WFD\)](#)  
[Native Leadership Institute](#)  
[Next Generation Resource Governance Leaders Program \(African Centre for Energy Policy\)](#)  
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[Rise up](#)  
[Rosa Luxemburg Stifting](#)  
[Run for office academy](#)  
[Small Giants Climate Leadership Accelerator](#)  
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[South African Institute of Race Relations \(IRR Atlas Partner\)](#)

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[The Social Impact Fellowship](#)  
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Todd Brogan	ITUC-CSI	Global
Brenda Akinyi & Cynthia Kingori	Emerge, The Boardroom of Africa	Pan African
Hira Amjad	Amplify Feminist Fund	Pakistan
Mais Iqrsusi	Leading Change Network	Global
Ingo Marowsky	International Transport Workers Federation	Global
Bridgit O'Loughlin	PartnersGlobal	Global
Maria Julia	Instituto Update	Latin America, expanding to Africa
Alex Ryan	AktivAsia	Asia
Benet Northcote	Four32 (former climate lobbyist)	UK
Pratima Amonkar	Tie Women, Investor - Epic Angels	Global
Aishwarya	Equilead	India
Ammar	Student Movement Bangladesh	Bangladesh
Vijay Puranik	Local area coordinator RSS	India

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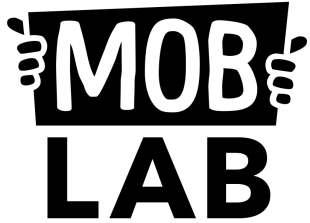
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Mobilisation Lab Collective empowers and strengthens progressive movements by providing capacity-building support and fostering strategic collaborations. We work alongside civil society organisations to build power, drive systems change, and amplify the voices of communities facing injustice and oppression through people-centred and powered campaigns. Why? Because these strategies are key to addressing the scale and complexity of the challenges we face today.

We want to play a meaningful role in initiating, growing, supporting, and scaling people-powered campaigns and movements across different regions. For 14 years MobLab has hosted workshops, convenings, trainings, and programmes to ensure that activists, campaigners, and movements have access to tools and knowledge to design and implement effective people-powered campaign strategies.

We also shine a light on stories of experimentation, innovation and learning to challenge changemakers to adapt to what works (and what doesn't) in global social change.

MobLab is a not-for-profit collective of highly experienced, primarily LGBTQIA+, working class, BIPOC, women and gender-nonconforming individuals. We are all committed to centering justice and equity while designing and delivering 'the MobLab Approach': people powered and collaborative approaches to systems change.

Follow us on [LinkedIn](#) or visit [mobilisationlab.org](http://mobilisationlab.org) to find out more about our work.



# Intertidal Lab

The intertidal zone is where two worlds meet. A place of constant change, surprising abundance, and remarkable adaptation and resilience. Where life learns to live differently.

The tide is turning on the world we have known. Intertidal Lab works in the space that is opening up alongside the leaders and movements building what comes next. Deepening the collective wisdom that outlasts any single moment.

**We are working towards a new paradigm for society**, one that moves from extraction to care, connects the inner and outer dimensions of change, and builds resilient communities across the fault lines of collapse and emergence.

We believe systemic change happens collectively, and from the inside out. It depends not on individual heroics but on the quality of connections between people, the depth of thinking they can do together, and the conditions that allow them to sustain the work over time. **Intertidal Lab is building infrastructure for emergence.** Identifying and resourcing frontline leaders to work across the fractures of our time. Creating spaces where movements can think and strategise across silos. And weaving care and collective wellbeing into the work itself, not as an afterthought but as a precondition for it.

Follow us on [LinkedIn](#) or visit [IntertidalLab.org](https://IntertidalLab.org) to find out more about our work.

# Appendix

# Survey highlights

The background features abstract, organic shapes in shades of purple and pink. A large, light purple arch dominates the right side, with a smaller, darker purple arch nested within it. A bright pink circle is positioned in the lower-left area, and a cyan circle is located in the upper-right area, partially overlapping the purple arches.

# Survey Overview

We surveyed our global network of organisations and activists involved in talent development and of the 119 valid and unique responses, the vast majority were from non-governmental organisations or alliances.

Responses paint a picture of a civil society sector that sees talent development as core to its mission, but is constrained by chronic underfunding, weak infrastructure and increasing political barriers. At the same time, it highlights powerful examples of holistic, care-centred approaches that are building new leadership for social and ecological change.

Survey responses:

- 98** from NGOs or NGO alliances
- 7** private funders
- 1** trade union
- 8** political organisations
- 12** from other relevant actors

Average of 11-12 years of experience in talent development across all respondents  
With a combined reach of over 120,000 participants in the last year.

92% said limited financial resources is one of their biggest challenges.

80% expect to be affected by decreases in funding or increased competition in the next year.  
15% said it was still unclear if they would be affected.

86% of initiatives use participant feedback as an indicator of impact, but only 13% of initiatives track participant career progression as an indicator of the impact of their programmes.

# Survey Insight no.1

## **There is a shift towards holistic development.**

Organizations increasingly see talent development as more than HR or project activity. It is considered a strategic investment in long-term social impact. Programmes mix technical skill-building with relational skills and personal development, especially for marginalised groups such as women, youth, people with disabilities, and ethnic minorities.

*“We have seen that when frontline, mid-level and first-line managers have clear learning ladders, simple behavioural indicators, embedded feedback practices and mentorship support, talent stays, grows and leads change with ownership.... Agency, confidence and voice-building are as critical as technical skill training.”*  
- Anahat for Change Foundation

# Survey Insight no.2

## Experiential and Peer Learning are preferred

While online learning is often a element of talent development programmes, mentoring or coaching and “learning by doing” methods are leading approaches. Peer group reflection, alumni support, in-person workshops, and action learning are consistently cited for their lasting impact.

*“The strongest impact comes from investing in the people who drive the work, rather than only focusing on end users or beneficiaries. ... The most meaningful growth often happens in small, intentional moments through mentoring conversations, reflective exercises, and collaborative problem-solving, rather than through formal training alone.”*

- LICEULICE

# Survey Insight no.3

## **There are major structural challenges.**

Many organisations lack robust strategies and systems for talent development, relying on ad hoc or sporadic initiatives rather than long-term, ecosystem-based planning.

There is insufficient investment in internal infrastructure including as monitoring, strategic recruitment, onboarding, and leadership progression, which leaves organisations exposed to skill gaps, leadership vacuums, and burnout.

# Survey Insight no. 4

## Funding is fragmented and under pressure.

Respondents commonly depend on a mix of foundations, government grants, individual donations and other sources, and many respondents anticipate decreased funding or increased competition, with 'limited financial resources' frequently selected by 92 percent as one of their biggest challenges.

*“Scaling requires long-term, flexible funding not just project-based grants. ... Donors often fund projects, not ecosystems, making continuity and impact measurement harder. For community-driven organisations, it's often difficult to secure support for core capacity, staff, and follow-up with participants after training.”*  
- Romani Godi-Roma Memory Studies Association

# Survey Insight no.5

## **Measurement of outcomes and impact remains a weakness.**

The absence of clear metrics, outcome tracking, and feedback culture means that learning is not always iterative, and success stories often go unrecognised or are not applied at scale.

Building feedback mechanisms and a culture of learning from failure (not just success) can dramatically improve programme performance and adaptability.

# Survey Insight no.6

## Centre care, wellbeing and personal sustainability

A striking thread across multiple responses is the emphasis on care, wellbeing and the need for time and space to reflect. Some organisations build wellbeing and psychosocial elements into programming, recognising that activism under constant pressure leads quickly to burnout. One fellowship organiser underlines that “the space that is created in our Fellowships allows for slowing down,” lamenting that there is “nowhere near enough investment in this at present” because “there is so much pressure to ‘do the work’ that it’s really difficult for people to get this,” even though “it is this kind of space that will make all the difference.”

Investing in psychosocial support, mental resilience, and safe spaces for activists and learners can transform retention and sector sustainability, given the observed burnout and threats reported.

# Survey conclusions

When asked about future priorities, respondents emphasise deepening and stabilising what already works: longer-term, cohort-based programmes with coaching and mentoring; more intentional focus on psychological safety and wellbeing; and stronger, more inclusive leadership pipelines for youth, women, LGBTQIA+ communities, and marginalised groups. Many want to scale digital offerings such as multilingual leadership platforms and blended learning programmes, while ensuring they remain context-specific, accessible and relational. Others call for more collaboration across organisations, sectors and regions, including jointly developed curricula, shared toolkits, and coordinated advocacy for ecosystem-level investment in talent development.

Taken together, the survey suggests a sector that knows what it wants to do and has developed promising practices, but is **held back by short-term funding, weak institutional infrastructure, and a lack of shared measurement and learning systems**. The most compelling voices in the dataset insist that talent development must be holistic, rooted in community realities, and designed to build not just skills but agency, solidarity and resilience so that civil society can meet the social and ecological challenges of our time with the leadership and imagination they demand.