How We Meet This Moment

REPORT TO THE FORD FOUNDATION BOARD OF TRUSTEES

HEATHER GERKEN, PRESIDENT
OCTOBER 2026

Ford
Foundation

About the Ford Foundation:

The Ford Foundation is an independent global organization that protects and strengthens the democratic values, fundamental freedoms, and inclusive economies that empower people to shape their own futures.

For 90 years, it has promoted human dignity, human rights, and human achievement by supporting leaders, ideas, and organizations on the front lines of social change.

Our legacy demands our unwavering commitment to people pushed to the margins and denied equal justice, equal rights, and equal opportunity–to women, to people of color and people with disabilities, to LGBTQ+ and rural communities.

And we believe in the power of representation and agency, which flows from this core conviction. Everyone deserves a voice in shaping the rules and tools with which to build better lives and stronger communities.

Today, with an endowment of $18 billion, the foundation has headquarters in New York and regional offices across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East.

What does fidelity to our values require now?

For three quarters of a century, the Ford Foundation has asked, answered, and then asked this question anew.

In the aftermath of the Second World War—and the global turn to fascism that precipitated it—democracy's allies tasked themselves with rebuilding a new order alongside the multilateral institutions that would hold it together. The Ford Foundation worked proudly in that vanguard. Then, as now, we reckoned with a breakdown in the global democratic order and challenged ourselves to rebuild something more durable.

Today, we find ourselves at a moment of upheaval and uncertainty, the likes of which the world has not experienced since at least the 1940s. The democratic values we've long served—and the democratic institutions we've long sustained—bear overwhelming strain.

Since the Ford Foundation's last major strategic review more than a decade ago, the world has changed profoundly. The inequality on which we have fixed our focus has proven both a consequence of our unbalanced, imperiled democracy and a cause of its continued degradation. Along with economic insecurity—also cause and consequence—inequality has destabilized communities around the world and driven a pernicious breakdown in trust.

Meanwhile, technology has reshaped society faster than governments can respond, as social media and generative artificial

intelligence fracture the very idea of shared truth into countless shards of personalized, partial information—allowing misinformation and disinformation to metastasize throughout the body politic.

With our social fabric fraying, a new cohort of leaders rules with grievance, resentment, and fear—weaponizing shared interests like public safety to polarize and vilify rather than unify. They divide families, neighbors, and communities along lines of identity, while violating basic rights and freedoms, and further repressing democratic and civic participation.

This emboldened strain of 21st-century authoritarianism has undermined democratic institutions and governance—and subverted global cooperation precisely when humanity's greatest challenges transcend national borders. Mutually reinforcing crises have weakened the conditions under which democratic values and institutions can endure.

And yet, this moment—our moment—while deeply concerning, is hardly unprecedented.

Indeed, the moment of the Ford Foundation's rebirth, some 75 years ago, was another era in which the fate of global democracy hung in the balance—another era in which the Ford Foundation marshaled every asset at our disposal to help secure democracy's future.

Our original charter—drafted by our founder, Edsel Ford, in 1936—instructed the foundation's trustees and staff simply to "promote the public welfare." It did not prescribe priorities or define programs. It entrusted each generation with determining how best to fulfill this broad promise in its own time—how best to meet *its* moment.

In the late 1940s, after the passing of Edsel and then his father Henry Ford, the foundation suddenly became the world's largest philanthropy. Virtually overnight, Henry Ford II—Edsel's son and our new leader—confronted a fundamental question: *What, exactly, will this institution do?*

To choose and chart a way forward, he commissioned a blue-ribbon panel of the day's luminaries, chaired by H. Rowan Gaither, founder of the RAND Corporation and one of the era's most respected business leaders. And in the fall of 1950, the foundation's trustees published that panel's recommendations in what came to be known as the Gaither Report.

To the modern eye, the Gaither Report is decidedly imperfect: its outlook, occasionally wrongheaded; its language, sometimes dated. It leans into claims that history has rightly left behind; its prose unmistakably bears fingerprints of the time and of conventional thinking that no longer holds currency.

And yet, the document represented an audacious effort to grapple with the upending of a stable world order, the brutal desecration of

basic human rights, and a massive contestation of basic democratic norms across the globe. This is why, despite its anachronisms, it became the charter of our second founding, defining our purpose for the succeeding years.

In their report, our forebears argued that "human welfare" depends on certain indispensable conditions:

> Dignity, the inherent worth of every person, equal rights and equal opportunity, tolerance and respect for difference, freedom of speech and association, the rule of law, justice, self-government, and the opportunity for every citizen to play an effective part in public life.

These "requirements for human welfare," they concluded, are "in substance the ideals and aims of democracy." Human welfare itself, they maintained, "is in large measure synonymous with a declaration of democratic ideals."

For the Ford Foundation, then, democratic ideals have not been *one* objective among many. They have been *the* objective that all our work aspires to accomplish.

Of course, the wisdom of the Gaither Report was not merely that it identified democracy as the foundation's enduring purpose. It also recognized that democracy itself must continually be renewed.

As the report observed:

> Democracy must do more than declare its principles and ideals; it must constantly translate them into action…and meet the eternal challenge of change by

> giving, where necessary, fresh forms to its underlying principles.

This commitment—giving "fresh forms" to "underlying principles"—is our inheritance.

Across the decades, different generations of leaders have emphasized different dimensions of the same democratic project: public affairs and democratic citizenship; citizen participation; responsive government; governance and civil society; power building; structural democracy; reflective governance; and, more recently, "the bigger we."

Our vocabulary has changed because life and culture have changed, but our purpose has remained a constant from one iteration of our work to the next: equality has remained our guiding light.

During the late 1940s and '50s, we recognized that a broad commitment to "the public welfare" was no longer sufficient to operate at global scale. And while our predecessors did not always keep full faith with our shared democratic values, we sped the work of a resurgent global community to build a new order from the figurative and literal rubble of the old.

During the 1950s, under the leadership of Rowan Gaither and Henry Heald—and the ongoing, steady stewardship of Henry Ford II—we defended free expression and dissent amid the fear and repression of the McCarthy era, while helping to build the emerging infrastructure of public broadcasting.

During the 1960s, McGeorge Bundy aligned the foundation's efforts with the civil rights movement and the broader expansion of freedoms and opportunities that followed—helping to build the backbone of public interest law and civil rights and human rights advocacy.

During the 1970s, Franklin Thomas, a singular icon in our history, transformed the foundation anew—especially in his efforts to deconstruct apartheid and build constitutional democracy in South Africa—while shaping a leaner, more efficient, and more disciplined organization, optimized for impact.

During the decades that followed, Susan Berresford advanced the "ideals and principles of democracy" through a wide range of investments in social justice, economic opportunity, education, arts and culture, and civil society more broadly. Luis Ubiñas capably carried forward the baton, ever a champion for the foundation's fiscal responsibility and operational excellence.

In the 2010s came Darren Walker and the recognition that widening inequalities of all kinds posed an existential threat to democracy. Under his leadership, we reoriented our work to address the injustices that, paradoxically, make philanthropy both possible and necessary—supporting individuals, their ideas, and the institutions building a fairer, more just society. We also embedded our commitments to racial justice and to disability rights *throughout* the work of the foundation, a reflection of their urgency and a charge we will keep.

Different moments have led different leaders to employ different strategies. But through it all, we have embraced and expanded the same abiding charge of Henry Ford II and Rowan Gaither: to translate democratic principles for a changing world.

And now, once again, we have work to do.

So: *What does democracy require now?*

This moment requires more than merely defending our values. Together, we must return to our roots, and to first principles, in order to fortify democracy's preconditions.

Meeting This Moment

The preconditions for thriving, resilient, meaningful democracy have changed. We must change, in turn.

During the last year, without preconception or prejudice, we have dedicated ourselves to assessing what democracy will require of us during the decade to come. Our work was informed and inspired by years of accumulated experience and insight derived from countless conversations inside and outside the foundation, steady and consistent outside reviews, and critical perspectives of staff across the foundation.

In designing our thorough, thoughtful, everything-on-the-table review, we made an important choice: We turned to those who know and love our community—and who are known and loved by our community—to guide our decisions. The senior-most leaders on

the Ford Foundation's executive leadership team have reviewed every element of our work in open, honest, fearless, if not always easy dialogue.

Like everyone across our sector, we thought hard about whether the Ford Foundation's work had evolved commensurate with the deep-seated, far-reaching change in the world—and if and how we could do better. What was most remarkable about all of these conversations—from early meetings of our executive leadership team to granular comments in staff surveys—was how much agreement existed about the path forward. Ambition and openness to change are not always the hallmarks of institutions conducting a self-review, but both expressed themselves consistently and unambiguously throughout this process.

At the same time, our collective excitement about the possibility of change was tempered with sadness about the *need* for change. The work we have done across the last decade is and always will be a source of enormous pride. No one relishes the hard choices we face, and yet everyone understands the need to make hard choices. We found a way to make decisions and to mourn them at the same time. And we never lost sight of how incredibly lucky we are to support important work at scale at this extraordinary moment.

Everyone approached this review with pragmatism and humility. We recognized the difficulty of seeding and sustaining enduring change, a simple fact that challenges us to look forthrightly at the reflection

in the mirror. We recognized that we are conducting a strategic review at a moment when no one knows the answers.

For all these reasons, we didn't come to our work with predetermined notions, nor with a framework imposed from above. Instead, we asked ourselves a set of simple, pragmatic questions about where we can make the greatest difference, drawing on our distinctive strengths:

- Where does the Ford Foundation command a unique lane?
- Where have we built differentiated relationships, knowledge, and credibility?
- Where can we take advantage of our global networks to solve problems?
- Where can we deploy not only our financial capital, but also our human capital, in the service of change?

We did not begin by assuming that our touchstone would inevitably be democracy. Yet, no matter what part of the foundation's existing work we discussed, this is where we ended.

We found ourselves returning, time and again, to the basic preconditions that are necessary for democracy to thrive: the rule of law. Free and fair elections. Equality. Civil rights, civic rights, and human rights. Access to truthful, accurate information. The capacity to govern ourselves. The ability to govern *together* to solve problems that cross borders. An economy that works for all—that offers the

potential for mobility and progress. The safety and justice that comes from a free and open society in which everyone belongs.

We found ourselves reaffirming our enduring values: We are a social justice foundation, a throughline across the decades. Our legacy demands our unwavering commitment to people pushed to the margins and denied equal justice, equal rights, and equal opportunity—to women, to people of color and people with disabilities, to LGBTQ+ and rural communities.

Our belief in human rights, in the inherent human dignity of all, is coded into our very DNA—as is our conviction about the power of representation and agency, which flows from this core belief. After all, everyone deserves a voice in shaping the rules and tools with which to build better lives and stronger communities.

We thus found ourselves reaffirming our origins, the Gaither Report, written when the world had also been upended in an entirely different and yet all too familiar fashion.

In the end, we made choices: energizing choices about what we will do, and painful choices about what we will no longer do. And while these choices inevitably involved difficult tradeoffs, the need for change always trumped the hidden but inferior tradeoffs associated with inertia. That is why we resolved that impact—not habit or practice—would guide our work going forward.

Here are the choices we made, the essential components of our new strategy:

- We are reorganizing the foundation around a smaller number of priorities; instead of dividing our attention among 19 defined programs and 28 lines of work, we will focus on seven interconnected funding areas in order to execute at sufficient scale to meet the problems before us.

- We are investing more deeply in these priorities, making fewer but larger grants in order to help our grantees become stronger, nimbler, and poised to meet this moment.

- We are holding true to our own values, as ever, but also seeking out new opportunities for coalition, collaboration, and common ground, and so we are open to critique, difference, and disagreement. We are building a bigger tent, not retreating to a tighter corner.

- We are maximizing our own flexibility to respond as the world changes, emphasizing humility, pragmatism, and productive tension in our decision-making.

Our More-Focused Mission

We must fulfill a renewed statement of purpose.

At the center of our strategic refresh is a clearly defined mission for our institution:

> The Ford Foundation protects and strengthens the **democratic values**, **fundamental freedoms**, and

inclusive economies that empower people to shape their own futures.

This mission demands four things of us:

- First: focus where we can deliver the greatest impact. As stewards of a trust, our responsibility is to deploy every asset in our arsenal—our endowment, our grantmaking, our facilities, our convening power, our voice, our ideas, our relationships, our reputation—where the Ford Foundation uniquely can make the greatest contribution.

- Second: sustain and strengthen the ways of working that have long made us who we are. We will continue our steadfast commitments to human potential and achievement as a means to inspire and elevate; to the arts and culture and free expression, and empathy more broadly, essential to a vibrant democratic life.

- Third: become a real-time *thinking* foundation purpose-built for the age of artificial intelligence, fragmented information, and social upheaval. The world will continue to change—faster and more dramatically than ever before, but also more unpredictably and unevenly than any strategy can anticipate. We must learn continuously, welcome disagreement and dissent, proactively adapt and reallocate resources, and harness the winds of change to advance innovation of all kinds in and for our sector and beyond it.

- Fourth: preserve what differentiates us as a legacy foundation, with global reach and deep local expertise and relationships. Our offices stretch like pearls on a string across the Global South, from China to Indonesia to India, from Africa to the Middle East, from Central America to South America. We have worked in many nations since their own declarations of independence. These countries are at the front lines of global change, and the future of multilateralism lies with them.

To be clear, this is evolution, not revolution. What has changed is the moment. And so, our imperative is to change, in turn, in order to preserve our best traditions.

The Ford Foundation's Seven New Funding Areas

Through seven funding areas, we will strengthen democratic values, fundamental freedoms, and inclusive economies.

To fulfill our more focused mission, we must identify the preconditions that make democracy possible, as our predecessors did before us. Together, these preconditions strengthen the democratic values, fundamental freedoms, and inclusive economies that enable people to shape their own futures.

Accordingly, we will reorganize our work into seven funding areas—interconnected investments in democracy and its preconditions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the continuities

between our moment and theirs, our plan bears a marked resemblance to the bedrock goals identified in the Gaither Report, which identified among its core pillars the strengthening of democracy, the strengthening of the "economic well-being of people everywhere," the education of a democratic citizenry, and the strengthening of global cooperation. Our plan also builds on our foundational, cross-cutting commitment to racial justice, which emerged subsequent to Gaither's charter, but is no less central to who we are.

Protecting democratic governance and the rule of law

In 1958, foundation leaders first deemed "public affairs"—the work of democracy—"an important area of endeavor." "All of our other programs," our forebears said, "are likely to falter in the end *unless* the healthy vitality of American democracy and its capacity to cope with public problems is maintained."

We believe now, as we did then, that everything we do depends on the rule of law, vibrant democratic representation, effective governance, and meaningful voting rights, civil rights, and civil liberties. Everything depends on the ability of people and communities to shape the policies that affect their lives.

Democracy has never fully lived up to its promise, nor served all of the people it represents. But these beliefs have been bolstered as the tide of democratization that began in the 1970s and extended through the end of the Cold War has ebbed.

In 2000, more than 50% of the world's population lived under some form of democracy. Today, nearly 74%—some six billion people—live in autocracies. Across the spectrum, many countries are experiencing an erosion of the rule of law.

Meanwhile, public opinion within the world's remaining democracies is grim. Public confidence in democratic institutions is declining—and, for a variety of reasons, many prioritize economic and physical security at the expense of civil and democratic rights.

This problem is not just one of representative democracy, but governance itself. Democracy depends, in part, on governments' abilities to deliver on their promises—to deliver protections for all people, including immigrants.

Now, as when Gaither's committee wrote its report, too many governance decisions "fail to be effective because the machinery of government is inadequate or inefficient."

We thus are trapped in a vicious cycle: Declining civic participation weakens accountability, thus enabling concentrations of power and corruption, thus further eroding trust. Unsurprisingly, the efficacy of our grantmaking has suffered through this period of democratic decline.

We recognize that the work *of* progress is a work *in* progress—that even as we strive for *more perfect*, the imperfection of our existing systems can reinforce inequality and exclude entire communities from participation. The stubborn persistence of racial inequality,

alone, proves the case. Yet, we remain inspired by the audacity of our democratic values. And we are harnessing this moment not only to rebuild and reinforce, but also to reimagine and redesign.

Put more simply, we are choosing to renew our commitment to this cause now because we are left with no other choice. If a foundation dedicated to confronting and uprooting inequality is to be effective, then it must defend democratic governance and the rule of law—the only system of government that embraces equality at its core.

During the years ahead, then, we will work to bring people back into their political processes and restore trust in government; rebuild failed or dismantled institutions to ensure that democracy can deliver on its promise; and ensure that democracy is something people experience every day.

Building just and inclusive economies

Economic inequality, the large-scale concentration of economic power, and the dictates of basic fairness, all loomed large in Gaither's report, as they have throughout the 2020s and on this eve of the 2030s. Extreme economic inequality emerges from a poorly functioning democracy and, in turn, undermines democratic values and social stability in countries around the world.

At this writing, some 56,000 people hold three times more wealth than the poorest four billion people on the planet. Quality jobs and secure income remain elusive for most people. More than 60% of the world's labor force works in the informal economy.

In the United States, workers have steadily and systematically lost rights, protections, and voice during a period of unprecedented volatility—an era when our shared dynamism and shared prosperity depend on all three. In many places around the world, they never fully enjoyed these rights in the first place.

At the same time, watershed economic transformations threaten to aggravate this upheaval and dislocation—particularly in the intersecting technology and energy sectors. Large corporations pursue narrow self-interest to the irreversible detriment of workers, families, communities, and the natural resources on which our survival depends.

At the Ford Foundation, we have long supported rights and protections for workers and people in rural regions, as well as economic opportunity for marginalized communities. We have long believed that markets can be a force for good, if we harness their immense power and direct it toward economic justice.

Going forward, then, we will continue to invest in and with people, organizations, and governments to rebuild a more inclusive economy with workers at the center; to rewrite the distorted rules of an out-of-balance capitalism; to champion economic justice for people with disabilities; and to reweave frayed social-safety nets in order to protect the very communities most exposed to the speed, volume, and magnitude of the economic disruption underway.

Defending information as a public good

A technological transformation that began with extraordinary promise—widespread access to information, deeper connections among people, a public square that could encourage pluralism and dialogue—has turned increasingly dystopian with time, fueled by a set of mutually exacerbating factors.

The first is a concentration of power in the hands of a few information and communications technology companies that rely on user data extraction and addiction to amass market dominance.

The second is a sea change in the media environment. Reputable media sources are drowned out, as a small number of large corporations profit from a business model that distorts and damages public discourse.

The third is government failure: Policymakers have been overwhelmed by the speed of upheaval, struggling to regulate the field that they themselves lack the technical expertise to regulate. Worse, an increasing number of governments are deploying these technologies to restrict expression, to control and surveil populations, and to spread disinformation.

Vibrant democratic societies require an informed citizenry, and misinformation erodes people's faith in their own governments. The Gaither Report recognized the central importance of trustworthy information to democratic engagement—what it termed the ability

of citizens "to participate…constructively in the society in which we live."

At the time of the Gaither Report, Ford turned its gaze to higher education as a solution to what ailed society. Today, the internet and fragmented media channels have become the primary and most problematic places for the public to gather information and engage with others. As a result, that trust—inherent to a functioning democracy—has been undermined.

There is a window for change, opened in part by the work the Ford Foundation has supported in recent years. The public's tolerance for unchecked technological advancement is evaporating, replaced by a desire to understand and decide how and where these tools can shape our lives. The deployment of artificial intelligence has only increased the push for technology to be safely regulated—accountable both to human oversight and to a broader common good.

We see genuine momentum for change across the globe. Thus, in this multifaceted crisis we see a window of opportunity to fight for a healthy information and media environment that buttresses rather than undermines democracy. The moment has come to treat information as a public good.

During the past decade, Ford helped to establish the field of public-interest technology, but this is only the beginning. To realize the potential of digital technologies to enable and advance healthy

information ecosystems, we must alter how they are designed, deployed, and governed. Doing so remains a critical element of our work to sustain democratic governance and support equal opportunity around the globe.

Securing safety, justice, and fairness

The need for public safety—an ideal embraced by all—is often used to divide. Observing the willingness to accept totalitarianism during the 1940s, the Gaither Report noted: People "submit to authoritarianism when hunger and frustration undermine their faith in the existing order."

Demands for safety—and the racialized weaponization of fear—have set the United States on a far different trajectory than its democratic peers. Since the 1970s, the United States has grown its incarcerated population by 700%. Today, 77 million Americans have criminal records, five million have been denied the right to vote, and the criminal law system has been tainted by unfairness and gratuitous cruelty.

Injustices have been most heavily inflicted upon Black Americans (incarcerated at five times the rate of white Americans), with Indigenous Americans (four times) and Latino people (two times) not far behind. And even as racial disparities have narrowed in the last decade, the incarceration of those with little economic power continues; half the incarcerated population is either unemployed or earning less than $10,000 per year. Meanwhile, police too often are

asked to respond to mental health crises that demand far different support than they are able to provide.

We can do better. Today, despite the persistence of tough-on-crime rhetoric from some leaders, there is growing public support for a pragmatic approach to delivering safety and justice that defies the paradigm of "tough" vs. "soft." Many promising, data-driven pilots have demonstrated the value and effectiveness of community violence intervention as crime prevention. So, too, rigorous empirics support the expansion of non-police emergency responses to mental-health crises. The United States has experienced a dramatic and unprecedented decrease in violent crime in recent decades, one that has opened up support for alternative approaches to mass incarceration and criminalization.

Building on steady progress since 2010—often supported by the Ford Foundation—we see an opportunity to continue bending the curve on criminalization and incarceration while providing individuals in crisis the social services they need. This is a big bet, but one well worth making given the changing political environment, the strong empirical evidence of success, and the moral weight of this work. Investing at scale at this moment could turn the tide, improving the lives of countless individuals, as well as their families and communities, while helping dismantle an unjust and ineffective system.

Accelerating gender equality

While the Gaither Report recognized the central importance of equality, human dignity, and personal autonomy, gender equality was not taken up until later in the Ford Foundation's history, particularly under the stalwart leadership of Susan Berresford.

The salience of this work today is clear. Alongside democratic backsliding has come an attack on gender equality, depriving many not just of basic human dignity but the essential freedom to build stable, meaningful lives. While many of these concerns are anchored in basic human needs and the right of all to bodily autonomy, inequality is at their root.

In the United States, challenges to the rights and autonomy of women, queer, and transgender/non-binary people have increased. Care around reproductive health more broadly is at risk, particularly in rural areas, and health outcomes for women and babies are concerningly poor. Racial disparities remain staggeringly wide, with Black maternal death at three times the rate for white women. Transgender people are denied basic dignities and care. And political pressure has led many funders to withdraw from this work.

Ford will remain on the field even as others are leaving it—in part to secure the hard-won gains of decades. We will continue to protect the rights and autonomy of women and LGBTQ+ people. And, further, we will expand our aperture to support the full spectrum of

women's health care to ensure better maternal and infant health outcomes.

Internationally, one in three women report having experienced gender-based violence at some point in their lives. And while laws and policies preventing these attacks are necessary to end violence, lasting change requires a deep shift in social norms. There are still striking levels of acceptance and impunity around the globe when it comes to child marriage, female genital mutilation, rape and sexual abuse, and intimate partner violence.

At the same time, there is hope for change. We have witnessed strides forward for women's rights internationally in recent decades, with striking ripple effects—progress in one country often leading to progress across regions. At least 95 countries have adopted national action plans around gender-based violence. And, while female genital mutilation remains far too prevalent in over 90 countries, the tides are turning there as well, as both laws and social norms are making the practice less acceptable.

By supporting evidence-based interventions for shifting policy and social norms and defending basic rights, we believe there exists an opportunity to turn the tide on these issues, ultimately resulting in gender equality at scale.

Fostering global cooperation

The multilateral institutions that make up the system of global cooperation were established for a different world order—an order

anchored in the power of international cooperation to help solve complex global problems, including peace and security, trade and finance, natural resources and health. Global cooperation was a pillar of the Gaither Report and a beacon of Ford's work across decades.

Today, however, as countries seek to advance their own priorities at the expense of international cooperation, global institutions have lost both power and legitimacy. Meanwhile, cross-border challenges—including climate and technological changes—eclipse the capacity of nation-states to effectively address shared problems. These pressures come at a time when global economic crises add to growing debt burdens with little financial relief for many nations.

This is a moment to seize opportunities for multilateralism whenever they come. It is an opportunity to leverage the status of the Global South—regions where Ford has long worked—to address problems that affect us all, including efforts to build on our long-standing work to advance climate justice. A new model for international cooperation is emerging—one that decentralizes existing global institutions in favor of regional bodies and "coalitions of purpose" that form to address specific challenges.

While governments will necessarily rethink their development trajectories and efforts to address central challenges in an era of fragmentation and strategic competition, these challenges cannot be solved by governments alone. A multi-stakeholder approach that engages the private sector, civil society, and global alliances is

urgently required. And communities and countries deeply affected by these global shifts—those most impacted by climate change, for instance—deserve representation at the decision-making table.

In order to address specific issues around climate change, artificial intelligence, and debt, we must reimagine effective multilateralism to be more representative and more adept.

Advancing racial justice

Transcending all our programmatic work is one enduring commitment: racial justice. The Ford Foundation proudly fought for civil rights and against apartheid—for equal justice and equal opportunities through the decades. And we will prioritize racial justice as an institution-wide means of serving our mission.

This approach is more essential—even indispensable—than ever, during a time when the world is grappling with a crisis of erasure and retreat: An erasure of truth and history; a retreat from the reconciliation and healing that only an honest reckoning with our past, and the myriad ways it shapes our present, can provide.

Racial justice is a multidimensional objective. Its achievement is inextricably intertwined with everything to which we aspire, and our commitment to it must inform everything we do.

To be clear: For us, racial justice is not a program area, but rather a programmatic imperative threaded through all of our work. In recent years, this orientation has allowed us to devote resources, at

scale, in ways that simply would not be possible in a siloed program. So we will extend and expand our work in this way.

A racial justice fund will enable us to integrate this work within our other programs. We also will embed dedicated professional staff within program teams to shape and implement these efforts for us, for our sector, and for the communities with whom we work.

Meeting this moment requires that we not only uphold our commitment to racial justice, but also advance it in more, and more effective, ways. In doing so, we will strengthen all our other work—and our impact in the world.

How We Work: Ongoing Philanthropic Innovation

We are changing how we fund, not just what we fund.

These seven commitments describe *what* we will fund. Just as important is *how*.

We have made this kind of choice before. The Gaither Report devoted an entire chapter to how this foundation should operate, insisting that Ford must be "first of all, a workable institution in structure and procedures," whose staff would not be hampered "by a clumsy pattern of administration."

Our forebears understood that how a foundation operates drives what it is actually able to accomplish.

In recent years, threats to the social sector have seemed existential. In the United States, almost 70% of nonprofits reported a reduction in funding from at least one source. Globally, the pullback of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and other development aid poses dramatic consequences for NGOs and the communities they serve.

Governments have also learned that the neutral vocabulary of regulation, tax status, and compliance can accomplish what open censorship once did. Reporting rules built for another century make it nearly impossible to invest in people and infrastructure at scale.

Many organizations now need a general counsel, a controller, and a compliance officer to do their work but cannot afford even one of the three. Layer on surveillance technology, coordinated political attacks, and the harassment of individual leaders, and the result is a sector paying an enormous uncertainty tax while its leaders and staff burn out. These burdens fall most acutely on those who share the identities of the communities they serve.

Philanthropy has not yet met these challenges—and, despite the best of intentions, we can inadvertently add to their weight. The practices of traditional philanthropy have many virtues. But they sometimes result in foundations being slow where speed is required and rigid where judgment is required.

Collectively, we do not award enough of the flexible, multiyear grants our partners need. We have relied on intermediaries to

extend our reach while declining to fund their operations. And when a field is under attack, too many funders step away just when their partners most need their support.

At Ford, we will start where our influence is greatest, which is over our own ways of working. We will change our grantmaking work in three ways:

I. More flexible funding, more flexible teams

Legacy foundations have long been structured to avoid chasing headlines or being whipsawed amidst swirling winds. While this approach has many virtues, it is not well suited for the fast pace of change today.

Now is also a time for humility. We must acknowledge that, in many instances, we failed to enact change that was enduring—that the tents we built were not big and sturdy enough to hold in today's challenging climate. Moreover, this is a moment of tremendous uncertainty in almost every sector. Everyone is questioning their strategies and commitments, and no one is truly sure of the best way forward.

For these reasons, we will organize our grantmaking programs differently, with larger teams and more centralized funding. Our aim is to steer steadily, while ensuring that our grantmaking is flexible enough to allow for pivots, surge funding, and new targets of opportunity. We will do our best to welcome critical perspectives

and create space for deliberation, dissent, and debate. We also will create more space for learning and introspection.

II. Larger, multiyear grants focused on general operating support

In 1949, the Gaither Report observed that a grantee on a short grant "spends a great deal of time campaigning for [their] next year's grant" instead of doing their core work and urged Ford to fund for long enough to provide "the stability necessary for sustained" work.

Ford's Building Institutions and Networks (BUILD) program, a hallmark of Darren Walker's leadership, proved them right at scale. Grantees with dependable, flexible, long-term funding were far better able to meet a moment no one had forecast.

As we move forward, this approach will be fundamental to our way of working rather than a delineated program:

- We will expand general operating support.
- We will increase the share of funding we commit to multiyear grants.
- We will make larger grants.
- We will enhance our support for the institutional strength of our partners.
- We will preserve the flexibility and capacity to move resources and respond as circumstances change.

Delivering on these commitments requires that we continue to adapt our own practices. So, we will make our processes and decisions faster, clearer, and less costly for the people on the other side of them. We will work to ensure that our partners are not limited to those already known to us.

III. Innovation and sector investment

We also aim to use every degree of our leverage to support the nonprofit sector. For that reason, we will expand the tools available to our grantmakers, including impact investing, engagement with the private markets, and new capital-allocation mechanisms to deepen our impact. We will also carry what we learn into our own field, investing in the organizations that hold philanthropy together and sharing what we find while elevating others as exemplars. We will build relationships with sources of capital outside of institutional philanthropy in order to grow the resources available to our grantees.

Most consequentially, we will invest directly in the strength of the nonprofit sector itself by committing meaningful resources to institutional strengthening. We will fund and build in areas where collective action is essential, including infrastructure like shared back-office capacity, strategic consolidation and partnership, the workforce conditions necessary to retain staff, and ethical technology tools. We will help a regulatory environment built for a different century adapt to changing realities. And we will explore

creative new financial models that will ensure that the work of artists and arts institutions is sustainable over the long term.

We are proud of the work we have done alongside other funders to ensure philanthropy puts more trust in its partners and to lighten the administrative burdens asked of grantees. There is still much to be done to be more responsive and adaptive. And we are committed to building a culture of innovation within Ford and more broadly in the field that meets the needs of the moment and of the fields we support.

***

Beneath all of this sits a question we intend to keep asking: What are the conditions that make the change we seek possible? What are the skills, the ways of operating, the inspiration? And how do we foster these conditions inside Ford, then extend them to our grantees, our fields, and the sector? It means funding experiments without knowing how they end, moving quickly when they work, and saying plainly what we learn when they fail.

Democracy requires resilient institutions capable of responding to changing conditions. So does the sector that sustains it. So must the foundation that enables both.

Toward Our Second Century

Together, we will dream a stronger democracy into existence.

From the era of Henry Ford II, each generation of Ford Foundation leadership has inherited the same question: *What does democracy require now?*

Each has answered differently, while remaining faithful to the same core purpose: maintaining the interlocking gears of equality and democracy that keep progress moving forward. Serving as servants to the servants. Steering a steady course when it is all too easy to be buffeted.

Some of our work will protect what we love. Some of our work will build where we can. Both responsibilities are crucial to mastering our rapidly evolving era.

The truth is, our valiant partners—courageous visionaries on the front lines—often have little choice but to defend what exists.

The Ford Foundation has a broader opportunity and thus a broader obligation: To look over the horizon.

Now is the time to imagine what the next generation will need. And then we roll up our sleeves and help build it.

As one of our partners—the brilliant Sueli Carneiro—told us during a recent trip to Brazil, “To be pragmatic right now is to dream.”

We must be clear-eyed about the challenges before us—and the threats facing our work. We must understand exactly what is at stake. And we must find ways to imagine something better.

For 75 years, this has been the work of the Ford Foundation. It is the work before us now. Through this work, we will meet this moment—and in its doing, we will welcome our second century.

# # #