



Rockefeller  
Brothers Fund

Philanthropy for an Interdependent World

# Evaluating Program Impact

## Our Approach to Performance Assessment

*Abridged Version*

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*February 2013*

# **EVALUATING PROGRAM IMPACT**

## **Our Approach to Performance Assessment**

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*This is an abridged version of a final report describing the Rockefeller Brothers Fund's (RBF) approach to program impact assessment. The full report, complete with appendices, is available in PDF format at [www.rbf.org/content/foundation-performance](http://www.rbf.org/content/foundation-performance).*

### **Introduction**

Discerning and communicating the impact of grantmaking and other programmatic contributions are essential to fulfilling the Rockefeller Brothers Fund's [mission](#) as well as our commitment to stewardship, transparency, and accountability. The Fund's board and staff have found that engaging policymakers on the results and insights gained from our grantmaking, informing the public about our grantees' work, and attracting additional donors to promising institutions and approaches are key activities that help build a more just, sustainable, and peaceful world.

In order to bring additional rigor to the Fund's approach to program impact assessment an impact assessment committee, comprised of RBF trustees and staff, was established in March 2012. This committee continued the work of the Fund's 2003 Foundation Performance Assessment Committee that provided guidance to efforts to streamline internal processes, solicit grantee feedback on the RBF's funding approach, and conduct program reviews at regular intervals to assess program impact. The task for the 2012 Impact Assessment Committee was to further define and embed regular program review and impact assessment activities in the Fund's institutional processes in a manner that supports its program approach and grantmaking style.

### **Principles and Conclusions to Guide the Fund's Approach to Impact**

The Impact Assessment Committee developed the following principles to guide the Fund's approach to impact assessment.

- The Fund's impact assessment approach is rooted in its mission and its program goals and reflects and supports the RBF grantmaking style as captured in its program statement. It must be flexible enough to work across the Fund's six programs and their respective evolving contexts.
- Given the nature of the RBF's grantmaking, a wide range of indicators and information is needed to understand the impact the Fund is having on a field or issue.
- The Fund's approach to impact assessment is action-oriented. It enables staff and trustees to better understand the effectiveness of our grantmaking in light of the context in which our grantees are working, make mid-course corrections as necessary, and identify opportunities to share our insights with external audiences.
- Impact assessments focus on the contribution of the Fund's grantmaking to a field or issue over the long term; staff monitor indicators of progress over the near and medium term.
- The impact assessment process should add value to Fund and grantee work, not create administrative and financial burdens.

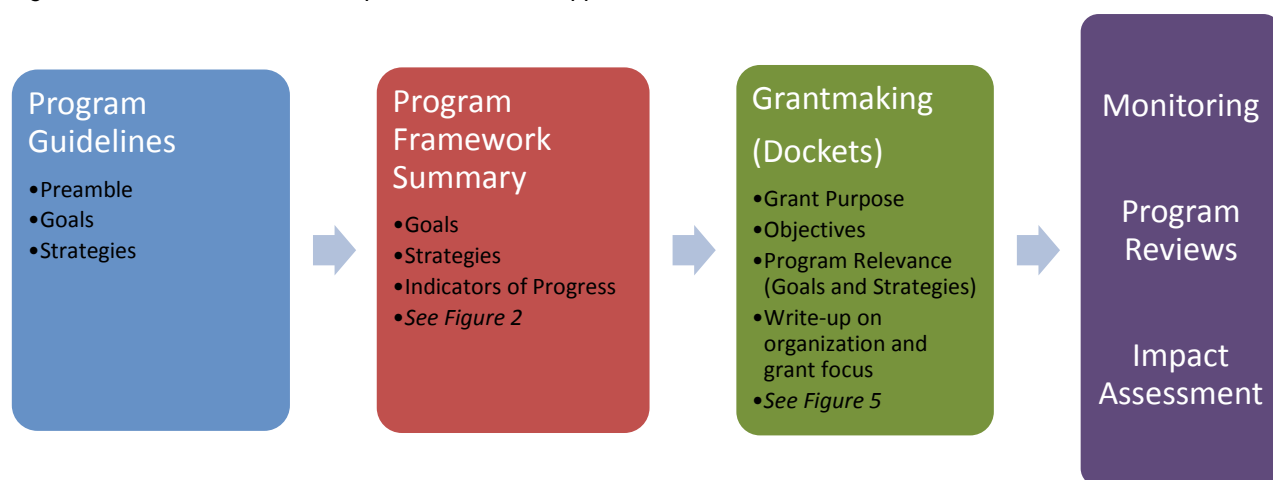
With these principles in mind, the committee recommended the following approach to organizing the Fund’s impact assessment efforts.

### The RBF’s Approach to Program Impact Assessment

Six programs comprise the Rockefeller Brothers Fund’s current grantmaking focus. These programs reflect board and staff assessment of the challenges facing today’s increasingly interdependent world on which strategic philanthropy and the Fund’s accumulated grantmaking experience can have a meaningful impact. Three programs ([Democratic Practice](#), [Peacebuilding](#), and [Sustainable Development](#)) are global fields of work within which the Fund has identified issues of enduring global concern where breakthroughs are needed. These thematic programs typically maintain a focus on the United States along with work internationally, as appropriate, to strengthen the vitality of democracy, advance just and durable peace, and advance solutions to climate change. Three pivotal place programs ([New York City](#), [Southern China](#), and [Western Balkans](#)) pursue program goals in the Fund’s three fields of interest as appropriate in these specific contexts, generating lessons and innovations of significance to their immediate regions and beyond. We believe that a combination of thematic- and place-based approaches is needed to achieve enduring change in larger systems.

The key elements to the RBF’s approach to assessing program impact are described below; and are illustrated in the diagram.

Figure 1: Elements of the RBF Impact Assessment Approach



#### 1. Program Guidelines

[Program guidelines](#) are the board-approved articulation of the Fund’s vision for its programs and grantmaking. The guidelines include a preamble that presents each program’s focus within a field or geographic area, grounding it in the ideas that motivate the Fund’s interest and grantmaking strategies, and presenting its distinct point of view. The goals present the Fund’s aspirations over the long term, while the strategies articulate the specific actions the Fund will support to achieve progress toward its program goals. The guidelines communicate the Fund’s grantmaking focus to external audiences and provide direction to staff on the areas in which they can develop and recommend grants.

## 2. Program Framework Summary and Indicators of Progress

The program framework summary is a building block for the Fund’s approach to program impact assessment. It summarizes the program guidelines and presents each program’s goals and strategies along with indicators of progress. These indicators identify anticipated changes in understanding, behavior, capacity, public engagement, or public policy that would demonstrate that program strategies are contributing to realizing program goals.<sup>1</sup> In effect, this framework presents a program’s “theory of change” and its desired impact.

Figure 2: Indicators of Progress

| Indicator Focus          | Definition  | Sample Indicators   |
|--------------------------|---|---|
| <b>Behavior</b>          | People and institutions change their actions  | More corporations disclosing or curtailing their political spending (Democratic Practice)   |
| <b>Capacity</b>          | New institutions are in place to inform and advance debates or experiment with solutions in a field; organizations are better equipped to act | Cross-disciplinary research and mapping informs policymakers and practitioners of the impact of environmental pollution on human health, gaps in risk management, and potential integrated solutions (Southern China) |
| <b>Public Engagement</b> | People and institutions take action around issues at a public level to shape society  | Global advocacy learning networks influence global energy investment decisions (Democratic Practice)  |
| <b>Public Policy</b>     | Institutional and/or public policy or practice has changed  | Civil society has secured the legal framework to allow it to thrive and develop (Western Balkans)   |
| <b>Understanding</b>     | The issue is defined and understood differently   | Increased public belief in the urgency of taking action on climate change (Sustainable Development)   |

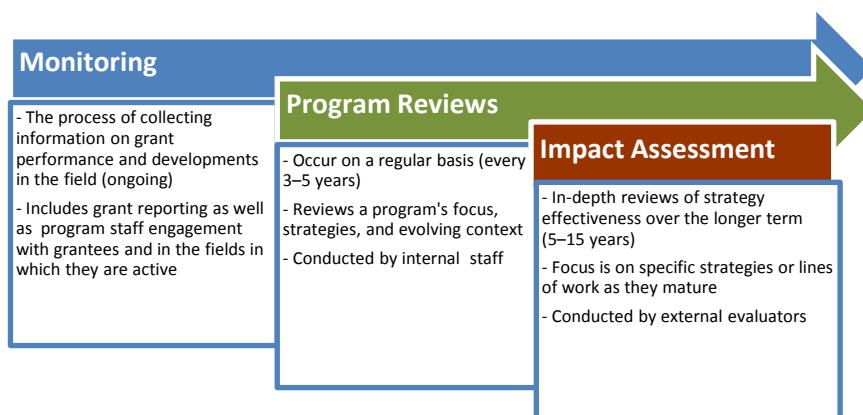
The Fund establishes qualitative and quantitative indicators of progress over three to five years to guide grantmaking and program development. The indicators are for internal reference and are not intended to be an exhaustive list of all the changes we expect to see in the field of work. They identify expected developments that would signal that progress is being made. Indicators that are quantitative in nature may be useful, but we recognize that it is difficult to predict or quantify results related to our organizing, advocacy, and public policy-focused grantmaking.

## 3. Activities within Each Program

Within each program, evaluation activities occur on an ongoing basis. **Monitoring** of the field and of individual grants draws on regular staff engagement and grantee reporting. **Program reviews**, conducted every three to five years by program staff, provide an opportunity to engage the board in a strategic review of progress—often resulting in updated program strategies. **Impact assessments** are conducted by external consultants after five or more years as strategies mature.

<sup>1</sup> Definitions of change and indicators largely drawn from the Women’s Funding Network, “Making the Case: Five Indicators of Social Change.”

Figure 3: Impact Assessment Activities



**Monitoring** (grant-by-grant and field level) is the ongoing process of collecting information on grantee performance during a grant and developments within a field of funding. Monitoring includes grant reporting as well as program staff engagement with grantees and in the fields in which they are active. Close engagement with grantees allows program staff to assess progress on an ongoing basis and to identify aspects of funded activity that are making positive contributions to advancing program strategies and realizing program goals. The indicators of progress provide staff with a roadmap for this activity. RBF staff stay abreast of developments in their fields and gather information to determine if ideas, practices, and social movements are gaining momentum or acceptance. Based on all this information, staff recommend that grants be renewed, discontinued, or complemented with related grants, convenings, or other activities.

**Program reviews** examine a program's focus, strategies, and evolving context. They occur on a regular basis (every three to five years) and allow staff and trustees to reflect on the program's overall direction and preliminary indications of impact, and to make midcourse corrections as needed. In general, program staff author the program reviews, with assistance from external experts as needed. Drawing on grantee reports as well as field engagement, program reviews assess context, strategies, and progress against established indicators and toward achieving program goals. Program reviews are the point in time at which staff revise indicators of progress in light of the changing context, strategy refinements, or other board-approved changes in program direction.

**Impact assessments** are in-depth reviews of strategy effectiveness over the longer term and focus on program design and the contribution of grantees and other activities to advancing specific strategies or lines of work to achieving program goals as they mature (five to 15 years). Select strategies that warrant an impact assessment are determined by the vice president for programs and the program teams or by suggestion of the president or the board. Impact assessments follow the same general outline as program reviews, but focus in on a particular strategy or line of work over a longer period and are generally carried out by an external consultant.

#### 4. Annual Institutional Processes

Several institutional processes occur during the course of each year that provide a structure and opportunities for the board and staff to communicate, vet, and approve each program's strategic direction at key junctures of program development. These activities include a yearly program staff retreat, annual budget planning, docket preview meetings (discussion of program-related papers and review of proposed grants), and board meetings (three times per year). These gatherings provide opportunities for the board and staff to propose, approve, and monitor the program guidelines and frameworks, grantmaking, information gathering, analysis, and strategy refinement activities that

comprise impact assessment. Board trips, conference calls on program topics, and other board-engagement activities occur throughout the year, providing opportunities for board to learn about program development progress and provide strategic guidance to staff. The following graphic illustrates these processes within the Fund’s annual institutional calendar.

Figure 4: Annual Institutional Calendar



## Conclusion

The Fund has had a longstanding commitment to impact assessment. The purpose of this project was to bring more rigor and clarity to our work in this regard and to build attention to impact more explicitly into a variety of institutional processes. This review has further clarified both what it is we are trying to achieve through impact assessment and how we describe our grantmaking approach. It enabled us to glean best practices from across the field and from the experiences of other funders, as well as to develop and refine processes that will allow us to assess impact assessment through our everyday grantmaking activities. This will ensure that it is not an isolated activity, but one that improves the overall impact of Fund’s grantmaking, institutional effectiveness, and overall performance.

The full *Evaluating Program Impact* report, complete with appendices, is available in PDF format at [www.rbf.org/content/foundation-performance](http://www.rbf.org/content/foundation-performance).