

# Philanthropic Foundations and Transnational Activist Networks: Ford and the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights

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Foundations provide key funds for nongovernmental organizations. We know little about what they do for transnational activism or the mechanisms via which they seek/achieve influence. We carve a middle ground between those who see donors as supporting actors in transnational advocacy networks (TANs) and those who think they distort activism through impersonal market forces. Our negotiation-oriented approach looks at the micro-dynamics of donor–grantee relations. We argue that influence is a function of donors' organizational characteristics. Only some, especially foundations, have the vision/means to shape grantees. However, internal complexity can cause coordination problems, complicating influence. Additionally, if many donors exist, recipients' leverage increases. It does so too if their expertise is in short supply. Using archival evidence, we reconstruct how Ford tried to shape the Inter-American Human Rights Institute, a pillar of the region's human rights regime, and the factors conditioning success. For Ford, the Institute could play a role in a fledgling TAN, but only if it downplayed its emphasis on research and directly engaged activists. Coupled with analyses of USAID's relationship with the Institute and Ford's relationship with Americas Watch, we shed light on the activities of an important class of donor and illuminate foundations' role in the development of TANs.

Las fundaciones aportan fondos clave a las ONG. Sabemos poco sobre lo que hacen las fundaciones por el activismo transnacional o los mecanismos a través de los cuales buscan/obtienen influencia. Adoptamos una postura intermedia entre quienes consideran a los donantes actores de apoyo en las redes transnacionales de defensa de los derechos (RTD) y quienes piensan que distorsionan el activismo a través de fuerzas de mercado impersonales. Nuestro enfoque orientado a la negociación examina la microdinámica de las relaciones entre donantes y beneficiarios. Sostenemos que la influencia se debe a las características organizativas de los donantes. Solo algunos de estos donantes, especialmente las fundaciones, tienen la visión y los medios para influir en sus beneficiarios. Sin embargo, la complejidad interna puede causar problemas de coordinación, complicando el efecto en su influencia. Además, si existen muchos donantes, aumenta la influencia de los beneficiarios. También lo hace si su experiencia es escasa. Utilizando documentos de archivo, reconstruimos cómo Ford intentó influir en el Instituto Interamericano de Derechos Humanos, pilar del régimen de derechos humanos de la región, y los factores que condicionaron su éxito. Ford estaba convencida de que el Instituto podía desempeñar un papel en una RTD incipiente, pero solo si minimizaba su énfasis en la investigación e implicaba directamente a los activistas. Combinando este análisis con los análisis de la relación de la Agencia de los Estados Unidos para el Desarrollo Internacional (USAID, por sus siglas en inglés) con el Instituto y de la relación de Ford con Americas Watch, arrojam luz sobre las actividades de una importante clase de donantes e ilustramos el papel de las fundaciones en el desarrollo de las RTD.

Le financement des fondations joue un rôle essentiel pour les ONG. Leur rôle dans le militantisme transnational est obscur, tout comme leurs mécanismes de recherche et d'obtention d'influence. Nous cherchons un juste milieu entre ceux qui considèrent les donateurs tels des acteurs soutenant les réseaux transnationaux de défense des droits (RTDD) et ceux qui considèrent plutôt qu'ils déforment le militantisme par le biais de forces du marché impersonnelles. Notre approche centrée sur la négociation s'intéresse à la microdynamique des relations entre donateurs et bénéficiaires. Selon nous, l'influence est fonction des caractéristiques organisationnelles des donateurs. Rares sont ceux, surtout chez les fondations, qui possèdent tant la vision que les moyens nécessaires pour influencer les bénéficiaires. Or, la complexité interne est susceptible d'engendrer des problèmes de coordination, qui compliquent l'exercice de leur influence. En outre, plus les donateurs sont nombreux, plus la force de négociation des bénéficiaires se renforce. De même quand leur expertise est rare. À l'aide d'archives, nous reconstituons les moyens utilisés par Ford pour influencer l'Inter-American Human Rights Institute (l'institut interaméricain des droits de l'homme), pilier du régime des droits de l'homme de la région, et les facteurs de réussite. Pour Ford, l'institut pouvait jouer un rôle au sein d'un RTDD encore en formation, à la seule condition qu'il minimise l'accent sur la recherche et qu'il traite directement avec les militants. En nous appuyant également sur des analyses de la relation de l'USAID (Agence des États-Unis pour le développement à l'international) avec l'institut et la relation de Ford avec Americas Watch, nous mettons en lumière les activités d'une catégorie importante de donateurs et le rôle des fondations dans le développement des RTDD.

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*Author's note:* We would like to thank Martha van Bakel for her excellent research assistance and our interviewees for their valuable insights. The Berlin So-

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cial Science Center (WZB) granted us seed funds for this project. Álvaro Morcillo received support from the Einstein Foundation Berlin (ESB), the Cluster of Excellence "Contestations of the Liberal Script" (EXC 2055, Project-ID: 390715649) funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG; German Research Foundation), and the European Union's Horizon 2020 program (Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement 702562).

Gonzalez-Ocantos, Ezequiel, and Álvaro Morcillo Laiz. (2023) Philanthropic Foundations and Transnational Activist Networks: Ford and the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights. *International Studies Quarterly*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqad022>

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## Introduction

Philanthropic foundations are a major source of funds for international and domestic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Since the 1960s, historians, sociologists, and American politics scholars (Curti 1963; Perkins 1997; Korey 2007; Reckhow 2016; Skocpol 2016; Kelly 2018) have paid attention to foundations' impact on health, development, education, diplomacy, and human rights. The international relations (IR) literature less so (Youde 2019). To be sure, work explores the contributions of US foundations to democratization (Stacey and Aksartova 2001; Sperling 2009), Open Society's policy diffusion efforts (Stone 2010), the Ford Foundation's involvement with Human Rights Watch (Wong, Levi, and Deutsch 2017), the Gates's global health interventions (Youde 2013; Harman 2016; Fejerskov 2018), and the role of philanthropy in IR's disciplinary history (Guilhot 2011). It is still the case, however, that "despite what is now a large literature on the role of NGOs [...] there remains a surprising lack of attention to the organizations that fund these actors [...] [F]unding provided by private foundations remains largely black-boxed" (Wong, Levi, and Deutsch 2017, 82).

We know little about what leading general-purpose foundations do in and for transnational activism, including the mechanisms via which they seek influence and the factors that moderate the outcome of those efforts. This is related to how scholarship sees donors. Work on transnational advocacy networks (TANs) plays down donor agency, characterizing TANs as egalitarian and implying that value-congruence between donors and grantees leads the former to adopt a hands-off approach (Brysk 1993; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 2001; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999). In their pathbreaking contribution, Keck and Sikkink do mention foundations as relevant actors, yet conclude that "foundations cannot implement their own ideas" so they remain peripheral to understanding the development of human rights and advocacy networks (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 98). In contrast, the literature initiated by Cooley and Ron (2002) assumes that activists depend on resources obtained in competitive markets, which opens the door to donor impact (Cooley and Ron 2002; Bob 2005; Prakash and Gugerty 2010; Krause 2014; Bush 2015; Pandya and Ron 2017; Stroup and Wong 2017). For instance, Eilstrup-Sangiovanni (2019, 401) argues that NGOs "seek to reduce competition through strategic differentiation." However, this impact is understood as the result of impersonal market forces rather than individual donor policies. This also means that scholars often fail to investigate the distinct impact of different kinds of donors, let alone individual ones.

We argue instead that individual donors may purposely seek to shape advocacy and in ways that are distinct from, rather than mediated by, the market or egalitarian advocacy networks. We further argue that a distinguishing trait of general-purpose philanthropic foundations is that they tend to have clear, ambitious agendas and considerable autonomy to set policy. Indeed, every foundation worth its salt defines its own priorities (Zunz 2014).<sup>1</sup> Unlike NGOs, some of which are short of funds and exposed to repression, foundations benefit from a range of assets that

go well beyond their affluence. In this sense, money is not the only resource that "introduces significant asymmetries into networks" (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 182). Foundations are therefore far from being mouthpieces of civil society (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 182), altruists subject to an "organizational imperative" (Bob 2005, 5), or perfect agents of a state (Bush 2015). Another important trait is expertise. Foundations employ highly qualified staff who harvest local knowledge through field offices and are thus able to define sophisticated goals and become central nodes in advocacy networks. Because of this expanded role, foundations do not just indirectly condition the projects that NGOs pitch to them, as implied by Cooley and Ron (2002), but also actively shape the general orientation of policy fields, including the kind of organizations that exist within them.

General-purpose philanthropic foundations deserve more scholarly attention, just like large NGOs (Clark 2001; Bob 2005, 2009; Bortolotti 2010; Fox 2014; Slezkine 2014), the NED (Bush 2015), and aid agencies (Swedlund 2017; Norris 2021) have received in the past. How exactly do these foundations wield power? Under what conditions do donations compel (I)NGOs to alter their priorities? Can donors alter or build TANs? In this article, we engage these questions through a negotiation-oriented approach. We carve a middle ground between those who see foundations as supporting actors in principled/egalitarian networks bound by value congruence and those who advance the view that they distort activism through impersonal market forces. While the tone of the documents exchanged between foundations and grantees may signal consensus and value congruence (for more cynical readers, obsequiousness, and subjugation), this frequently obscures that negotiations are high-stakes, heated affairs during which foundations' core interests or the continued existence of recipients is in play. Value congruence, moreover, does not exempt donors and recipients from debating goal prioritization and the appropriate means to achieve goals.

Grant negotiations set the stage for foundations' influence. Recipients, however, do not leap at every demand. To understand the extent of general-purpose philanthropic foundations' involvement in and impact on transnational activism, one must therefore consider the organizational characteristics that make foundations willing and able to shape grantees *and* the characteristics of grantees and of the policy field, which sometimes allow recipients to resist. With regard to donor characteristics, we argue that general-purpose philanthropic foundations are a distinct type of donor capable of developing the vision to steer grantees and even shape the networks in which they are involved. Foundations also possess the administrative means to do so. This bureaucracy, however, may result in high levels of organizational complexity that produce coordination problems, complicating influence. Regarding recipients, we contend that if they are under-professionalized, organizations can frustrate donor goals. Additionally, the ecology of policy fields matters. A multiplicity of donors (high donor fungibility) increases grantees' leverage. This leverage increases further if the expertise or operational scope of specific organizations is in short supply (low grantee fungibility).

Empirically, we reconstruct Ford's efforts to shape the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights—a pillar of the region's human rights system—during the formative years of the Latin American human rights TAN. Ford was a pioneer in identifying the need to strengthen "the professional capacity of local, regional and international organizations" and assure "that they are effectively linked in a strong and independent network" (Ford Foundation 1981, 3).

<sup>1</sup> Comparatively recent legal institutions, general-purpose foundations exist since the early twentieth century. They comprise a small but extremely influential group, usually based in the United States. The largest ones include Bill & Melinda Gates (US\$51.9 billion), Open Society (US\$19.6 billion), MacArthur (US\$6 billion), Bloomberg Philanthropies (US\$4.2 billion), and Rockefeller (US\$3.7 billion). Ford is nowadays the fourth largest (US\$13.7 billion). For additional details about their history and structure, see the online appendix.

In Ford's eyes, the Institute could play a key role in the fledgling network, but only if it downplayed its founders' emphasis on legal research and directly engaged activists.

We use archival material documenting a grant Ford awarded to the Institute between 1982 and 1993 to unpack negotiations and probe propositions about how, when, and why foundations succeed or fail to shape grantees. In so doing, we follow the lead by Wong, Levi, and Deutsch (2017, 97) to use "Ford's archival holdings in fine-grained detail [...] to illustrate the power of Ford in shaping the types of human rights NGOs that would emerge." The over 16,000 micro-filmed pages include internal memoranda, correspondence, consultant evaluations, and Institute reports.<sup>2</sup> A focus on donor sources means that we cannot directly observe discussions Institute staff had about their relationship with Ford, but the correspondence does reveal how they perceived the donor. We also rely on interviews with Ford and Institute officers, first-hand accounts of the Institute's early years (Buergenthal 1982, 2005), and documents from the archives of USAID.<sup>3</sup> The latter are useful to see general-purpose philanthropic foundations' distinctive (more involved) approach to grant-making.

We first outline a framework to understand how donor and recipient characteristics, and their respective positions in policy fields, condition negotiations. We then introduce the case study and process trace how these conditions, and their change over time, facilitated and complicated Ford's attempts to transform the Institute. The conclusion probes the portability of the argument in two shadow cases that similarly rely on primary interview and archival data: one varies the type of donor (USAID's experience with the Institute) and the other the type of grantee (Ford's experience with Americas Watch [AW]). We also draw lessons regarding the role of foundations in the development of the human rights TANs.

### The Negotiation-Oriented Approach

TAN scholars emphasize horizontality and complementarity between donors and NGOs. In the foremost account, donors bankroll "principled causes" (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 9); they are check-signers who "respond to new and exciting issues in the NGO realm" (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 182). In the "spiral model," donors do not feature prominently because their role is similarly limited to distributing money. Donations, in turn, allow norm entrepreneurs to take risks and boost the effectiveness of activist organizations. Crucially, donors are assumed to share the network's values, which reduces their incentives for exacting surveillance (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 896–98; 2001; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999). To be sure, this literature does not completely overlook power differentials. Keck and Sikkink acknowledge that "power often follows resources" and "power is exercised within networks" (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 207). However, this scholarship downplays the agency of donors (Carpenter et al. 2014), especially their ability to conceive ideas independently or act as entrepreneurs. Such propositions graft well onto constructivist worldviews, which see egalitarianism and consensus-building as important structuring forces in world politics (Finnemore 1996; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 2001). However, the assumption that donors lack (or do not exercise) agency within

TANs goes against work on foundations (Curti 1963; Dowie 2001; Fleishman 2009; Zunz 2014) and has resulted in "the role of funding [...] from Western organizations" being "largely absent from the discussion" (Sundstrom 2005, 419).

Claims about the horizontality of donor–grantee relations contrast with work that emphasizes power asymmetries. The pessimistic undertones of this second camp resonate with neo-Gramscian literature that sees in philanthropy another instance of hierarchy in IR (Berman 1983; Cox 1983; Hopf 2013): funding sustains the hegemony of US foreign policy elites or big money (Parmar 2012; McGoey 2016). Other work adopts a rational choice approach, but similarly emphasizes that resource dependence curbs recipient autonomy. The argument first developed by Cooley and Ron (2002) spread to a larger literature that challenges the idealistic conclusions of TAN scholarship (Bob 2005, 2009; Berkovitch and Gordon 2008; Prakash and Gugerty 2010; Krause 2014; Bush 2015; Bush and Hadden 2019). In their opinion, authors who emphasize liberal value congruence overlook how competition for resources affects behavior. NGOs compromise their ideals to secure grants and engage in "dysfunctional organizational behavior" (Cooley and Ron 2002, 6). For instance, how NGOs perceive donor priorities induces changes in internal structures and agendas (Stroup and Wong 2017). Moreover, foundations are pushy, seeking to "professionalize" NGOs, often at the expense of grassroots activism (Bush 2015; Wong, Levi, and Deutsch 2017).

The resource-dependence approach reveals donors' clout but has limitations. Both neo-Gramscian and rational choice variants maintain that dependence alone is sufficient for subjugation and depict influence as the aggregate result of impersonal "market forces" rather than the outcome of purposive behavior by specific donors. Donors, even highly prominent ones, are seen as fungible, just like the money they provide. The problem with this view is that aggregate demand is formed by donors that are neither equally willing nor equipped to influence grantees. Some, especially general-purpose foundations, participate actively in defining goals and establishing TANs (Bob 2009). This suggests that a donor's ethos matters in determining whether we see attempts to wield influence and the means through which this is pursued. It is entirely possible that some behave like the hands-off agents described in the TAN literature, while others do not. To understand what money can buy and how, it therefore seems promising to examine what individual donors want or do, rather than subsume donor agency into aggregate demand.

In sum, the TAN and resource-dependence approaches do not fully explore what donors do for transnational activism, either because they assume that donors adopt a hands-off approach, acting as facilitators, or because they theorize influence as the outcome of impersonal market forces. To scale donors down to mere underwriters or buyers of activism limits our understanding of *when* donors adopt an active role and *why* they sometimes get what they want. To remedy this gap, we propose the negotiation-oriented approach.

The starting premise is that donor–grantee relations center around grant negotiations, including the amount of the contribution, the strings attached, its goals, and implementation. It is in this setting where we empirically detect donors' intention to micromanage recipients (or not), how they seek influence, and whether they succeed. We structure the analysis of negotiations around two questions: (1) what donor characteristics make them willing and able to influence grantees? and (2) what

<sup>2</sup>We look at grant PA 0820-898, the largest of the fifteen grants that Ford awarded to the Institute between 1982 and 2001. The file belongs to the Ford Foundation collection, Rockefeller Archive Center, New York. Unless otherwise stated, all primary sources come from this file.

<sup>3</sup>Interviewees are listed in the online appendix.



ecological and organizational factors condition recipients' responsiveness?

To answer the first question, we maintain that not all classes of donors have similar appetites for micromanagement. General-purpose philanthropic foundations are particularly prone to articulating robust visions for change. Unlike individual philanthropists, these foundations are organizations invented with the goal of bringing about social transformation (Zunz 2014), in Ford's case, "to eradicate the causes of suffering" (Ford Foundation 1950, 22). And unlike governmental aid agencies, they enjoy considerable levels of autonomy to set long-term goals. While aid agencies—and their expenses—are instruments of countries' foreign policies, and therefore conditioned by the political cycle (Bush 2015; Swedlund 2017), foundation endowments pay for overheads and grant-making; administrative independence is embodied in their boards, whose members freely appoint their successors (Dowie 2001; Fleishman 2009); and within the limits set in the United States by the IRS, boards are free to spend money however they deem appropriate (Wong, Levi, and Deutsch 2017, 82). A key implication is that general-purpose foundations do not shy away from having a large overhead-to-grants ratio, allowing them to develop the administrative capacity to carefully pursue these policy objectives, even with specific grantees (Freund 1996). They do not face stringent controls by elected representatives keen in keeping overheads to a minimum. To the extent that aid agencies' overhead-to-grants ratios have increased in recent decades, bureaucrats' eyes are set on minimizing "waste" scandals that upset politicians rather than on substantive goals (Carothers 2009).

Having an effective monitoring infrastructure is important. As Boulding (2012, 120) notes, obtaining "quality information on the goods and services provided by NGOs is very difficult because the tangible factors can be hard to evaluate (is the NGO spending the money prudently? Is the project effective?), and because many of the qualities that are important are in fact intangible." Aware of what it takes to monitor recipients, Sarah Bush recommends donor governments eager to increase the effectiveness of assistance to "use the private foundation model" (Bush 2015, 229). It is not hard to see why. Thanks to generous overheads, foundations have perfected surveillance strategies, usually detailed in comprehensive handbooks. These nurture the means to enforce preferences and standardize rules of engagement.<sup>4</sup> One is to require potential grantees to have informal discussions before submitting applications, allowing foundations to doctor drafts. Another is conditionality, staggering disbursements to ensure that recipients stick to the plan. Foundation officers are also instructed to avoid committing funds to overheads and earmark contributions, and to prefer shorter grants. A final tool is the constant request for information and performance evaluations via country-level officers and external consultants.

By virtue of their embeddedness in these bureaucratic structures, foundation officers develop a strong interest in seeking influence. Unlike a multimillionaire who underwrites a recipient on a personal capacity, foundation officials are rarely content with merely setting general goals for the projects they fund. Their eyes are on the details of the foundation's grant-making strategy. This is because the job of a foundation official consists of, and depends on, the routinization of surveillance. Moreover, staff members are not naïve Samaritans, but often PhD holders with years of

experience. They also specialize in specific topics, regions, or countries, which means that they command knowledge to devise precise instructions.

Independence, bureaucratic sophistication, and knowledge, in sum, allow foundations to develop a vision for and the means to transform policy fields as diverse as humanitarian aid, development, and global health (Curti 1963; Perkins 1997; Birn 2006; Cueto 2007; Korey 2007; Palmer 2010; Youde 2013; Kelly 2018). An important caveat is that while foundations are probably better placed than other types of donors to shape grantees, their organizational complexity can occasionally complicate such efforts. Thematic or regional specialization, as well as stints in country offices, transforms the preferences, social networks, and allegiances of staff members. This can lead to a type of "tacit activism" (Menzel 2021) that creates conflict and undermines resolve. Some officers may lobby internally for extending grants that serve personal goals or for terminating those they do not care about. Officers could ask different things from grantees in pursuit of narrower interests, for instance, to steer recipients such that they do not encroach on the turf of a favorite client or to promote NGO staff they personally like.

Internal coordination problems are just one obstacle in the way of influence. Others are related to grantees' own capabilities, ideas, and priorities, which may on occasion lead grantees to underperform, openly refuse to acquiesce, or subtly fool their patrons. This takes us to our second question. Three factors may account for lower levels of responsiveness as well as for greater leverage to negotiate more favorable terms: grantees' position in the policy field or their fungibility; the availability of other donors; and recipients' organizational characteristics.

First, donors rely on grantees to pursue more or less well-defined policy objectives. They "increase efficiency, effectiveness and legitimacy" by "tapping into the capabilities of third parties" (Abbott et al. 2015, 719–20). The global reach of organizations such as aid agencies or general-purpose foundations would be severely limited if they tried to implement programs "in house." It is not just a matter of finite resources; there are also legal, reputational, knowledge, and operational constraints. Crucially, grantees allow access to policy targets. Defending victims of repression in domestic courts requires the expertise and accreditation of local lawyers. Certain development projects cannot be implemented without the authorization and support of governmental partners. The design and production of vaccines for new diseases requires support for science/industry partnerships with relevant experience. And, of course, beneficiaries, mass publics, and authorities in developing countries are more likely to accept the money of foreign donors, especially those based in the United States or former colonial metropolises, if they are not themselves meddling directly in domestic affairs.

The availability of third parties with the desired capabilities varies, making some grantees more fungible than others. This constraint is likely more severe when donors come up with complex new goals and command tasks that have not been done before. Under such conditions, donors may need to incentivize the creation of third-party capabilities from scratch, but even then, some existing partners will have greater potential than others to meet demand. In other words, fungibility is not necessarily a function of the number of NGOs in a policy field, but of the assets of individual NGOs. In a crowded field, some organizations may be more prestigious or have greater geographical reach, and therefore guarantee better access to policy targets. Others may have know-how in certain areas, allowing them to deploy

<sup>4</sup>For the view of the doyen of twentieth-century foundation officers, see Weaver (1967).

their expertise in pursuit of donor goals or to transfer/adapt those skills to new, adjacent areas with greater ease. Donors, especially those with a clear vision, will not forfeit the opportunity to establish links with the most promising partners. In the absence of viable alternatives, donors may reluctantly stick to underperforming recipients (while possibly trying to optimize them) or ones that prove unwilling to strictly comply with grant conditions. If grantees are conscious about their own non-fungibility, they may, in turn, exploit favorable conditions, further complicating donor influence.

Second, just like the number of grantees with the desired assets produces different “market” structures that could range from monopolies to competitive fields, the number of donors also conditions recipient leverage. This can operate in a variety of ways. Recipients with multiple patrons can afford to push back or ignore requests. When there “are numerous donors with different preferences,” this “provides human rights NGOs with a certain amount of latitude” (Berkovitch and Gordon 2008, 894). In addition, attracting grants from various donors enhances NGOs’ reputation because money has a way of attracting money, and also cultivates an aura of independence, protecting grantees from accusations of being mouthpieces of certain interests (Boulding 2012, 119). Finally, the presence of multiple donors may lower responsiveness simply because grantees struggle to deal effectively with different demands (Stroup and Wong 2017). Consequently, a recipient may have to focus on addressing donor concerns only partially. This could entail prioritizing immediate operational issues rather than crafting long-term plans.

Third, grantees, just like donors, are unevenly professionalized. Variation in levels of grantee administrative capacity can cut both ways. On the one hand, the absence of routinized administrative practices opens the door to donor influence. Under these circumstances, donors can mold recipients’ procedures and personnel policy according to their visions. However, low administrative capacity may also render grantees highly dysfunctional or unable to process demands (Cooley and Ron 2002). This is especially true when donors expect recipients that lack basic capacities to implement complex policies or develop ambitious long-term plans. In those cases, we expect disorder and contingency rather than outright resistance.

This framework yields several observable implications regarding the dynamics of grant negotiations. First, we expect to see differences in how donors approach grantee relations. Due to their levels of bureaucratic sophistication, general-purpose philanthropic foundations are particularly prone to trying to shape recipients and their activism. The record should reveal that, compared to, for example, aid agencies, foundations outline clearer goals for grantees and push for changes more forcefully through a variety of surveillance tactics. In addition to information hoarding and periodic evaluations, foundations are more likely to shorten the leash with greater conditionality and funds that are earmarked rather than destined to overheads. As an officer who led Ford’s human rights program admitted:

Grantees were vehicles for realizing the foundations’ goals and ambitions. In the course of screening proposals or deliberately seeking out grantees, or on some occasion creating organizations, we played a very substantial role in how the grantees conducted and defined their business.<sup>5</sup>

While the record should reflect this clarity of purpose, we also expect the decentralized nature of foundations’ decision-making structures, with headquarters and field offices staff involved in grant negotiations, to occasionally muddle efforts, especially when priorities diverge among staff.

Whether donors succeed is also contingent upon grantee characteristics. When donors perceive recipients to be pivotal for achieving certain objectives due to their unique assets or privileged position in a policy field (expertise, degree of access to policy targets), grantees will find room to resist encroachments. This is also likely to be the case if grantees have access to multiple funding sources. Under these conditions, donors may express frustration and step up their surveillance through conditionality, evaluations, etc., but nevertheless put up with underperformance. As grantees gain leverage, deviations from donor demands will become more explicit, perhaps confrontational, rather than subtle attempts to fool their patrons. Finally, we expect grantees with underdeveloped infrastructures to struggle to keep up with exacting donors. This is prone to getting worse if, due to underperformance, donors decide to tighten conditions such that contributions become more earmarked. The paradox is that these short-term grants facilitate monitoring but may also increase recipients’ difficulty to develop long-term strategies.

In the following case study, we probe how donor and recipient characteristics, as well as the environment in which they operate, shape the tone and outcome of negotiations.

### Case Study: Context and Actors

In the 1960–1970s, South American dictatorships threatened Ford’s clientele, namely researchers and intellectuals. Field staff responded with ad hoc measures. After Pinochet’s coup, for instance, Ford relocated grantees.<sup>6</sup> These actions proved problematic. Senior staff worried about field offices taking divergent courses. Furthermore, aiding activists jeopardized traditional development programs reliant on governmental partners (Carmichael 2001). To justify a new form of involvement, it was therefore necessary to devise a formal program of activities in the field of human rights.

In October 1978, Ford gave human rights grants to two Chilean organizations.<sup>7</sup> The “underlying strategy” was “to help establish and strengthen human rights groups within the region and link them to international non-governmental organizations.”<sup>8</sup> These grants foreboded the definitive move toward a programmatic line of action against repression, which expanded Ford’s understanding of human rights from intellectual freedom to political and civil rights.<sup>9</sup> In 1981, human rights was finally declared one of six thematic areas (Ford Foundation 1981, vii).

By then, Ford had long recognized the importance of building what Keck and Sikkink would later call “transnational advocacy networks.” There were very few local actors with the capacity to carry out complex and dangerous human rights missions, so it was imperative to augment the density of national civil societies. Ford officers sought

<sup>6</sup>“Making Rights Real: A History of the Ford Foundation’s Human Rights Program in Latin America and the Caribbean” (Report 11705), 1989, 10. See online appendix for details of the individuals mentioned as authors/recipients of the documents cited in footnotes, including the positions they occupied within their respective organizations.

<sup>7</sup>“Making rights real...,” 16.

<sup>8</sup>Carmichael, Recommended Grant Agreement, 1988-02-18, 3–4.

<sup>9</sup>“International Human Rights Efforts. Human Rights and Governance Program” (Report 6622), 1982, 5.

<sup>5</sup>Interview, Forman, 2021-03-29.

to connect local activists “to emerging regional organizations,”<sup>10</sup> especially, “strong, independent and credible” ones that could facilitate capacity-building.<sup>11</sup> According to a former head of the Mexico office, Ford wanted

to support [...] the creation of local human rights capabilities, so that these organizations could [...] monitor what was going on in their countries, [...] and provide connectivity between these organizations, so that they wouldn't feel isolated.<sup>12</sup>

Chief among the regional organizations that could act as network nodes was the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights. Ford's relationship with the Institute is worth studying for its significance in the history of Latin American human rights TANs. This was probably the first big opportunity Ford found to realize the vision it had distilled during the prehistory of the human rights program in the 1970s regarding the best way to guarantee change, namely building local capacity via regional networks. In Ford's eyes, the Institute born out of a 1980 agreement between the Inter-American Court and Costa Rica was “the best placed institution to carry out a full human rights mandate on a regional basis.”<sup>13</sup>

The historical significance of the case has advantageous research design implications. First, this is an instance in which we will most likely observe what foundations do for transnational activism, allowing us to carry out a productive “plausibility probe” of our challenge to the view that donors are hands-off and epiphenomenal and to the view that donors wield power through impersonal market forces. Ford had a clear vision of how it wanted to shape the human rights field, with Latin America as the main testing grounds for its global ambitions, as well as the bureaucratic eagerness and means to push for it. As the officer in charge of Ford's Latin America program put it, “we really wanted there to be a robust region-wide institution. And were bending over backwards trying to make that happen.”<sup>14</sup> Second, while a most-likely case for observing attempts at micromanagement, the relatively long duration of the relationship also allows us to study how changing contextual conditions complicate or catalyze these efforts. In fact, the relationship features within-case variation in the factors that our framework identifies as potentially relevant to understand donor impact, especially donor and grantee fungibility.

For the Institute to play the role Ford envisioned, changes were required. Modeled after Strasbourg's International Institute of Human Rights, the Institute's founders focused on “teaching, research, and [the] promotion of human rights.”<sup>15</sup> In their view, the Institute's constituency should be academics, law students, and judges. Contact with activists was deemed unfitting for an elite academic initiative. The founders understood “human rights as law, not as networking or media campaigning.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the founders cherished narrow ideas about human rights and what constituted a victim. Such ideas impinged upon whom they thought should receive training. Indigenous people or feminists were, for instance, excluded. To realize their vision, the founders, most of them Inter-American judges, appointed like-minded Costa Rican male politicians to the board.

Hernán Montealegre, the Institute's inaugural Director, approached Ford. After foundation officers asked Montealegre to detail his plan, he wrote back with a ranking of priorities: the Institute would focus on (1) evaluating legal systems; (2) conducting historical research on human rights; and (3) offering human rights courses.<sup>17</sup> This ranking sounded alarm bells at Ford.<sup>18</sup> The emphasis on research contradicted Ford's practical goals. Ford thought that the Institute should primarily strive to connect Latin American activists so that they could exchange knowledge and experiences, and thus nurture a continental network that would make use of the fledgling Inter-American System.

An external consultant confirmed Ford's fears. She recommended that Montealegre's ranking be flipped. More thinking should go into sharpening institutional goals and extending the Institute's regional reach. The Institute should narrow the scope of research activities and prioritize an annual training course for activists.<sup>19</sup> With this in mind, Ford approved a \$300,000 grant in October 1982 to “provide the Institute with general support over three years, enabling it to consolidate a core staff, establish a basic set of programs, and expand its financial base.”<sup>20</sup> A further aim should be to push the Institute to adopt a more practical profile and expand its geographical focus.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, one-fourth of the grant would be used to pay for the Director's salary and hire a full-time South American staff member and the rest for the course and publications.<sup>22</sup>

Following the initial grant, this donor-recipient relationship unfolded in complicated but consequential ways. We bring to light a conflict between the founders and Ford as the latter tried to realize its vision for the Institute: turn it into a training and networking hub for human rights organizations. First, we focus on exchanges regarding the Institute's administration and substantive priorities. We then explore Ford's push to expand the Institute's regional reach by revamping the publications program, training initiatives, and board composition. A subsequent area of contention was Ford's insistence that the Institute comply with new diversity standards.

### *The Institute's Administration and Flagship Programs*

Foundations generally possess substantial experience professionalizing recipients (Colvard 1961; Lagemann 1989). The Institute, however, proved a difficult case. Ford's Jeffrey Puryear was initially ready to be patient, as he saw the relationship as a precious opportunity for vernacularizing human rights.<sup>23</sup> However, in the absence of tangible improvements, Ford soon made support conditional on significant changes.

At first, the Institute focused on Montealegre's research projects. While by 1984 the Institute had “evolved into a conference center abuzz with periodic activity,” “such meetings [...] absorbed the bulk of the staff's energies and resulted in limited follow-up.”<sup>24</sup> Montealegre had failed to recruit

<sup>17</sup> Montealegre to Puryear, 1982-03-05, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Cleaves to Puryear, 1982-06-16; Puryear to Cleaves, 1982-06-23.

<sup>19</sup> Crahan, “Report on the Proposal of the Interamerican Institute of Human Rights,” 1982-07-03, 1–2.

<sup>20</sup> Carmichael, Recommended Grant Agreement, 1988-02-18, 8.

<sup>21</sup> Carmichael, Recommended Grant Agreement, 1988-02-18, 8; see also Crahan, “Report on...,” 1, 11.

<sup>22</sup> Grant letter, 1982-10-20; adjusted for inflation, the grant was worth almost \$800,000.

<sup>23</sup> Interview, 2021-04-13.

<sup>24</sup> Crahan, “Human Rights and Basic Needs in Central America,” attached to a letter from 1984-03-12 to Carmichael, Puryear, and Forman, 6.

<sup>10</sup> “International Human Rights Efforts...,” 2.

<sup>11</sup> “Human Rights. Needs and Priorities” (Report 2503) 1973, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Interview, Cox, 2021-03-30.

<sup>13</sup> Kubisch to David Winder and Welna, 1986-07-1.

<sup>14</sup> Interview, Puryear, 2021-04-13.

<sup>15</sup> Marks to Puryear, 1984-12-14.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with a former member of the Institute's board, 2021-04-30.



permanent personnel or set up a proper organization. For example, 3 years into the Institute's life, it employed five secretaries and one professional.<sup>25</sup> Prompted by Thomas Buergenthal, who would become later an Inter-American judge, the Institute's board decided to fire Montealegre on the grounds of his limited achievements.<sup>26</sup>

Still in wait-and-see mode, Ford hired another consultant to review the Institute and convey the conclusions to the new leadership. In her damning report, the consultant wrote: "the Institute can no longer enjoy the indulgence that one would normally accord to a new-born."<sup>27</sup> The Institute lacked strategic vision and its resources were being stretched too thin because it accepted too many small consulting/research projects. One of the problems was that it did not charge donors for overheads. Consultant-led projects "put a far greater lien on the Institute's resources." The Institute could therefore "be pushed and pulled in a diversity of directions." The Institute also had a "relatively anarchic" "system of financial administration." Put differently, it lacked a defined mission and remained a one-man operation centered around Montealegre. Furthermore, under-professionalization limited the Institute's ability to secure grants to fund the kind of long-term strategic thinking Ford expected. The outcome was a vicious cycle of short-term contracts, administrative precarity, and few clear objectives.

The consultant recommended the Institute strive to become a "major resource" for activists, discontinuing some projects to focus on what made it unique.<sup>28</sup> For example, a project that involved monitoring Central American elections, which had recently led to the creation of a new "center" within the Institute (Centro de Asesoría y Promoción Electoral, CAPEL), ought to be reconsidered. This USAID-funded initiative, aligned with Reagan's foreign policy, had been a long-standing source of tensions with Ford. Before CAPEL was created, Ford officers warned that it could destroy the Institute's neutrality and reputation among activists.<sup>29</sup> In 1985, with CAPEL already established, the consultant echoed Ford's concerns: "CAPEL [...] is [...] the most perplexing part of the Institute [...] [Does it] represent the Institute's best, permanent interests, or is it a drain on its program, its resources, and its credibility?"<sup>30</sup>

Institute staff pushed back. Some expressed *ad personam* criticism of the consultant and tried to hide the report from the board.<sup>31</sup> Ford, in contrast, agreed with its conclusions. In a meeting with the new director, Ford asked him to define long-term goals, as well as an appropriate personnel strategy, a new financial system, and auditing mechanisms.

Another source of tension was the Institute's interdisciplinary course. Inaugurated in 1983, the course was an important element of Ford's strategy to turn the Institute into an organization that would support activists. In the words of a consultant, the courses should serve to "share experiences, pool knowledge, and devise strategies."<sup>32</sup> Demand for these services must have existed, for the course attracted many applicants. The fourth (1986) edition received 515 applications and the Institute accepted 157

participants.<sup>33</sup> The courses brought together activists from across the region, with teaching delivered by Latin American and Spanish lawyers. To be sure, nobody questioned the value of connecting activists and offering them training. But Ford, always an exacting taskmaster, wanted more.

Ford made recommendations on how to improve the course. Initially, the only criticisms foundation staff encountered when sounding attendees "were insufficient time for work and discussion in small groups, and too much heterogeneity in [people's] backgrounds." In time, however, Ford's perceptions worsened.<sup>34</sup> Positive reviews became "exceptions" to a "dismal picture."<sup>35</sup> While some admitted that the course offered superb networking possibilities, it was "overly academic." Activists also complained about dry lectures devoid of practical content.<sup>36</sup>

Ford officers leveraged this feedback to reiterate a long-standing demand to veer away from the founders' vision for the Institute. In fact, Ford's commitment to improve the interdisciplinary course was at the core of a conflict in the fall of 1986. The first 3-year grant had expired in 1985, so the Institute drafted proposals for a 5-year extension. Due to the Institute's shortcomings, however, Ford hesitated. Foundation officers even entertained the idea of cutting all ties. But because the Institute was an organization "whose goals and objectives we agree with and indeed are important,"<sup>37</sup> a second, 1-year grant was awarded. Through this grant Ford officers wanted to give the Institute the chance to improve, while signaling the urgency with which Ford expected change. When negotiations resumed, Ford officers were determined to bring the Institute closer to their vision.

The Institute had to become a central node in a budding regional activist network. With the consent of William Carmichael, Ford's Vice-President, a human rights officer, sent a telex to Thomas Buergenthal, the chair of the Institute's board:

[S]upport [...] will be extremely limited and will be contingent upon [...] a restructuring of the annual interdisciplinary course to reflect the priorities [...] of human rights practitioners [...] [and] a clear statement to the Foundation regarding the current status of the [administration].<sup>38</sup>

This bluntness backfired. Buergenthal disinvited Ford officers from an upcoming board meeting. Another board member, who worked for a US congressman, wrote to Ford's president arguing that the foundation should refrain from "hegemonic hectoring."<sup>39</sup> In the aftermath of the confrontation, the officer responsible for drafting the telex justified the move: "we have expressed our views diplomatically (and oftentimes, quite firmly) for the past four years and have seen little change."<sup>40</sup> Similarly, when we showed the telex to some of our interviewees, Ford officers deemed it "indelicate" but defended its content.<sup>41</sup> Back then, however, escalating tensions was unproductive and

<sup>33</sup> "Requests received per country" in "Informe Consejo Directivo," 1986-11-08.

<sup>34</sup> Puryear to Forman, 1983-10-13.

<sup>35</sup> Hall to Puryear, 1986-09-05; Welna to Puryear, 1984-10-16; Shifter to Heisler, 1988-01-12.

<sup>36</sup> Remarks by a member of the Andean Commission of Jurists, attached to Hall and Puryear, 1986-09-05; remarks by the head of Amnesty International in Mexico, attached to Welna and Puryear, 1984-10-16.

<sup>37</sup> Kubisch to Forman and Marks, 1985-05-15, 2; see also Welna to Kubisch, 1986-11-28, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Kubisch to Buergenthal, 1986-11-05, 1-2.

<sup>39</sup> Delgado to Franklin, 1986-11-24.

<sup>40</sup> Kubisch to files, 1986-11-06, 3.

<sup>41</sup> Interview, Forman, 2021-03-29; see also interview with Welna, 2021-04-21.

<sup>25</sup> Crahan, "Human Rights and...", 7.

<sup>26</sup> Institute's Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Directors, 1984-01-16; Marks to Forman, 1984-01-30, 6.

<sup>27</sup> All quotes in this paragraph are from "Evaluation of the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights" (Report 8545), 1985, 7.

<sup>28</sup> All quotes in this paragraph are from "Evaluation of the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights" (Report 8545), 1985, 3.

<sup>29</sup> Puryear to files, 1984-05-14, 3.

<sup>30</sup> "Evaluation of...", 15.

<sup>31</sup> Kubisch to Forman and Marks, 1985-05-15, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Crahan, "Report on..." 1982-07-03, 3.

Ford was forced to launch an internal investigation. With the goal of appeasing critics, Ford resumed funding to the Institute in the spring of 1987.

Ford's assessment of the interdisciplinary course eventually improved. Whereas in November 1986 one officer noted that "despite repeated calls to do so, no curriculum specialist has been brought in,"<sup>42</sup> 1 year later the tone was different. A colleague was "impressed [...] The working groups and more in-depth study sessions on specific topics [...] allowed lively exchanges."<sup>43</sup> Another acknowledged progress in "the design of courses and workshops."<sup>44</sup> And yet, a third admitted an improvement that was crucial from Ford's perspective: the course seemed "to be increasingly relevant to the region's human rights activism and organizational needs."<sup>45</sup>

In 1988, Carmichael neatly summarized the tactics applied since 1982 to steer the grantee:

Foundation staff have worked closely with Institute officials [...] to spur the development of an organization that has the promise of becoming the most important human rights center in the region. Through monitoring visits to the Institute, grant renewal negotiations, transmitting feedback from local human rights groups, and a Foundation-sponsored evaluation in 1985, they have attempted to help the Institute analyze the region's human rights needs and develop an effective response. And Foundation grants have been explicitly directed towards projects that will help link the Institute more closely with activist groups.<sup>46</sup>

Given the scope of these efforts, why was Ford only partially successful?

First, the Institute's organization mattered. Early on, the Institute was essentially a one-man operation. Montealegre's preferences played an outsized role in determining the scope of the enterprise. And his preferences were very different from Ford's. The absence of professional staff also meant that the Institute was organizationally incapable of doing what Ford wanted it to do, namely design a long-term plan, extend its geographical focus, and rationalize its administration. Others shared Ford's frustration: a consultant for USAID, for example, lamented that there was "no clear policy statement or common understanding [of human rights] which may guide the Institute in setting up priorities."<sup>47</sup>

Second, the Institute chose to prioritize small projects for which funding was available. This gave the Institute much needed cash but had problematic side effects. One was that it diminished its ability to develop a longer-term strategic vision, as Ford insisted it should. Since every project had its own budget, and the jobs of the temporary consultants assigned to each one depended on a narrow, project-specific definition of success, nobody had incentives to devise such plans. As the USAID report put it, "the donor-driven nature of funding has resulted in a 'hodge-podge' of highly fragmented" activities, reinforcing "'territorial' feelings [...] and contributes to the lack of an 'institutional' perspective."<sup>48</sup> A vicious cycle ensued in which small projects

diminished the Institute's ability to secure long-term grants with money for overheads.

There was, however, a brighter side to the Institute's appeal among donors, which constitutes the third reason why Ford only partially succeeded. Ford became more fungible, while the Institute remained irreplaceable for the ambitious plan to create a regional TAN. Crucially, in August 1986, USAID approved a 5-year grant. Worth more than \$2.750.000, the grant included generous support for overheads and did not impose severe conditionality.<sup>49</sup> As our framework predicts, this changed the Institute's relationship with Ford, diminishing responsiveness and increasing tensions.<sup>50</sup> Ford suggested that the Institute should abandon USAID-funded projects to focus on what it saw as "strategic priorities" without providing the support needed for long-term thinking. Naturally, despite Ford's misgivings about the political implications of meddling with Central American elections using Reagan's money, the Institute never dismantled CAPEL. The consequence of this bonanza was that "by the end of February 1989, the Institute was working with an annual budget of \$2.613.000. Of that sum approximately \$1.5 million still comes from AID," with 60 percent of this money earmarked for CAPEL. Ford only contributed between 15 and 20 percent of the Institute's non-CAPEL budget.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, the Institute's position in the human rights field, which Ford considered unique, reduced its fungibility and limited donor leverage. As a Ford officer put it in 1986:

The problems that we have all identified at the Institute don't seem to go away [...] There does, however, seem to be fairly widespread agreement that a need exists for a regional organization and that the Institute is probably the best placed institution to carry out [a regional mandate] [...] [T]he Institute carries a certain amount of prestige and clout by virtue of its association with the OAS.<sup>52</sup>

Institute staff likely sensed that they could get away with a lot. It is nevertheless worth noting that Ford did see rays of hope, making it unwise to break ties. Apart from improvements to the interdisciplinary course, the Institute began to offer courses for specific groups such as lawyers, civil servants, and even the military. It also offered training (and networking) opportunities to inexperienced human rights NGOs. This happened first in Central America and then in Mexico. Ford's ambition, however, was always to implement this project regionwide. The next section explores this bone of contention and how it affected donor-grantee relations in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

#### *The Institute's Regional Scope, Its Support for Activism, and the Issue of Diversity*

The trait that made the Institute most appealing, its potential for regional impact, was the source of bitter conflicts in subsequent years. Ford was adamant to turn the Institute into a truly Latin American, rather than merely Central American, or, even worse, Costa Rican institution. This colored Ford's take on project-specific funding, Institute publications, and the composition of the board. A related issue also became increasingly contentious: compliance with Ford's diversity policy. Throughout, Ford officials faced coordination challenges that complicated attempts

<sup>42</sup> Welna to Kubisch, 1986-11-28, 3.

<sup>43</sup> Heisler and Bushey to Shifter, Sánchez, and Welna, 1987-11-24.

<sup>44</sup> Marks to Heisler and Bushey, 1987-11-30, 2.

<sup>45</sup> Shifter to Heisler, 1988-01-12, 2.

<sup>46</sup> Carmichael, Recommended Grant Agreement, 1988-02-18, 5.

<sup>47</sup> "Assessment of the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights" August 1988, 2. All USAID documents are available from its Development Experience Clearinghouse: <https://dec.usaid.gov/dec/home/>. Accessed November 13, 2022.

<sup>48</sup> "Assessment of the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights," August 1988, 3.

<sup>49</sup> PDFAY374-42 - Grant Award LAC-0591-G-SS-6065-00.

<sup>50</sup> See the Conclusion for an account of why USAID's approach differed.

<sup>51</sup> Heisler to Cox, Joan Dassin, Sánchez, and Shifter, 1989-03-23, 1.

<sup>52</sup> Kubisch to Winder and Welna, 1986-07-1.



to micromanage the grantee. Ford's lingering fungibility as a donor and the Institute's continued non-fungibility as a recipient further conditioned the leverage both parties brought to the negotiations and delayed Ford's impact.

A few obstacles that complicated Ford's attempt to turn the Institute into a regional organization were homemade. In particular, the total budget for regional organizations—around one million dollars per year—was insufficient<sup>53</sup> and officers mainly allocated it to US-based recipients,<sup>54</sup> leaving little for Latin American organizations. To compensate, New York staff regularly invited field offices to chip in. For instance, the officer in charge of the Institute insisted that field offices needed “to support the kind of training and technical assistance programs which the Mexico office has supported in Central America.”<sup>55</sup> However, the heads in Lima and Rio often thought that the Institute was not adding sufficient value to their local constituencies. Moreover, the Institute had to compete with other subregional organizations such as the Andean Commission of Jurists or the Mexican Human Rights Academy.<sup>56</sup> Only when field offices contributed did Ford award substantial, multiyear grants to the Institute that brought it closer to achieving its regional potential.

The Institute's Central American Commissions project is a case in point. Among Ford's attempts to move the Institute to serve activists regionwide, this was the most expensive, longest-lived, and, given the tenor of abuses in Central America, arguably the most critical. The project sought “to strengthen and support the activities of local human rights organizations by [...] providing regular educational and legal training.”<sup>57</sup> Time and again Ford had to protect the program from the board, whose members objected that the staff member in charge, a Ford protégé, wanted workshops to exclude government officials so that activists could speak freely and avoid legitimizing governments with a poor human rights record. He also insisted that workshops should be carried out in the target countries, not in Costa Rica. True to the founders' vision, board members resisted the exclusion of governmental elites and the prioritization of activists. Ford fought back because the project “demonstrates the importance” of “the Institute's potential ‘back-stopping’ role” for “activist organizations in the region.”<sup>58</sup> In this instance, Ford succeeded because its internal coordination problems were less severe. Most notably, the Mexico office adopted (and awarded several grants to) the Commissions project, thus easing constraints on New York's budget.

The Institute's publication program was also relevant for Ford's masterplan, and therefore another item that it funded for a decade despite quality issues. In a predigital age, Ford was convinced, more so than Institute staff, that publications were “particularly important in helping the Institute establish its presence in Latin America.”<sup>59</sup> Nonetheless, they consistently expressed dissatisfaction with the “bulletin and scholarly journal,” which after 6 years were “embarrassingly void of substance.”<sup>60</sup> The journal was “blatantly self-promotional, reprinting stale, mediocre

materials [...] It is not a Journal one would turn to get any idea of current Latin American thinking about human rights.”<sup>61</sup> Another Ford officer noted that the journal contained “little more than ‘filler.’”<sup>62</sup> These two officers insisted on the need for more intensive guidance from the Ford-funded editorial committee or simply “getting the Institute a new editor.”<sup>63</sup> These interventions notwithstanding, publications remained “undistinguished.”<sup>64</sup> However, Ford's grants kept on earmarking funds for publications at least until 1995 because Ford was sure that the “*Boletín* and journal [...] are of interest to organizations regionwide.”<sup>65</sup> The utility of the Institute as a vehicle to reach a regional constituency compelled Ford to accept underperformance. This patience, however, eventually paid off. In fact, a recent evaluation argues that the journal became an important venue for human rights debates (Soley 2021).

A final area of contention was the board's diversity. Ford maintained that the Institute's regional destiny could not be realized with a board controlled by Costa Ricans (who were all acquaintances of the Institute's founders). During the Institute's early years, Costa Ricans were about seven of twenty-six, but most other members lived abroad and did not attend meetings. Ford therefore decided to fly board members to meetings.<sup>66</sup> Shortly after, “three or four” non-Costa Rican members were added to the board.<sup>67</sup> Two years later, however, Ford still thought that the excessive number of Costa Ricans “prevented [the Institute] from becoming an important regional actor.”<sup>68</sup> In fact, when the Institute's director visited New York, a Ford officer “went through the current membership of the Board one-by-one to see to what extent the members contributed to the Institute's programs, prestige and funding.” Thanks to these pressures, the number of Costa Ricans eventually went down from seven to five.<sup>69</sup> When this number was further reduced to four, an officer finally concluded that the changes “do represent an improvement in the geographic diversity of the Board.”<sup>70</sup>

Beyond nationality, Ford thought that the board should become more diverse in terms of gender and ethnicity. For example, in the early 1990s, it included only two women. Indigenous people were similarly underrepresented. Margo Picken, the program officer now in charge, also insisted that the Institute expanded its reach to the Andes and the Caribbean, attracted more grassroots activists to the interdisciplinary course (still dominated by university graduates), and created an endowment to pay for activities that directly targeted activists.<sup>71</sup> Picken's vision for the grantee's future was articulated in a letter responding to an Institute's grant proposal. Before evaluating the new proposal, Ford needed to see:

a list of staff and responsibilities, [...] a list [of] board members, and a list of other donor agencies and what they are contributing for what purpose. Along with these lists, we would appreciate some discussion of the diversity of your staff and board [...] [T]he proposal

<sup>53</sup> Interview, Sanborn, 2021-04-26; interview, Dassin, 2021-05-18.

<sup>54</sup> For instance, in the Conclusion, we discuss Ford's relationship with America's Watch.

<sup>55</sup> Picken to Forman, Trebat, Sanborn, Dassin, Sánchez, and Shifter, 1991-04-03, 1.

<sup>56</sup> Puryear to Heisler, 1987-12-2; Sánchez to Sanborn, 1991-05-7, 2.

<sup>57</sup> “Project of Support for the Human Rights Commissions of Central America,” 1987-01-01 (approximate date).

<sup>58</sup> Kubisch to Winder and Welna, 1986-07-14, 2.

<sup>59</sup> Carmichael, Recommendation for Grant Action, 1982-07-22, 9.

<sup>60</sup> Carmichael, Recommendation for Grant Action, 1985-10-03, 2; Welna, Report on a meeting in Costa Rica with the Institute's Director, 1986-03-12, 1.

<sup>61</sup> Welna to Heisler, 1987-12-07.

<sup>62</sup> Sánchez to Heisler and Bushey, 1988-01-06.

<sup>63</sup> Sánchez to Heisler and Bushey, 1988-01-06.

<sup>64</sup> Shifter to Heisler, 1988-01-02, 2.

<sup>65</sup> Sanborn to Picado, 1991-05-21, 2; see also Dassin and Forman, Recommendation for Grant Action, 1993-08-19, 6.

<sup>66</sup> Puryear to files, 1984-05-14, 3.

<sup>67</sup> Puryear to files, 1984-08-29, 2; Welna to Winder, 1985-06-05, 1.

<sup>68</sup> Hall to Marks, 1986-11-03, 2.

<sup>69</sup> Marks to Carmichael and Forman, 1987-05-12, 2.

<sup>70</sup> Heisler to Bushey, Peter Fry, Sánchez, and Shifter, 1988-02-03, 2.

<sup>71</sup> Picken to Forman, Trebat, Sanborn, Dassin, Sánchez, and Shifter, 1991-04-03, 2; see also Picken to Sanborn, Trebat, and Forman, 1991-04-29.

lacks a full discussion of the overall program of the Institute, and what your plans are for staff, program, and institutional development.<sup>72</sup>

The Institute pushed back. Executive Director Sonia Picado did recognize problems in integrating indigenous people but objected to lack of progress on gender. For instance, she listed female staff with leading roles and highlighted that most attendants to the 1990 edition of the course were women.<sup>73</sup> When 2 years later, negotiations for another grant got underway, Ford remained unsatisfied. As an officer from the Mexico office wrote to headquarters, “it would be important for her [Picado] to know that the concerns [...] are institutional concerns of the Foundation.”<sup>74</sup> However, Ford eventually had to admit defeat: “women continue to be under-represented, as are indigenous minorities.”<sup>75</sup>

Picken’s offensive ran into difficulties in other areas too. For example, when it came to addressing delays in hiring more South Americans, Picado responded that higher salaries were needed. To convey that the foundation should stop making exacting demands, she also submitted documents showing Ford’s waning importance as a donor.<sup>76</sup> Without systematic contributions from field offices, a policy based on “keeping our financial foot in the door,” one that granted only modest support for regional organizations, did not warrant intense monitoring. It did “afford us some leverage”, as Ford officers intended, but only *some*.<sup>77</sup> As a result of the internal disagreements that prevented Ford from pooling resources, and in a context increasingly defined by a multiplicity of donors, Ford lacked the leverage to force all the changes it wanted and disagreements with the grantee became more overt.

### Conclusion

By the 1990s Ford had partially transformed the Institute and the network of which it was part. The Institute professionalized and became a site where practitioners could train and network. Furthermore, Ford expanded the Institute’s understanding of “rights,” reaching a broader clientele. However, Ford’s success was not unalloyed. In 1993, Ford still insisted that the Institute ought to pay more attention to minorities, acknowledging wrongs beyond standard violations of civil/political rights. Moreover, the Institute’s presence in South American and Andean countries remained elusive. Lack of diversity among board members was yet another source of disappointment.

Ford deployed many tactics, so why did it only partially succeed? After 1986, Ford remained an important donor, but others were giving more. Ford mistakenly assumed that “modest foundation funding” would suffice to form “a strong and viable international network.”<sup>78</sup> It certainly did not help that field officers repeatedly refused to pool resources. These disagreements suggest that while bureaucratic sophistication allowed the foundation to practice relentless monitoring, organizational complexity occasionally conspired against those efforts. Finally, the Institute’s unique status in the human rights field complicated influence. Ford kept writing cheques (lowering the credibility

of its threats in the process) because it saw the Institute as a non-fungible vector in the fledgling TAN. The Institute’s “*sui generis*” position, in turn, allowed it to secure multiple grants, some with very generous conditions, further limiting Ford’s leverage.<sup>79</sup> As expected, increasing donor fungibility over time and growing recognition of the Institute’s importance for Ford’s ambition exacerbated conflict.

Our framework indicates that to a greater extent than other donors, general-purpose foundations have the bureaucratic means and motives to micromanage grantees. The archival evidence revealed the lengths to which foundations are prepared to go when they decide to be “proactive in the creation of transnational policy” (Stone 2010, 282). We expect other donors to be less geared toward micromanagement, resulting in greater degrees of freedom for grantees. Considering their resources and potential for impact, aid agencies are a particularly relevant alternative donor type.

USAID’s relationship with the Institute is illustrative of a donor that is less laser focused than Ford. Rather than imposing severe conditionality or trying to actively change the Institute’s priorities, as Ford did, USAID outlined its expectations for the second 5-year grant approved in 1986 in a single page.<sup>80</sup> The current Institute Director, who was a young staffer back in the 1980s, confirms USAID’s hands-off approach: “AID officers [...] swiftly approved our reports or agreed to changes to the grant.” In contrast, “Ford was very disciplined. Program officers knew their institutional priorities perfectly well [...] When Picado visited Ford for the first time, she almost left in tears.” Crucially, AID approved non-earmarked funds to finance “overheads.”<sup>81</sup>

It is unlikely that USAID did not find fault in the Institute’s behavior or that the Institute had similar political goals, therefore removing the need for exacting monitoring. For one, as we saw, the occasional performance reports commissioned by USAID were not flattering. Moreover, recall that USAID gave the Institute resources for an election monitoring program inspired by Reagan’s foreign policy toward Central America. Institute staff were too close to the Latin American human rights movement, both personally and professionally, to share Reagan’s objectives or to be perceived as fully trustworthy agents of US interests.<sup>82</sup>

The answer to the lack of monitoring most likely lies in USAID’s organizational characteristics. First, agencies such as USAID do not have policy autonomy (Milner and Tingley 2010; Swedlund 2017) and are subject to the vagaries of the political cycle. This severely limits their ability to come up with their own priorities, let alone define substantive long-term objectives for each grantee, and subsequently micromanage *à la Ford*. In this particular case, the lack of clear preferences regarding specific Institute activities or the NGO’s general direction of travel is evidenced by the flexibility of the grant vis-à-vis overheads. USAID’s hands-off approach was likely exacerbated by the historical context. While USAID was created in 1961, it only began thinking about democracy promotion during the Reagan era. The CAPEL grant to support election monitoring was a step in this direction, but an experimental one (Bush 2015, 125–26). It was not yet part of a coherent plan. In fact, USAID’s flagship “Democracy Initiative” was only announced in 1990, after the agency caved into pressures to pivot away from an exclusive focus on development. This means that

<sup>72</sup> Sanborn to Picado, 1991-05-01, 1; Sanborn to Picado, 1991-05-21.

<sup>73</sup> Picado to Sanborn, 1991-06-21.

<sup>74</sup> Kimberly Krasevac to Rebecca Nichols, 1993-02-11, 1; see also Krasevac to Picado, 1993-02-11.

<sup>75</sup> Dassin and Forman, Recommendation for Grant Action, 1993-08-19, 7.

<sup>76</sup> Picado to Dassin, 1993-07-06.

<sup>77</sup> Kubisch to Winder and Welna, 1986-07-14.

<sup>78</sup> “International Human Rights Efforts...,” 11.

<sup>79</sup> Interview, Sánchez, 2021-03-30.

<sup>80</sup> PDFAY374 - 42 - Grant Award - LAC-0591-G-SS-6065-00, attachment 2.

<sup>81</sup> Interview, Thompson, 2022-06-02.

<sup>82</sup> On the incentives of NGOs to accept grants from donors they dislike, see Mayers and Peutalo (1995).

when USAID started funding the Institute, there was still no “extensive political development expertise” (Diamond 1995). As an officer put it, “the late 1990s is when we really started to see ‘best practices’ come into play for the electoral processes. You come [to a country] with a toolbox of stuff: ‘this is how you do it’” (Bush 2015, 127).

Second, USAID’s monitoring infrastructure is very different from Ford’s. USAID is subject to the stringent control of politicians, especially Congress. There is an incentive to minimize “waste” and lower the overheads-to-grants ratio. As Boulding (2012, 116) puts it, “there is a strong ethical imperative to use resources directly [...] instead of diverting [money] to costly monitoring.” Coupled with a comparatively larger portfolio of grantees, this limits USAID’s capacity to develop bespoke plans for each client and evaluate progress. Given stringent political oversight, to the extent that USAID officials are inclined to monitor, the focus is not on “big picture” goals. Instead, they rely on contractors (Bollen, Paxton, and Morishima 2005) and off-the-shelf measurable, formalistic targets that are useful to show politicians value for money (Bush 2015, 107). This may be part of a process of “dysfunctional bureaucratization” that results in a “hollowed-out organization more preoccupied with administration and management than the substance of development work” (Carothers 2009, 20–21).

In line with this picture, the Institute’s Director explained that because USAID “was huge,” “there was a gap between official regional policy and what was eventually done” with the money. Bureaucratic distance between high-level decision makers and grant officers meant that the latter often “approved things [...] that were not fully compatible with US policy.” Part of the explanation lies at the level of the USAID officer in charge of the Institute: Roma Knee was nicknamed by Buergenthal “the Institute’s godmother.”<sup>83</sup> Her lack of monitoring was of course welcome because the Institute regarded Reagan’s Latin America policy as “unhealthy.”<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, USAID officers seemed to prioritize formal aspects of the grant over substantive ones. In this sense, our Institute source explained that since “we never had financial scandals,” USAID officials stayed on the sidelines. Considering that the emphasis on measurable programs began in earnest in the 1990s (Bush 2015), this portrayal of USAID as light touch, even regarding administrative issues, is credible. In the mid-1980s, USAID officials lacked clear templates to conduct exacting surveillance.

Our framework indicates that donor–grantee relations are also determined by grantee characteristics. If our intuitions are correct, Ford ought to have had different experiences with other NGOs. In fact, in 1986, a Ford officer contrasted the Institute with other organizations:

Grantees do not normally question the propriety of the Foundation’s raising issues about managerial practices or the expertise of the Foundation in the field at issue. And they are usually very receptive to the tools we use to conduct such a discussion (external evaluations, private discussions at all levels of an organization, written questions).<sup>85</sup>

The relationship between Ford and Americas Watch (AW) further illustrates Ford’s systematic attempts to micromanage grantees. Ford resorted to instruments comparable to the ones it used when dealing with the Institute, with the

goal of setting up a regional TAN.<sup>86</sup> This shadow case also reveals that foundations’ leverage is much greater when they avoid coordination problems and grantees are fungible.

Ford was the first—and for 10 years, the largest—funder of Helsinki, Americas, and Asia Watch, which would eventually become part of Human Rights Watch.<sup>87</sup> The funders of Helsinki Watch were close to McGregor-Bundy, Ford’s outgoing president, so much so that the first application in 1978 was not sent to grant officers but to “dear Mac.”<sup>88</sup> Bundy expedited a grant, allowing them to explore the utility of a Watch committee in the United States. Ford’s main human rights officer did raise serious objections, but they went unheeded.<sup>89</sup> In fact, in 1979, shortly before Bundy left the foundation, Ford approved another \$400,000 grant.

Bundy wanted to fund this undertaking before leaving office. In addition to his personal ties to the recipients, there was a Cold War imperative that advised quick action on the Helsinki Agreements. Helsinki Watch got what it wanted with few strings attached because Bundy prevented Ford officers from doing their job. However, this hands-off approach would not last. During subsequent years, Ford closely micromanaged the grantee, which underwent significant transformations in line with foundation wishes. The Watch committees moved from aspiring to become a Washington lobby organization to a multipronged imitation of Amnesty.

By 1981, Ford had a new president and Shepard Forman oversaw the human rights program. Forman anticipated that Watch might once again try to “seek early closure on grant discussions directly through [the president],”<sup>90</sup> and therefore sought to avoid internal coordination problems so that the foundation spoke with one voice. Forman found this particularly important at a time when the recipient was discussing plans to create AW and could thus impinge on Ford’s own plans to build a TAN in the region.

During negotiations about the creation of AW, Ford’s main source of leverage came from making it clear that it perceived the new NGO as fungible. Several human rights lobbies already existed in Washington (e.g., WOLA) and there was not much difference between AW and organizations such as the International Commission of Jurists. Rather than giving money to create yet another NGO that would lobby US foreign policy elites, Ford insisted that AW should conduct fact-finding missions and publish reports, employing staff with knowledge of human rights, and cultivate on-the-ground contacts with human rights monitors and organizations. Ford made it clear that “the Foundation’s underlying strategy [in Latin America] has been to help establish and strengthen human rights groups within the region and to link them to international non-governmental organizations that can work with them to improve human rights conditions.”<sup>91</sup> This is the exact same language they used with regard to the Institute and is further evidence of Ford’s ambitions for the regional TAN.

In addition to the grantee’s fungibility, Ford’s leverage came from avoiding internal coordination problems. Everyone at Ford told AW’s Director Aryeh Neier that he had to do something unique if he wanted to obtain funding amidst fierce competition. This worked: Watch kept its office in Washington, but its prestige increasingly came

<sup>86</sup>This is based on the files from a planning grant for Helsinki Watch and from the first two Ford grants to Americas Watch—PA78-50157, PA82-576, and PA87-614.

<sup>87</sup>Neier to Kubisch and Marks, 1987-02-20.

<sup>88</sup>Bernstein to McGregor-Bundy, 1978-6-18.

<sup>89</sup>Bushey to Sutton, 1978-6-19, 1980-7-24.

<sup>90</sup>Forman to Franklin, 1981-9-11.

<sup>91</sup>Recommendation for Grant Action, 1982-4-8.

<sup>83</sup>Her USAID obituary states that the Institute was the project “she was most proud of.” See <https://usaidalumni.org/roma-knee/>. Accessed November 13, 2022.

<sup>84</sup>Interview, Thompson.

<sup>85</sup>Welna to Kubisch, 1986-11-28, 2.



from outstanding on-the-ground reporting. This shift in the direction of Ford's preferences is clearly seen in Neier's request for a second grant in 1983. Lobbying Washington became less prominent. Instead, Neier highlighted that "Americas Watch has acquired the ability to assemble the most comprehensive, reliable and up-to-date information on human rights conditions in several Latin American countries." He also emphasized that "a role that we consider very important is our support for those who monitor human rights in their own countries."<sup>92</sup>

Ford played a lot of what it had in its micromanagement repertoire. For example, staffing decisions were closely examined, with Ford insisting that professional staff were being hired before the utility and orientation of the Watch committees had been decided. Ford made use of other instruments, such as shortening grant periods, thus compelling Watch leaders to continuously inform about their achievements and repeatedly negotiate plans.<sup>93</sup> Ford also demanded a diversification of donors, to which Watch also reluctantly agreed, and later conditioned grants to Watch's matching ability. Every time Watch failed to find matching funds, they were at Ford's mercy.

The record does reveal pushback, but the relationship was not conflict-ridden, and Ford's impact was palpable. In his memoirs, Neier writes that Ford "attempted to use its financial clout to limit the work of [AW]" but "we didn't yield to the pressure" (Neier 2003, xxvii). His correspondence with Ford, however, shows that AW repeatedly yielded to pressure, adjusting activities to Ford's agenda. On one occasion, for instance, he claimed, "Asia Watch was established at the initiative of the Ford Foundation. The Ford Foundation also proposed that we declare ourselves a group that would operate globally — by adopting a name such as Human Rights Watch."<sup>94</sup>

Our characterization of how general-purpose philanthropic foundations behave vis-à-vis grantees is based on extensive literature on their origin and development, but the cases analyzed in the article do not allow us to probe whether the argument also applies to, say, Gates or MacArthur. We leave this for future research. What the cases do illustrate is the contrast between foundations and aid agencies, and how grantee characteristics alter the impact equation. Moreover, the discussion of Ford's relationship with AW shows that concern about the creation of a TAN was real and went beyond its dealings with the Institute. Our negotiation-oriented approach focuses on the micro-dynamics of donor-grantee relations and is therefore ill-equipped to measure or detect a donor's structural impact on policy fields. But by showing Ford's impact on the profile and goals of two key actors in Latin America's TAN, it stands to reason that the added effect of the transformations induced by Ford across a variety of local and regional organizations must have shaped the human rights regime. In fact, there is no doubt that by the early 1990s, there was a TAN not too dissimilar to the one the foundation envisioned.

The article thus alerts us to donor influence and how exceedingly apt foundations are as norm entrepreneurs. Assumptions about which actors play which roles within TANs have consequences for the types of mechanisms we select to explain norm diffusion, activism, and its impact. We showed that scholars can benefit from paying closer attention to philanthropic foundations. The analysis suggests that the

formation of a Latin American TAN was not an inevitable step in the development of activism. It took an actor like Ford to identify the need to link domestic organizations both vertically and horizontally. Moreover, despite value congruence among these actors, defining which values ought to be prioritized was not something that occurred naturally. In this sense, we showed that Ford disagreed with some important interlocutors over the means for realizing network goals, and acted as a *primus inter pares*, setting the general direction of travel.

The reason why Ford intervened was not that the foundation had the money, but that its officers had a vision. Crucially, Ford took up this idea and did not just simply extend checks hoping that the network would materialize. As the officer in charge of Ford's human rights program explained:

we did not see our work simply as the role of the funder [...] We had a world-wide view of what we were hoping to accomplish through our grant programs, so Ford's funding has always been extremely purposeful.<sup>95</sup>

This implies that foundations operate as norm entrepreneurs and, in fact, can combine all relevant traits (Carpenter et al. 2014): a foundation's head of program is asked to conceive visions for social change; officers marshal knowledge and directly know activists; and their trustees accumulate resources.

### Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available in the *International Studies Quarterly* data archive.

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<sup>92</sup> Neier to Puryear, 1983-12-5.

<sup>93</sup> Picken to Neier, 1989-2-6.

<sup>94</sup> Neier to Picken, 1989-2-08; Americas Watch/Helsinki Watch Executive Committee meeting minutes, 1983-12-29.

<sup>95</sup> Interview, Forman, 2021-03-29.

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