

How the Segal Family Foundation Funds Globally, Acts Locally

Liz Longley | April 02, 2024

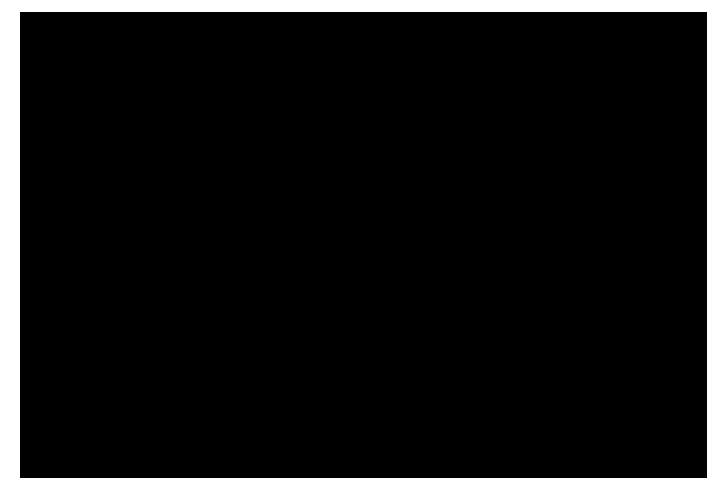


HOMES IN KIGALI, RWANDA. BLACK SHEEP MEDIA/SHUTTERSTOCK

Despite all the growth in global giving, U.S.-based foundations have historically funded close to home. Fewer than a quarter engaged in [international grantmaking](#) over the past few decades.

And while the ideas of locally led development and proximate empowerment are gaining [traction](#), much of that activity has come through through U.S.-based intermediaries. Just [13%](#) of global grant dollars between 2011 and 2019 directly funded organizations based in the countries receiving support.

Global giving would also seem a more natural fit for larger organizations with the staff and resources to navigate the unique challenges involved. That is the case to some extent with juggernauts like Gates and Ford leading the list of largest givers. But independent and family foundations provided 9 in 10 globally focused grants in the past decade, with some smaller names showing up in the lists of top givers.



One of them is the Segal Family Foundation, an early adopter of the idea that the best solution is a local one. It has been punching above its weight in Sub-Saharan Africa since 2006, executing on a grant portfolio that sits [squarely](#) between Gates and Ford in terms of the number of grants made.

Here's how its work has grown to reach 385 partners across 20 African countries — 80% of which are African-led — and its plans to champion Africa through grantmaking, partnerships, community-building and leading a movement toward equitable development with fellow philanthropists.

Origin story

The Segal Family Foundation's story begins with Barry Segal, the New Jersey-based founder and CEO of a successful roofing materials company. After 40 years, Segal retired in 2006 and turned his attention to philanthropy.

To learn more about the topic, he attended the Clinton Global Initiative ([CGI](#)), which helped him both broaden his giving horizons and narrow his priorities. There, former president Bill Clinton opened his eyes to the myriad ways of doing good globally, while encouraging him to hone his focus for effectiveness.

Excited by the opportunities, Segal made his first trip to Africa in 2007 and left with a few important takeaways that continue to drive his family foundation's giving philosophy. Segal saw a notable lack of local resources and opportunities, and tracked that while a number of organizations were working toward the same goals, they were not working together.

As a result, the Segal Family Foundation saw a role for itself in Africa that was grounded in the idea that local solutions are the best solutions, and an opening to create ways for local leaders to work together to achieve collective power — and ultimately, better outcomes.

Building a local infrastructure

Following Segal's first visit to a children's youth village in Rwanda in 2006, the foundation began funding in Rwanda and Tanzania. From there, SFF expanded to neighboring Kenya and Uganda. All four places are still considered among its strongest hub countries.

Later, the foundation looked for geographic impact "further from the beaten funder path," expanding to Burundi and Malawi. Segal built on successes there by expanding further south, to South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Managing Director and Board Chair Martin Segal said that as it grew, the foundation developed a belief in "a world where development is steered by grassroots leaders and power is shifted into the hands of communities."

Over time, Segal shifted its staffing and decision-making model to one that puts power in the hands of local program officers and local communities. Today, its **team** is 70% African-based versus 30% U.S. Eighty percent of its nearly 400 local partners are African led.

Its current engagement strategy includes grantmaking, creating what it refers to as “active partnerships” and building a robust community of proximate funders.

Local projects, local grants

Martin Segal shared that when the foundation was first setting priorities, big projects were getting a lot of funding and attention. After careful consideration, it instead concentrated on local projects that were drawing little focus.

Through 2023, the foundation has made more than 3,000 local grants, second only to Gates, based on number grants made. Between 2024 and 2026, Segal expects to average \$15 million in annual grants averaging \$50,000 each.

Grantmaking currently focuses on the six outcomes it sees as the most dynamic and challenging for Africa, within the foundation’s general focus on Health, Education and Livelihoods. They include improved opportunities for children and families; initiatives that help create dignified employment and economic on-ramps for youth; increasing quality education for learners from marginalized communities and backgrounds; health access and equity; scaling community-driven development; and creating inclusive futures for the socioeconomically marginalized. Climate issues are integrated across all areas.

SFF builds local partnerships with early-stage, up-and-coming organizations that are poised to achieve the kind of budgetary and catalytic growth that can attract large-scale funders. It defines “early stage” as small registered organizations with budgets of less than \$500,000 that typically fly under the radar but that have the structural capacity to deliver good governance and programming.

In keeping with its belief in local solutions, the foundation prioritizes groups that work locally, are locally led, and are deeply connected to local issues — rather than affiliates of national and international organizations. Strong grant candidates provide direct local service, demonstrate the potential to improve their immediate communities over time, and are in a position to be a resource for others within its growing network.

Active partnerships

Segal Family Foundation’s relationships with organizations on the ground span four stages, from a discovery phase that’s based upon developing mutual knowledge and expectations, to a “luminary” phase where the partnership has developed beyond years of foundation support to achieve the kind of budgetary and catalytic growth that can attract large-scale funders.

Segal's theory of change focuses on the ways partnerships can boost community development and drive knowledge and resource-sharing for greater impact. It also catalyzes movement between local leaders and progressive donors by building the kind of evidence needed to support equitable philanthropy in terms of influence and expertise.

The foundation funds a package of active partnership supports and capacity-building services that roughly equal grant expenditures. Open resources provide access to fundraising platforms like [Philantropia](#), as well as \$500 stipends for things like visiting partners, organizational development, connecting with local service providers, and communications and marketing.

The foundation said its decade-plus experience in offering "all manner" of capacity-building has taught it that targeted capacity interventions can have an outsized impact in nurturing early-staged organizations. Program officers and grantee partners typically mutually identify specific areas for organization development like financial controls, governance, or evaluation, then are connected to outside experts.

Leading leaders

Leadership development is also a priority. The foundation recognizes the break-out leaders at partner organizations with awards at its annual meetings. They include Angel for Africa, which honors leaders who serve as resources for others, or Systems Innovators who've developed pioneering models.

Segal also supports a network of African Visionary Fellows, or AVFers, local leaders that are at the vanguard of development, but not yet on the radar of big donors. The program began with its first cohort of 25 in 2017.

Delphine Uwamahoro, founder and executive director of [Our Sisters Opportunity](#) in Rwanda, found the combination of mentorship and exposure to changemakers it provides valuable.

Uwamahoro was recognized as an AVFer for her leadership of an organization that provides pathways to end poverty through education and economic empowerment in her home village. The fellowship has helped her refine her vision and boost capacity. "In most cases, the journey of visionaries is accompanied with loneliness and long waits between opportunities to bring their vision to life," Uwamahoro said. The Segal Family Foundation fellowship helped change that story. "Not only did I get access to coaches to refine and accelerate my vision, our organizational budget increased by 65% during the first year of the fellowship due to the referrals made."

Segal's most successful partners are celebrated with membership in a Luminary Circle that profiles organizations that have graduated beyond SFF, to stand as examples for younger portfolio partnerships.

Building proximate philanthropy

Segal's plans to build the foundation's community across sub-Saharan Africa includes expanding the Luminary Circle to more than 100 active members and creating partner coalitions to build collective power.

In the next three years, the foundation plans to deliver resources of more than \$47 million in unrestricted grants and partnership support to a cohort of between 250 and 300 African organizations. The total value created is expected to exceed \$167 million, when factoring in \$120 million the partners may receive from other funders.

Segal is stepping up as a leader in equitable development by working to help other philanthropists engage through advisory services and by building evidence to support its giving model and philosophy. In 2023, for example, it hosted its first Donor Salon in Kigali, which brought like-minded donors together to trade insights and talk about the realities of collaborating for maximum impact.

As its networks and partnerships continue to grow, Martin Segal said the community that the foundation helped create has exceeded all expectations, something "we couldn't even have imagined."

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