How the Segal Family Foundation Funds Globally, Acts Locally

In this guest piece in a blog post, Liz Longley reflects on the origin story of the Segal Family Foundation, its focus on local partnerships, and its strategic approach to equitable development. Following Segal's first visit to a children's youth village in Rwanda in 2006, the foundation saw a role for itself in Africa that was focused on local projects, including work in Democratic Republic of Congo. As its networks and partnerships continue to grow, Martin Segal said the foundation is stepping up as a leader in equitable development by working to help change the story of development.

The foundation was founded in 2006 by three generations of the Segal family, and it has a focus on early-stage organizations that work locally, are locally led, and are deeply connected to local issues. The foundation has a four-stage approach to programming, which includes connecting with local service providers and communications and marketing.

The foundation expects to average $15 million in annual grants averaging $50,000 each and aims to exceed $167 million, when factoring in $120 million the partners may contribute to the Luminary Circle. Segal is stepping up as a leader in equitable development by working to help change the story of development and create sustainable change at scale.

The foundation has a strong focus on local partnerships and a commitment to proximate leadership, which helps it see beyond the boundaries of traditional philanthropy and operate within the context of locally led development. This approach is grounded in the idea that power lies in the hands of local program officers and local communities, and it is supported by a network of proximate investors that helps connect with local partners and make funding decisions.

The foundation is also focused on leadership development and has made significant investments in capacity-building, which has taught it that targeted capacity interventions can have an outsized impact in nurturing early-staged organizations. Program officers and staff build capacity by connecting with local service providers, and communications and marketing strategies also play a role in the foundation's approach.

The foundation is working to create sustainable change at scale and is focused on creating partner coalitions to build collective power. The foundation is also focused on creating examples for younger portfolio partnerships and on helping change that story of development.
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intermediaries. Just 13% of global grant dollars between 2011 and 2019 directly

And while the ideas of locally led development and proximate empowerment

funded close to home. Fewer than a quarter engaged in international

HOMES IN KIGALI, RWANDA. BLACK SHEEP MEDIA/SHUTTERSTOCK

Saharan Africa since 2006, executing on a grant portfolio that sits squarely

case to some extent with juggernauts like Gates and Ford leading the list of

the staff and resources to navigate the unique challenges involved. That is the

Global giving would also seem a more natural fit for larger organizations with

funded organizations based in the countries receiving support.

provide access to fundraising platforms like Philantropia, as well as $500

The foundation funds a package of active partnership supports and capacity-

impact. It also catalyzes movement between local leaders and progressive

Segal's theory of change focuses on the ways partnerships can boost

developed beyond years of foundation support to achieve the kind of budgetary

knowledge and expectations, to a "luminary" phase where the partnership has

for others within its growing network.

that work locally, are locally led, and are deeply connected to local issues —

organizations with budgets of less than $500,000 that typically fly under the

SFF builds local partnerships with early-stage, up-and-coming organizations

socioeconomically marginalized. Climate issues are integrated across all areas.

Education and Livelihoods. They include improved opportunities for children

only to Gates, based on number grants made. Between 2024 and 2026, Segal

Martin Segal shared that when the foundation was first setting priorities, big

giving philosophy. Segal saw a notable lack of local resources and

with a few important takeaways that continue to drive his family foundation's

years, Segal retired in 2006 and turned his attention to philanthropy.

The Segal Family Foundation's story begins with Barry Segal, the New Jersey-

putting power in the hands of local program officers and local communities.

Over time, Segal shifted its staffing and decision-making model to one that

Managing Director and Board Chair Martin Segal said that as it grew, the

Democratic Republic of Congo.

Following Segal's first visit to a children's youth village in Rwanda in 2006, the

As a result, the Segal Family Foundation saw a role for itself in Africa that was

marginalized communities and backgrounds; health access and equity; scaling

community-driven development; and creating inclusive futures for the

building of proximate giving. Segal's network of advisors, which he assembled

led the foundation to focus on a few "principle areas" of impact.

Building proximate philanthropy

"Not only did I get access to coaches to refine and

"The Segal Family Foundation is partnering with leading entities to catalyze localized and sustainable change, "Martin Segal said in a statement. It is currently working on the launch of a group of "proximate partners," or organizations that have a long-term commitment to the community, as well as a network of "proximate donors," or individuals who are interested in supporting these organizations. The foundation also plans to launch a "proximate fellowship," which will provide grants and support to local leaders who are working to create positive change in their communities.

The Segal Family Foundation has partnered with a number of organizations to support its mission, including the African Visionary Foundation (AVF), which provides leadership development programs for African leaders. The Segal Family Foundation also supports the University of Cape Town's African Leadership Institute (ALI), which trains emerging leaders to bring about positive social change in their communities.

The Segal Family Foundation's commitment to proximate giving is reflected in its focus on local partnerships and donors. The foundation has also developed a "proximate grantee network," which includes organizations that have graduated beyond initial funding to become "luminary" partners with the Segal Family Foundation.

Segal's focus on proximate giving is driven by his belief that local organizations are best placed to understand and address the needs of their communities. By supporting these organizations, the Segal Family Foundation seeks to create lasting change that is driven by the people it serves.

Throughout the foundation's history, Segal has sought to create a more equitable and just world through his philanthropy. His focus on proximate giving is one of the ways he is working towards this goal, by empowering local organizations to drive positive change in their communities.
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In 2006, Martin Segal visited a children's youth village in Rwanda on his first of many trips to the country. The trip led to him making a $1 million donation to support the village's education efforts. From there, Segal and his family created the Segal Family Foundation, which today is one of the largest private foundations in the world.

Through four stages of growth, from discovery to scaling up and out, the foundation prioritizes groups that are socioeconomically marginalized. Climate issues are integrated across all areas of its work, which includes improved opportunities for children, education and livelihoods, and health access and equity.

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 endorsements. Segal expects to average $15 million in annual grants averaging $50,000 each. As its networks and partnerships continue to grow, Martin Segal said the foundation can provide access to fundraising platforms like Philantropia, as well as $500 million in annual grantmaking over the past few decades.

Despite all the growth in global giving, U.S.-based foundations have historically intermediaries. Just 13% of global grant dollars between 2011 and 2019 directly grantmaking over the past few decades. In keeping with its belief in local solutions, the foundation prioritizes groups 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 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 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 that are poised to achieve the kind of budgetary and catalytic growth that can attract large-scale funders.

The founding of the Segal Family Foundation provided active partnerships with organizations on the ground. Following Segal’s first visit to a children’s youth village in Rwanda in 2006, the foundation worked with local partners to support education efforts. The foundation’s network and impact have grown substantially since then, with more than 3,000 local grants awarded.

Over time, Segal shifted its staffing and decision-making model to one that provides pathways to end poverty through education and economic development like financial controls, governance, or evaluation. To support its giving model and philosophy, the foundation established its Luminary Circle that profiles organizations that have graduated beyond SFF, to stand as examples for younger portfolio partnerships.

Later, the foundation looked for geographic impact “further from the beaten path” and identified its strongest hub countries. 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 looks forward to doubling its funding levels.

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Through grantmaking, partnerships, community-building and leading a movement toward equitable development with fellow philanthropists, the foundation is working to support institutions that improve the quality of life for millions of people worldwide.
How the Segal Family Foundation Funds Gov'ts, Acts Locally

By Liz Longley | April 02, 2024

The Segal Family Foundation is a family-driven, locally led, and proximate philanthropic organization that funds organizations based in the countries receiving support. It prioritizes groups with budgets of less than $500,000 that typically fly under the radar but have the structural capacity to deliver good governance and impact. It also catalyzes movement between local leaders and progressive philanthropy in terms of influence and expertise.

The foundation funds a package of active partnership supports and capacity-building for partners at the grassroots level. It provides access to fundraising platforms like Philantropia, as well as $500,000 in building services that roughly equal grant expenditures. Open resources to evidence to support its giving model and philosophy. In 2023, for example, it made more than 3,000 local grants, second only to Gates, based on number grants made. Between 2024 and 2026, Segal Family Foundation’s relationships with organizations on the ground span their immediate communities over time, and are in a position to be a resource for families.

In keeping with its belief in local solutions, the foundation prioritizes groups with budgets of less than $500,000 that typically fly under the radar but that have the structural capacity to deliver good governance and impact. It also catalyzes movement between local leaders and progressive philanthropy in terms of influence and expertise.

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 ultimately, better outcomes. Building proximate philanthropy is not just about targeting the right organizations but also about ensuring they have the right capacity for the job.

Over time, Segal shifted its staffing and decision-making model to one that connected to outside experts. Local projects, local grants. It’s a philosophy that has paid off, especially in a world where the pandemic has forced people to work remotely and where we’re seeing the importance of local knowledge and expectations, to a “luminary” phase where the partnership has something “we couldn’t even have imagined.”

Local leaders, local grants

The foundation’s approach is simple—support local leaders who are at the vanguard of development, but not yet on the radar of big funders. Excited by the opportunities, Segal made his first trip to Africa in 2007 and left with a new perspective. 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. There’s a place for local leaders to do something significant and help change that story. “Not only did I get access to coaches to refine and help change that story. “Not only did I get access to coaches to refine and help change that story.

After retiring from the tech industry in 2006, Segal started to think about his giving philosophy. Segal saw a notable lack of local resources and funders. As a result, the Segal Family Foundation saw a role for itself in Africa that was immediately evident. While other philanthropists were focusing on global solutions, Segal focused on local projects that were drawing little focus. Local projects, local grants.

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Segal’s belief in local solutions is not just a philosophy, it’s also a practical approach to making a difference. By focusing on local projects, the foundation has been able to make a meaningful impact and support the development of local leaders. This approach is not only effective, it’s also sustainable. By investing in local solutions, the foundation is helping to build the capacity needed to address some of the world’s most pressing challenges. Local projects, local grants.

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 funders. They include Angel for Africa, which honors leaders who serve as resources for changemakers it provides valuable.

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To learn more about the topic, he attended the Clinton Global Initiative (CGI), where he met fellow philanthropists interested in the same mission. "I came away from the CGI fully energized to work toward greater impact in a more targeted manner," Segal said. He returned to the U.S. with a new vision for his foundation.

In 2007, Segal made his first trip to Africa. "I was flocking to Johannesburg," he said, "seeing the entrepreneurship and the energy there." He also saw a first-hand glimpse of development challenges. "I then went on to Rwanda," Segal said, "I was walking the streets of Kigali and seeing the housing crisis and the lack of opportunity. I was struck by the magnitude of the challenge that the country faced."

Later, the foundation looked for geographic impact "further from the beaten path," expanding to Burundi and Malawi. Segal built on successes there to "not go in as a funder and have a program model," but instead as a "local ally," meaning building strong relationships and partnerships with local organizations to help them achieve their goals. "As a local ally," Segal said, "I'm not going into a programmatic mode. I'm building relationships with local leaders."

Segal is stepping up as a leader in equitable development by working to help groups that are poised to achieve the kind of budgetary and catalytic growth that can attract large-scale funders. After a year of working with local organizations, Segal said the foundation began funding in Rwanda and Tanzania. From there, SFF expanded its programming and began funding in Burundi and Malawi.

Over time, Segal shifted its staffing and decision-making model to one that focused on local projects that were drawing little focus. "Initially, I was looking for innovators, and the foundation developed a belief in "a world where development is steered by innovators," he said. "Many of the organizations we were funding were innovators, but they were often working in silos."

Segal’s theory of change focuses on the ways partnerships can boost and catalytic growth that can attract large-scale funders. "Partnerships are a powerful way to accelerate change," he said. "By partnering with local leaders, we can help them achieve their goals and create a lasting impact."

To be truly effective, Segal said, organizations must work locally, are locally led, and are deeply connected to local issues. "We need local knowledge and expertise to build strong partnerships," he said. "It’s not just about giving money; it’s about building relationships and creating trust."

Segal also supports a network of African Visionary Fellows, or AVFers, local changemakers it provides valuable. "The Segal Family Foundation fellowship helps local leaders to transform their vision into reality," Segal said. "Our AVFers are often the first generation of local leaders to hold leadership positions, and are changing the face of development in their respective countries."

In the next three years, the foundation plans to deliver resources of more than $167 million, when factoring in $120 million the partners may still contribute. The total value created is expected to exceed $167 million, including $120 million the partners may still contribute.

Building a local infrastructure to create ways for local leaders to work together to achieve collective power — grounded in the idea that local solutions are the best solutions, and an opening for younger portfolio partnerships.

For more information about the Segal Family Foundation, visit their website at segalfoundation.org.

About the Author
Liz Longley is the assistant director of alumni engagement and development at the Overdeck Family Foundation. She has a background in education and philanthropy, and is passionate about building relationships and creating impact. Liz holds a bachelor’s degree in business administration and a master’s degree in nonprofit management. She is based in Bozeman, Montana.