

What Is Missing Before Resources Move

The Missing Public-Interest Infrastructure for Issue-Governed Philanthropy

Core Thesis

Philanthropy has built many sophisticated tools — nonprofit databases, grantmaking platforms, workflow systems, outcome frameworks, and place-based data portals. These systems make organizations, grants, outcomes, and geographies more visible than ever. Yet funders still struggle to answer core issue-level questions before allocating resources:

- Who is responding, and who is not?
- Where is funding already flowing, and where are the gaps?
- What are communities experiencing?
- Which barriers and roles matter most?
- What does the issue itself require before organizations are compared?

The problem is not lack of data or tools. The problem is that existing systems are built around different units of analysis (organizations, grants, donors, places, applications, portfolios), and they do not add up to a governed, issue-level preparation environment before money moves.

This paper asks: If issue-governed decision preparation is necessary, what infrastructure layer is missing to make it possible at scale?

What Infrastructure Exists Today

The paper surveys current philanthropic infrastructure and finds a rich but fragmented ecosystem:

- Organization- and grant-centric tools (e.g., Candid) reveal nonprofit profiles, funding histories, and funder behavior.
- Place-based tools (e.g., PolicyMap) reveal demographic conditions, economic indicators, and spatial patterns of need.
- Outcome and evidence tools (e.g., Impact Genome) connect interventions to outcomes and evidence quality.
- Workflow and grant management systems (Fluxx, SmartSimple, Foundant, Submittable) support application processing, reviews, approvals, and reporting.
- Donor guidance and discovery tools (e.g., GiveWell, Giving Compass) help donors find organizations and opportunities.
- Community listening tools and public-sector data systems capture feedback and conditions in specific domains.

Individually, these tools are effective at what they were designed to do. Collectively, they are organized around separate centers of gravity, not around the issue landscape itself.

What Is Still Missing Before Resources Move

The missing piece becomes visible when a funder tries to understand an issue — not just select an organization. The paper identifies six categories of information that are needed together for issue-level preparation:

1. Conditions of need
Data and analysis about who is affected, where, and how, across multiple sources and definitions.
2. Institutional response
A view of who is already responding (nonprofits, public agencies, tribal governments, mutual aid, clinics, faith communities, informal networks) and how roles and coverage map across the landscape.
3. Capital flows
Not just individual grants, but how money moves across the issue: where it is concentrated or absent, how restricted or flexible it is, and how timing and intermediaries shape impact.
4. Community-level signals
Lived experience, local interpretation, trust, and priorities from communities closest to the issue, entering via many channels (listening sessions, surveys, advisory groups, stories) and carrying governance obligations.
5. Contextual factors
Policy, geography, infrastructure, housing, history, culture, trust, language access, and other structural conditions that shape whether responses can work.
6. Organization role and fit
How specific organizations fit into the broader ecosystem: which roles they are positioned to play, where they complement or overlap others, and where smaller or less visible actors are critical.

Each of these exists somewhere in the current ecosystem, but they are rarely assembled, governed, and maintained together in one decision-preparation environment. As a result, philanthropy can understand parts of an issue but not the issue as a whole.

Why the Missing Layer Matters

The absence of a governed issue-level layer matters most when decisions are:

- Strategic, systems-focused, collaborative, place-based, or public-interest in nature.
- About directing capital across an issue, not just picking among applicants.
- About ecosystem-level effects (fields, communities, systems), not only organizational health.

Fragmentation is real, but the paper argues it is mostly a symptom of deeper problems:

- Power asymmetry between funders and affected communities.
- Capital-flow misalignment relative to actual need and response ecosystems.
- Uneven evidence regimes and weak shared standards.
- Accountability gaps at the issue level.

Thus, the missing layer is not just about connecting data. It is about building a shared, governed environment for assembling, interpreting, challenging, and using issue-level knowledge before decisions are made.

What Makes Infrastructure “Public-Interest”

Not every tool aimed at social problems is public-interest infrastructure. The paper emphasizes:

- Public-interest infrastructure is defined by governance and stewardship, not by software type, nonprofit status, or open-source labels alone.
- It must protect against:
 - Vendor capture (dependence on one provider’s changing terms).
 - Funder capture (infrastructure quietly reflecting one sponsor’s priorities).
 - Data enclosure (information of broad value locked behind restrictive terms).
 - Platform dependency (convenient but opaque systems that can’t be challenged or exited).

Cross-sector examples (OpenStreetMap, 360Giving, DHIS2, OpenMRS, UK Biobank, etc.) show that robust public-interest infrastructure features:

- Clear governance, inclusive access rules, transparency, interoperability, accountability, and long-term stewardship.
- Protection against unilateral control of essential standards, interfaces, and interpretive authority.

For philanthropy, this is critical because a system that shapes how issues are seen before resources move wields real power; that power requires governance.

Community-Originated Information and Governance

A central argument is that community-originated information is not ordinary data. It includes:

- Lived experience, cultural knowledge, trust signals, local interpretation, and priorities.
- Often relates to collective identity, territory, wellbeing, or protected knowledge.

Governance frameworks (Indigenous data sovereignty, CARE, OCAP, AIATSIS, participatory data stewardship, community-based participatory research) converge on key principles:

- Communities may be rightsholders, not just “informants.”
- Authority, consent, provenance, interpretation, and benefit-sharing must travel with the information.
- Institutional “stewardship” is not ownership; community interpretation is distinct from institutional summaries.

For infrastructure, this means:

- Systems must carry permissions, consent, provenance, sensitivity flags, interpretation status, and restrictions with community-originated information.
- Some knowledge should never enter shared systems (e.g., sacred or highly sensitive cultural information).
- Community knowledge must not be simply extracted, aggregated, and turned into institutional evidence.

Issue-governed philanthropy therefore requires that community signals be treated as governance-bound inputs, not raw data.

Minimum Viable Infrastructure

The paper argues that the missing layer is not a giant centralized data warehouse. The minimum viable infrastructure for issue-governed preparation is a thin, federated layer that connects existing systems while preserving governance and provenance.

It sketches six interconnected layers:

1. Registry and crosswalk layer
Stable identifiers and mappings so organizations, places, issues, grants, and sources can be linked across systems.
2. Grants and transactions layer
Visibility into how capital actually moves across issues over time, not just static grant records.
3. Source catalog
A way to describe, find, and connect to diverse evidence sources (datasets, reports, evaluations, indicators) without centralizing all data.
4. Provenance layer
Tracking where claims and summaries come from, who created or transformed them, and what versions were used.
5. Quality and challenge layer
Mechanisms for review, challenge, correction, and documenting disagreement — recognizing that issue-level preparation involves interpretation, not just facts.
6. Governance and access layer
Structures for participation, permissions, protection of sensitive and community-originated information, and control over how information is used and changed.

This architecture is federated, not centralized: information remains with its original stewards; the preparation layer connects and documents rather than absorbs.

Open Core, Governed Edge

To reconcile transparency and protection, the paper proposes an “open core, governed edge” model:

- Open core
Shared elements that can be broadly open: identifiers, registries, metadata, taxonomies, provenance structures, many grant records, governance policies, and challenge mechanisms. Openness here increases public value and accountability.
- Governed edge
Spaces where access is restricted and governed: community-originated information, sensitive local knowledge, legally protected or high-risk data. Here, authority, consent, and cultural protocols define who can see and use what.

This model avoids a false open/closed binary and makes it possible to be discoverable and governable at the same time.

Limits, Risks, and Responsible Claims

The paper is careful not to overpromise:

- It does not claim philanthropy lacks data, tools, or intelligence.
- It does not claim infrastructure will solve power imbalances, value conflicts, or political realities.
- It does not claim that issue taxonomies, population ontologies, or community governance questions are already solved.

Instead, it makes a narrower claim:

Philanthropy lacks a durable, governed, issue-level decision-preparation environment that brings together conditions of need, institutional response, capital flows, community signals, contextual factors, and organization role and fit before resources are allocated.

Even with such infrastructure:

- Disagreements, uncertainty, and contested interpretations will remain.
- Dashboards and indicators can create false certainty if limitations and gaps aren't visible.
- Adoption, stewardship, and governance capacity — not just technical design — will determine success.

Infrastructure should therefore surface what is unknown and contested, not only what is measured.

Conclusion: Infrastructure for Seeing Before Selecting

This paper is a companion to the first white paper:

- Paper 1 diagnosed the decision-design problem: philanthropy uses organization-level processes to answer issue-level questions, and needs issue-governed decision preparation.
- Paper 2 identifies the infrastructure gap: philanthropy lacks a public-interest, issue-level preparation layer that can responsibly assemble and govern the knowledge needed *before* resources move.

The proposed infrastructure:

- Is federated, thin, and governed — not a universal database.
- Organizes around the issue landscape, not just organizations or grants.
- Treats community-originated knowledge as governed, not owned.
- Aims not for perfect decisions, but for better-prepared, more accountable, and more legitimate ones.

“Seeing before selecting” becomes not just a sequencing improvement, but a new standard of responsibility: understanding the issue landscape — and governing how that understanding is built — before choosing organizations and moving capital.