

MacKenzie Scott's Far-Reaching Giving Continues to Grow. What Impact Is She Having?

Philip Rojc | November 15, 2022



MACKENZIE SCOTT'S GRANTMAKING HAS EXTENDED INTO NEW GEOGRAPHIES, INCLUDING INDIA. MANOJ PAATEEL/SHUTTERSTOCK

One of the philanthropic sector's real weaknesses over the years has been a tendency to go long on the strategy and short on the execution. That is, spending far too much time and resources spelling out intricate goals and theories of change, only to end up underfunding, micromanaging and delaying support to nonprofits serving people in need.

That certainly doesn't apply to MacKenzie Scott. In her latest Medium post (and the first since she parted ways with Dan Jewett), the prolific but media-averse mega-donor updated us on the nearly \$2 billion she's given away over the past seven months. All told, this newest batch of recipients brings Scott's total outlay over the past three years to roughly \$14 billion. Many of these organizations have shared news of their gifts already, while others have not.

As in the past, Scott sought to de-center herself in a short preface to the list of grantees. She began by sharing a poem by writer Gwen Nell Westerman, which Scott said "inspires me by shutting me up every time I read it." Written from the perspective of an Indigenous person at some generic nonprofit shindig, the poem, "Dakota Homecoming," appears to depict a situation where well-meaning but clueless white organizers remain centered in their own narrative while the "honored guest" is pressed to "tell us what to say."

"I needn't ask those I care about what to say to them, or what to do for them," Scott wrote. "I can share what I have with them to stand behind them as they speak and act for themselves."

That philosophy, which we've seen reflected throughout Scott's three years as a mega-donor, informs this tranche of gifts. Simultaneously, Scott and her team have still made decisions about what kinds of organizations and areas of work get funded. Seeing as we're on round five at this point, it's safe to say some definite patterns have emerged, even as Scott's giving project continues to grow and evolve. And while we're still waiting for the promised grants database to begin to see some hard data take shape, in the form of a new report from the Center for Effective Philanthropy documenting the substantial benefits Scott's grants have brought for recipients thus far.

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Here are several takeaways from MacKenzie Scott's latest grant drop, and our growing understanding of her remarkable giving project's impacts.

Scott's a charter school fan after all

Charter schools have long been a favored (and controversial) cause among the billionaire set, but until now, Scott hasn't done much to get behind them. That's changed. This round, Scott gave money to no less than around three dozen charters and charter networks across the country. That makes her, virtually overnight, one of charter schools' biggest backers.

Such thoroughgoing charter support might have earned Scott more criticism a decade or so ago than she's likely to get today. Even as she supplemented direct support for dozens of charters with a gift to the Charter School Growth Fund — which received millions in the past from boosters like the Walton Family Foundation and the Gates Foundation to evangelize the charter model — much of the energy around charter schools as a means to “reform” K-12 education via market-based competition has faded. These days, even the biggest charter backers are more likely to say that charters are merely one of several approaches to education they support.

That seems to be the case with Scott's funding. Taken in context with the rest of her education giving, Scott's embrace of charters in 2022 seems like simply another way she's backing direct service providers, and not some kind of ideological stance.

Educational equity remains a focus

As evidence of the above, consider Scott's wide-ranging and expanding support for educational equity. Carrying on with a theme we've seen over and over again in her giving, Scott backed numerous nonprofits making it easier for disadvantaged children and youth to get ahead in school and as they enter the workplace. That includes groups operating across multiple cities, like [Breakthrough Collaborative](#) (one of the many recipients this round that went public with its gift earlier this year), as well as organizations focused on specific places, like Achieve Atlanta and teacher residency programs in Kansas City, Nashville and St. Louis.

A couple grantees are seeking to elevate teaching careers as an empowering option for young men of color, including Brothers Empowered to Teach and the Urban Ed Academy. Scott also supported several nonprofits working in the education-to-workforce equity space, like One Million Degrees, Opportunities Industrialization Centers of America and Urban Alliance.

Finally, Scott extended direct support to over 10 public school districts across the country. As we saw when we covered her [seemingly out-of-the-blue gift of \\$20 million to the Fresno Unified School District](#), this unconventional support sparked more than the usual mixture of gratitude and bafflement from the recipients. They include major districts in Chicago and Detroit as well as much smaller districts in more out-of-the-way places like White River, South Dakota.

Immigrant and refugee groups have a friend in Scott

Grants to organizations serving immigrants and refugees are nothing new for Scott, but she doubled down on that support this year. I counted over 20 recipients whose main missions involve serving or advocating for immigrant communities and refugees, both in the U.S. and abroad. That includes organizations focused on policy and movement building in the U.S., like the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA) and the [Four Freedoms Fund](#), as well as service providers like the Immigrant Legal Resource Center and the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service.

Intersectionality is a focus for many of these grantees, including the UndocuBlack Network, the Black LGBTQIA+ Migrant Project, the Women's Refugee Commission and others. [Narrative change](#) is another theme for groups like Define American. Several Scott recipients in the immigration and refugee space work mostly or solely outside the U.S., like Asylum Access (which operates in Mexico, Thailand and Malaysia), or Cohere and RefugePoint, which conduct much of their work in Africa.

An expanding palette of global giving

[Scott's last round of gifts](#) heralded a major expansion of her global giving. [Brazil, in particular, was a focus](#), and while this round did include some contributions to Brazilian nonprofits, other countries and regions got the bulk of Scott's global support. Notable among them is India, where Scott backed a variety of causes ranging from support for the country's vulnerable migrant workers to public health efforts. Women's empowerment was a theme for Scott's Indian giving, including through grantees like Ibtada and Study Hall Educational Foundation.

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Women's empowerment was also a theme uniting most of the Latin American organizations Scott backed, including in places like Colombia (Fondo Lunaria Mujer), Mexico (Instituto de Liderazgo Simone de Beauvoir) and across the region (Laboratoria).

Scott also moved money to more organizations working in Africa, like the Desmond Tutu Health Foundation, Food for Education and the Luminos Fund, as well as to several policy shops and funding vehicles confronting global poverty at large — examples include the Global Development Incubator, Innovations for Poverty Action and the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation.

Direct service groups with local chapters

Ever since she burst onto the scene as a mega-giver, Scott has showered billions of dollars upon well-established U.S. nonprofits with networks of local chapters. They aren't the sexiest names in the nonprofit world, but Scott's support for these direct service stalwarts reflects well on her ability to avoid trying to reinvent the wheel— as some other billionaires are wont to do — and just get lots of money out to groups capable of distributing those resources widely.

This round, national organizations serving children and youth got the majority of these gifts. They include Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (\$122.6 million), Girl Scouts of the USA (\$84.5 million), Friends of the Children (\$44 million) and Junior Achievement USA (\$39 million). Scott also contributed to 25 National Urban League affiliates to the tune of "more than \$100 million," according to a [press release](#).

What happens when the safe is empty?

With 343 grantees this round, Scott didn't confine her giving to those categories alone. Gifts also went out to numerous LGBTQ organizations, [health conversion foundations](#), disability advocacy groups, mental health nonprofits, community funders in the South, several environmental nonprofits, and even a couple of workers' rights nonprofits — the National Day Laborer Organizing Network and the Worker Defense Project.

All told, it's another chapter in the vast tale that is MacKenzie Scott's philanthropy — which is all the more impressive given the fact that, as that new report on her giving from the Center for Effective Philanthropy found, the median size of Scott's gifts stands at \$8 million. A full 88% of recipients described the gifts as the largest unrestricted contributions they've ever received.

And yet. Even as the billions flow and Scott's fortune noticeably dwindles (believe it or not), we still haven't really gotten a sense of a unifying strategy or theory of change knitting together all of this worthy work.

That may be the point, of course. Scott's grantmaking philosophy has always been to trust her grantees (though she's still choosing them), and to try to de-center herself in the process. She's not the type to dictate to grantees from on high, and that's a good thing. In terms of grantmaking practices — call it execution — her approach has been exemplary in the degree of trust it entails, particularly in its steadfast dedication to general support. Case in point: in the CEP report, two-thirds of leaders interviewed said the money will significantly strengthen long-term organizational capacity, and 90% said the money is improving financial stability. We may see the impact of Scott's support, in terms of strengthening this vast ecosystem of organizations working toward equity, reverberate for many years to come.

But there is a flip-side to this decentralized approach. As IP editor David Callahan [argued earlier this year](#) in a piece addressed to Scott, great tactics don't necessarily add up to a winning long-term strategy. Scott is already "down" to under \$30 billion, and [unlike her former husband](#), she's well on track to give away her entire fortune during her lifetime. What happens when she has no more to give? What happens when the financial benefits of these gifts, significant as they are, run their course? As the CEP report notes, "One reason not all leaders perceive this grant as significantly strengthening long-term stability may be the one-time nature of the gift." And more broadly, will underlying challenges like poverty and inequity, which Scott clearly cares about, be any less pressing when her giving is complete?

We don't know the answers to those questions, but they're worth asking as Scott's giving project evolves and she spreads her immense fortune over an entire planet where it is, in the end, still a drop in the bucket.

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