

# Chorus Foundation retrospective: A Q&A with founder and chair Farhad Ebrahimi

By Senowa Mize-Fox and Farhad Ebrahimi

**NCRP:** Farhad, I wanted to meet with you to essentially talk about the story of Chorus Foundation that you, you know, have some involvement in [laughs]. And Chorus is still sunsetting at the end of this year, is that correct?

**FE:** Yeah, yeah, this is our final year.

**NCRP:** Final year. How are you feeling about, overall, about the final year?

**FE:** Pretty good. I think that the personal, closing a big chapter, “what am I going to do next” stuff? I think that’s one of those things where that hasn’t really hit me emotionally yet. I’m in that space where I’m feeling a way that I’m not feeling a way yet, if that makes sense. But, as far as what we’ve done, and what, hopefully that sets up for other folks to do and things like that. I’m feeling pretty great about it.

an example of a family philanthropy or individual donor activity, where the idea was, this is not going to be like an intergenerational thing, this is not going to be in perpetuity. And I think the initial ideas were twofold: One was my not wanting to create some sort of thing that then is handed off to my kids or to nibblings, but something that like accomplishes a job of redistributing resources, and doesn’t exist any longer than it needs to, to do that.

But that evolved over time I think, compelled by the urgency of the work that our grantees were doing around climate. But you know, there were other tipping points as well, around economic inequality, about, you know, our democracy, that it just made more sense to move the resources now rather than later. That’s really when we shifted from

being like a vague gesture, at sunsetting within my lifetime, to let’s have a strategic planned spend down over 10 years.

But then the final phase of thinking about it was really around thinking about a just transition as

applied to the philanthropic sector. As we proceeded into our spend down, we really started thinking that what we’re doing is we’re decommissioning an organization. There’s an argument elsewhere in philanthropy that organizations like this need to exist in perpetuity, because people are dependent on them. And so if we’re decommissioning something that other folks might feel like people are dependent on, what does it look like



Farhad Ebrahimi

to support the kind of infrastructure at the community level that credibly makes them that much less dependent on outside philanthropic or investment organizations such as our own? That really has become our ultimate reason for thinking about spending down, but these are each additive, right? Like each of these reasons sort of reinforced the ones before it.

**NCRP:** I’m wondering, along those lines, what does it mean to be informed by movements? You talked about how the state of the world, and your conversations with movements have kind of like led you to spend down. And so, I want to know, what does that mean for you?

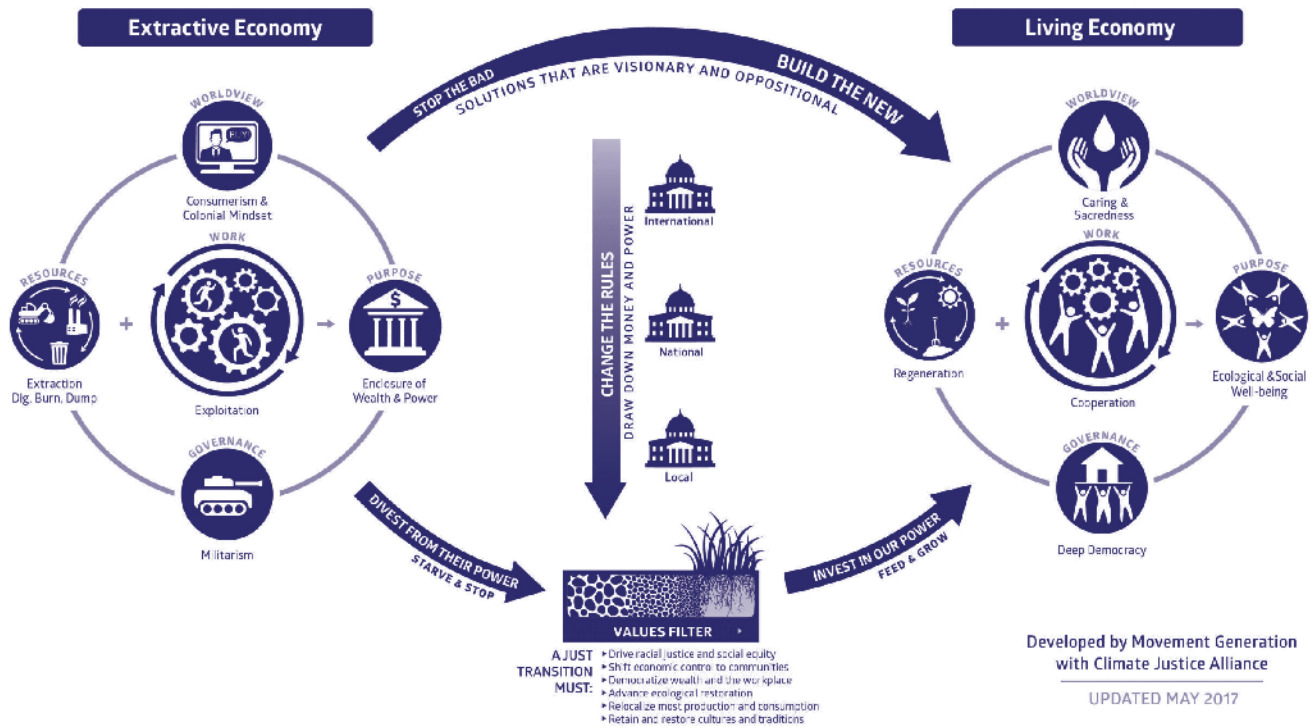
**FE:** I mean, I think it starts with being really as relational as possible and approaching our work with a radical humility. In philanthropy we can talk a lot about processes and structures: how do we get those exactly right? How do we make decisions about who to fund if we’re making the decisions? Or how do we create processes for democratic

*“We see ourselves as instruments of movements. And to do so, we need to be flexible, we need to be emergent, we need to be relational.”*

**NCRP:** Yeah, that’s, that’s awesome. And I definitely I resonate with that feeling. I think before big milestones, I’m always like, why is it not hitting me that I’m graduating, I’m leaving this thing? That’s a very real, real, real feeling. And so, I’m wondering what led to the decision to sunset Chorus.

**FE:** It was always the idea for Chorus to sunset within my lifetime. It was always

## A STRATEGY FRAMEWORK FOR JUST TRANSITION



The story of Chorus Foundation is the story of a single-issue funder that chose to be led by movement groups' Just Transition framework.

decision making, if it's community members making those decisions? How do we structure collaborations between funders? Things like that.

Don't get me wrong, process and structure are legitimate areas of inquiry. It's really important that we try to learn from past efforts and really get them right. And also, to me to what it means to be informed by and accountable to movements is that those processes and structures are ultimately only as important, or only as useful, as our willingness to change them or scrap them entirely if the movement leadership and community leadership that we're in relationship with informs us that these structures are not working for the folks that they're supposed to be working for. Part of it is how we show up.

We see ourselves as an instrument of movements. And to do so we need to be flexible, we need to be emergent, we need

to be relational, we need to be the kind of folks that people can reach out to easily without fear of it being like, a whole thing, reaching out to a funder. We're receptive and ready to respond if there's anything that we could be doing differently, or if there's anything that we need to do because of something another funder did. And maybe it's not even our fault, but we're in a position to help folks deal with it. To me, being informed by movements has to do with how we take our leadership from movement folks. Not that we say what we're going to do, and we get everything right. It's that we're in constant conversation. And are always willing to do things differently. And relatively quickly, and with relatively few asks of our grantee partners, for us to have what we need to be able to do things differently.

**NCRP:** Thank you! So, there's a two-part question here: who were the groups that first led you to this concept of Just

Transition and thinking about it in the way you do? And what were the next steps in terms of ceding power kind of under that framework?

I'm really fascinated with what you said about a Just Transition framework in terms of shifting power in the philanthropic sector, but also, Just Transition, means something in the world as well, in terms of climate justice and making sure that frontline communities are supported as we shift from a more carbon-focused economy.

**FE:** And I mean, they're directly connected to each other. I have a deep love and respect for Climate Justice Alliance, Movement Generation, specific place-based organizations like Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, Asian Pacific Environmental Network, Center for Story-based Strategy. These are all folks that engaged with Chorus. You know, they invested in our leadership.

They didn't just try to connect with us because they thought we would be more pleasant people to fundraise from than some of the other foundations they knew. I would like to think we were more pleasant folks right to have that side of the conversation! But it was also very much about their, you know, being interested in us as people, as an organization. They wanted to see, what are we up to? What are we doing? How are we engaging with our peers in philanthropy? And part of what was in that conversation with these groups was, the clarity that they had around how climate is an on ramp to just transition as a frame and just transition as a frame is bigger than just climate.

I think the story of Chorus, in many ways, is the story of a family foundation that started with this issue, focusing on climate. And through no small ways, just transition as a frame broke out of that single-issue approach, into a multi-issue approach towards thinking of systemic change, that really centered questions of equity and power, which is a way of describing what we learned from just transition. You know, you can't have systems change if you're not thinking deeply about equity and power. And this discovery was at the same time that a lot of folks in climate philanthropy were scratching at the surface of like, oh, this is this is a big systemic thing, right? This isn't just about one issue.

So those organizations, I think, were trying to talk to a lot of folks about expanding, they're thinking about what effective climate work really needs to look like. And they were not only having that influence on us, but inviting us into that process of reaching out to others in philanthropy. And then, something interesting was happening, where there's this appetite in philanthropy, to hear about how movements are thinking about just transition and how the movements for climate and environmental justice are, you know,

very clearly about more than just climate and environmental justice, right? That for those of us who had been in relation with these movements to see them show up talking about housing, or talking about policing, and mass incarceration or talking about, migration or talking about any number of other things, that it just made sense, whether there was climate in the group's name or not. So, the question became how do we how do we talk to more funders about this?

**NCRP:** I am curious. If you had to give a speech to these foundations that are at this inflection point, wondering, "Should we sunset? What's the point?" and they're kind of struggling with this, what would you say to them? And don't hold back, please?

**FE:** Something I'm really interested in is how to help folks see that this process of going from holding power accountably to finding ways to share power to ultimately try to find ways to hand over power entirely, is a liberating process.... We're actually deeply asking people to show up as protagonists and agents, just in a way that's very different from what they've been encouraged to do. And I think it's a shift in "protagonism." It's not saying, you don't get to be a protagonist anymore, people don't value your input anymore. It's about saying, there are ways in which people deeply

need you to show up and leadership and want to hear your wisdom, and your expertise and things like that. But it's not about deciding where money goes in other people's communities. That idea that like everybody who currently sits right in some structure of power and privilege can find their own version of like, what their influence can be, in a way that's transformative and regenerative. It's tremendously liberating to realize that, you know, you can still be a hero, just not the kind of hero the current system has shaped you to be.

For Chorus as part of our spend down, this one of the concrete examples we can point to: this is what we mean by us being the training wheels for our grantees, for community organizations and for community members to build their own infrastructure for making decisions about how money gets allocated in their own community.

**NCRP:** That's such a wonderful note to end on!

*Senowa Mize-Fox is the Senior Movement Engagement Associate for Climate Justice at NCRP. Farhad Ebrahimi is the Founder and President of the Chorus Foundation and an NCRP Board Member.*



Kentuckians for the Commonwealth protest ahead of I Love Mountains Day 2011.