

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION<sup>Review</sup>

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***MacArthur Foundation Supplement***  
**Selecting a Pool of Bold Ideas**  
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# Selecting a Pool of Bold Ideas

How the University of Pennsylvania's Center for High Impact Philanthropy winnowed 100&Change's Top 200 Entries

BY ANNE FEROLA & LINDSAY KIJEWSKI

**T**housands of applicants from around the world responded to the MacArthur Foundation's open call for \$100 million proposals. These ideas represented a rich collection of potential solutions for significant social and environmental problems. But while most of the attention was focused on 100&Change's lone \$100 million grant, the University of Pennsylvania's Center for High Impact Philanthropy (CHIP) saw broader opportunity: With a database of more than 1,900 solutions to the world's most pressing challenges, how could the visibility and opportunity associated with a project as enormous as 100&Change be useful beyond a single prizewinner?

MacArthur asked CHIP to evaluate the top 200 proposals (as determined by MacArthur's judges), highlighting those that our team felt had the greatest potential to create meaningful impact. The result is our guide, "Bold Ideas for Philanthropists to Drive Social Change." It includes 81 opportunities organized in various ways (e.g., by geography or cause area), as well as 11 "Best Bets"—those proposals that truly stood out based on our team's rigorous analysis.

CHIP believes that the experience of reviewing large numbers of diverse proposals helps new philanthropists learn how to think about opportunities and risks. Indeed, inviting talented and committed students to be a part of this process is one of the best ways to advance the field of philanthropy, by training the next generation of thoughtful donors.

Our 100&Change analysis differed from CHIP's standard research process in that it was based solely on what was presented to MacArthur and the comments of 100&Change judges; our analysts did not conduct additional due diligence to validate claims made by the applicants. The

MacArthur Foundation provided CHIP with the complete text of each application, along with a database that included their judges' scores and comments. Because the purpose of the project was to identify additional opportunities beyond those selected by MacArthur, we did not evaluate the foundation's semifinalists, which left us with 192 total prospects. CHIP's team narrowed this pool through a series of four phases that took place between June and October 2017.

**Phase 1: Social Impact** | The first phase of our analysis focused on two overarching questions:

- Does this proposed solution address CHIP's understanding of social impact—i.e., a *meaningful improvement in the lives of intended beneficiaries*?
- What is the scope of positive change that could be achieved with the project's success?

Each application was reviewed by two researchers on the project team, who considered the problem it was trying to solve, who would benefit from the solution, and to what degree those lives could be improved if it were successful.

It was at this point that we chose to exclude scientific and medical R&D from our analysis. In reviewing those submissions, we realized that a fair assessment of their strength required a level of technical expertise that we did not have, and thus they could not be properly evaluated.

Eighty-one applications stood out for the clarity of their social impact goals and the logic of their proposed solutions; these are included in our "Bold Ideas" guide. This pool offers a wide array of high-quality opportunities for donors, but we didn't stop there.

**Phase 2: Theory of Change** | In consultation with CHIP senior staff, the team constructed detailed logic models and theories of change for each of the 81 projects. This process identified any gaps in logic or assumptions made on the trajectory from inputs to impact. We reviewed the evidence

offered in the applications to assess whether the assumptions seemed reasonable and, in turn, completed one more step in the process of evaluating each project's potential for success.

**Phase 3: Tactics and Risk/Reward** | To narrow the field even further, the team looked at the finer points of the applications, comparing their scale with that of proposals we commonly see in this philanthropic arena. The differences presented some interesting insights and challenges for the team to grapple with. Did the level of risk seem appropriate? Were the implementation strategies sound? Did the implementers have the infrastructure to support such a dramatic influx of funding, and was there any potential for the projects to sustain themselves without a grant of this size from MacArthur? It was at this stage that the 100&Change judges' comments were also considered, helping to guard against any biases our team may have had. After incorporating these additional perspectives, the team was ready to present its top 24 proposals to CHIP's panel of experts.

**Phase 4: Selection and Vetting** | The team presented the final submissions to an assembly of CHIP senior staff, analysts, fellows, and experienced funders with expertise ranging from community development and public health to education and impact investing. This distinguished panel chose 11 projects that they felt had the greatest potential for impact. These proposals then passed a final round of vetting with area-specific experts from the University of Pennsylvania and were recognized as our best bets in the guide.

This final group represents a wide cross-section of global funding opportunities, offering a variety of strategies from large-scale expansion of proven programs to higher-risk/higher-reward innovation plays.

One of our biggest takeaways was the importance of communicating solutions in a way that is understandable to a wide variety of stakeholders in order to gain the broad support—philanthropic and otherwise—that such solutions deserve.

We continue to consider the best ways to share the information we have synthesized. Our hope is that by distilling the information into guidance that can be understood and tailored for interested individuals, we help move the billions in uncommitted philanthropic capital now sitting on the sidelines into active use to generate the real-world changes we all seek. ✕

View and download our guide, "Bold Ideas for Philanthropists to Drive Social Change," at <https://www.impact.upenn.edu/100-and-change-bold-ideas/>.

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