

A RESPONSIBILITY TO REBUILD

Investing in Digital Infrastructure for Civil Society

Published on March 30, 2021

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TECHNOLOGY
ASSOCIATION of
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OVERVIEW

THE CHALLENGE OF 2020

One in three nonprofits is in financial jeopardy as a result of the 2020 pandemic, according to [a recent study](#) by Candid and the Center for Disaster Philanthropy. As grantmakers consider their responsibility to stabilize and even reimagine civil society, they increasingly recognize that social change in the digital era requires not just an investment in programs but also an investment in **technology infrastructure**. This investment is more than tools alone; rather it's a commitment to building digital skills, capacity, and new platforms to unlock the knowledge, passion, and collective strength of civil society over time as the relationship between technology and society continues to evolve. Combined, these dependencies might best be referred to as **digital infrastructure**.

There's plenty of evidence that the dearth of investment in digital infrastructure set the stage for a global crisis among nonprofits. As described in the [Roadmap for Funders: Investing in Digital Infrastructure](#) paper published last year, "Investing in the digital infrastructure for civil society is a vital part of ensuring its future and yet less than 1% of all global giving goes to infrastructure¹. Contrast this with government spending on the maintenance of physical infrastructure which comprises over half of public spending on transportation and water infrastructure."

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Years of underinvestment in digital infrastructure for nonprofits has perpetuated a situation where nonprofits are ill equipped to leverage technology to better achieve their mission. Chris Worman, Vice President of Alliances and Program Development at [TechSoup](#) states that "almost all of the 1.5 million nonprofits reached by TechSoup - overwhelmingly organizations providing social services, education, and ensuring food security - use on-premise productivity tools. More than 80% of these organizations have five or fewer staff, and fewer than a quarter have had any tech support of any kind, free or paid, ever. They are generally either unaware of the opportunities, threats and inevitability of the cloud, or unprepared to make the necessary shift. They, and the communities they serve, are being left behind by digitalization."

Nonprofits need sustainable investment for digital infrastructure in order to survive the next major disruption, to thrive today, and to accelerate their mission going forward. Rather than perpetuating this untenable position, we choose to imagine, in this report, a world where nonprofits and NGOs are digital leaders, equipped with the software, technology, and skills training to meet the needs of their communities and constituencies. Nonprofits must join their peers and counterparts within grantmaking organizations and the private sector in leveraging technology for operations, for impact, and for disruption. Grantmakers and nonprofits alike must reject the mindset of "technology as overhead" to achieve this bold vision.

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¹ https://www.thenonproffitimes.com/npt_articles/foundations-pushed-give-1-infrastructure/

Grantmakers and nonprofits alike must reject the mindset of “technology as overhead” to achieve this bold vision.

Find out how to invest in digital infrastructure in this report provided by the [Taskforce on Digital Infrastructure](#) led by the Technology Association of Grantmakers. For the past six months, the Taskforce has met to identify the most pressing needs of nonprofits in the area of digital infrastructure and envision solutions. This report aims to catalyze awareness and build momentum toward investing in this critical infrastructure for social good.

DEFINING DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Before proceeding, it's important to define digital infrastructure. In 2020, the Technology Association of Grantmakers in partnership with NetHope, NTEN, and TechSoup identified six key elements of digital infrastructure as a minimal viable combination.

1. **Rights and Equity:** Policy and regulatory frameworks that enable access, representation, and participation, ensuring that systemic inequalities are not perpetuated by investments in digital infrastructure and that social sector data is secure.
2. **Access:** Equal opportunity to freely and independently connect reliably to the internet at sustainable costs regardless of location globally.
3. **Tools & Technologies:** Co-created technology platforms and ecosystems that leverage the value of open-sourced and community-owned systems as well as private sector investment. Moving from a product mindset to a platform mindset keeping sustainable resourcing models in mind.
4. **Data:** Ensuring responsible data practices (e.g., ethical, private, secure, just, non-biased, etc.) for collection, management, analysis, and sharing. Investing in new ways of lowering the cost for nonprofits such as data collectives and shared reporting tools.
5. **Skills:** Basic data literacy and technical skills as well as digital responsibility awareness and highly adaptive collaboration skills.
6. **Resourcing Models:** Funding approaches and pooled investment models that ensure digital infrastructure is equitable, affordable, and sustainable.

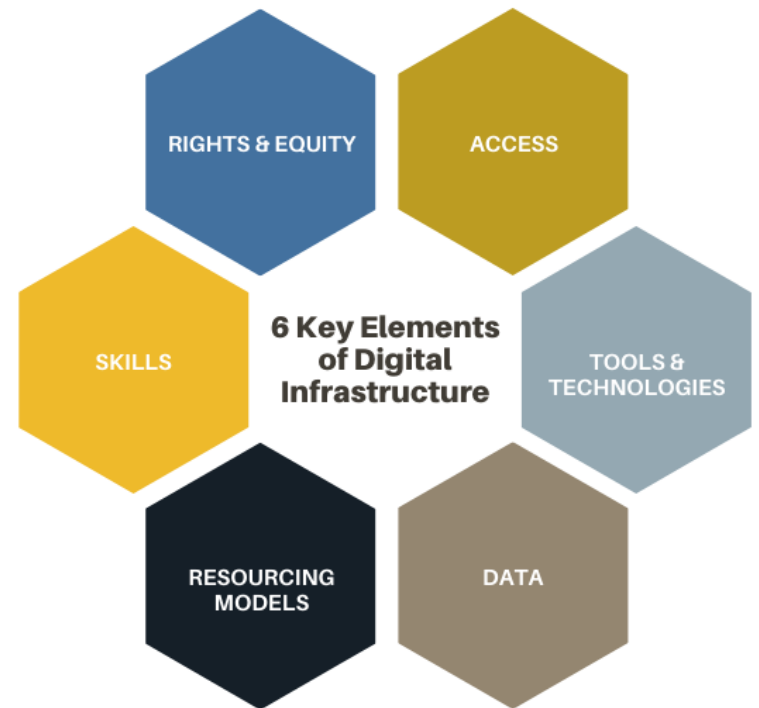


Figure 1: Download the framework at [TAGtaskforce.org](https://tagtaskforce.org)

Each element is necessary to creating robust, scalable, sustainable, and equitable infrastructure for the mission of civil society. Thankfully, each element requires finite investment and finite effort to leverage existing social-enterprise models that put the power of tech in the hands of civil society. The challenge facing philanthropy; however, is **willingness**. Is philanthropy willing to invest in infrastructure and the collaborative effort necessary to understand the need and commit to sustainable solutions?

INVEST IN THE SECTOR'S FUTURE

THE CASE FOR A POST-PANDEMIC COMMITMENT TO INFRASTRUCTURE

While immediate effort by individual funders is vital, the digital infrastructure gap laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic will only be addressed through **sustained and collective action**. This gap is hardly new as organizations have been calling for civil society infrastructure since 2016², and yet this pivotal moment of stress makes strategic investment imperative.

“An economy needs roads, bridges, and train stations to thrive. A community needs schools, parks, and houses of worship to ensure the flowering of human potential. And civil society needs infrastructure to ensure that nonprofits and foundations can act with integrity and impact.”

— From “Investing in Infrastructure,” a letter from 22 Philanthropy Serving Organizations to the sector (May 13, 2016).

This lack of investment in digital infrastructure is untenable and limits the sector's impact both now and in the future. "I've been arguing for several years now," states Lucy Bernholz, Director, Digital Civil Society Lab at Stanford PACS [in a recent article](#), "that civil society is dependent on digital systems." Not only does this dependency limit the scalability of social change, but it also becomes an equity issue. "If digital infrastructure fails," writes Michael Brennan, Program Officer, Technology and Society at the Ford Foundation, "the consequences will be the same as when physical infrastructure falls apart: people with privilege and resources will find other ways to navigate the world, while those on the margins will bear the brunt through higher costs, decreased access, and a related lack of opportunity."³

As our societies increasingly grapple with the role that technology plays in exacerbating inequity, particularly as a result of the 2020 pandemic, now is the time to build a digital infrastructure initiative that is:

- Led collectively, rather than an isolated or overlapping initiatives, with other funders, nonprofits, private sector, and public sector partners
- Committed to addressing equity issues that perpetuate and exacerbate disparities in access, skills, and funding
- Committed to reducing nonprofit burden through the development of common tools (e.g., common grant application, shared reporting, etc.) and open source platforms

BEGIN TODAY: INITIATIVES LAUNCHING IN 2021

To catalyze development of this critical infrastructure for nonprofit success, the Technology Association of Grantmakers proposes a series of key initiatives designed as a starting point for infrastructure investment. You are invited to invest in each as a commitment to strengthening the social sector after the devastation of 2020.

² <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/tools-resources/investing-infrastructure>

³ <https://www.fordfound.org/ideas/equals-change-blog/posts/announcing-13m-in-funding-for-digital-infrastructure-research/>

“We are at an exceptional time. All foundations are being called to action and have an obligation to deliver and respond to the needs of the world.

Investing in shared platforms and integrated solutions to reduce this burden is not only a call but also an obligation.”

– John Mohr, CIO, The MacArthur Foundation

The initiatives proposed in this report are the result of the Taskforce on Digital Infrastructure (<https://www.tagtaskforce.org>), a six-month sectorwide effort to describe and address the significant need for infrastructure that became apparent during the pandemic.

Over the six-month period, voices from the corporate sector, nonprofits and grantmakers of all stripes came together to explore six key areas of digital infrastructure: Access, Tools & Technology, Data, Resourcing Models, Skills, and Rights & Equity. Over a short six months, the cohort discussed and debated challenges, root causes, and ideas. We quickly moved from theory to practice, identifying ideas and solutions that could provide maximum impact while remaining practical and achievable. The taskforce agreed that some areas of demonstrated need were already being addressed in other forums, and instead chose to focus on three areas that promised to provide the greatest return on investment and address the immediate, real-world needs of nonprofits:

1. Cloud technology starter pack for nonprofits
2. Technology and data skill-building, focusing on both leadership and literacy
3. Addressing the myth of technology investment as "overhead" prevalent amongst funders

The following is a description of the ideas and proposals on which the task force focused. Two significant areas, Policy and Data, were determined to be outside the task force's purview of influence given the larger number of existing efforts already underway. Three remaining initiatives emerged from the group's work, and are described below. It is our fervent hope that the following initiatives will resonate with you, and that your organization will choose to participate in bringing these critical ideas to fruition. Each initiative is actionable and directly addresses a key need among our many nonprofit partners.

As the work of the taskforce transitions to the following initiatives, we humbly recognize that this is just the beginning. The evolution of our nonprofit digital infrastructure has a long path ahead, and will require considerable effort from each of us. We hope you will engage your partners in frank discussion to better understand their digital challenges, needs, and vision for the future. And then lean in to help by tackling the issues as a collective. Together we will build a new digital infrastructure that enables every nonprofit to thrive and achieve their mission in profound new ways.

PRIORITIZED INFRASTRUCTURE INITIATIVES

The responsibility to rebuild is ours. As an approachable, but no less critical, starting point, the three initiatives below offer a method of building vital momentum by investing in infrastructure today. To realize these efforts, please contact the lead for each initiative presented at the end of each section.

CLOUD TECHNOLOGY STARTER PACK

This initiative will assemble and distribute a pre-packaged group of cloud-based applications for nonprofits, enabling them to transition away from costly on-premises computing and accelerate their transition to modern platforms.

Why This Initiative Matters

By 2030, the overwhelming majority of software used by nonprofits, and all standard operating tools, will have shifted from on-premise to the cloud. This shift opens significant opportunities to lower technology maintenance costs, increase security and enable data collaboratives to bring forward the unique and important insight and voices of those served by the nonprofit sector. **This shift also presents significant threats to both nonprofits and those they serve as organizations struggle to migrate to the cloud and align their data without support.**

For example, almost all of the 1.5 million nonprofits reached by TechSoup - overwhelmingly organizations providing social services, education, and ensuring food security - use on-premise productivity tools. More than 80% of these organizations have five or fewer staff, and fewer than a quarter have had any tech support of any kind, free or paid, ever. They are generally either unaware of the opportunities, threats and inevitability of the cloud, or unprepared to make the necessary shift.

Without concerted efforts to migrate organizations like these to the cloud, the critical social services they provide will begin to deteriorate as unsupported on-premise tools begin to fail. Communities who are already underserved and marginalized will be less served as organizations struggle to repair failing technology without the skills or resources to do so.

Proposed Program

Civil society capacity building organizations, philanthropy and technology corporations can address this challenge through the community-driven design and scaling of ‘cloud starter packs’ that are inclusive of tools, guides and services to enable cloud migration and management. It will take a concerted effort leveraging the unique capabilities of each, so that:

- The variations in technology needs related to the operations, work and data flows, services and regulations pertaining to specific nonprofit services are voiced by the community;
- Nonprofit technology capacity builders representing various nonprofit communities such as NTEN, TechSoup, TAG and NetHope, are able to facilitate design between the nonprofits they serve and cloud technology providers; and,
- Cloud technology providers are able to, through community-driven design processes, contribute their knowledge and skills related to integrations necessary to meet specific workflows.

Over the next 48 months, we would propose that an Alliance between TechSoup, NTEN, NetHope, and the Impact Cloud community, overseen by a smaller steering committee from nonprofit leads and staffed with dedicated headcount, will implement and deploy at least one mission-specific cloud starter pack through a community-driven design process in a way that would allow us to capture learnings and enable repetition to other mission-types.

Partners will bring the following resources:

- TechSoup's community of 1.2m nonprofit organizations around the world, communications platforms, and community-driven design capacities will be leveraged to recruit design participants, ensure communications feedback loops for testing and refinement over time, and ensure design is driven by nonprofit needs. Once completed, Cloud Starter Packs and associated forums can be hosted on TechSoup (and in other places) and shared with nonprofits coming to TechSoup seeking products or support.
- NTEN's community, decidedly more technically savvy than the average nonprofits, will be leveraged to help with outreach to nonprofits and ongoing iteration and refinement as technology needs evolve.
- Impact Cloud corporate partners maintain commitments to corporate volunteerism that will be leveraged to convene sales engineers with nonprofits through design sprints to understand and map relevant product integrations.
- TAG maintains a thought leadership role within the foundation community that can be leveraged to support the design of small foundation-specific cloud starter packs.
- NetHope's membership relies on thousands of nonprofit field partners delivering their core programming who will be leveraged to test, pilot and scale vertical specific cloud starter packs relevant to international development and humanitarian aid.

Expected Outcomes

1. Improved understanding of nonprofit mission-specific technology needs
2. Acceleration of nonprofit cloud adoption leading to Increased digital capacities
3. Lower entry barriers for digital migration and transformation service providers
4. Improved ability to support, evaluate and design further digital transformation programming

How to Invest

Please contact the lead for this initiative, Chris Worman, at cworman@techsoup.org.

SKILL-BUILDING: LEADERSHIP & LITERACY

This initiative will make visible the diversity of existing skills-building programs designed for nonprofit staff to increase technology management and leadership competencies. Furthermore, it will connect capacity building organizations to better support nonprofit staff in finding and utilizing programs right for their needs and goals.

Why This Initiative Matters

NTEN's research for more than a decade consistently finds that nonprofits who include technology in their strategic planning, have technology decision-makers in their leadership teams, and include technology training for all staff are more effective in using technology to meet their mission. **Investing in strengthening the technology leadership capacity and skills across the sector, and across teams within every organization, will improve the effectiveness and better position the sector to navigate changes ahead.**

NTEN led an analysis nearly a decade ago to evaluate what overlap may exist between Nonprofit Technology Assistance Providers (TechSoup, NTEN, Tech Impact, and so on). That analysis found that by and large there was little overlap as each NTAP was supported by different funders and funding models, operating with different missions, programs, services, and methodologies to different nonprofits throughout the sector. As such, **it can be difficult for a nonprofit to receive the end-to-end training needed to build capacity from the literacy to leadership stages.**

Proposed Program

TechSoup, NTEN, and NetHope are three of the many organizations who provide, as the whole or part of their mission, technology capacity building programs and services across a wide range of skill areas and with a variety of approaches. Similarly, the needs of nonprofit professionals across the sector are diverse and require a plurality of options. And yet, navigating these options without a holistic roadmap toward strategic skill-building is a challenge. We propose a full analysis of the NTAP sector to surface organizations providing capacity building services in varying regions, styles, and models; the results will catalyze collaboration and cross-communication of the currently disconnected field and offer a clear path for funders to invest and scale up the reach of NTAPs operating in geographic and mission aligned areas.

Before building and investing in anything new, it's important to ensure funders have an understanding of what exists today and how to invest in the growth of those scalable programs first, with investment in new work focused on evaluated gaps with strategic relationships to existing organizations and communities.

1. Systems map with community and opportunity gap analysis to understand the current programs and organizations supporting technology skill and capacity building for the US nonprofit sector, understand community and sector coverage of existing programs, and identify opportunities for expansion of current programs or development of new programs to better cover the sector.
2. Concerted cross-partner/funder campaign for engagement in current programs to immediately accelerate learning, skill-building, and technology training.

- a. Promotion of existing programs specifically and widely by funder community. This may include direct promotion of specific programs to grantees as well as elevation of materials, resources, and opportunities generally.
- b. Funding to enable scale and accessibility for organizations providing programs, especially to systemically excluded communities including BIPOC staff, non-technology titled staff, and others.

Expected Outcome

The systems map will provide clear opportunities for funders to invest (financially as well as through promotion to their grantees) in existing programs, services, and opportunities that organizations can benefit from today, as well as make clear where gaps continue to exist so that thoughtful and intentional planning efforts can engage those communities in designing responsive solutions.

Six months from now, an immediate outcome should be a significant collective investment in tech capacity building across the sector with a multi-year commitment to ensure that programs scale.

How to Invest

Please contact the lead for this initiative, Amy Sample Ward, at amy@nten.org.

ADDRESSING THE "TECH AS OVERHEAD" MYTH

This campaign will establish a new paradigm for funding the digital infrastructure necessary for an equitable and sustainable social sector.

Why This Initiative Matters

Funders often feel reluctant to provide grant dollars for digital infrastructure. Instead, they are more likely to fund outcomes and outputs specific to a nonprofit's program or "project" work. As such, **nonprofits under-invest in their own sustainable infrastructure, perpetuating what's known as "the nonprofit starvation cycle."**

This infrastructure gap became apparent in 2020 as nonprofits became increasingly reliant on digital service delivery, virtual fundraising, and vulnerable to the growing threat of cybersecurity breaches. Many lack the tools or skills necessary to provide services in their communities in a digital context.

Proposed Program

Leveraging the strength of its member foundations and partners, the Technology Association of Grantmakers will spearhead a campaign to establish a new paradigm for funding the digital infrastructure necessary for an equitable and sustainable social sector. The campaign will work to build awareness and provide actionable templates for two key audiences: Funders and Nonprofits. Program activities include:

1. **Alignment:** As noted above, we will engage with existing funder efforts and nonprofit organizations already engaged in addressing other elements of the overhead myth. This initial outreach will serve to build coalitions and complementary messages and activities.
2. **Assessment:** Building toward case-making with funders, we will identify data needed to understand the current state of digital infrastructure investment for nonprofit organizations. This assessment activity will also serve to identify case studies, templates and other materials that might aid nonprofits in advocating for tech funding in sustainable ways.
3. **Case-Making:** Now, awareness begins in earnest. In coalition, we will develop separate campaigns for both funders and nonprofits designed to change funding practices from both sides of the transaction. For grantmakers, we will make the case that tech investment leads to greater impact, agility, or resilience. For grantseekers, we will provide communication/advocacy templates, example strategic plans that include IT, and case studies of nonprofits successful in making the case for sustained tech funding.
4. **Solution-Building:** Joint funder-nonprofit sessions will be held to explore how philanthropy might best fund technology / digital infrastructure at the sustainable levels needed to ensure equitable access.
5. **Commitment:** Through the course of outreach, we will identify funders willing to commit publicly to the proposed solution for funding technology / digital infrastructure at the sustainable levels needed to ensure equitable access.

With funders, we aim to begin by aligning with efforts such as the True Cost Initiative led by Hewlett, Ford, MacArthur, OSF, Packard, RWJF, Hilton, Rockefeller, Arnold Ventures. With nonprofits, we

will begin by aligning with organizations who have already invested in assessing nonprofit digital maturity such as GrantAdvisor.org, NTEN, TechSoup, and NetHope.

Why This Program?

The pandemic of 2020-21 made clear the gap in digital access, tools, and skills for many nonprofits. As philanthropy reimagines its role in rebuilding society more equitably, now is the time for a reexamination of the way that inequity is perpetuated when digital infrastructure is assumed and therefore under-funded.

Expected Outcome

Key indicators of a successful campaign include the following:

1. Nonprofits have the internal skills and knowledge to know what they need in terms of technology investment and how to ask for investment in these needs.
2. Nonprofits are able to secure sustained funding for the digital infrastructure required for mission fulfillment.

How to Invest

Please contact the lead for this initiative, Chantal Forster, at chantal@tagtech.org.

NEXT STEPS

We hope that these initiatives resonate as the best first steps in helping our nonprofit partners enhance their digital capabilities, providing resiliency and a core foundation for strengthening operations and programming. If you would like more information on how to get involved, please contact TAG at chantal@tagtech.org.

ABOUT THE TASKFORCE

Catalyzed by the challenges of 2020, the Technology Association of Grantmakers (TAG) created the Taskforce on Digital Infrastructure as a response to member foundation requests for assistance in providing technology tools and support to their grantees. It became clear during the pandemic that nonprofits struggled significantly to move their missions to digital service delivery models without the necessary funding and skills. Together with NetHope, NTEN, and TechSoup, TAG authored two publications designed to identify priority needs for nonprofit tech and to catalyze investment:

- [Call for Nonprofit Tech Support](#), April 2020
- [Investing in Digital Infrastructure: A Roadmap for Funders](#), August 2020

Following these publications, TAG launched the Taskforce on Digital Infrastructure in September 2020 together with over 42 representatives from global grantmakers, nonprofits and the corporate sector who responded to a public call for participation. Over a short six months, the cohort explored six key areas of digital infrastructure: Access, Tools & Technology, Data, Resourcing Models, Skills, and Rights & Equity, discussing and debating challenges, root causes, and ideas. Invaluable partnership throughout the taskforce was provided by NetHope, NTEN, and TechSoup.

Learn more at <https://www.tagtaskforce.org>.

FUNDERS

Funding for the Taskforce on Digital Infrastructure was provided by:

The Jessie Ball DuPont Fund
The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
OKTA for Good
Salesforce.org