

Shape-Shifting in Philanthropy: 2009-2015

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Shape-Shifting in Philanthropy: 2009-2015 Reconsidering the Short-Term Future of Philanthropy in America

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New Shifts in the Larger Context

Many of the ideas we have been debating in philanthropy for the last decade are now being crunched in a crucible of uncertainty. The 2008 recession upended foundation assets under management, destroyed earnings in most individual retirement accounts, and generated a unusually high level of turbulence in several sectors of the U.S. economy: financial services, banking, housing, construction, transportation, manufacturing—and even retailing, where consumer spending constricted more tightly than any time in the last 25 years. Aggressive government intervention has reshaped the role the federal government will play in stabilizing the market, the social safety net, financial policy, and funds flows. “Infrastructure” and “green” are hot topics.

Right now, it looks like a great rebalancing—a return to a new “basics” with less emphasis on the leverage, hype, and attitude that had colored the last five years. The shifts are unbalancing millions of lives as unemployment, layoffs, and foreclosures force families and communities to confront the new economic reality with an increasingly fragile social safety net.

Another key change in the context is the Obama presidency. Its extensive, distributed social networking components and youth engagement will likely change the way people, organizations, and institutions relate to and design public solutions for the greater good. Climate, environment, equitable health care and energy issues have become central policy “openings” as the new administration plans a nearly \$1 trillion stimulus plan for economic recovery.

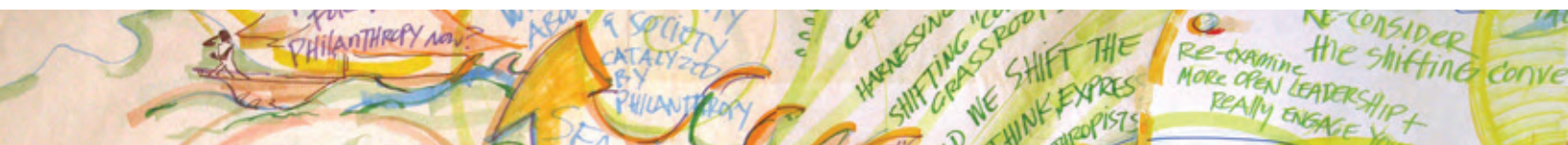
Big deficits seem inevitable. A New York Times article on January 6, 2009, quoted then President-elect Obama warning Americans of “trillion-dollar deficits for years to come.” The record deficits are likely to exceed post WW II levels and may constrain the Obama reform agenda in a few years. The Times noted that economists fret sustained fiscal imbalances combined with increasing retirement of aging Baby Boomers will create strains on the federal budget, Medicare, and Social Security. So the long-term perspective looks frosty too.

Signals of Change in the Broader Context That Influences Philanthropy

Obviously, the U.S. economy is in a funk. According to “The World in 2009”—the Economist magazine’s annual collection of predictions—the recession and government bailout of the financial system created a pervasive, self-reinforcing investor mistrust that is scaring away credit.¹ There have been more frequent boom and bust cycles in this decade, creating a deep undercurrent of turbulence in the foundations of the economy. It may take years to redress the imbalances of the current cycle and rid the financial system of its bad debt. Results: lending standards are tighter, and an aging population won’t be able to depend on rising home and stock prices to finance retirement. People will consume less and save more.

The choking of bank credit, combined with general gloom about the economic outlook, is affecting other industries, especially automobiles. Many other non-financial businesses are likely to retrench, which further reduces growth and triggers continued layoffs and unemployment.

According to the Institute for Supply Management, new orders in the manufacturing sector fell to the lowest level in 60 years, part of a worldwide slowdown. No sector of the economy reported overall growth in December 2008.²



Corporate profits have fallen for seven straight quarters as of December 2008, according to the Bloomberg News coverage of reports published by the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis,³ but other stocks in the finance sector should eventually turn upward as the country comes out of recession.

Is this recession like others—largely cyclical and predictable—or is it different? I think this is what everyone wants to know, but can't figure out. One smart source, the worldwide management consulting firm McKinsey, reports a distinctive structural difference in our current, emerging recession that suggests the unfolding economic reality will be different, and worse:

In most of the recessions of the past 40 years, according to a McKinsey study, demand caught up with capacity and growth returned in 10–18 months. This recession feels different because it is hard to imagine the full-steam re-expansion of financial services or a rapid turnaround in housing. Beyond these two hot-spots, there seem to be unsustainable trends in commodity prices, oil imports, the nation's trade balance, the state of our schools, and large entitlement promises. Already, the idea that the United States can grow by borrowing money from China to finance consumption at home has begun to seem implausible. We know in our bones that the future will be different. When the business model of part of all of the economy shifts in this way, we can speak of a structural break... adjustment is neither easy or quick...old sources of comparative advantage weaken and new sources appear.⁴

The global economic recession is part of larger pattern of expected turbulent change that was the key finding in the new U. S. National Intelligence Council's scenarios for the next decade. In the introduction, the consensus report forecasts “more change than continuity.” The report suggests major discontinuities or disruptions and surprises. One predictable feature is the important energy transition from dependency on fossil fuels to alternatives—something that happens only once a century. In the energy sector, the report notes that it typically takes 25 years for a new production technology to be fully adopted.⁵

While there are no certainties about the length or impact of the recession, it looks like we're in for a slow, drawn-out recovery. As the Economist observed, the “go-go years” of 2003–2007 are being replaced by “go-slow years” of 2009 and beyond. Possibly for developed world, we're looking at the worst years since the 1980 recession (Economist).

More regulation is inevitable as payback for the public money put into the financial sector plus new focus on environmental regulations and labor during the early phase of the Obama administration.

What Signals Are Visible in the Transactional Environment for Philanthropy?

A *Chronicle of Philanthropy* article from November 27, 2008, noted the likelihood that recession will cut into number of gifts in the \$1 million to \$50 million level. A report from Indiana University Center on Philanthropy studied impacts from the 2001 recession, discovering that gifts were down markedly—about 50 percent—in the two years following the recession.⁶ In the summer of 2008, the *Chronicle* reported a gloomy outlook for corporate giving, with even the most optimistic corporate philanthropists ratcheting back and moving to a highly selective approach to giving.

“Sustainability is the new buzzword” for the arts and museum sector, according to “*The World in 2009*.” After the buzz wears off a new building or pricey blockbuster shows, operating costs rise and visitors ebb. Organizations are exploring how to successfully incorporate sustainability (Economist).

Many charities see experienced older workers delaying retirement, and many organizations are forced to leave positions unfilled or are combining job duties for existing staff. Another *Chronicle* article from November 2008 mentioned that working through the later years had crystallized a trend to lengthier working lives. More Boomers are now more likely to stay in corporate jobs if they can, while for those laid



off, the nonprofit sector looks like a meaningful place for employment, though the number of openings is limited.⁷

According to some studies, in the next decade more than 640,000 senior positions in the nonprofit sector will turn over, though the pace will likely be affected by the recession.⁸

Tough economic times increase pressure on impact measurement for nonprofits.

Will philanthropy be expected to close gaps in the social sector during the downturn? Total foundation giving in 2007, according to the Foundation Center, was only 6 percent of the \$700 billion the government invested in the 2008 financial bailout. Yet in the past, government and public sector leaders expect philanthropy to provide the missing resources.⁹

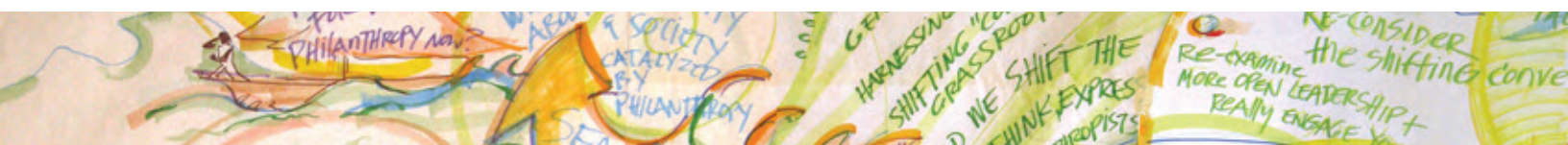
Is the current environment a recipe for a tipping point or just a rut?

The simple question is whether philanthropy will adapt to the turbulence in the larger ecosystem and how it will do so. Will the convergence of powerful forces cause important changes or merely form a shadow over the field that doesn't fundamentally alter the prevailing model and mindsets? Is the current environment a recipe for a tipping point or just a rut?

The magnetic power of the status quo in the world of philanthropy could prevail for another decade. In the study *Cultivating Change in Philanthropy*, authors Katherine Fulton and Andrew Blau argue there are important features of today's environment that could push philanthropy into new shapes if the convergence hits just right. However, the "business as usual" scenario for philanthropy is just as likely to prevail by incorporating a few new tools and clichés but maintaining the same basic direction. "The relentless centrifugal forces at work in philanthropy continued to dominate," wrote Fulton and Blau in a convincing status quo scenario, "reducing efforts to look at collective impact in new ways. Each donor, organization, and network was increasingly challenged to simply keep up with all the choices and pressures."¹⁰

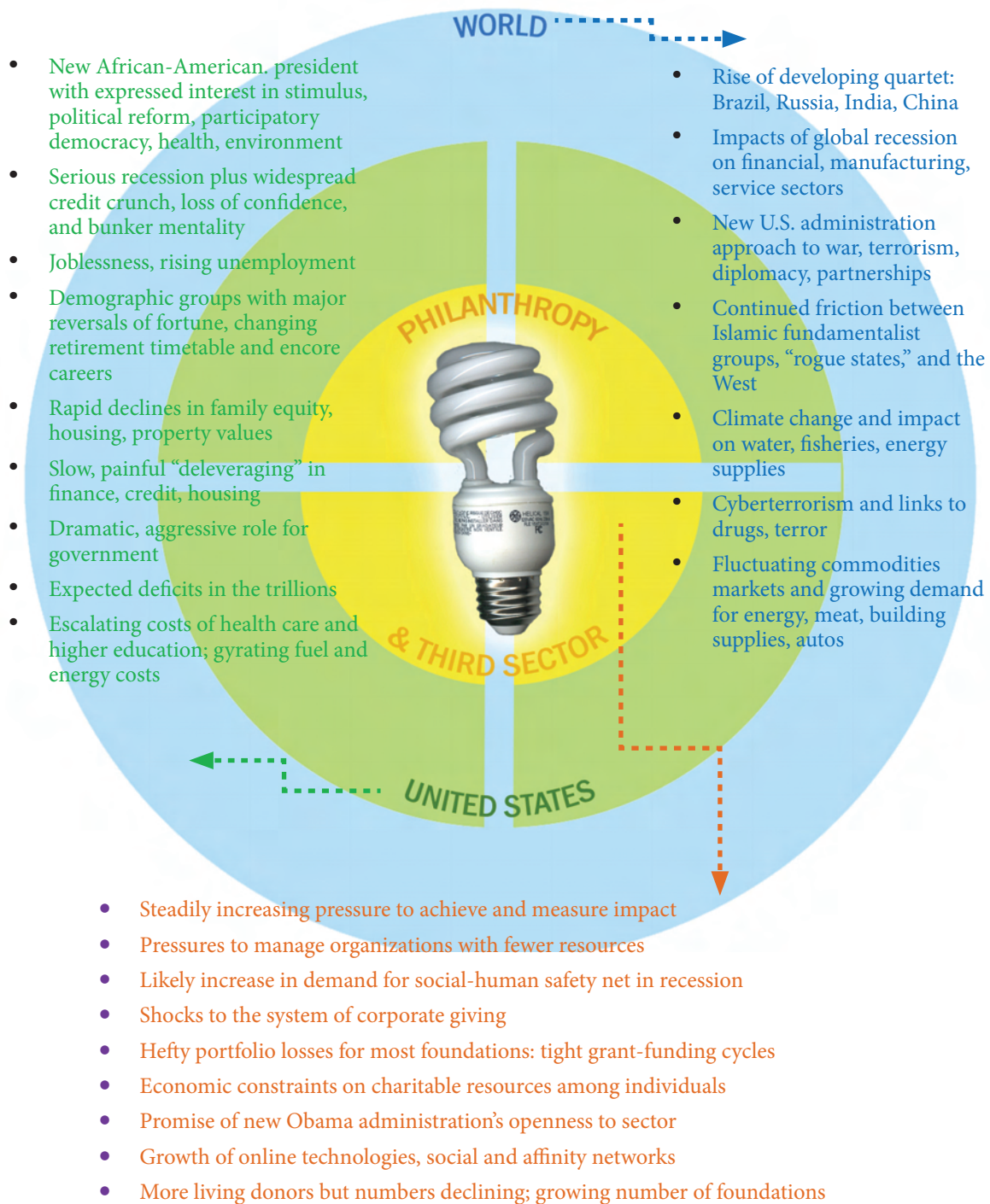


Online fundraising ad (December 2008): Saving dance from the economic crisis through \$2 donations. Perhaps they're taking a page from the Obama fundraising toolbox



The Leader's New Frame: Mapping the Forces That Are Shaping Our Environment

So, let's distill or simplify the key forces or signals of change on a target map to make it easier to visualize the whole environment facing the "third sector" and philanthropy at the start of 2009.



To further interpret this map of the current environment, we can attempt to collect our current wisdom into two complementary tables. This will help identify what might be certain and uncertain about the current and emerging situation—and the possible impacts and consequences.



Relative Certainties for Next 5 Years in Third Sector	Likely Impacts
U.S. stimulus program will provide new level of federal grants to nonprofits, states.	More competition and influence “gamesmanship” but new opportunities for groups that can create immediate jobs while building community infrastructure.
U.S. government is playing an increasingly active role in private and public sector.	Increased regulation and policy change, possibly more scrutiny for impacts from investments.
Individuals and families will be dealing with declines in retirement funds and value of housing and other assets of their own and their parents.	Nonprofit organizations will deal with slowdown in level of cash contributions or commitments.
Initial phase of Boomer generation will move into retirement era—10,000 every day.	Up to 640,000 staff and executives will enter transition to extended work lives, career shifts. May open up board positions, volunteer positions, and generational shift as staff members retire.
Most corporations will be more selective with contributions.	Pressures on nonprofits to maintain existing programs; increased competition for new grants, likely of smaller size.
Most foundations will operate with reduced grant-making budgets and smaller staffs.	Pressure on operations outside of direct program implementation; increased need or openings for collaboration. Social service groups may be caught in gap between rising demand and fewer resources.
Higher education tuition increases will continue outpacing families’ ability to pay. Enrollments typically rise in downturns and recessions. All states facing long-term structural budget deficits for higher ed.	States may trim higher education funding to free up additional funds for safety net during recession. Workforce agencies may increase grants for community college and training programs.



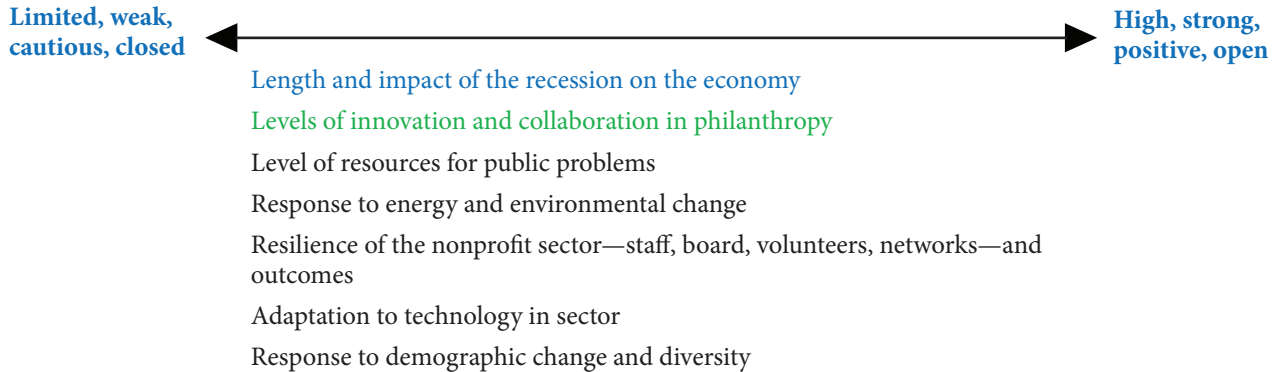
New Uncertainties in Third Sector	Possible Consequences for Third Sector
How will the “Obama nation” survive the recession? Will young progressives maintain the pitch of their engagement in social and environmental change?	Networks of committed change agents could tackle the rebuilding of the country in a new civic partnership, or political and economic realities could be this generation’s “Vietnam syndrome,” producing pushback, cynicism, drop-outs.
How will a long recession impact grassroots groups and fledgling nonprofits?	Some will continue to serve while carrying extra load with strapped staffs, but many will face desperate cutbacks that affect low-income people.
How will a deep recession impact foundations and other civic funders?	Will institutions hunker down and retrench, or will a convergence of forces stimulate a new era of collaboration and public service?
What will an era of muscular government do to the field of philanthropy? How long will the progressive phase last and will it be truly transformational?	What will it be like after the recession when the price tag for the stimulus and bailout hits the government hard? The “old guard” may be too proud to see ways to collaborate with public leaders, or the sheer diversity of the sector (from arts and health care to community development and education) ensures that it remains disconnected and insulated. It is also possible that the philanthropy community and partners could forge a spirit of alliance and true collaboration that fundamentally shifts the way all three sectors renew communities and industries.
Will the shift to energy savings and environmental awareness that is occurring in the private sector be taken seriously in the third sector? Will the sector adopt a “green” perspective or see it as a fad only for the privileged?	Factoring in the environmental costs and the benefits to the ecosystems of serving the greater good, local food systems, recycling, etc., could reshape the way nonprofits operate and communicate.
Will the credit crunch and economic uncertainty create a new era of caution or of community (back to basics, back to the land, taking care of others)? Will the social safety net be a shared responsibility, or will communities be left on their own?	A critical leadership challenge is at hand. We may see a new era of compassion and renewal, or steady increases in grinding poverty and hunger—or both simultaneously. Will we see a new “WPA” and Chautauqua decade, or a more rapid rise in income inequality? Alliances will be critical in articulating policy perspectives.
Is the current recession another boom and bust cycle, or is it a sign of deeper shifts in the foundation of the “real economy” as well as the societal fabric?	Magnifies zero-sum mentality and survival thinking instead of long view and systemic thinking.
Will gas and other fuels, transportation, and food prices continue to oscillate?	Increasing anxiety in developing and operating programs.



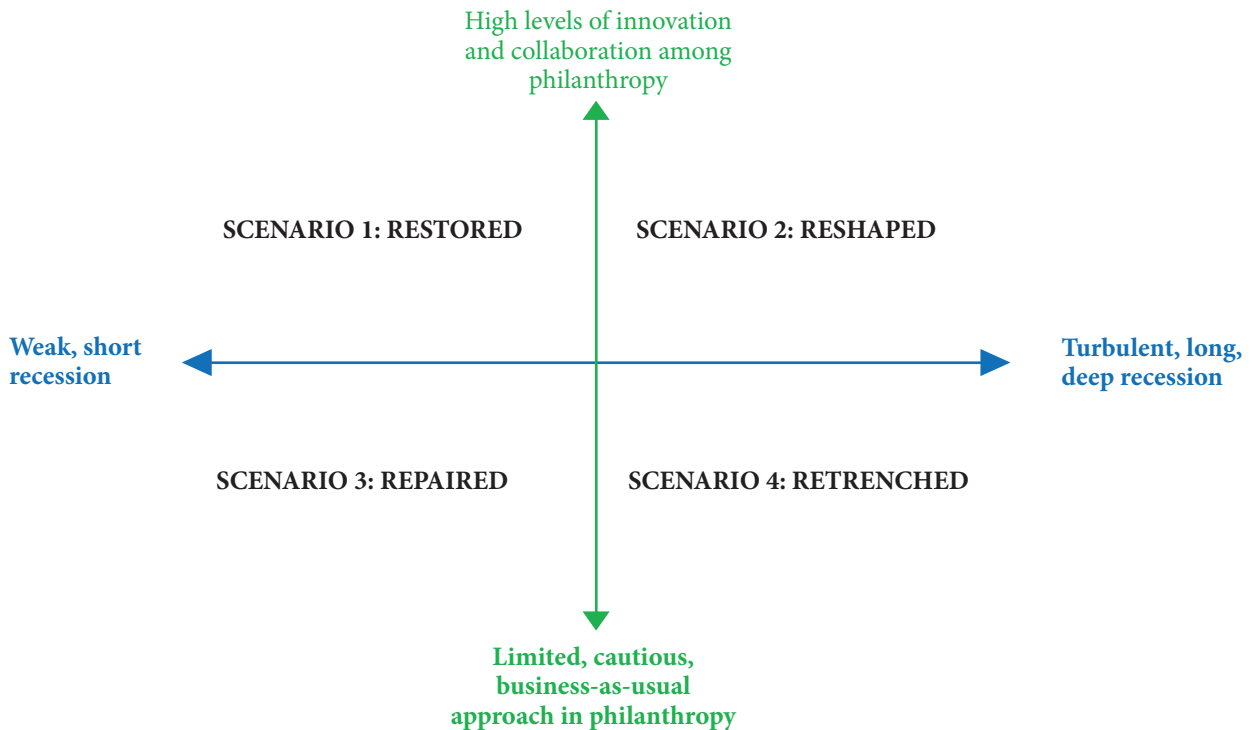
Key Drivers of the Short-Term: What Will Philanthropy Look Like in 2015?

Since it is impossible to write the future from today’s vantage point, we can use scenarios to develop a set of possible short-term futures. This helps philanthropic leaders and consultants shape and test strategy and prepare today for eventualities in a whole range of possibilities. In this way, we are rehearsing and anticipating the future.

In order to simplify the range of uncertainties, we can create a shorter, consolidated group of dynamic forces from the map and tables. Since these forces are in constant motion, and leaders at all levels are shaping impact by their choices and actions, these are then framed on a continuum to include a range of strong and weak options.



These forces provide a structure for generating structurally different future scenarios. I believe the top two are simultaneously the most uncertain and the most critical in shaping the next five years in the third sector. These could be the key drivers. They are laid out below on opposite axes to structure four different possibilities:



Stakeholders That Will Shape the Short-Term Future

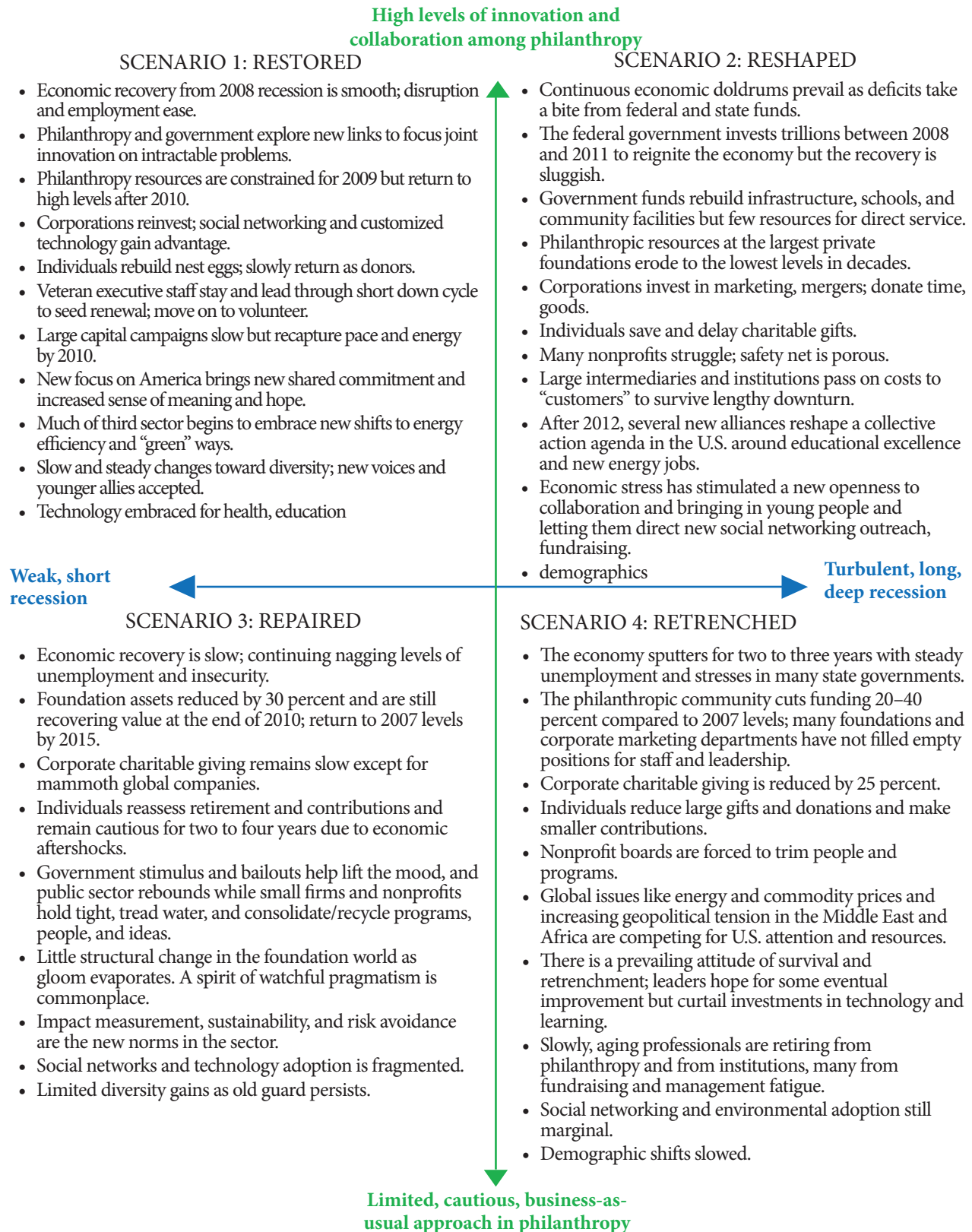
In order to identify assumptions and rehearse actions in the scenario process, it helps if we can list the actors that could have roles in the scenarios. Through their perspectives, attitudes, and actions, they shape the unfolding futures in different ways. Here is the initial list that I considered for this set of draft scenarios:

- Large private foundations, especially those with national scope
- Small family foundations
- Health conversion foundations
- Community foundations
- Federal and state agencies
- Corporate giving/PR or social responsibility departments
- Networks and associations of grant makers
- Academic programs linked to philanthropy
- Media devoted to independent sector
- Technical assistance providers, consultants
- Individuals and families who have contributed or may contribute
- Nonprofit grantees, especially large institutions like colleges, universities, hospitals, etc. with multiple revenue streams (boards, admin, professional development offices/staff/faculty, volunteers, partners, etc.)
- Mid-size nonprofit groups with good programs but limited operational resources
- Smaller community-focused groups and grassroots organizations or startups with tenuous support/resources

In more highly developed scenarios, we could test the scenario's implications for most of these stakeholders and play out enough possibilities to give the stories depth and complexity. For this brief overview, we have incorporated a few in each scenario. The scenario outlines and capsules follow.



Features and assumptions for scenarios



Four Scenarios for Philanthropy: 2015

SCENARIO 1: RESTORED

In Scenario 1, the year 2015 marked the blessings of positive convergence where a surprisingly swift and short recession coincided with a new progressive presidential administration. Widespread public concern over the negative impacts of markets, workforce cutbacks, unaffordable health care, and stagnating education stimulates successful dialogue about equity, high expectations, and new solutions for energy, health care, and youth opportunity.

Philanthropy and government explore new links to focus joint innovation on intractable problems. Philanthropic resources, constrained for 2009, returned to high levels by 2010 and provided a steady base and a new appetite for innovations that improved the common good.

Veteran executive leadership and energetic staff across the nonprofit world were able to create resiliency for many organizations.

Large capital and endowment campaigns were slowed but recaptured pace and energy by mid-2010. The renewed focus on America generated new shared commitment to volunteer, contribute, and engage the most diverse allies. New shifts to energy efficiency and “green” strategies became mainstream.

SCENARIO 3: REPAIRED

In Scenario 3, economic recovery from the 2008 recession was slow, and continuing nagging levels of unemployment and insecurity dampened communities. Many nonprofit organizations struggled, but most survived and developed new plans.

Foundation assets had initially been reduced by 30 percent and were slow to recover their previous strong value. Corporate charitable giving slowed too, except for mammoth global companies. Before 2011, most giving levels were back to their 2007 levels. Individuals were buffeted by market turmoil and layoffs, and emerged cautious, reassessing retirement plans and contributions.

Government stimulus and bailouts lifted the mood and public sector rebounded in most states; however, small firms and nonprofits treaded water and consolidated/recycled programs, people, and ideas.

Little structural change occurred in the foundation world. People maintained existing networks and habits of thought; risk avoidance emerged as the new norm in the sector.

A spirit of watchful pragmatism became commonplace, with an increased focus on impact measurement and sustainability. Diversity was still limited by the persistence of the old guard.

SCENARIO 2: RESHAPED

In Scenario 2, the new century’s first big recession provoked continuous economic doldrums from 2008 to 2012. The federal government invested trillions between 2008 and 2011 to reignite the economy, but the recovery was sluggish. Rising federal deficits took a bite from federal and state funds. Government funds had rebuilt a large percentage of the transportation infrastructure, schools, and community facilities, but there were few resources for operating programs and direct service, so communities and families suffered. Corporations, too, had to rebuild, and individuals struggled to save, so many gifts were delayed or cancelled entirely.

While philanthropic resources at the largest private foundations eroded to the lowest levels in decades, by 2012, several new alliances led by community foundations and social entrepreneurs emerged to reshape a collective action agenda in the U.S. around educational excellence and new energy jobs. This helped lead a new wave of stubborn optimism and resilience that piggy-backed on the second Obama administration. Young leaders emerged, bringing facility with technology and communication that helped reshape the third sector.

SCENARIO 4: RETRENCHED

In Scenario 4, the year 2015 was the first break from a sputtering economy and unusually problematic unemployment levels. The housing, auto, and retail sectors finally shook off the gloom and depression in 2011, but access to credit was still uneven for businesses, and lending was still conservative. This was a tough downturn for state and federal governments as legislators worked through fiscal deficits and constraints.

By 2012, global issues like energy/commodity prices and increasing geopolitical tension in the Middle East and Africa co-opted U.S. recovery attention and government resources.

The philanthropic community was operating with deep asset losses, and many foundations and corporate marketing departments consolidated staff and leadership positions. There was a survival mindset and retrenchment in the third sector; leaders began seeing signs of improvement after the 2012 election cycle, but were forced to limit investments in technology and learning.

Four hard years of economic stress had at least stimulated a new openness to collaboration and change, a sign that young people could lead the sector. Slowly, aging professionals retired from philanthropy and from institutions, many exhausted from fundraising and management fatigue.



Implications or Unanswered Questions

In the article “Leading through Uncertainty,” the McKinsey Quarterly explained: “A crisis is a chance to break ingrained structures and behaviors that sap productivity. Such moves aren’t a short-term response.” However, they are valuable in any scenario and could help an organization survive during the more turbulent scenario prospects.¹¹

Clearly, these short scenarios are stylized with a broad brush, but they suggest a set of difficult straits that many stakeholders in the third sector may confront in the next five years. Leaders of institutions and foundations should generate strategic and tactical options for each scenario. Leaders concerned about the sector as a whole can consider these questions:

- If foundations respond by cutting back grant-making, will their grantees be resilient enough to survive in every scenario?
- If the signals of economic distress described in scenarios come to pass, will foundations be able to push past retrenchment and innovate enough to reshape philanthropy?
- Will the recession shake the sector enough to lead to either Scenario 1 or 2, or are the essential features of philanthropy so ingrained that it is protected from discontinuities?
- How will leaders in philanthropy maintain their vision through what could be for many the most serious challenge of their careers?

It is wise to continue tracking the signals of change as they unfold or converge in 2009 to see which elements are surfacing. In addition, we can use the scenarios to illuminate assumptions about how people and institutions respond in times of stress and possibility. Each scenario will create winners and losers and trigger unintended consequences.

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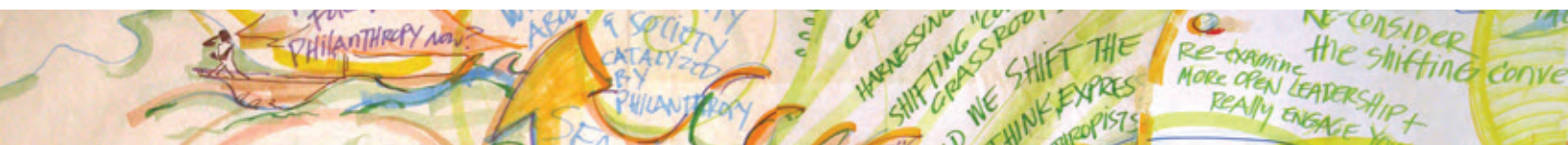
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About this extract

In Spring 2009, Gary Hubbell Consulting convened a think tank of North American nonprofit organization and development leaders. Four topics were selected for discussion, each of which became the focus of an insightful essay by each of the hand-picked attendees. The four topics are: New Perspectives on Leadership, Reimagining the Future of Philanthropy, Development in a Systems Context, and Demonstrating and Communicating Philanthropy's Impact. The resulting e-book, *In Search of New Meaning: Philanthropy, Community and Society*, is available for free download at www.OnTheCuspPublishing.com. This essay is an extract from that publication.

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