In New Orleans in April, two hundred foundation members and allies accepted an invitation to *Come to the Edge*, to "explore economic, cultural, political, and ecological contours of systemic crisis, learn and draw inspiration from worldwide struggles for people and planet, and work collectively to advance our role as funders, organizers and philanthropic activists, moving ourselves and moving our field."

Over three days, participants gathered in engagement labs, workshops, dine arounds, a membership assembly, community meetings, powerful plenaries and challenging discussions - all aiming to "advance efforts to deepen understanding and move us and our community from sincere but insufficient approaches at the center, towards the edges of what is possible and necessary."

With a strong call on how patriarchy has been shaping the injustices of this system, the conversations varied from climate justice, human trafficking, shifting power, racial justice, indigenous rights, participatory philanthropy, human rights defenders, urban systemic change, and many other systemic alternatives.

“I've said to my employer that EDGE should be a required conference for all employees at our foundation.” EDGE member

*Out on the edge you see all kinds of things you can't see from the center.*

- Kurt Vonnegut
Plenaries

Following opening remarks by EDGE Board member and Conference Chair Amanda Gigler with Mama Cash, the gathering got off to a moving start with tributes honoring the memory of our colleague and conference co-chair Leslie Lowe, provided by her brother Edward Lowe and long time friend Charmel Gaulden. A short introductory film then set the scene for a powerful opening plenary guided by Tanya Dawkins with CarEth foundation. Colleagues from a diverse set of funding organizations - Regan Pritzker, Libra Foundation; Zohra Moosa, Mama Cash; Marnie Thompson, Fund for Democratic Communities; Kiti Kajana, Open Society Foundations and Solome Lemma, Buen Vivir Fund/Thousand Currents provided insights from their work addressing transformative change, which were then taken up in table conversations facilitated by Prospera’s Emilienne de Leon.

On the second day, Indie Philanthropy’s Arianne Shaffer, who helped guide EDGE’s inaugural Global Engagement Lab co-learning cohort over the previous six months, facilitated a discussion that began with an overview and an analysis from Pablo Solon with the Systemic Alternatives Initiative, followed by a conversation with three other GEL members - Sofia Arroyo, Sacred Fire Foundation; Sanjay Bavikatte, Christensen Fund; and Vivian Paulissen with European Cultural Foundation - who shared what they’d taken away from the experience, and how it has deepened their reflection on the nature of systemic crises, and shaped their understanding of the roles they can play in supporting civil society partners working for social change and transformation.

Just before the final closing, foundation colleagues from Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo took to the stage as we announced that our 2019 conference will be held in Brazil.

Graciela Selaimen with the Ford Foundation in Rio, Ana Valéria Araújo with Brazil Human Rights Fund, Amália Fischer with Fundo Elas and Maria Amália Souza with Fundo CASA provided context for next year’s gathering, reminding everyone of the vibrancy of social movements in the country and across Latin America, the political stakes involved, and the richness of systemic change efforts in the country that gave birth to the World Social Forum under the banner “Another World is Possible.” Amalia then closed us out with a beautiful rendition of “Canto das Três Raças”, and an invitation to all meet again in Brazil next year.

“It’s only a good first step if you keep walking.”
Regan Pritzker, during the plenary “Come to the Edge.”

At this year’s annual conference we were confronted with the fact that at least for some of our movement partners, the experience of engaging with EDGE was not as transformational as it should be. Mark Randazzo offers some reflections on what all this means for the future of systemic change philanthropy.

Leslie Lowe

Leslie was happy to accept EDGE’s invitation to be the co-chair of the conference, which would take place in a city that she knew very well. She was born in Queens, NY, and for the last five years, was a proud actively involved resident of the Treme in New Orleans. Leslie was an African American attorney, a fierce fighter for social justice, whose work focused on corporate and governmental accountability and environmental law and policy.
Feminist Organising School

“Now more than ever we have to be unabashedly, unapologetically feminist,” opened Cindy Wiesner from Grassroots Global Justice during a plenary on the second morning of the conference. She and M Adams from Freedom, Inc. laid out why systemic change is impossible to achieve without an intersectional lens, including one that accounts for how extractive and exploitative capitalism is predated by and enabled by patriarchy, racism and imperialism.

They presented what a just transition to a feminist economy could look like – one that puts us in right relationship with not only all forms of labor, but also our bodies and nature and one that debunks the myth of individualism.

In addition to presenting various frameworks and examples for how these systems of oppression are interlinked, including within philanthropic practice, Cindy and M encouraged us to look inside our own organizations to ask which of these oppressions we perpetuate and which we actively resist.

Also, they asked us to consider how feminisms, gender justice and anti-racist practice can better inform our work, using examples from various social movements around the U.S. and the world. M closed the session by challenging funders to try and match with their money the incomparable and intangible generosity that activists exhibit in social movements.

Gender Justice Institute

The Gender Justice Institute built on several years of work and organizing by the Gender Justice Initiative in the EDGE community. Recognizing that in order for the GJI to realize its objective of centering gender justice in progressive philanthropy, a long term framework for action and accompanying resources are needed, the institute was designed as a strategy building space. Participants were invited to brainstorm strategies for integrating gender justice into their own work, institutions, and communities, and identify potential sources of support for this work.

The institute brought together over 40 individuals from around the world, both familiar and new to the gender justice initiative. With such a range of organizations and interests represented, it became clear that space to discuss the current political context and strategies for supporting grassroots women’s rights organizing in these contexts is needed.

Politics of Care

Tatiana Cordero from Urgent Action Fund Latin America and Ledys Sanjuan from FRIDA Young Feminist Fund shared how the politics of self-care is completely intertwined with systemic change.

Explaining that “self-care is a necessity not a privilege” and sharing FRIDA’s Happiness Manifesto, they asked the audience to consider what care looks like at the individual, organizational and community levels, including dismantling hierarchies and democratizing power – one way to diminish risk. They also presented a very powerful video.
Workshops and Engagement Labs

On the Call for Sessions, funders submitted 58 proposals for workshops. The final list had 12 sessions divided in two slots of 90 minutes each, to explore the role of philanthropy in topics like: protection of defenders and civic space, disaster capitalism and recolonisation, racism and wealth accumulation, democratization of access to resources, among others.

Through a participatory process, participants proposed 14 engagement labs, also divided in two slots of 90 minutes each. The topics ranged from decolonizing philanthropy, gender, Africans rising, to challenging corporate power, participatory and community philanthropy, the commons and systemic alternatives in action.

“Loved the way these [Labs] were planned, structured, and facilitated. Really excellent format, thanks for all the work that went into supporting their emergence!”
Conference participant

Community meetings and Dine Arounnds

This year, community meetings and walking tours were organized with the local community and with Hidden History Tours, to give conference participants the context of the local history and how it influences the struggles the community faces nowadays.

With tours in the city center and other neighborhoods, participants learnt about: “Truth Black History and Truth Environmental Racism”, and “African Life in the French Quarter”, besides other tours organized by participants.

Video

*Come to the Edge* was edited for the EDGE Funders Alliance annual conference on systemic change philanthropy, drawing on narratives developed by the **Systemic Alternatives Initiative** and others working for social transformation around the world.

Click [here](#) to watch the short video.
The Conference in Numbers

Participants and Sessions

This year, the EDGE Conference had 217 participants, coming from Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europe. In total, 54 sessions took place during the three days and a half. From that, 7 dine arounds, 14 engagement labs and 12 workshops were proposed and organized by participants.

Survey results

95% would recommend the conference to others interested in progressive philanthropy

“Because its a space for innovation and new ways of thinking. Everyone is open for new ideas and is ready to talk to you about them” conference participant

84% believe the conference fulfilled their reasons to attend

71% said EDGE should retain the format of Engagement Labs

CO2 Emissions

EDGE, like every other actor, is part of the problem as much as part of the solution. 2.3 tons is the sustainability limit p.p / p.a

Climate gas emissions through air travel to the conference were 632 tons of CO2

Reasons for attending:

84% believe the conference fulfilled their reasons to attend

71% said EDGE should retain the format of Engagement Labs

27% Personal growth & development

57% Networking

66% Content and subject matter

“I thought my organization was nimble and took risks and engaged with the front lines, but after attending this conference I see we are actually pretty conservative!” conference participant
Acknowledgements

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Leslie Lowe - in Memoriam

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EDGE Conference 2019
In early April, join EDGE in Brazil. Stay tuned for the announcement of the city and venue.