



LEADING CHANGE

Are social justice leaders born, or can they be developed? Life-defining events occur even in earliest childhood. Born in a remote village in Vietnam's Dong Nai province, Vo Thi Hoang Yen contracted polio when she was only two years old. For Yen, the physical constraints imposed by this infectious disease became a driving force for change, rather than a limitation to her life. Education was the essential vehicle for advancing Yen's journey, and what has enabled her to become a formidable Vietnamese leader for the rights of people with disabilities (PWDs).

The transformational efforts led by Yen exemplify the most audacious ambitions of the Ford Foundation's International Fellowships Program (IFP), a 10-year initiative that began in 2001. The single largest grant program in the history of the Ford Foundation, IFP aimed to further the development of social justice leaders, such as Yen, who could change institutions, communities, nations, and, indeed, the world. Through IFP, Yen earned a master's degree in human development at the University of Kansas in 2004. She has since earned her doctorate in social work from La Trobe University in Australia. She is one of 4,305 IFP alumni now advancing social justice around the world.

Yen's achievements were recognized recently with the Ramon Magsaysay Award, a prize established in 1957 by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund in honor of the revered former Philippine president, and now considered the highest award given to Asian leaders. The 2018 Award was bestowed upon Yen for the work of Disability Research and Capacity Development (DRD), a nonprofit organization she founded in 2005 to expand opportunities for the differently-abled. According to the Award citation, Yen's own desire "to be able to live independently, and to see this in other people with disabilities, is at the heart of her advocacy. Autonomy, inclusion, a sense of dignity, releasing and enhancing the capacities of the differently-abled—this is what she is about." DRD has aided 15,000+ PWDs while also working with the public and private sectors in addressing PWD-related policies.

Alumnus Daniel Aquino Lara discusses artifacts in Guatemala's National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. Daniel received a Master's in Cultural Heritage Management from the Universitat de Barcelona in Spain.



Program Creation

Starting in 2000, former Ford Foundation president Susan Berresford led the board and organization in an 18-month planning process to conceive an institution-wide, unifying initiative to utilize a sharp increase in grant-making resources from unexpected endowment gains. According to Berresford, Candid president Bradford K. Smith, then a Ford Foundation program director, proposed the initial idea that evolved into IFP. The Ford

ABOUT IFP FELLOWS

IFP made a compelling case for the belief that talent, often concealed by circumstance, could be found everywhere. Advanced educational opportunities were made available to students from the world's most marginalized populations in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and Russia—including women, indigenous people, and individuals from rural regions. To ensure greater inclusion of populations under-represented in higher education, the selection criteria sought candidates who were typically overlooked. IFP fostered greater inclusion by going beyond traditional selection criteria in assessing leadership potential, such as academic achievement, and instead looked for action-oriented evidence of commitment to social justice. The ensuing roster of 4,305 IFP fellows from 22 countries was evenly comprised of men and women, and represented 6 percent of the eligible candidate pool. The IFP Fellows studied at 615 institutions in 49 countries, and possessed the following characteristics:

- 79 percent: First-generation university student.
- 73 percent: Parental income below national average.
- 68 percent: Born in rural area or small city/town.
- 57 percent: Mother did not progress beyond primary school.

Foundation had a long, productive history in scholarship support that had strengthened academic institutional capacity and nurtured new fields of knowledge. The vision was that Ford Foundation's expertise in scholarship programs and global presence through its field offices could be mobilized to further the professional development of social justice leaders from vulnerable and under-represented communities around the world. The Ford Foundation board insisted that IFP be a leadership development initiative, and not just "another" scholarship program. Berresford said that the IFP concept "captured the energy and imagination" of her Ford colleagues, who were "determined to show the world that a scholarship for social inclusion could succeed."

With a core commitment of \$420 million, IFP was designed as an independent entity with its own governing board and situated at the Institute of International Education (IIE). Under the dynamic and dedicated leadership of executive director Joan Dassin, IFP was constructed as a decentralized network of 22 local nonprofit partners that found, recruited, and selected the IFP Fellows in each region. Integrity was preserved through the utilization of a consistent program framework developed by Dassin and her colleagues; the framework defined common criteria, transparency, independent panels, and regular reporting of results. A subsequent Ford Foundation commitment provided financial resources to conduct a [10-year tracking study](#) and create an archive at [Columbia University](#).

Early Criticism

In general, graduate studies supported by traditional fellowship programs reward individual accomplishments and the leadership preparation associated with privileged circumstances. With its focus on identifying and supporting those emerging social justice leaders who were usually excluded, IFP was a dramatic departure, even for the Ford Foundation. When IFP was launched and the first fellows named in 2001, the Ford Foundation's announcement was met with skepticism, if not outright cynicism. According to Berresford, attendees to the press conference questioned the basic premise that a large pool of such emerging social justice leaders existed and could be readily identified; the ability of such individuals to complete their graduate level studies; the potential corrupt diversion of resources to further enrich the elite, and not those striving at the edges; and the likelihood of "brain drain" by fellows who would chose not to return to their home countries.

Ultimately, IFP defied the skeptics and exceeded many of its ambitious goals. The IFP applicant pool was even larger than anticipated, resulting in a 6 percent acceptance rate. In aiming to develop social justice leaders at unprecedented scale and scope, IFP affirmed that "equity and excellence are not mutually exclusive."



IFP is designed to help recognize and cultivate untapped talent, empowering young people to become strong leaders who are equipped to challenge inequality around the world.”

- HILARY PENNINGTON

Lessons Learned

When asked about the IFP critical-to-success factors, Berresford noted the following characteristics of the IFP Fellows:

- They had lived with hardship and were familiar with institutions outside of the mainstream.
- They were resilient and could endure challenges.
- They had a sense of responsibility to their communities and possessed a commitment to return home.
- They were resourceful and could cope with unforeseen issues.
- They were smart and could problem-solve effectively and efficiently.

The “Linking Higher Education and Social Change” final report issued in 2013 offered the following IFP lessons:

- First, a large pool of qualified fellowship applicants could be identified, even in the most remote regions.
- Second, small supports for personal needs, such as travel to see family, made possible large individual success.
- Third, greater inclusion could be achieved through flexible admissions policies that recognized leadership potential and did not eliminate worthy candidates who lacked full preparation.
- Fourth, local sourcing and selection by the regional nonprofit partners played a crucial role.
- Fifth, graduate fellowships can be an effective use of global development resources.

Measuring Change

During their studies, the IFP Fellows utilized their abilities and developed the skills that would propel them into leadership positions upon completion of their graduate degrees. As intended, they were becoming agents for change, and activists on behalf of the most vulnerable within their communities. According to the findings of the 2015 IFP Global Alumni survey, the reported individual and collective impacts of IFP were extraordinary:

- Despite all obstacles, 96 percent had completed their advanced degrees.
- Of those responding, 84 percent were living in their home country, and 52 percent were living in their home community, so the fears of IFP leading to “brain drains” proved to be mostly unfounded.

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We were determined to show the world that a scholarship for social inclusion could succeed.”

– SUSAN BERRESFORD

Indian alumna Saba Hasnain speaks with community members about their rights in Andhra Pradesh.



- The program’s stated goal of leadership development had been attained: 79 percent held senior leadership roles in local organizations as well as national and international social justice organizations.
- Over 900 IFP alumni have created new social justice programs and organizations, and 48 percent were established by women.
- IFP alumni had generated nearly 35,000 social justice products and various forms of outreach, including conference presentations, books, reports, and works of art.

For more information, see the 2019 *Leveraging Higher Education to Promote Social Justice: Evidence from the IFP Alumni Tracking Study* and *other studies* examining regional impacts.

Reflections

In reflecting on this unprecedented venture, IIE president Allan Goodman acknowledged that many of the lessons of how IFP re-invented a traditional funding mechanism—the fellowship—were as applicable to undergraduate education as to graduate education. So-called “bridging” experiences, such as English language immersion, were often critical to individual success, especially for those Fellows who had gaps in preparing for the rigors of graduate studies. In considering how IFP could have been improved, Berresford noted that the re-entry of IFP alumni to their home communities and countries could have been given greater consideration to ease what were often difficult transitions.

As envisioned nearly 20 years ago, Yen and 4,304 other alumni are now leading both visible, award-winning initiatives and less-visible, yet significant local efforts to increase social justice. Around the world, IFP alumni continue to support each other through regional networks and gatherings. In some cases, they are also being aided in their local efforts with IFP Alumni Incentive Awards.

As current Ford Foundation executive vice president Hilary Pennington has written, the lasting impact of IFP and other scholarship programs designed for greater inclusion is to “help recognize and cultivate untapped talent, empowering young people to become strong leaders who are equipped to challenge inequality around the world.” In doing so, the Ford Foundation’s IFP has proven to be a powerful force in developing social justice leaders.

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For more on the International
Fellowships program and the
Ford Foundation, visit
[iie.org/en/Research-and-Insights/
IFP-Alumni-Tracking-Study](https://www.fordfoundation.org/en/Research-and-Insights/IFP-Alumni-Tracking-Study).

This case study is one of 12 in a suite of case studies focused on how donors are supporting scholarships to create change. These case studies showcase the rich and varied narratives of giving in the scholarships space, giving insight to the philanthropy landscape and approach for foundations, academics, and practitioners.

The case studies have been developed in companionship with Candid's project [Scholarships for Change](#), a dynamic hub that pulls together data and knowledge to tell the story of how philanthropic dollars are supporting transformative scholarships. It includes a mapping tool and a repository of reports and case studies to learn from peers. The site was made possible through the generous support of The Ford Foundation and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Please visit scholarshipsforchange.org to explore further.

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