

An International Foundation

An Interview with Hilary Pennington,
Executive Vice President for Program, Ford Foundation

EDITORS' NOTE Hilary Pennington also oversees Ford Foundation's BUILD program, and the Office of Strategy and Learning. Before assuming her current role, she served as the Foundation's Vice President for Education, Creativity, and Free Expression. A national expert on postsecondary education and intergenerational change, Pennington joined the Foundation in 2013. Early in her career, she founded Jobs for the Future, which she led for over twenty years. She also led the Generations Initiative, a project funded by national foundations to develop effective responses to the dramatic demographic shifts occurring in the United States. Between 2006 and 2012, she served as Director of Education, Postsecondary Success, and Special Initiatives at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, where she guided grant programs across the country and worldwide. Pennington serves on the boards of Bard College, the Center for Effective Philanthropy, and the European Foundation Centre, and is a member of the Trinity Church Vestry. She is a graduate of the Yale School of Management and Yale College, and holds a graduate degree in social anthropology from Oxford University and a master's degree in theological studies from the Episcopal Divinity School. In 2000, she was a fellow at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.



Hilary Pennington

ORGANIZATION BRIEF Ford Foundation (fordfoundation.org) is the third largest philanthropy in the United States with over \$13 billion in assets and \$600 million in annual giving. The foundation operates worldwide with offices in Asia, Africa, and Central and South America. Across eight decades, the foundation's mission has been to reduce poverty and injustice, strengthen democratic values, promote international cooperation, and advance human achievement.

What is the history of the Ford Foundation?

We were established in 1936 by Edsel Ford, who was the son of Henry, the founder of Ford Motor Company. Henry II assumed the leadership of the Foundation in the mid-1940s and that's when we truly became an international foundation.

That was the period right after World War II and he made a number of really important choices at that time. The first was to have an international focus on reducing poverty, promoting democratic values, and expanding peace and human achievement. The second was to make it an independent foundation and to set it up from the beginning to remain independent of the Ford Motor Company.

Henry II moved the Foundation from Detroit to New York City. He had a real vision for a legacy institution that would exist over time to work on the kinds of hard problems evident post World War II, so that is part of our origin story.

How do you define your role and what are your main areas of focus at the Foundation?

My biggest job is to make sure that we have integrity in our programming, and that we punch above our weight as an institution, which means that we do high-quality grantmaking and are an excellent partner to our grantees. In the few years that I've been in this role, we have restructured the program leadership at the foundation. For many years, we had a matrix structure where the program vice presidents, of which there were originally three and I was one of them, were responsible for a region of the world and also for a set of programs.

We have restructured so we now have one vice president for our international work and another vice president for the U.S. work. This is the first time in a generation that Ford has had a structure like this. One of the reasons that I wanted to do this was that we had made a set of decisions to embark on some bold international programming that would pull across all ten of our regional offices and get them working together against some very big global challenges. It made sense to have one guiding leader for the international work. It also made sense to do this for our work in the U.S. at such a challenging time. As an institution, we need to be thinking about the country as a whole and not just through the lens of the individual program areas that we happen to have. The two program vice presidents report to me as executive vice president, as do a couple of cross-cutting functions in the foundation.

Structurally, the role of those cross-cutting teams, like our Office of Strategy and Learning, is to make sure that we are one foundation, doing

things in similar ways, and the international/U.S. structure helps us make a greater impact.

Will you highlight the BUILD initiative and the major commitment Ford Foundation has put behind this effort?

This is one of the things that I am most passionate about, having run a nonprofit organization for 20 years. The idea behind this is that our most important partner organizations need multiyear support in order to continuously adapt and be first movers in the very tumultuous times that we live in. They need to be able to plan for the long term in terms of hiring staff and developing programs. We have made a \$1 billion commitment to make five-year general operating support grants to our key partners. We have made around 300 such grants so far, and we hope to be able to influence other funders to do more funding like this. We see this as one of the most important things we are doing.

How critical are metrics to track impact when you are focusing on long-term challenges and making long-term investments?

It's absolutely necessary to have metrics. They have to be the right kinds of metrics, but we can't do what we do without having some indicators and some sense of the outcomes that our grantees are trying to accomplish.

For each of our strategies, we have a ten-year set of goals and we have quantitative outcomes we expect for each of those strategies and those goals. We track mid-course indicators that help us know if we are on track or off track.

Obviously, we do not have enough resources to create changes in the big systems we work on, such as criminal justice and climate change, on our own so we also track the degree to which our funds leverage other funds.

How critical has it been for Ford Foundation to have such an engaged and committed board?

It's hugely important for us. The work we do is complex and the board is the keeper of the strategic vision and the values of this institution in the deepest and most important ways. The board contributes at every level from what they think about our mission-related investment commitments, to the BUILD commitment, to a particular program area, to what do we do about challenges that are happening in China and India, to renovating the Ford building. Ours is a very complex institution and our board provides essential and informed guidance to us. ●