

Tackling Toxics

Funders Collaborate to Catalyze a Movement

■ Big Problems, Modest Resources

In 2004 the Bauman Foundation and Beldon Fund hosted a retreat for foundations concerned about hazards to people and wildlife from tens of thousands of untested chemicals on the market. They saw little public awareness, weak regulation, and low philanthropic investment. While funders gathered approached these concerns from different perspectives, they agreed on many changes that would help protect health and the environment.

Those funders and subsequent partners formed a HEFN “Catalysts Collaborative” to tackle toxics with more collective impact. The Catalysts then regularly consulted for almost a decade as they invested, shared information, discussed strategies, partnered in projects, and helped build a movement to shift from toxic to safer chemicals.

■ Diversified Strategies

The Catalysts adopted an initial set of strategic objectives in which every funder could find a focus.

Many Catalysts aimed at **reforming policies**, including a comprehensive reform of U.S. chemicals policy through overhaul of the outdated [1976 Toxic Substances Control Act \(TSCA\)](#). Funders helped develop campaigns in [an alliance of states](#) to build models and nationwide pressure. Later grants helped weave constituency organizing, state and [international progress](#) into a multi-stakeholder [national campaign](#) for reform.

Several Catalysts targeted resources on **moving markets**. They supported campaigns building consumer awareness and pressure on businesses using chemicals in everything from building materials to baby bottles. Projects linking advocates, academics and businesses encouraged shifts in products and processes. **Science-focused grants** helped expand research and accelerate green chemistry to design safer chemicals.

Numerous Catalysts aimed at **building engagement and advocacy** in communities and in highly affected and/or influential constituencies. Place-focused grants supported local organizing, while national funding helped mobilize

health-impacted groups, health professionals, faith, labor, and other groups.

Catalysts recognized early the strategic value of investing in **infrastructure to support strategic collaboration** across the diverse and expanding field. This focus on field capacity helped grow numerous organizations that served as hubs of activity in – and helped link across – policy, markets, science, and other organizing efforts.

■ Broad Changes, Tangible Progress

The Catalysts’ work together over nearly a decade leveraged hundreds of millions of dollars of aligned investments and catalyzed a broad-based movement to tackle toxics. There are tangible results:

- Public awareness has dramatically expanded.
- Companies are replacing toxins, reducing risk and responding to consumer pressures for “retail regulation.”
- Bipartisan majorities in 34 state legislatures have passed chemical safety laws;
- A national coalition representing over 11 million people is advocating federal reforms; and
- New tools have been developed to guide chemicals design and selection towards safety.

Catalysts’ collaboration has yielded funder lessons. Adopting a set of objectives rather than a single target enabled more funders to buy in and seeded more field innovation; it also presented challenges in maintaining cohesion. Differences over priorities and resource allocations had to be addressed to better integrate community and justice interests with national advocacy.

Catalysts’ investments also laid groundwork for next steps. Intense debate surrounds TSCA overhaul, with other reforms needed on chemicals in agriculture and food. Advocates cite companies replacing known toxins with questionable alternatives rather than safer substitutes. The toxics field offers a landscape of new opportunities in research, advocacy, and organizing. Veteran funders are cataloging gains to develop a case for the next generation of investments to tackle toxic threats to health.