

4-2017

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### Recommended Citation

Gienapp, Anne; Reisman, Jane; Shorr, David; and Arbretton, Amy (2017) "The Legacy of a Philanthropic Exit: Lessons From the Evaluation of the Hewlett Foundation's Nuclear Security Initiative," *The Foundation Review*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 4.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1347>

Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr/vol9/iss1/4>

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# The Legacy of a Philanthropic Exit: Lessons From the Evaluation of the Hewlett Foundation's Nuclear Security Initiative

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*Keywords: Summative evaluation, advocacy evaluation, time-bound investment, philanthropic exit, nuclear security*

## Introduction

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation's Nuclear Security Initiative (NSI) began as an exploratory grant in 2007, and was extended into a seven-year, \$24.7 million initiative when the foundation's leadership saw a window of opportunity and the potential to make a significant impact within a relatively short time. The initiative was sunset in 2015.

The Hewlett Foundation currently organizes its grantmaking within five core program areas (William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, n.d.). Like many foundations, Hewlett pursues opportunities for impact beyond its primary program areas, reserving funds each year to support what it calls "special projects." These projects — including one-time grants or multiyear initiatives — are not required to align neatly with existing program goals, but must adhere to the framework (now called Outcome-Focused Philanthropy) that guides all of Hewlett's strategic work.

Once funded, special projects are often renewed or extended over several years, so it can be easy to lose sight of an impending end point. Such was the case with the NSI: partnerships had developed, momentum built, and expectations arose as the initiative was extended over seven years. Uncertainty among Hewlett staff, grantees, and co-funders about when the initiative would end led to disappointment within and outside the foundation when the NSI exit strategy began to take shape.

## Key Points

- As its seven-year Nuclear Security Initiative wound down in late 2014, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation engaged ORS Impact to conduct a summative evaluation. That evaluation yielded insights pertinent to future work on nuclear security and other fields where policy-related investments, strategies, and goals are prioritized, as well as insights regarding Hewlett's approach to the initiative exit.
- During the life of the initiative, significant changes in the geopolitical landscape influenced both the relevance and the expected pace of advancement of its established goals and targets. Rather than focusing on whether identified targets had been achieved in a narrow "success/failure" framework, the evaluation explored where and how Hewlett's investments and actions made a difference and where meaningful progress occurred over the seven years of investment. Evaluation findings highlighted contributions and areas of progress that had not been explicitly anticipated or specifically identified in the initiative's theory of change.
- This article describes the initiative and its theory of change, evaluation methods and approaches, findings, and how these informed the foundation's planning for initiative exits and approach to measurement of time-bound investments. Although time-bound philanthropic initiatives are a well-established practice, the approach merits closer examination in order to discern effective ways to implement, evaluate, and wind down these types of investments.

*The initial Nuclear Security Initiative investments occurred at a time when many philanthropies were shifting from more traditional grantmaking to bolder approaches — sometimes called “big bets” — that were often designed to address complex, systemic issues and achieve meaningful social or environmental change. A common belief in the philanthropic sector was that with a high degree of accountability to impact, foundations could surgically and successfully realize ambitious goals within a reasonable time period.*

As the NSI drew to a close in late 2014, Hewlett engaged ORS Impact to conduct a summative evaluation. Although the NSI included specific goals and targets, the foundation team and evaluators determined that summative evaluation would not focus narrowly on assessing whether or not these had been achieved. Instead, evaluation sought to document how and where Hewlett’s investments made a substantive difference during the seven-year NSI, where meaningful progress occurred, and how Hewlett’s exit was perceived by the field. The timing of ORS Impact’s evaluation offered a rich opportunity for the foundation’s leadership and program staff to

deepen understanding about both philanthropic approaches and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in the context of a time-bound initiative.

Although time-bound philanthropic initiatives are a well-established practice, the approach merits closer examination in order to discern effective ways to implement, evaluate, and wind down these types of investments. This article describes the NSI evaluation along with how findings informed Hewlett’s philanthropic approach, and provides a case example of a philanthropic-initiative exit. Key considerations for M&E practices that are particular to the context of philanthropic investments where an exit is planned are also presented.

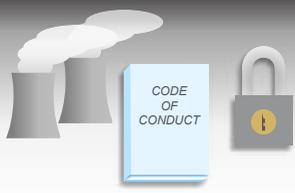
### Overview of the Nuclear Security Initiative

Security issues are not a central element in the Hewlett Foundation’s main programs, though it has a history of funding special projects in the peace and security space in response to perceived opportunities. At the time the NSI was launched in early 2008, the foundation assessed that near-term gains on pressing policy issues were possible, presenting a ripe opportunity for impact.

The initial NSI investments occurred at a time when many philanthropies were shifting from more traditional grantmaking to bolder approaches — sometimes called “big bets” — that were often designed to address complex, systemic issues and achieve meaningful social or environmental change. A common belief in the philanthropic sector was that with a high degree of accountability to impact, foundations could surgically and successfully realize ambitious goals within a reasonable time period (Brest, 2011). At the NSI’s inception, Hewlett’s philosophy of grantmaking was guided by this point of view, an approach known as “strategic philanthropy” (Brest & Harvey, 2008).

The NSI had a bold, aspirational goal to reduce the risk of a nuclear disaster by a discernable margin. The initiative encompassed three main strategy areas, each one large and complex in its

**FIGURE 1** Overview of NSI Strategy Areas

| Strategic Stability Among the P5 and Their Allies                                  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
|  | Aspirational Outcomes   | Sample of Grantees   |
|   | <p>The nuclear powers (P5) and their allies develop or maintain stable bilateral and multilateral strategic relations, and reduce their reliance on nuclear weapons in their defense policies.</p>      | <p>Carnegie Endowment for International Peace<br/>Stanford University<br/>The China Institute of International Studies<br/>British American Security Information Council<br/>Center for Arms Control and Nonproliferation<br/>Center for Public Integrity<br/>World Security Institute<br/>Center for Strategic and International Studies</p>    |
| Prudent Development of Nuclear Power   |   |  |
|  | Aspirational Outcomes   | Sample of Grantees   |
|   | <p>Where nuclear power is being pursued, it is developed to ensure safety &amp; security of fissile material and with minimal impacts on proliferation.</p>   | <p>American Academy of Arts and Sciences<br/>Center for Strategic and International Studies<br/>Arius Association<br/>Nuclear Threat Initiative<br/>Center for Economic and Foreign Policy Studies<br/>Institute for Science and International Security<br/>Natural Resources Defense Council<br/>Carnegie Endowment for International Peace</p> |
| Better International Rules   |   |  |
|  | Aspirational Outcomes   | Sample of Grantees   |
|  | <p>The international nuclear nonproliferation regime becomes more effective, enforceable, and equitable. Non-nuclear emerging states commit to equitable and enforceable nonproliferation policies.</p> | <p>Ploughshares Fund<br/>National Security Initiative<br/>Carnegie Endowment for International Peace<br/>The Arms Control Association<br/>Center for Economic and Foreign Policy Studies<br/>NPSGlobal Foundation<br/>Fundacao Getulio Vargas<br/>Monterey Institute of International Studies</p>  |

own right and each with numerous ambitious policy targets.<sup>1</sup> (See Figure 1.)

During seven years of investment the NSI set over 100 specific targets that spanned numerous issues, including strategic developments within NATO, multinational as well as nation-specific actions, and the fair consideration and adoption of treaties and agreements.<sup>2</sup> The number and the array of targets reflected the foundation’s view

that a time-bound investment could be successfully and precisely calibrated.

The NSI grants were made to a range of organizations, including university-based research institutes and think tanks, as well as nonprofits engaged in advocacy and communications activities. Grants included both restricted support for specific programs and general operating support. Significant investments were made in five

<sup>1</sup>A target is a type of outcome that describes a specific change or specific amount of change (e.g., 90 percent of all third-grade students are reading at grade level). Targets communicate expectations about impact and are often used in strategic philanthropy or venture philanthropy. In the context of the NSI, targets reflected expectations about change and could be assessed as having been “achieved” or “not achieved.”

<sup>2</sup>Although some of the NSI’s targets may reflect the passage of legislation (based on inputs from grantees and experts in the field), the Hewlett Foundation does not lobby or earmark its funds for prohibited lobbying activities, as defined in the federal tax laws. Its funding for policy work is limited to permissible forms of support only, such as general operating support grants that grantees can allocate at their discretion and project support grants for nonlobbying activities (e.g., public education and nonpartisan research).

*[T]he evaluation was a broad and inclusive inquiry that aimed to systematically assess and determine how and where the NSI had made a substantive difference — where meaningful progress had occurred, and perceptions within the field about the foundation, the initiative, and the exit process.*

“anchor” grantees — organizations that the foundation viewed as key partners in the pursuit of initiative goals.

Beyond these financial investments, Hewlett invested human resources to boost the efforts of grantees and enhance impact. The NSI program officers took steps to convene grantees and support coordinated strategy, and were also careful to situate the initiative’s efforts with the ongoing work in the field, coordinating closely with their counterparts in the Peace and Security Funders Group. As time went on, program officers gained a sense of the nuclear security field’s strengths and weaknesses and shared insights with both peer funders and grantees in order to inform strategy.

A combination of shifts in the foundation’s strategic priorities and an assessment of diminished opportunity in the nuclear policy arena led the foundation to wind down the NSI in 2013. An important aspect of the wind-down strategy was intentional efforts to strengthen capabilities within the nuclear field via joint efforts with other funders and a number of organizational capacity-building grants.

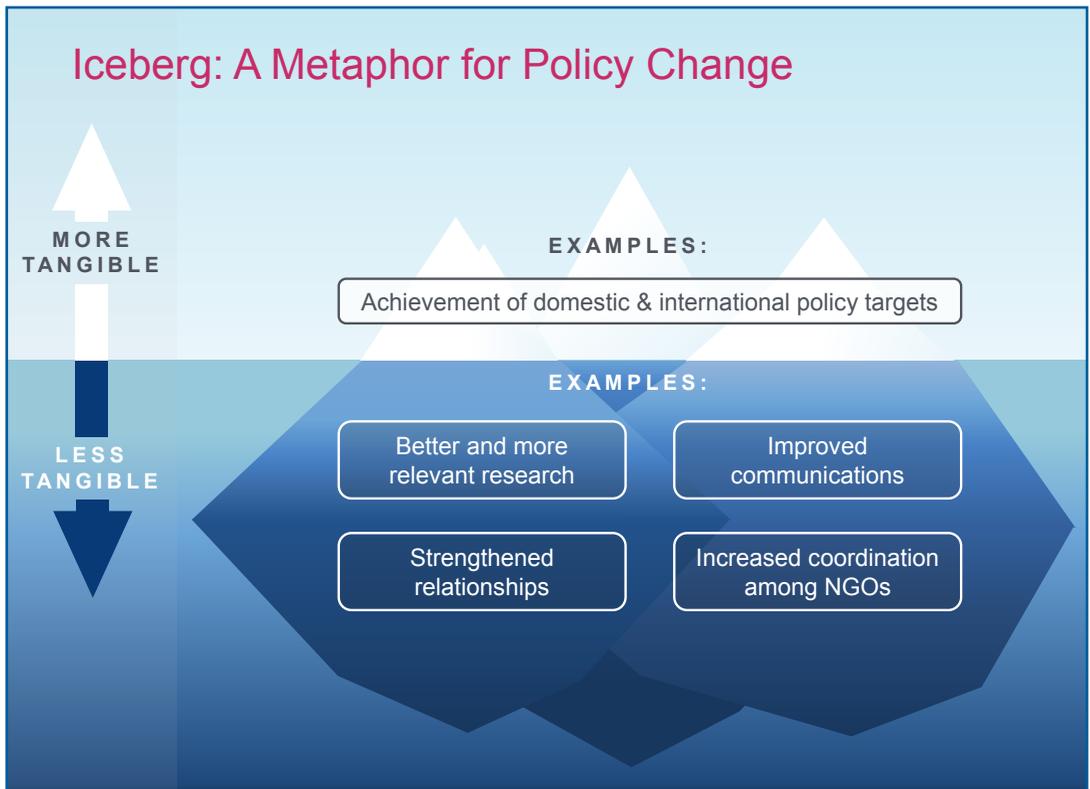
## NSI Evaluation Approach and Methods

The field of nuclear security is beset by a host of wicked problems. Thousands of destructive weapons — in the hands of regimes that are stable and in those that are less so — inevitably shape power relationships within a complex, global political system. Nuclear materials are transported and stored without proper protections and there is the risk that weapons or nuclear materials can wind up in the hands of nefarious actors. For these sorts of problems, the pathway to desired goals cannot always be plotted in advance. Despite established goals and targets, the actual results for any initiative tackling such a web of wicked problems are unlikely to conform to plan. To maintain relevance, targets — and sometimes goals — must evolve in response to an interplay of global factors. It is against this complex backdrop that the NSI summative evaluation took place.

Evaluation can be conducted for a number of purposes. The NSI evaluation did not focus on accountability; nor did it aim to assess the merit and worth of the NSI’s impact by examining its 100-plus targets within a narrow “success/failure” framework or by asking whether the initiative had advanced its bold goal to reduce the risk of a nuclear disaster. Instead, ORS Impact’s evaluation was intended to support the foundation’s learning and ongoing strategy decisions.<sup>3</sup> As such, the evaluation was a broad and inclusive inquiry that aimed to systematically assess and determine how and where the NSI had made a substantive difference — where meaningful progress had occurred, and perceptions within the field about the foundation, the initiative, and the exit process.

To support learning and decision-making, evaluation inquiry broadened the notion of what could be considered “success” in a global-scale policy-change effort and assessed where progress had occurred in forms other than achieving specific policy targets — certainly the most visible but also the most ambitious sorts of change.

<sup>3</sup>The NSI evaluation’s purpose and methods are consistent with strategic learning. For further description of this evaluative approach, see Patton, 2011; Coffman & Beer, 2011; and Lynn, 2012.

**FIGURE 2** Iceberg: A Metaphor for Policy Change. Adapted from Schlangen and Coe, 2014.

The NSI summative evaluation relied on four sources of data:

1. in-depth interviews with a broad cross section of actors in the field, including Hewlett staff, grantees, funders, policy-makers, and experts inside and outside of government (n = 35);
2. analysis of 720 grantee and program officer reports;
3. review of selected news articles, op-eds, websites, and grantee and funder publications; and
4. a focus group with four evaluation experts, including those with experience in philanthropy, where the intent was to discuss monitoring and evaluation approaches relevant to initiatives such as the NSI.

Using purposive sampling, key informants were carefully selected with the help of an advisor who consulted with the evaluation team. The evaluation advisor, Joy Drucker, brought deep expertise in peace and security issues and was able to identify and help broker connections to those who could provide rich perspectives on the questions of interest, including those inside and outside of government.

Key informant interviews and reporting documents underwent thorough content analysis. Interviews and reports were coded to surface particular patterns and themes where data offered a weight of evidence. To provide perspective on how and where meaningful differences had been realized over the life of the initiative, the evaluation drew on the metaphor of an iceberg. (See Figure 2.) The evaluation sought to describe the wide base of the iceberg “below the waterline” — the array of less visible changes

that constitute modest but important incremental progress or establish the enabling conditions for more visible policy changes, such as more effective dialogue, stronger alliances among key actors, and improved capacity for effective communications. In the case of the NSI, the “below the waterline” outcomes were highly relevant to the initiative’s strategies — including both grants and nongrantmaking approaches (Schlangen & Coe, 2014).

The methods employed in this evaluation were intended to generate useful findings that could inform action. Findings are not intended to be generalizable, though they may be reasonably applied to other, similar settings — e.g., policy-change initiatives implemented in an environment of complexity that are also time bound.<sup>4</sup>

The foundation understood that insights from the summative evaluation would not be applied directly to its efforts within the NSI; rather, the desire was for an inclusive, comprehensive set of lessons that could be applied to other foundation initiatives. The foundation was also interested in delivering insights to those that would remain in the nuclear security field — including its grantees and the Peace and Security Funders Group (PSFG).

Insights relevant to the foundation and the field that are described in this article include the following:

- Be thoughtful about the desired impacts of a time-limited initiative based on the context, the scale of investment, and the range of strategies.
- Regularly reassess the ongoing relevance of desired impacts and/or targets given changes within foundations or the surrounding environment.
- Apply broad measurement frames that allow a full, rich picture of progress to emerge — beyond quantifiable targets.

## Evaluation Findings: Notable Accomplishments

The weight of evaluation evidence pointed to key accomplishments that were attributable to Hewlett’s grantmaking and its role as a philanthropic partner. As a partner, the foundation spurred interchange and collaboration within the field by convening key players, identified and addressed the field’s biggest capacity gaps, contributed to significant policy agreements, and facilitated tighter alignment among grantees and funders.

### *The ‘Three-Legged Stool’*

The NSI addressed shortcomings and enhanced capacity within the nuclear security field by emphasizing that the field’s diverse organizations — including technical, research-focused organizations and politically savvy advocates — are necessary complements for one another. The NSI program officers recognized the need for grantees to adopt a sustained campaign mentality to marshal their strongest arguments and allies against the wicked problems inherent in the field. The NSI helped grantees and funders see that the field must function as a “three-legged stool” in order to be most successful. The concept refers to intentional integration of elements that together provide a solid base for advancing policy change: the “legs” being strong, relevant research and analysis; effective advocacy and communications; and seamless coordination among multiple actors, some of whom might specialize in either research or advocacy. The NSI supported an expansive group of grantees, including those that were described as “new voices, new players.” Noting that grant support in the field had previously been tilted towards research, interviewees credited Hewlett with proactively and intentionally leading the effort to build advocacy capacity within the field. The cohesive “three-legged stool” framework reflected a new way of operating for the field.

While emergence of a strong campaign mentality was not one of the targets specifically articulated within the NSI, evidence indicates that

<sup>4</sup>For more discussion of the generalizability of qualitative evaluation data, see Patton, 1980.

grantee efforts bore impressive fruit by helping create an enabling environment for adoption of the New START strategic arms reduction treaty in 2010. As one interviewee noted, “[to advance policy solutions], you want to have a set of grants that goes at the drivers of [nuclear security] policy.” In the case of the New START, well-coordinated actors with a greater range of expertise were well positioned for success. There is also evidence that the NSI’s ongoing, balanced investment in research and analysis, advocacy, and field building helped ensure that actors were prepared for future efforts.

### *Improved Nuclear Governance*

One of the NSI’s strategy areas was to create or strengthen international rules and governance structures to address weapons proliferation, prudent development of nuclear power, and safe handling of nuclear materials. Consistent with Hewlett’s approach, there were numerous policy targets associated with this strategy area, and the evaluation found evidence of progress on a number of them. Grantees also succeeded in highlighting urgent nuclear security issues confronting NATO. And, the NSI was credited with boosting the capacity of nongovernmental nuclear policy specialists in key countries to engage more effectively in the arena.

A notable international policy success arose via one of Hewlett’s anchor grantees — namely, the creation and adoption of the nuclear vendors’ code of conduct, which enlisted commercial vendors of nuclear energy technology in a new nuclear security regime and thus achieved an important paradigm shift. One NSI grantee observed that vendors had previously viewed those in favor of nonproliferation as radical: “You couldn’t be pro-nuclear energy and pro-nonproliferation. [With the code], that has now evolved.” Although the complexity of the policy-change process can make it difficult to confirm a clear causal relationship between philanthropic investment and policy outcomes, this was a rare instance where it was possible. As one expert put it, “This was the Hewlett Foundation punching above their weight.”

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Adoption of the code of conduct was one of the initiative’s targets, and highlights the notion of quality over quantity. There were numerous policy targets associated with this NSI strategy, and some may ask whether achievement of a single target qualifies as a notable accomplishment. However, it is important to recognize the code of conduct was a significant, multinational, cross-sector agreement that resulted from strenuous negotiations.

### *Perception of Hewlett as Leader*

The Hewlett Foundation’s re-entry into the nuclear security space was seen as bringing “excitement, energy, and innovation”; many key informants perceived the Hewlett brand as synonymous with innovation. Throughout the NSI, the foundation showed a willingness to embrace new, potentially high-value investment areas that had not received significant attention from other funders in the nuclear security space. An example was investments the NSI made in Turkey and Brazil, which were emerging both technologically and politically and thus bound to influence the trajectory of nuclear security. Hewlett was credited with being a leader and the main funder for this work, and those knowledgeable about the effort described the impacts as “huge.”

## *Hewlett's investments in building the capacity of both government and civil-society actors to develop localized solutions to nuclear challenges, enhance oversight, and shape the debate at the domestic and international levels were viewed as critical to improving nuclear security globally.*

Early in the NSI, there was concern that certain states entering the global nuclear security debate lacked a cadre of thought leaders with sufficient expertise, relationships, and funding to wield meaningful influence. Hewlett's investments in building the capacity of both government and civil-society actors to develop localized solutions to nuclear challenges, enhance oversight, and shape the debate at the domestic and international levels were viewed as critical to improving nuclear security globally. Those familiar with the NSI's work in Turkey and Brazil saw significant gains in both states in terms of knowledge, transparency, and relationships between governmental and civil-society actors.

Hewlett also made a concerted effort to encourage innovation in the field. During the final years of the NSI, the foundation forged a partnership with four other nuclear security funders — the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Ploughshares Fund, and the Skoll Global Threats Fund — to form the Nuclear Innovation Collaborative. A charge of this group is to bring “positive disruption” to the arena of nuclear security in order to identify new ideas and approaches. The ultimate aim is to update the archaic Cold War framework within which nuclear security is often discussed and address the waning prominence of nuclear weapons

issues in recent political debate (Ploughshares Fund, 2014). Although the collaborative is still young, one of its major areas of focus will be bringing together innovators from different backgrounds to pursue high-impact collaborations and draw more active and effective people into the field.

Like the campaign mentality that emerged, broadened innovation in the field was not articulated as an NSI target — although evidence indicates that the foundation's work in this area led to impressive results.

### **Insights Regarding Strategy, Evaluation, and Exit Planning**

Contemporary approaches to grantmaking employ a wide variety of philanthropic tools for addressing a problem or opportunity of interest to a foundation. Traditionally, grantmaking focused on establishing core programs and continuing to support them over a long time frame. The desire for high-impact approaches grew with the trends of venture philanthropy, strategic philanthropy, and grantmaking effectiveness. The concept of a targeted, time-bound initiative is an outgrowth of these newer philosophies; emphasis is on investment in specific strategies aimed at achieving clear goals in a limited time period. Given that the success of policy-focused efforts can be contingent on mercurial realities, it can be self-defeating to tie an initiative's success to overly specific or ambitious goals. This raises the questions of how a time-bound initiative can be both targeted and responsive, and which approaches are best to gauge progress. Discussion below illuminates insights from the NSI evaluation.

#### *Shifting Strategy Amid Changing Opportunities*

During its lifespan, NSI strategy shifted in response to changing opportunities in the global landscape while retaining many of its original targets. The foundation re-examined the NSI's strategies and goals after an initial three-year investment and, after some tweaks, extended the initiative for another three years. A mid-course evaluation of the initiative carried out by a respected expert in the field suggested that

the NSI's strategies had been largely successful to date — namely due to the code of conduct and the grantee's work on adoption of the New START — and that continuation of the NSI would likely achieve more of the initiative's targets. Hewlett's board agreed to extend the NSI, but as the second phase of the initiative began, a number of shifts occurred around the globe. Tensions between the U.S. and Russia intensified as Russia effectively annexed the Crimean Peninsula. At the same time, relations between the U.S. and China had begun to cool and the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, which resulted in a critical incident at Japan's Fukushima nuclear plant, dampened the potential for expansion of nuclear energy. These factors, along with increasing gridlock in Congress, meant that earlier hopes for rapid advances in nuclear security policies were starkly diminished. Internally, a new program officer assumed management of the NSI. With a strong background in policy work via years of experience working on Capitol Hill, this officer recognized that advancing policy-related targets would be challenging.

As the second phase of the NSI moved forward, strategies shifted to reflect a “perceived niche” for the foundation (Redstone Strategy Group, 2012). Goals continued to be ambitious, emphasizing alignment and agreements among global actors. The new program officer focused her efforts on building a stronger, campaign-style infrastructure across the field so that everyone — including a range of grantees and members of the Peace and Security Funders Group — would be more effective both individually and collectively.

#### *A Mismatched Focus on Policy Targets*

Continued focus on ambitious policy targets was a mismatch with both the time frame of the NSI and the mix of funded strategies. The NSI's multiple policy targets suggest that perhaps there were outsized expectations about what could be accomplished within given grant cycles and via the funded strategies.

As noted, Hewlett's philosophy of grantmaking at the outset of the NSI was guided by a strategic

philanthropy approach that emphasized setting clear goals and measureable targets. The targets were useful in so far as they helped establish what the initiative set out to achieve. However, many of the NSI's fixed targets became quickly outdated as global circumstances shifted and thus were less useful as longer-term benchmarks. Setting targets in the dynamic context of policy change work is challenging because impact is affected by a multitude of factors, including the evolving complexities of the decision-making environment as well as the types, scale, or combination of funded strategies (Guthrie, Louie, David, & Foster, 2005; Reisman, Gienapp, & Stachowiak, 2007; Morariu & Brennan, 2009). The potential pitfall of relying on highly specified targets as the measure of success is that they may skew toward a best-case scenario — what could happen given unfettered strategy. Targets may not accurately reflect what is achievable given fundamental capacity in the field and inherent obstacles in the landscape, or the less dramatic but often very important incremental steps necessary to advance goals.

While the NSI realized progress on many fronts — including the enhanced capacity of certain actors, stronger dialogue and debate, and adoption of the New START and the code of conduct — it was probably overly optimistic to expect the initiative to advance so many ambitious targets without more sustained and targeted investment (Harvey, 2016). In addition, important successes of the initiative were not reflected within the 100-plus targets — e.g., greater alignment and cohesiveness among grantees and funders in the field and increased momentum due to new energy and innovation in the field.

As noted above, policy work is somewhat like an iceberg: it is not always easy to see in its entirety. Major policy advances are typically visible — like the tip of the iceberg — but reflect only one component of a much greater set of achievements, i.e., the deep, wide base of related results that are less visible. The base of the policy-change iceberg is comprised of elements that signal the right conditions for big policy “wins” as well as less newsworthy budgetary or technocratic steps that can still be quite valuable, so

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it is important to bring them to light (Reisman, et al., 2007). As noted, there is evidence that the NSI influenced change "below the waterline" — e.g., greater capacity to build bridges, stronger relationships with decision-makers, and enhanced coordination among a range of actors in the field. Although these outcomes were not identified as expected targets at the outset of the initiative, these types of changes were nonetheless a logical fit given the mix of NSI strategies. During the NSI's second phase, as the landscape shifted, a greater focus on advancing the necessary preconditions for policy change rather than precise policy targets would have been more reasonable and "right sized" given the initiative's breadth and time frame.

### *Challenges to Measurement*

Because the NSI's measurement tended to focus on achievement of targets and did not intentionally assess progress on interim outcomes, measurement efforts were not as comprehensive or valuable as they could have been. As is common with a strategic philanthropic approach, measurable goals and targets were viewed as the markers of progress for the initiative. Many of the targets were built on linearly predictive "x will lead to y" assumptions. As policy targets appeared to be less obtainable later in the initiative's life cycle, the NSI program officer focused on advancing "below the waterline" outcomes. However, grantee reporting and the foundation's measurement remained narrowly focused on targets. Grantee reporting focused on performance, such as the number of conferences organized, the satisfaction of conference participants, the production of conference proceedings, and number of white papers developed. The vast majority of grantee reports stated that performance targets had been "met" or "exceeded." However, there was no formal or intentional measurement of how grant-funded work was advancing policy targets or broader strategy outcomes.

The increased infrastructure and development of champions realized by investing in a few "anchor" grantees, for example, was not identified as a key expectation or measure of the NSI's progress. In reality, infrastructure development is largely accepted in the field of advocacy and policy-change evaluation as a key progress indicator for advocacy investment.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the convening role that the foundation played led to stronger alliances among the PSFG. While increased capacity, the championing of development, and alliance building are not adequately captured by quantitative targets, these changes can in fact be directly measured through many innovative techniques that are becoming common practice in the advocacy-evaluation field. Intentional measurement in these areas can help foundations to better estimate progress

<sup>5</sup>A few existing frameworks describe outcome areas related to advocacy and policy-oriented work, and describe the areas of infrastructure and other interim outcomes that reflect enabling conditions or otherwise signal progress for long-term policy change or social change. See Reisman, et al., 2007; Coffman, 2007; Reisman, Gienapp, & Kelly, 2015; Alliance for Justice, 2013; and Klugman, 2010.

and inform decisions about strategies or funding approaches.

### *Approaches to Gauging Success*

The NSI evaluation acknowledged the weaknesses inherent in a too-narrow assessment of policy work, and applied a broader frame to describe the initiative's successes. Gauging success by documenting the percent of targets achieved over the course of the initiative would have provided a more quantified but a much more limited picture of the results of the initiative. While some targets were achieved, the changing global landscape meant that many targets were off the mark and out of reach. The assumptions upon which targets were built became overtaken by events — assuming, that is, that the original optimistic views of the opportunity were solid in the first place.

By probing deeply in the areas “below the waterline,” the NSI summative evaluation was able to provide rich data about the varied types of success that were actually realized and pointed toward areas of opportunity to continue the work. Significantly, the evaluation was also able to lift up important messages about the exit strategy and the effects of the initiative sunset on partners who were continuing to forge ahead to keep nuclear weapons out of the hands of bad actors. While the foundation's intent was to make a gracious and conscientious exit and leave the field in a strong place, there were unique aspects to Hewlett's role and the expectations applied to its presence and actions in the field that left questions about how key efforts would be sustained following the NSI's sunset.

### **Impact of Evaluation Findings on Hewlett's Thinking**

Many of the NSI evaluation findings illuminate how careful thought about goals, outcomes, and strategy — at the heart of the foundation's Outcome-Focused Philanthropy (OFP) approach — reflects both strengths and potential pitfalls (William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, 2016).

While the foundation's approach to OFP has evolved, its commitment to reflect on both

successes and failures has been consistent (Hartnell, 2003). When Hewlett staff commissioned the NSI evaluation, a hope was to use the results for learning. Aside from documenting achievements of the NSI, the evaluation surfaced provocative issues and recommendations relevant to complex, policy-oriented, and time-bound initiatives — features that characterize the foundation's existing work. The NSI evaluation findings brought timely value to Hewlett staff in a number of areas.

### *Outcome-Focused Philanthropy*

The evaluation affirmed a reorientation of outcome-focused grantmaking already in progress at the foundation. Outcomes-Focused Philanthropy retains a focus on outcomes already in place at Hewlett, but more explicitly recognizes the need at times to flex and adapt outcomes throughout a philanthropic strategy's life cycle. As described earlier, there was a too-strict management to the NSI's highly aspirational goals and myriad specific targets and not enough attention to how developments in the field suggested the needs for course adjustments, such as closing opportunity windows. While management to goals continues, OFP places greater emphasis on the utility of interim outcomes, scanning for developments in the field and at the foundation, and learning and adaptation through every stage of a strategy's life cycle — origination, implementation, refresh, and, in the case of some strategies and all time-bound initiatives, exit.

A subsequent evaluation of another Hewlett Foundation policy-oriented strategy provides an example of how the foundation flexed and adapted outcomes. Program officers intentionally shifted monitoring and evaluation (M&E) questions to better recognize the initiative's early stage. Given the context, foundation staff recognized that the greatest value of M&E would be to guide decision-making and future implementation of the strategy. The initial M&E questions focused heavily on the extent of progress toward policy goals. Upon reflection, those questions were recognized as too far-reaching and too summative, given the strategy's stage of development. Foundation staff instead adopted

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questions that explored grantees' access to policymakers, grantee alignment with the established policy goals, and the degree to which grantees might form an effective coalition. These questions were a better fit with the strategy context and M&E purpose, and ultimately more useful as findings informed the strategy's adaptation and ongoing implementation.

### *Balancing Expectations*

The evaluation underscored the need to balance expectations about the timeline for progress with an understanding of what information is needed to make good decisions at key strategic moments. As the NSI case illustrates, attacking complex, wicked problems — which are the focus of many of the Hewlett Foundation's programs and initiatives — is tricky, and progress is almost always nonlinear. It is also true that advancing ambitious goals often requires a long time horizon. To guide learning and decision-making in both long-term efforts and those known to be time bound, the foundation's evaluation guidance — including its Evaluation Principles and Practices (William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, 2012) — encourages staff to establish comprehensive evaluation questions in a project's origination phase, then prioritize and sequence, and apply evaluation findings to learning and adaptation throughout the life cycle. Evaluation questions may address the overall effectiveness of the work, value for money, or continued "fit" of the strategy and approach, particularly given any changes in the external environment.

The NSI evaluation also confirmed the importance of assessing field capacity thoroughly before launching an ambitious initiative, as well as the need to align a strategy's scope and goals with the capacity of the field to accomplish those goals. In the NSI example, the need for significant capacity building was identified only after the foundation was deep into the work. Taking that to heart, Hewlett has included questions about capacity and needs in the OFP framework; these are to be addressed throughout the strategy life cycle.

Finally, the NSI findings illustrate the need for caution about targets. Targets can be useful to help gauge progress, particularly when initiatives are mature, when strategies are stable, when a robust evidence base has been established upon which to base expectations about future outcomes, or when there is a clear and logical time frame for achievement. For initiatives such as the NSI that are implemented within a highly

complex environment,<sup>6</sup> continuing to hammer away at specific targets even when opportunities have changed suggests the need to establish better triggers during strategy origination that can spur reflection about whether or when it is necessary to change course. For example, staff may need to periodically ask and answer questions such as: What facilitates or creates barriers to progress? How will we assess whether to keep going or change directions? It is important to ask these questions early enough to make a difference, and to be open and transparent with grantees, engaging them with regard to these questions as appropriate.

### *Methods Aligning With Principles*

The NSI evaluation illustrated methods that aligned well with the Hewlett Foundation's evaluation principles. The foundation's first principle of evaluation is "lead with purpose." The NSI evaluation offered a clear model of how to do so when engaged in complex work, be it policy change or other long-term endeavors. Given that the policy arena can be unpredictable, it is a mistake to focus only — or too much — on whether a particular policy change has happened. "Progress" — frequently the basis for decisions about whether to continue an investment — should encompass key intermediate steps that make ultimate change more likely, such as improvements in the capacities of advocates or the addition of new allies. The foundation increasingly recognizes the value of including such interim achievements as relevant markers of headway in policy-focused strategies. There is more emphasis on how Hewlett's investments can help create conditions for positive change: "below the waterline" outcomes versus emphasis

on specific tactics and whether they generate high-profile targets. And there continues to be recognition of evaluation data's value for learning and enhancing the efforts of the foundation and its partners. This approach has been applied recently in two foundation initiatives.<sup>7</sup>

### *Exit Planning*

The NSI evaluation helped refine thinking about exit planning. The Hewlett Foundation is now even more cognizant about the need to be as crisp and clear as possible regarding the definition of an initiative and the expectation of exit. It is important to point out how initiatives fit into the foundation's ecosystem. In most areas, Hewlett invests for the long haul (e.g., performing arts, Western conservation, reproductive health). Initiatives are launched when the foundation sees the potential to have an impact in a specific area, and can learn and test whether and how its philanthropic dollars can be leveraged to make a difference. However, the default expectation is that an initiative is time bound.

Two issues arose regarding the decision to end the NSI and exit the field of nuclear security. First, although the NSI was intended as a time-bound effort, the work gained momentum, opening up the hope that the foundation's investment might continue. There was ambiguity among Hewlett staff, grantees, and partner funders about when, exactly, the NSI would end. Once the decision was made to exit, it caught the field by surprise — there was no sense of a planned or intended end.

The NSI's finite time horizon was not communicated clearly at the outset, either internally or

<sup>6</sup>For further discussion of sense-making in complex systems, see Snowden, 2010. The framework sorts issues facing leaders into five contexts defined by the nature of the relationship between cause and effect. Four of these — simple, complicated, complex, and chaotic — require leaders to diagnose situations and to act in contextually appropriate ways. The fifth — disorder — applies when it is unclear which of the other four contexts is predominant.

<sup>7</sup>The Cyber Initiative commissioned its first evaluation in 2016, focusing on progress in building a network of experts. While it was one of five initiative outcomes, staff believed it should be evaluated first because findings provide an opportunity for learning. To that end, they have identified a number of questions to investigate: Have cyber experts in industry, government, academia, and other relevant sectors begun working together? If not, why not? If so, what are the key enablers? Are there particular forces that can promote or inhibit the emergence of a network? The Madison Initiative commissioned an external evaluation group to work closely with the staff team throughout the initial three-year grantmaking period. The evaluators played the role of "critical friend" and helped the team take a developmental approach by asking tough questions, uncovering assumptions, and collecting and interpreting data to aid the initiative's development with ongoing feedback offered in real time.

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externally. Although justification for the decision to exit was laid out for stakeholders in 2013, the hope that had mounted for the NSI's extension led to disappointment both inside and outside the foundation. External stakeholders perceived the decision as abrupt and opaque, and contrary to the openness, frankness, and spirit of collaboration that program officers brought to the PSFG. As one funder said, "we had spent so much time collaborating and being as open as possible that it would have been useful for us to have been involved earlier on before the foundation's decision to completely pull out was made."

For grantees, Hewlett's decision to exit resulted in significant uncertainty, and organizations had to make hard choices about where to focus their energy. Organizations' need to increase their fund-development efforts necessarily resulted in

diminished program resources — and this at a time when there were significant demands and activity in the field during the lead-up to the U.S.-Iran nuclear framework. In retrospect, it seems clear that the foundation could have done a better job signaling its intentions and communicating the decision to exit.

Once the decision was made, the foundation sought to exit the NSI as conscientiously as possible, augmenting staff and taking other steps to leave the field and grantees in a strong position. Grantees were informed of the decision a full year prior to the NSI's final grants. Many of these grants, supported in part by the foundation's Organizational Effectiveness grantmaking program, enabled grantees to hire consultants and address particular areas of organizational weakness. One such grant, for instance, went toward a communications consultant to work with a leading center of scholarship on nuclear security. Two grants supported organizations facing transitions of longtime leadership, and another supported an international network of next-generation security professionals to develop a case statement to bolster deeper engagement of their constituents. In addition to these targeted capacity-building grants, some anchor grantees received general support at larger than normal levels so they would have running room to adapt. The foundation commissioned the ORS Impact evaluation in part to harvest lessons for the NSI grantees and other funders — conducting the evaluation in an open manner and providing grantees and grantmakers with opportunity to provide input on evaluation questions and preview findings, digest, and comment.

The Hewlett Foundation also took steps to preserve funding for nuclear security efforts by both encouraging peer funders to stay in the field and supporting the recruitment of new funders to the field. The foundation was particularly concerned about continuation of support for its field-building efforts in Brazil, Turkey, and Israel, and the foundation's staff stressed the value of this work to peer donors.

Drawing from these and other lessons, the foundation has heightened intentionality regarding

good exit planning. Hewlett is specifically mindful of the need to begin planning for exit as early as possible, communicate early and frequently with grantees and other stakeholders, and work collaboratively to ensure a smooth transition for all. There is also greater intentionality with regard to drawing actionable lessons from a planned exit. The foundation's OFP materials also encourage program staff to consider a range of questions as they gear up for and carry out an exit:

- To what extent did the strategy achieve its goals, outcomes, and key implementation markers?
- What were major accomplishments?
- What were significant factors enabling or inhibiting success?
- What lessons were learned?
- What would you have done differently?
- What are recommendations for colleagues, other foundations, and the field?

## Conclusion

The NSI leaves behind a proud legacy: a strengthened professional community, significant policy accomplishments, noted progress in priority strategy areas such as nuclear energy and emerging powers, and the infusion of new energy and innovation into the nuclear policy field. These outcomes were beneficial to the field, though they weren't initially identified as the focus of the initiative.

Evaluation highlighted the importance and value of thoughtfully identifying outcomes for a time-limited investment — particularly an investment that aims for ambitious policy results. In addition, the evaluation points to the utility of regularly reassessing the relevance of established outcomes (or targets) given likely shifts in the operating environment, and application of broader measurement frames that generate learning and inform action. The Hewlett

Foundation has applied lessons and insights from the NSI summative evaluation in order to enhance and strengthen efforts regarding implementation and measurement of complex work, including exit planning for time-limited initiatives. While not broadly generalizable, we believe that the NSI evaluation findings nevertheless offer lessons that are widely applicable in the field as investment in time-bound special initiatives has become a more common philanthropic approach.

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