



ALIGNING STRATEGY

How to ensure coherence in your corporate social impact operating model

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JULY 2026

FSG's resources on strategy development for CSR teams and corporate foundations



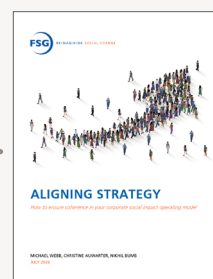
Simplifying Strategy

In *Simplifying Strategy*, we introduce tools to determine *what* your social impact strategy focuses on.



Advancing Strategy

In *Advancing Strategy*, we explore how to *further* your strategy through more ambitious societal engagement and programmatic models.



Aligning Strategy

In *Aligning Strategy*, we introduce an **operating model** to define the dimensions that help deliver on your social impact strategy and how those dimensions work in sync.

Aligning Strategy

How to ensure coherence in your corporate social impact operating model

CSR, corporate giving, and corporate foundation teams operate in the dynamic, complex contexts of their companies. As the field of corporate social impact evolves alongside stakeholder expectations, these functions—and, sometimes, independent entities such as some corporate foundations—have as well. Over time, they often become increasingly ambitious, strategic, and well-resourced operations that not just meet baseline expectations but influence, shape, and create value for the company's stakeholders.

This evolution brings a particular kind of complexity. As CSR / corporate foundation functions mature, the challenge is rarely a lack of commitment or ambition. More often, it is **misalignment** between different parts of the function and/or between the function and the broader company, especially at critical inflection points (e.g., M&A activity, significant financial growth or decline, large regulatory or other shifts in the external context). A team may hold ambitious impact aspirations but operate with limited resources to match. It may

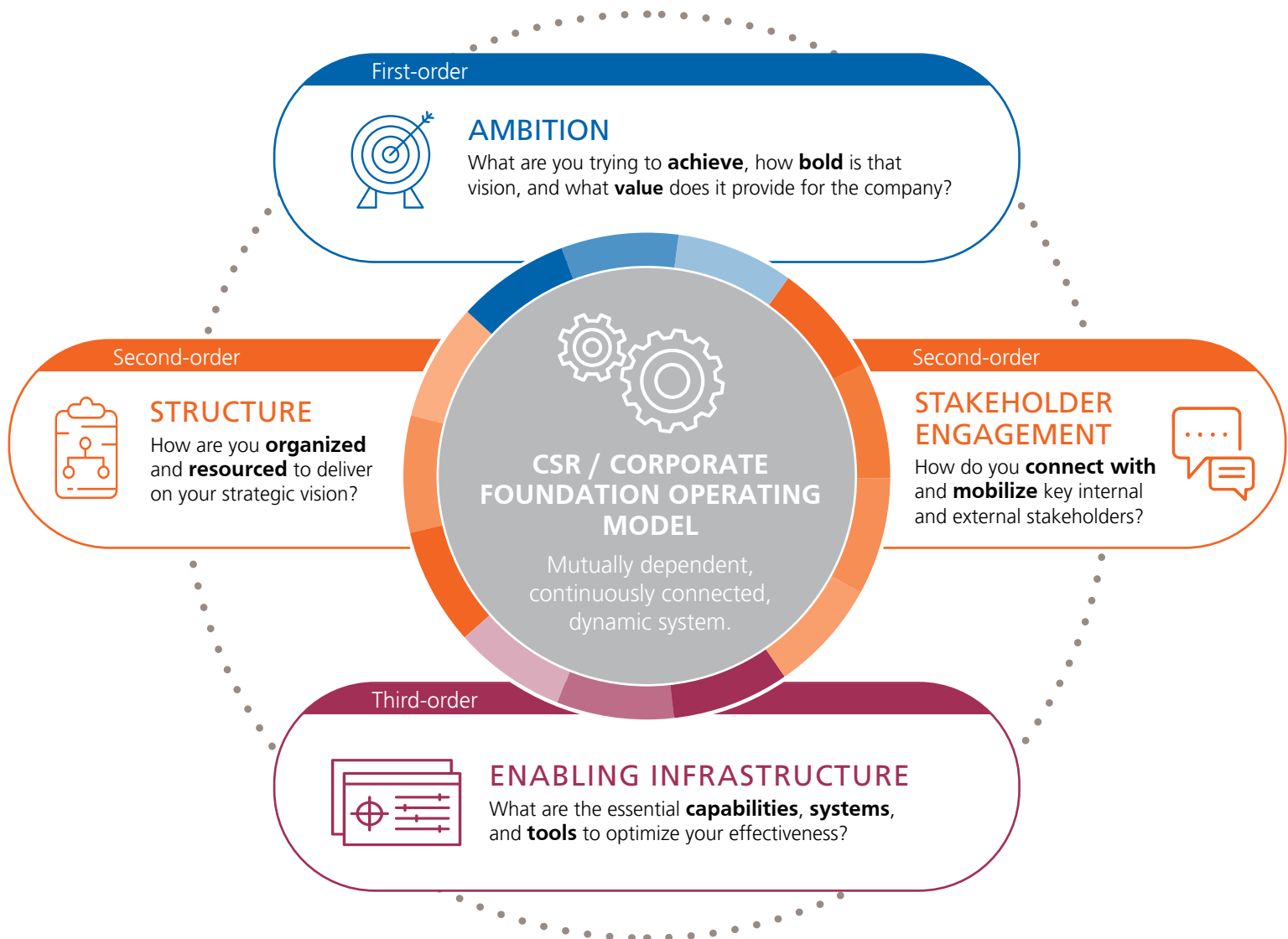
be trying to tell a coherent, company-wide impact story while managing largely autonomous local giving with little coordinating structure. A strategy that once felt cohesive can drift out of sync as the organization evolves through internal restructuring, mergers and acquisitions, shifts in community need, or changes in employees', investors', and the public's expectations.

These misalignments sometimes reflect a need to revisit strategy. More often, they reflect the genuine complexity of running a high-performing social impact function inside a large organization and what happens when parts of the function's *operating model* (i.e., the bridge between the overarching CSR / corporate foundation strategy and day-to-day execution) are out of sync. The misalignments can be hard to see clearly from the inside. This is not because leaders aren't thoughtful or vigilant but because, in the thick of things, it can be difficult to assess how different parts of the CSR / corporate foundation function are or are not working coherently with each other.

Introducing the CSR / Corporate Foundation Operating Model

The motivations, structures, and requirements of CSR functions and corporate foundations are unique from those that guide private philanthropy or core business activities. This distinction should be reflected in the function's operating model, which defines how the team organizes and delivers on its strategy. In the context of CSR and corporate foundation teams, the operating model helps align specific structural, relational, and systems components with the function's overarching strategy to maximize the function's ability to create impact. Additionally, this operating model helps clarify how the CSR / corporate foundation relates to the company's broader operating model and corporate strategy.

The **CSR / Corporate Foundation Operating Model's** components—or dimensions—are organized across four strategic choices that are mutually dependent, interact as a dynamic system, and keep the operating model aligned.





AMBITION

First and foremost, the operating model should be grounded in a clear ambition that defines what the CSR / corporate foundation's vision and strategy are, how impact is created, and what value it delivers to the company. Without a clear ambition, it can be difficult to make subsequent choices; resources can feel constrained, priorities unclear, and activities disjointed.

Ambition includes the first three dimensions of the operating model:



Dimensions and Definitions

Strategic Vision

Why, in what, where, and for whom the CSR / corporate foundation will drive impact

Business Alignment

Degree of alignment between CSR / corporate foundation and corporate strategy (e.g., priority markets, consumer segments, materiality of issue areas) and how that creates value for the company

Approach to Impact

How a CSR / corporate foundation develops and deploys activities that drive impact (e.g., using clustered grantmaking; leveraging multiple approaches—supporting programs, shifting narratives, etc.)



STRUCTURE

Once the ambition is set, a key secondary choice is aligning on how the CSR / corporate foundation team is organized and resourced to deliver on the strategic vision in order to maximize impact and value for the company. Structural dimensions create parameters for decision-making, lines of accountability, and the mechanisms for delivering, sustaining, and scaling a strategy.

There are three key dimensions under Structure for CSR / corporate foundation teams to consider:



Dimensions and Definitions

Governance

Structure of oversight bodies (e.g., board, advisory committee, internal or external members)

Coordination across Geographies

Level of alignment and/or centralization across geographies (e.g., local giving is aligned to global impact goals)

Resourcing

How the CSR / corporate foundation team is resourced (e.g., operational budget, staff, functional support) to advance the strategy

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Alongside structure, CSR / corporate foundation teams also make a set of choices on the appropriate ways to connect with and mobilize key stakeholders, both internal and external. The close interplay between structural dimensions (e.g., resourcing, governance) and stakeholder engagement make it critical that these choices be made side by side rather than sequentially so they can appropriately inform each other.

The four dimensions under Stakeholder Engagement parallel four key stakeholder groups (two internal and two external) whose support is most critical to provide legitimacy, buy-in, and ground-level insight to the work of CSR / corporate foundation teams:



Dimensions and Definitions

Leadership Buy-In

How company leaders (including executives) understand the role of CSR / corporate foundation, understand the value it provides to the company and society, and champion the work internally and externally

Employee Engagement

How CSR / corporate foundation activities influence employee morale and behaviors, including but not limited to the mechanisms by which employees directly participate in the activities

Grantee Relations

Nature of the relationship between a company's CSR / corporate foundation team and its grantees/partners (e.g., how they engage, strength of relationship)

Community Engagement

Nature of relationship between a CSR / corporate foundation team and the community of the company (e.g., near operational footprint, intended beneficiaries); degree of coordination with company's other community engagement efforts

ENABLING INFRASTRUCTURE

Ultimately, a CSR / corporate foundation team's strategy, structure, and stakeholder relationships must be supported and reinforced by strong capabilities, systems, and tools. Without appropriate and right-sized enabling infrastructure in place, it is hard for teams to optimize for efficiency and effectiveness in delivering impact to society and value to the company.

Among the many delivery systems and processes that support effective CSR / corporate foundation teams, three dimensions are particularly salient when thinking about Enabling Infrastructure for these functions:



Dimensions and Definitions

Measurement & Learning

Approach to measurement & learning, how it informs decision-making, and how it is integrated into the design and delivery of impact

Delivery Systems

What systems support day-to-day operations (e.g., data tracking, grants management, volunteering), how they match needs, and how they coordinate with each other

Communication & Storytelling

How the story of value creation (social impact and business) is articulated, and how that story is communicated internally and externally

Together, these **13 dimensions** of the CSR / Corporate Foundation Operating Model, across four categories of strategic choices, form a dynamic system.

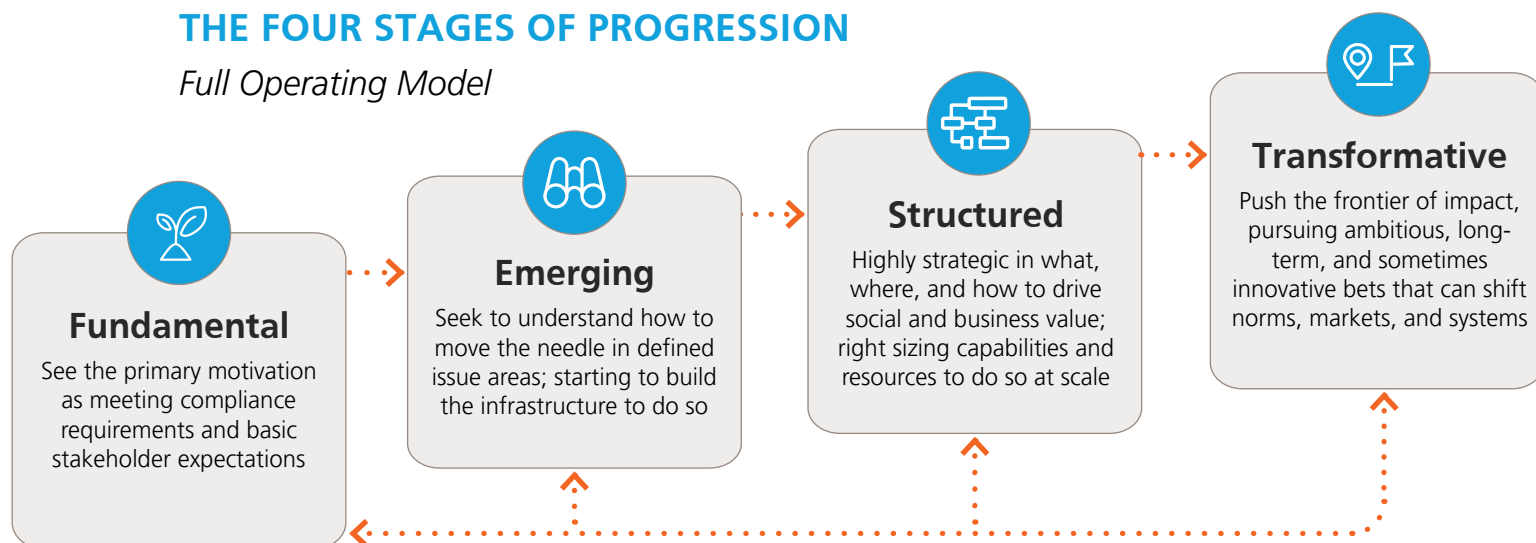
Evolving Your Operating Model to Match Your Strategy

A CSR or corporate foundation's strategy is not static. In best-case scenarios, it is designed with learning mechanisms and feedback loops that help leaders and teams implement their strategy in an emergent manner that matches the dynamic environments in which they operate. At minimum, most CSR / corporate foundation teams have a regular cadence (e.g., three years, five years) at which they take a step back for a bigger strategy refresh or at key inflection points for the company (e.g., merger, large restructure).

In our experience, as teams advance their strategy, we typically see CSR and corporate foundation operating models progress or mature in their journey across four stages. These stages are based on the company's ambition and ability to deliver on it. While we depict and describe these as four distinct stages, in practice, progression is more of a continuous spectrum without clear boundaries between stages.

THE FOUR STAGES OF PROGRESSION

Full Operating Model



Progression across the stages is neither “one size fits all” nor prescriptive. It also does not suggest a particular timeline. For example, a corporate foundation may be around for 20 years and remain “Fundamental,” with legitimate reasons that make it the right choice for that company to do so. What matters most is if your CSR / corporate foundation is advancing and/or able to execute in a way that matches the vision of impact you seek to create.

CSR / corporate foundation efforts often—but not always—evolve in a somewhat linear fashion.

For example:

- Some corporate foundations may invest early to *start at a more advanced stage* (e.g., “Structured”).
- Some may *skip* stages (e.g., moving from “Emerging” to “Transformative” in a strategy refresh process, without spending much or any time in “Structured”).
- Some may *backslide* when the company or team goes through an inflection point (e.g., financial constraints, merger/acquisition).

In the same way a CSR / corporate foundation portfolio progresses across these four stages, there is a similar

progression across these four stages for each of the 13 dimensions in the function's operating model. **Ideally, the dimensions of your operating model progress to match the larger progression of your CSR / corporate foundation strategy and portfolio.** In reality, the dimensions are dynamic, and it is rare that all 13 of the dimensions in your operating model perfectly align with the stage of your CSR / corporate foundation.



Take, for example, the case of a **manufacturing company** that made a bold public commitment to invest in water stewardship for its communities, promising to increase by five times the amount of clean water available in five years, to engage communities for input in the process, and to report on it in the company's quarterly investor calls. The company's ambition and stakeholder engagement jumped

to **"Structured,"** but the CSR team responsible for delivering on this commitment did not change its grantmaking budget, team resources, or approach to measurement and reporting, which is mostly focused on outcomes and aggregated on a yearly basis to be shared in the company's annual impact report. Despite best intentions, the misalignment in the company's CSR operating model feels stronger than ever.

Alternatively, consider the case of a **regional retailer** that spent three years systematically progressing from **"Fundamental"** to **"Emerging"** across its corporate foundation. Suddenly, the company announces a merger and that, as part of that merger, a new independent foundation will be created. The new foundation will combine both companies' philanthropic efforts, with an annual grantmaking target that is 12 times the combined annual giving of either company. The goal will be a bold new ambition for **"Transformative"** systems change for

the communities in which their stores and distribution centers operate. This bold new vision and significantly increased budget can be simultaneously exciting and daunting for the foundation team responsible for delivering on it. This new vision promises the potential for significantly more impact as well as the harsh realities of merging teams and cultures across two companies, not to mention the upskilling and increasing capacity and capabilities to be able to deliver that impact.



Instances like these may feel familiar. They bring to life the visceral feeling many CSR / corporate foundation teams and leaders experience when one or multiple dimensions are out of alignment and/or not progressing at the same rate as others.

Despite interdependencies between dimensions and the best designed strategies, a company's CSR / corporate foundation is unlikely to be in the same stage for every dimension (e.g., for some dimensions, the function may be **"Transformative,"** for other dimensions it's **"Structured,"** and perhaps one to two dimensions are still **"Fundamental"**). Identifying where there is the greatest disconnect between interdependent dimensions can help leaders pinpoint the elements of what is preventing their ability to deliver on their intended impact.



Deep Dive

Coordination across Geographies

To understand the impact of aligning across dimensions as the function's operating model evolves, it can be helpful to first understand the progression in a single dimension. Let's take a closer look at the progression for one of the dimensions: Coordination across Geographies, or the level of alignment and/or centralization across geographies (e.g., the extent to which local giving is aligned to global impact goals).

Geographic coordination determines whether a CSR / corporate foundation entity is a scattered set of one-off activities or a coherent, multiplied force across local and global scales. When global and local efforts are aligned around the same priorities and goals, the CSR / corporate foundation can concentrate resources, learn faster, and produce deeper, more measurable change. When efforts are uncoordinated, work is often duplicative, uneven in quality, and hard to scale or evaluate.

This dimension is closely linked to several other dimensions in the CSR / Corporate Foundation Operating Model, including:

Ambition

A unified geographic approach lets a company pursue concentrated, scalable goals rather than fragmented wins.

Governance and Resourcing

Central coordination requires clear governance as well as sufficient staff and budget to link local teams to global strategy.

Grantee Relations and Community Engagement

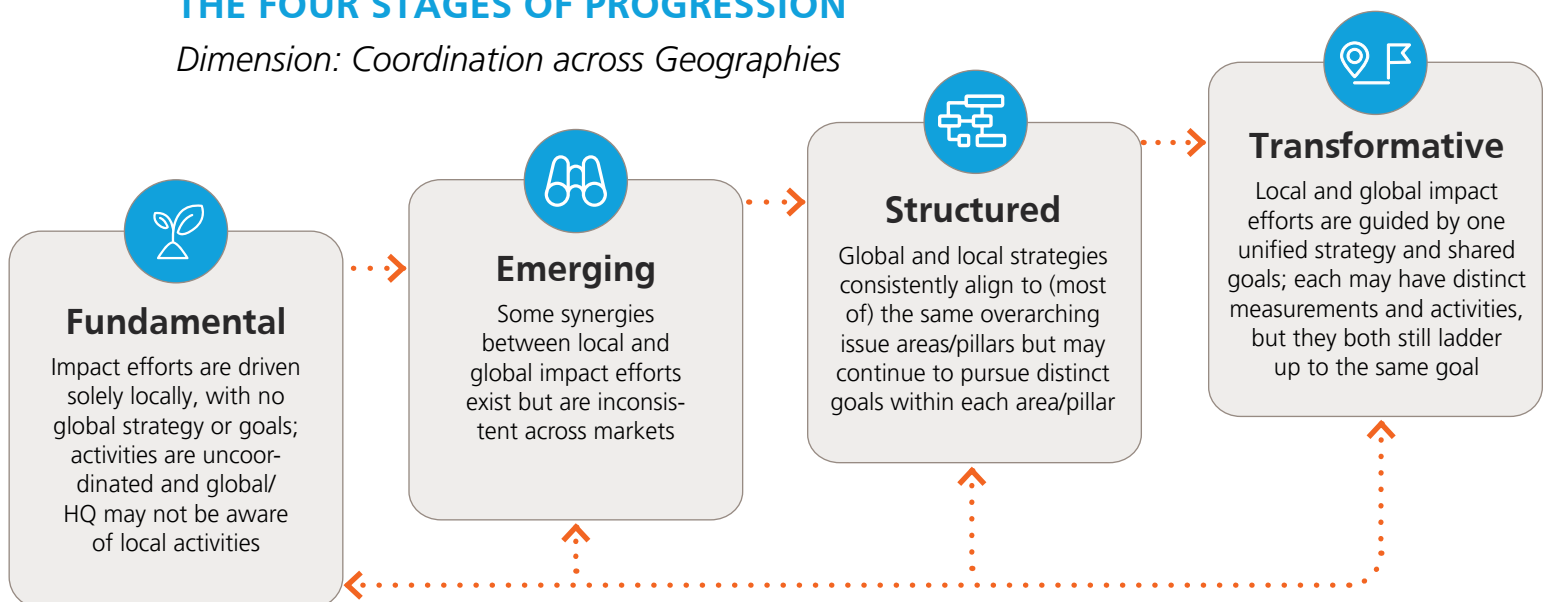
Aligned geographies make it easier to center community voices consistently and build trust-based grantee relationships.

Measurement & Learning

Shared measurement and delivery systems let learning travel across markets and make data-driven decisions possible.

THE FOUR STAGES OF PROGRESSION

Dimension: Coordination across Geographies



At the “**Fundamental**” stage, impact efforts are driven locally with no global strategy. Their activities are uncoordinated and often unknown at headquarters. In the “**Emerging**” stage, some synergies appear: HQ begins to set priorities and a few regions align through pilots or shared themes, but the approach is inconsistent. At the “**Structured**” stage, global and local strategies consistently align around common issue areas; local teams may pursue distinct goals tailored to context, but those goals ladder up to shared outcomes. At the “**Transformative**” stage, there is a single, unified strategy and shared goals across geographies, integrated systems, and metrics, and local and global efforts are coordinated to drive large-scale, systemic change.

Case Study

Alignment in Action

Consider a hypothetical company, GearGreen, Inc. (“GearGreen”), to explore what this can look like in practice.

GearGreen is a global manufacturer of industrial equipment and components, serving customers in agriculture and energy sectors across 40 countries. The company employs 15,000 people worldwide, with manufacturing facilities in 12 countries and sales and distribution offices in dozens more.

The starting point: A tale of two CSRs

Over the past five years, GearGreen’s global CSR team has made remarkable progress. They developed a “Structured” global strategy focused on two core impact areas: workforce development in skilled trades and clean water access in manufacturing regions. The global team built sophisticated partnerships with technical colleges, created a workforce pipeline measurement framework, and secured CEO commitment to report annually on their progress and twice a year to the board. Their clean water work has garnered industry recognition and is regularly featured in the company’s investor presentations.

Meanwhile, local giving has remained largely unchanged. Each country office maintains its own philanthropic budget, often 1% or less than local revenue, and site leaders have full discretion over how to allocate it with zero reporting requirements. The result is not just a scattered but disjointed portfolio. For example:

The **German** office sponsors local youth soccer teams and annual arts festival in the town where GearGreen operates a manufacturing plant.

Sites in **Mexico** support a mix of children’s hospitals, employee-nominated causes, and disaster relief under the banner of “Strengthening Our Communities.”

U.S. facilities are most aligned to the global CSR strategy, likely because HQ is in Ohio. These facilities have two signature multiyear partnerships (one per core impact area) with national nonprofits that do work in each of the geographies where GearGreen operates. In addition, GearGreen offers a mix of smaller grants to local causes loosely and sometimes tangentially related to workforce development and clean water, but mostly guided by plant leadership’s favorite causes.

The **India** office, giving at exactly 2% of net profits to comply with local CSR regulations, focuses almost exclusively on education but across a range of age groups and subjects, from primary school literacy to engineering scholarships for university students.



These efforts are well intentioned and meaningful to respective local employees, but they operate on an almost parallel track to the global CSR strategy. Recently, the global team asked local leads to share giving numbers for the first time in the company's 50+ year history. What they learned shocked them. In total, local giving represented nearly 60% of GearGreen's global CSR budget. The philanthropic spend—not to mention the impact created—had never been accounted for, was essentially invisible to global leadership, and was completely uncoordinated with the global impact goals.

A Wake-up Call

The misalignment became impossible to ignore. The global CSR director realized that several opportunities for impact—not to mention value creation for the company—were left on the table:

- **Missed opportunities for scale:** Seven different country offices were funding workforce development programs, but none were connected to the global skilled trades initiative. Local programs ranged from high school career days to coding bootcamps to women's entrepreneurship. Each was valuable in its own right but fragmented and impossible to measure collectively.
- **Duplicative efforts:** Three manufacturing sites in different countries had independently developed water access projects in their surrounding communities. Each site used different implementation partners, metrics, and approaches. None knew about the others' work.
- **Missed learning and resource inefficiency:** Local teams were reinventing the wheel, missing opportunities to leverage the expertise, partnerships, and measurement systems the global team or other sites had built.
- **Stakeholder confusion:** One year ago, when a potential major investor and brand ambassador (a well-known celebrity vocal on climate and water) asked about GearGreen's total investment in clean water, the CSR team could only report on global programs. The actual number was likely 40%–50% higher, but the investor had no visibility into relevant local spending. In the end, the investor chose to invest in and align with GearGreen's primary competitor.

GearGreen's global CSR team reached an inflection point. The director decided that the scatter of local activities was not delivering the deeper, measurable impact the company wanted. The team set an **18-month goal to move its geographic coordination from "Fundamental" to "Structured."** The target would be to concentrate 65% of local giving in the two core impact areas and build the processes and systems to enable this level of aligned action.

The global team articulated this strategic focus and success criteria, selected initial priority markets, identified a scale plan across other sites, and created a steering committee (HQ, regional leads, and community representatives) to shift local approaches and approve country plans. To balance local autonomy with centralized oversight, GearGreen established a grants-review threshold so larger strategic investments would require steering committee approval.

The Alignment Journey

As the global CSR director began thinking about the 18-month implementation plan, the director quickly realized it wasn't an isolated problem. The misalignment rippled across multiple dimensions of the CSR / Corporate Foundation Operating Model:



Governance

In addition to the global steering committee, the global CSR team would need to establish clear decision-making protocols for global initiatives. Ideally, external experts and local community perspectives would inform each site's giving, but plan leaders currently had almost unilateral decision-making authority, often based on personal relationships rather than strategic criteria. To align geographic coordination, the global CSR team would need to establish clear criteria, establish local councils, and clarify decision rights between global and local teams.



Resourcing

Over the last five years, the global CSR team grew to a small but mighty six full-time equivalents (FTEs) with specialized roles in partnership management, measurement, and communications. At best, local CSR "teams" were 10%–25% add-on responsibility for a site HR manager or community relations lead. These local leads lacked the time, CSR best-practice expertise, and support to implement more strategic approaches. Effective coordination would require consistent local resourcing and, at the global level, dedicated budget and staff to support coordination, tracking, and programmatic and strategic consistency.



Grantee Relations

Ahead of many multinational companies (MNCs), the global team had invested years building trust-based partnerships with a small portfolio of high-performing national and global nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), with multiyear commitments and collaborative learning agendas. Local relationships were transactional, mostly one-year grants with minimal engagement. The director knows it is important to the CEO and the board that the CSR and giving match the "One GearGreen" philosophy of the company. Geographic coordination would mean helping local teams develop deeper, trust-based partnerships and thoughtfully transitioning grantee relationships that are no longer strategically aligned.



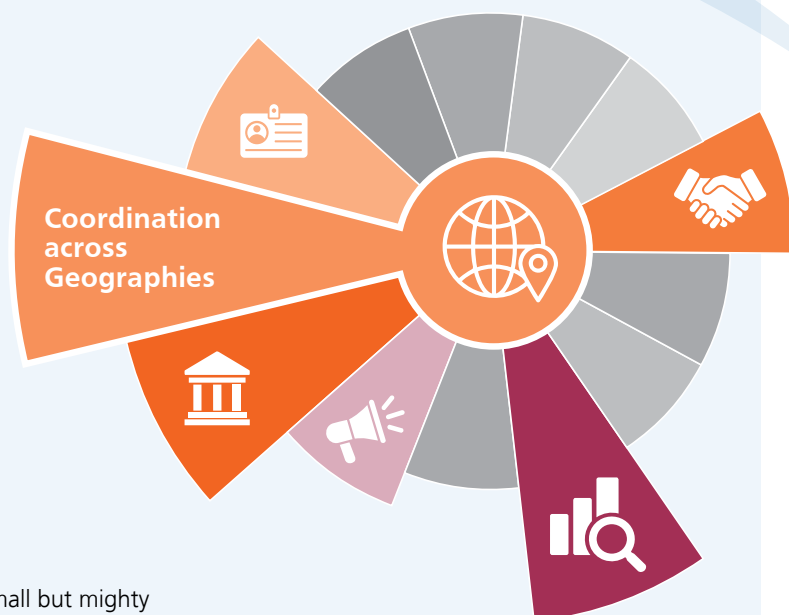
Measurement & Learning

The starkest gap was in measurement. The global team used a sophisticated outcomes framework with quarterly data collection, learning sessions, and course corrections. Local giving was tracked only by dollars out the door; there were no outcomes data, no beneficiary feedback, no learning loops, and no reporting to global. Without sufficient local team resourcing, simplified measurement tools would be essential. With greater strategic alignment and similar programs in core impact areas across geographies, it felt equally essential to establish regular forums to share what global teams are learning.



Communication & Storytelling

The global CSR website—and intranet hub—had just been redone and featured compelling impact stories, data visualizations, and partner spotlights. Leadership and employee engagement are easier to sustain when everyone is working toward the same cross-market objectives and is aware of each other's efforts to simultaneously motivate, inspire, and spur a healthy, light level of competitive spirit. If successful, geographic coordination should help surface local stories to integrate them into the company's broader impact narrative, including annual report and investor call mentions, central tracking, and internal celebration.



At first glance, effectively addressing geographic coordination would mean addressing at least five other dimensions and likely more. Otherwise, they were set up to fail before they even started.

The team decided to start with a pilot approach in three countries, working intentionally across all six dimensions to develop a playbook that specified local site archetypes in order to chart out a pathway to scale globally over 18–24 months.

Conclusion

The CSR / Corporate Foundation Operating Model provides a structured way to examine how the different parts of a social impact function work and how well they work together. The model is organized around **four strategic choices** of Ambition, Structure, Stakeholder Engagement, and Enabling Infrastructure, with **13 dimensions** that span the full scope of how a CSR or corporate foundation function executes. Each dimension matters on its own, but deeper value lies in surfacing the interdependencies between them: how misalignment in one area can limit progress in another, and how bringing the components into sync unlocks a program's broader potential.

As the CSR / corporate foundation function evolves, so should its structure, stakeholder engagement approach, and infrastructure. It is important to monitor and understand the implications for how the dimensions advance from one stage to the next. When dimensions don't progress at the same rate, misalignment across interdependent dimensions is amplified, creating [interference](#). The bigger the disconnect, the harder it is to deliver on the intended impact. Proactively identifying critical interdependencies and investing in advancing these dimensions together help companies create the enabling conditions that ensure the success of their social impact strategy, maximize impact, and augment value creation.



13 Dimensions of the CSR / Corporate Foundation Operating Model



AMBITION

Strategic Vision

Why, in what, where, and for whom the CSR / corporate foundation will drive impact

Business Alignment

Degree of alignment between CSR / corporate foundation and corporate strategy (e.g., priority markets, consumer segments, materiality of issue areas) and how that creates value for the company

Approach to Impact

How a CSR / corporate foundation develops and deploys activities that drive impact (e.g., using clustered grantmaking; leveraging multiple approaches—supporting programs, shifting narratives, etc.)



STRUCTURE

Governance

Structure of oversight bodies (e.g., board, advisory committee, internal or external members)

Coordination across Geographies

Level of alignment and/or centralization across geographies (e.g., local giving is aligned to global impact goals)

Resourcing

How the CSR / corporate foundation team is resourced (e.g., operational budget, staff, functional support) to advance the strategy



STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Leadership Buy-In

How company leaders (including executives) understand the role of CSR / corporate foundation, understand the value it provides to the company and society, and champion the work internally and externally

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How CSR / corporate foundation activities influence employee morale and behaviors, including but not limited to the mechanisms by which employees directly participate in the activities

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ENABLING INFRASTRUCTURE

Measurement & Learning

Approach to measurement & learning, how it informs decision-making, and how it is integrated into the design and delivery of impact

Delivery Systems

What systems support day-to-day operations (e.g., data tracking, grants management, volunteering), how they match needs, and how they coordinate with each other

Communication & Storytelling

How the story of value creation (social impact and business) is articulated, and how that story is communicated internally and externally



NOTES ON USAGE

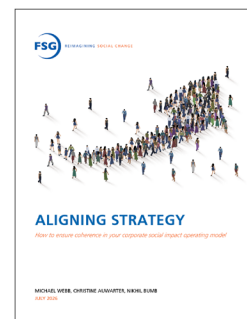
Context: This CSR / Corporate Foundation Operating Model is designed to be broadly applicable across a range of contexts (e.g., industry, company or legal structure, geography). Some dimensions may be more (or less) applicable to specific contexts.

Interdependence: The dimensions are highly interdependent, both within and across strategic choice categories. For example, a global CSR / corporate foundation strategy is meaningful only if the coordination mechanisms and resourcing exist to execute it. Relatedly, resources will only exist if there is strong leadership buy-in at HQ and in each geography. Similarly, governance without community voice risks delivering on a strategy solving for the wrong problems, and community partnerships without internal leadership support are hard to sustain.

CSR / Corporate Foundation Operating Model

Getting Started Worksheet

As you consider the model and what it may mean for your ability to advance your own work, consider the following guiding questions:



OVERALL MODEL

- ☐ Where does our CSR / corporate foundation portfolio sit across the four stages—Fundamental, Emerging, Structured, or Transformative? Note: It is normal to be “in between” stages or to feel like different parts of your work sit in different stages.
- ☐ What stage would we like to be at and how quickly do we want to get there??

STRATEGIC CHOICES

- ☐ What strategic growth opportunities or challenges are we facing today? How are those opportunities or growth challenges reflected in our operations?
- ☐ How clear are we on our answers to the questions in each strategic choice area (i.e., Ambition, Structure, Stakeholder Engagement, and Enabling Infrastructure)?
- ☐ Where do we feel well set up to execute our strategy? Where do we feel constrained to make progress? Where do you see the biggest gaps or opportunities?
- ☐ Are there one or more choice areas that feel significantly more or less mature than the others?

DIMENSIONS

- ☐ Which dimensions feel the most mature or advanced?
- ☐ Which dimensions feel the least developed?
- ☐ In which dimensions have we seen the most progress, and what has enabled that progress? Are these dimensions aligned with the overall portfolio stage?
- ☐ Conversely, in which dimensions have we seen the least progress, and what has prohibited that progress?
- ☐ Which dimensions are linked and need to evolve together? (E.g., If we want to advance employee engagement, what else needs to change?)
- ☐ Where do we see the biggest misalignments (e.g., high ambition but low resourcing; sophisticated measurement but weak storytelling)?
- ☐ Which misalignments are the most painful or are creating the most interference right now?
- ☐ If we could only focus on improving two to three dimensions over the next 12–18 months, which would most accelerate our ability to deliver on our intended impact and value? What would success look like?

SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS

1. Review answers to these questions as a team and compare perspectives.
2. Discuss with leadership/governance (e.g., board) and key stakeholders where misalignments are constraining impact.
3. Develop a road map for evolving priority dimensions and aligning your operating model over the next 12–24 months.

ABOUT FSG

FSG is a global nonprofit that partners with foundations and corporations on strategies to create and advance equitable systems change. Through customized consulting services, thought leadership, innovative initiatives, and learning communities, we're working to create a world where everyone can live up to their full potential.

Learn more at www.fsg.org.

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