WHY WE RHIZE
Learnings from a Decade of Supporting Movements
ABOUT THIS REPORT

Lead Author/Consultant:
- Amber French (External)¹

With contributions from:
- Mariam Azeem, Rhize Co-Director of Programs (2018-2023)
- Alice Duesdieker, Rhize Co-Director of Operations (2019-2023)
- Erin Mazursky, Rhize Founder and Former Executive Director (2013-2020)

Editors:
- Alice Duesdieker, Rhize Co-Director of Operations (2019-2023)
- Alison Miranda, Rhize Board of Directors Co-Chair (2020-2023)

Publication Coordinators: Alice Duesdieker, Amber French
Publication Designer: Arno Sebban
Spanish Translators: María Ítaka, Fernando León
French Translators: Amber French, Raphaëlle Abou-Sebban

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¹ The lead author/consultant conducted the interviews and background research that fed into this report. Our choice to hire an external consultant for this report is in keeping with our work to promote freedom of expression, transparency and integrity.
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Thank you
Highlighted countries indicate where Rhize conducted a training or workshop, or where a Rhize coach, staff member or board member resided between 2013-2023. Rhize trained 50+ coaches who worked with 200+ movements around the world.
2013
Erin Mazursky held her first training with Breakthrough in India, as she started to build the organization that would become Rhize.

Rhize conducted one of its first pilot programs working with Activista in The Gambia, laying the foundations with the knowledge and tools that would become key in Activista's work.

2014
Rhize launched the Catalyst Fellowship program and developed the first iteration of its First Exposure Training (FET) with Ivan Marovic in Kenya and Uganda.

2015
Rhize published *The New Global Citizen: Harnessing Youth Leadership to Reshape Civil Society*, which exposed how the global development sector has not kept pace with the changing ways youth seek to create social change, creating a disconnect between formal civil society and the majority of youth leaders.

2016
Rhize published *Understanding Activism*, which provided critical insights into practices that can be adopted across civil society to ensure more effective support to nonviolent movements. Rhize launched the Adopting a Movement Mindset course and set up the Africa Hub to serve as a center of support for Coaches in Africa.

2017

2018
Rhize began the year with a retreat for the African Coaching Corps in Kenya and ended the year by reflecting on the organization’s priorities, leading to a clarity of programmatic focus that would result in the Rhize Coaching Fellowship.

2019
Rhize led the research for *The State of the Growing Movement Fighting Inequality* released by the Fight Inequality Alliance in partnership with the Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity. Rhize published *Let Movements Lead*, the culmination of five years’ of work with movements and traditional institutions to understand the most effective ways to support movements.

2020
Rhize launched the Rhize Coaching Fellowship, which brought together movement leaders, coaches, trainers, organizers and activists working with movements to learn from each other and gain new skills to support movements. Erin Mazursky stepped down as Executive Director of Rhize, with Alice Duesdieker and Mariam Azeem taking over leadership of the organization.

2021
Alice Duesdieker, Mariam Azeem, and Natasha Chaudhary became Co-Directors of Rhize, leading the organization in a collaborative model, with a balance of operations, programming, and fundraising focuses.

2022
The Rhize Coaching Fellowship continued to run successfully, and alumni coaches were increasingly directly delivering trainings to nonprofits and movements around the world as independent trainers.

2023
After 10 years of working with movements and activists around the world, Rhize closed as an organization. While the structures may change, the work and the spirit of the organization continues to live on in all the coaches, activists, and organizations that worked with Rhize.
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“Rhize” is derived from the botanic term “rhizome”, a continuously growing horizontal underground stem that sprouts new networks of roots at regular intervals. Rhizomes endure—even when one is cut, it will continue to shoot out new networks of roots. Like a rhizome, Rhize grew a self-perpetuating community and decentralized network of social movements that are building people power around the world and are based on the values of freedom, inclusivity and dignity.

WHY RHIZE?
Dear Rhize Community,

In the following pages, we bid a heartfelt farewell to an organization that has been more than just a non-profit; it has been a source of hope, change, and community for all those who have been touched by its mission. As we pen these words, we are filled with bittersweet emotions, reflecting on the journey that has led us to the necessary yet difficult decision to close down our home: Rhize.

In 2020, after the departure of Erin Mazursky, Rhize’s Founder and Executive Director, we took up the organization’s reins as Co-Directors. We managed the responsibility of steering the organization through turbulent times to the best of our abilities. We worked hard to bring
intentionality to leadership and created a human-centered community by redefining Rhize's values using feminist and collective care approaches. This allowed us to create compassionate policies around work ethics, employee and community care and made Rhize a safe space to reflect and nurture our personal and professional skills and growth. With the matchless support of the board we equipped ourselves with mindfulness to make informed decisions and foster collaboration. We also fortified our ability to remain informed and inclusive of the community we serve—a tradition that has been the hallmark of Rhize since its inception.

Unfortunately, despite our best efforts, we were not able to continue to sustain Rhize as an independent organization. The decision to close was a result of careful consideration, introspection and a profound commitment to the values and mission that define our organization. Our commitment to integrity and transparency has been a cornerstone of our work throughout our existence, and this ethos remains unwavering as we approach the closure of our organization. The goal of the report you are about to read is to reflect on the successes and challenges that led us to this point.

In the report, we outline the significant lessons and experiences related to operational, programmatic and fundraising aspects from Rhize's history. As we reflect on Rhize's remarkable journey, we are reminded of the invaluable role each past and present board member, staff member, consultant, coach, program participant and funder has played in our shared mission. We are thankful for everyone from all around the world who has been part of Rhize in any capacity.

Together, we have made a lasting impact, and we are excited to see the legacy of our work continue to shape a better future. Rhize as an organization may be closing, but the Rhize community, coaches and spirit continue to live on.

With deep appreciation and optimism for what lies ahead,

In Solidarity,

Mariam Azeem

Mariam Azeem, Director of Programs (2018-2023)

Alice Duesdieker

Alice Duesdieker, Director of Operations (2019-2023)
Dear Rhize Community,

In late 2017, Rhize co-sponsored the second CampaignCon in Johannesburg, South Africa, a convening of activists, organizers and campaigners from across the globe. Peer organizations looked to Rhize to bring the “real” organizers into the room, the grassroots leaders who did not work for hyper-professionalized organizations or had the largest platforms, but rather the ones organizing people and building power in their communities and who were rarely recognized.

I was so excited to introduce and bring together the activists Rhize had trained over the course of its first four years. The first day of the conference, I was busy leading a Movement Mindset training. At the end of the day, I started searching for Rhize-trained leaders in hopes of bringing them together, when I stumbled upon the full group of them, already convened, chatting like old friends.

Our people found each other, despite language barriers, working on different issues or hailing from different nationalities. Through Rhize, they now spoke a common language of movement-building and saw each other as comrades in each other’s struggles. That was the essence of Rhize.

When I founded Rhize in 2013, I had seen an over-investment in digital organizing (with a focus on sheer scale) and an under-investment in relational organizing, the glue that holds movements together. I knew that if we invested in organizers’ ability to train at scale, not only would movements be more successful and have more longevity, they would create lasting connections and communities that are the underpinnings of healthy democratic civil societies.
As you’ll read in this report, we did just that. We innovated a coaching and training model and a powerful learning network that built scale through relationships. As a result, we catalyzed numerous, significant campaign victories and a handful of successful revolutions. Invest in people and relationships, and the movement outcomes take care of themselves.

When I stepped down as executive director in early 2020, we had built an incredible model for coaching and training upon which our staff continued to build. Rhize was never about me and my vision. It was about what could be created through community. Alice and Mariam went on to build an even stronger, more dynamic network of coaches over the last four years, and I could not be prouder of their and the Rhize Board’s leadership.

As the world and global politics rapidly shift around us, the fundamentals of successful movements remain the same. I still believe with every fiber of my being that movements and the organizers that drive them are an essential part of the answer to creating a world of belonging, community, justice, equity and ultimately strong, pluralistic democracies. As the world changes, so must Rhize, but our mission, our impact, and the intrinsic connections like those that happened before my eyes in Johannesburg will continue to live on.

In Solidarity,

Erin Mazursky

Erin Mazursky, Rhize Founder and Executive Director (2013-2020)
This report aims to celebrate Rhize’s legacy and document its many impacts, while also distilling challenges and learnings on diverse themes relevant to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working in social change worldwide. As such, this report does not offer exhaustive descriptions of an NGO’s programmatic work, as an annual report or a website might. Instead, it offers an organizational history through a multi-voiced narrative of an NGO’s twists and turns, drawing from interviews with 15 key stakeholders from various points throughout its decade-long journey.²

² In September and October 2023, the author of this report conducted phone interviews ranging from 30 to 75 minutes with three people who held leadership positions at Rhize, four board members, four staff members, two program alumni, one consultant and one third party who followed Rhize’s work from afar throughout its lifespan.
What did Rhize set out to achieve? In the simplest terms: training, connecting and building networks of outstanding activists and organizers. But it didn’t stop with the activists. Everyone—civil society, NGOs, funders, governments and other stakeholders—could have a role. As Erin Mazursky, Rhize’s Founder, shared, “Even if you are not an activist, you can still be an activist ally: by donating, following and supporting movements, and so much more”. The original goal was to engage the whole movement ecosystem by supporting activists and other movement actors, as well as educating their allies. Movements facilitate authentic participation in social change and community action; they are the basis of democracy.³

This was the operational premise behind Rhize’s work with movement coaches, defined as activists who are trained in “strategies, skills and resources to partner with and train activists in their community, creating a force multiplying effect that helps movements sustain and grow movements’ impact”.⁴ The Rhize Coaching Model (see image below) aimed to create a global learning space where movements benefitted from new lessons and best practices in real-time.

³ It is implicit that all movements referred to in this report were or are nonviolent. Rhize did not make this explicit on its website or in publicly available operating guidelines; however, according to Founder Erin Mazursky, “nonviolence was very explicit in Rhize’s trainings. It was a question I often got with funders, to make sure they weren’t funding any violent or straight-up political groups”. In addition, Erin never saw Rhize as educational but instead as a training organization, because “we were training for the sake of catalyzing action and building power. Education connotes learning for the sake of it”.

Rhize Coaching Model

1. Connect and Train Coaches
Rhize provides up-front investment in coach development in facilitation skills and movement strategy and trains coaches in the Coaching Model's core components and tools.

2. Movement Support and Partnership
Coaches work in their communities to lead trainings, facilitate workshops and build stronger, long-term partnerships with grassroots movements.

3. Emergent Grassroots Training Capacity
Coaches begin to develop more sustained capacity for training through building new trainers networks, setting up their own training operations and identifying new coaches for Rhize to support.

Rhize’s work was originally inspired by U.S. organizing models—the Marshall Ganz framework, in particular—and nourished by the theory and practice of nonviolent civil resistance. The organization saw movement building not just as a means to an end but as an end in itself. It believed that movements could be studied and connected, in order to build best practices across different contexts and types of struggle. The anatomy of a movement could be understood by how it emerged, its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, and other observable, comparable traits.

Erin confided that her original vision for Rhize was as a “50-million-dollar organization like ActionAid that would support movements around the world and change the way we do development work”. While a 50-million-dollar budget would never materialize, Rhize’s invaluable human and societal impacts promise to live on.

Marshall Ganz, a prominent U.S. organizer, consultant and Harvard professor, emphasizes activists’ human agency, challenging them to tell “the story of self”, “the story of us” and “the story of now” in their organizing. He teaches five key organizing practices: “how to turn values into motivated action; how to build relationships; how to structure leadership as a collaborative team; how to strategize; and how to translate commitments into action”. More: https://scholar.harvard.edu/marshallganz.

Inspired by the work of Gandhi, Gene Sharp and many others, practitioners of nonviolent civil resistance, also known as nonviolent conflict, leverage pressure on oppressors and oppressive systems through grassroots people power. It is a political method of action that relies on nonviolent tactics like mass demonstrations, engaged art and boycotts to further goals of social justice and human rights.
Erin Mazursky first started to understand the potential for connectivity across movements in the summer of 2009. She had just left her organizer job with the Barack Obama campaign, which was then the largest grassroots mobilization in U.S. history. In the lead-up to their own national elections, a growing movement of Albanian youth invited her to deliver what was ultimately an early version of Rhize trainings. As the ballot results trickled in, Erin and the Albanian participants watched TV footage of Iranians pouring into Valiasr Square in Tehran, protesting the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in what would later be called the Green Revolution.

In the following years, movements around the world, like the Green Revolution, would continue exploring social media as a key—sometimes sole—tool for organizing. For Erin and many others in the movement space, this digitalization of activism bypassed person-to-person relationship-building—a crucial ingredient of successful organizing. "With more [in-person] support for organizers, maybe we could actually learn from each other, adapt and take on authoritarians like Iran’s Islamic regime", she shared.

From 2009 to 2012, Erin continued to develop the concept which in 2013 was set up as Rhize LLC and then in 2015 became a registered 501(c)3 organization called Rhize, based in New York City, USA. The approach for launching an activist solidarity initiative was: “How do we empower movements through training and coaching? How can we stay connected, so everyone grows and evolves?”, in Erin’s own words. Her goal was to find a way to give activists tools that they could adapt and apply to their own local context and movements.
Having quit her job in June 2013 to plan Rhize’s launch full-time, Erin carried out a first pilot project in late 2013 in India, delivering a training for gender justice activists of a US-Indian organization called Breakthrough. Small-dollar funds made possible several other training pilot projects in 2014 and 2015, in Kenya, The Gambia, the United States and India, with activists working on disability rights, accountability for sexual abuse on college campuses, land rights and economic justice.

Rhize’s early work was devoted to testing what it would look like to bring activists from different countries and movements together with coaches trained by Erin and other allies who could provide specific skills and services to activists. The first trainings were focused on theory of change development, public narrative, organizing basics and campaign strategy. As she started to build a curriculum structure, Erin worked with individual activists in The Gambia, Cameroon, Lebanon and elsewhere, who then went on to act as coaches and mentors in future iterations of Rhize’s programming. As the vision for a fellowship to build a global corps of movement coaches took shape, the content became more centered on power models, increasing participation in movements, pillars of support and other movement building tools. The idea was that coaches would bring these tools back to the movements in their communities.

By Rhize’s launch, Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan’s groundbreaking data had been released on the superior effectiveness of nonviolent campaigns over violent ones at achieving their political goals. To become better versed in the strategic dynamics of nonviolent civil resistance, Erin participated in the first Momentum training, which shared common frames with nonviolent resistance. Between 2013 and 2015, she also participated in two educational programs run by the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC), a leader in this growing field of study and practice. A major turning point for Erin was in 2015 when she met Ivan Marovic, an experienced trainer and one of the leaders of Serbia’s Otpor movement, which played a role in bringing down the country’s brutal dictator, Slobodan Milosevic, in 2000. She told him about her vision for Rhize, and together they began designing a “guild” of movement organizers (a precursor to the Coaching Fellowship) and First Exposure Trainings (FETs), which sought to build on U.S. organizing models with civil resistance models.

“The U.S. organizing world uses different approaches than the nonviolent conflict world”, Althea Middleton-Detzner, former Rhize consultant, explained. “There are two different camps. The U.S. organizing folks are usually trained in the Marshall Ganz method [and] Saul Alinsky… and the nonviolent conflict folks are exposed to other literature and concepts. I think Erin, in her dream of dreams, was trying to bring both of those approaches into the same program”. Althea, also an ICNC consultant at the time, began consulting with Rhize to help develop the coaching curriculum and continue realizing this difficult bridging task.

Althea recalled that Erin “had some really good momentum at the time and some close allies really supporting her”; therefore, things took off very quickly—before the coaching curriculum itself could really “wrap its head around either of those camps”, Althea shared. The cross-pollination of these two worlds was nevertheless in motion; now the team needed to rhize to the occasion.

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Rhize had a remarkable level of impact for such a small and new organization. The organization’s work demonstrates that a relatively small number of movement coaches in different parts of the world can energize existing movements, support each other across borders to strengthen movements facing crisis and create new spaces to foster movements in their communities. As both coaches and activists themselves, Rhize alumni have created lasting ripples in their country’s history—without ever having resorted to violence. This is perhaps the most important part of Rhize’s legacy.

Below are three stories that are representative of the ways Rhize coaches took the lessons they learned with Rhize and achieved remarkable results in their communities and movements.8 The stories in this section are contributions from Erin Mazursky, Rhize Founder and former Executive Director (2013-2020), Alice Duesdieker, Rhize Co-Director of Operations (2019-2023) and Mariam Azeem, Rhize Co-Director of Programs (2018-2023).

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8 For more stories about the work of Rhize coaches, please see Let Movements Lead: https://web.archive.org/web/20231103085233/https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54c7f971e4b0d312f4d794ef/t/5ddc7d5e8f4efe6a742b5372/1574731107418/Let+Movements+Lead++Rhize+Report.pdf
The Gambia

One of Rhize’s first pilot programs in 2014 tested the trainer of trainers (ToT) model with the youth activist network Activista-Gambia. At the time, The Gambia had one of the longest standing dictators on the African continent. Activista’s leader, Muhammed Lamin Saidykhan, was one of Rhize’s earliest supporters and eventually one of the organization’s first coaches. In reflecting on his experience with Rhize, he recalled that before Rhize, “[Gambians] were doing easy activism. We were holding government accountable at the lowest levels of power... When Rhize came in, it was a new way of activism... Rhize’s movement building training opened up and made Activista the super movement building trainer in the country at very early stages of fighting against the dictatorship and was a big part of us bringing down the dictator two years later”.

With the analysis enabled by the “Pillars of Support” tool, frontline activists were able to identify the key pillars holding the dictatorship in place, including parliamentarians, department ministers, the military and police force. As Activista built momentum across the country and trained more people, they were able to target key leaders in each of these pillars and call them out. They forced defections in the lead-up to the 2017 elections, which left the 22-year dictator, Yahya Jammeh, with almost no cabinet, a noncompliant military and few loyal parliamentarians.

Since the success of Activista and the revolution in The Gambia, Lamin has gone on to train hundreds of other activists and coaches in Rhize’s methodology. He has served as Africa Rising’s first executive director and as the global movement-building lead for a large climate justice organization. “People may not say oh this is Rhize work, but Rhize built the foundation. The foundation of the knowledge and tools that I still use are from Rhize. So Rhize created a very long lasting change process across Africa”, Lamin shared.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

In 2017, Rhize began engaging with Lucha, one of the foremost democracy movements fighting the Democratic Republic of the Congo’s dictator Joseph Kabila. “Rhize gave us the opportunity to meet other folks very engaged in democracy and human rights defense, which was very impactful because it could help us be inspired by others but also build a network through those different networks”, recalled Rhize coach and Lucha leader, Dirk Shaka. Rhize was an opportunity to form connections and learn from others.

Lucha had an incredibly close-knit network of activists and “Luchologists”, skilled Lucha trainers who would travel throughout the country slowly bringing in new Lucha members. Rhize’s training helped the Luchologists grow from training others to become coaches to training others to become trainers themselves. The development of independent trainers at the local level enabled Lucha to increase their organizational capacity, recruit more quickly and still maintain the unity of vision.

Lucha’s growth had a big impact on civil society and the political arena. Political parties at the time were resorting to violence, but the ethic of nonviolent action was key to Rhize’s methodology. The more people Lucha trained within Rhize’s framework of nonviolence, the more they were able to change the culture of the resistance. Lucha’s strategic approach of building sustained, active, nonviolent and diverse participation culminated in Kabila’s unlikely election defeat in 2019.
Kenya

Hallima Nyota was a Rhize Coaching Fellow in 2022, and leads the Matungu Social Justice Center in Kenya, a grassroots movement that advocates for justice and fair treatment for all. After her participation in the Coaching Fellowship, she was selected for a position in the Digital Disruptors program at Amnesty International, which is now operating in Kenya for the first time. The program supports inspiring young activists to create ground-breaking, youth-led, digital campaigns and runs for 10 months. Through this platform, the participants learn and achieve the requisite skills to continue with campaigns over an extended period of time.

Hallima credits the Rhize Coaching Fellowship with introducing her to the concept of digital security in social justice work. Based on the training she received during the Fellowship, she learned and applied the concept of understanding digital threats, securing communication, understanding the importance of privacy to safely maintain the presence for online activism and the skills to spot disinformation and fake news. These are necessary tools for protecting activists from digital threats and increasing their chances of safely and effectively leveraging digital platforms for their advocacy work. This foundation was key to her selection for the Digital Disruptors program, and she is using both of these programs to build her movement support work in Kenya.

“Through the [Fellowship], activists are able to use the knowledge gained to give direction to grassroots movements and effectively guide them in terms of sequencing of tactics, formulating strategies and [planning] feasible campaigns”.

- Namara Claire, Rhize Coaching Fellow
RHIZE’S LEGACY & LEARNINGS

This section explores six recurring themes that emerged during interviews conducted for this report: movement support; movement supporters; organizational model and fundraising; organizational culture; organizational leadership and leadership transition; and organizational connections and knowledge. Each section includes key insights and lessons from Rhize’s story and thus focuses on learnings rather than impact. Some learnings are for leaders of NGOs, while others are for leaders within the funding community. Highlighting a specific learning does not imply that Rhize failed or succeeded at it; rather, it signals a lesson that Rhize staff, board members and leadership wanted to share for others leading or supporting similar work.

NGO work happens in real time, in the real world and on a continuum; successes and setbacks are sometimes messily intertwined and wrought with irony. This section reflects that complexity, weaving together things that could have been improved with things that went well.
Structuring and professionalizing the activist career

Rhize’s signature program was the Coaching Fellowship, a trainer of trainers (ToT) program that matured throughout the organization’s lifespan. ToTs are capacity-building programs that aim to produce a cohort of advanced movement-trainers (“coaches”) who can in turn train less-experienced, local trainers in a customized curriculum. ToTs create networks of coaches, scaling up the impact of a particular curriculum around themes like models of power and movement building. This also allows an NGO to have a broader geographical reach.

The Rhize Coaching Fellowship eventually evolved into an annual six-month program that professionalized the activist career by exposing coaches to curriculum in grassroots organizing, social change leadership, nonviolent action and other themes. The program provided a stipend for coaches, as well as funds to host trainings, rent rooms, purchase supplies, etc. This was novel for the field because any activist-related work is usually unpaid.

The first iteration in 2015 supported eight movements with two to four fellows each, guided by nine coaches whom Erin had previously trained, from eight countries and five continents. In 2017, Rhize launched the Global Coaching Corps with eight previously trained coaches, establishing this ToT program as Rhize’s flagship program. In 2019, Mariam Azeem, then Rhize’s Director of Movement Support and Learning, worked with Erin to formalize the strategy and structure of the fellowship. Between 2020 and 2023, the fellowship supported a total of 31 coaches and mentors (more about mentors below) from 13 countries who worked with 127 movements.
A unique activist program

Rhize’s fellowship work aimed to provide coaches with a structured and systematic journey toward movement building. ToT programs are not new, but Rhize’s model had several defining characteristics. First, Mariam, who brought to Rhize years of training experience in Pakistan, described it as “a very experiential model for the coaches” and “an applied experience for their communities”. It was more than just about learning tools; coaches had a supportive space to experiment with those tools and experience using them with movements in their communities.

Second, the Coaching Fellowship embraced a listening-first approach with activists, which is a crucial part of social change leadership. Coaches began their fellowship with the Movement Mapping Tool, which required them to listen to movements in their community, instead of assuming or projecting needs onto those groups. They reached out to local movements to identify their leaders, origins, grievances, philosophy and theory of change. At the same time, the Movement Mapping Tool created the space for coaches to understand existing relationships between movements and power structures within their communities. “Fellows came to love this process”, shared lead trainer Ashley Waudo. “It enabled them to give back to the community, understand local agency and build power across issues and themes”. More specifically, it allowed coaches to design movement trainings that were embedded in community values.

An outgrowth of the listening-first approach was that a coach’s local community “knew they were working with professionals, which inspired greater trust in movement leadership”, in Coaching Fellow Victor Agada’s words. On a more personal note, Victor added that simply by learning the listening-first approach, he gained “a sense of awareness—that I’m a leader, and my fellow activists look up to me. They expect me to lead them”.

Third, the Fellowship adopted a holistic approach to organizing, including catering to coaches’ intellectual thirst and emotional needs. For example, themes of self-care and community care in activism emerged through the Movement Mapping Tool. In response, Rhize expanded its curriculum to incorporate these important yet often overlooked aspects of activism that are also critical in movement supporter work (more on this below).

Lastly, the Fellowship offered mentorship to the fellows. Experienced activists participating in the Fellowship were available to provide coaches with helpful insights about organizing, the regional movement landscape and other helpful guidance.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 crisis hit in early 2020 and altered how movements operated. Rhize kept apace, adapting its fellowship to virtual engagement tools. Fellows began learning how to conduct online trainings, which allowed movement work to continue despite social distancing and other public health measures. As a result, the Coaching Fellowship became an extremely engaging virtual program. “The [Coaching Fellowship] was certainly virtual, but thanks to the work strategy that included [clear] communication and sometimes moments of celebration like birthdays, we felt as if we were in the same room and in the same place”, Coaching Fellow Nicolas Mbiya shared. Coaching Fellow Angela Ngulube was also surprised that a 100% virtual fellowship could be so dynamic: “I wasn’t sure if I would have meaningful engagement because it was going to be virtual. But after participating in the online retreat, I had an awakening. I had hope that I could also utilize online platforms to continue my work” during the COVID-19 crisis, she shared.
Continuing engagement

In training new cohorts of coaches year after year, Rhize built up a network of alumni who were continuing to work with movements. Alumni looked to Rhize for ongoing support, requesting continued mentorship and small grants to carry on local training initiatives. Continuing engagement—while actually an opportunity—presents challenges for many small NGOs working with movements when funding is not available to sustain such work. Overall, Rhize was not an exception.

However, some successes can be highlighted. First, alumni from the 2017-18 work with coaches did go on to found the African Coaching Network (ACN), today a self-sustaining organization doing ToTs for movements across the African continent. “The ACN is a really big deal... It is the only recently established coaching network anchored outside the United States with all-local trainers”, highlighted Ivan Marovic, Rhize’s first Training Director. And in its later years, Rhize was able to work with individual alumni and help them build their skills, by incorporating them in future fellowships as mentors for less-experienced coaches in training, or hiring them to deliver trainings to other organizations with Rhize. These were powerful experiences for a few coaches, but the fact remained that Rhize lacked the resources to create a broader structure of ongoing engagement for coaches.

A broader challenge with movement support work is that engaging with a foreign organization can draw unwanted attention to activists in their local community, or worse, heighten risk to their personal security. These problems do not just disappear when a fellowship or other engagement ends. In one example from Rhize’s work, townspeople accused a Coaching Fellow from a country in Eastern Africa of being a spy. Such circumstances undermine coaches’ ability to build trust with their local community, which is crucial to movement leadership.

“Rhize gave people the tools for building movements. People were able to take those tools and contextualize them to their reality and their work, and make them meaningful”.

- Ann-Sofie Jespersen, Former Rhize Board Chair
View activist support programs as “decade work”, not as short-term project work.

Both funders and NGOs need to understand that a movement’s life cycle is a matter of years or decades, not months; likewise, capacity building should be viewed as a long-term process. Much of Rhize’s programmatic successes came from focusing on the long term and investing in coaching capacity, rather than conducting individual, one-off trainings with one movement at a time. Both coaches and the movements consistently valued this foundational support. However, maintaining this type of foundational, big-picture programmatic work is made more difficult when funding is granted one project at a time with a short timeline. NGOs need to consider the long-term scope of movements when designing programs, and funders need to respond to meet that scope.

Prepare to build a lasting community of program alumni.

Rhize’s programs emphasized building a deep and lasting community of coaches who can support each other. Yet building a training program is a distinct project from building a way for alumni to continue to engage with your organization and with each other. Rhize did try to create a space for alumni, but such lasting institutional support is difficult to provide when funding is consistently program-based. On the NGO side, you need to plan for what happens after your programs. And on the funder side, you need to prepare to support movements for the long haul, which includes general support after a specific program. Activists must be cared for in the long term if we expect them to carry out the work they are pursuing. NGOs can consult their alumni about their needs, to inform their continuing engagement planning and budgeting.
Creating a common language

The goal of Rhize’s work with movement supporters was to help them understand what movements were and what kind of support activists really needed and wanted. During Rhize’s early days, few funders were open to supporting activists and even fewer were connecting directly with activists. Rhize’s work played an important role in bridging this divide, and much of the organization’s early years were dedicated to creating a common language between movements and their allies. Through this common language, Rhize sought to educate large NGOs and funders on how to work with grassroots movements in a way that centers their needs and builds their power, instead of relying on top-down styles of engagement.

Among many activities during the period from 2016 to 2019, Rhize carried out research and wrote a number of reports for foundations, and also planned an online course, “Adopting a Movement Mindset” course, targeting funders seeking to better understand movements. The course was offered primarily for funders and civil society workers. At the end of 2016, Rhize began offering this course, designed with Ivan Marovic. The curriculum was supported by research that Rhize conducted between 2015 and 2019.

Bridging the gap between movements and their allies

Rhize’s first report, The New Global Citizen: Harnessing Youth Leadership to Reshape Civil Society\(^\text{10}\) (2016), found that there was (and still is) a disconnect between formal civil society—especially the piece-meal approach to supporting actors in social change—and the majority of youth leaders, who have a more intersectional approach to how they work. The report drew from literature analysis, organizational mapping and interviews with key stakeholders.

In a second report, Understanding Activism\(^\text{11}\) (2017), commissioned by the Atlantic Council, Rhize advanced funding recommendations that fundamentally broke away from traditional industry practice. The report was based on interviews with activists about their perceptions of funding and their experiences with external support. It found that “experiences of support are not consistently positive, with almost as many positive experiences of support as negative experiences in most countries”, and that, although funders favor short-term projects, what activists really need is “closer collaboration, security support, amnesty or safe passage and media coverage”. In other words, activists needed (and still need) types of support that did (do) not fit into the prevailing funder mindset that once a project has been executed, it’s time to move on to a new one.

Understanding Activism “made its rounds in funder and NGO circles”, former Rhize board member Maria Stephan shared. She recalled observing first-hand an evolution in some funders’ thinking on how they were supporting activists and movements. She attended numerous meetings about the “movement mindset” with a small number of U.S.-based funders at the time who were sympathetic to the Rhize report conclusions. They formed some of the key players involved in early conversations about funding movement work, which continue today and have grown more substantive.\(^\text{12, 13}\)

In a 2019 report entitled Let Movements Lead,\(^\text{14}\) Rhize laid out how they designed their fellowship and what they learned from this iterative process. It made the case that funders should support Rhize’s work and that of like-minded organizations. The report showed that with investment in just eight coaches, the coaching program reached 10,000 people.

Letting movements leads

Collectively, these reports allowed Rhize to “[feed] into the ethos of needing to do funding differently”, shared Maria Stephan. The reports also provided a foundation for Rhize’s programming, which focused on cross-border connections between movements and a basic understanding that you have to let the needs of movements guide your work rather than the other way around.

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\(^\text{10}\) https://web.archive.org/web/20231204102939/https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54c7f971e4b0d312f4d794ef/t/57e160a3eb8f5bfb/7cc853b/1474388179666/The+New+Global+Citizen+Sep+2016.pdf

\(^\text{11}\) https://web.archive.org/web/20231206122303/https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54c7f971e4b0d312f4d794ef/t/59655b446c3c40d6a9e9f321608148450384/Understanding+Activism+%28July+2017%29.pdf

\(^\text{12}\) For example, the People Power Conference, organized by ActionAid Denmark in 2023, brought together some 300 activists, funders and movement-support NGOs to address these enduring challenges. A forthcoming report will lay out specific recommendations that many funders in attendance made public commitments to uphold.


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https://web.archive.org/web/20231204102637/https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54c7f971e4b0d312f4d794ef/t/5ddc7d5e8f4e6a742b5372/1574731107418/Let+Movements+Lead++Rhize+Report.pdf
Movements benefit most from long-term, intersectional support that meets their stated needs.

One of the key themes that came out of Rhize’s research is the importance of centering activist needs in the support you provide. Conducting listening exercises and movement maps is essential for providing relevant support (and would mirror the highly successful listening-first approach that Rhize adopted in its Coaching Fellowship). Beyond that, it is crucial that this support be long-term, because movements are enduring, dynamic entities that go through life cycles. Lastly, cross-pollinating with other movements increases movement effectiveness by countering oppressors’ tactics of isolation, repression and divide-and-conquer. As such, activists deeply appreciate the value of learning from each other’s work in different movements, different countries and different regions. If funders want to be genuine movement allies, then they should, too.

Treat funders as thought partners and allies in the work of supporting movements.

NGOs, like movements, may be tempted to see funders as a traditional power structure, and for good reason. Yet funders, like other power structures (governments, armies, patriarchal systems) are staffed with real people capable of learning, growing and empathy, and of adopting new attitudes, work processes and expectations. A lot of Rhize’s early success was due to the organization’s efforts to build connections between funders and activists on the ground. By engaging funders on intellectual and human levels, social change actors can work together to create more significant changes. Maria Stephan raised an interesting point that intersects with this; she suggested that NGOs critically engage funders by holding them accountable to any stated commitments to support movements and movement work better. By engaging funders critically but constructively, NGOs can help deconstruct unhelpful power dynamics. They can help level the field between funders and movements for better impact.
Rhize was a community-led intermediary working across themes and borders. This is apparent in its cross-cutting engagement with diverse movements from around the world through the Coaching Fellowship, which connected movement activists and coaches across different issue areas and regions. In keeping with this model of breaking down silos, Rhize simultaneously worked to create meaningful connections between funders and activists on the ground.

While internally coherent, this organizational model presented a few major obstacles for fundraising. First, funders usually focus on specific regions and causes. This makes it difficult for organizations like Rhize to stay committed to the belief that movements and movement actors from different regions and diverse thematic focuses can learn valuable lessons from each other.

Second, the impact of activist programs is often difficult to quantify or cannot be detailed for security reasons. Because of the nature of their work, movement activists and coaches have a high need for privacy and security, which does not lend itself well to the traditional monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) expected by funders. Many activists fear repercussions (government repression, attracting unwanted attention in their community) for revealing that they are receiving external support to advance politically sensitive causes. This inability to meet reporting norms makes it difficult to rely on traditional grant-based funding, and Rhize was no exception.

Third, Rhize, like many NGOs, was dependent on project funding, which made it difficult for them to stay committed to and fully realize their original vision of creating a Global Coaching Corps. As a function of changing funding expectations, Rhize "shifted from a research institution to building a coaching hub, and back, so it was confusing for funders", a former staff member explained (also pointing to the irony of the situation). Ultimately, instability in funding translated to instability in programming, leaving Rhize little chance to mature as an organization.
The limits of sector education

Rhize engaged in sector education work, defined as courses, events, reports and other initiatives that are intended to educate one sector, like funders, about another sector, like movements or movement support. In 2019, Rhize convened a funder gathering, attended by some 33 funders from 16 movement-funding institutions, to engage them on more human and intellectual levels around the topic of movement support. This major bridge-building event was complementary to Rhize's Movement Mindset course for funders, as well as its contracts to produce reports to help shape a new funder paradigm that is more compatible with movement realities (discussed above).

Beyond these initiatives, Rhize also delivered custom, in-person and virtual trainings to educate funders and NGOs on movements, raising funder awareness of how funding impacts movements on the ground and how to better support movements. These trainings created a space for funders to connect directly with coaches, and also provided an opportunity for coaches to continue to build their training skills in new venues. As fee-for-service contracts, these custom trainings provided a mission-aligned and unrestricted revenue stream. However, it is easy to underestimate how much work it takes to design and manage custom services. Ultimately, Rhize found it difficult to continue this custom training work.

By doing this sector education work, Rhize was trying to compensate for funding challenges. Perhaps more important, Rhize had hoped that educating funders would eventually further its own and like-minded organizations’ true raison d’etre of supporting movements worldwide. However, this expectation of trickling-down never materialized for a complex set of reasons. Among them, one former board member pointed out the sometimes self-serving nature of philanthropy: that delivering educational workshops to funders about movements “felt extractive at times”—to get paid to explain movements to funders instead of getting paid to support movements.

“Meeting Rhize not only deepened my passion for supporting movements beyond activism but also expanded my network beyond my immediate circle. The opportunities and knowledge they provided have become invaluable tools in my leadership roles”.

- Jacob Pwakim, Rhize Coaching Fellow
Experiment with different approaches to engaging funders.

“Instead of doing a hard pitch, ask funders what they fund. Find just one funder who is interested in the work you do. Ask them for referrals to other funders who are interested in that kind of work”, offered Rhize board co-chair Alison Miranda as suggestions for NGOs in the fundraising phase.15

Invest in monitoring and evaluation systems early.

Monitoring and evaluation is such a crucial part of fundraising and organizational growth, and it’s important to set up structures early on that allow you to collect and centrally store this data. Not only does this make it easier to write funder reports, but it also supports ongoing reflection and learning. This information also gives you a ready source of information to explain the value of your program to potential program participants. When designing systems, keep in mind the balance of the privacy needs of the people you’re working with, the reporting requirements of funders and what you have the organizational capacity to do.

Diversify your funding sources, while being realistic about how much work they require.

At times, Rhize was able to achieve more flexibility by delivering custom trainings that both advanced the organization’s mission and provided some revenue to support general operations. However, this work targeted different audiences and required different human resource capacity than Rhize’s other programming. Setting up a reasonable fee structure can also be difficult to do. When thinking about ways to diversify your funding, be conscious of the strategic and human resource implications for the organization’s mission, finances and staff.

Paradigm shifts take time.

Shifting attitudes is long-term work, not to mention the actual application of new funding practices across an entire sector. Some ideas for expanding impact in this regard are easier said than done, but they still merit a mention. First, it is valuable to build or join a coalition of like-minded organizations focused on this shape-shifting work. Such spaces offer solidarity and possible force multiplying effects of such efforts. Secondly, organizational and individual experiences can offer powerful stories to focus attention on needs and better practices. This can start with NGO leaders and staff writing op-eds, engaging on social media channels like LinkedIn around shifting attitudes and practices (”thought leadership”). This can also include giving shout-outs to funders who adopted new, more movement-friendly practices.

Funding partnerships instead of projects gives NGOs the flexibility and trust they need to do high-impact work.

Funders should consider approaching NGO support in the form of partnerships instead of projects. Partnerships place greater emphasis on duration, flexibility and impact (open-ended and synergy-friendly), instead of on the amount of money and deliverables (close-ended and zero-sum). Start small, carving out room for the partnership to grow and evolve as a function of the NGO’s needs and those of its communities. A good first step is a discovery phase to get to know the NGO as an organization, its impact, its theory of change and its communities. Flexibility is key, and let NGOs lead. Let trust reign.
Rhize was a start-up organization with ever-changing needs compounded with unreliable funding sources. Yet even beyond fundraising, recurring themes of leadership model, movement crises and self-care emerged in the interviews conducted for this report. Each of these themes carried with them unique sets of obstacles to building organizational culture, with real impacts on leadership, staff and program participants.

**Chronic understaffing**

In Rhize’s case, small, program-restricted grants necessitated hiring more junior staff than what was really needed: more high-level, experienced staff. In addition, being a start-up meant staff are often expected to be generalists and that job descriptions changed as needs and funding changes. The same was true after Erin left Rhize; the Co-Directors were “all in their individual areas working at multiple levels—executive, middle management, associate levels”, shared Alice Duesdieker. Alison Miranda shared that “Rhize never had enough staff and consultant power”, echoing that small organizations struggle to match skills to the work at hand. Without a proper operational budget, “every year is a different challenge”, as Erin summed up.
The inherent ironies of NGO leadership

Leadership model, in particular, is a difficult subject for small NGOs working in social change. In addition to the problem of trying to operate on a shoestring budget, there is a conflict between what leadership models are expected by funders and what leadership models would best meet the values of a movement support organization. On the one hand, having a charismatic and well-networked executive director is an entrenched tradition for an NGO to find and sustain funding relationships. On the other hand, the singular, often top-down, model of executive director leadership can hamper efforts to create an organizational culture that aligns with the values innate to bottom-up social change work (self-care, checks and balances to power relations, etc.). Rhize, like many small NGOs, struggled to establish an organizational culture that balanced external expectations and internal values. “We were under a ton of pressure and stress, much of which was from the outside but a lot of it was also self-imposed”, Erin shared.

Stress, crisis and self-care

Movement support work inherently comes with a lot of stress, stemming from everyday struggles, acute government persecution and much more. This is a daily reality for activists as well as for their allies, who sometimes build direct and personal connections with activists they support. Having an organizational plan for how to approach crises is all the more important because crises are unfortunately very common in movement work. In Rhize’s case, when staff learned of a coach’s imprisonment, they went into “crisis mode”. A former staff member reported not feeling free to express their grievances about organizational culture in such times of crisis, which impacted their ability to respond to the crisis. “Had I been a more mature leader, I would have known to ask for more from funders or slow certain processes down”, Erin responded, underscoring the turbulence caused by lack of operational support in terms of organizational culture and impact.

In social change work more broadly, some NGO team members have intense passion and commitment for their work, perhaps even to the extent of disregarding work-life balance and personal health, and may expect others to do the same. In movement support work, it is critical to take care of ourselves and each other, because this is a marathon, not a sprint. When self-care in social change work is not addressed with intentionality, miscommunication and misunderstanding can compromise NGO team unity. Rhize was no exception, yet they still worked through these problems and kept their team unity intact to the best of their ability.
Try to invest in organizational structure from the start.

When building a new organization, it’s important to do your best to set up your human resource structures. When hiring staff, NGOs should have very clear expectations and descriptions for each staff role. Make an effort to adapt your organizational culture processes as your structure and leadership model evolve (more on this below). General operating grants from funders are crucial to giving new NGOs the space they need to develop these structures.

Self-care is at the heart of social change leadership and should be addressed with intentionality within NGO teams.

NGOs can bring intentionality to the topic of self-care in social change work (often considered precisely as care work in itself) by, for example: 1) defining organizational culture as a team exercise; 2) establishing genuine listening processes for team members to anonymously express their thoughts and concerns about organizational culture, self-care, etc.; 3) developing and sharing specific guidance, such as how to navigate personal relationships with program participants in healthy and sustainable ways; and 4) adopting a movement crisis support plan (see next point). Such intentionality allows organizational culture to evolve and grow with the work, the team, the organizational structure and other elements that are constantly in flux.

Adopt a movement crisis support plan. Proactively define risk tolerance and the range of appropriate staff responses.

NGO leadership and staff will invariably experience pressure and stress, often stemming from funding constraints (lacking general operational support, understaffing, etc.) or the political context of their work. Pressure and stress mount when an organization suddenly enters crisis mode. Yet each individual has different coping mechanisms and emotional responses to crises. As such, NGOs must take the time to develop a movement crisis support plan, which involves holding open discussions about what is expected of staff and making space for the full spectrum of emotional responses to crises. A crisis response plan must be in place before crisis sets in.
Prioritizing a diverse and skilled board

From the very beginning, Rhize’s approach was to bring in board members based in different world regions and diverse skills. From its inception, board skills included everything from foundation experience in the United States to movement experience in Kenya. The board channeled knowledge of local contexts and area-specific expertise, which allowed Erin to tap them for technical advice for Rhize’s work at the crossroads between foundations and movements, and directly with activists.

This board diversity helped make Rhize’s work in the early years quite robust. It was especially essential in the lead-up to Erin’s departure in 2020 and the transition from an executive director leadership model to a co-director model for Rhize’s last four years in operation. However, for better or for worse, board members only had relationships with Erin, rather than the broader staff, before her transition. Only staff later in Rhize’s history reported having any sort of interaction with board members. In addition, two interviewees pointed out that ideally, staff should have (or receive training in) the technical skills necessary to carry out program work and keep an NGO running, not board members—which of course is easier said than done when you’re operating on very limited project funds.
Transitioning to a new leadership model

Yet to understand Rhize’s experience with organizational leadership, we must go beyond the board and look at how Rhize navigated the leadership transition from an executive director model to a co-director one in 2020. The co-director model, in many ways, would “never quite crystallize”, shared Alice. For her part, Alison Miranda echoed, “The organization never got into a new groove and needed to better publicly represent itself, and that’s important for funders and others to trust you. We needed to reinvent ourselves, our voice”. Rhize specifically lacked the space, time and awareness to fully realize the co-director model with intentionality. It wasn’t until two years after the transition that the Co-Directors truly realized what their co-leadership model meant, Alice said. “In the transition, it was difficult to find time to sit down and talk about what it means to be a co-director”; instead, they fell into it, she shared.

NGO leadership is inextricable from fundraising efforts for many small NGOs. In the world of philanthropy, “What matters is that you know people and that people know you. People knew Erin, which is a big part of why the organization was able to get off the ground in the first place”, shared Ivan Marovic. Yet these relationships were difficult to transition because of the personal nature of the funding relationships. Ivan Marovic offered a systemic analysis of this as a material reality of what is often diagnosed as the NGO founder’s syndrome. Rhize Co-Directors were based in different countries, with different abilities to access visas for travel to some regions to network with funders. Shifting staff and strategy at various funder organizations also meant that some relationships were not there to transition. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic halted in-person relationship building opportunities for a prolonged period.

“Rhize has been an absolute blessing and gift in my life. [...] It opened my mind, heart and spirit in unimaginable ways. It ultimately reignited my love, respect and appreciation for human-kind. What a journey, what a network, what a cause to drive home”.

- Phindile Dhlamini Motshegwa, Rhize Coaching Fellow
There is value in boards providing fundraising connections and other skills to staff.

Many NGOs include a “give-get” clause which requires board members to either contribute or secure a certain amount in donations to the organization. Rhize did start out with a give-get clause to support initial fundraising work, but ultimately decided to remove the clause in order to develop a more inclusive and diverse board. Considering the fundraising struggles that many NGOs encounter in movement support work, board members, or designated board members, perhaps do need to play a fundraising role. At the same time, there is value in the board having different skill sets that can help guide, coach and share specific knowledge with staff, to enhance the organization overall. The key is balance, direct communication (between board members and staff, not just leadership) and synergies between the different levels of the organization (leadership, board, staff and program participants).

Setting up a co-director structure requires thought, planning and guidance.

If a co-director model is adopted, set it up with intentionality. Schedule a retreat for key actors in the organization to imagine exactly what that model will look like, how it might play out for the organization in terms of mission, fundraising, workflow, organizational culture and so on. Think about how your organizational values influence a co-director structure and make decisions accordingly. Talk to peer organizations who have tried a co-director structure, to learn from them and share your experiences.
Looking outward, looking inward

Building a sustainable organization requires both building a community of like-minded organizations and an institutional knowledge base—a healthy balance of looking outward and inward, at the same time.

In the early years of the organization, Rhize was embedded into a strong movement network, actively collaborating with peer organizations and bringing activists to international fora. However, in the later years, Rhize staff lacked the time and capacity to tap into this network, missing out on potential strategic partnerships. They also were unable to find and create avenues for coaches to externally represent Rhize, which could have provided another bridge to peer organizations.
The Co-Directors who piloted Rhize’s final years may not have excelled at looking outward, but they did excel at building a knowledge base—something that one former staff member and one board member noted as a shortcoming of the organization’s early years. In this spirit, Mariam documented the Coaching Fellowship each year she managed it, creating a template that could be referred back to year after year.

As Rhize prepared to close, Mariam also created a central institutional memory file to document various processes and guiding materials for the Coaching Fellowship, with hope that the fellowship might be able to live on after Rhize’s closing. Lastly, Rhize’s final Co-Directors commissioned the present report in order to leave an actionable written trace for all those who will come after Rhize. Documenting processes and organizational histories is part of how knowledge management can be resistance in itself, since such information poses real threats to authoritarians and oppressive systems.

Whether in its early years, driven by a strong sense of entrepreneurship and an extroverted leadership style, or in its later years, marked by introspection and documentation, the organization never had the right footing to be able to uphold both approaches simultaneously.

**Building a sustainable movement**

Importantly, the strategic value of having parallel inward and outward strategies also carries value for movements themselves. Rhize’s work imparted to movement coaches the value of reflecting on and recording their own processes, while simultaneously connecting them with other movements worldwide. By completing the Grievance Mapping and Movement Mapping exercises during the Coaching Fellowship, coaches were documenting their own local movement knowledge in collaboration with individual local movements themselves.

Coaches acted like investigative journalists in a sense, to document movement processes and decision making, which activists do not typically have time to do. Rhize enabled this important documentation work, generating knowledge from movements—and importantly, created a platform to circulate that knowledge among other movements in their network. This information sharing is a rare and valuable currency in our day and age.

“Activists joined Rhize as strangers and left as family”.

- Mariam Azeem,
  Rhize Co-Director of Programs
Find your community as an organization.

It’s important to work with peer organizations. Rhize did a great deal of this in its early years but struggled to maintain those relationships after Erin stepped down. Movement support work is fundamentally community work, and we are all stronger if we work together and collaborate on movement support projects. In an ideal world, there would be a pipeline of organizations that could sequentially provide, first, baseline education about movements; then second, training and capacity building; and last, opportunities for continuing engagement. Under the current framework, no one organization can handle all three types of engagement. So, while taking the time to build a network of organizations is hard work, synergies are always rewarding—for organizations, their respective communities and the broader international community of social change actors.

Do and repeat; document your processes.

This begins with day 1 of a project or program and is a continuous process throughout the lifespan of a project. Building a coaching fellowship requires training skills but also, importantly, specific program development and management skills. If NGO staff do not have these skills, leadership should hire or invest in training staff to create structures and document program processes. This documentation makes repeating a program a much lighter lift for the organization.

Look inward and outward as an organization.

The inward-facing strategy of creating a knowledge base can be achieved by documenting your programs, processes and learnings for future staff and program participants. Knowledge is power, but it is even more powerful when it is documented for future generations. Likewise, the outward-facing strategy of building mutual support networks with similar organizations reinforces your work (and sometimes opens up new funding possibilities). One strategy is not better than the other; their potential benefits for an NGO derive from being in operation simultaneously.
Work in the movement space comes with its own unique set of complexities and ironies. After all, ours is real-world work. So how can the impact of a unique organization like Rhize even be measured? How can one make sense of the twists and turns Rhize took during its decade-long operation? And perhaps most important of all, as the title of this report asks, why do we Rhize?

When an NGO closes, it is tempting to try to find someone to blame—or at least some straight-forward explanation for what “went wrong”. This report rejected these overly simplistic and unhelpful frames of failure and blame. Instead, it strived to weave together praising, critical or neutral evaluations and interpretations of Rhize’s work into a pluralistic history with actionable takeaways. Rhize’s closure is not a reflection of failure. It is an opportunity for all of us to pause and take a moment to reflect on how we, movement supporters, are doing and how we can all do better.

One broader takeaway from this report is that we, as movement supporters, can follow in Rhize’s footsteps to adopt a more critical, granular view of the actors in a movement ecosystem. Not all movement allies are the same. Some of us have much more room to improve than others, and even the best of us still need to be held accountable—whether by other NGOs or by activists themselves—to our stated commitments to movements. We must not content ourselves with
simply being on the side of activists. For its part, Rhize aspired to be—and was—much more. Rhize's closure is a call for us, NGOs and funders, to critically self-examine and try to be more, too.

Likewise, not all activists are the same. As a heterogenous group embedded in diverse contexts, movement phases and many other factors, their views of movement allies vary vastly. As one Kenyan activist stated at a recent international gathering, movements existed long before NGOs and funders. And they will persist long after these organizations. Not all activists are openly willing to accept movement supporters’ frameworks of engagement, seeing those relationships through a power structure framework—and rightly so. Others are happy to engage in our programs, then move on with their work.

To take better account of these complex realities in movement work, we can follow Rhize’s example of listening to activists’ needs and humbly walking alongside them. It isn’t about bringing down dictators as much as it is about adopting a listening-first, community-driven and sustainability-centered approach to our movement support work. We must first get ourselves right as movement allies before we can expect societal change.

With multiple devastating wars being waged internationally at the time of writing, it has become more important than ever to understand how nonviolent movements create genuine pathways to peace, freedom and justice. War will perhaps always exist, but it does not negate the value of nonviolent struggle. The two are not mutually exclusive.

So let us not be discouraged by war. The walls are coming down. Oppressors everyday, everywhere are trying to keep powerful knowledge under wraps: knowledge that ordinary people have agency. We have that knowledge. We know that people can leverage real political power when they form a united, nonviolent front against injustice.

Movements are writing history, and movement allies like Rhize—like you and me—are on the right side of it.

“What’s next? I have hope. Can another platform take over the program? We have all this alumni network. We are here. We want to be connected. When we had our Rhize family, we felt more secure”.

-Grace Kamau, Rhize Coaching Fellow
To the ones who came before us, thank you for taking the time to learn from each other and work together to build this amazing organization that impacted so many activists, coaches and movements around the world. Your openness—to trying new things, learning new tools and developing new approaches to working with movements—is what made Rhize the powerful organization that it was. Each past and present board member, staff member, consultant, coach, program participant and funder played a crucial role in Rhize’s journey.

To those who will come after us, we are so excited to see what you will do. The spirit of Rhize is bigger than a single organization, and the project of working with and strengthening movements will continue to live on. We cannot wait to see what you do next with what you’ve learned from Rhize. Together, we can build a better world.

In Solidarity,
Alice & Mariam
Learnings from a Decade of Supporting Movements