

If philanthropy is going to play a constructive role in creating a more just and equitable world, foundations and donors need to be accountable for the power they hold, creative in how they share it, and ultimately bold in handing it over to the communities they serve.

We at the Chorus Foundation see all of our work through the lens of power, and this supplement offers stories, lessons, and recommendations from our efforts.

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HOW WE GOT HERE

Nearly two decades after our founding, the Chorus Foundation and our allies take stock on what we have learned about philanthropy, power, and creating a better world.

BY FARHAD EBRAHIMI

This supplement has been almost two decades in the making. The Chorus Foundation was created in 2006 as a vehicle to fully redistribute all the wealth under my direct control. True to that intention, Chorus and our sibling action fund are now closing out our final year of grantmaking.

This is a very exciting time for us. But this moment is about much more than Chorus. We have come into our own as part of a much larger ecosystem of philanthropic and grassroots organizations. This supplement is our effort to showcase both the thinking and some of the thinkers whose impact has proven transformative for us. In that sense, this supplement belongs to all of us.

We understand that basic questions about power—what is it, who has it, and how can it be shifted—are central to every social issue and social sector. We have unfortunately also seen how power, in its many forms, is taken as a given or even obscured entirely. This is, of course, by design. If we can't see power for what it is, and we can't ask why power operates the way it does, then we will find ourselves subject to the power of others, rather than becoming the agents of our own power. That is precisely how the status quo perpetuates itself.

Despite an unremitting belief in our own exceptionalism, the philanthropic sector is no different. In fact, philanthropy offers a pernicious example of how power can be everywhere without being named or questioned. Not only does philanthropy hold tremendous power—to allocate resources, to set agendas, even to dictate strategy—but there also exists an ecosystem of power and power dynamics within the philanthropic sector itself.

As a result, power has become the primary lens through which we at Chorus view our own work. Admittedly, it took us time to get here. The story of that journey is essentially the story of this supplement.

ABOUT ME

Before we dive in, it only seems fair that, as the living donor, I share a bit about myself. The story of the Chorus Foundation begins with a successful tech entrepreneur, but that entrepreneur was not me. It was my father, who achieved enormous success in the desktop-publishing industry in the mid-1980s. My introduction to philanthropy was as a next-generation member of a high-net-wealth family.

For what it's worth, I'm the family's radical lefty straight out of central casting. That said, my views have been deeply informed by my family history in the sense that both my parents are refugees. My father is Iranian and my mother is Cuban, and their stories have profoundly shaped my personal and political development.

My parents talked about politics all the time when I was growing up, even yelling at the TV while we watched the news. You might say they had strong feelings about US foreign policy. In retrospect, this was a form of political education for me. One theme became crystal clear: the value of community self-determination. My parents described their refugee experiences in terms of displacement and the loss of home, but also as examples of what can happen when community self-determination is undermined. Multiple interventions by the United States and other forces contributed to the fraying of community self-determination in both Iran and Cuba.

I don't think I can overstate how formative these messages from my parents were for me. Their stories helped me make sense of my own experiences as an Iranian American and helped launch my own line of political inquiry. Like any good teenager or young adult, I harangued my parents: *Why didn't we talk about race more? Why didn't we ever talk about class or capitalism? As a high-net-wealth family, what was our relationship to community self-determination now that our refugee days were behind us?*

Meanwhile, family money loomed in the background. My father put a significant percentage of his shares in one of his most successful enterprises in my name, even though I wasn't even a teenager at the time. By my mid-20s, the wealth under my direct control was worth well over \$50 million. I had yet to reckon with any of it—in fact, I had been avoiding the subject entirely.

THE BIRTH OF THE CHORUS FOUNDATION

After a great deal of personal reflection and following many conversations with working-class friends and mentors, I decided to create my own private foundation. My plan was to create the appropriate vehicle to give away all the wealth under my direct control during my lifetime.

I had never felt that the money was mine. In my organizing experience, this feeling is common among next-gen members of high-net-wealth families. But I would like to be clear that my decision resulted from a process of intentional political education. I had been taught to interrogate the circumstances that allowed my family to accumulate so much money in the first place. While I love my parents and believe that my father worked hard and deserves to be compensated for that work, no individual should accumulate so much wealth. You don't get this rich without benefiting from a system that keeps other people poor.

I promised myself that I would initiate a wealth-redistribution project by the time I turned 30. I was able to beat that self-imposed deadline by a few years but lacked a clear framework, ideological or otherwise, for how to think about philanthropy as a project.

And so began the Chorus Foundation 17 years ago, somewhat conventionally. First, the elephant in the room: This was a private foundation, and surely we could dedicate another article to unpacking the meanings of that particular convention (as some already have). I was a living donor, surrounded by the usual advice that living donors receive: Pick an issue, select a measurable outcome, develop your strategy to “move the needle,” and treat your grantees like service providers to implement that strategy.

This advice did not resonate with me, and yet initially, I believed that I didn't have other choices. Looking for a place to start, I picked my issue: climate change. It was hardly the only issue I cared about, but I had been told that philanthropy could only effectively tackle one problem at a time.

As we developed our strategy at Chorus, we set out to learn what other climate funders were up to. The results were mixed at best, with large sums going to top-down strategies that did not deliver. I'd be lying if I said that we didn't make some mistakes of our own!

But we were lucky to show up on a few finely tuned radars. I stood out just a bit as the only punk kid at a funder conference, wearing my faded David Bowie shirt. Whether that helped is unclear, but our radical peers in philanthropy found us, welcomed us, and took us under their wing. In particular, I would like to recognize New World Foundation, Solidago Foundation, and staff and member leaders from both Resource Generation and EDGE Funders Alliance for their early mentorship. Instead

Power is not a monolithic concept but instead a complex ecosystem that takes different forms and includes a web of relationships and interactions.

of chasing the latest fads in climate philanthropy, our new friends encouraged us to connect directly with leaders from the grassroots organizing sector. Since I was raised to value community self-determination, this recommendation resonated with me. It simply made sense. We learned a great deal more, not surprisingly, from frontline BIPOC and working-class leadership than we ever did from our (predominantly white, privileged, and disconnected) peers in climate philanthropy.

I want to acknowledge the Center for Story-based Strategy, Climate Justice Alliance; Grassroots Global Justice Alliance; and Movement Generation Justice & Ecology Project for all the ways they invested in our leadership, not only as grant makers, but also as organizers in their own right. We are incredibly grateful that **Michelle Mascarenhas (former codirector at Movement Generation)** contributed an article to this supplement describing how these relationship-building, leadership development, and organizing efforts felt from the grassroots perspective.

Owing in large part to the political education we received from these organizations—and from place-based organizations such as Asian Pacific Environmental Network, Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, and Western Organization of Resource Councils—we saw that the fundamental challenge presented by the climate crisis wasn't about policy, technology, or science. Rather, it was about power. Moved by this clarity, we finally shed our initial issue focus on climate, and adopted an overall framework around building and shifting multiple forms of power for community self-determination.

LET'S TALK ABOUT POWER

When we use the term “power,” what do we really mean? At the Chorus Foundation, our understanding of power has been sharpened by engaging in our work, and it will continue to be sharpened long after Chorus closes its doors. This is not a theoretical conversation but a commitment to accompany the people and organizations that are building and shifting power in new ways.

Power, as it turns out, is not a monolithic concept but instead a complex ecosystem that takes different forms and includes a web of relationships and interactions. There is no one right way to create a taxonomy in this vast ecosystem, but for Chorus, it has been helpful to name political, economic, and cultural power as the three forms that we are most interested in. It has also been helpful to acknowledge that, alongside their intersections and interactions, each form of power describes an ecosystem in its own right. In the spirit of that complexity, this supplement includes two articles that explore political, economic, and cultural power, weaving together various topics and perspectives in an effort to broaden our shared understanding of what the word power can mean.

When we say “power” without any qualifier, we often refer to political power. Loosely speaking, we understand political power as the ability to influence or control collective decision-making. For this supplement, we are pleased to feature articles by **Vivian Yi Huang (Asian Pacific Environmental Network)**, **Lisa Owens (The Hyams Foundation)**, and **Mónica Córdova (Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing)** that explore political power as both a case study and a concept.

As funders, the most basic form of power we hold is economic. We would like to highlight the understanding of economic power shared by **Aaron Tanaka from the Center for Economic Democracy** in a key contribution to this supplement: Economic power is the degree to which an individual or group controls valued assets and resources, including

the decisions that surround their use. **We are also incredibly excited to share** an article by **Nwamaka Agbo** from the **Kataly Foundation** that explores economic power as it applies to philanthropy's approach to investment and integrated capital.

Cultural power is arguably the least discussed and most pervasive form of power. Our understanding of what "politics" or "economics" means is shaped by culture! This supplement features two articles on cultural power authored by **Alexis Frasz (Helicon)** and **Aisha Shillingford (Intelligent Mischief)**. Informed by their collective wisdom, we understand cultural power as *the capacity of a group to shape what it believes, values, does, and creates in ways that align with its worldview and preferred way of being.*

WHAT A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF POWER WOULD MEAN FOR PHILANTHROPY

These understandings of power distilled the Chorus Foundation's focus on multi-issue organizations and efforts to build and shift power in communities that have historically had power wielded against them: Black folks, Indigenous peoples, immigrants and refugees of color, and working-class folks more broadly.

Our grantees do not only talk about "climate solutions" or "climate justice." Today, they talk about a "just transition." We have seen climate organizations, including mainstream climate philanthropy, begin to address the need for "systems change." But systems, as it turns out, change all the time, and "systemic change" can be dangerous if it doesn't center both equity and power. As we've learned from our friends at Movement Generation, "Transition is inevitable. Justice is not."

These understandings of power not only informed *what we funded* but also *how we funded*. Funders, especially individual donors like me, retain enormous power, and we have seen that philanthropy generally does not wield that power equitably. Philanthropy and the ways we give can present one of the greatest obstacles to transformative work. It is entirely possible to fund the right things in the wrong way. In fact, it's quite common.

Staying in character as a radical lefty, I maintain that philanthropy, conventionally defined, requires the extraction and enclosure of wealth and power to exist. It continues to function according to extractive and exploitative structures, even in how the money is given away. But a more interesting question for us to consider is: What would it look like to do things differently? Revisiting our journey at Chorus, we can see a clear path through the following stages: *holding power accountably to sharing power equitably to handing over power entirely*, with each step contributing the necessary preconditions for the next.

When we talk about holding power accountably, we might start with what is now called "trust-based" philanthropy. It includes making long-term, unrestricted commitments, and for Chorus, "long term" means 8-10 years. Trust-based philanthropy also refers to building open, honest, and vulnerable relationships with grantees and community members. But for us, this was only an initial step to building trust to share power equitably.

A just transition for the philanthropic sector will require confronting the conditions that produce wealth inequality and that allow for private philanthropy in the first place.

When we talk about sharing power equitably, we might begin with "participatory" philanthropy, which includes codesigning tactics, strategies, and processes with grantees and community leaders, or building the processes and structures for democratized decision-making when it comes to how resources are allocated. We are fortunate to feature an article on power sharing in this supplement, a contribution by **Sadaf Rassoul Cameron** and **Arianne Shaffer** from the **Kindle Project**, which has far-reaching experience in this space. For Chorus, we should be clear that sharing power was a step that allowed community members to "exercise their muscles" before we handed over power to them entirely.

When we talk about handing power over entirely, what does that look like? For Chorus, it has meant spending down our entire endowment in the last 10 years. As part of that spend down, we have made grants available for organizational endowments, land acquisition, community loan funds, and more. Most important, it has meant supporting the creation of alternative infrastructure, held by the community, for resource allocation that will outlive the foundation. To be clear: We believe in "spend-down" philanthropy but we don't believe in it as a panacea. It should be a strategic question, not a cult. I am incredibly honored to have coauthored an article with **Ash-Lee Henderson** from the **Highlander Center** on this very subject.

THE ROLE OF PRIVATE PHILANTHROPY IN A JUST TRANSITION

As a private family foundation, we see Chorus as a transitional form, at best. If we seek to support transformational work, then we must remain open to transformation ourselves. We think of this as a "just transition" for the philanthropic sector, and we are greatly indebted to the work of Justice Funders for helping to expand and sharpen that thinking. We are also indebted to **Lorenzo Herrera y Lozano** from **Justice Funders** for his contribution to this supplement, in which he outlines the types of (re)generative leadership at our organizations, including philanthropic organizations, that will be required for a truly just transition.

One thing is already clear: A just transition for the philanthropic sector will require confronting the conditions that produce wealth inequality and that allow for private philanthropy in the first place. For some, this assertion might seem frustrating, possibly upsetting. But we believe in this idea unequivocally, and so we must ask ourselves: If another world is possible—a better world that is equitable and just—what would philanthropy look like? Would it be philanthropy as we currently understand it? Or can we allow ourselves to dream of a radically different approach to resource allocation?

In many ways, I think of myself as an abolitionist. Most readers will be familiar with this term in the context of slavery, police, or prisons. As an abolitionist, I no longer think along the lines of "good" policing versus "bad" policing. Instead, the question for me is: Why is some form of policing our default solution? I adopt a similar stance with respect to private philanthropy. Conversations about "good" vs. "bad" philanthropy can be pragmatic in the context of transitional forms such as Chorus, but I remain most interested in helping build a world where resources and power are never extracted and consolidated in the first place. I believe this would represent liberation, not just for our grantees but for all of us, including other donors and members of high-net-wealth families like me. □

Farhad Ebrahimi is founder and president of the Chorus Foundation.

WE NEED A STRATEGY FOR SPENDING DOWN

Spending down is only a tactic. To turn it into something more strategic, we will need to consider a host of questions.

BY ASH-LEE WOODARD HENDERSON & FARHAD EBRAHIMI

There have been so many different responses, both inside movements and inside philanthropy, to the Chorus Foundation's decision to spend down.

On the one hand, responses from movement practitioners have included telling every funder they know that every foundation should spend down. Sometimes these practitioners mention reparations (as though reparations were synonymous with charitable giving) or abolition (because they believe, as we do, in a world where philanthropy no longer exists). Other responses reflect fear that comes from years of scarcity: "What will we do when Chorus isn't around to fund us anymore?" The question suggests that the money to do the work is limited and might be affected to such an extent that organizations will no longer be able to secure funding for their own work. There is the feeling that the necessary relationships, and capital resources that come with them, will not be easily available or accessible after Chorus.

In philanthropic circles, there is also a spectrum. Some take an absolutist position that everyone should spend down and do so on the quickest timeline possible, because folks on the ground need the money and because philanthropy should not exist in a liberated world. Others express the belief that spend-down strategies are utopian, extreme, irresponsible, and not strategic in the world that exists.

Chorus has written multiple articles about the tactic of spending down. Spending down is a response to the relational, experiential, and data-driven research that has informed (and continues to inform) choices and recommendations regarding philanthropic strategies. Our conversations about the strategic utility and tactical intervention of spending down—whether philanthropy- or movement-oriented—might seem to be all over the place.

Even though Chorus has shared assessments and lessons in the hope that other philanthropic institutions (and the humans that sustain and maintain them) might shift their approaches, not only when it comes to *what* gets funded but also *how* movements are funded, we seem to be stuck in a feedback loop: transformational versus transactional impact, long-term versus short-term or one-time funding, general operating versus project-/program-specific grants, the 5 percent versus the 95 percent, and more.

How do we move past these sound bites to a multisector strategy for social justice funding? How do we stop the cyclical overcorrection of movement demands that are often more tactical than strategic, as well-intentioned as they might be? How do we challenge philanthropic

strategies that are informed more by donor and trustee politics and the opinions and interests of the wealthy than by what is happening on the ground?

NOT ALL FOUNDATION SPEND DOWNS WERE CREATED EQUAL

If one thing is clear, it is that fetishizing the act of spending down will only get us so far. To effectively make the case for *why* more foundations should spend down, we will need a sharp, compelling, and collectively held strategy that indicates *which* foundations should be spending down at any given moment, by *when* they should spend down, and *how* they should go about doing it. In the spirit of developing a collectively held strategy, we'd like to propose the following strategic criteria to consider:

Will this spend down allow the foundation to support urgent work at a scale and on a timeline commensurate to that urgency?

This consideration is particularly relevant to the climate crisis, but that is far from the only context in which it applies. We face similar tipping points in our economy, our democracy, and in our culture(s) at every level. Regardless of how any of us might feel about our own institutions spending down, we simply cannot deny that we currently face multiple, intersecting crises that affect human lives today. These crises will only accelerate if not fully addressed at a systemic level. With this in mind, we confront a clear strategic argument for spending down as a means to mobilize sufficient resources to address specific crises.

Will this spend down support grantee organizations in raising funds more effectively from other funders?

One of the most perverse ways in which philanthropy's inherent risk aversion shows up is when funders are reluctant to support a given organization or effort until they see that another funder has already committed themselves to similar support. The rationale, inasmuch as we have been able to understand it, is that funders do not want to risk "their" resources supporting an initiative that lacks the overall capacity to accomplish the work. The outcome, of course, is that grassroots organizations are labeled both "low capacity" and "high risk," and are subsequently caught in a vicious circle of being under-resourced *precisely because they are already under-resourced*.

Spending down is an opportunity to view the entirety of a foundation's endowment as serving a holistic institutional strategy. In other words, it's not "here's what we're doing with our grants, and there's what we're doing with our investments," but rather, "here's what we're doing with the whole thing." Instead of "what we're doing right now," or "for the next few years," we can say, "here's what we are doing until we run out of money." Put simply, spending down can catalyze big commitments, including commitments that might normally seem risky. That level of risk tolerance can open the door for other, more risk-averse funders to make similar commitments more comfortably.

After committing to a specific spend-down timeline, the Chorus Foundation was in a position to make long-term (i.e., 8-10 years), unrestricted commitments to anchor organizations in multiple geographies. These commitments were both visible and provocative and had a profound impact on mitigating risk aversion for other funders who were subsequently moved to make new or increased commitments to the same organizations and/or geographies.

Will this spend down support grantee organizations to engage in activities that make them credibly less dependent on philanthropy moving forward?

A conventional grant is a *consumptive* unit of economic power: it is used up and then gone. For a foundation spend down to meet this criterion, the foundation in question must also hand over *productive* units of economic power—for example, by making grants available for building organizational endowments, acquiring or developing land, seeding cooperative loan funds, or acquiring of the means of production (e.g., supporting a worker cooperative to purchase manufacturing equipment). By including the redistribution of productive units of economic power as an intentional part of a spend down, a foundation can support its grantees to become that much less dependent on outside resources. If we believe that a just transition for the philanthropic sector is possible, then the shifting of productive economic power should be a primary goal for any foundation spending down.

In full transparency, this goal was *not* part of the Chorus Foundation’s original reasoning for spending down, which is very much something that the foundation would do differently if given the chance to do it all again. With that in mind, we would like to recognize the folks at the Kataly Foundation for making this a central part of their in-progress spend down from day one.

Will the spend down allow the foundation to charismatically demonstrate to its peers what a just-transition strategy for the philanthropic sector might look like?

There is a word for removing something from active service and it is rarely used in a philanthropic context: *decommissioning*. When we consider the larger concept of just transition, however, the concept of decommissioning is quite common. For example, we know that we cannot equitably decommission a power plant—no matter how poisonous—without replacing the energy that it produced or the wages that it paid. Similarly, as abolitionists, we do not advocate for defunding the police without simultaneously advocating for the reallocation of those resources to social services that will create real safety and security in our communities. The question of philanthropic transformation is no different; we cannot equitably decommission a foundation without replacing—in one way or another—the resources it mobilized.

It is one thing to name these as criteria for a specific site, municipality, or philanthropic institution. It is something else—sometimes *something else entirely*—to change the story about what is possible, desirable, or even necessary for an entire sector. With that in mind, we believe that there should be criteria to shape the narrative strategy of a foundation spend down.

It should come as no surprise to anyone reading this supplement that the Chorus Foundation aspires to play a role in changing the story about philanthropy. And we would be remiss if we failed to acknowledge the impact of the foundation’s decision to spend down on its profile and platform in the larger

No foundation spend down exists in a vacuum, and thus no spend down can be fully evaluated without assessing its impact on the ecosystem of economic power.

philanthropic community. In short, were it not for that decision, you would probably not be reading this supplement.

On this theme, we would like to acknowledge the spend-down foundations that ventured down this path before us, and name the enormous influence their outspoken leadership had for the Chorus Foundation, most particularly the Beldon Fund, the Quixote Foundation, and the Fund for Democratic Communities.

CONSIDER THE BROADER ECOSYSTEM

As these criteria show, not all foundation spend downs are created equal. We would like to be unequivocal in stating that an individual high-net-wealth donor, and even an entire high-net-wealth family, spending down the totality of their wealth in response to their own ideological beliefs about wealth hoarding will not make that act strategic. If a spend down is not done in a way that addresses specific urgent needs, improves grantees’ overall relationship to philanthropy, reduces grantees’ overall need to relate to philanthropy, or embodies a coherent narrative strategy, then it will be no more than that: a personal decision in response to personal beliefs. To bring justice into this world, we must ask wealth holders to do much more.

We also want to make something else explicit about these criteria. They come from a fundamental belief in the abundance of our movements and the capacity for abundance that progressive and radical funders who support our movements have. No foundation spend down exists in a vacuum, and thus no spend down can be fully evaluated without assessing its impact on the ecosystem of economic power, including but not limited to its impact on a foundation’s peers in philanthropy.

BUSINESS AS USUAL WILL COME AT A COST

Without a multisector, multitactical strategy for funding—that includes elements from philanthropy but that is fundamentally informed by and accountable to a BIPOC- and working class-dreamed, designed, and driven *movement* strategy—philanthropy will continue to produce more of what we in justice work have always experienced: the boom-and-bust cycles of wealthy philanthropists and the professional class that works for them and their random interests. What has followed is the never-ending frustration of movement operatives inside philanthropy who simply lack the power to move beyond the challenges of the bureaucracies where they work.

We must be clear: The philanthropic right wing is committed to spending aggressively to develop and communicate conservative ideas and to control the intellectual, political, and cultural mainstream in the United States. (Read James Piereson’s 2002 *Philanthropy Roundtable* piece “The Insider’s Guide to Spend Down” as an example of how progressive forces are hardly the only ones who have considered the topic.)

We must be honest: If, in relation to philanthropy, we do what we have always done, we will get precisely what we always have. Today, we find ourselves facing multiple, serious threats, including fascism and authoritarianism; catastrophic ecological tipping points; public health crises; and xenophobic, homophobic, transphobic, patriarchal, and white supremacist violence. The time is upon us to get as serious as life or death about collectively playing to the strengths of our individual/institutional interests and assessments of where philanthropy needs to go. If the last few years have been a wake-up call, then we have been hitting snooze for far too long. It is past time to deprioritize our egos and work

together in intersectional ways to cover the many issues that impact people around the country—none of us live single-issue lives—because there are enough philanthropic institutions and financial resources to fund all of the work that must happen to save the world.

Our current conversations are intellectually stimulating at best. Parading the trauma of targeted and marginalized communities in front of wealthy benefactors for the sake of their awareness of our issues represents the worst. Now is the time to move our institutions to ask: Are we more interested in existing in perpetuity than we are committed to and interested in saving lives—not to mention the human ability to survive on this planet?

If we are thinking long term, might there be a pressing need for us to spend out and spend down for the sake of funding movements in order to see people living in healthy, equitable, and sustainable communities in our lifetime? As some of us move to spend down, are there others who might not be ready, but would be excited to participate in innovative longer-term plans that transfer wealth over time to sustain the stamina, momentum, and wins of liberatory movements to achieve freedom and justice for all?

LET'S GET TO WORK

Now is the time to feel excited about what a windfall of resources might mean for the successful democracy-saving work of movement practitioners who have a track record of integrity and real relationships with a directly impacted base. These efforts are led by folks with lived experiences shared by marginalized and targeted communities. Now is the time to have conversations inside philanthropy about your best and highest use: to spend money or trickle it out, and for the sake of what? Strategy? Or perpetuity for its own sake? Now is the time to build the inside/outside organizing strategy we have dreamed of, to identify our roles and responsibilities, and move money for the sake of resourcing life-saving work as though we want our people to win.

We trust that we have made our point. We need a multisector strategy for spending down. This strategy will require collective clarity on where we believe progressive and radical philanthropy ought to be going, but will also require collective clarity on—as well as coordination and collaboration in—how we will get there. The fundamental value of our strategy will not be in the goals it sets, or the criteria it articulates, but in the efficacy of the organizing efforts that will be required to achieve these goals or satisfy these criteria. More so than perhaps any other goal we can set to transform philanthropy, the voluntary decommissioning of multiple iterations of philanthropic institutions will require that we take the project of funder organizing more seriously than we ever have. If we are to move past sound bites, this is the conversation we need to have.

Finally, we would like to be clear about our vision for where such a strategy would lead. As abolitionists, the voluntary decommissioning of individual philanthropic institutions is not our ultimate goal. Instead, it is to build a world where resources and power are never extracted and consolidated in the first place. We understand that a strategy for spending down is only one of many steps toward building that world, and that a much bigger step will require changing the rules for all philanthropic institutions. We look forward to being on this journey together, and we hope that you will join us. Another world is possible! □

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson is codirector of the Highlander Center.

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HOW TO USE INTEGRATED CAPITAL TO SHIFT POWER TO THE FRONT LINES

The Kataly Foundation invests in communities in ways that ensure that more value stays in the community.

BY NWAMAKA AGBO

In philanthropy, there is no shortage of debate when it comes to how funders can be most effective and enjoy the greatest impact. While the details of these discussions vary, one thing remains the same: As funders, we center ourselves in these conversations.

One area of contention is whether a foundation should spend out its assets in the short term or exist in perpetuity. But this is a false choice and the wrong question. Individuals and groups with access to wealth should ask how assets can be used to support social movements to build power, systems, and structures to move beyond an extractive economy and a failing democracy.

As funders, we have many transformative tools at our disposal, and one of them is our investment in our grantee partners. In philanthropy, some investment focuses on social impact, and yet the priority remains, “What are the returns to the foundation?” For investment to become a transformative tool, we must reject that premise and prioritize returns to communities. This is why we use nonextractive investments at the Kataly Foundation. These investments are structured with loan terms to ensure that more value—financial and nonfinancial—stays in the community to support local economies that are community-centered and regenerative.

Kataly was founded in 2018 with the goal of spending out all our assets in 10 to 15 years. Spending out can be seen as a radical act in philanthropy, which is disappointing given that philanthropy’s purpose is to give resources to charitable causes. But without an intentional strategy to support communities of color in their efforts to build power and agency, spending out can replicate the unjust, inequitable practices that characterize foundations operating in perpetuity.

For Kataly, spending out means shifting power by moving resources into communities with the intention that those resources generate returns that recirculate within the community. Instead of accruing wealth and concentrating power within a single institution, communities build their own systems for wealth, well-being, and sustainability, and create shared prosperity for everyone.

Shifting power can be achieved in a variety of ways. Kataly’s Mindfulness and Healing Justice program builds power by redistributing resources to mindfulness and healing justice organizations, networks, and practitioners. It is born from the belief that healing and contemplative practices, such as meditation, are indispensable to movement building and liberation. The Environmental Justice Resourcing Collective (EJRC) engages in wealth redistribution based on the understanding that environmental and climate justice intersects with many social issues, and that communities of color bear the greatest burden of injustice. This collective is an experiment in radical wealth redistribution. Nine women of color, who are the movement leaders that comprise the EJRC, have full control over distributing \$75 million in assets.

For the Restorative Economies Fund (REF), achieving regenerative wealth redistribution means expanding our thinking about how to deploy \$300 million in capital beyond just grantmaking. REF uses an integrated capital strategy for resource redistribution, which means the coordinated use of financial products (grants, lines of credit, equity investments, guarantees and more) to meet the capital needs of a mission-focused project. While integrated capital mostly refers to financial capital, it can include nonfinancial forms of capital or resources to support a project.

REF combines grants with nonextractive investments, technical assistance, and strategic advice. A major component of the integrated capital strategy is that returns from our investments do not make their way back to Kataly; instead, they live and regenerate within communities in which we invest.

For example, one of REF’s grantee partners is The Guild, an organization in Atlanta, Georgia, that builds community wealth and power through cooperative real estate, entrepreneurship programs, and access to capital for marginalized communities. The Guild employs a community stewardship trust model to acquire and redevelop mixed-use properties that are held in a trust to stabilize the value of the land. This structure allows eligible local residents to buy in as equity shareholders of the trust, which builds shared prosperity throughout the neighborhood. This community-owned real estate model produces long-term affordable housing and enables residents to practice collective decision-making.

Through the model of integrated capital, Kataly’s support of The Guild included a \$50,000 rapid response grant, a \$550,000 per year general operating support grant for three years, as well as a \$5 million loan at 0 percent interest with a term of 10 years. In addition to financial support, we provided strategic advice for fundraising, supported funder briefings, and offered technical financial advice on their projections. In the case of The Guild, providing these different forms of support was critical to their success because they needed a loan to purchase the building, begin construction, and cover general operating costs in order to resource the programs they provide for the community.

REF supports community wealth-building projects, such as The Guild, that are both community owned and governed to foster community self-determination and political, economic, and cultural sovereignty. REF’s operating framework is an opportunity for us, as funders, to leverage our resources, power, and position to challenge traditional financial systems and investment mechanisms that oppress, exploit, and extract from Black and brown communities, or block them from wealth-building opportunities. Our investment model allows us to challenge traditional financial systems that have excluded these communities while build-

ing strategies and infrastructure that serve as a foundation for a just, prosperous, and equitable economy in the future.

Integrated capital is a powerful tool that allows us to achieve many goals as a foundation committed to systems change. The history of the racial wealth gap has been well documented by scholars and others who have shown how structural racism denies communities of color access to capital, which has exacerbated economic inequality in the United States and abroad. By offering nonextractive integrated capital investments in Black and brown communities, REF:

- **Provides access to critical capital under affordable terms, ensuring that impacted communities enjoy access** to resources for their projects under supportive and favorable terms that mainstream financial institutions do not offer.
- **Provides projects with the upfront capital they need over an extended period of time to focus on the project’s community-centered mission.** REF’s current portfolio of long-term patient capital investment terms (up to \$53 million in loans, with a range of 0–2 percent interest at a patient capital term of up to 10 years) create the conditions that allow organizations to focus on their mission, as opposed to making a profit that will go back into the pockets of investors.
- **Shifts the investment risk assessment from centering the investor and their central preoccupation**—“How much risk am I willing to take with my money?”—to a focus on the community: “What is at risk for this community if I don’t support them?” The first question prioritizes profit over people and the planet, while the second question centers the health and well-being of disinvested communities.

Another core feature of REF’s approach to nonextractive investment is that we assume a subordinate role in the overall investment capital stack for the projects in which we invest. This means that among a project’s many investors, REF shoulders a greater burden of risk if the outcome is not financially successful. In taking on more financial risk, we might attract more investors to support the project, especially more risk-averse investors. We serve as leverage to our borrowers so they have access to other funders and traditional capital markets that they otherwise would not. This also creates an opportunity for other investors to learn alongside us.

Nonextractive investments mean that financial returns to the investor are rightsized to reflect the disproportionate burdens that Black and brown communities bear. Repayment of the loan does not come at the expense of, or create harm to, the borrower or the mission. This type of investing is rooted in the recognition that wealth inequality was created through extracting natural resources and exploiting the labor of Black and brown communities. Nonextractive investing represents an attempt to redistribute wealth and resources to communities most harmed by the racial wealth gap and structural racism. It also challenges financial structures and strategies that, founded in slavery, continue to uphold structural racism.

In our work we have seen how integrated capital supports the building of economic

Nonextractive investing represents an attempt to redistribute wealth and resources to communities most harmed by the racial wealth gap and structural racism.



er. As active stewards of community resources, people strengthen their ability to make decisions that support the entire community rather than individual self-interest. In this process, they come to understand that resilient communities see their interdependence as a strength. For example, Potlikker Capital, a farm community-governed charitable integrated capital fund, was created to serve Black and Indigenous farmers who operate at the intersection of racial and climate justice. Potlikker Capital is democratically governed by BIPOC farmers in the US South. Together with restoring land ownership and creating generational wealth, Potlikker provides resources to support cooperative ownership. Kataly supported Potlikker with a \$50,000 rapid response grant and a \$250,000 per year general operating support grant for six years. Additionally, we provided Potlikker with two \$1 million loans, based on terms they set rather than terms set by REF.

Supporting these essential community wealth-building projects means tending to and caring for our relationships with all our grantee partners and remaining mindful of the power dynamics. Whether a foundation spends out or exists in perpetuity, the tendency in philanthropy is to redistribute resources in a way that keeps power in the hands of foundations. Funders traditionally make decisions about who and what to fund and create definitions of impact into which grantees are forced to fit their work.

At its best, philanthropy can act as a vehicle to move capital with speed and at scale to people and groups making the world more just. In order to serve as an accelerator instead of a barrier, funders must acknowledge the root causes of inequity and injustice, not only in *who* but also in *how* we fund. The resources that funders redistribute are part of a long history that has kept large sums of money in the hands of a few

and prevented people of color from creating intergenerational wealth. power that is centered on the health and well-being of the community, and not on a handful of wealthy individuals. For example, Kensington Corridor Trust (KCT), an organization based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, uses a neighborhood trust model to direct investments in commercial and residential buildings that preserve culture and affordability while building neighborhood power and wealth. To stabilize the neighborhood's gentrifying economic corridor, KCT supports local control of property and property values by ensuring that business and residential tenants have a long-term history and relationship with the Kensington neighborhood. REF's nonextractive investment in KCT began as a \$3 million nonrevolving line of credit (debt paid back in one installment). The first three years of the 10-year loan have a 0 percent interest rate, and a 1 percent interest rate beginning at year four. In addition to this loan, Kataly supported KCT with a \$357,000 general operating support grant over three years, and a \$50,000 fortification grant. We redistributed fortification grants in the winter of 2023 to our active, multiyear grantees in recognition of challenging economic conditions.

In addition to creating shared prosperity, integrated capital supports the capacity of local residents to govern their resources and assets togeth-

er and prevented people of color from creating intergenerational wealth.

Spending out and engaging an integrated capital strategy is one approach that we believe can meaningfully shift power to Black and brown communities. Of course, it is not the only approach, and many other groups are engaging in their own power-shifting funding experiments. Initiatives such as the Democracy Frontlines Fund, Arch Community Fund, the Olamina Fund at Candide Group, and Solidaire Network use tools such as collective giving, participatory grantmaking, impact-oriented loans, donor organizing, and more to radically redistribute wealth.

Regardless of what tools and methods we use to make grants and investments, we must ask ourselves some critical questions about the impact of our approach: Who holds power? Are communities being supported to govern themselves? Are the people who will be most affected making decisions about their future? Many of us wish to participate in creating transformative change in the world. To make that vision a reality, we must reckon with and transform our own relationships to power and control. □

Nwamaka Agbo is CEO of the Kataly Foundation and the managing director of the Restorative Economies Fund.

SUPPORTING VISIONS OF NEW ECONOMIC POWER

Visionary solidarity economy projects are putting down roots in communities across the United States. But philanthropy will be needed for these seeds to bear fruit.

BY AARON TANAKA

Late-stage capitalism has produced multiple cascading crises around the planet. In the United States, the harms of these crises are concentrated in working-class neighborhoods and communities of color where there is a long history of violence, extraction, and neglect. But “where there is power, there is resistance,” as Michel Foucault, the French philosopher, famously said.

Domestically, we’ve seen this axiom expressed in diverse actions that have led to the abolition of slavery and then Jim Crow, the granting of women’s suffrage, and the passage of fundamental labor laws and the right to organize. And yet the struggle for democratic inclusion is nowhere near complete. We continue to see it expressed in fights for the rights of undocumented and incarcerated people, and in critical efforts to beat back voter suppression and the dismantling of democratic institutions.

This work is also reflected in growing calls for a just transition to a new, regenerative economy. This is the terrain the Center for Economic Democracy (CED) was founded to till. Power and resistance are bedfellows, but not all resistance translates into advances for our communities. As we envision fundamental alternatives to our current crises, the tools and tactics of our movements must adapt to the moment.

To build alternative economic infrastructure is to create space for political respite and community independence. Especially in moments of political rupture and struggle, mutual aid systems and collective economic infrastructure have proven essential. Building alternative economic and political institutions has helped meet immediate needs while fortifying a base from which to contest dominant rule.

PREFIGURATIVE APPROACHES

The history of any oppressed group offers examples of meeting their own needs while finding ways to resist. In her 2014 book, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*, economist Jessica Gordon-Lembard recounts a rich history of Black mutual aid and cooperatives as an integrated part of Black struggles from abolition to civil rights. And while more holistic economic and political power-building strategies continued and even received foundation support through the 1980s, the increasingly defensive orientation of the US

nonprofit industrial complex allowed these economic power strategies to decay through the early 2000s.

Visionary economic power building can accomplish more than just meeting immediate needs. It can also model the future we seek to create. In the last 10 years, perhaps aided by the Occupy movement’s popular renunciation of capitalist inequality, we have seen a resurgence of grassroots efforts to create alternative economic models to radically transform the economy. This trend has been accelerated by community leaders who understand that long-term climate resilience requires the re-localization of supply chains and economic infrastructure that meets community needs rather than chasing profits.

The early months of COVID-19 exposed these dynamics. Profit-first decision-making and rigid global supply chains made basic personal protective equipment (PPE), such as masks, hard to access in lower-income communities. In Boston, an immigrant women’s sewing cooperative under the Center for Cooperative Development and Solidarity (CCDS) was contracted by local grassroots organizations to produce hundreds of attractive reusable masks for their members.

In contrast to the temporary nature of strike funds, emergency mutual aid, and reinvestment campaigns, many alternative economy projects are intended as standing infrastructure that can meet the material needs of exploited communities while modeling non-capitalist forms of economic organization.

Renowned sociologist Erik Olin Wright describes these efforts as “interstitial” strategies that help grow the seeds of the new in the widening cracks of capitalism. In movement strategy circles, these approaches are sometimes referred to as “prefigurative” approaches, where we “show, don’t tell” the possibilities of the future. Wright saw cooperative, community-controlled institutions as not only essential to protecting and sustaining communities in moments of major geopolitical, ecological, and financial dislocation, but also as a vehicle for demonstrating—and critically, learning to inhabit—the structures of economic democracy that we envision for a just transition.

LAND, LABOR, AND CAPITAL

At CED, we consider strategies for visionary economic power to democratize each factor of production: (1) land/ecology; (2) labor; and (3) capital. We further distinguish these factors and their governance between private sector, nonprofit/commons, and public-sector administration.

In the realm of land, we have seen significant growth in housing justice groups that are moving to acquire land from private markets to shift them into community land trusts (CLT). CLTs meet the housing and land needs of communities while modeling a non-capitalist form of land allocation and stewardship, based on democratic resident governance and prioritizing human needs over private greed. Inspired by our historic Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative CLT, which controls over 30 acres of land, including 227 affordable homes, the Greater Boston area has grown from two CLTs to eight in less than a decade.

In the realm of labor, we have seen the rapid rise of worker-owned cooperatives, which are structured to distribute economic power to all workers. Workers, not shareholders, elect the board, and profits are distributed to employees based on hours worked, rather than enriching shareholders or management. While cooperative labor formations have a long history in our communities (whether Black Americans, Indigenous, or immigrants from the Global South), after a period of historical

amnesia, we are seeing their resurgence, especially among low-wage workers of color. The number of employee-owned cooperatives, while still small, has grown by 30 percent since 2019, to some 612 cooperatives across the country.

In the realm of capital, we have witnessed the proliferation of new strategies to build community-controlled, movement-aligned financial vehicles. Reflecting the intent of the original credit unions, organized communities are modeling the democratic allocation of capital as an alternative to profit-maximizing markets that currently mediate our investing decisions. Building investment and philanthropic vehicles that are accountable to mission over profit not only facilitates the funding of cooperatives and community trusts, but also creates space for democratic participation in the development of our own communities. In Boston, groups such as Boston Ujima Project are animating the principles of local self-determination by managing a \$5 million investment fund through direct democratic processes.

What distinguishes these visionary economic power-building strategies from conventional efforts to “out-capitalist the capitalist” are both their relationships to organized “people power” groups, but also their unique democratization of governance and ownership, whether in land, labor, or capital.

CREATING STRONGER COMMUNITIES

But how do democratic ownership and governance translate into the overall power and health of a community? And why are those outcomes

distinct from those generated by traditional capitalist modes of development? We see at least three major differences.

1. Promoting just economies through democratic governance | When key stakeholders—workers, residents, or communities—are formally empowered to make decisions, companies, real estate projects, and capital funds are more likely to enact pro-social policies and activities than shareholder-controlled ventures. When workers run a cooperative, they are less likely to tolerate unsafe working conditions or callously pollute their own neighborhoods. When communities control land and capital, these resources can be geared toward meeting collective needs, rather than pursuing the highest private returns. In these cases, economic decision-making is devolved from the ownership class to communities, where material conditions are better met, and these “high road” entities offer an alternative to extractive corporations. Although multi-stakeholder, inclusive governance does not guarantee against unsavory behavior, the collectively negotiated voices of workers and communities will more reliably move toward justice than unaccountable owners.

2. Redistributing value and ownership | Traditional economic development focuses on building private asset ownership in historically marginalized communities. The resulting increase in home ownership or minority-business growth is undoubtedly preferable to the current racial wealth divide, and all efforts for reparations and redistribution at scale should be prioritized. But traditional economic development, even when successful, sees the benefits of those assets accrue to a relative few, and rarely to the most disenfranchised members within our communities.



In contrast to individualized, trickle-down community development, cooperative and collective structures are designed to distribute benefits more equitably to more value creators and stakeholders. In a worker co-op, for example, as profits are redistributed to employees, more people will gain from those profits. Solidarity economy projects are designed to retain value within the communities that create it.

Furthermore, since these prefigurative structures are designed to meet human needs rather than maximize profits, the financial efficiency of these approaches is often overlooked. In a land trust, for instance, a homeowner is limited by how much they can re-sell their property for, which effectively caps the profits that a seller can capture. A traditional economic development lens might lament the below-market equity value accrued to the homeowner. But this approach views wealth as an end in itself, rather than a means to procuring necessary provisions such as housing. From that perspective, the seller's "lost profits" from failing to sell at the top of the market are also the "discount" that allowed past and future homeowners to achieve the goal of housing in the first place.

3. Empowering cultural agency | Those of us involved in building prefigurative economic institutions know that cooperation and governance can be difficult. Movement Generation says that "what the hands do, the heart learns." When workers are disempowered and communities are disregarded, we will believe that we are never meant to govern. Conversely, community-based economic alternatives not only help meet material needs and model the values we espouse, but also create new spaces for working-class people and people of color to control assets and develop the muscles for economic self-governance. Whether a worker-owner, land trust steward, or democratic investor, the prefigurative structure reclaims the decisions that the one percent makes for us and asserts our capability and right to self-determination. Inhabiting positions of economic power can facilitate new learning, hone real skills, and build confidence that a democratic economy is not only possible but also necessary.

With each experiment in community ownership and governance, new cohorts of leaders gain a taste of economic self-determination, thereby whetting the appetite for more. Since 2013, people aged 12-25 have been empowered to allocate \$1 million in city funds through a participatory-budgeting process. Ten years later, some of those individuals are now young adults who are leading the call for Boston to expand participatory budgeting to the whole city using tens of millions of tax dollars.

POLICY-PROJECT SWING

As communities reintegrate solidarity economy approaches to complement broader political organizing efforts, the benefits of prefigurative strategies should not be overlooked. In fact, the borders dividing economic, political, and cultural power are largely oversimplified, potentially obfuscating the nature of integrated power. We have outlined ways that community ownership makes for more socially responsible firms, more effectively meets consumer needs, and builds appetites for economic democracy. But these benefits also have direct consequences for our communities.

Controlling assets and distributing surplus profits will position our communities to more successfully support political agendas, fund candidates, and elevate causes that reflect our interests. Better resourced, organized communities can also promote and socialize counter-hegemonic worldviews, whether through ownership of media and arts, promoting culturally reflective education, or celebrating cooperative culture in contrast to greed-is-good ideology.

To operationalize this analysis, we have pursued multiyear strategies at CED that leverage intersectional political, cultural, and economic power. As we build community power to force policy change, these legal and regulatory shifts can generate new economic power building for oppressed communities. Conversely, solidarity economy projects can create popularity and cultural momentum for democratic practices, which can spur political victories that further fortify those projects.

For example, in 2011, following work by environmental justice groups, Massachusetts passed a zero-waste bill that requires large restaurants and institutions to compost their organic waste. This law was a victory for environmental justice communities, but also created a new demand for organic composting services. To capture the new market, two prominent grassroots worker centers seized the opportunity to establish a new worker-owned composting business, known as Cooperative Energy, Recycling, and Organics (CERO) Co-op. Later, other co-op advocates pushed the City of Boston to begin a lending program to support worker ownership, making their loan to CERO their first ever to a worker co-op. Here, a new policy helped enable a new community ownership project, which inspired further action to win additional government support for that project.

Similarly, the Boston Ujima Project was formed as a voluntary membership organization for the city's working-class communities of color to democratically invest our savings in the local economy. As Ujima members gain experience and confidence in our right and capacity to collectively govern finance capital, a new campaign has emerged to establish a democratic public bank in Massachusetts. The proposed state bank would not only direct capital to community intermediaries such as Ujima, but also the bank would be structured with the principles of democratic governance that Ujima embodies. In this case, the "project" creates cultural momentum for a broader policy intervention that brings those practices to scale.

We call these approaches the "policy-project swing," where we seesaw between public policy strategies and prefigurative economic development initiatives, all while leveling up community power and ownership and revealing new horizons for contestation and transformation.

Notably, "resist and build" strategies take time to express and depend on ecosystems of organizations, rather than single actors, to scale successive victories over time.

These projects all offer narrative inspiration that advances the belief that we can and should control our own economy. Of course, exercising increased community control over land, labor, or capital does not resolve the many pressures these entities will face as islands in a sea of capitalism. But we contend that this economic infrastructure, though far from utopian, can preview democratic alternatives to capitalism while increasing the power and influence of our communities. □

Solidarity economy projects can create popularity and cultural momentum for democratic practices, which can spur political victories that further fortify those projects.

Aaron Tanaka is executive director of the Center for Economic Democracy.

BUILDING POLITICAL POWER WHEN EVERYTHING IS AT STAKE

Philanthropy needs more movement funders who stand on the side of racial and economic justice and against right-wing authoritarianism.

BY MÓNICA CÓRDOVA & LISA OWENS

Our organizations, The Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing and The Hyams Foundation, are movement funders that share a common set of assumptions about the nature of power and the role that progressive philanthropy must play in defending democracy. As women of color and leaders of movement foundations, we are preoccupied with the question: *What role should progressive philanthropy play in responding to the rise of repressive, authoritarian policies that threaten the lives and well-being of the communities we are accountable to?*

We hope that readers are similarly preoccupied.

We maintain that racial and economic justice movements need political power to block right-wing attacks on multiracial democracy and to win governing power that can transform systems and build deep democracy.

Philanthropy needs more movement funders who stand on the side of racial and economic justice and who take direction from the movement-led forces working to expand democracy. We can do this by changing our practices in fundamental ways and aligning our grantmaking and investments with movement-identified strategies.

WHAT'S OUR ROLE?

At The Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO), our mandate is to advance leadership nationally in the youth-organizing field and develop its capacity as a power-building force within social justice movements to transform social and economic conditions and advance lasting structural change. Youth-led and intergenerational organizing is our movement terrain. To succeed, we know that our work—which includes everything from resource mobilization to capacity building, political education, and funder organizing—must be grounded in a clear vision built in partnership with leaders in the youth-organizing field.

In 2018, leaders from organizations including Power U Center for Social Change, PODER In Action, and Youth United for Change came together to identify the primary challenges that hinder the ability of the youth-organizing field to build meaningful power. Following a

power-mapping session where they assessed their relative influence, these organizations called on FCYO to lean into our unique position as a funding intermediary and play a role in cohering this sector of the movement ecosystem. We were not entirely sure what that meant, but knew we had to try.

Fast-forward five years and we have learned a great deal about building a movement ecosystem and the importance of assessment, experimentation, and failure. Our success is not solely based on the amount of money we can move. It is also measured by our ability to assess conditions and create resourcing strategies that strengthen relationships and build a more powerful, strategic, and aligned youth-organizing field. We do this by curating an environment of discovery, offering organizations in our cohorts the ability to dream, test, fail, and adapt, again and again, until we win.

The Hyams Foundation is a movement funder based in Massachusetts. We work to increase racial, economic, and social justice and power within multiracial working-class communities in the state. Our role in the local ecosystem is to support BIPOC-led movement-organizing groups to build power to transform systems in the service of racial and economic justice. Over the past few years, we have become even more intentional about strengthening movement infrastructure to provide more support to organizing groups whose work and caseloads became almost unmanageable during the pandemic.

At Hyams we strive to be good partners in the social movement ecosystem. To us that means:

- Taking responsibility for understanding the state of the field, its strengths, and challenges.
- Being proactive about maintaining strong trusting relationships with BIPOC movement anchor organizations and coalitions. (A movement anchor organization plays a critical role in sustaining local, regional, and/or national coalitions and networks.)
- Actively working to support the sustainability of movement anchor organizations, their coalitions, and campaigns.
- Being proactive about maintaining strong relationships with progressive funders, including creating and participating in networks of aligned funders who support movement-identified priorities.
- Regularly assessing our utility as a partner in the ecosystem and making internal shifts to our operations, grantmaking, investment policies, and governance structures as we learn and grow.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

We are living in a time of heightened political crisis, characterized by the rise of a white supremacist, authoritarian far-right movement with a growing base. The January 6, 2021, insurrection at the US Capitol attracted white supremacist groups and militias, law enforcement and military personnel, small-business owners, religious fundamentalists, and a disgruntled base angry at a system they feel is not working for them. According to our trusted allies at Political Research Associates, it is significant that these formerly disparate groups of people were united under the banner of Make America Great Again (MAGA).

This far-right MAGA base is organized and continues to organize. It has been busy using its power to try to pass local and statewide policies that span issues that directly target multiracial working-class communities and US territories (such as Puerto Rico), including attacks on reproductive rights, gender-affirming health care, education, affirmative

action, voting rights, collective bargaining, affordable housing, climate resilience, and the list goes on.

We know that since the insurrection, this far-right base is increasingly willing to use violence and the threat of violence to intimidate political opponents and the communities they serve. According to the FBI, the seven states that have continued to see unusual levels of violent threats to election officials are the places where the 2020 election results were questioned by President Trump and his supporters: Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Nevada, and Wisconsin. This threat is real and growing.

On the other hand, youth-led, adult-led, and intergenerational grassroots, base-building organizations and their national coalitions and networks have been at the forefront of defending multiracial working-class communities against attack. They have tirelessly worked to preserve and expand democracy for all people while engaging in issue campaigns to increase wages, fight mass incarceration, defend public education, stop displacement, direct public funding to solidarity economy projects, create climate resiliency, and more.

Movement coalitions and networks are now positioning themselves to act as a unifying force by creating local and national strategy that will help them organize the majority of people in this country who reject the politics of white supremacy and authoritarianism and who can be organized to fight for the preservation and expansion of multiracial democracy.

WHAT IS POLITICAL POWER?

The most immediate goals of political power are to defeat the racist, authoritarian right's policy agenda and, where possible, win the reforms that improve aspects of daily life in our communities.

The longer-term goal of political power, or people's power, is governance and deep democracy. *Having political power means that the communities whose land, labor, traditions, and cultures were/are being extracted to build wealth for an elite class have the power to reshape society.*

More than simply electing individuals to office, winning real political power will give the multiracial working class and people living across the United States and in its territories the ability to:

- Roll back repressive laws and statutes. Enact laws that protect democracy and enshrine human rights. Respect the sovereignty of colonized peoples.
- Abolish old public institutions that exploit, extract, and dehumanize. Build truly democratic institutions and processes that put decision-making authority into the hands of people who have to live with the consequences.
- Organize civil society at scale. Fund a robust social movement ecosystem with many kinds of well-resourced organizations. Support people to develop exciting new capacities. Forge bonds of solidarity and interconnection. These bonds offer an example of what it looks like when political power is leveraged to build cultural power.
- Shift public money into the solidarity economy. Support and expand community land trusts, worker co-ops, and cooperative urban

Our work must engage young people in issues that directly affect them while developing their consciousness and skills to be lifelong organizers and activists.

farms in every town, city, and state. These models demonstrate what it looks like when political power is leveraged to build economic power.

- Regulate corporate profit and invest in the commons. Tax exorbitant corporate profits and individual wealth and reinvest back into the commons. Enact rent control and stabilize rents. Build high-quality affordable housing, schools, day and elder care, youth programming, and green space for all.

HOW DO MOVEMENT GROUPS ORGANIZE FOR POLITICAL POWER?

Movement groups build political power along three crucial dimensions:

- Base building to move significant numbers of our people into action.
- Strategic and tactical alliances to unite the sectors and constituencies capable of achieving our goals.
- Shifting public narratives to promote our vision of social justice and true democracy (drawing on the deep relationship between political and cultural power).

Movement groups use issue-based campaigns to win reforms, expand their base, develop their leadership, and change dominant narratives in society. As they build power, movement groups increase their ability to successfully make demands of decision makers or replace them with people who will. As they grow stronger, their coalitions and networks develop and advance strategy that enables them to win governing power to reshape society.

Seven years ago, in the wake of the 2016 presidential election, FCYO convened a network of 70 youth-organizing groups to build alignment on what it will take to achieve transformative political power. Their call to action is still timely and relevant to youth-led, adult-led, and intergenerational groups. (To learn more about FCYO's framework for building political power, please go to our website and download our report *The Power to Win Framework*.)

FCYO set three priorities:

- 1. We need power, not just empowerment.** | While youth organizing often takes place on the front lines of social justice fights, many groups struggle to ground their work in a coherent long-term strategy for building power. Youth organizing often emphasizes youth empowerment over actual power. And groups commonly employ strategies that mobilize small numbers of leaders in an attempt to persuade decision makers. While it is possible to achieve some wins this way, it is nearly impossible to realize transformative changes or ensure that victories remain meaningful. To win the change we need, youth organizing must tap the social leverage of young people to organize entire communities, build bases at scale, develop strategic alliances, and shift public narratives. These lessons are grounded in our experiences supporting youth organizing but they are also applicable across the board.
- 2. We need campaigns that are fights for today and training grounds for tomorrow.** | Campaigns are not just about winning policy change but also vehicles for political and human development. Our work must engage young people in issues that directly affect them while developing their consciousness and skills to be lifelong organizers and activists. We need leaders, both young and old, who can ground their struggles within a broader ideology and vision of social transformation. They should also have core organizing competencies, including how to build a base, develop meaningful alliances, and forge a strategy based on a concrete power analysis.

3. We need infrastructure that leads to broader political life. | Youth organizing should be an on-ramp to a life of movement work. When young people age out of youth-organizing groups, there should be clear pathways for them to continue engaging in political struggle as professional organizers, rank-and-file workers, or grassroots community leaders. Creating these pathways requires developing enduring collaborative relationships between organizations working with people of different ages, including youth, young adults, and more. Just as intergenerational infrastructure can lead to political life beyond youth organizing, we need a clear path for anyone to continue engaging in political struggle beyond their initial experiences.

WHAT CAN PROGRESSIVE FUNDERS DO DIFFERENTLY?

Progressive funders can advance movement-identified strategies to create lasting change by doing the following:

Continue to learn about organizing and fund it to build power. | Many movement-building groups lose so much time educating funders about what it means to organize for power. To be clear, base building and transformative leadership development are fundamental to any organizing methodology. There are also other tools in the toolkit. Groups rely on a variety of complementary approaches such as healing justice, youth and intergenerational media, and arts and culture work to build community, learn, and develop new skills. These approaches, however, are not the same as organizing. In our experience, if everything is perceived as organizing, then real organizing does not receive the resources it needs. Funders working to understand organizing and power building must commit to study the theory and praxis of various forms of organizing and learn from the history of people's movements around the globe. Without this intentionality, the concepts of organizing and power are liable to go the same route as "diversity," which has been emptied of meaning such that we can no longer discern where organizing occurs or where power is being built.

Build trusting relationships. | We must stop being passive patrons of change and step into true strategic partnership with trusted movement partners. Organizers are in it for the long haul, and we must also be. This means supporting organizing groups to strategize, experiment, and fail because success is often masked as an alleged failure. It is through failure that the most significant lessons are learned and leaps in strategy are made.

Conduct ongoing internal assessment and stay flexible when the time comes to pivot. | To be generative partners to movement organizations, we must have regular practices of looking inward and asking difficult questions about what we need to learn, grow, and shift to serve as better partners.

Work collaboratively with other funders. | Every progressive institution has a role to play in the ecosystem; we urge you to ask your movement partners what roles they need you to play. Follow their direction and organize other progressive funders to move resources to the ecosystem.

WHERE DO I START?

We invite you to consider what it would look like for your foundation to embark on the process of becoming a movement funder. What trusting relationships would need to be strengthened or built? What past harm

would need to be repaired? What exciting new possibilities might arise for the ecosystem you are part of? What initial step can you take now? Here are some concrete ideas and suggestions to help take the next step:

1. Build trusting relationships with movement anchor organizations and networks. Specifically, we recommend the following:

- Have a long-term, multiyear orientation as a partner to movements. Follow, don't lead. Experiment, learn, and course correct. Long term implies periods of intense activity and then lulls. Stick with it.
- Make commitments to the entire system: base-building organizing groups, the coalitions they anchor, the participating organizations, and the intermediaries/allies they depend on.
- Fund experiments in building movement infrastructure at scale—support projects that scale up administrative and finance capacity, technology, communications, leadership pipeline, successful executive transitions, land and capital projects, and organizational development.
- Fund movement groups' experiments in developing and refining strategy.
- Fund movement groups' efforts to scale up organizing efforts to build the big tent. Support them to expand their base and a wider base of allies. Do not abandon them when they experience challenges related to growth.

2. Conduct ongoing internal assessment and stay flexible when the time comes to pivot.

- Provide a great deal of support for staff. Help them learn to pivot and respond to movement-wide challenges and opportunities. Adapt internal processes to meet the movement's needs.
- Develop new structures to share power with movements, including de-siloing traditional grantmaking areas and committing to participatory grantmaking.
- Change internal foundation operations to streamline getting money out the door and simplify grant applications and reporting. Turn evaluation inward to assess whether we are being good partners and sharing power.

3. Work collaboratively with other funders.

- Support progressive funder networks. Organize or participate in progressive funder networks that are action oriented, rather than focused on funder learning as a goal.
- Host staff peer-learning exchanges with another aligned foundation. Share strategies for streamlining grantmaking and reporting. Start a pooled fund in partnership with movement advisory groups.

We hope that we have conveyed our commitment to being in community with our peers so that we can collectively move resources at the scale that is required to protect and expand multiracial democracy. In that spirit of community and fierce urgency, we say: Philanthropy must do differently to do better. We must get out of our silos. We must stop acting independently and unilaterally. Our movement partners demand a higher level of coordination and cohesion from us.

Let us move from performing our values about justice and equity toward embracing discomfort, curiosity, and risk. That is where the real transformation happens. □

Mónica Córdova is executive director of Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing.

Lisa Owens is executive director of The Hyams Foundation.

BUILDING GRASSROOTS POLITICAL POWER

Our work organizing the Laotian community in Richmond, California, is a case study in power building.

BY VIVIAN YI HUANG

Taking inspiration from the 1991 People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) formed in 1993 to satisfy a desire and need for an environmental justice organization that was deeply rooted in Asian immigrant and refugee communities.

APEN started the Laotian Organizing Project (LOP) and Asian Youth Advocates (AYA) in 1995. Many Laotians had been forced to flee their homelands in the 1970s during the US imperialist wars in southeast Asia and came to Richmond, California, through refugee resettlement programs. Laotian families helped one another navigate life there, including where to buy food and how to get their kids to school. As more Laotian refugees heard about the community in Richmond, they began moving there to be near friends and relatives. Sandy Saeteurn, our Contra Costa County political manager and former AYA youth leader, recently shared how her environment not only was a source of community connection and strength, but also a site of toxins and pollution, where high rates of asthma and cancer proliferated.

“Several girls in AYA lived, like me, in the public housing projects in North Richmond in tight-knit Mien communities,” Saeteurn said. “Sharing meals and planting vegetables together, we were raised with an understanding of mutual care and appreciation for the land. We were also eating and breathing the poison of the oil giant and chemical plant next door.”

At that time, more than 350 other toxic facilities existed in Richmond. People’s homes, schools, and workplaces showed dangerous levels of air pollution, lead, pesticides, and other chemicals. Towering over the city since 1901 was the Chevron Richmond Refinery, which had earned the dishonorable title of being one of the largest polluters in the state.

We at APEN organized the community to fight back against Chevron and protect our health and welfare. Over the last 30 years, and especially in the last decade, with support from Chorus Foundation, our experience has demonstrated that when frontline community members lead and build grassroots political power, we all win with solutions that are essential, effective, and equitable. With its vast resources, philanthropy plays an essential role in long-term funding for organizing and political power building to bring about transformative change.

RICHMOND POWER BUILDING

In 2013, Chevron advanced a proposal to expand their refinery. APEN had contributed to earlier efforts to block a proposal through a legal ruling. The 2013 version, while scaled back, sought to add capacity for the refinery to process greater volumes of dirtier and heavier crude. APEN and Communities for a Better Environment worked with our members and allies to devise a campaign strategy, discuss possible amendments, and assess who we needed to organize.

While our side was smart and strategic in organizing, we fell short of matching the resources that Chevron enjoyed. Overnight, every billboard in the city featured ads touting the alleged merits of the expansion project. Mailboxes were stuffed with flyers and messaging about the economic development need for the project. Weekly neighborhood community barbecues distributed free food, T-shirts, and swag. At hearings, we were outnumbered as Chevron turned out their corporate employees, partner labor union members, and even nonprofit directors who received grant funding from Chevron.

Despite the size of the opposition from Chevron and its partners, our deep roots, courage, and commitment to community helped others understand the negative impact of any expansion of the refinery. We won the city planning commission’s support for amendments. And while we lost the city council vote, our campaigning forced Chevron to pay \$90 million through a community benefit agreement.

As soon as the city council completed its vote on the project, the billboards in town transformed overnight, displaying ads that touted Chevron-backed candidates for city council or attack ads that smeared progressive city council members and candidates. Once again, Chevron poured money out of their overflowing coffers and stuffed mailboxes in a bid to take over the city council. They made a strategic error, however, in failing to develop a ground game. By contrast, we, as volunteers, knocked the community’s doors, organized individuals, phone banked voter lists in Richmond in multiple languages, and talked to reporters. Richmond voters, seeing that Chevron was blatantly trying to buy the election, soundly rejected all three of Chevron’s candidates. Instead, all three progressive candidates were elected, kicking off a legacy of progressive political leadership in the city, largely thanks to partners such as Richmond Progressive Alliance, SEIU, ACCE Action, and APEN’s sister organization, APEN Action.

This remarkable electoral victory, the result of political power organizing, coincided with the start of a 10-year investment from Chorus Foundation. Building on the lessons from that year-long fight, combined with a decade of significant, consistent, and flexible funding from Chorus, we have undertaken a remarkable journey, transforming Richmond into a power-building heavyweight.

BREADTH, DEPTH, AND SCALE

To achieve transformative change for our communities, we have found it critical to build power broadly across our base, deeply within our base, and at scale by collaborating with other sectors and allies.

Power in breadth | We are more powerful when we have more people on the front lines engaged in the fight. Over the last decade, APEN’s base has grown beyond our Laotian elderly refugee community to include Southeast Asian working-age adults, and East Asian, Southeast Asian, and South Asian youth. Our regular civic engagement programs have expanded to connect with voters across Contra Costa County.

To build a strong base, we recognize that organizing is a science *and* an art that requires both a consistent practice of traditional in-person organizing methods, such as one-on-ones, house parties, and classroom presentations, as well as adapting to changing conditions and broadening our reach through integrated voter engagement, digital organizing, and more.

Power in depth | We are more powerful when we have more deeply committed people on the frontlines who can offer leadership in the fight. We provide interpretation and translation for our monolingual members at any event or discussion. We hold an annual APEN Academy, a series of political and skills trainings for our member leaders and provide fellowship/internship opportunities to deepen experience and skills. We also hire from our base, and some of our staff have served as former member leaders.

"In 1989, I hadn't known I could plan meetings, build campaigns, or that I could speak and have city council members respect what I had to say," Sandy Saeteurn recalls. "In my 26 years organizing with APEN, I've learned to knock doors, build coalitions, win campaigns, and empower my community."

Power at scale | Focusing on organizing deeply and broadly with Asian Americans, we have long recognized the importance of building political power collectively with multiracial coalitions and movement ecosystem partners while connecting the local level to the state. This orientation toward building a united front has resulted in new and important formations as organizations across issue areas have joined forces with different constituencies and geographies, all while building with labor.

In 2020, the No Coal in Richmond Coalition brought together teachers, students, parents, local businesses, nurses, environmental justice groups, community residents, and others to win a historic ordinance that both stops the storage and export of coal and petroleum coke and transitions to safer commodities and healthy jobs in a few years.

ROOTED AND STRATEGIC

Over our many years of organizing, we have come to embrace several strategic values:

Ground the vision in our people. | We have fought by drawing on our own lived experience to advance change that is relevant to our people. Seeing our kids with asthma gasp for air, we fight for clean air. Seeing our neighbors forced to move out of Richmond, we fight for renter protections and affordable homes. Seeing climate destruction on the horizon, we fight for climate-resilience centers that are designed for and by us. Seeing Chevron's profiteering while our loved ones suffer from cancer, we fight to transition away from oil and Big Oil.

By rooting our political power building in community members and their families, we have developed a vision that is also rooted in community. As frontline community members, we are closest to the



problem, and it is through our lived experience that we have become experts on solutions. In our vision for a regenerative economy that centers ecological and social well-being for all, it is imperative that our ideas, rather than theoretical positions or academic research, remain relevant to our daily lives.

Keep clarity of destination and coherence of strategies. | I remember developing a platform for an early version of an environmental justice coalition for Richmond. The process was intentional, yielding many agendas that emerged from conversations with our collective organizational bases. But despite a long list of campaigns, we lacked clarity about our final destination: how to arrive there together and how we were going to win. Climate Justice Alliance defines just transition as a vision-led, unifying, and place-based set of principles, processes, and practices that build economic and political power to shift from an extractive economy to a regenerative one. In 2014, while we battled Chevron on several fronts, Richmond hosted the national Climate Justice Alliance gathering. This event represented an important step in building coherence for our environmental justice movement. We identified our destination, defined what a regenerative economy looks like, and determined how we might get there.

Within APEN, we have sharpened our organizational destinations and our strategies to arrive there. One long-term destination, in partnership with Communities for a Better Environment, is decommissioning the Richmond Chevron refinery. We are currently conducting a series of

community visioning workshops that will shape, guide, and clarify the routes to this outcome that our members wish to see.

Use all the tools in the toolbox. | Through experience, we know that building power requires multiple, sequenced, and integrated tools. Building our local base and leadership development work has been at the heart of APEN's work from the beginning. And yet this is not enough on its own. These efforts must be closely connected to other strategies, such as state-wide organizing and advocacy, electoral organizing, movement building, direct actions, strategic narratives, and using values-aligned resources.

Last year, as the California Air Resources Board (CARB) moved to develop its scoping plan for addressing climate change, APEN, together with our environmental justice allies, demanded a phaseout of oil production and a future beyond oil. In just a few months, we sent 10,000 letters to CARB; mobilized 750 people to participate in marches and rallies in Richmond, Sacramento, and virtually; worked with Richmond members to provide testimony; organized toxic tours in Richmond with decision makers; developed parameters and scoping plan language for an interagency phasedown of oil production; wrote a big-tent advocacy letter with over 80 organizations signing on to oppose the use of carbon capture for fossil fuel infrastructure; devised a paid media campaign including billboards, mailers, radio ads, and TV ads tying the state's push for carbon capture to oil and gas lobbyists; created timely social-media content connecting our scoping plan demands to climate-related news; and generated illustrated op-ed pieces.

Despite an initial unfavorable power analysis, the momentum that accumulated from our strategies led to major wins, such as doubling the state's goals for reducing vehicle miles traveled (requiring scaling up investment in mass transit), stopping the expansion of gas power plants and setting a strong interim target to retire gas plants and bring more clean, renewable energy online, and calling for a multiagency process to phase down oil refining and extraction in line with in-state demand, which is projected to drop 83 percent by 2045.

JOIN US

In Richmond we have shown that frontline organizing works, from voters seeing through Chevron's efforts to buy the election to young people finding power and agency to fight for a different world. Across the country, many communities are winning fights for climate, economic, and racial justice by building grassroots political power in its many forms. Working-class communities are developing visionary demands and resources. Power structures are shifting to advance community governance and agency.

Philanthropy has often focused on shorter-term or new initiatives, but durable, consistent partnerships are what we need. Behind every APEN member testifying at a hearing are the many intentional steps that brought them there: community connection, political education, outreach and recruitment, leadership development, neighborhood meetings, phone banking, organizing the vote, and more. As our experience shows, sustained, long-term grassroots political power building is the key to countering our well-funded opponents who are able to pursue their goals over the course of many years. We need democracy funders, climate funders, and racial justice funders to organize in frontline communities in the long term and at scale to create a just world. □

Vivian Yi Huang is codirector of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network.

POWER TO THE PEOPLE

At Kindle Project, we have embraced power-sharing models for more than a decade. Although we have gained many new insights, we continue to maintain that philanthropy must share power with the communities it seeks to uplift.

BY SADAF RASSOUL CAMERON & ARIANNE SHAFFER

In a world where vast inequalities of wealth and opportunity persist, power sharing has emerged as a transformative approach to philanthropy. Power sharing is not a trend but a necessity. But how can more funders and donors share power in lasting ways, and why should they?

At Kindle Project, we have worked for more than a decade to elevate trust-based, people-powered giving models and participatory decision-making. We have seen the impact of this work on communities and donors alike. As one community-based decision maker put it, sharing power "is a way to start knocking down the walls of power imposed on philanthropic relationships to [make way for] one that is more generative, accessible, transparent, and with humanity at the center."

Power sharing centers communities, allowing them to decide for themselves what they need, how much they need, how they need to receive it, and how to define success. Without community self-determination, disrupting the systems we hope to change proves impossible. In the words of Ash-Lee Henderson, coexecutive director of the Highlander Center and a leader in the Movement for Black Lives: "Fund us like you want us to win." Lasting wins are only possible when power is shared.

WHAT IS POWER SHARING?

Power sharing, sometimes referred to as participatory grantmaking, democratizes philanthropy by inviting community members to become decision makers. (They may also be called community-based decision makers, flow funders, or community advisors.) Community members might make grant decisions, choose areas of impact, weigh in on budgets, shape strategy, and hold positions of influence. Power sharing remakes conflict of interest into *confluence* of interest, whereby preexisting, trusting relationships are valued as assets. It raises webs of connection within and among communities (including philanthropy) and enables community-based decision makers to exercise agency over resources in ways that traditional philanthropy does not allow.

Power sharing is lived, learned, and relational. It is not a science, and we cannot algorithm our way through the process. It is about relationships and trust.

Power sharing represents a departure from traditional models where donors, predominantly white men behind closed doors, control wealth across generations and dictate the direction of charitable endeavors, including strategies and indicators of success. Some statistics illustrate this point:

- There are 127,595 foundations in the United States, with assets totaling \$1.2 trillion. Total giving is \$90 billion, which means that \$1.11 trillion does not move due to philanthropy's tendency to hoard with the 5 percent rule.
- Currently, 92 percent of US foundation presidents are white, 83 percent of full-time executive staff are white, and 68 percent of program officers are white.
- More than 40 percent of the US population is not white, and yet less than 7 percent of total grantmaking is directed to the benefit of communities of color. (It is safe to assume that very little of it is moved with power-sharing intent.)
- At a minimum, power sharing aims to establish more equitable partnerships between donors, communities, and organizations working on the ground. In the elite sector of philanthropy, creative imagination and diverse approaches are desperately needed.

There are many bold efforts afoot in the progressive philanthropy sector, and even more buzzwords to describe them: trust-based philanthropy, participatory grantmaking, post-capitalist philanthropy, social justice philanthropy, decolonizing philanthropy, just-transition philanthropy, bolder giving, indie philanthropy, community-based philanthropy, and more. Often these trends co-opt or re-dress practices that have already been active for generations in communities and even in philanthropy. Pressures to "innovate" run the risk of keeping the philanthropic sector in navel-gazing mode, rather than doing the necessary work of exploring and activating practices that match the values of justice touted by many foundations and donors.

While buzzwords and philanthro-celebs can galvanize followers, create movements, and become anthems, they might also dilute the original intent or call to action. By simply checking a box, anyone can call themselves a trust-based funder, a social justice donor, or a participatory grant maker.

And yet there is a long list of individuals and groups working to dismantle the sector's old structures by shifting power. Marion Rockefeller Weber brought her vision of Flow Funding to the world more than 30 years ago. Today, powerful examples of institutions that share power include international flow funding programs (Regenerosity) community advisory committees (Radical Imagination Family Foundation); boards that feature community representation (Panta Rhea Foundation); international intermediaries that use localized decision-making models (Global Greengrants); community-informed rapid response programs (Urgent Action Fund); activist-driven foundation strategy creation and decision-making (Guerrilla Foundation); and foundation-initiated giving circles (North Star Fund). This evolving list includes social justice funder organizers working to move the sector (we see you, Justice Funders, Solidaire, EDGE Funders Alliance, Change Philanthropy, and Participatory Grantmakers, to name but a few).

WHY SHARE POWER?

The rationales for sharing power are diverse. Some institutions believe that shifting power is right and necessary to tip the scales toward justice.

Acknowledging the systems that have created vast wealth inequality can also serve as an impetus to use power sharing to disrupt the status quo. Others view power sharing as a form of reparations, or simply believe in it as a guiding principle. When some foundations reflect on their effectiveness, they find that closed-door decisions can fall flat and more often do harm. To address the chasm between what goes on inside the gated green zone of a foundation and the outside world, institutions have turned to power sharing in various forms to bridge this gap.

For individual donors, the motivations can be more personal. Many feel a sense of isolation, since giving is often done in secrecy, with anonymity providing a protective layer. Class dynamics create compartmentalized identities for wealth holders, which can show up as divisiveness between the wealthy and the rest of the world. Donors turn to shared power to find community, to find alignment with their values, and to align with collective values. With each power-sharing act, the capacity for empathy emerges as a new currency that breaks through silos for both funders and community members, to share a walk-a-mile-in-my-shoes experience. As one flow funder we work with said, "Only when we build together will we heal together."

In 2021, only 1 percent of foundation grant recipients accounted for nearly half of all grant dollars. Participatory grantmaking breaks open this predictable pattern and creates space for money to flow to groups who sit off the radar of mainstream philanthropy even while doing some of the most urgent work. Community-based decision makers recognize these frontline efforts because the work is happening in their backyards. Place-based funders in particular benefit from giving community members power over grantmaking dollars. For example, with our Kindle Project Slow Fuse Fund, a New Mexico-based gender justice participatory grantmaking fund, several women invested in many groups we had never heard of in our 15 years of working in the state. Power-sharing enlarges our radar, revealing underfunded work. It is the communities that intimately know the solutions they are working toward.

Sydney Fang, former network officer for Chorus Foundation and former just-transition organizer for Justice Funders, facilitated a long-term participatory grantmaking program between Chorus Foundation and Richmond Our Power Coalition. Fang described the profound impact

exerted by community decision makers, especially when it comes to place-based funding: "Who's on the committee is really important; these are the folks engaged in everyday campaign work who know what local folks need and what movement terrain is. Even if a grant application wasn't perfect, committee members could recognize, 'Oh, this partner is really effective at doing turn-out and organizing, we're already familiar with them'—leaning on direct knowledge that wouldn't be possible if they weren't already part of the community."

In all our funds at Kindle Project, we explore this confluence of interest. Starting in 2020, our Indigenous Women's Flow Fund (IWFF) brought together a cohort of five Indigenous women to act as decision makers over grantmaking dollars and shape the fund

Power sharing is lived, learned, and relational. It requires community, accountability, and willingness to experiment. From start to finish, trust is vital.

according to their vision. These women are fully compensated for their participation, as are all of Kindle Project's community-based decision makers. Simultaneously, donors engage in their own peer-learning cohort. To date, the program has moved more than \$1.8 million to over 80 Indigenous-led projects across the country. The Indigenous women's cohort knows what their communities need and turn to one another for insights when questions arise about a grantmaking decision. In turn, donors have trust in these women, which translates into a flexible funding approach.

Indigenous peoples receive only 0.4 percent of philanthropic dollars. Out of 43 percent of philanthropic professionals in the United States who are people of color, only 0.8 percent identify as Indigenous. These numbers alone should be convincing enough to hand over power.

When communities provide resources and uplift one another, the need for outside saviors disappears, which in turn supports resiliency. A more dynamic and diverse ecosystem can emerge to counteract the dangers of philanthropic homogeneity. Funding predictable groups feels safe but only reinforces the weaknesses of the systems we are trying to fix.

CHALLENGES

Money comes with uncomfortable power dynamics and historical traumas. When certain people are invited to sit at the table, it becomes apparent that others are not in the room. Sometimes the pace of participation cannot meet perceived urgency. Organizations that receive funding may not fit into a predesignated strategy. The list of challenges is long.

Consider some of the baseline challenges for donors and foundations:

- Donors may expect a certain level of contact, closeness, and sharing. But the transfer of money and power does not guarantee connection. It can be difficult to accept that no one can buy their way into authentic relationships.
- When you let go of decision-making power over money, you may not agree with the grant decisions made by community members.
- Challenges can arise while moving toward shared power within existing financial structures (family foundations, donor-advised funds, etc.).
- There can be eagerness to move toward sharing power, but uncertainty about how, and limited experience in foundations that lack personnel with participatory experience. Donors may need a team to implement power sharing.
- Some donors grapple with their sense of purpose or self-worth once power over money is no longer theirs. (Most donors who are ready to share power, however, have already crossed that bridge.)

Community-based decision makers, on the other hand, face the following challenges:

- Many difficulties that donors face are also experienced by community members who are new to making financial decisions. It is common to feel isolation, pressure, and the desire to fall back on habitual grantmaking practices.
- Power in the hands of community members can pose challenges for those who step into leadership positions. Community dynamics are nuanced, and power over dollars can disrupt the balance. Some decision makers therefore choose to be anonymous. While anonymity provides safety, transparency deepens trust and can be a salve to historical trauma.

- It can be difficult to balance intentional time for programs and decision-making with existing professional and community commitments.
- At some point in the process, community-based decision makers may need or want to share their own power to stretch beyond their known circles.

While the work of reshaping how money is moved must be done carefully, it is important to remember that challenges are a natural part of change.

FUNDAMENTALS OF POWER SHARING

As an ongoing process, power sharing is not formulaic. It is the antithesis of what we might call CrossFit-style philanthropy—go hard in the shortest amount of time, responding to crises with urgency to move money in a predetermined “right” way. Rather, power sharing is lived, learned, and relational. It requires community, accountability, and willingness to experiment. From start to finish, trust is vital.

Power sharing is not an exact science, but those who have experimented with it can offer wisdom to help develop its practices.

VALUES | Ethical participatory grantmaking requires a foundation of shared values and alignment toward equity between partners. Without such values, participatory grantmaking can be wielded to frightening effect in the service of antidemocratic efforts seeking to undermine equality rather than expand it. Bigoted funders and community-based decision makers can use similar methods to cultivate hateful grassroots/astroturf groups that advance populist ideologies. These tools are so powerful that they must be expressly aligned with social and economic justice values and lifted up as a North Star for each initiative.

Effective power sharing is best executed when a North Star-like vision is created from the ground up when those who sit at the table are in alignment with the values of represented communities. Practices within participatory grantmaking should be an expression of those values in action, and the North Star provides a compass to return to over the course of the project. Communities and donors alike should identify and commit to the values that underpin their work and connect to greater social movement values. One community-based decision maker defined her North Star as “a world in which all feel a sense of belonging, where we see the Earth and animals as family, where we live into the fullness of our somatic selves, valuing emotional intelligence and experience as much as rational and cognitive thought, and where we practice methods of healing and justice that address the root causes of injustice and suffering.”

MAKING AND TAKING TIME | Like a healthy democracy, participatory grantmaking takes time and requires participants to make space to address dynamics as they emerge. Without space to air out the complexities that power and money present, there is a risk of replicating the systems that are being confronted. Many communities have culturally relevant practices that take time to carry out. For example, with IWFF, the cohort of Indigenous women makes decisions according to the cycles of nature and the seasons, aligning with their cultural practices. This requires that we at Kindle Project approach our internal programmatic plans with malleability. The role of the donor/foundation is to honor community processes, despite assumptions about responding to urgency. The pace to do this well can be a complex tension to hold, but with curiosity and



openness to sit with discomfort, funders may learn different ways to relate to need and crisis.

In the program she facilitated with the Chorus Foundation and Richmond Our Power Coalition, Sydney Fang reiterated that time considerations are intrinsic to the process: “A challenge I’ve heard about participatory grantmaking is that it takes people away from doing the work, running the campaigns, engaging the community. We addressed that in our process by making sure the committee’s time was not only focused on applications or numbers, but also on how the grantmaking itself is advancing their work; thinking about how the processes engage partners in ongoing movement building to make sure the grantmaking is serving the coalition, rather than vice versa.”

INTERMEDIARIES | Power-shifting endeavors flourish with the support of seasoned intermediaries and facilitators. These entities play a critical role, not only as bridge builders, problem solvers, and holders of healthy spaces, but also to operationalize grand visions into tangible outcomes. The role of the intermediary and facilitator cannot be overstated, yet it is often underfunded and overlooked.

In the case of IWFF, what has become possible with Kindle Project as an intermediary is that both donors and flow funders move at their own pace, within the safety of their own cohorts, to learn and explore the most pressing issues for them. Not only do we take on all the administrative labor, allowing the Indigenous women to focus on what matters most to them, but we also help address power imbalances that can arise when donors and community members are in a shared space. As one donor to a Kindle Project program explained: “By shifting our relationship to resources and power, what becomes possible is a remembering that we don’t have to have all the answers ... that there can be bridgers and translators to help us feel that connection.”

Sharing power cannot be done alone, and philanthropic intermediaries play a key role in building bridges and community.

FLEXIBILITY | Power sharing is about relationships and building lasting trust. This requires fluidity and elasticity to meet communities on their terms. Participatory grantmaking does not mean being passive. Instead, it is a proactive approach, centering the wisdom of communities that is best executed with transparency, a solid structure, and clear parameters. This means that funders should come to power-sharing initiatives with a flexible framework that is malleable enough to be adapted over time. A level of shared decision-making and basic agreements on limitations are especially helpful from the inception of a new program. Over time, initiatives evolve, and this balance can shift. Remaining flexible also means allowing for greater impact to emerge in ways that perhaps were not initially expected.

A PATH FORWARD

Sharing power is a practice that evolves over time and brings its own challenges. Rather than trying to fix every issue at once, what becomes possible if we learn to sit in the discomfort of the unknown and relinquish control? Instead of stepping into the roles of outside heroes or problem solvers, philanthropists must walk alongside communities, uplifting their agency while remaining available to participate when asked. Power sharing is an ethical imperative but also a necessary strategy. □

Sadaf Rassoul Cameron is cofounder and director of Kindle Project. She is also cocreator of the Indie Philanthropy Initiative.

Arianne Shaffer is director of programs at Kindle Project and cocreator of the Indie Philanthropy Initiative.

MAKING REVOLUTION IRRESISTIBLE

We designed the (Re)Generative Leadership Framework to be accountable to movements and future generations by creating the conditions to bring our best and full selves to achieve our vision.

BY LORENZO HERRERA Y LOZANO

As we in philanthropy work for a just transition, it is essential that we reflect on our relationship with power and how we use it within our organizations and how our practices advance or obstruct the transformative changes we seek in the world. In this article, I will share lessons grounded in 20 years of experience with a variety of different organizations, which also apply to philanthropic institutions. These are not simply curious challenges faced by grantee organizations, but destructive and pervasive phenomena that are critical for funders to confront as well. This is an invitation to sit with the contradictions and misalignment between the world our hearts envision and the world our behaviors create.

Late in the summer of 2020, after more than a decade operating as a fiscally sponsored project, Justice Funders (JF), a Just Transition-aligned organization whose mission is to be “a partner and guide for philanthropy in reimagining practices that advance a thriving and just world,” incorporated as an independent nonprofit. Two years prior, JF had experienced rapid growth and was confronting its growing pains while also learning from them. As an organization working to partner with and guide philanthropy to redistribute wealth, democratize power, and shift economic control to communities, JF saw that the moment presented an opportunity to pursue its mission. But we also realized that to organize philanthropy for the purpose of practicing deep democracy, we also had to develop this practice ourselves. JF would be structured as a worker self-directed nonprofit.

I was three months into my tenure at JF when these decisions about its organizational structure were taking place. Twenty years before joining JF, I began my organizational leadership journey working alongside other queer and trans artists, educators, and organizers in Texas. As a young person new to racial and social justice, I learned about radical institutions birthed from resistance movements that were later professionalized and co-opted, other groups that had risen and fallen according to the capricious whims of philanthropic partners, and those that imploded under the weight of staff and community heartbreak, burnout, or death. I spent the first 17 years working at two racial justice organizations where the staff and board were composed entirely of (often queer) people of color. It was in these organizations that I both experienced and caused

the most heartache. For years, I grappled with the contradictions of working at social change organizations whose visions inspire a more just world for all of us, yet cannibalize our own through the practices and behaviors with which we think we are carrying out our missions.

I became convinced that if we were to continue relying on the nonprofit industrial complex (and its precarious, dependent relationship with philanthropy) as a mechanism for facilitating social justice, we were guaranteed to fail if we continued sacrificing ourselves and each other in the process. Hope and desperation fueled a two-decade quest to make sense of these contradictions. After two stints as associate director and two Icarus-like experiences as executive director, the first at age 24, as well as coleading organizational startups, restructures, and dissolutions; serving on a dozen boards of directors; studying organizational leadership, ethics, and movement-sourced frameworks; diving into psychology, neuroscience, behavioral economics, and interpersonal neurobiology; and years of coaching, consulting, and training, I have learned a few lessons.

As carbon copies of for-profit corporations, virtually every nonprofit organization I encountered, most of which were social-justice-oriented, functioned according to the 18th-century premise that workers must be managed, and that management is responsible for ensuring worker production and compliance. Despite our desire to honor our shared humanity, our policies, values statements, and supervision practices suggested expectations that workers conduct themselves as cognitive machines: thinking beings lacking feelings and unmoved by their own nervous systems.

The assumption underlying the policies, team agreements, and values at these organizations is that everyone is working with positive or neutral psychological states. Rather than proactively building our individual and collective capacity to follow through on our mission when challenges inevitably emerge, our policies, team agreements, and values are often weaponized to police behavior and enforce compliance.

In hierarchical organizations, information and power are concentrated and guarded among higher tiers or perceived as such. Individuals at the top feel isolated, misunderstood, and unappreciated. Near the bottom of the hierarchy, people feel mistrusted, patronized, and undervalued. Folks in the middle receive barely enough information to assuage the frustrations of those at the bottom tiers and are given just enough power to enforce compliance with expectations, real or perceived, from above.

Yet less hierarchical and nonhierarchical organizations are not inherently immune to these problems. Having participated in restructuring a community-based organization from a hierarchy to a collective, I learned how access to information, identity or experiential privileges, and cultural capital can contribute to inequitable decision-making and imbalanced power dynamics, even in the absence of structural power differences.

We have created an industry so dedicated to the humans to whom we pledge our mission statements that we exclude the humans inside our organizations. Our heartbreak and burnout are by design.

CULTURES TO FORGE AND SUSTAIN CHANGE

Several years into my search for answers, I realized that learning how to do the work without sacrificing ourselves and each other ensured only survival. The internal resources and radical interdependence it will take to pursue our vision requires us to push beyond just surviving, and instead move toward flourishing and thriving. Just as our vision

depends on transformative changes in the world, pursuing our vision requires transformative changes in our organizations. We need a shift from a culture of compliance and constraint to “one based on caring and sacredness of relationships to each other and the world upon which we depend.”

For decades, researchers in neuroscience and psychology have noted the vast differences between positive psychological states and neutral or negative ones. When we experience positive psychological states, dopamine is released, creating a sense of happiness and well-being; adult neurogenesis (the growth of new neurons) is stimulated; our brain’s learning centers are activated, enabling cognitive flexibility and adaptability; and we enjoy increased creativity and energy levels, better immune system functioning, and emotional and perceptual openness. Building our capacity to bring about lasting, transformative change means being deliberate and proactive in cultivating the conditions for us to show up with the capacity to experience not only positive but also thriving psychological states. *We need to come alive.* To call on the wisdom of Toni Cade Bambara, “[our] work: to make revolution irresistible.”

We must be deliberate and proactive in cocreating organizational cultures that build on what our brains are best at. We have to anticipate our brain’s hardwired negativity bias and threat surveillance, and gradually rewire our brains toward cognitive frames that imagine, build, and sustain a just world. We need to recognize that organizational culture—our ways of being with and making sense of ourselves and one another—permeates, animates, and shapes our organizational structures, systems, and strategies. Culture cannot be relegated to the periphery of our efforts, as if it were separate from “the work.” In the shadow of our movements’ achievements are a growing number of broken hearts and disbanded organizations—evidence that culture can break us when left unattended. Culture does not happen to us, it happens *through us*.

The further we travel toward a just transition, the more resistance we should expect from the systems and structures we seek to transform. Stopping the bad, changing the rules, and creating the new in the face of mounting resistance will require the continuous expansion, reinforcement, and regeneration of imagination, courage, persistence, and resilience. None of this is possible without each other. So in anticipating increased resistance, we must invest in one another as if we intend to win, as if we expect our vision to come to fruition, as if our love of humanity and the planet includes the people in our own organizations.

(RE)GENERATIVE LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK

As the newly incorporated JF emerged as a worker self-directed organization, we knew it was vital to invest in strong structures, systems, and practices to govern and steward personnel, finance, programs, and operations together. Equally important, we understood that the health of the organization and impact of its mission would depend on our ability to cocreate a culture where every one of us could come alive—flourishing and thriving in the full expression of our humanity—and bringing our whole and full selves to this work. We also recognized that as an organization partnering directly with philanthropic institutions, JF had an opportunity to model for movement organizations and funders themselves, the possibility of organizational cultures that honor shared humanity because it is both *just* and *strategic*. A framework began to coalesce as we set out to steward the creation of such an organizational culture: the *(Re)Generative Leadership Framework*.

STOPPING THE BAD

Organizations still rely on practices that pursue similar ends to those sought by the inventors of “management” in the 18th century: control and compliance to maximize labor output. Since the Industrial Revolution, “management,” as most of us understand, practice, and experience it, has relied on threats and incentives to motivate people to work.

Research on self-determination and motivation has demonstrated that carrot-and-stick approaches to external motivation are ineffective and even counterproductive. A punishment-and-reward approach serves as a mechanism for control and contributes to what the Just Transition Framework describes as a culture of militarism that is deeply embedded in an extractive economy. When these extractive external motivation strategies are present in grantmaking institutions, they can be replicated in relationship dynamics with grantees.

BUILDING THE NEW

Inspired by the principles of Just Transition, the (Re)Generative Leadership Framework draws on the botanical theory of heliotropism (the directional growth of a plant in response to sunlight), neuroscience and positive psychology research, self-determination theory (which holds that individuals are more motivated when they believe they can determine their own outcomes), and appreciative inquiry, which is a model of organizational and social change that seeks to engage stakeholders collectively in imagining and designing better possibilities for themselves. This framework is a strategic move from *management* to *co-stewardship* and an explicit shift from *control and compliance* to *intrinsic motivation and engagement*. It is a self-sustaining engine of interwoven practices that build on and fuel one another, enabling us to come alive in our work with the capacity to create lasting change.

As fields of wildflowers tilt toward the sun throughout the day, we turn to life-giving forces for energy, inspiration, and direction. At JF, our vision of “a world that honors the sacredness of our natural resources and recognizes the inalienable rights of all” is the heliotropic force that compels us to move forward. We apply the asset-based model of appreciative inquiry to cultivate the conditions that enable us to begin embodying our vision in the present while moving in the direction of the world we seek and expanding our vision for that world by pushing against the boundaries of our current imagination.

By operationalizing our values of psychological safety, centering well-being, radical interdependence, generative leadership, and untethered imagination, we name the behaviors and practices we need from one another to self-govern and co-steward the organization’s resources. These behaviors and practices become the conditions that seed the nutrients for *intrinsic motivation* and *flourishing*.

As the name implies, we are able to experience intrinsic motivation when our basic psychological needs for autonomy (our ability to shape our own lives), competence (feeling skillful and confident in what we do), mastery (learning, mastering skills,

This framework is a strategic move from *management* to *co-stewardship* and an explicit shift from *control and compliance* to *intrinsic motivation and engagement*.

noticing our progress), purpose (feeling connected and contributing to something greater than ourselves), and relatedness (connection and belonging) are met. A transformative vision cannot be realized when we feel miserable, disengaged, disconnected from others, and intellectually stuck. Engagement becomes possible when our psychological needs for intrinsic motivation are met. These needs, when satisfied, also contribute to the elements of well-being (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment) that enable us to flourish.

FROM COMPLIANCE TO ENGAGEMENT

Across organizations, supervision practices continue to rely on dated, inefficient, and empirically flawed ideas and models that are antithetical to our professed values. These ideas and models serve as deterrents to our ability to bring our best, fullest selves to move our mission forward. These antiquated practices include performance evaluations (a relic of the Industrial Revolution that perpetuates an extractive workplace culture), the US military's World War I-era merit rating system, the "rank and yank" system popularized by General Electric in the 1980s, and hierarchy-reinforcing practices, popularized in the 1940s, that tie raises to merit and evaluation. Efforts to incentivize employee performance can have the opposite of their intended effect. And while tools such as performance improvement plans can improve worker performance, basic expectations are unlikely to be surpassed. We often celebrate compliance and improvement at the expense of opportunities for engagement.

When we move away from control and compliance and toward intrinsic motivation and engagement, supervision shifts to coaching others to notice when and how the nutrients for intrinsic motivation and flourishing are present, and identifying what contributing factors can be cultivated. By investing in the conditions that allow us to come alive (thriving psychological states), we unbind performance potential. Accountability becomes a valuable byproduct of employees' (re)generative relationship to their work, instead of a limiting tool for control and compliance.

STOPPING THE BAD

Despite their widespread use, performance evaluations continue to prove inefficient, inaccurate, and counterproductive. While employees are supposed to receive feedback based on an objective assessment of their performance, studies in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* in 2000 and *Personnel Psychology* in 1998 and 2010 have demonstrated that feedback is overwhelmingly about the person offering it, rather than the recipient. Involving more than 500,000 manager evaluations (across the three studies) from managers' supervisors, peers, and supervisees, researchers found that around 55 to 71 percent of the evaluations' variance was attributable to the peculiarities of individual raters (known as the "idiosyncratic rater effect"). The studies found that no more than 20 percent of variance was attributable to actual performance.

The use of inherently subjective feedback, coupled with differences in hierarchical power, have produced compliance and enforcement practices that purportedly support learning and identify growth opportunities. At best, performance evaluations can lead to adequate performance and create a growth ceiling, which is set by the supervisor's imagination and skills. All too often, however, performance reviews turn into demoralizing conversations that risk activating our sympathetic nervous system and

interrupting our ability to receive feedback, learn, and adapt. We have come to realize that our focus on people's shortcomings impairs, rather than enables, learning.

A similar dynamic characterizes philanthropy as metrics and evaluation protocols are used to hold grantees accountable. These onerous requirements offer little, if any, benefit to grantees and their missions but go a long way in reinforcing funders' power over them. Instead of nurturing partnerships of care and trust, these practices create a sense of overwhelm for grantees and imply that they cannot be trusted to carry out and evaluate their own work without funder rubrics and oversight.

BUILDING THE NEW

Moving from theory to practice, we replaced performance evaluations with a (Re)Generative Leadership model for coaching and supervision. Designed in accordance with the 4-D model (discovery, dream, design, delivery) of appreciative inquiry, our model facilitates introspection, reflection, and collaborative conversations with the goal of naming, affirming, and inquiring into peak moments in our work. By naming what is working and delving into our strengths, we are able to identify—and cultivate—the nutrients for flourishing and intrinsic motivation, while also optimizing our cognitive capacity by increasing creativity, perceptual openness, and energy levels. We maximize learning opportunities, allowing us to recognize, reinforce, and refine our skills and practices.

As the Just Transition Framework urges, we must "resist, rethink, restructure." To build a regenerative economy guided by caring and sacredness, where resources are regenerated and work is carried out through cooperation and guided by deep democracy, we need to *resist* supporting the organizational cultures, structures, and strategies that reinforce dominance and control. By *rethinking* how we care for and show up for one another, we can lean into radical interdependence—where gratitude, kindness, and solidarity strengthen our bonds—so that when we struggle, when times are hard, and when we break each other's hearts, we remain in shared humanity. If organizations continue to be how we organize our work toward a just transition, we must *restructure* them to facilitate the individual and collective resilience to bounce back

when we fall and find our way to each other when we "other" and mistake one another for a threat.

The (Re)Generative Leadership Framework is an invitation to stop the bad of traditional organizational development and management practices that engender compliance enforcement, distrust, ineffectiveness, and heartbreak. We can build the new by meeting our core needs for flourishing and intrinsic motivation. We can invite the possibility of building organizations where we no longer incentivize, coerce, or punish, as the work itself becomes the reward, and "revolution is irresistible" because—not in spite—of one another. □

To build a regenerative economy, we need to *resist* supporting the organizational cultures, structures, and strategies that reinforce dominance and control.

Lorenzo Herrera y Lozano is co-executive director of Justice Funders.

CULTURE AND COMMUNITY POWER BUILDING

To achieve systemic change, philanthropy must invest in culture that builds community power.

BY ALEXIS FRASZ

Over the past decade, philanthropic leaders and others working for progressive social change have increasingly focused on culture. This growing interest in culture comes from a dual understanding that achieving systemic, lasting change requires a shift on a cultural level—our worldviews, lifestyles, norms, social relations, and values—and that cultural strategies and methods can help catalyze and accelerate change.

Philanthropists have invested in certain parts of the cultural strategy landscape—a growing field of practice that engages culture and cultural practitioners in efforts for social change—but much less so in others. Investment in cultural work that supports community power building is particularly lacking. While some grassroots organizations and organizers do integrate culture into their efforts, the potential to build power in under-resourced and marginalized communities by harnessing culture is not well understood or supported by funders.

This is a missed opportunity for two reasons. First, robust people-powered movements have proven highly effective at achieving transformational social, political, and economic change. Second, grassroots cultural strategies can catalyze and enhance community power in significant ways.

This article describes some of the essential features and functions of culture as it relates to community power building. My intention is to help funders (and practitioners) who are engaged in community power-building work see how cultural strategies might support and amplify their efforts. In addition, I hope to encourage funders who support cultural strategy to see community power building as a critical lever for change.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture can be defined as the various ways that people understand, embody, and express their worldviews, identities, and values. In a power-building context, two aspects of culture are especially important.

FIRST, culture includes, but is more than, narrative. Narrative strategy is an important tactic, but not everything meaningful or real—let alone visionary, subversive, or not yet manifest—can be expressed in narrative form. Moreover, in certain organizing contexts, narrative methods may not be the most appropriate, such as when stories trigger trauma, amplify power dynamics, or highlight divisions, or when a language barrier exists. For example, the Asian Pacific Environmental Network uses music, food, and imagery to foster belonging and solidarity among

its multilingual constituents. A holistic and inclusive cultural strategy must include narrative as well as embodied and relational practices such as dance and movement, music, imagery, craft, ritual, and more.

SECOND, participatory culture—the process of people making and doing themselves—is critical for power building. Creating culture with others builds social bonds, shared identity, a sense of agency, an attachment to place, and other critical capacities that serve as a foundation for community power. For people who have been structurally disempowered, this can be transformative. El Puente, an environmental justice organization in East Williamsburg, Brooklyn, uses community art-making activities as “an antidote to disempowerment.” According to cofounder Frances Lucerna, “The arts are transformative because they help people see themselves and tap into their own potential for creation. The arts help people realize ‘I can.’” Transforming people from “consumers of democracy to agents within it” is a primary goal of power-building work. Participating in shared cultural activities builds relationships and a sense of agency that can be carried into other settings.

BUILDING A “WE”

Building community power is long-term work that requires stable, resilient, and accountable organizations to nurture and channel people’s energy and will toward strategic change. Organizations that most effectively build and channel power do three things well:

Build a “we” by fostering authentic relationships and a sense of collective identity among community members, across lines of difference.

Develop visionary and distributed leadership by helping people cultivate a shared understanding of the root causes of their conditions and a vision for their desired future.

Build new worlds by helping make alternatives tangible and visible. Grassroots cultural practice can support efforts in all three areas.

From the Civil Rights Movement to the pro-life movement, effective movements galvanize people around a common purpose and a sense of collective identity, or a shared sense of “we.” Power-building organizations use relational organizing to foster and sustain deep, mutually accountable connections with and among community members so that people stick together when challenges arise, or in moments when strategies must evolve. The “social infrastructure” built through organizing not only enables communities to fight for future change but also directly and immediately improves people’s health and well-being.

Participatory cultural activities create contexts for forging deep interpersonal connections and a sense of belonging to place and to a larger “we.” This “social cohesion” includes “bonding” between people who share a common identity and “bridging” between people across areas of perceived difference. Both bonding and bridging are essential for grassroots organizing, which requires leadership from community members who have experienced injustices working in solidarity with a larger constituency that is willing to fight for change. Cross-class and multiracial organizing yields a solidarity dividend that is essential to securing changes that both benefit marginalized groups and improve society for all.

Many organizers use cultural practices to help build relationships and group identity. UPROSE, an environmental justice group in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, uses community-based arts “because it helps us see and remember and understand who we are,” according to executive director Elizabeth Yeampierre. For structurally oppressed groups, reaffirming cultural identity can help members operate from a place of power and

strength and sustain long-term struggles. For example, while protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline, the Sacred Stone Camp at the Standing Rock Reservation taught traditional cultural practices such as horse racing, sacred rituals, and food preparation to fortify Native culture and pride. This was critical to sustaining cohesion and will in a challenging context.

Sharing cultural experiences with others who have different backgrounds and perspectives can help heterogeneous groups build trust, find common ground, and practice collaboration in low-stakes contexts. Even supposedly apolitical activities such as singing in a choir or sharing poetry can build a foundation of trust and shared experience that makes future collective action possible.

VISIONARY AND DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

The erosion of democracy and concentration of power in the United States has created a reinforcing feedback loop whereby people feel powerless, as though the status quo is inevitable and there is nothing that they can do to effect change. A critical part of power building is helping people develop a shared analysis of *why* things are the way they are and a shared vision of a better world. Many organizers use critical storytelling methodologies to help people question inherited views about how the world works, who and what has value, and who gets to make decisions in society. Through a process of “re-storying,” people come to understand the systemic and unjust causes of their personal struggles and see themselves as agents of change. The Grassroots Power Project maintains that developing a new story must be “a democratic process—it is not something that is imposed on others, it is something people struggle with, develop, and test out together.”

Organizers like Movement Generation, The Point, and PUSH Buffalo integrate arts and culture in their work to help unlock people’s imaginative capacities to resist what they do not want and envision a better future from a perspective of abundance, hope, and joy. Through creative practices, especially those rooted in deeply held cultural values, community members are able to experience their full humanity and view themselves as creators and world builders. Even when the creative act seems purely artistic, the process of making something fuels a sense of agency that can be translated into other realms. For groups whose cultural values and practices have been erased, suppressed, or co-opted, reclaiming expressive capacity can be a political act of self-determination.

For Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, cultural strategies pursued in partnership with artists have proved critical to organizing in coal country. The region’s complex relationship with the coal industry—a source of harm, but also livelihood and identity—has divided many communities. Over the course of several years, artists Carrie Brunk and Bob Martin hosted community gatherings where people shared meals featuring locally grown foods and made music together, celebrating aspects of Appalachian culture that sparked pride and united people across ideological divides. Through story circles, community

Creating a world where people are not only free from suffering, but also able to express and develop their full human potential is one of the main purposes of organizing work.

members processed their past and shared hopes for the future, eventually turning their stories into a play, which they performed together. Brunk says that this creative process “opened up an explicit and aspirational conversation within our community about our relationship to the land, about the preciousness of our good water, about our food and farms as a source of abundance, about the kind of community we live in, and the future we are building.”

These cultural strategies proved their relevance when prospectors began approaching community residents to buy their land for fracking exploration. Thanks to the relationships and networks of trust that had developed, people quickly mobilized to share information and unite in resistance. Martin notes that cultural organizing work has made the community “more resilient and flexible ... more able to respond creatively to fracking, climate change, homophobia, racism, or whatever else might come our way.”

WORLD-BUILDING

The goal of building power is to enable people to change the world in ways that improve their lives. This means having the capacity to “fight the bad,” as well as the vision and agency to “build the new.” World-building creates opportunities for people to practice better ways of living, working, and meeting their spiritual, social, and material needs *today*. These experiments—whether mutual aid groups, cooperative businesses, democratically run investment funds, land trusts, alternative currencies, publicly owned utilities, open technology platforms, restorative justice communities, or sites of cultural production—build community, transform people’s perceptions and capacities, and create possibilities for larger-scale changes down the line. Even when such experiments are small or hyperlocal, they offer the “threat of a good example” by demonstrating that another world is indeed possible.

The Mississippi Center for Cultural Production, Cooperation Jackson, Utah Diné Bikéyah, the East Bay Permanent Real Estate Cooperative, the Boston Ujima Project, the Philly Peace Park, Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation, and Ekvn-Yefolecv are just some examples of world-building initiatives that are culturally rooted or incorporate cultural dimensions. The Boston Ujima Project has created a democratically governed fund to invest in local, socially beneficial businesses, led by and for working-class and frontline communities of color in Boston. Executive director Nia Evans says that participating in the fund has changed community norms: “Real power and democracy are becoming more and more normal as we continue to practice better ways of being.” Ujima uses arts and culture to create meaningful, joyful experiences so that community members feel a sense of belonging and want to participate in the work, which can sometimes feel “dry and hard.”

But arts and culture are not simply the honey that attracts people to participate in something serious. When people have a chance to envision the world they want, culture and creative expression typically feature prominently in it. Creating a world where people are not only free from suffering, but also able to express and develop their full human potential is one of the main purposes of organizing work. The East Bay Permanent Real Estate Cooperative is working to develop community-run cultural spaces for Black arts and culture in West Oakland as well as permanently affordable housing. Thunder Valley CDC is designing its local economy and built environment in ways that embody and sustain traditional Lakota cultural values.



The cultural, economic, and political dimensions of these world-building efforts are interconnected. People engage in collective decision-making (political) about how to steward and allocate resources and labor (economic) in ways that align with their values and worldviews (cultural). With this in mind, I offer a definition of cultural power as *the capacity of a group to shape its physical environment and socio-economic systems in ways that align with and support its worldview, values, and preferred way of life.*

PHILANTHROPIC SUPPORT

Most progressive philanthropic funding for cultural (and narrative) strategy to date has supported mass media or pop culture strategies led by expert practitioners (professional storytellers, impact producers, cultural strategists, communications consultants). These approaches are often appealing for issue-based and electoral campaigns because they can reach large audiences with strategically coordinated messages. However, philanthropy has invested very little in cultural strategies for

building power at the community level, which is critical for winning transformative and lasting social change.

There are many possible reasons for this dearth of investment. Organizing is decades or generational work, which does not align with the one- to three-year grant cycles at most foundations. Power building may feel “too political” for funders who prefer to see themselves as ideologically neutral (philanthropy currently invests only about 3 percent of its funds per year in grassroots organizing). Grassroots power-building organizations are typically multi-issue and shift to accommodate community needs in real time, which may not fit the issue silos or logic models at many foundations. Community power-building work is often hyperlocal, which can appeal to place-based funders but not others working at the national level. Perhaps most significantly, grassroots power building aims to disrupt and counter concentrated elite power, whether political or economic, which may threaten some of philanthropy’s embedded interests.

There are also barriers to supporting grassroots cultural work. Community-based cultural work is slower, less scalable, and less flashy, and its outcomes are harder to quantify. It often involves creative work made by “regular people” that may not meet professional artistic standards. Moreover, community-based cultural work is not always legible to outsiders, which can make it hard for funders to see and understand it. One funder told me that the cultural work they support, though critical to the movement groups who deploy it, “is not ‘arty’ enough for arts funders and not ‘campaign-y’ enough for political funders, so it falls between the cracks.”

URGENT WORK

Building people-powered movements is the best way to combat authoritarianism and advance a society that is more fair, caring, and sustainable. Incorporating cultural strategies into power building can help grassroots organizations build solidarity, activate agency, and

create living examples of a better future. Cultural power is not limited to representation and visibility within cultural domains. Rather, it is closely linked to people’s ability to shape the structures and systems that influence their daily lives in ways that reflect their own values and worldviews.

Among organizers, funders, and cultural practitioners, there is growing interest in work that sits at the intersection of culture and community power building. The Culture and Community Power Fund (with which I am affiliated) was launched in 2022 to invest, connect, and amplify efforts to build community power through arts and culture. Other funders who support culturally rooted movement work include Tao Rising, Chorus Foundation, and The Southern Power Fund. Much more can and should be done to support organizations and organizers that do the urgent work of harnessing cultural strategies to build grassroots power. □

Alexis Frasz is codirector of Helicon Collaborative, which works on the intersection of culture, economics, and the environment to achieve a more just and beautiful future for all.

BUILDING THE CULTURAL POWER ECOSYSTEM

To win the battle for our world's future, we need imaginative activism that moves culture to embrace mutual care and regeneration.

BY AISHA SHILLINGFORD

At Intelligent Mischief, our purpose is to boost invention and imagination, realign action logic, and experiment with new forms of culture and civil society to create atmospheres of change. We do this work because we are waging an imagination battle, as our founder, Terry Marshall, explained in *Emergent Strategy*, adrienne maree brown's 2017 book. This battle is for the meaning of the future of the world. Our work is imagination activism that seeks to build the power of working-class, Black communities to advance a collective political imaginary grounded in love, care, regeneration, and interdependence.

Increasingly, many people believe that human life is inherently nasty, brutish, and short, that resources are scarce, and that each of us acts as a solitary individual who must compete for limited resources to ensure our own survival. This notion underpins much of our political economy and reinforces capitalism's hegemonic power to commodify, exploit, and extract from all life to support the survival of a few.

In this paradigm, culture plays the role of normalizing a capitalist worldview and its associated values, norms, behaviors, and structures to such an extent that we believe that no alternative is possible. To survive, we are told, we must win at competition. In fact, competition is perhaps the most pervasive value in this social imaginary. We compete for market share, jobs, housing, love, attention, health, and in the social sector, funding. Narratives of competition and scarcity saturate our culture in both direct and subtle ways. Structures of competition and scarcity force us to battle one another, reinforcing the belief that not all of us will survive, but that I must survive at any cost. The premise of an imagination battle also suggests competition as an ideology (alongside individualism and consumerism).

But there is another imaginary, or rather, there are many other imaginaries that share the belief that life is emergent, beautiful, chaotic, and unpredictable, but also that resources are abundant when shared, and that we survive and thrive together in interdependent relationships with one another, the land, and other beings.

This is a worldview broadly embraced by Indigenous communities and grounded in values of abundance, care, and community. In contemporary US culture, there are songs, books, and games about sharing and caring,

especially to teach young children about cooperation and collaboration, that reinforce this worldview. Historically, many cultures have been shaped by some combination of these imaginaries. While sometimes difficult to see, these imaginaries still underpin our political, economic, and cultural conflicts and guide our assumptions about how the future will look.

The extent to which these pro-social ideas shape our behaviors, values, and systems is determined by their power to capture our imaginations. The imagination battle is waged largely in the realm of culture: on social media, in entertainment, in play and leisure, in education systems, in religious spaces, and more.

In 2016, Intelligent Mischief wrote an article called "Contending for Dreamspace," where we advocated for a greater focus on cultural strategy within the social justice left. We subsequently delivered a talk by the same name to an audience of artists and social justice activists at the offices of the Open Society Foundations. In this talk we discussed a critical element of our purpose statement: atmospheres of change, a cultural strategy based on what it might take to build cultural power for an imaginary that is undergirded by values of love, care, regeneration, and interdependence.

We think of culture as the air or atmosphere that moves around us, through us, and between us. It is all that constitutes what we understand as society or social culture. It is the stone soup of our beliefs, ideologies, values, assumptions, myths, behaviors, structures, systems, institutions, identities, workplaces, hobbies, economies, and more. Culture is what underpins our political and economic systems. It is also the manifestation of our political and economic decisions. Indeed, culture is who we are and what we do.

If culture is all that we believe, value, do, and create, then cultural power is the ability to shape what we believe, what we value, what we do, and what we create. It is the power to decide what imaginary shapes our society. In recent years, significant philanthropic and institutional investments have sought to build narrative power on the left. If successful, these investments will enhance our ability to shape stories that promote progressive, radical assumptions and ideas about who we are as a society, who is included, and who is represented. Funding collaboratives such as the Pop Culture Collaborative and entities such

as the Narrative Initiative are innovating within the left to advance pluralist narratives and build narrative ecosystems to move progressive ideas into the mainstream.

Even so, narrative power alone does not constitute cultural power. An implicit assumption in our investment in narrative power is that shaping stories and ideas will result in a shift in behaviors and practices and eventually, institutions and systems. But building the power to shape narratives is only one component of building cultural power. Social transformation requires us to shift narratives, but also to reshape behavioral norms and systems by creating vast, robust networks, institutions, and ecosystems that can sustain those narrative and behavioral shifts in the long term. For example, media narratives that remind us

What might it look like for the progressive left to cultivate an ecosystem that advances a worldview of love, care, regeneration, and interdependence?

of Indigenous sovereignty, such as land acknowledgements, are made even more powerful by repatriation initiatives such as the Sogorea Te Land Trust.

Mainstream cultural institutions exist in consort with political and economic structures to reinforce a dominant/hegemonic culture, which views systems of control, extraction, and violence as normal and acceptable. Within this paradigm, narrative power is mediated through institutions such as the media, Hollywood, religion, and education. Sub-cultural narratives and infrastructure that challenge these dominant narratives and institutions exist, but their relative power is limited.

What does it look like for the progressive/just-transition left to build the power needed to shift culture at the scale that is required to achieve some of our most urgent goals?

We must build a cultural power ecosystem—in other words, a form of cultural power that reflects the future we wish to see. This cultural power ecosystem is interdependent, regenerative, life affirming, and nourishing. It has the capacity to influence culture and shift economic and political realities. It eschews power structures of domination, competition, and extraction while generating the resilience that is required to navigate a systemic transition.

WHAT DOES THIS ECOSYSTEM LOOK LIKE?

Culture is all around us. It exists most clearly in our cultural industries or sectors (such as art, entertainment, and theater) but also within our social, economic, and political institutions, the places where our worldviews become embodied and collectively reinforced. This list includes our families, schools, religious institutions, workplaces, areas of governance, and so on.

What might it look like for the progressive left to cultivate an ecosystem that intentionally and systematically advances a worldview of love, care, regeneration, and interdependence through our institutions so that a future based on that worldview becomes irresistible and eventually inevitable? What is already taking place that might be scaled, replicated, and shared more widely?

Let's consider some forms of culture:

ART | How might we cultivate an arts ecosystem that advances the narratives, visions, and assumptions of our progressive movements, both in terms of subject matter and the process of making, sharing, and owning art? We might look to the work of the Center for Cultural Power (CCP), which is building the power of artists and culture bearers who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color at the intersection of art, culture, and social justice. CCP is building the Constellations Fund



to support artists and culture bearers of color.

ARCHITECTURE | How might we design buildings that reflect values of equity, accessibility, and sustainability and that engage the population in embodied experiences of Black liberation and Indigenous sovereignty vis-à-vis materials, the stories of past, present, and future they tell, the healing they provide, and more? We might turn to The Black Reconstruction Collective, which is committed to multidisciplinary work that is dedicated to dismantling white supremacy and hegemonic whiteness within art, design, and academia. They created a groundbreaking exhibition in 2021 at the Museum of Modern Art conveying speculative architectural concepts that center Black thriving.

ACADEMIA | How might we develop academic institutions and programs that advance liberatory worldviews, Indigenous-centered structures and subjects, sustainability, and regenerative practices of repair and healing? As a model, we can turn to Ijeruka, a digital learning community that curates immersive online courses and conversations with visionary African and Afro-diasporic minds about the self and social and systemic change.

ENTERTAINMENT | How might we cultivate media that advances narratives that encourage love, regeneration, and interdependence and that represent the vast diversity of our stories? How might we support media that advances the dignity of all workers and that accurately portrays our histories and futures? We might turn to the Pop Culture Collaborative, a philanthropic resource and funder learning community working to transform the narrative landscape in America around people of color,

immigrants, refugees, Muslims, and Indigenous peoples, especially women, queer, and transgender and/or disabled individuals.

TRITUAL, CEREMONY, AND SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS | How might we create opportunities for ritual, ceremony, and spirit-centered life that invite us to heal, embody re-Indigenized worldviews, and reconnect to our various ancestral traditions? We might turn to Ancestors In Training, which cultivates reconnection to earth-based practices among Afro-diasporic peoples.

COMMUNITY-BASED STORYTELLING | How might we support community theater, parades, festivals, and gatherings that tell the stories of all of us? We might learn from Buffalo, New York, which since 1976 has hosted one of the largest Juneteenth celebrations in the country and is home to Ujima Theater Company, which produces plays by and about the city's Black community.

NIGHTLIFE | How might we create nightlife that shapes and embodies our worldviews by practicing safety and care for people of all genders and providing equitable pay for workers? We might turn to Papi Juice, an art collective that aims to affirm and celebrate the lives of queer and trans people of color. Structured around curated events, Papi Juice lives at the intersection of art, music, and nightlife.

MUSIC | How might we cultivate a music industry that embodies our worldviews by championing the dignity and value of all music-industry workers, equitably distributing the vast wealth generated within the industry and providing care and healing for all performers? We might turn to Resonate Coop, the first community-owned music streaming service, a multistakeholder platform cooperative that is democratically governed by its members: artists, listeners, and workers.

RETAIL | How might we advance an economic sector that offers opportunities to embody our worldviews by internalizing the externalities of supply chains, demanding sustainability and equity, and operating as a conduit for care, community, and connection? We might look to the US Federation of Worker Cooperatives, the national grassroots membership organization for worker cooperatives and democratic workplaces.

SOCIAL MEDIA | How might we cultivate a social media and technology sector that advances and embodies narratives of care and community by implementing equitable labor practices, energy sustainability, and democratic ownership? We can turn to New Public, a platform that connects designers and technologists to build thriving digital spaces.

Reflecting on these and other initiatives, I see that the core of a progressive cultural power ecosystem already exists. There are organizations and institutions across every realm of culture where people are cultivating narratives of love, interdependence, and regeneration to sustain these values for the long term. But compared to our dominant cultural institutions, these entities are few and small, if not experimental.

To scale, replicate, and share these approaches and build the power needed to shape local and regional cultures that influence local and regional political economies, we will need an investment far greater than what philanthropy currently awards. We will need bold and robust investments to build a cultural ecosystem that is able to fully engage in the imagination battle at scale. We will need investments that allow for building flexible legal structures that can meaningfully operate through transition and take the lead in shaping the next system. □

Aisha Shillingford is artistic director of Intelligent Mischievous.

HOW MOVEMENT ORGANIZATIONS ORGANIZED FUNDERS

The Chorus Foundation worked with climate movement activists to create an ecosystem of allied funders and organizers that could usher in a just transition.

BY MICHELLE MASCARENHAS

About a decade ago, as frontline-led environmental justice groups came together to create a new center of gravity in the climate movement, a group of climate justice leaders, including me, began connecting with the staff and trustees of the Chorus Foundation, which was developing its own strategy on climate funding. After discovering our shared goals and realizing that we needed each other to achieve them, our movement groups formed deep partnerships with Chorus trustees and staff.

For Chorus, what began as an effort to move money to an emerging climate justice ecosystem blossomed into deeper relationships and a coordinated funder organizing effort by and with the entire movement ecosystem. The practices, approaches, and strategies developed as part of this relationship-building process among movement groups, Chorus, and other funders hold many lessons for how funders can build meaningful relationships with movement groups to inform their own strategies, and how to advance funder organizing efforts to cultivate support for the grassroots organizing sector.

As movement groups approached Chorus, and Chorus began engaging in the climate space, the shared focus was the ecosystem, rather than individual leaders or organizations. As we approached Chorus and other funders, our goal was to build an ecosystem, not to compete to become grantees. We were a set of movement groups raising money to build what was required to bridge the gap between the scale and pace of the crisis and our current social movement strategies. A deep strategic alignment process resulted in the formation of the Climate Justice Alliance and Just Transition Strategic Framework.

What follows is based on a roundtable discussion among movement organizers who participated in this shared effort, which began around 2011. The discussion included Gopal Dayaneni of Movement Generation; Christine Cordero, formerly of the Center for Story-based Strategy and now at the Asian Pacific Environmental Network; Miya Yoshitani, Climate Justice Alliance steering committee member and former executive director of Asian Pacific Environmental Network; Cindy Stella Wiesner, executive director of the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance; and me, Michelle Mascarenhas, formerly of Movement

Generation now at Taproot Earth and cofounding cochair, with Cindy Stella Wiesner, of the Climate Justice Alliance. My commentary and questions appear in italics.

PARTNERS IN SHIFTING PHILANTHROPY

For many, perhaps all of us, our experience with Chorus was the first time we had ever partnered with a funder in a deep way. Two things made this collaboration possible: first, sharing the same goals; and second, how Chorus showed up wanting to build trust and relationships. Working together, we began organizing other funders to broaden the field of funders that supports a climate justice agenda, using affinity groups such as Making Money Make Change, EDGE, NFG, EGA, and Justice Funders spaces, and then making collective interventions in these groups and spaces to increase investment in the climate justice movement.

How did the movement partners' recognition of Chorus as an institution evolve, and what did we think we needed to do to organize them?

GOPAL DAYANENI: Prior to my work at Movement Generation, my relationship with funders was much more transactional. For me, this was an opportunity to realize, "Oh, this is different." This is like building relationships in any other sector of the movement. We can organize in the philanthropic sector in the same ways that we organize community members and other movement groups.

One thing that was complicated was when Chorus asked me to help facilitate a strategy meeting in New Orleans around just transition with their grantees and potential grantees. That was personally very challenging. What does it mean for us to try and organize together in an honest, transparent way, knowing that philanthropy was in the room? If the strategy is just transition, then I think some grantees should no longer be grantees. Some groups should not have resources directed their way. But there were also allies in the room with a shared agenda. It was not as if we had a perfect plan that we were trying to move. Instead, we were working together in real time to come up with that plan. As the facilitator of that process, it was challenging but also transformative in a way that made all future organizing easier.

This new way of partnering also meant that movement groups trusted Chorus enough to be real about challenges and see where we could address them together, rather than feeling that we had to go it alone. This was a departure from our usual experiences where we felt that we could not necessarily trust funders to continue to support the work if they glimpsed behind the curtain.

CHRISTINE CORDERO: I was the incoming executive director at the Center for Story-based Strategy, and we were holding an

advanced training. Cuong [Hoang, the primary staff person at Chorus] and Farhad [Ebrahimi, the founder and president of Chorus] were encouraged to apply to participate in the training.

There was a somewhat tense conversation with staff about whether we should have funders in the space. I thought it was the right thing to do because I sensed that we were all organizing Chorus around this ecosystem and framework, and ideally, they would have a methodology to put them in relationship to just transition and the ecosystem.

It was the first big call I was allowed to make, and I made it without a unanimous agreement. And it ended up being great. People were like, "Which ones are the funders in the room?" I saw that Chorus had the potential to become deep allies. I remember thinking, keep cultivating them, they can roll with us.

CINDY WIESNER: There are the dreamers and realists, and I felt that Chorus was part of the dream team. It was helpful to have space where we could imagine what is possible, where there was trust, and to be able to say, "I'm going to commit over the long term." I also have an image in mind of Farhad shoveling horse shit at a march, and I felt that he was one of us. If he had a task to do, he'd do it.

MIYA YOSHITANI: Something I remember is how receptive Chorus was to the conversation, not saying, "This is exactly what we were thinking," but more like, "Oh, tell us more." I mean the way they kept inviting us into the conversation. There were also moments when we were strategic about it. We would say, "Chorus is coming to town. Let's have a dinner and talk with them."



CHANGING MOMENT

The time between 2009 and 2013 was a dynamic period in which dozens of frontline grassroots groups, together with their alliances and movement support groups, came together in person on many occasions in a climate justice alignment process. This resulted in the formation of the Climate Justice Alliance and the Strategic Framework for a Just Transition, which was our unified strategy. We used these tools to organize funders such as Chorus, Libra, and Surdna, not only to fund our work but also to shift the landscape of money and power.

GOPAL DAYANENI: “The right relationships at the right time,” is how I would characterize our relationship to Chorus and these two [Farhad and Cuong]. The development of CJA and our collective thinking and experiments with ideas in different spaces, some of them funder spaces such as Making Money Make Change and the EDGE conference, contributed to the dynamism that helped us articulate ideas in new ways. It was exciting and created other opportunities that helped us be more, collectively.

Fast forward to 2023, a profoundly different moment. Organizations have grown and become more sophisticated but are taxed by a three-year-long global pandemic, an economic downturn, a reactionary political climate, and staff and leadership burnout and turnover.

MIYA YOSHITANI: There’s less of an explicit or aligned organized strategy right now, which is in part due to leadership and organizational transitions. With the pandemic, a great deal has happened, and it has proven difficult to maintain focus on collective action given that leaders are dealing with crises in their own organizations.

In focusing on the same group of progressive funders, the other challenge is that we have not had a strong strategy to go far beyond that group. I think we lack the collective capacity to be more intentional and creative about a strategy, and personally, that has been frustrating.

CHRISTINE CORDERO: Yes, I would say we’re in a completely different political and movement moment. My guess is that 90 percent of the alliances and coalitions APEN is a part of have greatly suffered in the pandemic. Not having regular in-person time means a lack of depth when it comes to leadership and trust.

When it comes to philanthropy, we had an influx of billionaire money, which means greater potential funding for just-transition work. But the infighting starts early, and suddenly there’s “big EJ” [environmental justice] and “little EJ.” These are the perils of success in some ways.

Our movements are asking, do we try to get those funds? How do we navigate that process? Some of us are in the room, while others are not. CJA played a key role in aligning us to work with the Bezos Earth Fund. But coordination is definitely up and down. For me, the level of movement and coalition dynamics means that I haven’t had much time to spend on funder organizing since becoming co-executive director of APEN. I have a distinct sense that this time is needed. But carving up time in my

Chorus had a hypothesis that investing in the front line-led climate justice ecosystem was critical to advancing a just transition. I believe the Chorus hypothesis has been proven correct.

schedule to sufficiently coordinate with people and do some of our own organizing hasn’t happened yet.

ROLES AS FUNDERS, FUNDER AFFINITY GROUPS, AND FUNDER ORGANIZERS

The group discussed the roles of funders as grant makers/investors as distinct from funder affinity group spaces and funder organizers. Affinity group spaces have provided critical arenas for funder organizing to take place. Funders, such as Chorus, also had a job to do in distributing its endowment, especially as a foundation committed to spending down in a decade.

CINDY WIESNER: Mark Randazzo of the EDGE Funders Alliance did matchmaking between us—the leadership of the Climate Justice Alliance—and Chorus. If I think about it in relation to my own development as a director, there was always a great deal of reluctance to trust funders, and I think that the relationship with Chorus transformed that. They made the transition to more confident, bolder asks much easier. And because they made long-term commitments, it empowered many of us to go out there and make bigger asks [to other foundations], and so it was incredibly important for our own development and the ecosystem as a whole.

We were part of this movement-philanthropy intervention. I think our experiments, whether in the BEA [Building Equity and Alignment], EDGE Funders Alliance, or other spaces, reflected efforts to recalibrate relationships and affect the balance of forces within the philanthropic world. Here were Farhad and Cuong trying to implement this strategy and intervention, and sometimes it assumed a kind of guerrilla style, and sometimes it felt more planned. Sometimes individuals acted, and in other moments, it was a collective strategy.

GOPAL DAYANENI: The processes that were innovated with Chorus created space for folks such as Regan Pritzker (a trustee of Libra Foundation and cofounder of Kataly) and Leah Hunt-Hendrix (founding director of Solidaire), among others, to be in the world in ways that differed from what had been passed down from established philanthropy.

MICHELLE MASCARENHAS: Movement Generation led a just-transition retreat for funders in 2015 that Chorus and EDGE cosponsored. The retreat resulted in deep relationships between funders and movement partners who then made a joint intervention at the 2016 EDGE Conference. In between the retreat and the conference, we documented the Just Transition Framework around which CJA was organizing.

The EDGE space had been primed for such organizing in part because Chorus was in leadership there. Funders and movement groups who organized together ended up calling for foundations to reinvest 15 percent of the amount they had divested from fossil fuels into regenerative economic ventures such as Seed Commons. From there, we launched Shake the Foundations, a space for funders to practice reinvestment and support others to take the same leap. This was one of several examples of how we carried out funder organizing and movement building across multiple spaces.

CINDY WIESNER: Chorus had a hypothesis that investing in the frontline-led climate justice ecosystem was critical to advancing a just transition. The ideals of the ecosystem seemed impossible 10 years ago but are now widely discussed and being put into practice. I believe the Chorus hypothesis has been proven correct. □

Michelle Mascarenhas is a senior fellow at Taproot Earth and a former codirector of the Movement Generation Justice & Ecology Project.

WHERE WE NEED TO GO

To usher in a just transition, allied funders need to organize.

BY FARHAD EBRAHIMI

Two years ago, I wrote an article for *The Forge* titled “Knowing What to Do Will Never Be Enough.” It was—and still is—the clearest articulation of the Chorus Foundation’s line of inquiry when it comes to funder organizing. As I reflect on the contents of this supplement, I can’t help but return to that line of inquiry. A better understanding of power must inform what we fund and how we fund it. But it must also inform how we build and shift power within the entire philanthropic sector.

As I shared in the opening of this supplement, Chorus’ focus and strategy have evolved over time. We began with little more than my personal commitment to move all the money under my direct control and eventually focused on how we might move that money in transformative ways. We’ve pursued this through opinion pieces, videos about our work, and conference presentations, but mostly through hundreds of informal conversations with our peers, in the hopes that we would both inspire and challenge one another to do better. Through our journey we shifted from holding power accountably to sharing power equitably to handing over power entirely. It’s a good story, and I’d like to think that we have improved at telling it. But this story is, unfortunately, also incomplete.

The story I have shared outlines the path we created with our grantmaking. As we moved down that path, two challenges emerged. First, we were increasingly asked to talk about our grantmaking work by our peers in philanthropy or by our grantees who encouraged us to engage our peers. Second, as a private foundation reorganized around long-term, unrestricted commitments and democratic decision-making, we discovered that we were no longer spending anywhere near as much time on “our” grantmaking processes as we had previously. When we asked our grantees what else we could do to better support their work, the answer was clear and resounding: *Go collect your folks in philanthropy.*

And so began our earliest attempts at “impacting the field.” Essentially, what this entails is a smattering of research, strategic communications,

political education, and storytelling, all intended to help our peers transform their approach to their own grantmaking.

You might ask, what did these efforts to “impact the field” amount to? Was the field ... impacted? To be fair, there was some movement, but mostly in organizations that already benefited from sufficient internal alignment. In *The Forge* piece, I describe a familiar experience: The friendly program officer who consistently reads reports, attends briefings, and shares thought pieces, and yet the behavior of the foundation at which they work does not move an inch. We asked, what is missing? What is happening—or not happening—behind closed doors?

It was clear that we needed to get serious about organizing in philanthropy. This meant not only modeling better grantmaking and fundraising, but also developing leadership, building power, and effecting structural change *within the philanthropic sector.* We had to do more than develop better grant makers; we needed to develop better funder organizers. As a result, these priorities soon became a large part of our work, even larger than our grantmaking.

When *The Forge* reached out to me, they asked me to write something about alternative approaches to philanthropy. What could or should philanthropy be doing differently? Given what Chorus had seen—and not seen—in our efforts to impact the field, I asked if I could write something else. I wanted to directly name and challenge the ways that philanthropy assumes that change happens in our own sector. I wanted to embrace the contention and contestation that characterize philanthropic organizations and high-net-wealth families. I also wanted to identify the need not only for leadership development in philanthropy, but also for base building, organizational development, campaign development, and alliance building—all of it targeting philanthropy. *The Forge* was amenable, and they helped me write a piece that I’m enormously proud of. (It’s a great issue of *The Forge*, and you should check it out!)

A SOBER ASSESSMENT

While my article in *The Forge* was well received, the real work is still in front of us.

The good news is that real organizing work is already happening. There are folks in philanthropy who excel at this, and I have seen them in action and learned a great deal while working with them. In particular, I would like to acknowledge Resource Generation, Solidaire, and Neighborhood Funders Group as communities that actively support their members to lean into these questions about organizing, both in theory and practice. (For full transparency, I was a cofounder of Solidaire and currently sit on its board of directors, but I cannot claim any credit for the staff's success in these areas.)

Grassroots organizations regularly organize their funders to do more than simply cut checks. As Michelle Mascarenhas captures in her article, the Chorus Foundation's grantees organized us with strategies that went far beyond fundraising. I would also like to express my appreciation for the Center for Story-based Strategy, Climate Justice Alliance, Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, and Movement Generation Justice & Ecology Project for the many ways they engaged with us. As skilled organizers, these folks know what they're doing, and yet we cannot expect them to single-handedly organize our own sector for us. We are responsible for joining them in these efforts and for taking our role as funder organizers at least as seriously as our role as grant makers.

Writing in *Dissent* earlier this year, Nina Luo shared the following assessment:

Because funders don't have a clear strategy based on an analysis of power and outcomes, what remains is cyclical and beleaguered conversations about structure and capacity. It doesn't have to be this way. Many foundation program officers are former organizers. Many donors are seriously committed to the project of redistribution. Many advisors and consultants hold aligned values and think strategically. But they're unorganized. And our failure to organize progressive funders reflects larger problems on the left.

Part of the challenge is that we often do this work without shared language, shared frameworks, dedicated organizing infrastructure, or clarity around what strategic campaigns ought to look like. If we're being honest, we must admit that we are doing this work without sufficient coordination, accountability, or equity in our division of labor between folks inside philanthropy and the movements we seek to support.

This work also involves risk. Funder organizing is often a form of workplace organizing, and workplaces can be deeply contested spaces. Knowing what to do only goes so far when your boss doesn't share your perspective, and there are real risks in pushing for transformative change at work. People can and sometimes do lose their jobs doing this kind of organizing.

In discussing challenges, I'd like to underline one of the clearest patterns in philanthropy: Women and people of color, particularly Black and Indigenous women, putting in the most work and assuming the greatest risks. When we talk about creating dedicated organizing infrastructure, we must include infrastructure to support and make whole the individuals who take the most risks. In the past, I've participated in informal efforts to provide this support. While these informal efforts will no doubt be necessary in the foreseeable future, the conversation around real, sustained infrastructure is long overdue.

Finally, I would like to name what is perhaps the most daunting challenge of all. We lack a shared vision of the end toward which we are organizing philanthropy. As I wrote at the start of this supplement, I am an abolitionist with respect to police and prisons, but also with respect to private philanthropy. I am often quick to share this information about myself because I believe in ideological transparency, but also because abolition is what I offer as a potential vision for our collective funder organizing work. Without a shared vision, any organizing success we enjoy will be limited to individual institutional outcomes. If we aspire to transform our entire sector, then both our vision and capacity to collaborate—with other funders, grantees, and social movement forces writ large—must be equally ambitious.

LEANING INTO DISCOMFORT

Although each of these challenges can be overcome, a critical mass within philanthropy will be required to challenge how power is wielded in the philanthropic sector and where that power resides.

Some resistance to organizing tools and techniques remains, largely because of how openly they deal with contention and contestation. For example, we have been experimenting with Labor Notes' framework for "An Organization Conversation." This framework, tried and true to the point of appearing unremarkable in any workplace organizing milieu, has raised some eyebrows in a philanthropic context. Why? Because it unapologetically suggests that someone in our own organization might be responsible for the status quo.

There are legitimate strategic questions about how disruptive funder organizing can be without risking the alienation of the very people we seek to organize. And there are very real tensions between funder organizing that is fundamentally disruptive and funder organizing that is fundamentally invitational, and between funder organizing that is about accountability ("calling out") and funder organizing that is about raising the bar ("calling in"). From my own perspective, the answer is a classic "yes, and ..." We need a funder organizing ecosystem that can hold and navigate these tensions with creativity.

Without an organizing ecosystem and a shift in our own culture, we will continue falling back on strategies that are grounded in deficient theories of change. Information dissemination, including in publications such as this one, is necessary but insufficient. Strategic storytelling, even by powerful grassroots leaders, is necessary but insufficient. Modeling, including the type we have done for 17 years at the Chorus Foundation, is necessary but insufficient. If we are going to transform the philanthropic sector, then we must first transform how decisions are made and who gets to make them.

CHALLENGING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF SELF-INTEREST

At many points in the last two years, we have heard that funder organizing is somehow fundamentally different from other forms of organizing. This is true, of course, but in what ways is it different?

Some observers have suggested that when organizing funders, especially high-net-wealth donors or well-compensated members of the philanthropic professional-managerial class, we are not asking them to act in their own self-interest. Instead, we are asking them to make a personal sacrifice in the name of the greater good. I could not disagree more with this assessment.

There is a quotation, often credited to artist and activist Lilla Watson, that should be familiar to many of us: *If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.*

If we believe these words, then we can grasp the difference between a short-term, transactional understanding of self-interest, and a long-term, transformational understanding of self-interest. It might have been in my short-term, transactional self-interest to hold on to the resources and the power I was given at a very young age, but my long-term, transformational self-interest can only be found in handing over resources and power to radically democratic processes and structures for community self-determination.

Liberation can be the result of building or wielding one's power, but can also come from letting it go. Having far more power than one ought to is deeply toxic and corrosive. When power is handed over to someone who has historically had power wielded against them, both parties can be liberated.

This is a strategic matter, not just a personal one. The tendency is to underestimate our collective capacity to influence or control philanthropic institutions. "At the end of the day," we'll say, "it's the board's decision." Or we'll declare, "If the family doesn't want to do it, it's never going to happen." But how often do we ask, "Who is organizing the board?" or "Who can organize the family?" How often do we allow ourselves to dream of changing their perspectives, or supporting insurgent members of those boards, families, and other governance structures to do their own internal organizing? If we believe that the board's liberation, or the family's liberation, is bound up with that of their grantees, then what might be possible?

Describing the ideal funder, Nina Luo writes:

The donor I want is an excellent organizer. They have the patience, emotional intelligence, and strategic analysis to form long-term relationships with other wealthy people to develop them into partners. The donor I want is someone we strategize with not just because we want their money, but because they have something meaningful to teach us about how to make money part of our plan. They are a real comrade, with just as much emotionally invested as the rest of us.

At its most transformative, funder organizing represents a cross-class, multiracial undertaking that prioritizes the long-term, transformational self-interest of all parties. It involves not only forging class solidarity, but also cultivating class traitors. This means that many of our existing tools and frameworks for workplace organizing, which focus on the short-term, transactional class interests of a conventional workplace, can only get us so far.

Fortunately, the idea of organizing multiple bases toward a shared vision of liberation is not unheard of, and is a core strategy of multiracial, anti-racist organizing. Alongside the arguments about workplace organizing that I articulated in *The Forge*, we must envision what explicitly cross-class, multiracial, anti-racist, and anticlassist—dare I say anticapitalist—organizing ought to look like in a philanthropic context. If we aspire to organize multiple bases toward a shared liberatory strategy, then how should relationships, accountability, and alignment develop between these bases? This is not simply a question for funder organizers, but also a much larger proposition that requires our collective attention.

NAVIGATING CONTRADICTIONS

As Movement Generation has shared:

The work of just transition is not easy. Transition is the process of navigating contradiction. So for transition to be just, we must have a clear vision of where we are heading and a well-tuned moral compass to help us get there.

As we have seen in this supplement, philanthropy is rife with contradictions. Some authors here have explicitly named these contradictions, while other tensions are visible within the supplement, including this article. If just transition is a process of navigating contradictions, then how might we understand and thereby navigate the contradictions inherent in funder organizing?

In the just-transition community, we use the phrase "false solution" to describe any alleged solution for which the decision-making process, material benefits, overall impacts, or power dynamics serve to reinforce the status quo. Sometimes, false solutions are clear-cut, but sometimes, pointing out a false solution can become quite contentious. What if something that's clearly a false solution in terms of the world we want is also a strategic organizing opportunity in terms of the world we currently inhabit? This is precisely the type of contradiction we must learn to navigate if we are to succeed at organizing in philanthropy.

In the opening to this supplement, I referred to the Chorus Foundation as, at best, a "transitional form." As an abolitionist, private philanthropy is explicitly not part of my vision of what the future ought to look like. In that sense, private philanthropy, and in particular the Chorus Foundation, is a false solution. That said, the Chorus Foundation has also presented a strategic opportunity to mobilize resources for the grassroots organizing sector and to agitate and organize from within the philanthropic sector. A transitional form is a particular kind of contradiction: an activity that we might strategically engage in today, even if our vision of tomorrow explicitly excludes that activity.

From a just-transition perspective, all private philanthropy is, at best, a transitional form. As Audre Lorde taught us, the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. Private philanthropy would not exist without an economy built on extraction, exploitation, and the enclosure of wealth and power. But there is good news: Where we are going, we won't need private philanthropy. Can the process of letting go of private philanthropy—in other words, the process of handing over power entirely—be a credible part of the journey? Despite the contradictions embedded in this question, I believe it can. But only, as Movement Generation has said, if we have a clear vision of where we are heading and a well-tuned moral compass to help get us there.

As I wrote in the opening, this supplement is, in many ways, the product of almost two decades of work, of which we are incredibly proud. And yet we know that we have barely begun to scratch the surface. This work can be deeply uncomfortable but also profoundly liberating. We must stay focused on where we are heading. For all its faults, I believe the philanthropic sector is worth organizing, not simply as an ATM from which to withdraw resources to support transformative movements, but as a sector worthy of transformation itself. □

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The Chorus Foundation
works for a just transition
to a regenerative
economy in
the United States
by supporting communities
on the front lines
of the old, extractive
economy to build
new bases of
political, economic, and
cultural power
for systemic change.



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