

## **A Funders Network Alliance In Support of Grassroots Organizing and Movement-Building**

*An initiative of the Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing,  
the Funders Network on Transforming the Global Economy  
and the Working Group on Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace*

Over the past two decades, activists and transnational movements have mounted successful challenges to the hegemony of neoliberal market fundamentalism. From the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas (1994) to the Battle in Seattle (1999) to the creation of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre (2001), the TINA years of Reagan and Thatcher (There Is No Alternative) have been replaced with the growing conviction that “another world is possible.” Counter-summits, global campaigns and social forums have been crucial spaces to articulate local struggles, share experiences and analyses, develop expertise, and build concrete forms of international solidarity among progressive movements for social, economic and ecological justice.

These spaces and mobilizations have also made visible actors from the “periphery,” be they Indigenous Peoples promoting *buen vivir* in the Andes, farmers calling for food sovereignty in Africa, or youth activists leading grassroots climate campaigns in California. All are contributing to the political momentum begun by civil rights, feminist, ecological and other movements from four decades ago. Along with complex experiences in Latin America, uprisings in the Arab world, new networks emerging out of the US social forum process and more recent “Occupy” movements inspired by Tahrir Square, Spanish *Indignados* and Chilean students, these and other movements like them have opened a new cycle of political innovation and activity which could profoundly change the shape of politics, and the prospective for activists everywhere.

### **CONTEXT FOR THIS COLLABORATIVE EFFORT**

Since the current crisis began unfolding in 2007, institutional funding for progressive grassroots organizing has steadily declined, even as new grassroots organizations, practices, leaders and alliances offer concrete evidence of being able to lead the process of deep transformation needed.

Inspired by increasingly dynamic community organizing and movement-building in the US and around the world, this set of funders are aligning to create new collaborative efforts to significantly increase resources to the grassroots organizing sector, and advance it as an innovative and crucial force for transformative social change. This effort is understood within the context of funder/movement discussions organized over a number of years by the Funders Network on Transforming the Global Economy (FNTG), within the US and World Social Forum process and similar spaces. It is modeling the decade-long experience of the Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO) to help legitimize and bring new funding into the youth organizing sector, informed by movement leaders and funders. And it will incorporate tools and approaches being developed by the Working Group on Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace to expand dialogue and learning among funders around the world.

This initiative will take root first in the fertile ground of US grassroots organizing and philanthropy. It will be global as well, however, undertaken within an analysis of the international context and an understanding of the transnational nature of movement-building today, and engaging grantmakers in Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America as the process unfolds.

## THE POLITICAL MOMENT: WHY NOW?

Against a backdrop of declining US power on the global stage and the emergence of a minority majority domestically, the US is experiencing increased political polarization and an intensifying decades-long assault on the social safety net and the public sector as a whole. Increased levels of popular unrest and class antagonism seem inevitable, as a prolonged economic recession and austerity policies begin to be felt more deeply and broadly, and ecological flash points like Irene, Katrina, the BP oil spill, tornadoes and droughts become the new normal.

Internationally as well, the financial and economic crisis has provided new opportunities to cut social benefits and engage in regressive austerity policies, and seems already to be a catalyst for a rise in extremisms, from religious fundamentalism and more secular racism and xenophobia. In many respects the current crisis, reaching into two continents, is worse than in 1929. Organizing linked to movement building thus makes sense as one way to defend social and democratic benefits and prevent extremism and inequalities from deepening further.

Like steam that is released when the tectonic plates shift in the ground, the question becomes, who and what will capture the energy from these eruptions and channel them into a force of enduring change? What organizations and vehicles can be built today to prepare for what's to come? The lessons from the last three years, as well as the last century, inform our response.

## THE STATE OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: WHY GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING?

Social movements ebb and flow. The outbursts of energy described above have the potential to animate movements not through linear progress, but with exponential growth, if the organizations poised to capture and channel it are adequately resourced and prepared. Think tanks, policy advocacy shops, communications and media operations are all important pieces to the equation. But without a militant, mass social movement locally rooted in communities within - and to an extent trans-locally linked across - nations, the inevitable eruptions of steam won't be channeled into the organizations that are the motive force, the powerful pistons needed to drive the systemic change that is so desperately needed.

Over the past four decades, thousands of community-based organizations have taken root and grown throughout the globe, responding to local needs, though anchored in core values -- democracy, food sovereignty, immigrant rights, workers rights, racial and gender justice. This grassroots organizing sector of community-based organizations, their networks and allied NGOs represents something new within the wider social justice ecosystem, distinguished from other community organizing efforts or policy and advocacy organizations in a number of key ways:

- It is rooted in and accountable to the **frontline communities directly impacted by the issues addressed.**
- It **builds local power**, developing endogenous leadership, membership bases, and institutions, promoting genuine participation and democracy in organizations, grounded in values, principles and perspectives of oppressed peoples.
- It is **linked trans-locally and internationally**. From the Third Worldism of the 1970s, Central American solidarity and South African divestment in the 1980s, the emergence of the global justice movement in the late 1990s and most recently the social forum process, the creation of

Grassroots Global Justice, and transnational labor/worker organizing efforts, building international linkages remains central to its strategies and culture.

- **It connects individual and societal transformation**, seeking deeper social change over more limited transactional political goals, and evolving the theory and practice of how individual and broader social transformation are intertwined and inextricable.
- It is **beginning to contend for power at scale beyond the local**, waging more offensive campaigns, building progressive political movements independent of major political parties, engaging in electoral organizing as a strategy to build new bases and power.
- It **develops new kinds of alliances and regional, national and international vehicles** to build political strength between organizations and movements, bridge issue silos, allow for greater impact on national policies, and begin to build the infrastructure required for mass social movements.
- It is **pioneering innovation and experimentation** in organizing method, leadership development training, sustainability models, and organizational form- from a recognition that new vehicles have to be imagined in order to respond to contemporary conditions.

## **MOVING FORWARD**

Among many concrete recommendations for ways to increase support to such grassroots movements in the US and internationally, funders and social movement leaders meeting at the US Social Forum last year called for the creation of organizing body or hub to bring together various parts of the philanthropic field, building strategic alignment among funders and funder alliances, developing communication strategies to generate attention and momentum and to help legitimize and institutionalize support to the grassroots organizing sector within philanthropy. Mechanisms for tracking, reporting out and helping distribute funds were discussed, as well as ways to keep funders accountable to target goals and to the leadership of grassroots organizers who have been partners in this process.

As we progress with this initiative and begin to gain a better idea of how it can work in practice, we are developing an effective collaborative framework that builds on the strengths we each bring to the table, while reaching out to funder colleagues and sister affinity groups to build a larger shared space to move philanthropy towards increasing resources for social justice and support for deeper systemic change.

Working closely with others within the funder community, these efforts aim to combine with other programs and initiatives to make philanthropy's collective efforts in support of these new grassroots movements and organizing strategies greater than the sum of our individual parts.