

A GRASSROOTS THEORY OF FUNDING

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“Grassroots” is a word that gets thrown around all the time in the non-profit world. Usually it means that a group is local, community-driven, or has a small budget. When funders identify ourselves as grassroots, we’re usually just talking about the kind of work we support. But I believe that we need to do much more than give money to grassroots groups. We need a grassroots theory of funding.

At the most basic level, a grassroots theory of funding requires that the communities a funder serves take the lead as grantmakers, grantees, and donors. This means prioritizing the leadership of those who are most affected by the issues we focus on, and committing serious time and resources to make participation accessible for people who experience multiple, intersecting oppressions.

But community leadership is just scratching the surface of what a grassroots theory of funding could be. We need to go deeper, and to do that, we’re going to have to start thinking like grass.

As funders, most of us are focused only on the trees. When groups first form, organizing with little cash and no paid staff, we see them as seedlings. Soon those seedlings will seek fiscal sponsorships, and with that, their first grants. We pride ourselves on knowing which seedlings hold promise and invest in those we think will grow tall over time. Eventually, if a group is successful, they will expand, hiring part-time and then later full-time staff. They will incorporate as their own non-profit and begin to broaden their scope, moving beyond local issues to state, national, or even global work.

At last, what started out as just a seedling has grown into a tall, strong tree with an impeccable reputation, a broad vantage point, and a multi-million dollar budget fed by its deep roots in private and corporate philanthropy and perhaps even government funding.

Let me say first that I’m not proposing chopping down anyone’s tree. Large organizations, as long as they are truly accountable to the communities they serve, provide stability, reliable services, organizing know-how, and inspiration. There should be funding for them. There should be big, multi-year grants with simple application requirements that don’t require a full-time development staff to comply. But our focus on trees has meant that we’ve missed the bigger picture. Social justice movements are not just the story of the trees. They are also the story of the grass.

Grass thinks horizontally. It doesn’t concentrate its resources into a thick trunk or wait until it’s older to develop seeds. The goal of grass is to spread and it can do that in multiple ways: it flowers; it sends out runners—stems that travel above ground; it sends out rhizomes—stems that travel below ground.

A grassroots theory of funding does not mow down the prairie in favor of just a few trees. It does not pit groups against each other, forcing them to fight for a few, lonely spots in a manicured garden. Instead, it helps the wild grasslands grow strong and spread. A grassroots theory of funding knows that if you want to see the grass flourish, you’d be a fool to water only a few blades.





What all this means is that we need to redefine our idea of success as funders. Every group does not and should not become a tree, with long-term growth, trackable results, and a focus on national policy. In the grasslands, some groups fill a need for a moment. Some stay long term. Some grow and some fall apart. Some stay fiercely local, some go global. Change is slow, complex, and messy. But in these ever-evolving grasslands, over time, new leaders emerge, new organizing tactics are tested, new theories of change evolve, new methods of interdependence thrive, and innovative ways of mobilizing and inspiring people are developed. As the field grows and spreads, so too the movement—not because of any one groups’ leadership, but because of the collective, collaborative creativity and strength of the grasslands.

A grassroots funder is not afraid if grantees fail. Of course it’s heartbreaking for everyone involved when that happens. But we can’t forget what grassroots movements for social justice are really up against: a violent, globalized, system of white supremacy where a very small group of people control almost all of the planet’s wealth and power. With these kinds of impossible odds, if we are not failing constantly, spectacularly, and tirelessly, even as we have our wins and gains, then we’re not doing it right.

When funders require results with no room for failure, we co-opt the boldness of radical movements, forcing groups to play it safe for fear of losing their grants. This is not a sign that philanthropy has lost its way—co-opting radical movements is, in fact, exactly what philanthropy was designed to do. Philanthropy is often used as a synonym for giving, generosity, charity. But philanthropy is not a value. Philanthropy in the United States is an institution, just like the criminal justice system or the health care system. And like most American institutions, philanthropy’s job is to preserve the status quo, to protect assets, and keep wealth and power in the hands of the few.

A grassroots theory of funding must demand nothing less than the redistribution of wealth and power. It must demand the end of philanthropy itself. Because if we are thinking like grass, we must think of the resources grass needs like the sun, like the rain. The money funders grant does not belong to them or to any donor. Funders and donors are not stewards either, carefully tending a sodded lawn—we are talking about the wild grasslands here.

In a grassroots theory of funding, this money, like the sun, like the rain, already belongs to the communities a funder serves, already belongs to all those who, through their organizing, service, time, love, and sacrifice, are making change happen. A grassroots funder’s job is only to gather as many resources as possible and then distribute them to as many groups as possible. To honor and amplify the work those groups are doing. And to tread very, very lightly so that the grass can grow.