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Where We Need to Go
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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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