Philanthropy and Power Supplement
Sponsored by Chorus Foundation

How Movement Organizations Organized Funders
By Michelle Mascarenhas

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Winter 2024

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

**RITUAL, 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 multisector 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 externals 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 Mischief.

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**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 an 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.

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 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. I believe the Chorus hypothesis has been proven correct.

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