



A Philanthropy at Its Best® Report

CULTIVATING THE GRASSROOTS

A Winning Approach for Environment and Climate Funders

By Sarah Hansen

About the Author

Sarah Hansen consults with foundations and nonprofit organizations to advance multi-issue, progressive social change agendas. She specializes in developing big-picture strategies and long-term visions connected to concrete, manageable work plans. Sarah currently serves as program advisor to the Elias Foundation in Westchester County, N.Y., which seeks to promote a more equitable society by supporting community organizing. She also leads an initiative at the Ford Foundation to convene four successful community-led public foundations.

Previously, Sarah served as the associate director and senior program officer of the V. Kann Rasmussen Foundation, doing grantmaking in the environmental health and climate change arenas. She also led the Starry Night Fund of the Tides Foundation through a theory of change process and helped the fund determine its \$8-million grants portfolio. Prior to that, Sarah served for eight years as executive director of the Environmental Grantmakers Association, providing leadership in connecting environmental issues to issues such as globalization, economic inequality, racial justice and community empowerment. Sarah helped to found the Funders Network on Trade and Globalization as well as the Gulf Coast Fund for Community Renewal and Ecological Health. Sarah recently served as a board member of the North Star Fund, one of New York City's leading community foundations dedicated to building social change. She currently serves on the solidarity board of Community Voices Heard, an organization of low-income people working to build power in New York City and New York State to improve the lives of families and communities by connecting public policy with grassroots organizing and leadership development. Sarah lives in Brooklyn with her partner, Sally Kohn, and their three-year-old daughter, Willa. She can be reached at sarah@confabulist.org.

Acknowledgments

This report is the collaborative result of a visionary and dedicated group of individuals.

First and foremost, I am grateful to the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy for asking me to author this paper. For Aaron Dorfman, a thank-you for his tireless efforts and just vision for philanthropy. For Niki Jagpal, a thank-you for her fearless editing and intellectual firepower. For Kevin Laskowski, a thank-you for his data prowess and impeccable edits.

It was a happy privilege to work with the advisory committee, and I am particularly indebted to Lisa Abbott, Millie Buchanan, Jeffrey Campbell, Bill Gallegos, Heeten Kalan, Roger Kim, Martha Matsuoka, Peter Riggs and Jen Sokolove. In addition, my deepest thanks to the devoted team of Benno Friedman, Lois Gibbs, Peter Montague and Cheryl King Fischer for their unfailing advice and guidance. In particular, Peter Montague has my everlasting loyalty and affection for being a constant resource of information. Heartfelt thanks as well to Jeffrey Campbell, Danielle Deane, Denise Joines, Lisa Pike Sheehy and Kolu Zigbi for providing superb case studies that strengthen this report immensely. And thank you to Janet Keating, Terry Odendahl and Michele Prichard for allowing me to include exemplary examples of their organizations' work in this report.

A number of people were good enough to read drafts along the way and offer their expert advice: Harriet Barlow, Sarah Christiansen, Jon Cracknell, Annie Ducmanis, Hugh Hogan, Cathy Lerza, Bruce Lourie, Anita Nager, Mark Randazzo, Marni Rosen, Jenny Russell, Kathy Sessions, Shelley Shreffler, Midge Sweet, Lee Wasserman, Maya Wiley and Ken Wilson.

Thank you to Rachel Leon and everyone at the Environmental Grantmakers Association for allowing Aaron Dorfman and me to introduce a preliminary draft of this report at the organization's 2010 retreat. The advice we received there was pivotal to the project.

Thank you to Jen Naylor and Kate Frucher for offering up their beautiful home to me as a quiet daily writing space. Most importantly, loving thanks to my family, especially Zachary, Gloria and Jeffrey Welcker, who provided great edits and title ideas. And to my partner, Sally Kohn, and our daughter, Willa Hansen-Kohn, who are a constant source of inspiration and support.

Executive Summary

The pace of social change is quickening in the United States and across the world. From a historic presidential election in 2008 to the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, long-standing barriers to justice and equality are being challenged in every corner of the globe. Unfortunately, the environmental movement is not keeping up. New environmental initiatives have been stalled and attacked while existing regulations have been rolled back and undermined. At a time when the peril to our planet and the imperative of change should drive unyielding forward momentum, it often seems as if the environmental cause has been pushed back to the starting line.

The goal of this report is to help environment and climate funders become effective resources of a strong and successful movement for change. **This report argues that we can secure more environmental wins by decreasing reliance on top-down funding strategies and increasing funding for grassroots communities that are directly impacted by environmental harms and have the passion and perseverance to mobilize and demand change.**

History supports this approach. From women's suffrage to the civil rights movement to early environmental wins, grassroots organizing has clearly been a vital lever of victory. Campaigns against dirty energy as well as, notably, the success of grassroots campaigns *against* environmental regulations show the power and impact of community-driven change. It's not merely that grassroots organizing wins change at the local level but, in case after case, builds the political pressure and climate for national change as well. Moreover, testing a given agenda at the local level is a practical threshold assessment to determine whether a campaign can

resonate more widely, building from the ground up to create broad public demand for change.

The case for supporting grassroots environmental efforts is especially strong. Grassroots organizing is particularly powerful where social, economic and environmental ills overlap, as is all too common in lower-income communities and communities of color. By engaging with the organizations that serve these communities and nurturing the growth of their leaders, we not only are investing in a healthy planet and people now, but also building a movement that reflects the future demographic majority of America.

This funding strategy will require a dramatic shift in our philanthropy. In 2009, environmental organizations with budgets of more than \$5 million received half of all contributions and grants made in the sector, despite comprising just 2 percent of environmental public charities. **From 2007-2009, only 15 percent of environmental grant dollars were classified as benefitting marginalized communities, and only 11 percent were classified as advancing "social justice" strategies, a proxy for policy advocacy and community organizing that works toward structural change on behalf of those who are the least well off politically, economically and socially.** In the same time period, grant dollars donated by funders who committed more than 25 percent of their total dollars to the environment were three times less likely to be classified as benefitting marginalized groups than the grant dollars given by environmental funders in general. In short, environmental funders are expending tremendous resources, yet spending far too little on high-impact, cost-effective grassroots organizing.

The good news is there are many effective, powerful organizations on the ground,

advancing a pro-environment agenda every day. But they are under-resourced and under-utilized in our overall advocacy infrastructure. As environment and climate harms build up, the number of communities ripe for organizing also continues to grow. Around the globe, there is a constituency for environmental change, one that can expand and mobilize at a massive scale if we fund the infrastructure needed to do so.

This report is written for funders working on the full range of environmental change – from conservation to environmental health, green jobs to climate science, environmental justice to global sustainability. It shows that success will require grantmakers who:

- Provide at least 20 percent of grant dollars explicitly to benefit communities of the future.
- Invest at least 25 percent of grant dollars in grassroots advocacy, organizing and civic engagement.
- Build supportive infrastructure.
- Take the long view, preparing for tipping points.

Filled with case studies and examples that illustrate the impact of funding grassroots organizing for environmental change, this report provides concrete recommendations on how funders can increase their engagement with this vast potential constituency. Together, we can and must support and expand motivated, grassroots communities that, by speaking out and taking collective action, can help advance the bold changes we all desire.

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“From toxic chemicals to dirty energy, contemporary environmental challenges are broadly distributed and deeply embedded in our society. An effective defense must be equally distributed and embedded. This NCRP report underscores how far communities living amidst environmental health hazards have stretched modest investments to protect their families and the places where they live, work and play. It provides pragmatic guidance for philanthropy to better equip affected communities to raise awareness, strengthen policy initiatives and mobilize majority support for stronger environmental protection.”

—Kathy Sessions, Director, Health and Environmental Funders Network (HEFN)

“We're not going to make big changes in climate as long as climate is seen solely as an environmental issue”

—Ed Miller, Environment Program Manager, The Joyce Foundation

The pace of social change is increasing rapidly in the United States and around the globe but unfortunately the environment and climate movement has failed thus far to keep up with movements for justice and equality. Existing environmental regulations have been diminished and new initiatives have been attacked and stymied. From 2000-2009, grantmakers provided \$10 billion for environment and climate work, funding primarily top-down strategies; yet, we have not seen a significant policy win since the 1980s. Our funding strategy is misaligned with the great perils our planet and environment face.

This report contends that environment and climate funders can be more effective and secure more environmental wins by investing heavily in grassroots communities that are disproportionately impacted by environment and climate harms. By engaging meaningfully at the grassroots level, grantmakers have the opportunity not just to support efforts that are especially strong but to use their work at the local level to build political pressure and mobilize for national change. Grassroots organizing is especially powerful where economic, social, political and environmental harms overlap to keep certain communities at the margins. By acknowledging the coming demographic shift in the United States and investing in lower-income and other underserved communities, environment and climate funders can increase their impact and build a movement that is more aligned with the future of our country. The report includes case studies that illustrate the impact of funding grassroots groups that are organizing for environmental change, and provides concrete suggestions for how environment and climate funders can engage with this vast potential constituency.

This is the fourth in a series of reports from the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP) that invites grantmakers focused on specific issues to reconsider their funding strategies to generate the greatest impact. A report for education grantmakers was published in October 2010, one for health funders was published in April 2011, and one for arts and culture funders was published in October 2011.

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