

Foregrounding Social Movement Voices

Popular Organizing and Philanthropic Funding in
Asia and the Pacific



Methodological Notes

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Thousand Currents is a funder headquartered in the U.S. that supports movements and movement support organizations in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean that are working on food sovereignty, climate justice and economic justice. Thousand Currents invests in making practices of philanthropy more responsive to grassroots movements needs and less dictated by the agenda of institutional funders.

PSJP is a global program hosted by Global Dialogues, UK. Its purpose is to support the civic space, mainly the fields of philanthropy and civil society, to become more effective as a space for agents of social change and be more aligned with people-led agendas.

The artwork accompanying this report is a portrayal of the complex, trust based relationships that movements share with some of the donors that support them. The design and images also seek to portray that in the creative space that is people's movements, everyone is a weaver and they improvise as they adapt and evolve to ever shifting socio political realities

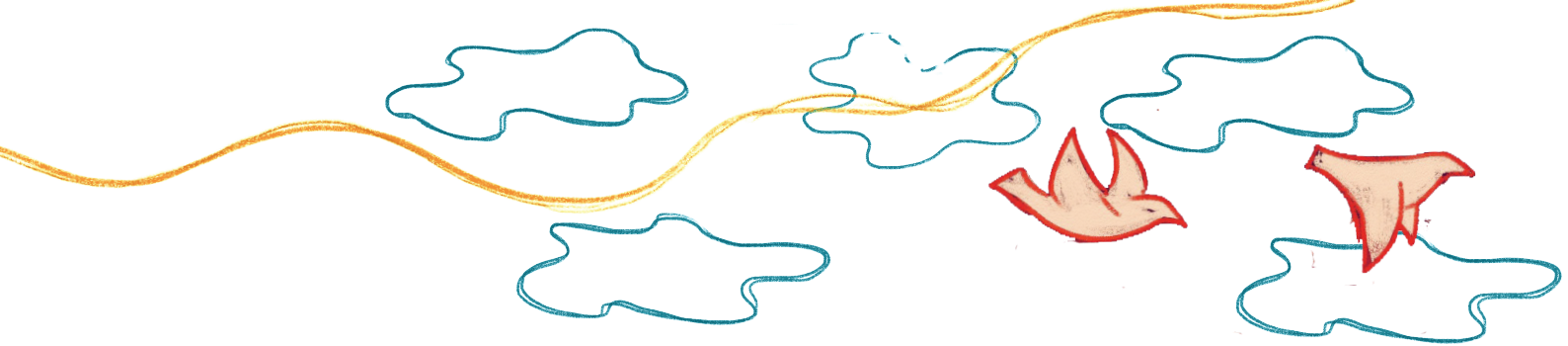
Working off of 20 in-depth interviews with activists and people who work in funding institutions spread across 12 countries in Asia and the Pacific, this paper explores the relationship between institutional philanthropy and social movements in Asia and the Pacific. Our research details the experiences of those 20 people and their recommendations for how institutional philanthropy can better engage with non-registered and collective socio-political efforts for social change led by oppressed peoples. Interviewees lived in these sub-regions of Asia: the Pacific, South Asia, South East Asia, and West Asia.

We conducted this research with the knowledge that it is extremely difficult to generalize about the whole of Asia and the Pacific and that 20 people constitutes a relatively small sample size. Consequently, this represents not a comprehensive study but rather a glimpse into an area of inquiry that we hope will be useful for those in philanthropy who are curious about how some activists across Asia and the Pacific experience philanthropy and how to fund their, and other, movements more effectively and relevantly.

We asked activists to describe their work and the structures of any movements or formations of which they are a part or with whom they work. We subsequently asked more in-depth questions about their relationships with institutional funding. These questions involved access to funds, salaries, political ideology, workability, expertise, power dynamics, reporting, accountability and a range of related topics.

Of the 20 interviewees, 18 participate in popular movements. Of these 18 people, some worked in smaller organizations that identified as allied to larger movements, and a few of the 18 said they worked in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that received funding but still considered themselves part of movements. The remaining two people were funders whose work focused on supporting grassroots social movements and advocating for grassroots social movements in Asia and the Pacific to receive adequate funding.

We found participants through either mutual contacts or, in some cases, people we interviewed introduced us to more people we could speak to, and we used this snowball method to find more people. Our research focused on social movements that had a membership base



Introduction

that identified as progressive justice-oriented movements. We had an interpreter present in only one interview, and we made sure to cross-check with the person we interviewed about the accuracy of the translation.

The political contexts of the different represented movements varied. Most of the movements acted in countries that would be technically identified as democracies, yet some of countries have populist-authoritarian leaders who sometimes identify progressive social movements as enemies of the state. The vilification of social movements differs across contexts, and in some contexts, the activists described the presence of an occupying force.

Interviewees also revealed that some regions within a country experienced persistent marginalization or underdevelopment vis-à-vis more prosperous and politically powerful regions. So social movements had emerged in an effort to distribute resources and political power evenly within these national contexts. The internal diversity within a national context itself makes it even harder to make generalizations about so vast a region as Asia and the Pacific. This, of course, also led to a diverse definition of “popular organizing.”

Issues regarding institutional philanthropy resonated across contexts; some trends in how actors experience institutional philanthropy transcend geographic context.

An interview confidentiality agreement protects not just participant names and institutional locations but also their national locations. To maintain confidentiality, we refer to interviewees by number (Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2 and so forth).

Readers of this paper will find long block quotes transcribed from our interviews. This reflects an intentional methodological choice to foreground the voices of the people we interviewed.

We are grateful for all the activists’ rich reflections, and we are thankful that they shared their time with us.

The 1990s saw growth in the rhetoric of civil society worldwide. Goals like good governance and strengthening civil society became commonplace in the discourse, policy, and practice of governments, intergovernmental organizations and financial institutions¹. This increase was accompanied by an institutionalization, professionalization, bureaucratization and depoliticization of social movements via what is referred to as the “NGOization of social movements.” This process accelerated in neoliberal policy contexts and in contexts where NGOs flourished after states withdrew from public services. Philanthropy and aid have played a key role in NGOization, since funders require grantee-partners to demonstrate particular, and narrow, understandings of managerial and technical capabilities to administer, monitor and account for project funding². In policy and funding spaces, NGOization led to the marginalization of more popular forms of organizing led by rural and urban working-class populations, which decreased compared to NGOs and professional community engagement groups³.

This research explores different forms of popular organizing efforts in Asia and the Pacific. We primarily intend to show how activists who are a part of popular movements have experienced institutional philanthropy in relation to their own functioning and objectives. We also try to understand whether popular movements want the philanthropic sector to engage with them and how.

¹ Aziz Choudry. “Global Justice? Contesting NGOization: Knowledge Politics and Containment in Antiglobalization Networks. In *Learning from the Ground Up*. SpringerLink. Accessed August 10, 2022. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9780230112650_2.

² Ana Margarida Esteves, Sara Motta, and Laurence Cox. “Issue Two Editorial: ‘Civil Society’ versus Social Movements.” *Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements* 1, no. 2 (November 2009): 1-21. <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/summary?doi=10.1.1.695.3103>.

³ See the discussion about NGOization of the Indian feminist movement in Srila Roy, “The Indian Women’s Movement: Within and beyond NGOization.” *Journal of South Asian Development* 10, no. 1 (2015): 96-117. Or see reflections about the phenomenon by the global peasant movement in María Elena Martínez-Torres and Peter M. Rosset. “La Vía Campesina: The Birth and Evolution of a Transnational Social Movement.” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 37, no. 1 (2010): 149-175.



By “popular organizing,” we mean collective efforts led by excluded and marginalized peoples acting to improve the daily circumstances of their own lives. Popular organizing efforts receive less funding than NGOs, from both the philanthropic and aid sectors ⁴. This study of the relationship between popular organizing and institutional philanthropy relies almost entirely on in-depth interviews with activists about their experiences. These interviews offered a window into the world of popular organizing, and we heard directly from activists about how institutional philanthropy could change its practices to accommodate movements better.

We hope our research will support engagement and sensitization of institutional funders about how their funding and funding practices are perceived and experienced by activists who are a part of popular movements. We also hope to use the research findings to advocate and broaden the mindsets of funders who do not fund popular movements and favor NGOs.

Thinker, journalist and researcher Richard Pithouse captures well how vital social movements are to social change. He writes: “NGOs cannot substitute themselves for movements in terms of constituting an emancipatory political force because significant progressive change is seldom possible without sustained popular mobilisation. Moreover, while movements can be democratic, and sometimes are, NGOs very seldomly attain democratic modes of working given that they are overwhelmingly professional organisations driven by funders, boards and directors rather than members.” ⁵

Our research shows that movements are open to receiving funds and engaging with institutional philanthropy but often cope with funders’ lack of knowledge of how grassroots movements actually operate. We should mention here that there are some important exceptions to this, and some movements do not take institutional funding no matter the circumstances, as a political choice. A founder of a prominent South Asian movement that does not accept funding from philanthropic institutions stated that “funding must come from people whose battle is represented (that is, movement members), or from (individual) supporters of the movements and campaigns ⁶.”

⁴ Nicola Banks, David Hulme, and Michael Edwards. “NGOs, States, and Donors Revisited: Still Too Close for Comfort?” *World Development*, Volume 66 (2015): 707-718

⁵ Quoted in Marcelo Lopes de Souza. “NGOs and Social Movements: Convergences and Divergences.” *City 17*, no. 2 (2013): 258-261.

⁶ Smarinita Shetty and Sneha Philip. “IDR Interviews: Aruna Roy.” *India Development Review*. January 26, 2022. https://idronline.org/features/idr-interviews/interview-with-aruna-roy-social-activist-and-an-architect-of-indias-rti-act/?utm_source=Twitter&utm_medium=social_media&utm_campaign=interview_aruna_roy.

Our interviews generated considerable insights on donor inflexibility, the barriers in registration processes, the difficulty of fitting movement work into a proposal, the overreliance on technical skills created and formed for the NGO sector, the depoliticizing effects of money, internal power dynamics within movements, power dynamics between donors and grantee partners, and many other aspects of the process of receiving and accessing funding.

Rethinking Contemporary Institutional Philanthropy

Philanthropy continues to be at a crossroads. On one available path, donors continue with market-oriented approaches and intensify the focus on efficiency and particular understandings of scale, which prioritize absolute numerical changes. Terms like “strategic philanthropy,” “philanthrocapitalism,” and “effective altruism” capture this line of thinking. On another path, the philanthropic sector contends with power, recognizes community labor, develops accountability and supports calls for social, economic, gender and racial justice.

Important questions are being raised about where philanthropic wealth comes from and how the decision-making structures within foundations and philanthropic organizations are created⁷. In line with this trend, there has been a shift toward approaches captured by terms and phrases like “democratization,” “community leadership,” “community-asset building,” “social justice,” “#ShiftThePower,” “decolonization,” “trust-based funding” and “feminist funding,” among many others⁸. Many of these approaches recognize self-led social organizing and social movements as the key factors in social change processes⁹.

Philanthropy’s seemingly new emphasis on movements is not entirely new. Institutional funders did indeed fund some social movements in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, but since then, the prioritization of registered NGOs and international NGOs for funding has drawn resources away from social movements. More recently, we have

⁷ Anand Giridharadas. *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World*. Vintage, 2019; Edgar Villanueva, Jennifer Buffett, and Peter Buffett. *Decolonizing Wealth: Indigenous Wisdom to Heal Divides and Restore Balance*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2021; and Benjamin Soskis. “The Importance of Criticizing Philanthropy.” *The Atlantic*. May 12, 2014. <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/05/the-case-for-philanthropy-criticism/361951/>.

⁸ Philliteracy. “MacKenzie Scott & the History of Challenging Philanthropy’s Status Quo.” *Medium*. June 23, 2021. <https://philliteracy.medium.com/mackenzie-scott-the-history-of-challenging-philanthropys-status-quo-2be25bdea0a4>. Also see “Community Philanthropy and #ShiftThePower.” *Global Fund Community Foundations*. <https://globalfundcommunityfoundations.org/what-we-stand-for/shiftpower/>.

⁹ “Ford Grants \$6 Million to Seven Organizations to Reshape the Global Human Rights Movement.” *Ford Foundation*. September 13, 2013. <https://www.fordfoundation.org/news-and-stories/news-and-press/news/ford-grants-6-million-to-seven-organizations-to-reshape-the-global-human-rights-movement/>; and “Our Approach.” *Funding Growth, Agroecology Fund*. <https://www.agroecologyfund.org/our-approach>.



Understanding NGOization

Additionally, funding to North America and Western Europe is six times more likely to come in the form of core, flexible grants than in Asia and the Pacific, revealing a trust deficit regarding organizations operating out of the Global South. Importantly, these statistics focus on the umbrella category of human rights funding, and within that, social movements received considerably less funding.

Many analyses of how the philanthropic sector perceives social movements do not always reflect the realities of social movements of oppressed peoples from the Global South. Further, the Global North philanthropic sector's understanding of social movements, we argue, leads to the marginalization of many non-institutionalized, volunteer-led, collective socio-political efforts by oppressed peoples (that is, popular organizing).¹⁵

Several ongoing efforts exist to address the asymmetries of power in the funding relationship between movements and philanthropy. A 2020 research paper by Halima Mahomed on institutional philanthropy and its relationship with social movements in Africa highlights that the appropriateness of institutional philanthropy's engagement matters less than how it engages.¹⁶ Mahomed shows that movements would be open to receiving external funding, but only if donors came rigorously to terms with the power imbalance implied in the relationships between funders and receivers. Mahomed also notes that "more radical shifts in philanthropic thinking and ideology must occur before mutually respectful relationships can be developed."¹⁷ Another paper by Hope Chigudu (from the viewpoint of a practitioner and activist) challenges the philanthropic sector to "be revolutionized to work in conscious, empathetic and transformative ways."¹⁸

¹⁵ INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, ed. *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*:

Beyond the Non-profit Industrial Complex. South End Press, 2007.

¹⁶ Halima Mahomed. "Institutional Philanthropy and Popular Organising in Africa: Some Initial Reflections from Social Movement Activists." *International Review of Philanthropy and Social Investment* 1, no. 1 (September 2020): 17-30.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Hope Chigudu. "Beyond Us and Them." *Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace*. January 2021. <http://www.psjp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Beyond-us-and-them-by-H-Chigudu-January-2021.docx.pdf>.

There now exists an increasingly vast critical scholarly literature on NGOization.¹⁹ This body of literature points to the growth of NGOs in the context of the neoliberalization of many economies across the world. The words "depoliticization," "co-option," "professionalization," and "institutionalization" often appear in this literature to indicate the general shift in orientation. As the scholar-activists Aziz Choudry and Dip Kapoor put it in their book on NGOization: "Drawing from perspectives of activists and critically engaged academics, we argue that NGOs – and the process of NGOization – frequently undermine local and international movements for social change and environmental justice and/or oppositional anti-colonial and anti-capitalist politics, in complicity with state and private-sector interests."²⁰ They also note that NGOization has often led to the loss of an oppositional rhetoric toward the state. Additionally, they argue that NGOs often position themselves as the gatekeepers to social movements because they are seen as being "in the information loop."²¹ The information loop, in this case, refers to access to resources, relationships with donors and command over the (mostly colonial) languages spoken by donors as well as over discourse that appeals to donors, or "donor speak."²²

However, scholarship also emphasizes the deep complexity of organizational forms within the rather broad umbrella category of the NGO, especially given NGOs' complex history over the last three and four decades. Some scholarship situates NGOs and social movements as not always oppositional and completely distinct from each other. Sometimes, depending on the type of NGO, researchers see them as more complexly interlinked. Additionally, scholars Feyzi Ismail and Sangeeta Kamat draw our attention to contexts in which NGOs are increasingly coming under attack from the neoliberal state. In this context, they write, "NGOs must be defended. The contradictory space of the NGO sector must be consistently negotiated – sometimes from within, sometimes from without."²³

¹⁹ Aziz Choudry and Dip Kapoor. *NGOization: Complicity, Contradictions and Prospects*. Zed Books, 2013; Feyzi Ismail and Sangeeta Kamat. "NGOs, Social Movements and the Neoliberal State: Incorporation, Reinvention, Critique." *Critical Sociology* 44, no. 4-5 (2018): 569-577; and Sangeeta Kamat. "The Privatization of Public Interest: Theorizing NGO Discourse in a Neoliberal Era." *Review of International Political Economy* 11, no. 1 (2004): 155-176.

²⁰ Choudry and Kapoor. *NGOization*.

²¹ Choudry and Kapoor. *NGOization*.

²² J.G. Townsend and A.R. Townsend. "Accountability, Motivation and Practice: NGOs North and South." *Social & Cultural Geography* 5, no. 2 (2004): 271-284.

²³ Feyzi Ismail and Sangeeta Kamat. "NGOs, Social Movements and the Neoliberal State."



Complex Structures of Popular Organizing

In response to the scholarship on NGOization, David Mosse and Sundara Babu Nagappan use a case study of the Dalit movement against caste oppression in southern India to “challenge the preconception of donor-funded NGOs as co-opting, privatizing or depoliticizing citizen action, acting as contractors of state or capital rather than agents of the oppressed, as the notion of ‘NGOization’ often implies.”²⁴ They paint a complex picture of the political effects of NGOs, arguing for “the importance of NGOs in addressing second-order injustice, that is the ‘framing’ of what counts as an issue and who counts (who can make a claim as a rights holder), and how (by what procedures claims and contests are staged and resolved).”²⁵

Important for our study, movements in different national and regional contexts experience the effects of NGOs differently, and those within these movements have different understandings of the place of NGOs in the movement ecosystem.

The activists we spoke to participate in human rights movements, livelihood generation movements, women’s movements, queer movements, farmers’ movements, peasant movements, food sovereignty movements, fisherpeople’s movements, youth movements and environmental justice movements. Many of these activists described the movements they were a part of as both comprising and representing the issues of Indigenous Peoples in various national contexts.

Some activists we spoke to worked on a range of social issues, but regardless of the specific theme, an anti-colonial lens and/or a political fight against an occupying force underpinned the work. In other words, many of the activists did not silo economic, environmental, social and political issues. Interviewee 6 told us the following:

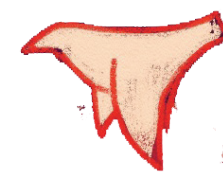
In Asia we have a different context for the social movements. I think we have to understand that context. Most of the social movements in Asia are political movements. That means, ideologically and politically, they have very clear vision[s].

One of the running themes in our interviews involved the problems with project-specific or single issue-based funding offered by philanthropic funders. Many interviewees used the term “NGO” to refer to something other than, or opposite to, their movement’s way of functioning. In some cases, interviewees used “NGO” to describe the type of organization they had found it necessary to start, or to collaborate with, to secure funding for their movements.

²⁴ David Mosse and Sundara Babu Nagappan. “NGOs as Social Movements: Policy Narratives, Networks and the Performance of Dalit Rights in South India.” *Development and Change* 52, no. 1 (January 2021): 134-167.

²⁵ Ibid.





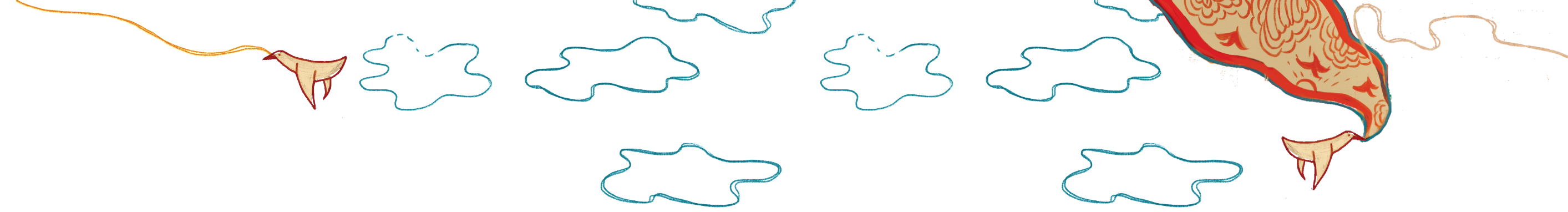
Some of these formations had structured themselves into complex community, national and international bodies or secretariats that met to make collective decisions, which were then coordinated in the different spheres in which they operate. While the movements may be international, they most often focused on national or regional organizing. Some of the activists told us that their movements hired representatives to support organizational matters, including outreach or fund-raising.

Apart from two interviewees, everyone we spoke to was open to their movements receiving funding. Even the two interviewees who were quite wary of taking funding, especially from international organizations, said that if they encountered what they described as pro-people funding – that did not force them to comply with a neoliberal economic agenda – they were ready to take funding in those conditions.

The activists participated in movements typically resourced by a combination of internal contributions (that is, members) and external financial resources (like funders). More specifically, they often described external resources as funding from international funders. However, in a few of the activists' national contexts, there were local funders who were categorized as institutional philanthropy. Variety also existed in what activists described as external financial resources. For some, it meant financial resources from communities; for others, funds from the diaspora, local professionals or local religious organizations.

Internal resources often reflected contributions from the membership base of the movements, and it did not always come in the form of money. Contributions could include volunteer time, digital operations support, agricultural produce and provision of infrastructure like housing, office space or collective meeting space.

We found it significant that at least five interviewees mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic as a major factor that changed the balance between internal and external funding, since members of movements were themselves struggling for bare economic survival and did not have the means to contribute extra resources to support their organizations. One interviewee specifically mentioned a shortage of cash during the pandemic, saying that, where possible, members tried



to support movements with non-cash resources like food or unpaid time.

Many of the interviewees mentioned that their formations had begun work in the 1990s or early 2000s as social movements. One interviewee described their organization as comprising second- and third-generation activists. These organizations did not start with external funding. They mobilized resources through their membership bases, which grew in the first decade of their existence. As time passed, these organizations became open to taking some forms of external funding but remained keenly aware that even without external resources they had to be able to continue their work.

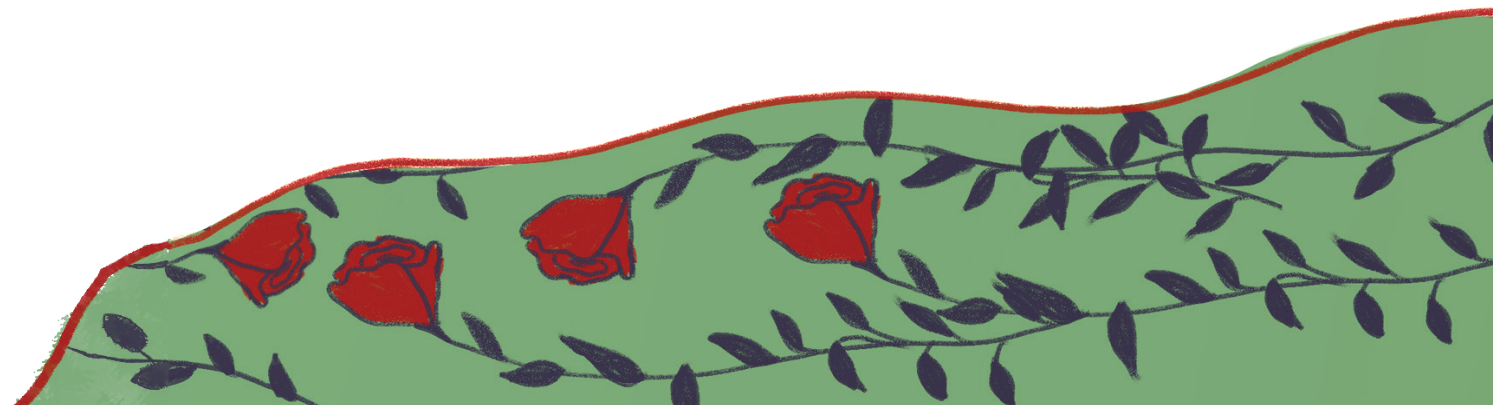
In some cases, the increased impoverishment of peasant communities in rural areas since the 1990s and the spread of market-oriented economic liberalization have contributed to some movements' inability to sustain themselves on purely internal resources. One interviewee told us that it is important that their mobilization of external resources never exceeds how much they mobilize through internal means.

The organizations deployed external resources only to support capacity or infrastructure building and to sustain the economic lives of activists.

For example, one interviewee told us that they accepted external funding to support organizational meetings that brought movement members from different regions together and paid for their boarding and travel. Another interviewee told us that they found external funding useful for funding legal cases against land-grabbing in rural areas and other legal strategies to enforce human rights. Yet another interviewee told us that they sought and received an unprecedented amount of external funding during the COVID-19 pandemic to provide food and livelihood aid in rural areas and that the existing capacities of their movement were suddenly being deployed toward surviving the pandemic as a result.

While many organization representatives emphasized the aspect of self-reliance, we spoke to some movement representatives who relied more heavily, and sometimes almost solely, on external resources because of the nature of their work. These movements often set up an NGO or a network of professional organizations to systematize funding and ensure some amount of sustainability in the flow of external resources.

By the interviewees' accounts, the size of the movements varied, even though our focus was on grassroots movements with wider memberships. One interviewee described being part of a million-person peasant group, while others described working through a core group of under ten people. One interviewee described the strength of their movements by saying that at "any point of time we have thousands of active members advocating for us." These broad-based movement formations often distributed the decision-making among different members who took leadership roles on a rotational basis; in some cases, the memberships elected leaders.



Difficulties of Registration

Some interviewees who were part of formations that had begun as unregistered social movements told us that in the last decade, they had registered in some form or created a collaboration with an allied NGO to access external resources. Though most of them said their movements were registered, we noticed much internal variety in modes of registration, as well as important intra-movement debates on registration. Much of this variety had to do with national contexts and, more specifically, was related to the tightening restrictions movements experienced in authoritarian political contexts. Registration involved deep forethought and ideological debate for most of the participants.

Multiple interviewees described the process of registration as almost compulsory if a movement wanted to access philanthropic funding. As Interviewee 10 put it:

It has always been a requirement for even progressive fundersto have an organization that is registered because the registration is required to open a bank account and an internal revenue certification. For you to get some funding for your initiatives will require that you have to do some legal good housekeeping around finances.

Interviewee 5 echoed this even more bluntly, saying “[For] a certain tier of funding, we could only get [that] through registration.” Yet we heard from multiple interviewees that the bureaucracy involved in being a registered entity was often so burdensome that groups had to reconsider whether to be registered at all.

Interviewee 10 noted, “We find it maybe too risky and dangerous and we will be very vulnerable to state harassment if we’re not legally registered.” Just as we spoke to interviewees who thought it was too risky not to register, we also spoke to those who felt their vulnerabilities to state harassment could go up if they registered. Not registering could carry financial and political risks, and elsewhere, registering could carry political risks through a paper trail involving money. As Interviewee 12 put it:

There is no bank account because there is no registration ... So, for a point of time, we used a number of consensual names [names agreed upon by the movement members] as signatories and opened a joint account in the bank. But that has become difficult now. Bank wants to do a lot. So that’s another challenge[.] These are the challenges ... [of] ... running an informal process. But registration we don’t do ... given the regime and given the political scenario in this country. I don’t think it’s a good idea really. So, we need to be outside the ambit of the state.

Interviewee 4 reflected on the larger politics of donors requiring registration:

I don’t think there is any state right now that is really pro-people. [I]n the guise of democracy or ... civil society spaces, they provide some spaces for us and yet there are more barriers than spaces. You can access that space but with so many barriers. And yet most of the funding agencies, especially in Europe, they require you to comply with the legal requirements.

Despite these challenges, we found that activists find creative ways around this situation of near compulsory registration to access funding. We spoke to two initiatives across two different countries that channel money toward smaller unregistered groups. One of them said they preferred to crowdsource money from individual donors instead of relying on institutional funders because they retained more autonomy in the redistribution process. Activists founded these initiatives with the knowledge that often grassroots work requires funding but cannot, or will not, bureaucratize enough to receive it from institutional donors. Both initiatives emphasized their own autonomy regarding redistributing money to smaller groups; they simply did not give donors a say. Interviewee 8 told us the following:

We fund a lot of small initiatives, a lot of unregistered ones ... without ... conditions, with a lot of flexibility, and at the same time we have very strict rules about where our money comes from, that nobody can monopolize our budget and that the vast majority of the funding that comes in is ... from individuals.

Interviewee 7 described their work as a practice of community philanthropy

whereby the whole idea is to recognize the capacity of the people, that they have the skill, they have the knowledge, they have the know-how to manage their own requirements, manage their own changes, plan for their own change, so that they don't have to depend on an external agency.

Interviewees understood donor reluctance to fund unregistered initiatives as an implicit or explicit donor preference for NGOs that had the right paperwork and the kind of technical capacities they had a bias for.



Rule of Technical Expertise

One theme that came up repeatedly in our interviews was the way that donor requirements for formulating project proposals and reports could negatively affect the ability of a movement to access funding. The critique centered on donor practices that heavily relied on bureaucratic methods of engaging grantee partners. Interviewee 6 even suggested that all the paperwork would distract movements from the work of organizing:

The most difficult thing we face, the most challenging thing, is that we are a social movement and that means they are forcing us to be more technical, more bureaucratic, follow all financial policies, procurement, something, something and then it somehow impacts our movement. That is how there is NGOization of the movement. How they are ... dragging our attention from the issue-based social transformation agenda to this bureaucratic, this technical, financial documentation type of thing.

Interviewee 4 gave a concrete illustration of the unfairness of the reporting regimes required to access institutional philanthropy funding:

[Organization staff] ... are not confident of the way they speak in English. And the biggest problem is technical writing. When it comes to technical writing, they are not much confident with themselves. So they need somebody to prepare the report. The organization has to pay for an interpreter, which costs ... 100 dollars ... and if you need documentation, it is another 200 dollars. And it is big for community organizations losing 300 dollars, because just imagine the allowances of those people working in the communities.

Interviewee 7 called the emphasis on English a colonial hangover, suggesting that donors be open to accepting reporting and proposals in a variety of languages. Multiple interviewees suggested that translation costs could be worked into the budgets of donors. One interviewee suggested that donors pay people to support building mass movements' technical capacities vis-à-vis donors. Another suggested that donors themselves provide writing support and compile the information they require through verbal interviews with movements actors.

One of the funders we spoke to who works with movement organizations said that they support organizers with compliance requirements and sometimes translate reports written in other languages to English, to ensure that the organization can access funding.

We also heard from some movement representatives that they relied heavily on volunteer technology experts to produce the spreadsheets and documentation required for financial compliance. These volunteer experts often had to maintain other jobs and were exhausted by the unpaid labor contributed to movement functioning.

Interviewee 16 foregrounded that problematic internal power dynamics in organizations could be shaped by donor requirements. Those who possess the skill of technical writing could accrue more power within the organization:

In many cases, in case[s] of NGOs and even cases of social movements, a few people apply for the grant but the rest of the organizations do not know what they have applied to. Institutional decisions before the proposal is submitted are very important. If not [agreed on together, then] the person who applies, who knows about different sources of funding and who knows how to draft the proposals, receive[s] the funds and they started bullying the organization.

Beyond the Project

Interviewees highlighted several negative ways that donors function, including the singular focus on projects, the lack of flexibility in use of funds and bureaucratic requirements. Movement representatives perceived project-based funding as too narrow, bureaucratic and ephemeral to be useful in the longer-term work of sustaining and building movements. The issue of donor flexibility extended beyond projects and touched on larger aspects of donor functioning and the power dynamics between donors and grantee partners.

Interviewee 12 described what they perceived as a major problem with donor approaches toward movements:

Donor agencies are politically eschewed. They don't know what they're trying to do, or ... work can be done in only one way. Any other way, they are not going to recognize ... very unfortunately. I mean, it's like how the state thinks. If it's a big corporate donor with a big office and many staff and highly paid, they function in a corporate manner. They don't understand the realities of the grassroots or the lives of the people whom they are supposed to support. So something social, something intrinsic, something organic becomes a time-bound project, quantifiable in terms of deliverables and outcomes and stuff. And indicators, give ten ticks here, ten ticks there. And yeah, show them quantities. Maybe they have their limitations or obligations to their source donors; I don't know why this happens. But this is my general experience, so this is why things don't work.

The need to have projects of specified duration presents a challenge for movements. Some participants described getting intermittent funding for projects, which made the overall sustainability of their work difficult. Interviewee 10 put it bluntly:

It is quite difficult to see communities left behind because the project has already lapsed. And with mass movements, because we are operating from a class perspective, it is quite difficult to abandon the communities even if we don't have the funds needed to campaign for human rights. We rely on commitments by donors.

One of the funders we spoke to, Interviewee 17, told us that it is important that funders move away from siloed funding approaches:

Some funders may only raise money for early child[hood] marriage and they have that program for ten years. Then the funding just stops and so grassroots groups have to constantly meander and fix their work. But the beauty of working with grassroots collectives ... is that they work on several issues so there are always ways for funders to fit in their work.

Interviewees specifically recommended more donor flexibility regarding how grantee partners use funds and on reporting requirements, since the needs of movements change depending on shifts in their political, social, environmental and economic contexts. Interviewees told multiple stories of interactions with funders that revealed how little they understood the contexts of their grantee partners. Interviewee 4 described their experience:

For example, the finance officer would comment like this: Why are your transactions all in cash? I almost fell from my chair! Because my god! I thought to myself, that's a very ridiculous question. Because we are working with the communities and yet you are looking for bank transactions in the community. ... It is really ... Almost every day we are quarrelling with the finance department.

Interviewee 18 echoed this sentiment, adding, "In the policy, they state quite clearly that you have to submit all the receipts for everything that you buy, and in the village you don't buy one banana and you get receipt for every individual item you buy. You can't."

Tied into the framework of projects, Interviewee 14 discussed their discomfort with donors' expectations for quantifiable project results:

Oh my god, sometimes even I find that the results framework just reduces us ... reducing to one unit, and for the donor the one unit is the money. For me the one unit is the woman. She's reduced to dollars and pounds and yens and whatnot, but no ... I always say don't reduce the work to dollars and pounds; don't reduce the women to a unit of pound and dollar. And forms are getting [so] very, very complicated, cumbersome, tedious, tiresome, mentally exhausting that you need to go off on a two days' break after filling up an application.

Interviewee 9 told us that funders often do not comprehend the actual work required to keep social movements going, and it was difficult to constantly repackage the daily work of organizing in terms exciting enough to capture the attention of funders:

It is just normal projects, but you know it is very difficult for us as a kind of grassroots movement because many items cannot be shown in the report or the finance report. It might and might not be there as well. I am talking about the issue of organizing people. Sometimes it is something that is not fancy; it is not exciting; it is not, let's say, sexy [laughing] to the funding agencies, because many of them, they want innovation, not the idea of reaching out to people. We're just doing one thing, repeatedly, all the time.

We just travel to the village and talk. We just go to village and talk to the people. You know [we do] all this kind of organizing technique that we have to combine with other organized activities, and that kind of "organizing people" expense cannot be shown in the project. And I think that we have to do the two together, you know? We do the project, and we ... organize people.



Supporting Activists' Lives: The Necessity of Core Funding

Interviewee 3 brought up the now-widespread and problematic 80-20 formula that donors insist on, in which only 20% of funding can be spent on salaries. Many interviewees echoed a call for donors to think about core funding as a way to lessen movements' dependence on intermittent project funding. Core funding means that movements can use the funding in ways that they see best.

The questions we raised about core funding and salaries brought up difficult reflections among interviewees about economically supporting their own and their families' lives. Some, as a result of problematic donor requirements that sideline equitable pay, have been forced to seek other sources of income for themselves, while other activists have simply managed with erratic or low pay. Many activists had to creatively work around this situation, since they did not think they could rely on funding for their daily sustenance. Often, this resulted in them not being able to do their movement work full time.

Interviewee 4 described how their organization could not possibly keep up with all the labor required to access regular funding. They decided simply to let some funding go and find another way to manage. This interviewee told us that they found it hard to get salaries for their movement's workers, and they wanted to make sure that the ebbs and flows of funding did not affect the basic economic safety of their members:

The funders changed their focus. But then the bad thing is when they changed their focus, they also lessened the amount of grants. And that ... impacts everything: the activists' food, their transportation[.] Basically there is nothing left for their family. So they have to find ways to sustain their family. But then of course in the spirit of social change ... we also do not promote ... [the] employee thinking that "if I work I have to have a salary like that[.]" We call that NGOism. So what we do is we provide family support for our full-time organizers, and if the family support is not enough, and they make a request, we find ways to help them. You know, how we live is like a family.



Interview 10 poignantly described alternate forms of livelihood that they could undertake to make sure they would not be dependent on funding:

I am already 54 and some in my generation are already in their 60s. And most of them want to retire already. But they will be retiring very, very poor, and they will not be able to afford their hospitalization; they don't have a house. So what we are trying to advocate internally for is for embedded activists who will work on land, which they can make productive as a source of income for their self-reliance ... to assure that they will be in the movement without too much economic pressure.

Apart from incomes through agricultural production, Interviewee 18 described creating personal livelihood options through driving a taxi and selling their writing:

We have local NGOs that ... have died because of the very fact that you don't get the money from donors. So from my experience, I realized that in order to run an organization ... you need ... an alternative source of revenue. So, in my case, I was running a taxi and now I am selling merchandise items and then selling my book. So this keeps going. I'm not dependent on very much, not entirely on the donor funds. If you rely on the donor funds ... once it doesn't come, you are dead.

Interviewee 5 situated the low and erratic salaries offered by donors in the context of gender discrimination and the marginalization of people in the Global South. They connected the ways they were pushed toward overwork and unpaid care work— sometimes to the point of burnout – and a funding regime that recognized only some forms of labor:

I don't even get healthcare. I don't get anything except my wage, and it's a small wage. Please, those with power need to think about Global South women and how much we are already putting in and what we are dealing with.
...

There's a lot of unpaid care and expertise and technical skills that are taken for granted from the economic South. For those who choose to do it, we should be careful because then you become resentful.



Strings Attached: The Politics of Institutional Funding

Even though almost everyone we spoke to was open to receiving funding under the right circumstances, interviewees offered important and wide-ranging critiques of the potentially depoliticizing (and even potentially harmful) effects of philanthropic funding. We want to highlight how complex negotiating the necessity of external funding and philanthropic practices can be for social-movement actors. The activists we interviewed held a range of views on the politics of funding, and not all interviewees mentioned depoliticizing effects of philanthropy. Those who did not speak about harm instead spoke about internal systems that could be changed to make philanthropy more accessible to movements.

Three interviewees told us that to ensure the funder aligns with their values, they scrutinize funders more carefully than funders scrutinize them. As Interviewee 3 put it:

Funders sometimes actually say, "We'll give you money if you don't call it an 'apartheid wall.'" "[We'll give you] money if you do your website in a certain way." "We'll give you money if you change your politics[.]" And it's literally an attempt to buy organizations, and with lots of money, they offered lots of money.

Interviewee 8 commented on what kind of solidarity they looked for and support that funders may not even perceive as interference:

We are not looking for charity but rather for actual political solidarity that entrusts us as grasasroots, as those who are on the ground, who are aware of our situations, to decide on our resources, on the priorities of how these resources are distributed, and also to even think about long-term sustainability and not the urgent need all the time for donors. We also think about the harm, not only the harm of conditioning and depoliticizing civil society, but also the heavy harm of even funding.



Because it killed many values. Because sometimes the mere engagement with money for movements who are in the first stages means domination and control of these movements and, sometimes, corruption of their nature ... as popular movements.

And this is the frame, and as long as you don't accept that, I think your money is going to cause harm more than any benefit. In the spectrum between actual support of colonialism and engagement with sustaining the [colonial] status quo to impacting what we want and our will ... you're doing harm [throughout], regardless of what kind of harm. Some funders are so proud that they're not doing the extreme harm, but it's still harm, as long as you don't recognize our situation and what we want. We don't want money. We don't need money. We can do this work voluntarily, and we know how to build [our movements]. And when we need resources, we'll think about how to bring resources. But when you go and empower civil society that was irrelevant, you're also empowering them over us. You're creating power dynamics on the ground. This same civil society that we're trying to hold accountable for being too conservative, for being classist, for not seeing the most marginalized, for not seeing women, for not seeing working-class people.

Other activists offered reflections on how money contributes to creating unequal power dynamics within a movement or between social movements and NGOs. As Interviewee 5 put it, "Money brings in cash and interest and all of that. So be honest and open about that and that it brings in an uneven set of power."

Interviewee 12 also reflected on how internal power dynamics within movements can change with the entry of money:

Unless you have a transparent mechanism of money ... it gives people the wrong kind of ideas. And it's very difficult to say to the community leaders, "See, we are getting so much money, so what to do with it?" We had to do this, but this gives you the wrong kind of ideas. And we found that in a number of places the community leaders who are a bit advanced, [a] bit educated ... they got their own setup, they split the movement, they started a new setup, [and got] all the money.

Interviewee 5 told us how their organization has established internal processes to mitigate the potentially divisive effects of funding on their work:

If there's an issue that we discuss ... [the issue] generally always includes some aspect of fund-raising, resourcing or finance. [This is] because it's such a big area of work for us to work out how to stay sustainable, but also we have continual praxis on the politics of resources. Everybody does the concept notes; everybody does the budgeting for their own set of work. It's done on Google Docs – we love Google Docs. Some people hate it because it means that it's transparent from the beginning and accountable. That means from the very beginning, we know where it's all going and then we have our global budget for the year, and everybody knows where that goes too. Every quarter we have a discussion on that. The discussion is endless, and it can get ridiculous, and we can keep talking. We go down to the cost of nails. It can get ridiculous, but it means that no one feels like they don't know what we are doing.



Reflections on Power: How to Build Trust?

Further on the topic of power, the activists reflected on the power dynamics between donors and grantee partners. One interviewee described this as the power dynamic that often exists between “more Western European or North American funders with people here in Asia and the Pacific.” Most interviewees also acknowledged that these power dynamics were hard to dislodge or wish away. They instead suggested that funders work with an awareness of the power dynamics and build that awareness into their daily functioning.

Interviewee 15 captured the theme of power dynamics in the context of flexibility, core funding and project-specific support:

When it is a fixed project, with activities, there is not that much flexibility in it as well. So, we are talking about core funding; we're talking about flexibility; we're talking about deeper understanding of the needs and coming with the mentality that we are equal. This is very important – that it's not like a giver and receiver. A donor and beneficiary. With this kind of mentality, there is no balance of power and we can never talk in a way that is very comfortable to us. We still think of the donor as someone that we need to be in a certain image for. And this has to be also broken, in my opinion. The power balance should be better between ... [donors and grantee partners] so we would go for more partnerships rather than just a donor [and grantee relationship]. And of course, aligning with the vision of the organization, of the groups, this is very ... important as well... We have become NGOized. And this kind of mentality is very hard to shatter.



Multiple interviewees suggested that partnerships based on equality between the donor and the grantee partner constituted a better model for donors to use while engaging movements. The term “trust” also came up multiple times as a requirement for productive relationships between donors and movements. Interviewee 3 said the following:

To which extent can one relinquish the grip of power and build a relationship of trust and mutual understanding and getting to know people? And then it is less about how well written your proposal is but how well you are doing on the ground, how well we understand each other, how well do we actually build, together, a common vision for another world.

Interviewee 12 expressed that working with movements required donors learn, absorb and discuss, and be flexible. They also suggested that donors hire staff with movement experience instead of staff with the right educational credentials:

So while dealing with movements, or supporting movements, they have to be both flexible and they have to see it in a bottom-up approach, not a top-down approach. So that kind of dialogue space has to be there somehow. They have to configure that and how ... this can happen in a very personal way, as we are talking [in this interview]. This can be one way. [Funding staff could] come to visit the space ... so they have some organic link with some people, if not directly with grassroots groups, but with people who work with grassroots groups. So they need to have a kind of feeling of the [political and social] space they are getting into.

...

If they don't have any idea, it's just a bookish kind of thing and the stuff they learn in their graduation or post-graduation courses, so [laughs] it won't work.

A funder we interviewed, Interviewee 17, outlined what holistic and committed support from funders could look like:

There is no denial that there will always be ... power dynamics between a donor and a movement. I, as a part of the program, keep saying that we have a solidarity and mutual trust, and we have been funding the same partners for 35 years. But there is still a power dynamic that cannot be taken away from this relationship. Which part of it do you play out openly or not is a question. Now, when you have done work for so many decades, groups think of you as family; sometimes it can be good and bad. We have seen movements and organizations have their highs and lows. Do we stick around at the time of a low is a question.

Interviewee 4 told us that they try to balance taking funding from donors with self-reliance, a situation they see as desirable:

Of course, from the very beginning, we have been looking for funding. Because we know that without funding, we cannot reach farther. It is really a practical question. But then there is also a debate within, wherein what we should be developing is self-reliance – you know, we should be relying on our internal resources. That is ... because ... [it] ... is the principle of our organizing. We organize in a way that the people we organize are owning, owning the struggle. So one way of expressing the ownership of the struggle is their contribution financially, physically or in any other way. But then you also know the economic capacity of our membership.

Interviewee 12 eloquently summarized this principle of self-reliance. They stated that “[donors] can support a process which is already there and which would be there without your support. That’s my way of looking at it.”

Summary of Activist Recommendations for Donors

We asked the activists what they would like to see from donor funding practices. We will conclude this paper with a summary of their recommendations.

1) Be Flexible

The most common recommendation was flexibility. This included, very specifically, flexibility about how funds could be spent but also flexibility regarding reporting and grant-seeking procedures.

2) Rethink Reporting, Paperwork and Mediums of Communication

In general, interviewees asked donors to rethink the heavy bureaucratization that has crept into the everyday functioning of grantee partners. Donors can rethink their emphasis on professionalized forms and on writing in English, because it sometimes prohibits movements from applying for funding or makes it more difficult.

Language justice also emerged as a prominent theme, and discussions went beyond just the issue of interpretation. A few related suggestions included finding ways other than written English to gather information about the work of grantee partners, conducting interviews instead of asking for written reports, accepting reports in multiple languages or hiring interpreters/translators to translate grantee partners' submissions into English, and providing staff to support movements with paperwork.

Regarding unpaid and underpaid labor, donors were also encouraged to think about how not to overburden volunteer-led movements and instead craft methods to lessen the work required for movement organizations to access funding. This could include having different compliance and documentation processes, providing personnel to produce documentation for movements or funding the movement actors who are often barely surviving but support the process of accessing funding.



3) Think Beyond the Project

Activists emphasized that philanthropic organizations need to move away from project-specific funding and provide longer-term core funding. One suggestion involved donors committing to funding movements for at least five to 10 years, or more, to ensure some continuity for longer-term movement-building. The idea of core funding also came up in relation to using funding for salaries, or any other operational expense, as movements deem necessary, to ensure that activists are able to meet their basic requirements while doing movement work.

4) Build Trust and Mutual Understanding

Most interviewees emphasized that mutual understanding and trust form the bedrock of any good donor-movement relationship. They noted that a deep awareness of the unequal power dynamics that exist between donors and grantee partners is key to building trust. As Interviewee 3 said, it is important that donors learn to “relinquish the grip on power.”

Relationship-building also stands central to trust and mutual understanding. One way donors can build a relationship with grantee partners is to spend time in the places where movements operate. Interviewee 14 noted that “some individuals [who work for donors] come because they have a mandate to fulfill. They just come hurriedly. [T]hey come in the morning, tired, dropping dead, securing information, flying away the next day. We’ve also told them, ‘You don’t do that.’”

5) Resource the New

Another suggestion called for donors to be open to funding newer organizations run by women, youth and social minorities. Interviewee 8 said this is important:

[W]e need to struggle to push the discourse ... [because] it’s always white people who decide it. And they rely on local directors, especially men, to enforce the power relations inside civil society. A lot of the



work is done by really fierce and amazing young women who [do] all the work, all the research, all the advocacy, all the political work.

6) Do the Homework

Interviewees also suggested that donors put in more effort from the beginning of a relationship to learn about the local contexts as well as the movements they want to fund. This could include hiring staff in philanthropic organizations who have a solid movement background. A related suggestion posited that donors set up learning sessions for their staff about popular organizing and the many ways popular organizing can function.

7) Inquire of the Larger Questions About Philanthropy's Role

Donors were also encouraged to educate themselves about the broader role philanthropy plays in society and to ask themselves questions like the following:

What are the ramifications of NGOizing civic space?

What does the focus on short-term deliverables do to social change processes?

What is the higher purpose of philanthropic work?

8) Support Existing Local Intermediaries

Activists told us that in particular circumstances, like when governments are increasing restrictions on funding for movements, donors did not support. In these types of situations, interviewees called for donors to be creative and open to other means of supporting movements. This could involve, for instance, having community funds that redistribute money or working via registered allied organizations. Some community funds could bear the burden of paperwork and accounting work so that unregistered formations could avoid legally entangling themselves or spending extra time on bureaucratic work.

We hope this paper and the above recommendations will encourage donors not just to rethink philanthropic practices but to commit more resources to research and data collection about the state of social-movement funding in the Global South, of which we still know far too little.

