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fundraising is not a dirty word

Community-Based Economic Strategies for the Long Haul

WHEN YOU CONVENE ORGANIZERS, NON-PROFIT STAFF MEMBERS, and activists together, fundraising is rarely the center of passionate debate. Though an important component of most organizing efforts in the United States, fundraising is usually perceived by activists as our nasty compromise within an evil capitalist structure. As long as we relegate fundraising to a dirty chore better handled by grant writers and development directors than organizers, we miss an opportunity to create stepping stones toward community-based economies.

In fundraising, there is foundation income and grassroots income. For the purpose of this essay, grassroots income is defined as all income generated from individuals, fee-for-service, and non-foundation sources. One of the staunchest critiques of the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC) is that non-profits have become over dependent on foundation funds as their primary source of income. We cringe about questionable investment policies or association with the elite, so foundations ostensibly provide a nice buffer between social movement work and finance capitalism. But relationships with foundations, like all things in capitalism, come at a cost. Relying on foundations removes an accountability mechanism from our work. In this current political moment in the US, the non-profit structure is the primary model used to organize, launch campaigns, and respond to attacks. Though grassroots fundraising does not completely free us from the limitations of the NPIC, it is a method that can increase and strengthen out accountability to the communities most affected by injustice.

grassroots fundraising as an organizing strategy

Project South is a scrappy organization located in Atlanta, Georgia, focused on movement building for racial and economic justice. More than just a necessity, fundraising is a crucial element to our organizational purpose and direction.

Grassroots fundraising is a strategy to maintain a firm connection to our base and to initiate community-based economic structures. We define *organizing* as building relationships and institutions to sustain community power, and it follows that fundraising *is* organizing. Project South doesn't hire fundraisers to fundraise; we hire organizers to fundraise. While our model may not work for everyone, we believe that part of building community power is creating a community economy in line with our principles and analysis.

Project South works to tie local and immediate struggles to the systemic root causes of oppression. Using popular education models, we partner with grassroots organizations and communities to step back and focus on the patterns of social movements, government politics, and economic trends. We create spaces to develop leadership, strengthen analysis, and plan strategies for more effective organizing. We believe in movement building, and we believe in community power. We connect grassroots fundraising to our central program goals for two reasons: foundation dependency limits effectiveness and to create a community-based economic model while building a base of allies and community members to whom we are ultimately accountable.

fickle foundations

Project South's experience has shown foundations as a whole to be fairly unreliable. With the media and financial institutions regularly declaring economic scarcity, non-profits are willing to meet foundations' programming and even political mandates. Our work becomes compartmentalized products, desired or undesired by the foundation market, rated by trends or political relationships rather than depth of work. How often do we hear that "youth work is hot right now"? Funders determine funding trends, and non-profits develop programs to bend to these requests rather than assess real needs and realistic goals. If we change our "product" to meet foundation mandates, our organizations might receive additional funding and fiscal security. But more often than not, we have also compromised our vision and betrayed the communities that built us to address specific needs, concerns, and perspectives.

Competition does not enhance movement-building work. Weeding out the "weak" to create three or four perfect organizations does not meet the many and complicated needs of diverse communities. Competing for resources with our partner non-profits aggravates the tendency toward turf wars and territorialism. Small organizations located in the US South face these dynamics. The South has fewer regionally based foundations than anywhere else in the US. The foundations we do have are small and fund small organizations. The only option for small organizations like Project South is to appeal to national foundations and

compete at a national level. We are told time and again that resources for the South are limited and shrinking, and on a particularly bad day, a grant even disappears in the middle of a three-year award. Struggling community-based organizations are at an extreme disadvantage.

As an organization that works with many other grassroots groups to define and implement strategies that connect to long-term movement building, we see common barriers. Bound to yearlong grant cycles, foundation-funded organizations are discouraged from taking the long view and forget to expect the slow push to real change. Organizers working to connect local issues to broad transformation strive to build relationships and examine root causes of inequities. Though short-term projects and goals may move us along in the right direction, developing leaders and carving out integrated, multi-issue strategies does not happen in a year.

So, we still need money. How are we going to get it?

community-based economics

Fundamentally, economies are about the give and take of resources. In a community-based economy, resources flow from and return to that same community. Connecting organizing and fundraising allows those affected by the work of an organization to determine its course. Project South receives 40 percent of its income from grassroots fundraising. Our goal is to increase that percentage every year through publication sales, fee-for-service, community collaborations, and membership.

Publishing our curriculum is a simple example of providing needed resources and generating grassroots income. Community members (low-income people of color, students, and community organizers) request accessible education tools about globalization. Project South researches the historical dynamics and develops interactive, popularly based exercises to explore the effects of corporate globalization on our communities. We sell that tool kit for \$15. The community receives a needed resource, and the organization receives income to sustain itself and our program work.

Another basic method used by Project South to support the community while sustaining our organization is serious collaboration with other organizations. We plan, coordinate, and share costs of community events with other groups in the area. All the organizations expand their base and visibility, the events are at cost or free, and there is a give and take for community members who may donate or pay a few bucks for raffle tickets. On the surface, these events may look similar to traditional fundraising parties, but there is an important difference. The folks attending, performing, and soaking up the politics are the same

folks (youth, low-income organizers, community members) who participate in the organizing projects. We don't throw parties to raise money but to develop a culture of economic give and take that places value on community, collaboration, and resource sharing.

building a base

Project South also works to integrate fundraising goals and strategy with our overall efforts around base building. Just as we are intentional in ensuring that our leadership positions reflect those most affected, and that our programs address the institutionalized marginalization of so many communities, so must we integrate our fundraising efforts along these same lines. We believe it is better to be dissolved by the community than floated by foundations. Members who contribute to an organization will stop contributing when the work is no longer valuable. Tangible ways used by Project South to do this include hiring from within affected communities (staff, consultants, caterers, performers, researchers, tech support) and creating a membership base that participates in the give and take of all kinds of resources. Some provide financial resources, others provide cultural support, and still others provide links to organizations or people in the community.

Regardless of individual contribution levels, we need to ask the same hard questions about our membership as we do of our leadership and staff. Do they reflect the communities most affected? Are we building intergenerational, multi-racial, multigendered membership? Simple structures can help ensure a base that is truly reflective of the broader community's composition. For example, Project South offers annual membership on a sliding scale: \$25 if you earn a full-time, living wage; \$10 if you are employed part time or at minimum wage; and \$1 if you are incarcerated or unemployed. The system of value goes both ways. We express value and acknowledgement of all levels of work, and members express their support of the organization's work. Paying attention to who values us and who we value keeps our organization focused on those building a stronger movement for long-term change.

Grassroots fundraising through income-generating projects and base-building work also provides a solid structure to determine the effectiveness of our organizations. Program work with income-generating elements (like registration fees for workshops) has helped Project South gauge community interest and investment in our various projects. And when people do not respond or seek out opportunities to participate with us, it forces us to ask questions, especially this one: Do our programs/publications/resources reflect the priorities in the community? Grassroots fundraising provides a checks-and-balances structure.

The danger in this practice, as our organization still operates within a capitalist framework, is that we might be tempted to follow the money rather than follow the work. Generating income while maintaining relationships built on a commitment to long-term social justice requires consistent examination and evaluation so that organizations do not compromise principles for the sake of increasing revenue.

Project South has not, by any means, perfected this approach. We are not fully funded by grassroots sources. Our membership is still unorganized and uncharted. But we strive for a process that prioritizes grassroots sustainability over limited (and dwindling) foundation relationships that chart our success on a short-term rather than long-haul basis. We consistently ask ourselves: Could we survive if we didn't have foundation money tomorrow? Our answer is yes, but at a reduced level. We make a commitment to increase our financial independence not only for our own sustainability in a dangerous political climate, but also to be accountable to the communities who support us and whom we work to support.

To think of fundraising as a dirty word does not make our vision of a better world more viable or pure. Developing a real community-based economic system that redistributes wealth and allows all people to gain access to what they need is essential to complete our vision of a liberated world. Grassroots fundraising strategies are a step in that direction.