//WATERING THE GRASSROOTS: A STRATEGY FOR SOCIAL MOVEMENT SUPPORT

Mary Joyce (contact@maryjoyce.com) for the engine room

- **Supporting the grassroots of social movements is a pragmatic means of strengthening social accountability.**

- **Removing risks to the safety and legitimacy of grassroots actors, as well as distortion of participation incentives, activities, and aims, is the first step.**

- **Grassroots organizations can be identified by a range of indicators, which demonstrate that those directly affected by an injustice are empowered to change it.**

- **The grassroots are diffuse, decentralized, and informal. Supporting them requires a mix of financial and service support provided directly and through intermediaries, aimed at both organizations and individuals.**

Introduction

This is the final piece in a three-part series initiated by the Transparency and Accountability Initiative's TALEARN working group on social movements and state accountability. The first two pieces in this series can be found here and here. Both this Think Piece and the preceding one are based on a literature review and 18 qualitative interviews with a range of funders, INGO staff, and activists from around the world.

The first Think Piece in this series critiqued current methods for funding transparency and accountability. The second described an under-recognized social accountability actor: the social movement. This final Think Piece suggests supporting social movements by resourcing the grassroots and describes a means of doing so.

Why Support the Grassroots?

Transparency and accountability begin not with academics, funders, or policy experts, but with people directly affected by systemic injustice. These people are the grassroots. *Supporting the grassroots is not sentimental, but pragmatic.* Noted one

employee of a transparency INGO:

> "People will say, okay, South Africa has a very low level of budget transparency. We're going to lobby for the government to improve that. The limitation of all of that is... those improvements aren't immediately put to use in the service of accountability.... This type of 'build it and they will come' approach, we're learning very often, if you build it they won't come. So we've oriented our work to come in behind social movements."

His organization found that a "real-life demand of government," transmitted by a social movement, was necessary for change. *No one will fight harder for transparency and accountability than those that suffer most from its absence.* The grassroots are the core of any social movement. They are its engine.

Challenges in Supporting the Grassroots

Yet supporting the grassroots is often easier said than done. People who are directly affected by systemic injustice are likely affected by multiple injustices and multiple marginalizations. They may lack access to the educational resources necessary to attain an

movement

think tank   formal advocacy NGO   membership based organization   loosely affiliated group
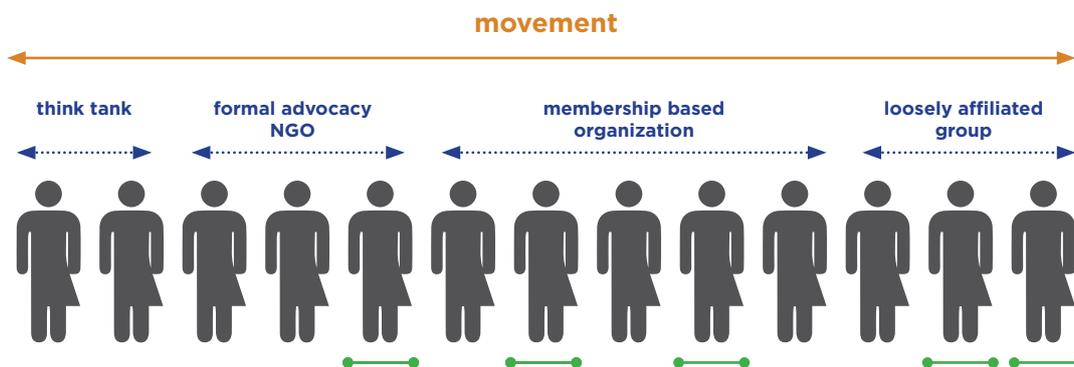
Within those organizations, individuals directly affected by injustice are the grassroots. An organization is grasstoots to extent that it includes and empowers those directly affected.

*The diagram does not includes all the organizational types that can exist within a movement. It provides examples of common organizations.

advanced degree in management or policy. They may lack access to the legal services necessary to incorporate an NGO. They may lack the foreign language skills necessary to confidently present their work to funders from abroad, especially in writing. Because of their marginalization, the grassroots are often inaccessible to funders.

Funders most often support organizations structurally similar to themselves;technocratic, highly specialized, Anglophone. It is hardest for them to support the grassroots: dispersed, fluid, educated by experience, deeply familiar with local context, but not with bureaucratic practice. Yet these are the people who will fight the hardest for change.

The grassroots is a continuum, not a binary. The most thoroughly grassroots organizations are composed uniquely of individuals directly affected by an injustice. Yet some more elite organization also take care to empower those directly affected through consultation and facilitation of self-advocacy. The funder's challenge is to get resources as close to the grassroots as possible. This Think Piece will describe how.

The Steps to Grassroots Support

This Think Piece proposes a three-step process for supporting the grassroots.

- **Remove Risk**: Following the principle of "first, do no harm," the first suggestion

is to curtail activities which endanger grassroots actors. These are risks to safety and legitimacy and distortions of participation, activities, and aims.

- **Identify Grassroots Actors:** Though the grassroots will look different across different causes and contexts, this Think Piece proposes seven grassroots indicators, all of which signify that those directly affected are empowered.

- **Find a Support Path:** Once the grassroots has been identified, the Think Piece discusses direct and indirect methods of providing service and financial support.

Remove Risks and Distortions

Risks to Safety

The first step in effectively supporting the grassroots is to remove practices that are harmful to them. Of these harmful practices, the first priority should be avoiding risk to the physical safety of activists. Ben Gharbia describes multiple examples of Middle Eastern activists interrogated after participating in foreign-funded technology trainings in supposedly safer settings abroad. "[T]echniques of data encryption on which activists and bloggers are trained won't be of any help in front of torture, detention, and the fabrication of charges," he warns.

To prevent these threats, funders must have an excellent understanding of the political environment in which transparency and accountability activists operate. This expertise can come from local partner organizations. It can also come from local consultants brought on as risk advisers. Without this due diligence, it is safer for the grassroots if funders do not become involved.

Risks to Legitimacy

Funder support can also damage the legitimacy of individuals and organizations they fund. Civic space is closing in many parts of the world and funders have become enmeshed in the conflict. Foreign funding has become a pretext for numerous forms of persecution by national governments. In countries like India and Russia, foreign funding has been used as an excuse to shut down NGOs or attack them in the press. Noted one foundation employee with expertise in South Asia, "In the current Indian context… a movement can be accused of being a foreign agent by the government, and then the legitimacy of that particular movement can be compromised." These types of attacks have also been used to prosecute individual activists in the courts, such as the case of Russian opposition activist Alexei Navalny.

Foreign funding can reduce legitimacy even when the movement actor is not slandered by the government. According to a 2012 study by Bano, community-based groups in Pakistan that received donor funding lost public trust because of a belief that staff were motivated by profit rather than the cause. This lack of legitimacy can make it harder for a grassroots organization to tap into local resources, such as volunteers and donations. Ironically, foreign funding can crowd out local funds, making the organizations more vulnerable.

The solution to these threats is again due diligence and informed consent. After funders have done their own contextual research, they should explain these risks to activists before supporting them, allowing them to make an informed decision about whether and which type of support to accept. "Personally, I think that we need to have honest conversations with leaders," said the foundation employee. "You may lose your credibility and legitimacy by accepting foreign funding," he noted, "no matter how good that funding model is."

Funders also have the ability to publicly challenge questions of legitimacy by "articulat[ing] a principled, positive affirmation of the role of foreign funding." Yet these public relations efforts should be taken on with extreme care, and only after consulting with local partners. For savvy governments seeking to weaken civil society, these defences could be repackaged as confirmation of foreign meddling.

Distortions of Participation

Even when foreign funding is not being used in rhetorical and legal attacks on civil society, it can negatively affect activist behaviors and bring bad actors into the movement. Ben Gharbia details the harmful effects of American funding to Middle Eastern activists. His frustration is palpable.

"The informal, decentralized and generic nature of native… activism is being altered by the mechanism of funding and its bureaucratic procedures with a final result of…recruiting a horde of charlatans who are claiming to be 'activists' but are out there to make a career for themselves with zero interest in activism or in the struggle for human rights."

A Nigerian study by de Sardan found that, after foreign funding, "[a]t local levels, the reserves of volunteerism and dutiful community service" gave way to "an almost universal hunger for ways to access different forms of 'development rent.'" "If you must pay activists, don't overdo it," implore Stephan, Lakhani, and Naviwala. Rather, "[a]ssistance must be structured so that it does not create… above-market salaries or overgenerous budgets" that might attract Ben Gharbia's charlatans.

Distortions of Aims and Activities

Funding can also alter the aims and activities of grassroots actors, functionally co-opting them. Notes McAdam, "destructive forces of… co-optation, and the dissolution of indigenous support tame the movement by encouraging insurgents to pursue only those goals acceptable to external sponsors." According to Kabeer et al., in Bangladesh many organizations changed their focus away from mobilization and towards microfinance in the 1990s because of donor preferences.

It is common for prospective grantees to skate to where the puck will be, altering their professed aims and proposed activities in order to appeal to a funder's mission. Yet it is incumbent on funders to ensure that they

fund organizations whose aims already align with their own, rather than using funding as an incentive to change course.

Monitoring and evaluation can also be tools of distortion. One of the most common ways distortion can occur is through rigid activity and timeframe targets. Responsiveness and unpredictability are core strengths of grassroots organizations, yet measurement has not caught up.

An INGO staffer based in Southern Africa described how overly specific activity targets can lead to wasted time and resources.

"Somebody joked to me the other day and said, look - what is it that they're asking of us? That we'll have four protest marches in a year? Get to the end of the year, and we've only done one. Better schedule another three quickly to meet the target!"

Short timeframes are also a cause of frustration. "You can't expect miraculous results in two years," noted a South Asian NGO staffer. Representatives of a tech-focused NGO in the Middle East noted that passing a seemingly straightforward piece of antismoking legislation took ten years, the same amount of time it took to pass the Right to Information (RTI) act in India.
If funders are to support movements, they will need to find measurement mechanisms that recognize:

1. Movement activities are most effective when they are flexible and responsive, rather than rigid and prescriptive.
2. Metrics should measure progress

toward a goal, understanding that the exact path of that progress is unforeseeable at the outset.

3. The big payoff of social or political change is likely years away.

At worst, monitoring can be used manipulatively and punitively, not to guide and track but to control and demoralize. The following box describes a worst case scenario of this type. Where targets are inflexible, where measurement is narrowly numeric, and where relationships are abandoned, the funder is no longer supporting an organization. They are harming - not helping - the grassroots.

"THEY BROKE OUR HEARTS": A STORY OF PUNITIVE MONITORING

"They didn't just disappoint us," said the grantee, "they broke our hearts." With other funders, numeric targets had been something to aim for. "You'll do everything you can to reach that number," she said, "but nobody's holding a gun to your head, saying you've got to reach that number otherwise no money will be given." Yet that is exactly what happened to her grassroots organization, which agreed to a number of high targets at the funder's behest. When they did not reach a revenue generation target, a priority of the funder but not the organization, they were shocked to learn that they would only receive a percentage of the money allocated in the funding contract. Measurement was purely quantitative. "The only thing we could express in words was why we didn't meet those numbers," remarked the grantee. Program officers the organization had been dealing with frequently suddenly stopped responding. The grantee even went so far as to use alternate email addresses, thinking that the lack of communication was the result of a technical glitch. But this was not the case. The funder had abandoned the relationship.

Identify the Grassroots

Once risks and distortions are removed, it's time to focus on support. But what does it mean in practice to "water the grassroots"? What do these organizations and individuals look like? The table below provides an initial checklist of indicators, though additional research in this area would be valuable. All characteristics in the table are indicators of the same feature: Those directly affected must have power over the agenda and activities of the organization.

As noted previously, the grassroots is a continuum, not a binary. In the most grassroots organizations, all power is held by those directly affected. In other organizations, like Society For the Promotion of Area Resource Centers (SPARC) in India or

TABLE 1: INDICATORS OF GRASSROOTS EMPOWERMENT

CHARACTERISTIC	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLES
1) Leadership	Organization is led by individuals directly affected by the injustice, either currently or historically. Ideally the director himself/herself is a member of the affected group. (This also applies to individual activists a funder might want to support.)	If the issue is poverty, the organization is led by someone who is/was poor. If the issue is access the health, the organization is led by someone who has been denied treatment.
2) Composition	In addition to the leadership, individuals directly affected by the injustice make up the plurality of the organization's paid and voluntary workforce.	On discrimination issues, the plurality of staff/volunteers comes from the group that is discriminated against.
3) Governance	The organization is structured to ensure that those directly affected maintain power within the organization.	An executive council composed of those directly affected has a say over the organization's activities and agenda, either in an advisory capacity or, better still, with veto power.
4) Consultation	Regardless of staff composition, the organization frequently seeks the input of those directly affected who are not part of its internal structure.	Staff regularly go out into the community and talk to those directly affected to understand their experiences and perspectives.
5) Self-Advocacy	The organization helps those directly affected to speak on their own behalf, rather than speaking for them.	A policy organization sets up meetings between government officials and those directly affected so they can lobby for their own cause.
6) Mobilization Capacity	The organization is able to mobilize those directly affected to take action on their own behalf.	Those directly affected use pressure tactics like protest marches and lobbying of officials and self-help activities like collective savings funds.
7) Location	Organization is located in the same area as those directly affected.	Offices are outside the capital city or in a poorer neighbourhood of it.

[Social Justice Coalition](#) (SJC) in South Africa, significant positions of power are held by those not directly affected by injustice.

Yet these organizations also empower those directly affected by using the tactics described in Table 1. For example, SJC has an Executive Council of people who live in informal settlements, the demographic whose rights and welfare the organization defends. [Patel and Mitlin](#) describe how SPARC staff consult with and empower pavement dwelling women to use self-advocacy.

> "One of the immediate issues was the need to deal with the crises that were commonplace in women's lives…. [T]he constant threat of demolitions, coping with police harassment, and obtaining access to subsidized food…and water. In every case, the community collectives of women and SPARC staff explored what women wanted and what they were entitled to, and then they proceeded to find ways through which women could get these entitlements for themselves….

The [Social Justice Fund](#) in the United States is an example of one funder that makes grassroots indicators a part of its [funding criteria](#). Yet additional work is needed to both identify and develop institutional processes for identifying grassroots organizations and individuals.

After grassroots actors in a particular national or cause context have been identified, *dialogue* with grassroots actors is necessary to better understand their needs. These exchanges would include a discussion of the actor's needs for support, their constraints to accepting support, potential risks of external support, and how their results will be defined and measured.

Determine a Support Path

Once the needs and constraints of the grassroots actor have been determined, the funder needs to analyze their own capacity to meet that need and determine a means of doing so.   The means by which the funder will meet the needs of the grassroots actor is the support path.

Challenges of Direct Support

"It's easy to envision how to craft a grant for technocratic organizations," noted an employee of a North America-based family foundation. However, it's "not easy to think about how to support a group of people." Funding grassroots organizations directly can be challenging because of their *lack of bureaucratic experience and informal structure.* An employee of a North America-based INGO said that grassroots organizations

"…may not have any kind of history of managing funds…. They don't have any way of proving that they can manage a grant effectively and it's very hard for us to do due diligence on them. They can also be just… individuals in a loose affiliation."

Yet funding an informal grassroots organization (for example, one without a legal identity or bank account) is easier than funding *unaffiliated activists.* Contemporary mobilizations from [Gezi Park](#) to [Kiev's maidan](#) are not led by organizations, but rather by ["flexible, rotating, ad hoc structures"](#) without ["recognizable leaders"](#) or even ["established spokespeople."](#) The grassroots is becoming more informal, more independent, and less bureaucratic. This poses a challenge for funders.ù

Strategies for Direct Support

In order to support the grassroots, funders will need to make themselves accessible to those without the bureaucratic skills and legal and financial characteristics of a traditional NGO. In cases where the grassroots actor is an organization, *streamlining funding procedures* and managing relationally will make it easier for these organizations to interface with the funder. If the grassroots actor is "individuals in a loose affiliation" or an independent activist, it may be necessary to bypass organizations entirely and *support individuals directly.*

Fast funding mechanisms provide an ideal laboratory for streamlining processes without changing existing systems. Called alternatively "just-in-time" and "surge" funds by [Stephan, Lakhani, and Naviwala](#) and "opportunistic action" by the [International Budget Partnership](#), these funds provide small amounts of money using short review processes and less paperwork. If they work well, streamlined processes tested here can also be applicable to the funders' standard funding protocols.

Paperwork and reporting are a recurrent frustration for small organizations. [Ben Gharbia](#) notes that funding bureaucracy turns the "good and talented activists into… bureaucrats spending their time in [writing proposals and reports instead of being active](#)." An employee of a Southern African INGO agreed, bemoaning the fact that

TABLE 2: CHARACTERISTICS OF FAST FUNDING

CHARACTERISTIC	EXAMPLES
Unanticipated Acute Need	A news story highlighting a corruption scandal increases political openness to accountability demands; Mass arrests at a protest require additional legal resources.
Short, Informal, and Relationship-Based Application	Long-form paper application replaced with a three-page description written in collaboration with a program officer.
Rapid Turn-Around	Multi-step approval process replaced with a three-person approval committee and ten-day turn-around time.
Small Grant Size	Payment for the addition of a part-time media consultant to help promote the findings of a report.

grassroots organizations

"are given tiny amounts of money on ridiculously short timeframes with huge reporting requirements. People that would otherwise be on the ground making change are sitting filling out reports." Remarked an employee of a local Southern African NGO, "Often people are pulled away from doing the actual work... to deal with donor bureaucracy."

Even worse than taking valuable time from movement work, production of applications, reports, and budgets may be beyond the competency of certain organizations and individuals, cutting the grassroots out of the funding process before they have even begun. The ability to satisfy bureaucracy is not a requirement for effective activism. It should not be a requirement for support either.

Stephan, Lakhani, and Naviwala suggest that relationship-based management may be the solution.

"Emphasizing text messages, e-mails, phone calls, and in-person conversations -- combined with site visits can be more revealing than formal reports, especially for partners who do not speak English as a first language."

Relationship-based management is also conducive to grantee learning. The employee of the Southern African INGO wished "donors would become more engaged in a conversation around learning, rather than... logframes and reporting requirements, which are, frankly, quite detached from the actual practice of organizations." Ross agrees, arguing that "over-reliance on written forms of communication (proposals, reporting)...

are not sufficient to develop relationships of trust and openness which support sharing of learning."

Another way to directly support both grassroots individuals and the organizations they are a part of is to bring them together in convenings that facilitate collaboration. Yet convenings are "pretty hard to do... meaningfully," noted the employee of the Southern African INGO:

"I've seen donors wanting to bring people together, because they somehow think it's good to bring people together, just because. For these sorts of relationships to make sense... demands a very specific strategic fit between the missions of organisations... [The] reason people go is because donors are asking them to, not because it's useful."

"If you want to get into that game" of brokering relationships, he continued, "you've got to get all the way in, or else you've got to get out." Getting "all the way in" means really thinking about which groups need to be in the same room. "Real partnerships across organizations are useful when they are actually working together on the ground," explained the employee of the local Southern African NGO. Furthermore, where collaboration on concrete projects is likely, "simple introductions are often the best support for... partnership."

Financial Intermediaries

Because of these challenges, sometimes the easiest way for funders to support the grassroot is to find an institutional intermediary. Noted the North American

family foundation employee, "If there is an intermediary organization with whom we could work, and therefore were able to engage in social movements, that would be absolutely fantastic. We'd be very excited about that." She continued, "But for us to engage with a social movement directly becomes very complicated." Without offices around the world and regionally focused staff, it would be difficult for a funder such as hers to directly support social movements in general, or grassroots actors in particular.

Re-granters can form a critical link between funders and grassroots actors. INGOs like International Budget Partnership, National Resource Governance Institute, and Eurasian Harm Reduction Network can provide funders with local and topic-area knowledge and management capacity, while providing bureaucratic support to grassroots organizations. Booth notes that re-granters may be more able to "recruit local or locally experienced staff" who have relationships with the grassroots actors. Re-granters may also be more answerable to the grassroots, and can push back against funders' "hyper-planning" and "micro-management tendencies."

Yet re-granters are also not a silver bullet. Very large funding organizations may have similar geographic and topic area specialization as the INGOs they would use as re-granters. Re-granters may also choose not to support the grassroots. Criteria for re-granting must include criteria like those in Table 1 to ensure that funds reach as close to the grassroot as possible.

Service Intermediaries

Intermediaries are not only conduits for financial support. They can also provide specialized services to grassroots organizations. Noted a South Asian NGO employee, "the empowerment of the grass-roots requires solidarity of different kinds - mentors, people with various skills, people who can negotiate on behalf of the community where [the] community itself cannot be present."

Service intermediaries need not be INGOs. A technology **consultant**, paid to revamp an organization's website, or a **researcher**, supported to evaluate an organization's program, are examples of individual service intermediaries. Other services, like **legal aid,** can be performed by directly by a staff lawyer employed by a funder, indirectly by an independent lawyer contracted by a funder,

or indirectly through a grant to a legal aid NGO.

Training is another service commonly provided by an intermediary, especially when the skill is outside the expertise of funder staff. Yet trainings need to involve skills implementation in order to be effective. "You don't learn political organizing in a classroom," explained an interviewee from a North American governance INGO, "You have to do it." Having grantees "sit in a workshop all day...and then everyone goes home" is "time-consuming and it's a burden," noted the representative of the local Southern African NGO. "It doesn't really have an impact on an ongoing basis and in the long term." In place of one-off trainings the interviewee from the governance organization suggested **guided practice**, an ongoing system of project implementation paired with mentorship.

Another approach to training is to create **regional centers** that provide traditional workshop-style trainings, but on an ongoing basis – as is being undertaken by the Civil Society Innovation Initiative. However, it is unclear whether this initiative will go beyond the traditional NGO actors to include grassroots actors.

Finally, intermediaries can provide both financial and service support. The head of an academic research center in Central America provides one example of how this **dual support** works:

> "The role that we play is threefold. We provide capacity-building... developing the skills and knowledge necessary to use the legal framework. The second work that we do is to facilitate channels of engagement between... the state... and these specific indigenous groups. So we play an important role but we do not intend to speak on behalf of indigenous organizations.... We [also] provide funding... if the organization has identified that there is a window of opportunity...."

Yet working with intermediaries has its limitations. Intermediaries are **middlemen**, adding value while also siphoning resources. The funder should design these intermediary interactions such that funds that go to the intermediary are converted directly into support for the grassroots with minimal transaction cost. True intermediaries collaborate with the grassroots. They do not usurp their voices. They do not compete with them for funds. At best, the intermediary provides support to a grassroots organization or individual, increasing effectiveness. At

worst, intermediaries play this role in name only, absorbing resources for activities that do not benefit the grassroots at all, in effect becoming competitors of grassroots organizations.

Conclusion

"Supporting movements" is not an actionable strategy. It is vague and diffuse. This is because movements are diffuse entities. They are ever-changing networks of organizations and individuals working in loose coordination to undo a systemic injustice. To actually support social movements, funders must get more specific.

This Think Piece provides guidance for answering that question. It suggests that, in order to support transparency and accountability through movements, funders should **support those directly affected** by the injustices that result from a lack of transparency and accountability.

Supporting the grassroots will look different across different contexts. Sometimes they will be previously unaffiliated activists, like the digitally connected protesters in Tahrir Square and Gezi Park. Sometimes they will be informal and unregistered organizations like Ferguson Action and Millennial Activist United, created by black youth in the United States. Sometimes they will be legally incorporated NGOs like SPARC and Social Justice Coalition, which are not entirely composed of those directly affected, but who have instituted multiple practices to ensure they represent those interests. Other times they will be membership-based organizations like the Peasant Farmers Association of Ghana or movement organizations like MKSS.

To support the grassroots effectively, important questions remain:

1. How are funders currently funding the grassroots?

2. Which forms of support lead to the best transparency and accountability outcomes?

3. What procedures and criteria can help funders integrate grassroots organizations and individuals into their transparency and accountability portfolios?

4. What is the full range of grassroots organizational structures and what are their characteristics?

The grassroots are funders' staunchest

allies in the fight for transparency and accountability because they suffer the most from its absence. It is time to find better ways to empower them in that fight.
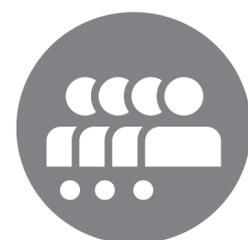
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