

In Focus: Evaluating Social Change

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A critical aspect of fostering progressive social movements is a funder's ability to monitor and evaluate (M&E) the social change process, while learning from partners on the ground as well as from each other. Over 28 years of accompanying progressive social movements, Grassroots International, an international development and human rights funder dedicated to supporting social movements in the Global South, continues to hone its ability to monitor and evaluate social change. From Grassroots' perspective, a strong monitoring and evaluation process is critical to strengthening the grantmaking process and equally as important in building relationships with partners and grantees. M&E strengthens grantmaking in a number of ways, including:

- Gaining relevant information about grantees' challenges;
- Providing tools to improve grants oversight, and
- Strengthening grantmaking goals.



Photo courtesy of Grassroots International

Propelled by the Forging Alliances North & South (ForAL) dialogue on evaluation and social change, Grassroots International recently conducted a thorough assessment of its M&E procedures. Grassroots was one of the funders that participated in the ForAL dialogue between funders, civil society organizations and social movements. This dialogue focused specifically on understanding the social change process and building strong working relationships between organizations of the global North and South and between funders and grantees.

The focus of Grassroots' assessment was to: 1) analyze why many grantees find that evaluation processes reinforce power imbalances between funders and grantees, and 2) shift the one dimensional standard for measuring social change, which is a complex and multi-dimensional process. As part of this process, Grassroots conducted a review of its own M&E process and engaged in a number of vibrant internal conversations to identify the challenges both Grassroots' staff and grantees face in monitoring and evaluating grants. Grassroots' staff underscored the need to learn more about our grantees' own M&E methods. As such, it was critical for Grassroots to deepen our understanding of how our partners internally engage in discussions on evaluation.

We began by compiling key pieces of information on our grants from internal documents, including project proposals and reports, and strategic plans, to learn what M&E practices and tools our partners and

grantees were using. Specifically, we looked at what type of indicators our partners and grantees most often used. This information gathering affirmed that Grassroots identifies movement building as a central theme in our grantmaking and advocacy goals. As such, the indicators of success through our grants all relate to movement building: creating partnerships, supporting sustainable livelihoods, fueling advocacy, and strengthening financial sustainability. For instance, our sustainable livelihood grants that typically support development projects are evaluated based on whether the project has served as an entry point for organizing and movement building; created a sense of ownership and collective learning; enabled leadership development of participants, especially women; and provided the community with the tools to replicate or develop sustainable livelihoods.

A critical piece of this assessment was getting input on our key indicators and M&E procedures from our grantees, which we had the opportunity to do in Haiti last March. During that site visit, we shared our M&E ideas with our partners and learned about their M&E practices. Unsurprisingly, all of our partners described negative experiences with M&E procedures imposed by funders, and almost every one of them questioned whether the time they spent on collecting information for funders was useful for their (the grantees') work. None of our partners recalled any of their funders willing to accept grantees' own evaluation methods or to work with existing grantee practices. Funders typically want to evaluate their grantees' work based on their own processes and procedures. Having an open discussion with our grantees about our evaluation indicators and gaining their perspective helped us ensure that our M&E process is aligned with our ultimate goal of bringing about social change.

Evaluating social change begins with transparency and trusting relationships. How much energy and resources do we funders dedicate to that? Grassroots International's experience shows that long-term commitments to organizations, grounded in transparency and trust, create better conditions for the development of meaningful partnerships. In fact, that trust allowed our partners to share with us their experiences with other funders in monitoring and reporting, and engage in problem-solving together to create meaningful solutions.

Clearly, funders have a long way to go to ensure that our M&E process actually benefits the organizations and social movements we aim to support. The more that our own monitoring practices are transparent and informed by our grantee partners' evaluation methods, the more likely we are to be successful in capturing important lessons for strengthening social movements and creating lasting social change.

Resources for Funders:

- "[Evaluating Social Change: A Funder-Social Movement Dialogue:](#)" This report emerged from the funder-social movement working group created through the initiative of Forging Alliances South and North (ForAL). The report is also available in [Spanish](#).
- [Background on ForAL](#): Forging Alliances South and North (ForAL) is an initiative to create links between U.S. funders and organizations, networks, and social movements in Latin American and the Caribbean who share an interest in promoting positive social change.
- Association for Women in Development: "[Strengthening Monitoring and Evaluation for Women's Rights -12 Insights for Donors](#)."

- The "[Most Significant Change](#)" Technique.
- [Empowerment Evaluation](#).
- "[In Focus: Evaluation and Human Rights Grantmaking](#)," IHRFG E-Newsletter, July 23, 2010.
- "[Movement-Building Indicators](#)," Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice.
- [The American Evaluation Association Library](#) contains hundreds of free downloads available to the public. Searches on "human rights evaluation" will yield resources of interest.
- Contact [Saulo Araujo](#) for more information at saraujo@grassrootsonline.org.