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How to Make Friends and Influence Donors: Three Models for Philanthropic Advocacy

Thursday, July 11, 2013

1:30-3:00pm

Session Organizers:

- Sangeeta Budhiraja, Director of Programs, Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice
- Sarah Gunther, Director of Africa Programs, American Jewish World Service
- Mia Herndon, Coordinator, Global Philanthropy Project

Facilitator:

- Mia Herndon, Coordinator, Global Philanthropy Project

Panelists:

- J. Bob Alotta, Executive Director, Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice
- Adisa Douglas, Senior Advisor, Funders Network on Population, Reproductive Health and Rights
- Diana Samarasan, Executive Director, Disability Rights Fund

Sponsor:

- Global Philanthropy Project (GPP)
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Mia Herndon, Coordinator of the Global Philanthropy Project (GPP), began the session by talking about the GPP, which began in 2009. It is housed at Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice, and its mission is to support LGBT rights globally; to expand resources; deepen knowledge; and leverage collective power, thoughts, ideas and money. It works and builds across different sections of advocates and organizers, which can be challenging when constituencies are marginalized. Herndon described this particular panel as an opportunity to share these challenges with the disability rights and reproductive health community. It was intended to be a frank conversation, with participants bringing together knowledge about collaboration, but also their work with grantees, and to share models and the opportunities and challenges within those models.

J. Bob Alotta, Executive Director of Astraea, expanded on the goal of the GPP, which is to leverage resources where there is a dearth, and to increase sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) rights work globally. There are two areas that the GPP can make the most impact: facilitating knowledge and grantmaker strategies sharing; and identifying global opportunities and trends in order to rethink what collaborative philanthropic advocacy means.

Alotta also elaborated on Astraea's strategy and outlook. Astraea's grantees are partners, and the donors make up the community. Astraea also has different collaborative funds, and is the first

implementer of USAID money for LGBTI rights. However, this is a partnership rather than a grant, and Astraea understands that collaboration is inherent in doing this work.

Diana Samarasan, Executive Director of the Disability Rights Fund (DRF), noted that DRF was launched in 2008 as a pooled fund, with collaboration among and between donors in the disability community, in order to address the emergent rights of 1 billion people around the globe living with disabilities. All levels of decision-making roles have a majority of people with disabilities. DRF began with 3 donors, and is now comprised of 2 governments, one public charity and some private donors. There is collaboration among donors – the governments are interested in development, and the private donors are interested in human rights.

Samarasan also stressed that there is collaboration between the donors, and people with disabilities who help make grants, including people with disabilities from around the world, and people from indigenous communities, who learn from the advisory panel to bring back to their own communities. This advisory panel makes grantmaking recommendations, while the grantmaking decisions are made through majority vote. In conclusion, there are different levels and types of collaboration. This can be complicated, but overall leads to a good conversation.

Adisa Douglas, who is a senior advisor at the Funders Network on Population, Reproductive Health and Rights, talked about the Network as covering a broad range of reproductive issues. They have taken into consideration intersectionality for a long time, and in collaboration with other funding groups.

Douglas described the most successful collaboration she has been part of – the Catalyst Fund. This fund came out of the Women of Color (WOC) Working Group. It took 2 years to have conversations around who to fund, and the focus of the funding. It was finally made into a clear formula, with national funders (27 over 5 years) who contribute to Groundswell, which re-grants the money to 12 grantmaking organizations/partners. After these 12 raise a match from their base of 450 individuals, they re-grant this to 101 WOC-led organizations in the community. Through this, they have reached 50,000 people and 1,700 organizations. She highlighted that reproductive justice was about building alliances with environmental and criminal justice.

Douglas also brought up the International Funders Working Group, which has international collaborations with NGOs. Governments can sign on to this, and NGOs can then make them accountable. The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) sub-group was created to focus on this, and the meeting of the NGOs within this was to put strategies on the table, develop communication and build connections. In January, this funders group brought together 30 NGOs in London, which was an example of how funding could evolve quickly and efficiently to fund different kinds of things.

Herndon then asked the panelists about the importance of transparency in working together, especially with funders who have different theories of change, but who all must come to an agreement in order to successfully leverage resources as a collaborative.

Samarasan replied that there are different kinds of donors at the table, and that DRF is young, and so they have difficulty developing donor interest. Too often this struggle is understood as a medical model, with charity-oriented thoughts, and people are seen as objects of intervention, rather than subjects with rights. Importantly, funders must bring in leaders with disability, to break down barriers between development funders and human rights funders, as disability spans economic, social, cultural, political and social rights. However, there is still a divide between disability work as framed in terms of human rights, and human development. Additionally, funders must manage intersectionality, and must build collaborations with other human rights movements. Three seats in the advisory panel of DRF are “bridge-builders,” which allows participants to learn from the disability movement and bring this back to their own movement.

Question and Answer Session

One participant asked specifically about the advisory panel members nominated by the International Disability Alliance, and whether there is a conflict of interest if they are involved in the structure of the fund and grantmaking strategies; as well as if they are also grantees.

Samarasan responded that they have a conflict of interest policy, and that they only carry out a recommendations role. While four of the global advisory panel members sit on the grantmaking panel, they cannot put an application in for funding. However, there is little funding available and this does not seem fair, so if their organizations put in applications for funding, they have to recuse themselves from decision making.

Another question was posed about the stereotyping of people with disabilities, and included the difficulty in funding for the “mentally handicapped”.

Samarasan responded that there are hierarchies within the disabilities community, e.g. types of disability, class, sex, etc. There is also a complexity involved in “entering” the disability “fraternity.” She also brought up the example that in Peru, there were 23,000 people with psycho-social disabilities who were removed from voting eligibility. This case was brought to the United Nations, and they were able to get voting rights reinstated, and the indicator of disability status on voter ID cards was removed.

A participant asked about building partnerships between transatlantic multi-country stakeholders, especially when funders work in different countries with different cultures.

Alotta responded that there are varied assumptions of what civic engagement and government responsibility is. European collaborators are in a different situation than U.S.-based ones. However, there is also the responsibility of what it means to be a funder from the West, on a rights issue that is seen as a cultural issue, and funders cannot divorce it from the frame of imperialism. However, Astraea honors and respects the grantee partners’ autonomy and knowledge, and their grantmaking is meant to uplift their work and agendas. Alotta emphasized that it is incumbent on funders to put groups in contact. Yet, there are also conflicts and challenges, in terms of metrics and statistics. For example, what

happens if there is no access to this data, and who determines what measures are used to calculate “progress”? Should funders burden their grantees for this data? And when funders have different theories of change, how can evaluation efforts be coordinated? It should be the funders’ responsibility to find common theories of change to meet this goal.

A participant asked how collaborative funds can work within philanthropy as a strategy for doing better work – for example, many foundation officers are isolated.

Douglas responded that a model would be the Catalyst Fund. It created a toolkit on reproductive justice with a video, as they wanted funders to talk to other funders, and to break down barriers to what it means to fund reproductive justice.

Samarasan described two main strategies – a grantmaking strategy (the main one), and an advocacy strategy, as it takes a lot to get donors to the table. There is a need to educate and raise awareness within the philanthropic community, such as speaking at international human rights meetings, other funders meetings, and producing publications, to give strategies for disability inclusion in other funders’ grantmaking.

Alotta reminded the participants also not to forget the position of philanthropy, as funders come from different institutions with different levels of endowment, geographic locations and intentions. Collaborations should lay these bare, and then get rid of the differences. Identities of a person and institution will always be judged, and funders should take advantage of these differences. A participant also suggested that funders publish mechanisms of their funds, to deal with the critiques and feedback from organizing, as well as to invite non-donors to learn and understand the landscape.

A participant noted that funders don’t often talk about power, and are too polite. Sometimes conflict is good for collaboration so funders can find out where there is disagreement and what to do about it. Additionally, much of these are culture-bound touchy issues – for example, Arab organizations doing SOGI work can discuss “personal rights,” but cannot go near groups talking explicitly about SOGI. The participant suggested that the people should define issues for funders, rather than a top-down approach. Lastly, the participant also questioned the connection of the political issue of war to disability.

Herndon concluded the session by emphasizing the necessity of trust in order to be effective, while also highlighting that hierarchies exist in funders’ work. She asked the panelists to explain how they manage these hierarchies, to be successful for people who are most marginalized.

Douglas responded that there are successful collaborations through leadership to keep the momentum going, and that funders should leverage with collaborated resources.

Samarasan responded that there is a hierarchy within the disability community with respect to war – for example, some organizations will provide post traumatic stress services, but not deal with people who already have disabilities prior to war.

Alotta concluded by noting that power structures will always exist, and how LGBTQI people operate within them is a response, a reaction, and a declaration. Alotta stressed that the closer a funder's structure gets to the lived experiences of the people that they are trying to engage, the more likely funders can manifest this. There is a need to acknowledge power, and being polite is not being honest. Funders should take advantage of their unique positions, and should look at other things that appeal to them and that are successful.