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Funding Human Rights Work at the Margins – Innovation or Quagmire?

Friday, July 12, 2013
10.45am – 12.15pm

Session Organizers:

- Ariel Jacobson, Senior Associate for Economic Justice, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC)
- Yifat Susskind, Executive Director, MADRE
- Martha Thompson, Rights in Humanitarian Crises Program Manager, UUSC

Facilitator:

- Ariel Jacobson, Senior Associate for Economic Justice, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC)

Panelists:

- Wendy Flick, Haiti Emergency Response Manager, UUSC
- Guylande Mésadiou, Coordinator, Zammi Timoun Foundation
- Yifat Susskind, Executive Director, MADRE

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- Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC)
 - MADRE
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Ariel Jacobson, Senior Associate for Economic Justice at the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC), introduced the session by explaining how grantmakers look for innovative work, but asked what are the real margins, and what are the complexities involved in working with marginalized communities. This challenging work is meant to be done over the long haul, and inspiring stories are necessary. She asked each table of participants to discuss what the levels of marginalization are that make it difficult to fund some groups that work at the margins; as well as specific institutions that the participants belong to that deal with difficulties in finding groups to support, or convincing their board members.

Participants shared key points from their discussions:

- One group discussed exclusion and lack of access, as well as language capacity and the capacity of marginalized organizations to access donors, including just sending proposals.
- Another group questioned funders with privilege to see the broader view and patterns, and asked how other groups handle this balance when they do not have that opportunity.
- One group discussed multiple layers of marginalization – for example, criminalization. These communities cannot access existing systems, such as abused women who do not go to the

police for fear of additional violence, or the reproductive rights for women in the U.S. Military who have different rights, as well as lack of legal association for some groups.

- Another group discussed the hierarchies within LGBTI issues, where trans people have are discriminated against and have difficulty accessing resources. Even within the southern United States, there is an uneven distribution of funds where some groups cannot get 501(c)(3) status.
- The last group discussed logistical challenges for foundations, and the difficulties in making cross-border grants to small groups.

Jacobson asked the panelists to speak about the practicalities and complexities of grantmaking to build capacity, lead grantees to other funding sources, and identify valuable groups.

Yifat Susskind, Executive Director of MADRE, described MADRE's work as working in long-term partnerships, using three overall strategies:

1. MADRE has a commitment to provide direct and basic services to marginalized communities. They have a project with Syrian refugees in Jordan, to ensure that women can access international protection mechanisms. If they cannot focus on basic needs for marginalized women, they cannot focus on more abstract justice issues.
2. In their evaluation practices, MADRE seeks to reduce the gap between labor-intensive methodologies that funders expect, and what is reasonable for grantees to provide, without compromising critical evaluation. MADRE has two core evaluation questions: what have you learned, and how have you changed your work as a result? Everything else must be incumbent upon funders. This means being present programmatically, as MADRE co-creates programs with its partners. Alternatively, working collaboratively with mutual funders of grantees, to think about funders as a community of support, rather than competing for evaluation.
3. Providing financial support to these types of groups means more than simply recognizing that marginalized groups can't get receipts or wait for reimbursement. For example, how do funders transfer money to ensure that grantees are safe? MADRE has accompanied grantees through the entire process of opening bank accounts, as there are invisible barriers that class throws up. MADRE has also done grantmaking through cash.

Funders need a certain level of design and expertise to work with marginalized groups and not burden the grantees, but not all funders should do that, as there should be an effective division of labor.

Susskind also emphasized that marginalization is framed in terms of a lack of access, but funders should change the frame to look at the assets that come with the experience of marginalization. Funders at the center of power cannot see the system clearly, while looking in from the margins gives a clear look at the system of power – grantees thus provide capacity building for funders.

Wendy Flick, Haiti Emergency Response Manager for UUSC, described how UUSC seeks out marginalized people to work with since groups on the margins are in the best position to know what is going on in terms of human rights violations, and the way to come up with solutions. Flick also suggested that supporting people on the margins is not as difficult as people imagine. It is important to do due diligence, but the most important part of due diligence is relational, as funders need to know if they

have the capacity to carry out relationship-building. However, there are always intermediaries, such as fiscal sponsors, or a group on the ground that has NGO status, and bridges can be used on the way to work with marginalized groups. It is important to know how to strategically provide a grant so as not to overwhelm a group, and through that, work with other funders. In conclusion, funders should stretch their lens to think about what is helpful.

Jacobson then introduced Guylande Mésadiou, Coordinator at the Zammi Timoun (“Friends of Children”) Foundation. Zammi Timoun was founded in 2011 to work with children in Haiti. Their objective is to promote social justice by promoting the rights of children and women through education and reintegration of unaccompanied children who come to Port au Prince. They also provide professional training to at-risk youth, rape survivors and single mothers, including plumbing, carpentry and other jobs. They carry out basic advocacy at the local, state, municipal and state level. Even though Zammi Timoun is small, UUSC trusted them and provided them funds, and from that relationship other funders have invested in them.

Jacobson asked the panelists about coming up with creative solutions to work in environments of natural disaster and highly politicized situations.

Flick responded by citing the example of UUSC’s grant in 2004 during the political coup in Haiti. They had planned to donate a well-drilling rig, but it was trapped in Texas. Through discussions with partners they trusted that knew the context better than they did, they sent the rig to Haiti. It was important to value the expertise of people on the ground that didn’t necessarily have certifications to demonstrate their expertise, but knew what was going on.

Susskind discussed the role of capacity building and community support. MADRE works in long-term relationships, and advocates on behalf of partner groups with other funders, to address to other funders where their lack of confidence is (often around financial capacity) and how they can shore it up. For example, a grantee was audited by another funder, and the audit turned up deficiencies. MADRE discussed the audit with the group and the other funder, figuring out issues that the funders had to deal with, but also how to help the grantee. This depends on transparency, and a willingness by everyone to stop downplaying or hiding the lack of capacity. It is a labor-intensive practice, but it is important. Flick added that there is a need to ask grantees what is holding them back from being more, and for the funders to plug those capacity gaps, as defined by the grantee.

A participant brought up the definition of capacity, and the context in which it is defined. The grantees know what they are facing but they need the skills to communicate issues on the ground to the funder. Additionally, within foundations there needs to be an awareness of what they can fund, and how to communicate this to the higher level of funders.

Another participant brought up the tension between being a human rights advocacy funder, but also a funder that does capacity building. Funders have limited funds, and so have to pick and choose. Well-

capacitated organizations do not necessarily do the best work – for example, the Disability Rights Fund made the choice to leave the more traditional capacity building to other funders.

Susskind shared that some of the best capacity builders for marginalized groups are other marginalized groups, and that there is a horizontal sharing of what has worked, to grow their options. This results in a more organic exchange of capacity-building, but without a pre-existing top-down model, to meet the needs of the organizations. Funders also have to keep in mind the paradox that the sources of peoples' marginalization are also the same things that are their sources of strength. Flick added that there is a balance between what funders can add from their positions of relative privilege, but also have to be sensitive not to make too many assumptions.

Mésadieu shared that there is a lot of diversity within the NGO community in Haiti, and that although the larger organizations can secure funds easier, smaller grassroots organizations do important work. She reminded funders that very small grants can go a long way for meaningful programs in social change, and that funders should be creative, as not only funds matter.

A question was raised as to whether due diligence should be relational, and how to be open to new ideas that aren't yet part of the network.

Panelists responded that relations are important, and innovative solutions must be vetted. Different contexts must be respected, while building new relationships in all contexts. Each new situation should be approached differently, and relationship networks should be elastic – for example, faith-based organizations are very different depending on the region.

Participants commented that an option could be to take a risk to see how it works, and then start to build relationships between the network and the grantee. A participant also brought up an example of having problems with an individual grant for a member of a grantee with a health problem, as this individual's health problem was also a capacity issue. However, emergency funds cannot fund something that is not a direct consequence of human rights violations.

Susskind described how MADRE is structured in a way that can take risks – for example, having an emergency and disaster relief fund that is deliberately flexible, discretionary, and can be moved quickly. However, there is certainly a lot of subjectivity, and funders have the authority and responsibility to exercise their judgment.