

In Focus:

How Philanthropy Can Sustain the Occupy Movement

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The supporters of the global Occupy movement view it as an unprecedented opportunity to overcome an inequitable system of corporatism, injustice, and financial recklessness. For the philanthropic and social change sector working on issues of economic justice, Occupy has been remarkable and frustrating -- unique in its scale, character, and appeal -- but at once difficult to engage because philanthropy is used to operating within well-understood systems and organizations. One thing is clear: this is a new kind of movement, spontaneous and charged in a way that shakes up our deeply-held conceptions of leadership and social action. If the bonds and energies established through these remarkable events can be sustained in a meaningful way, they could form the basis for the kind of lasting organizations necessary to traverse the long, hard road to economic and social equity. It could very well mark a significant moment in the history of the United States, and worldwide, for the millions who encompass the 99%.



Although recent weeks saw Occupy activists dislodged from a number of public spaces, with only about 50 encampments still remaining, the movement itself is going strong with massive mobilizations planned for the Spring including hundreds of campus actions across the United States, an International Women's Day March in New York, and a massive march of 50,000+ people planned for the [G8 and NATO](#) Summit in Chicago this May. Earlier this month, [Shut Down the Corporations](#) actions occurred in over 80 U.S. cities, with similar mobilizations in Europe -- most notably in Greece, Spain, and Belgium -- and more planned in alliance with European Trade Unions in almost all 27 EU nations in the coming weeks.

At a time when institutional funding for progressive organizing has been on the decline, Occupy serves as a much needed catalyst, prompting a heightened interest in strategies that shift power towards movements that create change from the bottom-up. Such movements amplify voices from the "periphery" -- be they Indigenous Peoples in the Andes, farmers calling for food sovereignty in Africa, or popular uprisings in the Arab world -- all of whom have mounted successful challenges to the hegemony of neoliberal market fundamentalism. Likewise, Occupy is seen as having opened a new cycle of political innovation and activity which could profoundly change the shape of politics and the prospective for activists everywhere.

Across the philanthropic landscape, foundation representatives seeking ways to engage with frontline communities and grassroots allies, recognize the complexity of such an endeavor. Indeed there are dangers in flooding any organization, much less a decentralized social movement, with financial resources too quickly.

In responding to this complexity, funders associated with the Funders Network on Transforming the Global Economy (FNTG), the Neighborhood Funders Group, and the Working Group on Labor and Community Partnerships among others launched an Occupy email distribution list for grantmakers which within a week had more than 100 members. This was an indicator of the breadth and appeal of a movement that had tapped into something far deeper than just the energy of its core organizers, and inspired within these organizations an opportunity to envision what could happen if the movement is appropriately nurtured.

There are a number of approaches that funders can take to participate responsibly in this movement. The following strategies have been outlined by foundation staff, members of the Occupy movement, activists and organizers who have been working in this field for decades:

- **Keeping the Flame Burning: Funding Occupy Directly.** Contributing directly to the encampments is both invaluable and necessary as they are the heart and soul of the movement. This may be channeled through associated groups such as OccupyWallst.org, the official online resource for the movement; or [Occupy Wish List](#), which outlines the material needs of the encampments; [Kickstarter Occupy](#), a funding platform which currently supports over 70 Occupy initiatives; and the [Alliance for Global Justice](#), Occupy's fiscal sponsor, which oversees everything from housing, venues, transportation, outreach and administration.
- **Funding Community Organizations Engaged with Occupy.** This approach enables donors to contribute to a grassroots infrastructure that builds on years of community organizing and can help sustain the movement towards long-term systemic transformation. In support of the movement, community-based organizations have mobilized experienced organizers to forge stronger linkages with Occupy activists and networks, providing support through trainings, teach-ins, and guiding the movement through an intricate network of people and resources.
- **Tackling the Issues: Money in Politics.** A central refrain of the Occupy movement is that corporations have too much power. One entry-point for philanthropic leaders seeking to support the movement is to fund organizations working to sever the ties that exist between corporations and the government. Such organizations are working on local, state, and national levels to pass specific pieces of legislation which would limit the influence of the corporate sector in politics. Among them are: [Free Speech for People](#), [Move to Amend](#), [The Funders Collaborative on Civic Participation](#), and [Fund for The Republic](#).

The group of funders mentioned above and a number of allied organizations have also launched an informal effort, [Occupy Philanthropy](#), a website hosting an open letter to colleagues within the philanthropic sector entitled, *Why We Must Support the Occupy Efforts*, to which almost 70 foundation representatives and philanthropic leaders are now signatory. In addition to the letter, the website serves as a portal for idea-sharing and learning on how philanthropy can appropriately support organizing and movement-building at local, national, and international levels. The intricacy and complexity of Occupy is demonstrated through the breadth, depth and diversity of the philanthropic response in determining how best to fund it. Recognizing that there is no right approach -- some may find it appropriate to fund directly while others to support connectivity and infrastructure -- FNTG developed *Funding the Movement: Occupy and Beyond*, an evolving collection of thoughts on ways grantmakers can participate responsibly in the Occupy moment, some of which are outlined above.

For many, the Occupy movement does not only decry the economic inequality of our time, but stands for something spirited and hopeful: that another world is possible. It is nothing short of remarkable, that thousands have camped across the globe, willingly enduring the elements, bolstered only by the invigorating amity and camaraderie of fellow citizens, to strategize collectively and creatively for justice, fundamental fairness, and systemic positive transformation. Philanthropy's quandary may be that it works within a system that has created the very problems it is trying to resolve. Supporting a movement that can change the system itself should therefore be its highest aspiration. This is indeed an unprecedented moment, and one the philanthropic community cannot fail to seize.

RESOURCES FOR FUNDERS:

- Visit the [Occupy Philanthropy](http://occupyphilanthropy.org/) website: <http://occupyphilanthropy.org/>.
- Read the complete document, [Funding the Movement: Occupy and Beyond](http://occupyphilanthropy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/InSupportofOccupy_007.pdf): http://occupyphilanthropy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/InSupportofOccupy_007.pdf.
- Watch the video: [Why the Occupy Movement and Philanthropy are Related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=_MYyaXHjjNQ): http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=_MYyaXHjjNQ.
- Read the *Nonprofit Quarterly* article, [How Institutional Philanthropy Can Support the Occupy Movement](http://www.nonprofitquarterly.org/philanthropy/19902-how-institutional-philanthropy-can-support-the-occupy-movement.html): <http://www.nonprofitquarterly.org/philanthropy/19902-how-institutional-philanthropy-can-support-the-occupy-movement.html>.
- Read *The Social Change Collaboratory* piece, [A Square Peg in a Round Hole](http://socialchange collaboratory.org/2011/10/13/a-square-peg-in-a-round-hole/): <http://socialchange collaboratory.org/2011/10/13/a-square-peg-in-a-round-hole/>.
- Listen to the audio recording of the Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace telebriefing on [Occupy Philanthropy](http://www.p-sj.org/node/1470): <http://www.p-sj.org/node/1470>.