

Building Constituencies for Progressive Social Change

By Cyrus Driver

In 1998, a group of Ford Foundation grantmakers came together to discuss a shared problem. Many of us were strong advocates for the power of community organizing to promote equitable and effective public policy. Indeed, most of us already were supporting community organizing in our own portfolios, and we often supported the same groups. Yet, the fact that our foundation focused its grantmaking on a discrete set of fields—such as school reform or racial justice—presented a challenge. Since local community organizations often address a wide array of important issues, we decided that we needed to unite grantmakers across many different issue areas in an effort to support these organizations more effectively. We also had to address the fact that our grants—typically designed for large, national and international organizations—would need to be reshaped to meet these organizations’



On April 14, 2008, a broad coalition of labor, community, environmental, and faith organizations called on Denver’s Mayor to use tax-payer subsidies at Union Station, the hub of FasTracks, for good jobs, affordable housing and sustainable development.

needs better. This is the story of how we met these challenges by developing an innovative, cross-foundation initiative: the Fund for Community Organizing (FCO). The FCO far exceeded our expectations and, I believe, represents a replicable model of collaboration between national and local funders to support grassroots organizations as advocates for progressive social change. *(continued on page 13)*

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Supporting Community Organizing

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IDENTIFYING THE CHALLENGE

Ford long has valued community organizing as an essential means for developing fair and effective public policies, and for ensuring that public officials and other leaders are accountable to local communities. Since the 1960s, it has considered community organizing as central to building *civic capacity*, defined as the ability “of various sectors of the community to devise and employ formal and informal mechanisms to collectively solve problems.”¹ In 1998, when I arrived at Ford, we routinely funded community organizations in many portfolios, such as women’s rights, working families, school reform and racial justice. While we used different terms for these efforts, such as “constituency building” or “civic capacity-building,” it was clear that Ford was supporting an eclectic and important array of organizing models.

Yet, we realized that several key differences in the way our organizations operate might be preventing our grants from reaching their full potential:

- While our grant programs generally focus on specific fields, community organizations worked on multiple issues, and rarely could be classified within a single field.
- The relatively large size of our grants meant they were best-suited for large organizations, yet exciting work in organizing often was happening in smaller, nascent groups operating below our radar.
- Our programs tended to be national or global in scope, but community organizations often were based in neighborhoods.

SPARKING INNOVATION THROUGH COLLABORATION

Given these challenges, we asked ourselves, “Can greater collaboration help us improve our funding of community organizing?” Our goal was to build the capacity of groups working collectively on multiple issues of concern to us, rather than to any one portfolio. We wanted to see stronger coalitions to push for policy reforms, and hoped

FORD’S FUND FOR COMMUNITY ORGANIZING (FCO) OBJECTIVES AND BENCHMARKS FOR SUCCESS OF IMPLEMENTATION GRANTS²

3-YEAR OBJECTIVES

1. Strengthened organizational capacities of grassroots community groups

2. Heightened prominence of COs in local and/or state or regional-level debates and decision making, and increased success of COs on multi-issue reform agendas

3. Greater networking of COs in selected region(s)

4. Increased support for CO groups

INDICATORS OF PROGRESS

- > Increased membership of community organizations (COs)
- > Increased and diversified funding base of COs
- > Broadened base of organizational leadership

- > Increased CO representation during formal policy discussions (e.g., hearings, board meetings)
- > Increased media coverage of CO proposals and CO reactions to others’ proposals
- > Increased adoption of CO proposals in multiple social policies (e.g., racial justice, economic rights, education reform)

- > Increased number of meetings across COs in a region
- > Broadened number of issues upon which individual COs take action
- > Greater establishment of formal or informal coalitions

- > Increased grant support from regional and national foundations to initiative COs as well as other COs
- > Increased number of foundations making grants to COs
- > Establishment of a ‘funders’ collaborative’ in the target region

our support might leverage local funding. With these goals in mind, in 1998 we began to explore an internal Ford collaboration, including reviewing the pros and cons of other funders' collaboratives. Our exploration culminated in 2000 with the launch of the Fund for Community Organizing or FCO. The FCO's goals were to: (1) strengthen capacity of the funded community organizations; (2) build coalitions among the organizations and others to achieve wins on policy issues; and, (3) foster greater local understanding and support locally (see table on page 13).

In 2000, the FCO pooled \$4.5 million in funds from 10 program staff budgets. We issued an RFP to key local funders in select cities or regions that we believed were near a 'tipping point' on policy reforms, where community organizing efforts could push such reforms forward within a three-year time frame, and where local funders had shown some support for organizing. The key local funding partners had expertise in supporting community organizing and networking of organizations, and the capacity to create forums for other local donors interested in funding organizing.

In the summer of 2000, we recommended three grants, each at \$1.5 million for three years. Each of these grants went to a lead local funder, which then worked with other local funders to re-grant dollars to their community organizations. The three sites (and lead funder/grantees) were Chicago (Wieboldt Foundation, and then Woods Fund), Los Angeles (Liberty Hill Foundation), and a seven-state region of the American South (Southern Partners Fund of Atlanta).

We believed that a collaborative fund to support capacity-building would enable groups to work more effectively across many issues of concern and might attract a broader array of local donors who worked in various fields. Because grantees would approach a range of problems using community organizing strategies, important lessons about the utility of organizing across fields might be generated.

The FCO was unique because of the extent and depth of the collaboration among Ford program staff. By the time final grants were approved under the FCO in 2004, about 30 Ford grantmakers had contributed funds, actively participated in our committee meetings or attended sites visits. At least two grantmakers from every program within the Foundation contributed resources from their budgets to our shared pool of funds, which eventually totaled \$9.3 million.

BUILDING ON SUCCESS

By 2003, the evaluation team and Ford staff were noticing remarkable developments. Besides numerous policy wins on issues such as living wage and predatory lending, organizations in Chicago and Los Angeles were coalescing more intensively than ever before on major citywide issues. The local funders in all three sites also had begun to coalesce, and the Chicago funders were committing new dollars to partially sustain the work, anticipating the end of Ford support.

At Ford, as staff turned over or moved to other positions, new program staff joined the effort to learn about the FCO's accomplishments and consider next steps. Foundation leadership grew more interested and some began attending meetings with evaluators and staff.

Despite tight funding in 2003, we determined that the efforts underway required one more round of funding to mature, and so we pooled a total of \$2.2 million dollars to re-fund the three sites through 2005 or 2006. In 2004, we decided to explore replication, and collected another \$2 million to fund two expansion sites, Denver and Miami/Central Florida, for two years. We hired a consultant to help develop cross-site learning opportunities, and funded the continued evaluation of all five sites.

The initiative drew to a close in 2006, and we are in the process of completing a final evaluation report.

LESSONS LEARNED

In many ways, the FCO was a great success. In all five sites, we saw significant progress towards FCO goals, including:

- Strengthened organizational capacities, including increased membership, larger and more diversified funding, and stronger board and management practices;
- Numerous policy wins on issues such as living wage campaigns, back wages for immigrant workers, and predatory lending, resulting in billions of new dollars flowing to low-income communities of color;
- Greater and more favorable media coverage of organizing campaigns in major news outlets such as the *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Denver Post* and local TV stations; and,
- Increased local funding for community organizations both in number of funders and in total grant dollars.

Yet behind these individual successes were even more significant collective achievements, both for community organizing and philanthropy itself. First, funders and

10 Best Practices

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community organizations began to work together in new ways, forging effective and evolving divisions of labor among multiple funders and community organizations on key policy issues. Our evaluation team sees these collaborative processes as a qualitative leap forward in building the civic capacity needed for effective movements for progressive social change.

Second, these new relationships are helping to address deep-seated challenges in movement-building, such as strengthening African American/Latino coalitions and addressing core issues that cut across multiple issue areas, such as public transportation and zoning regulations for development.

Finally, the FCO has demonstrated an effective model for how a large foundation can partner with local funders to strengthen civic capacity across multiple issues. By funding the infrastructure of community organizing, we are seeing payoffs in all of our fields. And by developing a workable division of labor between Ford and local funders we have developed a model for national-local funder partnerships that now is being replicated in fields such as school reform.

LOOKING AHEAD

We hope that these achievements will help pave the way for new commitments from additional funders. We believe that the FCO has highlighted the cost-effectiveness of community organizing as a strategy for broad policy reforms. And we hope that our evaluation, which points to the remarkable sophistication, complexity and variety in organizing, will help motivate funders who remain hesitant to invest in this core strategy for progressive social change. We believe that the payoffs to supporting community organizing through long-term, significant funding can be immense—for greater civic capacity, stronger and fairer public policies, real improvements in the lives of people of color and low-income communities, and for a vibrant and just U.S. democracy.

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NOTES

1. C.S. Stone, J.R. Henig, B.D. Jones, and C. Pierannunzi, *Building Civic Capacity: The Politics of Reforming Urban Schools* (Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2001), p. 4-5, 27.
2. Ford Foundation Fund for Community Organizing Request for Proposals, April 2000.

Create a great foundation for passionate employees to work for.

7. Impact the fields in which you work and apply philanthropy's strategic advantages: Unlike government agencies and most corporations, philanthropies have the rare ability to take risks, put a stake in the ground and take stands that are ahead of our time. We can react quickly, and even fail. So, in a respectful way, shape the enduring context and culture of philanthropy, education and politics for the good of those who will follow, even as you focus on concrete outcomes today. Be a philanthropic pillar, a convener, and create space for difficult issues to be brought forward.

8. Foster community organizing as the root of all change: Old fashioned, roll-up-your sleeves grassroots organizing still is the gold standard of effective change. Media campaigns may provide air cover, but you need to go door-to-door to make the chemistry happen. Look for bottom-up, decentralized, contagious and infectious strategies that build community. Fund good Internet organizing, but make sure it is combined with grassroots events. Make sure the efforts are deeper than just the number of "hits."

9. Bring a wealth of first-hand experience: Ground and surround yourself in the struggles of poor people, to raise your own consciousness, and make smart informed investments to help them achieve positive change.

10. Invest your assets in ways that support your vision and mission: Make sure your endowment investing strategy is aligned with your grantmaking mission so they mutually reinforce each other.

Our experience has taught us that to achieve the threshold of effectiveness in these complex times, one must be strategic. If you are a philanthropist, be a strategic philanthropist.

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