SUSTAINING GRASSROOTS SOCIAL JUSTICE ORGANIZATIONS IN CALIFORNIA’S LATINX COMMUNITIES

A Report by the Grassroots Institute for Fundraising Training & Research Action Design

Winter 2017
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Grassroots Institute for Fundraising Training (GIFT) The Grassroots Institute for Fundraising Training (GIFT) builds the capacity of nonprofit organizations to raise money and to develop healthy, diverse, and sustaining fundraising programs. We believe that how groups are funded is as important to achieving their goals as how the money is spent, and that building community support is central to long-term social change. GIFT specializes in providing fundraising training and consulting to nonprofit organizations with budgets below $1 million, especially those working for social justice and those based in communities of color. Most of GIFT’s work focuses on raising money from individuals and grassroots fundraising. More about GIFT can be found here: grassrootsfundraising.org

Research Action Design (RAD) uses community-led research, transformative media organizing, technology development, and collaborative design to build the power of grassroots social movements. RAD is a worker-owned collective. Our projects are grounded in the needs and leadership of communities in the struggle for justice and liberation. More about RAD can be found here: http://rad.cat/

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Fernando Romero, Executive Director of Pomona Economic Opportunity Center
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Jorge Gutierrez, Executive Director of Familia: Trans Queer Liberation Movement
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Margaret Sawyer, Development Director of Mixteco/Indigena Community Organizing Project
Naomi Boas, Development Coordinator of Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education
Patricia Malagon, Member-leader of DeColores Queer Orange County
Suguet Lopez, Executive Director of Lideres Campesinas
Susana Cáceres, Executive Director of El/La Para Translatinas
AGUA Coalition
National Day Laborer Organizing Network
Restaurant Opportunities Center of Los Angeles

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INTRODUCTION

“It was two years ago, I believe, that I signed up for a pitch competition,” recounts Suguet Lopez of Lideres Campesinas, a farmworker women led organization based in California, with chapters throughout the state. “During this pitch workshop I focused on the primary goal of the organization—leadership development. Farmworker women do not need anybody to come and rescue us. We can do it ourselves if we’re given the space to recognize, to realize, that we have talent. Even though we haven’t had that much formal education, we’re actually capable of accomplishing anything if we’re given an opportunity.”

“When I was working on this pitch, I could easily relate it to my personal story, my personal testimony of being out there and saying that I’m a survivor, which is one of the areas of programs that we address within the organization. The fact that I discovered my own talents and that I’m capable of doing many more things than what I thought I could accomplish. That I belong to this network of farmworker women. Now I feel more comfortable asking for support. We also did something like the pitch workshop during one of our board gatherings. Each of the women wrote down something in five minutes that they would say if they were asking for support for the organization. They dedicated time to gather their speech and, one by one, they went up there and did like a theater. The first two women were initially shy, but then as we were all engaged and giving feedback, little by little you could see the self-confidence building. We needed to create that space.”

GIFT initiated this project because we understand that:

• Grassroots organizations need to be accountable first and foremost to the communities in which they work, and this is best done when financial and other support for the work comes primarily from those same communities.

• Even when grassroots organizations recognize this and wish to structure their fundraising efforts accordingly, they often run into significant barriers both internally (in terms of training, staff/volunteer capacity, etc.) and externally (from established funding communities, perceptions from communities who are not accustomed to being approached as potential donors, etc.).

• Latinx immigrant communities and their organizations both reflect these more general truths and exhibit specific assets and challenges to grassroots fundraising that need to be explored in order to best support their grassroots fundraising efforts, particularly long-term.

Given the scarcity of published information and research on the fundraising experiences of grassroots organizations in Latinx immigrant communities in California, we decided to speak directly with organizations doing the work to learn about their needs, challenges, and strategies around funding and sustainability. Our goal was to better understand the fundraising experiences of grassroots organizations in Latinx immigrant communities in California. We wanted to lift up participants’ perspectives about strengths, challenges, and needs they face as they attempt to grow and sustain their work. We also sought to better understand participants’ analysis of the role of fundraising within social justice work.

With that in mind, this project serves a four-fold purpose:

• To better understand and document the current funding challenges facing California’s Latinx immigrant communities doing social justice work;

• To share these findings with local communities, allies, funders, stakeholders, and capacity builders in
hopes of moving more resources to support Latinx immigrant communities throughout the state;

• To build stronger connections between Latinx immigrant communities in California, with the hope of bridging their work to broad out-of-state networks;

• To use research outcomes to help inform approaches that will strengthen fundraising capacity to grow and sustain these communities;

We hope the examples, research findings and recommendations in this report are useful for shoring up the capacity of grassroots organizations and aligning funder and fundraising support to anchor the sustainability of social justice movements rooted in California’s Latinx immigrant communities.

Research Design and Participation

During the spring and summer of 2015, the research team conducted in-depth interviews by phone, video, and in-person with individuals from 21 organizations who fundraise for movement-building work in Latinx communities across California. We also interviewed two fundraising consultants who work closely with grassroots social justice organizations. We asked participating individuals to complete a short survey prior to the interview, to provide background information on their organization’s mission, budget, revenue sources, fundraising capacity, and size (staff, volunteers, membership base). During the interviews, we asked participants about:

**Vision for sustainability:** How their organization was currently resourced, how they would like to see their support sources change, and what it would take to realize their vision of sustainability for their own organization and for social justice movements more broadly.

**Fundraising approaches & capacity:** How they as individuals, and their organizations as a whole, approach and structure fundraising work. We also asked who within the organization was involved in fundraising, and what fundraising looks like in practice.

**Money & finances:** We asked participants to share their own personal experiences with money, as well as their thoughts about their organization’s current, and ideal, financial and fundraising practices.

**Strengths, needs & challenges:** Finally, we asked participants to describe their fundraising strengths and strategies. We also asked what they need most to become more sustainable, and what challenges they face in getting there.
**Who Participated.** We interviewed 22 individuals from 21 organizations, and two fundraising consultants. Participants provided information about their organization’s work, staff size, budget, and funding sources via survey and during interviews. The majority of participants also provided their personal demographic information via survey, although not all did so. In charts below, “N” refers to the number of respondents to the question, not the total number of study participants.

**Research Limitations.** We feel that it is important to note several limitations of the study. All of the individuals we interviewed have unique perspectives that may or may not be shared by others in their organization. Most did reflect on others’ experiences; some recommended that we also speak with one or more of their coworkers in order to capture the complex reality of sustainability work in their organizations and communities. Because of that complexity, we do not pretend that this report fully represents all perspectives and experiences among the research participants. We have synthesized key findings from over 500 pages of rich interview transcripts, and we hope that we have been able to capture a measure of both the shared and unique experiences of participants. Additionally, outreach to participants was primarily based on established relationships of trust. The struggles of Latinx communities across California, from migrant farmworkers in the rural Central Valley, to restaurant workers in urban Los Angeles, to translatinxs in the Bay Area and beyond are all deeply linked, but are also unique in ways that must be understood and acknowledged. While this project sought to include a broad spectrum of organizations and issues, inevitably there were areas that we missed, or that would have required additional resources to explore in greater depth. We also note that most of the people we talked to were not just responsible for fundraising in their organizations, they were also generally in a position of authority in their organization. This makes the report less reflective of the experiences of staff, volunteers, and members of organizations who may be in positions of ‘sharing leadership’ over fundraising work.

**Areas and Opportunities for Further Research.** The project’s limitations revealed critical areas for further research, generated new questions, and revealed strategic opportunities. Based on reflections from our conversations with participants, there is a clear need for resources to speak with more organizations, especially those whose work focuses primarily on the links between mass incarceration and mass deportation. There is also a need for deeply focused research on the specific fundraising strategies and struggles of organizations in the Inland Empire, the San Diego region, and the Central Coast. Finally, there is a need for more research with an intersectional analysis of dynamics within organizations when paid staff (with different pay scales) and unpaid members try to collaborate on fundraising work. We hope that future participatory research about fundraising and movement sustainability will include these and other questions that were beyond the scope of this report.

**Organization Work (N= 21)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Respondents N</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Indigenous Cultural &amp; Human</td>
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**Individual Participants (N=23)**

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<tr>
<td>Central Valley</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inland Empire</td>
<td>14%</td>
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<tr>
<td>San Diego</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statewide</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Binational</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Race/Ethnicity**

- **Latino/a/o** 54%
- **Asian American, Pacific Islander** 13%
- **Indigenous** 6%
- **Other** 8%
- **White** 29%
Gender

- Women 65%
- Men 35%
- Trans*, GNC, Queer 0%

Organization Staff, Budget & Funding Sources (N=21)

- Paid Full Time Staff
  - Yes 70%
  - No 24%

- Paid Development Staff

Organization Budget

- No budget
- $1 - $24,999
- $25,000 - $99,999
  - 19%
- $100,000 - $249,999
  - 10%
- $250,000 - $499,999
  - 24%
- $1M - $3M
  - 24%
- $2M - $4M
  - 10%

Funding Sources

- Foundation Grants
  - 50%
- Government Grants
  - 10%
- Individual Donors
  - 11%
- Earned Income
  - 9%
- Other
  - 6%

CHIRLA members, alongside congressional leaders and Los Angeles city council members, rally to protect DACA outside Los Angeles City Hall
**Sustaining Grassroots Social Justice Organizations in California’s Latinx Communities**

Estimated Donor Revenue, Participating Organizations*

*Note: estimates based on information provided by participants: annual budget & percent of budget from donors.

**KEY TERMS**

**Latinx.** This report uses Latinx to broadly include people of all genders from all countries in Latin America & the Caribbean, including non-Spanish speaking indigenous communities, with a shared history of colonization. This includes people born in the United States to Latin American parents or ancestors, as well as those who identify as Chicana/o/@/x. For the purposes of this report, Latinx recognizes the participation of Mixtec communities in California, but we also seek to clarify the linked yet unique struggles of Mixtec communities. The term Latinx also removes the gender binary denoted by the use of Latina and Latino. In this report, Latinx seeks to acknowledge the gender self-determination of all participants.

**Culture of Fundraising.** For the purposes of this report, this phrase refers to organizations whose members, volunteers, staff, board, and/or community members take collective ownership over the organization's sustainability. It may also refer to organizations that view fundraising as a form of long-term movement building.

**Grassroots Fundraising.** Fundraising that comes from individuals and groups from local communities, base members, or allied constituents is referred to as grassroots fundraising.

**Donor.** A donor is an individual, organization, or institution that makes a gift.

**Development.** For the purpose of this report, development refers to all aspects of an organization's fundraising, including fundraising from foundations, major donors, grassroots fundraising, or other sources that contribute to the sustainability or work of an organization.

**Development Director.** Typically, a development director is someone within an organization who leads the organization's development work.

**Indigenous Migrants.** The indigenous peoples of Mexico living in or migrating from the region known as the states of Oaxaca, Guerrero and Puebla. Transnational or binational (if referring to Mixtec communities in Mexico and the United States) indigenous communities are diverse, and speak many different indigenous languages. This report includes the reflections of two organizations that struggle for the binational social, economic and cultural justice of Mixtec indigenous peoples.

**Popular Education.** Popular education is a theory of mutual learning described by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which combines developing critical consciousness with taking reflective action in order to create social transformation.

**Intersectionality.** Intersectionality (following feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw) refers here to the ways in which structural oppression is experienced not only based on any one identity category, but rather at...
the intersection of gender identity, sexual orientation, race, class, immigration status, language, disability, age, and other axes of identity.

**Trans*. This report uses trans* to broadly refer to people whose gender identity differs from the gender assigned at birth, which can be taken to include (among others) the following communities and identities – transfeminine, transmasculine, MTF (Male-to-female), FTM (Female-to-male), Two-Spirit, transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, gender non-conforming, gender-variant and third gender/sex.

**Queer.** Queer is used as a broad umbrella term by a wide range of people who identify as outside of normative and/or binary constructions of gender, gender identity, sex, and/or sexual identity. Queer also refers to a politics of refusing normative constructions and the oppressive systems that reproduce them.

VISION AND VALUES: BUILDING SUSTAINABILITY

We asked participants across California to share their perspectives on the values and priorities that inform their organization’s sustainability and fundraising efforts. We also asked them to describe their organization’s strengths, as well as to discuss the barriers they face in building sustainability for their organizations and for the broader social justice movements of which they are a part. In this section of the report, we highlight some of their vision and values.

The Health and Human Services network, a statewide coalition of health and consumer advocates, hosted a press conference to respond to Governor Brown’s 2016-17 proposed budget. Community members from numerous organizations including SCOPE LA called on the Governor to invest in programs and services needed by our communities.
Community Accountability and Autonomy

“Our organization is concerned with the violation of the rights of indigenous people,” shared Leoncio Vásquez Santos, vice-coordinator in California of the Binational Front of Indigenous Organizations (Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales, or FIOB), who lives and works in the Central Valley. “We organize to respond to problems the indigenous community faces here in the United States, in Baja California, and in Oaxaca. More than anything it is rights, labor rights, human rights, rights as original peoples of this continent. We take into account our culture, how we perceive the world, and indigenous languages that we still speak with pride.”

For more than 20 years, this volunteer-based organization, which Vásquez Santos estimates to be more than 150 active volunteers strong in California, and perhaps half of that number in the Central Valley alone, has carried out its work without incorporating or turning to a paid staff structure. FIOB, he clarifies, is defined by its members—not by paid staff, nor brick and mortar structures.

“When we talk about our organization, it is each person in the space where we are, with whatever we have—that’s where we do the work. We are all volunteers, from the members, to the longtime leaders, to the founding members. Our work is based on the cargos that we are given in the communities. If we are leaders, it’s because the members have given us this cargo, and we move into leadership roles based on the community work we perform and how our community evaluates such performance.”

Cargos, the Oaxacan indigenous communities’ concept of rotating community leadership responsibilities, are, among other things, community and cultural norms of accountability and sustainability. So too are the community and cultural practices of tequio (voluntary community work carried out by members), and intercambio (exchange). The self-sustainability of the organization is also a commitment to self-determination.¹

“Our is an organization that has autonomy. We are not linked to any political party or any religion, instead, we pay attention to what they do and hold them accountable in their responsibility to our people. We have this distance because they are the ones who have usually divided us. We are autonomous from the political parties, the government, the churches, everyone. Private foundations as well. No one maintains us. That is the essential part of who we are as an organization.”

FIOB conducts campaigns in the United States for migrant and indigenous communities’ rights, and in Mexico for indigenous communities’ ‘derecho de no migrar,’ the right not to migrate. Day-to-day, the organization sustains binational work without paid staff or an office.

Most of the members in the Central Valley are Mixtec migrant farmworkers who commit time after work, on weekends, and during vacations.

—Leoncio Vásquez Santos, Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB), Binational Front of Indigenous Organizations

Grassroots social justice organizations strive, and often struggle, to center community accountability and autonomy in their fundraising and sustainability efforts.

Organizations want resources that are not restricted by outside interests, that they can put to use in ways they feel are necessary and accountable. The majority of the organizations we interviewed stressed the importance of self-determination and community accountability to their mission and work. Some of the ways they maintain autonomy and community accountability include: mission-aligned resources, unrestricted funds, diversified funding streams, and developing internal planning processes and accountability mechanisms that drive fundraising.
People and planning first. Several participants described how their organizations attempt to stay ahead of fundraising through proactive internal planning, rather than follow shifts in philanthropy that might result in mission drift. Many expressed sentiments similar to those of Jorge Gutierrez, executive director of Familia: Trans Queer Liberation Movement, who said, “We're intentional in ensuring that those most impacted by the issues we're working on are at the forefront of our work. That they're the decision makers and strategists. That part of our organizational culture is what matters to us, and we allow the funding to support what we think is important to our communities, rather than allowing money to dictate our work.”

Unrestricted funds. Nearly every participant stressed the value of unrestricted dollars to their organization's work. They feel that unrestricted funds, whether from major donors, events, or core operating grants, enable them to more readily adapt to changing organizational and community needs. Firestone put it this way, “Organizations need unrestricted core support, support that is flexible enough to follow resource needs that arise as you're doing the work. Unrestricted grants are important, core operating grants are important, and of course this is also why donors and events are important. When you don't have that and you're really reliant on grants that are entirely restricted, you don't have that flexibility.”

Aligned donor base/Member-sustained organizations. Although not all organizations we interviewed have donors, those who do grassroots fundraising shared some of their approaches to building a base of donors aligned with the organization's mission and work. How to do this well is an ongoing conversation among movement organizations. For many, building an aligned donor base also addresses an ongoing question: How does fundraising square with social justice work? Many of the organizations we interviewed also described the intimacy that is often present between donors and the organizations they choose to support, whether the donors are constituents or members of the organization or not. Some also see grassroots fundraising as an opportunity for organizing and movement building. Although few of the organizations we spoke with have monthly sustainer programs, several agree that grassroots sustainability is, or perhaps should be, a core part of organization and movement strategy. Not everyone we interviewed shares the optimism that their organization can be sustained through grassroots fundraising. Others we interviewed already depend entirely on grassroots fundraising in their work, such as the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB).

Family, Friends, Allies and Colleagues—Inner Circle: Family, friends, allies and colleagues were among the most frequently identified donors. Joann Lo, co-director of the Food Chain Workers Alliance, a national organization with a large base in California,
described the organization’s growing donor base: “We have around 25 monthly donors. Most of those are people we know. They’re allies, colleagues. There are a couple family members. I don’t think there’s anyone who signed up as a monthly donor who we don’t know in some way or who didn’t come to an event. The other donors who give periodically are also generally allies, colleagues, and again, family members.” For some participants, the donors’ connection to the organization was established early on, through its founding members. Many original donors continued to support the organization even after founders had moved on.

Donors Outside of the Community—Outer Circle:
Organizations with long-time donors outside of their constituency described them in positive terms, when these donors were individuals who understood the issues and were personally aligned with the organization’s mission. These factors keep donors connected to and involved in supporting the work. Beth Rayfield, development director of the Los-Angeles based Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA), a immigrant rights organization that works with low-income immigrant workers and students, described the organization’s donor base: “Most of our donors are supporters of immigrant rights; we have strong supporters in the business community, lots of attorneys that support us. We have some major donors but not that many, that’s an area that we’d like to get a lot better at. This year we raised about $50,000 from five major donors. We have people that give every year which is so beautiful. I really love those donors. They don’t always give large amounts. Some of them are older and they write their checks for our annual appeal, I know they really care about the organization.”

Shifts in the funding climate frequently push organizations in directions they do not feel are guided by their communities or values.

Many participating organizations that rely on external funding expressed frustration with feeling pressured to change the direction of their work in order to remain financially stable. The pressures organizations described are sometimes direct, for example, when donors or funders ask organizations to make mission or programmatic shifts. Often, pressures are less direct but quite powerful, as in major changes in donor and foundation funding priorities, or when funding requirements result in unanticipated, gradual shifts in focus or programmatic work.

Organizations want to know what works for their peers.

Several participants expressed their desire to learn from peer organizations how to build a resource base aligned with and accountable to their organization and constituents. As Firestone shared: “I think it would be really great to have some coaching and a peer space to talk with other organizations working with similar populations, to troubleshoot or learn from each other about what’s working or what they do. How to balance bringing in outside resources and supporters that maintain accountability to local communities.”

The sentiment was echoed by Javier Saucedo, administrative director of DeColores Queer Orange County, a grassroots volunteer run Latinx LGBTQ+ community organization, “I would like to know from similar organizations what are their biggest successes in similar things and how to do that and still be really accessible to the community, and the community to still be very connected to the fundraising work.”
Fundraising with Constituents

“I got up in front of an assembly of 500 organizers from around the country representing the affiliated organizations of the National Day Laborer Organizing Network and I did a donor ask,” recalls Christy Lubin, development director of Centro Laboral de Graton/Graton Day Labor Center, a social justice organization based in Sonoma County, California that organizes with day laborers, domestic workers, and their families for safe and dignified employment, and for workers’ and immigrant rights.

“That organization had never publicly asked its general membership for money. There’s an annual organizational membership, but they’ve never asked the workers or the staff, the people who worked for these organizations for money. I got up in front of 500 people and I had a check that I’d written for $100. I made the ask in my not so perfect Spanish and everyone, especially the workers, were so happy to pull out their wallets. Whether they gave a dollar or $20, everybody in that room gave money. It just felt really good."

—Christy Lubin, Centro Laboral de Graton/Graton Day Labor Center

While some participants expressed concern around asking communities who are already struggling financially, many others discussed the need to challenge assumptions about who to ask for support, financial or otherwise. They expressed that fundraising, while sometimes difficult, is a part of their political and organizing work, and that involving staff and community members in fundraising efforts increases their stake in organizational sustainability. For those that fundraise with their base, membership dues and support from family, community and allies were among the most frequently described approaches. Many organizations develop a donor base that contributes small amounts on a regular basis, whether as sustainers or as member dues. For organizations that do seek support from their constituents, the key is to ask, rather than assume.

**Commitment to the struggle.** Some organizations have the explicit political analysis that for movements to grow they must sustain themselves, and therefore they ask members to contribute money, time, or other resources. According to these organizations, this approach ensures autonomy from external funding sources and helps to build a power base in the community, both of which are key to movement work. Even when members may not have money to give, they may commit their time to an organization, which is just as valuable to its sustainability. Leoncio Vásquez Santos, of Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB), put it this way: “Every person has their [day-to-day] work. That’s how we survive. Now, this work of our organization, like I told you, and I want to repeat it, we do it after our regular work. On the weekends, when we take vacations, if our regular work has vacations. So this is very important. We work sometimes up to seven days a week to complete our commitment. Many people take their vacations and dedicate them to the organization.”

**Validation of the work.** Organizations that ask their community for time or money frequently said that their community does give, even when they have very little, and that this sustains the work, but also makes organizations feel supported and validated in their work.

Christy Lubin of Centro Laboral de Graton described the decision by worker-members to establish a monthly membership fee, which adds up to significant sums: “Our workers all pay a membership fee of $5 a month. We raise about $12,000 a year from the workers. That was their own decision to do that. We didn't ask them for money. It's really a big deal. For our events, even if they volunteer, members still pay to come to the event.”

Suguet Lopez is the executive director of Lideres Campesinas. Lopez described assumptions that people make about grassroots fundraising with
farmworkers: “I think a challenge is the myth that farmworkers hardly have the means to sustain themselves and their families, much less the means or the resources to support our movement. It’s true that the income of farm workers is not as high as in many other industries,” Lopez continues, “and that we could identify many needs. But people like to share. We just have to be asked. There is evidence that working-class people, when they’re asked, whether it’s a church or to follow their tradition, they find a way. As long as whatever they consider giving is representative for that person. Let’s not just assume, ‘they can’t, so we’re not going to ask them.’”

Other participants also shared similar perspectives. Andrea Lee of Mujeres Unidas y Activas described how she tries to be respectful when asking members for money, and also to acknowledge what it means to them to give: “We ask for money from the community, and from our membership base and from their friends and from their family. But there’s always been a tension: How can you ask them for money when you know they have so little? Well, that can be patronizing. They get to choose. So how do you do it in a way that doesn’t make people feel guilty or obligated but also know that they will give what they can? Frankly, our members give more than most people who have an incredible amount of wealth. I like it when our members give us money. It’s like a vote of confidence that they believe in what we’re doing, and I know that every one of their dollars is so hard-earned.”

A continuing question. Many participants, however, shared that it is difficult to ask their members, constituents or people in their communities who are extremely low-income and struggle financially to support the organization. Some participants said they felt comfortable doing so only if, or because in exchange the organization had offered community members something tangible. Many participants who grew up with few financial resources hesitate, because they understand what it means to struggle. Others felt guilt or discomfort. Some also felt strongly that those with resources should give. “I feel strongly that other people should be giving and not the women themselves,” said Susana Cáceres of El/ La Para Translatinás, “because when we talk about trans-women being murdered it’s cis people that are murdering them. If we look at the society as a whole, we should feel responsible for everyone, especially the most vulnerable population in that community. Many people are choosing not to talk about it, not to take action or not to give resources. I feel much more comfortable holding people outside of the community accountable.”

Member engagement in fundraising. Several participants discussed broader engagement in
fundraising as a necessity for the organization. For several organizations, broader participation in fundraising is a way to build sustainability and grassroots leadership. Some, like Andrea Lee, described engagement in fundraising as a component of leadership development. One participant talked about fundraising by members as a form of ongoing exchange between the constituents, other organizations or coalitions, and funders. Speaking about the relationships that are nurtured by this process, one participant said, “The members have been active in conversations with funders, for example by having one of the members talk about why it’s important to fund the base, why it’s important to do the work that we do in order to have that kind of exchange and partnership from funders. I think it is an exchange. Funders believe in the movement, funders believe in us, and we do the work. The base helps us by activities and implementation of our strategies, so it’s a complete exchange and that’s how we look at it from our base. One specific member brought in $1,000 in donations. You have to understand, that’s a member that doesn’t have drinking water. Now I use that opportunity to reinvigorate the base and let them know ‘Look, you can continue to do activities to fund the work that we do, and I will continue fundraising with grants and pull you in for key meetings and conversations with the funders. But if we all fundraise then it happens. Organically, that’s how we’ve done fundraising activities within the base.”

Defining community. For some organizations, redefining community in the context of fundraising has broadened their perception of their donor base. For example, more than one interviewee described members building donor-relationships among their employers, and said that workers found the process empowering. “Who is your community?’ is such an interesting question,” remarks Andrea Lee, of Mujeres Unidas Activas, “to us community includes the membership, and then the broader community, the Latinx community and the community of employers who employ our members. Our members are a path to the employers. There were two workers who had gone through our leadership program who asked their employer to make a donation to the organization. The employer wrote a $1,000 check when the workers shared with the employer what they had learned and their work with the organization. That was incredibly empowering for those workers. I don’t think they ever expected that.”

The Personal is Political

An executive director based in the Central Valley described how his experiences growing up with poverty and economic injustice influenced his feelings about asking for money: “We were a family that lived from month to month on a very tight budget. I remember that money was always a big need. My mother was a hotel maid, and I remember a time when she was injured, but she had to keep working, so my sister and I used to sneak in and help her everyday after school to finish up the work. We would do it and sneak back out. Financial need, right? Everything was in need, but you weren’t allowed to ask, you just didn’t ask.”

The reproduction of class, race and other forms of privilege in philanthropy and nonprofits, as well as individual and community experiences of privilege and oppression, shape access to funding and affect individual and organizational experiences of fundraising.

For many of the individuals we talked with, the majority of whom play a central role in their organization’s fundraising, asking for money can (still) be hard. Many shared their personal experiences with money, as well as their communities’ experiences with money, and connected these experiences to how their organizations do fundraising work. Most pointed to the contradiction between their deep commitment to social justice and their discomfort with asking others to support their work financially. Other participants reflected on the differences they saw in fundraising comfort levels when
compared to white-led or majority white organizations, organizations with white development staff, or among individuals at their own organizations based on class, race and other intersections of privilege. Several also shared their frustration with the lack of diversity in philanthropy. A few discussed the explicit pressure they felt to bring on white fundraisers, leadership or board members in order to be more effective at fundraising, or to be seen as more ‘legitimate’ (i.e. fundable).

We asked participants about their experiences with money, and how those experiences might influence their fundraising today. The responses ranged from “we never talked about money, there was never enough” to “I was raised to share money. If I had a dollar I would share it with my brother. I was raised to share money and save money, because you never knew what can happen. Now as an older woman and a fundraiser I believe money is a great tool to move the movement. But without money we can still move the movement and I think money is an opportunity to engage, it’s an action you can take.”

Many participants who grew up in poor or working class communities learned that you work hard for money, you don’t ask for money, but you give what you can to help others. It can be a challenge for individuals to learn to ask for money, after growing up learning never to ask. This is especially true when asking for money from individuals who may have different cultural and class backgrounds. For example, Kathy Hoang shared “I felt comfortable giving money, but asking was a challenge. It’s been a transformation to embrace the role of asking for money and knowing that people do want to give. It’s about showing them that this is their connection with their own values too.”

Experiences of privilege or oppression can also shape the comfort level that organization members, including staff, volunteers, board members, or community members have with fundraising from individuals with personal wealth or from foundations. For example, organizations talked about the challenge of approaching major donors or people outside the community for financial support, and described their feelings of discomfort, despite their commitment to the community and organization. A few participants, shared experiencing the reverse, and feeling most comfortable, and that it was most appropriate, to ask people outside the community for resources.

Partnerships to Build Organizational and Movement Sustainability

“We all come together four times a year and we talk about issues and challenges our organizations face including fundraising. Each organization has different strengths in fundraising. One Center has a really charismatic woman who leads it. She goes to every church, every community and business group, and she raises a lot of money. Some of us are stronger with foundations. Some of us write better grants than others. When we first met together, I asked how can we collaborate more on raising money together?”

—Christy Lubin, Centro Laboral de Graton/Graton Day Labor Center

**Fundraising partnerships can be critical for building organizational and movement sustainability.**

Solidarity among allies can anchor donor engagement and build the sustainability of movements as well as organizations. Across participating organizations there was a strong sense of solidarity, and most organizations lifted up the importance of building intersectional coalitions and bridging movements. Mutual support among organizations ranged from acting as an echo chamber, helping to spread the word about each other’s work, to hosting or co-sponsoring fundraising events, to joint long-term fundraising strategy, to sharing resources and infrastructure.

Participating organizations identified key elements in fundraising strategies for movement building and mutual sustainability: seeing struggles as interlinked, sharing resources and strengths, finding creative ways to collaborate, co-planning fundraising events, and, above all, valuing solidarity over competitiveness and organizational individualism.
Mutual Sustainability Networks and Partnerships. Organizations are developing collective strategies to work towards shared sustainability, maximizing complementary capacities. It makes dollars and sense. “When I first started at the organization, near the end of 2013, I learned that we normally hold a special annual event. We weren’t able to do it in 2014 or earlier this year because of major staff transitions. Instead we held a five-year anniversary event in October of 2014 in partnership with an ally organization, of which we are a member organization. We work together very closely, in fact I share an office with their executive director. It was a natural fit, and so we hosted the special anniversary event together last year and it was successful. I think collectively between our two organizations we did about $17,000. It was very exciting.”

Sharing Resources and Infrastructure. To foster relationships of mutual sustainability, partner organizations offer each other their resources, skills and knowledge. Particularly for organizations whose budgets may be comparatively small, for those who do not readily have access to a large donor base, or for newly-formed organizations, the support they receive from their fellow organizations can go a long way in terms of both day-to-day operations and long term planning. This support ranges from sharing material resources for an action or meeting, to sharing physical space for events, to teaching specific skills, such as grant writing or technical support. “I think as an organization we’ve been in touch. We are part of coalitions and we know there are organizations even smaller organizations than ours. We also want to support folks with resources. Whether that’s buying or printing materials for actions, events, or meetings or other things. It feels good to be able to support organizations in that way.”

Members from SCOPE, TRUST South LA, Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust, and Physicians for Social Responsibility—Los Angeles to learn about climate change, environmental health, pollution, and the potential for investment to improve our climate and communities.
Just as values and personal experiences can influence organizational fundraising, the practices and structures organizations have in place, or are absent, can also impact fundraising capacity. For a number of organizations, fundraising only involves a few people and can be viewed negatively by others in the organization. Often creating tension and divisions instead of integrating fundraising with the program and organizing work. Funding instability can also be a contributing factor to maintaining or growing fundraising capacity. Participants discussed the internal and external challenges they encounter and the practices and approaches some have taken to address these issues.

Transitions and Turnover

“I think that’s a problem with funding structures: we get little $5,000, $10,000, $20,000 grants. We may have four foundation grants but we still don’t have enough to pay for a full-time staff person. So, I have mixed feelings about fundraising—because sometimes I feel the amount of energy we put in isn’t equal to what we receive, and I feel protective of our one part-time staff person’s time. We’re a volunteer organization, so turnover, along with having highly skilled fundraisers who are taking ownership of our fundraising work, is a challenge for us. There is a gap between what it takes to do the fundraising and our capacity to meet that gap. We are recruiting new fundraising team members. We also are building skills of our staff person, who has gone to fundraising trainings and has been getting a lot of experience writing grants. We are building more of an internal capacity around it. We have people who are really invested in our work. Then they leave, mostly to go back to school. We had one person who was trained to do pitches and did a really great job. Then she went back to school. Most of these people are still supporters, but they’re not involved at the core level where we need. We have a lot of supporters. We need more at the core level.”

—Somos Familia
As this participant noted, the considerable time, effort, and resources her organization put into fundraising were not always proportionate to the size of the grants the organization actually received, raising questions about whether or not it was worth the investment to pursue these grants. Combined with the pressure to professionalize fundraising staff, high rates of turnover within the organization, owing to the rotating door of volunteers, made it difficult to build up and distribute the capacity to do fundraising across the organization.

**Operating in a continual state of flux**—driven by internal and external factors—**can strain the well-being of individuals and the sustainability of the organization.** Restrictive or fluctuating funding is often outside of an organization’s control, yet it affects transitions and turnover. The threat of foundations shifting priorities, or a major donor suddenly discontinuing to give, creates stress and leaves many feeling vulnerable. Organizational culture and values also contribute greatly to the sustainability and stability of fundraising efforts. For organizations where fundraising is concentrated, individuals responsible for fundraising need to feel valued and integral to the entire work of an organization.

Funding Insecurity Is an Important Driver of Turnover. All of the organizations we interviewed, regardless of their size or the sources of their funding, expressed feeling overwhelmed by the year-to-year instability of funding. The pressures of fundraising to financially sustain an organization often cause staff members to experience isolation and burnout, which, according to a recent study, accounts for high rates of job turnover and vacancy, especially for nonprofits with smaller budgets. This study reported that 57 percent of development directors anticipate leaving their jobs within two years, and the average vacancy for these positions was 12 months.²

Individuals and organizations worry about foundations shifting funding priorities, donors scaling back or discontinuing their giving, or governments changing fiscal priorities. Funding volatility often leads to loss of staff. For organizations already stretched thin, doing a tremendous amount of work with insufficient resources, losing valuable staff members further undermines stability, programmatic work, and sustainability efforts. It can also create friction between managers and frontline staff. Andrea Lee of Mujeres Unidas y Activas knows this experience well: “I think the biggest challenge we have is when funding is cut or when funders’ priorities change. And then that influences what we’re able to do so dramatically. A lot of time we experience staff tension around that because their perspective is, ‘You’re telling me I need to do more, I need to do something different than what I did, and I like what I did or I don’t want to do more. Like, I’ve had enough.’”

**Fundraising Silos and Isolation**

**Fundraising silos can lead to individuals feeling alone in the work and impact an organization’s ability to meet programmatic goals.** Several organizations that we interviewed have highly concentrated or siloed fundraising efforts, with the responsibility for fundraising falling on one or two people, typically the executive director for small
grassroots organizations, or development staff for larger organizations that have dedicated fundraising capacity. Often this leads to those doing fundraising work feeling isolated or overextended. Fundraising silos also produce a sense of disconnection between fundraising and programmatic work, resulting in discordant goals or priorities among organization staff and members. Having board members and staff step up and take part in the work of fundraising helps relieve some of the pressure organizations experience.

Isolation and lack of shared leadership for fundraising can be a recipe for frustration and burnout. In every case, those who are primarily responsible for fundraising expressed their exhaustion, anxiety, stress and frustration over being solely responsible for the financial sustainability of the work. As one participant shared, “I’m scared if I make one false move or miss something, the organization could lose funding.” These feelings were echoed again and again. There are real pressures pushing organizations to concentrate fundraising roles, which in turn makes these roles rigid and difficult to change. For small grassroots organizations, capacity is chief among these pressures. “Honestly, it’s just me. I think that my staff is really at capacity. To ask them or to ask our participants to engage in fundraising or explain what they think about fundraising, it’s just not realistic right now. I think we would have to have a designated fundraiser to create that culture generally and to support people before we can ask them to fundraise,” shared Susana Cáceres of El/La Para TransLatinas. “Then I think we would have to create more full-time positions so that people, especially people working part-time, are not overwhelmed. We’re all at capacity, so I don’t feel like the culture of fundraising is there. Because there would be added tasks that not all my staff can take on.”

Lack of board member participation or support in organizational fundraising efforts can be a source of frustration and missed opportunities for organizations. Expectations of board members differed among organizations. Although some organizations have boards with explicit fundraising roles, several organizations found it difficult to hold their boards accountable for fundraising responsibilities. A participant of one organization viewed the board as both a strength and a challenge:

Trans, queer and undocumented folks stage a hunger strike to demand Santa Ana City Council cancel its contract with ICE and end the deportation of transgender undocumented women.
“Whenever we need some help with making sure the word gets out nationally through media, through press and everything, our board members have a lot of connections.” On the other hand, he said, it was a challenge “...getting everyone on board, literally getting the board members to buy into the fact that everyone should be fundraising.”

Organizations have different visions of what their board composition should be. While some see value in having board members who are connected to funders or potential major donors, many organizations consider board alignment with the mission and board member representation of their communities to be top priorities. Some organizations have rotating boards comprised entirely of members. Luis Olmedo, of Comite Civico Del Valle, Inc shared his critique of mainstream nonprofit development: “Most directors have this corporate belief of how to run an organization, because that's what we learn. Any time you go to trainings, you're always given the textbook approach. I've read them. I've been there. I've seen so many. Most isn't applicable to grassroots organizations. For example, they tell you that you can only have influential people on your board in order to get the money. But this strategy is impairing the community from empowering themselves. And so, to me, it's no longer relevant. You've got to find a board that will support you in promoting social change.” Whether organizations center member-leadership in board composition, or follow more mainstream models of board development, the vast majority of organizations agree that board members should be working intentionally towards the financial sustainability of the organization.

Building a fundraising team can help organizations develop a sustainable fundraising culture. Assembling a fundraising team is one effective method for helping organizations identify ways for individuals to plug into fundraising. Natalia Lopez, a fundraising and organizational development consultant, shared how organizations may rethink how they define fundraising roles: “People have to define their relationship to fundraising. Not everyone has to be part of the ask. There are many roles that are part of the fundraising process. We just need to identify the roles within an organization and define where people can fit based on their interest, skills and time availability.” Beth Rayfield mentioned how her organization, Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, set the expectation early on in the hiring process by
Sustaining Grassroots Social Justice Organizations in California’s Latinx Communities

asking candidates, regardless of the position they were applying for, if they were comfortable with fundraising. Others understand there are many different roles and skills needed to implement fundraising activities. Andrea Lee, of Mujeres Unidas y Activas, explains, “Everyone on our board both donates as well as contributes. Our board is made up of half members from our base and half community allies. The community allies on the board actually do play an important role helping us to reach and bring in new donors.” Joann Lo of the Food Chain Workers Alliance shared how her national organization has built a culture around fundraising as a team: “It’s often a point of discussion on weekly staff meeting agendas. We talk about it a lot. There is a primary person to oversee our fundraising, the planning, and the implementation, but everyone does their part. That feels good, that we’re a team and it’s not only on me. I would say the majority of the members do help with either some fundraising event or selling T-shirts or comic books. It feels like they know it’s part of the expectation and the culture of being a responsible member of the alliance.”

Fundraising Strategy, Skills, and Infrastructure

Jorge Gutierrez of Familia: Trans Queer Liberation Movement spoke about the simultaneous need for and complexities around creating a fundraising strategy.

We’re an up and coming organization, formed a year ago, and we’re still figuring out a lot of our infrastructure as we go. We are lacking a grassroots fundraising culture. I think that’s what we need to be able to have a fundraising strategy. At the moment, we create the strategy as we go. I think being able to have a very solid, concrete fundraising strategy, not just for right now but for five years from now, is very important. What does that look like? How much in terms of staff? What is it going to take to sustain that growth? What is it going to take to sustain the work that’s happening now?

Foundations and other allies need to understand that investing in the organization at its beginning, it’s crucial in order to be able to sustain our work right now, but also being able to sustain the organization in the long run. Investing in the organization will allow us to figure out all these different pieces in a much faster manner, and also will allow the organization to spend more time on figuring out a model that will bring in grassroots money to the organization so that we’re not so dependent on foundation money.

— Jorge Gutierrez, Familia: Trans Queer Liberation Movement

Organizations seek support to develop and realize their long-term fundraising strategy. Developing organizational fundraising capacity takes a short- and long-term game plan in accordance with the organization’s vision and includes strategies that will support these plans. The lack of a fundraising plan is often due to constraints on time, priorities or capacity. Developing a plan requires having a planning culture within the organization. One participant noted, “I would love to have a fund development strategy, a planning process that is done within the base, and a planning document that would identify key activities that we can actually commit to and do. I want to do things that feel right to us. Because fundraising is ongoing, it’s not going to end. The process has to feel right. I don’t want to make people feel uncomfortable through the process, and because we are working with a sensitive base I’d like to have a fundraising development strategy.” Even for organizations that had plans in place, it was difficult for them to actualize these plans, citing that it was not a priority or that resources to implement plans were not available. Naomi Boas remarked, “Grassroots fundraising is included in our annual and strategic plan but we have had less success implementing it. Our staff strategy sessions and trainings are rarely focused on fundraising.”
Grassroots fundraising calls for and benefits from diverse skill sets when implementing fundraising strategies. For example, Kathy Hoang mentioned how organizing skills can be an asset for outreaching and making an ask to potential donors. “I think on a personal level, having a strong organizing background is a fundraising strength. My background is in worker organizing, so that’s really helpful. I can have a conversation, I can guide the conversation towards something. I can make an ask. It’s very familiar to me. It’s just a matter of communicating what we’re asking for. That’s one thing that I think is a real strength”.

Building a sustaining base takes time and can be hard. While some participants described flourishing grassroots fundraising programs, other shared the struggle of figuring out what works. One organization in the early stages of their grassroots fundraising program development described their expectation that building a strong grassroots fundraising strategy would take time: “The idea is it’s going to start out small,” said a member of the Bay Area-based organization, Somos Familia. They described several strategies, from 24-hour online crowdfunding events, to personal letter-writing by members and staff, to establishing a monthly sustainer program. “As we keep doing it we’ll get more people involved. It will become more successful over the years. So far that has proved to be true that in the two years that we’ve been doing it. Our monthly sustainer program is our other strategy. It’s getting our members and core supporters to become monthly sustainers, and some of that has already happened through our other fundraising campaigns.” Several organizations described moments of frustration when investing time and money yielded limited returns, as Alex Fajardo of El Sol Neighborhood Educational Center described, “Doing fundraising is not that easy. You do fundraising work and spend three weeks to raise $5,000. Already you spend on the staff, and time about $3,000. Doing fundraising to sustain programs is not that easy.”

Navigating donor relationships takes time, practice, knowing how (and how much) to engage. Many organizations shared their experiences of learning how to navigate what is often a very wide variety of donor relationships. Both donors and organizations have varied expectations about the level of engagement or involvement they would like to have. “We have people who really care about our base and we also have some donors that are really proud that California has become a real beacon as a pro-

MICOP’s Radio Indígena DJs (L to R: Yesica Ramirez, Celia Mendez, Dulce Vargas, Angelica Nevarez, Delfina Lopez) being honored at Radio Indígena’s 1-year on Internet celebration.
immigrant state. They are deeply committed to the movement, and it’s been exciting recently to work with a few of these major donors who are extremely well educated about what’s happening,” said Beth Rayfield of Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, who expressed both the excitement and areas of growth to meet the challenges of connecting with donors passionate about the organization’s work. “As a development director at a grassroots organization, I’m a little bit new to major donors and the amount of relationship development that it requires. A lot of organizations like us want to have major donors but then you start to get them and it does require a different kind of stewardship and donor cultivation than you might be used to with smaller donors or foundation program officers. It’s been great but there is also a learning curve.”

Access to trainings and the opportunity to apply fundraising skills for staff, members and boards can expand organizational fundraising capacity. Many organizations felt the lack of knowledge, training and professional development is a challenge for deploying fundraising strategies. “We have different people in the organization that are differently empowered about it. We have one person, she’s on our leadership team. She’s just so great. She’s really great about asking for money. We’re not all there,” stated Somos Familia.

Geographic or financial barriers often limit access to training opportunities. At times organizations cannot find trainings that are a good fit with their learning needs. “Training on new fundraising platforms, or incorporating technology and social media into fundraising and program work would be useful,” responded Naomi Boas, when asked what training would be useful, pointing to a desire to build their online fundraising and fundraising systems. Even when organizations found relevant trainings, many organizations would have liked to have received more support around implementation.

Organizations seek to establish practices and systems that support consistent communication with their members, donors and funders. Acquiring and supporting the use of software and database systems helps organizations track contacts and communicate information to donors and funders. Few organizations felt they had support systems in place to manage and track fundraising efforts and relationships. Others felt their organizations lacked the time, practices or ‘data culture’ required to maintain and utilize the systems to their fullest. The vast majority of participants shared the desire to build their fundraising systems infrastructure. “We have a great database that we just started a couple years ago,” shared Margaret Sawyer of Mixteco/Indigena Community Organizing Project in Ventura County. The software in this case was developed specifically to support grassroots organizing campaigns and relationship. “It’s called Powerbase. It’s open source software that this company Powerbase made into a community organizing database. They’re totally great. We’re capturing information better on our donors. Then we’re using that to send emails, to invite to other events. People are registering for our events through the database now.”

Several organizations identified their approach to continuous learning and experimentation as a core strength in general, and key to their grassroots fundraising in particular.

Creating a culture of learning, experimenting, and sharing to determine what will work best for the organization and community. Several organizations identified their approach to continuous learning and experimentation as a core strength in general, and key to their grassroots fundraising in particular. “We have a culture of fundraising at the organization,” said Andrea Lee of Mujeres Unidas y Activas, “We’ve just been experimenting with it so many different ways over the last five or six years, and particularly getting staff to have their own personal donors that they’re contacting, trying to call them regularly. That doesn’t always work, so in the last two months, we’ve
started having bimonthly phone calling sessions where everyone makes calls together for an hour once a month to do direct pitches. We’re trying to do one-on-one meetings with donors. Very few donors will actually meet with us. But those that do, have really good meetings.”

Several organizations also described similar orientations toward continuous learning. “One of our greatest strengths -- we make our fundraising events appealing and we make the effort to see what people would like,” said Patricia Malagon of DeColores, who continued, “We ask each other, ‘Is this something that you would like to do if you went to a fundraiser?,’ but we’re not just going to guess what the public would like. We ask. We do our research. See what works or what hasn’t. We say, ‘this is where your money and your support is going to.’ And our experience is that people think and feel ‘I want to support this, and at the same time, have fun.’”

TUNING THE FIELD

A Fundraising World that Mirrors the Movement

I see a lot of white development directors and we need to push for more people of color in fundraising.”

Beth Rayfield, Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles

The fundraising world is not reflective of grassroots communities. While activists and funding allies strive to make racial justice a compass for new directions in fundraising, the funding world has yet to reflect the communities in which we work as well as the broader context of shifting demographics. This lack of symmetry may be remedied by advancing the leadership of people of color directly engaged in social movements. Shifting beliefs about who can fulfill fundraising and funding roles as well as removing structural or systemic barriers can create opportunities for people of color from the communities most impacted to assume leadership positions, thus aligning fundraising strategies with movement aims. In addition to building fundraising leadership, cultivating donors of color, through understanding culturally-specific attitudes and beliefs around giving, increases their connection to organizations in their communities and strengthens grassroots donor bases.

People of color need to lead organizational fundraising and occupy development roles to strengthen fundraising and movement building within communities. In “Reaching Out to Donors of Color in the 21st Century,” the authors note, “Latinos tend to respond better to solicitations from other Latinos from the same ethnicity” and that, “Latinos tend to give to individuals over organizations and consequently need to be cultivated by organizations and given more time to trust.” Many of the organizations interviewed mentioned the staff’s passion for the organization’s mission as a key fundraising strength. Mobilizing that passion to build upon other essential fundraising skills can help individuals see themselves as fundraisers and become more comfortable in taking on this role. “I see a lot of white development directors and we need to push for more people of color in fundraising. It would be great to have a GIFT or other trainings on how organizations can encourage organizers and other staff to consider careers in development and help build their capacity to pursue those goals”. In “Growing Your Own,” Byron Johnson states that, “We have a crisis and an opportunity” and raises that, “People of color run organizations need fundraisers of color in order to raise money more effectively in the communities in which we work, and to legitimize the fundraising profession in the eyes of our program and admin-oriented colleagues. When people of
color take on fundraising responsibilities, other staff of color are more likely to participate in fundraising activities, thus increasing the overall effectiveness of the organization’s fundraising efforts. They may even see themselves in that role, thereby increasing the number of fundraisers of color in the profession.”

Cultivating Latinx Donors. Cultivating Latinx donors is a critical part of mirroring movements. Both foundations and organizations have a role to play in understanding giving among Latinx’s at all income levels, identifying relationship-building and fundraising models or strategies that work best, and educating potential donors about the work and communities. Gaining an understanding of how Latinx donors’ experiences of privilege, oppression, shame, and discomfort around money can support organizations in developing fundraising strategies that resonate with Latinx donors and thus grow a donor base more reflective of the communities in which they work.

Rural Organizing and Organizations in California

Grassroots organizing and grassroots fundraising efforts in rural communities must be responsive to rural contexts while not assuming that communities are monolithic.

One participant from a Central Valley based organization and coalition described the importance of face-to-face organizing as well as the challenge it presents in the Valley. She also countered reductive characterizations and assumptions of rural communities. “We don’t have information. Information is not reaching our base. We don’t have local newspapers. We don’t have anything that gets to the base that needs to know about certain things. Our coalition is a hub to disperse information, people come to us, we give them information to distribute in their own communities. That model has worked thus far but we still need to go into each community to have conversations.” She stressed the importance of addressing each community on its own terms to learn of its specific needs and challenges around grassroots fundraising: “Go into these different community groups, get to know them, hear them out and then figure out how to connect them. How do we bring in fundraising strategies that feel right to this specific base. Just because we’re rural it doesn’t mean that each strategy is going to be appropriate for that community.”

Rural organizations would like to see the growth of local and accountable philanthropic models.

Opportunities for Movement. Rural and semi-rural organizations interviewed pointed to shifts they want to see happen in their communities, shifts that would center community knowledge and work, build local infrastructure for grassroots, nonprofit, and philanthropic organizations, and be responsive to the unique local circumstances and unique solutions required.

Community organizing that builds grassroots leadership with the capacity to shift policy, institutions, and social structures in rural regions is critical and it’s happening. Investment in community organizing in rural contexts must recognize what rural grassroots organizing requires. One participant described the need for funders to better understand organizing in the context of rural Latinx communities, particularly in the Valley: “I think a lot of funders don’t really understand what organizing is, how it takes form, and how that’s vital in any type of strategy or social movement. Organizing is so key. I think that funders need to understand what empowerment means and what capacity building means. I think those are really general terms used, but what it really means is people speaking up for themselves, coming to a meeting, getting engaged, asking questions, provoking thought. Funders sometimes just want a few broad numbers, ‘How many people?’ It’s more than that. The behind-the-scenes work that has to go into supporting someone to become empowered, for them to be able to talk and give testimony and provide recommendations and solutions...I sometimes feel
funders don’t really recognize and acknowledge that it’s needed. Because you have to understand, someone who’s worked all day in the field, and then for them to be thinking about ‘Oh, I have to go give testimony.’ That’s not what they think at work, right? It takes a lot of time to make the connections for people to feel like they’re part of the strategy discussion, listening to people and then support them to implement the strategy.” In addition to its salient reminder to grantmakers, this comment also speaks to the specific need for strengthening grassroots fundraising capacity among rural organizations, so that they can circumvent the unrealistic (or off-point) expectations that they have experienced from some funders.

Rural organizations would like to see the growth of local and accountable philanthropic models. Organizations we interviewed shared both the need to develop a more active donor and philanthropic base, as well as a thoughtful way to engage and educate a new cadre of local donors. “We need to develop a donor community, especially in the Latino community,” said a participant based in the Central Valley, “We really need to educate both the public and ourselves. It’s happening but it hasn’t happened that much. Educating people about how important that is, and about the benefits really is key.”
Reflection and Dialogue: Models, Strategies and Support  
Alex Fajardo, of El Sol Neighborhood Educational Center, spoke about the support that would be most helpful to El Sol’s fundraising work:

“It’s important to work directly with organizations. We learn by doing. We’ve been to a lot of trainings, but we are not only busy, we learn by doing and things shared have to be adapted to our context.”

Fajardo shared the health promotoras model as an example of an approach that takes seriously the unique social and economic circumstances in which organizations and their communities live and work, provides support to put theory into practice, and is culturally relevant:

“For example, healthy eating is not just a message, it’s a process. You may take a class that tells you to eat healthy. You may have a doctor or even a class tell you to eat healthy, you need to eat fewer tortillas, you need to stop eating dairy proteins, you need to get more exercise. But it is not as simple as I tell you and then you do it. For the doctor that may sound simple. He has the money to buy healthy vegetables and other healthy food, he lives in a neighborhood where he can walk anywhere he wants and so forth. But when you get back home you can’t do this as easily, fresh fruit and vegetables are very expensive, and walking in your neighborhood at night when you return from work is difficult for many reasons. Health promotoras go through the process together with the community, they understand the circumstances and support community members to make changes, together, step by step. This is how the promotoras work, to find another way together. That example is what is happening in the nonprofit sector. There is a lot of information available, but organizations need support putting it into practice.”

—Alex Fajardo, El Sol Neighborhood Educational Center

Reflection and dialogue on fundraising models, strategies, and approaches that support movement building in Latinx communities is much needed. There is an opportunity for honest and nuanced analysis, and for allies, organizations and funders to tune and deepen their engagement within their own communities and organizations, as well as with each other.

Grassroots organizing, which involves face-to-face relationship-building, is essential for systemic change. Every organization we talked to centers face-to-face relationships, grassroots organizing, and grassroots leadership development as key to movement building. Participants would like to see a better understanding of organizing in Latinx communities among funders and allies.

Organizations remind funders, donors and allies to respect their communities and recognize what they are asking, explicitly or implicitly, of organizations, their members and their communities. This includes moments of offering support or partnership.

Storytelling can be a powerful strategy for organizing and movement building. Storytelling can be a life changing experience; it’s empowering to speak one’s truth. Stories are also deeply personal, and represent aspects of people’s real lives. Susana Cáceres of El/ La Para Translatinás describes the experience of storytelling in the context of fundraising: “When we are asked to speak, as much as we would love to have participants speak about their experience, it takes a lot of support from the staff to make sure that it’s not going to be a re-traumatizing experience. We do it very rarely and I’ve realized that I have to hold people.” Cáceres also points to the need for consideration for the time and work involved in storytelling: “When we tell a story, it’s a lot of work. These women need resources and money and so if you are asking them to come share part of their lives you have to pay them.”

Laurel Firestone describes Community Water Center’s efforts to challenge exploitation of communities in advocacy and fundraising work, “We work with people who have no running water in their homes,”
Grassroots Institute for Fundraising Training & Research Action Design

says Firestone, “we’re working with communities to help bring money into their communities, and it’s really important to us that advocacy and fundraising work is not ‘poverty porn,’ or simply a charity model.” Participants ask that when funders, allies and journalists ask community members to share their stories, they respect the inherent dignity of communities and work with people in ways that are safe, accountable, and address the potential for retraumatization. It’s crucial not to present or reproduce personal stories in ways that feel exploitative, voyeuristic, or lack the full consent of those who share their lives.

Multilingual spaces are an important part of broadening movements for justice. Participants cited English-only monolingual events, trainings, and gatherings as a major barrier to the participation of their members and leadership. Placing the burden of interpreting information and materials on non-Anglophone majority organizations saps their time and resources and creates hurdles to movement building. In addition to having multilingual events and trainings, organizations said they would like to see more translated written materials, which they could then take back to distribute to their members.

“The coaching that I’ve been able to receive was in English and that’s another challenge that we face,” said Suguet Lopez of Lideres Campesinas, “there are many capacity building opportunities available, but they are for people who are bilingual. For example, we are participating in a wonderful leadership program for executive directors and board presidents, but our board president couldn’t participate because she doesn’t speak English. The program hadn’t planned for translation and doesn’t have the resources. It had to be a bilingual member who speaks English, and so a bilingual member of the executive committee and a board champion also attend the training. All of the written materials are in English. Our role is to digest the information, for one, and then bring back the information in Spanish. So, there are different phases of the process that represent challenges.”

Creating multilingual spaces is not just about providing written or verbal translations for those who do not speak English. A commitment to equality among languages, with no one language being dominant, is necessary for language justice. It takes resources to support cross-language conversations, so that everyone has an equal opportunity to express themselves and listen to others, and this is essential for building more inclusive spaces.

AGUA Coalition and Co-Directors Laurel Firestone and Susana De Anda outside of the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board.
Geography, mobility, and documentation status can be barriers for community leaders to participate in opportunities outside their local communities. For many organizations and their members, training and convening opportunities that are out of state or near the U.S.-Mexico border can be difficult to access, even with support. Suguet Lopez of Lideres Campesinas shares a recent experience: “recently there was a great grassroots fundraising training conference opportunity held on the East Coast. We were offered resources for one individual of our organization to attend. Unfortunately, our member got sick and she couldn’t travel. I think that if this training had been in California, or even just closer to the West Coast, then other members could have attended in her place, traveling by car or train. Then again, not everybody can travel out of the state. Many of our members are undocumented and it’s not easy for them to make certain trips, sometimes even to places in California where border patrol is heavier. Many would rather stay local, rather than take that risk”.

Meeting organizations where they are to increase access to opportunities. Several participants explained that capacity building trainings and convenings are most accessible for their organizations when they take place outside of traditional nonprofit business hours, for example, in the evening or on the weekend, which is often when they hold meetings and do their organizing work. According to Leoncio Vásquez Santos of Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales, “Even if we are invited to workshops, often we can’t go. Although it might be a good idea, we all have our regular jobs. But if you do something on the weekend that would be better. We always conduct our organization’s business after hours or on the weekends.”

Digital access inequality remains an obstacle to grassroots fundraising online. Participants said they would like training and support in using social media to conduct grassroots fundraising campaigns. Challenges stem from digital access inequality, both for organizations and their members. Online fundraising strategies that assume or require broadband access and digital media literacies, or that rely on communities’ participation in mainstream banking and financial systems, present challenges to grassroots fundraising. At the same time, many participating organizations are experimenting with sophisticated online grassroots fundraising strategies, including strategies that link online and “offline” events or spaces.

MICOP’s annual fundraiser Night in Oaxaca 2016
However, for many organizations, online donations for fundraising campaigns (crowdfunding sites, for example), monthly sustainer programs, or regular member dues is a challenge. Online giving is difficult for community members who do not have bank accounts or credit cards. Suguet Lopez described how members of Lideres improvised while experimenting with online fundraising, “the women had a very hard time making their contributions online because it required a credit card, but we found creative ways to work around that. The women would call me and I would use my card, and later they would bring the money. I would do the online donation for them.”

Restrictive payment options in online fundraising technology, along with technical challenges, means that online fundraising strategies do not always work; yet if they did, many organizations would find it very helpful. Kathy Hoang shared a recent experience, “We tried to pilot monthly membership dues last year, but it was really challenging, just logistically. We didn't have an online system set up where we could do automatic deductions from people's bank accounts. Most people that we work with use cash, and they pay membership dues in cash. We had to approach people every month to pay their dues. But that's the point of contact, “Hey, have you paid this month?” It was kind of unwieldy. It wasn't that effective as far as being a tool to build our membership and fundraise.”

Coaching and partnership for sustainable capacity building. Several participants said that event-based or one-time fundraising or capacity-building trainings, while providing valuable information, ideas, and skills for organizations, are often not enough when it comes to real world implementation. According to Jorge Gutierrez of Familia: Trans Queer Liberation Movement, “Training, coaching, leadership development are very crucial to the personal growth of our staff, of our Steering Committee, but also all of our members.”
Yet many participants shared that transforming systems and daily practice requires a different model of support and coaching, to truly build the skills, capacity and leadership of staff, members and community boards. Laurel Firestone of Community Water Center described how deeper engagement helped her own organization grow; “having someone that coaches the organization while you implement changes is powerful. That coaching helped us get to the next level, all organizations still need that, we still need that.”

There is no one-size-fits-all model for grassroots fundraising. Participants shared that “one-size-fits-all’ models of fundraising that are sometimes offered in capacity building workshops are rarely in step with their particular strengths or unique challenges. At other times, organizations felt pressure to professionalize in certain ways in order to conform to what they saw as a standardized fundraising approach, despite poor mission fit for the organization. Most organizations felt that models for building fundraising capacity should be adaptive, specific, and responsive to community needs, which includes accounting for regional differences in what approaches work best. As one participant based in the Central Valley shared, “Technical trainings here would be really useful. A lot of training happens outside the Valley. It's hard to attend those trainings, and then to get a sense of how or if it would actually work here. We need someone that understands the culture and dynamics of working with the base that we work with, that then can conduct trainings on how to best run a sustainable model of fundraising here. We don't have that. We have all these theories about what works, but practical case studies of how we do that in the Valley would be amazing.”

Organizations want to hear from each other. The vast majority of participants expressed their interest in peer learning and support. When asked what they would like to learn from or discuss with their peer organizations, they gave a range of responses that clustered around themes of mutual aid, effectiveness, strategy, and motivational fire. “It would be great to have a group of people that understand the issues that I'm going through in working with trans-community,” said Susana Cáceres of El/La Para Translatinas. She expressed interest in exchanging experiences and skills with peers, as well as having a space for mutual support: “having that space, that context of being united with other people that are in a similar situation would be really helpful.”
Endnotes


