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# What We Have Learned About Grassroots Philanthropy: Lessons From Mexico

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*Keywords:* Grassroots, philanthropy, civil society, community associations, community groups, Mexico, solidarity, grantmaking

## Key Points

- Mexico is going through a transition from traditions of authoritarian, top-down social and political management that have tended to marginalize the efforts of community groups in addressing social and environmental challenges.
- While there are many important questions about strengthening civil society organizations in general, grassroots groups in particular are challenged by the weak enabling environment for social action.
- Despite this, the Action in Solidarity Fund has found that it is very possible for philanthropists to reach small grassroots groups with the support they need and to begin to strengthen the social fabric for communities to act on their own behalf. This article shares lessons from the fund's experience in grassroots philanthropy.
- Effective support must go back to the basics and build trust, networks, and collaboration as key elements of solidarity. Financial support must be built around the objectives, knowledge, and understanding of grassroots groups in order to lay a foundation for them to learn and act on their own initiatives. This financial support needs to be accessible to these groups and to incorporate philanthropic approaches that promote a self-sustaining social capacity to act on issues and priorities.

In 2008, a politician in the Mexican state of Nayarit on the Gulf of California was surprised by a visit from a member of a local community group who wanted to discuss the potential impacts that a dam on one of Mexico's last

free rivers would have on her community. The politician's confusion was justifiable. The path seemed clear for the dam: a major environmental organization had given its blessing and the promise of creating a booming tourist area seemed to make the project a winner. But here was an informed member of the community concerned with the impacts on the water system, the livelihoods of upstream and downstream communities, and the natural environment. Such feedback, of course, is critical for policymakers to understand the needs and wishes of their constituents. Encounters such as this in Mexico, however, tend to be rare. Civic associations are often linked to the government and are, therefore, less likely to offer an independent voice and criticism. As Jacqueline Butcher (2010) notes,

In this fashion, it is considered that a large part of volunteer participation in Mexico, unlike in other countries, has occurred under the protection of governmental entities and not in the form of voluntary individual association, in addition to constituting a more corporative participation combined with acceptance of authoritarian forms (p. 7).

The upshot is that those who are most affected by proposed policies and development initiatives have a limited say in them, and the unintended consequences of such policies are costly to fix or change after they are implemented.

This article represents a moment of reflection on the experience of one organization – the Ac-

tion in Solidarity Fund or FASOL (Fondo Acción Solidaria). By employing the term “grassroots philanthropy,” we are aware that it is sometimes reserved for the enterprise of fundraising from the grassroots. We are using the term, however, in its broadest sense – as the effort to expand philanthropy to better understand and work with grassroots groups.

The Oxford Handbook of Civil Society identifies three kinds of grassroots philanthropy: providing resources for, with, or from the grassroots (Ruesga, 2011). In thinking toward effective systems of grassroots philanthropy, this article argues largely for a perspective that prioritizes working with grassroots organizations as part of a philanthropic system that leads to a powerful, positive social capacity for thriving communities. Grassroots grantmaking is defined by Grassroots Grantmakers (2014), a U.S.-based association of funders, as

a place-based grantmaking approach that focuses on strengthening and connecting resident-led organizations and their leaders in urban neighborhoods and rural communities. Typically, it is aimed at strengthening the capacity of people who come together to improve their communities through projects and activities that they initiate and manage.

Thus, grassroots organizations are groups, in many forms, that are led by residents to act on their own priorities.

We hope this article can open dialogues with the philanthropic community about how to build effective grassroots philanthropy in Mexico and other countries. In this vein, the article shares lessons we have learned over the past 14 years in making more than 650 small grants to grassroots organizations around the country for social and environmental initiatives. The informed community members in Nayarit who spoke with their representatives, for example, had received a small grant from FASOL.

Our experience emerges from a specific model and approach that is beginning to bear fruit. We have found that it is very possible to reach groups

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with the support they need and to strengthen the social fabric for communities to act on their own behalf. In our experience, effective support must be built around solidarity with the priorities of community groups. A 2014 independent evaluation conducted by INSAD (Investigación en Salud y Demografía S.C) in Mexico City largely validates this claim, and we use many of the observations it collected from FASOL grantees throughout this article along with our own.

Given a chronically weak enabling environment for grassroots organizations and their near invisibility, however, we argue that effective support requires a conscious effort by philanthropic organizations to build the trust, networks, and understanding – what we mean by solidarity – that are critical to long-term success. We believe that the seeds for stronger community action are already in place. It is important, however, to understand that addressing traditions of authoritarian, top-down social and political management will require patience. We have seen that philanthropists can and are beginning to invent new forms and hope this article can help reinforce these promising attempts to foster a social capacity to propose, innovate, and act.

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### The FASOL Approach to Grassroots Philanthropy

From 2003 to 2007, seven experienced social and environmental activists from a variety of organizations in northwest Mexico began discussing and designing ways to improve support for community initiatives in their region. The communities with which they worked had seen that money and economic investment were a corrupting influence on local politicians and often benefitted the interest of the investor without taking into account what the community actually wanted. And yet the need for financial resources was acute.

They knew these issues firsthand, having provided financial and other support to grassroots organizations for many years. One of the most useful types of support came from the U.S.-based Global Greengrants Fund, which in 2001 asked them to act as advisors to recommend for its small-grants program grassroots groups working on environmental issues. The grants, in the range of \$500 to \$5,000, were developed with minimal proposal

and reporting requirements – enough to promote accountability but flexible enough to reach a wide variety of groups.

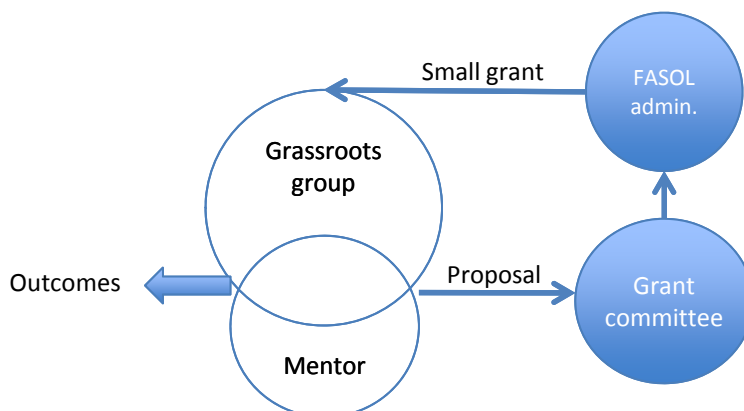
While the grants were small, the Mexican advisors to Greengrants observed that this support had begun to create new capacities – supported groups were accomplishing their goals and many were moving on to tackle larger issues or assist other community groups in their regions to act. These grassroots groups were building awareness and improving their communities' response to social and environmental challenges. As a result some became larger organizations, others influenced like-minded groups, and many were bringing their voices to networks that gave them the opportunity to shape and influence government and corporate policies.

The seven activists believed that the value they were adding was not only about financial support. These grassroots grants were working because they grew out of direct contact with dozens of grassroots associations and were targeted to their priorities. The activists realized that the investments in community initiatives were helping reweave and reinforce the social fabric or social subject – by which we mean the ability to take meaningful action and define the priorities of the community – for communities to address their own issues and better negotiate the terms around larger investments.

With this in mind, they launched FASOL to create a movement of healthy, sustainable, effective grassroots associations to work for environmental and social justice for the people of Mexico.

FASOL's approach is to support groups through the assistance of mentors – experienced social and environmental activists who identify and make grants to grassroots associations. In addition to grants, mentors provide these groups with advice, connections, and information. Mentors bring the proposals of groups with which they are in contact to a grant committee comprised of mentors, staff, and board. (See Figure 1.) The grant committee matches available funds to the proposals and then sends them to the FASOL administra-

FIGURE 1 Grant Development



tion, which determines how to best disburse the funding. Groups without the ability to receive money identify fiscal sponsors to help manage and report on its use.

FASOL invites mentors based on their significant social credentials in various fields and their interest in strengthening the networks with which they work. Many have learned from or started out in grassroots organizations and have gone on to specialize in areas such as marine conservation, sustainable development, and human rights. While FASOL gives mentors a small honorarium, they are primarily volunteers who have to date contributed thousands of hours to the shared objective of strengthening grassroots organizations.

Most grassroots organizations learn about FASOL's support in conversations with mentors, former grantees, and others in our network. Groups can also learn of the organization through its website or the participation of mentors, board, and staff in the activities of a variety of networks. The mentor may already be working with them and usually has some knowledge of the communities and issues on which they are working. Mentors' involvement ranges from preparing requests and helping define strategies to connecting these groups to information and supportive networks. While FASOL does not take unsolicited proposals, it makes every effort to connect groups

to mentors in their region when these requests come in.

Almost all of the requests for funds must be addressed quickly. Funding usually assists with immediate opportunities or needs, such as action on a proposed policy or participation in an event. FASOL is generally able to get out a grant within four months of a request. Funding decisions are made three times a year, although FASOL will consider requests for urgent funds. It is able to fund about 60 percent of the requests it receives, based largely on availability of funding. In many cases, FASOL's assistance will be the first grant a grassroots group has received.

### Left Behind: A Shortfall of Grassroots Support in Mexico

It is fair to say that grassroots groups have not been well supported by philanthropists in Mexico. As a relic of a society historically segregated along economic lines, philanthropy in its most recognized form grew out of the practice of the Catholic charity mandate for the social and political elite. Philanthropy in its larger sense – from the Greek love of mankind – certainly also has its roots in the practice of communities of both Mexico's European and indigenous populations, but the word *filantropía* is largely associated today with this Catholic tradition that has influenced the wealthy.

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This is changing. Alexandro Natal (2002) calls attention to three generations of philanthropic evolution in Mexico. The first, ending around 1940, was marked by the engagement of wealthy individuals largely as a matter of religious faith. The second, from 1940 to 1960, represented a transition from pure charity to an emphasis on community development. The final generation, in which we find ourselves, was marked first by an expansion of professionalized philanthropy and after 2000 by an increasing preoccupation with human rights and democratization (Winder, 2007).

Mexico is a socially and economically stratified country. It has the second-highest income inequality among member states of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development and only 0.04 percent of gross domestic product dedicated to charity, according to the Mexican Center for Philanthropy's 2003 study. This is 40 times lower than the United States and significantly lower than many comparable Latin American countries (INSAD, 2014; Salamon & Sokolowski,

2004). Mexico struggles with this income gap. While its economy is growing – at about 2.5 percent increase in GDP in 2013 (World Bank, n.d.), its poverty levels have been increasing – from 42.9 percent in 2006 to 52.3 percent of the population in 2012 (World Bank, n.d.). As such, philanthropy has not always seen grassroots groups as a significant resource for social objectives, and it can be characterized historically as a largely paternalistic enterprise that imposed policies and solutions on politically marginal communities. For this reason, many of the community groups with which FASOL works express some resistance to engage with philanthropic organizations.

The true scope of civic association in Mexico is somewhat elusive. Estimates of the number of civil society organizations, starting at about 11,000 (Pérez & Cano, 2009) to as high as 30,000 (Butcher, 2010), identify Mexico as one of the least organized societies in the Americas.<sup>1</sup> But these estimates report organizations that are formally registered with the government or are counted by the Mexican Center on Philanthropy.<sup>2</sup> There are certainly no authoritative estimates on the number of grassroots groups, most of which are not in directories of nongovernmental organizations. But there is evidence of significant numbers, particularly in Chiapas, Oaxaca, and the Mexico City region, where social movements have been more visible and organized. In our experience, however, the lack of good estimates on size distorts the true scope of organized social groups and obscures the reality that grassroots groups are part of the fabric of Mexican society.

If community action and engagement is so critical, why are community groups being left behind? Organized community action is thought by some (Layton, 2009) to go against the grain of culture: As Nobel laureate Octavio Paz (1985) wrote, “Our

<sup>1</sup> As Butcher (2010) notes, “if the [Encuesta Nacional Sobre Filantropía y Sociedad Civil] data for 2005 is compared to Chilean data, where there are 50 organizations for every 10,000 inhabitants, in Mexico there is only one organization for the same number of inhabitants” (pp. 10).

<sup>2</sup> For an interesting discussion of the difficulty in counting Mexican civil society organizations, see the Tides Center's report, “Strengthening Nonprofit Organizations in Mexico, Costa Rica, and El Salvador, 2006” ([http://www.tides.org/fileadmin/user/pdf/WP\\_FeasibilityStudyEnglish.pdf](http://www.tides.org/fileadmin/user/pdf/WP_FeasibilityStudyEnglish.pdf)).



relationships with other men are always tinged with suspicion. Every time a Mexican confides in a friend or acquaintance, every time he opens himself up, it is an abdication” (p. 30).

Given a society in which mistrust is common, are Mexicans lacking solidarity? Do we hold back or wait for others to address our communities’ problems? Butcher’s study on volunteerism finds that two-thirds of Mexicans report performing acts of solidarity and about one in four do so through membership in a group (2010). She finds this to be low in relation to other countries, but the flip side is also true – despite a prevailing pessimism regarding civil society, Mexicans are significantly engaged. Still, a weak enabling environment for civil society is an impediment. A lack of legal and fiscal incentives, little horizontal accountability and transparency, and low institutional capacity create an environment in which it is difficult to produce results or raise resources (Layton, 2009; Mendoza, 2014).

Over the past decade, we have found and supported hundreds of groups on the community level, so we are convinced that Mexico has a diverse and important tradition of grassroots action. Given the nature of these groups – small, localized, driven by volunteers, and vulnerable to external pressure and insecurity – the lack of an enabling environment tends to make them easy to overlook. One path available to some is to formally register with the government, which can help in creating an institutional identity for work on policy. As one FASOL grantee reports, “With the formalized legal situation, [we] collaborated with government agencies and NGOs in the development and implementation of education plans and campaigns focused on hygienic needs, health, and birth control for pets” (INSAD, 2014, p 25). Formal registration, however, is not attainable by nor makes sense for all groups in the current legal and tax environment.

On the other hand, we have seen that these groups can be reached if we build appropriate systems for identifying and supporting them and, most of all, if we understand their strengths. We need to start from the principle that grassroots

*We have seen that these groups can be reached if we build appropriate systems for identifying and supporting them and, most of all, if we understand their strengths. We need to start from the principle that grassroots associations are not powerless; they influence the practices their communities choose to accept, improve, embrace, or resist and are a critical force for the functioning of democracy.*

associations are not powerless; they influence the practices their communities choose to accept, improve, embrace, or resist and are a critical force for the functioning of democracy (Putnam, 1993; De Tocqueville & Grant, 2000). In our experience, they also refine and act on local social priorities and tend to make wise and appropriate use of scarce resources. We have seen this in the adoption of local recycling initiatives, work to improve agricultural and fishing methods, and choices made to rebuild after disasters, among many other practices. Some illustrative examples are:

- A group in Sinaloa designated a critical parcel of local land to be used for conservation and is now developing small-scale rural tourism enterprises that will protect the land and bring in new resources.
- A group in Baja California Norte held four community workshops to promote the reuse and recycling of tires to raise incomes and to deal with the widespread problem of tire disposal in the state.

- Three grassroots groups in Oaxaca are working together on the production and marketing of amaranth, a highly nutritious grain indigenous to Central America that was once banned by the Spanish for its supposedly “pagan” origins.
- A group in Veracruz built a coalition that petitioned against the creation of an open pit mine that would have directly affected nearly 5,000 people in 37 communities. The coalition persuaded the Secretariat of Environment and Natural Resources to deny a permit.

*Given the real power of grassroots groups, it makes no sense that they are left behind as we work together on social and environmental issues. The questions are clear: How can we work with these groups; how can we change the inherited mistrust in our culture; and, ultimately, how do we make a large-scale difference leading to sustainable development and environmental stewardship in Mexico?*

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### Lessons in Grassroots Philanthropy From the FASOL Experience

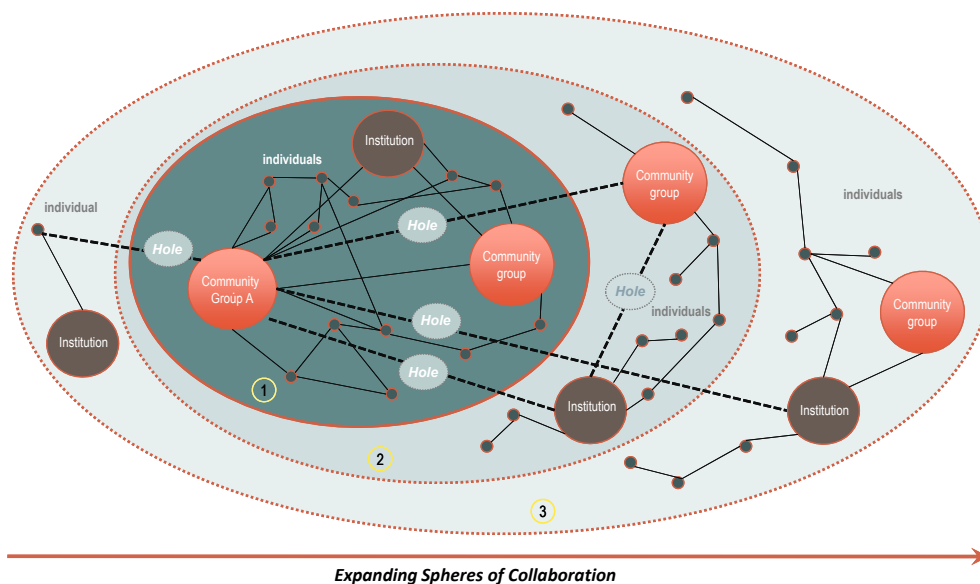
The spirit of solidarity – building on and fostering a mutual understanding of the nature and priorities of grassroots groups – is, we believe, an essential orientation in grassroots philanthropy. As Paulo Freire (2012) argues, “Solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary; it is a radical posture” (p. 49). To enter into the situation of grassroots organizations, we must work and communicate with them side by side. The capacity to act in solidarity brings communities together, and it can be expanded into broader networks and collaboration that will ultimately provide new resources and ideas for tackling the daunting issues of poverty, exclusion, and environmental degradation.

Practically, it may seem difficult to operationalize the principle of solidarity in a grantmaking program. Philanthropic organizations have limited time, resources, and staff. We seek to make the most significant impact with the tools we have in the face of challenges that require us to act urgently. But the ability to value and support the social capacity for solidarity is central to releasing the power of communities to make a difference and solve problems as they emerged “The answer lies in a feature of social life closely related to the duality of ways to define and defend group interests: the exclusive and conservative, contrasted to the solidaristic and transformative” (Unger, 2000, p. 222).

Grassroots groups grow directly out of the experience of solidarity, generally starting at the initiation of friends and even family who share a common objective. Because they are close, they tend to share many common contacts, which means the resources and networks upon which they can draw for information, resources, and assistance are small, closed off, and shared. These relationships are few but strong and accessible. (See Figure 2.) A group may have close connections to those institutions in its community – a school, for example – and to a close network of individuals and other community groups. This initial circle provides a largely closed network and reach within which limited resources circulate.



FIGURE 2 The Challenge of Building Grassroots Strength



Effective support helps the group not only move forward its immediate projects, but also to build its credibility and capacity and to call on a broader sphere of networks, institutions, and individuals. As it acts, a group gains the ability to reach outside its initial circle, in effect calling on expanding spheres of solidarity. In so doing, it forges new members and partnerships into an expanding sphere where it can collaborate. It needs to develop its internal capacities as well, but in ways that draw from its grassroots strengths. And finally, it must gain confidence from its own successes and experience in advancing its initiatives. In our experience, these key points for supporting grassroots organizations translate into four practical strategies that show some promise in helping philanthropists to establish a solidarity-driven approach to grassroots philanthropy:

- 1) Strengthen the networks of trust on which grassroots organizations rely.
- 2) Seek to expand spheres of collaboration leading to a common movement.
- 3) Encourage groups to strengthen their own internal capacities.

- 4) Build confidence through experience and over time.

Of course, providing meaningful financial support is a primary function of the grassroots philanthropist. These strategies focus on how this support is given and how it can be made more effective.

#### *Strengthen the Networks of Trust*

In 2002, an advisor for the Global Greengrants Fund who would later become a founding mentor for FASOL helped a tiny group in a fishing community in Cabo Pulmo, Baja California Sur, to get funding for outreach and coordination with communities, government, and NGOs. As part of this initiative, the group mobilized volunteers to clean up the local beach. In addition to providing a small grant, the mentor spent time with the group and joined it in picking up trash with community volunteers. She helped members think through their outreach plan and connected them with several NGOs and people at local universities.

Because it is one of only three coral reefs on the west coast of North America, Cabo Pulmo was designated a national marine park in 1995. Regula-

*Among grassroots groups, networks tend to be fragmented because they are often isolated from official decision-making and because members tend to rely on closely knit circles of a few friends and family – what are called strong ties in social networking – to protect and sustain themselves. Poverty and social exclusion exert a centripetal force on social networks, strengthening the ties between intimates that share close, common struggles for work, food, family, and community.*

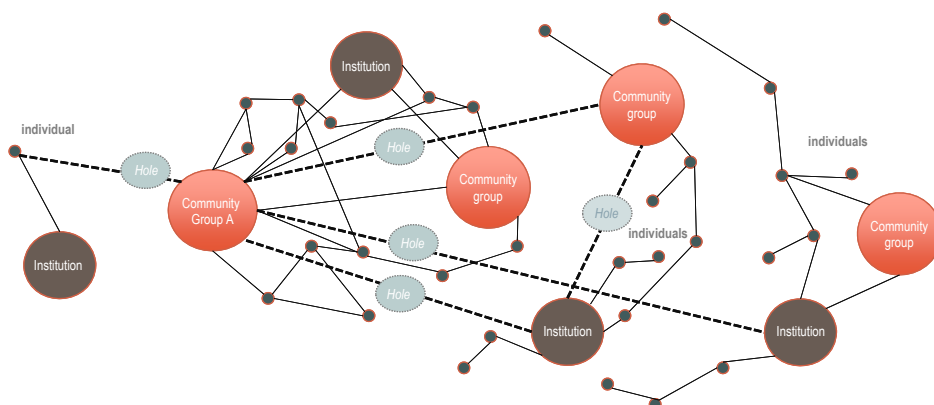
tions permitted the continuation of traditional fishing and other income-generating activities from the park and required outreach in the community. The group was concerned that many families in Cabo Pulmo had already lost their primary livelihood through the degradation of the reef and fisheries, and would be forced to leave in search of better jobs.

By the time the group received its second small grant for a citizen-monitoring program to protect the park from poaching and the destruction of sea turtle eggs, it had already begun to see the future of the reef as one that could rejuvenate both the fisheries and the communities that relied on them. Toward this, it had begun working with the park and the group of universities and NGOs that were concerned with marine conservation.

As a result, the group decided to start a small-scale ecotourism enterprise to protect and rebuild the local reef. The group believed that the reef, being in close proximity to tourist areas, could bring much-needed economic opportunities to the local families as well as begin to re-establish the dwindling fish populations. As the work progressed, the group managed to raise nearly \$500,000. This, of course, went far beyond the initial investment and relationship with a FASOL mentor, but the early buy-in helped it mobilize community volunteers, information, guidance, and funding that led to its widely recognized success in transforming the reef.

A paucity of trusted relationships tends to fragment social networks, impede strong community action, and restrict flow of information and resources. Small or closed networks not only keep communities isolated from information, influence, and resources, they reduce the possibility for innovation (Granovetter, 1983; Unger, 2000). Among grassroots groups, networks tend to be fragmented because they are often isolated from official decision-making and because members tend to rely on closely knit circles of a few friends and family – what are called strong ties in social networking – to protect and sustain themselves. Poverty and social exclusion exert a centripetal force on social networks, strengthening the ties between intimates that share close, common struggles for work, food, family, and community. These strong ties are the center of trusting relationships – those developed over time, interaction, and affection (Krackhardt, 1992); trusted neighbors and family members support one another with food, material resources, solace, labor, and many other ways. But they also tend to think alike and have access to a small pool of resources. As Granovetter (1983) argues, it is the weak ties – the acquaintances and relationships across the divides of identity and culture – that open up communities to innovation, ideas, and resources; weak ties can be local bridges that serve “crucial functions in linking otherwise unconnected segments of a network” (p. 217). Weak ties are essential elements in the strength of networks and social solidarity, Granovetter writes: “Weak ties provide the bridges over which innovations cross the

FIGURE 3 Closing the Structural Holes



boundaries of social groups; the decision-making, however, is influenced mainly by the strong-ties network in each group” (p. 219).

Traditional mutual reliance, of course, is not a weakness; these tight circles of trust provide for much social welfare and the first experience most people will have with working together on common objectives. In Cabo Pulmo, strong ties in the fishing community led the local group to look for solutions that would provide for new income and support as well as repair the damage to the environment. Individuals with strong ties to each other are the initiators of community action because they count on assistance within their small but powerful network.

As they advance their objectives, they will need to expand their social networks to bring in the material resources, knowledge, and skills they need. This means they must build new relationships and expand their capacity to interact with people outside of their area of action. For example, a community group describes how its organized project helped to expand its local network beyond the family:

We thought about what we were going to do to get more people involved. ... [I]t occurred to us that by inviting more people from different families we were going to have more support ... from their parents or their grandparents. ... I had always only worked with my family (INSAD, 2014, p. 28).

To help grassroots groups connect to larger social networks, it is important to be aware that the gaps, or structural holes – “a relationship of nonredundancy between two contacts” meaning that neither of their networks have access to the same resources and information (Burt, 1992, p. 65) – must be bridged. (See Figure 3.) For example, the group in Cabo Pulmo – say, Community Group A in Figure 3 – wanted to protect the new national marine park, but needed to learn about the ecology of fish and sea turtles and understand the park’s objectives and regulations. To assist the group, we can add the element of social bridgers who can connect them to a community leader in another area who has started a similar program or to an agency with the expertise it needs.

FIGURE 4 Adding a Mentor as a Weak Tie to Expand the Network for Grassroots Organizations



The information and contacts from these bridging relations, we have found, are key to the success of community projects. Practically, it would be costly and difficult to have program officers in every community working with potential grassroots grantees. We have found that some mix of program staff combined with a network of social bridgers is a practical approach that can reach and develop effective support for grassroots groups.

For FASOL, mentors play this role by advising groups throughout the process of developing grant support and often in the implementation of their initiatives. Mentors bridge structural holes created by geographic isolation, economic class, language, and lack of information. (See Figure 4).

A bridger need not have strong relationships with the institution or individual in question, but the bridger's experience with finding information and resources provides a valuable new set of links to a grassroots network. The gap between community groups and information on the policies and plans that will affect them can begin to be addressed simply by collecting or knowing how to connect information. As a FASOL mentor describes it,

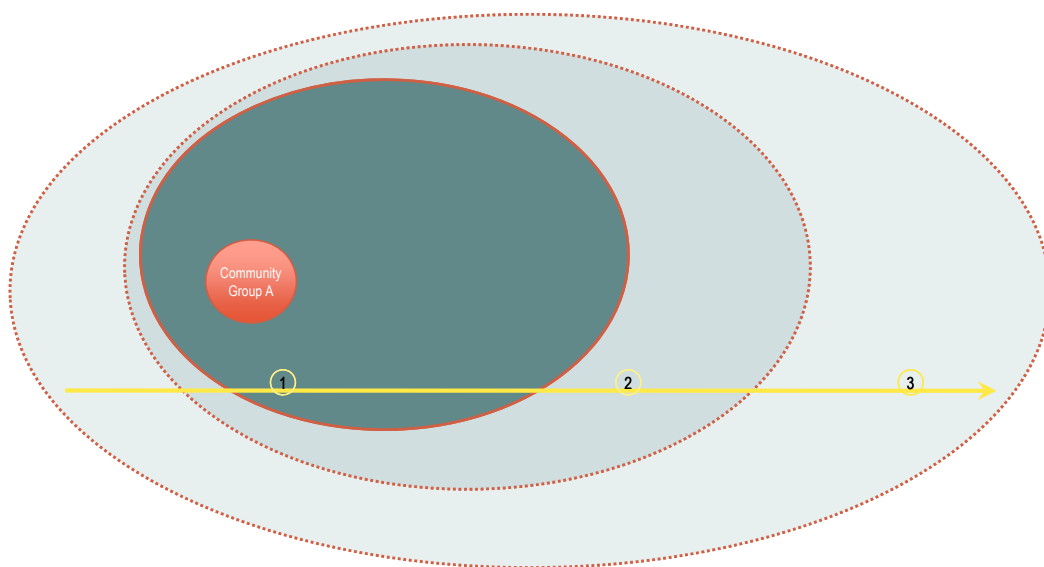
A major weakness among grassroots groups in [our region] is access to information ... or the ability to analyze and reflect on the information that reaches them. This situation makes them especially vulnerable to almost any proposal that comes to their land. Without that capacity communities cannot develop short-, medium- and long-term planning processes. For me, this is the central theme that explains why this country has massive immobility and little or no participation in the construction of a social, nonpartisan policy (M. M. Mijangos, personal communication, August 27, 2014).

The ability to bridge in the network requires people who are engaged around similar issues and share a belief in the centrality of community action and ownership over the forces of their own development and sustainability. In our experience, as long as this is clear we have seen mentors, our network bridgers, work together across different ideologies and experiences. Having tackled issues from their bases in NGOs, government offices, universities, and companies, they know how to bring hard-to-access information and expertise to the service of our community partners. There is also an element of patience. As was the case in Cabo Pulmo, in the early stages the group gained strength by engaging community volunteers and strengthening its core network, but as the work progressed it gradually brought together a larger and larger network. Ten years later, it had become a resource for other community groups. In 2012, for example, it hosted a group in Sonora that wanted to learn from the Cabo Pulmo group and subsequently decided to advocate for a regulated fishing area in its own region.

#### *Foster Spheres of Collaboration*

In the case of the proposed dam in Nayarit, in 2009 one of FASOL's mentors became aware that upstream communities did not know about the plans to dam their river. The danger here was not only that the absence of the participation of the upstream communities could make the downstream communities less capable advocates; it was that any proposed solutions would be less sustainable without taking into account how the dam would impact everyone who relied on the river. To address this, the mentor identified additional groups in these areas and helped them to access information, connect with other groups, and build their agendas.

FIGURE 5 Expanding the Spheres of Collaboration



As a result, FASOL funded 10 community groups in the region that would be affected by the dam over the next three years. The organizing efforts that took place in so many communities became an expanded coalition that attracted participation of other networks and specialist organizations from across Mexico. While the story of the proposed dam is still being written, the groups managed to delay the agreement around the dam until an environmental study could assess the impacts on upstream and downstream communities. Not only were the perspectives and interests of all the communities important to the outcome of the project, but also many of these groups had never organized around the issue and they became aware of the potential impacts.

One group working alone in isolation is never really alone. The change of practices and conditions it seeks impacts other groups, regions, networks, and the public. As a group moves forward, it needs to attract both the passive and active collaboration of others to mobilize increasing numbers

of supporters who can influence institutions and the public. (See Figure 5.) The daily competition for resources and recognition tends to obscure this fact, but the practice of coming together around issues such as the proposed dam expands the sphere of collaboration, contributing to the strengthening of movements.

To this effect people speak of a confounding number of movements toward building the environment, democracy, human rights, feminism, etc. Charles Tilly (2004), in his analysis of social movements, argues that they require the leadership of social entrepreneurs and are composed of campaigns and actions to gain public support for their cause. Not every cause meets this test of a wide-scale social movement, but even more limited movements around a cause still rely on the factors Tilly suggests: demonstrations of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment to gain the public acceptance of their goals. As a group acts, it widens the spheres of collaboration through these demonstrations.

*Despite the power gaps, community groups and donors can learn how to communicate their needs and values to build one another's capacity. We need to be their support by asking honest questions. One grassroots group, for example, notes that "the questions helped us to see our strategy, so we ... asked for the support of a local authority and thus involved and committed him" to the project (INSAD, 2014, p. 35).*

There are several ways a grassroots philanthropist can help expand the spheres of collaboration. As is the case above, simultaneously supporting a number of affected groups to work on an issue at the same time promotes understanding among all of the differing perspectives, and the resulting coalition yields more influence from the buy-in of all the affected communities. Another way is to work with networks to identify and expand participation by providing financial support for groups to travel or work with others on shared issues. FASOL asked a major regional network campaigning on marine and coastal issues, with which it was working closely and has provided some support, to identify several grassroots groups that would strengthen its networking conference and then provided funding to these groups to enable their participation. As a result, all the groups that participated continued to work with the network, attracted the participation of even more groups, and are now working in ways that range from direct management of local marine reserves to pro-

posing national and state policies to protect water resources. We continue to work with the network and are now designing support to encourage more youth to get involved. These exchanges in the context of networks are important because they enable on-the-job learning and the establishment of partnerships among organizations that are necessary components of expanding collaboration. Philanthropic support can be instrumental in this because funding for travel, training, and communication is difficult to raise.

Community groups, of course, have different interests and will never agree on everything. The point is not to decide who is right, but to seek out ways to enable them to work together and learn to resolve their differences. This goes beyond requiring them to show that they are partnering with other groups – this, in fact, can lead to fake collaboration to please the donor and may provoke unnecessary tensions. As an alternative, we ask groups to tell us with whom they plan to work in their own communities and trust mentors to help them connect with other organizations and individuals.

#### *Encourage the Group to Strengthen Its Own Capacities*

We have found that a one-size-fits-all approach to building the capacity of grassroots groups does not work well. Many times these capacity-building initiatives take groups away from the work and, at worst, teach them skills such as proposal writing and financial accountability that are largely irrelevant to their immediate challenges. As in every field, power dynamics are at play. Even small financial support can influence how a group allocates its time, and many people are eager to learn the sort of skills we think they need. The point is not to be neutral or to forego building capacity; it is that we must first build our own capacity to act as peers as much as possible by taking the time to understand the priorities of a group and what needs to be done.

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need to be their support by asking honest questions. One grassroots group, for example, notes that “the questions helped us to see our strategy, so we ... asked for the support of a local authority and thus involved and committed him” to the project (INSAD, 2014, p. 35).

We have found that building the capacity of groups should as much as possible be incorporated into grants, enabling them to get the training and assistance they seek. It can meet an immediate need, such as a grant that enables a group to register with the government: “The donation permitted us to formalize the group and the civil association in order to increase our capacity to have influence with authorities” (Castro Felix, 2014, p. 25). Or support can enable dialogue, planning, and community workshops that help attract new members and formulate clear priorities. One group began by working locally, building awareness in its community, and acting as a bridge to information on mining developments. Armed with what it learned, it was able to work with a national network several years later to submit proposed legislation to the national senate.

Funders and institutions often emphasize building and identifying leadership. There is no doubt that leadership is an important element in community success, but not all forms of leadership are conducive to expanding collaboration. In our experience, community groups must develop their own leadership in the context of their initiatives. In this way, as is understood by community organizers, the conditions for everyone to potentially be a leader also emerge: “The goal is the internal development of the community’s capacity to make improvements, solve problems, and generate its own leadership” (Staples, 2004, p. 7).

Proposal and reporting requirements are two key points of contact where a philanthropic organization can assist groups in building capacity – that is, if we can break ourselves from forcing groups to turn to expensive skills and staff in order to produce them. A minor industry has grown around specialized assistance from staff, training, and consultants to help meet the requirements of grantmakers. Grassroots groups cannot afford to

*A minor industry has grown around specialized assistance from staff, training, and consultants to help meet the requirements of grantmakers. Grassroots groups cannot afford to compete with better-financed professional organizations for this funding, nor is it to their comparative advantage – direct access to the challenges, ideas, and priorities of their communities – to do so. We do not, however, argue for lesser standards of accountability, merely relevant ones.*

compete with better-financed professional organizations for this funding, nor is it to their comparative advantage – direct access to the challenges, ideas, and priorities of their communities – to do so. We do not, however, argue for lesser standards of accountability, merely relevant ones. With an eye to expanding the capacity of these groups, the mandate of grant administration should be to promote accountability to group objectives and its members while also requiring strong fiscal accountability. The ability of groups to understand and fulfill administrative requirements should not keep them from accessing grants.

One approach is to ensure appropriate assistance to help a group translate its priorities into a proposal and a report at the end of its grant. FASOL mentors often play this role in helping a group to fulfill its part of the grantmaking contract. In the words of one grantee group,

*The most important element we have found in building the confidence of groups is support for initiatives that set achievable goals. When groups see their own success, they attract attention and are able to articulate how they have made things better.*

We did not clearly understand the format, what they wanted, what we had to say. ... [The mentor] helped us to clarify. ... [W]hen we had to check the report, we sent it to him first to see how it looked ... and then we dove into it alone (INSAD, 2014, p. 27).

As these administrative requirements evolve, it is not enough to simply be unobtrusive; the requirements should facilitate and strengthen a group's ability to act. This depends on the questions that are asked. FASOL asks not only what a group intends to do, but also how it will strengthen its own membership and reach into its community. As one group noted,

Another thing [FASOL] helped with is to strengthen the group, because in other projects what you do is just write your project and in FASOL you have to include a description of your group, how to strengthen the internal part, the collectivity.... (INSAD, 2014, p. 25).

The size of support can also build or diminish the capacity to act. Clearly, grants should be appropriate to the need, but smaller grants can be more effective than larger grants because they are easier to account for and because a larger grant can refocus the group on spending the money well toward what it thinks the funder wants. In other words, people can become accountable to the

money and not to one another, and this diminishes their unity and the commitment of some to do whatever it takes. In cases where larger support is really needed, the small grant can help build the capacity and/or reputation that can help prepare the group to tackle larger initiatives and acquire the skills for managing greater funding.

And we are acutely aware that the capacity issue goes both ways. As philanthropists, we need to continually learn from the groups we work with. While FASOL focuses our support on social/environmental issues, we have learned over the past decade that the capacity of grassroots groups is hampered by ongoing insecurity and infringement of human rights. Groups that speak out on their issues often fear for the security of their members, family, and friends. In 2013, a member of a group supported by FASOL was assassinated in Veracruz right outside an important network meeting he was attending. We all face a challenge to strengthen collective rights and security and need to partner with organizations that can help communities address issues of insecurity.

#### *Build Confidence Through Experience*

Translated as trust, *confianza* is an essential element for expanding networks and collaboration to open up resources. But *confianza* translated as confidence is the necessary condition for the internal strength of a group. Starting from the investment to enable a group to carry out its priorities, however small this may seem in terms of accomplishing larger objectives, the message is sent that "we" believe in you. The accomplishment of this initiative leads to plans to bite off a larger part of the problem.

In this way, the most important element we have found in building the confidence of groups is support for initiatives that set achievable goals. When groups see their own success, they attract attention and are able to articulate how they have made things better. A group that reported it "achieved the discontinuation of pesticide use within rural communities in the municipality" is now helping other groups to address the use of pesticides (INSAD, 2014, p. 33).

Groups can then build on this success by strengthening their profile and adding new capacities. This is part of a process that not only increases the reach of community groups, but also enables them to sustain changing practices. In the words of another group,

[We] decided to create the environmental program; before it was like an activity, an action performed by partners. ... [Now we are] pulling together a network of promoters, seeking a culture of environmental care within the partners and in some families in the communities (INSAD, 2014, p. 31).

Of course, the importance of success can be overemphasized. Groups learn many lessons from failure. It is important to allow this to happen and to enable the conditions for groups to learn from their failures and successes. Another group reports that as the result of its work, “they closed the dump, they put up signs to stop littering, ... but we are still waiting for them to present the landfill project or the relocation of the dump” (INSAD, 2014, p. 35). This partial success has led the members of the group to reevaluate objectives and to try new strategies.

A grant should be a lever for social change, but it is the people it supports who matter. If the initial project is successful, it will touch dozens of people; if it is not, it can encourage the group to reach out to others. As groups begin to believe they can make a difference, they also learn how to bring in the networks and resources they need. One of the key outcomes for us has been the new confidence of the groups we have supported to mobilize greater resources and funding. In this way, grassroots philanthropists stimulate self-sustaining social systems as groups gain recognition and can call on new sources to sustain themselves: “The mentor supported us in capturing the attention of other donors. ... We were able to inform the work of the organization ... [and] we had the potential to generate community organization with the design and integration of inter-council.” (INSAD, 2014, p. 53).

### Summary Principles

The lessons we have discussed are important to

thinking beyond financial grants to a world in which community initiative is a more significant force, leading to more sustainable and just solutions to many of the problems we face. For us this is about working with communities to weave a strong social fabric. Day to day, we have found the following principles in the grantmaking process help bring these lessons down to an operational level:

- The priorities and initiatives of grassroots organizations must be the primary guide to funding.
- To identify both the priorities and the community groups, a personal connection and understanding of the community context is essential.
- Our support should not cover everything. Part of the work is for the groups themselves to mobilize the human, social, and material resources to get the job done.
- The group and the grantmaker are mutually accountable for improving conditions for the community.

### Pitfalls and Challenges in Grassroots Philanthropy

The laboratory of community action is the real world, with all the messiness of social plans. In working with grassroots philanthropy, there are several areas where we have seen efforts to work with grassroots groups go awry.

#### *Managing Evaporating Relationships*

There is a delicate balance between building an effective grants-delivery system and keeping a significant connection with grassroots partners. It is a challenge to maintain these relationships. As staff and mentors have left FASOL for other work, community groups we support can come to believe that FASOL has moved on. This leaves holes in the network and can affect the work of a community group and the funder. A mentor who stepped down in one region, for example, left a number of groups that were still developing their proposals. FASOL was able to rebuild connections with some by linking them to a new mentor, but has lost contact with other groups.

In a complex system that is supporting diverse objectives, some tension around ideologies and

perspectives is to be expected. As the responsibilities of these bridgers are voluntary, the commitment of time is usually the biggest issue. That said, we have found that the shared solidarity with grassroots groups is largely sufficient to bring people together across thematic, ideological, and geographic divides. For example, a year ago a disagreement resulted in a mentor deciding to leave, but he continues to work with the organization to channel support where he can.

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#### *The Danger of Grants to Individuals*

While we think it is important to design grants around people, we have found that making grants to individuals has not been as effective. In the few cases where we have supported the initiative of a single person, regardless of how well founded the initiative was in the local context, the support exacerbated tensions within groups by creating claims over funding, reducing trust, and not contributing to the fundamental cohesiveness of the group. The individuals then struggle with getting to the objectives of their initiatives and trying to find the right formula to engage others.

#### *Diluting Cohesiveness and Priorities*

At times donors can get almost too enthused about individual community leaders, expecting them to act like specialists and spokespeople for their communities. Turning these perceived leaders into out-of-context experts can reduce their capacity to relate to their own communities, the very thing that made them community leaders to begin with. Well-meaning awards that recognize the achievement of one individual and the continual invitations directed at a group's star can reduce the shared responsibility of group solidarity. In the words of one of those frustrated rising stars, "It is not my work. It is the work of all of us together. Yes, I am the representative because they have named me as the representative, but it is the council that is leading all of the work" (Castro Felix, 2014, personal communication, July 2014).

Likewise, it is easy to get carried away with the success of one group and press it to change course. In the case of Cabo Pulmo, because its work on rehabilitating the reef was seen as a success some of the group's enthusiastic backers asked it to turn its efforts to doing more "community development" projects. Even though the group had not set out to do community development and initially said it was not interested, the allure of additional funding was too great and the group changed its priorities to accommodate the funders.

#### *Evaluating Impact*

Measuring the impact of grassroots action and the improving conditions for it is a complex task because the many individual groups face very different circumstances, and while each success is important in its own right, it doesn't necessarily indicate the expanding collective impact or social capacity to act. Foundations in the United States have made a significant contribution to this effort. An evaluation of the Ford Foundation Community Organizing Initiative, for example, provides these indicators:

- strengthened organizational capacity as measured by increased membership, funding, and organizational leadership;

- heightened prominence of community organizations in policy debates as indicated by participation in formal policy discussions, policy victories, number of issues, and media coverage;
- greater networking of community organizations within their regions as reflected in the number of meetings across organizations and the number of coalitions; and
- increased funding support for community organizing groups, measured by the number of local, regional, and national funders supporting groups and establishment of a funders collaborative (Gittell, Price, & Ferman, 2009).

When FASOL commissioned the evaluation of its grassroots support, it identified three logical and interrelated pathways as essential to understanding the impact of grassroots action (INSAD, 2014):

- 1) social and environmental results in the priority areas for action of grassroots groups,
- 2) the ongoing improvement of social and environmental practices that are developed, and
- 3) the development of a sustainable institutional model for grassroots support.

These pathways take into account both the development of increased community participation in social and environmental action and creating the conditions or social fabric needed to improve the system.

#### *Results In Priorities of Grassroots Organizations*

The success of grassroots support can be measured by the extent to which groups accomplish what they set out to do and by evidence they are moving on to continue, deepen, or tackle new challenges. The first is not hard to know; we have found the reporting of our grantees to be exceedingly honest. Evidence that they are continuing to do more is a little harder to come by. Many have become considerably bigger and important points of reference in a variety of areas, thereby playing a major role in strengthening the action of other groups; others have gone on to tackle new

challenges within their own communities. But even where groups have ceased to exist – not all challenges are ongoing – we want to see a culture of action.

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*With the increasing engagement of grassroots groups, it should be possible to measure improvement on key broad indicators of changing practices, new policies, and improvements in the general population. While these indicators are difficult to tie to specific projects or interventions, the reports of grassroots groups indicate some benchmarks for where these changes in practice are occurring.*

The strengthening social fabric of our communities is reflected in the positive experience of association. Along these lines, 89 percent of the groups we supported reported positive change in their organization. Evidence that groups are bringing in financial, information, and human support by working in alliances and networks demonstrates the expanding social capacity to act in solidarity. Along these lines, 57 percent of our grantees reported that they had formed or become part of social and environmental alliances (INSAD, 2014).

#### *Ongoing Improvement of Developed Practices*

With the increasing engagement of grassroots groups, it should be possible to measure im-

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provement on key broad indicators of changing practices, new policies, and improvements in the general population. While these indicators are difficult to tie to specific projects or interventions, the reports of grassroots groups indicate some benchmarks for where these changes in practice are occurring.

For example, 28 percent of FASOL's grantees report progress in developing policies; 37 percent report changes in the general population (recycling, composting, engagement in sustainable production initiatives, use of green technologies, monitoring environmental impacts, and increasing people involved in community activities); and 57 percent of groups reported advances in the knowledge and awareness of their communities

about environmental and social issues (INSAD, 2014). In the end, of course, we would like to see many of these practices become commonplace and social and environmental benchmarks to improve across the country. We are not there yet.

### Conclusion

In 2014, the government concluded an impact analysis on the proposed dam in Nayarit. The project has moved more slowly than intended; whether this is due to the valid questions raised by groups from across the affected region or to the natural speed of things is not clear. FASOL's mentor in the region has expressed some frustration because community groups are beginning to lose interest, feeling that they have already "done their bit." The impact analysis does not address many of the concerns they have raised over the last seven years, although they have spoken to many policymakers. If the dam goes ahead as planned without addressing these concerns, was the support of grassroots groups successful?

Whether the dam goes ahead or not, we argue that the awareness of the local groups, their vigilance, and the experience of engagement will result in increasing capacity for groups to internalize and plan for the changes in their conditions and to work together to find solutions. We face a culture in which policymakers can be deaf to the voices of community groups. Wherever networks, collaboration, and confianza are woven together in the social fabric, however, communities have a greater voice and policymakers begin to hear that voice. The success of the Nayarit groups is that policymakers heard them and they heard each other. Grassroots groups may not be able to solve every problem, but they are the front line in helping their communities adapt and thrive.

Three years ago in the state of Baja California Sur, few communities were concerned with the impact of mining. But in response to the issuance of six gold mining concessions, many groups were alarmed at the threat to the precious water resources of this parched region. Amazingly, an alliance of more than 30 organizations has formed in just three years and is calling for these concessions to be reconsidered. Members of youth organiza-



tions and other local groups have camped outside the county office in La Paz to make their point. Such civic capacity to unite on a common issue has become possible only because many groups across the region have learned how to engage and the spheres of collaboration have begun to grow. Despite enormous obstacles, we are becoming a culture with a stronger civic capacity and a growing sense of responsibility for the health and well-being of our communities.

Grassroots groups can be powerful stewards of critical knowledge and local resources. Funders can mobilize this great resource by supporting local initiatives, by opening up space and dialogue, and by strengthening networks that build on it. Civic action is not a panacea, but it is a necessary ingredient in solving many problems.

We have found effective grassroots philanthropy, in the contexts faced by Mexican communities, must build these stronger networks, expand the culture of collaboration, take into consideration the nature of grassroots organizations, and build the confidence and experience of these groups. Since these are among the resources that have always built and sustained communities, increasing their social stock and not just their access to financial and material resources is part of the results and impact of grassroots philanthropic funding.

With the emergence of new community foundations and a growing interest in grassroots philanthropy in Mexico, the timing is good to prepare the ground. Our hope is that these reflections will be of some use in starting discussions and attracting new entrants to the field of grassroots philanthropy. It is clear that it is not enough to merely give grants to grassroots groups; we must also weave the social fabric that sustains and benefits our communities.

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