# The Community University Experience: Shift the Power or Share the Power?

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## Introduction

Community philanthropy has grown visibly and significantly over recent years, and within this context it becomes crucial and urgent to analyze the causes of this phenomenon. In the current scenario, marked by crises in the major narratives (and the political model of modernity) and particularly the representative policy, the return to the local and the different dynamics of community organizations become powerful and transformative political paradigms.

The return to "communisms" — understood as the introduction of common and universal benefits and wealth and nongovernmental public spaces — implies the creation of different types of activities and collective organization at a local level. This trend allows us to better reflect on direct participation processes. Furthermore, the organization of the community dynamic also promotes the creation of transversal and cooperative work and networking. At the same time, however, new conflicts, dynamics, and demands emerge and it is necessary to study and analyze these phenomena.

As stated by Jenny Hodgson (2013), the visible growth of community organizations and collectives — grassroots groups, funds, community foundations, etc. — can be seen within this larger context: as a consequence of social movements that have emerged in recent decades as spaces of struggle for the establishment, recognition, and defense of human and civil rights. From this perspective, the emergence (particularly in the Global South) of a diverse set of community and philanthropic institutions — community foundations, women's funds, environmental funds, and other types of multistakeholder

### Key Points

- The recent growth of community organizations and collectives can be seen as a consequence of social movements that have emerged in defense of human and civil rights. This article reflects on an initiative implemented by Instituto Rio, a community foundation based in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, within the context of this expansion of community philanthropy.

- The initiative — the West Zone Community University — works to strengthen civil society actors so they can lead efforts to secure civil and human rights, decentralize the production and sharing of knowledge, and construct a public, democratic space for local communities. The analysis will focus on the potential of the Community University case to inform the field of community philanthropy and on the possibility that universal elements of this initiative can be more widely applied.

- The article closes with reflections on the role of community foundations in different global contexts, specifically in terms of their capacity to resolve local problems, connect multiple social actors, and assume a leadership role implementing dynamics focused on "the common good."

foundations — can also be understood as a response to the crisis:

> Global forces such as economic recession, migration, and climate change are making themselves felt on a community and neighborhood level. As social and economic inequalities increase and governments continue to reduce basic services in many parts of the world, local people are becoming increasingly active about addressing their concerns. (Hodgson, 2013, p. 238).

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The process of expanding different forms of community organization has produced multiple publications and driven many discussions from different perspectives. At the end of this article, we reflect on the role of community foundations within different global contexts — specifically in terms of their capacity to join different voices to resolve local problems, connect multiple social actors, and assume a leadership role implementing dynamics focused on "the common good."

## The Community University Initiative

The purpose of this article is to reflect on a specific experience: the West Zone Community University. Since 2014, the initiative has been promoted and implemented by Instituto Rio — a community foundation based in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil — within the context of the expansion of community philanthropy and current paradigm shifts.

The West Zone of Rio de Janeiro has the lowest United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) in the city, while containing almost 50 percent of the population. The share of the zone's working-age population with a high school education is comparatively low — in some neighborhoods as low as 7 percent. In 2015, 30 percent of the city's homicides occurred in the West Zone, as well as 39 percent of the city's rapes — the highest rate in Rio. And even though slums, such as those in the West Zone, can be understood as territories of resistance, struggle, invention, and self-construction, they are also spaces where intolerance, violence, and exclusion reign, marked as they are by the absence of public services and government agencies and by the presence of militias and drug traffic.

The Community University initiative is guided by the key principles of universal access to human and citizenship rights and the implementation of a culture of territorial coordination networks — principles that should be understood as a point of departure for promoting the development of local communities. This initiative works to strengthen civil society groups, movements, and organizations so they can instill the dynamics of universal access to civil and human rights, the decentralized production and sharing of knowledge, and construction of a public, democratic space for local communities, understood as a common good belonging to all. The Community University is not an institution offering formal higher education. Instead, it is an umbrella of initiatives — a network of networks striving to encourage the sharing of experiences and work by promoting informal education activities like workshops, seminars, conferences, training sessions, and ongoing discussions organized by community-based organizations and local partners.

The author of this article is a professional with an academic background who oversaw a community foundation[1] for five years. Therefore, the challenge is to combine analytical, practical, and theoretical approaches so that an analysis of the Community University experience can be informed by both perspectives. This is no easy task in a scenario marked by positivist visions and binary logic, which tend to separate practitioners

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[1]Created in 2001, Instituto Rio was the first community foundation in Brazil. It works to promote social development in Rio de Janeiro's West Zone. For more information, see www.institutorio.org.br.

and academics — introducing barriers to analyses and limiting approaches from the perspective of complexity.[2] We start with the recognition that both worlds — the academic and practical — have through different approaches contributed to analyses and discussions associated with current paradigm shifts. In particular, they have addressed phenomena related to the expansion of the types of community organizations, emerging concepts, and redefinition of old notions.

Certainly, the title of this article generates a central discussion about the issue of power that will be essential for understanding the dynamic of the Community University. As Jenny Hodgson observed in an interview during the Global Summit on Community Philanthropy in 2016:

> I think that in development, we do not talk about power enough. Sometimes we presume that because we are all sitting together in the same space, we fail to see the unequal distribution of power. … We are not talking about creating more gatekeepers or more power-holders: there is evidence of emerging practices in this field that show ways to balance power. I think that, generally speaking, as institutions we do not think enough about power. We think that we are having horizontal, equal conversations, but unless we reflect on where power resides and acknowledge it, we are not being very truthful. (Hodgson & Badia I Dalmases, 2016, p. 2)

Part of the discussion, then, will focus on the tension between the concept of "#Shift the Power" — the slogan of the 2016 summit — and the idea of "Share the Power." We raise the following question: Will the notion of "Shift the Power" be sufficient for analyzing the Community University dynamic?

The Community University experience will be presented here based on the transformations confirmed within the global socio-political context that led to the emergence of a new paradigm (one that has gone by a number of names: "post-Fordism," "cognitive capitalism," etc.), through which it is possible to recognize that the notions of the

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common and community work have established themselves as effective alternatives for political and productive organization. To study both the transformations seen in the current scenario as well as this particular experience, we will address the analysis based on three key concepts that should be examined interconnectedly:

- the notion of the common, which will allow us to reflect on the concept of "communitary" and the types of emerging community organizations;

- power, which is crucial to understanding the complexity of the dynamics involved in the notions of "shift the power" and "share the power"; and

- general intellect or public knowledge, also essential for understanding community work, cooperative networks, and the dynamics of sharing the common.

Moving forward with the initial reflections, we ask ourselves: Why is the Community University a significant experience?

Certainly, the Community University can be considered a broad social technology that can be implemented within different contexts and realities. The purposes of this article are to explore the potential of this experience to influence the field of community philanthropy and to locate the universal elements of this initiative that will allow us to apply concepts and dynamics to a

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[2]Addressing complexity puts the focus on analyzing relationships and interdependencies among the key elements in the transformation process, mapping the dynamics, multiple actors involved, paradoxes, and contradictions.

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range of realities. Initially, this experience may be significant in that it can serve as a reference for community foundations working in different global territories, inspiring reflections that lead to concrete actions — specifically for those who seek to create a culture of transformation through cooperative and community networks. Indeed, the purpose of the Community University — and of the reflections that we want to encourage with this article — is to leave a legacy in global communities by instilling a specific world vision and concrete dynamics of community work, as well as the production of the common and territorial coordination, that will strengthen local capital and leverage significant transformation.

## Working to Build the Paradigm: The Common, Power, and Community Work

The modern political crisis as verified on a global scale — that is, the exhaustion of models based on government centrality, wage labor, and representative democracy — is a phenomenon that allows us to explain the emergence of a new paradigm. Undoubtedly, the current context is characterized by the introduction of new production and organizational dynamics based on the dynamic of the common, leading to the emergence of new actors and the construction of nongovernmental public spaces.

But how can we understand the phenomenon of growth in different types of community

organizations within the context of the paradigm shifts underway? What is behind this phenomenon? What are the main trends, dynamics, and emerging concepts?

Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (2009) argue that the notion of the common should be understood as "an open network in expansion, in which all differences can be expressed freely and equally, offering the means of convergence so that we can live and work in common" (p. 27). From this perspective, the concept of the common is associated with both the struggle for new rights and the idea of a productive territory determined by the relational and cooperative dimension and communication and associative flows. In this sense, the notion of territory cannot be understood as a homogeneous space, but rather as a terrain composed of power relationships.

When we talk about the common, we need to think of the idea of the law of the common as inseparable from the production process: The common is not given, but rather, produced. Furthermore, even though we are surrounded by shared common goods — the natural resources we consume, the air we breathe, the languages we use, etc. — we can create these only in cooperation, as part of the production process of our lives. This is so because common goods are more social relationships than they are material objects. The common is productive, and productivity is inherent in the experience of new movements and production networks; free flows of knowledge; bonds; the production, circulation, the sharing of content, images, values, and subjectivity.

The notion of public knowledge, directly associated with the idea of the common, constitutes other key concepts. It is based on the recognition that knowledge is produced collectively and publicly and, therefore, is considered cognitive common content shared through communication and cooperation networks that should be viewed as the main productive forces. And based on this dynamic, it is possible to see transformative forces at work and the emergence of innovative types of relationships with public and private actors. Certainly, the new technologies of

communication and information play a central role in this dynamic and within the context of the shifting paradigms, facilitating information and knowledge production and sharing processes.

Community is produced every day through the collective actions of subjects, creating the common. The common consists of the lasting connections we build to make life even more alive — connections that cannot be limited to institutions or things (water, earth, nature). In this sense, the so-called material and immaterial "common goods" cannot be understood only as objects, bodies separated from people. Rather, they are what communities do so they may remain common to all. Nevertheless, the notion of the common cannot be understood as the absence of conflicts and antagonisms. In the current scenario, the struggle for the common has been introduced not only as a revolutionary political and productive action, but also as an antagonistic force — resistance to the "old paradigm." References to this "revolution" and the paradigm shifts underway can be found in today's emerging social movements: the international Women's Marches on January 21, 2017, and the Women's Strike on March 8, 2017; recent occupations of public spaces such as Wall Street and Madrid's Plaza del Sol; protests waged by environmentalists, black populations, indigenous groups, and migrants struggling for the recognition of old and new rights.

Through these resistance actions, the movements emerging in the current scenario were able to establish their position against both the historical problems of social inequality and the excluding dynamics inherent in the globalized capitalist system. Consolidated from the construction of strategies for struggle and innovative political agendas based on the recognition of racial and ethnic minorities and specific gender and socio-cultural situations and their intersectionalities, the resistance actions of these collectives are focused on both claiming rights

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and combating social, cultural, and economic exclusion. And it is significant that the efforts of these movements are based on both resistance to the power in place and the quest to create new languages and signs, new agendas and types of cooperative and self-managed production and organization, creating new spaces and periods marked by struggle and exodus.

It is a biopolitical revolution[3] that encompasses the most diverse forms of life. The construction of intersectional subjectivities that emerge through the networks and flows inherent to the movements and mobilizations that, besides seeking to differentiate themselves from refusing the entire binary identity pulse, seek to intensify their work in the field of producing new narratives, giving them consistency and transformative power. From this perspective of community networks, the power of the common is certainly biopolitical because it implies

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[3]The concept of biopolitics is also key to understanding the transformations underway, since it involves an intricate and complex intersection between power and life. The fact that power is inserted into life itself and has reached the social fabric as a whole — creating dynamics related even to what Gilles Deleuze (1992) calls the "society of control" — does not mean there is not resistance. Saying that life resists means that it affirms its power, or, in other words, its capacity for invention, production, and subjectivation.

*Sharing the power means recognizing that relationships of power are fluid and shifting, and that communities and community organizations possess transformative power not only through expressions of resistance, but also in their capacity to intervene in realities, introducing innovative types of organization and social production.*

not only how life resists the power in place, but also the construction of new forms of life. Accordingly, "communitary" is by definition antagonistic because it implies the construction of challenging types of power that extend beyond the power in place — formal democracy, wage relationships, etc. — as an affirmation of other forms of life and social organization. According to Michel Foucault (2000), every social relationship is a relationship of power. However, power does not necessarily imply a relationship of domination, given that "from the moment in which a relationship of power exists, there is a possibility for resistance" (p. 251). Power and resistance walk hand in hand, and from this perspective power cannot be thought of as static, as something given, but rather as a set of multiple collective devices and mechanisms that allow people to generate resistance and reestablish new balances or social pacts.

From these initial reflections, we believe that the "shift the power" concept is not sufficient for analyzing the dynamics of power when we are analyzing the transformations underway, since it is based on the assumption that it deals with "something" that can change from one group to another, depending on the circumstances

and social contexts. From the perspective of constituent power (Negri, 1994), power should be understood as strength — as the capacity for permanent creation, an uninterrupted flow of transformation. The concept of constituent power refuses any measurement, determination, or sign of external definition. Subordinating the constituent power to a specific purpose implies capturing its strength — controlling and subjecting its creative force; it means thinking about a power whose very purpose is to order and regulate the power of its strength. And it is based on this argument that the "share the power" concept appears the most adequate to us — not only to understand the complexity of the notion of power within the context of the new paradigm, but also to understand the dynamics of the Community University. Sharing the power means recognizing that relationships of power are fluid and shifting, and that communities and community organizations possess transformative power not only through expressions of resistance, but also in their capacity to intervene in realities, introducing innovative types of organization and social production.

## The Experience of the Community University: Share the Power?

The purpose of the Community University is to promote the creation of an open and democratic public space for the access and production of knowledge designed to make the community development process more dynamic through the creation of partnerships with public, private, and civil-society entities. It is a constituent experience because it arises from the idea that communities have the power to produce and share knowledge and common goods, transforming realities based on innovative types of local organization and the construction of open and democratic public spaces.

As such, the Community University initiative is aligned with the dynamic and concepts introduced within the context of the new paradigm and is a significant experience that fits within the modes of operation that Jenny Hodgson, Barry Knight, and Alison Mathie (2012) call *The New Generation of Community Foundations*. The

authors present important reflections for thinking about (or rethinking) the role of community foundations within the context of the "new economy," the crisis of the state, and, consequently, within a scenario marked by the rise of new political and social dynamics. From this standpoint, the concepts of social justice and emergence of collaborative and cooperative dynamics with all sectors and actors present in the area of activity through the construction of networks and partnerships become essential strategies because they represent authentic social-innovation actions.

Within the scope of the emergence of this new generation of foundations, the Community University seeks to develop innovative dynamics focused on the construction of a fair and open society to promote the development of active communities by strengthening the local social capital and creating spaces of trust and engagement within and between the local communities. However, it is important to highlight that the Community University is associated with Instituto Rio's grantmaking program[4] and was designed to offer ongoing support to organizations and civil-society groups and to strengthen existing local networks. Since the culture of giving cannot be restricted to a grantmaking program alone, it is important to clarify that the Community University also works with people who share their work, time, knowledge, experiences, and networks.

In 2015, the Community University promoted approximately 80 activities involving funded civil-society organizations and partners, including courses, gatherings, workshops, chats, panels, sports events, lectures, artistic and cultural exhibits, nature trails, and visits to supported projects to promote an exchange of experiences and sharing of knowledge. The main themes addressed during those activities involved topics in gender and race, youth, religious intolerance,

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human rights, citizenship, environment, artistic and theatrical creation, cinema and video, health, community communication, cultural production, and the culture of peace. There were about 800 participants: 89 percent were members of the supported collectives' coordination team; 56 percent were members of technical teams (teachers, workshop leaders, etc.); and 56 percent were community audiences.

In 2016, one of the Community University's strategic activities was the West Zone Youths' Letter, initiated at a meeting of youth in May and constructed over six months with participation from local youth and leaders, civil-society organizations, social activists, universities, and private and governmental institutions in the region. The letter asserts a purposeful agenda to promote the rights of young people in the West Zone to a more just, democratic, and sustainable city. The

[4]The Instituto Rio grantmaking program is based on three integrated processes: calls for proposals (selection process); capacity building through the development of training programs for community leaders; and monitoring and evaluation focused on processes and results. The support work is focused on social transformation and achieving structural changes that have the potential to guarantee the human and civil rights of less-favored populations, the redistribution of all aspects of well-being, and the promotion of diversity and equality among the different categories of gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, culture, and disability.

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main topics for debate, chosen by the participants, were rights within and access to the city; education, work, and income; safety and bullying; and gender and race. A facilitator collective created to implement the initiative was made up of various public and private organizations[5] that worked with the participants committed to the initiative and were the key actors for its mobilization.

The West Zone Youths' Letter initiative was a significant experience in territorial coordination. It gathered together a diverse set of actors working on a common agenda and then elaborated on a proposal calling for recognition of the fundamental rights of a population that has historically suffered from discrimination. Its principles are fully aligned with the spirit of the Community University: self-management, territorial coordination of local networks, sharing dynamics, and the collective production of a rights' agenda. And the initiative was significant in the field of advocacy by encouraging open dialogue with different social sectors to influence public policy, in this case concerning issues of concern to young people.

It is important to recognize that the Community University is a political initiative, a concept that, according to Emmett Carson (2012), refers to the capacity to promote transformation within the context of a democratic society. Carson also affirms that if we recognize community foundations as political organizations, they cannot be viewed as neutral spaces since they must deal with conflicts and other complex relations among actors in government, civil society, and the marketplace, and because they must offer solutions by creating spaces for engagement and participation. The fact that the Community University is a space for promoting social justice also affirms its political role: according to Ruesga and Puntenney (2010), this mission is clearly associated with the processes of social transformation, empowerment, and expanding access to civil and human rights. For Ruesga and Puntenney, the effectiveness of grantmaking programs to further social justice depends on their objectives, beginning with the clarity of the concept and its implications for human rights and extending to identifying the germane inequalities and the strategies to eliminate their causes.

The West Zone of Rio de Janeiro — the Community University's neighborhood — is plagued by social and political conflicts characterized by violence by police and drug traffickers, urban disorder, and profound inequality, particularly among the large sectors of the population that have limited mobility and access to public and private goods and services. Yet it is still a territory characterized by vibrant social and cultural activity, including communication and media, tourism, community-based agroecology initiatives, Afro-Brazilian collectives, tourism, theater groups, and hip-hop, funk, rap, and graffiti artists. These activities are rooted in place; their sources are the daily experiences of the local favelas: the fight against violence and marginalization, affirmative action, and the search for alternative means of production. These movements of denunciation and resistance are a productive force, with the capacity to create wealth and introduce types of production and

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[5]The members of the collective group were Instituto Rio, Casa Fluminense, Farmanguinhos, FioCruz Mata Atlântica, and UNISUAM.

organization through new networks of youth and neighborhood associations, community leaders, artists, entrepreneurs, and small producers united by a common idea: transforming peripheral communities whose talents and potentials are undervalued due to social, racial, and class-based prejudice.

Among Community University's challenges are to value social wealth and the common good, and to build an effective public sphere. It acts on these by recognizing existing conflicts and identifying local assets and their potential to promote shared experiences of a horizontal character, the participation and involvement of different actors, and the introduction of types of collective and self-managing organizations. Indeed, within the context of the new paradigm, the dynamics of resistance and production should be understood as inseparable, forming part of a process that involves both. Furthermore, recognizing the socio-cultural movement's potential and capacity for resistance, Instituto Rio has worked through the Community University to offer permanent support for projects in these areas. In 2015, for example, 89 percent of the collectives selected for grants were in cultural areas, 50 percent worked in human rights and affirmative action, and 67 percent were involved in community development projects.

Although the Community University was launched three years ago, it is still early to evaluate its full impact on the territory and actors involved. It is, however, possible to analyze processes, and statements from leaders of some grassroots community organizations shed light on what they perceive to be the contributions of the Community University:

> The West Zone Community University was a really great idea that came from Instituto Rio. It was designed to bring the institutions together, since each one does its work separately. So when this initiative comes with the idea of integrating through a big network, we had the opportunity to learn more about the work that others do and to exchange experiences.

> What interested us about the Community University was to avoid the idea of creating

dynamics from the top down [and instead] a horizontal sharing, so through this experience the community knowledge produced by the organizations could be shared and disseminated. In this way, we can become the leaders of our own development. This is truly the concept of what this university is.

The chief executive officer of Instituto Rio also shared some observations on its role in the Community University initiative:

> You don't help institutions only with grants; you help institutions with technology, you help them with governance, by sharing activities and ideas, because there are extraordinary people at these institutions. We hope to continue growing together to form a large network. This is my expectation.

## Conclusion

The concept of the political entrepreneur, developed by Antonio Negri (1999), may be effective for analyzing the work of the Community University, if it is understood as a local actor who combines the social, administrative, and political conditions of production. Rather than assuming direct involvement with production, the political entrepreneur creates the conditions for it to happen, building bridges between actors, promoting dialogues, investing and donating resources to leverage and mobilize networks, and valuing the cooperative work of various movements in the construction of a public space and the common rights of citizenship.

We know that today, cooperative social and production networks organize their work around the creation and dissemination of knowledge. The universalization of rights can occur only through transversal and horizontal production (from inside to inside, down to up). For rights to become universal, they must first become material. Accordingly, it is necessary to break down the myth that by definition, in a democracy the law extends opportunities to all citizens, who are equal under the law. Indeed, this is the priority for community organizations and funds that work to empower citizens and communities, operating in a tense and contradictory territory when it comes to formal and real rights.

Our intent was to use the Community University model as a heuristic standard to find the most encompassing, universal elements with which to think about the dynamics associated with the production of the common and community development based on two structuring axes: the relationship between the common and law — the common and power, and its relationship with the development of community philanthropy in different territories and within different contexts.

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