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# Grassroots Environmental Justice Work and Philanthropy: Challenges and Opportunities

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## Introduction

The grassroots environmental justice (EJ) movement in the United States, consisting of a diverse network of groups working at the local level, rose in prominence in the 1980s (Bullard et al., 2014; Perez et al., 2015). In reaction to the environmental movement's long-standing focus on wilderness preservation, natural resource conservation, and similar ecological issues, grassroots EJ organizers embedded civil rights and social justice into the scope of environmentalism (Bullard et al., 2014). These local groups challenged government and industry to cease environmental harms and their disparate impacts on communities of color and on low-income, fence-line, and Indigenous communities.

For the past 40 years, the movement has grown to encompass climate change, food access, gender rights, and Indigenous sovereignty, among other issues. This broader reach within the scope of EJ activism has led to different interpretations of the movement's priorities and the tactics employed to achieve its goals (Harrison, 2016). Nevertheless, grassroots EJ organizations are leading powerful campaigns to protect public health, develop more robust climate and environmental policies, and build new economies rooted in sustainability (Baptista et al., 2019; McCauley & Heffron, 2018). These groups are led primarily by women and people of color, and are grounded in community-based initiatives across the country (Hansen, 2012; Sze, 2006).

The philanthropic sector also plays an integral role in environmental decision-making in the United States. In addition to grantmaking, foundations with environmental portfolios provide

## Key Points

- Across the United States, grassroots groups within the environmental justice movement are leading important work on the front lines of the climate crisis, especially in marginalized communities. Despite the importance of these organizations, the philanthropic sector has devoted the lion's share of environmental funding to more mainstream nonprofits.
- Building Equity and Alignment for Environmental Justice and the Tishman Environment and Design Center at The New School conducted a landscape assessment study of environmental funders and grassroots environmental justice organizations in the Gulf South and the Midwest. The study had four research aims: gain a greater understanding of environmental justice funding, capabilities, and priorities in these regions; highlight the complementary objectives of both groups; develop a replicable methodology for similar assessments in other regions; and identify opportunities for funding alignment.
- The foundations examined in the study awarded the bulk of their environmental funding to mainstream organizations and a minuscule fraction to grassroots environmental justice groups. Differences in terminology may account for some of the divergence in reported funding; of the 14 foundations who participated in interviews, none had a formal definition of a grassroots environmental justice organization. Other clear misalignment drivers involved issues of access, capacity, racism, and ideology.

*(continued on next page)*

### Key Points (continued)

- This article explores these areas of misalignment between foundations and grassroots environmental justice activists, and offers specific strategies and opportunities for funders to address them.

*[T]he most critical voices on behalf of equitably mitigating climate change and resisting and reversing environmental degradation are left out of decision-making processes.*

access to politically powerful institutions and other resources to support environmental policymaking at local, state, and national levels. Unfortunately, even though grassroots organizing and the inclusion of low-income communities and communities of color is essential to implementing meaningful climate legislation, most environmental philanthropic support goes to mainstream, white-led environmental organizations that lack community-based input (Jenkins et al., 2018; Schneider, 2002).

As a result, the most critical voices on behalf of equitably mitigating climate change and resisting and reversing environmental degradation are left out of decision-making processes (Faber & McCarthy, 2001; Jenkins et al., 2018). According to a report from the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, from 2007 to 2009 only 15% of environmental grant dollars were dedicated to marginalized communities, and only 11% were classified as “social justice” grants (Hansen, 2012). In addition, environmental organizations with an annual budget larger than \$5 million received half of all funding to the sector during those years (Hansen, 2012).

According to Bullard and colleagues (2014), the number of environmental groups led by people

of color has grown to more than 3,000 organizations. But despite the emergence of new EJ groups representing vulnerable communities, the number and percentage of grassroots EJ organizations receiving foundation support remain low. Jenkins et al. (2018), the most recent published study on environmental grantmaking, included a comprehensive data set of environmental grants from 494 foundations showing that even though the percentage of grants awarded to environmental justice activities increased from 1961 to 2000, only 3.7% of those grants went to grassroots EJ groups in 2000. In prior decades, those groups received less than 1% of total environmental grants (Jenkins et al., 2018). Although extensive, this study of environmental grantmaking does not include trends in EJ funding beyond the year 2000.

### Funder and Environmental Justice Group Dynamics

In recent decades, numerous critical scholars of philanthropy have investigated the relationship between philanthropy and social movements. A standard analysis has focused on the theories of “elitism,” where foundation leadership represents the dominant class of wealthy, white corporatists. These board and staff characteristics impact the relationship between funders and grassroots groups. A 2014 report by Dorceta Taylor, *The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations*, showed that most environmental funders were predominantly white, with less than 12% consisting of persons of color. The report also indicated that “the dominant culture of the organizations is alienating to ethnic minorities, the poor, the LGBTQ community and others outside the mainstream” (Taylor, 2014, p. 5).

This lack of diversity can lead to implicit bias, institutional racism, and a general lack of attention or understanding of EJ issues and the vulnerable communities that are affected. Boards are more willing to engage with organizations within their social sphere or networks. They are more likely to deem grassroots groups working in lower-income communities as too risky or not professionalized enough to receive grant funding (Jenkins et al., 2018; Taylor, 2014,

2015). These perceptions affect the allocation of grants, the conceptualization of effective strategies, and theories of change. They determine which organizations are deemed credible by funders and how funders interact with grassroots groups whose staffs are predominantly Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC).

Another lens of analysis has focused on the theories of “co-optation” or “channeling,” both closely associated with elitism, whereby funders steer the priorities, strategy, and targets of movement organizations away from intense activism and toward more mainstream advocacy or education efforts (Delfin Jr. & Tang, 2007; Harrison, 2015; Jenkins et al., 2018; Kohl-Arenas, 2015; Roelofs, 2003; Sicotte & Brulle, 2017). In channeling theory, foundations and government institutions tend to favor professionalized nonprofit organizations by directing a majority of grants to these types of groups (Jenkins et al., 2018, McCarthy, 2004). In co-optation theory, foundations tend to steer social movement grantees toward more moderate action through restricted grantmaking. As a result, co-optation leads to more support for environmental projects deemed by funders to be nonconfrontational to polluting industries, and thus typically favors the advocacy work of mainstream environmental organizations or service-oriented activities of community-based groups (Harrison, 2016; Kohl-Arenas, 2015; Jenkins et al., 2018, McCarthy, 2004).

In recent years, several social justice and environmental funders have initiated new hiring and training practices and developed equity statements for their organizations to respond to criticism of elitism and racism. In addition, some foundations have recruited environmental justice leaders and community organizers as “activist–funder” program officers. As McCarthy (2004) described in her study, activist–funders see their role as altering funder and grantmaking priorities to better align with the

grassroots EJ movement’s core values. To avoid resistance from the board and staff, activist–funders have to be creative in how they “sell” the work of grassroots EJ groups to secure board commitments (McCarthy, 2004).

Perceptions of environmental justice priorities and principles present another challenge for relationships between funders and grassroots EJ groups. Harrison (2016) examined the perceptions of EJ priorities among bureaucrats and administrators in government programs, and found that even with government agency commitments and training, staff in charge of EJ grantmaking “deviate from EJ advocates’ long-standing pursuit of change” (Harrison, 2016, p. 545). Decidedly, more research is needed to fully understand the factors that drive the dynamics of these two groups.

### Alignment and Divergence Between Funders and EJ Groups

To better understand the disparities in access to funding and the relationships between funders and grassroots EJ organizations,<sup>1</sup> we conducted a landscape assessment of the philanthropic sector and its relationship to those organizations in the Gulf South and Midwest regions of the United States.<sup>2</sup> The research team chose to focus on these regions because they are underfunded and under-resourced by environmental grantmakers relative to other regions in the United States; they have unique environmental challenges and contexts that will play a critical role in the fight for climate justice; and because both regions have recently been the subject of philanthropic interest (Allen et al., 2011; Schlegel & Peng, 2017). We believe this research can help inform philanthropic strategies that acknowledge the rich networks and power of the grassroots organizing sector. As a result, funders can become better partners, leverage more resources, and address misalignment patterns that hinder EJ movement building and impact at the grassroots.

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this study, researchers used the terms “grassroots,” “environmental justice,” and “front-line” organizations while acknowledging that there are differences in the work, priorities, and structures of these types of groups and that some organizations may not identify themselves in the same way.

<sup>2</sup> For this study the Gulf South comprises Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida; the Midwest includes Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

## Method

This study employed a mixed-method, qualitative case study design to explore the issues of alignment and divergence between grassroots environmental justice organizations and foundations with environmental portfolios in the Midwest and the Gulf South.

There were two main research questions:

1. What are the priority issues and funding sources for grassroots, front-line EJ groups in the Building Equity and Alignment for Environmental Justice (BEA)<sup>3</sup> network and environmental/climate grantmakers in the Midwest and Gulf South?
2. How do the priority focus areas align or diverge between these groups in the BEA and local, regional, and national funders?

This study's primary data collection methods included in-depth semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and online database and website content review. We used purposeful and snowball sampling to determine the selection of grassroots EJ groups and funders in the study. Transcripts from the interviews were analyzed by the nine members of the study team. Themes were drafted based on interviewer notes and summaries. Interview transcripts were coded using inductive, pattern-matching analysis of the text. NVivo software was used to aid in grouping and identifying themes across all of the interview data. Four overarching themes were found, and interview responses were coded under (1) access, (2) capacity, (3) racism, and (4) ideology. The research team discovered 10 primary codes and four subcodes, which corresponded with the four themes. The qualitative data were then triangulated with funding data from the Foundation Center database and content analysis of funder websites.

## Interviews

We completed and analyzed 33 interviews — 19 with grassroots environmental justice organizations operating in states in both regions, and 14 with national or regional foundations supporting work in those states.

We define grassroots EJ organizations as those whose leadership is based in the community, with the community defined according to geographic or identity-based markers. These organizations represent communities that are historically and systematically overburdened by pollution and climate change and whose mission or values are grounded in justice principles, such as the Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing<sup>4</sup> or the 17 Principles of Environmental Justice, adopted at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991.<sup>5</sup> Grassroots environmental justice organizations are rooted in, accountable to, and representative of communities of color, low-income communities, and tribal and Indigenous groups directly impacted by the addressed environmental issues.

We define EJ intermediary organizations, such as the BEA, as those that support and represent members of grassroots, front-line, and community-based EJ groups. These organizations may provide funding, act as a fiscal sponsor, or serve as a central point for coalition- and alliance-building activities at scales beyond the local level. The activities of these intermediaries are based on a shared membership mission or vision, rather than a link to a specific geographic community. Environmental justice intermediaries adhere to justice principles and their board and/or organizational leadership includes representation from their membership groups.

Out of 32 requests for interviews, 14 foundations agreed to participate. The response rate for national funders was much higher (67%)

<sup>3</sup> BEA is a California-based grassroots environmental justice intermediary organization. See <https://bea4impact.org/about>.

<sup>4</sup> Established in 1996 at meeting hosted in Jemez, New Mexico, by the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, the principles are intended to guide mainstream environmental organizations in engaging with BIPOC communities. See <https://www.ejnet.org/ej/jemez.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.ejnet.org/ej/principles.html>.

than for regional funders (30%), and there was a low response rate for regional funders in the Gulf South (25%). The higher response rates for national funders may be attributable to sampling bias; some had more familiarity with the BEA and with environmental justice funding, thus making them more willing to share insights and experiences with the issues of funding alignment for the grassroots.

### Grant Awards

We turned to the Foundation Center's Foundation Directory Online, a searchable database of more than 103,000 foundations in the United States, for our research into grant awards.<sup>6</sup> For the 32 foundations identified by the study team, only 28 had data available online; we collected information on the types of organizations receiving funding from those foundations and the dollar amounts for all grants categorized as "environmental" for the most recent year, 2016–2017. We then categorized the funded groups as either "mainstream," "EJ organization," or "EJ intermediary," with the "mainstream" category essentially a catch-all for any group that did not fall under our definition of EJ organization or intermediary. Among the mainstream organizations were other types of institutions, including museums, universities, conservation groups, and gardening clubs.

Within the "environment" category, the Foundation Center assigns subcategories based upon a description of grant activity. To ensure we did not underreport totals, we also analyzed and collected data on any grant under the "environmental justice" subcategory. For this article, we tracked the "environmental" funding explicitly awarded to EJ organizations according to our definition, rather than the Foundation Center's criteria for that subcategory. This distinction is critical because grantees receiving funding for EJ activities listed by Foundation Center are often non-EJ organizations, such as universities or larger environmental

organizations, that are eligible for funding as long as they classify the grant activity under the definition of EJ that Foundation Center provides, which includes "activities seeking to ensure the fair distribution of benefits, hazards, and burdens related to the environment among all peoples and communities regardless of wealth, ethnicity or geographical location ..." (Candid, n.d., para. 4). We centered our analysis on the organizations being funded, whereas Foundation Center applies the "EJ" subcategory designation regardless of the type of organization receiving the grant, a difference that highlights the importance of precise terminology in arriving at an accurate picture of the funding that goes directly to the grassroots environmental justice movement.

### Limitations

The study methodology had several limitations. First, the environmental justice organizations and foundations included in the study do not represent an exhaustive list of relevant organizations in the two regions. Second, the study may be underestimating funding grassroots EJ groups receive from these foundations from grants outside the "environmental" category.

Third, because not all funders provide financial information on their websites, researchers relied on accounting provided by the Foundation Center. Therefore, our analysis did not include any possible discrepancies between the Foundation Center database and the funder's records. Last, researchers could not account for all of the grant money reported by the Foundation Center that flows from intermediaries and is regranted to the grassroots sector, because this information is not available in the database.

### Results

Definitions of grassroots environmental justice organizations vary widely in literature and practice. These differences can hinder the ability to

<sup>6</sup> Foundation Center data collected from the Foundation Directory Online (<https://fconline.foundationcenter.org>) included the list of environmental grants awarded by each of the 32 regional and national foundations in 2016–2017 for all available data in the Foundation Center dataset. Researchers used the search term "environment" in the Foundation Center's database. Foundation Center and GuideStar joined forces to become Candid, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, in 2019.



*Of the 14 foundations interviewed, none reported having an explicit definition of environmental justice organizations. ... Despite philanthropic interest in supporting grassroots groups, funding disparities continue between mainstream and grassroots EJ organizations.*

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account for divergences and misalignments in funding. In interviews with foundation staff, we asked if they formally define grassroots or environmental justice organizations and track funding according to these terms. Of the 14 foundations interviewed, none reported having an explicit definition of environmental justice organizations. Three reported that while they do not have a formal definition, they use a shared, informal definition in practice. In some cases, the foundations may fund project activities they consider to have environmental justice aims irrespective of the organizational category.

The snapshot assessment of grant dollars allocated in 2016–2017 by the 28 national and regional environmental funders included in this study confirms previous research on philanthropic giving. Despite philanthropic interest in supporting grassroots groups, funding disparities continue between mainstream and grassroots EJ organizations.

### National and Regional Funding

Overall, the funding disparities between EJ organizations and mainstream environmental groups are stark. In 2016–2017, the 12 national

foundations in this study awarded a total of almost \$1.34 billion in environmental grant dollars to environmental organizations. Slightly more than 1%, or \$18 million, of this was awarded to grassroots environmental justice groups. The average award to mainstream organizations was \$528,501, compared to an average award of \$223,001 to grassroots environmental justice organizations. (See Figure 1.)

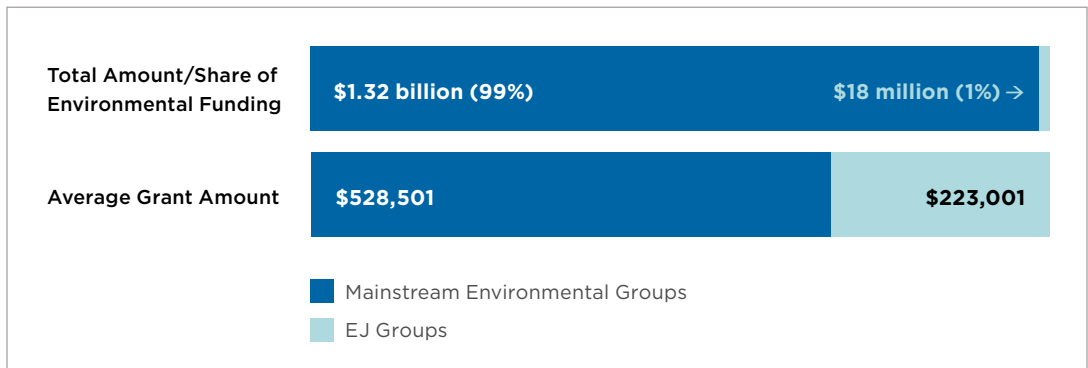
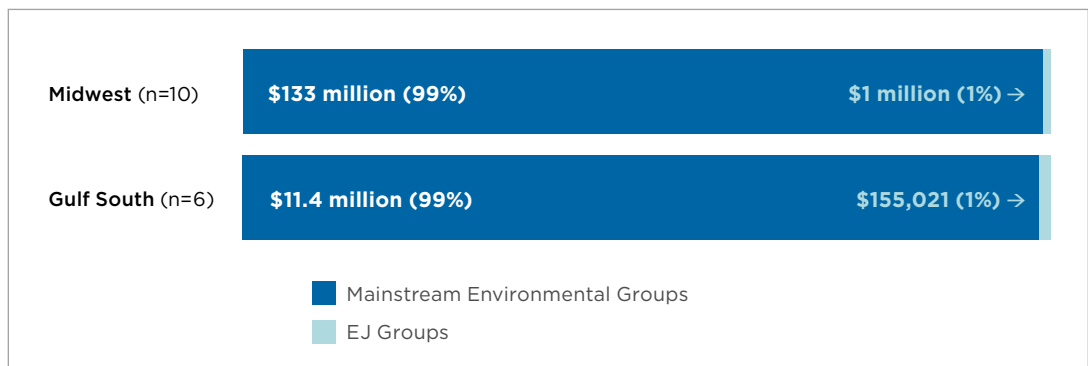
The data show that the 12 national funders made grants to 24 EJ organizations and 18 EJ intermediaries, while the remaining funding went to approximately 1,230 other environmental organizations.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, these data showed that 36% of the \$18 million in grants to EJ organizations went to intermediaries, defined as organizations that act as a grouping (e.g., network, coalition, or alliance) of smaller, similarly oriented local member organizations at the state, national, or regional levels or based on particular issue or identity affiliations. Since the Foundation Center database does not track how much of the funding awarded to intermediaries is regranted to grassroots EJ groups that may be among their membership, the total number of these groups receiving grants might be underestimated. Nevertheless, the total amount and share of environmental funding from the 12 funders in 2016–2017 remain the same.

Interviews with national and regional foundation staff, however, revealed a funding disparity that was less clear-cut, with estimated giving to EJ organizations of between 5% and 80% of the funders' environmental portfolios. It is essential to note that we did not use those estimates to track annual giving because the interviewees did not specifically define an EJ organization and, in some cases, their foundations did not formally track this information internally. It may also be that the foundations interviewed shifted their grantmaking in the fiscal years after 2016–2017, which could explain the differences between their reporting and our figures. In addition, some foundations may fund grassroots EJ

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<sup>7</sup> Data sets for mainstream environmental grants sometimes list organizations multiple times in different ways, which makes it difficult to confirm their numbers. Because data sets for EJ organizations and intermediaries are smaller, we are able to confirm them with greater accuracy.



**FIGURE 1** EJ Versus Mainstream Giving by 12 National Foundations**FIGURE 2** EJ Versus Mainstream Giving by Midwest and Gulf South Funders

groups under categories other than environmental grantmaking, such as civic organizing or economic development.

Foundation Directory Online data were available for 10 Midwest foundations and six Gulf South foundations reviewed for this study. These regional funders follow a pattern similar to that of national funders, with most of their environmental grants awarded to mainstream organizations. (See Figure 2.)

Of the \$134 million in total environmental grant dollars distributed by the 10 Midwest funders, about \$1 million, or less than 1%, was awarded to 32 environmental justice organizations. Eleven of those grant recipients were located outside the Midwest, and 6% of that EJ funding was awarded to EJ intermediaries.

Of the \$12 million in total environmental giving awarded by the six Gulf South funders, an estimated \$155,000, about 1.25% of that funding, went to 12 EJ organizations. All but one of those groups were located in the region, and 13% of that \$155,000 was an award to one EJ intermediary.

### Alignment of Priority Issue Areas

One of the underlying assumptions implicit in the question of misalignment between the funding strategies of philanthropy and the work of environmental justice organizations is that environmental funders prioritize the type of work local EJ organizations are doing on the ground. This implies that the funding is not well aligned despite an alignment in priorities. To test this assumption, we reviewed foundation websites and interviews with foundations and grassroots

**FIGURE 3** Priority Areas of Alignment Between Grassroots EJ Groups and Funders

Organizations	Funders
Civic Participation & Democracy	Renewable Energy/Climate Change
Community Organizing	Economic and Racial Justice
Youth Leadership/Mentoring	Ecosystem Preservation
Economic and Racial Justice	Research Policy & Advocacy
Water Initiatives	Green Infrastructure/Sustainable Design
Renewable Energy/Climate Change	Capacity-Building for Grassroots
Workforce/Professional Development	Education
Indigenous Rights	Resiliency
Food Justice	Community Organizing
Coastal Resiliency/Climate Adaptation	Clean Transportation/Air Quality
Community Asset Development	Coastal Resiliency/Climate Adaptation
Air Quality	Water Initiatives
	Civic Participation & Democracy
	Workforce/Professional Development
	Youth Leadership/Mentoring
	Indigenous Rights
	Food Justice
	Land Use
	Public Health

Note: These priorities are listed in order of how frequently they were mentioned in interviews. Some categories were shortened or combined if they were similar in meaning or purpose (i.e., "community organizing" encompasses any reference to "community engagement," "movement building," or "direct action"). Priority areas are also color-coded to indicate aligned intent or meaning.

EJ organizations to compare the groups' articulation of their priorities.

While there is a great deal of diversity in priority areas, there is significant overlap in 13 of those areas. (See Figure 3.) Civic participation, movement building, youth mentorship, and economic and racial justice were among the priorities most often mentioned by grassroots environmental justice organizations; funders most often cited climate change and clean energy. In addition, funders frequently named economic and racial equity or justice as priority areas, and five foundations specifically discussed the importance of supporting grassroots organizations led by people of color. Funders that are prioritizing racial justice and grassroots organizing are essential allies in creating shared goals and strategies with EJ organizations.

### Perceptions of Misalignment

One of our main goals with this study was to identify the root causes of misalignment between environmental funders and grassroots environmental justice organizations. Interviews with funders and EJ groups were analyzed to identify the challenges and opportunities most salient to both sectors. As a result, four overarching themes emerged concerning barriers and opportunities. We categorize these themes broadly as access, capacity, racism, and ideology.

#### Access

Access emerged as a clear barrier to alignment identified by both sectors. We applied the theme in various contexts, such as access to relationships, processes, knowledge, expertise, technical support, decision-making, influence, and funding. Staff at grassroots environmental justice

organizations discussed the lack of access to foundations and philanthropic funding in terms of information about foundation processes, decision-making, and grant priorities. These respondents also pointed to the difficulty they faced in traveling to events where they could meet foundation staff, and how that related to access to resources, information, and power. As one activist remarked, staff “have OK relationships with some of these [foundation] staff, but the grassroots can’t always afford to get to the places that these funders hang out in. They have invite-only meetings.” Often, interviewees cited more positive relationships with local, state, or family foundations than with national funders, which may be more removed from groups on the ground.

In interviews, funders recognized that their internal structures might make grant application processes challenging, particularly for organizations without a “back-door” or inside connection to the foundation. They also shared how building relationships influenced their priorities and funding strategies. A strong connection to a trusted philanthropic partner can mean greater access to such other crucial resources as policymakers, technical information, and additional funding sources. Ultimately, these relationships are supportive of organizational sustainability and offer access to important meetings where decisions on environmental policy and priorities are made.

### Capacity

Environmental justice respondents mentioned the issue of capacity more frequently than did foundation staff in terms of the limitations encountered in multiple dimensions, including staffing, administrative infrastructure, development, communications, technical resources, strategic planning, and the scale of programmatic activity.

These respondents specifically discussed the capacity needs that, if addressed, would lead to better connections with funders: development staff expertise, communications, social media tools, participation in networks and alliances, and general operating funds for organizational sustainability. Many grassroots EJ groups raised

*“Funders are expecting us to do way more than they would expect from a traditional business or from a bigger, more established nonprofit; the expectation that grassroots are going to be way more passionate ... is profoundly unjust.”*

– Grassroots EJ group activist

the issue of small grants for specific project work that do not cover the total costs of general operations and staffing — capacity issues that, in turn, shape foundation perceptions about the ability of these organizations to achieve larger goals. As another grassroots activist observed,

I think there’s this myth that there’s this magical point at which nonprofits become sustainable. ... Funders are expecting us to do way more than they would expect from a traditional business or from a bigger, more established nonprofit; the expectation that grassroots are going to be way more passionate ... is profoundly unjust.

Some funders did acknowledge that a local organization may lack the capacity to focus on grant writing and development when their resources are being used to address pressing community issues, such as asthma and pollution. However, funders also addressed capacity issues in terms of their own challenges, specifically concerning staffing, issue expertise, administrative processes, and evaluation metrics. One foundation stated that it could develop expertise and relationships only in one or two states, where it is likelier to enjoy credibility and a good sense of the issues and players on the ground.

Another vital area impacting capacity is fiscal misalignment. Two foundation respondents

*“When we begin to fund an EJ organization, especially if they’re small, there are several limits on how much money we can give them. It’s something that isn’t well known or understood, and it can be challenging to explain — or we never get the chance to explain.”*

– Funder

discussed a rule of thumb, used by many funders, that grants cannot comprise more than 25% percent of an organization’s total annual budget. Thus, for a national foundation with large minimum grant amounts, such as \$250,000 per year, any prospective EJ grantee with an annual budget of less than \$1 million would be disqualified from direct funding consideration. As one funder remarked,

When we begin to fund an EJ organization, especially if they’re small, there are several limits on how much money we can give them. It’s something that isn’t well known or understood, and it can be challenging to explain — or we never get the chance to explain.

Intermediaries were an issue in capacity discussions raised by both funders and EJ groups. Environmental justice intermediaries received 35% of the funding granted to grassroots EJ groups by environmental funders included in the study, and these organizations play an essential role in filling capacity needs for both funders and EJ organizations. The EJ movement has seen a growth in intermediaries, which can bring smaller member groups together and secure larger grants from national foundations. These intermediaries can overcome the 25% budget ratio barrier, and funders often believe

intermediaries can carry out larger-scale work than can their individual members. Program officers can more easily interact with a handful of intermediary organizations than with dozens of local member groups.

However, funders and EJ organization staff expressed some reservations about the intermediaries’ role in shaping funding decisions. Intermediaries can act as gatekeepers, determining which grassroots organizations have access to funders and receive pass-through grants. As a result, funders can become overly reliant on intermediaries and detached from relationships with local EJ organizations in vulnerable communities. If the reliance on intermediaries continues to grow, accountability structures should be developed to ensure transparent, democratic decision-making processes.

Ultimately the issues of capacity impact both groups, but present acute limitations for grassroots EJ organizations seeking to strengthen and sustain their organizational and movement aims. Therefore, targeted investments in some of the most critical capacity areas identified by EJ organizations could provide pivotal alignment points.

### Racial Bias and Ideological Divides

Structural and institutional racism, white privilege, white supremacy, and implicit bias manifest not only within philanthropy, but also reflect the greater society in which philanthropy operates. Supporting other scholars’ previous research, both groups frequently mentioned racism as a critical driver of misalignment in interviews.

Twenty of the 33 interviewees explicitly acknowledged forms of racism as a root cause of misalignment. At least five foundations and nine EJ organizations identified implicit bias and structural racism as significantly impacting their relationships with each other. Environmental justice respondents discussed their impressions of disingenuous actions or intentions from funders directed at racism and implicit biases. They also cited the tokenizing of BIPOC environmental activists as a practice that leads to the

disenfranchisement of BIPOC-led grassroots EJ organizations.

Interviewees also pointed to fundamental differences in ideology that shape each sector's strategies and worldview. An activist remarked:

To a certain extent, philosophically, we're trying to end capitalism, but capitalism is what keeps our doors open. So, we're constantly going to be inherently in conflict with a lot of our foundation funders. So part of this is, how do we then recognize that that's problematic? And how do we work with the foundations to rectify or change, either in how they do business, or fix, or give back to how they have gotten their wealth?

Sometimes ideological differences were implicitly discussed in the context of direct action, which describes some of the grassroots environmental justice movement's tactical approaches and can be viewed by foundations as oppositional or "risky." One funder also discussed concerns regarding direct-action strategies and the response from the board:

We'd really love to fund this grassroots organization, but we feel that organizations that are too front and center of what ..., to the foundation leadership, might look like picket lines. ... But ... we have not successfully been really able to move them away from this preconception that to be an EJ group or to be a grassroots organization ... you have to be, you know, an angry, politicized group. And they [the foundation] are super adverse to anything that seems political.

Changing the ideological perspectives of some philanthropic institutions may be an impossible task, given the elite, corporate makeup of some foundation boards. But there may be opportunities to better value the strategies pursued by grassroots environmental justice organizations if philanthropy begins to diversify program staff. And, if a foundation chooses to address climate change, then its funding should not be limited to conservative, risk-averse tactics and, instead, should support grantee-led strategies aimed at a similar goal. For example, staff at a more conservative foundation might seek to identify grassroots EJ organizations and connect them to

*Twenty of the 33 interviewees explicitly acknowledged forms of racism as a root cause of misalignment. At least five foundations and nine EJ organizations identified implicit bias and structural racism as significantly impacting their relationships with each other.*

social justice funders that are less risk-averse and more supportive of direct-action tactics.

## Discussion

This study confirms that most environmental funding in the Midwest and Gulf South continues to go to mainstream environmental organizations, with just a tiny fraction (1.25%) going to grassroots environmental justice groups. Although interviews with funders and EJ organization staff reveal some barriers to funding alignment, there are significant areas of opportunity. Funders and grassroots EJ groups, for example, cited some of the same priority areas, including civic participation, energy, water initiatives, economic and racial justice, and climate change. The interviews also revealed many opportunities for better alignment. Some of these opportunities include:

- **Access:** Foundations and grassroots EJ organizations can benefit from intentionally building deeper relationships grounded in trust and shared meaning. Funders can invite EJ groups to funder gatherings or special convenings and offer travel stipends to lower barriers to attendance, and can provide more opportunities for informal informational meetings between foundation and grassroots EJ staff in the communities they serve. Both sectors can set a course for more transparent, accessible, and impactful work by building stronger ties. These efforts, however, will

likely require sustained, long-term efforts with willing participation and experimentation from both sectors.

- *Capacity:* The lack of capacity that hampers the effectiveness of EJ organizations presents short-term opportunities for philanthropy to better align with grassroots activists. Funders can help identify and connect EJ groups to technical and administrative assistance, such as a shared development consultant, fiscal agents, or technical training. They can create administrative hubs with shared resources, such as space, media, video and conferencing equipment, and technical support. And funders can continue to leverage the role of intermediary organizations by creating a set of standards for transparency and by tracking this funding to ensure resources flow directly to local EJ organizations. Funders should also periodically assess the work of intermediaries by seeking direct feedback from grassroots groups and building relationships directly with EJ organizations.
- *Racism and ideology:* The root causes of environmental injustice require a direct acknowledgment of how philanthropy reflects the racism embedded in society. While funders interviewed for this study pointed to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives at their organizations, they acknowledged that more is needed to dismantle pervasive, systemic racism in philanthropy. Those respondents also acknowledged the need for more staff

training — and, more importantly, board training — on racial equity. Raising awareness and understanding among board members of structural racism is key to shifting worldviews and, ultimately, grantmaking priorities in philanthropy. Some local and regional foundations have begun to take a more direct funding approach in support of racial equity efforts, allocating a specific percentage of grant dollars (e.g., 75% of all environmental grants) to groups working exclusively in communities of color and low-income and Indigenous communities. Funders can also convene with EJ organizations, intermediaries, and other social movement actors to explore shared understandings of racial equity and social justice, ultimately leading to systemic change and greater ideological alignment.

Climate change and rising inequality pose urgent threats to humanity. Both environmental funders and grassroots environmental justice organizations have essential roles in reforming environmental policy and addressing environmental harms. The alignment of these two groups is critical to creating a more just and sustainable world.

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