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The West County Toxics Coalition protests the health and climate effects of the Chevron oil refinery in Richmond, CA. Creative Commons image by Flickr user JacobRuff, http://www.ickr.com/photos/jacob_ruff/.



New Constituencies for the Environment: A Case Study

In 2004, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation's Environment Program launched a California grantmaking initiative called "New Constituencies for the Environment" (NCE), now called "Broad Based Support". More than \$20 million was invested over a seven-year period to bolster the environmental movement in California by broad-

ening the range of groups advocating for clean air, the top environmental concern in California. The foundation had long been one of the largest grantmakers to large and established environmental organizations working on state and federal policy. It had a proud legacy of supporting NGOs that helped propel California into becoming arguably the nation's most innovative environmental policy leader. But there was a risk of this forward movement stalling. The state now had a majority-minority electorate and an increasingly diverse elected body. High projections for population growth rates would degrade environmental conditions unless

By Danielle Deane

stronger safeguards were put in place. The grantees Hewlett had historically supported were struggling to adjust to these changes. A wider range of partners would ensure that the public's high support of balancing growth with a healthy environment was heard.

The initiative thus aimed to increase support for medical, faith-based and labor groups concerned about environmental issues, as well as environmental and health organizations that had emerged from minority communities. Organizations emerging from minority communities often, but not always, identified themselves as environmental (continued on page 13)



challenging grantmakers
to strengthen communities

New Constituencies for the Environment

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justice groups. These organizations were dynamic in many ways, but usually smaller and more grassroots than the foundation's typical grantees. The Environment Program team recognized that it needed to adjust its own grantmaking approach to invest effectively in these organizations. Below are some examples of the approach and strategies that often contrasted with the large foundations' typical *modus operandi*.

We conducted pre-grantmaking outreach that was more extensive than usual. We sought to find areas of overlap with the Environment Program's strategies that were most likely to have the most impact, whether regionally or at the state level, by interviewing potential grantees about their organizational capacity and priorities over several months. A strategic decision was made to focus on the largest sources of air pollution and some related climate and energy concerns, rather than spread ourselves too thinly. Air pollution consistently polled as the top environmental concern in California. Many interviewees were pleasantly surprised by this degree of outreach coming from a large foundation. It was telling commentary on foundation approaches as seen by grassroots groups. The Environment Program team realized that there was room for improvement in communications during times like this. Now, there are now stronger communication protocols in place across the board at the Hewlett Foundation.

We engaged communications consultants to work with grantees, which made a huge difference to small and medium-sized grantees' expertise in dealing with journalists and editorial boards, and sharing their concerns with elected leaders. The influence of ethnic media was under-appreciated and changes were made. For example, in partnership with an ethnic media

leader, the pollsters who conduct the annual environment poll funded by Hewlett pioneered having separate ethnic media briefings that included some of our grantees. Away from the media spotlight, there were briefings at which grantees could ask questions that they might not ask in a larger, more public setting. Addressing these grantees' needs improved the effectiveness of our grantmaking.

One of the most frequent complaints from the potential new crop of grantees was that communication and requests for collaboration from larger NGOs can come late in the game on campaigns, and can foster mistrust and flawed strategies. As a result, we invested heavily in improving information sharing and strategic collaboration among regional and state grantees. When California adopted its landmark diesel truck/bus rule after a strong show of support in public hearings, several members of the environmental community said it was the best collaboration they had seen among the different wings of that community in some time. More grassroots organizations were strategically engaged and consulted. The win was all the more impressive because it came in the midst of the economic downturn.

Hewlett's targeted approach to organizational effectiveness grants was incredibly helpful, particularly for smaller organizations. After becoming a grantee, there is the opportunity for a smaller grant to pay for a consultant to address an area of concern. In administering these, more frank conversations about organizational needs emerged and grantees chose their own consultants. One of the most popular requests was to build long-term fundraising capacity. Although money is not the sole problem for smaller environmental groups, the underfunding of these groups must be addressed to help generate the pressure needed for

solutions that are adequate to the scale of the problems that we face.

We ensured researcher consultations with grantees before, during and after reports were commissioned, and were very careful about selecting scientists and academics who were willing to sit down with grantees before research began, meet with them when results were preliminary to answer questions, and then have separate grantee-only briefings after publication. This approach with smaller grantees enriched both sides, helped build trust and encouraged peer learning. It left grantees better able to use research to educate their members and more secure when quoting the data. Researchers often were excited to better understand how grantees wanted to put their work to use, and gratified to see their technical skill increase.

The foundation's reputation helped give grantees greater access to influential leaders. Two examples were meetings organized in partnership with the California Latino Legislative Caucus Foundation and another with the Black Chamber of Commerce Foundation. Smaller groups would have had a tough time pulling leaders in for one day to focus on air pollution, energy and climate concerns. We helped grantees get more face time than is typical and dispel many of their own leaders' old notions about "environmentalists." Grantees saw an increase in the attention paid to air pollution issues, for instance from minority leaders, after hearing from groups in their own backyard suffering the ill effects of air pollution. In addition to leveraging Hewlett's convening power, we also provided as much multiyear and general operating support as possible, as Hewlett tries to do across the board with foundation grantees.

One frustration was that sometimes there was too much hesitation about significantly scaling up small or me-

dium-sized organizations, even after many had proven themselves able to handle what in some cases were the largest grants they had ever received from a major foundation like Hewlett. Is scaling up hard? Absolutely. This is all the more reason to have more test cases, thoughtfully done with the help of the right organizational consultants and evaluators, to better understand what works. Staying in the current holding pattern will not help us reach our desired destination.

IMPACT AND CONCLUSIONS

- Funding smaller organizations is more time-intensive, especially in the early stages, than funding big organizations where a foundation can write a large check, have a couple of check-ins if at all, and wait to hear the results in a year. But the effort to fund and grow the small and medium-sized organizations delivers. It is vital if we hope to make our air, water and land healthier for everyone. Hewlett's funding did not just improve how much organizing power was behind the same old strategy. It improved our grantmaking strategies, as well as the effectiveness of the pollsters, researchers and consultants who worked with this newer set of grantees.
- Not every organization that we invested in worked out and some efforts died on the vine. Some barriers – of capacity, trust and leadership – could not be overcome. Some organizations were able to leverage receiving support from a major foundation like Hewlett to improve their fundraising and strategies better than others. This is not a story of giving to organizations without high expectations, or giving equally to all out of a sense of “fairness.” This is about strategic, patient but high-reward grantmaking where everyone learns. It meant evolving

from the foundation's typical style of operation and ensuring that any consultants or experts that we engaged were willing to adjust their work style if the situation required it to have impact. To keep us on track, we engaged savvy evaluators who were not slaves to numbers, but who make sure to help grantees quantify what is meaningful and tell compelling stories about qualitative results. Payoff is significant in some ways that are measurable and some that are not easy to quantify.¹

- Mainstream organizations sometimes are unfairly described as completely stuck when it comes to reaching out beyond their typical base and diversifying their leadership. We need instead to shed light on those leaders who are making changes. No side has a monopoly on sometimes getting stuck within its own narratives, based on very real negative experiences, which can prevent us all from seeing efforts to change. This limits the progress and collaboration that are sorely needed to push back on efforts to weaken environmental and health safeguards.
- So, to which policy wins did this investment in advocacy by grassroots organizations contribute? At the nation's largest gateway for receiving imports, the Los Angeles-Long Beach ports, air pollution from trucks is now 70 percent lower as a result of a program the grantees helped to advocate for. At the state level, California's standards for heavy-duty diesel trucks – an estimated one million traverse the state – are among the strongest in the nation. It is estimated that billions of dollars in health-related costs will be saved as a result. In California's most polluted region, the San Joaquin Valley, science and medical expertise must now be better inte-

grated into clean air decision making, and many have commented that the public process has significantly more – and more effective – participation than in the past. When some interest groups tried to weaken California's landmark climate change efforts, there was a stronger web of relationships for the field to build on to educate and organize. Of course, many foundations contributed to a wide range of organizations on each of these issues. But independent feedback indicates that the field has benefitted meaningfully from Hewlett's channeling more funding into the NCE organizations.

Given the scale of our environmental problems and the complications of our politics, we need to scale up the resources for small and medium-sized organizations that are doing great work. It needs to be done with care, humility and high standards. It is needed to win the battle to achieve growth that is healthy for businesses, people and the environment.

Danielle Deane served the maximum eight-year program officer term at the Hewlett Foundation from 2003–2011. She designed, built and managed the Environment Program's New Constituencies for The Environment initiative. The case study represents her views and not necessarily those of the Hewlett Foundation.

Notes

1. Paul Brest and Hal Harvey. *Money Well Spent: A Strategic Plan for Smart Philanthropy*, 2008.