

Learning What Worked to Support Women and the Organizations that Serve Them

By Erin McDonald & Elizabeth James

Six years after the Great Recession was declared over, many women continued to experience significant hardship. The burden was amplified in the pockets of the disadvantaged and among specific groups whose experiences of a life in recession were not a new or time-bound phenomenon. Following the economic downturn, the reduction of poverty became an increasingly timely priority for policymakers, local communities and citizens. Yet, attempts to alleviate poverty inevitably produced more questions than solutions, as the path to economic security is a complex and long-term process that requires addressing the intersecting challenges that inhibit a person's ability to thrive.

In the midst of the heightened barriers facing women and families, nonprofit organizations became increasingly strained as resources declined. When the stock market failed, foundations lost an average of 30 percent of their asset values, and a scaling back of grantmaking followed. Community organizations saw a decline in foundation grants and state government funding, which gradually fell during 2009–2010 and was \$350 billion less by the end of fiscal year 2011. A Nonprofit Finance Fund survey in 2010 revealed that 80 percent of organizations reported having a maximum of six months of operating cash and 49 percent had only one to three months' worth. While 80 percent of organizations surveyed in 2010 anticipated increased demands for their services, roughly half answered positively about their ability to meet growing needs.

In addition to straining service capacities, economic burdens in the sector affected the individual stability of nonprofit employees. Despite these pressures, the nonprofit community proved resilient during and following the Great Recession by innovating and partnering to confront persistent hurdles.

AN IMPORTANT PHILANTHROPIC STEP FORWARD

Recognizing that vulnerable women and the organizations supporting them were struggling, The New York Women's Foundation (NYWF) stepped forward and created the RISE-NYC! Initiative. Informed by the insights of grantee partners, NYWF created a multi-year commitment to invest in community-based organizations with proven models for supporting women to gain stability. Resources intentionally focused on women who had been overlooked by other recovery funding and who experienced the Great Recession as a continuation of persistent economic hardship. The five-year initiative was designed to create spaces in which long-term barriers could be meaningfully addressed through community solutions rooted in a gender lens.

Over the course of the initiative, 19 community-based organizations were supported to improve access to economic opportunities through a range of strategies, including job training, entrepreneurship, financial literacy and adult education for women who had been marginalized by other programs. RISE-NYC! benefitted women throughout a changing New York City and helped

grantee partners to continue providing critical services to their communities in the face of resource scarcity.

Success in the initiative resulted from NYWF's ability to deepen pre-existing funding principles while also integrating new and innovative practices unique to RISE-NYC!. Critical learnings have emerged that elucidate how philanthropic partners can develop more effective and culturally competent strategies by working in partnership with communities. Learnings orient into three dimensions of impact, which highlight important, yet frequently overlooked, aspects of investment that are essential for the sustainability of community-based organizations.

DIMENSION OF IMPACT 1: ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH AND SUSTAINABILITY

- **Supporting community-driven systemic change is important but neglected by funders in times of crisis.** Policy change serves an essential role in deepening the resiliency of communities and local organizations. Yet, in times of economic downturn, many organizations focused on community activation and policy reform faced a steeper battle resourcing critical work as funders prioritized investment in basic needs. This short-sighted perspective threatened the long-term growth of the most underresourced communities, and many direct service organizations felt the void of support for systemic

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Melville Charitable Trust
Minnesota Council of Nonprofits
National LGBTQ Task Force
North Star Fund
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Public Welfare Foundation
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change as individuals experienced recurrent challenges that could only be resolved through policy. Community organizations stepped in to advance mobilization and policy reform despite lack of funding for critical social justice efforts.

- **Grounding funding in a gender lens creates a thriving economic community for all.** Working through a gender lens created the opportunity to understand the recession with a greater appreciation for how the crisis shaped communities. Despite this, workforce responses supported by funders were predominately male-focused and generated a false perception that women were faring well.

Perceiving this gap, community-based organizations created opportunities for women to better access fields that were considered male-oriented. Organizations in the RISE-NYC! Initiative changed their structure to think differently about what women needed, creating a period of discovery and learning versus constriction. Prior to the initiative, many of these groups had not focused specifically on the unique needs of women; RISE! provided an essential bridge to expand their gender competency. This commitment created substantive change for women and also enabled organizations to be recognized as experts in cultivating new employment pathways.

- **Flexible community-guided funding enables organizations to apply resources for maximum effectiveness.** Flexibility is often the most difficult ideal for funders to embrace, but it crucially enhances the capacity and success of small organizations. Funders are the most powerful when they release control

and reduce funding restrictions. RISE! highlighted how enthusiasm for new ideas during a crisis creates more dynamic solutions with greater staying power relative to conventional and externally defined best practices that were not translating to greater economic security for low-income women.

Community organizations most effectively created change when they were able to shift course as needed during the funding period to proactively address community-determined needs rather than well-intentioned funders directing from the sidelines.

DIMENSION OF IMPACT 2: INVESTING IN COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

- **Cultivating leadership from within communities.** A guiding value of grassroots organizations is that they are formed and led by members of the very communities they seek to support. Yet, this means many staff personally face barriers to advancing the work that coincides with the challenges constraining their community. RISE! reinforced the necessity of fostering grassroots leadership alongside addressing local needs.
Funding strategies that integrate staff development through capacity building support economic stability not only for the women served but also for the organizational leaders, in turn generating community resiliency.
- **Stimulating partnerships to address shared challenges.** The compounding challenges experienced by low-income women make it imperative for organizations to collaborate through a network of services that surpass referral relationships. Yet, philanthropic partners often leave the development of partnerships to stretched community organizations instead of provid-



Advocates from Make the Road New York fight for economic justice throughout New York City. Photo courtesy of Make the Road New York.

ing insight from a bird's eye view of potential partner opportunities. Even when organizations have the expertise to make these connections, all too often the focus necessary to run high-need programs prevents lasting partnership cultivation if a forum does not exist for connections to organically develop.

RISE! emphasized the value of having a philanthropic partner facilitate partnerships resulting in silo-breaking strategies that unearthed the intrinsic relationships between seemingly disparate areas of work, such as workforce development and violence prevention.

DIMENSION OF IMPACT 3: DEVELOPING MEANINGFUL AND USABLE KNOWLEDGE

- **Value added by pushing for greater understanding and knowledge use.** Data is often polarizing,

especially when the value of work and financial support is tied to its interpretation. The question of who owns data and the meaning that grows out of it can create a power differential between a community organization providing the information, and the funder, interpreting and assessing their performance.

Community organizations work diligently to demonstrate how their complex work cultivates change, but what it takes to create lasting economic stability cannot be fully quantified. RISE! deliberately sought to break down this imbalance in funder-grantee relationships to ensure that knowledge ownership remained within communities.

The initiative employed data as a tool for creating collective understanding rather than to measure performance. By generat-

ing spaces to explore approaches that were not working and identifying the varied trajectories of success for women, organizations were able to create tools and implement insights that actively improved their strategies instead of feeling limited by prescriptive measurements that threatened the value of their approach.

- **Creating a vision for community-defined success.** Organizations were intentionally engaged at the outset of funding in defining their own success. By employing a collaborative and participatory strategy, it was possible to identify critical insights that an external partner would otherwise have missed.

This shared definition of success increased investment and integration of different ways of learning within (continued on page 14)

the place where you can make a difference. Once you do, we look forward to working with you. ■

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Notes

1. Sean Dobson, *Freedom Funders: Philanthropy & The Civil Rights Movement, 1955-1965* (Washington, D.C.: National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, 2014), <http://www.ncrp.org/campaigns-research-policy-sp:1492/36-campaigns-research-a-policy/1081-freedom-funders-philanthropy-and>.
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3. Jaime Grant, Lisa Mottet and Justin Tannis, "Injustice At Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey," (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Transgender Equity, 2011), <http://www.transequality.org/issues/resources/national-transgender-discrimination-survey-full-report>.
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5. Naa Hammond and Kristina Wertz, "Trans Formational Impact: U.S. Foundation Funding for Trans Communities" (New York: Funders for LGBTQ Issues, February 2015), http://www.lgbtfunders.org/files/TRANSformational_Impact.pdf.
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8. Zeke Stokes, "New Poll: Number of Americans who report knowing a transgender person doubles," GLAAD Press Release, September 7 2015, <http://www.glaad.org/blog/new-poll-number-americans-who-report-knowing-transgender-person-doubles>.
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small grassroots organizations, leading to greater capacity, program support for data use and opportunities for additional dynamic research.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PHILANTHROPY

The multidimensional impact of the RISE-NYC! Initiative supports conclusions about how grantmakers can most effectively partner with underresourced communities. Here are three takeaways for foundations:

- **Step in quickly to support dynamic needs in alignment with how each community uniquely defines solutions.** In the midst of complex challenges and great economic hardship, we witnessed the resiliency of small community organizations as they adeptly responded to the diverse and evolving problems confronting low-income women and families.
- **Invest in ways that demonstrate that the very process of investing is generative and catalytic for community growth versus impeding growth by our need for externally defined and prescriptive solutions.** We must recognize grassroots community partners as owners of the vision and direction of work. Responsible funding requires that we consider what the scope of funding can create for women and embrace community-driven investments that resonate with communities and disrupts rigid and externally defined visions of "success."
- **Fund not only to strengthen outcomes for women served, but to also improve the structure and capacity of organizations.** Such holistic attention ensures that, when funding ends, communities are left in resourced, rather than weakened, positions. ■

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Notes

1. Joseph C. Morreale, "The Impact of the 'Great Recession' on the Financial Resources of Nonprofit Organizations," Wilson Center for Social Entrepreneurship, 2011, p. 8, <http://digitalcommons.pace.edu/wilson/5>.
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