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IN THIS ISSUE

Redirecting International Environmental Grantmaking 1

BY TERRY ODENDAHL AND PETER KOSTISHACK

Community Foundations as Partners in the Public Policy Process: What it Takes 3

BY DEBORAH A. ELLWOOD

5 Principles of Global Feminist Philanthropy 6

BY KELLEA MILLER AND CAITLIN STANTON, WITH ESTHER LEVER

First Relationships. Then Results. 9

BY STEFAN LANFER

A Message from the Executive Director 2

Member Spotlight 15

MIMAT leadership in Puerto Lempira, Honduras. Photo courtesy of Global Greengrants Fund.



Redirecting International Environmental Grantmaking

Whether grassroots groups and communities are sorting trash as an alternative to garbage incineration, establishing seed banks instead of planting GMOs, or managing the forests where they live instead of working on biofuel plantations, we know that 99 percent in the Global South have the most, and probably the best, solutions for our planet's

future. Sustained advocacy, organizing and networks focusing on a range of issues are building strong social movements and creating change around the world. Yet, the U.S. funding community largely ignores these efforts.

China is the world's largest manufacturer of paraquat – a highly poisonous weed killer. The chemical is responsible for thousands of deaths among Chinese farmers and their families each year, and tenfold more across the globe.

Pesticide Eco-Alternatives Center (PEAC) is a grassroots organization in the Yunnan province of southern China that began advocating in the early 2000s for improved safety and educa-

By Terry Odendahl and Peter Kostishack

tion around pesticide usage. PEAC received its first grant of \$5,000 in 2003 from Global Greengrants Fund. In 2005, the group launched an investigation into the production, use and health risks of paraquat. PEAC distributed its findings to farmers, local organizations and policymakers, and then launched an Internet-based advocacy campaign aimed at securing a ban on the use of paraquat. Just this past April, the Chinese government released an official announcement stating that the country will phase out paraquat "in order to protect the health and safety of the people." The chemical will be banned by 2016. *(continued on page 13)*



challenging grantmakers to strengthen communities

Redirecting International Environmental Grantmaking

(continued from page 1)

According to Sun Jin, deputy director of PEAC, "It's not only the success of China's stop-paraquat campaign, but is also meaningful to the health and life of millions of people in China." Given that this ban also will halt paraquat production in China, the impacts of this organization's grassroots work will likely stretch much further – benefitting small-scale farmers and organic agriculture movements around the world.

Global Greengrants Fund provides small grants – usually from \$500 to \$5,000 – that allow quick and flexible support for grassroots actions, positioning groups to respond to challenges as they emerge. Our funding promotes the creativity of local leaders who are best positioned to protect their land, water and livelihoods in the face of ongoing environmental and human rights challenges, supporting hundreds of different solutions in as many different places, each one appropriate to the context and culture of the region.

In order to identify the groups that are doing the best work and are most in need of support, we have built a strong network of activists and community leaders from every walk of life. These locally based experts comprise our 13 regional advisory boards throughout the world, each operating under its own grantmaking strategy, tailored to the pressing issues in their respective regions. It is through their efforts that Global Greengrants Fund is able to fuel local solutions driven by those directly affected.

Large and disappointing international convenings about the environment, such as Rio+20 in Brazil this summer, or the earlier UN Conferences of Parties on Climate Change, confirm that the world is deeply divided about how to save the planet and the people who live on it. According to Nnimmo Bassey, founder of Environmental Rights Action in Nigeria and chair of Friends of the Earth International, the world's largest federation of grassroots organizations



Chinese workers spraying Paraquat without proper protection. Photo courtesy of Global Greengrants Fund.

fighting for environmental and social justice, "The trend has been set right from Copenhagen in 2009, in Cancún and in Durban, that these gatherings are not really about real solutions."

We also must ask if the U.S. funding community is tackling real solutions. The vast majority of environmental grantmaking stays in our own backyard, in spite of the obvious fact that biodiversity or the climate chaos know no borders, and weigh heaviest on poor communities around the globe with few resources to respond.

In the North, we have begun to understand that the increased frequency and intensity of tropical storms is related to climate change, something those experiencing them have long known. When Hurricane Felix struck the Moskitia coast of Central America in 2007, flooding and mudslides devastated the region. More than 160,000 people were affected by that one natural disaster.

Cendela Lopez and her organization, MIMAT – a women's group in Honduras that works with indigenous Moskita to realize their rights to land,

sustainable livelihoods and cultural traditions – traveled to affected communities to speak with local women and their families about recovery.

Thousands of acres of crops had been destroyed. There was an immediate food shortage and loss of income, but the greatest concerns were long-term. Local women were especially vocal about the vulnerability they felt to future disasters and new weather patterns. They needed to build resilience in the face of their changing climate – a global crisis to which these communities had not contributed.

With \$3,000 from Global Greengrants Fund, MIMAT created three seed banks. Now, these subsistence farmers, and especially the Moskita mothers providing for their families, have access to new seeds if their crops are destroyed by drought, flood or some other environmental disruption. Crops of beans, rice, yams and yucca will continue to thrive and support local communities facing climate chaos.

In "Cultivating the Grassroots: A Winning Approach for Environment

and Climate Funders,” Sarah Hansen and NCRP contend that “we can secure more environmental wins by decreasing reliance on top-down funding strategies and increasing funding for grassroots communities that are directly impacted by environmental harms ...” While Hansen’s study focuses primarily on domestic grantmaking, her arguments are even more valid for international environmental funding.

Grantmakers are beginning to see the need for a more global strategy on many issues, but they usually overlook the most local solutions. According to a 2010 report from the Foundation Center, international giving by U.S. foundations has increased steadily since the late 1990s, even faster than overall funding between 2006 and 2008. Although global funding was below these record levels by the end of the decade, the rate of decline was slower than that of domestic giving. Yet, “exceptionally large grants of \$10 million and more accounted for well over half (57.7 percent) of the growth in international grant dollars among these foundations.”

Health has consistently been the largest portion of international support from U.S. foundations, followed by international development and relief. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation provides the vast majority of all support in both areas.

According to the Foundation Center, funding to “the environment and animals ranked third among international funding priorities in both 2006 and 2008.” Of this, \$461 million was a five-year grant by the Hewlett Foundation to Climate Works. Four U.S.-based international conservation organizations, whose 2010 incomes together exceeded \$2 billion, received much of the rest.

In 2011, Global Greengrants Fund paid the Foundation Center to undertake a special analysis of its most recent data on environmental funding. Over the five-year period from 2005–2009, including all grants of \$10,000

or more awarded by a sample of more than 1,000 U.S. foundations, \$1.5 billion went to environmental work each year. Of that, nearly \$1 billion annually was dedicated to domestic U.S. environmental causes. Of the remaining \$500 million awarded for international environmental work, only 20 percent actually reached organizations based outside of the U.S. The rest went to U.S.-based international programs. Very little (less than 6 percent of the total \$1.5 billion to the environment) was dedicated to local environmental groups doing work in the Global South.

Contrast this support to the enormous investments that underfunded and unheralded environmental activists make in saving the planet. In “Who Conserves the World’s Forest,” Arvind Khare estimates that community investment in forest conservation, including time, labor and financial inputs, is between \$1.2 billion and \$2.6 billion per year globally. Local groups also make significant investments in

climate change mitigation and adaptation. A study of more than 80 community forests across Africa, Asia and Latin America found that forests sequestered more carbon when communities had secure ownership and greater autonomy over their management. Secure tenure to common property resources, strong local resource management institutions and the capacity to build networks and resolve conflicts with neighbors are also variables that increase the ability of communities to adapt to climate change.

A few large funders are changing their approach and we applaud them. In 2010, the MacArthur Foundation’s Conservation and Sustainable Development program completed a 10-year review of its grantmaking. From the findings, it has initiated a new strategic approach to promote development that respects the environment. One of the key parts of this new approach will be to support “conservationists to work with stakeholders to explore options and identify conservation scenarios that maximize benefits and minimize costs to local economies and thus have broad support among the people most directly concerned.”

What can be done to ensure that some of those resources reach the environment’s unseen protectors? As grantmakers, we have an obligation to share our strategies for funding these groups, which bring innovation and creativity to solving the world’s most pressing and complex issues. Our efforts must be focused on ensuring that grassroots groups have the resources to continue to fight for the protection of our environment on the frontlines. ■

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