

# AS THE SOUTH GROWS

*It seems that all roads in the South lead to Atlanta. Constructed as a railroad hub connecting the Midwest to the Southeast, Atlanta was destined to become an economic powerhouse of the region. Railroads brought industry. Businesses and universities concentrated in Atlanta, laying the foundation for the city to become a political force as well as an economic one. Today, the busiest airport in the world is in Metro Atlanta, and the city has one of the fastest-growing economies in the country. However, Atlanta's growth and its forward-looking political climate have left many communities, especially low-income communities and communities of color, behind.*

While Atlanta is a city of transition and growth, it is also a city of contradictions. Business and civic leaders have thrived, taking advantage of Atlanta's welcoming and progressive reputation and self-branding as the "city too busy to hate."

Meanwhile, communities experiencing generations of disinvestment and disenfranchisement have not been able to partake in the fruit of that prosperity. As economic opportunities expand for people attracted to Atlanta's growing cosmopolitanism, disenfranchised neighborhoods find it increasingly difficult to access those opportunities. Beyond the memorials celebrating Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s work, the progressive prosperous future that Dr. King and other civil rights leaders fought for has not come to fruition for all.

Like the civil rights activists before them, Southern leaders are building an intersectional, grassroots and often countercultural movement ecosystem. Communities are collaborating across race, gender and generational lines to develop dynamic and innovative strategies to fight for a future where they, too, can experience the safety and prosperity Atlanta promises.

Yet, philanthropy has missed a crucial opportunity to support the people and communities trying to fulfill

the hope of prosperity and inclusiveness that Atlanta has portrayed to the rest of the world. Atlanta is home to the largest charitable sector in the South, but most philanthropic resources deployed in the city have gone to provide direct services rather than to build power and change systems. And, as movements keep growing in power and size, they will need the support to expand their work beyond Atlanta to ensure that their freedom and safety exists at the state level.

In some ways, the grassroots power-building ecosystem in Atlanta may resemble those like it in New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles and elsewhere. But Atlanta's historic and political context make the accomplishments of these leaders unique – and merit study by any foundation interested in structural change grantmaking.

Atlanta's civic and business leaders have worked for more than a generation to project an image of a thriving, welcoming city in a region where reactive politics and entrenched poverty are widespread and that strategy has borne fruit. But for whom? How can communities protect, defend and break down barriers to their success? How can these communities build power and resources to expand their work out of Atlanta to make statewide changes? These are the questions that

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leaders in Atlanta are trying to answer and questions that others, in the South and nationwide, will be watching closely.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

“They don’t see a place for themselves in this city,” one interviewee said of multi-generational Atlantans faced by a rising tide of gentrification and criminalization. Atlanta’s explosive growth has kicked off a process of cascading displacement of low- and moderate-income communities. Its roaring commercial sector has turned a blind eye to state crackdowns on immigrant communities, Black communities and LGBTQ communities while it touts a reputation as a city that defies the South’s reputation for regressive politics.

Atlanta’s transition along with that taking place in cities across the South poses a few thorny questions: Who gets to take up space in Atlanta? Who gets a place – at the decision-making table, on a sidewalk, in a home of their own? How can the economy of space in booming Southern cities be made more just?

The South encounters these challenges around spatial economy, displacement and criminalization at a time when they are beginning to become more prominent challenges for the nation. In many ways, Atlanta’s physical and political environment will be the harbinger of things to come for other Southern communities, and then for the nation beyond the South.

In order for Atlanta to “be what it says it is,” as another interviewee put it, grassroots coalitions that build the leadership and voice of marginalized communities need resources quickly. Intermediaries will be part of the resource mechanism for those coalitions, but ultimately foundations within Metro Atlanta and beyond must be willing to commit long-term funding for the messy, forward-and-back work of community organizing.

Metro Atlanta and other cities like it across the South are home to deeply intersectional grassroots power – building movements that have racked up significant policy change achievements by articulating a uniquely Southern vision for what it means to be a “sanctuary.” As another interview respondent put it, “we’re not just trying to win stuff for LGBTQ people.

## Metro Atlanta Grantmaking by Population, 2010-2014



We want to win stuff for our aunts and our cousins and our neighbors.”

The successes of Georgia Not One More and Solutions Not Punishment Collaborative have come despite the historic dearth of foundation grantmaking for structural change work in Atlanta and in the region. But foundations can no longer use the “make-do” attitude of Southern organizers – and the success that comes with it – as justification for this continued lack of investment.

Because building the power of marginalized Southern communities within nominally progressive (or at least liberal) cities will never be enough to affect the regional, structural change necessary to liberate the South and in doing so liberate the nation. Foundation grantmaking to build the statewide and regional reach of grassroots nonprofits will be crucial to that liberation.

Southern cities are indeed learning labs for philanthropy and the nonprofits they fund to learn how to act courageously in what can be a hostile environment. As Southern cities attract new residents, sprawl into once-rural areas and begin exploring new definitions of what it means to be welcoming, forward-looking places, they will produce important lessons for cities across the country who have experienced decades of disinvestment and displacement.

Atlanta’s identity as “the city too busy to hate” and the “Black Mecca” are mutually reinforcing articulations of the same self-image. The Atlanta Way has been a robust center of political and economic power in the region for decades and an enthusiastic booster for that self-image. But why should progress in Metro Atlanta require the displacement and criminalization of Black, Brown and queer Southerners?

The Atlanta Way and the complicated, “glossy” image it projects is not isolated to Atlanta. Southern powerbrokers across the region in the civic, business and political spaces have found ways to market the South’s cultural and human resources to sources of capital outside the South for a long time.

And that marketing push has obscured the reality of a persistent racial wealth gap; rampant criminalization of Black, Brown and queer communities; and suppression

of grassroots political power. In the context of structural change work, these marketing ploys focus Southern communal life on individual behavior instead of assigning responsibility for inequity where it often belongs – on decisions being made at the institutional level.

Any funder interested in building the wealth, power and resilience of Southern communities must invest deeply in the region’s cities and metropolitan areas. But they ought to approach the rhetoric of civic leadership with healthy criticism, and ask themselves and trusted community leaders: Who is left out of that narrative? Who benefits from that elision?

The opportunities for foundation investment in Atlanta and other Southern cities are exciting, and with patience, trust and deep relationships with grassroots partners, they have the potential to bear fruit for the broader region.

## GETTING STARTED

*Are you ready to get started investing in Southern grassroots leadership? Here are a few recommendations to guide the way:*

- **Don’t accept that a highly productive economy and robust social service sector are enough for people to have what they need to thrive.** Make sure data that inform your priorities and strategies are disaggregated by race, gender, income, sexual identity, etc.
- **Recognize how much work it takes to organize marginalized communities** against Atlanta’s and other Southern cities’ dominant political culture and invest in the evolution of policy and culture in a way that is defined by people who don’t see themselves in the glossy marketing materials for a bustling city.
- **Be prepared to make long-term investments in grassroots organizations** to build their base and build formal and informal relationships with allies – that means patient, risk-tolerant capital – and coalition on your grantees’ terms, not yours.
- **Give general support grants to your Southern grantees** – invest in infrastructure organizations to exist, not just to complete projects.
- **Understand who your philanthropic partners are** and who they aren’t, wrestling with history, context, power and priorities.