

Peer Learning (3 of 4): The Revolution Will Not Be Funded

This is a summary of the peer learning session entitled *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* held on 3 June 2022 as part of the decolonising digital rights process. The session was hosted by Renee Hatcher and Mukasa. This summary was written by Joel Hide.

The session was opened by Renee Hatcher who is the Director of the Community Enterprise & Solidarity Economy Clinic at UIC John Marshall Law School Chicago. Renee shared that she had gone to law school to see how the law could be used to support social justice causes before going on to work at a number of non-profits. There she experienced jarring internal dynamics: what the groups were fighting for (such as civil rights) was not reflected at all in the internal conversations and the way decisions were met. Her experience in non-profits led Renee to realise that a lot of the work has to be done internally to these organisations rather than at a programmatic level or at services. As a result of disillusionment with these organisations, she redirected her career to academia.

Renee referred to the book [*The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*](#) by INCITE!, a collective of women of colour. This collection of essays by radical activists, educators, and non-profit staff from around the world critically rethinks the long-term consequences of what they call the “non-profit industrial complex”, whereby social justice organisations and boards end up reproducing the same power dynamics and hierarchies that exist in wider society, often mimicking the very structures of for-profit corporations. Renee noted that these structures don’t allow us to employ different values of collective organising and democracy. This structure of “charity” leads to paternalist thinking, rather than solidarity and to a widespread failure to provide agency and accountability to those whom the organisations pretend to serve. Renee argued that the alternative lies in looking at Indigenous practices of governance to increase democracy and distribute power and leadership. In addition, Renee highlighted that we need recognise that we operate in a situation of power and privilege that centres western organisations and structures and centre this reflection in all aspects of the way we do our work.

More broadly, Renee pointed out that the non-profit sector was developed to monitor and control dissent, to make the world safer for the status-quo. She cited the example of the Black liberation movement in the 1960s and 70s. Many activists from this movement wrote essays for the book, describing how they were lured into dealing with the systems instead of the roots and the causes of racism, such as in the early days of the Ford Foundation. A lot of people from the black radical movements who had been working to create cooperative housing, free medical clinics, and distribute free breakfasts etc. went on to become professionals in the non-profit sectors.

Renee noted that corporations and the wealthy use philanthropy to continue exploitative colonial practices in the name of doing good. They are a means of social control to enact an agenda counter to those working on the ground most impacted by our systems of oppression.

Mukasa then took the floor, beginning by talking about the work of the International Trans Fund (ITF), where he works as Program Officer. ITF is the only global participatory grantmaker that is solely dedicated to supporting and funding trans-led movements worldwide. As an organisation, they work to achieve a world where trans people are free, safe and get respect. They work intersectionally: having a safer world for trans women means a better world for us all. They recognise the underfunding of the trans movement and the barriers which prevent organisations from receiving sustainable resources, one of which is the fact that trans orgs sometimes can’t register due to state transphobia and the risks involved with making themselves visible.

Decolonising the Digital Rights Field in Europe

Addressing the title of the session, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, Mukasa stated that with any kind of change, inclusivity and intersectionality are important to address the power dynamics.

He believes that we need to debunk the non-profit model and redefine and reframe the philanthropic community, changing the way we fund, breaking power dynamics and removing bureaucracies. He argued that participatory grantmaking through intermediary organisations, such as ITF, is an important part of this as this model enables accountability to the wider movement that is being funded.

Mukasa then explained what participatory grantmaking entails. The model of participatory grantmaking used by ITF sees them work with fifteen trans activists as a grantmaking panel to decide on the allocation of the available funds. As such, instead of distant people with little knowledge of the realities of trans people, it is trans activists who make the decision about what gets funded and what does not, based on the principle “nothing about us without us”. As far as possible, those on the ground and local communities should be at the forefront of decision making and consulted to make sure the funding really has an impact on the ground. Alongside ITF, the Frida Young Feminist funding is another example of an organisation engaging in participatory grantmaking, alongside a feminist funding perspective.

Good grantmaking involves reparation, giving to the communities that have been harmed by historic and ongoing forms of colonial violence and extraction, as well as letting go of power, handing over money and taking a step back. Alongside the participatory model, ITF use flexible, rather than restricted, funding so that groups can work on their priorities, rather than having their work dictated by a funder. Because they work with activists on the ground, ITF are also able to fund unregistered groups which other funders would or could not fund.

Some questions followed about how we can get funders to change. Renee answered that some changes did happen during the pandemic, partly due to urgency, such as a growth in non-restricted funding and reductions in or elimination of grant reporting. So there has been progress and we need to build on this. There are examples of funders who are working in different ways, with flexible grantmaking and limited reporting requirements, such as Thousand Currents, the Black Feminist Fund, and Mamacash. Further change in this direction needs to happen; those who decide where funds go should be people are grounded in the communities who are being funded.

One big challenge that came up in the discussion is resistance within the leadership of funders, this leadership can often block the good work or reform that more junior staff try to introduce. Further, even as a growing number of funders and foundations seek to co-opt the language of accountability and participatory grantmaking, this is often not backed up by the reality. Some participants shared ideas about how to make the position of funders who engage in harmful practices untenable, such as by naming and shaming them.

Resistance to funders can come in different forms from different actors in the ecosystem. For instance, organisations such as DFF which are intermediaries, both funders and funded, can use their power to push for change from those further up the funding chain. Moreover, as Renee highlighted, there are some groups who place conditions on their funders, for instance by not accepting money from funders who use “white saviour” narratives.

Another question that came out of the discussion was how to create solidarity and connections among groups and activists that usually are put to compete against one another by the nature of how funding currently operates and the scarcity of funds, particularly for work on certain topics such as anti-racism.

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Linking back to the broader work of the decolonising process, Renee stated that she thinks it is crucial to apply a decolonising lens to the funder scene. Crucial to this would be funders interrogating their own specific histories and using this story as a starting point for change. Ultimately, however, the entire concept of the non-profit is rooted in colonialism. As Mukasa pointed out, the legal structure of the non-profit originated as a way for money stolen through colonialism to be hidden. What is needed are non-reformist reforms to the funding system; reforms which deconstruct the harm of the current system while moving us closer to the end goal of a world in which philanthropy and the NGO model no longer exist.