



Charter for equitable relationships between NGOs/funders and grassroots groups

This charter was developed based on the lived experiences from over 30 grassroots activists/organizers, NGO staff and philanthropic staff from around the globe. This includes contributions from the following organizations:

African Coaching Network, Amandla MEK Foundation, Amazon Theatrix Ensemble, Amnesty International, Beautiful Trouble, Friends with Environment in Development (FED), G for Girls Initiative, Green Foster Action Uganda, Horizons Project, Justice and Empowerment Organization, Kayole Community Justice Center, Kenyans for Tax Justice Movement, Mobilisation Lab, Social Change Lab, Stroomversnellers, Students Mentor Foundation Malawi, Thinking Doing Change, Women Action on Eco Health and Legal Rights, Zambian Governance Foundation for Civil Society & several other individual grassroots activists/organizers and academics.

The Charter

As persons and parties coming together to combine power and efforts towards social change, we agree to the following principles and practices to foster equitable and effective relationships:

1. Let community needs lead.

Include grassroots leadership in a bottom up, co-creative, participatory-planning and decision-making approach from the beginning of a project/campaign/funding cycle.

Grassroots groups should be equal autonomous partners, involved in shaping strategic priorities from the start, and throughout the implementation process. Accountability and interests should flow into communities, not up an organizational ladder, and challenging this dynamic requires an active commitment that is cultural, not just structural.

Rationale: While progress has been made to emphasize “localization” and “shifting power,” in practice, power imbalances persist. Grassroots groups are often treated as implementers, not partners. Moreover, not letting communities lead can derail movements and cause harm. For example...

- *Campaigns spotlighting individuals and/or depicting social justice activists as heroes, and not endorsing the collective aspect of the movement to which they belong, isolates individuals, elevates their risk and can lead to fractures in their organization.*
- *When focus suddenly shifts from grassroots programming towards accountability and reporting on other priorities, this can fragment movements because it changes the direction of activities.*

Positive interactions prioritize serving/empowering/facilitating justice for the vulnerable and marginalized. These values should remain at the heart of working together.

2. Be transparent about where we're coming from so we can move forward together.

Building trust and healthy relationships requires time for honest discussions about power dynamics and the path that brought all parties to their present standing.

Accountability works both ways around agreed-upon responsibilities.

NGOs/funders are accountable to the people they work with and for. Grassroots organizations are accountable to their funders and partners. Parameters that each party will work within should be defined. Specifically, this includes:

- Developing a set of 'shared values' or 'common ground' at the beginning of the partnership,
- Sharing stories of involvement in the issue, both organizationally and as individuals,
- Clarity around intentions and timeframes,
- Honesty about possibilities, capacity and constraints,
- Identifying values and roles, and
- Defined exit strategies if one party feels agreed upon principles are not being met.

Rationale: Start with where each party is coming from to provide a basis for alignment, and space to proactively discuss power dynamics and resource

imbalances. Historic experiences of being extracted from, narrative-hijacking without giving credit, or having movements derailed by NGOs/funders 'parachuting' into grassroots movements, makes grassroots groups wary of these relationships. NGOs/funders are wary their challenges will not be considered. When these dynamics are named from the start, they can be addressed proactively.

3. Invest in deeper, long-term relationships.

Relationships take curiosity and a commitment to nurturing trust over time.

Getting to know and understand everyone as humans beyond 'roles' should be prioritized, along with having honest and transparent conversations to engage in generative conflict. Where actors operate from different ideological frameworks, conversations about differences—rather than forced consensus—should be encouraged. The co-existence of multiple strategies and value systems ('movement ecology') can be a key strength of our movements. Agreeing to disagree should be defaulted to as needed.

The emotional toll of grassroots work should be acknowledged. Care, reciprocity, and continuity matter—not just efficiency or deliverables.

Sustainable funding allows grassroots groups to respond to emerging issues, and to build capacity without financial insecurity. NGOS/funders should not abandon the grassroots when the campaign cycle, or high visibility moment ends, if the reality for impacted people remains the same. Funders should work to ensure the distribution of funds is timely, as delays in transfers restrict organizations and reduce trust.

Rationale: Short term and opportunistic funding breaks trust, leads to dependency, does not empower grassroots movements and can undermine social change by restricting long-term movement building. Funding short-term is like a stone being thrown in the ocean; something is started, and then the funding dries up.

4. Commit to addressing rising fascist and authoritarian threats.

There is increasing pressure from radical right-wing governments to disconnect from or defund radical grassroots groups. What's more, grassroots groups are disproportionately taking on risks.

Challenging this requires a willingness to listen to the challenges of everyone involved, a commitment to being innovative and taking risks, and to workshopping solutions together.

Rationale: Grassroots groups rely on support organizations for many resources. There is a ripple effect when the licenses of NGOs are cancelled by oppressive governments. Many national laws have made it difficult for foreign funding to be directly transferred to organizations that face too many barriers for the necessary permissions to receive foreign funds. Large to mid-level NGOs may not be allowed to redirect foreign funding received in their accounts to grassroots partners. Licenses to receive foreign funds from entities that appear to be working against the 'national interest' can be flagged as a threat.

5. Prioritize learning, both within our organizations and in our partnerships, and be willing to change.

Partnerships should be treated as co-learning opportunities, rather than charitable or paternal relationships. Commitments to reflect and learn together throughout the partnership should be maintained.

NGOs/funders should seek opportunities to learn about the ways that the systems which grassroots movements are seeking to dismantle may be propagated. Opportunities to surface and address power dynamics should be taken proactively. An openness to exploring impact, and to accepting changes proposed by knowledge coming from realities on the ground—including lived experience, oral traditions, and non-academic expertise—is necessary. This includes being flexible and adaptable to the needs of communities.

Rationale: There can be a disconnect between individuals and the institutions they work for. Organizations may consider appointing someone to build relationships with grassroots groups – someone committed to building processes and nurturing spaces that facilitate greater trust and collaboration. Getting real about these relationships requires structural shifts and institutional accountability based on realities on the ground.

6. Proactively discuss and challenge barriers to inclusion.

Explicitly mapping the enabling or disabling factors for participation can provide a basis for deeper conversations about power and positionality.

Barriers that prevent participation can include race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language, age, class, education attainment, religion or belief, health, disability, etc., practical barriers, and financial barriers (transport, child care, communications, location etc). These should be named to proactively seek concrete ways of redistributing power. Exercises of introspection should be prioritized across organizations to acknowledge how positions shape relationships, decisions and outcomes.

An empathetic listening approach should be used, rather than addressing one another in an accusatory manner. The support of facilitators who understand group dynamics to help us surface and address power dynamics may be used as needed.

A major imbalance also exists in the influence between global minority and majority. Funders should include the global majority in the conception and execution of funds.

7. Limit financial reporting and funding restrictions.

Adopt less strict, complex means of providing resources for grassroots organizations. Reporting should be limited to the sharing of outcomes as much as possible, so that the relationship becomes a learning opportunity.

Rationale: Stringent, tedious financial and narrative reporting guidelines pull time and resources away from core activities. Communities in need might not have documentation required by many reporting mechanisms. Putting energy towards seeking documentation pulls energy away from urgent needs. The bureaucratic elements of administration (reporting, documenting) should be limited.

Best practices

The following are concrete practices that help bring the Principles of the Charter to life in partnerships. These were further ideas contributed by the individuals or groups cited above.

1. Let community needs lead

Engage in deep and ongoing consultation around grassroots needs, rather than assuming what is needed.

Funders may consider assigning someone to work within communities on the distribution of grants, that is, with relationship building, decision making, and completing financial paperwork. Ultimately, community-driven solutions should be prioritized when addressing community needs, over compliance with donor checklists and the influence of money.

Pre-determined solutions, deliverables and/or activities should not be imposed on the grassroots. The goal should not be to force the most impacted to align with another agenda. The vision of donors should be honoured and explained, and the grassroots (rather than senior management) should have the final decision within the established project framework. Power should be willingly redistributed—through shared control over strategy, budget allocation, and public messaging.

- *Rationale: Implementing projects without meaningful consultation with local communities is top-down decision making; grassroots organizers are not*

subcontractors or mobilizers for the mission or projects of other parties. Moreover, bringing in local knowledge/decision making too late in strategic planning reduces possibilities for longer term strategies of building power, often in favour of only marginal wins, and may leave challenges on the ground and in communities unaddressed.

Train staff on movement practices and principles.

This includes working on expanding the appetite for risk within NGOs.

Amplify the grassroots.

NGOs/funders with access to platforms and connections should amplify grassroots work and voices, without modifying how the message is presented. Funders should limit requirements to publicly promote financial support for the grassroots to protect the security of activists. Credit should be given to grassroots movements and people power, rather than framing support as a charitable act. Consent should be required before sharing someone else's story.

Offer knowledge, resource, skill building and networking opportunities that strengthen local leadership.

NGOs and funders have remained an important compass to positively shape our balance as humanity. They offer strengths related to program management systems, communication strategies, and operational efficiencies which can be adapted to support grassroots initiatives when contextualized to local needs. Activities to empower and give agency and ownership to communities should be consistent with a movement mindset, that is, the goal should be to enable teams to build capacity and leadership skills for organizations that are sustainable, and

not one off projects. Activities should be presented as suggestions, rather than necessary, to continue the relationship.

Specifically, helpful collaborative activities from NGOs/funders include:

- Engaging with the community you're supporting and attending their actions (visible solidarity)
- Aiding the building of organizational structures and policies
- Supporting with network-forming
- Resourcing community-led convenings and peer learning exchange
- Simplifying language and awareness-raising on the policies of targets
- Sharing offices, materials etc.
- Giving sign off to grassroots groups on joint activities (i.e. statements and press work)
- Providing additional learning opportunities, especially for people new to organizing
- Human resources, financial administration
- Legal and security support
- Facilitating access to decision makers, fellowships, convenings, media, grants, consultants etc.
- Language translation support
- Making information about funding opportunities more accessible, especially for the Global South

3. Invest in deeper, long-term relationships.

Provide feedback on why grant applications were/were not successful.

This means going beyond the explanation that a large number of applications were received, as transparency is key to good relationships.

Rationale: Not providing any input reduces trust. Grassroots groups have historic experiences of applying for grants and, without communication on why their proposals were not successful, an extraction of ideas following. Ideas from the grassroots are implemented without grassroots involvement or credit.

Parties should seek further partnership opportunities.

Rationale: Campaigns prioritizing traditional (i.e. Indigenous) leadership, and that include a wide variety of stakeholders, have the highest chance of succeeding.

6. Proactively discuss and challenge barriers to inclusion.

Challenge exploitative interactions with the grassroots.

NGOs/funders should actively seek ways to challenge patronizing and tokenization of youth grassroots organizers, especially marginalized youth organizers. For example:

- Telling them they are ‘resilient’, that ‘they are the hope’
- Giving them platforms without resources; exposure/visibility (i.e. opportunities to speak at events or consult) alone is not enough, and can be exploitative.

Inclusion should be substantive, not symbolic. Participation should be matched with real decision-making power, rather than performative representation.

Grassroots participants or groups should also be compensated for the exchange of their valuable knowledge, experience, labour and time, to address imbalances related to access and distribution.

7. Limit financial reporting and funding restrictions

Help the grassroots access funding.

NGOs should act as fiscal sponsors when possible for grassroots groups. Many grassroots groups cannot receive support due to government censorship or not having access to bank accounts of their own. Finding ways of getting funds to the grassroots may require a commitment to getting creative with framing and methods, and a willingness to take risks.

NGOs should draft grant proposals with grassroots partners and divide responsibilities equally. Grassroots organizers are not to be exploited for information or treated like competition for attention and resources.

Rationale: NGOs are often in competition for funding between with grassroots groups. NGOs have advantages to acquire grants due to resource, connections, access to information and time to complete applications, which is not available to the grassroots. This dynamic creates distrust. Opportunities should be sought to disperse these resources.

Avoid placing major restrictions on how funds can be used and who they're for.

The grassroots should feel empowered to more autonomously manage funds in alignment with their local contexts. Donors should limit expectations that

grassroots fundraise from different sources, and fund groups struggling to access opportunities.

Rationale: Restricting the scope of opportunities leads to inequitable and ineffective distribution, and decreases the likelihood of collaboration. For example, only funding youth groups may discourage groups from working with people outside this restriction. Moreover, areas that require funding aren't receiving any, and areas that are receiving funding are receiving them in saturation levels. Lastly, often methods of reporting impact are focused on output and are expected to be reported numerically. People and capacity for operations are critical to the community and power building needed for longer term movement building that moves beyond marginal wins.

Offer grant opportunities for organizations that are not registered.

Rationale: Groups become tied to the rules and regulations of NGOs when they are forced to register. The push for institutionalization takes capacity away from social movements.