

**New England Grassroots Environment Fund:**  
A Model of Participatory Grantmaking, a  
Participatory Organization, and the Essential Nature  
of Belonging

**Executive Summary**

**By Christine Robinson**

“In a real sense, all life is inter-related. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be... This is the interrelated structure of reality.”

—Martin Luther King Jr.,

*Letter from Birmingham Jail: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham Jail and the Struggle That Changed a Nation*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Christine Robinson** is a seasoned thought leader with expertise in nonprofit and public sector systems, generative networks and systems across the US and in building on-ramps to policy and systems change for justice. She is a recognized strategist known for her work in equity, vision articulation, program development, and design. She also has extensive experience in program evaluation, the formation of collaborative ventures, and the launching of local, statewide, regional, and national initiatives on significant social justice issues.

Robinson served as a consultant to the Obama Administration's White House Office of Asian American and Pacific Islanders, crafting a municipal strategy. Her areas of expertise include economic security and asset strategies, health disparities, human development, education disparities, two-generation strategies, policy alignment, equity and inclusion, and place-based endeavors.

Robinson has served as a senior program staff member and consultant to some of the nation's leading foundations, including the Ford Foundation (co-architect of the six-year initiative to close the racial wealth gap), the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (coordinating consultant for the national childhood obesity initiative), the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Lumina Foundation, the Moriah Fund, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

Robinson was appointed Director of the Division of School Age and Adolescent Health for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and was intimately involved in establishing the statewide network of school-based health centers and the first violence prevention coalitions in the US. She facilitated the creation of the first multicultural HIV/AIDS coalition in the US and the first K-12 HIV/AIDS curriculum, which Tom Brokaw reported on because of how innovative the curriculum was.

She designed a significant disability initiative and brought an abiding commitment to co-creation, inclusion, the inherent dignity of all people, and recognition of historically marginalized communities' numerous intersectional realities. Robinson was educated at Vassar College, Brandeis University, and the University of Pennsylvania and is trained as a developmental and community psychologist. She was the 2017-18 Christopher Peterson Memorial Fellow at the University of Pennsylvania in applied psychology. She is a Fellow at the University of New Hampshire's Carsey School of Public Policy.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### BACKGROUND TO THE PROCESS EVALUATION

This participatory grantmaking process evaluation was conducted with the support of the Ford Foundation. The Ford Foundation is supporting a cohort of grantees to explore participatory grantmaking models and how they engage a broad range of stakeholders in the interest of equity. The New England Grassroots Environment Fund received a generous grant from the Ford Foundation to

- continue to refine the Fund’s learning and evolution of grantmaking/program innovations through thorough assessment and feedback tools developed with a consultant;
- examine, document, and share learning insights from the developmental process as evidence of the value, myriad benefits, and core need of participatory grantmaking; and
- work directly with funders, whether individual donors or larger foundations, to incorporate participatory grantmaking that prioritizes traditionally marginalized and underrepresented voices.

#### Overview

This report is the result of a nine-month process, recounting the work of the New England Grassroots Environment Fund; data was collected from March 2020 through December 2020. This document aims to chronicle the Fund’s work and to outline the organization’s structure, theory, approach, and implementation modalities. The majority of the data-gathering for this report consisted of a deep dive with the Grassroots Fund’s leadership and staff in examination and reflection to codify, document, clarify, solidify, and more deeply recognize the power and potential of numerous functions of participatory grantmaking and the resulting participatory philanthropic organization and network that had emerged. Future aspirations are also outlined throughout the text; the document discusses the roots of grassroots environmental justice work, participatory work with an equity lens, philanthropic strategy, and movement building.

#### The New England Grassroots Environment Fund

The New England Grassroots Environment Fund (hereafter the Fund or the Grassroots Fund will be used interchangeably) is a philanthropic organization that is dedicated to co-creating healthy and sustainable communities throughout the New England region. The Fund aims to achieve its goals by offering grants to grassroots organizations, particularly those from historically marginalized groups, who do work in the field of environmental justice through a process of **participatory grantmaking**. The Fund currently works with approximately 3,100 grassroots grantee partners.

The central elements of the Fund’s current work are outlined here:

- Participatory process

- Assessment of the mitigating impacts and wellbeing effects from multiple and cumulative exposures through creating a culture of evidence; to this end, the Fund is
  1. beginning to develop a system for internal data collection on the region and specific areas, and it is starting to prioritize how data is used;
  2. planning a participatory evaluation process with grassroots partners to include those directly affected in the formation of questions of interest and ways to collect information involving scoping, data-gathering, alternatives, analysis, mitigation, and monitoring;
  3. conceptualizing a stakeholder mapping process to outline numerous partners and means of collaboration to move various environmental justice issues forward across New England; and
  4. building the framework for a healthy ecosystem: the work integrates campaigns for ecological justice on behalf of traditionally historically marginalized communities’ environmental sustainability and amelioration.

#### Values, Vision, and Mission

The Fund’s stated objectives are as follows:

- Increase civic engagement, volunteerism, and the number of emerging leaders engaged in initiatives that forward environmental and social justice, particularly those that prioritize creating and maintaining healthy, just, safe, and environmentally sustainable communities.
- Increase the incorporation of equity and justice values as fundamental considerations in the economic, environmental, health, and resilience goals and functions of the grassroots, nonprofit, and funding community.
- Increase participation and understanding to develop a more inclusive environmental movement that speaks to the need to support intersectional solutions to broaden awareness and address environmental challenges for the Grassroots Fund network of collaborators, including grantee partners, applicants, planning committee members, grant reviewers, nonprofit colleagues, and funders.
- Increase the impact and volume of financial support to grassroots environmental and social justice projects and movements in New England by fostering a culture of risk-taking and constant growth.
- Increase networks of grassroots activists across New England committed to building a just and equitable society, sharing their knowledge, and working toward collective action and community problem-solving.

## PARTICIPATORY PHILANTHROPY AND PARTICIPATORY GRANTMAKING

Traditional philanthropic models are characterized by a top-down model of decision-making that eschews feedback loops and frequently fails to foster a sense of community and belonging among participants in the process. Institutional philanthropy is historically structured in a way that creates a power imbalance through which a privileged few determine resource allocation (grant dollars).

**Participatory philanthropy** is a philanthropic model envisioned to address these issues with the traditional model by ceding more decision-making power to grantee partners, grassroots networks, and community members. **This can only be done when their perspectives and lived experiences are honored as expertise.** The measure of whether this model has been effectively implemented is **not merely levels of equity and inclusion** (although these are key factors): it is **whether power has been effectively shifted to those who are most harmed by environmental degradation, economic injustice, and the climate crisis.** This is the crucial outcome that is the be-all and end-all of a participatory organization with the thematic focus of environmental justice.

### Aspects of a Participatory Philanthropic Organization

- Regularly inviting **input and active participation from community stakeholders who are directly affected by present challenges.**
- Adding new functions that strengthen the Fund's capacity to **engage those directly affected more effectively.**
- Developing recruitment and hiring practices that ascertain **potential employees' commitment to authentic community participation and network building** in all organization elements and engaging grantee partners and grant proposal readers for organizational roles.
- Ensuring that the Fund's board committees include community stakeholders and non-grantmakers.
- Facilitating board discussion on the benefits of inclusion, authentic perspectives, community participation, and decision-making.
- Integrating an **ongoing feedback loop** of grantee partners and community participation in all the institution's activities.
- Redesigning program staff's role **to serve as partners alongside grantee partners.**
- Initiating field-wide discussions that engage community voice in issues, approach, grantee partners' participation in grantmaking processes, proper resource allocation, and emerging work to define grantee outcomes.
- **Prioritizing transparency** as an institutional value and practice **by consistently making information and data about funded projects publicly available.**

At the heart of the Fund's intention to fully adopt a participatory model of philanthropy is participatory grantmaking. Grantmaking processes are traditionally relatively limited and transactional. Typically, they include preparation of proposal guidelines by funders, preparation of proposals by prospective grantees, a funder-led proposal review process (sometimes with outside expert or academic input), and a final decision on who is funded and to what extent. The participatory model of grantmaking, in contrast, works to include grantee partners, community members and leaders, and voices from historically marginalized groups in decision-making in a reciprocal process where the grantmaking organization and funders can learn, share their power, and promote aligned field-building.

The grantmaking process developed by the Grassroots Fund entails numerous steps:

1. An intricate review process that is presently open to any community member.
2. The engagement of the communities directly affected by disparities in the grant review process.
3. The provision of small grants to emerging grassroots groups.
4. The building of relationships with others in related geographic areas, issue areas, or cultural communities.
5. The facilitation of participation in a number of learning venues (RootSkills, Communities of Practice, and Catalyst Convenings).

**This evaluation's most crucial finding is the far-reaching impact of a participatory lens that has informed and continues to inform the organizational structure, staffing, evaluation, grantmaking, technical assistance, and community partnerships. In addition, the work of grantee partners is significant and merits further amplification and understanding. The work entails dialogue and reflection on how equity was incorporated into strategy development, funding priorities, and funding mechanisms.**

## PROCESS EVALUATION

The Fund's approach to process is nuanced, layered, complex, and evidence-informed. For this reason, a detailed investigation of the Fund's processes was necessary, and the results of this investigation are presented in the Process Map (see below).

### Methodology: Intersectionality and Equity

The process evaluation was conducted with a comprehensive framework of equity and intersectional belonging. Equity is the promotion of just and fair belonging throughout society and creates the conditions in which everyone can participate, prosper, and reach his, her, or their full potential. Intersectionality is the recognition of how numerous axes of oppression can affect individuals and groups: it calls us to pay attention to the complex and varied intersections of identities that make up the fabric of society.

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*Intersectional belonging goes a step further than mere inclusion: you are invited to participate in co-creating the thing you belong to actively. Active engagement, respect, seeking the story, and working to develop gateways to ecological justice is a powerful combination. The issues of philanthropy, participatory engagement, intersectional identity, belonging, equity, and environmental justice are too rarely connected.*

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With this in mind, the process evaluation examined

- Comprehensive change: building an equity focus into all endeavors of the Fund through internal operations.
- Organizational culture and external values as exemplified by the process and grantmaking.
- Reflection on principles of equity in policies, practices, procedures, and people.
- Ways in which the Grassroots Fund addresses systems change and power dynamics by removing the systemic barriers that create inequities.
- Grantee partner selection with a focus on systems changes, advocacy, community organizing, public education, civic engagement, and power-building among grantee partners to co-create the systems that affect them and environmental justice.
- The participatory grantmaking model.
- Ways the Fund intentionally engaged specific populations on environmental justice issues, including marginalized populations who have been historically excluded from the environmental justice movement.
- How diversity and inclusion were reflected in the staff, board, proposal readers, volunteers, consultants, and grantee partners.

### Guide to the Process Map

The Process Map expresses the Fund's various processes and structures in the form of a flow chart that depicts the sequence of activities, constituent elements, and decision points. It is organized into five interconnected streams: Approach, Governance, Commons, Enablers, and Change, which are defined here:

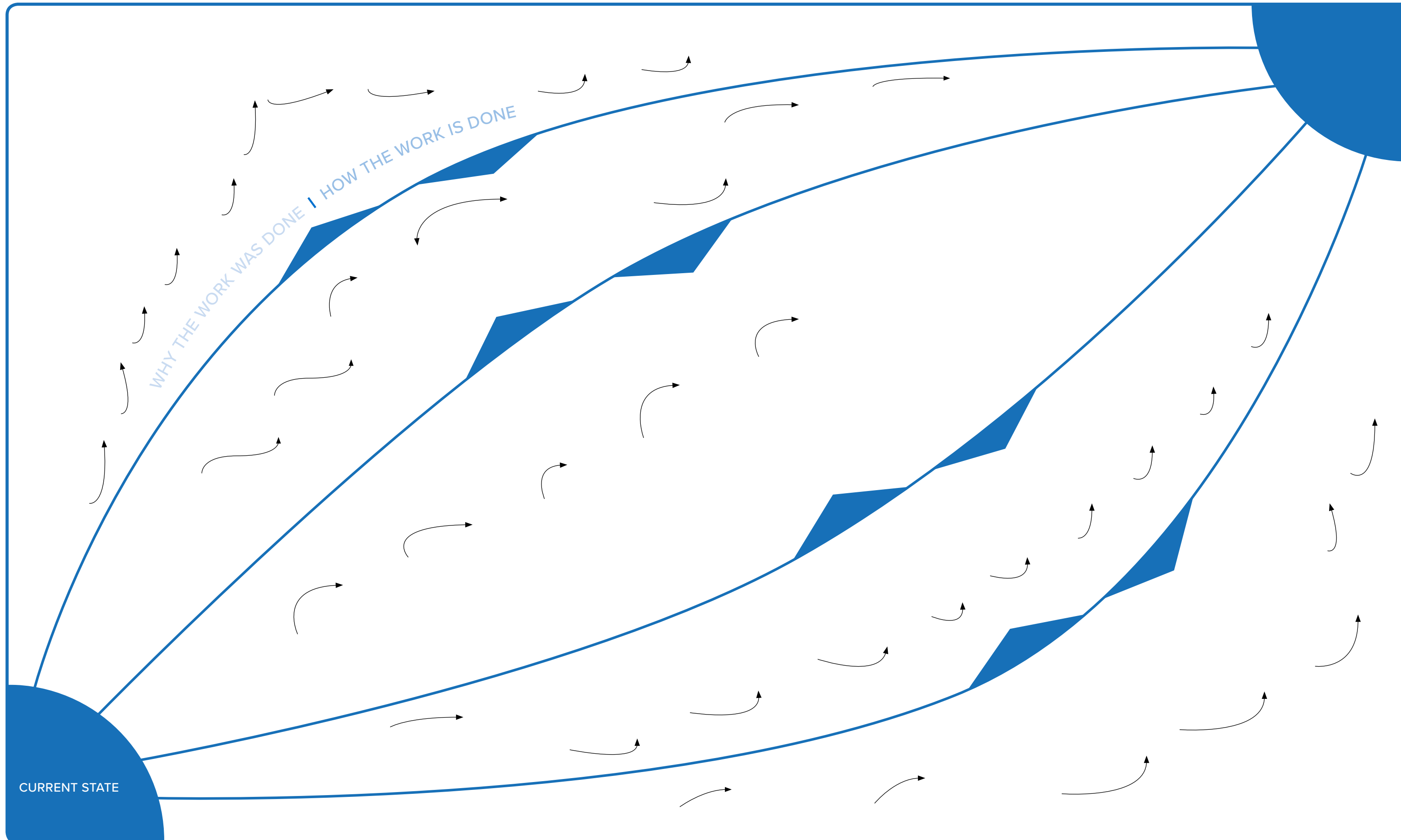
- *Approach stream*: Defines the organizational approach; prioritizes nonprofit capacity, equity, information management, and organizational effectiveness.
- *Governance stream*: Establishes the structures and processes for managing the framework through development, implementation, evaluation, and sustainability; provides ongoing oversight.

- *Commons stream*: Develops the necessary support for effective information sharing, resources, and management of internal information and data; serves as a resource and passing gear for effective information management and sharing promising practices for organizational capacity.
- *Enablers stream*: Establishes an overview of the mechanisms, people, and processes used in the design and delivery of the developing framework; highlights all people and venues that enable the changes required to adopt the framework.
- *Change stream*: Establishes an overview of the change process mechanisms foundational to adopting the entire ecosystem's framework, resulting in achieving ultimate goals.

The Process Map outlines **connections**; it is effective connections that foster a sense of belonging and purpose, key factors in the functioning of a participatory organization. The mapping out of these connections is a key finding of this report, and it is incumbent on the Fund that it works to strengthen these connections in a way that is inclusive, equitable, and reciprocal.

# PROCESS MAP: 2020

Illustrates the process and effective information alignment on environmental justice and democratic grassroots engagement across six New England states, leading to improved environmental justice outcomes, stronger and more robust grassroots organizations, and better outcomes for New England as a whole. **All elements in the frame are clickable.**



## Utilizing Organizational Assets

**F. Develop and articulate the overall change management plan based on organizational assets an articulated and demonstrated needs of Grantee Partners**

1. Reflect on the Common tools and additional tool development.
2. Develop strategies to share management plans and processes outwardly for community learning.
3. The participatory nature of GF facilitates access, communication, and sharing. The developing learning capacity will further develop ways that organizational assets can be utilized.

## Conclusions of the Process Evaluation in Summary

- ◇ The Fund considers ways to amplify grantee partners' voices and work more intentionally to build grassroots groups and a vital generative movement and network as part of a broader social justice ecosystem. **The focus to date has been internal, on the process.** It has emphasized mechanics and proposal review, **with a limited focus on many of the more significant environmental justice issues that are highlighted in the mission statement.**
- ◇ Funders have admiration for the Fund and its leadership. They are regarded as highly knowledgeable and innovative, and they provide vital information to the field. Many funders who are more traditional in their views find the Fund helpful in translating both food systems and racial justice issues. They are seen as informed on mutual aid groups' needs, given their proximity to those most directly affected. There is a recognition that traditional environmental groups need grassroots engagement to be most effective. Grassroots groups, organizers, and youth leaders can help build the field and funders' knowledge. There is a need for the grassroots voice and perspective. The Fund has an excellent opportunity to be at the heart of grounding an integrated approach weaving grassroots lived experience, organizing, civic engagement, and building pathways to equity, sustainability, and justice. Effective change strategies, movement building, and leadership development will amplify a diversity of perspectives and help move the region toward a more equitable future.
- ◇ The Fund seeks to realize its potential as a leader by more strategically engaging and convening grassroots partners, stimulating broad-based dialogues and collaboration around complex issues, as well as educating funders and the traditional ecological movement and leaders about powerful grassroots insights, innovation, and strategic approaches. The Fund has the potential to **significantly amplify the voices of grantee partners** and deepen the understanding of their interconnected endeavors.
- ◇ The Grassroots Fund is beginning to address issues of racism and othering in a forthright manner while deepening insights on equity and undergoing self-examination. Those working in organizations that do not explicitly address environmental justice and/or serve predominantly white communities are frequently dismissive, exclusive, and often offensive; **the perspectives and lived experiences of grantee partners from historically marginalized communities must be placed front and center in the Fund's work.**
- ◇ The Grassroots Fund must continue to build bridges in instances of lack of understanding, harmful language, and unfortunate tone-deafness to empathy about the role of oppression, othering, and the false perception that racism does not impact environmental work. This work has to start with a continued commitment to engage in the co-creation of accountable models, to build its own internal capacities to be more aligned with this

shift, and to utilize its convening capacity to strengthen communication in communities and across long-standing divides of race, culture, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and geography.

- ◇ **There is a significant opportunity for the Grassroots Fund and grantee partners to leverage numerous relationships with other social justice activists in New England. Other environmental justice movements, policy leaders, and foundation funders can learn about the insights gleaned from the process and innovations of communities most affected by environmental injustices and make these needs a priority.**
- ◇ The Fund continues to innovate and experiment with approaches beyond funding, such as emergent technical assistance and capacity-building work that promises to strengthen grantee leadership. Through RootSkills, Catalyst Convenings, and the emerging virtual Communities of Practice, **the Fund must continue to build its capacity to share information, help ground collective dialogue, prompt power-sharing, and strategize to advance the environmental justice movement, without necessarily becoming the spokesperson for campaigns.**
- ◇ The Fund has developed an intricate internal process and includes more grantee partners as grant proposal readers who offer depth, breadth, and gravitas in environmental justice. The Fund sees value in providing ongoing education to volunteers, but **efficiencies in working more intentionally with grantee partners, and building on the knowledge and insight of those who have received grant support, must be developed.** The real promise of the model is the engagement of those directly affected in grantmaking decisions and building capacity, providing technical assistance, developing strategies and tactics to ground the field. This is the future work of the Fund.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER ACTION

As has been shown above, the Fund's staff and board have taken admirable steps and continue to work on the process of educating themselves on issues of intersectionality, equity, and social justice and how they are relevant to the Fund's work, and they are to be praised for the depth of their reflection on the Fund's internal processes. After a year of internal investigation and evaluation, it is now time for the Fund to take these lessons forward and implement them to further its mission of promoting environment justice across the New England region.

### Moving to Environmental Justice

- Develop liaisons and connections to numerous fields that are aligned and relevant approaches to address the challenges of traditionally marginalized communities. These fields include, but are not limited to, public health, health disparities, ecological justice, civic engagement, democratic practice, community development, and movement building.
- Support increased public education on pollution prevention strategies and the alignment of environmental iniquities with numerous health and wellbeing

disparities.

- Facilitate matrixed cross-disciplinary, geographic, and cultural coordination to ensure environmental justice.
- Provide intentional outreach and engagement, and foster belonging, education, and communication.
- Co-design policy pathways and trajectories.
- Attend to matters of scale: leverage collaboration and cohort-building to empower grassroots groups to tackle issues beyond the merely local.
- Organize grassroots grantee partners into cohorts in order to catalyze deeper understanding, creativity, and shared purpose and to bring promising partnerships to light and scale.
- Amplify unheard voices through a blending of stories, videos, data collection, and other means of documentation.

#### Generative Network Formation

- Build an intentional internal learning process and capacity for internal evaluation, research, and documentation capacity.
- Develop an intentional, collaborative food justice model for the region.
- Develop an intentional stakeholder and power-mapping analysis identifying priorities for outreach and relationship-building.
- Instigate a comprehensive cross-program evaluation of the Fund's current programs.
- Expand ways to act as a convener, facilitator, and coalition-builder.
- Define a strategic direction that is inclusive and deliberate.
- Refine an influence strategy focused on messaging, narrative change, and building synergy across domains, including early warning systems and promising leverage points.
- Chronicle the stories of grassroots leaders, movement builders, and emerging groups to highlight how the grassroots work is building the field.
- Reconsider the structure of all formal application processes in order to shift staff focus to the work of grassroots groups.
- Consider aligning the grant proposal reader process to be more reflective of grassroots groups, community members, and those who are directly affected, thereby being more intentional in bringing authentic voices to the fore and building on the expertise of the grassroots, consistent with Fund investments