



ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND PHILANTHROPY:
Challenges and Opportunities for Alignment
Gulf South and Midwest Case Studies

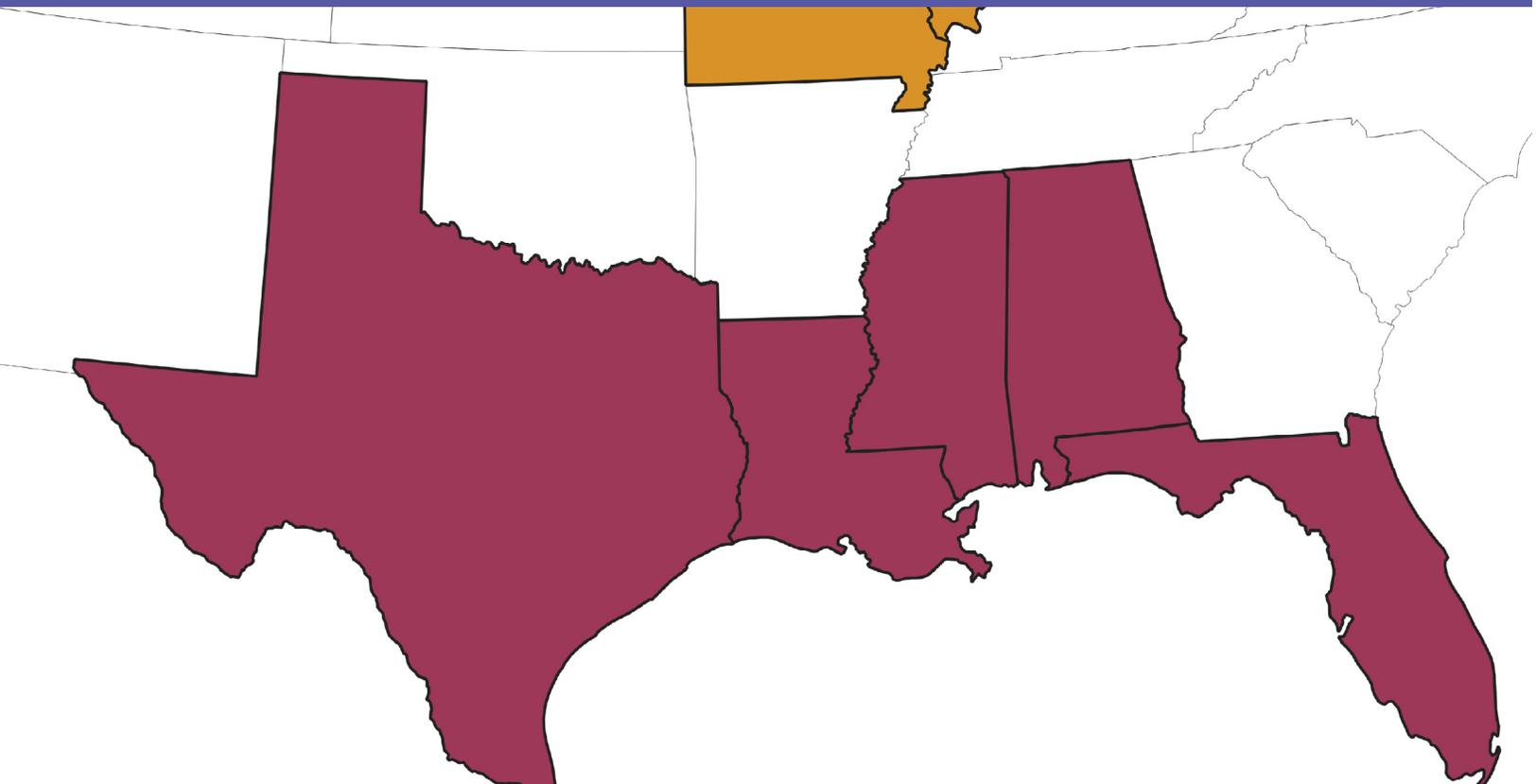


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About the Tishman Environment and Design Center

The Tishman Environment and Design Center integrates bold design, policy and social justice approaches to tackle the climate crisis and advance environmental justice.

About the Building Equity and Alignment for Impact

Building Equity and Alignment for Impact (BEA) brings together dynamic grassroots organizing groups, effective national green organizations, and innovators in philanthropy to advance the progress of the environmental movement towards a just transition and directly confront powerful polluters. BEA works to build equitable relationships and expand the pool of resources for base-building organizations in people of color, Indigenous, and low-income communities that are achieving results on the frontlines of the climate and ecological crisis.

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Executive Summary

Across the country, environmental justice (EJ) organizations and communities of color are leading influential campaigns and initiatives aimed at protecting public health, developing stronger climate and environmental policies, and building new economies rooted in Just Transition principles. However, the power and scale of grassroots environmental justice organizations are often misunderstood or overlooked by philanthropy, despite a long record of community organizing and action. As a result, funding disparities persist, and the most important voices acting on behalf of equitably adapting to and mitigating climate change and environmental degradation are often excluded from critical decision-making processes.

This study of the underlying dynamics of misalignment between the philanthropic and environmental justice sectors in the Midwest and Gulf South regions confirms that environmental funders are largely **granting to mainstream environmental organizations (99%), with just a tiny fraction (1 percent) going to environmental justice organizations**. While it is clear there are barriers to alignment between philanthropy and the EJ sector, it is equally clear that there are significant areas of opportunity.

Both funders and EJ groups cited many of the same priority issue areas, signaling **alignment, including movement-building, civic participation, energy, water initiatives, economic and racial justice, and climate change**. However, there were distinctions in how the two sectors conceptualized and addressed these priorities. Where EJ organizations were focused on multiple, intersecting social, economic, and environmental issues using community-based organizing and direct-action strategies, funders focused on more traditional environmental policy making and advocacy issues. Thus, even when the two sectors used similar language to articulate their priorities, the underlying meanings and approaches diverged or were subject to broad interpretation making it difficult to establish alignment in the strategies used to carry out organizational goals. There was also a lack of clarity or gaps in terms of the definitions the two sectors use when referencing environmental justice organizations and environmental justice or grassroots activities.

Interviews with leaders in the environmental justice and philanthropic sectors in the two regions revealed some clear drivers of misalignment that cut across both groups, including:

- **Access** to funding, information, processes, and guidelines from the philanthropic sector were all elements that the EJ organizations point to in terms of the key barriers to accessing greater resources. The limited transparency of the philanthropic sector also leads to limited access to decision-making power and relationships of trust between foundation and EJ staff.
- **Capacity** of EJ organizations was a barrier because of limited resources and administrative infrastructure, with many organizations specifically noting low development and communications capacity. Philanthropy highlighted limited staffing capacity for establishing trusting relationships with many dispersed EJ organizations.
- **Racism** was a dominant driver of misalignment mentioned by both sectors. It was discussed in various forms, including structural and institutional racism, white privilege, white supremacy, and implicit bias. These forms of racism within philanthropy and the broader society result in systemic under resourcing of groups and communities that are underrepresented in environmental decision-making spaces.
- **Ideology** in the form of divergent world views and theories of change, informs the strategies of EJ organizations and philanthropic institutions. These ideologies can lead philanthropy to shy away from funding the EJ movement which may be perceived as less effective or as more overtly political or riskier in terms of their strategies.

In addition, important opportunities for better alignment emerged from the interviews with foundation and EJ staff. Some of these opportunities include:

- **Commitments to Relationship Building & Access** - Both philanthropy and EJ organizations can benefit from investing in opportunities to come together and build deeper relationships grounded in trust and shared meanings. By building stronger ties, both sectors can set a course for more transparent, accessible, and impactful work. These efforts will likely require sustained, long-term efforts with willing participation and experimentation from both sectors.
- **Investing in Capacity Building** - The lack of capacity that hampers the EJ sector's effectiveness presents short-term opportunities for philanthropy to better align with grassroots organizations. Investments in administrative, communications, and development functions of EJ organizations can be leveraged for long-term sustainability of the EJ movement and relationship building between the two sectors.

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- **Tackling Racism & Structural Power** - The root causes of environmental injustice require a direct acknowledgement of the ways in which philanthropy reflects the racism embedded in society. The increased interest and recognition of racial equity, diversity, and inclusion by philanthropy opens up a window to better center and prioritize funding to the EJ, grassroots organizations that are rooted in and led by people of color, and Indigenous and low-income communities.
 - **Leveraging the Power of Intermediaries** - Intermediary organizations have grown in number and influence as important bridges between local EJ organizations and funders. By creating a shared set of standards for transparency and funding to flow directly to local EJ organizations, these intermediaries can help fill a critical role between the two sectors.

The urgency of climate change and rising inequality poses serious threats to humanity. Both philanthropy and the EJ movement have important roles to play, and the alignment of these two sectors is critical now more than ever. This report is intended to contribute to ongoing efforts to strengthen the capacity of grassroots environmental justice organizations that are essential to ensuring a more just and sustainable world.



Introduction

The environmental justice (EJ) movement and its constituent organizations are leading important work on the frontlines of climate change. Communities of color, low-income, Indigenous and tribal communities all across the country suffer some of the worst impacts of environmental degradation, economic inequality, and climate change. This legacy of disproportionate impacts shapes the critical perspective and strategies of grassroots, environmental justice groups. EJ organizations must address these entrenched patterns of environmental pollution while also responding to the ever-increasing impacts of the climate crisis. Despite this important intersectional work on the frontlines and fencelines, EJ organizations are often overlooked by philanthropy.

The philanthropic sector plays an integral role in environmental decision-making. In addition to giving much needed financial support to organizations, foundations also provide unique opportunities for and access to centers of political power, decision-making, and technical resources in the development of environmental policies at local, state, and national levels. As the world increasingly confronts the climate emergency, the philanthropic sector must engage more deeply and in equal partnership with grassroots organizations. Grassroots organizing and the inclusion of low-income and communities of color is essential to implementing meaningful climate legislation, yet the vast majority of environmental philanthropic support goes towards mainstream, white-led environmental organizations that can demonstrate scale but lack diverse, grassroots support for policies.¹ In fact, environmental organizations with annual budgets of more than \$5 million received half of all contributions and grants made in the sector from 2007 to 2009.² By supporting grassroots movements and local expertise, philanthropy can help democratize environmental decision-making power, thereby moving toward a more just and sustainable world.

In order to better understand and confront the disparities in access to funding, the [Building Equity and Alignment for Impact \(BEA\)](#) approached the [Tishman Environment and Design Center](#) at [The New School University](#) to collaboratively conduct a landscape assessment of the philanthropic sector and its relationship to grassroots, environmental justice organizations in the Gulf South and Upper Midwest regions of the United States. The Building Equity and Alignment for Impact Initiative (BEA) is a unique initiative led by representatives of the grassroots organizing sector in partnership with national environmental organizations and the philanthropic sector. The BEA's mission is to help develop stronger collaboration among the three sectors to achieve effective environmental and climate policies by engaging and supporting the inclusion of equity into environmental philanthropy and non-profit agendas and promoting equitable allocation of resources. The Tishman Environment and Design Center is a research and practice center, housed at The New School, committed to interdisciplinary, critical participatory approaches to advance environmental and climate justice.

Since its founding in 2013, the BEA has played an essential role in bringing environmental justice and matters of racial equity to the attention of funding communities. Significantly, in recent years many foundations have responded and publicly voiced a commitment to racial equity, yet, the forms of alignment that currently exist among donors have not yet resulted in the strategic flow of resources to grassroots organizations at a significant level. Given this reality, the primary aim of this research is to better understand the root causes and organizational barriers that result in funding misalignment between environmental grant makers and grassroots environmental justice organizations. Mindful of histories and legacies of institutional racism in philanthropy, this project also searches for potential solutions to funding misalignment and identifies opportunities for building lasting relationships that can overcome barriers and lead to greater resources and support for these groups. This report presents a snapshot of alignment issues in two particular regions and is not meant to serve as a comprehensive study of all philanthropic and environmental justice group dynamics.

This study focuses on four specific research aims, to: (1) gain a greater understanding of grassroots EJ organizational funding, capabilities and priorities in the respective regions; (2) highlight the complementary objectives of funders and EJ organizations; (3) develop a consistent methodology that can be replicated in other regions for similar assessments and, (4) identify systemic challenges and opportunities for better aligning and increasing future funding for the grassroots sector working for environmental justice.

The research included a baseline assessment of grassroots or frontline organizations working for environmental justice and climate justice in the Upper Midwest and the Gulf South regions. This assessment included collecting information about the priorities, needs, and capacities of EJ organizations, as well as their perspectives on the challenges and opportunities for increasing environmental grantmaking and building meaningful relationships with funders.³ The BEA research

committee chose to focus this project on the Gulf South and Upper Midwest regions specifically because 1) both regions are under-resourced by environmental grant makers as compared to other regions in the United States; 2) both regions have unique environmental challenges and contexts that will play a critical role in the fight for climate justice; and 3) both regions have recently been the subject of regional studies and philanthropic interest as racial equity has moved to the mainstream of philanthropy, especially in the Gulf South after the disasters of Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Harvey, and the B.P. oil spill.⁴

The hope is that this research can help inform philanthropic strategies that acknowledge the rich networks and power of the grassroots organizing sector and that both sectors can become better partners, leverage more resources, and address patterns of misalignment that hinder movement building and impact.

Model for Successful Alignment: The BEA

- Since its founding in 2013, the BEA has served as a national model for truly grassroots-driven work, with expertise, and broad participation to operationalize a tri-sector initiative bringing together grassroots organizations, national greens, and philanthropy.
- Since 2018, the BEAI Fund* has distributed \$1.5 million to grassroots environmental justice organizations and will be distributing an additional \$1.5 million in 2020.
- The BEA launched case studies [“From the Margins to the Mainstream”](#) and [“Victories and Momentum on the Frontlines”](#) in an effort to shift the narrative and change public opinion toward equity and root-cause solutions coming from frontline communities.
- The BEA organized and hosted Clean Power Plan and Just Transition Forums convening a broad cross-section of leaders to dialogue and develop strategy on climate, energy, adaptation, and resilience.

*In 2017, Grassroots International (GRI) partnered with the BEA to manage the BEAI Fund. Together, the BEAI Fund and the BEA are working towards a goal of moving \$10 million in philanthropic funding over a five year period towards the climate and environmental justice movements to help ensure the grassroots sector has the necessary resources to replicate, expand, and scale its impact to create lasting solutions on the ground.



Literature Review: EJ Movement and Philanthropy

The environmental justice (EJ) movement rose to national prominence in the 1980s, consisting of a diverse network of groups working at the local level. These local groups challenged the state and industry sectors to cease the production of environmental harms and their disparate impacts on low-income, fenceline, Indigenous and communities of color. The communities that bear a disproportionate weight of pollution also face some of the most devastating impacts of climate change.⁵ Thus many local grassroots and frontline environmental justice groups have taken on a growing number of inter-sectional issues, including climate change, that impact the health and well-being of residents.

The EJ movement's historical roots, as well as its tactics and core organizing principles, diverge significantly from many of the mainstream environmental organizations in the US. EJ movement organizations often reflect a more radical critique of industrial and capitalist modes of production while also challenging the reformist state to intervene to curb industry's impact on communities more affirmatively.⁶ The EJ movement has also historically called for more direct and democratic modes of environmental decision making and for the voices of the most impacted communities to be at the forefront of environmental and climate policies.⁷⁸ The diverse and growing grassroots, and frontline groups that make up the EJ movement have core values that center their efforts on the many dimensions of justice (recognition, procedural, distributive) and the well-being of often marginalized communities.⁹

After more than 40 years, the EJ movement is comprised of an increasing number of community-based non-profits, regional networks, and national associations working at multiple scales of policy, advocacy and activism.¹⁰ These EJ groups are led primarily by women and people of color and are staffed by and grounded in local communities of color or low-income communities throughout the US.¹¹ In the last three decades, "the number of people of color environmental groups has grown from 300 groups in 1992 to more than 3,000 groups and a dozen networks in 2014."¹² Nevertheless, despite the emergence of new EJ groups and the growing national attention and government recognition at varying levels, the EJ movement remains one of the lowest funded environmental areas in both government and private foundation grantmaking.¹³ Comparatively, there are approximately 26,000 registered environmental non-profit organizations, primarily representing conservation, natural and human environment objectives, with the most significant mainstream environmental organizations averaging budgets well over \$100 million annually.¹⁴

In recent decades, numerous studies have examined the relationship between philanthropy and social movements. Many of these studies show that this relationship is a complex and oftentimes contentious one, where foundations can moderate or "co-opt" the goals of social movements through coercive activities, such as encouraging them to steer their priorities, strategy, and targets away from intense activism against polluting industries toward more mainstream advocacy, education or conservation efforts.¹⁵ Additionally, Jenkins and other scholars contend that some foundations reward professionalized, national conservation organizations by also "channeling" a majority of their environmental grants toward these organizations, while virtually ignoring grassroots environmental groups who work at the community level and are disrupting negative corporate influence on environmental issues, such as pollution.¹⁶ Dowie (2002) adds that it's not only the interest in conservation that directs some funder interests, but that funders sometimes have links to the wealth generated from polluting industries that the EJ movement opposes, and thus, have no desire to confront corporations or use more aggressive means, such as citizen protest, to change public policies that contributed to the source of their wealth.¹⁷ By not funding the grassroots groups or steering work away from protest and activism, scholars conclude that these funders are substantially limiting resources available to the EJ movement and its ability to bring about change.

Another well-documented issue that informs the relationship between funders and grassroots groups is the fact that a majority of foundations suffer from a lack of diversity in their staffing and boards. This lack of diversity can give rise to implicit bias, institutional racism, and a general lack of attention or understanding of EJ issues and organizations. A 2014 report by Dr. Dorceta Taylor, called "The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations," showed that a majority of environmental funders were not only predominantly white, with less than 12 percent consisting of persons of color, but the report indicated "the dominant culture of the organizations is alienating to ethnic minorities, the poor, the LGBTQ community and others outside the mainstream."¹⁸ This report points to the fact that environmental leaders used decades-old racial stereotypes and tropes to explain the lack of diversity in their institutions; describing a lack of environmental knowledge and awareness on the part of minority groups, a lack of interest in environmental positions and the fear that minority recruits would have high-turnover rates. Leaders also stated that a focus on staff racial diversity would detract from the organizational mission and focus.¹⁹ The predominantly white and wealthy leadership of philanthropy can precipitate implicit bias within

these institutions. For example, less diverse boards may be more willing to engage with organizations within their social sphere or networks and they may be more likely to deem grassroots groups working in lower-income, communities of color as too risky or unfamiliar to receive grant funding. The perceptions of predominantly white philanthropic staff and boards affect the allocation of grants, the conceptualization of effective strategies and theories of change, which organizations the funders believe are credible, and how they interact with grassroots groups with predominantly people of color staff and leadership - if they interact with them at all.

Additionally, Dr. Taylor's report examined the recruitment of under-represented groups among mainstream environmental organizations including philanthropic institutions. Leaders from environmental organizations reported interest in diversification; however the recruitment and outreach activities they pursued did little to reflect active measures to increase staff diversity or reach persons of color working on environmental justice.²⁰ After Dr. Taylor's report was released, some organizations took measures to look at institutional racism and racial bias in their environmental grantmaking activities. However, the philanthropic sector as a whole, has not taken the measures necessary to marginally change the results of Dr. Taylor's report five years later.²¹ Despite growing attention to racial equity as a philanthropic focus area and attempts at staff diversification, there continues to be a lack of racial diversity amongst boards and staff, particularly within environmental foundations.²²

Responding to criticisms around a lack of diversity, some progressive funders initiated new hiring and training practices for their staff, including a strategy of creating an "activist-funder" role among program officers in foundations. These activist-funders are program officers in the foundations that have a prior history of organizing and may even have a background working directly in the environmental justice movement. **Activist-funders working within large, well-endowed foundations may be uniquely positioned to work within the philanthropic community in order to organize fellow program officers and foundation leadership who can advance more systemic change within their respective foundations and across the sector.** As McCarthy (2004) has shown, this role is much more focused on altering funders and grantmaking priorities to align the foundation goals more toward EJ core values than on changing grantee activities.²³ Many activist-funders admit that it is a delicate negotiation navigating between board member resistance and the most oppositional EJ grantee work. In order to avoid resistance from board and staff, activist-funders have to be creative with how they "sell" the work of EJ groups to secure board commitments, often "sneaking them in the backdoor." The negotiations necessary for some activist-funders to gain buy-in from board and staff present another problematic issue with social justice grantmaking: administrators and bureaucrats interpret the needs, wants and activities of the EJ movement on their tacit understanding of what EJ is (or should be). Thus, these issues are not defined or characterized by the active movement leaders and grassroots groups working on the frontlines.²⁴ In Harrison's 2016 study, "Bureaucrats' Tacit Understandings and Social Movement Policy Implementation: Unpacking the Deviation of Agency Environmental Justice Programs from EJ Movement Priorities," the author makes the argument that even with government agency commitments and training, staff in charge of EJ grantmaking understand EJ movement directives differently than activists. They have views of "key movement concepts that differ from those of advocates."²⁵ Thus having explicit definitions and goals around what is meant by environmental justice across the philanthropic sector may be a useful guidepost for future grantmaking.

In recent years, the philanthropic sector has increasingly shown interest in supporting issues of equity, race, and climate justice led by grassroots and frontline groups. Unfortunately, this increased interest has not necessarily translated into significantly increased funding. McCarthy concludes that despite some examples of co-optation and channeling, or different understandings of movement priorities, **the biggest threat to the viability of the EJ movement is a general underfunding of the movement and the procedural constraints that make it difficult for grassroots groups to engage with funders,** comply with grant guidelines and, yet, stay close to core movement activities.²⁶ Despite the work of activist-funders and the efforts of progressive foundations to embrace the core values of the grassroots EJ movement, the movement is still the lowest funded of all environmental grantmaking areas. According to a report from the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, only 15 percent of environmental grant dollars were dedicated to marginalized communities, and only 11 percent could be classified as "social justice" grants from 2007 to 2009. However, even these estimates include grants to organizations with annual budgets above one million which does not describe the majority of EJ organizations.²⁷

Participatory approaches to grant-making decisions are one way of bridging the divide between funders and EJ groups that has also been tried in philanthropy.²⁸ These approaches invite stakeholders outside the foundation staff, including grassroots group representatives, to identify potential grantees, shape funding strategies, and make funding decisions. Another way to increase funding to the grassroots is to provide more resources for the infrastructure that builds grassroots environmental organizations, including providing small groups with professional development training, media support, free or low-cost office and meeting space, and technical support²⁹ There are recent cases where philanthropic institutions experimented with these more inclusive grant-making strategies.³⁰ However, the misalignment between grassroots groups and funders persists despite these forays into participatory processes.

Decidedly, more research is needed to fully understand the driving factors that undergird this complex and diverse sector. McCarthy concludes in her study that future research should look at the relationship between foundation grantmaking procedures and grantee autonomy over decision-making processes to better understand the impact on specific grassroots activities.³¹ Harrison observes that there should be more extensive ethnographic studies related to understanding and identifying the inter-organizational dynamics and processes that make grant-making staff negotiate conflicts between groups and demands of board and other staff.³² This research fits within these calls for further studies by taking a closer look at the perceptions of misalignment between environmental funders and the frontline organizations in two regions.

Model for Successful Alignment: The Gulf Coast Fund and Participatory Grantmaking

The Gulf Coast Fund for Community Renewal and Ecological Health was formed in 2005 as a special project of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors in the weeks after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The Gulf Coast Fund was a collaborative partnership between funders and grassroots leaders from across the region, and was created to resource, connect, and amplify the work of grassroots, community-based organizations in the most vulnerable communities and ecosystems. The Fund was led by an Advisory Group made up of community leaders engaged in work that addressed not only the effects of natural and human-made disasters in the region, but in social and environmental justice efforts that strengthened civil society in order to address the underlying inequality and ecological destruction that led to the severity of disasters in the Gulf Coast.



Methodology

Research Questions & Design

This study employed a mixed method, qualitative case study design to explore the issues of misaligned funding between EJ organizations in the Upper Midwest and the Gulf South regions and environmental grant makers in the respective regions. The study set out to identify the funding allocated to EJ groups in the regions as well as the priority areas of work for EJ groups and environmental funders in each region. It also explored the barriers to increased funding to EJ groups, and opportunities for overcoming these barriers from the perspective of EJ groups (potential grantees) and environmental funders (grantors).

The research team included the BEA Research Working Group Committee co-chairs, Dr. Antonio Lopez and Dr. Andrew Rosenberg, regional BEA representatives, and researchers from The New School's Tishman Environment & Design Center led by Dr. Ana Baptista. The study team included critical regional EJ leaders, specifically: Colette Pinchon, JD, and Matthew Kennedy, from the Gulf Coast Center for Law and Policy, and Jasmine Becerra from Little Village Environmental Justice Organization in Chicago. These regional points of contact ensured that the research assumptions, questions and methods were pertinent to the aims of the overall study and relevant and responsive to the needs of EJ communities in each region. Even the definitions used to structure the research team's analysis, such as the definition of an "environmental justice" or "grassroots" organization was critical in developing the questions and conducting the analysis of findings. This team worked through an iterative and collaborative process on all aspects of the research design and implementation. The involvement of field researchers was integral to the project, helping to ensure greater response rates from interview subjects and providing extensive knowledge of the regions, EJ organizations, and the regional philanthropic sector. The design of this study, using multiple points of contact, in academia, the BEA, and in the EJ sector, allowed for greater construct validity and data triangulation. It also served as a productive outlet for testing study assumptions and clarifying meanings together throughout the study process. One of the aims of this research is to share this study design in the hopes that it may serve as one model for conducting similar field assessments in the future with the direct involvement and under the guidance of the EJ sector.

The primary methods of data collection for this study included (1) in-depth, semi-structured interviews, (2) document analysis, and (3) online database and website content review. The selection of EJ groups and funders to include in the study was based on purposeful and snowball sampling. Data from interviews was triangulated with funding data from The Foundation Center database and content analysis of funder websites. Data from regional funders was also supplemented with data derived from select national funders with relevant links to funding EJ groups or regional initiatives.

Interview Methodology

Foundations

The team identified 32 regional and national foundations for inclusion in the study. The criteria for selecting foundations for the study included consideration of the following:

- (1) foundations that fund environmental initiatives in the two target regions;
- (2) foundations that participate in the BEA either as an active participant (part of committees) or directly fund the BEA and/or BEA participants;
- (3) foundations that have specific programs or funding strategies targeted to environmental justice, climate justice, or related issue areas.

Requests for interviews were sent to 32 foundations identified using these criteria and 14 agreed to be interviewed. The response rate for the foundation interview requests was 44 percent.

EJ organizations

EJ organizations included in the study were identified using the BEA participant organizational contacts, organizations identified by the team's field researchers and snowball sampling (asking existing contacts for additional points of contact). There were 35 EJ groups identified by the project team. These 35 organizations were invited to participate in an interview and 19 agreed. The response rate for EJ organizations was 54 percent.

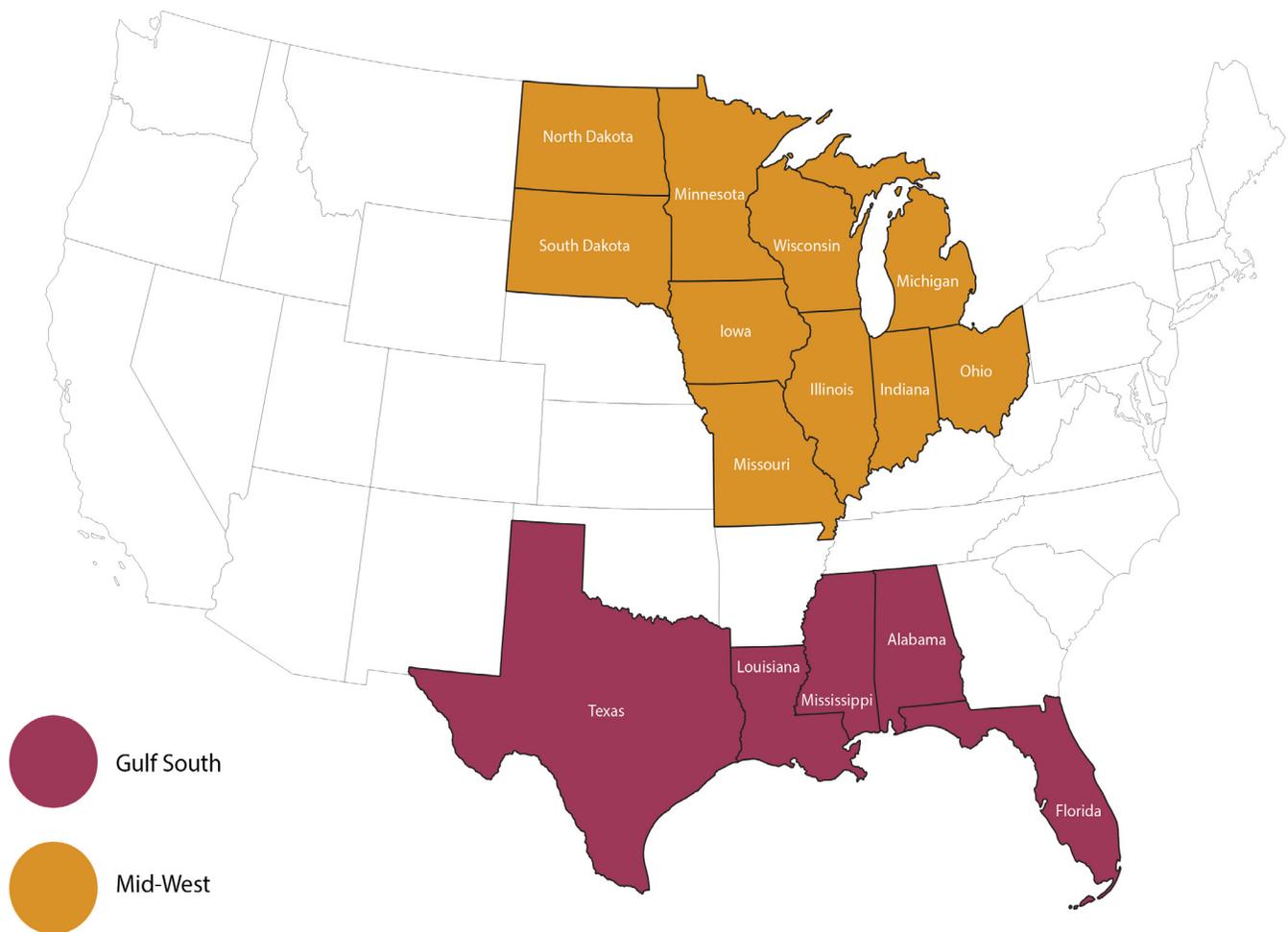
Groups were defined as an “Environmental Justice Organization” using the BEA’s definition of “grassroots” groups³³ and a shared definition based on our collective understanding of the makeup of the environmental justice sector. (Refer to table 1 for the Definition) For the purposes of this study, the term “EJ organization” is used to identify organizations that may self-identify as environmental justice, climate justice, frontline, and/or grassroots groups, reflecting a broad range of work.

Table 1: Study Definition of Environmental Justice Organization

Organizational leadership is based in the community and the community has been defined with some geographic or identity-based definitions. These organizations represent communities that are historically and systematically overburdened by pollution and climate change. The mission or values of the organization are grounded in justice principles such as Jemez Principles or environmental justice principles. These organizations are rooted in, accountable to, and representative of communities of color, low-income communities, and tribal and Indigenous groups who are most directly impacted by the issues being addressed. They are committed to building local power and leadership to influence the decisions that affect their communities.

Interviews with EJ organizations and the regional foundations were conducted by the team of EJ field researchers and BEA co-chairs based in each region to ensure better response rates. Interviews with national foundations were conducted by the Tishman Center Principal Investigator and the BEA co-chair. Figure 1 depicts the states in each region where research was conducted. In total, 33 interviews were completed, of which 19 were with EJ organizations and the remaining 14 were with national or regional foundations.

Figure 1: States in Gulf South and Midwest Included in Study



Grant Awards Research Methodology

Data on grant awards were researched for each of the 32 foundations included in the study using the [Foundation Center Directory Online](#).³⁴ The Foundation Center Directory is a searchable online database of more than 103,000 foundations in the U.S. The database categorizes grant giving by year, sector, activity, and details the dollar amounts and organizations receiving funding. The 32 foundations identified by the study team were searched, and 28 foundations had available data online. Fourteen foundations participated in interviews out of 32 requests (Table 2).

The response rate for national funder interviews was much higher (67 percent) than regional funders (30 percent). There was a particularly low response rate for regional funders in the Gulf South (25 percent). The response rate for Midwest funders was 33 percent. Two foundations in the Midwest and two foundations in the Gulf South participated in an interview but did not have data available for environmental grant giving in the Foundation Center database for 2016-2017. The higher response rates for national funders may be attributable to sampling bias since the study targeted national funders with some connection to or familiarity with the BEA and EJ funding, thus making them more willing to share insights and experiences with the issues of funding alignment with the grassroots. In some of the responses where regional foundations declined to participate, they cited a lack of staff knowledge on the topic, a lack of focus or funding specific to grassroots groups, or uncertainty about the relevance of their programs or points of contact. Of the eight foundations contacted for interviews in the Gulf South, only two responded, and these two were familiar with the regional team researchers. The other 6 foundations did not reply to requests. This lack of response in the Gulf South may be attributable to the nature of environmental foundations in the region, which may be less focused on grassroots groups, less aware of environmental justice issues or groups or generally more conservative in their approach to environmental funding.

Table 2: Foundations Researched by Region

Region	Foundation Center Data	Interviewed	Requests for Interviews
National	12	8	12
Midwest	10	4	12
Gulf South	6	2	8
TOTAL	28	14	32

Data about the organizations receiving environmental grant funding and the dollar amounts were collected for all grant awards categorized under the term “environment” for 2016-2017, the most recent year with data available for most foundations. The organizations receiving funding from the 28 foundations were then categorized as either an “EJ organization” or “EJ intermediary,” using the shared definitions developed by the research team.

In addition to the “environment” category, the Foundation Center also assigns each grant a primary subject category.³⁵ “Environmental Justice” is a primary subject category under the “environment” category that defines grant activities deemed “environmental justice”. The data on organizations receiving funding and grant dollars under this sub category of “environmental justice” activity was also collected.

Table 3: Foundation Center Definition of Environmental Justice Activity

Activities seeking to ensure the fair distribution of benefits, hazards and burdens related to the environment among all peoples and communities regardless of wealth, ethnicity or geographical location, especially in relation to industrial emissions or accidents, agricultural activities, land use and planning, and weather events with deleterious effects on the quality and availability of water, air, soil, food, wildlife and other natural resources. Also the study, theoretical and applied, of these issues.³⁶

Interestingly, most of the organizations awarded grants under the “EJ activity” subject category, did not meet the definition of “EJ organization” developed by the research team. Thus, in this study, these grant dollars are reported separately, according to the categorization of organizations receiving these grants. For the purpose of this study, the categorization of organizations was the principle criteria for searching grant dollar allocation, regardless of activity. This is because the research questions are focused on the environmental grantmaking flowing to EJ organizations and the EJ movement broadly rather than EJ activities, which can be claimed and carried out by organizations outside the EJ movement. This difference highlights the importance of definitional distinctions in tracing the amount of

funding flowing to environmental justice. The study definition clearly defines an “EJ organization” and only considers a grant as “EJ” if it is going to an EJ organization or EJ intermediary.

Table 4: Study Definition of EJ Intermediary Organization

Organizations that support and are made up of members of grassroots, frontline, and community based EJ groups. These groups may provide funding, act as a fiscal sponsor, and/or serve as a central point for coalition, movement, and alliance building activities at scales beyond the local level. In addition, intermediaries’ work is not tied to a specific local geographic community but to that of shared membership mission or vision. EJ intermediaries adhere to justice principles and have leadership within their board or organizational structure from their representative membership groups, including grassroots, local organizations. These groups are typically committed to strengthening the work of their members at the grassroots, local level and are accountable to and led by communities of color, low-income communities, and/or tribal and Indigenous-led organizations.

Limitations

There were a number of limitations associated with the study methodology which are important to note. First, the environmental justice organizations and foundations included in the study do not represent an exhaustive list of relevant organizations in the two regions. The EJ groups may be difficult to access because of limited staffing capacity; it may be difficult for the research team to identify organizations that are smaller or less visible in the region or to determine if these groups meet the terms of the study team’s EJ definition. In order to account for these limitations, BEA participant EJ groups in the Gulf South and Midwest were asked to member-check the list of EJ organizations identified by the research team, and snowball sampling was used to identify additional groups for inclusion in the study.

Secondly, the study may be underestimating funding that flows to EJ groups via intermediaries or via funding that falls outside the “environmental” category. Many foundations provide grants to intermediary groups that sub-grant to smaller EJ member organizations. Researchers were unable to account for the funding dollars reported by The Foundation Center that flow from intermediaries to the grassroots sector because this funding is not tracked in terms of pass through recipients. This study also does not include an exhaustive list of funders in the region or funding that may be allocated to EJ organizations under other categories of giving beyond the environment category. Third, most of the funder interviews conducted were with foundations identified as national, not regional. Sampling bias likely played a role in the higher response rates for national funders with an openness to discussing the issues of environmental justice, racial equity, and funding misalignment. Lastly, relationships with funders and funding strategies are sensitive topics for many EJ organizations, as is the issue of racism and funding disparities within philanthropy for funders. It is possible, some EJ respondents and foundation staff were not comfortable being interviewed or being completely forthcoming about the nature of funder relationships and the reasons underlying foundation decisions due to these sensitivities. In addition, EJ groups might be guarded about their funding sources and relationships.



Findings

PHILANTHROPIC GRANTMAKING ALIGNMENT

One clear measure of alignment between the goals of environmental funders and EJ organizations is the funding granted to EJ groups in comparison to other groups, like mainstream environmental organizations. The literature demonstrates philanthropic funding disparities exist between mainstream environmental groups and EJ organizations, and this study confirmed this pattern among the funders studied both nationally and in the two target regions. The relative amounts of funding flowing to EJ groups reflects something about the value and prioritization that philanthropy places on the work of EJ groups.

In order to assess the funding priorities of the philanthropic sector in relation to EJ organizations, a snapshot of the most recent annual grantmaking awards from 2016-2017 was compiled using the Foundation Directory database of grants.³⁷ Additionally, in-depth interviews with foundation and EJ organization staff provided more nuanced information about the funding strategies, particularly the distinctions between funding that flows to EJ groups, and intermediary groups. Definitions of the terms environmental justice or environmental justice organizations vary widely in both literature and in practice. These definitional differences can hinder the ability to account for divergences in funding. In interviews, foundations were asked if they have a formal definition of grassroots or environmental justice organizations and if they track funding according to these terms. **Of the 14 foundations interviewed, none reported having a formal, explicit definition of environmental justice organizations.**³⁸ Four reported that while they do not have a formal definition, they use a shared, informal definition that they apply in practice. In some cases, foundations may fund project activities or programs they consider to have EJ aims but that are not carried out by EJ organizations. This may result in foundations attributing funding to EJ purposes broadly without accounting for whether the organization receiving funding is representative of groups in the EJ movement.

National Funders Grantmaking

Between 2016 - 2017, the 12 national foundations in the study awarded a **total of \$1.34 billion of environmental grantmaking dollars to environmental organizations and about 1.3 percent (\$18 million) of this was awarded to EJ organizations**, as defined by the study team. An estimated \$11 million of environmental grant dollars was awarded to EJ “activities” as defined by the Foundation Center. **Of the EJ “activities” dollars, 9 percent (\$930,000) went to EJ organizations and 91 percent (\$9,994,000) went to non-EJ organizations.** Figure 2 compares the funding awarded to non-EJ organizations vs. EJ organizations.³⁹

Figure 2: EJ vs. Non-EJ Grant Giving for 12 National Foundations (2016-2017)



Overall the funding disparities between EJ organizations and non-EJ organizations or mainstream environmental organizations are stark. The data reveals that only an **estimated \$18 million of grants from the 12 national funders made it to 25 EJ organizations and 18 EJ intermediaries while the remaining \$1.32 billion went to approximately 1,230 non-EJ organizations.** The average award to non-EJ organizations was \$528,500, compared to an average award for EJ organizations of \$223,100.

Additionally, this data showed that **of the one percent of grant dollars going to EJ organizations, 36 percent went to intermediaries**. The Foundation Center database does not track how much of the funding that is awarded to intermediaries is re-granted to EJ groups that may be among their membership. Thus, there may be an under-estimation of the total number of EJ groups receiving grants, but the total amount of funding distributed remains the same.

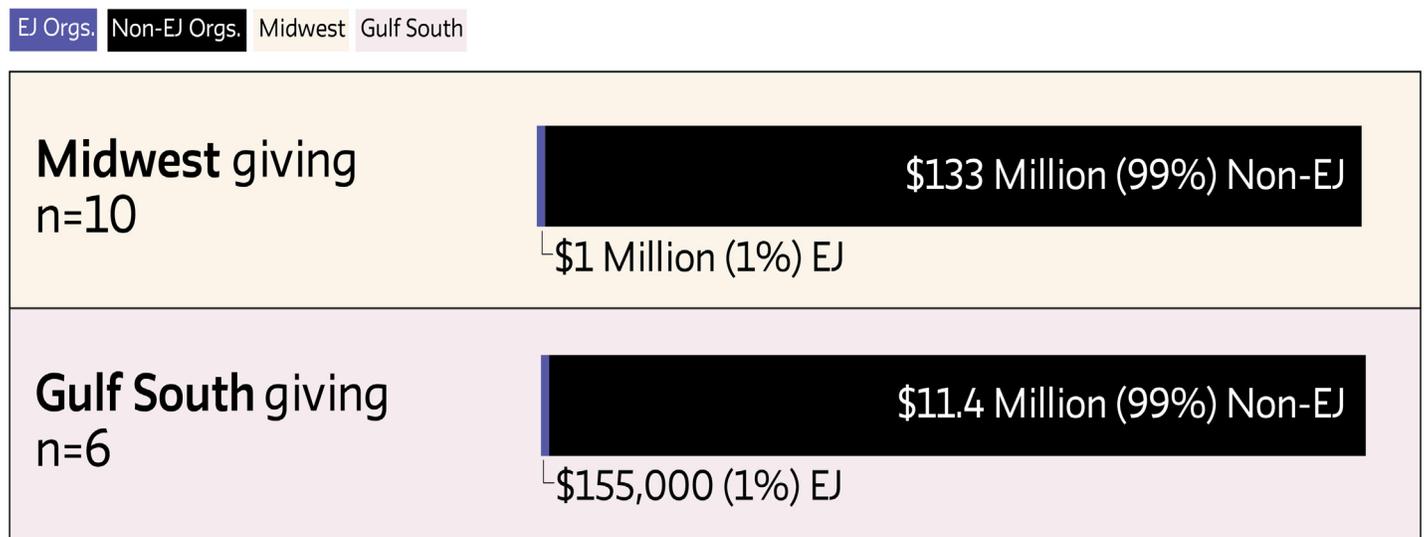
In contrast to the Foundation Center’s data, interviews with national and regional foundation staff revealed less stark funding disparities. During interviews, foundation staff estimated giving between 5-80 percent of their environmental portfolio to EJ organizations. The majority of foundations reported giving between 5-15 percent of their portfolio to EJ organizations. One national funder reported giving over fifty percent of their program’s funding to EJ groups and two national funders said that they did not track this data. As stated previously, many of the foundation staff interviewed did not have a formal definition of an EJ organization, thus their estimations were not used to track annual giving.

The discrepancy between the allocation of funding reported by the foundation staff during interviews and the data collected from the Foundation Center database (using the study team’s definition of EJ) may be attributable to a variety of reasons. The discrepancy may be due to differences in how foundation staff define EJ activities and EJ organizations. They may be using a broader definition of an EJ organization than the one used by the study team, or they may be attributing EJ funding to activities carried out by groups that may not fit the study team’s definition of an EJ organization. It may also be that the foundations interviewed have implemented shifts in their giving in more recent fiscal years, after the 2016-2017 period that are not yet reflected in the Foundation Center’s database. Lastly, some foundations may be giving grants to EJ groups under a different category of funding outside of environmental grantmaking altogether, such as civic organizing or economic development.

Regional Funders Grantmaking

Data from the Foundation Center was also used to compare the amount of funding that regional funders dispersed to non-EJ organizations vs. EJ organizations. Data was available from the Foundation Center Directory for ten Midwest foundations and six Gulf South foundations, represented in Figure 3. The regional funders follow a similar pattern as national funders, with the majority of their environmental grant funding allocated to non-EJ organizations.⁴⁰ It is important to note that some of these regional funders provide grants to organizations in other parts of the country as well.

Figure 3: EJ vs. Non-EJ Organizations Receiving Grants from Midwest and Gulf South Funders



In 2016-2017, the ten Midwest funders gave approximately \$134 million in environmental grants and the six Gulf South funders gave approximately \$12 million in environmental grants. **In the Midwest, of the \$134 million in environmental grant dollars given, approximately \$1 million went to EJ organizations, with about half of that going to EJ groups in the region.** Six percent of this \$1 million allotted to EJ organizations went to several intermediaries. The remaining \$133 million went to non-EJ organizations, including approximately \$65 million to environmental organizations in the region.

In the Gulf South, six foundations awarded approximately \$12 million total in 2016-2017, with an **estimated \$155,000 allocated to EJ organizations** of which almost all stayed in the Gulf South. Of the \$155,000, 13 percent went to one EJ intermediary. These comparisons support the notion that **EJ groups receive significantly less environmental grant funding from both regional and national funders in comparison to their non-EJ counterparts.**

EJ Organizational Structure and Funding

A total of 19 (nine in the MW and 10 in the GS) EJ organizations in the two regions participated in interviews and shared information about their structure, size, and funding. The EJ organizations participating in the study were relatively smaller in staff size and budget as compared to non-EJ organizations yet are representative of the size and budget of many EJ organizations across the country, particularly in these two regions.⁴¹ In the Gulf South, staff sizes ranged from zero full-time staff members to approximately 27 staff members. Midwest staff sizes ranged from 0 to 14 full-time staff members. It is estimated that Gulf South EJ organizations have an average annual budget of \$1.2 million and Midwest EJ organizations have an estimated average annual budget of \$471,500.⁴² These annual budgets represent funding from a variety of sources, including funders outside of the Gulf South and Midwest.

Table 5: Staff Size and Budget of EJ Organizations Interviewed

Region	Gulf South	Midwest
Staff Size Range	0-27	0-14
Annual Budget Average	\$1.2 Million	\$471,500

The majority of **EJ organizations interviewed reported relying heavily on support from private foundations**, saying that this was where most of their funding was obtained. A few groups get a small percentage of funding from government grants or member dues. The EJ groups included in this study reflect a common pattern of reliance on philanthropic foundation funding for EJ work. Despite being a fraction of the overall environmental grantmaking by foundations, the little funding that is allocated to EJ organizations is vitally important to sustaining EJ grassroots groups.



ALIGNMENT OF PRIORITY ISSUE AREAS

One of the underlying assumptions implicit in the question of misalignment between the funding strategies of philanthropy and the work of EJ organizations is the idea that environmental funders prioritize work similar to the work EJ organizations are carrying out on the ground. This implies that, despite an alignment in the priority issues of importance to the two groups, the funding is not well aligned. In order to test this assumption about priority areas of strategic focus, both foundation websites and interviews with foundations and EJ organizations were examined.

Priority Issues for Foundations

Although grant awards are the primary way that a foundation expresses its priorities and strategic focus, another way is the explicit commitment to specific areas of work or program strategies articulated by foundations. Foundation interviewees (12) were asked to describe the priority issue areas in their respective environmental portfolios. Foundation websites (32) were also explored to triangulate the priority issues identified in interviews and the articulation of priority grant areas.

There was significant variety in the issues foundations named as priorities during interviews and culled from websites. A total of **12 foundations mentioned climate change and energy (i.e. clean, renewable and efficiency)**. **Ten foundations mentioned economic and racial equity** (normally in tandem) as a priority issue area, including three foundations from the Gulf South, four from the Midwest, and three national foundations. In the Gulf South, the two foundations interviewed identified **water, sustainability, and coastal resilience** as priority issue areas. In the Midwest, foundations mentioned an extensive list of priority issue areas, some of which were also mentioned on their websites, including **economic justice, clean water, capacity for grassroots organizations, and research and policy**.

Priority Issue Areas for EJ Organizations

Similar to foundations, EJ organizational priorities included a diverse set of environmental and climate issues. The determination of EJ organizational priorities was primarily ascertained via interviews with organizational staff (19) who were asked to explicitly list the key areas of work for their respective groups.

The interviews with EJ groups in both regions revealed that all the groups consider **community organizing and engagement** in some form a key part of the work they do across many issues. EJ staff used a variety of terms including **movement building, base building, community organizing, community knowledge, civic participation, and voter engagement** to describe their engagement with community members. For all the EJ organizations included in the study, a substantive and deep engagement in their respective communities was fundamental to their mission, structure, and purpose. This community-centered approach to environmental and climate work distinguishes EJ organizations from many mainstream environmental groups and informs the way in which they implement their work across a variety of priority areas. Table 6 summarizes some of the specific issues raised by EJ organizations interviewed.

Table 6: Regional Priority Issue Areas for EJ Organizations

Priorities for Gulf South EJ Organizations	Priorities for Midwest EJ Organizations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coastal Resilience • Alleviating Poverty • Organizing • Direct Action • Economic Justice • Climate Mitigation and Adaptation • Civic Engagement, Political Participation and Self-Governance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth Leadership • Movement Building • Civic Participation • Economic Justice • Climate Change • Community Knowledge • Water Initiatives • Renewable Energy & Weatherization • Indigenous Food & Rights • Food Justice and Food Sovereignty • Community Asset Development • Air Pollution/Quality

Gulf South

Organizations throughout the Gulf South highlighted a number of issue areas that were most salient to their organizations. They discussed issues of **self-governance, alleviating poverty, organizing their community, and direct-action engagement. Economic and workforce development** was mentioned by two organizations, particularly for African American farmers and the agricultural community. Four of the ten organizations in the Gulf South talked about **economic justice**. One organization said they were focused on climate mitigation and adaptation planning in their region. Finally, three organizations talked about their work around **voting rights, civic engagement, political participation and/or self-governance**. The importance of organizing their community around issues of environmental and economic justice was a clear thread that was prevalent in discussions with most of the EJ Gulf South organizations.

Midwest

For Midwest EJ organizations, interviewees discussed a number of intersecting issue areas they prioritize. Similar to the Gulf South, six out of nine Midwest organizations mentioned the importance of **movement building, community knowledge, or civic participation**. In addition, five organizations talked about their work with **youth leadership** or youth mentoring programs. Four organizations talked about **water** initiatives and the importance of access to **clean, affordable drinking water**. Four organizations discussed initiatives around **renewable energy** or weatherization and three organizations discussed **Indigenous food or Indigenous rights, food justice, or food sovereignty**. Organizations also talked about **economic justice, community asset development, air pollution and air quality, and climate change**.

Figure 4 shows that while there is a great deal of diversity of priorities, there is important overlap with approximately **10 priority areas including: civic participation, movement building/community organizing, youth leadership, water initiatives, renewable energy, economic and racial justice/workforce development, Indigenous rights, food justice, coastal resiliency and climate adaptation, air quality, and climate change**. In the Gulf South, both sectors discussed the importance of **climate adaptation and coastal resilience**. In the Midwest, EJ organizations discussed **economic justice** while philanthropy cited **economic mobility**.

Civic participation, movement building, youth mentorship, and economic and racial justice were some of the most mentioned priority issue areas for EJ organizations. Movement building and youth mentorship/leadership came up less frequently for foundations. Climate change and clean energy was the most cited priority issue area for funders. Funders frequently cited economic and racial justice as priority issue areas, and five foundations specifically highlighted the importance of supporting grassroots organizations led by people of color. **Funders prioritizing economic and racial justice and supporting grassroots organizations led by people of color are primed to lead efforts within philanthropy to increase funding, resources, and relationship building with EJ organizations in their respective regions. They represent important allies in helping to create shared goals and strategies with EJ organizations.**



Figure 4: Priority Issue Areas for EJ Organizations and Funders

Organizations	Funders
Civic Participation and Democracy	Clean Energy and Climate Change
Movement Building/Community Organizing/ Community Engagement/Community Knowledge	Economic/Racial Equity
Youth Leadership/Mentoring	Ecosystem Preservation/Biodiversity/Natural Resources
Economic and Racial Justice, Alleviating Poverty	Research Policy and Advocacy
Water Initiatives	Green Infrastructure, Sustainable Design
Renewable Energy	Capacity-Building for Grassroots Orgs.
Workforce Development	Education
Direct Action	Resiliency
Indigenous Rights	Movement Building/Community Organizing/ Community Engagement
Food Justice	Clean Transportation and Air Quality
Coastal Resiliency and Climate Adaptation	Coastal Restoration and Ocean Preservation
Community Asset Development	Clean and Affordable Drinking Water
Air Quality	Civic Participation and Democracy
Climate Change	Environmental/Climate Justice
	Workforce and Professional Development
	Youth Mentorship
	Indigenous Rights
	Food Justice
	Land Use
	Public Health

Figure 4: The order in which the priorities are listed reflects the frequency that the issue was mentioned. The higher the priority falls, the more frequently it was mentioned. The colors correspond to aligned priorities across the two sectors. Priorities that are highlighted in the same color were explicitly mentioned by both the EJ organizations and funders at least once and show sectoral alignment. In some cases, multiple priority issues appear as the same color because researchers felt there was overlap in the meaning or purpose of the issue area.

Examining priority issues and determining whether these issues align across the two sectors is difficult to definitively ascertain because the articulation of these priorities is sufficiently broad so as to encompass a wide range of projects, grants, and activities. The interpretation of what a funder means by “climate change” versus what an EJ organization means, can diverge significantly. These general priority areas can translate into diverse programs and expressions of funding strategies set by each foundation and each EJ organization.

Another limitation in determining issue alignment, is problem identification. For instance, while both groups may identify climate change as a priority issue, EJ organizations may see this issue as a problem fundamentally linked to racial and economic inequality, while foundations may see it as a technological or market failure problem. Each sector’s underlying assumptions about the root cause of issues requiring attention or funding may diverge significantly even when the language used is similar. These two sectors may also articulate and address the same issues very differently. **EJ respondents emphasized the intersectionality of priority issue areas, discussing the connections between economic**

empowerment, community engagement, social justice, and environmental priorities. Foundations, on the other hand, define discrete environmental issues in their portfolios. These foundations may, in turn, not perceive the work of EJ organizations as distinctly ‘environmental’ or aligned with their portfolios. The vast range of intersectional issues that EJ organizations prioritize may best serve the needs of vulnerable communities, but foundations may perceive this as unfocused or believe that it spreads groups too thin to be successful. One funder did recognize that funding based on “issue siloing” missed out on opportunities and that the issues being tackled by EJ groups are “inherently multi-issue”.⁴³

Model for Successful Alignment: Collaborative Events for Aligned Strategy

Since the inception of the BEA, efforts have been made to expand opportunities for EJ groups and funders to gain a deeper understanding and alignment of issues important to both groups. The following events represent two instances when both sectors came together to achieve a shared understanding of an issue and to devise aligned strategies and explore funding opportunities.

- [It Takes Roots Funder Briefing, Solidarity to Solutions \(Sol2Sol\) Week in 2018](#): Funder briefing hosted by It Takes Roots in response to the Global Climate Action Summit, highlighting Indigenous peoples’ and frontline communities’ solutions to interconnected crises and challenging market-based schemes.
- [Clean Power Plan Gathering Hosted by the BEA, Southwest Workers Union, and Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Series \(TEJAS\) in Houston, TX in 2016](#): For two days, grassroots, green NGO, and philanthropic leaders from over 100 organizations focused their discussions on building alignment to meet long-standing environmental justice demands that national climate policy reduce emissions in frontline communities. The forum featured EJ-led trainings and invited tough dialogues on equity, funding disparities, and environmental movement building.



call was with a foundation after they had been rejected for a grant, and how this conversation provided significant feedback and helped build a trusting relationship. Strong relationships with a trusted philanthropic partner can lead to both sustainable funding sources and greater access to other crucial resources, such as access to government officials, policy-makers, technical information, and the larger philanthropic sector. Additionally, relationships provide access to closed-door meetings where decisions are often made that have implications for issues of importance to both sectors.

Foundations discussed misperceptions around how decisions within foundations are made. For instance, at many foundations the board or family make the final decision on the allocation of grant dollars. The program officers often only make recommendations. Foundations recognize that their existing, internal structures may make the grant application processes difficult to access or understand, particularly for those without a “backdoor” or inside connection.

In addition, EJ respondents discussed the difficulty for EJ staff to travel to events and meetings where foundation staff can be found and how this was related to access to resources, information, and power. Further, by not being able to attend these events and represent the EJ perspective directly from the grassroots, crucial insights may be missed and priorities can often be shaped by those whose views reinforce the thinking already within philanthropy. The closed nature of philanthropy coupled with the under-resourcing of EJ organizations means that there are fewer opportunities for the two sectors to access innovative or challenging ideas across both sectors.

Again, they [EJ staff] have okay relationships with some of these [foundation] staff, but the grassroots can't always afford to get to the places that these funders hang out in. They have invite-only meetings.
- Grassroots Activist 8

Funders shared how building a strong relationship influenced their prioritization and funding strategies. More often, **interviewees cited more positive relationships with local and state foundations or family foundations**, as compared to national foundations that may be more removed from the groups on the ground. EJ respondents also discussed examples of some of the best relationships they have in regards to raising funds are with an intermediary network and not directly with the funders themselves.

Capacity

The theme of capacity was mentioned by both sectors, but more frequently by EJ organizations than funders in terms of the limitations faced across a variety of programmatic and organizational dimensions, including staffing, administrative infrastructure, development, communications, technical resources, strategic planning, and scale of work at the state and national levels. This concern about lack of capacity was also expressed by foundations in terms of their organizational capacity, specifically programmatic staffing, as well as their capacity on issue expertise, administrative processes and evaluation metrics. While both sectors suffer from capacity limitations, this is an area where EJ organizations are clearly more impacted. These capacity issues are in part due to the documented under-resourcing of smaller, multi-issue EJ organizations that are stretched to meet the needs of under-resourced communities where they face disparities across economic, environmental, and social dimensions.

EJ respondents specifically discussed the types of capacity needs that would help them better connect with funders such as **development staff expertise and support, communications and social media tools and staffing, support to participate in networks and alliances, and general operating funds for organizational sustainability**. Some funders also stated that they understand how a local, grassroots organization may not have the capacity to focus on grant writing and development, especially when these organizations are focused on immediate issues like asthma and pollution. EJ groups discussed feeling pressured to “chase the money” instead of focusing on community needs. Foundations, on the other hand, also recognize that larger, traditional environmental organizations can be nimbler and more responsive to specific funder requests and RFPs because of much greater resource and staffing capacity as well as communications infrastructure that helps them hone and polish their messages. Many EJ groups reflected on the challenge of receiving small grants for specific project work that does not cover the full costs of general operating and staffing needs to sustain groups. These capacity issues, in turn, shape foundation perceptions about the ability of EJ organizations to carry out larger grant goals.

And I think there's this myth that there's this magical point at which non-profits become sustainable...funders are expecting us to do way more than they would expect from a traditional business, or from a bigger more established nonprofit, the expectation that grassroots are going to be way more passionate ...is profoundly unjust.

- Grassroots Activist 14

Foundation respondents also discussed limitations to their capacity which can create barriers to better alignment as well. For instance, one major foundation discussed the difficulty in funding local organizations because of their own limited staffing capacity to establish relationships with many EJ organizations that are too numerous and dispersed for them to reach. One foundation stated that they only have the capacity to develop expertise and relationships in one or two states, where they can have credibility and a good sense of the issues and players on the ground.

...For me, I know I go to any state, and people will think, 'Hey, it's [Blank Foundation], great.' But, if I'm being honest, I can't tell one group from the other. - Funder 9

Another important area impacting capacity is the issue of fiscal misalignment. Two foundation respondents discussed a standard operational rule of thumb used by many foundations: that their **grants cannot be more than 25 percent of an organization's total annual budget**. For a national foundation with large minimum size grant amounts, such as \$250,000/year, any organization that has an annual budget of less than \$1 million would be disqualified from direct funding consideration.

That is common practice...you don't want to fund more than 20 percent to 30 percent of an organization's budget. -Funder 14

Foundations may fear that smaller EJ organizations do not have the administrative experience or capacity to handle very large grants or that the organization will become overly dependent on the foundation for their sustainability. This creates a feedback loop where small EJ organizations are not able to access larger grants to build up their general infrastructure over time and overcome this fiscal barrier.

... when we begin to fund an EJ organization, especially if they're small, there are several limits on how much money we can give them. It's something that isn't well known or understood and it can be challenging to explain, or we never get the chance to explain because assumptions are made about why more money isn't being offered.

- Funder 3

Intermediaries

Intermediary organizations play an important role in filling capacity needs for both funders and EJ organizations at the local, grassroots level. Intermediaries arose as an important point of discussion during interviews by both funders and EJ organizations. EJ Intermediaries are often organizations that act as a grouping (in the form of a network, coalition, or alliance) of smaller, local members that form a larger affinity of similarly oriented groups at the state, national, or regional levels or based on particular issue or identity affiliations. (See Intermediaries definition in Table 4). **Intermediaries were shown to receive 35 percent of the funding granted to EJ organizations by environmental funders included in the study.** Some intermediaries that receive funding use these grants for their own organizational or programmatic needs in order to serve a specific role at a scale that supports the work of local, member groups (i.e. they represent member interests in Washington DC). Others act as a conduit for larger grant funds that are then passed on to members for locally based, grassroots work. Some intermediary organizations serve both of these functions.

The EJ movement has seen a growth in network, coalition, and alliance groups that bring smaller member groups together and are able to secure larger grants, from national foundations in particular. EJ Intermediaries can overcome the capacity issue of the 25 percent budget ratio and are often perceived as groups that can carry out larger scale work than their more local, grassroots members. It also solves one of the capacity issues that foundations cite, which is that program officers can interact with and manage just a handful of intermediary relationships more easily than dozens of contacts with multiple local member groups. It relieves the foundation staff from having to establish relationships with many groups, instead relying on the knowledge and networks of the intermediaries to navigate the issue of group identification and legitimacy. Ideally, the intermediaries also relieve pressure on the capacity issues of smaller EJ groups by helping them find and secure

funding from national funders. They can also help EJ groups make their local work more visible to funders and ideally direct and shape the strategies and policies for issues that are important to them at a scale beyond the local communities where they are based.

While intermediary organizations serve an important function, both sectors expressed some reservations about the role that intermediaries play in shaping funding decisions. **Intermediaries act as a gatekeeper, determining which grassroots organizations have access to funders and which organizations receive pass-through grants.** Funders can become overly reliant on these groups and detached from the issues, conditions and groups on the ground.

... In some instances, intermediaries have become like straw bosses, where they have brokered their multimillion dollar, multi-year kinds of agreements with funders, based on piecing together all of our work... You (the intermediary) give all of us a five thousand dollar contract to go make magic happen, and you've got a quarter of a million dollar contract to really do nothing more than facilitate us into a narrative,... We do realize that there is a role for intermediaries, but I think the role of any intermediary should be more along the lines of being a collaborative partner. - Grassroots Activist 15

Responses from foundations also spoke to the pros and cons of intermediaries. While the majority of the national foundations supported the intermediary model, some funders found that intermediaries can be a barrier to developing relationships with EJ organizations.

...We (funders) can be much better advocates and champions for the environmental justice groups when we have a relationship with them directly, we know them, there's that trust and that two-way communication, makes us better donor organizers... - Funder 5⁴⁴

Ultimately the issues of capacity impact both sectors but present acute limitations for EJ organizations seeking to strengthen and sustain their organizational and movement aims. Targeted investments in some of the most critical capacity areas identified by EJ organizations could provide pivotal points of alignment between the two sectors and put the EJ organizations on a path to sustained funding and meaningful impact.

Racism

Both sectors frequently mentioned racism as a key driver of misalignment. Racism, in a variety of forms such as structural racism, institutional racism, white privilege, white supremacy, and implicit bias manifest not only within philanthropy, but are also a reflection of the greater society in which philanthropy is based. **The acknowledgement of racism as a root cause of misalignment was explicitly discussed in at least 20 of the 33 interviews conducted.** Both sectors reflected on the ways that racism played a role in access to resources and information, tokenization and co-optation of ideas and strategies, leadership in philanthropy and mainstream environmental groups. One EJ respondent described the ways in which racism within philanthropy reflects racism in the larger society,

I mean, it's centuries of colonization and slavery and deep systemic racism that I just think it's a trend in everything nationally, especially in philanthropy, where it's definitely dominated by white supremacy and by "do gooder capitalism," the sort of charity model.... - Grassroots Activist 5

Implicit bias and structural racism were identified by at least five foundations and nine EJ organizations as something that greatly impacts the relationships between the two sectors. EJ respondents discussed feelings of disingenuous actions or intentions by philanthropy to address issues of race and implicit biases from foundation staff and leadership. They also cited the long-term practice of tokenization of people of color leaders in the environmental movement to disenfranchise people of color-led EJ organizations. This history has led to mistrust which impacts their ability to build lasting partnerships.

I also feel like a lot of it is just implicit bias and structural racism that plague the people of color-led organizations that are seen as incompetent [by philanthropy]. They're seen as messy, as childlike, as unsophisticated in their analysis. That they don't understand the political contexts and that are often infantilized when we win. - EJ Activist 17

Institutional racism within philanthropy was also discussed as a barrier, including the lack of diversity of the boards and staff within foundations, which are predominantly white. Funders reflected on how this lack of diversity and white privilege can challenge alignment.

I think the lack of diversity among environmental funders is a big part of the challenge, because we know people of color support environmental issues at a higher rate than whites and we know you need organizing power, and many of these states are in states that are battleground states for climate. It seems therefore, logical you would want to beef up support to these groups, but it doesn't happen. So, I do think there is some issue of bias and racism happening. - Funder 7

A number of foundations have taken steps to address racism explicitly in philanthropy. In “Philanthropic Leadership Means Following the Frontlines” by Alison Corwin from the Surdna Foundation, she states, “racial justice—the systematic, fair treatment of people of all races that results in equitable opportunities and outcomes for all—cannot be a separate goal or outcome; it must be the central objective of our collective work.”⁴⁵ One regional funder spoke to their commitment to confronting challenges of racism in environmental philanthropy.

Inside the organization [foundation], we are centering community at every level and frontline communities for this specific issue [racial equity] area. There's a deep understanding in the climate program that the effects of climate change exacerbate existing socialized and racialized inequities that are already built into every layer of our legal system, our policies and practices at various state agencies. - Funder 2

In recent years, foundations have crafted and publicized equity statements in response to racism and historical inequalities. Equity statements may provide an important framework for engaging with environmental justice communities or organizations led by people of color. But some in the EJ community are concerned that equity statements are too weak to affect substantive change. For most of the foundations interviewed, equity statements were not found on their websites.

Five of the foundations interviewed had ‘Equity Statements’ on their website, another five addressed equity in their mission statement, and four of the foundations had no explicit equity statement available online.

Only one foundation stated during the interview that racial equity was a primary goal for their funding strategy. Many of the equity statements focused on external commitments, such as a description of how and why they fund the work they do, which is often described as intended to promote equal access to resources and structural changes. **One regional funder undertook an internal process to create an explicit and shared commitment to racial equity. This resulted in systemic changes to how the foundation grants money to environmental justice organizations, including broader board approval and increased grant giving directly to EJ organizations and EJ movement intermediaries.** Other foundations committed to increased internal diversity and racial equity trainings for staff.

How much of the trend within philanthropy to tackle racial equity will result in tangible outcomes in the form of decision-making and resource allocation remains to be seen. It is clear that the largely people of color-led EJ organizations are skeptical about the promise of deep, structural reforms to philanthropy happening quickly, but the **recent attention by philanthropy towards racial equity could mean new opportunities for funding to EJ organizations.**

Ideology

Interviews also pointed to fundamental differences in the ideologies that shape each sector’s strategies and worldview. Ideological differences can sometimes be referenced as “theories of change” or refer more specifically to political ideologies. Some of the key words that signaled the presence of ideological differences between funders and EJ organizations, included discussions of values, power, and politics or explicit political leanings (i.e. conservative or progressive). Sometimes ideological differences were implicitly discussed in the context of organizing, base building, or radical, direct actions that were used to describe EJ tactical approaches and that were perceived as oppositional or “risky” by foundations. These terms were also sometimes used in relation to descriptions of funders that are “risk averse”. The underlying assumptions about the root causes of environmental problems and their solutions informs the way in which different foundations see

the world and how they approach grantmaking. Similarly, organizations in the EJ or climate justice movements have a view of environmental issues that shapes their mission, strategies, and priorities. These different ideologies or worldviews can often be seen in the priority issues and strategies that these respective groups pursue.

In the interviews with EJ organizations, there was a clear articulation that movement building, direct action and community/political organizing was a fundamental part of their work. This is, in part, because EJ organizations see environmental problems, like pollution and climate change, as part of larger systemic, economic, and social injustices that intersect and impact their communities. The literature on environmental theory and history reveal the deeply divided roots of the EJ and traditional environmental movements. The EJ movement sees itself as primarily a social justice movement that is informed by a critical perspective of power structures, capitalism, and corporate relationships to the state. This view of environmental problems thus leads EJ groups to adopt more oppositional or direct-action tactics to challenge these entrenched systems that produce inequality in multiple ways (economic, environmental, etc).

So to a certain extent, philosophically, we're trying to end capitalism. But capitalism is what keeps our doors open. So we're constantly going to be inherently in conflict with a lot of our foundation funders. So part of this is how do we then recognize that that's problematic? And how do we work with the foundations to rectify or change, either in how they do business, or fix, or give back to how they have gotten their wealth. - Grassroots Activist 19

Most foundations, on the other hand, adopt a more reformist or standard environmental management framework that suggests environmental problems can be solved largely via the existing market systems, and through technological and policy innovations carried out by traditional political mechanisms like lobbying, litigation, and policy advocacy. **Foundations, thus, naturally gravitate towards those mainstream environmental organizations that mirror this worldview.** Additionally, many foundations derive their wealth and their leadership from the legacy of market systems that contributed to the environmental problems they now seek to address. One funder reflected candidly about the value or perception of the grassroots sector within philanthropy.

One, I don't believe most people in philanthropy think that grassroots matter. I think that's one of those nice things people say. And that's not just on the climate topic, I think that goes across any topic...This is not just particular to EJ communities, let me just say that." - Funder 9

These distinctions about political ideology or theory of change are rarely explicitly stated by foundations or EJ organizations but become quite obvious in the discussion of why some of the work that EJ groups carry out is not funded by philanthropy. Some EJ respondents discussed the impact of foundations supporting initiatives that are in direct contradiction to the priorities, strategies, or values held by EJ organizations. In the Midwest, EJ interviewees discussed the close ties that some local philanthropic groups have with politicians and corporations that pollute in EJ communities or support initiatives that result in gentrification and displacement of communities of color or low-income communities. The EJ respondents suggested that the foundations involved identified EJ organizations as too "radical" with respect to development pressures and saw their efforts to curb gentrification as directly competing with their development interests. One funder discussed concerns regarding direct action strategies and the response from their board.

...We'd really love to fund this grassroots organization, but we feel that organizations that are too front and center of what would, to the foundation leadership, might look like picket lines...but it's just like we have not successfully been really able to move them away from this preconception that to be an EJ group or to be a grassroots organization... you have to be you know, an angry, politicized group. And they (the foundation) are super averse to anything that seems political. - Funder 6⁴⁶

EJ organizations from both regions discussed the conservative ideology and approach of some segments of the local philanthropic community. In particular, Gulf South regional funders were mentioned as being reluctant to give to social justice issues or to organizations that explicitly identified with social justice missions. What foundations consider to be too "political" or risky, the EJ movement may see as foundational to their work of organizing and shifting the current political, social, and economic systems.

Despite these divergences, there may be opportunities for better valuing and evaluating the strategies carried out by EJ organizations if philanthropy begins to diversify the programmatic staff that are brought into grantmaking positions.

If the funders have a background of organizing prior to becoming some program coordinator in the foundation, then they have an understanding of how we measure [success], but sometimes foundations don't have that background and their vision of success is a lot different from community organizing and so their expectations are a lot different from an [EJ] organization. - Grassroots Activist 3

There may also be opportunities to identify new funders or aligned funding sectors that are less risk averse and supportive of similar organizing and direct-action tactics across other movements.



OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALIGNMENT

Despite significant drivers of misalignment, both funders and EJ organizations pointed to specific examples and opportunities for better aligning funding and relationships over time. Table 7 summarizes some of the opportunities shared during interviews. This section of the report is divided by sector with the acknowledgment that many opportunities need to be collaboratively addressed. These opportunities represent both long-term and short-term actions that can be implemented by both sectors.

Table 7: Summary of Opportunities for Alignment from EJ and Funder Interviews

OPPORTUNITIES FOR EJ ORGANIZATIONS	
Relationship Building & Access:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite funders to visit and tour local communities to highlight wins, deepen funder understanding of priority issues, strategies and needs. • Engage trusted philanthropies to help make connections with foundations where conflict or tension or mistrust may exist • Ask existing funders or intermediaries to broker informal meetings, one on one conversations, or convenings with new funders • Make multiple attempts for funding even if an application for a grant is declined, attempt to learn the rationale for decision, and re-apply • Participate in funder briefings or convenings where funders and EJ organizations can exchange ideas, share strategies, build shared visions, and align theories of change • Create spaces for learning collaboratively to help build lasting, trusting relationships
Capacity Building:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly define organizational needs internally so that external communications to funders and in grant applications are explicit; verify that organizational goals match the foundation's goals • Communicate and emphasize movement 'wins' to the general public and specifically to philanthropy throughout the year, not just during the granting process • Connect local work to broader policy goals or systemic change work in the field • Emphasize the networked, collaborative, and long-term initiatives that contribute to multiple environmental and social justice goals • Provide staff training on communication skills across different media and platforms • Pool resources with other EJ organizations or leverage the communications' capacity of allies in larger organizations to spread messaging to funders and the public • Shift attention towards finding new environmental funders (i.e. individual donors, giving circles, pooled funds, etc.) or other philanthropic sectors (i.e. civil/immigrant rights, reproductive justice, criminal justice reform, human rights, etc.) that are better aligned with social justice goals and direct-action tactics of EJ organizations • Identify foundations with newly formed, explicit commitments to racial equity, social justice, or grassroots organizing to build partnerships with • Build relationships with activist-funders already within philanthropy
Leverage the role of Intermediaries:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritize joining alliances, coalitions, or networks that serve as intermediaries and have commitments to opening up access to new, larger sources of funding • Ask intermediaries to make direct connections between EJ staff and well aligned funder staff • Request that intermediaries help fill the organizational and programmatic capacity needs of EJ organizations (i.e. communications tools, development skills, etc.) • Work together to develop shared accountability structures that ensure transparent and democratic decision-making processes of intermediaries

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUNDERS	
Relationship Building & Access:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage directly with the EJ communities by committing to a number of local site visits each year led by EJ organizations Provide travel stipends and invitations to funder gatherings or special convenings where funders and EJ organizations can build shared understanding of issues, tactics, and goals Provide more opportunities for informal, informational meetings between foundation staff and EJ staff Broadly disseminate clear, transparent, and shared metrics for evaluating grant applications, explicitly defining EJ, EJ organizations, environmental grant goals, and theories of change Provide feedback to EJ organizations, particularly first-time applicants, on applications that were denied and also throughout the grant process Provide “Get to Know You” introductory grants that are simple to receive and report on Make applications simple and reduce the reporting burden overall
Capacity Building:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prioritize general operating support grants including funding for non-programmatic activities like strategic planning and leadership development Help identify, secure, and connect EJ groups to technical and administrative capacity such as a shared development consultant, fiscal agents, or technical training for EJ staff Create “administrative hubs” with shared resources such as space, media, video and conferencing equipment, and technical experts Offer larger, multi-year grants to organizations with smaller annual budgets to build their organizational and development capacity Help identify pooled resources or technical support from funders or other institutional partners that can work collaboratively with EJ orgs Offer targeted grants to build the communications & development staff of EJ organizations
Racism & Structural power:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Require all board members and staff undergo racial equity training Diversify staff, boards, and leadership in philanthropy, including adding staff with experience working in the grassroots sector Adopt participatory grant-making practices like the formation of granting circles that include EJ organizational representatives that are empowered to shape the strategies, metrics, and funding priorities for pooled funds that can go directly to EJ organizations Help connect EJ groups to political power through legislative briefings, policy meetings, and informational sessions Commit to funding targets that deliver a larger percentage of environmental grant dollars to EJ organizations or those groups that are led by people of color and are working primarily in EJ communities Support and grow activist-funders within philanthropy - convening affinity groups and sharing best practices around anti-racism Convene with EJ organizations, intermediaries and related social movement actors to explore shared understandings of racial equity and social justice Include EJ organizations in the development of philanthropic strategies before they are deployed; include EJ groups in grant making decisions Share, disseminate, and utilize clear definitions of equity and EJ that align with grassroots groups; share these definitions with boards and leadership as a learning tool Adopt evaluation metrics that can value and account for long-term, systemic change Adopt explicit theories of change that are directly informed by and developed with frontline groups and examine these against funding strategies and outcomes over time
Leverage the role of Intermediaries:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a set of standards to assess the transparency, impact, and representativeness of intermediaries; track funding from intermediaries directly to member EJ organizations Leverage intermediaries to build relationships with local EJ organizations and develop relationships with members of intermediaries for more direct funding to EJ organizations

Opportunities for EJ Organizations

Relationship Building & Access

A majority of EJ respondents discussed the importance of relationship building opportunities and the need for gatherings and meetings where funders could spend time listening to grassroots groups in order to truly understand the issues they face and the work that needs to be done. Funders also acknowledged the need to build new relationships with local groups by meeting them where they are. One way to build these new relationships would be for **EJ groups to invite funders to an “EJ Tour” of the community**, sharing wins and strategies, and providing funders a deeper sense of the significance and scale of the problems and solutions developed on the ground.

I try to just get out and see, going to events that community groups hold, or where community organizations are gathering. Whether they're tabling, or community garden events, just so I can spend more time, because what I find is, you meet more EJ leaders when you're working with and talking with the EJ leaders you already know.

- Funder 3

One EJ respondent recognized the importance of allowing funders to be vulnerable and make mistakes, especially around issues of equity, race, and justice. She surmised that if there was fear among funders around making mistakes, they may be less likely to participate and engage. **Creating safe spaces and opportunities for learning collectively will help build more lasting, trusting relationships.**

Persistence and patience are also key for both sectors in building trusting relationships. Some EJ respondents gave examples of having to work through difficult periods of external conflict with funders. Additionally, they chose to invest time on educating funders on why their issues are so critical and relevant to the broader movement. Persistence is also required when applying to the same foundation multiple times before receiving a grant. These processes may help to establish new relationships and provide opportunities for the foundations to get to know EJ groups, their capacities, strengths, and strategies.

So it just seems like nine times out of 10 you're not going to get funding the first time you file an application or kind of speak with those folks. It's really about them getting to know what it is your organization does over a period of time. And then kind of buying into that process. - Grassroots Activist 1

Ultimately, there are many foundations in the environmental sector that will not desire to align their theory of change toward a more critical stance that is justice-centered. These foundations may still find ways to fund and support EJ groups with divergent ideologies, but likely will not direct significant resources that threaten to upend their preferred approaches to environmental problems. One foundation respondent spoke candidly about the need to shift attention towards finding new funders and new philanthropic sectors that are better aligned with social justice. This pivot away from traditional environmental funders would mean spending less effort trying to attract resources from environmental foundations that will likely never result in significant funding and focus more on potentially a whole new set of funders to build relationships with. These new funders may support areas such as civil rights, democracy, immigration, criminal justice reform, and other sectors with a more explicit commitment to racial and social justice, organizing, base building, and direct action.

I'm just interested in us finding other sources of money, other than trying to ask the same people for the same dollars who clearly don't or aren't committed to giving them. So, yeah just thinking about what big pots of money are out there. Whether it's new big donors, lots of small donors. - Funder 13

Capacity Building

A national funder suggested that one way to address the misalignment between EJ organizations and funders would be for EJ groups to work on **communicating the connection between local work and the broader national narrative so that the relevance of local work is understood in the context of systemic change.** Another funder emphasized the **need for EJ groups to uplift and focus on their solutions** rather than on the problems that need to be addressed. This may be especially helpful for initiatives that are replicable in other locations or can be brought to scale. In turn, funders can help provide communications funding, trainings, and links to professional communications staff that would aid EJ groups in crafting these messages.

There needs to be a greater acknowledgement that it needs to be both [local] and [national]. We do also need to look at what are the national and state level policies that can help get us the scale of emissions reductions that we need. - Funder 7

Both sectors raised the importance of **EJ groups clearly communicating movement “wins”**. The philanthropic sector and the engaged public is often unaware of the successes achieved in the grassroots sector, in part, because frontline organizations often lack the resources, time, and staffing to focus on promoting their wins. Additionally, groups could find ways to share successes with foundations throughout the year, not just during the grant application period. EJ organizations point to examples when mainstream environmental groups have worked with EJ organizations on a successful initiative but failed to share and publicize the EJ group’s contribution to the “win,” essentially erasing them from the conversation. This makes it hard for funders to determine if smaller groups have the capacity to accomplish shared goals. If grassroots groups that collaborate with more well-funded organizations require upfront commitments to shared communications strategies and resources, they can secure more visibility for their contributions to wins.

The groups don’t have as much money to talk about their wins, and so people don’t know about it. I do think the lack of communications capacity for a lot of these groups to talk about their wins is one part of the problem, especially with these big funders that are accustomed to seeing big groups that have a way of making all their wins look very visible. - Funder 7

Some funders saw providing communication support as an easy opportunity for collaborating with EJ groups. EJ groups may need to think through and **define organizational needs and strategize on how to most successfully communicate those needs to funders. Funders can support EJ groups by providing technical assistance around crafting their funding pitches.**

Hey, we could all do a better job, particularly those who do more work at a local or regional level, offering ways to just help these groups make better asks. It’s not about being a polished pitch, it’s more about pressing these organizations, “What is it that you actually need money for?” Or “What would you like to do?” - Funder 9

Leveraging the Power of Intermediaries

Currently, foundation staff often rely on the role of intermediaries to move money into the EJ sector due to the capacity limits of national foundations to disperse relatively small amounts of grant dollars to a large number of grantees across the country. However, it is vital that funders not become solely reliant on intermediaries as a proxy for supporting and maintaining their relationships with and funding to frontline organizations. It is also equally important that these intermediaries recognize that they play a facilitator role in bridging the divide between funders and grassroots organizations in a way that builds confidence and trust in the ability of grassroots to carry out grant-funded activities. **Intermediaries, like the BEA, were created and designed to do just that; to collaborate with both grassroots organizations working in the frontlines for environmental justice and the philanthropic sector, and to figure out how to rebalance funding so that more money can move to these groups.**

The ability of EJ organizations to grow their staffing, development, operational, and communications capacity will help feed a virtuous cycle in which they become more sustainable over time and are able to develop and deepen relationships with foundation staff directly. This will ease the burden on the limited program officers to identify and sustain relationships on their own terms rather than overly relying on intermediaries.

So, we really liked the intermediary model. We think it helps to support capacity at the national level while building capacity and connections at the local level. At least that’s the hope. We continue to assess the effectiveness of that. But for funders like us who have a high threshold for grantmaking it works really well for us because we do have a desire to make more funding available for the grassroots. - Funder 13

As intermediaries continue to play an important role in the relationship between smaller, dispersed EJ groups and national funders, more attention needs to be paid to the nature of intermediary’s relationships with their members and funders. **Both sectors can work together to develop accountability structures that ensure transparent, democratic decision-making processes, tracking systems for funding that passes through, and clear metrics**

for work that is held by intermediaries. EJ organizations can also consider these metrics prior to joining on to intermediary groups. More research can also be conducted that focuses on the impact, reach, effectiveness, and accountability of intermediaries as foundations become increasingly dependent on these groups for funding dispersion.

Opportunities for Funders

Relationship Building and Access

Respondents from both sectors discussed the importance of building deeper, more trusting relationships between the two sectors. One way the philanthropic community could work towards this goal would be to make **commitments to engage directly with EJ organizations.** This commitment could be carried out through site visits to local organizations, providing opportunities (i.e. invitations and travel stipends) for staff to attend gatherings where funders and organizations can build trusting relationships, joining coalitions like the BEA or participating in one on one consultations or informal meetings to get to know one another. EJ respondents also articulated an appreciation for funders who make an effort to build new funding relationships. In particular they cited funders who made small, **unexpected “getting to know you” grants** without a cumbersome application process. These introductory grants created new funding relationships without taking up a considerable amount of staff time or capacity on either end. EJ respondents also expressed appreciation for funders who provided **prompt information and feedback throughout the granting process.**

Capacity Building

EJ respondents discussed the ability to do more when restrictions were removed from the allocation of grants. Some foundations have moved away from program-specific funding and instead offer general operating support to ensure that the organizations have the maximum amount of flexibility in the use of funds and can help build their internal infrastructure. Furthermore, they do not cap the percentage of funding that can go to indirect costs. They develop a process to encourage a high degree of autonomy while building a relationship with the organization.

I would say that [in terms of] capacity or sustainability, general operating is a little more challenging to get funded. That would include communications and admin support. Those have always been a challenge for nonprofits, and something that we’re looking at focusing on, because in order for us to serve our community and do the things that we’re doing, we really need to build that up. - Grassroots Activist 16

Many EJ organizations discussed the need for **increased funding specifically for development capacity for the grassroots.** While most mainstream environmental organizations have staff positions solely for fundraising, most grassroots groups do not. Staff from frontline organizations must juggle time spent on community-based work with development activities. Additionally, some discussed receiving grants from funders that covered **other non-programmatic costs such as strategic planning, leadership development, technology, or media efforts.**

The [foundation] basically helped us design a media gathering event, gave us basically the value of the original grant and then some media time, staff time, and location time. And left us with actually a really powerful video about the project. - Grassroots Activist 14

If there was a way for some [foundations] to collectively put together an administrative hub where people could possibly get virtual support, tech support, in a way that would be trusted, that would be bonded, would be secure, that could potentially help some of the work we advance, without those small operations of having to take on an additional cost...What I’m suggesting is it needs to be done in a more hub fashion, like for the Midwest, or for the east coast. - Grassroots Activist 15

One program officer discussed the need for foundations to increase the amount of funding to support the work of frontline EJ groups by leveraging multiple funders to provide a variety of resources.

You know, we’re actually working with another funder in the region to try to leverage bigger money to frontline groups, to think strategically about what support that organization provides, and what support we provide as an organization, how could we strategically grant more together? Whether that’s various kinds of technical assistance or whether that is grant dollars for operational support or programming. - Funder 2

Racism & Structural Power

There was general acknowledgment that philanthropy has considerable work to do to gain the trust of EJ groups and tackle the multiple expressions of racism present in the philanthropic sector. However, some activists also acknowledged the strides made by some funders to begin to diversify their recruiting by hiring not only people of color, but staff with experience as community activists or in the EJ field. This type of diversification helps introduce program officers to philanthropy who have a different worldview about the work and can also challenge entrenched norms in decision making. Foundation respondents also recognized that **wealth accumulation is tied to colonialism and structural racism** and reflected on the changes needed to reform how philanthropy operates in order to address this legacy of racism long-term:

Our role is to do as best we can in this gate-keeping role to reflect the needs of the field while also, what's not listed in there, but a lot of our work is in organizing philanthropy to shift the practice and culture of philanthropy to actually return and redistribute resources to the people in places where it was stolen from. Philanthropy is concentrating that wealth. - Funder 12

While foundation respondents pointed to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives within their respective organizations, they acknowledged that more would be needed to tackle systemic and pervasive forms of racism in philanthropy. **Foundation respondents also spoke about the need to increase not only staff training but, more importantly, board training, on racial equity.** Getting to the board members and shifting their perspectives and understanding of the systems of structural and institutional racism is key to shifting the priorities for grantmaking within philanthropy.

Another way that philanthropy could tackle racial equity would be to **allocate a specific percentage of grant dollars (i.e. 75 percent of all environmental grants) to groups working exclusively in communities of color, low-income and Indigenous communities and that are representative of these communities.** Some local and regional foundations have already begun to take this approach. This strategy has two benefits: 1) it works as a 'de-facto' mechanism to ensure that environmental grant dollars are going mainly to frontline groups, and 2) foundations who have built their wealth through a history of colonialism and white privilege are giving back some of that wealth to communities that have been most impacted by environmental racism. In reference to one funder who has allocated funding exclusively to communities of color, one activist admitted:

They have front-line community priority, so people of color, people working with under-resourced communities or under-served communities, they have priority when it comes down to funding. That's just an equitable way to alleviate the funding discrepancy. Other funders, I honestly feel like the funding institution or the funding system is still racist, man. In order to fix it, you've got to be anti-racist, so you've got to also put policy in place that you put priority toward front-line communities." - Grassroots Activist 11

Lastly, one of the foundation respondents spoke at length about the need for **program officers with a more progressive and explicit commitment to racial equity to serve as organizers within philanthropy. This organizing can take many forms such as the formation of affinity groups, publishing articles, increasing the visibility of grassroots groups at funder convenings, introducing new funding mechanisms via more democratic and open grantmaking processes, calling out evidence and best practices for tackling racism, and finding unlikely allies and funders outside the environmental sector who are further along in adopting racial equity measures.** Spearheading these initiatives within philanthropy bears risks for program officers who may become isolated or lack support from foundation leadership that can perceive them as too radical. This internal organizing process will require sustained effort and participation over time to gain a foothold in the philanthropic sector and begin to challenge entrenched systems of racism.

You know, I think this goes back to the need for organizing. Well, there's both knowledge-building about the history of philanthropy and about what's real and what's not. Why are we doing it that way...It's a balance of both knowledge and skill-building that I think needs to happen inside these different efforts to organize across philanthropy. -Funder 12

Some funders were particularly candid about the need to structurally change processes in grantmaking toward more bottom-up approaches. They admitted that philanthropy should make a commitment toward expanding equity funding by re-allocating grant dollars directly to grassroots groups, but also sharing power and learning as a foundation strategy toward building social equity. In order to ensure grant dollars intended for the grassroots are reaching the sector, it is important that **funders share and integrate into their guidelines clear definitions of equity and environmental justice that align with the grassroots sector.**

I think community-controlled resources are really important here, and community led work. I think the nature of foundations is to go into the room and decide what their strategy is independently and then release it publicly, and then be like, "This is our new strategy." I would love to see more foundations give space for the organizations on the ground to actually lead what that strategy of the foundation should be, potentially in partnership with the foundation. - Funder 2

This shift in the power dynamics between the grantor and grantee can help challenge the status quo assumptions of philanthropy about how change occurs in society. The idea that the solutions to environmental problems comes exclusively from boardrooms or academic circles can only be challenged when there is an opening to introduce different perspectives into the decision-making process. Most of the program officers acknowledged that the philanthropic sector has to work significantly harder to understand issues facing EJ communities and the activism that goes into building equity for these communities. **In order to better align the theories of change on how to tackle environmental problems, funders must first take steps towards a fuller understanding of the ways in which environmental problems are intrinsically linked to inequality on the ground.** This grounding can also help give foundation staff a better appreciation of the complexities and difficulties of frontline work that is likely distant or unfamiliar to staff and board members whose worldviews and experiences are informed by a greater degree of privilege.

There's nothing worse than trying to put it on the shoulders of people of color and environmental justice or frontline communities, educating you about what equity means. I think that's really important. I also think trying to get out there, spend as much time, if you want to work with an environmental justice or frontline community or organizations, get out in the community and hear and understand first hand what's going on and how people are talking about it so that you're more grounded when you're having conversations with groups who are trying to work on that issue. - Funder 3

With shared learning and power, funders may perceive that what may seem "risky" in promoting change is actually necessary to tackling racial equity and social justice. Without fundamental changes in the way that funders interact and learn from grassroots groups, the sector will continue to struggle to address the root causes of systemic crises like climate change and environmental injustice.

Conclusion

The power and scale of the grassroots EJ movement is often overlooked by philanthropy, specifically environmental grant makers. The resulting underfunding of EJ organizations systematically neglects those most impacted by the climate emergency, environmental racism, and social and economic inequality. Even as these issues have become areas of interest and prioritization in philanthropy, this study confirms that only a tiny fraction of funding is making it to organizations based in EJ communities and led by people of color. Despite seeming alignment on the priority issues of environmental grant makers and EJ organizations, the funding does not align. This study examined and identified four significant drivers of this misalignment between philanthropy and the EJ sectors: access, capacity, racism, and ideology. The problems of misalignment are not insurmountable. This study also revealed critical opportunities for building alignment in face of these barriers. The categories of alignment opportunity include (1) a commitment to relationship building and broadening access, (2) investing in capacity building, (3) tackling racism and structural power and (4) leveraging the power of intermediaries. In the face of rising climate emergency and its disproportionate impacts on EJ communities, the alignment of philanthropy and the environmental justice movement is urgent for achieving climate justice.



Appendix A: Environmental Grants by Region and Sector

National Foundations Environmental Grants by Region and Sector 2016-2017 (N=12)

National: 12						
	# Environmental Grants	Total \$ Environmental Grants	# Non-EJ Grants	Total \$ Non-EJ Grants	# EJ Grants	Total \$ EJ Grants
All States	2574	\$1,335,928,563	2494	\$1,318,081,245	80	\$17,847,318
Gulf South	77	\$20,028,526	66	\$16,303,526	11	\$3,725,000
Midwest	469	\$193,956,472	457	\$192,381,472	12	\$1,575,000

Midwest Foundations Environmental Grants by Sector 2016 - 2017 (N=10)

Midwest Funders						
	# Environmental Grants	Total \$ Environmental Grants	# Non-EJ Grants	Total \$ Non-EJ Grants	# EJ Grants	Total \$ EJ Grants
All States	2,588	\$134,108,221	2,556	\$133,103,594	32	\$1,004,627
Regional (Midwest)	1,519	\$65,997,609	1,498	\$65,433,108	21	\$564,501

Gulf South Foundations Environmental Grants by Sector 2016-2017 (N=6)

Gulf South Funders						
	# Environmental Grants	Total \$ Environmental Grants	# Non-EJ Grants	Total \$ Non-EJ Grants	# EJ Grants	Total \$ EJ Grants
All States	563	\$11,578,352	551	\$11,423,331	12	\$155,021
Regional (Gulf South)	417	\$8,338,414	406	\$8,184,393	11	\$154,021

Appendix B: Voices from the Field: Important Quotes from Interviews

There's a whole other adjacent set of principles and values and assumptions that ground the work, and the way that we show up, and the reasons why we believe those dollars should be moved to the frontlines, not just because they have a strategy and the expertise. As Ayanna Presley says, "Those closest to the pain should be closest to the power," as we think about our power-building approach, but we also understand that philanthropy is a symptom of concentrated wealth and of racism over time.

- Funder 12

There are foundations that we have really good relationships with their program officers, that have observed our work and have asked how they could support our work, instead of having to do that whole courting of a foundation. And they've helped us too, even if it's a matter of making sure that the language that we use in our proposal is relatable to their board. - Grassroots Activist 9

So again, it's about visibility, like are environmental justice groups visible? Do funders actually believe that they're viable? And do they understand the culture of environmental justice groups and that the work itself is tangible? - Grassroots Activist 17

We were trying to do too much at once, and I think part of it has been on our work, specifically our community organizing work. And our policy work, because we based it more on quality, not quantity and a lot of funders base their work on quantity. I think that's where we, philosophically, don't mix.

- Grassroots Activist 19

These four program officers got together, I want to say maybe three or four years ago, and were like, "You know what? A lot of foundations in Chicago talk a big game, but very few of them actually do the work to fund the way they say they want to fund." So these guys actually got a map on social inequality made, and based on the zip codes that were hurt the most by social inequality, they redesigned their guidelines, and they said, "Unless you work in these zip codes, your office needs to be based in these zip codes, we will not fund you." - Grassroots Activist 19

[This is] one where I feel more of a genuine partnership with the personal foundation because I'll be like, "hey let's sit down and talk about what's happened this quarter and where the organization is" and they'll be like, "I have thoughts and recommendations and fundraising experience and I have a lot of questions for you"....They have been clear when they do not agree with strategic decisions we're making but they never [with]held the funding. - Grassroots Activist 14

Many foundations claiming to be focusing on equity aren't explicit about racial equity and justice. They end up tokenizing frontline leaders, which is harmful not only to those select grantees being tokenized, but also to surrounding organizations doing good if not better work who haven't been tapped as token grantees. - Funder 2

A couple [of foundations] have maybe hired a token person, an officer of equity or they've literally hired a person of color thinking that that was sufficient. And it's not. And I think this stems from the question of what does equity mean? And having very different definitions of it. - Grassroots Activist 19

Endnotes

- 1 According to a report from the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, only 15 percent of environmental grant dollars were dedicated to marginalized communities, and only 11 percent could be classified as “social justice” grants from 2007 to 2009.
- 2 Sarah Hansen, “Cultivating the Grassroots: A Winning Approach for Environment and Climate Funders,” (National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, February 2012).
- 3 For the purposes of this report, researchers used the terms “grassroots, environmental justice, and frontline” organizations interchangeably, while acknowledging that there are differences in the work, priorities, and structures of these types of organizations and some organizations may not identify themselves in the same way.
- 4 The Gulf South included Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida. The Midwest included Michigan, Indiana, Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota, Ohio, and South Dakota: Ivye Allen, Linetta Gilbert & Alandra Washington. “The Role of Philanthropy in Reducing Vulnerability and Promoting Opportunity in the Gulf South.” In A. Liu, R. V. Anglin, R. M. Mizelle Jr., & A. Plyer (Eds.), *Resilience and Opportunity*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press. (2011): pp. 260–273
- 5 Robert D. Bullard, Glenn S. Johnson, Denae King, and Angel O. Torres, “Environmental Justice Milestones and Accomplishments: 1964–2014: A Report Prepared in Commemoration of the Twentieth Anniversary of the Environmental Justice Executive Order 12898,” Barbara Jordan-Mickey Leland School of Public Affairs, Texas Southern University (February 2014).
- 6 Ronald Sandler, Phaedra C. Pezzullo, *Environmental justice and environmentalism: The social justice challenge to the environmental movement*, (MIT Press, 2007).
- 7 Daniel Faber and Deborah McCarthy, “The evolving structure of the environmental justice movement in the United States: New models for democratic decision-making,” *Social Justice Research* 14, no. 4 (2001): 405-421.
- 8 Robert D. Bullard and Glenn S. Johnson, “Environmentalism and public policy: Environmental justice: Grassroots activism and its impact on public policy decision making,” *Journal of Social Issues* 56, no. 3 (2000): 555-578.
- 9 David Schlosberg, “The justice of environmental justice: reconciling equity, recognition, and participation in a political movement,” *Moral and Political Reasoning in Environmental Practice* 77, (2003): 106.
- 10 Alejandro C. Perez et al., “Evolution of the environmental justice movement: activism, formalization and differentiation,” *Environmental Research Letters* 10, no. 10: (2015).
- 11 Bullard et. al., “Environmental Justice Milestones,” 12.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Hansen, “Cultivating the Grassroots.”
- 14 Baird Straughan and Tom Pollak, “The broader movement: Nonprofit environmental and conservation organizations, 1989-2005,” (National Center for Charitable Statistics at the Urban Institute, 2008).
- 15 Mark Dowie, *American foundations: An investigative history*, (MIT Press, 2002); Erica Kohl-Arenas, “Critical issues in philanthropy: power, paradox, possibility and the private foundation,” in *Funding, power and community development*, ed. N. McCrea and F. Finnegan, Policy Press, (February 2019): 23.
- 16 Deborah McCarthy, “Environmental justice grantmaking: Elites and activists collaborate to transform philanthropy,” *Sociological Inquiry* 74, no. 2 (2004): 250-270.; Joan Roelofs, *Foundations and Public Policy: The Mask of Pluralism*, (SUNY Press, 2003).
- 17 Craig J. Jenkins and Abigail Halcli, “Grassrooting the System? The Development and Impact of Social Movement Philanthropy, 1953-1990” in *Philanthropic foundations: New Scholarship, New Possibilities*, ed. E. C. Lagemenn (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999): 229-256.
- 18 Dowie. *American*.
- 19 Dorceta E. Taylor, “The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations,” Green 2.0. 2014, <https://www.diversegreen.org/the-challenge/>.
- 20 Taylor. “The State”; Dorceta E. Taylor, Sophia Paul and Ember McCoy, “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and the Salience of Publicly Disclosing Demographic Data in American Environmental Nonprofits,” *Sustainability* 11, no. 19, 5491: (2019).
- 21 Taylor, “The State.”
- 22 Michael Roberts, “Confronting the evidence: Addressing racial disparity in environmental grantmaking,” *National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy* (2018).
- 23 Taylor et al., “Diversity”; Rick Cohen, “Reflections from the Inside: Philanthropic Leaders on Racial Justice and Grantmaking,” *Critical Issues Forum* 5, (2014): 27.
- 24 McCarthy, “Environmental” (2004).
- 25 Jill Lindsey Harrison, “Co-opted environmental justice? Activists’ roles in shaping EJ policy implementation,” *Environmental Sociology* 1, no. 4 (2015): 241-255.
- 26 Jill Lindsey Harrison, “Bureaucrats’ tacit understandings and social movement policy implementation: Unpacking the deviation of agency environmental justice programs from EJ movement priorities,” *Social Problems* 63, no. 4 (2016): 534-553.
- 27 McCarthy, “Environmental.”
- 28 Hansen, Sarah. “Cultivating” (2012).
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Hansen, Sarah. “Cultivating” (2012).
- 31 Cynthia Gibson, “Participatory Grantmaking: Has Its Time Come,” *Ford Foundation* (2017).
- 32 McCarthy, “Environmental.”
- 33 Harrison, “Bureaucrats.”
- 34 BEA definition of “grassroots group” : The Grassroots Organizing Sector is made up of community based organizations, tribal and Indigenous groups, and their networks and alliances; rooted in, and accountable to, communities of color, low-income communities, and tribal and indigenous groups who are most directly impacted by the issues being addressed; committed to building local power and leadership to influence the decisions that affect their communities; and, comprised of those working on EJ linked to broader struggles for positive social change and transformation.
- 35 Foundation Center data collected included the list of environmental grants given by each of the 32 regional and national foundations in 2016 and 2017 for all available data in the Foundation Center dataset. Researchers used the search term “Environment” in the Foundation Center’s database.
- 36 Each grant is assigned a Primary Subject by the Foundation Center, according to the Foundation Center website, the [Primary Subject de-](#)

scribes what is being supported, including “grantmakers areas of focus, primary work of nonprofits, and activities being funded”. The Foundation Center uses “Environmental Justice” as one option under Primary Subject (their definition of an EJ Activity is included in Table 3 in this report). The Foundation Center states that this category “*only varies from those used on the recipient organization if the grant details indicate that the work being supported by the grant is different or more specific than the default coding already applied to the recipient organization.*” Their classification of an “EJ” grant activity describes activities deemed “EJ” not organizations whose focus is EJ. Therefore grants under this category include many organizations that may not be considered EJ organizations.

36 Definition for EJ Activities can be found at this link under Environmental Justice “Term Definition” <https://taxonomy.candid.org/subjects>
37 <https://fconline.foundationcenter.org/>

38 From a review of recorded transcripts during interviews, two of the fourteen foundations were not directly asked this question about having an EJ definition. Of the 12 respondents who answered this question, a variety of relevant terms were used to describe their use of the term EJ or grassroots, including “communities directly impacted”, “impacted by pollution”, “challenging institutional racism”, “organizations led by people of color and Indigenous groups”, and “frontline, directly impacted”.

39 The study team used the Foundation Center’s dataset to identify all the organizations receiving environmental grants and then applied the study team’s definition of “EJ organization” to identify which of these organizations should be classified as EJ. Any organizations falling outside the “EJ organization” and “EJ Intermediary” definitions were considered “Non-EJ orgs.” The majority of Non-EJ orgs seem to fall into the category of mainstream environmental organizations, with a few outside the realm of environmental organizations.

40 For detailed information on grant giving by region, please see Appendix A.

41 Grassroots participants were asked to report staff size and budget during interviews. Some interviewees did not report staff and budget and data was supplemented with online research when available, including organization websites and 990 forms.

42 Annual Budget data was obtained from Guidestar using each organization’s most recent available 990 forms. Gulf South budget data represents eight out of ten organizations that were present on Guidestar. Midwest budget data represents six out of nine organizations that were present on Guidestar.

43 Funder 7, National Foundation. Interview, 2019.

44 There were some edits made in this quote to ensure confidentiality

45 Alison Corwin, “Philanthropic Leadership Means Following the Frontlines,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (October 10, 2018).

46 Some slight changes to the quote made in order to maintain confidentiality.

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