



ECOSYSTEM GRANTMAKING

A SYSTEMIC APPROACH TO SUPPORTING MOVEMENT BUILDING

In order to fulfill our mission to support the development of powerful social change movements that will eliminate structural racism and create a racially just society, at Akonadi Foundation we focus our funding on what we call “ecosystem” grantmaking. We hope that through this document we can explain how and why we fund the way we do, and also open up a space for dialogue—perhaps especially among funders—about how we can best support the movement building work of racial justice organizations. Through the stories of several of our grantees, we illustrate what we mean by ecosystem grantmaking and highlight the vital work of people of color-led organizations that are leading the way in implementing smart, innovative, and effective challenges to structural racism.

Akonadi has identified movement building as a critical strategy for achieving racial justice because we believe that social movements are the only process powerful enough to address a large-scale power imbalance and transform society in a fundamental way. We believe that in order to be most successful at building the capacity of racial justice movements, this means identifying and supporting not only people and organizations that explicitly think, act, and talk about racial justice, but also supporting the collaboration and coordination among those organizations.

This also means that we fund not only organizations that are doing base-building work but their key allies and partners as well. We emphasize the importance of funding

PHOTO COURTESY OF CAUSA JUSTA :: JUST CAUSE

inter-connected clusters of organizations because funding in this way bolsters the capacity of each of the organizations within the formation and, more importantly, supports a more effective and impactful movement to challenge structural racism overall.

In scientific terms, an ecosystem is a biological environment, comprised of a community of organisms together with their physical environment, which functions as a system of interacting and interdependent relationships. Borrowing this conceptual framework from science and applying it to Akonadi's grantmaking allows us to understand the importance of the diverse web of relation-

ships among communities, organizations, and political formations that Akonadi supports. Much like a healthy ecosystem in nature, successful movement building requires a range of intersecting approaches through a set of distinct stages over a sustained period of time.

Three of the most salient aspects of an ecosystem are diversity, interconnectedness, and relationship to the larger environment. While in different ways all of the organizations described below reflect all of these dimensions of an ecosystem, we focus on a discrete aspect of an ecosystem in each of these descriptions in order to foreground the importance of each of them in turn.

DIVERSITY

The strength of an ecosystem relies on an interconnected set of healthy communities and organizations. One of the indicators of a healthy ecosystem is diversity within that system, which in a racial justice ecosystem is reflected in a diversity of groups, approaches, and roles. Akonadi funds three spheres of work we see as crucial to eliminating racism: building power in communities of color, creating a culture of racial justice, and making policy. We fund both small and large organizations within the system—from those that do the day-to-day work of building power on the ground to those that sustain local-to-national and regional alliances, networks, and coalitions—as well as those that support and strengthen the impact and effectiveness of those formations, including organizations that provide research, strategy, and

communications support and skills-building.

For instance, in our work to support the movement for domestic workers' rights, we fund a diverse cluster of organizations that play different roles at different scales but work together toward a common purpose.

Domestic Workers' Rights: Mujeres Unidas y Activas, National Domestic Workers Alliance, smartMeme, Data Center, and EastSide Arts Alliance

Domestic workers represent the most informal and unregulated part of a vast and growing care industry that increasingly impacts the U.S. economy on every level. In the absence of labor standards, en-



National Domestic Workers Alliance—Caring Across Generations, San Francisco 2011

forcement, and cultural recognition of their labor as “real” work, domestic workers remain among the most vulnerable workforces. In response, **Mujeres Unidas y Activas** (MUA), a grassroots organization of Latina immigrant women located in Oakland, provides a space for members to develop their own analysis of power and make their voices heard. MUA addresses the basic needs of members through service provision including peer-to-peer counseling around job training, domestic violence, and women’s health, and takes the lead in building coalitions for immigrant rights, women’s rights, and domestic workers’ rights.

For instance, in 2007, MUA and other community-based organizations founded the **National Domestic Workers Alliance** (NDWA), an alliance of 33 local membership organizations of nannies, housekeepers, and caregivers for the elderly that represents a workforce estimated at 2.5 million workers nationally. As a coordinating committee member of the NDWA, MUA is playing a critical leadership role in the NDWA’s campaign to pass a Domestic Worker Bill of Rights in California. This bill would create labor standards and protections for domestic

workers in the state. A similar bill passed in New York State in 2010, and other NDWA member organizations are working on moving legislation in their own states. This year the NDWA will launch an innovative campaign called Caring Across Generations. Building on local and state-level successes, they are organizing at the national level to win respect and recognition and establish labor standards for the caregiving workforce.

In order to make this movement building work more effective, Akonadi seeks to connect structural racism research and thinking with locally grounded racial justice work. Thus to support the work of MUA and NWDA, we also fund the **Data Center**, a research center for social justice movements and grassroots organizing, to provide research and analysis to MUA and NWDA that provides them with the tools to design and implement their own participant-led data collection processes. The Data Center believes that policy and legislative interests of communities of color and poor people are compromised when those communities are systematically under- or misrepresented by data. Because these communities often must confront well-organized and well-resourced opposition, while they themselves have relatively few resources for leveraging the power of research, the Data Center supports a growing “research justice” infrastructure, which seeks to level the playing field in campaigns and policy.

To further amplify the vision and impact of movement building work around domestic workers’ rights, Akonadi also funds **smartMeme**, a narrative strategy center that provides story-based framing and communications strategies to grassroots organizations and movements. SmartMeme believes that social movements and organizations need better strategies to communicate with mass audi-

ences in today's media saturated environment in order to capture the popular political imagination and mobilize popular support. SmartMeme offers story-based strategy training to the National Domestic Workers Alliance and serves as a resource for communications and messaging for their movement building efforts.

Finally, in support of the creation of a culture of racial justice that we see as integral to effective movement building, Akonadi also funds the efforts of **EastSide Arts Alliance (ESAA)** which supports

communities of color to tell their own stories of struggle, setbacks, and victories through theater, dance, poetry, visual arts, and music. MUA has used original popular theater pieces to disseminate information on immigrant rights, health issues, and workers' rights to hundreds of immigrants in California and beyond. Recently ESAA collaborated with MUA to develop street theatre pieces to educate the community about the threats to public safety and the waves of racial profiling that would inevitably result from the passage of laws like SB 1070 in Arizona.

Interconnectedness

Like ecosystems in nature, the racial justice ecosystem is a dynamic interaction among organizations that are connected both within their sectors/environments as well as outside of them in order to survive and thrive as a functional unit. While all of the organizations are vital, certain organizations within the ecosystem have mutually supportive relationships, shared values, shared goals, and a commitment to developing a shared strategy and working in a symbiotic way.

Because current policy development and advocacy are limited by a lack of connection to strong grassroots movements demanding real change, one of the ways that Akonadi supports efforts to elevate the analysis of structural racism and build power to impact policy is by funding an ecosystem of organizations that build their work from the local to the national level in a coordinated way.

In our work to support education justice, we fund organizations that are connected across areas of

focus that include basic access to opportunities to learn, college preparedness and tracking, and school discipline and the school-to-prison pipeline, and that are connected through strategies that operate from local to state to federal levels.

Education Justice: Californians for Justice, Alliance for Educational Justice, and Advancement Project

The work to challenge structural racism in public education that has emerged in the last few years demonstrates the power of this interconnected approach to movement building. While historically much of the work for education justice has been rooted in school-based campaigns, we are seeing a growing emphasis in grassroots groups on collaborative work and alliance building that amplifies their impact at the state level. Furthermore, organizations are focusing not only on youth leadership development and school-by-school organizing,

but also on statewide budget-based advocacy and collective work to affect federal education policy.

Californians for Justice (CFJ) is a grassroots organization that builds the power of youth, communities of color, immigrants, low-income families, and LGBTQ communities to transform public education policies at the local and state level. Through their work in the Campaign for Quality Education, they are advancing college and career readiness, as well as advocating for new California Department of Education practices and legislation that provides access to quality courses and instruction. Their participation in the Communities for Public Education Reform collaborative addresses issues such as tax and fiscal reform in California. Through CFJ's leadership with other youth-based and inter-generational organizations in the Strategy Team and Policy Committee of the national **Alliance for Educational Justice**, their work connects to national efforts for racial and educational justice movement building.

The **Alliance for Educational Justice (AEJ)** is a national alliance of organizations united by a racial justice framework that works to hold the government accountable for developing non-punitive school reforms that support student achievement.



Alliance for Educational Justice—Chicago “Save Our Schools” Tax Day Action, 2010.

AEJ facilitates the collaboration of local grassroots groups and national partners to bring about changes in federal education policy, builds a national infrastructure for the local grassroots education justice sector, and builds the capacity of member groups to sustain and grow a long-term movement for racial justice in the U.S. education system. AEJ member organizations have worked for years in their own communities to address a broad array of issues impacting student achievement, from improving college access for students from marginalized communities and advocating for youth voices in school governance, to presenting positive alternatives to punitive school discipline and preventing the criminalization of student behavior.

In order to expand the network of grassroots organizations successfully working on these issues, **Advancement Project** provides legal, policy, communications, and strategy development support to local- and state-level campaigns. Because they are located in Washington, DC but work extensively on-the-ground across the country, they are positioned to bring the real world experiences to bear on inside-the-Beltway policy debates. In particular they work with grassroots and national partners to influence federal policy that will end the over-criminalization of youth in school, especially youth of color, who ultimately are pushed into prison. They collaborated with AEJ to write the concept paper for their Youth SUCCESS Act, which is designed to introduce federal legislation to guarantee high quality education to all youth. AEJ also will participate in upcoming School-to-Prison Pipeline Action-Camps hosted by Advancement Project, which are intended to help broaden and strengthen the youth- and parent-led grassroots movement around the pushout and criminalization of youth that will reverberate at the federal level.

Environment

Much like an ecosystem in nature must adapt to the quality of the air, the water, and the soil, a racial justice ecosystem is affected by its surroundings and must respond accordingly. Economic forces, shifting demographics, changes in the political landscape, and urgent concerns that arise unexpectedly require an adaptive, and sometimes immediate, response. Akonadi supports the work of organizations that have the ability and agility to shift their immediate focus to address urgent issues as they arise while at the same time maintaining an analysis of the underlying structural racism that creates these shifting conditions. Considering the broader view within which our grantees work allows us to understand the shifts in their work as strategic and practical and gives us a context in which to partner with them to challenge structural racism in its many forms, as it arises.

In our work to support economic justice, we fund organizations that are flexible and strategic in responding to the urgent and specific needs of urban communities of color who have been hardest hit by the current economic crisis, in particular those that are challenging foreclosures and bank evictions.

Economic Justice: Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment, Causa Justa/Just Cause, and Right to the City

Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE) organizes African American and Latino residents of working class and low-income

neighborhoods in California to take action to address racial and economic disparities in their communities. Their goal is to build strong neighborhood and issue-based groups that can collectively address the many by-products of structural racism that have left many of these communities stripped of resources and power for decades. In response to the most recent devastating impacts of banking practices on communities of color, they have shifted their work to focus in particular on predatory lending practices and bank foreclosures. In order to challenge these institutions, they build alliances with civic, labor, religious, business, and policy partners that translate into the campaign infrastructure needed to win progressive policy, tax, and budget reform for California communities. By developing leadership, increasing civic engagement, and empowering working families, local ACCE chapters are building movement to demand bank accountability and prevent foreclosures in low-income neighborhoods from the ground up. They also build these campaigns in coalition with other community and racial justice groups, including **Causa Justa/Just Cause**, to help ordinary residents organize and take action.

Causa Justa/Just Cause (CJJC) is a multi-racial, grassroots organization that combines base building with service provision to promote cohesion and unity in action among multiracial groups, specifically low-income African American and Latino members in the Bay Area, to achieve economic justice. In response to the fact that Oakland now has one of the top ten foreclosure rates in the country, CJJC targeted their work on both challenging individual foreclosures and confronting the



Causa Justa : Just Cause—Oakland General Strike, 2011.

financial institutions that have created the conditions for this economic exploitation in communities of color. They identified Bank of America as the source of much of the predatory lending practices in Oakland and successfully organized to pressure the City of Oakland to divest from the bank. They contextualize this work within racialized histories of gentrification, housing discrimination, and uneven

economic development, and participate in larger networks challenging economic exploitation, including the **Right to the City** network.

Right To The City (RTTC) is a national alliance of racial, economic, and environmental justice organizations based in low-income communities of color that is focused on providing a vehicle for innovative, cross-regional and national collaboration, sectoral investigation, movement building, and organizing to synchronize efforts to remake cities across the country. RTTC's members are cornerstone, urban base building organizations located in several cities and metropolitan areas, including Boston, DC Metro area, Los Angeles, Miami, New Orleans, New York, Providence, and the SF Bay Area. By providing a space in which local member organizations can collaboratively analyze issues, share strategies, and develop a common theory of change, RTTC supports base building organizations to deepen their impact against gentrification and displacement of low-income people of color from urban neighborhoods.

Conclusion

At Akonadi Foundation, we believe that the approach to funding we call “ecosystem” grantmaking provides the most effective, comprehensive, and values-driven way to support the work of successful movements for racial justice and social change.

Perhaps the most important aspects of how we think about how to fund—which are mirrored clearly in ecosystems in nature—are the importance of

relationships and inter-connectedness.

We believe that in order to best support movement building we must fund not only individual organizations that address racial justice but collaborations and coordination among them, and our ecosystem theory provides a framework for thinking about how to do this crucial funding work.

The ecosystem theory as we are developing it also

is flexible and responsive to the changing needs of our grantees. For instance, this framework is not limited by geographical constraints: the approach can be applied in the context of an all-local ecosystem, as well as in one that crosses regional boundaries or operates on a scale from local to state to national. The theory can also be applied to organizations that are working in particular sectors as well as to those that are place-based.

In the same way that ecosystems in nature are constantly in flux, so is our emerging theory of ecosystem grantmaking. We will continue to refine our understanding of the best ways to apply this approach as a funding strategy, and we will continue

to learn from our experience and the experience of others, both grantees and funders.

In that spirit, we are hopeful that this description of our ecosystem grantmaking framework will provide a launching point for further discussion and collaboration, especially with other funders. We welcome feedback, as we know we have much to learn from others, and we hope that such dialogue will lead to increased resources and collaboration. We believe that this commitment to relationship building and collaboration will support the creation of ever-more-powerful social change movements and, ultimately, we hope, a racially just society.

Acknowledgements

Written by: Cassandra Shaylor

Design and Layout: Design Action Collective

Photos: Alliance for Educational Justice, Causa Justa:: Just Cause,
Mujeres Unidas y ActivasNational Domestic Workers Alliance



436 14th St., Ste. 1417,
Oakland, CA 94610
ph: 510.663.3867
www.akonadi.org