Resourcing Movements for the Long Haul: LESSONS FROM THE GROW POWER FUND’S FIRST SIX YEARS
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This report was made possible by generous gifts of time from former Grow Power Fund grantees and Third Wave Fund staff members.

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We welcome feedback and questions about this report and our work at [rachel@thirdwavefund.org](mailto:rachel@thirdwavefund.org).
Grassroots movements’ ability to push mainstream movements and decision makers beyond what is imagined as possible creates transformative change.

We’ve known this for a long time, but in the past few years we’ve had some fundamental reminders. Grassroots networks of solidarity and mutual aid provided – and continue to provide – life-saving aid to millions during the pandemic.

And the grassroots groups that took the lead during the racial justice uprisings have pushed us closer than ever before towards meaningful reparations for BIPOC communities, and the elimination of a carceral state for all.

These change-makers were organizing long before crises pushed them to the center of national attention. They have often done so without meaningful philanthropic support.

In fact, many grassroots groups may prefer not to engage with philanthropy. But many others are inviting philanthropy to be a better partner by more meaningfully joining the struggle for justice and liberation.
There is a fierce urgency for philanthropy to do better by grassroots groups who want us as partners.

Many funders see the benefit in supporting grassroots groups, but fewer have incorporated specific practices to meaningfully grow their power. Grassroots groups need space to build institutions that work for them; to build new skills; to experiment, fail, iterate, and try again. And they need this space without the risk of losing their institutional partners or funding.

In 2016, Third Wave Fund started a fund specifically designed to support grassroots groups build their power. The Grow Power Fund is a six-year fund dedicated to supporting youth-led grassroots gender justice organizations where they’re at. As the first cohort of six-year grantees cycles out of this fund, we’ve learned some key lessons that we want to share with others who are dedicated to meaningfully supporting grassroots groups:

<table>
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<th>Long term, flexible funding is critical for the sustainability, responsiveness, and vision setting of our movements</th>
<th>This funding allows grantees to build more effective strategies for social change and increases their chances of making it through financial and political crises. Give long term, flexible funding – the longer, the better!</th>
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<td>Consistently support capacity building and experimental organizational development – at the pace that grantees set</td>
<td>This enables grantees to build innovative, values-aligned, organizational models that think beyond the power dynamics of traditional non-profit organizations, to best serve their missions. Supporting grantees to grow at a pace that works for them – including not at all! – means grassroots groups stay rooted in their communities, the source of their genius and power.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work at the speed of trust</td>
<td>This allows grantees and funders alike to have real conversations about their goals, needs, and struggles. When the focus of the grant is relationship – rather than a specific, fixed outcome – unexpected and marvelous things can emerge. And when grantees can reach out to other groups as thought-partners, grassroots power is multiplied.</td>
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Maybe some of these lessons are familiar to you, and your organization has already taken steps towards them.

Maybe some of these lessons are new, and you’re curious what they mean about how to be an ally to grassroots movements.

In this report, we’ll dive into the key lessons, concrete steps you can take to implement them, and grantee spotlights illustrating what happens when the philanthropic community meaningfully partners with grassroots groups.

Regardless of where you are on your journey, read on to learn more!
ABOUT THE Grow Power Fund

The Grow Power Fund (GPF) was launched in 2016 to address a gap in the philanthropic ecosystem: long term, flexible funding, structured specifically for grassroots groups. With the GPF, we tried to create conditions of financial stability and institutional support to enable groups to learn, practice, fail, re-group, and rebuild as stronger and more cohesive change makers.

Initially, the GPF had three different components: 1) six years of general operating support; 2) six years of dedicated capacity building support; and 3) annual grantee convenings.

As time went on and external factors shifted, the Grow Power Fund evolved to meet the moment. During the pandemic, we temporarily suspended convenings, increased grant amounts, and removed the separation between pots of money for general operating support and capacity building.

Simplifying and flexibilizing how grantees can use our funds allowed groups to be more responsive, and is more in line with our core belief that groups know what’s best for them.

To learn more about the current Grow Power Fund model and our brilliant grantees, check out our website!

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

At Third Wave Fund, we have a long history of asking ourselves how our processes align with our values and our mission. To learn how our values informed the methodology used to research and write this report, check out our methodology at the end of this report.
Six years of anyone’s life is full of nuance.

The same is true for the first cohort of Grow Power Fund grantees. We’ve tried to capture that beautiful complexity in our grantees spotlights, in the next section of this report.

On the following pages, you’ll find three key lessons we’ve distilled from our grantees experience with the Grow Power Fund.
Give long term, flexible funding – the longer, the better!

It’s been said in all the funder conferences in the past few years, but we’ll say it again until philanthropy’s practices change: long term, flexible funding is key. It allows grantees to take the long view, knowing that philanthropy will be there for them. When groups are working on deeply entrenched social problems, being able to plan for more than just a year or two leads to more strategic programs, less time wasted looking for funding, and better grantees mental health and wellness.

One grantee working for queer and trans liberation put it this way: “[Multi-year funding] allowed us to build a plan that said, ‘we can be sure of a certain amount of money.’ And so we can put the effort that we would have spent into finding that money on a yearly basis…. into building up our grassroots strategy. And so we were really able to build [our strategy] out.”

It also allows groups to pivot quickly when crises hit, as they did again, and again, and again over the past six years. A grantee working on access to abortion talked about the importance of flexible funding to weather financial downturns: “the year that the pandemic first started, where we weren’t really able to fully realize our main fundraising event... we were able to fill in a lot of gaps for our helpline...we were able to put [the money] where it was most needed.” It’s clear to us, long term and flexible funding is the best way to support grantees to build power!

Concrete Steps

Commit to multi-year funding. Funding that spans a minimum of five years is most impactful. Lighten the load for reporting processes, for example, through check in calls instead of written reports, or by accepting reports written for other funders. Prioritize general operating support. If general operating support is not feasible, be flexible in your willingness and processes to allow funds to shift... and let your grantees know this often! You can find more suggestions in the Hack List by Red Umbrella Fund, UHAI-EASHRI, and Third Wave Fund.
In philanthropy, we talk a lot about capacity building to make programmatic work more impactful. The Grow Power Fund grantees taught us something new: consistent capacity building support – by which we mean a mix of funding, technical assistance, and a willingness to act as a thought partner on tricky issues, enables grantees to choose how and when to grow as an organization. This deep work helps prepare groups to lean in and lead during key movement moments.

One grantee working toward Black liberation had this to say about the multi-year capacity building support they received from the Grow Power Fund. “[It] did make us sit down and try and make some ideas about what growth looks like, what transformation looks like, and how we could do this in a principled way... [These] preparatory things, it was the space to give us the room to actually build out...what our model truly was.”

The grantee increased the number and role of paid staff, using these roles to build up leadership capacity in young people in the community. Years later, “the [racial justice] uprisings and the leadership role that our young people took, it flooded us... our membership grew by three times out of nowhere... [I]f we hadn’t had capacity building conversations so early on, would we have been able to meet that moment? I’m not sure.” Our grantees made it plain: ongoing support around capacity building and mindful growth sets grassroots grantees up to meet key moments, rooted in their values.

Many grassroots groups have never had access to capacity building support. Help grantees assess where they’d like to grow, and support them to identify what types of capacity building support are available to them. Don’t limit your conversations about capacity to one point in time, continue them throughout your funding relationship. Don’t push grantees to grow for the sake of growth, or adopt any specific organizational model. Instead, support grantees to interrogate if they want to grow, and how they can do this in line with their values.
In activist circles, trust is everything. Knowing that an ally has your back is what allows activists to take calculated risks that lead to radical change. Philanthropy is a key actor in the social justice movement. Not only do we have funds, we have vital insight into the non-profit space. But just like other activists, we need to build trust with our grassroots allies. One grantee building working class power made the importance of a trusting relationship clear: “[The GPF program officer] was so intentional with us, and really talking to us about how to be radical while still being able to exist in the nonprofit space. And those conversations really influenced our models. Just being able to have someone, a partner we knew we could trust, because they understood how oppositional to the State we were, and tried to show us and teach us how we could do this work, but still be responsible to the folks that we are bringing into the organization... just gave us some space to say, ‘Okay, we may seem alone, in the small corner of the world’ [but we’re not].”

Another grantee summed it up this way “[The Grow Power Fund] allows us to be in relationship with Third Wave, where we can dream.” Beyond dreaming up new ways of working, grantees dreamed about bringing their lessons into philanthropy: After their involvement with the GPF, at least three leaders in grantee organizations now sit on Third Wave Fund’s Advisory Council.

By building trust-based relationships that counteract traditional grantor-grantee power dynamics, funders can become thought partners to grantees, and grantees can become thought partners to funders, providing mutual support that goes far beyond the dollar.

1 This powerful phrase is borrowed with deep thanks from adrienne maree brown, who shares so much wisdom about trust, relationship, and more in “Emergent Strategy”. 

Concrete Steps

It’s hard to build a meaningful relationship if you only expect to be allies for a short time – push for long term funding whenever possible. Ensure staff who hold relationships with grantees (often Program Officers) understand that their work is relationship building, and have the necessary time and skills to do this. Activism can be deeply isolating; making connections and funding groups to meet other activists who are working on related issues can go a long way to creating networks of support.
The lessons above just scratch the surface of what we learned from the first cohort of Grow Power Fund Grantees. Below, we’re sharing some spotlights to demonstrate how grantees experienced the mix of long-term funding, capacity building support, and deep relationship work. There’s a richness to learn from here; we hope these stories will provide food for thought.
One grantee promoting access to abortion tried out different ways of growing power in their community over the course of its six year grant. For this grantee, the GPF supported a nuanced approach to growth that suited its needs at various different stages of its organizational development, with long-term funding that gave it stability. “While we are trying to grow power, we’re not trying to grow ourselves, necessarily.”

With the support of the GPF, this grantee began to build power in ways that didn’t involve increasing the group size, by building “relationship[s] with folks outside of the current demographic and base that we were already engaging with.”

The organization used GPF support to enter into coalition with immigrant justice groups and environmental justice groups. It became interested in working with Spanish-speaking community members, but didn’t have experience making these connections. Another GPF grantee – who they met at a GPF convening – supported them to do this. This experience, among others, “helps us to inform what reciprocity looks like, what trust looks like, and what building power together [looks like].” The GPF allowed them to “be intentional about other ways that we wanted to grow.” Eventually, the group decided to hire its first paid staff member.
The decision was made as a response to increasing community need, but it was the stability of long-term funding that allowed them to make this decision. “A sense of stability and a sense of long-term investment definitely helps with being able to bring on staff. And bring them on in a way that makes them feel secured and supported.” As the group hired its first staff member, it used GPF funding to bring on a consultant to provide operational support.

This consultant was important in reducing the burden on staff: “It was always really good to have that available... to be able to hire outside contractors when we needed them. Instead of having to really lean on and run ragged the team that we had already.”

Summing up their position on growth now, the grantee states “[W]e are expanding our team at times when it’s necessary, expanding our base, expanding our volunteer base... [but we’re] really trying to make a meaningful distinction of what is [mission aligned], and what is just sort of replicating existing power structures for the sake of up keeping the nonprofit industrial complex.”

“While we are trying to grow power, we’re not trying to grow ourselves, necessarily.”
Over the course of the Grow Power Fund, half of the grantees re-conceived their organizational structures as an integral part of their missions. These groups looked beyond traditional non-profit models to build new ways of working. For one group working to build the political power of Asian-American youth, the deep relationship with Third Wave staff and long-term funding supported them to dream up and implement an organizational structure that better supports the change they’re trying to make in the world.

The group decided they would primarily hire young people, using their staffing structure as a tool to strengthen youth leadership. They stressed “our work is not just winning externally, but being able to win in ways where we are able to build a more holistic and transformative leadership experience... Because we don’t want to build a future of a one or two [person] leadership model, but really... a community of leaders that could have a role in the movement.”

The organization highlighted the GPF as part of what enabled it to significantly increase the number of youth it hired. “[The Grow Power Fund] allows us to be in relationship with Third Wave, where we can dream, and we could center [youth leadership]. If it was more centered around the outcome of program[atic] work, I think we would... not [be] centering how young people could be part of this process with us.”

At the same time, a deep relationship with Third Wave Fund helped the organization identify new frameworks and tools that could support its’ internal restructuring. “I think the core framework of the [restructuring] is really addressing power dynamics, addressing decision making power. And I think a lot of that has largely [been] influenced by how Third Wave has implemented gender justice work.”
One group working toward Black liberation moved from an all-volunteer collective to an organization staffed by their membership. For this grantee, the combination of thought partnership with other GPF cohort members, capacity building support for intentional study, and long-term funding to weather a temporary shutdown facilitated a key structural change that allowed them to best support their community.

Early on in their six-year grant, the collective made the decision to “take the base building model... and use it as the engine for the staff model...We were looking for ways to make sure that our base replaced the current [staff], continuously.” It was important for this group to be intentional about this shift, because many of them had experienced harms in the nonprofit sector, and they were determined not to repeat these. But there were no local groups doing this, who could support them to think through the creation of something new.

Then, at a GPF cohort convening, this group met another GPF grantee that had been asking itself similar questions. “It was the model that we wanted,” recalls a leader from the group. “Having the space and time to sit back and think about that, with folks who were also thinking about that, was really impactful to how we continue to restructure ourselves.”

After the group found thought-partners, it began to shift its structure. Using capacity building funding, the group engaged in deep internal education around different organizational models. “The study that we were able to do was really instrumental to the foundation of [our organization]. I mean, it’s still at the foundation of the work. And being able to use the capacity building grant there was great.”
The shift in structures took a lot of energy, and the group chose to shut its doors for a time to fully focus on their transformation. During this time, long term funding was key. “We would not have survived as a collective or an organization without that connection to Third Wave…Third Wave’s approach gave us room to experiment…What allowed us to make that shift when we wanted to was the fundraising model that we had, and we were able to implement [that] because of Third Wave stability being our anchor.”

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Conclusion

The Grow Power Fund is a fund in evolution. As we continue to learn from our grantees, we shift to be better partners to them. Our hope is that the lessons we’ve learned over the past six years and the shifts we’ve made can be the basis for widespread shifts in philanthropy. To best support grassroots movements, we must remember:

Long term, flexible funding is critical for the sustainability, responsiveness, and vision setting of our movements. A minimum of five years of funding is most impactful.

Consistently support capacity building and experimental organizational development—at the pace that grantees set.

Work at the speed of trust. Build long-standing, non-performative, relationships with grantees, and support grantees to build relationships with other activist groups.

If we take this on, philanthropy can help build the grassroots power to transform our world!
At Third Wave Fund, we have a long history of asking ourselves how our processes align with our values and our mission. In compiling this report, we wanted to uphold and further this practice. Additionally, we wanted to honor the time and emotional energy that former grantees took to engage in the research process with us. We did this by incorporating elements of decolonial evaluation practice into our research methodology, and by compensating former grantee organizations for their team members’ time.

For this report, we interviewed the first cohort of grantees to receive Grow Power Fund (GPF) support. There were six groups in the first GPF cohort. All had budgets under $200,000 and all were led by young people. The groups focused on issues from Black liberation, to access to abortion, to power building within Asian-American communities, to liberating queer and trans migrant communities.

As of October 2022, four groups are still operational. We asked members from five of the six groups to collaborate on this project. Recognizing that the closure of one of the groups had caused deep trauma, we chose not to reach out to members of this group.

This project started with a short survey to identify what themes were of most interest to former grantees. Intentional learning exercises are often not supported by funders. When they are, the focus is often on topics of interest to funders. In addition to informing Third Wave Fund’s understanding of our work, we hoped this evaluation could provide grantees with information that would be useful to them. We received survey responses from members of two groups.

Based on survey responses and conversations with current Third Wave Fund staff, we created a semi-structured interview guide to assess the GPF’s areas of potential impact. We contacted representatives from five of the six groups of the GPF’s first cohort. We heard back from members of all five groups, but were only able to complete interviews with members of the four groups that are still operational. In total, seven individuals from four GPF cohort groups were interviewed. Interviews lasted between 85 and 120 minutes; GPF cohort members’ organizations were compensated $200 for their interview.

We also interviewed the Program Officer in charge of the GPF from 2016 – 2021 and the Director of Third Wave Fund during the inception, creation, and launch of the GPF. Interviews lasted 60 minutes and were not compensated.

All interviews were transcribed by Otter.ai, and reviewed for accuracy by a researcher. We carried out a theme analysis to identify key topics across interviews. Theme analysis was carried out in Atlas.ti, Version 22.

After a draft report was written, all respondents had a two week window to review it. This was an important accountability mechanism, ensuring we accurately represented grantees’ experiences and opinions. However, no respondents completed a review. This time was not compensated, and the review period was scheduled for mid-October to early November, a busy busy period for many grantees. Future projects should schedule reviews around grantees schedules, and provide compensation for this labor.
youth vision and activism for gender justice

THIRD WAVE FUND