Towards an Ecological and Socially Just Transition to the Next Economy

EDGE Funders Alliance
Reflections on the 2014 Just Giving Conference in Berkeley, CA

There are two types of conferences: those that leave you feeling bored or frustrated by the set-piece speeches, lack of engagement and deadening process. That’s the majority. Then there are those where everyone you meet is interesting, where participation is taken seriously, and when you leave it’s with a buzz of energy and a head full of ideas. The 2014 Just Giving Conference was this kind of conference.

Organized on the cutting-edge issue “Towards an Ecological and Socially Just Transition to the Next Economy” this was the third global social change philanthropy conference of the EDGE Funders Alliance, a community of progressive funders that grew out of a merger between the Funders Network on Trade and Globalization (FNTG) and Grantmakers without Borders (GwoB).

The aim of the conference was to create a space for a deliberate and dynamic interaction between the “micro” and the “macro” or, as EDGE director Mark Randazzo describes it using the analogy of a mapping app, “zooming in” to focus on the local and the concrete where much of the organizing and technical work happens, and “zooming out” to see the broader landscape that allow us to grasp the big picture and discern more distant horizons. This conference was a place where philanthropy and activists could climb out of their silos to see how their issues are interconnected on the ground as well as systemically. This sounds abstract, but in the actual organizing and content of the conference, it worked.
“Community Dialogues were the best component of the conference. Getting to discuss issues in a small, consistent group with such outstanding thinkers and leaders was a great way to process information and build strong connections.” ~Participant comment

The conference asked three questions:

What is a just transition? What is happening on the ground? And most important: What can philanthropy do to support this work?

The three plenary sessions -- one each day -- “zoomed out” on these questions, with each speaker responding differently according to their own perspective and sense of priorities.

• The opening plenary on “components of a just transition” was intended to help us reflect on and grapple with what “deeper, more transformative change” means to each of us;

• The second plenary on “strategies for the historic shifts we need” help us all see more clearly what new approaches are going to be needed to bring about that deeper change; and

• The last plenary provided inspiration and examples of how philanthropy in general, and each funder’s own grantmaking and philanthropic efforts, can and should contribute to this work over the course of the next years and decade.

Following each plenary was the “community dialogue” which gave people a chance to be part of a small consistent group, and to dive deeper into the issues.
The panellists, workshops, and facilitation were excellent. There were some important and clear messages communicated around the importance of working to address root causes; of responsible philanthropy and lots of care put into including indigenous voices and women’s voices which is key if we are to imagine a just transition.” ~Participant comment

According to post-conference feedback, it seems that everyone agrees that the economic, political, social and ecological crises we are living through are interconnected and that philanthropy has a role to play -- no doubt some would even argue that philanthropy itself is part of the crisis. While most people thought that “just transition” is a useful frame, others struggled with the concept.

However, from where I sat, the recurring message that ran through the whole conference and which brought the greatest clarity was on what we need to do now. It’s simple: “organize, organize, organize.”

In all the plenary discussions and in all the workshops, time and again people talked about organizing. Organizing people, organizing workers, organizing community, organizing internationally, organizing philanthropy.

Maria Poblet from Causa Justa spoke of the importance of organizing around long-term visions so that we can “use moments when we are under attack to raise the visibility of our issues and our long-term vision will carry us through.”

Speaking from his experience in the trade union movements, Ashim Roy of the Indian New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI) reflected that we “cannot reclaim democracy without organizations; the battle of ideas is about changing ideas in collectivities.”

Meanwhile veteran campaigner Walden Bello insisted we “need to out-organize at all levels. Yes, we must eschew hierarchy but not leadership, not organization.”

Speaking about experiences on the ground, Christie Keith from Global Alliance Against Incinerators (GAIA) explained that “Working in waste, you have to talk abut the next steps, how to clean up, how to compost and clean the earth, how to organize waste workers, etc. In the past 15 years there have been 100 incinerator proposals and not one has been approved. This is thanks to rooted commitment to place, lives, and community. We are organizing, and we are winning.”

And in the closing plenary, Bobbie Peek from South Africa reminded us, “There is no quick-fix solution; it’s hard graft on the ground. There is no TED way to deal with what’s happening; we need strong and steady organizing on the ground.”

And perhaps the most moving and rarely stated reason for organizing was Maria Poblet’s comment that “organizing can help people to not be alone.”

In between the plenaries, dozens of thoughtfully organized workshops, engagement labs and site visits “zoomed in” on the same questions in ways that were practical, informative and inspiring. It was in these spaces that we discovered how networks and
communities in the US and elsewhere are connecting the dots between society, ecology, work, place, community, gender, race and class to solve practical problems and to “be” the future they want to see.

“Engagement labs were excellent. Really gave a sense of community of people interested in funding and working together on a particular issue. May have been useful to have these sooner because chance to connect occurred right before end of conference.” ~Participant comment

We saw the power of Organizing and heard many examples of “pre-figurative” praxis at its best such as the Boston Recycling Coalition which is linking social, labour and environmental issues by advocating for zero waste targets in the city while supporting marginalized workers, such as migrant women and long term unemployed, to set up worker-owned cooperatives that are subcontracted under good working conditions to deliver the recycling programs.

Or UPWARD -- the United Peninsula Working to Attain Responsible Development -- which is working in the post-Sandy context of the Rockaways to ensure that the development of 24 blocks of beach-front property brings “good jobs, truly affordable housing, community controlled meeting space, entertainment, economic opportunities and more for the Rockaways”.

Or The Working World, a group that describes themselves as “venture capitalists with a radical social mission: to lend people the tools to democratically build lasting wealth for themselves, their businesses, and their communities”. Working in the US, Argentina and Nicaragua, TWW has facilitated loans to dozens of worker owned and managed cooperatives, based on a vision of creating jobs that are “rooted in justice and anchored in local communities, where workers are able to improve not just their income but also their quality of life.”

Other workshops delved into innovations in philanthropy, such as indigenous funding, the divest/invest movements and investing in art and creativity to accelerate social and environmental change while the engagement lab space allowed funders to gather around common issues such as the new economy or partnering with social movements and go deeper into the issues and strategies.

In total, there were twenty-two workshops, four engagement labs, one gender caucus and two site visits. The workshops were organized by EDGE members and most included activists and grassroots organizers as speakers. Covering almost every aspect of an “ecologically and socially just transition” -- from food sovereignty and community control of capital to supporting social movement leadership and structural racialization analysis -- these sessions were highly rated by the participants. In the post-conference evaluation, more than 58% of respondents rated the participants-lead workshops as very good and 40% as good: at 98% this was the best-rated element of the whole conference.

“I loved the combination of heady theory and grassroots, down to earth practicality. Grassroots leaders were honest in ways that I seldom see at a conference and helped me to learn so much. The community dialogues were great and helped me to meet so many new people.” ~Participant comment
It’s always interesting on the edge.

The conference was held near the Berkeley Marina, across the bay from San Francisco. It’s a beautiful place but more importantly, it borders many dynamic communities and organizers who are working in on the intersections of class, race, gender, and environment in ways that empower and build community while moving towards a new economy embedded in social and ecological justice. Some of these organizations and activists joined the conference as participants, providing insights through the workshops, and as plenary speakers. In an afternoon of site visits, the conference went out into the communities. Through these interactions, we were able to get some answers to the question “What is happening on the ground?”

Oakland, just to the south of the Berkeley Marina, has a reputation for being radical, politicized and organized. It is the home of the Black Panthers, after all, and Occupy Oakland was one of the biggest and most tenacious of the 2011 Occupy movements. But in recent years, gentrification has been gutting Oakland of its diversity. Since 2004, the black population has dropped by a massive 25%. Housing prices have soared, having now recovered to the level of the pre-2008 bubble and still rising. This pattern of gentrification, stratification and displacement is happening across the US, as the number of people teetering towards the poverty line and below continues to grow, while the cashed-up super-rich earners of Palo Alto, San Jose and other booming financial and hi-tech hubs push real estate prices to stratospheric levels.

Causa Justa is one of the key coalitions working in Oakland to defend the housing rights of working class communities of colour. Maria Poblet is their executive director. Speaking in the opening plenary, along with author Susan George and Greenpeace International director Kumi Naidoo, Maria is an example of the very best of US activism. She describes herself as a “nerdy Latina” but in fact she’s an organizer and leader with vision and a powerful way with words.

“We are shaped,” she said, “by the conditions that we live in. Capital has shaped our lives and we need to fight for our revolutionary imagination.” For her, the key to a just transition is Organizing people to lead and be part of that transition: “We need to believe that we can lead society, we need to believe that ordinary people are part of that change, and we need to organize, because Organizing can help people to not be alone;”

I am glad I attended the conference, as what I learned and experienced there will be useful to me in my work:

- Strongly agree: 70%
- Agree: 28%
- Neither agree nor disagree: 2%
- Disagree: 0%
- Strongly disagree: 0%
“EDGE is a great name for this group, as what it does is edgy. It will be important for EDGE to continue going to the edges of its comfort zone, and be in places where its voice will be a dissenting one. This way, we will further influence discourse around philanthropy and the importance of working to address the root causes of the issues we are seeking to transform.” ~Participant comment

Organizing to help people not be alone is something that people have been doing for decades in Richmond, a small town north of Berkeley that also figures in the history of the Black Panther movement. It’s a community whose economy is almost totally dependent on Chevron’s local oil refinery. They have been trying to get Chevron to clean up its environmental act for years, but without much success.

As recently as August 6, 2012, the refinery experienced a “catastrophic pipe failure”.

“All of the employees escaped, narrowly avoiding serious injury. The ignition of the flammable portion of the vapor cloud and subsequent continued burning of the hydrocarbon process fluid resulted in a large plume of particulates and vapor traveling across the Richmond, California area. Approximately 15,000 people from the surrounding area sought medical treatment due to the release.”

Environmental justice takes on real meaning in this context. In fact, it’s communities like Richmond who have been fighting the front line environmental battles for decades, battles with a race and class dimension often absent from the mainstream environmental movement.

Not far from the refinery is the neighbourhood of Iron Triangle, where close to 40% of people live below the poverty line and almost half did not finish high school. The Greenway Community Garden runs along an old train track, with forty-two raised beds of flowers, vegetables and herbs tended by staff and community volunteers. The produce is free for all. Greenway is one of 11 gardens coordinated by Urban Tilth, whose work is to

“… help our community grow our own food; train and employ our own young people as “home grown experts”; teach our local residents about the relationships among food, health, poverty, and justice; foster public foraging programs; and forge partnerships with local small farmers to increase demand for their produce.”

These are small initiatives, but at the same time they are experimenting in new ways of cooperating to produce and consume good food, to share knowledge, and to create jobs in neighborhoods that are far removed -- physically and sociologically -- from the hip organic food culture.

From the U.S. Chemical Safety And Hazard Investigation Board Regulatory Report Chevron Richmond Refinery Pipe Rupture And Fire Chevron Richmond Refinery #4 Crude Unit, Richmond, California August 6, 2012, Report No. 2012-03-I-Ca May 2014
The 2014 Conference Program

Plenaries:
Components of a Just Transition
Strategies for the Historic Shifts We Need
Bold Bets: Philanthropy’s Role in the Just Transition

Breakout Workshops  {All workshops, Engagement Labs, and working group meetings were organized and supported by EDGE members and other funder allies.}

- Fishbowl Conversation: What Role for labor in the Just Transition?
- Ingredients for Cooperation: How Food and Farming Coops are Driving the Just Transition to a New Economy
- Resource Nexus: The Importance of Intermediaries in Advancing Social Justice
- Grassroots Women Lead on the Path to Climate Justice
- Why is it So Hard, Philanthropy?: Prioritizing Equity for Movement Building
- Exercising Community Rights in the Face of Extractive Industries: Leveling the Playing Field
- What is a Justice Funder?
- Connecting the Disconnected: Building Collective Power Between Movements and Networks Working on the New Economy
- Domestic and International Threats to Seed Sovereignty: Family Farmers, Indigenous Peoples, Funders Fight Back
- Indie Philanthropy – Funding Outside the Box
- Got Creativity? Why Investing in Art & Creativity Accelerates Environmental and Social Change
- Lessons from the Frontlines: Community Organizing for a Just Transition vs. The Corporate Capture of Clean Air Policies
- From Transaction to Transformation: Why a Structural Racialization Analysis is Essential for Challenging Global Corporate Power
- The Commons as a New/Old Paradigm for Advancing Systemic Change and Inspiring the Grassroots Organizations
- Navigating Unstill Waters: Supporting Leadership for Social Movements
- Dignidad Rebelde Righteous Dignity: 20 Years After NAFTA – Challenges, Social Movement Models, and Which Ways Forward for Trade Justice?
- Steering Towards a New Economy with ‘Old Actors’ at the Helm?: The Role of the Private Sector in Financing for Social and Ecological Transformation
- Indigenously-Led Funding From Around The World
- Leverage Your Foundation’s Endowment: A Conversation about Invest/Divest Philanthropy
- Community Control of Capital: Budgets and Banking in the New Economy
- Innovations in Community Philanthropy from Palestine, Southern Africa, and Vietnam: How international donors can help, and how they can hurt
- Developing Systems and Tools to Promote Learning-Focused Evaluation

In Anonymous Surveys, Funders Agreed or Strongly Agreed with the Following:

Participation reinforced or strengthened my view that the social, ecological and economic crises we face are interconnected, and systemic in nature.  
95%

Participation reinforced or strengthened my view that progressive philanthropy should seek to address root causes of these crises.  
96%

An ecological and socially ‘just transition’ to a new/next economy is a useful way to think of the social transformations needed.  
88%

Site Visits

- Our Power Hot Spot/Building Equity and Alignment for Impact (BEAI)
- Waste Zero: Practical programs for getting to a world without waste

Engagement Labs & Working Group Meetings

- Building Equity and Alignment for Impact (Organized as a site visit. See below.)
- Management Assistance Group (MAG) Funders
- Agroecology and Food Systems Funders
- New Economy Discussion Group
- Gender Caucus
“Out of the silos and into the struggle: it’s time for philanthropy to get its hands dirty.”

The third big question asked at Just Giving was “What can philanthropy do?” to be part of a socially and ecologically just transition to the next economy.

The clear message that came across in many different ways is: organize, organize, organize. So the challenge then for philanthropy is how to support that organizing, and how to organize itself to be part of the great transition.

Some of the criticisms of philanthropy were very direct. Susan George, author and president of the Transnational Institute, said that funders can be “very violent” and are “doing absolutely the wrong thing;” while Gopal Dayaneni of the Climate Justice Alliance pointed out that philanthropy is by-and-large the product of the extractive economy that we are trying to transition away from.

But it was not only activists that pointed the finger at philanthropy. Ellen Dorsey from the Wallace Global Fund Comment threw down a challenge.

“We have to ask ourselves some simply questions: Do our investments enhance the public good or do they create the problems that our grantees are trying to solve? How do we use our assets to seed, scale, popularise and render successful new economic models?”

“The role of philanthropy,” she said, “is to support the movements and to divest from fossil fuels and to invest in those things that will help the great transition.”

In his closing remarks, Ken Wilson from the Christensen Fund seemed to go one step further:

“The just transition is happening and it is taking place in the decomposing matter of a decaying system. At this conference, we have seen that almost every problem is matched with a vibrant solution; emergent self-assembling networks have created solutions, made and done by the people who have been the most marginalised. The transition is happening and philanthropy is part of it.”

“Change is not going to be about getting the big money. It will be about finding self-generating, self-multiplying processes that are not resource-demanding, but instead part of a circular economy. I’d like to see philanthropy, composting deliciously, increasingly part of that circular economy that includes relationships and goes far on the renewable energy of song and poetry, such as we have enjoyed here at EDGE.”

Earlier in the conference, Maria Poblet asked, “Is this a tent moment or a bus moment? A tent moment is when we all get together; a bus moment is when we all head off in the same direction.”

If anyone asked me that question “Is EDGE ready for the bus?” I’d say, they are already on board and the bus is moving.

Now it’s time to organize, organize, organize.
Here follows a partial list of those institutions and networks who attended the 2014 JustGiving Conference.

### Foundations and Funds

| 3rd Creek Foundation | Abundance Foundation | Appleton Foundation* |
| Bay Area Justice Funders Network | Ben & Jerry’s Foundation* | Bewegungsstiftung* |
| CarEth Foundation* | CGBD | Channel Foundation* |
| Chino Cienega Foundation* | Colorado Plateau Foundation | Dalia Association* |
| David & Lucile Packard Foundation | Dietel Partners | EcoViva |
| Environmental Grantmakers Association | Fondation Charles Léopold Mayer* | Ford Foundation* |
| Full Circle Foundation | Fund for Global Human Rights* | Gbowee Peace Foundation |
| General Service Foundation* | GIF | Global Fund for Women* |
| GiffenGrants Fund* | Grassroots International* | Groundswell Fund* |
| Groundwork Fund | Groundwork International | Hawaii People's Fund |
| HOW Fund/IDEX | IDEX* | IFIP |
| IHRFG | Inter Pares | International Labor Solidarity Center* |
| Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation* | Kalliopeia Foundation | Kindle Project* |
| Lawson Valentine Foundation* | LIN Center for Community Development | Linked Fate Fund for Justice |
| LUSH | MADRE | Mary's Pence* |
| McConnell Foundation | Movement Strategy Center | National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy |
| New England Biolabs Foundation | New Field Foundation* | New Israel Fund |
| New Field Foundation* | New Resource Bank | Open Channels |
| New Resource Bank | PRBB Foundation* | Overbrook Foundation* |
| Pi Investments | RBC Wealth Management Resource Generation | Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity |
| Schonfeld Consulting | Solidago Foundation* | Stranahan Foundation |
| Tikva Grassroots Empowerment Fund* | Tamalpais Trust* | The 11th Hour Project |
| Town Creek Foundation | Unitarian Universalist Service Committee* | Urgent Action Fund* |
| Unitarian Universalist Service Committee* | Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights* | USA for Africa* |
| Urgent Action Fund* | Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights* | UU Veatch Program* |
| VGIF (Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund) | Wallace Global Fund* | Wellspring Advisors* |
| Women's Fund in Georgia | Women’s Fund in Georgia | Veris Wealth Partners |

* indicates formal membership in EDGE Funders Alliance
Civil Society Organizations and Networks

350.org
AIDA
Akili Dada
ArtCorps
Asia Floor Wage Alliance
Asian Pacific Environmental Network
Association for Women’s Rights in Development
Causa Justa :: Just Cause
Center for Earth Energy & Democracy
CESTA FOE El Salvador
Clean Water Action
Co-FED (The Cooperative Food Empowerment Directive)
Colectivo Revuelta Verde(GAIA)
Commons Strategies Group
Community Agroecology Network
Community Food & Justice Coalition
CoreAlign
Desarrollo Económico Social de los Mexicanos Indígenas, DESMI
E-Tech International
East Michigan Environmental Action Council
Embodied Ecologies
Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide - ELAW
ETC Group
Food First/Institute for Food and Development Policy
GAIA (Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives)
Grassroots Global Justice Alliance
Greenpeace International
Greenpeace USA

Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society
Independent
Interamerican Association for Environmental Defense
International Indigenous Women's Forum
Jobs With Justice
Just Transition Alliance
La Via Campesina/Rural Coalition
Learning for Action
Management Assistance Group
Movement for Ecological Learning and Community Action (MELCA)
Movement Generation: Justice and Ecology Project
National Domestic Workers Alliance
New Trade Union Initiative
Peace and Dignity Journeys
Pesticide Action Network
Picher Allan Associates LLC
PODER
ROC United
Rockaway Wildfire
Rural Coalition
SEIU United Service Workers West
Strategic Communications & Community Engagement
SumOfUs
Sustainable Economies Law Center
Swift Foundation
The Cultural Conservancy
Transnational Institute
Turfloop Graduate School of Leadership
Union of Organizations of the Sierra Juarez of Oaxaca (UNOSJO)
Women’s Earth and Climate Caucus
Zenab for Women in Development, Sudan

HOW WE LIVE (H*WL)

How We Live: A Journey Towards a Just Transition, a 7 ½ minute film produced with our partners and award-winning filmmakers at Kontent Films, provided an introduction to our discussions at Just Giving 2014. Building on the analysis and pedagogy of the Movement Generation Justice and Ecology Project, the film introduced notions of a just transition that prioritizes human well-being within environmental limits and emphasized how grantmaking can support the next emerging economy. It highlighted the work of both funders and grassroots organizations in constructing new narratives and visions for a more just economy and healthy planet; and challenged the way in which we think about economics – as a process of care taking rather than as an abstract set of laws. In the weeks after the conference How We Live was selected for promotion by Upworthy, and has since been seen by over 15,000 viewers.
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