SHIFTING POWER
GUIDING PRACTICE REPORT

Introduction

The New England Grassroots Environment Fund supports civic engagement projects that contribute to a shift in power away from systems of domination and exploitation of land, people, and the environment, and towards systems that build and support healthy, just, safe, and environmentally sustainable communities.

Our current social and economic system allows for the consolidation of wealth and power for the few, at the expense of the many. This imbalance of power often leads to decisions that are made for communities without their input: pipeline approvals, toxic pollution, and influxes of big box stores that hurt local economies and mask externalities, to name only a few. However, everyday people have the ability to challenge this system through organizing their neighbors towards real solutions for their community and claiming the plurality of their voices in our democracy.

While grassroots groups have the ability to flip these power structures and build alternative solutions, they may also replicate the same systems that privilege only certain people's needs. The issues at hand are urgent, but without creating groups that challenge these dynamics, our solutions will remain faulty at best, and perpetuate oppressive dynamics at worst. This report aims to give organizers a structure with which to reflect on how their group is already, and could improve upon, operating under the guidance of this value.

Why This Tool is Important

Many guides for grassroots organizers start from the assumption that the problem and solution have already been identified and will not change. We believe that shifting power

begins with identifying who has the opportunity or clout to define the problem and craft its solution. Using lessons and recommendations from grassroots groups in New England, this assessment is meant as a tool for ongoing reflection, rather than a checklist of good or bad actions. We will continue to be engaged in conversation with grassroots groups about how this report is impacting projects in our region, and update this report as such.

Five Components of Shifting Power

In order to evaluate the extent to which groups are working to shift power, we have defined five components for groups to reflect on as they determine what measures of shifting power are accessible to them in the short and long term:

Community-Based	Community as Decision-Makers	Participation of Marginalized Groups	Accountability & Conflict Protocols	Transparency & Feedback Processes
Group is created by and/or made up of members of the community.	Decision-making is transparent and accessible, especially for those most impacted by the issue in the community	Group identifies and addresses barriers to participation for marginalized community members	Group engages in self-reflection and conversations about oppression, creates protocols to navigate conflict and criticism	Group makes their processes transparent to the community they serve or represent and engages in feedback processes

The first two components, **Community-Based** & **Community as Decision-Makers**, are based on the belief that solutions should be steered by grassroots community involvement, rather than top-down "expertise." The following three components (**Participation of Marginalized Groups, Accountability & Conflict Protocols,** and **Transparency and Feedback Processes**) are emphasized with the understanding that community-based groups may still exclude and marginalize community voices and uphold systemic bias.

These components are elaborated on in the proceeding pages. Following these definitions are questions that groups can use to reflect together on how these values and practices can or do show up in their work. It is our belief that being "community-based" means consistently checking in on how we are doing across these components. The Grassroots Fund will develop these questions further into curriculum and activities to aid this reflection process and identify next steps. In particular, in 2020 we are committing to creating spaces, both virtual and face-to-face, across the region to continue to dig in and

co-create these practices. Make sure to sign up for our newsletter to stay up to date with these opportunities at *grassrootsfund.org/participate*.

What is at stake when power dynamics remain the same?

Why is it not enough to start a community composting project without considering power dynamics? Or fight a proposed incinerator without working for the inclusion of marginalized communities? Especially in the face of multiple ecological crises, it is easy to react by wanting these projects to proliferate without the extra work of shifting power.

As we know - and are reminded by communities who have been on the forefront of social and environmental injustice - issues such as climate change and pollution are not simply matters of excessive carbon or scientific calculation. These externalities are pushed upon low-income communities and communities of color because of the social systems that allow for them.

The social and political system that puts short-term profit before the health of our neighbors and the environment is dependent on an ideology that devalues certain lives and communities. We know that white supremacy has been used as a tool to devalue many lives and thus make their devastation and exploitation politically possible. As such, social inequity within our communities does not exist separately from environmental destruction. Rather than building sustainable relationships between the land and the people that will be resilient in the face of change, this system is dependent on exerting power for short-term gains. When we replicate this system in our own attempt to meet the urgency of the situation, we fail to challenge this ideology and create just, compassionate relationships.

In order to reorganize our relationships to each other and to the natural world we must reinvest in our ability to make decisions together, include those who have been historically marginalized, build trust and accountability in our communities, and continue to grow our capacity to navigate the challenges inherent in this work.

Five Components

The following descriptions represent the depth of work that grassroots groups we work with are doing to shift power within their communities. We believe that taking steps towards these tenants of shifting power is accessible to all groups, and have included questions below to help groups identify where they are capable of continuing to build this capacity. There is no expectation that all groups are doing all of these things at the start - only that there is intention to self-reflect and move closer to our values.

Community-Based

The group was created by community members or is taking steps to cede power to members of the community. The group's mission and vision seeks to serve the community and is life-affirming for all members.

Community as Decision-Makers

The group provides the community with agency over what services they're receiving or what decisions the group is making. Decision-making is democratized and community members get a seat at the table to direct the growth of the group.

Trust-Building & Inclusion of Marginalized Groups

The onus is on the community group to self-reflect on which groups have been marginalized and excluded within their locality and begin trust building and relationship-building to understand what inclusion would look like for them, what their barriers to participating are, and how the group can have more perspectives represented in their decision-making.

Protocols to Promote Accountability, Resolve Conflicts, and Engage in Conversations about Race and Privilege

There are intentional structures and protocols in place for conversation, self-reflection, and conflict resolution in a way that promotes accountability, responsiveness to criticism and critique, and assists the community in understanding one another. Impactful, long-term systematic change relies on deep change within individual people, communities, and organizations in how we resolve conflict, care for one another, and hold each other accountable.

Transparency and Community Feedback Processes

Communities have access to group's information about their operations and their resources in order to be able to make informed decisions. The group invests time in developing a community feedback process that works for them and their community. They are intentional about being transparent with the community regarding their processes, the feedback they receive, and the next steps to address the feedback.

Questions for Reflection

The following questions were formed through our conversations with grassroots groups in New England about their strategies for creating group processes that shift power. Some questions may feel obvious, others vast and perplexing, and not all may be relevant to all groups. The terms "marginalized" or "community" might mean different things in different contexts. You may have many different responses to these questions, from snapping your fingers in agreement, to eye-rolling, or scoffing at their intent. We encourage you to pay attention to questions that make you stop and think, and ultimately hope these questions are used for group reflection in which many voices are able to share their observations and ideas.

Community-Based

- Who organizes your group? Were people from the local community active in creating the group and are they active members and decision-makers currently?
- Has the group looked at the demographic make-up of the community?

- Do you ask core group members to self-identify across various demographic characteristics and - if yes - how do you use that information?
- Are the group members primarily from the same race, socioeconomic status or gender?
    - If group members are homogeneous, why do you think this is the case? Is there a culture in the group that those from different backgrounds feel excluded, uncomfortable, or unwanted by? What are ways to get input about your group's culture from those different from yourself?
    - If group members are not homogenous, do you talk about the different identities that make up the group? Do you validate and encourage learning about different identities? What are ways you can validate different identities within the group? What are ways to encourage people in the group to learn about one another's identities?

Community as Decision-Makers

- How are decisions made in your group? Who decides the agenda and what are the guidelines to adding items of discussion to it?
- Are meetings, especially those where important decisions are being made, accessible and well communicated to the group's members and community? Is anyone from the community allowed to be at the meetings?
- Are meetings accessible? How have you confirmed that timing works? Are there multiple transportation options to get to the location? Do you offer childcare, food, translation and/or are there pathways for community members to communicate what barriers exist to participate in decision-making?
- Does your group provide the community with enough and/or all the information to be able to be active participants in the discussion and to have the ability to make informed decisions? What are the tools or resources you provide?
- Are those who attend the decision-making meetings representative of the community they're serving? Are there those who are directly impacted by environmental/social issues? Are there those who are marginalized in the community?

- If not, how are you keeping the larger community involved in the decision-making process? What can you do to understand why they are not able to be present in the meeting? How can you brainstorm together about how to reduce barriers to be present and take part in the decision-making?

- Have there been discussions about if the way the group makes decisions is what makes the group members and community feel represented, heard, and able to participate? Does your process create space for many perspectives?

- How often is your group engaging the community in the decision-making process? How often are you reaching out to community members for guidance, direction, and input? Do you feel as if the community has been provided the opportunity to be involved with the decision-making process at each step of your project evolving? Do you have protocols for community members to share barriers to participate in decision-making?

Inclusive of and Building Trust with Marginalized Communities

- How can you make your group more accessible to others, especially those marginalized in your community? How can your group begin to build relationships with those who are marginalized in your community? What is the work that your group is doing to check biases about certain identities (race, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, disability)? How can you begin conversations about these topics in a way that pushes people to think deeper about their biases and how to address them?

- How is your group building trust and relationships with marginalized groups?

- What are ways your group can begin having conversations about biases and oppression within your community? How is the group creating inclusionary spaces within the group for marginalized people?

Protocols for Accountability, Conflict Resolution, and Critical Reflection

- Have you done research about your community's context and demographics? What are some social and environmental issues that impact your city, neighborhood,

town, locality, or community? How do they relate to your group's mission and vision? Do these issues impact everyone in the area/community similarly or are some groups hit harder by these issues? Why do you think this is the case?

- Racism and racial inequality is present within almost every social issue and system in the United States. Is your group talking about racism and other structural oppressions within the work you're doing? And how it shows up in your community?
    - If yes, how are you having these conversations? Are they promoting new thoughts, healing, actions, and movements? Or do you feel like they are creating tension within your group and community? What are ways you can think of addressing this tension and address why these conversations are important?
    - If no, how can you begin these conversations? Are there local, regional, or national resources you group can access to begin learning about these issues? How can you bring this conversation to your larger group and membership? Can you imagine how you could have a dialogue about these issues and connect them to inequalities you see within your community? How do you think you can create a space where this conversation can happen?
- Have you had conversations within your group about privilege in general, and white privilege specifically?
    - If yes, did you feel like the conversation was productive? Was there defensiveness? How did your group handle that defensiveness? Did you feel the conversation was primarily focused on guilt, rather than acknowledgement and action? How does guilt manifest within you and your group? Is it productive or is it self-serving?
        - If it is productive, in what ways does it lead you to show up for marginalized people or your community?
        - If it is self-serving, what are ways to have an open conversation about this with your group? Who are groups you can bring in to guide your group through accepting their privilege and moving past their guilt towards actions that center the benefit and agency are marginalized people?

- How does your group handle conflict? If there's tension over a decision or about something someone said or between people, what does the group do? How does your group handle criticism from community members or within the group? Can you think of a strategy of how to address conflict that allows for all parties to share their perspectives, feel heard, and to reconcile? Can you think of techniques, protocols, or strategies for how the group can openly process criticism from the community, while also explaining their decisions? How can you create safety for vulnerability within your group?

Transparency and Community Feedback Processes

- How transparent is your group about their meetings, notes, decisions, and operations? What does someone from the local community need to do to get access to this information?
- Do you have a way of getting feedback from your local community about your projects, decisions, or services?
    - If you do, how often do you obtain feedback? What are your processes of getting feedback? How many people respond to you? Are they useful responses? Can you think of more accessible ways for people to engage in providing feedback to your group?
    - If you don't, can you think of aspects of your work where receiving more community feedback could be helpful? Why would it be important to your group to invest in developing these feedback processes? What is a feedback process strategy that fits the unique culture of your community? What is an accessible way for the community to engage in providing feedback to your group?
- What are ways your group can acknowledge and respond to feedback (positive or negative) in a way that makes members and the community feel heard? What process can your group brianstorm on how to navigate and implement the community feedback you're receiving?

Next Steps

These questions are big, and we are revisiting them alongside the grassroots groups in our network. In 2020, we will be building out virtual and in-person events to allow this conversation to continue off the page. Make sure to sign up for our newsletter to stay up to date with these opportunities at *grassrootsfund.org/participate*.

Further Resources

This report was created by the staff of the Grassroots Fund, who have relied on more resources than we could list or pay our respects to for helping us understand these issues. One resource that we pull out again and again is The Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture, which is accompanied by many other tools at dismantlingracism.org. If you would like to discuss further resources on these topics you can email audrey@grassrootsfund.org.

Grassroots Fund Spring 2019 Participatory Grantmaking Committee & Staff

The **New England Grassroots Environment Fund, Inc.** *(Grassroots Fund) is dedicated to co-creating healthy and sustainable communities throughout New England. With a focus on those who have often been marginalized, Grassroots Fund empowers individuals, groups and organizations working across a broad range of environmental and social justice issues. By helping them identify, select and access the specific tools, resources and connections they need to challenge existing systems, they are able to develop lasting solutions to the complex problems affecting the places they live and the health of the people who live there. We're supporting change makers who not only experience marginalization but face systemic and structural barriers to traditional funding.* **To learn more visit grassrootsfund.org.**

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