# FUNDING FOOD AND FARM COMMUNICATIONS

## LESSONS FROM SIX YEARS IN THE FIELD

**FOOD AND FARM**
COMMUNICATIONS FUND

# Overview

The Food and Farm Communications Fund is a multi-funder collaboration and pooled grant program organized around a shared belief in the role of strategic communications and narrative to build power and embolden transformative change in our food and farm systems. Since its launch in 2012, the Fund has awarded more than $2.1 million in targeted communications support to 41 organizations and projects.

In early 2018, we sought to evaluate this grantmaking and to investigate three key questions:

- ◉ What are the current communications needs and priorities of the field?

- ◉ What are the biggest challenges faced by food and farm movement nonprofits in expanding their communications capacity?

- ◉ How can philanthropy better address the gap in communications funding?

# Methodology

A range of methodologies were drawn upon during the course of the evaluation. They include:

- ◉ Reviewing available Letter of Interest data, full proposals, and grantee reports from all Food and Farm Communications Fund grant-making rounds;

- ◉ Administering an online survey to food and farm movement nonprofits (65 organizations responded, 60 of which were prior applicants to the Fund, and 26 were past or current Fund grantees);

- ◉ Conducting stakeholder interviews with 15 key leaders, to explore the communications gap and specific ideas for more targeted and collabora-tive philanthropic support.

# Findings

From nearly all of the grantees and community groups contacted, we heard a common refrain centered around the following communications needs:

## 🛜 Building Broad Communications Capacity

We heard time and again that organizations are constrained in their capacity to engage in strategic communications work. More than a quarter (28 percent) of all survey respondents reported having no dedicated communications staff, and more than 50 percent of organizations with budgets less than $500,000 reported this to be the case. Even with dedicated communications roles on staff, respondents noted that too many skills and responsibilities are expected of these positions, and it becomes a "superhuman task" to find someone who can do it all. Furthermore, of the dedicated communications staff reported in the survey, only 16 percent were engaged in executive decision-making or high-level planning, which reflects on how often these roles are undervalued.

Nearly a quarter of groups (22 percent) characterized their overall communications capacity relative to their needs (including any external communications support) as "not adequate at all," and 31 percent as "somewhat inadequate." Dedicated communications staffing and capacity-building shortfalls were reported as the highest priority funding gaps to address in both the short and long term, for organizations of all sizes.

## 🛜 Investing in Professional Development

While hiring dedicated communications staff is a top priority for many organizations, limited resources can make this challenging. Many organizations said that opportunities for communications-based professional development for existing staff would be beneficial, especially for people in leadership positions. They also noted the importance of engaging multiple staff members in these trainings as a way to build skills and increase communications across programs and operations.



Leah Cohen, Agricultural Justice Project

## 🛜 Supporting Robust Storytelling and Narrative Development

Groups understand that well-crafted messages and storytelling have huge potential to appeal to the public's emotions and conscience, and that their constituents are powerful messengers. They also know that media skills (like how to pivot during an interview or effectively integrate talking points) must be developed. Spokesperson training can boost constituent confidence in these skills and maximize PR opportunities to reframe public understanding and promote grassroots solutions.

Furthermore, groups we spoke with identified the need for narrative development connected to the bigger picture—but many stressed that this foundational communications work takes time and cannot be short-changed. As one interviewee reflected, "This story is not just one instance of farmers not being able to get a loan—it is part of something much bigger." Groups also emphasized that narrative development alone is not enough: that it must be integrated back into an organization's full range of internal and external communications. We heard from our grantees just how important in-depth narrative development is to their success. As one recipient put it: "Our communications need to draw from positive values that exist in our communities but are unexercised and often discounted or even disparaged in the dominant narrative. Advancing a new public narrative—about farming, about the land, about community, about people, about racial equity, about food—is a tall task, but one we believe is essential to changing the tide."

## 📶 Other Lessons on Communications Needs from the Field

◉ Having access to communications equipment (especially portable equipment) goes a long way to ensure that groups can capture and share the experience (and voice) of their constituents.

◉ Despite digital innovations, tried-and-true communications, such as earned media and radio, remain important strategies, especially in rural, tribal, and limited-resource communities.

◉ With reduced capacity, having a comprehensive, integrated communications plan becomes all the more critical (and empowering) to ensure that each investment in communications has impact, as part of an overall strategy.

◉ Innovative communications initiatives and creative media projects are most impactful when approached as stepping stones to building communications capacity that can endure beyond the life of the project.

◉ Groups want opportunities to learn from each other and to be inspired by peer successes in the field.

◉ Groups see the power of communications to bridge divides across differences, to engender empathy, and to build solidarity; they want multicultural communications and equity trainings to improve their capacity to serve diverse communities. As one group put it: "Our work is specifically within rural communities, so we hear and see what has played out on the national stage on a very grassroots level. We have an opportunity to reframe the discussion and bring hope to the communities that have felt so marginalized that they believed their only outlet was to lash out against all those who are not like them."


Food Chain Workers Alliance

# Challenges

The gap in targeted funding is not the only barrier that groups are facing in advancing their communications work. The current media, political, and technology environments further constrain and complicate their efforts, making investments in communications all the more critical for groups to keep pace. Work still needs to be done to help organizations recognize the immense value of communications in advancing their goals, and to prioritize it accordingly.

## 📶 Current Media Environment

With industry spin dominating the airwaves and investigative reporting on the decline, nonprofits can play a critical role in elevating disregarded issues and neglected voices and, in doing so, shift public opinion. Digital media has created an important opening for these groups to have influence, yet ever-changing social media algorithms and pay-to-play models are significantly limiting their reach. The reality for many of the groups we connected with is that they are scrambling to keep up in today's turbulent and fast-paced media environment.

## 📶 Current Political Environment

Groups reported that growing political divisiveness makes it difficult to formulate messages to reach a broad constituency. As one group put it: "In this current climate of needing to play defense on policy issues daily while also needing to be strategic and find opportunities, it is challenging to have enough capacity to do both well." Another group expressed the challenge this way: "As a people of color-led alliance, our communities are constantly fighting against the policies put forth by the current administration. As a result, we are trying to inform and mobilize our folks all the time, which takes a serious amount of communications capacity." Another shared: "It is challenging to communicate with such a diverse audience in such a divided social and political climate. This means everything we publish is carefully read to ensure we nuance our messaging in a way that does not further divide." It is clear that this political environment requires an even greater degree of communications savvy.

## 📶 Current Technology Environment

Groups emphasized that keeping up with frequent shifts in software and technology is a big strain, particularly for smaller organizations. Many groups reiterated the urgent need for updated software for contact management and learning to better optimize search engines. Groups shared that they often use free or low-cost tools, limiting their ability to segment lists, target communications to audiences that tend toward different platforms, or analyze their results. As one grantee put it: "Software has been a central hurdle, however it feels super important as an advocacy organization to get people to take action in a straight forward and powerful way."

## 📶 Communications Work Remains Undervalued

It was widely reported that communications work is often undervalued internally, especially when resources are slim. As one grantee reflected, "It's hard to hammer home: your organization could be doing the most amazing transformative work, but it doesn't matter if you're not doing the work to share it, because donors won't know, influencers and policy-makers won't know. You are missing all those ripple effects by not being good communicators." Supporting peer networking and opportunities for communications training and education are key strategies for showcasing the power of strategic communications and helping to make it a higher strategic priority. A number of groups reflected on how the very process of filling out a Food and Farm Communications Fund application helped them to see the significance of having communications skills and trained staff members to advance their work.

# Grantee Impacts

In conversations with grantees and in reviewing their reports and survey responses, it was clear that the Food and Farm Communications Fund offered a rare source of communications support and strengthened the overall communications capacity of these groups. Some of the outcomes shared as a result of these grants include:

**New voices heard:** "Food and Farm Communications Fund support has allowed us to produce podcasts that uplift seldom-heard voices and spark dialogue about strategies for change. We occupy an interesting space in the media landscape—straddling journalism, historical research and organizing for change—the Fund has been a critical source of support for this out-of-the-box project."

**Narrative building:** "Our grant enabled us to hire a communications person to help us craft a new narrative that has had a tremendous impact on the consistency and effectiveness of our message and how we communicate to the outside world as well as our internal networks."

**Reaching new audiences:** "Our Food and Farm Communications Fund grant provided the opportunity to tell the story of our work. We are very good at 'doing' the work, but not as good at sharing it with our audiences."

**Space to take risks and innovate:** "The Fund is supporting leading-edge efforts for low-capacity groups. This work is experimental in nature. It is great to see funders support innovation, even if it carries some risk."



Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance

Yet, for many of these grantees, communications capacity and funding are still significant and urgent gaps. And for the field at large, the unmet demand is resounding—a reality we've seen play out in our own grantmaking process, with just 8 percent of groups that submitted a Letter of Interest ultimately receiving a Food and Farm Communications Fund grant.

While it is evident that even small investments in communications can be a boon for boosting the capacity of organizations, especially for limited resource groups, it is also clear that the Fund's most successful grants came when grantees were able to tap communications support, technical assistance, and learning from other allies, inspiring the Fund to offer more professional development, targeted capacity-building trainings, and peer-learning opportunities in future grant partnerships.

# Conclusion

Our evaluation findings reinforced that while communications needs among food and farm movement organizations are still widespread and urgent, they are not one-size-fits-all. Efforts to fill the funding gap will need to design strategies for support that match the breadth and depth of the communications needs in different communities and contexts, and tailor grant partnerships based on grantee-determined priorities and capacities. It is also clear that while large investments are greatly needed, even small ones can make a real difference in enhancing program work and impact, as well as providing important ripple effects for organizational wellbeing. The overall takeaway is clear: as practitioners and funders committed to the systemic and cultural transformation required to achieve just, equitable, and resilient food and farm systems, we must do more to prioritize and invest in strategic communications as an essential tool for building power and advancing our collective goals.

At this point we'd like to express our gratitude to the many grassroots leaders and nonprofit staff who took the time to engage in this evaluative process and to share their valuable insights and experience. Our intention is for your wisdom to guide our work, and our hope is to share these lessons widely, so that others may benefit from it as well.

If you'd like to learn more about the Food and Farm Communications Fund and to see how lessons from six years in the field have shaped our updated grant program design, we encourage you to visit our website: foodandfarmcommunications.org. If you are a funder and would like to discuss pathways to contribute to the Fund or ways of supporting communications via your own grantmaking, we welcome your inquiry and participation: info@foodandfarmcommunications.org.

# FOOD AND FARM
## COMMUNICATIONS FUND

# COLLABORATIVE GRANTMAKING
# TO ADVANCE GRASSROOTS COMMUNICATION

To learn more about the Fund, visit
**foodandfarmcommunications.org**

To inquire about joining as a funder partner,
please contact Hilde Steffey at
**info@foodandfarmcommunications.org.**

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THE SCHMIDT FAMILY FOUNDATION

GRACE
Communications Foundation

THE CHRISTENSEN FUND

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