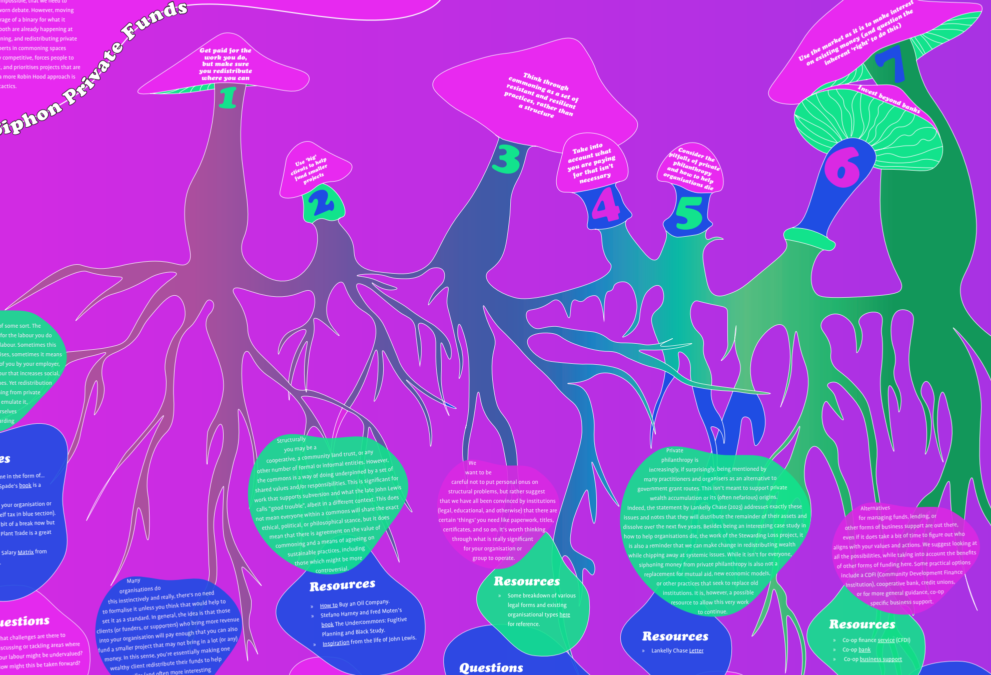
How to Siphon Private Funds

The tension between those who believe in changing the system from the inside and those who believe this is impossible, that we need to create an entirely new system, is a well-worn debate. However, moving beyond binaries—or rather seeing the mirage of a binary for what it is—forces us to work in the space where both are already happening at once (and both may be necessary). Siphoning, and redistributing private wealth is one proposed antidote that experts in commoning spaces espouse. If government funding is highly competitive, forces people to reproduce their own disenfranchisement, and prioritises projects that are ‘innovative’ but not disruptive, perhaps a more Robin Hood approach is possible, and it can start with a few key tactics.


Get paid for the work you do, but make sure you redistribute where you can
1
Use ‘big’ clients to help fund smaller projects
2
Think through commoning as a set of resistant and resilient practices, rather than a structure
3
Take into account what you are paying for that isn’t necessary
4
Consider the pitfalls of private philanthropy and how to help organisations die
5
Invest beyond banks
6
Use the market as it is to make interest on existing money (and question the inherent ‘right’ to do this)
7

Most of us engage in both paid and unpaid labour of some sort. The key is to make sure you get paid for the labour you do or, rather, to get value from your labour. Sometimes this means being proactive about pay rises, sometimes it means saying no to unpaid labour asked of you by your employer, sometimes it means validating labour that increases social, environmental, or communal values. Yet redistribution is also key, since we are siphoning from private wealth, not attempting to emulate it, we must also hold ourselves accountable for hoarding wealth.

Resources

Redistribution can come in the form of...

- Mutual aid: Dean Spade’s book is a great start!
- Self-taxing within your organisation or community (see self tax in blue section).
- Reparations: on a bit of a break now but the Underground Plant Trade is a great example of this.
- Try this Equitable Salary Matrix from Joy as Resistance.

Questions

- What challenges are there to discussing or tackling areas where your labour might be undervalued? How might this be taken forward?

Many organisations do this instinctively and really, there’s no need to formalise it unless you think that would help to set it as a standard. In general, the idea is that those clients (or funders, or supporters) who bring more revenue into your organisation will pay enough that you can also fund a smaller project that may not bring in a lot (or any) money. In this sense, you’re essentially making one wealthy client redistribute their funds to help a smaller (and often more interesting or disruptive) projects, that they might not otherwise support.

Questions

- Is this practice something you could or would want to make explicit and to whom (internally or externally)?

Structurally you may be a cooperative, a community land trust, or any other number of formal or informal entities. However, the commons is a way of doing underpinned by a set of shared values and/or responsibilities. This is significant for work that supports subversion and what the late John Lewis calls “good trouble”, albeit in a different context. This does not mean everyone within a commons will share the exact ethical, political, or philosophical stance, but it does mean that there is agreement on the value of commoning and a means of agreeing on sustainable practices, including those which might be more controversial.

Resources

- How to Buy an Oil Company.
- Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s book The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study.
- Inspiration from the life of John Lewis.

Questions

- What is the “good trouble” that supports your organisation, or what tactical practices might you employ to further support the organisation?

We want to be careful not to put personal onus on structural problems, but rather suggest that we have all been convinced by institutions (legal, educational, and otherwise) that there are certain ‘things’ you need like paperwork, titles, certificates, and so on. It’s worth thinking through what is really significant for your organisation or group to operate.

Resources

- Some breakdown of various legal forms and existing organisational types here for reference.

Questions

- Is there a different model you can operate under that requires less fees, less bureaucratic work, but also gives you all the functionality you need?
- Within your existing model are there fees that you’re paying to be included by name but from which you haven’t gotten much in return?
- Think through how you are part of the global supply chain- are there places we can cut back on needs and services or relegate them to a more local sphere (see non-monetary exchange).

Private philanthropy is increasingly, if surprisingly, being mentioned by many practitioners and organisers as an alternative to government grant routes. This isn’t meant to support private wealth accumulation or its (often nefarious) origins. Indeed, the statement by Lankelly Chase (2023) addresses exactly these issues and notes that they will distribute the remainder of their assets and dissolve over the next five years. Besides being an interesting case study in how to help organisations die, the work of the Stewarding Loss project, it is also a reminder that we can make change in redistributing wealth while chipping away at systemic issues. While it isn’t for everyone, siphoning money from private philanthropy is also not a replacement for mutual aid, new economic models, or other practices that seek to replace old institutions. It is, however, a possible resource to allow this very work to continue.

Resources

- Lankelly Chase Letter

Questions

- Does siphoning funds in this way bring up any ethical questions for your team, and how could these questions be weighed?

Alternatives for managing funds, lending, or other forms of business support are out there, even if it does take a bit of time to figure out who aligns with your values and actions. We suggest looking at all the possibilities, while taking into account the benefits of other forms of funding here. Some practical options include a CDFI (Community Development Finance Institution), cooperative bank, credit unions, or for more general guidance, co-op specific business support.

Resources

- Co-op finance service (CFDI)
- Co-op bank
- Co-op business support

Questions

- Where and how do you cur
with finances? Why did yo
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and are there more signifi
that you could consider?

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How to ween off grant dependency and create collective pots

Collective pots of money are a fundamental part of community building and certainly not a new idea, but they can help us build something new. That is, understanding how shared resources, exchange and support can function within, yet contrary to, the capitalist market as it is now. It's important to remember that this has been and continues to be a core feature of communities across the globe and learning about this in person, beyond our module, is key.

As one of the experts we consulted suggested, it's difficult to shake the notion that if you have money, you have an inherent right to make more money off it. She noted that this creates a system where people rarely just give you money; they invest in you, they expect something out of it that will build their own wealth. This has obvious knock-on effects for how organisations set themselves up and who is seen as 'valuable' enough to be worthy of investment. At the same time, there may be ways to exploit this very ingrained ideology. Take, for instance, Telluride Association as a case study of how to generate wealth that, in one way, is sustainable and has benefits to its community. At the same time, think about how long-term income that is dependent on the system as it is can be redistributed, short-term, or just generally 'bite the hand that feeds it'.

Resources

- Telluride Association

Questions

- Are you currently investing and if so, to what end? Is investment a part of sustainability or counter to it (or both)?
- How does the notion of investment determine or influence ideas of value?

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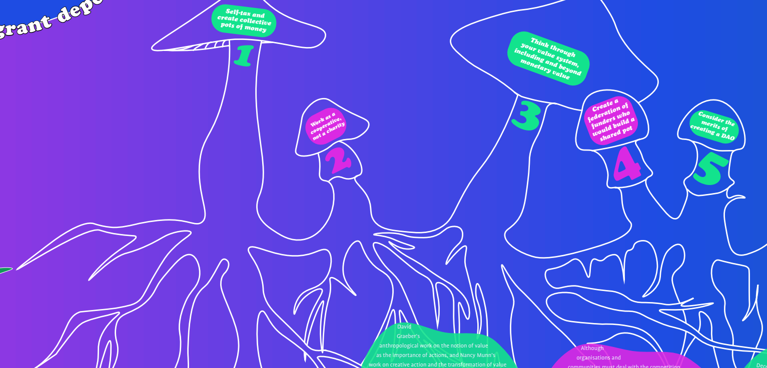
Self-tax and create collective pots of money
1
Work as a cooperative, not a charity
2
Think through your value system, including and beyond monetary value
3
Create a federation of funders who would build a shared pot
4
Consider the merits of creating a DAO
5

Creating shared pots of money can be either a one-off event or a consistent practice, in which case it becomes a sort of self-tax. There are a number of ways to do this, incorporating internet resources or without them. You may want to source through crowdfunding efforts, community shares, or simple recurring payments to a democratically managed community fund, akin to Solidfund. For example, My Cool Class is a teacher's cooperative where 19% of your revenue goes into a cooperative contribution where normal operating costs are paid and then members vote on what to do with any surplus. The CultureBanked model is a great case study in self-taxing. They have created an organisation based on the idea of shared ownership to build community wealth. Focusing on creative work that is made, stored or represented digitally, 'CultureBanking' hopes to help artists retain IP and yet connect to the commons by banking communal digital rights, which then refund community activities. While there are many different options for creating joint funds, the value systems that uphold them and the roles of those who contribute are key to picking something that can be sustainable. Also, don't forget to think about collective 'pots' of value beyond money, you can also source valuable work to replace monetary investments through sweat equity and trade unions.

Questions

- How might collective pots and self-taxing complicate notions of ownership, stewardship, identity and care? What processes of decision making would you instil alongside these tools?

Resources

- Good Finance
- Solid Fund
- My Cool Class
- Culture Banked
- A database of tools for collaborative funding from DarkMatter Labs.

There are many benefits to working as a charity, including certain tax breaks, but to truly create cohesion, reliability and mutual care requires a rejection of the paternalism and hierarchies inherent to charity work. While cooperatives are not the only responses to charities, the notion of democratic member control, solidarity and autonomy are key values that can be enacted across organisations working on equitable practices.

Resources

- The Cooperative College
- Training for Co=op advisors

Questions

- If you are currently operating as a charity, what resources and support would you need to set in place to transition to a different structure?

David Graeber's anthropological work on the notion of value as the importance of actions, and Nancy Munn's work on creative action and the transformation of value are great places to start when considering what we might mean by 'value' beyond money. For more practical applications we can tease out the ideas behind Gross National Happiness or think through other forms of 'value capture'. One way to do this is to think through your organisational forms of value using a value mapping tool. Traditional versions of these design tools focus on value captured, value destroyed, value missed, and value opportunities—or some variation therein—but there are iterations that focus on this from a sustainable point of view, and we've provided the Cambridge Value Mapping tool below to play with these concepts. Working through their activity might help you articulate how your organisation or group has 'invested otherwise' and help prove or clarify the usefulness of thinking beyond capital as value.

Resources

- David Graeber
- The Fame of Gawa
- Bhutan Wealth - Happiness Counts
- The Cambridge Value Mapping Tool - Institute for Manufacturing (IfM)

Questions

- What kinds of value do you see within the everyday work of your team/community?
- How can you keep track of other forms of value and their impact.

Although organisations and communities must deal with the competition inherent in seeking grants, funders themselves are also competing to get the 'best projects'. They also need to respond to questions of 'impact' and so tensions are created where there might otherwise be cooperation. How can we move away from this competition? One idea is to have funders (including, perhaps, your organisation) pool their financial resources together and create a very large, shared pot of money that could be used collectively. Funders would work together to find great projects, more resources could go into those projects, and each funder could share the benefits of the project's impact. This is a small start to dismantling the culture and incentives of competition.

Resources

- Solid Fund
- Check out resources for Funding and Partnership Agreements, as well as Grantmaking Practices here

Questions

- How could you frame the benefits of a 'funder federation' to interested parties?
- What sort of decision making practices would need to be in place for this kind of federation?

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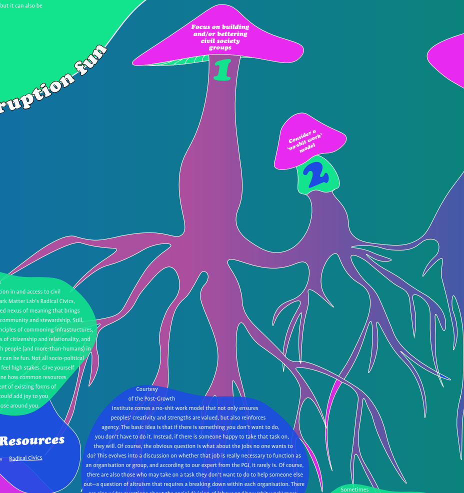
How to make disruption fun

What's the point in building a new world if it isn't any fun to be in? Creating, sustaining and growing communities that work within but against the status quo is hard work, but it can also be joyous. If we take care seriously, we must also take fun seriously.



1

Focus on building and/or bettering civil society groups

From discussions about participation in and access to civil society groups, to Dark Matter Lab's Radical Civics, emerges a complicated nexus of meaning that brings together citizenship, community and stewardship. Still, thinking through the principles of commoning infrastructures, complicating the notions of citizenship and relationality, and simply spending time with people (and more-than-humans) in groups of shared interest can be fun. Not all socio-political engagement needs to feel high stakes. Give yourself some time to imagine how common resources and abandonment of existing forms of ownership could add joy to you and those around you.

Resources

- Radical Civics

Questions

- How do your individual and organisational responsibilities to civic life influence your impact?

2

Consider a 'no-shit work' model

Courtesy of the Post-Growth Institute comes a no-shit work model that not only ensures peoples' creativity and strengths are valued, but also reinforces agency. The basic idea is that if there is something you don't want to do, you don't have to do it. Instead, if there is someone happy to take that task on, they will. Of course, the obvious question is what about the jobs no one wants to do? This evolves into a discussion on whether that job is really necessary to function as an organisation or group, and according to our expert from the PGI, it rarely is. Of course, there are also those who may take on a task they don't want to do to help someone else out—a question of altruism that requires a breaking down within each organisation. There are also wider questions about the social division of labour and how 'shit work' more broadly is distributed in (gendered and racialised ways) in the economy. Weeding out these issues can happen on a case-by-case basis, but one helpful tip is to create a strengths map for each member and review it annually or at another regular interval. This is a way for community members to think through what they are interested in, what they want to work on, and to provide them the skills and support to do so, where possible (in the form of mentoring or workshopping, for example). These practices reinforce autonomy and can make for a much more exciting environment.

Questions

- How might a 'no-shit-work' model make sense in your organisation?
- Is there a way to implement this model without ignoring the realities of gendered/classed/racialised divisions of labour?

Resources

- Embodied Leadership
- Feminist Theorist Nancy Fraser's work on Cannibal Capitalism presents an accessible entry point to processes and practices of exploitation and expropriation in the economy.

Sometimes this is as easy as giving people a tactile activity to do during meetings or dedicating (such as our exploratory relational economies worksheet) an hour to eat food and chat. Ask the big questions. What kind of world do you want to see? Provide alternative narratives. What could this public space be used for that doesn't involve commercial enterprises? (For inspiration, look to Public Works or FurtherField.) Show interest in the expertise of your co-conspirators, even if (especially if) it is seemingly unrelated to the group's shared central interest. Inspiration can be found across interests and fields, so dedicate time to imagining otherwise.

Resources

- Public Works
- FurtherField

Questions

- What kind of world would you like to see?
- How can we be more social?

A
DAO, or
entralized Autonomous Organization, is
ntralized and member owned organisation
oys smart contracts on a blockchain network.
eliminating the need for a trusted third party for
actions and having smart contracts that establish
ks/rules. While there are conversations to be had
and technocrats, as well as how these technologies
same techno-optimism as those that have gone
e is space for those who want to use these tech
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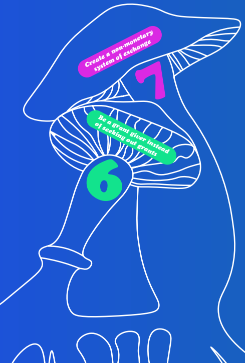
Questions

- What might a DAO allow you to achieve that you wouldn't otherwise?
- What are the merits and challenges?
- How might you build feminist strategies into a DAO concpetion to redress techno-optimistic approaches?



6

Be a grant giver instead of seeking out grants

This may seem a bit contradictory, but you don't have to start with a huge sum of money. Even having a small grant available builds your reputation as an organisation, and giving to significant and disruptive projects and people might even bring more money in from those who appreciate the work you're doing and want to see you fund more brilliant work. More importantly, you get to decide the terms of engagement and think radically about what grants should look like. You could try setting up a no questions asked scholarship like The Post-Growth Institute or look for projects that are long-term and disruptive. You can even repurpose that time you would have spent on grant writing for conversations about truly collaborative funding.

Resources

- Kendra IQ
- No questions asked grant giving from Post Growth. For an example see their scholarship application

Questions

- How might you redefine the terms of engagement of grant-giving?
- What are the limitations to change you've experienced through existing grant-making practices?

7

Create a non-monetary system of exchange

Another longstanding and well-trialled practice that has many benefits is creating a system of exchange not based on money. Some do this as a time banking model, where expertise shared with one person earns you a token of sorts, that can then be used to employ someone else's expertise. Another example of this is the Offers and Needs Market, where goods, services, and care are distributed through a virtual or in person session. Though there are several ways to structure it, the idea itself is a fundamental part of human interaction though some of the more resilient initiatives in this space have petered out, it does not need a formal entity to enact.

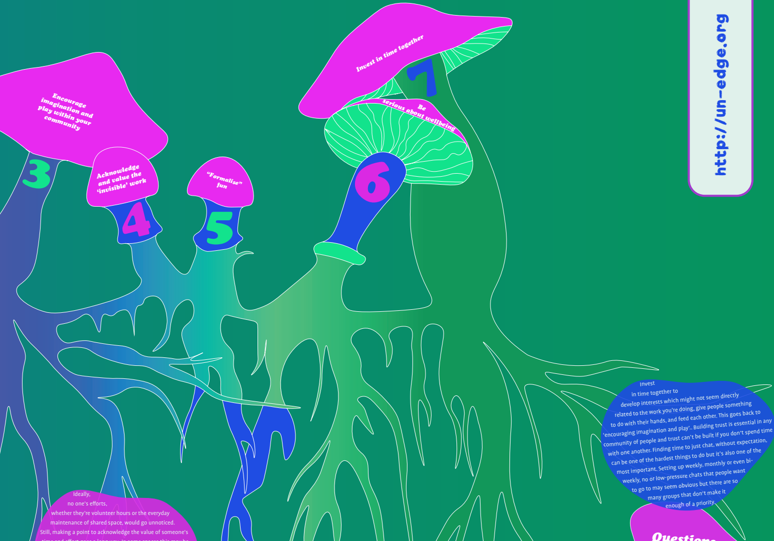
Resources

- Trade School
- Economy of Hours
- Offers and Needs

Questions

- What might be learned to build upon, from the successes and demise of non-monetary initiatives?

http://un-edge.org


Encourage imagination and play within your community
3
Acknowledge and value the 'invisible' work
4
"Formalise" fun
5
Be serious about wellbeing
6
Invest in time together
7

Ideally, no one's efforts, whether they're volunteer hours or the everyday maintenance of shared space, would go unnoticed. Still, making a point to acknowledge the value of someone's time and effort goes a long way. In some spaces this may be a push away from volunteerism and toward paying for the work that goes in. In others it might be keeping track of the impact that small acts have or agreeing on making those 'invisible' tasks visible and coordinating people accordingly. However you choose to do it, appreciating someone (and acting accordingly) can reinforce responsibility and relationality, which is foundational to any organisation or community.

Resources

» On Gratitude in the Workplace

Questions

» What are your current practices of acknowledgement? How might they be revised or extended? Are they appreciated?

Include joy as resistance into your principles, manifesto, or other central documents. Joy is disruptive in exploitative systems. When you centre it in everything you do, along with more 'serious' aims, you give it gravity and help to prevent certain pressures that lead to burnout. At the same time, make sure all your central principles are clear and easy to understand for any new members. In other words, don't give people homework or make them feel as if they should have read certain authors to 'get it'. Postgrowth Institute has pride in its work as non-economists working towards economic transformation.

Resources

» Healing and Joy as Resistance
» Check out the Joy as Resistance Employee Handbook

Questions

» What are the joyful aspects of your work?
» How might you lower 'expert' barriers to participation in some work domains?

If you understand the significance of supporting wellbeing but still find high levels of burnout there might be a disconnect in the way that you want to operate and the way that you do. Of course, sometimes this is due to bigger structural norms, the very kind your organisation may want to work against. Sometimes it's due to the competition inherent in applying for certain kinds of funding, moving forward with policy aims, or other institutionalized processes. Still, embedding a concept of commons health and wellbeing into your everyday work and your team is a great way to show that wellbeing is more than just a buzzword. Check out the School of Commoning 's workshops and team for inspiration.

Resources

» Climate Emergence
» School of Commoning

Questions

» How is wellbeing embedded in your work practices and structures?
» Are there safe spaces for listening? If not, how might you create some?

Invest in time together to develop interests which might not seem directly related to the work you're doing, give people something to do with their hands, and feed each other. This goes back to 'encouraging imagination and play'.. Building trust is essential in any community of people and trust can't be built if you don't spend time with one another. Finding time to just chat, without expectation, can be one of the hardest things to do but it's also one of the most important. Setting up weekly, monthly or even bi-weekly, no or low-pressure chats that people want to go to may seem obvious but there are so many groups that don't make it enough of a priority.

Questions

» How might you foster time and space for trust-building?