

How to Siphon Private Funds

The tension between those who believe in changing the system from the inside and those who believe that we need to create an entirely new system, is a well-worn debate. However, moving beyond binaries 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 prioritizes projects that are 'innovative' but not disruptive, perhaps a more Robin Hood approach is possible, and it can start with a few key tactics.

1
Get paid for the work you do, but make sure you redistribute where you can

2
Use 'big' clients to help fund smaller projects

3
Think through commoning as a set of resistant and resilient practices, rather than a structure

4
Take into account what you are paying for that isn't necessary

5
Consider the pitfalls of private philanthropy and how to help organisations die

7
Use the market as it is to make interest on existing money (and question the inherent 'right' to do this)

6
Invest beyond banks

Many organisations do this instinctively. 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. You're essentially making one wealthy client redistribute their funds to help smaller (and often more disruptive) projects.

We don't want 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 (e.g. paperwork, titles, certificates). It's worth thinking through what is really significant for your organisation or group to operate.

Private philanthropy is increasingly, if surprisingly, being mentioned by many practitioners and organisers as an alternative to government grants. This isn't meant to support private wealth accumulation or its (often nefarious) origins. The statement by Lankelly Chase (2023) addresses exactly these problems and they aim to distribute the remainder of their assets and dissolve over the next five years. - Still, siphoning money from private philanthropy is also not a replacement for mutual aid or new economic models. It may, in fact, be an institution we can let die.

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. This desire to 'invest' affects organisations too and has obvious knock-on effects for how who is seen as 'valuable' enough to be worthy of funding. While we may be embedded in an 'investment culture', 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'.

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. Yet redistribution is also central. Since we are siphoning from private wealth and not attempting to emulate it, we must also hold ourselves accountable for hoarding wealth.

Q 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 formal entity. However, the commons is a way of doing underpinned by a set of shared values and/or responsibilities. This does not mean everyone within a commons will share the 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.

Q 1. Is there a different model you can operate under that requires less fees, less bureaucratic work, but also gives you the functionality you need?
2. 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?
3. 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)?

Q 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 considering the benefits of other forms of funding (e.g. CDFIs (Community Development Finance Institutions), cooperative banks, credit unions, and co-op specific business support).

Q 1. Are you currently investing and if so, to what end? Is investment a part of sustainability or counter to it (or both)?
2. How does the notion of investment determine or influence ideas of value?

Resources
An example of working off investments: [Telluride Association](#)

Q Where and how do you currently deal with finances? Why did you choose these (ease, accessibility, visibility, reach, etc.) and are there more significant factors that you could consider?

Resources
1. Co-op finance [service](#) (CFDI)
2. Co-op [bank](#)
3. Co-op [business support](#)

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

Resources
Redistribution can come in the form of...
1. Mutual aid: Dean Spade's [book](#) is a great start!
2. Self-taxing within your organisation or community (see self tax in blue section).
3. Reparations: on a bit of a break now but the [Underground Plant Trade](#) is a great [example](#) of this.
4. Try this [Equitable Salary Matrix](#) from Joy as Resistance.

Q What is the "good trouble" (see John Lewis link above) that supports your organisation? What tactical practices might you employ to further support the organisation?

Resources
1. [How to Buy an Oil Company](#).
2. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's [book](#) [The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study](#).
3. [Inspiration](#) from the life of John Lewis.

Resources
Some breakdown of various legal forms and existing organisational types [here](#) for reference.