



By Craig White

# Giving Within Communities

## Center for Participatory Change's Research on Horizontal Giving

When the Cooper Boulevard Mobile Home Park in Buncombe County, NC, was sold for commercial development, friends, family and neighbors organized a yard sale to raise funds for the residents to move.

**WHEN MANY PEOPLE THINK OF GIVING** or philanthropy they typically imagine a wealthy person giving money (donations) or time (volunteering) to a nonprofit organization, usually to help people in need. This is one kind of giving, and it is important in strengthening the fabric of society, making sure that people are able to meet their basic needs, and promoting civic engagement, advocacy, and community organizing. Of course, in addition to the contributions of wealthy people are the time and money given by millions of people—middle class, working class, and poor—to a wide variety of nonprofit organizations.

But there is another form of giving that is less recognized or celebrated and that actually plays a far more important role in the lives of many more people. People give constantly to one another within their networks of friends and family. Friends help friends who are ill; family members lend each other money; people offer a ride when a neighbor doesn't have transportation. This kind of giving within communities is so widespread that it is frequently taken for granted and has rarely, if ever, been recognized as a form of philanthropy.

The Center for Participatory Change (CPC), an organization

that helps strengthen grassroots leaders, groups, and networks working on racial and economic justice issues across 25 counties in Western North Carolina, conducted a study of giving in low-income and marginalized communities in its area. Borrowing from a similar study that was conducted in South Africa, we looked at two kinds of giving:

- **Horizontal giving**—the giving and giving back that occurs between friends and family within a community, among people who know and trust each other.

- **Vertical giving**—in which an individual gives money and/or time to an organization and that organization, which is often based outside of a local community, provides some service or aid to people within a community.

We wanted to know more about how these forms of giving work in Western North Carolina communities and the relative importance of each. To do so, we held 12 focus groups with a total of 122 people across our area. There were four groups made up of Latinos, two of African Americans, two of Hmongs, two of European Americans, one of Cherokees, and one mixed-race group. Two-thirds of the people in the groups were women;

African American participant: Well, I have had a lot of health issues—quite serious ones, ones that lasted two years. And I needed a lot of help. [Friends and family] would cook food, either at my house or they would cook food at their house and bring it. They did the laundry. They washed, and they ironed. They transported me back and forth to the doctors. There was just so much done for me, that if you had to put a monetary value on it, you never could.

one-third were men. There was a generally even mix of ages, from teens to elders. Most people were working class or of low income.

We asked questions that focused on who gives and receives, what is given and received, and why people help and support each other.

Some of our findings are summarized in this article; the full report, *Horizontal Philanthropy: The Importance of Giving within Low-Wealth Communities*, is available at [www.cpcwnc.org](http://www.cpcwnc.org).

### Major Findings

The major findings of the report, summarized here, reveal the rich variety of horizontal giving that goes on in communities and the relatively less importance attributed to services provided through vertical giving.

**Categories of giving.** In the focus groups, people identified thirteen categories of giving. Roughly in order of importance to participants, these categories were emotional support, money, caregiving, information and skills, labor, food, transportation, support around racism, immigration support, cultural work, housing, faith and spiritual support, and material goods.

**Categories of organizations.** People referred to government agencies, churches, foundations, nonprofit organizations, and grassroots groups. Although these are mostly self-explanatory, people made a distinction between nonprofit organizations and grassroots groups. Although some grassroots groups are also nonprofits (that is, they have incorporated as 501(c)(3) organizations), the groups that fall in this category are generally small, founded and run by members of the community being served by the organization, likely to be run solely by volunteers or with only one or two paid staff people, and without significant infrastructure.

**Horizontal giving is more important than vertical giving.** Across all groups, people said that, in their daily lives, there is much more horizontal giving (giving among people within communities) than vertical giving (giving to and from institutions). They also said that horizontal giving is more important,

rich, and varied. Generally, the study data suggest that horizontal giving is a crucial part of people's everyday lives; vertical giving may provide important support or services, but it is less likely to touch people's lives as frequently or as deeply.

**Horizontal giving is rich in form and significant in impact.** All the forms of horizontal giving mentioned as being important were given through networks of friends, family members, and members of churches or grassroots groups. In fact, people repeatedly stressed the importance of these forms of giving in their lives.

**People rarely mentioned giving by the nonprofit sector.** We defined the US nonprofit sector as consisting of organizations that have a 501(c)(3) designation with the Internal Revenue Service. In the study, people talked a lot about churches, grassroots groups (many of which are not nonprofits), and government agencies. The nonprofit sector was not viewed negatively; rather, it was simply not mentioned.

**Horizontal giving occurs among people who know and trust each other.** People in the study reported that horizontal giving occurs within their social networks, among networks of people who know and trust one another. The most important of these social networks are family networks and networks

European-American Participant: One thing I see a lot is people helping each other by raising money to cover medical costs, to cover things that insurance won't cover. Sort of community action—the jug at the convenience store, and the spaghetti suppers.

of friends. Of secondary importance, but still important, are networks among members of the same church and members of the same grassroots group. Horizontal giving is based on pre-existing relationships. It appears that the closer these relationships (such as family members, close friends), the more likely it is that mutual giving and support will occur.

### Implications

The results of this study hold some important implications for churches, grassroots groups, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations. All the implications are discussed in the full report; here we focus on those relating to nonprofit organizations.

Research participants rarely mentioned nonprofit organizations other than churches or grassroots groups as important avenues of giving or receiving. Generally speaking, conventional nonprofit organizations—organizations that exist outside of

communities and provide services for those communities—did not come up in focus group conversations.

These types of nonprofit organizations might therefore want to consider how their projects, programs, or services intersect with the organic systems of horizontal giving that exist within

Within Cherokee communities, there is a tradition called “free labor groups” —groups through which labor is shared for the community good. Cherokee participant: “Each community has a Community Club Council. People tell the Council members what they need, and that’s sort of how it happens. The Free Labor Groups go gather the people and tools and materials needed for the job. They usually just let it be known what they’re going to do, and whoever can come on that day will come and work and donate their time. They take materials and do roofs for people, or build them ramps, or whatever it is that they need done. They dig graves. It’s all volunteer. They do the labor and the materials.”

any community. Questions that staff at nonprofit organizations might reflect on include the following: Are we trying to integrate our work into naturally occurring networks of horizontal giving? Are we recognizing that people within communities already know what they need, who has what they need, and how to get it to the people who need it most? As much as possible, are we seeing people in communities as creators of their own development rather than as clients?

## Discussion

It is common for professionals to view acts of mutual help and support as incidental, small-scale, and unimportant. This perspective stems from seeing individual actions—a grandparent caring for a child so that parents can work, neighbors taking up a collection for a friend in crisis—without seeing the aggregate impact of millions of similar actions throughout marginalized communities. Even in this limited study, the data showed that giving among friends and family members within communities is enormously significant in scope and impact.

It was humbling to see so clearly the existence of informal systems of mutual support within communities that are naturally (without any help from us or anyone else) doing so much to make communities more just and livable.

We hope that the findings from our study will raise awareness of the contributions made by people living in low-income and marginalized communities to strengthening their own communities and helping move people out of poverty. We

hope that institutions focused on giving—churches, grassroots groups, government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and foundations—will be more aware of and pay more attention to the underappreciated indigenous networks of mutual support and help that exist in communities.

We do not believe that such networks are enough, by themselves, to move people and communities out of poverty; we do not want to see anti-poverty efforts from outside of low-income communities dry up or move away. But we hope that institutions will build their work in low-income and marginalized

Latinoparticipant: “Whenever the season ends, there is no work for us. We didn’t have anything to eat at home. There was no food, and I had a little girl. One night, my husband got home very tired and with no money, and he asked me what were we going to eat. I had two potatoes, but they already had some root on them, so I told him we were going to eat that. He said, “Okay, let’s eat that then.” So I was just setting up the table when an elderly man from our neighborhood came. He had two plates of chicken with him from this restaurant. He had the full order, the chicken and the soda. He came to deliver that to other people, but they were not home. So he walked up and knocked on our door. He asked us if we wanted the food. We said, “Yes.” My husband and I were crying. We realized that God knew we didn’t have money for food, but that man came and brought us that food.”

communities on the significant resources already within those communities, realizing that people in local communities know how to get resources to where they’re most needed, and that people are already doing important work to help and support each other and make their communities better places to live.

We invite readers to reflect on the importance of horizontal giving in their own lives: Whom do you help, and who helps you? What sorts of giving are provided? Why do you give? Why do people give to you?

We believe that, regardless of your economic class, your professional status, your age, gender, and cultural background, you will likely find that some forms of horizontal giving have shaped your life, and that these forms might just provide a new perspective from which your nonprofit organization can improve its work. ■

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