

Inside Philanthropy

How Grassroots International Is Funding in Gaza and Haiti Amid Devastating Violence

Michael Kavate | April 10, 2024 | [Link](#)



PEOPLE SEARCH THE REMAINS OF A MUNICIPAL BUILDING IN KHAN YUNIS IN THE GAZA STRIP. ANAS-MOHAMMED/SHUTTERSTOCK

In the four decades since Grassroots International was founded in a one-room office in Cambridge, Massachusetts, it has funded dozens of movements by people around the world seeking to end apartheid, overturn repressive regimes and gain freedom. As violence, death and famine have wreaked devastation in communities around the world [over the past 40 years](#), the organization has strived to counteract those forces.

That experience has guided one of the most extensive philanthropic responses to the horrifying humanitarian emergency in Gaza, as well as ongoing work in Haiti, where a surge of [gang-fueled chaos](#) recently erupted. Funding for Palestine and the Caribbean nation are two of the intermediary's longest-running programs.

To respond to Israel's military offensive, the group helped launch an open letter, [Funders for a Ceasefire Now](#), to push for a halt of the bombing and raids. "That was really an invitation to funders to engage as their full self," said Chung-Wha Hong, one of the group's two co-executive directors. "We have the financial power, we have the moral power and the political power." More than 1,000 funders and donors have signed on. The intermediary has also launched an [emergency fund](#) for Gaza.

In Palestine, the regrantor has long supported a wide range of social movements working to protect food sovereignty, human rights, land and water. Long-term partners and other grantees include the Gaza Community Mental Health Program, Palestinian Center for Human Rights, Women's Affairs Centre, and the Palestinian Medical Relief Society, as well as other groups working with women, farmers, and fisherpeople.

"In Gaza, 90% of children have been struggling with post-traumatic disorder for... decades, to be honest," said Ayman Nijim, solidarity program officer for the Middle East. "And right now, it is genocidal trauma. When you see how difficult it is to operate inside the strip right now... they have lost so many of their family."

Nijim is an example of close ties the organization's staff have to the regions they fund. His hometown is Deir al Balah, a town of about 75,000 in central Gaza, about 10 miles southwest of Gaza City. He is now based in Western Massachusetts, but still has relatives in his Deir al Balah, who are facing dire food shortages.

In Haiti, Grassroots International focuses on networks and movements supporting food sovereignty, small-scale farmers, sustainable economic opportunities and climate justice. Its grantees include groups like Mouvman Peyizan Papay, Mouvman Peyizan Nasyonal Kongre Papay, the Platform of Haitian Human Rights Organizations and the Haitian Platform for Advocacy for an Alternative Development. Those partners were among the civil society groups that created [the Montana Accord](#), a vision for the future of Haiti.

"Our close partners are those who work around achieving food sovereignty and also achieving climate justice," said Boaventura Monjane, solidarity program officer for

West Africa and Haiti at Grassroots International. “They do, of course, political work, which is to organize the peasantry or organize small-scale farmers, and strengthen their political capacity to work together.” Like his colleague, Monjane is from the region where he funds, specifically Mozambique, and now based in Cape Town, South Africa.

I spoke with Monjane, Nijim and Hong, who is based in Boston, about their work last week. Below is our conversation, edited for length and clarity.

What have your partners in Gaza said about both the risks they have faced over the last few months, and how the recent [bombing](#) of World Central Kitchen workers has impacted them?

Ayman Nijim: Gaza has been under a slow-motion famine for 17 years. This was intentional. If you look at October, when [Israeli Defense Minister] Yoav Gallant said “[complete siege on Gaza](#),” he meant it. It was like an incremental genocide. But right now, it’s a fast-motion genocide.

Eighty percent are dependent on foreign aid in Gaza. There’s also severe restrictions on fishing off the Gaza coast – and this is one of Gaza’s best industries. We rely on fishing. They have obliterated the seaport. It’s very important to go back to the calorie count policy. Go to [the report] “Food Consumption in Gaza - Red Lines,” by Israeli human rights organization Gisha.

We have 195 aid workers that have been [killed](#) [since Israeli’s bombing began]. Those international aid organizations have coordinated with the Israeli side. Imagine our partners. We cannot even tell their deaths. They have been killed and murdered and injured, severely injured. And they cannot even travel to Egypt for medical treatment.

And in Haiti, how has the security situation they face and the recent [surge](#) in violence affected them?

Monjane: The situation in Haiti has deteriorated in the last couple of weeks. We saw gang groups, as they’re called locally, occupying significant parts of Port-au-Prince, the capital – attacking police stations; releasing prisoners from detention centers; terrorizing the civil population, especially the poor, and taking away their houses; and so on. It’s total chaos.

Our partners are having challenges organizing in Haiti. It’s not easy to move from place to place. Community groups, peasant groups, they’re not able to do their work

as they normally do. A lot of people are sort of running away from Port-au-Prince and seeking shelter elsewhere. Our partners are hosting those people and trying to provide them with shelter, food and health kits. We recently launched a call for support to our Haiti group so that we can respond to that emergency situation. Donors have a role to play while Haitians resolve their social-political situation. A humanitarian crisis has erupted and it needs an urgent intervention.

Hong: I want to make a link: In both places, food sovereignty and anti-hunger can't happen without human rights defense work. We specifically have human rights organizations working closely with farmers and rural communities. That's really important.

Oftentimes, the root causes of human rights issues are linked to foreign intervention. Haiti has a whole history of U.S. occupation and United Nations occupation forces, and same with Palestine. The solution to hunger isn't food aid, it's food sovereignty. Once people have the ability to grow their own food, you're less vulnerable. So we're not just funding food, but livelihood, infrastructure and the ability to restore the land and water itself. All of that together is food sovereignty.

Nijim: This is Ramadan, the holiest month. As you know, starvation is a dangerous weapon in war. This incremental torture. One-hundred percent of Gaza are struggling with acute food shortage, including my family, and I can attest. Everyone has changed. My sister shared with me a picture [of her husband]. All his hair is gray, after six months. My own brother is losing weight as if he were dying. This is what we call acute food shortage.

Grassroots International has been around for four decades, and you've seen past waves of violence, hardship and oppression in the areas where you fund. How do these recent events — months of war in Gaza, the recent strike on World Central Kitchen, the violence in Haiti — affect what you do as funders?

Hong: We're deeply affected, all of us, by what's happening. As funders, we need to lead with our conscience and humanity. This is not about some grantmaking strategy or portfolio — it is going to require a deep engagement in solidarity. That's the place where it's coming from. Funding is one type of solidarity that we can offer — being in the U.S. and having a lot more resources. Especially for funders in the United States, I think it is a reckoning. We need to think about how we as funders are implicated.

We're supposed to be part of this U.S. democracy. But if our democracy allows genocide, does genocide, is that democracy? We have to make our democracy genocide-proof. A lot of funders right now, especially during elections, talk a lot about democracy – and see that as separate from foreign policy. But we need to bring that together. It's really about what impact we're having around the world and at home.

This is the time to redouble our efforts, to continue to speak up and move even more resources. Unfortunately, some people are holding back, they're defunding. Some of our partners are telling us a lot of mainstream funders ceased funding them because they're too scared to get involved in controversy. This is a time to stand by your grantees, during time of genocide. Showing steadfastness and having their back, and then trying to mobilize both financial and political backing at this time is really important.

We need to just look at how we're behaving, and whether we're leveraging all the influence that we have to stop the genocide, and to support the vision of the people.

You said some are pulling back. What have funders said about what has led them to leave? Or, for that matter, to join?

Hong: For example, look at how UNRWA is being [defunded](#), because Israel made an [accusation](#). [No evidence](#) to back that up. Same thing with civil society groups. A lot of European funding sources are also subject to political winds. A lot of those funds have been either paused indefinitely or are lost. In the U.S., funders are not only defunding, but also censoring or conditioning their support on social media posts, or just not understanding that being against a genocide is not being antisemitic. There's multiple layers, but a lot of bad behavior. Both overt and more indirect.

On the positive side, funders who have never been involved in this issue are speaking out. Take reproductive justice funders. There's 50,000 pregnant women in Gaza. There's childbirth happening daily without anesthesia, without doctors available. Reproductive justice funders and feminist funds are among those who joined our open letter. Then climate funders: The land is being poisoned and destroyed, [the carbon emissions that come from the bombing](#). Disability justice funders are getting involved because there's like tens of thousands of maimed people in Gaza. That's the part that's been inspiring people. People who used to be in their silos are saying: “We need to be in solidarity.”

Foundations working on disaster relief and those who work on food systems often operate in silos. At this time of acute need, you've emphasized the need for food systems transformation, which can be seen as a long-term effort. How do you explain to other funders how these needs overlap?

Hong: A lot of the groups that we support focus on food sovereignty, which is based on both historical, systemic and political analysis. It's a more comprehensive framework than a very depoliticized approach that just gets food to the hungry. It is really the only sustainable way that we're going to be able to feed people globally. We start with the peasants, the people who are growing the food, and the seeds, particularly heirloom, local and Indigenous seeds.

We also want to support agroecology practice that produces healthy food and develops the people power, which helps protect it against attacks from corporate agriculture and governments that are not friendly toward them. It's funding the people, seeds, process and political vision of self-determination of the food system.

What would your partners and grantees in Gaza and Haiti most want funders and philanthropy to know right now?

Nijim: They should stand up to their own mission and vision. They should not exceptionalize Gaza. They should not exceptionalize Palestine. For those who are internally displaced, it is unfathomable. How can you become a refugee in your own country?

Monjane: Our partners, and Haiti society at large, they're confronted with the threat of foreign intervention. They want donors and philanthropy to know that they are pushing for a Haitian-led solution. They came up with a proposal – [The Montana Accord](#) – that articulates a number of solutions for Haiti to restore peace and political stability in the country. The core goal is to avoid foreign intervention and to give Haitian people space to find a local solution.

Hong: We want you to be more than just a funder. We want you to be our ally, to be a witness. We want you to walk with us for the long term. Solidarity is not a strategy, it's a practice and a commitment. It constantly requires looking at, are our outcomes aligned with the purported values of philanthropy of supporting justice and freedom? There's a big gap right now. It's our job to narrow that gap.

