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INSIGHTS
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SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN SOUTH AMERICA: BRAZIL'S FUNDO CASA INVESTS IN THE GUARDIANS OF THE EARTH

FOR ALMOST TWO DECADES, BRAZIL'S FUNDO CASA SOCIOAMBIENTAL HAS SUPPORTED EFFORTS TO PROTECT VITAL ECOSYSTEMS WHILE ADDRESSING SOCIAL INEQUITIES AND PROMOTING SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS THROUGHOUT SOUTH AMERICA. BUT UNLIKE MANY GRANTMAKERS, THE CASA FUND HAS A STRATEGY GUIDED PRIMARILY BY THE PEOPLE WHOSE LIVES ARE MOST SEVERELY AFFECTED BY CLIMATE CHANGE AND LOSS OF BIODIVERSITY, AND WHO OTHERWISE WOULD FIND IT TOUGH TO ACCESS FUNDING: REMOTE AND INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES.

The seeds of the Casa Socio-Environmental Fund were planted in the 1980s. That was when a Brazilian, head of his family's U.S.-based Damien Foundation, started to fund civil society groups that were addressing social and environmental challenges. This led to the creation in 1994 of the Francisco Foundation, Brazil's first socio-environmental fund. After the Francisco Foundation's activities were wound down, its mission was adopted by the Casa Fund, which since 2005 has served as a bridge for funding traditional, indigenous, and other grassroots communities, to conserve the natural environment and protect their rights and livelihoods.

At first, its scope of direct funding was the whole of South America. But since 2016, Casa Fund began to share its unique grantmaking model with other activists across the

region and the globe, inspiring the creation of five other likeminded funds. The Alianza Socioambiental Fondos del Sur (the Alliance of Socio-Environmental Funds of the Global South) originated from this effort, today counting 14 members across Asia, Africa and Latin America.

THE AMAZON IS A VERY COMPLEX PLACE WHERE YOU CANNOT USE A ONE-SIZE FITS-ALL SOLUTION."
MARIA AMÁLIA SOUZA

While its impact now extends across the globe, its approach remains hyper-local. "The people protecting the most important biomes of our region are indigenous and traditional communities," emphasizes Maria Amália Souza, Fundo Casa's Founder and Director of Strategic Development. "They provide unique solutions to humanity's biodiversity, climate and socioeconomic crises."

FILLING A GRASSROOTS GAP

Evidence of just how effective local communities can be in protecting their environments emerged in a 2022 report from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. It found, for example, that in areas where indigenous land ownership was secure, deforestation was lower than outside these areas. In Bolivia, it was 2.8 times lower; in Brazil 2.5 times lower; and in Colombia two times lower.

The Casa Fund has long understood this phenomenon. It sees the most powerful agents of change as the people living on the front lines of hardship, whether they face social inequity and discrimination, illegal activities like mining and logging in their territories, breaches of human and land rights, or the effects of climate change and nature loss. While indigenous communities are disproportionately affected by these problems, they are also uniquely positioned to develop solutions to them. "The closer you are to the ground the quicker you are to address a challenge," says Souza. Yet she saw that most conservation funders tended to support only very large international or national NGOs. To address the funding challenges facing small grassroots groups, the Casa Fund stepped in to fill the gap.

DESIGNING A SYSTEM BACKWARDS

While many large philanthropic organizations set goals and then seek nonprofits that can execute them, the Casa Fund does the opposite. It takes its lead from the traditional organizations and indigenous communities that have the clearest understanding of the problems they face and whose knowledge and experience mean they are best positioned to design solutions. "It's about listening and knowing what's happening in the field," explains Souza.

This called for a new approach to grantmaking. Rather than having in-house program officers develop project proposals, the Casa Fund turns to a wide range of local

networks, asking them what they need most. To avoid bias in its grantmaking decisions, Casa Fund's selections are made using what Souza calls "the jewel in our system," a sophisticated project database and a grading matrix based on publicly announced criteria. "That keeps our relationship with grantees horizontal, valuing what we call "power with" as opposed to "power over", which often comes with structures that hold the money," she says.

"WE ARE STRENGTHENING THE FABRIC OF SOCIETY TO ENABLE GREATER DEMOCRACY AND MORE PARTICIPATION OF THE COMMUNITIES THAT ARE WORKING TO IMPROVE WAYS OF LIVING INSIDE FRAGILE ENVIRONMENTS."
MARIA AMÁLIA SOUZA

Grantees are graded on the participation level of women or young people in the organization, or their involvement with local networks, in addition to criteria listed in the open calls – such as target region, topic, or audience. "Once you do the grading, you come up with a total number that ranks that group. So, it's not subjective," says Souza. Word of mouth also plays an important role in how groups access the calls. "It's a process of constant consultation," she says.

Once a grant has been made, the Casa Fund provides capacity-strengthening tools such as financial management and communications training. These resources further equip the grantee to manage their budgets and generate funds from other sources.

COLLECTIVE POWER OF NETWORKS

An important part of the Casa Fund's strategy is connecting grantees to other groups that could support their work. Harnessing the collective power of local and regional networks can help even the smallest of civil society groups to deliver big change. For example, the Casa Amazonia Program focuses on supporting projects run by traditional organizations and communities in some of the Amazon's most remote regions. While these communities might be hard for many funders to reach, the Casa Fund does so through its extensive network of partners. "Our role is to mobilize networks so we can find the people who are in most need of resources and that no one else is looking at," says Souza. "Now that we have 5 local funds covering most of the Amazon region, we can coordinate grantmaking across the borders to enable even better results."

The types of projects the Casa Fund supports are extremely varied. It might be a small infrastructure project, such as providing access to sanitation or clean energy. It might also include supporting groups that use research, litigation, advocacy, training, or communication to protect and promote human rights. But underpinning all its grants is a holistic approach. Instead of making isolated grants, explains Souza, the Casa Fund uses "a macro vision to act

in the micro." By connecting communities that are in the same regions or that share the same goals, its funding does not just fix individual problems—it helps change whole systems.

ENGAGING NEW FUNDERS

When it comes to its own financial resources, Casa Fund is supported mostly by large international funders, including the C.S. Mott Foundation, the Global Greengrants Fund, the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, the Inter-American Foundation, CLUA and the Oak Foundation, besides several embassies.

Between 2005 and 2023, with the help of these and other funders, the Casa Fund has been able to make grants to some 3,500 organizations totaling more than $25 million. In 2023, Casa Fund's grantmaking budget was $14 million, half in grants to local groups and half managing a donation from the Forests, People, Climate initiative for the Alliance of Socio-Environmental Funds of the Global South and nine of its members.

Even so, Casa Fund is always looking for additional sources of finance, which poses a challenge in Brazil. Large corporate groups or wealthy families often execute their own projects, and the vast majority doesn't make direct donations to civil society groups. However, there has recently been some engagement with new types of local philanthropists, who Souza believes are looking for new ways to give. "A new family foundation started funding us three years ago, and this year, we had an individual give us $20,000 on Giving Tuesday," she says. "That's huge in symbolic ways."

However, though Casa Fund makes around 500 grants a year, it still can only meet 40% of its demand. Souza believes the reason for this lies in the lack of comprehension of how trustworthy, transparent, and accountable Casa Fund and other similar funds in the Global South are.

The organization has recently opened its Friends of Casa Socio-Environmental Fund at Myriad USA. "One of the reasons we did this is that we now have a history and relationships in the U.S., which might help in accessing individual funders. It's opening a whole other universe for fundraising that we felt we weren't ready for until very recently," says Souza.

Given the scale of the climate and biodiversity challenges faced by indigenous communities—and by humanity more broadly—the Casa Fund has plenty of work ahead as both a fundraiser and a grantmaker. "There are way more project demands than we can fund," says Souza. "But 80 percent of the forests standing on the planet are on indigenous lands. We must fund communities so they can provide solutions for protecting them."

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