Building the Whirlwind

Movement-building lessons from the Montreal climate protests

Published by the Broadbent Institute
January 2023

INSTITUT BROADBENT INSTITUTE

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Why this report

People across Canada face significant threats and challenges, and yet are building social movements capable of offering collective visions backed by collective action. The climate movement is one valuable example.

We wanted to identify the strategies and the practices that grow movements today. We wanted to understand how and why collective demands generated in movements surge at certain moments, creating tectonic shifts in society, particularly in a Canadian context.

Our inquiry needed to be focused on one such instance to capture the complexity of one such surge and look at how it was propelled forward, so we dove into where we saw a rich story to hear, capture, and tell.

We also understood that movements have no one leader or spokesperson able to tell the story of an effort that is by definition collective and plural, bringing together disparate groups for one objective. We applied this principle to our inquiry, from researching collaboratively to our approach to interviewing movement builders to writing this report.

As a result, this report features many voices who speak to the experience and insights of many sectors, coalitions, organizations and collectives. While recognizing that our interviews did not include everyone or every group involved, we offer these voices who operated and collaborated in an ecosystem which gave the historic Montreal climate protests of 2019.

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Grounding concepts

> *"Social movements emerge as a result of the efforts of purposeful actors (individuals, organizations) to assert new public values, form new relationships rooted in those values, and mobilize the political, economic, and cultural power to translate these values into action."* – Marshall Ganz[1]

Organizing and mobilizing

Not the same as doing community-based advocacy work or mobilizing, we understand organizing is a foundational activity and leadership practice for movement building.

Organizing is rooted in a place and happens when people think collectively about the problems they face and their cause, and then together develop strategies for changing their situation by improving conditions. This builds powerful relationships.

Constituencies that are organized, they are groups of people with bonds based on shared interests, can be mobilized for specific collective actions. Protests are an example of mobilization.

Relational power

The relationship between the individual and the collective is indivisible, essential to life and to social change.

Shifting power relations is necessary for righting power imbalances that produce racial, gender, and class injustices, among others. People and groups persistently marginalized are inherently valuable and capable of generating solutions for themselves.

Building social practices that are relational, reflexive and reciprocal is crucial within organizations, coalitions and organizing spaces.

Movement storytelling

Movement storytelling is enabled by mapping and listening to many voices.

Revealing a map of organizations, grassroots and individuals embedded in each helps show where organizers and movement builders learn.

Listening to many voices surfaces common goals. It also helps to see how people acted together despite differences, without hiding the tensions inherent in movement building.

When captured and shared, the choices in strategies made collectively in movements can be a valuable resource for movement-builders in other places and contexts.

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1 Ganz, M. (2010). Leading change: Leadership, organization, and social movement. Chapter 19 of *Handbook of Leadership Theory and Practice*: A Harvard Business School. Centennial Colloquium. Boston : Harvard Business Press.

Introduction: Learning from moments of the whirlwind

Nicholas Von Hoffman, who worked with Saul Alinsky, dubbed moments like the Maple Spring, the 2019 climate movement and the Black Lives Matter protests of summer 2020 as "moments of the whirlwind."[2] At such times, multitudes take to the streets to participate in dramatic shows of force and moments of civil disobedience that capture our attention and collective imagination. The movement and the social issues it raises suddenly receive an unusually high amount of press coverage and public attention. The status quo is challenged, and the average person must reckon with the question, which side are you on?.

There are plenty of debates about the effectiveness of mass mobilizations. Those most involved in leading them are often the most critical of all. There's always an end to the momentum, and to many organizers, especially young ones, it can feel like nothing was accomplished.

However, in a matter of months, these moments of the whirlwind can do more to shift the window of what the public imagines is politically urgent and therefore what becomes politically possible than decades of campaigning, lobbying, and other forms of long-term institutional advocacy work.

Sometimes moments of the whirlwind emanate from deliberate planning. At other times, they appear unexpectedly. Often, it's a mix of both. It takes years of background work - building relationships, developing the movement ecosystem, building and activating their bases - and some form of coordination to guide the whirlwind as it surges.

The momentum for the surge of massive moments typically comes from the mobilization of member-based groups and informal collectives of local activists. Often these are supported by and/or collaborate with progressive institutions - understood here as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), philanthropic foundations and labour unions - but these relationships are not always seamless. Progressive institutions play a particular role in a movement's division of labour, and when they learn to strategize alongside grassroots leaders, movements gain momentum.

A significant number of our country's big progressive institutions are relatively rich in resources (defined here as knowledge, networks, access, and funds). Their commitment to becoming movement organizations - ones that are close enough to events on the ground to be able to fully participate in planning and supporting these moments of the whirlwind - would greatly advance progress on the many intractable social and environmental crises we currently face.

Given the movement-enabling potential of progressive institutions, we sought to ask: How can progressive institutions best participate in and support social movements before, during and after these moments of the whirlwind?

To search for answers, we focused on one case study: the vast climate moment that occurred in Quebec in 2018-2019, culminating in a protest that saw half a million people take to the streets of Montreal. At times productive and ground-breaking, at other times chaotic and frustrating, grassroots organizations, environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs) and unions worked together to create something unprecedented in scale.

This report attempts to surface the interplay between climate grassroots groups and professionals working in progressive institutions. We particularly focus on how resource-rich progressive institutions can support grassroots groups, where gaps persist, and the lessons from this case that can better support movements in the future.

2 Saul Alinsky as cited in Engler, Mark and Paul Engler (2016). This is An Uprising: How nonviolent revolt is shaping the twenty-first century. Nation Books, p. 177.

The Montreal climate protest movement moment

On September 27, 2019, 500,000 people took to the streets of Montreal, making it the city's largest protest in history.[3] The 2019 climate moment was one of the biggest social movements in Quebec since the Printemps Érable or Maple Spring, the 2012 student movement to oppose tuition hikes. It remains Canada's largest climate mobilization.

First, we delve into core questions about the events themselves intended to illuminate what was learned, to contribute to developing movement-building practices in Canada. What can we learn about how these relationships were built? Which roles did each of these actors play? What went well, and what was messy?

We acknowledge that while organizing is rooted in place, some lessons will remain place-specific. But it would be limiting to believe that organizers in other provinces and territories in Canada, and even in other parts of the world, have nothing to learn from movement-building efforts in Quebec in 2019.

Ultimately, this is a story about relationships: relationships between grassroots organizers and staffers within ENGOs and unions and between ENGOs and foundations. And such relationships and interplay exist everywhere.

This is also a story about strategy. How did grassroots organizers and other actors actually organize? How did they coordinate with other constituencies? What strategic choices did movement actors make, and how did these decisions advance or hinder the movement? More broadly and most importantly, what lessons can people working for progressive institutions in other parts of the world learn from the 2019 climate moment about being good movement players?

3 https://montreal.ctvnews.ca/this-is-an-emergency-we-will-not-be-bystanders-greta-thunberg-addresses-climate-change-march-1.4613247

The organizations

LPSP La planète s'invite au parlement or "The planet is inviting itself to parliament" is a grassroots organisation (it is not a student-led organisation).

LPSU La planète s'invite à l'université or "The planet is inviting itself to university" was a grassroots organisation made up of university students.

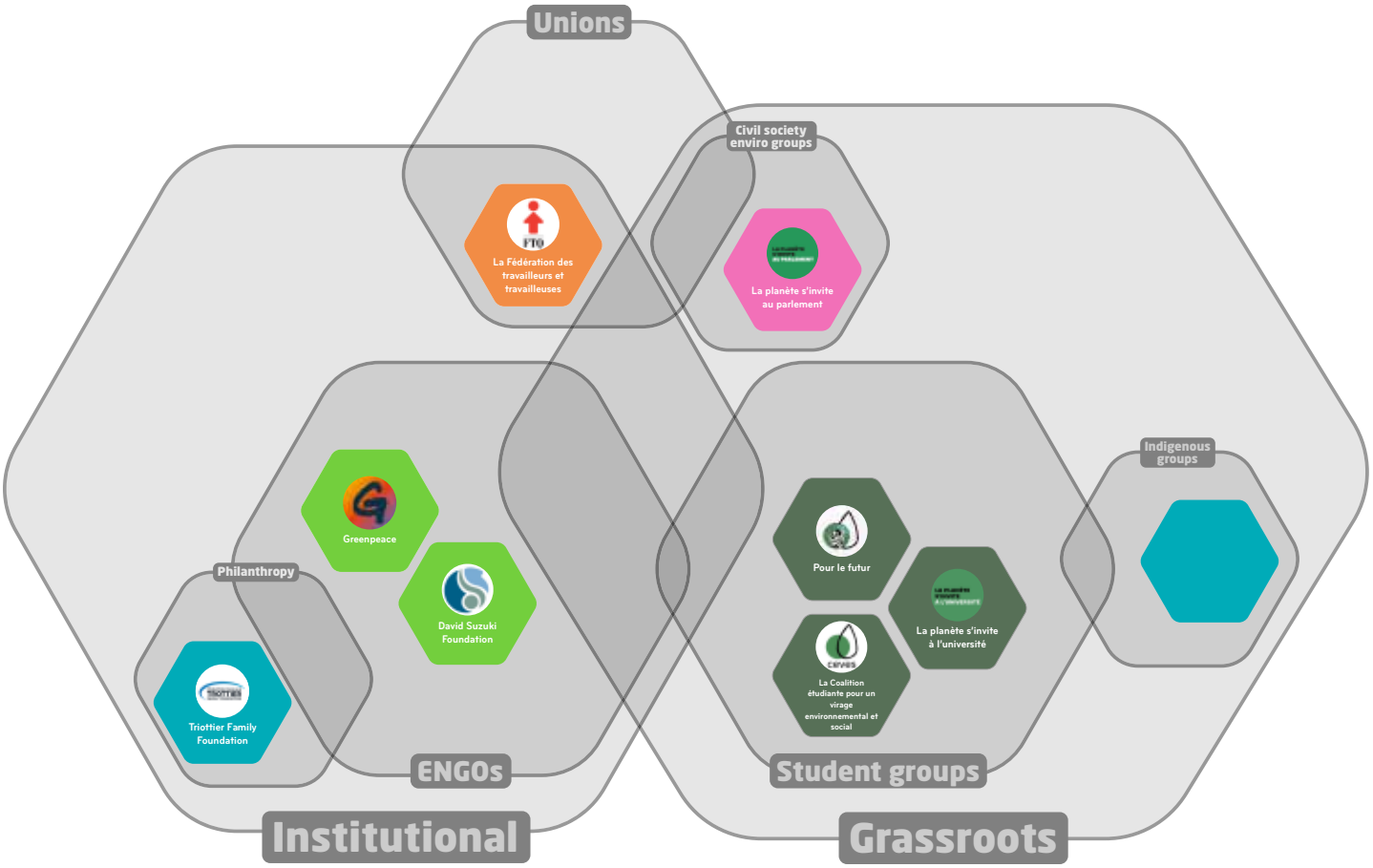
PLF Pour le futur or "For the future" was a grassroots collective made up of high school students.

CEVES La Coalition étudiante pour un virage environnemental et social or "The students' coalition for an environmental and social shift" is a grassroots coalition made up of high school, CEGEP and university students that merged LPSU, PLF and the CEGEP students' grassroots organisation.

FTQ La Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses or the "Workers' federation" is a major Quebec federation representing many unions and a total of 600 000 workers.

GP Greenpeace

DSF David Suzuki Foundation



The interviews

This study is based on interviews with nine movement builders who contributed to creating the 2019 climate "movement moment" in Montreal.

Albert Lalonde founding member of PLF (and later la CEVES), was a high school student at the time.

Ashley Torres university student, founding member of LPSU (and later la CEVES).

Eric St-Pierre Executive director of Trottier Family Foundation.

François Geoffroy CEGEP professor and founding member of LPSP.

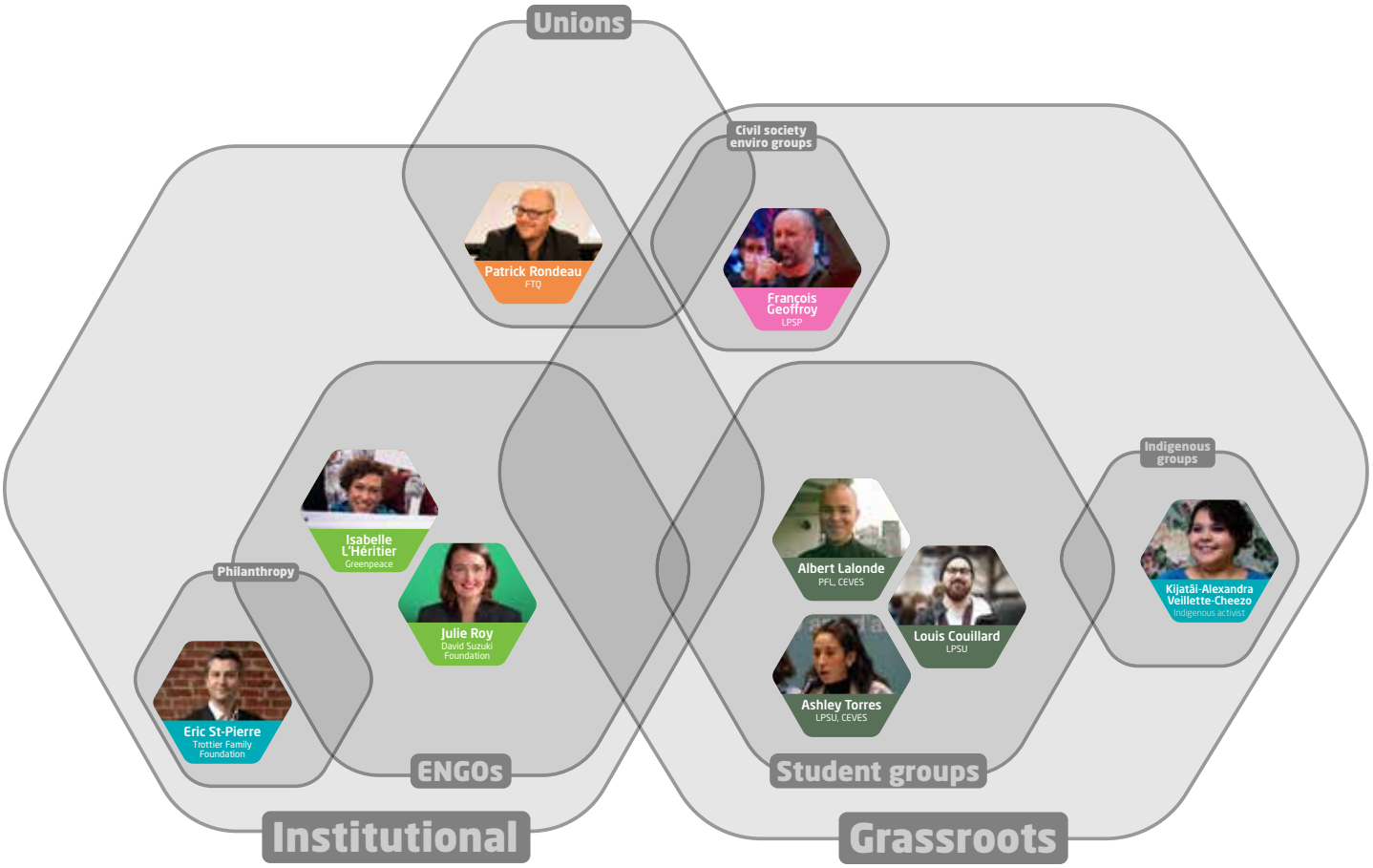
Isabelle L'Héritier mobilisation campaigner at Greenpeace Canada, in the Montreal office.

Julie Roy Responsable de l'engagement citoyen or head of citizen engagement at DSF, in the Montreal office.

Kijatâi-Alexandra Veillette-Cheezo youth from Anishinabek Nation, one of the participants in the cohort of 15 Indigenous youth and 15 settler youth that led the September 27 protest.

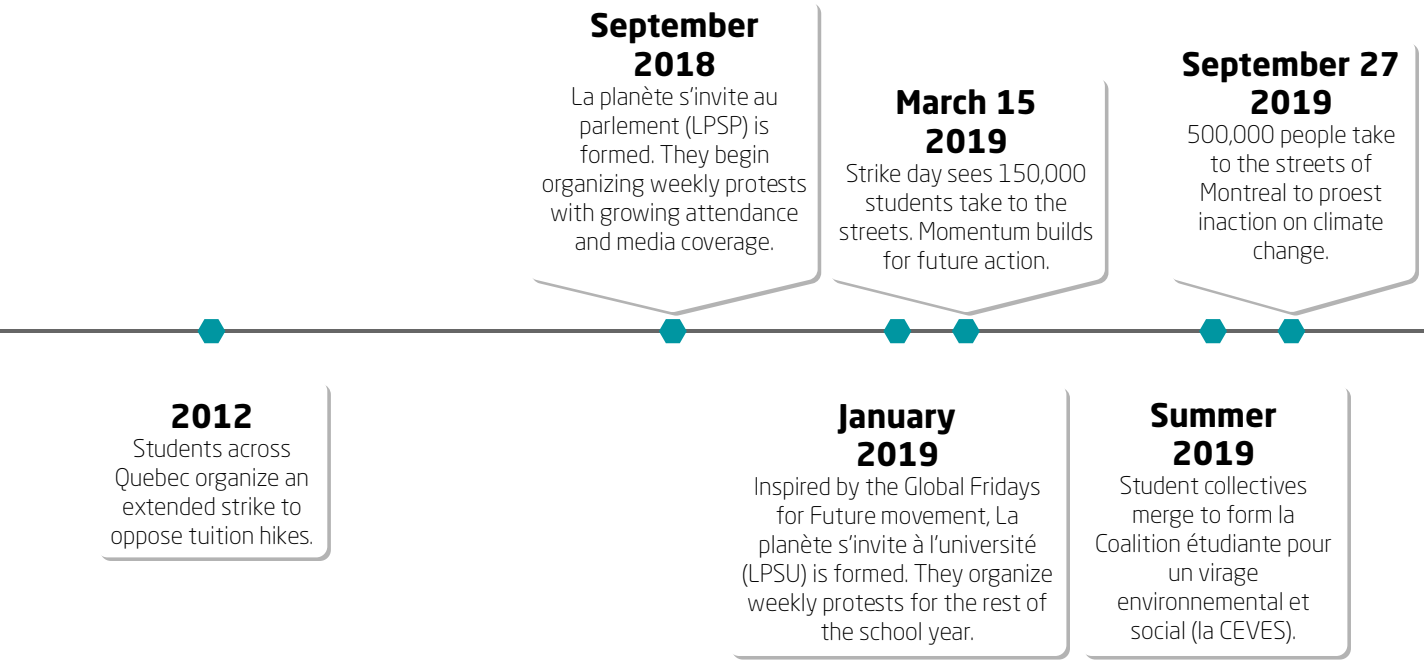
Louis Couillard university student, founding member of LSPU (and later la CEVES).

Patrick Rondeau Conseiller syndical - Environnement et Transition juste or "Union advisor - environment and just transition" and member of the coalition that organized September 27.



François Geoffrey's image is by Yvon Monette.
Kijâtai-Alexandra Veillette-Cheezo's image is by Claudia Chan Tak.

Timeline



Highlights of the movement

The movement-building process behind the 2019 climate moment was much longer than the months it took to organize the protest that saw half a million Montrealers take to the streets on September 27, 2019. During the year prior, new grassroots groups emerged and were built up and relationships between grassroots actors, ENGOs, unions and foundations were solidified and coalitions were formed.

The climate movement also built from the 2012 student strike in Quebec: hundreds of thousands in Montreal retained a collective memory of taking to the streets, forming a generation of leaders and a network that informally shared information about the work it takes to organize a formal strike in schools.

2012: Students across Quebec organize an extended strike and multiple mass demonstrations to oppose tuition hikes. Hundreds of thousands of students take to the streets in what later becomes known as "Le printemps érable" ("The maple spring").

September 2018: In the lead-up to Quebec's October 1st provincial election, grassroots organizers--including interviewee François Geoffroy--form La planète s'invite au parlement (LPSP) or The planet invites itself to parliament. Their goal is for the environment to be front and center as an issue during the election. They begin organizing weekly protests with growing attendance and media coverage.

January 2019: At the same time as LPSP is getting increasing attention in Quebec, the global Fridays for Future movement takes off, with Greta Thunberg becoming a well-known international figure. Between LPSP's momentum and the global movement, student-led grassroots organizations begin to spring up in Quebec. University students--including interviewees Ashley Torres and Louis Couillard--form La planète s'invite à l'université (LPSU) or The planet invites itself to university. High school students--including interviewee Albert Lalonde--form Pour le futur (PLF), or For the Future, the Quebec version of the Fridays for Future movement. PLF organizes protests every Friday for most of the school year, for 14 consecutive weeks.

March 15th, 2019: With the memory of student strikes in 2012, and with the momentum of the protests over the past few months in their hearts, student activists who had just formed LPSU and PLF organize a formal strike day which sees 150,000 students take to the streets. The March 15 strike is a major building block in the lead up to the half a million strong protest on September 27. According to most of the interviewees, the massive turnout on March 15 was the primary reason Greta Thunberg agreed to come to Montreal.

Summer of 2019: High school, CEGEP and university students merge their respective collectives and form a massive coalition called la Coalition étudiante pour un virage environnemental et social, or The Student Coalition for an Environmental and Social Shift (la CEVES).

Over 30 organisations including unions, ENGOs and grassroots organisations form a coalition and begin planning a massive protest which will take place on September 27, 2019.

September 27, 2019: 500,000 people take to the streets of Montreal to protest inaction on climate change.

The movement story

How relationship-building nurtured the movement

Before September 27, there was March 15th. Before March 15th, there were grassroots-level organizers connecting and building momentum.

The first significant way that some progressive institutions in Quebec contributed to the climate moment of 2019 was by supporting these grassroots organizations during the year before that massive protest, which had fewer resources than more formal institutions.

This started with building relationships.

It's not news to anyone that building relationships means building trust. Both individuals and organizations are much more likely to work with people and groups where there is reciprocity and respect. While the dominant idea is that building relationships occurs naturally in the course of organizing and mobilizing, we find it requires **flexibility** and **openness to sharing power**.

Building relationships takes intention

In Quebec, there is a widespread ENGO culture of devoting at least one staff person per organization to being in touch with the grassroots. Even if this staff member's job description officially has them working on leading one of the ENGOs' campaigns, informally, this person has the freedom to spend a lot of their time outside the office so they can attend grassroots groups' meetings and social gatherings. All of this is part of their paid work (although most people in these roles go above and beyond their paid hours) and often outside of 9 to 5 hours.

There are different models for this way of doing things. The Greenpeace (GP) team in Montreal, for example, builds it into their official workflow: each staff member spends 20 percent of their time supporting local activism.

For the staff at the David Suzuki Foundation's (DSF) Montreal office, it's more informal: their job descriptions may not technically list building

> *"One of the main reasons why I feel there's distrust or a lack of good work between grassroots and institutions—mainly NGOs—is relationships or a lack thereof."*
>
> **Louis Couillard**
> student at Université de Montréal and core organizer with la CEVES

relationships and supporting grassroots movements, but there is a tacit understanding that staff can use their time to do just that.

Julie Roy is one of the people at DSF who plays this role. "I'm not often at the office," she said. "I've always been super in touch with emerging movements, out of personal interest, and I mean, it's a fine line between the personal and the professional here...I'd say it's my job to be aware of what's going on [in movement spaces]."

Individuals like Julie at DSF and Isabelle at Greenpeace play an important role in connecting what's happening on the ground in activist spaces to what's going on in the office.

"[GP staff] were also willing to attend our meetings even though they weren't during office hours," said Albert Lalonde, who was a high school student and core organizer with Pour le futur (PLF) in 2019. "That's really basic, but it does play a role in how the grassroots and institutions interact."

Building relationships also happens informally

"It takes beer," says François Geoffroy, a literature professor at Montmorency College and core organizer with La planète s'invite au parlement (LPSP). "That's always where relationships are built, during activist hangouts. That's where we get to know each other, where we learn to trust each other, and after, well, it's when we work collaboratively that this trust is strengthened...or not," He adds, "It's the type of thing that has a multiplier effect. It just takes one person from an organization who builds trust with key people in the movement, and there you go," he said.

Beers aside, at Greenpeace the team decided early on to offer a part of their office space to grassroots organizers. The building, which the Montreal climate community refers to by its address— "454 Laurier"—has a large common space with couches, art supplies and a kitchen. This space rapidly became both an organizing space and a hangout spot. Grassroots organizers would stop by after work or after class, sometimes to paint banners, attend training or hold meetings, other times simply to be around fellow activists.

"It was really a great space where the youth could come and hang out, it was our mobilization hub, literally. That, I think, really created relationships," Louis said.

Relationships with grassroots organizers are important not only as a way of sharing resources and power - although this is key to building a healthy and sustainable movement ecosystem - but also to ensure that institutions will be useful on the ground when movement moments are generated.

Institutional allies during those intense months of organizing leading up to September 27 "were people we already built relationships with before," said Ashley Torres, a Concordia University student and core organizer with la CEVES. "When we would go into a room, they were people we would gravitate towards."

Walking alongside and supporting from behind is crucial to movement building

Building relationships and trust between professionals who are embedded in progressive institutions and grassroots activists and organizers (particularly youth) is facilitated when the former walk alongside and support the latter. Key practices that emerge from this study include deliberate attention to training, mentoring and care.

"In Europe and other places, the Fridays for Future movement started earlier than in Quebec and Canada. What I was seeing was that in other places, the adults took up a lot of space and were really involved in the strategy, and kind of took over the essence of the movements and were too involved for it to really be student-led and youth-led," Isabelle said.

"I was really like, this is supposed to be a movement where the youth have the strategy, and the decisions, and the key roles. It's not a place for us to be leaders. It's a place for us to be supporters, I don't want to have any other place than being behind the scenes. That was a discussion I had with my team from the beginning," she said.

This informal support work often started simply with ENGO staff offering to lend protest resources, like material or equipment, to grassroots organizers.

"We went to them, we were like, hey, we have megaphones, banner tissue and paint, do you want anything?" Isabelle said. "So they came to see us, to get the material, and they were like, hey, the police called us, what do we do? And so we just answered their questions, not in a proactive way. Just like, if there's anything, just ask us. I think that really created the environment of confidence, [they knew] we wouldn't be there to be using them."

From there, the relationship of trust grew and student organizers began to turn to members of the Greenpeace Montreal team for more and more logistical support.

Student organizers received informal training on topics as varied as how to hold a press conference, how to create a route for a protest, and how to infiltrate an office space for an occupation.

While the Greenpeace Montreal team did stand out - grassroots organizers talked about the ideological similarity in terms of tactics and vision - staff at other ENGOs and union federations supported too, often by lending or paying for protest equipment such as sound systems, verifying scientific information for grassroots spokespeople and their press releases, giving informal advice and allowing staff to be on the ground in a supporting role during protests and actions.

The genesis of trust is care

Less formal, less visible or valued, and certainly not as resourced, care work was done mostly by women, and women of colour in particular. This was foundational to trusting, durable relationships that would sustain organizers for the long term.

The people Ashley developed the strongest relationships with were women who supported her emotionally when the lack of rapid progress on intersectionality in the movement became overwhelming. "In terms of

institutional help, I don't know the answer to that, I just know that it was refreshing when institutions had those folks who were doing the same type of work that I was doing," Ashley said.

"But it was not something I could say was done everywhere. Yes, they would talk about intersectionality, but like, who are your employees? They're all white folks. So when I saw a person of color or an Indigenous person, naturally I would gravitate towards them, because it felt like, oh, this is someone who is doing the same type of work as I'm doing…"

For example, she connected with Melissa Mollen Dupuis, an Indigenous campaigner working for DSF. "She's someone who I really trust. How she sees organizing, I see it very similarly. The way she speaks, the way she talks about land, there's just something I really can understand and connect with. I was gravitating towards her."

"I think that a lot of women who I felt were allies and that I wanted to work with were the key people who made me feel safe, and also who I felt could teach me a lot," Ashley said.

Because she had developed a relationship of trust with these institutional support people, Ashley listened to them, and said no to some tasks and opportunities so as not to be overwhelmed. This wasn't the case for many of her peers, however, who didn't have access to experienced mentors. Most of the organizers and activists in Ashley's network eventually burnt out and left the movement entirely.

How progressive institutions prioritized the movement moment

In 2019, on the verge of the movement moments in Quebec, some progressive institutions were close enough to what was developing on the ground to understand that this was a time to drop everything and fully devote themselves to the moment of the whirlwind.

For ENGO and union staffers, this looked like formal participation in the coalition that organized the September 27 protest. ENGO staffers whose job it was to be in touch with the movement played a crucial role in this coalition.

Sometimes this looked like lending technical expertise to the organization of the protest. For example, Julie Roy from DSF references being on the committee that was responsible for figuring out the route--no easy task for a protest of that size.

These staffers were also the window into the rest of the organization. "Because I know what's going on on the ground, I can go see my team and say, in terms of fundraising we need this, or for social media support we need that, or there's a fight on this topic, can Karel [the Executive director at the time] help unblock this," Julie Roy from DSF said.

Movement moments change everything

When Greta Thunberg confirmed that she would be coming to Montreal to lead the march, everything changed. This was weeks before September 27 and the coalition was scrambling. Suddenly, the estimated number of expected protestors rose from 100,000 to 500,000.

"Basically, you have two weeks in which you're like, shit, what are we going to do? Yes, we're used to planning protests, but giant screens for 500,000 people, it's just not the same game," Julie says. "This is where the youth would not have been able to do it. And it's not a criticism, it's just that it's full-time work, and the youth were already working hard to mobilize their own crowd."

A few paid members of the coalition got to work, along with a grassroots organizer from LPSP who had expertise in sound systems. They found a company that could provide a stage and a sound system. It was going to cost $250,000.

At this point Julie went to Karel Mayrand, the head of DSF's Montreal team, and said, we need help. Given that Karel had worked on multiple projects with the Trottier Foundation and the two foundations had developed a relationship of trust, Karel and Eric St. Pierre were able to come to an agreement quickly. The Trottier Foundation, along with a second institution Eric was in touch with stepped in to support this urgent need.

Through inside-outside relationships, the Montreal DSF team was able to play the role of linking funders to movements at a key moment.

Flexible funding feeds movements

The anecdote about the sound and staging also provides valuable insights for progressive institutions who struggle to find ways to support movements given Canadian rules for charities restricting political action.

First, foundations can financially support social movements by going through fiscal agents such as ENGOs that are connected to what's going on the ground. This might look different from what foundations have previously funded. For example, social movements need infrastructure and a charity could make the most impact by paying for a sound system.

"That was our small role behind the scenes trying to support something that may not be interesting to other funders, because it was very much physical infrastructure that we were supporting, but that needed to get done," Eric St. Pierre of the Trottier Family Foundation says. "That's one example of us working through a fiscal agent and trying to support the movement."

Also, it's important for foundations to be fully literate in social movements and to have enough knowledge of the ecosystem to be able to distinguish between an ENGO's own campaign work - which deserves support but is not always connected to social movements - and funding that will be redistributed to grassroots actors or that is directly useful on the ground.

This speaks to the importance of developing direct relationships between grassroots organizations and progressive foundations, which is a task only achieved with careful work and intention. "People move through very quickly, so it's hard to keep in touch with who's in which position and for how long. I think that's an area that could be worked on a little bit more...finding a space to discuss with student leaders and making a strong link to foundations," adds Eric.

The second major takeaway from this anecdote is that if foundations want to serve social movements, they need to develop flexible funding mechanisms. Quarterly board meetings and regular grant applications are too slow to be useful, especially during moments of the whirlwind.

The Trottier Foundation had already set aside a portion of their annual funds to disburse in a flexible way. "All it requires is a quick email to the Board, saying like, we want to pay for a stage for Greta," Eric said.

Most large foundations aren't set up to move this quickly. When asked why the Trottier Family Foundation was different in this way, Eric replied that "part of it was just thinking of it with a lot of intention."

"Ultimately, our theory of change is that we want to find solutions that address climate. It's hard to do that on a very linear path. Sometimes things are messy and don't go according to timelines and plans," he said. "I think it's really exciting work, but it's also a lot harder, you have to be ready to put in more work."

We also asked Eric why it was that this particular request - paying for the stage - caught his attention. "I'm a late millennial, I have a fear of missing out," he says. "Greta coming to Montreal in [a few] weeks, what if we miss out on this opportunity to try to make a difference for this important event? That FOMO gets us to move a little more quickly."

His answer speaks to the magic that occurs during moments of the whirlwind. People from all walks of life find themselves longing to contribute, to be part of something bigger than themselves.

Of course, there are limitations and problems with flexible funding if it only goes to those with whom foundations have prior relationships, as Eric points out. "I think that finding a mechanism for the climate movement, or a platform for the climate movement to be able to access funds very quickly without having to rush to identify potential partners could be really interesting."

"If there are ways to pool funding in advance, for initiatives that are very hard to determine in advance but that require funding in a quick and efficient manner, I think we need to figure out how to build those pooled funding mechanisms," Eric adds.

While flexible funding is key to supporting moments of the whirlwind, Eric as well as many others, stressed the limitations of one-time donations to grassroots movements.

"I think grassroots initiatives need more support. Even more during times of protest, for big movement moments, but at all times really," Julie from DSF said. It would be much more difficult to mobilize during movement moments "if we don't take care of [activists] … the whole year".

At the time of writing, Julie was supporting a Quebec-wide network of grassroots initiatives. Some of the things local groups needed money for included paying for lawyers or environmental assessments if they were trying to stop condo projects on undeveloped land. She also said that many groups could have benefitted from small grants that would have allowed them to rent a space for regular meetings.

Collective strategy and action are inherently messy

In the leadup to the protest, there was tension in the relationships between progressive institutions and grassroots organizations, and power dynamics played a big role in this.

During the protest itself, the experience wasn't positive for everybody: multiple Indigenous people were shoved, and some protestors reacted negatively to Land Back signs, shouting that they didn't have a place at a climate protest.

Racism, conflict and power imbalances are part of the story, too. To pretend they didn't exist would be to ignore the complexity of social movements. Crucially, we can learn from the messiness and from what went wrong.

Protest experiences are not the same within a movement

In the leadup to September 27, young leaders - along with the support of other grassroots groups and some progressive institutions - organized a project that saw 15 Indigenous youth and 15 settler youth come together for three days of relationship-building and workshops. The goal was twofold: to train these youth to be climate ambassadors and to prepare them to lead the march on September 27, alongside Greta Thunberg. Kijatâi-Alexandra Veillette-Cheezo, a two-spirited youth from the Anishinabek Nation was one of the people who participated in this project.

On the day of the protest, Indigenous participants from all walks of life showed up to march alongside the youth leading the protest - land defenders, folks with their drums and chiefs such as Ghislain Picard. Kijatâi was holding the banner at the front of the march. When they saw all the Indigenous people with drums around them, "I was like okay, this is going to be a good protest, I'm going to be able to sing," they said.

This is not quite how it turned out. "I know that at a certain point, I couldn't hear [the drums] behind us, people were jostled about a lot. I was trying to sing what they were singing but I couldn't really hear them," Kijatâi said.

It came out the next day on social media that many Indigenous folks who had initially been at the front of the protest were pushed aside as other protesters tried to make their way to the front to catch a glimpse of Greta Thunberg. As the drummers were pushed farther back, protest organizers started chanting slogans.

"When I go to protests, I'm so used to singing, so I didn't know the slogans. I was trying to repeat what they were saying but it was difficult because there was a lot of noise," Kijatâi says.

For Kijatâi, this was one example of the difference between settler-led and Indigenous-led protests—while recognizing that neither are homogenous groups.

"That's when I saw that there's a difference between protests with Indigenous people and protests with many different people. We do things differently. When I was marching in support of the Wet'suwet'en nation, we had the drums in front, and we were singing and marching solemnly instead of chanting slogans," they said.

Another such difference was apparent when the leading cohort reached the stage. A young Indigenous woman who had flown in from Coast Salish territories on the West Coast for the protest, and who is a well-respected land defender, asked to go onto the stage to sing.

"At first, they said no because they needed to be prepared ahead of time. You know, it's not their way of doing things, you can't just climb onto the stage. But then again, that's not our way of doing things, we go with the flow, with the natural voice of things," says Kijatâi.

In the end, Ashley and a few other settler students chose to ignore the rules, and simply accompanied this young woman and a few others, including Kijatâi, onto the stage. "Students just made it happen," Ashley says.

For Kijatâi, one takeaway is that there is still lots of long-term decolonization and education work to be done. It's important to talk about the negative experience some folks had, as well as the differences in ways of organizing, so that we can learn from what went wrong.

"I understand that the people working the stage were under pressure and didn't just feel they could let someone go up," they said. "I think it's another way of seeing things. You know, some people say, oh, I'm decolonized. I don't believe them because I myself am not fully decolonized."

However, going onto the stage and singing was ultimately a positive experience for Kijatâi.

"It was a really beautiful moment, and I know it was talked about less. It's important to talk about what went wrong too, but I think that we can't forget to talk about what went well," they say.

"I really enjoyed the protest. I felt the energy of all the people walking for the same cause, and that's something you really cannot describe," adding, "It's a beautiful emotion."

Strategizing together is a challenge worth embracing

At the protest, young organizers were the ones who pushed for Indigenous youth to go on stage. There was a similar dynamic while planning the march itself.

"There was a lot of respect from the people we were working with, but it was hard, because there were moments where our vision clashed," Ashley says. "People didn't understand what we were trying to do. Making sure that Indigenous peoples' voices were included, and that young Indigenous people were included in that process was a priority for us. We had awesome organizers in the room that made that happen with us, but it was very contentious and difficult."

Ashley relays the fact that student organizers weren't available full-time – they had school and, often, part-time jobs on top of their organizing work – which made this dynamic more complicated. "They were working at a pace that was so much faster, so you barely had time to really revise what our communications were going to be, or what our message would be. It was more like, impose and then we could modify," she says. "Looking back, we could have had a bigger and stronger message. We could have had [more] young peoples' voices there."

In general, youth organizers were more radically committed to racial justice and Indigenous rights and sovereignty than others in the coalition. This is not to say that student organizations didn't have their own internal racial reckonings. In the coalition, youth voices were consistently those that raised racial and Indigenous justice. For example, they were the ones who pushed for the cohort of Indigenous youth to lead the protest, and they pushed for emissions reductions targets that were stronger than the big institutions were willing to accept.

To Albert, it felt like youth organizers were valued for the momentum they brought, but were not treated as equals:

> "We created a big wave. With us came momentum that had never existed in the entire lifetime of the organizations that preceded us. There's this weird dynamic where people are using us, because we're creating the momentum. They have financial obligations. Organizations have to raise money, and so they're using the narrative that we're creating without actually passing the mic to us or amplifying our demands.
>
> Since day one, we've always been invited to press conferences, like 'we want a youth.' We were always put in a position where we have to be emotion providers, so our take on things doesn't really matter. That's just not how it is for men in their forties or fifties who are predominant, public faces of the movement.
>
> We were happy to put forward racialized voices, but we felt we were being used because of our age and for our identities. We had things to say on science, and on social justice and intersectionality, but they never let us go there, or only when it fits the narrative."

The feeling Albert is describing is a common one in grassroots spaces: grassroots organizers do not want progressive institutions to direct them like small players in a larger preconceived plan or tell them what they can and can't say. This doesn't mean that grassroots organizers do not want to learn from and collaborate with other parts of the movement ecosystem -- in fact, the more progressive institutions see themselves as part of the movement ecosystem, as opposed to separate from the movement, the less likely it is for grassroots actors to feel threatened.

Still, today there's a widespread perception in parts of the grassroots sector that when progressive institutions say they want to collaborate, what they really want is to be followed: adoption of their theory of change or participation in their campaigns, which may not align or resonate with grassroots priorities.

Grassroots organizers are much more likely to collaborate on a campaign and/or remain committed to a coalition or partnership if they have a real say in decision-making around strategy and tactics.

"In terms of the negative impact, it's difficult to explain it, but it's all the missed opportunities. Every action that NGOs have taken, I think they could have brainstormed with us, and it would have brought the global movement somewhere else," Albert says. "The potential is, I think, huge if we can get out of this 'we admire you but don't actually respect you when the time comes'".

Different forms of relationships, accountabilities and resources

Inherent to any coalition work is the tension between different parts of the movement ecosystem. This is because the objective of a coalition is to bring together players that reach different parts of society.

The September 27 coalition was no exception. On March 15, hundreds of thousands of students had taken to the streets. This time, in the leadup to the federal election, the intention was to show that climate change was a major election issue for everyone–not just for students.

"We knew that politically, it was a moment where it was key to show up in union, in coalition, in diversity, to really show that we were different parts of society that each have our power and our following and our community. You can't negotiate the same way with individual groups and have the same power balance as you do with this huge coalition, and that was the idea," said Isabelle. "The key was to say: we're at another level, and we're demanding things, and we're huge because we're all together."

Therefore, the coalition was vast and contained actors with very different accountabilities, resources and relationships. Notably, coalition members focused on mobilizing workers were interested in different tactics, exemplified by François Geoffrey and Patrick Rondeau.

On the one hand, François Geoffrey was interested in getting unionized workers into the streets through wildcat strikes. François first got involved in the climate movement in 2018, in the lead-up to the Québec provincial election. He organized weekly protests with a growing turnout, and eventually co-founded the grassroots collective LPSP. Along with Extinction Rebellion Quebec, LPSP played the important role of bringing people who were not students into the movement. As a unionized CEGEP teacher in his day job, François eventually began to develop an interest in linking the labour and climate movements.

"On our end, we wanted to make sure that the story that would be told about this protest would center the strikes. We could draw on this building block in the future, when the time came to organize the next climate strike," he said. "We also had the responsibility to put forward the voices of workers that had agreed to this wildcat strike. This was very difficult, and unfortunately we didn't fully succeed." François saw himself as being accountable to the workers engaging in this wildcat strike, and to the piece of the labour movement he was working on growing.

Patrick Rondeau, on the other hand, wanted to get workers into the streets without officially calling for a wildcat strike. Patrick is the Environment and Just Transition Advisor at the Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec (FTQ), an organizational member of the coalition.

Patrick's story includes twenty years of pushing for change on environmental issues both from within the labour movement and as a representative of FTQ. He began officially working with local climate movement actors as early as 2014, when he slowly created a relationship with Greenpeace. Even then there were tensions, he says, and it was important to him to work through them and build a relationship of trust, which takes time.

As an FTQ employee, Patrick was accountable to both the central labour body's headquarters and to the 600,000 workers the FTQ represents. Promoting a wildcat strike was out of the question for union headquarters, since it was illegal and they could therefore be liable for millions of dollars.

As for the union members themselves, Patrick felt they weren't ready for an official climate strike. "It's not that we're opposed to a strike for the climate. It's that people just aren't there, they won't answer the call, they won't leave work illegally, they won't deprive themselves of their salary for the climate," Patrick said.

"It's the principle of the *rapport de force* [or balance of power]. You have to look behind you to see if people are there. It's a basic concept in union negotiations. When you're sitting in front of the employer, you can say all you want, he's going to look over his shoulder and see if the people are with you," he said. "Another thing to take into account is the difference on the ground between Montreal and the [rural Quebec] regions."

More clarity about the division of labour within the movement from the start might have helped identify the limitations in alignment between groups with different mandates.

"In terms of ways to collaborate, we came out of this big coalition experience with the idea that next time, it's going to be important to **have written commitments that lay out the expectations as clearly as possible, the limits of this partnership, what we can and cannot do.** " he said.

Ultimately, approximately 7500 workers went on a wildcat strike on September 27. What's more, as Patrick points out, "the September 27 protest wasn't 500,000 students. We didn't have a strike mandate, but we mobilized, and we got people into the streets."

In the end, while it was difficult to work together, all members of the coalition played distinct roles, contributing in different ways to the massive turnout. Messiness and conflict are inherent to coalition work, and this coalition was no different from the others. This does not mean that power dynamics should not be addressed or that conflict should be avoided; rather, the lesson here is that they should be planned for from the start.

Movement moment insights

In the days, weeks and months after the historic success of the September 27 protest, many grassroots organizers felt disillusioned. "The slump we felt post-September 27 was about what our next move was, as in how can we build from here? There was a lot of resentment related to the lack of concrete progress even though in terms of public discourse, there were major advancements," according to François.

Feeling this way after a big movement moment is, according to movement theorist Bill Moyer, a normal part of the process. He writes that "within a few years after achieving the goals of "take-off", every major social movement of the past twenty years has undergone a significant collapse, in which activists believed that their movements had failed, the institutions were too powerful, and their own efforts were futile. This has happened even when movements were actually progressing reasonably well along the normal path taken by past successful movements!"[4]

A longer view of history allows us to see that not only do movements have successive waves, but movements build from each other, too.

> *"Almost everyone I talked to mentioned the 2012 student movement to stop tuition increases as their entry point into organizing. For some, it had been the first time they attended a protest, the first time they'd felt like they were part of something bigger than themselves. For others, it was about tactics: 2012 taught them how to use strikes to build and show power."*
>
> **Naomi Goldberg**
> Research team

Informally, grassroots networks learn from each other, as the relationships with 2012 student protest organizers and the impact that movement had on climate organizers illustrates. But the activist burnout post-September 27 and the feeling of frustration with the lack of progress points to the need to create a more generous and enabling ecosystem for movements. In other words, movement moments build towards each other and if we want to see change happen more rapidly, which we urgently need, we can be intentional about supporting the build-up to the next movement moment. This can be done in the following ways:

Build relationships to nurture the movement

- Building relationships takes intention: People working at progressive institutions develop relationships with local activists when they assign one or more staff members to actively participate in the movement. To do this effectively, staff need the flexibility to work outside the office and outside 9 to 5 hours--and not just during movement surges.
- Building relationships also happens informally: Making time to attend not only meetings but also informal hangouts and/or offering a space for the latter is an essential piece of relationship- and movement-building work.

4 Qtd in Rose, Anna. Bill Moyer's Movement Action Plan. https://commonslibrary.org/resource-bill-moyers-movement-action-plan/

- Walking alongside and supporting from behind is crucial to movement building: Building relationships and trust between professionals who are embedded in progressive institutions and grassroots activists and organizers (particularly youth) is facilitated when the former walk alongside and support the latter. Key practices that emerge from this study include deliberate attention to training, mentoring and care. This includes everything from lending protest resources such as material or equipment to providing training, to allowing staff to be on the ground during protests organized by local activists.
- The genesis of trust is care: An often overlooked element of movement building is the emotional support and mentorship inherent in building relationships with local activists. This work, often done by women and racialized people, happens informally because it depends on the natural evolution of relationships. It needs to be viewed as work, and should be afforded more time and space to take place. Care work is essential for the well-being of activists and for the longevity of the movement – notably, it helps avoid burnout.

Prioritize the movement moment to build the whirlwind

- Movement moments change everything: things can move quickly and sometimes professional ENGO teams must be ready to drop everything else they've been working on and focus entirely on the movement moment.
- Flexible funding feeds movements
    - Building relationships with fiscal agents who are well-connected to the ground is a good way to redistribute money to movements (making sure that there is a clear differentiation between money that is going to an organization's regular operations and money that is going to be redistributed to grassroots actors or used to support a coalition). Often, movement actors do not need the same kinds of financial support as established nonprofits. Paying for infrastructure, such as a stage or speakers, goes a long way. It allows organizers to focus their energy on organizing and building momentum instead of fundraising. Basic infrastructure is important for scaling up movements. You can't have 500,000 people in the streets if there is no way for them to hear speeches or chants or get a sense of the collective energy.
    - Developing flexible funding mechanisms is crucial to supporting social movements. It can be hard to predict from one week to the next what kind of financial support a movement will need.
    - Movement moments do not spring up out of thin air, they take years to build. Local organizers need year-round support. Establishing listening channels with local collectives to inform funders' program design would go a long way towards building better relationships and more meaningful participation in social movements.

Acknowledge and work within the inherent messiness of collective strategy and action

- Protest experiences are not the same within a movement: Decolonizing movements and organizations is a long-term process that is much deeper and more demanding than simply making space for an Indigenous contingent at the head of a march, although this is one important step. It involves dialogue about our multiple and distinct ways of organizing, mobilizing, and being. This includes understanding that Indigenous and settler ways of being and doing are in themselves not a monolithic.
- Strategizing together is a challenge worth embracing: Youth, and grassroots organizers in general, want to participate in choosing a strategy and demands. Making space for this sometimes means working outside business hours, and listening to and targets that may be more radical than what is comfortable for

institutions or a coalition. If students and other grassroots actors feel they have an equal voice at the table, they are much more likely to continue working and building with organizations and coalitions in the long-term.

- Embrace different forms of relationships, accountabilities and resources: Inherent to any coalition work is the tension between different parts of the movement ecosystem. When working in a coalition, it can be useful to start by figuring out where alignment starts and ends. Coming to an agreement ahead of time about what each actor is comfortable with and allowing for a diversity of tactics and communications may be a useful way to ensure each group and individual feels respected and comfortable being part of the coalition.

Appendix I: Methodology

For the objective of this study, we interviewed both grassroots organizers and professionals working in progressive institutions. The purpose was to represent multiple sides of the movement-support inquiry. The majority of people interviewed acted within grassroots and social movements. The second, smaller group, are people embedded in institutions.

Primary group: Social-movement activists and grassroots groups

The main goal from these interviews was:

1. To bring to light their unseen work before, during and after movement moments.
2. To better understand what support they needed.
3. To understand how and where institutional actors have successfully stepped in, or failed to step in, to support them.

Secondary group: Movement-generous progressive institutional organizations and staff

These interviewees were people within institutions who have been active in supporting movements and grassroots actors. They were identified through the course of interviewing grassroots actors.

The main goal of these interviews was to better understand:

1. The challenges of doing this work from within an institution.

   A. Our assumptions were that institutions have mandates and structural challenges, including governance, that restrict the speed and horizontal decision-making prevalent in these movement moments. The interviews allowed us to hear directly from institutional actors who could speak to this and/or other challenges.

2. Why/how some were able to overcome these barriers and find space within the mission and governance structure to deploy resources to movement actors.

Research/Interview questions

- What is/was your role in the movement moment we are looking at here?
- Why are movement moments so effective at shifting discourse and the sense of what's possible?
- What is the unseen work of organizing, movement-building and care work that underlies movement moments and makes them possible?
- What does the behavior and work of core organizers and movement-builders look like before, during and after movement moments? How is this behavior and work different from other actors, or from the status quo?
    - Who are the people who show up in movement moments? Do they come from a lineage of long-term power-building and local community empowerment work?
- What is seen and well-supported right now, what is not?
- How are some institutions stepping into supporting movement ecology, or failing to do so?
    - What barriers hindered organizers' capacity to work with institutional actors (NGOs, foundations, unions, political parties)?

- Were there any inside-outside relationships that enabled organizers' objectives?
- What barriers hindered institutional actors' ability to support grassroots actors?

Ethical research commitments

Our goal is to compile knowledge and direct experience that will be useful to the larger community of progressive institutions who wish to better support the work of grassroots organizers, and who are willing to listen to some hard truths in the process. Given the nature of this research project, we wanted everyone who contributed to this research, and particularly those we interviewed, to feel respected and empowered. We laid out grounding concepts to help us remain accountable to this goal.

Appendix II: Research team: How we come to this work

The research team is composed of three people who are situated in different parts of progressive movement ecology. In fact, all three of us are simultaneously grassroots organizers and institutional actors. As part of our commitment to ethical research, we want to be honest about the assumptions we are bringing into this research project, which stem from our lived experiences.

As principal researcher and writer, Naomi conducted the interviews and wrote the narrative that resulted. Alejandra and Tom were senior consultants who supported the design and analysis of the research.

Naomi Goldberg

As a young grassroots organizer, it has sometimes felt to me like institutions do not recognize that bold visions and radical action are an incredibly important part of change-making work. Institutions - I'm mostly talking about NGOs here, I don't have much experience with other forms of institutions - will often say they value grassroots work, but in practice they mainly attempt to convince grassroots organizers that their own theory of change is better. Institutions should take a strategic look at the movement ecosystem and recognize that grassroots work (which, yes, is messy!) is a crucial piece, and one they are not well-placed to lead. The work of an institution should not be to "de-radicalize" movement work, but rather to find ways to support and collaborate with grassroots organizers - before, during and after movement moments. Real relationships take a long time to build. With the grassroots' vision and willingness to engage in radical action, and institutions lending their resources, experience and their own skill sets, we would be in a much better position to bring about the change we need and dream of.

Tom Liacas

Looking back at over two decades of forward movement on several social issues I have organized around including critique and search for alternatives to consumer-capitalist culture, economic and racial justice, decolonization and support for indigenous struggles as well as the fight to avoid disastrous climate change, I have noticed that the road to systemic change seems unending for many years until, all of a sudden, it doesn't. Possibilities for big and rapid change tend to appear dramatically and somewhat unexpectedly, as the result of a movement-moment flashpoint that quickly shifts the political discourse. For the past 10 years, from my vantage point as a consultant, I have seen institutions question their relevance during movement moments and reflect on how they can adapt their structures and approach to work more in sync with the grassroots and find a supporting role in these new ecosystems. I believe that this new hybrid of institutional-grassroots organizing holds a lot of potential for large social change moments in the future. But essential to these new relationships is an understanding and appreciation of all the unseen work that is core to building movements - deep organizing, capacity-building and community education, self-care and community care. Though not as visible as the outputs during large movement mobilizations, this core work is what creates the base conditions for the moments themselves.

Alejandra Bravo

Alejandra Bravo has a decades-long history of leadership with civil society organizations, including extensive governance experience with boards ranging from Art Starts, a community arts organization operating in under-serviced neighbourhoods, to serving on the Toronto Board of Health. An adult educator and facilitator by profession, Alejandra's work has been focused on helping communities understand and influence the government decisions that impact them. She was the Director of Leadership and Training at the Broadbent Institute, where she built training capacity across Canada and led the Institute's work on democratic renewal. Alejandra was elected as the City Councillor for Ward 9—Davenport in Toronto in 2022.