

Strength in Solidarity – Fiscal Sponsorship as Intentional Community Building: Collective Action and Resource Sharing in Puerto Rico

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Abstract:

Fiscal sponsors, in particular the comprehensive form, are essentially cooperatized infrastructure. As the field of fiscal sponsorship has become a go-to solution for movement building, social justice, and crisis-response work in our sector, we see sponsors moving toward more intentional community and Solidarity Economy strategies. With growth comes specialization, as we see fiscal sponsors focusing not just by geography and mission but also by identity. This evolution, coupled with less transactional and more transformational supports, supported by more peer governance approaches, makes fiscal sponsors hubs for gathering strength and resilience through intentional community building.

Introduction

The nonprofit framework has become the preferred solution for addressing society's most pressing challenges. Governments, the media, and the private sector are increasingly encouraging communities and individuals to self-manage and develop solutions to global crises.

While nonprofit systems can serve as an important source of support, bureaucracy, social biases, and tax-exempt restrictions often prevent funds from reaching where they are needed most—especially for initiatives led by the very populations facing systemic challenges. Grassroots organizations and community groups proposing innovative, neighborhood-level projects often struggle to find a place within the long-term vision of large foundations, making access to grants and unrestricted funding nearly impossible. The legal and administrative requirements imposed on nonprofit entities create additional obstacles and risks for those dedicating their time, energy, and personal resources to transforming their communities.

In Puerto Rico, nearly 75% of nonprofit organizations lack federal or local tax-exempt status (Estudios Técnicos, 2022). Fewer than half are registered as private foundations, and only about a dozen are frequent grantmakers. Those funding opportunities are mostly program and project-based, leaving a gap in support for operational and long-term needs. No official data exists on

unincorporated grassroots initiatives, further highlighting their invisibility within the nonprofit ecosystem.

The push for establishing independent nonprofit organizations can often create silos, where everybody competes for the same funds rather than creating interconnected initiatives that leverage diversity, specialized knowledge, and resources of multiple entities to solve social problems. A collaborative approach can create more efficiencies and long-term change. HASER was established on the firm belief that all meaningful change is local and collective and that communities have the wisdom and courage to create solutions to their challenges. Our mission is to promote social well-being in Puerto Rico through community-based projects that work towards equity and quality of life.

Community groups in Puerto Rico have been doing very effective and critical work for more than 50 years. The majority simply need funding and back-end support—whether writing a grant letter or setting up accounting processes. Recognizing that many grassroots and community organizations that are similar in scale and mission-aligned face these challenges, HASER was envisioned as a collaborative hub of shared operational resources with fiscal sponsorship as a key tool. This presented many questions. How to create a community? What values and principles guide communal action? What kind of work is most impactful? How can we share power and avoid the traditional hierarchical relations in nonprofit work?

The first point on HASER's institutional agenda was to address these questions and to build a theory of change centered on collective power-sharing to advance social well-being, equity, and quality of life—using fiscal sponsorship tailored to Puerto Rico's sociopolitical reality. Or at least that is where we thought we should start.

Just one year after HASER's incorporation, Hurricanes Irma and María devastated Puerto Rico. The life-threatening crisis demanded action. Donors in Puerto Rico and the United States were eager to help, but their contributions were limited to tax-exempt organizations. Meanwhile, community leaders and grassroots groups risked their safety and exhausted personal resources to provide aid and relief. HASER bridged the gap between donors and on-the-ground relief efforts, creating a swift fiscal, legal, strategic, logistical, operational, and financial framework to ensure that charitable resources directly supported the work of fiscally sponsored community-based projects in compliance with funding and legal regulations. Sponsees could then focus on life-saving actions—clearing roads, removing debris, distributing fuel and water, and setting up communal kitchens.

As the government emergency response failed to materialize, communities turned to mutual aid models, reclaiming a collective sense of agency. The demand for fiscal sponsorship surged.

Unable to take on every request, we focused on sponsoring projects that aligned with our mission and were led by groups committed to a collaborative approach and building a relationship with HASER.

The experience affirmed the importance of creating an intentional working community centered on social justice and equity from within. Many of the relationships forged during the crisis evolved into a shared vision for Puerto Rico. It became clear that HASER's role was not to facilitate transactional relationships between donors and sponsored projects but to foster long-term collaborations based on shared values and goals.

While some donors viewed fiscal sponsorship as a temporary solution, a necessary intermediary, or a stepping stone to nonprofit incorporation, many grassroots groups in our field after the emergencies had no intention of becoming tax-exempt entities. Instead, they saw HASER as a partner that could provide operational infrastructure and access to funding while allowing them to focus on direct community work. This realization led to the evolution of HASER's fiscal sponsorship into the Network of Actions Program—a collective of community-based organizations, named Allies, leading initiatives in food sovereignty, environmental and social justice, nature conservation, culture, and social advocacy. We are building a shared infrastructure with community groups that are leading social transformations for the benefit of people and the planet. The Network operates through a common operational, legal, and fiscal framework designed to make philanthropic resources more accessible and amplify the work happening locally.

The vision has evolved into a Shared Resource Platform, supporting Allies, partners, and collaborators in compliance, administration, accounting, programming, and development. The platform also provides essential equipment and materials, alongside behind-the-scenes operational services, allowing community organizations to focus on their direct impact. A participatory process guides the selection of resources, services, and fundraising strategies to strengthen the platform and sustain collective efforts.

The importance of shared infrastructure became even more evident after Hurricane Fiona in 2022. We responded strategically, drawing on our previous experience and through the leadership of the Network of Actions. The crisis underscored Puerto Rico's vulnerability due to its territorial status, which limits its ability to negotiate prompt delivery of essential goods and emergency relief and is exacerbated by the government's ineffective response. Another critical challenge was the lack of secure storage for essential and perishable supplies.

After a post-emergency debrief and analysis, HASER committed to strengthening its capacity for crisis response. Together with the Network of Actions and key partners, HASER continues to

strategize on how to improve aid distribution, enhance coordination, and secure necessary resources. The need for shared critical infrastructure emerged as a top priority.

In 2024, HASER acquired a 30,000-square-foot building in San Juan. It will be co-managed with our Network of Action, institutional partners, collaborators, and their respective networks of community groups, which include over 100 initiatives. By providing access to offices, meeting rooms, and storage, the space will enhance social justice movements and help deliver meaningful services to vulnerable communities in Puerto Rico.

HASER has navigated social crises in our communities while experimenting with different forms of intentional community building. Fiscal sponsorship has served as a key piece in our shared operational framework, fostering efficiency, collaboration, inclusion, sustainability, and scalability. The Network of Actions has grown, incorporating new Allies who are committed to advancing collective actions and sharing risks, responsibilities, and resources. Together, we are working to co-create a more equitable and just nonprofit ecosystem in Puerto Rico, where communities and historically marginalized populations leading systemic change have access to funding and operational security.

References

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