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For the New CEO of a Climate Justice Grantmaker, Funding From Bezos is Just the Beginning

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When Gloria Walton, president and CEO of The Solutions Project, graduated from UCLA, she knew her next step was law school. She had even been in the university's Law Fellows Program. But that summer, she got an internship at a grassroots organizing group.

The first house meeting she attended was in South Central L.A. She recalls someone in the house was frying chicken; another had brought pound cake. There to take meeting notes, she found herself surrounded by “people like my mom.”

GLORIA WALTON, CEO OF
THE SOLUTIONS PROJECT

“I was so moved by the people on the ground, people who looked like where I came from,” recalled Walton, who grew up in Jackson, Mississippi. “It was really kind of fulfilling in ways I wasn't even prepared for.”

She ended up spending 16 years with the organization, SCOPE, which stands for Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education, rising to become its executive director just six years after arriving. “I was a very young ED,” she said.

This October, when Walton was named president and CEO of The Solutions Project, the Oakland-based intermediary fund that in recent years has focused on grassroots environmental justice groups led by people of color, it marked a continuation of that quick rise. Her prior organization had been one of the fund's inaugural grantees, and she later served on the board of directors for three and a half years, helping to make The Solution's Project's board more diverse and reshape the organization's priorities.

She starts her tenure with new and unprecedented possibilities. In November, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos's Earth Fund **gave** The Solutions Project an unrestricted grant of \$43 million, more than her organization had ever received in its history, transforming what the fund can accomplish at the outset of a critical decade for the climate and our collective future. I spoke with Walton about how that gift came about and what's next for her organization.

'He actually came to the table wanting to learn'

This past February, Bezos announced he planned to spend \$10 billion to fight climate change. Sometime later, he quietly got in touch with The Solutions Project, launching a series of conversations with the organization and "another equity group," Walton said. From their first conversation, she was pleasantly surprised by his acknowledgement that he was new to the field.

"What I appreciated about the engagement was that it was a dialogue, and he actually came to the table wanting to learn," she said. "Oftentimes, people parachute in with suggestions."

She emphasized to Bezos that, as demonstrated by several studies of funding in the field, philanthropy was heavily invested in organizations that were already well resourced, while it was underinvesting or disinvesting from the frontline grassroots groups, particularly those led by and working with people of color, who are typically closest to the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation. "He was definitely receptive to that," she said.

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She also shared the breadth of her vision for the organization. In 2019, The Solutions Project had given away just \$673,000. But Walton, as she explained to Bezos, wants to raise \$100 million for the fund over the next decade. For her, it's about equity. While the concept can be “a jazzy term that we throw around, really, equity is about leveling the playing field,” she told me. “If philanthropy is really committed to that, then all those places where you've been underinvesting, you're supposed to overinvest there, now.”

Their conversations took place by phone and Zoom almost weekly over about six weeks. Bezos's partner, news anchor Lauren Sánchez, took part in the first chat, while later talks included the tech billionaire's representatives. After a few meetings, the organization was asked to submit a proposal. Their 15-page response detailed the organization's plans, and its appendix reviewed the history Walton had shared with Bezos on the climate justice movement and her definition of equity.

“I was also advocating on behalf of other equity organizations that were not at the table,” she said. “I come from the movement, I am who I am because of the movement. One valuable lesson that I learned is that it's never about one individual, or one organization for that matter, but what you're doing with the ecosystem and the movement.”

She urged Bezos to disrupt the status quo of climate philanthropy and do something different through his giving. “They didn't come originally with those ideas, but they were open to those ideas,” she said. “They listened, and ended up inviting others into the room.”

Ultimately, Bezos gave more than 80% of his \$791 million in gifts to big green groups such as the World Wildlife Fund and The Nature Conservancy. But the remainder went to a handful of groups, including several intermediary funds like The Solutions Project, that work to bolster grassroots environmental justice movements with a focus on communities of color.

Those gifts, which totaled \$151 million, appear to be more than such groups have received in the last several years, if not the last decade-plus. Given one study found environmental justice organizations received **only 1.3% of environmental funding** from top grantmakers—a total of \$18 million—as recently as four years ago, there’s still a long way to reach parity.

“With my definition of equity, when you see who got the majority of the funding, it’s a first step,” Walton said. “But it’s a good first step, nonetheless.”

“This is what we’re built for”

Bezos’ gift, which will be parceled out over the next three years, grows Walton’s budget more than 10-fold, and brought her nearly halfway to her \$100 million goal. But she’s ready for the challenge. “This is what we’re built for,” she said. “We can actually absorb even more funding to put it where it belongs.”

She’s had some recent experience to prepare her. Earlier this year, she was part of a cohort put together by the Kataly Foundation to give out about \$5 million in COVID-19 aid. “More than I’ve ever managed individually in my own life,” she said. Yet the group knew who needed support. “We were shocked at how quickly those dollars went.”

“When you know where to invest and where ecosystems of support are, it just goes like this,” she said, snapping her fingers over our Zoom call.

The Solutions Project will use a portion of the new funding to grow its currently six-member team, “but not by much,” she said. “Our model is about being lean and mean, and moving dollars out the door.” In an environmental sector known for being overwhelmingly white, particularly in leadership and among grantmakers in the space, that process may look a little different than most.

For instance, when Walton took the position as CEO, the organization’s former executive director, Sarah Shanley Hope, who is white, stayed on as vice president of brand and partnerships. Shanley Hope, along with the board, had invited Walton to join the organization as its leader.

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And Walton, who took a year to consider the offer before accepting, said she asked Shanley Hope to remain on board.

“We’re co-conspirators in this work,” Walton said. It is a “patriarchal, white supremacist way of thinking that a new leader and a former leader can’t coexist. To me, that’s what feminine leadership looks like... recognizing it’s not about me, it’s not about her, or anyone on our team. It’s about our mission and purpose.”

Walton’s leadership also marks a longer-term shift for The Solutions Project, which was founded by three white men: the actor Mark Ruffalo, Stanford scientist Mark Jacobson and entrepreneur Marco Krapels. The organization’s board and staff have grown increasingly diverse in recent years, coming to more closely resemble the communities it supports.

When I asked Walton how her team will use the new funding, she said they aim to deepen their work with the organization’s current grantees to expand their impact. In terms of expanding who they work with, rather than fund new efforts in new areas, the team will look to the frontlines for other groups. “It’s really important to fund where the work is already happening,” she said.

But she also turned back to the house meeting that launched her own awakening—and the experiences as an organizer that continue to ground her in her new role as the one signing the checks.

“Grassroots leaders in South Central L.A. really opened my eyes,” said Walton, who recently wrote in Medium about how her family reused bags, turned off lights out of economic necessity, but never called it conservation. Before arriving at SCOPE, she had thought of the fight against climate change as “don’t cut down all the trees” and “save the whales.” She’s still passionate about both topics, but the experience widened her perspective.

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“Climate is that, and it’s thinking about jobs, and thinking about our economy, and thinking about water and water infrastructure. It’s thinking about land rights, and land justice, and sovereignty,” she said.

“They really opened my eyes to the expansiveness of what climate can be.”

Inspired by those experiences, Walton is interested in exploring with grassroots leaders how to use the organization’s new windfall to create “a new center of gravity” on climate change. She hopes to reach those who are not involved and—like that young intern in South Central L.A.—maybe don’t yet see a place for people like them.

“What we do really well in the movement is preaching to the choir, talking to each other,” she said. “How do we translate all of this brilliance and all of these movements on the ground to the masses, and to my mother’s living room, so they can also feel like they can be an agent of social change?”