

Social Justice Leaders on What Matters: Hilary Pennington & Laura García

This video transcript captures a Zoom conversation between Laura García, president and CEO of [Global Greengrants Fund](#), and Hilary Pennington, executive vice president of programs at the Ford Foundation.

To return to the website, go to [Social Justice Leaders on What Matters](#), where you can scroll down to access more videos in this series.

Transcript begins.

[Laura García, a Mexican woman wearing a white shirt and glasses, sits for a video conversation with Hilary Pennington, a white woman with blonde hair, wearing a green shirt and sitting in an orange chair.]

LAURA GARCÍA: For us, who have been working in philanthropy and recognizing this problem for a long time, we have been trying to modify things, uh, so that we create the most desired and effective impact because with climate change, we know that, um, time is running out, that it is very important for us to create the best impact possible.

[on-screen graphic: Social Justice Leaders on What Matters, Hilary Pennington with Laura García]

[on-screen text: Hilary Pennington, Executive Vice President of Programs, Ford Foundation]

HILARY PENNINGTON: Laura is a Mexican feminist who has advocated for human rights, social justice, and civil society throughout her career. Before joining Global Greengrants, Laura served for seven years as executive director of Fondo Semillas, a Mexican nonprofit organization that finances grassroots organizations to achieve gender equality. Laura has vast experience in grassroots philanthropy, human rights, and movements for social justice.

Tell me about Global Greengrants, your mission, and the kinds of organizations that you fund.

[on-screen text: Laura García, President & CEO, Global Greengrants Fund]

LAURA: Sure. Thank you, Hilary. And thank you so much for the space to, to, to speak here with you today. Global Greengrants Fund is a global organization that provides resources and funding to global grassroots movements working for the—for environmental justice around the globe. Uh, we, uh, support, for example, farmers and fisherfolk, beekeepers, uh, Indigenous communities who are fighting to defend their, um, their culture and their ways of life. We are, um, one of the few funders in the world with an infrastructure capable of, um, of financing grassroots movements at the intersection of social justice and environmental justice. Almost half of our grantees are receiving a grant for the first time through us.

HILARY: That's fantastic. And, you know, I'm so looking forward to the chance to talk about, um, your own perspective and the way your, your perspective as a feminist influences how you

work and how you see the intersections between gender equality and environmental justice and more. And I'd love if you could say a little bit more, really more about that.

LAURA: One of the most valuable things that I have observed from feminism and from my career as a feminist is, um, that it's a deeper understanding of the systems that promote these injustices. And one key aspect of it is how all of that has been made by humans and by societies. We have created those systems. And I think that for me that was an incredible eye-opener, because I think that we were brought up—or we are brought up—to take reality as granted: This is the system. It's—there's inequality. It's almost like a human flaw, and it's perceived as natural, you know?

Through my work, uh, my previous work with Fondos Semillas in funding grassroots movements working for gender inequality, I started to understand not only the theoretical aspects but the way—the feminist agendas and the way that movement in the ground happens, uh, through activism, that it might be formal and institutionalized but also sometimes in informal ways with, with groups that are just, um, organizing in a basement. And that became key to my passionate advocacy for grassroots movements.

HILARY: And what I love about what you're saying is that it is, um, because human beings created these systems, we can change them. It is so true what you said, that in order to be able to do that, you have to see. You have to change the lens that you use.

Increasingly, in Ford's work, and I know in some of the work that we are doing with you, uh, there's another frontier that I think has been systematically unseen, um, which is the connection with disability. You have, have really begun such deep and important work in that space. What are you learning and how is that work transforming the general ways that you all think about your grant making?

LAURA: The lens is incredibly important because we learn to, to understand things from a certain perspective. When we were invited by Ford Foundation to start identifying the intersection with disability rights and the groups that have been working on these things, our systems were not formed yet with that lens to be able to identify quickly groups working with disability rights at the intersection of environment. And we started doing that work. Our advisory network that, uh, that Greengrants has—which is a network of, uh, environmental leaders around the world that are well recognized and grounded in grassroots movements, uh, across the globe—they help us identify the grantees and they give them accompaniment, which is our main or essential way of doing things in Greengrants. And they were very interested in starting to learn and starting to, um, identify and make the, make the connections between our work in environmental justice and these groups.

And we have, uh, funded a group in Honduras of men who have been, historically, diving for lobsters, uh, and hired by transnational companies to extract lobsters, but because of overfishing and climate change, they have been needing to dive deeper and deeper without the proper equipment. And you have full towns with men in wheelchairs who have been organizing to demand the Honduran government for the rights to, um, to make sure that they have their labor rights exercised and the proper equipment to continue doing what they have been doing

for millennia. They become defenders of the oceans and defenders of a good and healthy equilibrium of extracting resources that we need to survive. Uh, and they are putting in front page the enormous inequalities that exist with these transnational companies who have no limits and who are extracting the oceans to the point where these fisherfolk, um, are bearing the costs of that. And that, that is the intersection.

HILARY: That is such a powerful example. And, and really just to call, to call the question of what it means to have growth at any cost. You used a really beautiful and powerful word, Laura, about, um, which is the word “accompany.” And you talked about accompanying your grantees accompanying activists in the work that they do. You and I both are in lots of conversations about the need to disrupt philanthropy. What needs to change in philanthropy?

LAURA: Because movements have been largely underfunded historically, they face a very tense situation between doing what they know is the best solution and receiving the money that they need but with the cost of modifying their strategies. For us, who have been working in philanthropy and recognizing this problem for a long time, we have been trying to modify things so that we create the most desired and effective impact because with climate change, we know that, um, time is running out, that it is very important for us to create the best impact possible. And I think that’s what attracted many philanthropists to start understanding what would it mean for us to fund grassroots movements and meet them where they are.

HILARY: Where they are—

LAURA: Instead of having the grassroots movements, uh, replicate what we think is right. And I think that this shift, um, starts with something incredibly important, which is called trust. And it requires a system where we accompany each other and where we put the resources and the power that we have, but to serve the collectivity. So it is not about giving up power just—and becoming invisible. We need the Global North to redistribute resources. And, for us, that requires a lot of accompaniment, which means you walk alongside the grantee to understand what you can bring to the table in a conversation where we both learn from each other. And we recognize also that money provided by philanthropy is one small percentage of all the resources that grantees and grassroots organizations provide to their own movements.

HILARY: Like, what does it mean to have power with, you know, rather than power over? What do you hope are the outcomes of, of all the collective rallying around climate?

LAURA: That we can create big steps towards what Naomi Klein has said as the big umbrella, which is climate justice uniting all of the different social movements that are very powerful, that are creating change. I think that that happens with two things—a change in the narratives behind climate solutions and, uh, more integration of intersectional perspectives and agendas in the climate agenda itself.

We need to continue fighting for the—for our ability to see that climate change is real, is happening, but that also solutions and adaptation and mitigation, uh, approaches and strategies are very much happening in many communities around the world who are fighting for this and who have been fighting for this. We cannot wait until humans create this big and false solution

while systems of oppressions continue. We need to face the reality that we need to deconstruct these systems. And whilst we are sometimes feeling unable to, uh, to deconstruct, for example, a system as powerful as our economic system, there are other people, um, and communities who are already protecting their ecosystems, who are already, uh, capturing carbon in the soil.

HILARY: You work with a lot of leaders on the frontlines, many of whom are Indigenous peoples, and I'm curious what, what they are telling you about, about their experience, um, during the COVID crisis.

LAURA: We fund around, um, a thousand grantee partners per year with small grants, and these small grants provide them with a lot of flexibility. For example, um, at some point, moving away from their strategies of environmental justice into just basically providing food for fisherfolks. After a year of using their grants to, to organize food systems in the community, these groups became a reference point and reached out to new people and new communities and started to build stronger social fabrics needed to therefore protect the earth. So, through disasters, we also create the opportunity to build stronger communities. I know that from, from earthquakes in Mexico. And I'm not saying that, you know, we're better off, but I know that civil society comes out stronger. But we need philanthropy to be there.

HILARY: Yes, and to say, "You know better than we know. Use the money in the way that you need it now." But I think you are really describing, you know, the power of trust, right? And, and, and if you have trust as a foundation, then you can organize so much more effectively from that base.

I so admire and appreciate your leadership and your vision. I think that what you are doing through Global Greengrants, and what larger foundations like ours are able to learn, um, as we partner with you, is so essential. So, thank you so much for making the time for this. It really, really was just such a privilege and a pleasure to get to spend some time talking. Thank you.

[on-screen text: What's your take? Join the conversation]

[on-screen graphic: Ford Foundation logo]