

[What's the most important legacy institution to help humans cooperate?](https://gitcoin.co/issue/foresight-org/gitcoin-bounties/5/100027636)

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I'd like to share my personal experience working with NASA, and also compare that experience with working with Consensys - an Ethereum blockchain dev company touting the need for decentralization.

What I learned was that much of the hype around decentralized organization and cooperation would be better implemented if observations and lessons were learned from existing institutions that excel in decentralized cooperation.

In 2013, my company won a NASA education grant, implementing my multimedia live performance experience, BELLA GAIA, for Earth Science informal education for K-12 students; "[Beautiful Earth](#)." Never before had NASA funded a project as cross-disciplinary as BELLA GAIA, one of only 22 programs selected out of a total of 90 proposals. The main 'value proposition' that we made to NASA was that Earth science needs to be communicated in a way that humans understand - engaging both the emotional/right brain, as well as the cognitive/left brain. As the eminent neurologist Antonio Damasio and his colleague M.H. Immordino-Yang have noted, "We feel, therefore we learn" (Immordino-Yang and Damasio, 2007). It is critical to understand the need for integrating the science of emotional activation, and the science of communication not just as value added but critical to engagement, care, and action. This innovative 4 year education program for K-12 students packaged together the BELLA GAIA live performance with add-on education modules to take students deeper into earth science education. The modules included workshops with a NASA scientist, hands-on experiments, Native American scientists and educators providing indigenous perspectives of Earth, and teacher development workshops.

The NASA funded evaluation conducted by an independent third party led by [Action Research Inc.](#) concluded an increase in potential engagement to care for the Earth and its importance in their lives, families and community, from 32% before the show, increasing to 64% after just one BELLA GAIA show. This **personalization** of abstract biospheric systems is crucial and has converted climate skeptics in one show.

Pertaining to Gaming the Future, and the question at hand "What's the most important legacy institution to help humans cooperate?" - the process of writing the Beautiful Earth NASA grant proposal, roughly 100 pages of rigorous writing, budgeting, planning, collaborative input, and research, needed to successfully work its way through the complicated networks of relationships and departments and review boards within NASA. As an outsider, essentially a nobody, someone with neither a related degree from a prestigious university, nor part of a 'club' of scientists, - I was an artist and entrepreneur with a great idea who simply did the hard work of building

relationships, living an ethos of doing instead of talking, and cooperated with others to help kids learn about our earth and develop a deeper relationship with it.

It took us 2 years, and four attempts at submitting proposals and on our fourth try we won the grant. Despite the frustrations and hard work, this process revealed to me the genius process of how NASA produces and launches every one of its space or earth science missions. Every mission and space launch - whether it be the building of a new satellite, a manned space walk, or an interplanetary spacecraft mission, - every project starts with a proposal from someone not in a position of power. Certainly, NASA headquarters and the director does set an agenda and general direction - the trajectory set by the president and congress, implemented by the NASA grant solicitations it announces. This process is perhaps the only centralized directive and process. But, once set, it is a bottom-up process where a scientist has an idea or project - he/she gathers together a team that would create the best chance of successfully winning the grant and executing the project, and must go through the rigorous review process from multiple departments.

Perhaps other legacy institutions have a similar process - I am not sure. But the fact that someone like myself - an outsider, with no formal science background, came in to lead a NASA project, and that the process was fairly transparent, says a lot about the functionality of a system of cooperation. NASA's legacy of success, and global respect, is a testament to the process they have developed.

I have been trying to figure out why it works. Is it the 'mission critical' component that is for all the world to see? Is it that on some missions, a human life is in their hands? But there are plenty of other institutions that have human life in their hands, but are utterly dysfunctional.... So what gives? What makes NASA's system work so well despite its massive size and inherent bureaucracies? This would require a deep meta-analysis of institutional systems and functionality, some of it opaque and misunderstood - I am not quite sure I have the answer...

I have since written grant proposals to Non Profits, other institutions like the NSF, (National Science Foundation), and others, - yet have not won any type of grant that comes close to the NASA grant. These other institutions and NPOs essentially have an opaque review board, riddled with their own opaque agendas and internal political power struggles.

I saw none of this at NASA. Certainly, there are politics, and the need for building relationships with decision makers - but the system they have essentially works - and works very well, and encourages deep decentralized cooperation and collaboration in order to succeed.

A couple years later, in 2016-2017 I become interested in blockchain technology, and was approached by Consensus, an Ethereum based blockchain innovation company led by Joe Lubin. Joe Lubin is an outspoken loudspeaker for the need for the 'decentralize everything' approach, and supposedly designed his company in such a way. I was excited to propose to them a project for funding. I was met with excitement from every one of its employees I met, and they would then bring in another colleague and would have another meeting. Then they would say 'hey you

should talk to this guy', and I would be referred to another 'node' group within the company, which then would express much excitement, talk about possibilities, and then would ask me to fill out one of their forms, or to write a proposal.

Then I would get referred to talk to another group within the company, and you get the picture - repeat, repeat, repeat. Each team was 'super excited' - but somehow did not have the agency, or 'guts' to take the proposal to Joe Lubin - this centralized figure that seemingly was avoided. This process of eternal excitement, yet referring to 'the other guy at Consensys' lasted 2 years. I wrote about 7 proposals, all requested from each group. In the end, nothing materialized, and I had wasted an enormous amount of time in meetings, calls, events, relationship development, and proposal writing. Some of these events were Joe Lubin speaking in front of hundreds, evangelizing about 'decentralization', and yet, his very own company was a cupcake of disfunctionality. Never had I seen such lack of agency coupled with arrogance and excitement. The irony is evident.

A notable author on cooperatives and Web3 culture, Nathan Schneider wrote to me several years ago:

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Nathan Schneider

To me the priority is creating new organizational operating systems that builds in transparency and democracy at their core. Tools, for instance, that enable people to organize and finance new projects with minimum overhead and friction, and with cooperative practices as the default setting. Then we can build things like energy grids and the like over that.

Does that make sense?

Though not blockchain based yet, I think [OpenCollective.com](https://opencollective.com) is an interesting example of what I'm talking about.

First, I think the value of a blockchain-based tech is that it lifts the possibilities of cooperative enterprise out of the constraints of local legal frameworks, and allows for easier collaboration across borders—doing for entrepreneurship what, say, FB does for communication. I don't think blockchain stuff is totally necessary, and it also comes with serious liabilities—including a structure that, in many cases, encourages speculative gambling. But the vision of projects like [FairCoop](https://faircoop.org)/FairCoin propose to challenge that logic. I wrote about that [here](https://www.vice.com/read/be-the-bank-you-want-to-see-in-the-world-0000626-v22n4). <https://www.vice.com/read/be-the-bank-you-want-to-see-in-the-world-0000626-v22n4>

Second, I've been trying to figure out how to visualize even just the *existing* cooperative economy. I've built directories of [global platform co-ops](#) and [colorado co-ops](#) for instance. But it goes beyond that. It's a way of seeing I'm trying to figure out how to express, once which sees the logic of cooperation coursing through our economic lives in ways that our capitalism-trained

eyes disguise from us. Below is a passage from the book draft I'm working on, a little piece in which I try to pose the problem I'm talking about.

I've come to practice a kind of uncovering and reconstructing—piecing together the commonwealth. Where is it around me, propping up the world as I know it invisibly? Where are the traces of past and partial commonwealths, now tucked into the way of things, not bothering to dispute as capitalism claims credit for them?

Pass a Best Western hotel or a Dairy Queen on the road—can you see the purchasing co-op built into their franchise models? How about the chunk of Southwest Airlines that its employees own? Are there traces left in Burley bike trailers of the days when that company was a worker co-op? What remains of the co-op organic groceries that paved the way for Whole Foods to supplant them? The town where my wife grew up has the name of the mutual insurer headquartered there all over, but who notices its mutualism anymore? How many tons of the newsprint still printed each day carries dispatches from the Associated Press, and who remembers it has been a co-op since its founding before the Civil War? The rusty grain silo in a country town, the laundry service for my region's hospitals, the ugly credit union I pass every day—co-op, co-op, co-op. So what?

With this archaeology comes the specter of missed opportunities. Did you vote in the last board election for your credit union or your insurance company? Did you ask to? Did management give you a choice? The forgetting has frequently been purposeful. To use one's power, one has to remember, or be reminded, that one has it in the first place.