

THE CASE FOR USING A SOCIAL JUSTICE LENS IN GRANTMAKING

In the fall of 2011, the conference planning committee of the Grants Managers Network graciously invited me to present at its upcoming annual meeting on a topic of my choosing. I took the opportunity to reflect on emerging trends and practices in organized philanthropy. The growing use of the term social justice—especially among large foundations—caught my attention. Was this instance of ‘old wine in a new bottle’ or something entirely different?

By Michael Seltzer

SOCIAL JUSTICE—A NEW PHENOMENON?

No. As early as 1972, in an internal memo to John H. Knowles, the president of the Rockefeller Foundation, one of his officers suggested that the Foundation use the phrase “Towards Social Justice in an Interdependent World” as a ‘unifying theme’ to describe its work¹.

Also, in the 1970s, select small-to-medium sized public, family, independent, and public foundations embraced the practice, language, and ethos of social justice, as evidenced by their early support of the U.S. civil rights movement. Their ranks included such private foundations as Norman, Field, Stern, New World, Taconic, and the John Hay Whitney. Subsequently, the public foundations that comprised the Funding Exchange network—the Tides Foundation; women’s and LGBT funders such as the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice; and the Black United Fund movement—joined their ranks. David Hunter, Stern’s long-term executive director, served as a mentor and guide for many of these funds. The word ‘justice’ also appeared in the literature of religiously-affiliated grantmakers, such as the Catholic Campaign for Human Development of the U.S. Catholic Bishops, and the Jewish Fund for Justice. This was not surprising, since the precepts of justice are certainly evident in the world’s major religions and sacred texts.

Subsequently, this diverse set of donors, in terms of their structure and sources of revenues, began to meet annually under the aegis of the National

Network of Change-Oriented Foundations². In 1981, the Network’s successor organization, the National Network of Foundations (NNG), asserted the following two purposes in its mandate:

To be a voice for issues of social and economic justice within the philanthropic community and externally in sectors of the broad community including government, business, labor and education, and to expand the resource base (human and financial) for social and economic justice activities.

As one indicator of the size of this community of funders, also in 1981, the National Network of Grantmakers and the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO) in their publication, *The Grantseekers Guide, A Directory for Social and Economic Justice Projects*, listed more than 100 foundations and corporate-giving programs³.

In the following decades, other foundations used many terms akin to social *change* or social *justice* in their annual reports. A sample lexicon of phrases would include: advocacy, equity, the poor speaking and acting for themselves, human rights, civil rights, empowerment, movement building, progressive change, social action, promotion of democracy, accountability and transparency, systemic change, and public policy.

Starting in the 1990s, large foundations began to use the term social justice. When the Ford Foundation reorganized its program divisions in 1996, it renamed one of them Peace and Social

¹ INTERNAL MEMO, THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION, FROM MICHAEL P. TODARO, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF SOCIAL SCIENCES TO JOHN H. KNOWLES, PRESIDENT, THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION, OCTOBER 11, 1972. SOURCE: ROCKEFELLER ARCHIVES CENTER. ² THE NETWORK OF CHANGE-ORIENTED FOUNDATION CHANGED ITS NAME TO THE NATIONAL NETWORK OF FOUNDATIONS IN 1980. IT DEFINED ITSELF AS ‘COMMITTED TO SOCIAL JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZING’. [HTTPS://ARCHIVES.IUPUI.EDU/HANDLE/2450/893](https://archives.iupui.edu/handle/2450/893).

advocacy equity the
 poor speaking and
 acting for themselves
 human rights civil rights
 empowerment movement
 building progressive
 change social action
 promotion of democracy
 accountability and
 transparency systemic
 change public policy

Justice, for example. (That Ford Foundation program division is now called *Democracy, Rights, and Justice*.)

In 2007, The Atlantic Philanthropies adopted a *social justice* framework for its grantmaking in all of its program areas and countries where it operated. The Open Society Foundations (previously known as the Open Society Institute) also asserted a mission to “advance human rights and justice around the world”⁴.

WHAT THEN IS SOCIAL JUSTICE PHILANTHROPY?

Social justice is not just a slogan on banner or bumper sticker or button. Its definition needs to be backed up with substance to be a useful grantmaker’s tool. In the late 1990s, the Foundation Center and Independent Sector sought to define social justice philanthropy. What the group came up with, and what these two key philanthropic sector organizations adopted, is worth quoting:

Social justice philanthropy is “the granting of philanthropic contributions to nonprofit organizations based in the United States and other countries that work for structural change in order to increase the opportunity of those who are the least well off politically, economically and socially.” The report went on to describe the characteristics of a social justice framework, which makes lasting change more likely, including:

- A focus on root causes of inequity rather than symptoms
- Striving for lasting systemic and institutional change
- Employment of a combination of tactics such as policy advocacy, grassroots organizing,

litigation, and communications that together are more likely to yield enduring results

- Strengthening and empowering disadvantaged and vulnerable populations to advocate on their own behalf⁵

Subsequently, the Working Group on Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace, convened by the Ford Foundation, also endeavored to put forward a definition of social justice:

Effective social justice philanthropy aims to end the injustices suffered by one group of people at the hands of another. These injustices often result in social, economic, and/or political inequalities. But rather than focus on the effects of unjust treatment, good social justice grantmaking attempts to undo the mechanisms of oppression⁶.

HOW CAN A FOUNDATION EFFECTIVELY PRACTICE SOCIAL JUSTICE PHILANTHROPY?

According to the Working Group on Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace, the following elements are necessary for good social justice philanthropy:

1 SOUND ANALYSIS

Of the forces that contribute to injustice. Effective social justice grantmakers base their work on a sound analysis of the historical forces that contributed to shaping the current reality they wish to change, the forces that help maintain the status quo, and the likely future evolution of these forces.

Of the effects of membership in oppressed classes of people. Foundation staff examine the current context and their own work through the lenses of gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, country of origin,

and membership in other social categories that experience unjust treatment.

Of institutional structures. Because the mechanism of oppression sometimes appears faceless, foundation staff analyze the myriad ways in which institutional structures—the policies that govern institutions, their practices, their cultures, their relationships with one another and with the communities they’re meant to serve—contribute to injustice. The category of institutions studied is broad and might include, for example, the local school system, the church, the military, local and national governments, NGOs, the business sector or individual businesses, etc.

Of the distribution of power. One of the goals of an effective social justice grantmaker is to shift power from those who perpetrate injustice to those who suffer it. To this end, foundation staff examine how power in its various forms (wealth, political influence, etc.) is acquired, held, and brokered in the current context.

2 EFFECTIVE CHOICE OF STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

A good social justice grantmaker is able to translate a sound analysis into (a) an effective formulation of goals and objectives, and (b) a smart choice of strategies and tactics. Does the analysis lead to a clear sense of what should be changed and how? What are the best strategies for making the desired change happen? Do the strategies lead to a choice of tactics rich enough to initiate and sustain social change?

For example, if funding an advocacy initiative were deemed a good strategy, would the grantmaker support the organizational capacities of activist groups; the building of a broad base of support; strengthening the alliances of participating

organizations; improved data collection and analysis; more strategic communications; and the ability to mobilize additional resources over the long term? If the grantmaker seeks a particular policy outcome, does the foundation staff also fund the organizations that would monitor implementation and enforcement? If a social change effort requires litigation, does the grantmaker fund only the legal effort, or, understanding the nature of social change, does the grantmaker also support movement building and other activities that, taken together, are more likely to succeed in removing the injustice?

Because people's lives often hang in the balance, good intentions are not good enough. The grantmaker's work should have a significant chance of succeeding. It will thus be important to attend carefully to such matters as the scale of the intervention and its time horizon. Social justice is not easily achieved, nor does it come quickly.

A social justice grantmaker will be most effective they recognize and use all the tools and privileges at their disposal as a grantmaker: power to convene, ability to speak with the voice of an institution, access to decision-makers, ability to marshal significant resources, etc.

3 SOLIDARITY AND RESPECT

Solidarity. An effective social justice grantmaker works in meaningful partnership with the communities they aim to serve. The staffer recognizes that she or he is ultimately accountable to these communities. In practice, this means that the grantmaker will learn from communities and, whenever possible, take direction from them. The grantmaker will aim to make the communities' voices heard, not that of the foundation. There should, in other words, always be a strong presumption against contravening the desires of these communities, to the extent that going

against their wishes requires special justification. By working in solidarity with affected communities, the grantmaker gains a deeper understanding of the issues involved. By looking to these communities for leadership, the foundation staffer increases their ownership of the work. Both of these lead to better outcomes. Social justice grantmakers must also be willing to take the medicines they prescribe. We undermine our social justice efforts by exempting ourselves from the rules we would apply to others.

Respect. Effective social justice grantmakers respect the dignity of the communities they serve. They do not cast them as complete victims, unable to change their basic condition without assistance. Nor do grantmakers romanticize these communities. Because all people possess free will, all parties must acknowledge that they have the ability to participate in their own oppression or liberation. Respect drives out both under-valuation and unrealistic expectations. It motivates social justice grantmakers to seek wisdom and strength from the communities they serve.

4 THE GENERAL QUALITIES OF A GOOD GRANTMAKER

Effective grantmakers take calculated risks; they're often creative in the use of the limited resources available to them; they partner well with others, across sectoral lines and other divisions; they're patient because they understand that meaningful social change takes time; and they learn from failure—their own and that of others.⁷

The most difficult and most important practice may be to examine one's logic model and ask, "Even if I do all of these things, what is the change I must see in order to know I am engaged in social justice philanthropy?"⁸

KEY QUESTIONS

Is social justice a valuable lens for grantmakers?

Using a social justice framework has attendant issues: the concept of social justice has become so broadly defined that it may be perceived as being devoid of true meaning. In some cases, foundation trustees and executives may perceive social justice as having a negative connotation. At the Grants Managers Network's 2011 conference, one participant shared that, although most people, regardless of their relationship to the philanthropy sector, would regard her employers' grants as social justice funding. The foundation has awarded grants to address the issue of high incarceration rates, including awards to the Innocence Project and local re-entry programs for ex-offenders. Such grants certainly would be interpreted as social justice funding. However, the foundation framed them as public safety grants. "We couldn't have funded them under the name of social justice," the participant said.

If a foundation has clearly defined what it means by social justice, however, the terminology can provide a useful framework.

Is the term applicable to how a foundation conducts itself separate from its grantmaking?

Yes, that is a defining hallmark of social justice philanthropy. Listening, for example, is one of the most important tools when using a social justice lens. The Marguerite Casey Foundation, based in Seattle, Washington, which helps working families advocate for change on their own behalf, uses listening as its first line of approach. Several years ago, the Foundation convened a series of Listening Circles across the country, inviting local experts, parents, and youth for input on how the Foundation should spend \$30 million dollars per year to benefit low-income families.

Underlying this approach is a fundamental axiom—The outsider (e.g. funder) first should listen carefully to the members of the communities where it works or seeks to work before making any assumptions on where their support can effect the greatest and most long-lasting social change.

What are some of the common characteristics of social justice foundations?

Based on my informal survey of a number of select foundations that would be identified by their peers as social justice-focused, I identified the following common traits:

Their field of interests is akin to a forest that shares a common canopy rather than individual trees. In other words, they understand how one grantee's activities are part of a larger picture, which includes many other players.

Social change is a journey rather than a destination. That requires donors to perceive themselves as long-distance runners.

A foundation can draw on an extensive philanthropic tool kit in addition to grants. That kit includes convening organizations, providing resources, making recommendations on consultants, enabling peer exchanges, providing meeting space, and technical/management assistance.

Grants officers go beyond checking off the “we’ve received your report” box. In practice, they act more as partners and resource brokers. They move beyond checklist grantmaking at the front and tail ends of a grant. Their relationships with grantees do not have a beginning or an end date.

The menu of the types of financial support that these grantmakers provide is varied and includes general support, multi-year grants, capacity-building support, and individual fellowships, in addition to project-specific grants and endowment support.

How can grantmakers—and grants managers in particular—use a social justice lens in their work?

My checklist includes gauging a number of factors:

- Does the prospective grantee fit with the foundation’s mission, fields of interest, and strategy or theory of change?*
- Who are their leaders of the grant seeker and what is their governance practice?*
- Who is their constituency/base, and how does the organization engage them?*

- What is the organization’s record of diversity, as well as its reputation, track record, core values, vision, and mission?*
- Is there a clear plan of action?*
- Does the organization show evidence of collaboration and networking with kindred organizations?*
- What is the presence of other foundation supporters?*

If a grants manager’s job description doesn’t encompass at least some of the responsibilities described in this article, let me suggest that they be a topic for discussion when developing position descriptions, annual work plans and in the appraisal process. ■

RESOURCES

To find out more on the illustrative foundation social justice philanthropy practices, check out the following websites:

WRFOUNDATION.ORG
WINTHROP ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION
REPORTS & PUBLICATIONS

NEWF.ORG
NEW WORLD FOUNDATION
TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TO GRANTEEES

GNOF.ORG
GREATER NEW ORLEANS FOUNDATION
INITIATIVE GRANTMAKING

ATLANTICPHILANTHROPIES.ORG
THE ATLANTIC PHILANTHROPIES
THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

CALENDOW.ORG
THE CALIFORNIA ENDOWMENT
MEETING GROUND

CASEYGRANTS.ORG
THE MARGUERITE CASEY FOUNDATION
LISTENING

MICHAEL SELTZER HAS SERVED AS THE PROGRAM OFFICER AT THE FORD FOUNDATION RESPONSIBLE FOR PROMOTING ORGANIZED PHILANTHROPY WORLDWIDE, THE PRESIDENT OF THE NEW YORK REGIONAL ASSOCIATION OF GRANTMAKERS (NOW KNOWN AS PHILANTHROPY NEW YORK), AND THE FOUNDING EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF FUNDERS CONCERNED ABOUT AIDS. HE WRITES FREQUENTLY ON MATTERS PERTAINING TO FOUNDATIONS AND THE NONPROFIT SECTOR FOR PHILANTOPIC, THE BLOG OF THE FOUNDATION CENTER.

The background features a large, abstract geometric design. On the left, there are overlapping triangles in shades of orange and yellow. On the right, there are overlapping triangles in shades of light green and yellow. In the lower right quadrant, there are stylized, white, fluffy clouds. The overall aesthetic is clean and modern.

Grant managers are uniquely positioned to develop a holistic view of the practice of grantmaking.