

Understanding Social Justice Philanthropy

Change Beyond Charity

By Brenda Hanzl and John Hunsaker

What do we mean by “social justice” philanthropy? The term social justice is so frequently used today that it has lost much of its substantive value. In the philanthropic sector alone the term social justice is routinely used to describe activities ranging from public policy advocacy to soup kitchens to animal rights.

The National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy is currently researching social justice philanthropy; we started the project with a rigorous examination of the theoretical underpinnings of the term. We have explored interpretations of social justice from a variety of fields, including philosophy, economics, education and religion—and, of course, from practitioners within philanthropy itself—to develop a working definition of the term.

Based on our research thus far, NCRP believes that social justice philanthropy is making grants to organizations that work for structural change and to increase opportunity for those who are less well off politically, economically and socially. It is important to note that social justice philanthropy is not merely what issues a foundation supports, but how it supports them. We believe this is one of the important distinctions between grantmaking that supports charity, which offers services, and grantmaking that supports social justice, which teaches a group of people how to organize and promote positive change for themselves and society as a whole.

We suggest that foundation support for social justice generally fits into the following broad categories:

1. Researching root causes of social problems (such as poverty and its implications, discrimination, and lack of access to political processes, public policy making and economic opportunity).
2. Communicating and disseminating this information to the public, with a particular effort to reach those who are directly disadvantaged by social problems.
3. Strengthening new and/or existing social movements that work for social, political and economic equity through:
 - Grassroots political activism to mobilize disadvantaged and disenfranchised groups;

- Creating networks or alliances among social justice groups;
 - Community organizing to increase opportunity and redistribute political power;
 - Technical assistance, including board development, inclusion of constituencies and democratic funding processes for social justice nonprofits;
 - Economic development that increases the socioeconomic opportunities of disadvantaged and disenfranchised populations;
 - Labor organizing;
 - Legal advocacy; and
 - Political lobbying to enact changes in government laws, policies, regulations and programs affecting disadvantaged populations.
4. Promoting inclusion of constituents in foundation decision-making processes and governance structures, especially in grantmaking.

The basis of our definition comes from many different sources. One key thinker who helped formulate the concept of social justice is the philosopher John Rawls. In his works *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism*, he posits five “primary goods” that must exist in a just society:

1. Basic liberties (freedom of thought and liberty of conscience),
2. Freedom of movement and free choice of occupation,
3. Access to the power and prerogatives of office and positions of responsibility,
4. The ability to obtain income and wealth, and
5. The social basis of self-respect.

In addition, Rawls notes that justice and equality are not necessarily synonymous. A completely egalitarian world is impossible, according to Rawls, but in a just society economic inequalities are balanced by providing compensating benefits to disadvantaged and disenfranchised members of society.

The important point one can infer from Rawls is that social justice is not limited to income and wealth issues. That is hardly a ground-breaking

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thought, but it marks a crucial distinction between grantmaking that improves people's socioeconomic conditions and grantmaking that addresses the root causes of socioeconomic inequities. The development economist Amartya Sen calls for a change of viewpoint, from seeing "humans as capital" to appreciating "human capital." This means focusing not only on such challenges as poverty but also on life spans, freedoms, child mortality, literacy rates and so forth.

Within the field of education, Paulo Freire stresses empowerment as a catalyst for social justice work. Freire developed an innovative system of education based on the belief that ignoring racism, sexism, exploitation and oppression in education actively perpetuates cycles of injustice. According to Freire, education should not simply be the "banking" of socially acceptable knowledge poured into the empty vaults of learners' minds; it should be an arena for dialogue and critical thought that examines the social and political injustices in question. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* presents education as a two-stage path to social justice. In the first stage people become aware of their oppression, and in the second stage they take part in action to overcome it.

From Rawls, Freire, Sen and others, we understand social justice as addressing political empowerment and social change in addition to ameliorating economic deprivation. In order to claim social justice as a goal, philanthropy must actively engage in the above concepts. This means that social justice grantmaking focuses on achieving the structural, political and policy changes necessary to remedy the root causes of inequality and discrimination, and it must engage those most affected as the primary agents of change. This differentiates social justice grantmaking from the popular understanding of philanthropy as charity.

This difference is particularly striking in organized religion. There is a clear dichotomy between faith-based approaches to philanthropy that incorporate a strong commitment to social justice, and those approaches which favor direct service to the poor without focusing on structural social change. The idea of charity as benevolence to the poor has strong historical roots in religion. Christianity, Judaism, Islam and other faiths place great importance on acts of charity as key pillars of their beliefs. But there is great diversity among people of faith in how these beliefs are put into practice. Some, looking to the examples of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and the abolitionist and

women's suffrage movements, embrace a strong commitment to social justice deeply grounded in faith. Others tend to see charity as direct service to the poor without further work aimed at structural social change to alleviate the root causes of poverty.

For NCRP, our return to the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of social justice helps us take the research beyond the realm of mere rhetoric. Social justice philanthropy is not simply good intentions or idiosyncratic self-definition. In part, social justice grantmaking is as much about how you do something as about what you are doing. As Rev. John H. Vaughn, executive director of the Peace Development Fund, states, "It is more than teaching a person to fish, it is supporting their efforts to get a company to stop polluting the lake he or she is fishing in."

Better definitions will hopefully lead us to better research—although it may make our task more difficult. Complexities in applying such definitions abound. Some "mainstream" or "establishment" organizations may actually engage in projects that look at root causes and go all the way to Congress to create real change. Other organizations that claim to be about social justice may actually be practicing noblesse oblige charity rather than social justice empowerment. Most organizations and many grantmakers probably exhibit mixes of both.

Can we identify social justice grantmaking—even if it occurs within institutions whose missions may be significantly different than the five primary goods articulated by Rawls? Will we uncover a commitment to social justice and public empowerment from unexpected and surprising philanthropic sources? What is the size and scope of social justice philanthropy? Is it possible to determine the impact and effectiveness of social justice philanthropy? If so, how? What are the challenges facing social justice grantmakers and grantees? What are the pitfalls? What are the best practices?

These are among the many questions which we pose as we embark on this research. We will strive to find answers. We hope that the findings will help grantmakers more effectively fund not just charity but change. ○

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