

Philanthropy at its Best: Guiding NCRP into the Next Five Years

By Aaron Dorfman

“What is ‘Responsive Philanthropy’ anyway?”

This is one of the questions I have been asked repeatedly since joining the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy in February 2007. If we’re “for” responsive philanthropy, what does that really mean? During the past several months, the board and staff of NCRP have been seeking to answer that question in the context of developing a five-year strategic plan to guide the organization. Dave Beckwith, executive director of the Needmor Fund, and Christine Ahn, fellow at the Korea Policy Institute, co-chaired the board’s strategic planning committee, and the entire board participated in the process in meaningful ways.

At NCRP, we understand responsive philanthropy to have three core elements, each representing an essential component of what it means to be truly responsive.

One of those elements is that philanthropy **serves the public good, not private interests, and operates with the highest standards of integrity and openness.** When the wealthy abuse philanthropy to advance their own



NCRP’s Board of Directors approved the organization’s new strategic plan during its September 2007 meeting in Washington DC. Above: (L-R) Strategic Plan Committee co-chairs Christine Ahn and Dave Beckwith, NCRP executive director Aaron Dorfman and NCRP board chair David Jones.

interests, or when political leaders misuse philanthropy to circumvent the law, they betray the public trust. Thus, responsive philanthropy requires that people and institutions must not exploit philanthropy for personal or political gain, and they must follow the legal and ethical tenets required by law and practice.

Responsive philanthropy also **employs grantmaking practices that most effectively help nonprofits achieve their missions.** No matter what causes a philanthropic institution supports, employing good grantmaking practices—such as providing multi-year general operating grants and avoiding overly burdensome reporting requirements—demonstrates responsiveness to nonprofit grantees, the communities they serve and/or the causes they champion. Employing grantmaking practices that help nonprofits achieve their missions also demonstrates accountability to the general public by ensuring that philanthropic dollars have the greatest possible impact.

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Philanthropy at its Best

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Finally, responsive philanthropy **serves those with the least wealth and opportunity.** In our pluralistic society, philanthropy has a special responsibility to nurture and strengthen democracy by supporting low-income communities, communities of color and other marginalized groups as it fills the void that government and the market economy have left. Additionally, by supporting civic engagement, policy advocacy and community organizing in underrepresented communities, philanthropy ensures that all voices are heard in the public square.

Responsive philanthropy, therefore, meets all of these criteria and represents what we believe to be philanthropy at its best.

Over the next five years, NCRP will build on its more than thirty-year track record as the nation's premier philanthropic watchdog and bring the organization to a new level of effectiveness and impact. We have developed a strategic plan that will serve as a roadmap for our efforts.¹ By implementing this plan, we are confident we will see more funders practicing responsive philanthropy in the years to come.

What will be different under this plan? How will the new NCRP compare to the old NCRP?

Higher quality, more focused research. Under this new plan, NCRP will function with greater clarity, discipline and focus, aligning our research with our goals. We also will improve the quality of our research and ensure that what we produce is always credible and defensible.

More collaboration. We'll systematically build alliances in the sector and collaborate strategically with allies. That's not to say we'll shy away from a good fight, but we realize that such partnerships have been underutilized in the past.

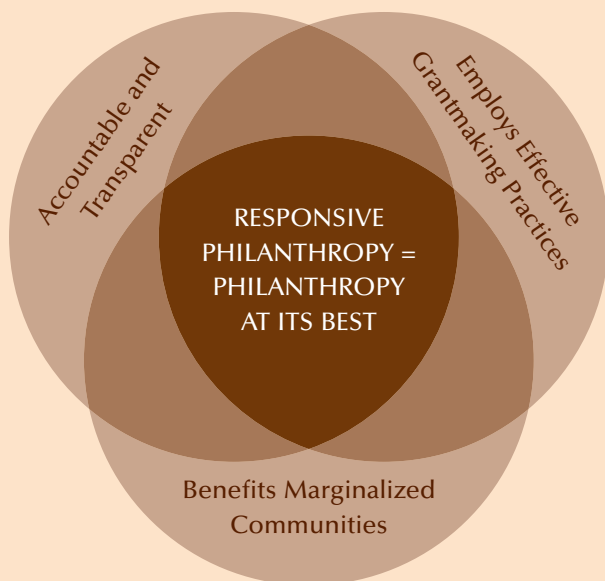
Larger, more engaged membership. Thousands of people across the country share NCRP's vision for philanthropy. Many of them are working for foundations or nonprofits, while others are consultants in the field or policy makers working to serve disadvantaged communities. To encourage new and continuing memberships, we have revised our dues structure. NCRP will harness the energy and commitment of our members as vital components of future campaigns.

Better communication. We'll expand our communications efforts to get our message into the right hands to achieve our goals. All new NCRP publications now will be available for free download on our web site to expand our readership. We'll continue to improve our communications infrastructure and make better use of electronic communications.

Improved impact measurement. We'll measure the impact our work is having on the practice of philanthropy in America. We'll examine the extent to which our goals are being achieved and how our program work has contributed to changes in philanthropic behavior. We'll then use the findings to improve our programs.

The board and staff of NCRP are excited about this plan, but we can't transform philanthropy without the combined efforts of the thousands who share our vision. I invite you to join us as a member, ally or funder, and help us promote philanthropy at its best. Together, we can have real impact on people's lives by ensuring that philanthropy contributes to a fair and just society.

THE THREE CORE ELEMENTS OF 'RESPONSIVE PHILANTHROPY'



NOTES

1. The NCRP Board of Directors adopted the plan at its meeting in September 2007. See the box on page 15.

NCRP AT A GLANCE

MISSION

NCRP promotes philanthropy that serves the public good, is responsive to people and communities with the least wealth and opportunity, and is held accountable to the highest standards of integrity and openness.

VISION

We envision a fair, just and democratic society where the common good is recognized as a high priority; where a robust public sector is empowered to protect, preserve and extend the commonly held resources and the public interest; where a vital nonprofit sector provides voice and value to those most in need; and where all people enjoy equality of opportunity, access and fair treatment without discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, national origin or other identities.

We envision philanthropy at its best contributing to this vision of society by operating with the highest standards of integrity and openness and by investing in people and communities with the least wealth and opportunity and the nonprofit organizations that serve and represent them.

VALUES—PHILANTHROPY AT ITS BEST

- > Philanthropy at its best serves the public good, not private interests. NCRP believes that the public has a legitimate interest in the use of philanthropic resources. Donors receive the privilege of tax deduction for charitable donations and tax exemption on investments. Foundations and other philanthropic institutions, therefore, have a responsibility to use their resources for the public good. The public benefit of philanthropy should at least exceed the public benefit that would have been possible with the foregone tax revenue—otherwise, the public interest is not being served. Both self-regulation and government oversight are needed to ensure that philanthropy serves the public good and is not abused for personal or political gain. Executives and boards of directors should rigorously ensure that their organizations live up to the highest standards of honesty, integrity and openness. Government should rigorously enforce the law, ensure sufficient transparency and aggressively prosecute abuses of philanthropy.
- > Philanthropy at its best employs grantmaking practices that most effectively help nonprofits achieve their missions. NCRP believes that both grantmakers and nonprofit organizations

are committed to improving society. Grantmakers, therefore, have a responsibility to listen to the needs, concerns and criticisms of their nonprofit partners and respond to what they hear, trusting that nonprofit leaders possess deep wisdom about what they need in order to most effectively achieve their missions and address critical societal needs. Grantmakers also should seek other forms of data about how grantmaking practices impact nonprofit effectiveness, and they should regularly adjust their practices to maximize the impact of their philanthropy.

- > Philanthropy at its best strengthens democracy by responding to the needs of those with the least wealth and opportunity. NCRP believes that philanthropy has a special responsibility to nurture and strengthen democracy and that the nonprofit sector is uniquely suited to promote the health and vitality of our pluralistic society. To strengthen democracy, grantmakers should provide sufficient resources to people and communities with the least wealth and opportunity. They should trust those in need and closest to the problems to play a powerful role in crafting and carrying out solutions, and they should provide support for civic engagement, policy advocacy and community organizing so that organizations working with and on behalf of marginalized communities can participate effectively in the public square.

THREE PROGRAMMATIC GOALS

- > To see fewer people and/or institutions abusing philanthropy for personal or political gain. This includes reducing abuses that are in violation of current law and also reducing practices that may be technically legal but serve only private interests, not the public's.
- > To see more funders employing good grantmaking practices that most effectively help nonprofits achieve their missions. This includes increasing general operating support, providing multi-year funding commitments and other practices.
- > To see more funders providing support at higher levels for low-income communities, communities of color and other marginalized groups. This includes increasing funding for civic engagement, policy advocacy and community organizing with and on behalf of people and communities with the least wealth and opportunity.