

Who Benefits? Why Effective Grantmakers Pay Attention to Demographics

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The 2012 elections showed that politicians ignore the changing demographics of our nation at their own peril. The same is true for philanthropy.

In 2010, an oil industry-backed effort to repeal groundbreaking restrictions on greenhouse gas emissions in California was soundly defeated at the polls. Local philanthropic organizations, national environmental organizations and even Hollywood played important roles in preserving the state's effort to reduce emissions starting in 2012. But, according to activist Cathy Lerza, what made the difference was the block-by-block engagement of those usually on the outside of politics and environmental activism. Savvy, responsive community organizing in Asian-Pacific and Latino communities not only crushed Proposition 23, it also brought together new constituencies for the environment that will not easily be ignored.

In *Cultivating the Grassroots: A Winning Approach for Environment and Climate Funders*, environmental philanthropy expert Sarah Hansen wrote, "Any push for environmental change that fails to prioritize communities of color is a losing strategy." Much the same can be said for any philanthropic endeavor. Prioritizing marginalized and underserved communities – lower income families, communities of color, people with disabilities, women and girls, the elderly and others – is essential for lasting impact.

As philanthropists strive to become more strategic and effective, grantmakers who want to achieve superior results must not only ask, "What am I trying to achieve?" but also, "Who benefits?" What proportion of our grant dollars is reaching those who might need those dollars the most? Given our mission and goals and the strategies we think will create change, is that share of grant dollars enough? Philanthropists who want to be effective have a strategic interest in understanding and documenting the communities that benefit from their grantmaking.

[Read the full commentary](#) .