



What is "Targeted Universalism"?

Philanthropic resources are limited relative to the problems the nonprofit sector aims to ameliorate. "Targeted universalism," a term attributed to Theda Skocpol, is among the most effective strategies that can help foundations leverage their grant dollars to increase their impact significantly. In practice, grants and investments are made to address the needs of, and reduce inequity and injustice in underserved communities. By reducing disparities for the most marginalized, overall wellbeing measured by many metrics improve for everyone.

For example, if a foundation aims to "improve health of Chicagoans" and gives a grant to a local hospital, some or all of that money could be spent on "general purposes" such as the latest high-tech equipment. Such expenditures often are necessary and beneficial to patients. But these patients are limited to those who are able to access sophisticated health services.

By contrast, under targeted universalism, a grant intentionally seeks broad social benefits using targeted means in implementation., Using the same example of a general purpose grant to improve health outcomes for Chicago's residents helps understand this concept in practice. If a portion of the general purpose grant is allocated explicitly to benefit lower-income and uninsured patients, not only does this assure that the beneficiaries are those who are underserved, but data support the fact that health outcomes for all Chicago residents would be more likely to improve as well. By addressing disparities in access to health care directly, this grant also contributes to the public good and various other measures of wellbeing because health is fundamental to other social indicators such as education.

An important nuance of this concept is that targeted universalism acknowledges that even the circumstances of those who are well-off are not uniform; each individual case is variable and individual circumstances must be accounted for in crafting solutions that lead to better outcomes for all of us. Lastly, by using targeted means within universal objectives, grantmakers have an opportunity to affect long-term and sustainable systemic change.

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