

Subj: Can philanthropy help society make progress?

More focused, is philanthropy helping society demonstrate greater social justice, fairness, and racial equity?

Here is my own bottom-line assessment, presented to a recent gathering of thought leaders and practitioners.

Big Picture, the notion of “social justice philanthropy” is much more in play than it was five years ago. It’s being discussed at conferences at all levels – local, regional, and national -- throughout the philanthropic and civic world. It gets discussed with apprehension by those not already involved, but the concept is out there, and there’s more momentum and demand for these discussions than ever before. Not just social justice *philanthropy*, but the theme of social justice itself, as well as equity and fairness. So, too, is discussion of diversity and inclusion.

“Social justice philanthropy” means different things to different people and organizations. Through our Pathways to Progress [\[link\]](#) project, we suggest it means philanthropy that helps reduce the inequities and disparities produced by imperfectly operating public systems and private markets. Something like that. It’s a slippery concept, and we don’t mean to be ideological about it, but we do mean to keep our focus on **fixing disparities through smart use of the full array of philanthropic resources – institutional, monetary, human, moral, etc.** One could as well say “intentional community philanthropy.”

That’s the upside – more awareness and discussion of the potential of philanthropy to address issues of social justice and equity.

On the downside, I’ve not seen much of the lofty language of social justice philanthropy actually touch ground. Far too many philanthropic organizations don’t get much beyond the exploratory, let’s have-a-discussion stage. **Worse, we don’t see much obvious intention to close disparities or gaps.**

I’m afraid that in the larger field of philanthropy the notion of “social justice philanthropy” is a big gloppy one, with little discernment of its moving parts, little appreciation of its possibilities, and little wish to grapple with How Do We Do This?

In short, the imperative to reduce disparities has not yet reached philanthropic practice. Even among those foundations that intend to create social justice and equity there is frustration in their efforts to produce real, sustainable change. And that’s a shame.

Why don’t we see more progress? Probably because it requires a substantial change in the way philanthropy is practiced. It requires going to a bigger picture of causes, solutions, and the role of philanthropy itself.

The problem is that disparities are deeply rooted in the historic context of particular systems (education, regional development, justice, etc). This requires remediation through very intentional, long-term efforts, engaging multiple partners and adapting to an ever-changing landscape.

That's not the usual style of most philanthropic organizations (each with its own culture and context), and collaborative forms haven't come close to rising to the challenge. Further, any social problem worthy of the name won't be solved with one grant, by one organization, in one year, through one initiative, and no one-anything will be able to take credit for success when it happens.

It's difficult work, to be sure, but going forward does not require a big strategic plan or a grandiose vision as much as a willingness to innovate and try things out while staying focused. The field over-thinks and under-acts. What's required is focused and energetic movement, supported by the best intentions of a public-spirited philanthropy.

Back to the Big Picture, on the positive side of the ledger, we have seen progress in five of the six different pathways that we judge to be related to long term success. We see:

- More prepared organizations
- More informed, cooperative, even trusting discussion
- More solutions and ideas that *could* close the gap
- More networks of trust, energy, and influence
- More philanthropic resources useful for support, innovation, and lubrication

What's missing are the *combinations* -- the intentional, strategic combinations of these five pathways that could be combined, DNA-like, to produce pressure on the mechanisms and forces that maintain gaps and disparities, inequity and unfairness. These forces and mechanisms are all man-made, so they can be adjusted and made to work better *for all*.

See our website www.JustPhilanthropy.org -- a framework for learning and acting on this subject.

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