

Confronting the evidence: Addressing racial disparity in environmental grantmaking

By Michael Roberts

Philanthropy has a tricky relationship with evidence. Evidence of progress toward our mission or of obstacles in such pursuit is welcome and actionable. However, evidence pointing to a truth that requires us to reframe our worldview is difficult for anyone – individual or institution – to grasp.

In 2014, such evidence confronted the environmental community – civil society and its funders alike – in its own relationship to racism. This evidence spurred us at The 11th Hour Project into action and reflection – launching a new institutional effort toward greater social and racial equity.

ANOTHER INCONVENIENT TRUTH

In late July 2014, Dr. Dorceta Taylor released *The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations*, a damning report prepared on behalf of Green 2.0. For years, green organizations paid lip service to diversity in their ranks, but the report indicated: “The dominant culture of the organizations is alienating to ethnic minorities, the poor, the LGBTQ community and others outside the mainstream.”¹

It is well documented that communities of color are overwhelmingly more vulnerable to environmental hazards compared with white communities, as noted by Center for American Progress.² And, as reported on *CityLab*, it is often irrespective of income.³ A joint Earth Justice and GreenLatinos poll and another conducted by the Natural Resources Defense Council and Green for All find that black and brown communities reli-

ably support action on climate change and other environmental issues.⁴ These are just a sampling of the data that point to this trend, yet the insular world of environmental nonprofits and philanthropy continues to lack space for talented men and women of color.

The “environmentalist” worldview often argues that protecting nature at all costs is a task of such magnitude that, for humanity’s sake, so-called social issues like race and class are the domain of other affinities. Such a myopic perspective depends on the fallacy that humans are wholly separate from nature.

Dr. Taylor’s report shows us that working on the environment does not insulate us from social issues. By ignoring the evidence, we are complicit in the systems of race and class inequity that inhibit progress on all issues – environmental, economic or otherwise.

LOOKING IN THE MIRROR

After Dr. Taylor presented her findings at the Environmental Grantmakers Association 2014 Fall Retreat, our team began an internal discussion. Founded in 2006 to confront the existential threat of climate change, The 11th Hour Project has evolved to reflect a diversity of tactics and stakeholders. It prides itself for having a culture of accountability to mission and a commitment to the most vulnerable. It has always pursued an integrative approach and intersectional focus, yet racial disparity proved a blind spot.

Our executive director, Joe Sciortino, absorbed what was laid out in front of us and put it simply: “What do we do now?”

Three years into formally launching our work on racial equity, we recognize the importance of that question as an ongoing mode of inquiry rather than a one-off pursuit. Below are some of the answers we discovered:

1. Start somewhere - seek outside support

My first response to Joe’s question set the stage for an ongoing process: “The answer to that is complicated, but a good first step might be to get some external support.”

We contracted Keecha Harris and Associates, Inc (KHA) to help us as an organization understand our structural relationship to issues of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) and explore what it looks like to bake racial equity into our “DNA.”

Dr. Harris and her team analyzed our portfolio on demographics and communities served, worked directly with Joe to find operational strategies and began the process of laying out a vision for The 11th Hour Project as a leader in the field on DEI.

To be clear, it wasn’t that conversations weren’t happening before we launched a formal process. A year or two earlier, one of our grantees – a person of color – remarked to me that an event we hosted felt “white.” It was said in jest but reflected a concern I know many colleagues in the field are familiar with. I’ve also made the occasional joke with the director of my program, Sarah Bell, when an event or conference seemed more homogenous than

the public golf courses I played growing up in Atlanta.

Casual conversations spurred action around the edges. Sarah and I increasingly found our voice with grantees, at conferences and within our affinity groups, calling for stronger attention to diversity and a better understanding of equity in our work. The conversations brought more stage time and some funding into frontline communities experiencing the worst economic and health harms of our industrial agricultural system. However, it didn't reflect the systemic introspection necessary to truly understand our power, privilege and responsibility to address racism as an underlying structural challenge to our work.

2. Invest resources for difficult conversations

Meaningful conversation about race is disruptive. For predominantly white organizations – including ours – talking about race is challenging because our culture has conditioned us to avoid the discussion.

In our first group exercise with Dr. Harris, we imagined a future where the foundation invested broadly and explicitly on racial equity. Responses were varied but polarizing. Two that stood out for me were along the lines of “Is this coming in our budget?” and “I thought we were here to talk about diversity, but this is all about race.”

These responses illustrate the two greatest barriers to our foundation and the field's ability to systemically move against obvious disparities.

On the one hand, we do good work, and we stand by our strategies: we take on difficult and entrenched systems like our food and energy sectors while seeking the most promising pathways for ecological and economic prosperity. Our grants support grassroots organizations and projects that don't typically receive mainstream attention and maintain a budget below \$2 million on

average, so any shifts in our portfolio would have immediate impact on the ground.

On the other hand, there was the common trait of many predominantly white organizations at play: We are great at talking about “diversity.” Diversity sounds positive, proactive. Safely broad. Race, on the other hand, is a trigger.

One of the greatest privileges white people enjoy is to voluntarily engage in the “race” conversation. White culture is treated as the default in society, seen in the ways terms like “mainstream” or “working class” seem automatically coded as “white.”

Dr. Robin DiAngelo describes a common defensive response when confronted with issues of race as “white fragility.” In a dominant culture that prides itself on values of objectivity and meritocracy, acknowledging racial disparity is challenging enough; acknowledging that we benefit from that disparity, and can be complicit in allowing these disparities to persist, is a challenge to our worldview.

DiAngelo argues for the importance of developing “perspectives and

skills that enable all people, regardless of racial location, to be active initiators of change ... Since all individuals who live within a racist system are enmeshed in its relations, this means that all are responsible for either perpetuating or transforming that system.”⁵

In collaboration with our staff, Dr. Harris recognized the need to develop a common language and build the skills to productively confront issues of race as it applied to our portfolio. Because we have always valued relationships with leaders in the field to support us as thought partners in our strategy, we reached out to Nikki Silvestri of Soil and Shadow for further support.

As the former director of People's Grocery and Green For All, Nikki was already familiar with our portfolio across programs and had trust with our staff. Nikki worked 1:1 with program staff and collectively with each program team to define learning edges around race and equity and use them to inform goals for our strategy.

As KHA continued to assess our wider operational practices and support Joe in setting benchmarks, it also continued to scan the field for best prac-



The 11th Hour Project joined other foundations around the country to address philanthropic inequities at the InDEEP professional development series in 2017. Photo courtesy of KHA.

tices and opportunities to develop cohorts with other foundations interested in addressing inequity in philanthropic practices. It recognized the demand in the field for peer-to-peer support to drive conversations on the issue, both internal and external.

As a result, KHA facilitated a series of “Peer Learning Exchanges,” which brought together foundations working across sectors to discuss strategies advancing our individual and collective practices. With our and other foundations’ support, KHA continues to facilitate peer-to-peer learning through the InDEEP professional development series.

By committing resources to internal diversity, equity and inclusion assessment and practice, we committed ourselves to confront the critical question head on: What does it look like for a predominantly white organization to be accountable in addressing the inequitable and institutionally racist systems we seek to change?

This is a question we continue to ask of ourselves and invite others to do so, too.

3. Your budget is a reflection of your values

Central to KHA’s inquiry in our practices was to follow the money. Recognizing the predominantly white leadership in organizations we fund, Dr. Harris and Joe conceived of a matching fund to support and encourage a shift in alignment of our grantmaking toward the demographic and social reality of the communities we aim to support.

With our board’s approval beginning in 2015, \$400,000 of annual discretionary funding provided a dollar for every two in new funding directed toward people-of-color-led and -governed organizations across our programs. This has translated to a sharpening of our strategies and a shift of more than \$2.4 million over two years for organizations at the frontlines of our climate and ecological crises.

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Being true to our values goes beyond budget, however. In the face of a challenging 2017, we reaffirmed our commitment to ongoing progress in DEI. The next step for all of us is to institutionalize the practice. We formed the “Beyond Equity” team last summer, comprised of associates across three programs. With the input of all staff and direct support from our executive director, the Beyond Equity team is collaborating to develop and standardize ongoing internal training on historical, institutional and structural oppression. To sharpen the analysis of our approach and worldview, the Beyond Equity team also helps facilitate regular lunch meetings to discuss topics outside our strategies.

We are still at the tip of the iceberg. As the team grows and diversifies, the commitment to learning and creating

shared language becomes mission-critical. We are establishing common ground by making space for productive conversations beyond our issue silos, which only serves to further our mission.

Racial equity does not require perfection, but a commitment to constant growth and accountability. It is our responsibility to step up to the task of understanding and articulating our role as individuals and organizations in the dynamic of structural racism and inequity. If we take the privilege to avoid the conversation, we undermine all our work at best and at worst, hinder our ability to face the social, cultural and ecological challenges in front of us. ■

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Notes

1. Dorceta E. Taylor, *The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations* (Green 2.0: 2014), <https://www.diversegreen.org/the-challenge/>.
2. Jasmine Bell, “5 Things to Know About Communities of Color and Environmental Justice,” Center for American Progress, April 25, 2016, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/news/2016/04/25/136361/5-things-to-know-about-communities-of-color-and-environmental-justice/>.
3. John Metcalfe, “People of Color Are Disproportionately Hurt by Air Pollution,” *CityLab*, April 15, 2014, <https://www.citylab.com/design/2014/04/people-color-are-disproportionately-killed-air-pollution/8881/>.
4. For more visit <https://earthjustice.org/features/poll-latinopinion> and <https://www.nrdc.org/media/2015/151104-2>.
5. Robin DiAngelo, “White Fragility,” *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, (NC: University of North Carolina Greensboro, Vol 3 (3) (2011), p 66, <http://libjournal.uncg.edu/ijcp/article/view/249>.