

Building Bridges

The Power of Multi-Issue Advocacy and Organizing

By Niki Jagpal

In 2002, Transit Partners was formed to pass a statewide comprehensive transportation plan in Minnesota. It was led by Transit for Livable Communities and included groups such as ISAIAH, the Alliance for Metropolitan Stability, and the League of Women Voters Minnesota. Working across issues ranging from environmental protection to racial and economic equity, coalition members identified one means to create a sustainable funding stream: a quarter of a cent increase in the regional sales tax. Despite the governor's veto of similar legislation in 2008, the legislature overrode the veto. The commitment of public funds to improve transportation infrastructure will benefit millions of public transit riders and address an immediate need for public investments because of the collapse of a major bridge in the Twin Cities. With the revenues for public transit, this is one of the biggest public investments in Minnesota's history.¹

This victory is instructive for many reasons. It demonstrates the power of

collective action when there is shared purpose. It shows that when we work across issues, we have more collective power and leverage. It suggests that breaking down issue silos might be among the most powerful ways to respond to real community needs.

Findings from the High Impact Strategies for Philanthropy series of reports on education,² health,³ arts and culture⁴ and the environment⁵ suggest that there is potential to break down the current issue silos that many grantmakers work in. They also illustrate how disparities keep underserved communities from equality of opportunity and diminish civic engagement and social capital. They underscore the importance of ensuring that grantmakers support the unique needs and urgency to empower underserved communities.

Many grantmakers have turned to strategic philanthropy to achieve effectiveness, but as currently practiced, it is limited by its technocratic and sterile approach to philanthropy. Using a social justice lens adds a much-needed

humanistic correction, as we suggested in *Real Results: Why Strategic Philanthropy is Social Justice Philanthropy*.⁶ Strategic philanthropy at its best is, in fact, social justice philanthropy.⁷

One way that grantmakers can fuse strategy and justice is by funding multi-issue advocacy and organizing by or on behalf of underserved communities.

In terms of economics, it just makes sense.

We are currently seeing the highest levels of economic inequality since the Great Depression. Indeed, the Census Bureau reported that the poverty rate remained stuck at a record high of 15 percent in 2012, while household income declined and the gap between the rich and the poor increased. With the continuing uncertainty of the future of the economy, funders across all issues must take disparities into account when developing their strategy. The High Impact Strategies for Philanthropy reports document the disproportionate negative outcomes across all issues for lower-income communities.

Given the economic structure of our country, there will inevitably be some level of inequality. However, the current levels of inequality suggest that disparities are being reinforced rather than mitigated. They will not be alleviated unless groups that are working on behalf of underserved communities receive more funding.

Larger organizations across all issues receive the majority of philanthropic monies, mirroring the socio-

TABLE 1: \$5 MILLION NONPROFITS' SHARE OF ORGANIZATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS, GIFTS AND GRANTS RECEIVED BY SECTOR, CIRCA 2009

	Organizations	Contributions, Gifts and Grants
Education (excluding higher education)	5%	71%
Health (excluding hospitals)	14%	75%
Arts and Culture	2%	55%
Environment	2%	51%
ALL 501(C)3 PUBLIC CHARITIES	6%	74%

FIGURE 1. STRATEGIC PHILANTHROPY'S LEARNING CURVE: BRINGING JUSTICE AND STRATEGY TOGETHER FOR PHILANTHROPY AT ITS BEST

economic disparities we confront. The imbalance of funding and over-resourcing of already well-endowed organizations results in a less effective and responsive philanthropic sector. While philanthropy provides a fraction of funding relative to the public sector, it plays an important complementary role. And when it does not reach the most vulnerable communities, it can exacerbate the very disparities that it seeks to alleviate.

This distribution is not strategic, sustainable or effective. Success requires a healthy ecosystem that includes small and medium-sized organizations, especially those that work at the grassroots level and engage and mobilize underserved communities.

To be clear, large organizations often play an important role in addressing disparities, but a broad spectrum of small and medium-sized organizations do not receive the resources required for a thriving nonprofit sector. As noted in Americans for the Arts' report, *Arts & Economic Prosperity IV*, "Every day, more than 100,000 nonprofit arts and culture organizations populate America's cities and towns and make their communities more desirable places to live and work. They provide inspiration and enjoyment to residents, beautify shared public spaces and strengthen the social fabric of our communities." For example, the Tucson Pima Arts Council launched the Place, Land, Arts, Culture and Engagement (PLACE) initiative in 2010, supported by the Kresge Foundation. The goal is to support arts-focused individuals and organizations working on difficult societal issues within communities that also have a civic engagement component. One such organization is the NEW ARTiculations Dance Theater, which offers workshops for community members of all ages that increased awareness of the issues of riparian ecosystems, water scarcity and the ecology of the Sonoran Desert.

Increasing Focus on Social Justice

- Emphasis on social and systemic change
- Prioritizes and empowers underserved communities
- Advocacy, community organizing and civic engagement by those most affected



- Emphasis on measurable impact
- Evidence-based strategy
- Clear goals
- Feedback

Politically, it makes sense, too.

Philanthropy will lack vitally important constituencies needed to make meaningful progress on any issue unless grantmakers use a social justice lens while developing their strategy. Most of the impacts documented in the education, health, environment and arts and culture reports suggest that long-term change is contingent on direct engagement with a spectrum of constituents. The work of Health and Environmental Funders Network (HEFN) suggests that success in one's issue is amplified when grantmakers work collaboratively across issues and fund multi-issue advocacy and organizing. Indeed, several of the successful campaigns documented in the reports were the result of multi-issue, cross-race coalitions. For example, HEFN's strategic support of cross-issue collaboration by funders and nonprofit partners led states from Maine to California to ban hazardous substances. And, recognizing the "gender gap," the HEFN Working Group on Women's Environmental Health was established to promote women's leadership in the environmental movement and highlight issues of concern to women.

The working group collaborates with the Catalysts Collaborative to amplify women's voices in chemical policy reforms and builds relationships among funders working on reproductive justice, health and rights.

The demographics of our country also provide a political rationale to reconsider grantmaking strategy. Race persists as a fundamental way that individuals identify themselves – and our country will have a non-white majority population soon. Indeed, the 2010 census noted that for the first time in documented history, non-white births outpaced white births. Age is another important factor – our population is younger and foundations must consider what the changing demographic trends imply for developing grantmaking strategies. The presumption of race neutrality is misguided and diminishes impact. Targeted funding within universal programs is strategic because it addresses "the needs of the particular while reminding us we are all part of the same social fabric."

Philanthropy by and large does not provide funding for advocacy and organizing, despite the potential of these two strategies to produce

lasting impact. On the rare occasion that it does, it prioritizes top-down, high-level national advocacy groups. Grantmakers overwhelmingly do not engage with their most potent grantees or communities – organizations that respond to pressing needs as articulated by the community. This is also a lost opportunity to build the needed political will to effect changes that philanthropy seeks in our society. As Sarah Hansen notes in our report for environment and climate funders, “any push for environmental change that fails to prioritize communities of color is a losing strategy.” The same holds true regardless of issue focus.

However, there are signs of hope – truly strategic funders provide critical funding to community-led education organizing efforts such as the Coalition for Educational Justice California has some of the nation’s strictest diesel truck standards because members of the environmental community worked strategically with grassroots groups that receive foundation monies and focus on different parts of the environmental movement, engaging and consulting with them throughout the campaign.

Social capital and civic engagement are bolstered when grantmakers adopt this approach in their strategies.

Bridging Silos

The two common themes discussed in this analysis provide a sound rationale for grantmakers working on any issue to reconsider traditional silo-ed approaches to advancing their specific issue of interest. The current funding ecosystem is misaligned; it is imperative to diversify the organizations that receive funding if grantmakers want to see more impact and success. There also are limitations to funding only one issue when issues are interconnected and represent a system; when any one

part of a system is changed, the impact is on the entire system.

Funding groups that work directly with intended beneficiaries of philanthropy offer the needed resources to mobilize these change-agents. It is especially necessary to fund organizations that work with or for communities across the lines of race, gender, class and other identity markers. If more foundations worked collaboratively and provided funding for multi-issue policy engagement work such as advocacy and organizing, and prioritized underserved communities, the potential for sustainable, systemic reform is incredibly high. ■

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Notes

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15. Ibid, p. 21.