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Shifting Philanthropy from Charity to Justice

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We need a new framework for giving to address America's economic, social, and political inequalities.

By Dorian O. Burton & Brian C.B. Barnes

Historical injustices—perpetuated by racial and cultural conflicts, and exacerbated by a lack of empathy—are at the heart of America’s growing economic, social, and political inequalities. Nowhere is this gap of authentic empathy and justice more pronounced than in the American philanthropic sector, where often well-intentioned people make decisions for communities they do not come from, may not understand, rarely interact with, and almost never step foot into.

“Philanthropy is commendable,” said Martin Luther King, “but it must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the circumstances of economic injustice, which make philanthropy necessary.” Philanthropists and philanthropic advisors who champion equality must work to shift from a framework that grounds giving in “charity” to one that grounds giving in “justice.” A framework rooted in charity alone ignores past realities that forced communities into oppressive situations, and risks reinforcing givers’ lack of understanding with rewards that recognize their benevolence. This sort of charity might relieve guilt and help some people sleep better, but it produces no reflection on either the genesis or perpetuation of inequality. In proposing this fundamental shift, we are not suggesting that giving is not admirable. Instead, we believe the field should seek to reclaim charitable giving by supporting practices that liberate—and that change the attitudes, beliefs, and policies of—society as a whole. It should seek to break down longstanding, intentional, institutional policies that have shaped social divides in the United States and that continue to promote inequality today.

How can we make this shift? To start, grantmakers and advisors must analyze both the inputs and outputs of their philanthropic efforts, with the goal of justice in mind. In doing this, we cannot overstate the importance of beginning with the right set of questions. Here are seven questions that every philanthropist should consider in their analysis:

1. Are you aware of and do you value the existing leadership in the community you plan to serve?

We should begin every initiative with the assumption that there is competent leadership within the communities we aim to serve—people already on the ground, building and changing lives. While some may be under-resourced or untapped, leaders exist in every community. Understand that leadership might look different than what you expect. Seek out people who have a propensity to inspire others to become leaders and who can move a group toward a common goal. These individuals understand the mindsets, perspectives, challenges, opportunities, and attitudes of the community, and unless you

spend time with them, you will not see the same assets they see, nor will you be able to truly support the transformation of the community through your collaborative efforts.

Ask: Are we publicly promoting narratives that affirm the leadership of the community? Have we checked our assumptions about whom we deem a leader? Is our organization supportive of the community's leadership strategies?

2. Do you see and understand the historical factors that underlie the issues you aim to tackle?

Justice-oriented giving is an act of righting a wrong, leveling the playing field, and removing the illusion of recipients as "less fortunate." It fully acknowledges past circumstances that have driven inequalities, and prompts givers to recognize the advantages some groups and individuals have gained over others from years of economic and racial injustices—advantages that made generational success and prosperity that much more attainable.

In his book *The Souls of Black Folks*, W.E.B. Du Bois asks, "How does it feel to be a problem?" It should concern the field that most grantee communities could handily answer this provocation, and in basing giving solely on a charity framework, we are, perhaps unknowingly, reinforcing this idea. The popular "problem-based" narratives ascribed to communities of color are inaccurate and counterproductive. Philanthropic strategies must drop the "problem" tag, and acknowledge that the economic, social, and racial disparities in America are the outgrowth of historical injustices.

One core issue we can correct by using a justice-based framework is the current tendency to set up "funding games," where grantees are pitted against each other, vying to tell the best, most compelling problem-based story about the communities they aim to serve. In this *Mad Max* "thunderdome-style" of grantmaking, philanthropic dollars too often flow to whichever organizations give the best deficit-based narratives—and the worst statistical analyses as to why marginalized communities are poor, disenfranchised, broken, and in need of being "saved" by a targeted intervention. When disseminating false narratives of inherently flawed or problematic communities becomes a beneficial strategy and necessary to secure funding, we as philanthropists must see that we are incentivizing and prolonging myths that continue to oppress those we aim to help.

Ask: Do we support organizations whose mission and vision are built on perpetuating and supporting problem- or deficit-based narratives? If so, how can we help them pivot to build and implement strategies for change rooted in justice?

3. What is the value in getting proximate to those you serve?

Understanding the historical context in which a community operates is an important first step, but we must then move from listening to a community's stories to gaining empathetic understanding. We must actively check our biases and respond with justice-driven giving. To this end, philanthropic organizations must move past the zero-contact grant application process and the feel-good stories of "giving without seeing" often told at homogenous cocktail hours, and strive to get to their boots on the ground, where they

can clearly identify how current systems—and in some cases their own practices—are perpetuating injustices.

This kind of *in-person* knowing is what lawyer and social justice activist Bryan Stevenson refers to as “getting proximate to the people you aim to serve.” In this proximate stance, we can understand that we are not dealing with people in need of saving, or with people who are inherently challenged or responsible for their own poverty. Instead, we must acknowledge advantages, privileges, and power dynamics, and approach our work *alongside* individuals to fix or replace broken systems. In this proximate stance, grantmakers can engage in meaningful dialogue and develop public kinship. We entreat our fellow philanthropic executives, advisors and program officers to not just spend time talking to one another at conferences about the perceived issues they aim to tackle. Get out in the community; don’t hide or shelter yourself from the people you are charged with serving.

Ask: Is getting proximate to the community you serve—to listen, learn, and partner—core to your organizations theory of change or action? Does every individual at your organization—including the board chair and the office coordinator—have an intimate understanding and knowledge of the communities they are tasked with serving?

4. Do you see grantees and community leaders as equal partners in your philanthropic strategy?

It’s important not to create power dynamics by placing your own organization at the top of a hierarchy. Be on tap, not on top; if organizations cannot co-create positive strategies, where all parties seek to learn from each other, then the chances of producing sustained results are limited. In other words, we must rework or remove common practices such as investing in already-envisioned initiatives or holding listening sessions that have no impact on how a social effort moves forward. These practices use the community as a type of insurance policy for buy-in, rather than as a partner who has the competence to meaningfully contribute. True community engagement requires that all parties listen with an empathetic ear, contribute ideas and perspectives, and then wrap whatever expertise and resources they have around community leaders in an effort to bring their dreams to fruition.

Ask: Are there mindsets and assumptions among the people at your organization that do not cast grantees and the community you serve in an “equal” light? Do you believe you have only something to give, as opposed to something to learn, from those you aim to partner with?

5. Do you see the value of including diverse persons on your own team?

Between 1980 and 2000, the minority population in the United States increased by 88 percent; the White non-Hispanic population grew by only 7.9 percent. Further, according to Pew Research Data Center, racial and ethnic minorities were responsible for 91.7 percent of US population growth between 2000 and 2010, and although minorities make up about 37 percent of the US population, 50.4 percent of the children born in 2011 were part of a racial or ethnic minority. There are and will continue to be ample opportunities to find people to enhance staff diversity—not only in terms of race and

ethnicity, or gender, but also in terms of socioeconomic status and proximity to communities we serve. Increased creativity, satisfaction, productivity, synergy, and wellbeing in the workplace are among the potential positive impacts of diversity. And as people with different experiences and approaches to problem solving interact and make connections between previously unrelated agents, goods, and knowledge, innovation tends to increase.

Ask: Do your organizational, executive, and program teams reflect the population of the communities you serve, or are you internally propagating the inequalities your program portfolios are tasked with changing?

6. Do you see the value of smaller organizations?

It is easy to assume that smaller organizations have less potential for impact than larger ones. But small organizations are often embedded in a community's day-to-day activities; as such, they have deep insight into the community and its history, and, given proper resources (especially long-term general operating support and other flexible resources), a strong ability to drive justice-driven change.

Ask: Does your organization tend to avoid working with smaller organizations on the ground? Are you funding organizations led by individuals who reflect the communities you wish to impact? How might you use your own influence to connect smaller organizations with the goal of increasing opportunities for impact?

7. Is your organization accountable to driving systems-level change?

Individual communities and philanthropic program efforts often engage in siloed causes that bifurcate economic, social, and educational policies and practices, rather than integrate them in ways that can lead to transformative change. So while well-implemented programs have potential for impact, they do not necessarily lead to systemic change.

In a justice-based framework, all program activities act in a coordinated manner to create a new systems-level "normal" that solidifies justice and dismantles inequalities for the communities we serve. By supporting opportunities for collaboration among grantees, we can tackle adaptive challenges and avoid mission creep. Bricks and mortar investments are great, but it is important to note that this type of scale comes through thought leadership. If grantees are creating reports that live and die on our desks, it is a waste of their time and a missed opportunity to bring bright spot models (or examples of excellence) into the national conversation for change. Part of our job as grantmakers is to get the word out, and work with advocacy organizations and policy makers to turn effective programs into sustainable policies.

We must also look at the metrics we are holding our own organizations—not just our grantees—accountable to. Systems of checks and balances that rest solely with the board, or that don't include the community in the governance structure might be missing the mark. Accountability rooted in community values and vision is also essential—what is good for the gander should also be good for the golden goose.

Ask: Do you support advocacy organizations that help build awareness and civic engagement around justice-oriented, systems-level reforms? Do you give your grantees space and room to work collaboratively with other organizations? How can your network support grantees' efforts in transforming programs into scalable policies beyond local efforts? How is your organization holding itself accountable and to who?

Ultimately, real change will come only when all organizations and individuals in a system change. But systemic change does not come without expense. Time, resources, reputation, and relationships all require adjustments and sacrifice as we move from charitable giving to a justice-based framework of philanthropy. The question becomes: Are we as philanthropists, in the name of justice, willing to pay the cost for the change we wish to see? Our actions moving forward will reveal our answer.

Charity is commendable, but justice is transformational. How will you spend your resources?

Dorian Burton (@Dorian_Burton) is the assistant executive director and chief program officer at the William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust. He is also co-founder of TandemED. Burton holds a Doctorate degree from Harvard University, where he is also an affiliate of the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at Harvard Law School.

Brian C.B. Barnes, (@BCBBarnes) is the chief community officer at the Tennessee Achievement School District and is co-founder of TandemED. Barnes holds a Doctorate degree from Harvard University, where he is also an affiliate of the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at Harvard Law School.