

The Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity

Sustaining Racial Justice Action in Philanthropy: Ferguson & Beyond



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Many of us have watched or perhaps even marched, as community members mobilize to keep the nation's attention on the racial injustice so evident in the recent tragic police killings of unarmed Black men and boys, with outrage then exacerbated by the failures to indict the police responsible for the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner.



Demonstrators protesting the killing of teenager Michael Brown in August 2014. Photo by Scott Olson/Getty Images

As change agents within philanthropy, as we witness local, national and global action in response to the repeated travesty of justice and societal failure, **how do we work to support the current movement and continue to build toward deeper transformational change?** How do we sustain attention and build within philanthropy as well? And importantly, how do we fight the tendency of the urgent need to respond that leads to overly simplistic responses?

At the [Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity \(PRE\)](#), we have been long been focusing on the question of what it takes to strengthen the support needed to combat structural racism, and in the past year have particularly sought to cull lessons from past racialized flashpoints as we work with funders and the field to advance deep transformation.

Our latest publication, [Critical Issues Forum Vol. 5. Moving Forward on Racial Justice Philanthropy](#), featured a [timeline and set of questions](#) that very intentionally began with the Los Angeles uprising in 1992, recognizing its pivotal role both in awakening much of our nation to the fact that we had not come close to achieving the "colorblind" society some believed we were in - and recognizing this was also a key launching point for many of the contemporary philanthropic approaches to racial justice.

More recently, following the killing of Michael Brown by Officer Darren Wilson and the subsequent protests and militarized responses in Ferguson, PRE convened a meeting of activists and funders, sponsored by the Ford Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation and Open Society Foundations, to

tackle the questions of how to address this tragedy and seize the moment in a strategic way for our longer term racial justice goals. How do we ensure that needed racial justice organizing and infrastructure work continues and is strongly supported, so organizations and communities can effectively and proactively respond when there are racialized flashpoints? How do we both address immediate problems, as well as frame solutions structurally for more significant and lasting change?

From our vantage point at PRE, both from what we heard at the meeting and are hearing from activists and racial justice funders around the country in these past months, the most essential challenges we must tackle are:

1) We must effectively support efforts to move from protest organizing to building real power.

Racial justice advocates have been operating in a climate of constant crises precipitated in part by rapid changes in settlement patterns, climate, forced migration, changes in the racial demography, an increasingly racially polarized political culture, and the absence of adequate resources to quickly and effectively adjust to these changes and get ahead of the wave. As a result, protest organizing, by its nature reactive, as opposed to organizing for power, has become a dominant mode of operation in the sector. Changing this will require that groups have opportunities to connect their stories and create a holistic view of the conditions they are facing, as well as a unifying national strategy; adequate resources; and the flexibility necessary to make the best use of those resources in changing conditions.

2) We must strengthen multiracial organizing and alliance building, but within that, must recognize that there has been a dearth of support for building Black community organizing infrastructure that is both necessary and has a vital opportunity to be strengthened now.

Intergenerational Black-led community-based organizations need to be supported more robustly and consistently between times of crisis (Katrina, Ferguson, etc.) as well as strengthened in their ability to work in leadership and partnership with other cross-racial alliances. Cross-racial alliance-building is necessary to ensure that flashpoint uprisings aren't isolated as a Black "problem" or a Black versus White problem, and to broaden the base for racial equity. Clearly support is also needed for other communities of color and immigrant communities in tackling the racism directed toward them, but it has been a mistake to believe those efforts could be isolated from the underlying racial narrative of anti-Blackness in a way that isn't to the detriment of justice for all.

3) We must work in ways that strengthen local philanthropy's ability to fund progressive racial justice work and organizing for more sustainable local support, including from community foundations.

This is particularly true in inner-ring suburbs where changing demographics have not been met with commensurate infrastructure. This includes asking the question, as national funders focus on place-based approaches, are they building

longer-term lasting local philanthropic capacity to strengthen racial justice efforts.

4) We need to support the linkages between think tanks, activists and advocates to ensure that policy solutions that address a targeted need like police reform are factoring in structural analysis that both assesses limitations, backlash and unintended negative triggers in other parts of the system. While it is a perennial challenge to ask how philanthropy can strengthen ties rather than exacerbate competition and tension between various approaches, this can be even more blatant amidst the urgency of a flashpoint moment. It is also important for funders to examine where divides between these approaches are either fueling generational divides, or perhaps being mistakenly conflated as such. What we are hearing as generational divides in some cases may be differences between local and national, or between organizing and legal advocacy, between community and academia. How can funders be intentional about providing constructive space and support that bridges rather than furthers division.

5) We have a real opportunity to add a greater international frame to racial justice work; but we must build capacity and tools for activists on the ground to effectively use that frame. As we see solidarity protests in France, Germany, Korea, India and elsewhere, we have both the potential to explore the use of international human rights tools for U.S. concerns, as well as build alliances to combat global injustice through more collective awareness. This also provides the opportunity for philanthropists to engage new partners, build toward systemic solutions at the national and global level across a range of issues impacted by structural racialization.

6) We need to continue to build once the flashpoint begins to lose momentum or worse, faces the backlash that is predictable, if not inevitable. We need to recognize that with most racialized flashpoints there is a cycle that begins with anger first within communities of color and some White allies, which gains momentum and mainstream attention and even outrage, but then faces a mix of forces intent on both squelching and reversing the building multiracial alliances. As we are learning from more understanding of the use of "dog-whistle racism," there are those who will strategically seek to set off or exacerbate the underlying challenges of White racial anxiety. How can we address that anxiety? How do we get ahead of those that seek to manipulate it? And if it is not possible to preempt, how do we engage trustees and leaders who might find themselves more persuaded by the backlash narrative?

7) We need greater alignment across different foundation strategies. This does not mean all funders jumping on the same trends, but being more aware of one another's approaches and funding patterns for greater coordination that builds or complements a funding opportunity. Recognizing the disproportionate power and influence philanthropy can often have in shaping the directions of campaigns, how do funders ensure they are listening and only

leading where appropriate? How do they join in collective efforts to maximize greater impact without simply leaving huge gaps in other areas?

These complex challenges take the wisdom of a broad range of racial justice activists working at local, regional, national and even global levels as we build a movement that has the potential for the scale of change our society's need. It takes general support to many core organizations that are able to effectively bridge between local communities, communications and policy, and it takes both the opportunity for as honest discourse as is possible amidst the power imbalance, as well as requiring the humility to learn from one another.

We encourage funders to scan the valuable comments raised by activists and funders in [this synthesis](#) and perhaps use excerpts as a tool to keep the conversations going among your own foundation staff and trustees. Likewise, we are sharing a [document](#) prepared for the meeting by Maggie Potapchuk considering past reviews and critiques of philanthropy's responses to other key flashpoints, such as Los Angeles uprising in 1992, unrest in Cincinnati after another police shooting in 2001, or the backlash after 9/11, the reactions to the lack of response in Hurricane Katrina in 2005 or the bankruptcy of Detroit just last year.

PRE has been fortunate to hear directly from hundreds of activists and funders seeking to advance racial justice work and we recognize that as complex as these challenges are, there are also significant lessons learned. We look forward to engaging you further and hope to be a resource to grantmakers at all stages of this collective struggle.

Please explore the resources linked above as well as many of our partners below, and let us know directly how we can be helpful by emailing me at villarosa@racialequity.org.

Yours in the struggle,

Lori Villarosa
Executive Director
Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity



Protest After Failure to Indict Officer Responsible for Eric Garner's Death, NYC December 2014

Related Resources

There are numerous resources available to keep the conversation moving. The following are a few articles by some PRE board members and close allies, which lift up some of the key issues funders should be considering now, as well as some of the websites serving as clearinghouses.

[#FergusonNext](#) is a solution-based collaboration between Guardian US Opinion, The St. Louis Post-Dispatch Editorial Page, Ebony.com, Colorlines, The St. Louis American and The St. Louis Riverfront Times. Beyond the Michael Brown case, how can we work together to find justice? Share your solutions on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr and more with #Ferguson

Race Forward:

Statement on the Ferguson verdict and next steps: [Failure of Justice](#)

In addition to the valuable current related information on **ColorLines**, we are sharing [this earlier post](#)

by Rinku Sen in response to a 2011 question of how we understand and address movement moments. The thoughtful reply still has strong resonance and pointers that are valid to consider at this time.

Center for Social Inclusion (CSI):

Thoughts on Ferguson and Eric Garner cases and their larger implications

[JUSTICE ON TRIAL: THE FAILURE FOR JUSTICE IN FERGUSON IS A FAILURE FOR ALL](#)

[JUSTICE FOR ERIC GARNER AND WHAT WE MUST DO TOGETHER](#)

The Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society at UC Berkeley:

Recent articles from john powell, Director

[Response to Ferguson: Systemic Problems Require Systemic Solutions](#)
[Response to Eric Garner's Case: A Deeper Conversation](#)

For an international perspective, check out

[Riot From Wrong](#): an award-winning documentary about the 2011 London riots triggered by the police shooting of a young man of color. The film, which explores how youth activists and the police coped with the aftermath, resonates with the events unfolding in Ferguson, Missouri, today and has been recently screened by Open Society Foundations in Ferguson, Washington, DC and New York City.

Key Collective Resources:

Neighborhood Funders Group (NFG) has launched a web portal for funders to serve as a virtual organizing space to keep to the momentum in philanthropy to support organizing in the racial and economic justice movement, including police accountability in their localities and at the national level:

[Police Accountability: Organizing and Philanthropic Strategies](#)

ABFE provides useful [fact-sheets](#) of data to help inform around issues related to the Black Community.

[Ferguson Movement Moment Rapid Giving Information](#): This list was compiled as part of a response from donor organizing communities looking to rapidly redistribute wealth to the movement ecosystem in Ferguson and beyond.