

# Can Counting Really Make the Difference?

by Makani Themba-Nixon



Every organized interest has a love-hate relationship with government regulation. We want clear public monitoring and benchmarks for the other guy. For ourselves, well, we urge more measured approaches like support for self-governance, expansion of voluntary guidelines and the perennial favorite - autonomy - because after all, us good people with good intentions don't need sticks. We are carrot folk who can be good for, er, goodness sake.

The unfortunate truth is that those interests with the most power tend to live more of a carrot life in the world of government intervention and regulation. And those with much less power live firmly under the stick. In fact, it was partially these policy inequities that catalyzed a study and then legislation that sought to connect the dots between the lack of diversity in philanthropy and the limited capacity of traditional marginalized communities (communities of color, sexual minorities and women) to affect change in their interests.

The legislation, now weaving its way through the state Senate, is California's AB 624, which requires foundations with assets of \$250 million or more to disclose diversity data for their organization and to track the diversity of grantees and vendors. The law comes on the heels of decades-long discussion about diversity in philanthropy that dates at least as far back as the 1940s. In 1944, Gunnar Myrdal published his groundbreaking study, *An American Dilemma*. Myrdal leveraged foundation dollars to look at how racism was undermining democracy and access to basic rights in the United States; he recommended changes

in social policy, including funding, necessary to make some headway on this issue.

For years, funders have preferred a carrot approach to their workings regarding social justice. For years, most of us were fine with that. Government was playing a much larger role in supporting direct service infrastructure and community assistance programs. Cities had matching funds and federal revenue sharing. Foundations were supplemental institutions that helped shape public policy, supported advocacy and augmented public funding. Today, even city governments are going to foundations to support projects like code revisions and other programs that should be firmly rooted in the public sphere. Of course, we need better public sector investments. However, with so much at stake, it's no surprise that advocates are seeking to make philanthropy more transparent and accountable.

But will counting diversity lead to fair and equitable funding practice and, subsequently, more equitable infrastructure for social change? AB 624 focuses on foundation diversity as the target for change. Diversity is important. It can help garner access for those traditionally locked out of decisionmaking and, in turn, these new voices can help forge a more representative agenda. Potentially. However, without an articulated change model that sets benchmarks and goals for equity, for minimum levels of advocacy capacity, infrastructure and power in communities, AB 624 could be the Disney version of diversity: the colors change but the basic tune - and power relations - stay the same (*it's a small world after all...*).

The data collection that AB 624 calls for just is not enough. What nonprofits need is vigorous research that tells us how marginalized communities are faring; that can tell us if foundation grants are really making a difference in helping communities to achieve equity and justice. Working together, however, we can forge a vision and reality that can move beyond counting to help us realize concrete change. We need:

▲ **Research that bridges communities and**

**context.** Funders can leverage their dollars to encourage community-based participatory research models and insist on disaggregation of data

and impact assessments by race, ethnicity, class and gender. Research should also examine and document privilege, institutional behavior, public policy and their impact on equity. This, along with better dissemination, will help increase the amount of research - and policies - that are relevant and address real problems.

▲ **An increase in authentic community input and decisionmaking.**

We can create vehicles for affected communities to have a real say about the investments where they live. The Gulf Coast Funders for Equity (GFCE), for instance, is already bringing this more democratic model into reality. GFCE developed a governance structure that enables local community stakeholders to determine funding and program priorities. Community-based board members - primarily folks of color - receive grants from a separate funding stream so they do not have to choose between participating as funders and receiving support. It is a model that certainly deserves replication.

▲ **Clear benchmarks for equitable social change infrastructure.**

We know what it takes to make

change - strong networks, organizing institutions, communications infrastructure, cultural work that helps people imagine that a better self and a better world is indeed possible. Right now, today we can set short- and long-term benchmarks on the way to the change we seek. We can ensure that every community with a certain set of demographics has a minimum number of paid organizers by 2015; that each community has at least two well funded, fair and

accessible media outlets; that every foundation and every group in our portfolio has access to learning about how various forms of oppression and privilege shape our work - and then can develop and implement

plans to address them.

▲ **Tracking not only of who gets funding but how much and how.**

We know the stories: the program officer who refuses to work with a group because of personal animosity toward its leadership; the national think tank that writes a short concept paper and gets its big, multiyear grant up front; the local community group that has to sit through eight meetings and write a 20-page proposal only to get a 1-year grant that allocates just half of the funds on the front end. The right kind of tracking can help us identify patterns of privilege and access. It can also help us evaluate our reach and impact - if we build these mechanisms into our process.

Some argue that AB 624 is a step in that direction. Yet, one cannot help but wonder what carrots - and sticks - will be necessary to get us beyond measuring to making a difference at scale.

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