



Walking Forward: Racial Justice Funding Lessons from the Field

by Julie Quiroz

Fifty years after the major victories of the civil rights movement, racial justice activists share a sense of bitter dismay at what Judith Browne Dianis, director of Advancement Project, calls a “new normal” of racial injustice that is actually painfully old.

“Like the civil rights placard ‘I am a man,’” says Taj James, pointing to the campaign by San Francisco group POWER following George Zimmerman’s acquittal, “we needed to declare again that Black lives matter.” According to James, who began his racial justice work as a Black youth organizer two decades ago and now heads the Movement Strategy Center, “It can feel like we walked back in time to a moment we never left.”

To some, there are disconcerting signs that the focus on race is eroding in philanthropy, ironically at a moment when many funders are keen to leverage the changing demographics of the U.S. electorate for policy change on a wide range of issues. Eva Paterson, president of the Equal Justice Society, observes that foundations appear to be leaving race behind. “I’m seeing disturbing trends in some national foundations,” says Paterson, “a pulling away from race where they seem to be adopting the notion of post-racial America. What is going on?”

The data in trends on actual foundation giving to work on racial justice is mixed and often challenging to document

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accurately – both due to differences of definition, and the limitations of coding and reporting. The concerns and questions raised in this essay are based on perspectives offered by several racial justice activists with breadths and depths of experience, sharing views that have been mirrored by many in the field in other recent reports. In this time of great challenge, we asked, how can foundations support the field of racial justice organizing to walk forward? What wisdom can foundations draw from the past in order to move more effectively toward the future? What, if anything, has worked?

In conversations with other racial justice organizers and activists,¹ several lessons for funders stood out.

1. Adequately and consistently fund base-building as the center of a change model.

Funders often do not prioritize the day-to-day work of community organizing, or base-building, in their funding strategies. “There’s a lack of an effective change model,” says Makani Themba, executive director of The Praxis Project and longtime activist who also has experience in the funder role. “Funders lack a clear understanding of where base-building fits in.”

Scot Nakagawa of ChangeLab, who has held leadership positions in organizations such as the National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce, the Western Prison Project and in foundations, agrees. “Funders are concentrating on ‘funding to scale,’ on larger organizations and less on smaller groups,” he says. “But policy is the end of the discussion and not the beginning. The beginning is the work of smaller community-based groups who deal with the most directly impacted.”

“There’s no sense of how a national organization goes to scale,” maintains Dianis, whose national racial justice organization, Advancement Project, is based in Washington, D.C. “A national organization goes to scale because of local organizations.”

Maria Poblet, director of Causa Justa/Just Cause, a multiracial grassroots group organizing on housing and immigrant rights issues in San Francisco and Oakland, believes that while there’s been some progress with foundations seeking to address structural racism, the results have been undermined by the lack of support for organizing in communities of color. “The structural racism framework has put pressure and expectation on groups that didn’t really have the infrastructure in the first place. These groups were then expected to overthrow structural racism with \$25,000 grants,” says Poblet. “When they didn’t, investment shifted away, with funders concentrating on bigger groups that they think can produce something. No one wants to fund the

infrastructure of organizing. That's one of the core ways that racial inequity plays out in the world."

Xochi Bervera, a co-director of Racial Justice Action Center in Atlanta, who previously as director of Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children worked on survival and justice issues following Hurricane Katrina, echoes Poblet. "There are projects to advance the theory of racial justice," observes Bervera, "but not support for the grassroots work needed to do it."

Research by University of Southern California economist and sociologist Manuel Pastor confirms the funding challenges organizing groups face. Pastor writes, "In interviews of over 100 grassroots leaders across the country ... they constantly say that day-to-day base-building work is their bread-and-butter and that funding it is a constant battle."²

2. Provide racial justice organizing groups with long-term general support funding.

Many organizers and activists identify the short-term approach of funders as a major obstacle to strong racial justice organizing. "A variety of different sectors within philanthropy have tried to move more resources to organizations of color, in particular to reproductive justice," recalls Kalpana Krishnamurthy, policy director at the reproductive justice organization Forward Together. "But the funding pattern is short. How do you get to structural change if you are only getting a few years of funding?"

In philanthropy, the prevalence of short-term and project funding as opposed to general support funding has been well-documented.³ "Funders get stuck in one-time funding mode," says Dianis. "Dealing with racial voter suppression in 2012, we did a communications program on how to talk about the issue and motivate people. That work was important but it was one-time funding."

Many in the field also describe the need for ongoing – not episodic – investment in electoral work. "In Latino communities," says Arturo Vargas, director of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund, "the number of voters is increasing but not the rate of participation. There is little investment in those not participating. But it's not apathy; it's that people have given up." Confirming Vargas's point, 2012 election data shows that the turnout of Latinos was higher than ever, while the Latino voter participation rate actually declined compared to 2008.⁴

"Organizing groups need funding between major election cycles," he continues, "in order to continue engaging and educating new voters through issue-based organizing, and

building leaders and constituencies to activate on future campaigns." Some examples of these efforts exist, such as the California Civic Participation Funders, which has provided regional support by aligning a set of funders around needs defined by organizing groups.⁵

Many believe support for grassroots organizing has declined, resulting in less support for the core strategy of advancing racial justice. For example, James observed a recent shift away from grassroots organizing among several large foundations that once provided a large proportion of funding. Recent examples include Surdna Foundation's elimination of its civic engagement program, Atlantic Philanthropies' shift away from social justice funding, the closing of the education-organizing funder collaborative Communities for Public Education Reform, and the end of the Ford Foundation's environmental justice program and shift toward large grants within specific issue areas.

3. Examine ongoing racialized practices within philanthropy.

The way foundations design and conduct grantmaking often reinforces racial inequities, and favors organizations that have benefited from White privilege through a history of White leadership. "As a country, the less White we get, the more decision-makers distrust democracy," argues James. "This plays out in philanthropy where we can now hear conversations like 'Is democracy good or bad in Detroit?'" Like the country as a whole, philanthropy is turning away from democracy and toward a technocratic approach that reflects and reproduces structural racism.

Bervera agrees, "People say they can't fund in the South because there is no infrastructure. How we define infrastructure is racialized. There is grassroots local work led by people of color, and powerful networks and connections. They just have less formal institutional resources."

Another activist who commented to Steve Williams and NTanya Lee for the Ear to the Ground project report⁶ raised a critical overarching concern that "foundations are not structurally accountable to our communities, yet have tremendous influence over our collective future by dictating which organizations, issues and/or strategies will be funded." This is ultimately racialized given that the majority of power within philanthropy is still White, wealthy and insulated.

4. Support accurate and compelling storytelling of racial justice work.

There is a growing recognition among organizers and activists that it is not only important to do good work, but also to build a "bigger we" of people who understand the work in the context of the change model, feel connected to

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it, and speak and stand up for it. “We need to tell our stories of the strengths of the racial justice movement,” says Dianis. “We are sometimes too busy doing the work to tell the story. It can be hard for funders who may not get the process of the work. We need them to understand what it takes to get to wins. We need to tell the story so that funders can understand the process.”

Themba makes a similar point. “The dominant theme is that explicit work on racial justice is hard to do and can be divisive. But we are winning talking about race and racial justice,” she says. “We need to be clear about what we mean by winning. It would be good to have a pool of resources to allow people to step back and write, like the Ear to the Ground project.”

Ruben Lizardo of Policy Link, a national social and economic equity organization, emphasized the importance of communicating the universal significance of racial justice. “What we used to see as solutions for people of color are solutions for everyone,” maintains Lizardo. His assertion is echoed in the recommendations of a 2009 report on addressing racial equity in foundations. “By seeing foundation programs in relation to racial equity,” the report asserts, “the depth of analysis on root causes is strengthened. This rigor assists thinking about the range of factors affecting program areas.”⁷

James also underscores the power of storytelling in funding. “The framing and story about the work shapes whether there are resources or not,” he argues. “Valuable and successful work can be going on but not getting resources. The same work can have a new story and frame, and the resources come back.”

5. Continue progress on funding intersectional issues and strategies.

Many in the field believe that racial justice work has become stronger when understood in dynamic relationship to gender, sexuality, class and migration. Organizers and activists observed a positive trend toward more intersectional strategies in the field, as well as support for intersectional approaches among funders.

“Success is happening where an intersectional approach is being supported alongside a racial justice movement,” says Cathi Tactaquin, executive director of the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights. “The presence of marginalized workers at the 2013 AFL-CIO convention is an example of this growing success.” James agrees, while pushing for even greater attention to intersectional approach across issues. “It’s crucial now for gender and ecology to be infused in racial justice,” he asserts.

Themba notes there has been progress on this front. “A small but growing group of funders are working to integrate support for explicit racial justice work into their issue-based portfolios,” she says. Cautions were raised, however, about not diminishing the significance of racial justice. As Themba explains, “We need a ‘both/and’ approach that doesn’t marginalize racial justice.” She points to the Edward W. Hazen Foundation’s work on education justice as a good example of a funder taking a “both/and” approach.

In spite of progress with some funders, some noted a failure to understand the racial justice dimensions across certain issues that are clearly racialized. For example, Vargas believes “there’s no conversation of immigration reform as a racial issue. We’re willing to let 11 million people live in the shadows because they are not White.”

Several practitioners described the role of funders in weakening the connections between race and immigration. “Fifteen years ago we were receiving funding from large foundations for developing and disseminating curriculum connecting racial justice and immigrant rights,” recalls Tactaquin. “But we saw a big decline with the 2007 recession when foundations switched to a narrow ‘no risk’ focus. Our racial/immigration justice work stalled and we had to let go of plans for further development of educational tools, community engagement and human rights documentation.”

Echoing Tactaquin, Taj James describes an increasing philanthropic focus on “specific policies and issues and solutions that have been defined by ‘experts’ disconnected from the experiences of communities of color.” The result is, according to Monami Maulik of Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM), a shift away from racial justice. “We’re in the world of dealing with funders on immigration, national

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security and policing, and profiling,” says Maulik. “Except for growing race/class framing in policing and youth criminalization funding, I’m hearing the same message now that I heard in the post 9/11 era: that we should not be talking about race. It pretty explicitly happened in immigration funding.”

6. Increase support for the network building and movement building needed to strengthen power across racial lines.

“Racial justice has been strengthened when individuals in foundations took a chance on movement building,” says Gihan Perera, executive director of Florida New Majority and former executive director of Miami Workers Center. “Right now people are impressed with FNM as a multi-issue, multi-ethnic statewide power that wins campaigns,” he continues. “But none of this would be happening without the decades of experience we spent building racial justice unity on the ground.”

Perera points to one key shift as an example: “While Black/Brown unity is now accepted as an important approach in organizing, 10 or 15 years ago we couldn’t talk to funders about it. We couldn’t talk to funders about the real work – the political education, the leadership development, the relationship building – that multiracial unity involves.”

Sharing lessons from their field experience, racial justice advocates have demonstrated the importance of such formations, and how foundations could support them. For example, in a 2003 report, the Center for Social Inclusion’s founder and former President Maya Wiley asserted that foundations need to support multiracial coalitions by identifying and supporting “community leaders with a vision for multiracial work, its importance and who understand the context of the communities for which the coalition would work ... [who] have credibility within their communities,” as well as supporting “institutions created by and for constituent communities, and run by community leaders.”⁸

Perera gives credit to the handful of funders who saw the value in naming the tensions and potential between Black and Latino communities, invested resources in this work, and provided thoughtful leadership that legitimized multiracial organizing to other funders. Perera observes that small foundations like the Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock and medium-sized foundations like

the Public Welfare Foundation “seeded cutting edge work and invested appropriately for their institutions.” He also believes large foundations such as Ford made a difference by supporting organizing infrastructure and signaling the value of the work to other foundations.

But Perera believes the key lesson for funders – that creating space for multiracial constituencies to come together toward a common agenda – has gone largely unlearned. “The breakthrough in understanding has not resulted in real shifts in funding,” asserts Perera.

7. Deepen relationships and alignment among racial justice leaders both in the field and in philanthropy.

The growth in philanthropic leadership on racial justice is widely viewed as a sign of progress. Says Lizardo, “There has been progress. We now have structural racism leaders within philanthropy.”

James agrees. “A core cadre has emerged of individual program officers and donors committed to racial justice. They have the potential to have broader influence on the field of philanthropy overall.”

Malkia Cyril, director of the Center for Media Justice, comments on the importance of alignment among organizers and advocates in shaping philanthropy. “We need more peer-to-peer conversations on how money moves, what outcomes we want.”

Vargas sees the value of leadership development in the field as key to all aspects of racial justice. “We need to create a pipeline of people in philanthropy who understand racial justice and use that lens.”

Conclusion

There are many effective ways to support progress toward racial justice, starting with large and steady resources for real change grounded in the experience and leadership of communities of color. Philanthropy can make a difference by lifting up stories of racial justice success, by recognizing the impact of race across all areas of social justice, by supporting the powerful work of building deep networks within and across communities, and by organizing itself as a sector with the knowledge and people needed to play its crucial role.

At a time when race continues to shape every aspect of our lives –from access to healthy food, treatment within schools, safety from violence, to our very recognition as human beings, all of us, including philanthropy, have a responsibility to step boldly forward.



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Endnotes

- 1 These quotes came from direct interviews, as well as from two separate events hosted by the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity: a focus group at Movement Strategy Center's offices in March 2013 with 11 locally based activists; and a webinar titled "Funding Racial Justice in the Moment and the Long Haul: What do Foundations need to hear?" held in September 2013. Presenters included Makani Themba, executive director of The Praxis Project; Scot Nakagawa, senior partner at Change Lab; and Judith Browne Dianis, co-director of Advancement Project.
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- 4 Lopez, Mark Hugo, and Ana Gonzalez-Barrera. "Inside the 2012 Latino Electorate." *pewhispanic.org*. Pew Hispanic Center, 3 June 2013. Web. 19 May 2014. <<http://www.pewhispanic.org/2013/06/03/inside-the-2012-latino-electorate/>>
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- 6 Lee, NTanya, and Steve Williams. "More Than We Imagined: Activists' Assessments on the Movement and the Way Forward." *earthtothegroundproject.org*. Ear to the Ground, May 2013. Web. 19 May 2014. <<http://earthtothegroundproject.org/read-report-online/>>
- 7 "Lessons Learned in Addressing Racial Equity in Foundations." *margainc.com*. The Marga Group, 2009. Web. 19 May 2014. <http://www.margainc.com/files_images/general/REPG_Lessons_Learned_May_09.pdf>
- 8 Wiley, Maya. "Structural Racism and Multiracial Coalition Building: A Report to the Annie E. Casey Foundation." *centerforsocialinclusion.org*. The Center for Social Inclusion, 2003. Web. 19 May 2014. <<http://www.centerforsocialinclusion.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Structural-Racism-and-Multiracial-Coalition-Building.pdf>>