

Foreword

By Nat Chioke Williams, Ph.D.

Over the past decade, the number of program officers, foundations and resources focused on social justice philanthropy¹ has grown. As the social justice philanthropic field has expanded, it has tried to figure out how to effectively help secure a society that is just and fair. Some of us focus on building the social justice infrastructure, others on particular issues or constituencies, and still others on strategies like organizing or civic engagement. However, there is an overarching belief that we need to dramatically increase the scope and scale of social justice policy campaigns and victories if we are to achieve that just and fair society. The aftermath of some imperfect, but nonetheless big, progressive wins in recent years, and the ensuing backlash, has caused some of us to ask more fundamental questions. Are we really getting to the root causes of social injustice by focusing primarily on policy and/or electoral change? How do we better engage the hearts and minds of the public in the quest for real and lasting change?

Policy wins that improve concrete material conditions and access to opportunity for marginalized people are critical and necessary – but they are not enough. Policy wins may open doors to greater access and opportunity for marginalized communities, but if the campaigns that led to these wins are not framed to engage an explicit public discourse on the socio-cultural beliefs that normalize and justify the disparate impact on these communities, then we are not addressing the underlying architecture that generate these disparities.

Let's consider the social, economic and political disparities resulting from structural racism. Structural racism is reflected in the interlocking, replicating and self-reinforcing web of institutional policies and practices that help construct and maintain disproportionate negative outcomes for people of color. The underpinnings of structural racism involve deeply ingrained cultural beliefs about the relative value of people based on race, which have been codified into

institutional practices and policies. Policies can be changed; but if the underlying value proposition about the relative worth of people of color is not exposed, challenged and eradicated, then our wins will be impermanent and frustrating, and our prospects for achieving true justice and equity will be limited.

A solution to this situation is to create policy campaigns that engage the hearts and minds of the public. This is where integrating a structural racism analysis and an anti-racism strategy in community organizing, advocacy and civic engagement campaigns is important.

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Many of my social justice funder colleagues recognize the importance of integrating a racial justice frame into policy campaigns. However, even with this understanding it is sometimes challenging to hold true to both the principle and practice of leading with race in policy campaigns for social justice practitioners and funders alike. Some social justice practitioners choose not to use a structural racism frame because, they argue, an examination of racism would be divisive for their racially diverse constituents, damaging the bonds of trust necessary to work together to create change. Other practitioners figure that policymakers don't want to deal with issues of race and that leading with it could damage their chances to win specific policy changes. The policies that these groups win often help improve the material conditions of people of color; however, structural racism cannot be dismantled through discrete policy change alone and needs to be coupled with work to transform cultural norms about race in order to create lasting and deep social change for communities of color.

Similarly, some foundation program officers may find it strategic to garner support from their boards for efforts to reduce poverty, improve public schools, or increase access to healthcare or affordable housing without examining the role that structural racism plays in creating these conditions. These program officers may reason that leading with a racial justice analysis would make their trustees uncomfortable and jeopardize support for their social justice grants. Some foundations make grants that *happen* to help mitigate some of the effects of structural racism; but without such institutional commitment to addressing the causes of structural racism, there will be circumstantial, but unsustainable, results.

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Another challenge is the overreliance on policy wins as the primary indicator of success and positive change. A focus on policy wins is valid because of the urgent need to improve conditions for marginalized communities and because it's a demonstrable measure of impact. However, our attention to policy change overshadows other key changes in the public discourse that are critical to dismantling structural racism (e.g., changes in the public openness to discuss race, introduction of new language, the formation of new alliances).

Conducting racial justice campaigns is hard, complicated, but ultimately critical work. In addition to providing multiyear, general operating support to racial justice groups, social justice philanthropy can support racial justice groups in many other ways. First and foremost, social justice funders can provide support to build the capacity of social justice organizations to effectively conduct racial justice campaigns. Also, targeted support for racial justice messaging and framing is critical, both in terms of engaging the public in constructive dialogues on race (which lessens the impact of wedge issue attempts) and to fend off efforts to delegitimize the use of a structural racism frame.

Support to analyze and develop targeted policy recommendations that can effectively reduce racial disparities is another needed area of strategic investment. Additionally, support should be given to foster cross-racial alliance and community building. Beyond grantmaking dollars, social justice funders can provide more time to see results from racial justice campaigns in order to ease the pressure to continually produce new policy victories. Finally, as individual program officers in foundations, we can advocate for the importance of racial justice with our peers in philanthropy and seek to leverage more support for the work.

The Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity has engaged a variety of key activists to shed a critical light on the intersections and intricacies of structural racism, community organizing and civic participation, and help bring more of us into the conversation. Those of us in philanthropy, and our community partners, need to consider a holistic approach to addressing structural inequities that engages policies and practices, but also values, norms and beliefs, in the public domain. This will allow us to get to the root causes, and together do the hard, messy and complex work necessary for true social transformation.

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¹ "Social Justice Philanthropy Seeing a Resurgence, Foundation Center Study Finds." Foundation Center. The Foundation Center, 15 July 2009. Web. 29 Aug. 2012. <http://foundationcenter.org/media/news/20090715.html>