



# Has There Been Progress on Racial Justice in Philanthropy?

by Lori Villarosa

“Have you seen any progress?” This is a question most of us are asked in our work toward social change. It is asked of ourselves, asked by our funders or boards or others. And when we focus that question on racial justice, a source of ongoing discourse where one’s answer can signify our level of awareness and be taken as a testament of our own righteousness, it’s an even more weighted question.

If we say there is no progress, are we denying huge strides? Are we invalidating reasons to keep trying? On the other hand, if we say there has been great progress, do we risk a self-congratulatory invitation to complacency?

As with most social justice work, the reality of moving a racial justice approach within philanthropy has been a mix of progress and setbacks. It is important to examine where has there been more or less progress, what has contributed to it and what may have diverted us. Some questions we might ask ourselves: Where has there been backlash? Could or should we have predicted it, so that perhaps in our future efforts we can be better prepared to pre-empt it or respond more effectively? Were there approaches that had important potential, but were ahead of their time? Or conversely, are we caught in a cycle of too many in power re-creating the wheel in the absence of a historical awareness – slowing overall progress?

As the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (PRE) marked our 10th anniversary last year, we were faced with these questions even more sharply than ever. When PRE received its initial support from the C.S. Mott Foundation in September 2002 through the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund,<sup>1</sup> it was led by a board primarily comprised of racial justice experts who had a nuanced understanding of philanthropy, joined by philanthropic leaders who had a strong racial justice lens. From the start, we made an intentional decision not to become a funder affinity group, believing in the value of an external perspective in philanthropic reform and of partnering with the many existing funder networks whose missions would be strengthened by greater exposure to racial justice frameworks.

In addition to conducting countless conference sessions in partnership with these membership associations and other nonprofit colleagues, PRE produced a number of publications, such as our *Critical Issues Forum* series. We also partnered on other resources, such as the *Guide to*

*Grantmaking with a Racial Equity Lens*, co-produced with GrantCraft, and *Catalytic Change: Lessons Learned from The Racial Justice Grantmaking Assessment*, with Race Forward (then called Applied Research Center). Later, when several funders sought to establish a dedicated space for grantmakers with a racial justice portfolio rather than only working through other affinity groups, we agreed to convene the PRE Racial Justice Funder Roundtable to help them learn from one another, sharpen their strategies and strengthen their leadership on these issues among other peers.

In 2007, PRE became a project of the Tides Center, continuing this work and in some cases convening affinity group partners as well as funders to strategize collectively and strengthen racial justice funding. But at the same time as we began engaging more funders in applying a structural racialization lens, it was also clear that those who had recognized the value of the analysis were seeking even greater skills-building to operationalize it in their grantmaking and throughout their foundations. As the need to deepen this work became more evident, PRE added another programmatic layer – the Racial Justice Funders Labs, which allowed teams of grantmakers and some board members to delve into strategy development and implementation more intensively over two days.

Throughout our first decade, PRE has engaged with hundreds of funders from all parts of the country and of all different sizes and types. We recognize real advancement in the sophistication of some of these funders’ understanding of the issues we address. On another level, progress can be measured by the number of funders in the room who are at the earliest stage of learning about structural racism, because it means we have effectively reached “beyond the choir.”

When we considered this retrospective publication, rather than solely focus on the past decade of our existence, we wanted to reference the work that PRE has grown out of and continued to work on in close partnership with racial justice leaders both inside and outside philanthropy. First and foremost for PRE, that reference point is the work of the activists who are at the heart of our change model. But we also recognize the leadership and appreciate the many opportunities to have partnered with the racial and ethnic identity-based affinity groups that were the earliest champions of racial justice efforts within philanthropy, and

PRE invited former and current board members to reflect on the past two decades of philanthropy and racial justice work. We asked what progress have they seen, and what they think we should collectively focus on going forward. These are just a few of their thoughts:

### Why Reflect?

***Given the tremendous amount of transition in philanthropy, looking back at trends over time is not only important - it is absolutely necessary. I am proud of PRE's efforts to look back on some of the important milestones in racial justice philanthropy and its importance, impact and implications for the work today. We at PRE know there are some important discussions to be had about this history, and lessons to be learned and shared.***

– Makani Themba, Executive Director, The Praxis Project

***It is useful to look at what foundations have done in the past to learn from both mistakes and impactful actions within racial justice grantmaking. For example, approaching the 2010 Census and redistricting cycle, foundations took an early proactive approach to fund outreach and invest in capacity for organizations to engage in what we knew would be a challenging redistricting process. We saw good outcomes in terms of Census promotion and participation in redistricting, but little to actually influence how the 2010 Census was conducted. We need to reflect on lessons such as these and recognize that more transformational changes require even earlier intervention and support, such as now, when we could still impact a major restructuring of the race and ethnic origin questions for 2020.***

– Arturo Vargas Executive Director, National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund (and PRE Board Member 2003-2013)

the other identity-based groups that later joined together as the Joint Affinity Groups.<sup>2</sup>

PRE has also appreciated the leadership among many issue-based affinity groups and geographically-based funder networks with which we have partnered closely, or that have independently advanced racial justice efforts. Our model of being more of an outside player with inside knowledge sought to modestly mirror some important dynamics of the National Committee on Responsive Philanthropy's early work. In more recent years, the Diversity in Philanthropy project and its later incarnation D5, has brought a new internal focus to efforts of diversity, inclusion and equity within philanthropy. The growth of such efforts and the continuing interest within parts of the foundation world to engage in them are marks of progress in the broader struggle.

During the past decade, the field of philanthropy has evolved in its understanding and willingness to tackle structural racialization in multiple ways. It has funded vibrant movements to reform the criminal justice system, the workplace and immigration policy. It has supported philanthropic leaders of color. It has learned about and debated implicit bias. It has funded some critical early experimentation on framing and communications related to racial equity projects, giving us deeper insight into the question of progress.

As we think about raising the bar going forward in philanthropy's understanding of a structural racialization lens in grantmaking, there is an ongoing need to experiment with effective framing and messaging. While the positions of PRE and its allies regarding the importance of being explicit around racial analysis – particularly in communications – are still contested, we have witnessed wins. For example, Race Forward's "Drop the I-Word" campaign has been successful in prompting numerous media venues to stop using the phrase "illegal immigrants." Also of note is Color of Change's efforts to get more than 69 corporations to drop their support for the conservative American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) by making more explicit its ties to the racial impacts of the Stand Your Ground laws following the killing of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. In addition to providing the core support that allowed for such campaigns, funders' intentional racial justice media strategies have helped lift an unprecedented number of leaders of color with strong structural racialization lenses onto media platforms like MSNBC, CNN and Huffington Post Live.

Just as we are making progress in reaching greater numbers of funders engaging in this analysis, we are now met with a new set of challenges. In our research for this publication, many activists expressed concerns about reduced support for the community organizing needed to build the power necessary to tackle structural racism. Others worried that some funders are actually moving away from a race focus completely. The grantmaking data is unclear. In part, it may be that there has been such significant growth in racial justice and organizing work that the available funding may not match their increased scale and need as they take on larger targets and operate in a more relational and sophisticated manner to tackle structural change.





## PRE Executive Director and Advisory Board, December 2013

*Front Row (L to R):*

Lori Villarosa, Kalpana Krishnamurthy, Makani Themba, Martha McCoy and Rinku Sen

*Back Row (L to R):*

Keith Lawrence, John Powell, Ron Chisom, Maya Wiley and Gihan Perera

*Missing:*

Richard Healey, Kien Lee and Julie Quiroz



Photos above:

**PRE Racial Justice Funders Lab faculty John Powell and Richard Healey engaging with participants, Chicago, 2012**

Photo at right:

**Rinku Sen presenting at PRE Racial Justice Funders Lab, New York 2013**



## Has There Been Progress?

*When we were seeking funding from others in the early '90s, they'd say 'Looks like great stuff, but it's not timely – we finished the race problem.' It's amazing that people thought that 'if you had started this in the 1970s, that would have been great, but 1990? We're done with race.' And most foundations don't believe that anymore. They actually understand race more, they understand that race is much more complex. They don't always understand what the complexity is. We've moved at least substantially, but not entirely, from personal prejudice, from intergroup relationships, away from just diversity, still not enough, but at least we are having a more complicated conversation and more complicated funding around structural racialization, around the mind sciences and implicit bias. I think the full implications haven't been realized yet, but we actually have moved.*

—John Powell, Executive Director, Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society, University of California Berkeley

*There have been many shifts over the past two decades in the ways structural racism manifests in U.S. society -- with progress on some fronts and further entrenchment of racial inequities in others. In light of this, racial justice grantmaking has been critical to analyzing structural racism across policy and community arenas and to assessing philanthropic approaches to addressing and flipping these destructive power arrangements.*

—Martha McCoy, Executive Director, Everyday Democracy and President, The Paul J. Aicher Foundation

*While it is certainly comforting to know that PRE exists and there is a level of effort and focus on the issues funding racial equity and justice, I think the philanthropic community has a very long way to go. We still are not comfortable dealing with issues that are racial. Our comfort level with looking at class versus race is considerably higher. Both issues of race and class are significant impediments in this country to economic progress, but they are separate issues. I hope PRE will encourage more of us to think seriously about funding racial equity and justice as an issue area.*

—Terri Lee Freeman, Executive Director, Community Foundation of National Capitol Region (and PRE Board Member 2003-2005)

Grantmaking with a structural racialization lens is complex and evolving. Within this volume, we address the concept, the dynamics of structural interventions, the challenges of measurement and the lessons that some funders and activists have gleaned. We know that there has been progress in philanthropy and that we must leverage the increased will to ask the right questions where it exists. Whether grantmaking with a structural racialization lens has increased in ways we can identify is an important next stage question as experts help to codify indicators that could be measured. The very nature of a structural approach requires understanding the relationships between issues and interventions. While we may be able to devise some appropriate markers to identify whether some proportion of funders have moved to this approach or not, at the moment there are no such proxies to measure. The fact that we must base our sense of progress on more qualitative measures at this stage does not indicate less rigor; on the contrary, qualitative analysis is an ongoing part of PRE's efforts to strengthen the discourse.

Even as we seek greater rigor, we also recognize that potentially transformative work has great value *even if it fails*. Our task is to identify what would make it more impactful, more structural and more apt to have long-term effects. This is difficult, complex work and we are up against hundreds of years of history as well as significant current interests that benefit from the status quo.

At PRE, we also try to remember to give those within the field, who may still be feeling their way to a path toward racial justice, the benefit of the doubt and opportunities to engage with our analysis. One of our board members, John Powell, often says “be soft on individuals, hard on structures.” While he and other PRE board members recognize there are certainly times when individuals in leadership roles must be challenged and held accountable, in general we find this is a useful sentiment to keep in mind. It pushes us out of the notion that the goal is to root out individual racists, and more importantly puts our focus on the broader structures that are at play within systems regardless of personal intent. Still, that does not mean there is no role for individual action. For those change agents within philanthropy, understanding the systems they themselves operate within and the broader systems their support can influence is critical. We appreciate the depth of passion and desire to deepen this understanding that is evident among so many funders, even when the progress overall might feel slower than many would like.

Very few of us enter into the nonprofit sector or philanthropy without wanting to do the right thing. While it is work we are very privileged to do, it is also challenging. Our struggle is finding the balance between holding ourselves and one another accountable, while also not being overly self-righteous to the point of shutting down others' learning. As a powerful quote from Malcolm X reminds us,

“Don't be in a hurry to condemn because he doesn't do what you do or think as you think or as fast. There was a time when you didn't know what you know today.”



Over the course of my own 20 years in philanthropy focused on advancing a racial justice lens, I've witnessed acts of courage, leadership and struggle. I've also seen missteps (of my own as well as colleagues) and understand the frustration that we heard from many in the field in the course of the past year as we have conducted focus groups, a webinar and our writers have done interviews to get a sense of both funders' and activists' perspectives on progress for the articles in this volume. And yet, through case studies of particular foundations and essays about structural racism, intersectionality and media justice, we're able to share real progress even as each piece recognizes there is still much more to be done.

As with each volume of PRE's Critical Issues Forum, we offer these articles with the hope of sparking deeper discourse and greater learning in the field. Even more so than in the past, we hope that publishing the volume online creates a shared space for others to weigh in. We invite you to join in the dialogue as we reflect and continue building on the work of so many before us, and create new bridges for the many who are taking up this work now and after us.



**Lori Villarosa** is the executive director of Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (PRE), which is intended to increase the amount and effectiveness of resources aimed at combating institutional and structural racism in communities through capacity building, education, and convening of grantmakers and grantseekers. For further information about PRE, including links to many related resources and organizations, please visit our website, [www.racialequity.org](http://www.racialequity.org).

## Endnotes

- 1 Now called the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights Education Fund
- 2 The Joint Affinity Group partners historically included Association of Black Foundation Executives, Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy, Disability Funders Network, Funders for LGBTQ Issues, Hispanics in Philanthropy, Native Americans in Philanthropy, Women's Funding Network and Women & Philanthropy. In recent years, Disabilities Funders Network and Women & Philanthropy have left the coalition or disbanded, and Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy has joined.

## Going forward

*There are a lot of steps that philanthropy can take to deepen and broaden support of racial justice movement building. Some of the most obvious – name race explicitly in the problem and strategies of the foundation, evaluate and change the culture of foundations to make them more accessible to communities of color, look at the grantmaking program and the assets to ensure alignment with racial justice – remain the most elusive for many grantmakers. Demanding that grantees change without doing critical work within philanthropic institutions is hypocritical and will not result in the kind of structural change we all seek. I hope in the future that foundations will measure their impact not only by evaluating their grantmaking, but also in looking at how well their own institution walks the walk.*

–Kalpana Krishnamurthy, Policy Director, Forward Together

*What foundations could do is begin to use an anti-racist analysis in their policymaking, grantmaking, and decision making. Foundations can also push the grantees to develop an anti-racist analysis when they request funding. They could ask both internally to the foundation, and externally to the grantees how they are institutionalizing anti-racist analysis with the people and in the communities they serve. When interviewing the grantees they can ask them, "Why are people poor?" Foundations can begin to incorporate an anti-racist analysis in their mission and vision statements.*

*If we at PRE want to become more effective reaching foundations to deal with racial equity then we must also be more humanistic and more accountable, giving technical assistance with principles guiding our work. Those principles being: undo facism/i nderstand, ghare and celebrate culture; re-examine and learn from history; analyze the manifestations of racism; undo internalized racial oppression; develop leadership; maintain accountability; network; and reshape gatekeeping. I see these principles as also helping to measure our progress and helping PRE to be more effective.*

–Ronald Chisom, Executive Director, People's Institute for Survival and Beyond

*Building on the important work of Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity, as we look to the future we need to recognize that racial justice philanthropy will need to explore the full breadth of the intersections between racial justice and environmental, economic, social and gender justice globally. Furthermore, it will be critical that philanthropy stops simply tinkering incrementally around the edges of service delivery rather than addressing systemic change and tackling the root causes of problems.*

– Kumi Naidoo, Executive Director, Greenpeace International (and PRE Board Member 2003- 2010)