



TO CONVENE, OR NOT TO CONVENE?

These are seven basic questions to ask about a potential racial justice convening:

1. Who called for a convening?
2. What do the callers hope to accomplish with this convening?
3. What is the position/power/role of those who we may be seeking to be convened?
4. If favorable, would their goals be the same as ours?
5. If favorable, do they want funders to join them?
6. Would a phone or video call suffice?
7. Are there better uses for the funds, time, and energy required to convene?

One longtime racial justice leader noted that it's unhelpful when a foundation has a convening of only its own grantees to tackle concerns facing the entire movement:

"It would be better if foundations first talked with each other, saw where their Venn diagrams overlap, and then invited people more broadly so that a gathering isn't grantee-specific. Because sometimes it's like we're in a particular fishbowl because we all receive funding from that foundation, and some of the partnerships or some of the relationships are mediated by that. It's great that we're together, but these other groups should also be in the room, and they're not because they don't happen to be funded by the same foundation."

In the same vein, inviting groups who are not grantees should mean being fair about expectations. In some cases, funders will invite a group of grantees along with those not receiving funds and expect non-grantees to take part in follow-up activities and other initiatives developed at the convening without any funding for their participation.

Convenings that create new relationships or expand skills get the highest marks. The activist cited above noted the benefits of a local foundation that gathered second-tier leaders among grantees for skill and

relationship building—one of the more successful foundation-led efforts. Another foundation that routinely gathered its grantee partners conducted training on how to handle contentious discussions about race.

To the extent that convenings lead to new collaborations or coalitions, funders must ask themselves if their presence is a help or a hindrance. A Black activist said, "Funder-driven collaborations are challenging. I think they're well-intentioned in terms of trying to get different groups to work together, relate to one another. But the best thing would be to figure out ways to support existing coalitions and collaborations, rather than starting new ones based on funding."

Funders should be extra careful about convenings. Because of the power differential with grantees, few are likely to say that they disagree with the need for convening—so funders have to listen for undertones that indicate grantee enthusiasm, or the lack of it.

The Philanthropic Infrastructure's Roles and Costs

Independent of a racial justice focus, throughout philanthropy there has been exponential growth in

layers of infrastructure in response to the sector's many needs. Funders routinely initiate new intermediaries, such as grantmaking collaboratives, networks, and formal philanthropic support organizations; communities or donors can give rise to intermediaries like public foundations.

These developments demonstrate the complexities of progress. While innovators can experiment with getting grants to smaller organizations through collaborative grantmaking and grantmakers of color often find helpful peer support in affinity groups, each layer of infrastructure brings substantial costs that require fundraising that may, in effect, undermine the goal of getting dollars to the field.

It is important to recognize that the first formal funder affinity group was born out of the racial justice struggle. The Association of Black Foundation Executives (ABFE) was created in 1970 when Black funders protested the lack of representation on the slate of the Council on Foundations board. Over the next five decades, hundreds of formal and informal funder affinity groups or networks formed, including those from other racial and ethnic communities, as well as countless issue-based and geographic-based associations. While there were some like ABFE that always focused on racial and ethnic community groups such as Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy, Hispanics in Philanthropy, and Native Americans in Philanthropy, others also had strong social justice frames like Funders for LGBTQ Issues or Neighborhood Funders Group. As late as 2006, the numbers of other such organizations that had an explicit racial equity lens was not significant. Certainly, the number of those leading with this focus as a primary component of their work, while expanding, was still low. However, as the field evolved, and as organizations like ABFE, PRE, Race Forward and others intentionally partnered with many of these networks to strengthen their own approaches, the work has grown exponentially.

With the increased interest in society, shifts in staff, and more funding opportunities for expanding their work on racial equity, 51 percent of philanthropy-serving organizations (PSOs) polled in a recent survey by the United Philanthropy Forum said they were at an intermediate level of work on racial equity, 43 percent were just beginning, and a small number were advanced. In fact, it is difficult to find a funder association conference that doesn't elevate issues of racial equity or justice, something that simply was not the case even six years ago.

In addition to the funder associations that serve as peer networks, smaller, more formalized collaborative funds have also developed; they can have anywhere from two to dozens of foundation partners with specific regranting agendas. Collaborative funds can add value when they are thoughtfully crafted, ease relationships between funders and field, and rigorously assess their position in the movement ecosystem. Such funds can provide a low-risk entry point for donors to explore racial justice organizations; organize multiple foundations to respond quickly to important events; raise the visibility of communities, issues, or trends; share philanthropic power; and create a path for smaller organizations—especially regional or local ones—to engage large foundations.

Many funders appreciate PSOs and collaborative funds for peer organizing and collective learning. Through activities like briefings and site visits, they can expose staff at larger foundations, which often aren't set up to make smaller grants, to a rich new set of leaders and organizations. Funders working to generate support for grants that might be considered "too radical" within their own institutions can leverage validators through a relatively low-risk engagement.

Intermediaries or public foundations are also part of the philanthropic infrastructure that is particularly relevant to racial justice. These are often started in response to the needs of communities of color, women, regions, or communities with less support, allowing donors with shared interest to actively center movement needs over donor interests and build a real path for racial justice. They are typically in closer relationship and alignment with the field and are more willing to make investments that others working from a range of biases or lack of knowledge may view as riskier. One president of a private foundation said, "If you look at emerging grassroots organizations, often their first grant will come from an intermediary."

The leader of a Native American intermediary noted that regranting organizations often know best how to get critical resources out the door. "Our partners in philanthropy reach out to us and others to do that specifically because they know they can't," she said. "They don't have the contacts. They don't have the eye. It can be a really effective delivery model to help nurture the dreams and aspirations of the communities they're hoping to support."

PSOs, collaboratives, and intermediary or public foundations can also help bring new people into racial

justice grantmaking. An Asian program officer at a women's foundation pointed to giving circles among women of color as both a training ground and a donor expansion strategy. A private foundation and a funder affinity group created a pooled fund to support Native organizations doing racial justice and sovereignty work, with activists and nonprofit leaders joining professional grantmakers on the selection committees for each round of funding.

One organizer who participated as a reviewer described the effect of the process: "It was a brief moment of self-determination. A taste of sovereignty, looking at all of our peoples together and bringing my best self to the table to say, 'This is what we need for Indian Country as a whole'—getting out of that sharp-elbow mode."

However, in our research, racial justice activists and funders spoke of this growing infrastructure with a mix of appreciation and concern. The overarching questions from the field were tied to concerns of whether these were ultimately building more resources for work on

the ground, whether the layers were increasing their access to relationships with funders or becoming a new gatekeeper, and where their accountability lay.

The question driving collaborative racial justice grantmaking has to be: "Is more transformational, sustainable money getting out into the field because we exist?"

This question implicates both hard costs, like the resources required for staffing a new organization, and soft costs, like the potential for inappropriate gatekeeping that limits direct access to foundations. For example, successful intermediaries are adequately funded (many collaborative funds set a minimum amount for membership) and adequately staffed—particularly with development directors, who are at a premium in the racial justice field. That reality creates both a hard cost (money to operate) and a soft cost (recruitment of development staff from organizations of color).



DO WE NEED A PHILANTHROPIC INTERMEDIARY?

These questions are important for any consideration of funding intermediaries, **but are especially useful for increasing racial justice resources:**

- 1. Where is the impetus for an intermediary layer coming from?**
Is it community-driven or funder-driven?
- 2. If it is funder-driven, will the intermediary support organizations that truly could not be supported directly by the foundation or is it intended to avoid added burden, time, political energy, or risk?** If any of the latter set, have the costs of those tradeoffs been carefully considered, centering community long-term goals and needs—especially the need to be in direct relationship with larger foundations?
- 3. What is the accountability mechanism for the intermediary?**
Through its function, it will now likely have greater access to more funders than will the grantees it is tasked with supporting and yet likely will not have the natural accountability of a base. How is it accountable to a field versus solely to its funders?

Additional soft costs include the benefits of direct relationship with larger funders. Perhaps of greatest concern to racial justice activists and funders was the notion that funding collaboratives allow some funders to maintain distance from progressive organizations led by people of color. While there may be certain tactical reasons for such an approach, it may also block potential relationship building between communities and funders or cost activist groups the prestige that can be gained from being a trusted grantee of larger foundations. Other options, such as improving internal strategies to argue for direct funding, still need to be pursued.

To be truly effective in shifting funding trends, collaborative funds need to be closely tied to the field. But that relationship can also encourage gatekeeping, perhaps by creating a feedback loop with established activists and organizations or by erecting additional barriers for new or innovative efforts. A collaborative fund should never, for example, accept money that would otherwise go or is currently going directly to groups, or exempt funders from the expectation that they will invest in racial justice directly as well as through the collaborative. Some funds are geared toward moving groups out of the collaborative bucket and into direct relationships with member funds. One former leader of a funding collaborative said, “If you’re not actually changing what the broader philanthropic sector funds, then you’re just doing expensive grantmaking.”

It is important to note the distinction between funding intermediaries. Some are developed to help organize and move resources to groups in communities or sectors. Others are rooted intermediary organizations, founded to support community and/or sector work and development—people-of-color-led institutions providing legal and policy research that are rooted in specific movements and/or communities, for example, or national networks of local organizing groups doing work together that are looking to pool expertise and resources in order to scale up their impact. These kinds of intermediaries are critical to the sustainable growth and development of the racial justice sector. Without them, organizations are asked to rely on predominantly white intermediaries that have limited experience working in their communities for research, strategic communications, fiscal sponsorship, and other support.

Lack of support for these organic, people-of-color-led intermediaries also tends to concentrate resources for racial justice at the smaller, local levels of grantmaking,

when all work—local, regional, and national—requires investment for a healthy sector.

Fund Predominantly White Organizations Only Under These Conditions

Over the past decade plus, as philanthropy recognized that so many existing institutional leaders in various sectors needed to increase their focus on racial equity, resources often flowed to support predominantly white organizations to diversify their staff and focus. In some cases, as racial equity became more palatable and “trendy,” largely white organizations have been funded to create projects that move others in their field. Often the initial motivations to get many of these organizations to focus on race was the desire for reform, changing sources of money (moving existing resources), or simply the recognition that in order to be vital and relevant they needed to be more responsive to changing demographics. However, as funders have greater willingness to fund racial equity, there has been concern that they are more apt to fund change in the often predominantly white organizations with whom they’re already familiar, rather than change the way they are funding to trust more organizations led by people of color.

However, a power-building approach to racial justice means that the goal of our grantmaking has to be self-determination and agency among communities of color themselves. Therefore, funding of predominantly white organizations to carry out racial justice work has to be contingent on rigorous criteria—far more rigorous than our interviewees had observed or experienced as common practice.

By predominantly white, we mean grantseekers whose decision-makers are majority white, which, depending on the organization’s structure, could mean board members or executive staff. We do not conflate this definition with having a white CEO—there are organizations with CEOs of color that operate without a racial justice commitment. We also exempt from this discussion white groups that deliberately organize other white people to participate in racial justice struggles, which is work that was recognized as critical by both activists and funders in our research.

There is a long history of predominantly white organizations entering irresponsibly into racial justice spaces. According to funders and activists we

interviewed, one consequence of diversity and inclusion framing is that energy and money are directed toward predominantly white organizations to take on racial justice projects, including internal diversification efforts and externally facing program work. These grants may fund outreach to people of color, internal training, or an advocacy project related to structural racism, among other things. There are two common rationales for such investment: first, that as a result of white organizations waking up, communities of color can access and use their power and resources to build their own organizations; and second, that groups of color don't have the capacity to accept large grants or start a new body of work, so the engagement of a white group is required. The negative effects of such entry reshape the political and cultural landscape and can do lasting harm to the goal of building capacity and infrastructure that is owned and operated by people of color. These effects include:

1. Lowered standards and unearned credibility for white organizations that put wrong frames out into the world that gain traction because of their access to media and social capital, or whose good work fails to credit adequately the people and organizations of color that helped make it so.
2. A drain on the capacity of leaders and organizations of color whose work the white organization uses to create its own products. It is highly unlikely any predominantly white organization is proposing to conduct racial justice work without seeking guidance and input from organizations, intermediaries, and leaders of color that have been working, sometimes for decades, to build their base of people, knowledge, and legitimacy.
3. White organizations that focus entirely on internal diversity efforts, but have no commitment to changing their strategy and program for racial justice goals, or—as we also see—the exact opposite: white organizations creating external products, but not addressing their own demographics and internal power relations.
4. Unchanged relationships, or even a growing gap between people of color working on racial groups and the funders who become interested in that work. Grants to white organizations can further consolidate their access to funders while continuing to shut out groups of color that can't get a meeting.

Many racial justice funders see access and capacity rationales as simply a dismissal of the leadership of people of color. A Native American funder said, "Capacity [is] a code word that we've learned over these last twenty, thirty years, as being, I guess, 'She's a little bit brown. A little bit too Black. You're probably just a little bit too this or that.'" These arguments can also constitute a self-perpetuating belief among funders who fail to recognize existing strengths in organizations of color and then create the very capacity shortfalls they aim to work around.

White organizations sincere in their desire to engage racial justice still may be unaware of what is actually required to align their programs, operations, leadership, and culture to contribute well to the ecosystem. "If I were a funder who was asked to fund change at a predominantly white organization," a white president of a private foundation said, "I would need to have a very high level of confidence that the people were aware of what they were actually asking of themselves, and willing to take it on." Indications of this high level of commitment include an active commitment to using a racial justice lens in crafting strategy, usually developed through trusted partnerships with organizations and communities of color, with commensurate internal change—hiring, culture, decision structures—to implement the strategy.

Some white organizations will argue that they are the best messengers to change attitudes and actions in their predominantly white field (e.g. health, environment, economic development, the arts). That is a different conversation than mobilizing white communities to support racial justice principles and policies, and it obscures the need for intermediary infrastructure built directly in and with communities of color in ways that institutionalize their expertise, solutions, and approaches. The usual flow of money goes from a foundation to a white organization, and then to an organization of color in the form of a contract or stipend (if even that). On occasion, we see white organizations subcontract with an organization of color to produce research or strategy, which is then credited to the white organization rather than to the creator of color. By credited, we refer to the social and political capital that results from the product, not solely to the people named in bylines.

While contracts may "compensate" the experts of color in a narrow sense, they do not cover the true cost of meeting the white organization's needs. Those true costs would surely include the opportunity costs for the



CRITERIA BEFORE FUNDING PREDOMINANTLY WHITE ORGANIZATIONS TO DO RACIAL JUSTICE WORK

Foundations considering support for predominantly white organizations on racial justice should first ask themselves these questions:

1. Is there an organization of color working in the same space or are there other investments that would build power and self-determination for communities of color directly?
2. Does the grantseeker understand the scale of change that would be required to become a truly multiracial organization and operate with racial justice values?
3. Has the grantseeker made investments in change work through their general operating funds, and have they ensured the work remains a top priority?
4. What would be the actual benefit to communities of color of the white organization's entry or expansion in racial justice; which communities, issues, or solutions would be elevated, for example?
5. Has the organization shown enough progress and a unique enough contribution to the work to justify continued racial justice grants?
6. Do they have authentic and lasting relationships with communities of color?

If after considering all of these criteria, investments in predominantly white organizations seeking to advance racial justice and equity still seem worthwhile, funders and these nonprofits should still consider how to operate in ways that offset the systemic inequities they are purporting to challenge. These are a few options:

1. **Predominantly white nonprofits working on racial justice can introduce their POC partners directly to their funders, either in joint applications or to independently apply.**
2. **If the white nonprofits in a sector need training support, funders can send grants directly to respected racial justice training organizations to partner with the institutions that meet criteria as being both strategic and committed.**
3. **Any grant applications from predominantly white nonprofits for racial justice work should show how much of their current and projected core funding will be aimed at that work independent of the supplemental support they are seeking. It should simply be a non-starter if work on equity and justice is only happening if this group can get added funds to do it.**

people of color—are those contracts taking them away from their own work? Additionally, the initial frames and final decisions come from the white organization, so the people of color who are brought in have to spend intellectual, physical, and emotional energy either catering to frames with which they don't agree or correcting them at the risk of being labeled "difficult."

Another way funders have been supporting their predominantly white grantees to shift is not with added grant dollars, but providing direct access to tools and resources. The following example reveals a positive, fruitful intervention in which a foundation's actions pushed a predominantly white grantee. A place-based foundation provided consultants to help grantees with understanding structural racism, eventually building a racial-impact assessment tool into its RFP. The foundation itself uses the tool to build shared analysis and a suite of solutions. The foundation provides a workshop on how to use the tool as a free service to local organizations; even those that don't apply then still get exposure to the language and practice of racial justice.

The president of this foundation tells a story of a white-led, very progressive advocacy organization that had kept a bit of distance from the foundation's racial justice focus. She received an email one day from the executive director, noting that the program and development staff were working through the impact assessment together. "I thought, 'Okay, cool, interesting.' Then, when I read the proposal, I was so shocked." The group proposed to expand its traditional agenda of advocating for more housing vouchers to address bias and discrimination by landlords through local policies. "They were naming a long history of housing discrimination," the foundation president said. "I was shocked to see this acknowledgement coming from previous resistance, and actually going from acknowledgement to 'here's what our policy work will look like this year.'"

Another circumstance that warrants positive consideration may appear when a new CEO of color takes leadership of a predominantly white organization. If the new CEO intends to move a racial justice agenda, it is critical that board, staff, and funders prepare to stand behind that person, rather than taking the "wait and see" attitude that frequently accompanies these leadership transitions and often jeopardizes their success. But it is entirely possible that a CEO of color doesn't want or won't be able to change decision-making norms or structures. The criteria questions

above should be applied to largely white organizations even if they have CEOs of color, examining changes to program, culture, and practice beyond a single—though undoubtedly significant—hire.

Does Direct Service Fit in a Systems-Change Approach?

There has long been a false dichotomy between direct service provision and organizing. Grantmaking with a racial justice lens does not mean cutting direct service providers from a racial justice-oriented portfolio. Instead, it should support flexible approaches to organizing that build power, whether it uses aspects of direct service provision or more recognized tools such as canvassing and rallies.

A Black president of a private foundation shared the metaphor of saving babies from the river with her board as they were seeking to impact systems change: "Do we stand downstream to pull them out, or try to prevent them from falling in the first place—to engage grantees in examining root causes and challenge the either/or notion of support for policy versus direct service. It's not just a relocation to focus on policy but to really have an understanding that folks in the community are the ones to solve the root causes of the problems with the resources. And that folks working in direct service often are extremely knowledgeable about what those root causes are and what the systemic intervention should be."

The national [Building Movement Project](#) notes in [Social Service and Social Change: A Process Guide](#), that most direct service organizations already adopt missions related to ending the suffering caused by inequality and injustice; that they come into contact with thousands of directly impacted people, which gives them a close view of how the systems play out; and that the U.S. social service network is massive and varied. This guide advises social service providers on a process to shift their interaction with service seekers to seeing them as consumers rather than clients and then ultimately, as constituents: This allows them to both be a vital lifeline as well as address larger systemic issues. The Guide notes:

"Addressing these larger systemic barriers is a daunting task, especially at a time when so many service providers face growing demands and reduced funding. We believe that a way must be found to meet clients' day-to-day needs as well as to change the circumstances that currently reinforce