Delivering Social Justice Through Philanthropy
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Alliance Magazine – June 2005

What is the meaning of social justice, and how can charitable foundations apply it in their grantgiving? Increasingly, foundations have begun to debate this issue. This article seeks to identify ways in which foundations, striving to become more socially just in their approach, can begin to reposition themselves. I acknowledge that this may be a difficult task and that the challenges facing philanthropic organizations in so-called 'developing' countries may be different from those in more 'developed' countries, but the questions of value are the same in each case.

While social justice is a concept that has been debated for thousands of years, it is only since the 1970s, and particularly in the past 15 years, that it has re-emerged in political discourse, notably among governments which have characterized themselves as social democratic or 'Third Way'. Essentially, as David Miller notes, in the context of the development of liberal democratic societies, 'the quest for social justice is a natural consequence of the spread of enlightenment'.

The concept is also a contested one, adopted from a variety of political positions and linked to wider arguments about the roles of the state, the market and the individual. Although contemporary social democratic governments appear to 'own' the approach of social justice, it has also been espoused by the political right, for example in the UK (where a former leader of the Conservative Party has established a Centre for Social Justice) and in Australia, where the government argues that social justice is best achieved when individuals are able to compete in the marketplace, unconstrained by the action of the state. Current arguments about social justice also expose tensions with other overarching political goals of economic competitiveness and environmental sustainability.

The first critical point for donors, then, is to be clear to themselves and to potential grantees what they understand by social justice. If foundations do espouse the values of social justice, this implies a strongly proactive stance to grantmaking. It will influence not only what they do, but how they do it. They must also have a clear theory of social change, an analysis of the causes of injustice and a strategy for addressing them. This, as we shall see, must involve the participation of grantees in political change. It might, for example, also necessitate building strategic alliances, partnerships or coalitions with other donors or with proxies who can act where donors can't, to pursue broader aims of social justice.

**Justice as fairness**

The simplest definition of social justice is that it is 'fairness'. Drawing on Aristotle, Hume, Hegel, Kant and other moral philosophers, John Rawls argued in the 1970s that “... the principal subject of justice is the basic structure of society ... the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation.” He was not concerned with the benefits to be derived for individuals from private association.

Philanthropic donors have a huge range of options open to them for promoting change through social action, research, lobbying, partnership working, developing their own voice, promoting information and intelligence, facilitating capacity within specific sectoral interests, supporting the voice of the poor, levering change within other organizations, bringing grantees together to form social movements, and so on. Some or all of these strategies can be pursued with organizations
similarly committed to social justice. Which strategies they adopt depends significantly on the political and policy context.

In Rawls' 'well-ordered society', everyone is presumed to act justly and vested interests are put to one side. Other theorists support this view: social justice cannot be found, they argue, in a society oriented towards individual gain and 'standards and values cannot be developed privately', i.e., within one institution or in relation to one practice. What 'we apply to others we must apply to ourselves.'

These approaches are grounded primarily in the traditions of a redistributive modern welfare state and have big implications for the relationship between donors and grantees. If donors require grantees to live up to claims of being socially just organizations, then the donors have to do so themselves too. Are the decision-making procedures of donors fair, transparent, culturally appropriate and open to challenge?

Social justice and equality

Social justice has a strong relationship with – but is not the same thing as – equality. The obscene disparities in income and wealth which characterize most societies in both North and South are clearly not socially just, particularly as much of that income and wealth is earned at the expense of others' poorly paid labour. However, it is arguable that the development of skills (often through extended training, on or off the job, and education) and the undertaking of particularly risky jobs that benefit society more generally deserve some public recognition, usually through financial reward. Conversely 'inequalities which are not to the benefit of all' constitute injustice, and this would include gross inequalities in income and wealth. This approach to social justice also highlights distinctions between equality of opportunity, or access, equality of outcome, and equality of status.

Most contemporary politicians arguing for equality tend to argue for equality of opportunity. However, those on the political right emphasize simply equality of rules and processes, the state's role being merely to ensure free market exchanges for all (although we know that the powerful – in Russia, China or the USA alike – can in any case manipulate the so-called 'free' market in their own interests). Those broadly on the left emphasize equality of outcome – or at least sufficient equality of outcome to prevent injustice. Technically, all full citizens have equality of status within a society; however, equality of opportunity and access, and of outcome – say, for black and minority ethnic groups, or for women – are clearly not present in any society. We know from educational statistics in most countries that equality of opportunity – in the sense that everyone starts school at roughly the same level of attainment – is not itself enough to achieve social justice. The impact of racism within educational systems in many countries means that many minority ethnic children fall far behind the average in terms of achievement by the time they leave school even if, as is the case in the UK, some are actually ahead of the average when they enter school. This is but one example of the critique that 'equality of opportunity in the context of economic and social structures that remain profoundly unequal is likely to remain a mirage.'

Desert, need and equality

More recently, David Miller has based his conception of social justice on the themes of desert, need and equality. In relation to desert, a just society is one 'whose institutions are arranged so that people get the benefits they deserve.' This principle cannot, however, become a rigid formulation contingent simply on institutional arrangements within a society. Resources cannot
be committed solely on the basis of desert but also on the basis of need. We should not, for example, starve prisoners who have been tried and convicted; their need for and rights to food override society's disapproval of their behaviour. And the concept of need cannot be 'merely idiosyncratic or confined to those who hold a particular view of the good life (as it usually is by the most powerful in society) … it must be capable of being validated on terms that all relevant parties can agree to.'

This validation is a political process; in some countries, consensual versions of poverty have been arrived at through market testing. Generally, however, many parties – usually the poor and disadvantaged – are excluded from defining their needs (or at least from publicly articulating their definitions and seeing them turned into policy) because of their lack of power. Hence, worldwide, definitions of poverty are usually imposed by transnational organizations such as the IMF and not negotiated with the poor themselves.

The implication of this for donors who claim to serve the interests of the poor and disadvantaged is that they must find means for listening to the voice of the poor; this would apply as much to priority setting and evaluation as to the choice of the individual projects that they fund. This is not to argue that the poor have a monopoly on progressive or socially just views, as Emmett Carson rightly points out (see below) – there is plenty of evidence to the contrary – but that their voice is often one which is missing in policy debates and one which donors should engage with.

This raises awkward questions for procedures: for example, what constitutes success and who defines the measures? Should evaluation of project work be done by peer groups rather than outside consultants? Is long-term support for sustainable programmes better than supporting one-off projects? Are donor priorities determined by detached research alone (if that!) or can engagement with potential grantees shape them? Why should grantees not have as powerful a voice as investment advisers? Most foundations are accountable only to the tax authorities: the claims of social justice suggest that they should develop transparent forms of accountability to their target publics. But the lack of political accountability also places them in a position where they – almost more than anyone else with power and leverage – can take risks. Exploring the causes of social problems may well cause controversy, but if they don't do this, donors will generally remain locked into dealing with their symptoms.

This approach also raises some interesting issues about the extent to which philanthropic grantmaking operates as subservient to, complementary to or in opposition to the policy of the state. The state often has a strong view on desert, and in most countries social assistance to the poor, for example, is set at extremely low levels. Do foundations support that approach or challenge it? And, if they challenge it, by what strategic means? Should donors be in the business of challenging unjust laws – as many do, for example in the case of the treatment of refugees – and how do they determine what is unjust? Again, the voice of the poor can be a guide.

**Social justice, citizenship and rights**

The concept of social justice is linked closely to other key concepts such as citizenship and rights. T H Marshall's classic exposition of rights is still used by many to identify the characteristics of citizenship. Human rights have traditionally incorporated:

- Civil rights: Property rights, legal guarantees and freedoms
- Political rights: Right to vote, rights of association, constitutional participation
Social rights: Entitlements to basic standards of education, health and social care, housing and income maintenance (whether through work or benefits)

These rights are not, however, of equal weight. Private property rights underpin the operation of the market economy. This generates much unjust inequality, and 'political rights and social rights tend to challenge such inequality.'

Moreover, the unrestrained workings of the market, which is the fundamental cause of much injustice, both social and economic, may afford certain rights – for example the elimination of absolute poverty – but it cannot deliver social justice. The goal of social justice as fairness therefore requires governments to confront the inequities of market systems. And if they do not do so, where do donors stand? To implicitly or explicitly challenge the state again involves risk, but not being prepared to take risks in pursuit of social justice implies acceptance of the status quo.

**Gender and culture**

Earlier analyses of social justice are also limited in their understanding of the way cultural rights and gender rights need to be built into a framework of values, particularly in the context of a globalizing world. For minority ethnic groups, this means the right to be culturally different within a society that provides the same social, civil and political rights to all. How this plays out in particular multicultural societies depends on the nature of each society. It may lead to further tensions for donors: for example, in supporting an independent role for women within cultures which devalue women's contribution, or encouraging the growth of migrant workers' groups in countries where they are exploited and given no formal political power.

Increasingly, foundations will face the challenge of exploring the nature of social justice within multicultural societies, particularly in those characterized by institutional and individual racism, whether it be the marginalization of aboriginal groups, structured racism against the Roma, or the 'everyday racism' of most societies. Multicultural societies have increasingly been struggling with the difficulties of incorporating respect and recognition for cultural diversity and difference within a framework of universal rights. These arguments have, however, generally been couched in terms of social integration, assimilation and cohesion – and their obvious manifestations such as preferences in food and dress – rather than social justice. Social injustice in these societies comes not just from the unconstrained workings of the mechanisms of the market leading to significant differences in income and wealth and the opportunities and outcomes that these bring, but also from cultural and socially constructed differences based on, for example, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and disability. Donors have to recognize how these differences operate and work to confront them in their own practices and policies.

**Respect and recognition**

Social justice is thus, critically, not just about the distribution of material goods and benefits but about the non-material aspects of life, the 'relations of respect' and 'recognition' between different groups and individuals (and not just the poor). This relational strand, in particular 'the elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression', needs to be added to the concept of social justice. Donors supporting 'relational' social justice may find themselves challenging powerful attitudes and practices, including the biases against women, minority ethnic groups and disability that characterize many societies. The task facing foundations is then to ensure that all cultural groups within their remit are, first, recognized and, second, engaged in the process of
determining and acting on these principles. But it also requires them to pay attention to the 
relations of respect between themselves and their potential grantees. This should be reflected in 
all donor processes, from application forms through to priority setting.

The disadvantaged as actors

Most conceptions of social justice still fail to consider the role of those most disadvantaged by 
social injustice as actors - rather than simply victims – in the search for social justice. Some 
foundations, at least rhetorically, have now acknowledged the importance of processes which 
empower the disadvantaged to act and speak on their own behalf. An additional dimension to 
social justice is thus about the role of community development as the means by which the 
excluded and the marginalized can act in pursuit of it. Human rights cannot be developed in the 
absence of processes of sustainable development, owned by the poor and disadvantaged 
themselves. To put it another way, social justice is not simply about achieving human welfare, but 
about the means by which it is obtained.

This focus on process again raises important questions about foundations' relationship with their 
grantees. Are grantees encouraged to develop a critique of the processes and practices of the 
foundations themselves? Do these structures and processes – which often provide limited funds 
for limited periods – really empower grantee organizations or simply tie them into a more 
dependent funding relationship? Does the language that donors use focus on the positive and 
creative aspects of potential grantees, and the opportunities that funding opens up, or does it 
encourage them to view themselves as victims, as people simply with needs rather than with 
skills, aspirations and potential?

A wide-ranging definition

Drawing on these developing analyses, one wide-ranging definition of social justice might be as 
follows:

A framework of objectives, pursued through social, economic, environmental and political 
policies, based on an acceptance of difference and diversity, and informed by values concerned with

- achieving fairness and equality of outcomes and treatment;
- recognizing the dignity and equal worth and encouraging the self-esteem of all;
- meeting basic needs;
- reducing inequalities in wealth, income and life chances;
- encouraging the sustainable participation of all, including the most disadvantaged

This challenging formulation, against which donors can test their programmes and practices, is 
not intended as a menu from which one can pick and choose but a range of dimensions to social 
justice, all of which must be contained within a policy programme. Which of these dimensions is 
focused on at a given moment does, however, depend on the political and cultural context within 
which donors are operating, as Alexander Irwan (see below) points out. Donors whose 
programmes focus on meeting basic needs alone cannot be regarded as implementing a social 
justice programme. Simply supplying the infrastructure for provision of clean water – a basic 
need for everyone – does not meet the test of social justice To meet that test, it must enable, for 
instance, sustainable control of that provision by the recipients which requires education, 
provision of skills and investment in human resources, alongside wider programmes to address
the reasons why some groups still have difficulty having their basic needs met while others have a disproportionate share of available resources

This might again suggest to donors that they need to think about the extent to which programmes they support simply address the manifestations of social injustice, or its causes. It may be acceptable in certain instances for donors to support symptomatic issues – for example, campaigns to raise the income of poor people – but only if this clearly derives from an analysis of change and is linked to wider action to promote that change. Debt relief by itself is not social justice, but promoting an understanding of and challenging the causes of debt (whether domestic or international) can be. These examples provide illustrations of issues where broader alliances between philanthropic organizations can help to address social injustice at a number of different levels.

Critics of social democratic governments argue that the state has to intervene more strongly to promote social justice both in terms of the process by which it is achieved and in terms of redistributive policies. The market distributes goods and services as well as life chances unfairly, and the state should have a key role in correcting those deficiencies. Governments focusing only on the poor and disadvantaged fail one key test of social justice, which is that it is concerned with the fair distribution of the good and bad things across the whole of society and not just among the poor. This is another way of saying that structural issues matter because the rich and powerful control structures and processes. Donors need to focus on structural issues too: in doing so, they will come to understand more clearly why the world is not a socially just place and why, without social justice, the world will not have peace.

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3 See for example www.wangarimaathai.or.ke
7 See for example the Breadline Britain studies in the UK
8 Interestingly, in the UK minority groups are becoming increasingly impatient with research projects that explore their needs, arguing that years of white-controlled research have not changed their impoverished position. They argue that they need to be involved from the start in setting research agendas.
9 The King Baudouin Foundation in Belgium has established a listening Network whereby 250 individuals feed stories of social injustice to the Foundation to help it shape its priorities. See www.kbs-frb.org and box on p30
10 Emmett Carson, President of the Minneapolis Foundation, is one who has argued that donors must be prepared to take risks in the interests of providing a counterweight to the actions of the state and market. See Alliance Extra, September 2003. at www.alfavida.org/allianceonline See also Steven Burkeman's article in Alliance Extra, March 2003.