

# Is there a will? John Heller

Can foundations help society become more just? How can they address the underlying causes of poverty and injustice? Seeking answers to these questions brought 33 foundation leaders to the very heart of philanthropy's promise, and possible contradictions. The occasion was an international conference on 'Foundations and Social Justice: Visions, Strategies, Capacities', organized by the Synergos Institute and locally hosted by the Oaxaca Community Foundation (OCF), in May 2003 in Oaxaca City, Mexico.



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Participants<sup>1</sup> represented a broad spectrum of viewpoints, cultures and philanthropic traditions, and a range of institutions including community and corporate foundations, environmental trusts, philanthropic support organizations and national grantmakers. The group offered a compelling snapshot of how foundations, particularly those in developing and transitional countries, are struggling with issues of justice, social change and the positioning of philanthropy within new democracies. Three key observations were made:

- ▶ *Social justice is an urgent and important issue.* Dissent about whether foundations should be concerned with social justice was conspicuously absent. The basic consensus was that their foundations exist, at least in part, to redress injustice and inequities in a fundamental way.
- ▶ *Obstacles abound . . . but the resolve to address social justice is taking root.* Challenges faced by foundations seeking to address social justice were acknowledged, including the fear of being controversial, risk-averse boards and staff, the incongruity of relying on funding generated by the status quo while simultaneously seeking to change it, and the sheer enormity of some social justice concerns. Despite these issues, optimism far outweighed negativity, with many expressing a determination to deepen social justice work.
- ▶ *Foundations are looking beyond grantmaking to address social justice.* Energy focused on the range of non-financial support that foundations can

offer to address social justice concerns – as convener, organizer, relationship broker, constituency builder, listener, policy promoter and knowledge circulator.

Participants offered many examples of steps their foundations are taking to advance social justice – from securing land tenure for upland indigenous groups in rural Mexico to mobilizing donors in support of children's rights in India. From such examples, three interconnected roles that foundations can play in advancing social justice emerge.

## Supporting community organizing and institution building

Social thinker Bernardo Toro from Bogotá, Colombia, counselled that 'the first step in overcoming poverty and social exclusion is to create and strengthen organizations', suggesting that organizations and associations help guarantee that rights can be exercised and protected, and participation in organizations induces self-regulation through social ties, which can restrain actions that could encroach on others' rights. Emmett Carson (Minneapolis Community Foundation) added that 'supporting the development of organizations by the communities affected by social injustices is one of the most important things a foundation can do'. In doing so, organizations representing groups affected by inequities can grow in their ability to self-advocate and leverage support for change. Practically, foundation support in this area may include grants for capacity building and financial or technical support for institution formation, leadership development, convening and networking.

## Engaging government

Participants drew attention to the fact that the state, as the ultimate guarantor of rights, needs to be included in any equation to advance social justice. With connections to a wide range of actors at different levels within society and a deep understanding of social issues, some foundations may be extremely well positioned to engage government. This can take on many incarnations, such as:

**Bridging** Foundations can play an intermediary role between macro-policy decisions and micro-level needs, and act as translator between communities and government. The Local Development Foundation in Thailand, for example, worked with NGOs to gather community-level input from hundreds of local constituencies during the re-drafting of the Thai

<sup>1</sup> The meeting convened foundation heads from 18 countries, mostly in Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe and Latin America, all of whom are participants in Synergos' Senior Fellows programme, which engages an international cadre of foundation leaders in a three-year peer learning and service fellowship. The meeting was made possible through grant support from the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation.

**"Poverty and social injustice can only take root in poorly organized communities."**

*Bernardo Toro, Javeriana University (Colombia)*

**"We learned to leave differences and fragmented visions behind to create bridges of understanding among the sectors."**

*Jaime Bolanos, Oaxaca Community Foundation (Mexico)*

**"The highest and best use of our resources is not just to make grants for social justice but to expand the constituency for social justice."**

*Shannon St John, Triangle Community Foundation (USA)*

constitution in 1997, resulting in the 'People's Constitution', Thailand's most progressive and citizen-focused constitution to date.

**Promoting standards** Foundations can identify and promote social justice standards for government (and business) and work to give meaning to standards at the local level. The Abrinq Foundation in Brazil, for example, has compiled a comprehensive set of standards on the rights and treatment of children and adolescents. Over 1,500 municipal governments in Brazil have adopted the standards and are developing local action plans.

**Improving public policy** Foundations can pursue a range of strategies to promote public policy supportive of social justice, such as participating in official policy commissions and public education campaigns, and funding the policy research and advocacy efforts of NGOs, educational institutions and think tanks. Monica Patten (Community Foundations of Canada) sees foundations as playing a highly constructive role in collaborating with other actors in society, including government, to ensure that regulations supportive of social justice are in place.

**Being a model** Foundations can provide alternatives to government policy and programmes simply through the way they work and by sharing information widely. In designing its programmes, the Lumbu Indigenous Community Foundation in Australia first took stock of the Australian government's own work with Aboriginal peoples, then pursued a markedly different set of strategies. It provides 'venture' investments in multi-year projects and supports them with advice, expertise and skills training, and ensures that communities fully own and direct the development process. If successful, such approaches may broaden the policy and service model options for government and other actors.

### Building constituencies and alliances

A final strategy envisions foundations as constituency builders for social justice. This may entail actions as simple as conversations with donors about the underlying causes of social issues, introducing grantees to one another or convening issue-based dialogues on social justice topics. Emmett Carson argues that 'often times, simply convening people to talk about an issue is enough to begin to influence

public opinion and begin to change the system'. A more intensive strategy involves actively supporting coalition building among activist groups, particularly among a foundation's own grantees and partners. Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi (African Women's Development Fund), for example, believes that promoting 'a culture of partnerships and collaboration' among women's organizations is vital to promoting change. Other methods include public education campaigns and actively fostering linkages between government, business and civil society.

Shannon St John (Triangle Community Foundation, North Carolina), emphasized the role of foundations in educating and raising awareness among donors to expand the constituency for social justice. One of the biggest opportunities is to work intensively with what she calls the 'caring but clueless' – potential donors who feel they want to do something but are not sure what. In her view, foundations have an opportunity to counsel, educate and engage such potential supporters, deepening their understanding of social issues over time.

David Bonbright (Aga Khan Foundation) remarked on foundation activity during the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, revealing much about the potential of foundations as constituency and alliance builders, even in the most difficult of environments. He contended that foundations can foster broad movements within societies struggling for social justice and provide linkages to other societies and international movements for change, raising consciousness among potential agents of change. Foundations can also provide 'safe spaces' for dialogue to help overcome the 'disunity of the oppressed' and lessen differences among opposing groups.

Woven together, these three roles – supporting community organizing and institution building, engaging government, and building constituencies – portray foundations as part of society's connective tissue, influencing social justice by communicating across realities, enhancing associational life, opening new possibilities for participation and connecting even the unlikeliest of allies. That some foundations are making a difference became plain in Oaxaca. That thousands around the world are not confronting these issues is obvious through word, deed and the painful inequities and structural injustices we see growing before us. There is a way. Is there a will? @

*For more information about the Senior Fellows programme, or for a CD-Rom with the full proceedings of this meeting, contact [jheller@synergos.org](mailto:jheller@synergos.org)*