

Special Feature

Social Justice



For this issue of *Effect*, we decided to focus on the concept social justice as a goal of philanthropy and invite a number of European Foundations to tell us about their understanding of "social justice" and how it influences their overall approaches and especially their grantmaking policies.

Over the next pages you will find a series of articles that reflect the diversity of how different foundations approach the idea of "social justice" and how they are working towards this goal through their actions and grants.

To introduce the topic, we asked two leading practitioners to share their thoughts about this increasingly important and sometimes controversial branch of philanthropy.

Working to build a fairer world

By Ben Carlin, EFC

Dealing with social challenges is nothing new for foundations. For centuries, philanthropists have supported services and facilities that improve the lives of the poorest members of our societies. In the last issue of *Effect* we highlighted how foundations are contributing to the fight against poverty by creating opportunities for people to build a better life for themselves and their families. One can find many examples of efforts to address the symptoms of poverty and reduce its harmful effects on people and communities.

During recent years, we have seen the growth of a new kind of philanthropy that aims to address the root causes of poverty, often by empowering people to stand up for their rights and demand structural changes that will lead to more fairness and greater equality. Social Justice Philanthropy has become an increasingly significant important branch of philanthropic activity, especially in the USA, where it accounts for more than 12% of all grantmaking by foundations (around \$3 billion per year)*.

"Fairness and justice for all groups and individuals" is how the Ford Foundation's Christopher Harris would sum-up the concept of social justice. While the term "social justice" can carry "different meanings in different contexts", Harris believes that "notions of fairness and justice remain universal".

According to Stephen Pittam of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, social justice combines two essential elements: "addressing the underlying causes of problems and looking for structural change"; as well as "empowering the most disadvantaged in society".

* See *Social Justice Grantmaking II*, published by the Foundation Center in July 2009. <http://foundationcenter.org>

Harris agrees that *“a basic aspect of work for social justice is the necessity to examine structural arrangements that cause and maintain injustice and focus on changing those structures instead of only ameliorating the symptoms of injustice”*. He says: *“another critical element must be a focus on power -- who has the power to maintain injustice and more importantly, how can marginalized groups gain power necessary to change their unjust conditions?”*

“Much of philanthropy is still in charitable mode – it is about making problems easier to live with” says Pittam. *“For me Social Justice Philanthropy looks to more radical solutions to address the underlying causes. It is about more than just giving money; it is about standing in partnership and in solidarity with those who are striving for a more equal and just society.”*

Harris notes that most philanthropic giving supports access to some kind

of service, either related to social or economic need (food, shelter, protection), health (vaccines and mosquito nets, for example), or simply the enjoyment of life (arts, culture, sport). *“Social justice philanthropy is different in that it explicitly attempts to address not so much the symptoms of injustice (the lack of access to goods and services), but rather the arrangements that cause the differential access.”*

“It is important to underscore the real value of philanthropic or charitable giving that funds services” insists Harris. At the same time, he points out that *“philanthropy can never operate at the scale required to provide all of the services needed”* – simply because its resources are relatively small in comparison to those available to the public and private sectors. *“Hence, the roles of the State and the market are fundamental in any context regarding social justice.”*

Putting social justice into practice

The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust has been committed to the concept of social justice since it was founded in 1904. At that time its founder was concerned that *“much of current philanthropic efforts is directed to remedying the more superficial manifestations of weakness or evil, while little thought or effort is directed to searching out their underlying causes”*. Joseph Rowntree noted that *“the Soup Kitchen in York never has difficulty in obtaining adequate financial aid, but an enquiry into the extent and causes of poverty would enlist little support”*.

More than a century later, the JRCT continues to have a clear idea of its own mission, which is rooted in the values of the Quaker movement. According to its website: *“We want to engage in philanthropy which changes the existing power imbalances in society to effect real change. ... We place ourselves deliberately at the cutting edge of difficult and contentious issues. We believe in creating a dialogue across difference and we want to support change towards a better world. ... Our interest is in removing problems, not in making them easier to live with.”*

In line with this approach, the JRCT recently funded a survey to investigate the situation of refused asylum seekers who remain in the UK without any legal status, and are effectively destitute - without access to services and resources. Many of these people cannot be returned to their countries of origin, which include Iran, Iraq and Zimbabwe. The JRCT also set up a Commission which has made recommendations for how government policies should be changed so as to reduce the human suffering caused by the destitution of asylum seekers and their children.

Other examples of the Trust's grantmaking include: support for the development of Cageprisoners, a human rights organisation which campaigns for the application of international law in respect of all detainees, including those held at the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp; and funding for work to promote peace and reconciliation with respect to the situation in Northern Ireland, including dialogue within and among organisations that had previously been involved in violence.

There does appear to be a significant overlap between the goal of promoting social justice and that of ensuring respect for human rights, which is also an important focus for many non-governmental organisations. Pittam agrees that a human rights approach could be one way of advancing social justice, but insists that *“the concept of social justice is a broader one that addresses issues of equality and power as well as the rights of individuals and communities”*.

Meanwhile the Ford Foundation is deeply influenced by the idea of social justice, and under its current leadership is increasingly focusing its resources on activities that contribute to this objective. *“Good examples of efforts to address structural injustice can be found in Ford's work on racial justice and immigrant rights”* says Christopher Harris. *“But there are also efforts to support social justice in economic governance, media and even arts and culture.”*

Ten years ago, Harris was closely involved in setting up Ford's philanthropy

STEPHEN PITTAM is Trust Secretary (head of office) of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust (JRCT), which is based in York (UK). The Trust was founded in 1904 by Joseph Rowntree, a businessman, philanthropist and champion of social reform.

JRCT makes grants to individuals and to projects seeking the creation of a peaceful world, political equality and social justice. Most grant recipients are based in the United Kingdom, Ireland and South Africa.

www.jrct.org.uk



programme – with an explicit mission to help increase the amount and improve the effectiveness of grantmaking for social justice issues. This has included efforts to expand the field of foundations supporting social justice, both by strengthening existing funds and also by helping to set up new funds (including TrustAfrica, the Brazil and Arab Human Rights funds), as well as support for research and documentation to improve understanding of social justice philanthropy.

Facing difficult choices

The issue of whether or not to work with governments is a difficult one for foundations seeking to advance social justice. “Governments can be forces for good” says Pittam, “and yet in so many countries the gap between the rich and the poor is growing. Very occasionally JRCT will work with government on promoting a social justice agenda. In the main, however, we do not see that it is the role of foundations to offer substitute funding for what is legitimately the role of the state.”

Christopher Harris notes that the idea of engaging with the public sector as a partner appears to be more widely accepted in most European countries than in the United States. “In many ways European foundation are more at ease with the notion of working with the State than are their American counterparts” says Harris, who adds that this is “not surprising given our very different traditions regarding the State and its responsibilities for social welfare”.

For the JRCT, it is more important to support NGOs to put pressure on the state sector, and hold it to account for failing to ensure that everyone has access to the rights and services they need. “For many of the organisations we support, particularly in the human rights field, it would be totally inappropriate for them to receive funds from any other source than independent funders,” says Pittam.

According to Pittam, the social justice agenda is relevant to the foundation

sector as a whole. “The very act of creating a foundation demonstrates that a founder has an interest in promoting the public good. But there is a big difference between wanting to ‘do good’ and developing an analysis that there needs to be systemic change to create a fairer society.”

Pittam recognises that many philanthropists would be reluctant to provide funding for the kinds of activities supported by JRCT. “Those that have created wealth may want to open up opportunities for others and to improve the lot of the disadvantaged, but may not want to address some of the more challenging issues that are at the heart of the inequalities in our society or to support those who are interested in changing the system.”

If foundations are supporting activities that benefit the public good, does it matter if they are not directly concerned with issues of social justice? “That depends on what kind of society we are interested in creating,” says Pittam. “If we want to foster a sense of social solidarity and inclusiveness, if our vision is of a society that can welcome difference and diversity and if we are interested in the benefits of resources being shared more equally – then it does matter.”

Looking to the future

Over the coming years, Christopher Harris expects to see a continued growth of interest in how philanthropy can contribute to social justice. “The difficult economic situation that the world faces only underscores the need for more philanthropy emphasizing social justice. To put it simply -- the economic need is greater and the resources foundations have are fewer. Foundations have to consider ways of funding that have greater impact.”

Following the financial crisis of 2008, Harris believes that increased interest in the idea of Mission-Related Investing will also help move foundations in the direction of paying more attention to social justice. “Mission-related investing is a term which captures a set of different

practices, and more foundations are considering these techniques. ... Many of the practices emphasize social justice outcomes.”

Stephen Pittam also feels hopeful about the prospects for social justice philanthropy. “I have a sense that as the triple crunch of the economic crisis, the depletion of oil resources, and the climate change crisis take hold, it is inevitable that the rampant individualism that has been so prevalent in the last quarter century will fade and there will be a re-discovery of community and a sense of solidarity. ... There will be plenty of opportunities for those interested in promoting a social justice agenda to back new ideas and ways of organising. We might all have less resources, but the environment may be more conducive to change. This is what I feel on good days, anyway!”

CHRISTOPHER HARRIS is a Senior Programme Officer at the Ford Foundation’s headquarters in New York. The Ford Foundation was chartered in 1936 by Edsel Ford, while he was also President of the Ford Motor Company. Reducing poverty and injustice is a key objective for the Ford Foundation, which is active across a wide range of issues including: human rights, social justice philanthropy, economic fairness and opportunity.
www.fordfound.org

