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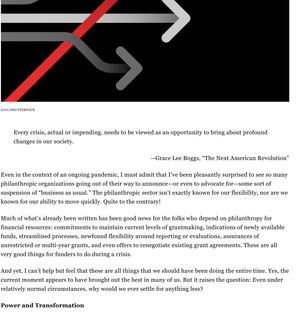
Why Should It Take a Pandemic to Bring out the Best in Philanthropy?

Farhad Ebrahimi, Guest Contributor



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Every crisis, actual or impending, needs to be viewed as an opportunity to bring about profound changes in our society.

—Grace Lee Boggs, "The Next American Revolution"

Even in the context of an ongoing pandemic, I must admit that I've been pleasantly surprised to see so many philanthropic organizations going out of their way to announce—or even to advocate for—some sort of suspension of "business as usual." The philanthropic sector isn't exactly known for our flexibility, nor are we known for our ability to move quickly. Quite to the contrary!

Much of what's already been written has been good news for the folks who depend on philanthropy for financial resources: commitments to maintain current levels of grantmaking, indications of newly available funds, streamlined processes, newfound flexibility around reporting or evaluations, assurances of unrestricted or multi-year grants, and even efforts to renegotiate existing grant agreements. These are all very good things for funders to do during a crisis.

And yet, I can't help but feel that these are all things that we should have been doing the entire time. Yes, the current moment appears to have brought out the best in many of us. But it raises the question: Even under relatively normal circumstances, why would we ever settle for anything less?

Power and Transformation

As with so many other crises, the COVID-19 pandemic—and the economic recession that it's catalyzed—will hit black, indigenous, immigrant, refugee and working-class communities first and worst. In the nonprofit world, many have come to frame this kind of dynamic through the lens of "equity." Or maybe even "diversity, equity and inclusion," if we're feeling thorough. These are all important words. But by themselves, they're insufficient.

If we're serious about equity, then we need to talk explicitly about power. For example, if we're going to talk about equity in outcomes, then we must also talk about equity in the processes that lead to those outcomes. It's one thing to say that we want equitable policies in response to a global pandemic. It's another thing to say that we want equity in who has a consistent voice and role in how such policies are created in the first place. This is a question of power, and it has much broader implications than any particular policy, or even any particular crisis.

We also need to talk explicitly about changing systems. There can be no real equity in any process that has been circumscribed within much larger systems that are implicitly (or even explicitly) white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, classist, xenophobic, etc. Real equity will require that these systems are changed, dismantled, or replaced entirely.

And, if we're honest with ourselves, then we need to acknowledge that philanthropy itself is one of the systems in need of such a critical assessment. If our aim is to support transformative change, then it stands to reason that we ourselves will need to transform. This means not only supporting work that builds and shifts power, but also confronting the implications of the power held by the philanthropic sector.

Many of the COVID-19 announcements emerging from philanthropy can best be understood as examples of shifting the power dynamics between funders and grantees. In a moment of crisis, practitioners within the philanthropic sector seem willing to relax our grasp a bit—to let go of some amount of power when it's absolutely clear that it would be in the best interest of both our grantees and the communities that they serve.

Which brings me back to my initial question: Why is it acceptable for us to have so much power to begin with? If our letting go of power can be helpful to our grantees during a global pandemic, then wouldn't it be just as helpful in the context of all the other interlocking crises—environmental, economic, political, you name it—that we currently face?

I'd argue that it would.

A Just Transition for the Philanthropic Sector

Going beyond protest organizing, visionary organizing begins by creating images and stories of the future that help us imagine and create alternatives to the existing system.

—Grace Lee Boggs, "The Next American Revolution"

If a stable, flexible, trusting and accountable approach to philanthropy ought to be our baseline, then what would it look like for us to meet the current crisis with an openness to even deeper transformation?

First, we should take this opportunity to practice radical humility. Given the power that we hold—and the responsibility that many of us feel—it can be tempting to assume that we must possess a commensurate level of expertise or authority. At best, this creates a slippery slope in which the daily lived experiences of our grantees risk being ignored or sidelined. At worst, it becomes a grotesque form of arrogance, in which we're able to see ourselves as the smartest, most qualified people in any room that will have us.

In the context of a global pandemic, it should be clear that we're not the ones making the toughest decisions in the nonprofit sector right now: that would be our grantees. With this clarity can come the willingness to cede some of the power that we normally hold. But this isn't just a moral approach in which we have deep sympathy for the "plight" of our grantees. It's also a strategic approach in which we make a calculated decision to defer to their leadership.

And COVID-19 isn't the only crisis on our collective plate right now. If we can practice radical humility in this moment, then we should also be able to maintain a similar stance with respect to climate change, income and wealth inequality, political dysfunction, and all the rest. It's not only the right thing to do; it's also the strategic thing to do. And it can be a deeply liberating thing for us to do as practitioners in philanthropy—especially in a time of overwhelming upheaval.

Second, we must challenge the dominant assumptions around philanthropy's role in our society. Are we here to support the kind of transformative change that will address the fundamental challenges in our society? Or are we here to manage our own financial holdings in perpetuity, making those resources available to social change work only as much as markets will allow? If it's the former, then we must note the current crises head-on, even if it means allowing our endowments to be diminished in the process. If it's the latter, then we remain rigidly financial institutions, not all that different from most banks.

Our role is not set in stone. Historically, an economic recession would pose a tremendous challenge to maintaining current levels of grantmaking, let alone to increasing payout. In the context of a crisis such as a global pandemic, however, it's clear that the normal rules no longer apply. If we aspire to support truly transformative change, and if we see our own transformation as a necessary precondition, then now is the time to push back on the dominant assumptions—and maybe to break a rule or two.

To be clear, challenging the dominant assumptions around philanthropy must also include challenging the dominant assumptions around our overall economic system. Private philanthropy—and especially family philanthropy—requires the extraction and consolidation of wealth. As such, we are deeply embedded in the current system. Meanwhile, as organizations committed to building and shifting power, our grantees are both challenging the current, extractive economy and laying the groundwork for the next, regenerative economy. How might we better support their leadership, even when it means challenging the very circumstances that brought our sector into being?

As a spend-down foundation, I think of Chorus as a transitional form. We represent part of the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly. A caterpillar exists as a fundamentally extractive entity, committed only to its own growth. That's how the wealth was accumulated in the first place. But a caterpillar's time inevitably comes to an end, at which point it must allow its very being to be made available for something new—something that can see and think and move in ways that a caterpillar never could. Something much more beautiful: a butterfly that exists as a fundamentally regenerative entity, facilitating the fertilization of other organisms.

It's not always clear what the butterfly that will replace us is going to look like. But there is great potential in what we've been able to support so far: participatory budgeting processes, grassroots intermediaries, radically democratic public foundations, community-controlled loan funds, and non-extractive financial cooperatives—all examples of regenerative entities committed to the sustainable growth of others. We believe that another world is possible, and we believe that private philanthropy, at least as it's conventionally understood, need no longer exist in that world.

Third, we must make a serious effort to organize the philanthropic sector. At Chorus, we believe that organizing is a fundamental practice for facilitating social change. We also believe that a transformative organizing strategy—that is to say, one that is capable of transforming entire systems by addressing the root causes—will require effective organizing in multiple sectors. And our own sector, philanthropy, is no exception.

We've seen the ways in which our grantees have repeatedly attempted to engage philanthropy with organizing strategies that go far beyond simply fundraising. As skilled organizers, our grantees know what they're doing. But we cannot expect them to single-handedly organize our own sector for us. We have a responsibility to join our grantees in these efforts, and hence to take our role as funder organizers just as seriously as our role as grantmakers.

I should clarify that funder organizing does not describe any single activity, but rather an ecosystem of related activities that share common goals. One such goal might be to move additional resources to specific grassroots organizations. Another goal might be to shift the overall grantmaking strategies of specific foundations, or even to shift the dominant culture within the philanthropic sector. As with the tools in our funder organizing toolbox, our organizing goals are complex and interrelated.

In order for a just transition funder organizing ecosystem to be both healthy and effective, we, as aligned funder organizers, must develop a shared understanding of how these constituent elements relate to each other, what the opportunities are to deepen those relationships, as well as what elements are still entirely missing. This kind of alignment takes work, and that work will require some challenging and at times difficult conversations. We will need to set aside our assumptions—and our egos!—in order to truly see new possibilities.

In the current moment, there is a clear imperative to keep resources moving—not just from our respective institutions, but from the philanthropic sector as a whole. But that's not where our responsibility ends; we must also make the most of the opportunities presented by the current crisis to permanently transform both our institutions and our sector for the better. What we're able to do now, if we do it right, could become the new "business as usual" once this particular crisis is behind us.

Moving Forward Together

My intent in writing this was not to create a new pledge or a sign-on letter; there are already several out there. Nor was it to develop a framework or a list of recommendations; there are already plenty of those, as well. Instead, I wanted to emphasize an overall line of inquiry: What if we made these kinds of commitments under "normal" circumstances? What if we applied these recommendations to our work even in the absence of a global pandemic? And, most importantly, what could it look like if we acted as if we really believed that another world was possible?

Now is the time for big, structural changes—both within our own sector, and well beyond it.

Thanks for reading! And please let us know what you think. If there's one thing that's crystal-clear right now, it's that we're all in this together.

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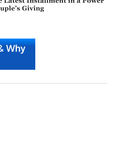

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