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PHILANTHROPY MUST ADDRESS STRUCTURAL INEQUITIES

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Until foundations address the structural inequities that contribute significantly to human suffering, their own effectiveness will be limited. Structural inequities show up in virtually all the data as gaps or disparities in the performance of our public and private systems, chronically favoring some groups over others. They represent fault lines in our society and its institutions, including philanthropic organizations themselves. If not addressed, they will drag down the performance of the very foundations and nonprofits that otherwise intend to do good.

Why, as frequent studies show, are African Americans turned down for a mortgage or business loan at a higher rate than Whites with the same credit histories? Clearly this favoritism is driven by false assumptions, even though it hurts the lender. It might take a more diverse foundation board to understand this is a problem, or to decide to address it, but it will take influence in the bank's inner offices to change its practice. There is a role for influential White board members to step up and do some heavy lifting to create the space for a legitimate fix to structural inequities.

Why does an achievement gap exist between African American children and White children even as they start kindergarten? Upstream of kindergarten success are parents who understand the value of education, who encourage their children to learn, who spend supportive time with their children and their teachers. African American and White moms alike face staggering challenges juggling work, transportation, child care, health care, aging family members, and their own development beyond mere survival. African American dads, far more often than White dads, are gone or locked up, having been booked on suspicion since adolescence, and booked again because they've been booked before. Chronically hunted down and tagged with a record assures an African American male a lifetime of disenfranchisement, with far greater challenges in finding legitimate work, breathing room, or the right to vote. This is Jim Crow at its worst, still lethal, and well-documented. As James Baldwin put it, "The wonder is not that so many Negro boys and girls are ruined ... but that so many survive."

Until these systems can be turned around, beginning with the justice system, and until those rebuked and scorned are permitted to put together a generation or two of fair and steady access to the fruits of opportunity, we're going to have parents who have kids who are not ready for school.

The Black-White divide is not the only one needing fixing; all non-White ethnic groups are treated less fairly by the typically unwritten operating rules of public systems and private markets. Among Whites, rural areas are disfavored, as are those born to poor circumstances.

One can argue it's for government to fix all this. One can argue it's a matter of personal responsibility. The third sector, philanthropy, has a decent record in caring for many of the victims of such flawed policies and practices, but philanthropy-as-usual has not done enough to stimulate the development of more level playing fields. There is a world of opportunity for foundations and nonprofits to promote solutions to unfair system dynamics. Philanthropy can help create the commitment, resources, and skills for fixing what's wrong. And yes, this kind of advocacy is perfectly legal.

Imagine the applause and support awaiting those working to extend the full fruits of society's potential bounty *to all*. The winner of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize was bankrolled by an American foundation in his early work in Bangladesh, lifting thousands out of poverty and setting an example now emulated world-wide. All it took was a good idea, good leadership, and the sustained commitment of a growing base of support.

To start, a foundation can create internal study time to explore the ways in which documented racial and other group disparities hold back good outcomes in its own program areas. Next, it can identify the dynamics that produce and maintain these disparities; typically this requires looking further upstream for the problems *causing* the casualties. It can listen to those who know these difficulties firsthand, and to authorities perhaps previously overlooked. Then, it can prioritize its resources to create a more muscular philanthropy capable of producing more balanced outcomes throughout society.

Nonprofits must send forward proposals that put pressure on the mechanisms that maintain these gaps. Of course, they must be assured by prospective funders that such ideas are favored. Foundations, for their part, can raise to the top and approve those credible proposals that put pressure on existing gaps. This would result in a different grants list than currently prevails.

Acting through able partners on the ground, a foundation can strengthen the relationships and networks that serve as the creative seedbed and community infrastructure that springs and supports good ideas. It can strengthen individual and organizational leadership to bridge the many divides needed to move promising solutions along to implementation.

The Boards and staffs of foundations are in a position to do a world of good, even staying within their existing mission. It's not just about the diversity of faces on the Board and staff, though a respectful regard for others' experiences would certainly help. It's about how well Boards focus philanthropic resources on closing the gaps and reducing the casualties. Philanthropy can and must put its collective shoulders to these wheels. Until it does, and becomes more relevant to today's society, we will continue to see mean-spirited systems and markets that contribute to substantial human suffering, and highly mediocre levels of philanthropic organization performance.

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