



Steven E. Mayer, Ph.D., has worked the past thirty years with the gamut of civic, public, and philanthropic organizations—grassroots groups, donors, foundations, agencies, associations, networks, and systems—to help them achieve greater effectiveness consistent with their mission. Mayer concentrates on organizations seeking to level the playing field, reduce barriers, and otherwise improve conditions that support fair and equitable progress. Before beginning Effective Communities in 1999, he spent 23 years as the founding director at Rainbow Research, Inc., a Minneapolis-based nonprofit that helps foundations and nonprofits focus on organizational effectiveness, program evaluation, and capacity building. Some of his key publications are *Building Community Capacity: The Potential of Community Foundations*; *Successful Neighborhood Self-Help: Some Lessons Learned*; *Community Philanthropy in Central and Eastern Europe*; *Better Together: Religious Institutions as Partners in Community-Based Development*; *Inclusiveness Assessment Tool: A Tool for Assessing Progress in Racial and Ethnic Inclusiveness and Cultural Competence*; and *Building Community Capacity with Evaluation Activities that Empower*.

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## Community Philanthropy: Strategies for Impacting Vulnerable Populations

The term “vulnerable populations” comes from the field of public health. It’s not a term I generally use, so I looked it up. The dictionary defines “vulnerable” as “capable of being physically wounded,” or “open to attack or damage.” In health, it means “susceptibility to poor health.” In public health, “populations” refers to such groups of interest as racial and ethnic minorities, children, the elderly, the poor, the chronically ill, persons with AIDS, alcohol or substance abusers, homeless individuals, residents of rural areas, the uninsured, individuals who do not speak English, or those who are poorly educated or illiterate (Shi and Stevens, 2009).

In my work, at the juncture of philanthropy and social justice, the notion of disparities is central. Disparities as a concept is akin to vulnerability, focusing on subpopulations and how they fare in life. There is a particular focus on how subpopulations are advantaged and disadvantaged as they interact with different systems and markets, such as our educational and health systems, and our labor and credit markets. My work concentrates mostly on the subpopulations named as racial and ethnic groups, and primarily white Americans and black Americans.

Disparities exist in how virtually all our systems and markets perform for different groups. Our schools graduate a higher rate of white students than students of color. Our job markets produce better entry-level jobs, easier career ladders, and better rewards for whites than for non-whites. Our health systems produce better access, better quality of care, and better outcomes for whites than for nonwhites. Our justice systems produce better representation, shorter sentences, and lighter long-term consequences for whites than for non-whites. Unfortunately, this pattern is true in all parts of our country.

These data have been admirably pulled together from public sources by the National Urban League, PolicyLink, Kids Count, and MDC, Inc. Such data form the backdrop for public policy at all levels, and for public service, too. My interest, however, is in what the role of philanthropy—particularly community philanthropy—could be in reducing these disparities, closing the gaps in our systems so that they perform more equitably for different racial and ethnic groups.

## A Wide Range of Disparities

Obviously, racial and ethnic groups aren't the only vulnerable populations for whom systems and markets don't work as well as they do for the dominant groups. Class is another way to distinguish subpopulations, though it is even harder to define than race. Class also is not a very popular theme among Americans, many of whom consider the United States a classless society.

Poverty, a theme that more and more people can relate to, can be cast as an income disparity. Total wealth, however, is a better predictor (and consequence) than income is of life outcomes. Poverty can also be framed as a disparity in access to opportunities that can lead to success. Poor people have less access—to health insurance, to better-funded schools, or to better service in the justice system.

Rural life, as distinct from urban or suburban life, relates sometimes to poverty and sometimes to race. Frequently, living in a rural setting limits access to quality public systems and functioning private markets.

Worse, these disparities seldom act alone, but in combination, often cascading through whole communities and whole generations. For example, we hear frequently of the damage caused by the educational achievement gap, in which vulnerable populations are subject to poor educational opportunities. This lack of education is likely to lead to a low-paying job without such benefits as health insurance. As a result, an individual's own health problems and those of his or her children are more likely to go untreated, which creates more barriers to educational achievement. The fallout from the educational achievement gap cycles through the generations until the pattern is disrupted.

One reason for the large disparity in higher education is the unfair housing practices used in implementing the GI Bill after World War II. White Americans were put on the path to middle-class comfort, getting into a home whose value could be leveraged for many other things down the road—retirement or education for the next generation. Yet this gateway to the middle class was not opened for African Americans, who were intentionally steered away from middle-class access. That disparity is deeply entrenched and long-lasting.

Still another illustration, the most insidious in my opinion, is the chain of events suffered by young African Americans who perhaps make the mistake of riding their bike into the wrong neighborhood or boosting a candy bar. Police and other agents of the court still come down harder on these kids than on white kids, who are more likely to be driven home and told to stay out of trouble when they behave in the same manner. Those early police records are frequently used to influence later decisions made by law enforcement, meaning that these kids have a harder time finishing school. The repercussions of youthful indiscretions continue, due to difficulty

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getting a higher education, and may lead young African Americans to experience major disillusionment. When young people have a harder time getting work, it increases the likelihood of re-offending and of engaging in other self-destructive behaviors. These circumstances break up families, prevent economic self-sufficiency, prevent the development of self-respect and respect for the dominant culture, and virtually ensure widespread unhappiness and poor prospects.

## Leveling the Playing Field

What to do? We somehow have to break these cycles, by making our systems work more fairly and producing more equal success rates for all racial and ethnic groups, as well as for groups in poverty or in rural areas. The metaphor “level the playing field” is helpful, suggesting that our systems and markets should not tolerate advantages for some groups and disadvantages for others—certainly not by design. The term social justice philanthropy suggests a philanthropy intended to create more level playing fields, so that all can benefit.

Unfortunately, this question of what to do can be overwhelming! How can we possibly fix all these systems when they operate under different customs and rules in every state in the union—indeed, in every county? Change is needed with policy or law at all levels. We must also change how our community institutions and agencies work, and how we, as individuals and families, relate to a changing world. Decisions that affect these systems get made in every boardroom, every council chamber, every gathering place, and every kitchen table.

And, of course, let’s not assume that everyone wants to make these systems operate more fairly. Resistance to change is real, strong, and effective. Encouraging systems to perform equitably for different racial and ethnic groups, while perhaps honored in principle and law, is not consistently honored in practice. For every Thousand Points of Light, there may well be a Thousand Points of Resistance.

## Noticing Progress Instead of Measuring Impact

My career has played out in the world of philanthropy and nonprofits. My doctorate is in Organizational Psychology (University of Minnesota), and after two years in academia at the University of Georgia, I jumped into the newly emerging field of program evaluation. I began a consulting practice where I could merge my training in measurement and assessment of individual and organizational effectiveness with my interest in community development, social change, and system reform. I especially like to work in those arenas where there are few established outcome indicators, where the simple naming of what’s going on is the entry-level methodology of assessment. Instead of insisting that we “measure impact,” I advocate that we “notice progress.” It’s less mysterious, more familiar, more engaging, more productive, more owned, and, therefore, more useful.

So when the Ford Foundation, with whom I’d worked before, asked if I could help them “benchmark progress in a portfolio of grants dealing with community philanthropy and racial equity in the American South,” I thought, “The gig of a lifetime!” It wasn’t a formal initiative with specified goals and objectives. Instead, it was more like a bunch of folders in the same file drawer. The notion of “benchmarking progress” was something we were allowed to develop as we went along.

The first big step was to decide to anchor the notion of progress in the imperative to close gaps or disparities. Then I and two colleagues, Betty Emarita and Vanessa McKendall Stephens, both African American women, held “appreciative inquiries” with a variety of philanthropic organizations engaged in this kind of work, asking, essentially, “What does progress look like to you? How do you spell success?” At the end of the third year, wanting to create a final report that would experience a better fate than most reports, we created a website to serve as a vehicle for publicizing what we had learned. The website also offered a platform for discussions among practitioners of organized philanthropy, consistent with Ford’s intention to help move the field of philanthropy closer to issues of social justice.

This website, [www.JustPhilanthropy.org](http://www.JustPhilanthropy.org), presents our synthesis of those conversations. The desired benchmarks took the form of six major dimensions of progress and performance, which we came to call Pathways to Progress. We humbly believe that these pathways, individually and together in different combinations, are the DNA of social change, from which can be created strategies for leveling the playing field, reducing disparities, and impacting vulnerable populations.

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## Expanding Conceptions of Philanthropy

Increasing philanthropic resources and targeting them toward justice is one of the pathways. In this country, many of the great private foundations were created thanks to the extraordinary wealth of the early 20th century and the Constitutional amendment authorizing a national income tax. Thousands more foundations are created every year. An enabling legal and financial environment, plus the historic national impulse to do good, has made American-style philanthropy the envy of the world.

Although philanthropy is a wonderful concept, it’s a terrible word. It trips clumsily off most tongues, and evokes images of ancient, overdressed white men and women. But philanthropy has changed a great deal in the last 20 years, along with America itself, and it’s no longer restricted to old, white people. Generosity and sharing are universally human impulses that are as old as dirt, and they have been elevated as a virtue and rule to live by in every faith tradition. Immigrant cultures—enslaved, indentured, or free—created mutual aid organizations to help newcomers get on their feet. The word philanthropy comes from Greek, meaning love for mankind, and philanthropic organizations come in dazzling variety. Within a half-mile of this spot we have Lions International, the Heifer Foundation, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, the Ottenheimer Foundation, the Clinton School of Public Service, and I’m sure many others hidden from this visitor’s view—as different as can be in origin and mission, but all of them philanthropic in that original Greek meaning.

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Also, philanthropy is not just about money anymore. The traditions of women’s, nonwhite, youth, and non-institutionalized forms of philanthropy have been rediscovered and lifted up under the rubric of community philanthropy. The current mantra is time, talent, and treasure, which includes volunteerism and service—and perhaps even social networking to organize time, talent, and treasure. Giving circles, a cross between consciousness-raising groups, investment clubs, and quilting bees, are springing up all over. This is community philanthropy, uncoupled from

institutions. To borrow from the National Rural Funders Coalition, “community philanthropy recognizes that solutions to community problems often come from unexpected places and from people excluded from community decision-making. When we look for models of community philanthropy, a strong argument can be made that rural communities and communities of color are leading the way” (Richardson and Lindsay, 2008). In addition, “big philanthropy” can help “little philanthropy” develop its resources.

Talking and listening—clumsily named but critically important—is another pathway to progress. How many of you cringed on hearing the words social justice and racial equity, saying to yourself, “Here we go. This will be uncomfortable.” Or the opposite, “Yeah, now we’re talking. Amen.” Well, learning to talk about these issues without inducing fear or anger, or shutting down the conversation, is essential to progress. Fortunately, using the language of disparities helps, because with it we don’t have to focus on personal attitudes or on what someone’s great-grandfather did or didn’t do. The language of disparities and inequity is not personal, but rather addresses impersonal systems. Data on disparities allow people to say, “That’s not right, and it’s against our larger interests, so let’s fix it.” Community philanthropy can support these conversations.

Preparing yourself and your organization to play a stronger role means getting better information about disparities and their causes and studying how they limit your philanthropy’s mission. By consulting diverse authorities and witnesses, one can learn what maintains those disparities, where the system needs repairs, and how one’s philanthropic resources can be helpful in changing the situation. Community philanthropy can support this discovery work.

Identifying promising solutions and moving them along is another pathway to progress. It’s useful to study the nature of the problem, but it’s not useful to study it for so long that study forestalls action. More productive, we believe, is analyzing and actively testing possible solutions to the problem. Philanthropy can spark innovation and pilot projects to test their feasibility, and then bring them to scale. Philanthropy can help promising solutions gain exposure and momentum toward adoption. Plenty of promising practices have already been identified and are waiting for someone to act and expand on them. There are plenty of good ideas in adversely impacted communities that we should take seriously. Community philanthropy can help move good ideas from conception to consideration to advocacy to implementation.

Creating relationships and partnerships built on trust, expanding them into productive networks and associations, and strengthening their leadership is a critically important pathway. The fear of free association to join in common cause is a lingering legacy of Jim Crow. Philanthropy can help marginalized people move from the margins by supporting networks and strengthening leadership that can work across divides. This provides the community support and political will needed for moving solutions along. Networks supply the people power needed to make change, and relationships based on trust are the seeds from which these networks grow.

Putting these all together in a focused and intentional way that addresses the disparity, the last pathway to progress, is a capstone, drawing on all the others. Philanthropy that impacts vulnerable populations or addresses inequities and injustice cannot be the same as charity, which is focused on helping the victims of disaster, natural or man-made, usually just one person at a time. Charity certainly is helpful and makes a difference, but it doesn't impact whole populations or address the causes of injustice. What's needed is philanthropy that keeps focused on the challenge of reducing disparities, perhaps one unfair system at a time. As the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., suggested, "Philanthropy is a wonderful thing, but let's not forget what injustices make it necessary."

A more complete description of how these pathways to progress work is presented on our website, [www.JustPhilanthropy.org](http://www.JustPhilanthropy.org), along with strategies for impacting vulnerable populations and reducing disparities.

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