



**SAVING THE BABIES:
LOOKING UPSTREAM FOR
SOLUTIONS**

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The story below ¹ lifts up a key dilemma underlying much of philanthropy. It's a parable illustrating a dilemma of choice. It tells of how difficult it can be to pick among alternatives for the best way to "do good" and "make a difference." What is the right choice? Or even a good choice? And if there's a group of us, do we all have to make the same choice? These questions have big implications for how philanthropic organizations, giving circles, and individuals approach challenging issues facing society.

The story: One day a group of villagers was working in the fields by a river. Suddenly someone noticed a baby floating downstream. A woman rushed out and rescued the baby, brought it to shore and cared for it. During the next several days, more babies were found floating downstream, and the villagers rescued them as well. But before long there was a steady stream of babies floating downstream. Soon the whole village was involved in the many tasks of rescue work: pulling these poor children out of the stream, ensuring they were properly fed, clothed, and housed, and integrating them into the life of the village. While not all the babies, now very numerous, could be saved, the villagers felt they were doing well to save as many as they did.

Before long, however, the village became exhausted with all this rescue work. Some villagers suggested they go upstream to discover how all these babies were getting into the river in the first place. Had a mysterious illness stricken these poor children? Had the shoreline been made unsafe by an earthquake? Was some hateful person throwing them in deliberately? Was an even more exhausted village upstream abandoning them out of hopelessness?

A huge controversy erupted in the village. One group argued that every possible hand was needed to save the babies since they were barely keeping up with the current flow. The other group argued that if they found out how those babies were getting into the water further upstream, they could repair the situation up there that would save *all* the babies and eliminate the need for those costly rescue operations downstream.

"Don't you see," cried some, "if we find out how they're getting in the river, we can stop the problem and *no* babies will drown? By going upstream we can eliminate the cause of the problem!"

¹ This version is composed from several variations heard by the author, and this paper was greatly aided by advice from Arthur Himmelman, Danielle Hicks, Charlotte Kahn, Ricardo Millett, Barbara Raye, Jim Richardson, Carol Simonetti, and Gary Stern.

“But it’s too risky,” said the village elders. “It might fail. It’s not for us to change the system. And besides, how would we occupy ourselves if we no longer had this to do?”

This parable is told in different ways for different audiences with different emphases. For our purposes, it illustrates a dilemma of choice. Do we direct our philanthropic assets to rescuing victims or to making sure babies don’t fall into the water? The answer for society is probably *both*, at least for the foreseeable future, because we *do* have to take care of the victims. But we also owe it to ourselves and everybody else to cut down or even eliminate the tragedy caused by something upstream that’s causing these babies to fall into the water.

As individual “philanthropists,” however, chances are we each have different inclinations, just as the villagers in the story did. Some of us, perhaps because we’re reminded of how *we* were fished out of the river, want to be sure there are rescue options for other victims. Others of us, perhaps because we’re angry at the system that victimized so many, want to fix the system so our brothers and sisters and neighbors won’t become the next victims.

These two basic options are clearly not the same. The first, while taking care of the victims, does not address the underlying causes of the problem. The second, while fixing the system to produce a more level playing field, does nothing to address the needs of current victims.

The first approach, for which our systems of charity and social services have been developed, is better funded in this society. The second, which requires efforts to create change in the way our systems and market work, is far less funded.

Why is that? The vocabulary may have something to do with it. The term “social change” can arouse suspicion and animosity in some people, especially in those people who are uncomfortable acknowledging the power dynamics that are usually unspoken. The term “social change” is part of the same category of emotionally-laden terms as “racial equity,” “social justice,” “advocacy,” “activism,” and “reform.” The political overtones are clear. Who has power? Is that OK? Can’t they share some? Why can’t we just leave things alone? What we have is at least familiar; change is unpredictable and scary. The terms “social service” or “charity,” on the other hand, sound nice and non-threatening, humane and charitable. They’re familiar and predictable. Service is not necessarily justice, but it can take you there.

In our Pathways to Progress project (www.JustPhilanthropy.org), we are looking for ways to make a difference in the chronic problems of society -- problems of justice and fairness -- so that our systems and markets work the same for everyone regardless of race, gender, or circumstances of birth.

So, back to the story, the dilemma of choice. Are we content to rescue the children and help them regain their lives? Or do we go upstream, see what’s happening, and create

solutions that prevent unnecessary loss of life? If we looked upstream, we could find any number of things.

Maybe it was a mysterious illness that had stricken these poor children. We could then search for a cure, and make sure that in the future they get the proper treatment.

Maybe the shoreline had been made unsafe by an earthquake. We could restore the shoreline, or put up fencing, or teach children how to swim.

Maybe there was some hateful person throwing them in deliberately. We could preach against hate, or keep that person away from children, or teach the arts of self-protection.

Unfortunately, even knowing the problem doesn't guarantee that we're of one mind about a solution. Lots of things could be contributing to the problem, and many legitimate approaches could contribute to their solution.

So, how do we choose what to do with our own time, talent, and treasure, and our community's collective time, talent, and treasure? Some guidelines:

Satisfy yourself that an investment of effort "here" has a good chance of affecting things "there," that there's a connection between your effort and a consequence for others.

Draw on the imagination, intelligence, resources, and skills of *all* those in the village – not necessarily to produce a unified effort, but to make sure that you're using all your assets.

Encourage the search for solutions. Invest in the leadership of the best and the brightest, help them achieve, and hold them accountable.

You can see there are lots of choices that can be made, and that your voice and your assets have the power to make change.