

COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS: HAVE WE BEEN SLOW TO TAKE UP SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES?

by Carolyn Milne

Abstract: Virtual and actual site visits to community foundations in Siberia, England and Northern Ireland prompt a reflection on why community foundations have generally been slow to demonstrate leadership on social justice issues. It is possible that our strengths (objectivity, breadth, facilitation, for example) contribute to our lack of leadership in creating a civil society. The chronic tension between our roles of grantmaker, community leader and fund developer may prevent us from taking risks. In some respects, the concepts of charity and justice may pull us in opposite directions. We are challenged to learn from colleagues who have “pushed the envelope” and develop a continuum of action on social justice that would encourage community foundations to be more deliberate in their self-assessment and consideration of social justice opportunities.

Introduction

This rhetorical question was posed after an opportunity to conduct three site visits (two virtual and one real) involving the Tyumen Community Foundation in Siberia, the Community Foundation serving Tyne & Wear and Northumberland in England, and the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust, as part of the Transatlantic Community Foundation Network meetings held in Newcastle Upon Tyne, England in September 2000.

These foundations ranged in age from 1 year to 21 years, and all of them reported a community history that was rooted in experiences related to hardship, poverty and various degrees of political instability. Each foundation was positioning itself strategically within the context of its culture, history, political realities, local community assets and internal capacities.

For Tyumen, it has meant starting to build credibility through flow-through grantmaking supported by funding from external sources and local corporations, since individuals do not have the means to currently contribute. Endowment building strategies will come later.

For Tyne & Wear and Northumberland, it has been an aggressive asset development and grantmaking strategy, which has reinforced the philanthropic comfort of their donors and has led them to the distinction of being the largest community foundation in England. They have now paused to examine at close range the value of their grantmaking to their community.

For the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust, it is the overwhelming situation of currently allocating ,42 million from the European Union for Peace and Reconciliation (1995-1999) as flow-through grants and dealing with the issue of sustainability of the community development and peacebuilding work into the future that has been initiated. Challenged with this extraordinary situation, they are giving a new meaning to risk-taking in grantmaking and leadership.

All of these organizations looked deep into their practices to examine their role in building a civil society during the site visits. There was a considerable variance related to the degree to which each confronted the issues of social justice.

The composition of the working group participating in this exercise brought a perspective that provided for a wide-angled cultural and experiential lens on this important question. Representation included three U.S. community foundations and representation from foundations in Canada, the Czech Republic, Russia, Germany, England, Belgium and Northern Ireland.

Despite the differences between the foundations, this paper will identify and explore several themes that developed during the site visit exercise as related to the question of why community foundations have been slow to take up social justice issues. They include the question of whether our greatest strengths are indeed our greatest weaknesses, and whether the presence of a chronic dynamic tension syndrome plagues most community foundations.

Social justice issues, often described as issues of legal, moral and economic obligation of both the individual and society, challenge us to reform and reconstruct both our practices and institutions in the name of greater fairness. Whether it be issues, to name a few, related to poverty, minority rights or environmental sustainability, many community foundations have not been seen to directly and formally take up the mantle of leadership related to social justice issues in their communities. The following themes may help in further self-reflection on this situation.

Can Our Greatest Strengths Be Our Greatest Weaknesses?

An old saying, but how true in many of our personal situations. Let's look at how the very characteristics and qualities that we champion as our value-add as community foundations can, indeed, contribute to our lack of leadership in critical community situations and diminish our role in creating a civil society.

1. The objectivity and neutrality of the community foundation can create a safe table to gather around for dialogue on issues that confront sectors in our community. On the other hand, the concept of neutrality may discourage community foundations from assuming a formal position on controversial social justice issues in their community.
2. Community foundations support all of the sectors in their community and generally do not stand for a single sector, cause or institution. This breadth and scope can provide a unique response and "community view" unlike any other organization. However, this commitment to the community as a whole can neutralize a community

foundation's potential leadership around specific causes in particular sectors, such as child poverty, multicultural rights or the rights of any disadvantaged group.

3. The community foundation acts as a catalyst and facilitator rather than a direct service provider. The role of catalyst can be the spark in a community that can cause a reaction leading to change and action related to charitable priorities. This "behind the scenes" facilitative style of leadership, coupled with our history of generally not providing service, can result in an attitude that leadership on social justice issues should come from those charities providing the direct service.
4. Traditional community foundation Board composition has reflected leaders in the community who have recognizable names with a track record of success in their particular field. While this pedigree approach is important in instilling confidence in potential and current donors, it falls short in connecting a community foundation to those situations that require the expertise of our community's "social entrepreneurs".
5. Our commitment to and emphasis on charitable causes as defined in some countries by law may divert our attention to the deeper social justice issues that exist in our communities. The Canadian Centre for Social Justice makes an important distinction between "charity" and "justice."

The characteristics of "**charity**" are described as:

- private and individual acts of caring
- responds to immediate need
- directed toward **effects** of social injustice
- provides direct service – food, clothing, shelter
- satisfying, usually non-controversial

On the other hand, they describe "**justice**" as:

- public, political, collective action for change
- responds to long-term cause
- directed toward **causes** of social injustice
- promotes social change in institutions, policies and systems
- exciting, sometimes controversial

Within this framework, it would seem that for many community foundations a context of "charity" drives most of the foundation's goals and objectives. Grantmaking is usually short-term and focussed on the symptoms, rather than the root cause. For community foundations to focus on the causes of social justice, it requires a long-term commitment supported by resources – financial and human – that most foundations are not positioned to draw upon. The context of justice may be a more realistic framework for those community foundations with the necessary internal capacity, such as institutional maturity, knowledge, skill and assets (both human and financial).

The irony of all of these situations is that we may lose an opportunity for our finest moment in community leadership because of misguided thinking as to who and what we are.

Chronic Dynamic Tension Syndrome

There is no cure for the constant push/pull that community foundations experience in their multiple roles of grantmaker, community leader and fund developer. This dynamic tension is inherent in the decisions that are made in relationship to actions that community foundations take or do not take around potential grants and leadership opportunities, Board composition and the corresponding response of donors.

With the need to build a permanent capital base to support the capacity of the community foundation to ultimately fulfill the general mission of “helping the community address opportunities to improve its quality of life by cultivating the philanthropy of individual and institutional donors and channeling resources to do the greatest good” (*Steven Mayer*), community foundations will often avoid the risks that attach themselves to dealing with social justice causes.

In fact, one could hypothesize that there is a direct co-relation between both the asset level of a community foundation and the degree of risk that is taken regarding grantmaking and leadership initiatives related to social justice issues. The greater the financial and human assets, the greater risk the community foundation can supposedly take in tackling the more controversial issues in its community. One caveat to this hypothesis is that with the North American trend towards donor-advised funds, size may have little relevance, but rather donor priorities may re-shape the work of community foundations.

Conclusion

There may be fundamental characteristics related to community foundations that inadvertently skew our response to social justice causes. By establishing a greater insight into our organizational psyche, we can be more intentional and deliberate in our consideration of social justice opportunities. By being more deliberate, we need to answer the question as to why it is important for community foundations to be more active on social justice issues.

We need to learn from community foundations that have pushed the envelope and can therefore provide great mentorship for other boards and staff. This mentorship could help to articulate the process, the leadership and the steps required in order to move in this direction. Through this analysis, a social justice continuum of action could be developed that would encourage an institutional self-assessment and identify the related organizational components that need to be in place at each step of the way.

We know that the tension inherent within the balance between the multiple roles of community foundations can lead to a priority focus on fund development and donor comfort. The dynamic nature of this tension is such that the Board and C.E.O. need to know when the focus requires shifting during the various stages of growth and development of the community foundation.

Seizing opportunities when they come our way and inspiring donors to support grantmaking directed toward causes of social injustice are ways of intersecting the multiple roles that community foundations play each day – grantmaking that inspires fund development that brings with it strong community leadership.

Carolyn Milne
President & CEO, Hamilton Community Foundation, Ontario, Canada

Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
August 28, 2001