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OPINION

How to Make Giving for Racial Justice Count

By Nat Chioke Williams

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Eye-popping headlines have appeared throughout the summer as the news media tries to capture the [sums pouring out from foundations](#) in response to the [national reckoning on racial injustice](#). At last count, at least \$6.1 billion has been committed, more than the total for all 11 years that this data has been tracked.

Just before she passed away from cancer this summer, Allison Brown, the director of the Communities for Just Schools Fund, warned us all that while the headlines might seem like a great thing, they actually pose a danger.

In an article she posted on [Medium](#), Allison, who had worked as a program officer at Open Society Foundations, noted that news coverage of the billions of dollars promotes a misleading and incomplete narrative of giving to Black-led racial-justice groups that may ultimately reinforce philanthropy's longstanding practice of underinvesting in these organizations. Using the term "historic" to describe the giving rate is problematic.

After all, the 1964 Civil Rights Act was historic because it guaranteed Black people basic civil rights that were already afforded to white people. Black people should have always had these rights. The historic achievement of the Civil Rights Act can also be seen as tragic compared with what should have been, how long essential rights had been denied, and the extreme sacrifices it took to make it happen.

Similarly, the billions pledged for Black-led racial justice and equity is historic only because of the long history of philanthropic erasure, delegitimization, and anemic support for Black-led organizations, Black communities, and Black-led racial-justice work. A report issued last year by ABFE: A Philanthropic Partnership for Black Communities documented what the data shows about the [philanthropic redlining of Black-led social-change organizations](#).

To be sure, the dollars committed thus far represent a big change and are critically important. But context is important, especially if the overall goal is to right historical wrongs and combat enduring racial inequities. Equally important, grant makers must coordinate their efforts and promise to stay with the fight for as long as it takes.

Without Justice, There Is No Equity

The terms “racial justice” and “racial equity” have been used interchangeably in reporting this philanthropic surge in the *Chronicle* and elsewhere although these terms mean different things. Both terms focus on the need for systematic fair treatment and equitable outcomes for all people. But a [report](#) from the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity noted that a focus on justice “brings into view the confrontation of power, the redistribution of resources, and the systemic transformation necessary for real change.” It adds: “Justice requires urgent fundamental changes that reposition communities of color in relation to power and resources, which includes being able to challenge and shape the many institutions that determine a community’s conditions.”

As far as we can tell, the surge in commitments so far this year seems to focus mainly on equity efforts, including efforts to mitigate the racially disproportionate impact of Covid-19, giving to historically Black colleges and supporting minority-owned businesses. Many companies are lumping into their philanthropy totals investments to support internal diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

It's unclear how much is focused on Black-led organizing, advocacy, and policy change explicitly for racial justice. But because news organizations are reporting on figures without much context or clarity, it can lead one to think that most of the funds are going to support racial-justice organizing and perhaps also conclude that those groups have a "flood of money" and don't need any more support.

To ensure philanthropic commitments make a difference, we have to be clear and transparent in our definitions of whether money is going to advance racial justice; racial equity; diversity, equity, and inclusion; economic development; education, or other needs. And if we aren't sure of the difference between these things, ask someone who knows, such as organizations led by people from racially oppressed groups that have a long track record of racial-justice work.

Coordinate Efforts

As we move forward, more of philanthropy's focus must be on helping Black communities build and wield the power required to transform systems, policies, practices, and social norms that currently reinforce white supremacy.

Some of the money foundations have pledged are directed specifically toward Black-led organizing, advocacy, and policy systems change, like the [Open Society's pledge](#) of \$220 million, the [California Endowment's pledge of \\$225 million](#), and [the Hill-Snowdon Foundation's pledge of \\$5.5 million](#).

Individually, these funds can make a difference, but to make them really count takes robust strategic coordination and alignment. Foundations are often notoriously

individualistic in their grant making, save for a relative smattering of pooled funds and joint efforts. While there are “I’s” in racism, white supremacy, and racial justice, it will take a collective team effort to actually make all Black lives matter and thrive. None of us can or should do this alone.

One part of the strategy [Meeting the Moment: Black Movement Infrastructure for Racial Justice](#), led by the Hill-Snowdon Foundation, which I head, is to pull together grant makers who are giving or have pledged significant and consistent resources for Black organizing and movement building for racial justice. Our goal is to develop a deeper understanding of our respective grant-making approaches and foster greater strategic coordination to make the most of the resources going toward advancing racial justice

. For instance, it would be important to consider the balance between issues and infrastructure or supporting issue-based campaigns for racial justice and supporting the development of long-term Black-led infrastructure for racial-justice organizing and movement building.

Winning issue and policy campaigns is important and this is made more possible with funding to build a strong infrastructure. Supporting infrastructure includes funding for training sessions and gatherings to develop strategies, expanding communications and digital organizing capacity, funding cultural work that develops public awareness and allows us to reimagine cultural norms, fostering partnerships between Black-led groups and others who can help advance change, experimenting with alternative strategies to promote justice, paying a living wage to employees of organizing groups, and establishing [healing-justice](#) practices.. We need to have these and other conversations about how to ensure the resources philanthropy commits have the maximum effect for the long term.

Similarly, the ecosystem for Black-led organizing and movement for racial justice is broad. It involves an array of issues, such as criminal justice, economic justice, gender justice, environmental justice, civic participation, and immigration. It is important to

develop a comprehensive, constantly updated map of the ecosystem for Black-led organizing and movement building so that we can see areas of strengths and ongoing needs, support strategic growth, and facilitate opportunities for collaboration and connection across the ecosystem.

The Long Haul Matters

We need to use the social unrest that spread worldwide after the murder of George Floyd as an opportunity to fortify philanthropy's commitment to supporting Black-led racial-justice groups and make it a longstanding priority. It is a sign of progress that several of the recent philanthropic commitments for Black-led racial-justice organizing are multiyear, in contrast with the short-term, rapid-response dollars granted after Mike Brown was killed in Ferguson, Mo., in 2014. If we are serious about pursuing racial justice, then the level of funding we are seeing now must become the norm and be seen as a down payment toward building the infrastructure needed to achieve racial justice in the long term.

Moreover, we have to recognize that nobody can sit on the sideline or take timeouts in combating the ubiquitous scourge of anti-Black racism and pursuing the transformative goal of racial justice.

Consequently, all foundations committed to the social good, regardless of their focus, interests, or location, need to commit to supporting racial justice and equity work. As our foundation and ABFE declared in the "[Case for Funding Black-Led Social Change](#)," it's time for all foundations to commit at least 25 percent of their annual giving to support Black-led social change in pursuit of Black-led racial justice and racial equity.

Some foundations, like the [Hewlett Foundation](#), have been compelled to move in this direction, even though they have little experience funding racial equity and justice work. Organizations like [ABFE](#) and the [Philanthropic Initiative on Racial Equity](#) are committed to helping foundations deepen their analysis and sharpen the focus on

racial justice and equity and are vital resources to foundations moving in this direction.

Most important, we need to be committed to trusting and taking our lead from Black organizers, movement leaders, and social-change leaders in setting the priorities, strategies, and support for racial justice and Black-led social change. This will lead to sounder strategies for achieving racial justice and racial equity, help to reorder the racialized hierarchy in philanthropy and society at large, and move us closer to a sector that [decolonizes wealth](#) by establishing structures and practices to [democratize philanthropic giving](#).

Notch Up the Giving

We are at a historically consequential inflection point in this nation's centuries-long struggle for racial justice.

The surge in philanthropic commitments for racial-justice and racial-equity work is one indication of this crossroads. However, to make these dollars count, we need to push ourselves to understand the full context and scope of anti-Black structural racism and racial injustice. We must develop the discipline to ensure clarity and precision of our analyses and approaches. We must challenge ourselves to coordinate, collaborate, and strengthen strategic partnerships. And we must commit ourselves fully to the pursuit of a lasting and lived reality of justice and fairness for all Black people and everyone.

As for the “flood of money” for racial-justice work, I think Allison Brown said it best: “Don’t touch that spigot. Turn it up some notches.”

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

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