What Is Social Justice Philanthropy?

Thursday, February 2, 2012, 12:00–2:00pm

Program and Panel

12:00 p.m. Welcome by Hudson Institute's William Schambra
12:10 Panel discussion
Christine Doby, Program Officer at the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation
Peter Frumkin, Professor of Public Affairs at the University of Texas
Albert Ruesga, President and CEO of the Greater New Orleans Foundation
Thomasina Williams, Former Program Officer at the Ford Foundation
1:10 Question-and-answer session
2:00 Adjournment
WILLIAM SHAMBRA: Good afternoon, and happy Groundhog Day. My name is Bill Schambra, director of Hudson Institute’s Bradley Center for Philanthropy and Civic Renewal, and Kristen McIntyre and I welcome you to today’s panel discussion entitled, “What is Social Justice Philanthropy?” Good afternoon and happy Groundhog Day. My name is Bill Schambra [LAUGHTER].

CHRISTINE DOBY: That was cute.

WILLIAM SHAMBRA: Those of you who know what that’s all about will have to explain to the people next to you who have no idea. Before we get underway, our customary preview of coming attractions. Please mark your calendars for February 16th. That’s in two weeks, so we have a pretty short turnaround here for our next panel, which will discuss the question, are think tanks becoming too political? Our conversation that day will take its bearings from an essay published by Hudson Institute’s Tevi Troy in the latest issue of *National Affairs*, in which he argues basically that they are becoming too political. I think you’ll find that the usual ideological categories will be hopelessly scrambled in the responses from our panelists, which will include Neera Tanden from the Center for American Progress, Will Marshall, the Progressive Policy Institute, and Michael Franc of Heritage Action and the Heritage Foundation. Christopher DeMuth, who just joined Hudson after many years as president of AEI, will be the moderator of that panel.

Now for today’s panel, it would be difficult to improve on Albert Ruesga’s fanciful description of what social philanthropists do, playing off the old adage that charity gives the person a fish while philanthropy teaches a person to fish. As he put it, “Social justice grantmakers aim to go one step beyond teaching a man to fish, to borrow an old saying. They ask why so few people in this man’s community can afford to own a fishing pole; why the county incinerator is being sited in his neighborhood, befouling his pond rather than that of his wealthier townsmen; and why he’s being taught to fish when he’s more likely to earn a living wage as an accountant or an engineer.”

Actually, Albert, today’s foundations would first insist that you construct a logic model, connecting the consumption of fish to the improvement of health, explaining how the fish catching will be sustained after the grant ends, and promise to form a fishing collaborative that would include all the stakeholders, including the fish. [LAUGHTER]

To tackle this question, what is social justice philanthropy, we have a knowledgeable and skilled panel with us today. We’ll hear first from Dr. Ruesga, who is currently president and CEO of the Greater New Orleans Foundation and one of the finest bloggers in philanthropy, White Courtesy Telephone. If you’re not familiar with that blog, you should be. It’s invariably enlightening and informing, even when I, myself, am the target thereof, which happens occasionally. Next we’ll hear from Peter Frumkin, who’s the director of the RFK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service at the LBJ School of Public Affairs, University of Texas at Austin. Next up will be Thomasina Williams, until recently a program officer at the Ford Foundation, and now director of the Sankofa Legacy Fund. And finally Christine Doby, a program officer at the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. So, Albert.
ALBERT RUESGA: Thank you very much. Thank you, Bill, and thank you, Kristen, for helping to get us all here today. As one of my uncles used to say when he first came to the United States from Cuba and was learning English, “I am very exciting to be here.”

[LAUGHTER] A special thanks goes, of course, to the Hudson Institute, which is hosting us today, even after all the things I’ve said about it, and thank you all very much for coming out today to reflect on social justice philanthropy.

By way of prefacing my remarks, which I assure you will constitute the crowning experiences of your lunch hours, if not your lives, I wanted to say a few brief words about the paper that I co-authored with Deborah Puntenney, very grandly titled, “Social Justice Philanthropy: An Initial Framework for Positioning This Work.” This is the paper that Bill recommended for your edification. It’s available from a link from the Bradley Center site and it goes especially well, I’m told, with a shiraz. [LAUGHTER]

The paper was commissioned by the Working Group on Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace, which has its roots—like so many other nefarious, unspeakable liberal things—at the Ford Foundation. Christopher Harris, who was then a senior program officer at Ford, brought together a group of smart, big hearted people and me, so that we could grouse about liberal philanthropy-as-usual, but also hopefully do something about it.

We were united then, as we are now, by two things: One was a very wide-ranging critique of mainstream liberal philanthropy, a critique that took aim at its assumptions, its analyses, its strategies or lack thereof, its methods, its fashion sense—the whole bowl of popcorn. The second thing that united us was a vision of the way that liberal philanthropy could be practiced, or should be practiced, in order to make a real and a lasting impact in the lives of poor and other marginalized groups.

Now I have a confession to make: We struggled mightily to define what social justice philanthropy is and was. So a number of us got fed up with that discussion and decided to write the article that I mentioned earlier. One of the purposes of the paper was to get people to stop arguing about the definition of social justice philanthropy and here we have an entire panel dedicated to arguing about this. This shows, if anything, that there is a kind of justice in the world, even if there might not be much social justice.

The paper essentially argues that philanthropy for social justice and peace is not one thing, but it is a whole family of approaches, a whole family of grantmaking traditions. We identified eight such traditions in the paper. We didn’t include some because we wanted, quite frankly, to preserve the sanity of our readers. I’m a huge fan of John Rawls, for example, but nowhere in this paper will you find any mention of the social contract tradition.

Many social justice grantmakers, but certainly not all, focus on helping the least well off in society. I’m informed by one of my colleagues Akwasi Aidoo, who is the director of Trust Africa, that merchants of Arab descent suffer terrible discrimination in Senegal. They are by no means the least well off in Senegalese society, but their cause is rightly the concern of grantmakers who care about social justice. Many of these grantmakers, but again not all, attempt to change the political, economic, and social structures that drive whole communities or whole
classes of people into poverty or into second class citizenship and keep them there. Some focus exclusively on empowering individuals politically, so that they have the means to vote their oppressors out of office. Still others believe that market forces can most effectively eliminate the causes of social disparities. And some—because I know my colleague Bill Schambra will try to raise this point—they don’t really give a flea’s nipple about the root causes of our social ills. For them, philanthropy for social justice is not the same as Bill’s benighted “root causes philanthropy”, which he’s been attempting to stamp out for the past 90 years. Has it been 90 years, Bill? [LAUGHTER] At least it’s felt that way. But these grantmakers argue that you don’t have to dig around too much to find the causes of many injustices, because they’re in plain sight.

Far more interesting than the question, “What is social justice philanthropy?”, in my view, are the questions, “Do you do it well?” and “Why is it important?” I wanted to give just a few examples of what its significance might be, but I’m going to leave the question of how you do it well to our discussion this afternoon, if anybody wants to raise that issue. However I will say this about its meaning and its significance. There are hundreds—perhaps thousands—of practitioners across the world who self-identify as social justice grantmakers or social justice philanthropists. It constitutes, I would argue, one of the largest schools of thought in contemporary philanthropy. There is often, in much of social justice philanthropy, an implied critique of liberal philanthropy-as-usual. The image that always comes to mind for me is that you have a group of grantmakers standing by a river, pulling drowned, injured, half-dead bodies out of the water. They’re bandaging some and they’re burying others, but they never stop to wander upstream to find out where these bodies are coming from and why. Venturing to ask that question, “Where are the bodies coming from?” is the essence of philanthropy for peace and social justice.

Championing what I’d call social justice philanthropy, by the way, implies no critique of charity, or checkbook philanthropy. It does imply, in my view, that if you’re trying to end poverty, or reform public education, or provide affordable housing, then you would be a fool, frankly, not to attend to the social justice dimensions of the issue that you’re trying to address. And in this way, philanthropy for social justice and peace is intimately connected with ongoing discussions in the field about measurable impact and strategic giving. For a very wide range of social issues, the effectiveness of the grantmaker is profoundly compromised if he fails to consider such things as the effects of racism and sexism; the manner in which power and privilege are held and brokered in a given society; the structural arrangements that benefit one caste at the expense of another; and a host of other factors that are typically the focus of the social justice grantmaker.

And lest I be accused of trying to skirt the question that brought us here today, I do want to confess that I have a dog in the definitional fight. I quiver like a bowl of lime Jell-O when I think about the Shared Values tradition of social justice philanthropy outlined in the paper. This tradition asserts that social justice can be most effectively promoted by appealing to universal or near-universal values. Martin Luther King, Jr. had a special genius for reminding us of the values that we share, values like liberty and fairness.

Our sense of fairness is especially powerful. There is a long line of thinkers—John Rawls among them, by the way—stretching back thousands of years, who identify justice with fairness. And what is most interesting to me about our sense of fairness is that it doesn’t appear to be confined
to the human species. That is one of the extraordinary things about it. In 2003, I don’t know how many of you caught this in the news, researchers taught a group of Capuchin monkeys to exchange tokens for food. And usually when these monkeys swap the token, they got a piece of cucumber in return. But if one of these Capuchins saw another monkey get a grape—which is a much more desired food amongst Capuchin monkeys—then all hell would break loose. The offended monkey would fling poo; or decry the researchers’ liberal bias. [LAUGHTER] Or in some cases they would become sullen and uncooperative. The scientists who conducted this experiment suggested that Capuchins might share to some degree our sense of fairness.

We know from our own experiences that a sense of fairness crosses party lines and international borders. In our country, there is wide, although not universal, agreement that there should be no public laws, policies, or procedures that overtly or inadvertently discriminate against women, racially defined groups, groups defined by religion, and others to diminish their life chances. Put another way, many of us believe that there should be a level playing field for all. But there is, as many of you know, strong evidence that the playing field has not been leveled for all, and that this unlevelled playing field has undermined our social and human capital. The evidence for this comes in three forms, probably more. First, there is the fact that there are laws, policies, and procedures that affect whole classes of individuals. For example, there is discrimination against gay and lesbian people in employment, housing, and other domains that is still legal in many states. There are many examples of legal discrimination affecting other groups, including so-called “zero-tolerance” policies in public schools, and laws that make it difficult for ex-offenders to find jobs and reintegrate into society once they’ve paid their dues.

Second, there is overwhelming evidence that racism and other forms of bigotry continue to affect the lives of individuals and the communities they belong to. This evidence comes not only from the lived experience of individuals who suffer sometimes daily assaults on their dignity, but also from empirical research that continues to document the effects of explicit and unconscious bigotry, decades of notched pair testing. Decades of matched pairs tests and other studies, for example, have provided strong evidence of racial bias. In these kinds of tests you have an individual who is a person of color and a person who is white, who are taught to present in the same way, who present exactly the same credentials and exactly the same resumes, and you’ll find again and again that typically the person of color gets the shaft, isn’t called back for a second interview. These and other studies have provided strong evidence of racial bias in the workplace, housing, and in many other domains.

Finally, focusing just on race for the moment, the disparities in health, housing, education, employment, and other outcomes between black Americans and white Americans appear too great and too persistent to be explained solely as the historical artifacts of slavery and Jim Crow. To just take a peek inside of the chamber of horrors:

- 69 percent of black children can’t read at grade level in the fourth grade, compared with 29 percent of white children, which is itself a barbarous thing.
- One-and-a-half million black men out of a total voting population of 10.4 million have lost their right to vote because of felony convictions.
- One in three black men between the ages of 20 and 29 is under correctional supervision or control.
• Close to half of all black children in the United States live below the federal poverty line, and that is a bar that is embarrassingly low.
• The net worth of black families is $6,100; the net worth of white families is $67,000.

Even if we cannot agree about the causes of these disparities, we can agree that these disparities hurt us all and require a special effort to address them. They undermine the human and social capital that we need to advance economically, and they can lead to social unrest and worse.

So there we have it. Justice as a kind of fairness. Social justice philanthropy as an alternative to what I sometimes call “philanthropy in bad faith.” Social justice philanthropy as a challenge to those who, for example, want to reform public education, but haven’t the slightest clue why, at one point in our history, we let our public schools start falling down around the ears of our poor and black children.

I realize that this is a tough sell. I’m reminded of the Italian proverb that everybody loves justice—in the affairs of another. But I’m also inspired by Matt Groening’s observation that while the courts may not be working any more, as long as everyone is videotaping everyone else, there’s still a chance that justice will be done. Thank you very much. [APPLAUSE]

PETER FRUMKIN: It is a pleasure to be here. Thank you, Bill, for assembling another interesting panel. I think we can have a good conversation about the question of what is social justice philanthropy. I’m something of a literalist, and so when I was invited to appear here, I was given a paper. I read the paper. I think my job as the resident academic is to focus on the paper and to raise the question for the author of the paper. So that is what I’m going to do.

We’ve had a kind of framing of what is social justice philanthropy. I want to try to drill down a little bit on what it is in the paper. There are eight visions of social justice philanthropy that are presented and they are simply presented as eight ways of seeing this domain. If you’re a philanthropist, how would you conceptualized this question of social justice philanthropy? One of these ideas is structural injustice. Second is human rights. Third is redistribution. A fourth is rule of law. Fifth is empowerment. Sixth is shared values. Seven is cultural relativism and eight is this triple bottom line.

Then the paper does a really nice job, and I really encourage you to take a look at it. It drills down into each of these eight visions of social justice philanthropy, the paper calls them a family of traditions, lays out examples, and walks you through these eight different paradigms of social justice philanthropy. Now as I read the paper, I actually thought that this is not really just a typology, a kind of simple little descriptive exercise. I thought there was something more going on, that in essence what the paper does is, it tries to lay out what I think are eight theories of change; eight ways in which social justice donors could go about trying to transform and change society. Each of these eight different ways, from structural injustice to rule of law, to shared values, to triple bottom line, and the others, constitutes a model, a way in which philanthropy could in fact change the social order.
The questions I had as I read this paper, and that kept coming back to me, fall into three categories. One is a set of practical questions. I’m going to pose them, and maybe we can explore them. Second are strategic questions, and the last are philosophical.

So the practical questions are: What exactly is the relationship between these different models? Are they nested in some way? Are they connected to one another? Do they complement each other? Or do they compete with one another? How do we understand how this field is coherent?

We don’t get an answer. We get these eight well-constructed visions of social justice philanthropy, but we’re not told from a practical point of view how we are to use them. So that is the first question I have: what is really going on here in terms of the exercise? Is it purely just a descriptive historical exercise or is it more of a normative exercise? I think it’s a normative exercise. But it hasn’t come out frankly and said: these are eight different models and here is how they work and when they work. I’d like to see more of that. I’d like to know exactly what is going on in terms of the normative content, and not simply a descriptive claim about social justice philanthropy.

I tend to think some of these eight theories or models are actually intentionally different ones. The idea of addressing structural injustice or pursuing redistribution is fundamentally different from the other idea of empowerment. As Albert says, we’re going to give people the tools to transform themselves, as opposed to working on changing the system in which they operate. So how do we understand it? Whose job is it to transform the world? Some of these theories say it is macro-structural work that has to be done. Others may simply focus on values, empowerment, and individual concerns. I think these are somewhat in tension, at least at on some level. So I’d like to understand more about what is the underlying theory there.

Then the second practical question I have is, how would you actually use these eight models? What would be the decision rule if one were a funder? What is the decision rule for knowing which one to use? When do I take an empowerment strategy? When do I take a triple bottom line approach? When do I focus on redistribution? What is my decision rule here? We don’t have guidance. We have a frame, a typology, but no concrete guidance. And that raises a set of practical questions, such as, who is the real audience for this paper? That is the real problem. Is the audience for this paper people who are already precommitted to social justice philanthropy, and then we are now giving them a little handbook to work with? Is it for opening up other people’s minds about this question of what is social justice philanthropy? That needs to be more explicit, along with this question of normative versus descriptive in terms of what the work is actually trying to do.

So I think it is a nice job. It is one of the few papers you can actually read and follow. There are eight nice ideas in here. They are laid out sequentially. However after we do all that groundwork, we need to stand back and ask, so what? How do I use that? How do we resolve this issue of tension or of competition between these theories? How do we know when to use them? We need to work that out in Volume Two, I would suggest.

There is also a practical consideration. I have some strategic concerns. At some level, the paper wants to argue that philanthropy should try to think about social justice. Why go through all this
work unless one believes that this is something that the field is trying to do? I can’t imagine you’re reaching for the alternative funds and the small number of social justice funders out there. I’ve got to believe you want other funders, bigger funders to look at this and consider this model as the one that they might use. But the question I have is, would this really work? Would getting mainstream funders, an individual institutional funder, turned on to social justice philanthropy actually promote social justice activities? I have my doubts.

There was a book written 30 years ago, published actually by Indiana University Press, called *Philanthropy and Cultural Imperialism*. In that book, Robert Arnova argues that in fact foundations and big donors are the enemies of social justice. He argues, in fact, that big foundations are cooling off agencies, places where social movements, change efforts are diffused and run into the ground. So if we are going to preach to the big foundation field and say to them, here are eight models for social justice philanthropy, you might want to try this work. Do you really believe that the mainstream philanthropic community is in the position to actually do this work? There is evidence, in fact, efforts at social change that have been compromised, deflected, and deferred as a result of deep entanglements with mainstream institutional philanthropy. So how do we resolve that? If we’re going to preach to the broader world, are you sure that this is actually a gospel that would advance the field? So that is a strategic question.

The second strategic question I had is a little bit more in the way in which the paper is presented. The paper has a lot of language which is philosophical and some that is very value laden and has a spiritual feel at some level. The question is, is this the language that the broader philanthropic world understands and would respond to? I would suggest from a strategic point of view, if you want to promote social justice philanthropy, you have got to use a different approach. You’ve got to change the language from values, norms, justice, redistribution, and all of these loaded terms into fuller, more technocratic, detached language, because the mainstream philanthropic world is interested in social impact, effectiveness. They’re fundamentally oriented towards this question of proof and there is not much in the paper yet that gets to this question of how this will work and make a fundamental difference. And unless you engage this question of effectiveness, impact, and proof, you’re not talking in the language of the mainstream philanthropic establishment. So if indeed you want to get the social justice conversation out of its little confine into the broader world, I think that there’s a problem of getting its language to connect more with the way in which people are thinking and focusing in terms of building philanthropic strategies.

Those are some practical and strategic concerns. I also have a more philosophical concern, which is that the paper is very much focused on the world, society, and social pain, and it doesn’t have much or anything to do with donors or funders. This is problematic because in some ways philanthropy is not just about getting things done, not just about getting to social pain or social justice. It’s not just about getting to certain kinds of end results. A lot of donors also view philanthropy as fundamentally expressive; that it is an expression of their values and of their commitments. Yes they want to have impact, but they also want to have their values and beliefs reflected in their giving. So I think the paper needs, and our discussion of social justice philanthropy needs, to have a little bit more balance between reflecting on social justice needs on the one hand and this question of how do we motivate donors to give. If social justice is put forward as a calling and as a way for philanthropy to move forward, I think it also has to find a way to engage donors. I don’t see much of that yet in this conversation.
I am trying to give a constructive critique. If you want to open up a conversation about social justice philanthropy, I think you have to answer these practical questions. You have to engage the deep strategic question about whether or not this field is really going to take on this work sensibly.

And finally, I think you’ve got to get more of a balance between the donor side and the community side for this to work. Ultimately philanthropy is driven by individuals and the institutions that they lead. So if you could address practical, strategic, and the philosophical question between the balance of instrumental and expressive purposes, I think you’ll be heading in the right direction. I thank you, and I’m glad to have had the chance to talk. [APPLAUSE]

THOMASINA WILLIAMS: I grew up in the segregated South in the 1960s. I remember my father always, and when I say always, I mean always having at least two jobs. But I also remember the hurdles that my father had to overcome just to do basic things, like fight against the city to get our street paved, to get the sewer system for the city hooked up to our house and the houses of our black neighbors. I also remember how he was repeatedly harassed for having the audacity to fight for those basic public improvements that each of the white neighborhoods had. Improvements, I might add, that they had in part paid for by the taxes that my father, my mother, and our neighbors paid.

I also still have very vivid memories of being stopped by the police on more than one occasion for the crime of being black and driving a late model luxury car. I remember seeing my brother and my father subjected to that same kind of humiliation, all because the white police officers who stopped us, for them, it was a given that if you have black folks in that day and age driving a late model nice car, then clearly the car must be stolen. It couldn’t be that they actually owned the vehicle.

I share these tidbits of my personal story, because they and a multitude of lived experiences are what have actually informed for me from a very early age what social justice is. I’ve learned what social justice is by experiencing firsthand what it is not. For me, growing up as a black woman in the segregated South in the ‘60s, at its core, social justice is about righting societal wrongs. Wrongs that impede people in doing the things that Albert alluded to; wrongs that flow from the statistics that he cited to us. And social justice philanthropy, then, is about devoting resources and strategies to proving how we rectify those societal wrongs in ways that actually make a difference in people’s lives.

Growing up in the South during a time in our nation’s history where segregation and mistreatment based upon race was not only an accepted social norm, but was actually the law of the land, I decided at a very young age that I wanted to go to law school. It seemed to me growing up, watching the televised debates of legislative hearings about the validity of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, it seemed to me as a child that the people who were making decisions that affected my life, my family’s life, and the lives of the people I knew, were lawyers. So I wanted to understand this system of the law and how to work from the inside to change the law and the legal structures that defined the quality of life that we enjoyed.
One of the things I find particularly interesting about being a trial lawyer, which is my background prior to coming to philanthropy at the Ford Foundation, I was always fascinated by the idea of juries. I was a big Perry Mason fan as a child and fascinated by how you could have a group of people who hear the exact same evidence, who see the exact same thing, and yet can come out with different, opposite conclusions. The defendant is guilty. The defendant is not guilty. We heard the same evidence. The plaintiff wins. The plaintiff loses. How does that happen?

It’s clear to me that one of the reasons that this happens is because we bring to our view of the world the things that we hear and we see, the lenses of our personal experiences. They filter how we view things. What have my personal experiences been? What is my predisposition? What are the things that interest me? What are the assumptions that are embedded in my view of the world? This is why we can have juries look at the exact same thing and come out with different conclusions. And I think of social justice philanthropy as being very, very similar.

One of the reasons that there is such a broad spectrum of varied approaches to social justice philanthropy is because different donors, different foundations, by virtue of their institutional cultures and histories, their personal preferences, their interests, their expertise, use different lenses both to define what the societal wrong is that they’re trying to change, and the methodology that they want to use to make those changes. Another reason that there’s such a multiplicity of definitions and approaches to social justice philanthropy is because of the sheer complexity of the issues that we’re trying to address—issues of governance and democracy, issues of the environment and sustainability, issues of race, gender and religious equity, just to name a few.

Issues such as these don’t lend themselves to the nice, neat little boxes that we tend to want to put them into. The ways in which these issues play out in people’s lives don’t readily fit within the parameters of our institutions, various initiatives or the way we’ve organized our institutions and our grantmaking. By their very nature, the issues that we are tackling are complex, multidimensional, and ever changing. Their sheer dynamism and intricacy requires that we employ a multitude of different strategies and approaches.

The piece of the social justice philanthropy puzzle that I’m committed to focusing on is what I term, “the healing and upliftment of black people.” Changes in the law to make it illegal to discriminate against people on the basis of race is obviously a very important piece of the puzzle, but it is still just a piece, an important piece, but nevertheless a piece. Changes in the law were, and in some instances remain necessary. But in and of themselves, changes in the law obviously are not sufficient. For decades it has been illegal to discriminate against someone on the basis of their race. Yet in this society today, racial discrimination still persists.

Political empowerment is another approach that defined social justice during the Civil Rights movement in my early formative years. When people have taken advantages of changes in the law, though, and voted, even in mass numbers, yes, there have been changes. Yes, there have been improvements. We’ve come a long way, both as a people and as a nation. But still, inequities persist. So again, political empowerment is necessary, but not sufficient. In a democratic society, political empowerment is how we change the law, how we change public
policy, how we change the allocation of public resources. So for me, political empowerment continues to be a foundational pillar of what social justice philanthropy should be about. However my own thinking on this issue has actually evolved over time. I’ve added two other components to define what social justice philanthropy work means for me.

One pillar is what I call social enterprise and what our reading today characterizes as triple bottom line. Particularly in this economic climate, with soaring, double digit unemployment rates in the black community, and in some places, rates that are so high that they are double the population at large, where people who actually are fortunate enough to have jobs, who get up and go to work each and every day and work very hard, they still can’t earn a living wage to take care of their family. In far too many black communities today there is still a prevalence of food deserts, a lack of basic goods and services. In this context, jobs and economic revitalization are paramount needs, obviously within the black community, and I believe that the answers and many of the resources to address these pressing needs lie within the black community itself. And I believe that social enterprise is a part of the answer.

To complement political empowerment, is the social enterprise aspect of what for me currently defines social justice; there is a third pillar that I’m dedicating myself to. It is what I call personal transformation. It’s an approach that I don’t think is really adequately addressed by any of the eight approaches that are identified in Albert and Deborah’s piece. But as he said, there are many different approaches. Personal transformation, as I define it, is a type of leadership development that consists of two elements. One is the diagnosing, acknowledging, and healing of social trauma. It’s also helping people to be more effective social change agents.

The tendency of social justice philanthropy is more often than not to focus on external factors to the people that we say we are trying to help, to either change the law or do something to restructure the institutions that are impacting them, to increase the money and resources that are available to them. Clearly these are all vitally important and very much needed. But we rarely stop to consider, what are the internal impacts that people suffer from injustice? There is an increasing body of scientific evidence to support what some within the black community have always maintained, and that is that structural racism has identifiable negative emotional, psychological, and even physical and spiritual impacts that are passed on from generation to generation and that continue to be exacerbated by current circumstances. Acknowledging, diagnosing, and healing this social trauma is part of the social justice philanthropy work that I deeply believe needs to be done.

The second element of personal transformation, as I am defining it, focuses on the nature of the leadership that is necessary to achieve the desired outcomes that we say we want. Much of the current focus in philanthropy is on impact and metrics, which is obviously a very important consideration. However we rarely stop to think about, what is the nature and the quality of the leadership we need to focus on the programmatic or to achieve the programmatic outcomes that we want? There is an emerging model of leadership development called transformative organizing, which I can explain a little bit about in the Q&A if people are interested. But at its core, what transformative organizing does it to focus on helping people to show up better in their interactions. It helps them to be more centered and grounded, so that they can consistently
maintain a high level of performance and have a greater impact in the work that they’re trying to do.

So again, a place where I think I can make a contribution, when I think that there is a huge need within social justice philanthropy, is on the integration of these three pieces—political empowerment, social enterprise, and personal transformation. The enormity of the issues that we are facing, these and others, is such that social justice philanthropy, I would submit, by definition must take on many approaches and must evolve as issues and circumstances change and evolve.

A pivotal question for the social justice sector is, regardless of how we define social justice philanthropy, at the end of the day is our work adding up to more than the sum of its parts? Are we working in systemic ways with each other, or with at least a consciousness of what each other is doing in ways that are discrete pieces of the puzzle? Are chosen approaches to social justice philanthropy righting societal wrongs and actually making a constructive, positive difference in people’s lives resulting in a society that we envision? Frankly, I’m not always so sure that it does. I look forward to hearing what you think. [APPLAUSE]

CHRISTINE DOBY: Good afternoon everybody. I’m Chris Doby and I work at the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. I’m going to take a little bit a different approach here, because I work for a foundation that does not identify as a social justice funder, and certainly does not identify as a liberal foundation. We do not have a kind of megascript of what we think society ought to look like. So as Peter noted, our grantmaking is informed by the values of our founder, Charles Stewart Mott. So, I’m going to just summarize in one or two sentences one of the ways that we talk about how we understand Mr. Mott’s values.

We operate from the perspective that enhancing the capacity of individuals, families, and institutions at the local level and beyond is the highest form of our philanthropy. We do that by nurturing strong, self-reliant individuals, by promoting work that preserves fundamental democratic principles and rights, by encouraging citizen participation, by encouraging personal accountability and institutional accountability, by developing leaders and by respecting diversity. So that is who we say we are. We don’t have a megascript about what your life or your community ought to look like, but operating from that value system, we have a set of grantmaking strategies that we pursue.

Now, how you think about what makes for strong resilient individuals, families, and communities is going to have implications for the kinds of strategies and tactics that you devise for your grantmaking. As Thomasina observed for us, the world view in communities informs what people understand to be just and fair for themselves, for their families, for their communities, and for their lives. The best way for people to act on their world view, those values that I just said about Mott, that we’re trying to fund, is to listen to people in these communities tell you what they want to do.

That is the reason that the Mott Foundation funds community organizing as a strategy for enhancing the agency and the accountability of individuals, communities, and institutions throughout the United States. We think that community organizing, sort of in the language of Albert’s paper, delivers that triple bottom line of human capital, social capital, and we would say
both bonding and bridging social capital, and financial capital, that it delivers real and tangle assets to people on the ground, and that those people can figure out which or whether it’s these eight philosophical traditions that they are the most interested in pursuing. If it’s a rule of law question that they want to address, if it’s a shared values question that they want to address, a structural injustice, a political empowerment question that they want to address, or some other question that they want to address. For us, it is by using the methodology of community organizing, which is why I think we get confused with being a liberal funder.

That is again why I want to go back to what is the value set that we are operating from? We come to our funding of community organizing not through a set of issues, but through this value of investing in the agency and capacity of individuals, families, communities, and the institutions serving those individuals, families, and communities. It is sort of a sense of a reciprocity of interest and efficacy. We have a definition of what we mean by community organizing, and I’m going to tell you what that is. And I think our grant making is very practical. So we say that community organizing is a form of leadership development that enables a constituency to create and sustain an organization that turns its resources into the power to make change. Want me to say it again? Did you want to write it down? [LAUGHTER]

So I’m just going to open up each one of those really, really quickly, and then I’ll just stop. So leadership. By leadership we mean taking responsibility for empowering yourself and others to achieve shared purpose in the face of uncertainty. So it’s not about positional authority. In organizing, we believe the success of the entire enterprise depends on the attention to developing leaders. A constituency is not a group of people that you represent. It is the people that you stand with together to achieve your common purpose, so it’s not like a political constituency. It is the, who is my us? That is my constituency.

It is important that people build an organization in our model of investing in the capacity of individuals and communities. Associational life is critical to democracy, and as I said earlier, democratic practice and principles is one of our value sets. We believe associational life is truly critical to democracy. It’s critical to the values of democracy, especially a system as complex as the one that we are all trying to navigate. The role of mediating institutions in our society has declined, and so when people build their own organizations that become the mediating institutions between themselves and this complex society in which we live, people can participate at a higher level of empowerment and agency. Rather than just asking them to plug into an organization or a program, they create an organization that designs its own solutions.

The organizations that we want to fund, we kind of have three questions. How do people develop as leaders? What effect does the structure of the organization have on agency and hope and creativity? And can it actually turn people’s resources into the power to make change? So we think that people have resources. The idea isn’t that people come together, get mobilized, create a set of demands and then they create a demand that somebody meets their demands. Rather, they gather their resources with the firm belief that they have at least some of the resources to respond to the problems that they, themselves, have identified. The basic resources are people, relationships and connections, knowledge, and money. Every community has some of those in some measure. They may need more of some of those. They may need more knowledge to figure out what to do about housing. They may need more relationships to figure out what to do about a
political question that they have. But they have something. They need to develop the power to move additional resources in order to achieve their shared purpose.

So the purpose of developing power isn’t to exercise power over anyone else, but rather to achieve your shared purpose, your aspirations for your family, yourself, your community, your kids, and your life. The organization, then, is the way that people can come together and create the influence to move resources that they need moved in order to enable them to act on their chosen strategies. The purpose of this, then, is to make a change. A problem has been identified. Something’s got to change.

We think change has to be measureable, clear, specific, and substantial. It’s not enough to say that the organization held a bunch of meetings and developed better relationships. That’s a change, you know, maybe in my life and your life. It’s an important underpinning of the kind of change we’re looking for. But poor people and working class people already have plenty of experience on how to lose. There is no point building an organization if you can’t win on something that your family and your community needs and wants. In organizing, then, people are actors. They are not beneficiaries. They are citizens. They are not clients.

So our approach, then, to what might be called social justice philanthropy, is an approach of listening. It is an approach of responding through a strategy of helping people build organizations. Assuming that people already have some of what they need, and that with a little bit of philanthropic investment they can organize to get more of what they need in order to achieve the purposes for which they’ve come together. For that reason, we invest in organizations that operate at the local level but have relationships at a state, regional, or national level. So we don’t invest, for example, in unaffiliated organizing. We invest only in organizing that is somehow networked, so that learning across communities and across this country can take place in a really rational manner. That informs not only people in communities, but it informs us in philanthropy, we think.

At the end of the day, I am kind of a pathetic, starry-eyed believer in America and American democracy. I mean, I just really am. I cannot be convinced to see my future otherwise. I don’t think that community organizing is going to save American democracy, but I don’t think we’re going to save it without it. So I’m really privileged to be in the position that I’m in, in investing in this approach to what some people, but not the Mott Foundation, would call social justice philanthropy. [APPLAUSE]

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Thank you all very much. I’ll just throw out a couple of questions, and then we’ll turn to the audience for Q&A. One thing, Ms. Doby, that you mentioned, it was kind of a telling phrase. You don’t have a preconceived notion of the sort of society you want to encourage.

CHRISTINE DOBY: Well, I meant to say, we don’t have like a script of what it ought to look like.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Right, exactly. Now that sort of goes to Peter’s point about a possible tension among these eight categories. The Mott commitment to community organizing more or
less says, it is somewhat agnostic about the notion of the society that you will have at the end of the process. Whereas some of the categories that Albert’s topology includes are very specific about the kind of society you’re going to have at the end of this process. So going to Peter’s question about a possible contradiction or tension among these approaches, in other words, to some extent, as Peter suggests, they’re complementary. You can choose from the menu and pursue different approaches. But sometimes, like this one, community organizing might not, in fact, result in a vision of social justice that’s included in some of these other categories. Can you say something about that? And other panelists please join in as well.

ALBERT RUESGA: Sure. I think that’s a fair criticism. These eight categories, when you talk about the practices of social justice grant makers, or any grant makers, they’re used in combinations. You will find a grantmaker start out talking about human rights and then shift to talking about empowerment, depending on the audience. They’re used in different contexts for different reasons.

You’re right, there are some that are fairly normative. I think perhaps the one normative vision that unites them all is that there is a kind of Star Trek world at the end of it all. There is a fair world where people have meaningful work, where they have access to quality healthcare, where their kids have world class education. It’s a Star Trek world, minus the intergalactic warfare. And that’s a vision pretty much shared by everyone. Nobody wants to live in war. Nobody wants to be hungry. These are very basic things. So if there’s one normative vision, I suppose that would be it.

But you’re right, how you go about it, whether it’s a community empowerment model that Chris is talking about, or whether you are entirely about the looking at the current laws and making sure that they’re enforced, or whether you’re about looking at structural injustice, that’s entirely up to the grantmaker. It changes, again, from context to context across the world. This is a kind of global typology in the sense that we interviewed people who self-identify as social justice grantmakers from all over the world, and that is what the typology was based on. And we agreed that there are tensions, not all views, all of these types of social justice grantmaking. Some will use some, some won’t. But yet, there is a tension.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: One other question. You mentioned at the outset that this project was undertaken with some sense of frustration about the way, what you describe as liberal philanthropy, operated. And I’m just curious, what does that mean? In other words, for some folks, there wouldn’t be a difference between liberal philanthropy and social justice philanthropy. What is that distinction that you were fretting?

ALBERT RUESGA: Right. Well, you know, talking about liberal philanthropy wasn’t even in the paper. I just added it today.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: No, it was a terrific point. I was just –

ALBERT RUESGA: Social justice philanthropy, it is not everybody who’s in this field who has the same kinds of critiques of the way philanthropy or mainstream philanthropy is practiced. I have a number of issues with the way it’s practiced. I don’t think, for example, that we talk
enough with one another when we’re working in a particular part of the world, let’s say New Orleans, my home town, where you can have national funders trying to do good there, and yet not always coordinating what it is that they’re doing in a particular area. That is one critique. There’s a critique that has to do with the degree to which grantmakers involve or fail to involve in a meaningful way the communities that they’re trying to affect. And this is, I think, a point that Christine was making very well, where the involvement is pretty thin in some cases, and where the grantmaker is not taking his or her cues from the communities. So that is another critique. And there are other areas that are implied by some of these traditions, but might not be implied by others.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: And Thomasina, right at the end of your presentation, you sort of ended on a note of skepticism about social justice philanthropy’s ability, I think, to embrace what you were describing as the transformational aspect of your understanding of social justice philanthropy. Could you say just a bit about that?

THOMASINA WILLIAMS: Yes. I wasn’t really speaking to the issue of personal transformation in particular. I agree with many of the critiques that Albert shared. I think one of the challenges is, justice by definition is a very subjective thing. What is fair to me might not be fair to you, so we have to be comfortable with that ambiguity. But at the same time, I think one of the ways that we can be more effective than we are in philanthropy, and it just boggles my mind sometimes the hundreds of millions of dollars that are poured at particular issues, but if we are working in isolation from each other, if we are working at odds with each other, sometimes tension is healthy, and sometimes you may want to try what might appear to be contradictory approaches. However it’s important to be cognizant of that when you’re doing it.

So for me, it’s not always a question of funders having to work together lock step, but as Albert was suggesting, at least be in communication so you understand what each other is doing. Hopefully the whole will be adding up to more than the sum of the parts. For me, I don’t know that the whole does add up to more than the sum of the parts. If it did, then we would have made a lot more progress than we have made on a number of issues.

I think that there is great potential for us to make more effective use of not just the dollars, but also people, resources, and expertise that exist in the sector itself. You know, Peter was talking about how the paper was sort of turned outward. I think that is how, in my experience, philanthropy tends to operate. That we will, for example, want to encourage our grantees to work together, to collaborate, to be in communication and conversation when we’re not doing that ourselves. So that is where my skepticism comes from. But I, like Chris, am an eternal optimist. We are making progress. But we could be making so much more progress, in my opinion, if we thought differently about the way in which we do our work, and what it is we’re actually trying to achieve at the end of the day.

CHRISTINE DOBY: If I could just add a little bit there. So this is what I think happens in philanthropy. Many large, small, medium philanthropies, family philanthropies, and donors operate, as Peter said, from their value system. And often there is an issue they want to work on and they really want that issue to resonate, and even to sometimes be driven by the community. But they get frustrated. And this is where, such as in a place like New Orleans, you have funders
who have an issue that they want to work on and they want some grantees to work on it. Then they have these community-based organizations that are developing and empowering leaders. Often that is where the clash is. The funder says that they would fund that group but that they’re not working on their issue. Well, what if your issue wasn’t the right issue? Well, of course my issue is the right issue. How could that even be a question? Not only is my issue the right issue, my issue is the most important issue. And they’re not working on the most important issue.

So I think it’s even worse than just sometimes miscommunication or a clash. It is that not only is it my issue, and obviously the most important issue or I wouldn’t be spending all this money on it, but since they aren’t working on it, I’m going to create a new organization that will.

So you know, I can get a little frustrated, although I’m pretty optimistic, and I love my colleagues in philanthropy. I can get a little frustrated by that approach. If we turn that around and listen to people a little bit more, we might find out that we do have really the most important issue, but maybe today is not the day to work on it.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: But Peter would say that is absolutely the donor’s prerogative, and to heck with these community groups, right?

PETER FRUMKIN: Well, I might put it slightly different. I’d like to see a balance between the donor’s prerogative and the community. But there is kind of disconnect here, because on the one hand you’re talking about this world which is, people are going to rise up. They’re going to take charge of their lives. They’re going to drive change. They’re going to stick it to the man. And then they put on their little Talbot’s dresses, and they come into the office, and they ask for grants very politely in the areas that they think you want.

So I tend to think that that’s why I spoke about that question. Is institutional philanthropy really ready to do this sort of work? Because a lot of the operating principles, a lot of the ethos, a lot of the systems are not set up to say, ‘I’m wrong. You’re right. Run with the ball and I’ll see you in three years.’ That’s not how mainstream philanthropy works. But if you take seriously this idea of empowerment, human transformation, all these big concepts that involve delegating a lot of authority to people and letting them construct their vision of the good and run with it, there’s a problem there, because that’s not the way mainstream philanthropy operates. And there is just a tiny little, insignificant sliver of the philanthropic world that is attuned to these issues.

There are these progressive funders. There are the alternative funders. There’s a small group that tries to reverse the grantmaking process and empower people in the community to make the decisions. There’s a small group. But by and large, if you look across 60,000 foundations, all the individual donors, they’re not thinking in these terms. They’re not.

THOMASINA WILLIAMS: I agree. I think you’re absolutely right. That’s part of the critique, that the sector needs to do some work internally. I’m a big believer in focusing on the internal and preparing to deal with the external, and I don’t think that the sector does enough of that.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: So Albert, that suggests not just eight sort of different views of social justice, but really a fundamental transformation in the way philanthropy does business. I mean,
would you go so far as to say that the alternative funds approach, which as Peter pointed out, hasn’t exactly picked up a lot of steam. Is something like that needed?

ALBERT RUESGA: Very much so. Interestingly, the original paper had a part two and the part two had a very strong normative element that we decided to take out. The reason we took it out was we thought the primary job of this paper was to cut through a lot of the lack of clarity about what social justice philanthropy is. There are a lot of people who had tried to define it very precisely.

The approach we took was a very big tent approach. We said, look, there are so many ways of doing this and so many traditions. And just be aware, for example, if you’re working in the human rights tradition, that this is a very old tradition, and as we put it in the paper, just about every thrust and parry in the human rights tradition and the arguments for and against has been tried. You could learn from this. The notion of a human right is problematic and you should be aware of this if you are going to make your argument for social justice in that tradition. And that is really all the paper tried to do. It’s very descriptive.

The normative part of the paper we published separately and it really lays out dos and don’ts. It includes things like how you should engage the community, where you’re leading from, what kind of values you bring to your grantmaking, and various other things that Peter and Thomasina and Christine have alluded to.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Ah. So there was a part two and we didn’t include that in the required reading. We’ll link to that in the transcript and you all will have to go back and read part two. I didn’t realize.

ALBERT RUESGA: We presented it to one group that did everything short of setting it on fire. [LAUGHTER]

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Oh, excellent. That’s our kind of paper. [LAUGHTER]

ALBERT RUESGA: There you go.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Terrific. All right, well, we have a terrific audience here, and we’ll go to Q&A. Please identify yourself, and please, questions only. I mean, of course, comments are welcome, but brief comments, leading to something like a question. [LAUGHTER]

PETER FRUMKIN: Or there is the way where it is a long statement, followed by, ‘I’m right, am I not?’ [LAUGHTER]

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Oh, yes. So we’re going to try to avoid that here today. Please, yes.

Q: My name is Ruth Lubic. I’m a nurse midwife and running a project here in the District in Ward Five, where we have been able to reduce the disparities suffered by the African American families there significantly. But we have a big problem. First of all, she’s only a nurse. Secondly,
she’s only a woman. But thirdly, can you tell me what effect the building of projects on demonstration rather than on research might have in the way of philanthropic gifts?

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA:  Could you clarify? In other words, is it better to have a project on the ground underway, rather than doing research?

RUTH LUBIC: Well, these positive outcomes that we’ve had, we’re criticized because we have not done a randomized controlled trial. We went in, and based on our human values and our knowledge of women and families, and set up something that we thought would be meaningful to them, and indeed, it has been. But I’m hard pressed, for example, in front of a Surgeon General’s meeting about the infant mortality in the District of Columbia, a big panel of researchers say, ‘Well, we just have to study them more.’ And they were talking about the African Americans, of course. They have the largest infant mortality. But I, at that point, grabbed a microphone, as I have done today, and said that you cannot go into a low income area and treat people like research subjects. So I was wondering, how much stock the philanthropists put into whether or not the organization has done a randomized controlled trial? Or are they in there with their hearts trying to help people that need help?

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Good, thank you. Yes, excellent question.

THOMASINA WILLIAMS: It obviously depends. I think there are as many approaches and criteria for what people are looking for in making grants as there are the different approaches to social justice philanthropy. You know, as you were talking, something that came to mind for me is this Chinese proverb that says, ‘Those who say that it cannot be done should get out of the way of those who are doing it.’ And I would suggest to you that there are funders out there who would be interested in the fact that you actually have made a difference in people’s lives, irrespective of whether you start with a randomized control group. So you have to keep looking for those funders and not worry about the people who want randomized control groups.

PETER FRUMKIN: But it goes to this tension, I think, of the methods of the funders and the mindsets of the social change actors, because the idea of you going out and paying some university to conduct an in depth, multiyear trial would be hard, very expensive. It’s extremely hard to do. And then the outcomes you may be after, particularly if they’re something like human transformation or empowerment, what are those outcomes? How do we measure those? Those are much harder than some of the more concrete health or educational outcomes that we typically might measure.

So the social justice approach has, I think, inherent in it very complex outcomes that don’t lend themselves as well as some of the more basic service outcomes to measurement. And that puts it, again, at some kind of odds with at least a part of the philanthropic establishment that is profoundly interested in measurement, impact, and proof.

ALBERT RUESGA: Ruth, I know your project. I can’t speak for all foundations, but I know that when I was here three years ago at the Meyer Foundation, we funded your group because of you. We were betting on good leaders, on people who had a vision about what needed to be done
and who were doing it. And it had nothing to do with metrics. We felt that the measurements would come later.

RUTH LUBIC: Well, my latest measurement is that I turned 85 last week. [LAUGHTER]

ALBERT RUESGA: Well, congratulations.

THOMASINA WILLIAMS: Happy birthday. [APPLAUSE]

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Yes, please, Mr. Ottinger.

Q: Hello, thank you all. My name is Larry Ottinger. I’m president of the Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest. I want to first say that I do think there is something normative in at least three of the four, I’m not sure if it’s a clean sweep, which is people being engaged in their communities and in the governance of issues that affect them. My question is about the metrics following up, and it may have been in the homework that I missed, and I apologize, teacher, if that’s true.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: It was required reading. [LAUGHTER]

LARRY OTTINGER: How do we measure, given that there are different definitions of social justice philanthropy? I do think it’s important to be able to have some measurement, even if it’s imperfect, and the data isn’t great. The Foundation Center has measured, based on a certain number of foundations and types of grants, somewhere around 12 percent, and that’s gone maybe to 15 percent now of total private and community foundation grantmaking that goes to what they’ve defined, based I think on a NCRP definition, of social justice philanthropy. What do you all think of that? How should we measure progress?

ALBERT RUESGA: Well, I can attempt to answer that. I saw the Foundation Center report that you’re talking about. They’ve had two, now, actually. And the definition that they gave, I forget what its elements were, but it was something about trying to change the structural conditions that keep people in poverty. And I think the reason the Foundation Center chose that definition was so that they could return to the survey year after year, and even though it’s an imperfect definition, at least against that definition they would be able to see how many people self-identified as social justice grantmakers. But I think if you look at a lot of the examples that are given in that particular publication, I have to squint pretty hard to tell, to really see social justice grantmaking in it. I don’t think just making a grant to an advocacy organization really puts you necessarily in the social justice camp. I think a lot more has to go into it, but that is a matter of discussion and debate.

PETER FRUMKIN: I totally agree with that, but the category, it’s extremely hard to set up, because a big function has to be the intention of the grantmaker, not just, is a particular community service engaged in an attempt to create better conditions? But is the grantmaker engaging in this activity because they’re committed to social justice? That’s a piece of it, and then it has to be what’s actually going on? Is it different than any other kind of service or
advocacy work? It has to have a different feel and it’s hard to get that nailed down across a large number of grants. So I would treat that data with some care.

THOMASINA WILLIAMS: For me at the end of the day, the bottom line is, are we making a positive difference in people’s lives? We can change a structure and it would still not change people’s lives. So to me, changing the structure in and of itself is not sufficient.

I think one of the challenges with the issues that we try to deal with and address in social justice philanthropy is that there is a long time horizon. Social justice philanthropists, and philanthropists in general, don’t usually stick with anything, frankly, long enough to have the kind of systemic impact that we are trying to get. The conditions that we are dealing with are longstanding systemic, deep rooted, evolving, and changing. The complexity of it requires a longer time horizon to even start talking about, are we making a difference? Are we making an impact in people’s lives? So I think it does have to be more of an individualized approach as to what exactly is this particular funder trying to do.

I also think that there is a lot of value in understanding more of the interconnectedness of our different issues. As Chris was talking about, people tend to think that my issue is the issue. This is the way, the only way. Well, there is no one answer. There is no holy grail here. The reality is that different issues intersect, intertwine, interrelate, and we need to have more of a consciousness of where does our little piece fit in the larger puzzle.

It may be that those kinds of considerations have to be taken into account when we’re talking about metrics. It’s not as empirical, sort of widgets. You know, we cranked out three bolts in two hours and 13 seconds, and it involved 20 pieces of equipment. Social justice transformation, social change just doesn’t lend itself to that and I think we have to be comfortable with that. We also have to be comfortable with the fact that there are no ready answers. And we have to be willing to take risks. Taking risks and trying new things means that some things aren’t necessarily going to work out the way you thought they would. But you learn something from that, and then you move on. So I would just argue for changing people’s lives, something tangible, and a longer time horizon.

PETER FRUMKIN: Bill, you might actually be a social justice funder in that you provided lunch to several NCRP members. This could be viewed as capacity building. [LAUGHTER]

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Excellent, capacity building.

PETER FRUMKIN: That’s part of it. You have to put some boundaries on it, and they have to be real. That’s the point.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Yes, and it raises this interesting question, Chris. The first thing you said was, Mott is not a social justice foundation.

CHRISTINE DOBY: We don’t identify that way.
WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Right. Why not? I don’t know whether, then, you are or are not counted in the Foundation Center’s social justice grantmaking. I don’t mean to put you on the spot. I’m sorry. I’ll take that --

CHRISTINE DOBY: Yes, I just work there. [LAUGHTER]

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: I take that back. No, I just --

CHRISTINE DOBY: We are a value driven foundation, so I tried to lay out those values. But we just do not self-identify as a social justice funder or as a liberal funder. We’re trying to make grants on this value line.

Q: I’m Laurie Hughes and I work on the Hill for a nonprofit called The Faith & Politics Institute. We’re bipartisan and we work with members of Congress and their staff. We do a civil rights pilgrimage to Alabama, Selma, Tuskegee, and Birmingham. I also run the Low Dollar Donors program, which is donors under $1,000; grassroots individual supporters. So what I’m trying to sell to the individual donor is that helping our leaders, helping Congress to understand the civil rights history, the trail, how far we’ve come, and how far we still have to go is incredibly important.

As you all can understand, that average individual person isn’t exactly sold on helping Congress is the exact best way to go. But I am convinced if we can help our leaders understand history and their staff, that we can make progress and have social change as well as bipartisan compromise. So I’d be interested in any advice from the panel on tactics to talk to individuals about both large and small donations to a nonprofit with a mission similar to mine.

THOMASINA WILLIAMS: Is the question how to help individuals, specifically to give to an organization that is working to influence congressional members?

LAURIE HUGHES: Yes.

THOMASINA WILLIAMS: That’s a tough sell, you’re right. [LAUGHTER]

LAURIE HUGHES: I’ve been working on it for five months.

THOMASINA WILLIAMS: Well, I think the way to deal with politicians is obviously through their constituencies. So to the extent that you are trying to work with people who are registered voters and actually cast their ballots in the places where those elected officials are, then that is obviously a more direct approach. But it is a tough sell, because there is such cynicism about Congress.

You said something to the effect of helping our leaders to be educated on these issues. I think part of the work, at least for me, around social justice philanthropy, and it sounds like very much also for Mott is, to help people see themselves as leaders and not just look to elected representatives.
WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Yes, Sue. I knew when the issue of measurement and social justice came up, that it had Sue Hoechstetter written all over it.

SUE HOECHSTETTER: I knew you were thinking that, but surprisingly, I’m not going to talk about it.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: You’re not going to talk about it? [LAUGHTER]

SUE HOECHSTETTER: I’m Sue Hoechstetter and I’m with the Alliance for Justice. We provide training and technical assistance on advocacy, including advocacy, and community organizing evaluation. It seems to me that there was agreement on the panel that mainstream philanthropy needs to take community input more into advising their grantmaking. I’m right, am I not?

PETER FRUMKIN: You are wrong. [LAUGHTER] I’m saying I don’t think they are very open. It’s hard for the field to do it. That’s my position.

SUE HOECHSTETTER: Well, that really does relate to my question. It seems that people thought that would be a good thing. And my question was going to be, how can we make that happen?

PETER FRUMKIN: That is a question that’s been asked for 40 years around the philanthropy field, which is, how do we break through these resource independent islands of privilege and power to get them to listen and act in a way that’s more connected to the community? That is the quest that I think is somewhat quixotic, just by the structure and institutional setup of these big institutions. That is not what they are designed to do. They are set up to grind out grant decisions by and large that are defensible, logical, and technically correct. That’s what it’s set up to do. It has a very fine educated staff across a large institution. They do that work well. It’s just very hard to then say, that’s why I asked you, for whom is this written? So maybe you can answer that, Albert, right now. Because the people working in these big foundations, they’re not going to read this and then decide that everything that they’ve done in their profession for the last 20 years is wrong.

ALBERT RUESGA: I can answer on behalf of our foundation, which is a fairly small community foundation, not a large national foundation. When I started working three years ago at the Greater New Orleans Foundation, we had very little by way of community input. We have tried to change that in several ways. The first thing we did was to look at what other foundations do. What we discovered was that getting real, meaningful resident input, and I’m not talking about just the input of professional advocates, which we call grass tops, but to get tenants and other people to chime in, is a very expensive thing to do. The best model I saw required actually having a staff member completely devoted to that purpose, working essentially 40 hours a week on that, setting up house parties, using community-based organizations to get actually into the homes of people who would invite their neighbors. So you could have more of a grassroots input. We can’t afford to do that. We hope to be able to afford to do that at some point.
Right now, we rely on the grass tops, the people who listen to their constituents to get that kind of input. We convene our grantees several times a year, actually, to tell us what we are doing wrong and how we can improve. We have a website that is based very much on a blog model, where you can comment. We put down our rationales for why it is what we do, and we invite criticism about why it is what we do. And we act on, and we respond to that criticism. So there are various mechanisms that you can use, but really getting into or deep into communities is difficult. And even then, knowing that what you’ve heard is at all representative of the community, whatever on Earth that is, as a whole, is a very, very difficult thing to do.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: But Chris, you would say that is sort of what you do, right, at Mott?

CHRISTINE DOBY: Yes, I think Peter is right. I think it is a design question and an institutional question. If the leadership of a philanthropic institution wants the inclusion of some competing perspectives as being essential to its success, then it is just a design question. And then you design which influences you want and you work with your staff to get those.

Generally where I work, we have a communications loop with our grantees, and with others. It’s our culture. It’s the design of the institution to listen and respond to what it is hearing. I want to say, though, to the question of community input, Sue, the idea here for me is not to poll everyone who lives in a community or set up a Twitter feed and vote on issues. I think there is a role for mediating institutions who are then representative of people in a community to bridge this complicated set of relationships between the citizens who live there and all the different institutions, government, private businesses, nonprofit organizations, and philanthropic organizations. I would posit, it’s completely appropriate to get your feedback from organizations and whoever those organizations have chosen to represent their membership.

A challenge is, how democratically governed are those organizations? So that is a question about who you listen to and making sure you are getting some competing perspectives in the room. You know, Albert, I just hate that phrase, grass tops. I just hate it. [LAUGHTER] I’ve got to tell you. Okay, I don’t do grass. I spend 40 bucks a week paying somebody to make sure that the grass roots grow, that they are fertilized, and they are stable. Then I pay somebody else $35 a week to get rid of the grass tops. So there is something wrong. I don’t know. Maybe we need a different analogy, but there is just something wrong with that.

The idea of grass roots isn’t people that are poor. It’s people who are living in communities and that is their perspective. They know that housing policy is education policy, is transportation policy, is workforce policy. They know it’s all one thing. So often from nonprofit organizations or philanthropy, we are siloed in our issue. For instance, they’re a housing funder. They’re a transportation funder. They’re an education funder. Grass roots people know that fertilizer has to fall on all this grass. I don’t just want the one little green patch and the rest of it brown. So I just think there’s a little challenge there in thinking through our analogy, and I’ll stop now and get off my soap box.

ALBERT RUESGA: Just a quick coda on that, the amazing thing is, a lot of foundations listen to the community, but then they do what they heck the want to do anyway. And that’s more often the case than not, I would say.
THOMASINA WILLIAMS: Which, I think, raises another question. I agree with Chris in that it’s a question of institutional design when you’re talking about an individual funder. But for the sector, I think it’s more of a cultural issue. So you need to do organizing within the sector. At the Ford Foundation I spent a lot of time, both internally within the organization and within my particular part of the sector, which was around political engagement issues, organizing, talking, trying to persuade other funders to see things my way. So it really takes a concerted, long term effort. It’s difficult, yes. It’s challenging. It’s expensive. It’s time consuming. But it has to be part of the work in order to really, I think, broaden the pie so that you do have more people in institutions who are willing to take that lead. I find that there are these individuals within institutions but often times, unfortunately, those individuals are not in decision making roles. But it requires a whole other set of strategies, I think, at the sector level.

CHRISTINE DOBY: That’s a good point.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Is that Kevin, are you raising your hand? Oh, good. I want to hear from NCRP.

Q: Hi. I’m Kevin Laskowski. I’m a research and policy associate at the vilified National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy. [LAUGHTER] Now I sympathize with a lot of the skepticism about whether or not philanthropy is built for this. What about philanthropy renews your faith, besides this has to be done and should be done? It could do more social justice philanthropy, those of you who think it should and can. What renews your faith that this is even a possibility for a sector that, as Professor Frumkin puts it, is built to grind out defensible technocratic grants?

THOMASINA WILLIAMS: What renews my faith, frankly, is the fact that there are individuals, people who, like my colleague here, Chris, who are in these institutions, who are committed to making that difference, to making that change. And as long as there are resources available, and there are some ways to access some of those resources or try to influence people who have those resources, to me, it’s worth making that effort. Otherwise, I should be doing something else.

ALBERT RUESGA: What renews my faith is a faith in philanthropic Ju Jitsu, which is essentially using the field’s current obsession with measurement and effectiveness, to call it to account for its outcomes, because there are many grantmakers who want to end poverty, or who want to address affordable housing. And if they really took that seriously, and they look at how well they were doing, they would see that they weren’t doing terribly well. I would argue that one of the reasons they’re not doing terribly well is because they’re not looking at the social justice dimensions of the issue that they are trying to address.

CHRISTINE DOBY: The only thing I would add to that is, as I move around philanthropic affinity groups and talk to my colleagues, what really renews my faith is just an increased desire for what is, the shorthand word, public will. But whether it is trying to re-energize democracy, revitalized American democracy, whatever the issue is, there is just an increased and ever increasing conversation about the absolute value and necessity of a deeper, more meaningful,
and engaged public. So that really renews my faith. I think more grantmakers will be moving into different ways of trying to do that.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: But Peter, you would continue to say --

PETER FRUMKIN: I have no faith. [LAUGHTER]

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: You have no faith. So you get to opt out of all these things. [LAUGHTER]

CHRISTINE DOBY: Just say no.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Exactly. Yes, please, right there. Here comes the microphone.

Q: My name is Susanna Shapiro, and I serve on the board of a philanthropic network called Grantmakers Without Borders. We work with approximately 160, some would call, progressive grantmakers. We say social change grantmaking for the very same reason that it is a sensitive topic. I’ll just say, for many of our members, they don’t want to talk about justice and their top donors would leave. So we have to kind of frame it in a way. But it’s the same thing.

I was totally inspired by this panel and to see how many people here in DC are interested in this topic. We work mostly with global givers. Something that sort of totally disturbed me, and I had to make a comment about it, is when Peter mentioned all of these great points, but then said that we should begin to embrace the language of mainstream philanthropy, it really bothered me, because I feel like there is the problem of being very confrontational, and I worked many times with social movements, so I always use like this oppressor language. It’s not very palatable. I had to leave like several organizations because of that. [LAUGHTER]

PETER FRUMKIN: There you go.

SUSANNA SHAPIRO: But the key is, I think that we have to recognize there is a third option and that would be to really begin to create and co-create with our grantees a common language for this new movement within philanthropy. So for example, trans-local organizing. Some of the work we’re doing, some of the work our members are doing, or the community organizing sector. So instead of saying, ‘Oh, poor people unite.’ and ‘That’s the real people. We have to just fund them. They know everything.’ It’s about whoever is committed to these social justice goals, whether they have money, whether they don’t, whether they have knowledge, it’s like you have to work as a sector. So I think kind of bridging this dichotomy is the biggest hope. And I wanted to hear if any of you have kind of begun to think about this new common language, which I think the Ruesga paper begins to really think of a framework about that.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Yes, great question. In fact, why don’t we make it our last question, and your comments would be your final comments. And let me just build on it for a second. In other words, at the end of the day we go back to Albert’s initial point of departure, which is there has to be some difference between social justice philanthropy and just plain old liberal mainstream philanthropy. And yet when you set out to describe social justice philanthropy, you
end up with this problem that the language is frightening to a lot of funders who are doing mainstream funding. So is there a third language that we can use that will somehow manage to lure over those from just plain old liberal philanthropy? I mean, will we get to the point where Mott will actually self-identify as a social justice foundation or is that ---

CHRISTINE DOBY: Stop picking on me.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Sorry. [LAUGHTER] You’re a fellow Michigander. You can take it. If you’re from Michigan, you can take anything.

CHRISTINE DOBY: We can take a lot. That’s right. [LAUGHTER]

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Exactly, thank you.

CHRISTINE DOBY: And have taken a lot, these days.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Yes, so please.

CHRISTINE DOBY: I think that there is a language that is emerging and developing. It feels like creepy messaging to say, you know, could we get like a little focus group and get new language so that we’re like fooling people? And I know that’s not what you mean, and I don’t want to participate in that. I think there is a language developing. But I also think there is a language in social science. There is language in sociology that we don’t use and that we could adopt. I really think that at Mott we’ve done a lot with our colleagues to talk about the kind of funding that we do by talking about sociological constructs like human capital, bridging and bonding social capital, and delivering financial capital. So I think we could do better with our language, but I don’t want to do any creepy messaging. [LAUGHTER]

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Good. Someone want to speak up for creepy messaging? [LAUGHTER] No? But answers to the question. What is the prospect of accomplishing what she’s asking?

ALBERT RUESGA: Even though our foundation is in New Orleans, which is a little island of blue in a sea of red, I still have a very conservative board. I think most boards, actually, pretty much anywhere, are conservative. And I think that the way you do it is, you stick to the truth. You speak the truth. You appeal to the best in other people, and assume that they’re on the side of the angels. And you assume that they share your sense of fairness.

I think you should avoid language that is very much linked to a particular time and place, where people are shaking their fists, and assume that there are people in the business community, people in government, and others who are willing to partner with you. And that has been very effective for us. I think that really one of the most effective social justice programs that we’ve had in Louisiana was started by a board member who has been a member of the Republican Party for many years, a close friend of Ronald Reagan, and was in the oil and gas industry. And now, this program is essentially guaranteeing a college education to every high school graduate who has a B- or I think maybe even a C+ or better grade out of high school. This program has
PETER FRUMKIN: I think it’s interesting that in your group of eight frameworks, you actually have some that I would describe as not as possibly frightening to the mainstream establishment.

ALBERT RUESGA: Structural.

PETER FRUMKIN: Whoa. Redistribution. Not my money. [LAUGHTER] Cultural relativism. It’s all the same. Those seem harsh, or having an edge to them. But other things in your list are softer. Empowerment actually works on both sides of the aisle, interestingly. There is a lot of people on both sides that love the idea of empowerment, because it has this double meaning of both giving people the ability to solve their own problems, but also not depending upon a handout. And you also have shared values. Who could be against shared values? So I think in the list there is language there that has a bit of an edge to it, and there’s also language there that has a softer contour.

I don’t think it’s sinister to say, you’ve got start thinking about when and how to use this language effectively, because I do believe that the foundation field will in a sense tune you out if you come in with the wrong. My little boy has a Kindle, which his grandmother gave him. We are working on taking it away from him, which is very hard. [LAUGHTER] But now, if he hears something he doesn’t like, he puts on the headphones, plugs in the Kindle, and says he can’t hear us. [LAUGHTER] That’s the foundation rule. If you go the wrong way, they just won’t hear you. They just tune you out. So you’ve got to be sensitive to that.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Yes, I was struck in Chris’s comments, the notion of mediating structures. I was at AEI in the mid 1970s when mediating structures was all the rage, with Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus. It’s a concept that can draw people together across the aisle. Thomasina, any last comments?

THOMASINA WILLIAMS: I would just say that while a common language might be helpful, I think you would have to add to that a common meaning for the words that you’re using, because there are terms that we use now, like social justice philanthropy, that people use the same words that have very different meaning for them. And at the end of the day, my personal preference or focus is not to be so much concerned about whether Mott characterizes itself as a social justice philanthropist or philanthropy funder, but with what is it actually doing. What impact is it having in the world? And just like we can’t agree on the definition of social justice philanthropy, I don’t know that we’re going to agree on a common language or even a meaning for the terms. So from my perspective, it’s like, why would I exert that effort? Why not put that energy into actually trying to make the difference that I want my social justice philanthropy to serve however I define it?

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Very good. Well, let’s thank our panel for a terrific conversation. [APPLAUSE]