

18 March 2020

Future Foundations UK | championing a vision of a just future

We are a supportive network for minoritised racial groups working in the Trust and Foundation sector to connect, create and lead change within the space.

We don't know what the true scale or impact of the COVID-19 outbreak will be. It's clearly an evolving situation, one that will likely escalate sooner rather than later. There are however, three clear knowns that we must come to terms with. One, this is the worst public health crisis in recent memory, a disaster that is disrupting the soul and infrastructure of British society. Two, in order for us to thrive and to do so in a sustainable way, we will have to rely on one another and pull together. And three, the government's withdrawal from reinforcing public services over the past decade has severely fractured and compromised the UK's ability to respond effectively. The government has both a moral and a statutory duty to ensure that those who are most marginalised and vulnerable are sufficiently resourced during this time.

How can independent funders and foundations support efforts to ensure that their response is as far-reaching as the circumstances COVID-19 has created?

Broadly, it will take bold leadership, challenging the traditional top-down funder mindset, empathy and trusting the voices and actions of local communities and marginalised groups. More specifically, here are a few actions that we recommend that funders should take and which we would be happy to discuss:

1. **Demonstrate a strong commitment to your grantees:** This should be seen as an immediate and first-stage response. The London Funders statement issued on behalf of 100+ funders offers to stand with civil society groups by enabling grant-holders to adapt activities, change reporting deadlines, and use funding flexibly. This is just the sort of positive first step needed but it is only a start - it's the minimum that must be done at this time. We are in the worst crisis in living memory and if the *only* response of foundations is to create more favourable grant conditions for their grantees, then that would be inadequate. As for those who have not signed the pledge or have not provided similar levels of support to their grant-holders, they should fundamentally ask themselves if they are fit for purpose.
2. **Commit more resources to local sustainable infrastructure:** According to the Association for Charitable Foundations (ACF), in 2016/17 the top 300 UK foundations distributed £3.3 billion in grant-making. These foundations had net assets of £65 billion. In short, they distributed approximately just 5% of their assets. True commitment by foundations during this time would be to pledge significantly more of their assets towards building or strengthening the community-led infrastructure that will be required to provide 'people-to-people' interim support and to create more sustainable systems locally. Independent funders have more than enough resources to try something significantly different, or to put the resource in the hands of those with a real understanding of how best to serve the most vulnerable, speedily and effectively.

Given that this is a public health crisis, independent funding bodies with public accountability have a responsibility to support efforts and to be forward-thinking in their responses. At this point, you don't need to state how much or what you will commit but given the current circumstances, an additional 5% of funding is a realistic aim. Nevertheless, you should signal your intent to adopt a radically different approach as soon as possible.

3. **Direct funding to grassroots movements:** In the coming months an essential step should be for funding to target groups that are deeply rooted in their communities, delivering work through an intersectional lens with a holistic, people-centred

approach. We've seen the mistakes in the past - disproportionate amounts of money going to (mis)leaders, like some of the large NGOs who struggle to reach the most impoverished or intermediaries who position themselves as thought leaders; or to short-term interventions, one-size-fits-all approaches, colonial and culturally inappropriate services, all of which have marred previous crisis responses. Responsible and effective funding needs to resource those who have a track record of providing support that meets people where they are, on their terms.

4. **Be pragmatic:** Alongside funding for grassroots movements, funders should look for the most practical ways in which their money can enhance and amplify work on the ground. Beyond meeting immediate needs, this may include ensuring that everyone is digitally enabled or the creation of online, culturally appropriate resources. How best can funders subsidise or support community workers and organisers, youth workers, caseworkers, etc who are providing vital support outside of our public services to ordinary people? This applies particularly to those serving the most vulnerable, from the elderly and the homeless to the disabled and domestic violence survivors. These groups exist, they are doing the work and they need urgent resourcing.

5. **Shift to a social justice approach:** As a sector, this should be our north star. Dominant funding approaches are still based on a traditional top-down model, where power holders - often those who have gained or inherited their wealth from extracting natural and human resources - control how money is distributed to disadvantaged communities. These groups are not qualified or equipped to speak for, or make decisions on behalf of, marginalised communities, particularly in times of crisis when the stakes are so high. This is a once-in-lifetime opportunity to shift the paradigm, to move from a charity model of benefactors and beneficiaries to a social justice model underpinning human rights, empowerment and dignity.

As former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer once said, 'Charity runs out of money. Justice with systemic change does not'. Funders will need to bring those with lived and proximate experience, and those working on the frontlines, into decision making processes in a meaningful way to ensure this shift is achieved. This will produce far more equitable and legitimate choices and enable funding to go towards disrupting and transforming, rather than preserving an unequal system. This is our best opportunity to move beyond existing rhetoric towards real and meaningful change.

This needs to be a time of bold leadership, empathy, humility and an understanding that the very models created to support people through traditional philanthropy are insufficient at this time. A willingness by all to commit to community over individualism, and society over self, is necessary if we are to get through this crisis and create sustainable solutions for all.