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THE SEPTEMBER 11 EFFECT

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New Priorities for Philanthropy

Robert L. Bach

The events of September 11 have forced institutions to reexamine their priorities and practices. Yet the first world war of the twenty-first century has left many wondering if there truly is a war, and what, if anything, different is demanded of them. The philanthropic sector in particular has not changed significantly, and it continues to struggle with fundamental concerns about its directions. If September 11 and its aftermath are to mean anything to philanthropy other than emergency relief, it must be a recognition that now is the time to tackle the problems and tensions that were ignored before the attacks. For nearly a year, philanthropy as a sector has not rallied behind this call for longer-term reform. Philanthropy should take up these tasks, no matter how daunting they may be, for if foundations do not lead the effort, it may be left to the governments and the militaries of the world to respond on their own.

That is not to say, of course, that foundations were unresponsive to the massive tragedies in New York City. Propelled forward by the immense generosity of the American people and its own best traditions, the philanthropic sector responded immediately, raising well over $1 billion, and, despite public criticism, it did so with a minimum of confusion. Many organizations agreed to pool their funds, and when administrative difficulties arose, senior members of the community quickly stepped in to help out.

Still, the philanthropic community did not, and largely has not, answered the implicit questions raised as a result of September 11. How could the events have so completely surprised everyone? Surely if the attacks were more than random acts, their root causes and systemic antecedents should have provided some warning. How and why had foundation staff and, especially, the civil-society organizations they finance, missed these emerging trends and tensions?

Questions such as these provoked defensiveness in the philanthropic community. Some argued that a quick shift in priorities after September 11 would devalue existing projects and call into question foundation strategies developed over many years. How would trustees' boards receive proposals for swift changes, and how would established funding constituencies react politically to new priorities? The result was that most foundations resisted anxious reflections about their own work. They stayed the course, defended established grant programs, and held on to entrenched financial priorities.

The public sector, in contrast, responded quickly and profoundly, charting a new course financially, militarily, and politically. Across the globe, governments forged ahead with an urgent sense of new priority setting. This is, perhaps, unsurprising. In the United States, certainly, the Bush administration's isolationist foreign policy was so out of touch with what was needed to respond to these attacks that an outburst of new strategic planning was to be expected. In contrast, the nonprofit community seems to persist in underestimating the implications of September 11 and its aftermath and, as a result, it has given insufficient attention to rethinking some of its core strategies.

REORIENTING PRIORITIES FOR JUSTICE

In many ways, the nonprofit sector was aligned before September 11 to fight a different global battle. Its strategies in the 1990s exuded the confidence and ambition of political and economic victory over communism. A triumphant ideology proclaimed that private enterprise would unleash the wealth-creating magic of the marketplace. With foundation reserves expanding along with the stock market's exuberance, many believed that civil-society organizations could take charge in those places where public authorities were weak and that, where necessary, private philanthropy could "correct" the market where it failed to spread as widely and rapidly as anticipated.

However, even before September 11, critics began to question whether these strategies identified the most useful targets, and the extent to which favored tactics and programs were truly effective. Some observers suggested that these efforts were not only ineffective but that some of the initiatives and approaches had gone too far. In particular, critics wondered if efforts to "build" civil society and work closely with private market development had fueled opposition to institutionalized forms of public authority and governance necessary for social development, political stability, and human security.

After September 11 a variety of critics turned these concerns into core ethical and politico-economic questions about the philanthropic mission itself. One foundation president called for reaffirmation of the core principle of philanthropy: the fundamental faith that "wealth can transcend its own parochial interests, and directly be used for the common good."[1] The events of September 11 might have reawakened awareness and interest in promoting a global common good, but that would have required several significant changes in philanthropic approaches. The events certainly demanded an engagement in the world and an end to implied and explicit isolationism. They called for a clear and critical reassessment of strategies to promote civil-society networks, especially in light of growing dissatisfaction with their lack of concrete accomplishments. They also challenged foundation leadership to reform program priorities to move beyond constituency-based philanthropy that further fragmented societies rather than promoting unifying, shared objectives.

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[1] Lance E. Lindblom, "Common Vision—Common Goals?" (speech given at the Independent Sector Annual Conference, Atlanta, Georgia, November 4, 2001).

The attacks also should have underscored the urgency of the reform task. They served notice that there were real dangers in a world in which states had too little authority and power, and in which nonstate groups might generate sufficient private wealth to capture from states weapons of mass destruction. In this context, the evolution of conditions in Afghanistan leading up to September 11 offered at least two lessons to guide nonprofit sector reform: First, a disregard for and opposition to institutional forms of public order and government will undermine the pursuit of both justice and economic well-being. George Soros had warned as early as 1998 that "a weak state may be as much a threat to open society as an authoritarian state."[2] September 11 underscored the potential impact of ignoring failed states, and of abandoning the very states that the international community had previously boycotted and punished. Second, no society can be peaceful if the logic of the global system systematically violates a sense of "fairness." Unnecessary human suffering at a time when the world enjoys an abundance of knowledge, technology, and resources compromises the "moral sustainability" of all societies.[3]

Of course, philanthropy did not have to focus on programs solely in Afghanistan to be responsive to new global trends. Unfortunately, the nonprofit community still resists involvement in places, such as Haiti, where the lessons of Afghanistan might be applied. Embracing the apparent lack of interest of both public and for-profit sectors, foundations have largely withdrawn from Haiti and virtually abandoned the Caribbean as a whole. Yet Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Its people are suffering from HIV/AIDS at rates comparable to and even surpassing many areas of the world receiving both UN and philanthropic attention. It also sits on the doorstep of the United States, and is thus intertwined with U.S. domestic concerns. Still, Haiti has been left to become another failed state. Echoing the steps of demise seen in Afghanistan, political violence has increased, human suffering has reached dramatic proportions, and drug cartels are seizing and corrupting civil society.

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[2] George Soros, *The Crisis of Global Capitalism* (New York: Public Affairs, 1998), p. 70.

[3] Lincoln C. Chen, "Partnerships for Social Development in a Globalizing World" (speech given at the Geneva 2000 Forum International Conference Centre, Geneva, July 27, 2000), p. 3.

Philanthropists should also be interested in Haiti as a political and moral gauge of the "fairness" and sustainability of efforts to create a Western hemispheric economy rooted in free trade and private enterprise. Philanthropic efforts should be targeted to ensure that the design and construction of the regional order contains a promise of improvement for the poorest and weakest. If such concerns are not central to formal negotiations among governments throughout the region, later efforts to provide assistance to Haiti will be marginally effective and much too late to help resolve its fundamental economic and political problems.

Haiti offers only one example of the misdirection of philanthropic strategies and its selective lack of engagement. Of course, Haiti is not Afghanistan, and even a political and social implosion will not generate the types of conditions that fueled the rise of the Taliban. In the midst of the American region, however, Haiti and other countries are descending into unbelievable and unacceptable misery. Their collapse will have direct and dramatic effects on the United States.

The post–September 11 strategic challenges for philanthropy, of course, go much further than the problem of failed states. Many foundations, however, have found that they simply could not shift directions swiftly enough. The networks of civil-society advocates constructed and funded during the 1990s were simply unprepared to respond to the new challenges. Facing inevitable political battles over funding, many foundations searched for ways to rationalize continued financial support for favored constituency groups by twisting previous work and objectives to somehow fit the new demands. These institutional problems, of course, were not new to foundation leaders and many had been working on ways to increase funding flexibility by placing time limits on institutional support.[4] Still, institutional constraints severely limited the capacity of the philanthropic sector to respond to the events of September 11 at a time when the common good justified impatience.

THE SEARCH FOR SECURITY

After September 11 the U.S. government's reaction, domestically and overseas, clearly launched a process of redefining world political priorities and of crafting a new model of world leadership. The process will continue to take shape for some time and involve, as it does now, conflicting priorities. These changes are so fundamental that it is not surprising that the process begins with a confrontation over fundamental principles—security, war, justice. The philanthropic community needs to be a part of this process, beginning with support for the debate to ensure it is truly global in character, inclusive of a broad array of perspectives, and practically oriented.

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[4] See, e.g., statements made by Theda Skocpol in Thomas J. Billitteri, "'The American Prospect': Civic Disengagement," *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, June 17, 1999.

For example, the revival after September 11 of long dormant intellectual and political debates about "just wars" reflects this rekindling of concern about core principles and strategies. The first principle of a "just war"—self-defense—is a reasonable starting point in the context of the September 11 attacks: it is both conceptually fundamental and practically oriented. The United States has a need to establish its moral legitimacy to carry a coalition of the world's strongest militaries into lethal action halfway around the world.

Yet, as a concept and as a tactic to mobilize coalition partners, it is much too narrow and limited. Self-defense arguments only begin to construct a rationale for U.S. policy re-engagement. Equally important are the second and third principles of a just war: issues related to the conduct of war, and the character, the justice, of whatever settlements are to come from these wars. A focus on these principles and issues is one way in which philanthropy could make a practical contribution. In a time of war, philanthropy should set its goals on crafting the peace—putting together the elements of a future economic, social, and political order that updates and surpasses the tricky notions of "nation-building." The philanthropic sector could lead both the public and the for-profit sectors in focusing on cooperative regional security, stability, and improvement in well-being.

For the philanthropic community to rise to this global challenge, however, it must move quickly past its legacy in the 1990s of disregard for public authority and state power, and an excessive focus on civil-society organizations. A necessary first step is to examine self-critically the shortcomings of existing strategies. The World Resources Institute (WRI) offers a good example of the value of this initial assessment. In its annual review, WRI reports on the sharp disjuncture between the growth of civil-society networks working on global environmental issues since the 1992 Rio Conference and their minimal concrete impacts. In the ten years following the Rio Conference, the role of NGOs and civil society in general in international discussions has expanded dramatically. Financed primarily by private foundations' civil-society initiatives, this engagement led to convention after convention, declaration after declaration, and resolution upon resolution. All the while, however, conditions on the ground, in the very areas that this increased participation targeted, continued their decline.

Philanthropy has also supported efforts to devise a framework and practical guidelines for when and under what circumstances international military force should be used to intervene in "local" affairs. In one case, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty struggled with the dilemma of deep antagonism and opposition between civil-society opponents and state authorities. Its proposed resolution would transform the question of protection from a rights-based framework, used primarily to monitor and criticize governments, to an engaged approach that focuses on the "responsibility to protect"—a political duty deeply rooted in governance and public legitimacy.[5] The example highlights the need for foundations to take even their past successes (their support for human rights globally during the last half of the twentieth century) and transform them to help meet new challenges.

For philanthropy, however, perhaps the most challenging consequence of September 11 involves the pervasive new security consciousness. If the sector hopes to contribute, it must overcome a reluctance to engage in issues related to national security, the military, and effective law enforcement, especially in terms of fostering cooperation rather than opposition between public authorities and civil-society organizations. Unfortunately, past neglect and outright antagonism make this a difficult domestic and international task. Civil-society organizations financed primarily to protect liberties and rights are ill prepared to keep pace with the growing acceptance of the centrality of civilian law enforcement as the new mechanism of international cooperation and governance.

Foundations have a crucial role to play in constructing this new framework. That framework will require innovations in all areas, including security, law enforcement, and protection of individual rights. As difficult as the process may be, without innovations in the way that security doctrines and civil liberties work together, neither approach will establish the common ground of concern that will create a framework for democratic governance in an age of terror. To be effective, however, foundations must be able and willing to shift course and seek a synthesis of approaches.

PHILANTHROPY'S HISTORICAL PROMISE grows out of its ability to take risks, to pursue issues and problems, and to serve people in circumstances that either government or profit-making institutions cannot. Once again, it is called upon to fulfill that promise. The demands of a post–September 11 United States, let alone of the world, call for recrafting principles and approaches to very tough issues—ones that are not well served by established programs and other sectors. To take a few examples, this may well be a historical moment in which the United States recalibrates the relationship between government authority and individual liberties. It may well be the moment in which the limits of civil society in effecting change are defined. And it may well be an era in which a series of failed states spawns public disorders that threaten, at various levels of risk, communities that are stable and at peace. To meet these new challenges, foundations will certainly need to struggle with realignments of established funding constituencies and disrupt entrenched programs that will cause difficult and unpleasant institutional reforms. No single foundation initiative would or should be adequate to this task, for it is not a new project that is needed, but a re-dedication of philanthropy to identifying core problems and searching for innovative solutions.

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[5] International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, *The Responsibility to Protect* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 2002).