

Reflections on Social Justice

(5 minute read)

Published: 17 February 2023

Written by: Alice Sachrajda, who provided consultancy support to John Ellerman Foundation between September and November 2022 – with support and input from Sufina Ahmad, Director and Tufyal Choudhury, Trustee

Like many other socially minded funders, John Ellerman Foundation has been reflecting on the growing discourse around social justice in the UK voluntary and philanthropic sectors. This post pulls together some of our current thoughts and conversations on social justice, though it does not constitute a new policy as our thinking on this subject is a work in progress. Furthermore, we remain wholly committed to our overarching aim which is to advance wellbeing for people, society and the natural world.

Connecting issues at the roots

The work of social movements has helped so many of us understand that the inequities we see in our society are entrenched and systemic. The Covid-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis have made this even more apparent. 'Social justice' as a framework helps to connect different issue areas, indicating their systemic root causes. We see organisations in the voluntary sector regularly use 'justice' as a frame for a variety of different issues, e.g. racial justice, climate justice, migrant justice, gender justice etc, creating opportunities for intentional alignment when issues intersect. Good examples are [Greenpeace](#) stressing that climate justice is impossible without racial justice; [People and Planet's](#) student campaigns that connect climate justice with migrant justice; and [Joseph Rowntree Foundation's](#) research, which has demonstrated that compassion and justice are powerful frames to invoke public solidarity when talking about poverty.

The movement for racial justice has initiated vital discussions about how entrenched and systemic racism is in our institutions and what decolonisation and being truly anti-racist requires of us. A central focus of this inquiry has been disrupting power structures that perpetuate racial injustice, including in the grantmaking process. For example, Ubele's paper on [Exposing Structural Racism in the Third Sector](#) outlines the funding structures, strategies and mindsets that continue to discriminate against Black and minoritised groups in the UK funding space.

Reflecting on our grantmaking practice

Growing gaps in social services and community support, which have created entrenched social inequities over the past decade, are increasingly being filled by voluntary organisations, many of which John Ellerman Foundation supports. As Chrisann Jarrett, CEO of We Belong, reflects in her paper [Vision for the Future of Youth-led Changemaking and Activism](#) for Paul Hamlyn Foundation: *"...the third sector and activist organisations will be needed [...] to 'fill the justice gap' left by government legislation, increasing the need for direct service provision and advocacy around human rights and representation of marginalised communities. The political landscape will make it increasingly difficult to influence systems change on a variety of campaign issues."*

This raises many questions for us about how our funding practice aligns with social justice goals. As an open, responsive and generalist grantmaker, our remit is relatively broad, and our current funding guidelines overlap with a social justice approach in many ways. For example, we have a commitment to funding organisations that tackle the root causes of social and environmental issues, focus on changing systems and take a long-term view. In our social action funding category, we ask that organisation centre lived experience to guide their work. We believe our practice of providing multi-year core costs funding is also in alignment with tackling issues that are entrenched and systemic.

Across our three funding categories of arts, environment and social action, there are many examples of past and current grant-holders whose work has a particular focus on justice:

- *Social Action:* Many of our grant-holders in this category are campaigning and working to create access to justice and a fairer distribution of resources. Examples include: [School of Social Justice](#), which shares the lessons and experiences of social justice campaigners, innovators, activists and leaders; [Voice for Change England](#) and [ACEVO](#) and their work on racial justice in the charity sector; [The British Institute of Human Rights](#) and their campaigning to protect our human rights; and [National Survivor User Network](#) and their work to support mental health rights through a social justice lens.
- *Arts:* Many of our grant-holders in the arts, museums and galleries space are working to support underrepresented artists and curators respectively and bring their work to communities for whom art and collections are otherwise less accessible. Examples include: the [People's History Museum](#), which inspires visitors around equality, social justice, cooperation and a fair world for all; [Manchester Museums Partnership](#), which explores the role museums play in challenging inequalities in our society; and [Tamasha](#), which is working to champion and support underrepresented artists.
- *Environment:* Increasingly, our environment grant-holders are incorporating a greater focus on climate justice. Examples include [The Poverty and Environment Trust](#), which believes that relieving poverty and protecting the environment and inextricably related; [ClientEarth](#), which recognises that climate change and air quality does not affect us all equally and promotes climate justice; and the [Environmental Philanthropy Lab](#), which is exploring new models and ways of working relating to climate and investing.

Collaborating and sharing learning

Our director, Sufina Ahmad, has been speaking with other funders to explore what it means to fund social justice initiatives well. These conversations have included organisations (mainly funders) such as Civic Power Fund, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Hour Is Late, Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, Legal Education Foundation, Blagrove Trust, Lankelly Chase Foundation, Trust for London, Barrow Cadbury Trust, Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust and Unbound Philanthropy.

Through our conversations we have learnt that becoming a social justice funder is something many grantmakers in the UK philanthropic space are making commitments around. We understand that this is different from simply funding social justice initiatives as it requires the application of a social justice lens to the whole foundation and grantmaking process.

We have been looking at examples where funders have taken steps in this direction. Addressing the inequitable distribution of grants, [The Phoenix Fund](#) (supported by The Global Fund for Children and The National Lottery Community Fund) has committed over £2m to Black and minoritised ethnic (BME) grassroots groups who were so vital in supporting communities through the Covid-19 pandemic, but have historically been underfunded. To address injustices in the grantmaking process, [Camden Giving](#) has developed an effective process for participatory grantmaking, through which resident panels make decisions about funding allocations. And [Charity So White](#) has significantly shifted the conversation about the lack of diversity and lived experience among senior leaders in the sector towards an active focus on racial representation, especially in organisations that serve Black and minority ethnic communities.

What next?

If we are to incorporate a greater focus on social justice, that requires us to consider which types of organisations we support, as well as examining how our existing funding approaches and power structures show up in our grantmaking. It also means exploring the crossovers between issue areas and the ways in which we apply an intersectional lens in our grantmaking. We are in active discussion about these questions with our Board of Trustees and will continue to engage fellow grantmakers and grant-holders in this process as we evolve our approach and explore next steps.