

# as the south goes

philanthropy and social  
justice in the us south

GRANTMAKERS FOR SOUTHERN PROGRESS

“Social justice is any structural or systemic change in order to increase the opportunity of those who are least well off politically, economically or socially.”

Foundation Center, 2009, Social Justice Grantmaking II

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## about grantmakers for southern progress

Grantmakers for Southern Progress (GSP), formerly the Southern Organizing Working Group, is a network of funders who seek to strengthen the infrastructure for social justice work in the US South to more effectively advance a social justice agenda on a regional and national level. GSP pursues this goal through leveraging resources for social justice work in the South, increasing the coordination among funders supporting social justice in the region and educating the philanthropic community about the critical role that social justice work in the South has in resolving persistent regional and national challenges. Grantmakers for Southern Progress recently became a working group of the Neighborhood Funders Group. For more information on GSP, contact Julie Mooney at [SouthernProgress@nfg.org](mailto:SouthernProgress@nfg.org).

# introduction

The renowned African-American sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois once said, “As the South goes, so goes the nation,” reflecting the pivotal role the South played in defining America’s character and direction as it stood at the crossroads of civil rights and social, economic and political progress and racial injustice and stagnation. While the struggle for civil rights that was waged in the South was traumatic and destructive, ultimately it ushered in a new era of progress and opportunity for marginalized groups throughout the country. The country is yet again at such crossroads. The nation can retrench and limit the potential for those communities to thrive or it can decide to expand opportunity for those who are least well off. The South, as always, will help determine the nation’s future. This path toward progress demands a concerted effort to deepen and expand social justice work in the South.

In the post-civil rights movement era, there has been a debate in progressive circles over the importance of the South in advancing social justice nationally. For some, desegregation and the passage of civil rights legislation signaled a time to shift to other important issues in different locales. For others, the intransigence and power of Southern cultural, political, social and economic conservatism and the resulting problems seemed insurmountable.

More often than not, the debate resulted in the functional de-prioritization and under-investment in a Southern social justice infrastructure. According to an analysis done by the National Committee on Responsive Philanthropy based on data from The Foundation Center<sup>1</sup>, the South, as a region, falls far short of national averages on both national and state-based giving to social justice groups. Between 2006 and 2008, the 13 Southern states<sup>2</sup> averaged nearly \$14.5 million in “grants awarded” as compared to the national average of \$56 million. Similarly the states in the region averaged nearly \$22 million in “grants received” as compared to the

national average of \$42 million. Compared to other parts of the country, particularly the Northeast, Midwest and West Coast, the South is woefully under-resourced.

Nevertheless, there is growing interest in the South from national and Southern funders of social justice work. Grantmakers for Southern Progress (GSP), a new network of Southern and national funders who seek to strengthen the infrastructure for social justice work in the South, believes this burgeoning interest should be cultivated and strengthened. One way to capitalize on this attention is to better understand why Southern and national funders choose to fund or not to fund social justice work in the region. Similarly there is a need to examine social justice funding strategies and how Southern and national funders define and think about social justice work. GSP commissioned this study and resulting report, which explores how Southern and national funders support social justice work in the South. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

- 1. How do local, regional and national foundations think and talk about social justice work in the South?**
- 2. Why do local, regional and national foundations choose to support or not to support social justice work in the South?**
- 3. What are some major barriers and facilitating factors for foundations to support social justice work in the region?**
- 4. What are some strategies to increase support for social justice work in the region?**

This report will begin with a brief discussion of the importance of the South and social justice in the South, followed by a description of the methodology and the study’s major findings, and will conclude with strategies for fostering greater social justice grantmaking in the South.

# why the south and funding social justice in the south is important

Before discussing the substance of the study results, two central issues must be addressed – why the South is important and why funding social justice in the South is important. These are complex subjects, so for the purposes of this report, two broad themes will be touched upon: the growing vibrancy of the South and the persistent challenges faced by impoverished and marginalized Southern communities.

From the beginning of this nation, the South has had a decisive influence on the social, political, economic and cultural character of the country. Outside of the region, particularly in the metropolitan areas on the coasts, the South is often characterized by its history of slavery, racial discrimination, segregation and violence and its conservative social and economic policies and values. Inside the region, the South is often viewed as a vibrant place, where the people have a deep and abiding connection to their communities, and the spirit of innovation and perseverance abounds. Both of these pictures of the South contain truths which make the region unique, dynamic and ripe for philanthropic investment.

The South continues to be the fastest-growing region in the country. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 38 of the 50 fastest-growing counties from 2010-2011 were in the South, and 21 of the 50 fastest-growing micro areas between 2010 and 2011 were in the South.<sup>3</sup> This growth is due in part to exponential increase of Latinos in the region over the last decade, but also to the return of African-Americans to the South, after their “Great Migration” to other parts of the country in the 20th century.

The South’s growing economy attracts people as well. According to Forbes magazine, eight out of the top 13 metropolitan areas with the best hiring prospects for

fall 2012 were in the South, while only one Southern city was in the bottom 10.<sup>4</sup> The South has been central to agribusiness for some time, but more recently, the region has increased its stature in other sectors, such as manufacturing, where Tennessee, Kentucky, South Carolina and Georgia lead Michigan in car manufacturing.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, North Carolina boasts the second-largest banking center in the country. The growing population carries with it a growing significance in national politics. The South gained 26 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives after the 2010 Census, comprising 37 percent of the total seats in the House (compared to approximately 18 percent for the Northeast, 21 percent for the Midwest and 23 percent for the West), and the South holds a third of electoral college votes for presidential elections.

However, this growth in population, economic and political influence is marked by acute challenges. The rapid increase of Latinos in many Southern communities coupled with a faltering economy and rising unemployment has resulted in most Southern states considering or passing legislation that would increase the official surveillance, incarceration and deportation of Latinos and other immigrants. As opponents of these bills suggest, this intensifies fear and intimidation in these communities. While most of the bills were defeated in the last two years, three out of five states that passed strict anti-immigrant laws in the past year were in the South. Similarly, African-Americans moving to the region may have to contend with persistent racial disparities in housing, education, income and a host of other factors.

The Institute for Southern Studies notes that the Southern economy is on the rise. However, the South’s “hospitable

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business environment” is marked by low taxes, anti-union laws and lax environmental protections, and this, combined with a weak social safety net, means the benefits of economic growth are not widely shared. In fact, the South is home to eight of the 10 states with the lowest household income and half of the 10 states with the greatest levels of economic inequality. The South continues to have lower percentages of high school graduates, high rates of obesity, the highest rates of teen pregnancy in the country and lower life expectancy and higher death rates, regardless of race.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, Southern states have also increased the number of laws aimed toward tightening voter registrations and eligibility. Of the 19 states that recently passed restrictive voting laws, nine of them were Southern states.<sup>7</sup> These laws seem to have a disproportionate impact on the poor, communities of color, seniors and college-aged students. So even though the South’s demographic composition is shifting to “majority-minority,” meaning soon the minority population will outnumber the white population, it is uncertain that this will translate to greater political influence for communities of color without intentional investment and support.

There are great opportunities, as well as persistent and severe challenges facing the South. Philanthropy can play a pivotal role in expanding the reach and benefit of these opportunities by making strategic investments toward dismantling the structural barriers to opportunity and fostering well-being by reducing persistent social and economic inequities.

Investing in social justice in the South can improve conditions for the region and for the country as a whole. Consequently, the question for foundations and donors – both inside and outside of the region – isn’t why should we fund social justice in the South, but why aren’t we funding social justice work in the South?

# methodology

The study sought to identify the reasons behind the decisions to fund social justice work in the South. Open Source Leadership, based in Durham, Carolina, were the researchers for this study. The researchers first decided which states to include in the study and how to identify interviewees who were not the “usual suspects.” For this initial study four states were selected: North Carolina, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas. These states were chosen for the following reasons:

## A range of philanthropic infrastructure

**North Carolina** is well recognized as having a developed and dynamic institution-based philanthropic sector, with a vibrant statewide philanthropic network, a broad number of philanthropic partnerships and the second-highest philanthropic giving for social justice work in the region.

**Texas** has a well-resourced but decentralized institution-based and individual donor infrastructure, where the lack of limits on political contributions in the state results in progressive donors investing heavily in political campaigns rather than in nonprofit capacity building and community organizing.

Although **Louisiana** is ranked seventh out of the 13 southern states in terms of social justice grant dollars received and granted, it has the unique “benefit” of national funder interest stimulated by natural and man-made disasters, specifically hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

**Mississippi** has one of the smallest donor and foundation bases in the country. The philanthropic scene is heavy with community foundations, with many newer community foundations generated by matching grants from the Phil Hardin Foundation.

## A range of philanthropic leadership on social justice issues in the state

**North Carolina** notably has the Z. Smith Reynolds and the Mary Reynolds Babcock foundations that play strong leadership roles on issues of social justice and equity in North Carolina (and throughout the region for Babcock); while the Foundation for Louisiana (formerly the Louisiana Disaster Relief Foundation) and the Greater New Orleans Foundation are emerging yet important advocates of social justice work in **Louisiana**.

**Mississippi** and **Texas** show relatively modest leadership for social justice issues in their states. However, this research found a number of women-focused funds and foundations playing important roles in both states, most notably the Dallas Women’s Foundation and the Embrey Family Foundation.

## A critical mass of social justice organizations in the state

Each of the four states has a good base of groups and projects focused on systemic change to improve conditions for impoverished and marginalized communities. Indeed, this research found 463 social justice groups and/or social-justice-related projects in the four states.

## Recent investment by national foundations or recent local and national philanthropic partnerships

In each of the four states there has been recent investment and a strategic focus on social justice issues from large national groups, including Kellogg, Marguerite Casey, Atlantic Philanthropies, Ford and Open Society foundations. These investments represent opportunities for leveraging additional national interest and funds.

“...this research found 463 social justice groups and social justice-related projects in the four states”

After the states were selected, the research team identified funders to interview for the study, seeking a broad range of Southern-based and national funders that supported social justice work. (To protect confidentiality, the funders interviewed for this study will remain anonymous.) A social justice funder was defined based on whether the funder made grants to social justice groups, rather than whether the funder self-identified as a social justice funder. The researchers asked approximately 20 members of GSP to share their lists of social justice grants in North Carolina, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas for 2008-2010. The team surveyed and interviewed the grantees from this list and asked them to share the names of their funders. The researchers also asked the grantees to provide the names of funders that they thought would be a good fit, but who have not funded them yet.

Finally, the team rounded out the list with referrals by GSP members. This approach generated a list of 200<sup>8</sup> funders that were based in any of the four states or made social justice grants to grantees there. Of these, the research team conducted individual interviews or held focus groups with 49 funders based in the four states and 28 national funders. While not a representative sample in the strictest sense, it is strong and diverse and provides a nuanced picture of philanthropic investments in the South.

Given the challenges of engaging funders on a topic like social justice that is not universally understood or without controversy, the research team took a journalistic approach to gathering data. The interview protocol allowed interviewees to share their story of what they fund, why, and how (as well as what they don't fund and why not) in their own words. This approach revealed a more expansive picture of the funding landscape and the language being used to communicate about that funding.

# study findings

A central question for this study was: What influences Southern and national funders to support or not support social justice work in the South? The findings from this study offered a mix of new insights, confirmation of existing assumptions and recognition of important nuances to those assumptions. Overall the study found four areas of interest:

## I Social justice language

Southern funders mostly avoided the use of social justice to describe their work, while most national funders interviewed used the term to describe their work.

## III Reasons to fund social justice in the South

The top reasons given for supporting social justice work in the South were that the South drives social, economic and policy trends for the country, and the persistent challenges facing the region require investment from funders committed to social justice.

## II Social justice strategy

Southern and national funders tended to support strategies at opposite ends of the social change spectrum, with Southern funders tending to emphasize service and community economic development, and national funders tending to emphasize policy advocacy and community organizing. However, several Southern funders were more open to strategies like organizing, while national funders tended to be more narrow in the strategies they supported.

## IV Reasons against funding social justice in the South

The top reasons for not supporting social justice work in the South were perceptions of a lack of social justice philanthropic and organizational infrastructure in the region, the absence of explicit place-based funding approaches by national foundations and the sense that problems were intractable in the South.

# analysis of findings

## I. Social Justice Language

A core assumption going into the research was that language could be a barrier to Southern and national funders developing partnerships. In particular, GSP assumed the term social justice might present a particular challenge. This proved to be the case.

The research team asked all the interviewees how they defined social justice and whether the term resonated within their foundations. The team also asked the interviewees their thoughts about other terms that related to social justice such as: opportunity, vulnerable communities, structural change, human rights, equity, organizing and power (For a detailed analysis of these terms see GSP's *Words Matter* companion paper at [www.nfg.org](http://www.nfg.org)). The study found that the term social justice resonated more with national funders than with funders based in the South. Also, the study did not find a term that could serve as a proxy for social justice that resonated well with Southern and national funders. Rather, Southern funders tended to prefer more generic terms such as opportunity, vulnerable communities and even structural change, while national funders tended to prefer more explicit language such as equity, power and organizing. Finally, Southern funders tended not to talk about race and racism with their peers. As one Southern funder described,

*Race is the third rail. If you want to divide an initiative, talk about race. If you talk about "the community that needs safer sidewalks," then you're for everybody. I don't think it's hiding race, it's talking about it obliquely. Because of that we've made great progress. Very confrontational racial discussions will paralyze you.*

This characteristic of either talking explicitly about race, racism, social justice and social inequity or talking about these things more obliquely or not at all was a

defining difference between most national and Southern funders. However, Southern and national funders were not monolithic in their views on social justice and community change. While Southern and national funders were split on their use of social justice and related terms, several Southern funders were supportive of the terms, while several national funders – even those that are seen as social justice funders – did not use the terms or were ambivalent. Regarding their stance toward social justice and social change, it would be more accurate to disaggregate Southern and national funders in this study into four categories:

- **Traditional Southern funders**
- **Southern social change funders**
- **National social change funders, and**
- **National social justice funders**

**Traditional Southern funders** oppose the use and concept of the term social justice on an ideological basis. For this group of funders, social justice is an outdated ideology of the 1960s, with negative connotations of the fight for civil rights and racial justice. They describe it as confrontational and divisive, in contrast to the gentility that they believe philanthropy should evoke. Some also speak about it as a suppression of individual rights and responsibility, and a need for redistribution of power, which can be especially negative and counter-cultural in the South. The following quotes from traditional Southern funders highlight these points:

*Our community foundation is a very traditional community foundation. We don't do anything social justice, or that's deliberately social justice-oriented. We bend over backwards to stay neutral in anything like that.*

*Terms like social justice and social organizing are not terms we'd use. We think they're overused. They seem to have a connotation that there's a social entity that will take care of everyone.*

“making assumptions about a Southern funders’ ideology or commitment to social change based on their use of terms like social justice is superficial and potentially inaccurate.”

*Power is really negative because it implies taking power from someone else.*

The term equity was also viewed negatively by traditional Southern funders because it implied a special interest focus and was seen as code for racial equity, which is, for them, a negative concept and no longer needed. Equity emphasizes that inequity exists and that the solution is to make conditions and outcomes more equal somehow – which can be an uncomfortable concept and a direct threat to those with privilege.

In contrast, **Southern social change funders** support work that seeks to promote social and economic change for impoverished communities, but they avoid using the term social justice. Avoiding the term facilitates their ability to create change within a conservative environment. As another Southern funder stated,

*We recognized that the language that [the] social justice sector uses can turn people off. If we’re trying to be in relationship with local funders and others that don’t have an analysis around race, justice and inequality, when you start using that language people can’t hear you. Our language has shifted, from primarily a social justice framework to an asset development framework and things more broadly received.*

The Southern social change funders far outnumbered the traditional Southern funders in the study. It is worthwhile to note that making assumptions about a Southern funders’ ideology or commitment to social change based on their use of terms like social justice is superficial and potentially inaccurate. As one Southern funder said, “Just because you don’t call it social justice doesn’t mean that you are not doing work in this area.”

Southern social change funders were also open to terms like equity and organizing, and even power in some cases. Indeed, it would appear that the dominant ideology of these Southern social change funders is pragmatism,

with an emphasis on achieving concrete outcomes for their communities rather than rhetoric, as reflected in this quote:

*I don’t think we would ever put ourselves out there as a social justice organization, but the work that we do does present itself as social justice for the people of our community. We are trying to raise the median household income; we are trying to ensure that everyone regardless of income level has a better public education, and better opportunities for educational attainment. Getting people free medications and free screening; we are trying to reach the underserved. If you look at the definition of social justice that is where we would fit. We are trying to improve conditions for those who have less access.*

Of course, there are some social justice funders based in the South that explicitly use social justice language and support social justice work, such as the Sapelo Foundation in Georgia, the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation in North Carolina, and the Southern Partners Fund that funds throughout this region and others.

**National social change funders** support work that advances a social change and social justice agenda, but they cannot use the term social justice internally with their board of directors. As a national funder mentioned,

*For [our] foundation it would make people hear “etch.” We wouldn’t call ourselves liberal or conservative ... a phrase like social justice makes you sound like a liberal foundation ... social justice has a connotation that is both small and big “p” political.*

Finally, **national social justice funders** are explicit in their use of the term social justice and their grantmaking strives to advance a social justice agenda. For them, social justice is not just a term but also the embodiment of a theory for how to achieve progressive social change in this country. For these funders, the core of social justice is the belief that those who are most affected by an issue have to build the power to change conditions as they

see fit. The issue, and in some ways the particular policy outcome, is not the point. The point is for those without power to build it so that they can protect and advocate for their interests. This can be done by leveling the playing field. A national social justice funder commented,

*We would see social justice in terms of changing power relations. It is not in and of itself a result; it is more of a process. For us, it is defined in terms of how to have power relations changed so that power is more equitably distributed and sustained on an ongoing basis.*

National social justice funders argue that altering power dynamics will lead to more sustainable change and have a reverberating impact on individuals, communities and over time society and cultural norms.

This idea of changing the power structure is exactly what made many funders in this study uneasy, whether they said it directly or implied it. In the South, this idea of power conjured up negative feelings about the civil rights movement and the fight for equal rights for African-Americans. In national foundations, it was more subtle, but there was sometimes a “liberal discomfort” that often translated into an emphasis on professional policy advocacy that worked on behalf of affected communities, but did not necessarily empower those communities to seize power and act on their own behalf.

Overall, the choice to use social justice language or not is both ideological and political. The question for Southern and national funders interested in fostering new partnerships with each other is how rigidly they hold to their ideologies and politics. The approach of Southern social change funders seems to be to find common ground with national funders, particularly if national social justice funders can look past the choice to not use social justice language.

## II. Social Justice Strategies

Language is only part of the puzzle. The study also found understanding social justice strategies to be a critical part of successful funding. The study revealed more Southern social change funders supporting social justice work in the region than commonly assumed by many national funders. It may have been difficult to recognize these funders because as stated previously, most Southern social change funders tend to avoid using terms like social justice to describe what they support. Southern social change funders also have different definitions of what social justice looks like in practice as compared to national social change and social justice funders.

For national funders, social justice primarily involves using policy and legal advocacy, community organizing, voter engagement and movement building as change strategies. The emphasis on these strategies is defined by these funders’ interest in promoting broad-scale change and in their belief that changing social power relationships is the ideal way to win and maintain this change.

*We want [grantees] to go from issue to issue. In the past we’d fund organizations for a campaign and they would win or lose and then the group would go away. Part of the theory of change is we want to see permanent organizations. We want groups to win concrete achievements, something people can see and feel — improvement in jobs, neighborhoods, etc. Second, we want organizations’ members and leaders to get a sense of their own power. Third is that they alter the relations of power, change the equations of power between low-income communities and dominant communities.*

The emphasis on increasing the sense of power and self-efficacy for marginalized communities and actually changing power relations tends to lead national social justice funders to a relatively narrow array of strategies they believe will result in long-term change. This narrow

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focus may limit the ability for these funders to see other necessary or complementary strategies that may be critical to ensuring the change they seek. As one interviewee from a national social justice foundation noted,

*Part of [the] problem is we are defining [the] social justice universe too narrowly. People organizing themselves [are] very social justice oriented, have all the right values, but just aren’t doing it under the label. ... Get [the] creative sector more engaged. [There’s a] real need to expand [the] universe of funders, but [a] corresponding need to widen our lens.*

For Southern social change funders, social justice work can involve a range of strategies including community economic development, youth leadership development and human services in cases where it is connected to a systems approach to change. However, Southern social change funders are also open to policy and legal advocacy, community organizing and civic engagement as change strategies. While many of these funders bring clear value and theoretical frames to their work, they tend to emphasize practical solutions to pressing challenges, rather than any one strategy. Says one Southern social change funder:

*A lot of the work that we do aligns with it [social justice], but we definitely look to what may be noted as a best practice. If there are best practices out there, no matter how they are quantified, we would look to see if it was a program or activity that aligns with our mission. We would look to implement it.*

Particularly in the South, local funders often work with grantees that serve incredibly under-resourced communities, and thus do not have the luxury to focus on only one strategy. Instead, they must meet immediate needs and work upstream to address the root causes that perpetuate those needs. These groups, and their local funding partners, understand that “there is a connection between direct services and policy change. It is often through direct services grantmaking that one is able to see the value of systems change. It is not an either-or proposition.”

### III. Reasons to Fund Social Justice Work in the South

The title quote “As the South goes...” reflects the belief that the South as a region drives national trends. This is particularly important to national funders, and Southern-based funders cite this as a reason national funders should support social justice work in the South. To some funders, it’s common sense:

*[You] cannot call yourself a national funder if you ignore the whole center of the country ... Geographically, demographically, intellectually – the two coasts do not make a country. You have to understand the great majority in the middle.*

The study identified both a push and a pull for funders to support social justice work in the South. The push came from trying to mitigate the influence of policy trends such as anti-immigrant bills, weak labor and environmental protection laws and voter suppression laws generated in the region.

*Unfortunately, the South has become a testing ground for all these bad things that then take on a life of their own and spread across the country. If you’re interested in national policy, you should be looking at and paying attention to what’s happening in the South. If you’re interested in civic participation, you should pay attention to the South ... We tend to ignore the South ... tend to say, “That’s all red, why bother with it?” But if you pay attention to shifting demographics, it’s an opportunity to think about how to build an alternative power base there. This is long term. It’s a huge opportunity.*

The pull came from the opportunity that Southern communities embody to positively address complex issues and to share lessons with the rest of the nation.

*We know well that the South has a rich history of progressive, grassroots organizing and is no stranger to struggle. Today, the region faces a host of complex challenges, including entrenched poverty, particularly*

*among families headed by low-income women, an expanding — and increasingly privatized — prison system, rapid urbanization, an influx of new immigrants (and with it growing anti-immigrant sentiment), and the degradation of the environment. The solutions to these problems, just like a generation ago, will prove instructive for the entire nation.*

Another top reason cited for supporting social justice in the South was the persistent and severe structural inequities. Interviewees felt addressing the challenges of Southern communities was beneficial to those communities and to the nation as a whole.

*Mississippi is at the bottom of children, families, whatever you want to call it. If you want to reduce inequities in the country, you bring up the bottom, you bring us up.*

*... There are opportunities there to make a critical difference in the everyday lives of people to help them build, on their own terms and by their own definitions, equitable and vibrant communities. The South lags behind in a number of standard indicators around economic and social justice. There's a great deal of work to be done, and there is no way we could not support work in the South and at the same time say that were moving towards a more socially and economically just country.*

Even in the face of these great challenges, interviewees saw how change could come to the region.

*We have the highest teen birth rate in the country; you can pick any subject and we have the worst statistics in the country. The good news is that there are a lot of smart, hardworking, good people that could make a difference with the right resources. There is a lot of collaboration going on.*

*If we are about social justice and addressing inequalities, how could you ignore the South where there are entrenched inequalities? Mississippi remains at the bottom of all indices in the country. As a foundation*

*committed to social justice, it's our responsibility to look at those places where they remain entrenched and ask why. Have we invested enough?*

In addition to the national importance of the South and the severe challenges, interviewees also noted several other reasons to fund social justice work including:

**Innovation and unique opportunities to effect change:** “[The South] is relevant because there are experiments and opportunities in organizing that are happening on the ground there that you don’t necessarily see in other places.”

**Concentration of core constituencies:** “Our target constituency is low-income families ... [The] largest number of families in poverty are in the sunbelt and the South...”

**Bang for the buck/return on investment:** “There is so much potential — vibrant local communities excited about partnering. There’s good experience here. We know how to work together, we know how to partner. The quality of life and size of the cities, the bang for your buck —there can be a lot of change leveraged with smaller investment. [It] change[s] more lives and more people.”

#### **IV. Reasons Against Funding Social Justice Work in the South**

The final insight the study offered was understanding why Southern and national funders chose not to support social justice work in the South. It must be noted that most of the reasons listed below came from national funders, the most prominent reasons being:

- **A lack of infrastructure, capacity and funding partners**
- **A dearth of social justice and community organizing groups**
- **Not having a geographic focus to their grantmaking**
- **The perception that the South is a lost cause for social justice work**

“[The South] is relevant because there are experiments and opportunities in organizing that are happening on the ground there that you don’t necessarily see in other places.”

The lack of infrastructure was the top reason stated, and the other reasons, all of which are discussed below, were more or less tied in importance.

### Social Justice Infrastructure and Capacity

When national funders mentioned the limited infrastructure for social justice in the South, many were referring to the number and the strength of foundations engaged in social justice work. Several funders were also concerned about the capacity of the groups on the ground, but the argument for not funding these groups reflected a flawed circular logic: “The groups have low capacity because they don’t have enough funding, but we can’t fund them until they increase their capacity.” Overall, the comments of these funders revealed a mix of accurate and, at times, exaggerated perceptions about the infrastructure and capacity challenges facing the region.

*The biggest problem in the South is that there is not a lot of philanthropic funding that is there and progressive. The big question is how to build it up and maintain it. National funders are going to move on, and they won’t always be in one place or another.*

National social change and social justice funders want funding partners in the region to ensure that the work will continue to be supported once they leave. They view their funds as catalytic or leveraging, rather than sustaining. While there is indeed a more limited pool of social justice philanthropic partners in the South than on the coasts, some funders have an inaccurate and exaggerated view of these limitations.

*The fact that there is not a philanthropic community in the South [emphasis added] ... a lot of philanthropy is outside the South. Whatever philanthropic institutions that exist in the South are very tied in to the economic and political elites that hold the power. That is changing now, but slowly.*

This study found there are more foundations and donors in the region committed to systemic change for impoverished communities than may have been previously assumed by national funders, although they may not employ social justice language or more typical social justice strategies such as community organizing.

While it is true, as another funder noted, that there is a lower “density of funder networks” than on the coasts, this does not mean that Southern funders are not in relationships with each other. This study found that Southern funders have several local partners with whom they collaborate on specific projects. These partnerships may look different than the social justice funder networks that focus primarily on education and networking but are no less important. To recognize these differences, national funders have to dig beneath the surface to understand what is really happening on the ground and who is doing it. But as one national funder observed, this is fraught with challenges:

*It is pretty daunting if you’re not from the South: How do I engage, develop a knowledge base of what/how we should fund in the South? [There are] psychological barriers, particularly since many funders are not in the South. They have to develop a knowledge base and that is an investment of time and resources.*

### Number of Social Justice Groups

The perceived lack of on the ground information for national funders is directly related to another reason cited for not funding social justice work in the South: the perception that there are few groups doing social justice work in the region. As one national funder said, “In terms of organizing, no one can accuse it [the South] as being in the hot spot.” It is true, compared to the coasts and some other major metropolitan areas, there are fewer community organizing groups in most Southern locales. However, community organizing is not the only way to create change for those most in need. As one national

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## “Funders committed to systemic change in the South for those least well off may need to expand their definitions of how to effect this change.”

community organizing funder with a focus on the South said, “Finding groups is the biggest challenge, so we have to expand [our] definitions.” Funders committed to systemic change in the South for those least well off may need to expand their definitions of how to effect this change.

### Geographic Focus and the South as a “Lost Cause”

Most of the national funders remarked that they did not have a geographic focus for their grantmaking; however, this did not stop them from making grants to groups in the South. GSP sees this as a missed opportunity for doing more effective and impactful collaborative grantmaking. The challenge with this approach to funding social justice work in the South is that it is, by definition, opportunistic and does not reflect the sustained engagement by funders necessary to address many of the pressing problems in the region.

Finally, some national funders suggested that the prospects for achieving change in the South might seem too dim. As one funder said, “I think maybe others have seen the obstacles to change are entrenched [in] power interest[s] in the South. Some foundations may find this too daunting.” The belief that things won’t ever change in the South means investing in social justice in the region would be like putting money into a “black hole.” A Southern funder captured these sentiments well while reflecting on why national social justice funders may not fund in the South:

*When you say “the South” [that] equates to “stupid,” everything we don’t want to be. [The] South itself is a loaded term. [There are] social orders that are more rigid than other parts of country: real and perceived. [We] need to portray strengths as well [as] struggles. [There’s a] sense that [they] will pour money in and not get anything out. Somehow the resources would not be used the same way nor create [the] same powerful outcomes.*

The idea that the “the South is a lost cause,” partially because of a belief that nothing will change, but also because “they’re not smart enough down there to figure it out” may be an unspoken bias that underscores decisions to bypass the South for social justice investment. If this bias is present, then it may not be best to focus on negative, as it may serve to reinforce stereotypes. On the other hand, national funders should recognize the potential for this bias and invest time to uncover the strengths, as well as the struggles in the region in order to develop an accurate assessment of the prospects for change.

# recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, which indicate Southern and national funders speak a different language and employ different strategies, GSP recommends a combination of the following with the goal of increased support for social justice work in the South:

- **Deeper relationship building**
- **“Out-of-our-box” thinking**
- **Greater alignment and collaboration among Southern and national funders, and**
- **Better understanding of the social justice landscape in the South**

## Deeper relationship building

Given that this study found no evidence of a common language that Southern and national funders could use to describe social justice-related work, and that language or jargon can actually serve as barriers for funders to relate to each other and work together, GSP recommends funders set aside shorthand language and take the time to have conversations about what they are trying to achieve and, just as importantly, why.

Community organizers typically use story-based conversations, called “one-on-ones”, when they are recruiting members and cultivating allies. The point of one-on-ones is not just telling a story, but listening for the other person’s intentions, values and analysis in order to uncover what motivates and drives them to do their

work and make their choices. This more substantive information can be the basis for building deeper relationships. Getting to the story behind the story can help establish common ground.

Although this study did not find a common language to represent social justice related work among funders, it did find commonality in the intention and overall goals of funders and foundations expressed in mission statements and in how they talk about what is important. There was a common interest in improving the conditions for impoverished communities and the recognition that there needed to be some focus on systemic change to effectively address the issues facing poor communities in the South. GSP believes focusing on impoverished and marginalized communities and incorporating a systems change approach are the core elements upon which funders and foundations can build common understanding.

While this may seem rather simplistic, one of the things that prompted this study was the recognition that many Southern and national funders are not aware that they support the same groups and the strategic reasons for this support. GSP sees this as a missed opportunity for becoming more effective with grant-making and potentially increasing impact. Building affinity, relationships and trust should not be underestimated.

“GSP recommends funders set aside shorthand language and take the time to have conversations about what they are trying to achieve and, just as importantly, why.”

“The fact is, there is an infrastructure for social justice in the South, but the goal is to build on, strengthen and expand it.”

Over time it is exactly these factors that allow partners to engage in more challenging conversations about race, power and social inequity and look for ways to address these issues together. But it all begins with being open to learning about each other, putting assumptions to the side and finding common ground.

In an effort to develop that deeper understanding, GSP will host gatherings that will allow Southern and national funders to have these more intimate conversations and lay the foundation for building stronger partnerships. GSP also encourages funders to do some “one-on-ones” with existing and new colleagues.

### Out-of-Our-Box Thinking

Beyond building deeper relationships, GSP recommends funders think outside the box of their typical grantmaking boundaries. There are many ways to do this, including:

1. **Recognizing and building on infrastructure and capacity**
2. **Developing a Strategic Geographic Focus in the South, and**
3. **Greater alignment and collaboration**

#### 1. Recognize and Build on Existing Infrastructure and Capacity

Southern and national funders alike observe that there is a less robust infrastructure and capacity for social justice philanthropy in the South, as compared to the coasts. However, less infrastructure and capacity is not the same as no infrastructure and capacity. Southern funders understand this and make the most out of what they have. Because there are fewer of them, Southern social change funders often know each other well and their partnerships can be more institutionalized and based on multiple connections and relationships, than perhaps some of the partnerships among national funders that may be more transactional, episodic and limited in terms of organizational connections.

It is important for national social change and social justice funders to tap into these partnerships and make an assessment of the philanthropic capacity on the ground.

Many funders know that social justice work already occurs on the ground across the South. These funders also recognize the capacity challenges of some of their grantees and therefore have discussed combining capacity building with programmatic grantmaking. Other grantmakers have responded to challenges like organizations being too small to compete directly for larger grants by partnering with local intermediaries to do re-granting to smaller groups.

For their part, the Southern social justice groups on the ground emphasized a need for culturally competent capacity building that understands the South and respects the wisdom and style of Southern grantees and does not impose a generic standard of organizational capacity. Sometimes well-intentioned national funders bring in intermediaries from outside the region to provide technical assistance to groups in the South. In some ways this can further reinforce the idea that there isn't capacity in the region and it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. One Southern-based intermediary shared the following:

*I was recently called by a well-resourced national organization that had gotten funding to do a leadership cohort based on certain identities in the South. We collaborate with this organization on other areas, and when I asked how this came about, they said, “Well the funder saw a need, a gap.” I said, “Well maybe that gap is there because the resources keep going to groups outside the region.”... It's incredibly frustrating to continue to be looked to as a knowledgeable resource for national organizations to help them expand their work in the South, when Southern orgs on the ground can well do that work. When that org got ready to do this program, who did they call? Us, and some other Southern groups.*

The fact is, there is an infrastructure for social justice in the South, but the goal is to build on, strengthen and expand it. To do this funders do not have to build the road as they walk it, but rather shore up the existing road so that it can better handle the increased traffic toward a more just South.

## 2. Developing a Strategic Geographic Focus in the South

There were several national funders that noted that their foundations did not have a geographic focus on the South (or at all in some cases), although they have made grants to social justice groups in the region. While it is admirable that these funders are supporting some groups in the region, GSP believes they would benefit from reassessing whether the “no geographic focus” box that they are in serves their interests. After a quick review of the programmatic goals of some of these foundations regarding immigration reform, civic engagement, worker rights, public education reform, civil rights and other social justice issues, it would seem that the South as a region is ground zero for most if not all of these issues. A more concentrated and strategic focus on supporting these issues in the South would be a critical step toward change on the national level.

One challenge for national funders may be that they are not connected enough to the region to see the opportunities and build a case to their boards about the strategic importance of the South. As one national funder shared, “We need more knowledge about organizing in the South, where there are opportunities for funding aligned with our mission and values; [and] being in touch with funders who are knowledgeable about those opportunities in the South.” In order to build a deeper and more accurate understanding of the unique landscape of social justice in the South, national funders should rely on the expertise and on-the-ground knowledge of local Southern funders. National funders also have to spend time in the region, not just in the cities, but in the rural areas as well, to develop their own perspective on the cultural dynamics and opportunities for investing in the South. Grantmakers for Southern Progress will coordinate periodic learning tours to the South that will bring together Southern and national funders to get a first-hand experience of critical social justice work taking place in the region. We will also work to connect our members throughout the year so that they can share information, perspective and opportunities for supporting social justice work in the region.

## 3. Expand Perspective on Social Justice Strategies and Approaches

As this study found, Southern and national funders tend to support strategies that are at different ends of the spectrum of change, with Southern-based funders more often supporting community development and national funders more often supporting community organizing and policy reform (particularly at the state and federal level). Funders at these different ends of the spectrum of change tend not to relate to one another because of sectoral isolation and also because of presumed ideological differences based on the strategies employed.

While it is only natural for foundations and donors to view the strategies that they choose to support as the most effective strategies, it would be a mistake to think that their strategies are the only strategies that are necessary to meet the myriad issues of Southern communities. Indeed, the severity, persistence and multi-faceted nature of the challenges facing Southern communities, and by extension the nation, requires an all-hands-on-deck, multi-strategy, multi-faceted and long-term approach to create lasting and substantive change.

If we begin with our definition of social justice, as “any structural of systemic change *in order to increase the opportunity of those who are least well off politically, economically and socially*”, then it is perhaps easier to imagine a broader spectrum of change strategies that would achieve this goal. This definition is purposely broad and expands beyond the traditional strategies associated with social justice work, such as advocacy, community organizing, and civic engagement to also include community economic development, community building and the provision of direct services - as long as it is connected/rooted to a structural or systems approach to change.

It may help to reframe how change strategies are viewed: from a linear model with direct service on one end and community organizing at the other, to an inter-connected spiral that represents the reality that change requires the coordinated use of multiple strategies. Picture a

“GSP believes focusing on impoverished and marginalized communities and incorporating a systems change approach are the core elements upon which funders and foundations can build common understanding.”

corkscrew. The sharp tip of the corkscrew can represent a particular foundation's lead strategy, for example, direct services or community organizing. The spiral of the corkscrew represents all the other complementary and interrelated strategies that are necessary to bring about change. That tip goes beneath the surface, but the rest of the spiral is needed to drill down deep, establish a firm hold and create the necessary leverage to remove the barriers to opportunity, well-being and a more just society. Different foundations may lead with different strategies, but ultimately all the strategies must be coordinated and integrated to yield a comprehensive approach to community and social change.

Expanding the range of strategies that contribute to social justice can also help reveal innovative approaches and practices. As stated earlier, many Southern social justice groups have to meet the immediate needs of their constituents in order to effect broad scale change

because they don't have the luxury of doing one or the other given the dearth of available services. In other cases, service groups expand their work to include advocacy and organizing to better meet the needs of their clients. Both groups are numerous in the South and this model of meeting the immediate needs of constituents and addressing the long-term community ambition for broader change can be instructive for national funders on how to achieve comprehensive community change.

Southern social justice change funders tended to support administrative systems reform that relied on professional advocates to achieve broader social change, and their actual support for community organizing and civic engagement was relatively modest. However, for systems reform to persist it is important that those systems are held accountable to the people being served. Southern social change funders should consider deepening their knowledge of strategies like community organizing and

## foundation spotlight: "Strategic Grantmaking" Guides the Babcock Foundation

Regional funders work between national and local funders, often playing the role of connector and broker while also providing critical support for work on the ground. The Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, one such regional funder, takes into account the strengths of both national and Southern-based funders. The foundation defines "strategic grantmaking" as seeking outcomes for individuals and families as well as policy or systems change that enables and sustains those outcomes with a focus on "moving people and places out of poverty."

"Part of the work is about improving personal decision-making and education," says Program Officer Lavastian Glenn. "But a big underlying cause of poverty is around structural barriers. Part of the work is focusing on addressing and changing those systems."

Babcock knows that moving people and places out of poverty is accelerated when local, state, regional and national players are engaged. This requires a "layered approach" to grantees and strategies. The foundation resists blind faith in any one strategy but instead focuses on impact and adapts to what's needed in any given context. Program Director Gladys Washington explains: "When we talk to an organizing group, we ask, 'organizing with whom and for what?' For the top-down groups, we ask, 'who are you connected to on the ground, who feeds you what you don't know?'"

Likewise, the foundation engages national and local funders by meeting them where they are and weaving a narrative in which they can see themselves. "With local funders, we learned to talk about organizing and policy differently. We take something that's issue-based and use it as an example of how change happens." Washington says using a specific example can be effective when talking to foundations. "You all want kids in your community to do better. Where are the parents? Your foundation can help with that, it's called parent organizing. Wouldn't you want them to be advocates for their own children and at the table with you for better outcomes for schools? If you change how the budget looks and re-direct resources to improve your schools, that is policy change and social justice.' I use a local example, a local implication, begin with the impact that they care about and then connect strategies from there."

The Babcock Foundation cautions against thinking of "strategic grantmaking" as silver-bullet language that can more palatably substitute for "social justice." Strategic grantmaking is not a buzzword for the Babcock Foundation; staff might not even use the term when talking with local or national peers. The more important point is that it helps the foundation better understand itself and the potential change it can leverage.

“Southern social change funders should consider deepening their knowledge of strategies like community organizing and civic engagement to help marginalized communities hold systems accountable and create lasting change.”

civic engagement to help marginalized communities hold systems accountable and create lasting change.

Overall, GSP recommends that all funders move out of their comfort zones and explore how different strategies are connected to, complement and can enhance their ultimate goals. Southern and national funders can build a greater appreciation for each other's strategies that may allow them to see opportunities for partnership and collaboration.

### Greater Alignment and Collaboration

The third recommendation to improve efficacy of social justice grantmaking in the South is that funders act together in more strategic and impactful ways. As one interviewee expressed,

*What I need is an informal space for co-conspirators. As funders, we are very formal with each other. ... We have very few conversations and spaces to talk about these things -- no frank, facilitated conversations about how we view power, how our work is synergistic, how we fill the gaps, and then a space to actually do something about it. It's hard, but what I find most valuable is that space where we have frank conversations, strategize, and move to action.*

GSP provides one vehicle for facilitating strategic conversations, but it can still be challenging for funders to act together more efficiently. Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO) recently coordinated a conference<sup>9</sup> on what it called strategic co-funding. Borrowing from this concept, GSP recommends the following strategies for engaging in cooperative grantmaking among Southern and national funders.

**Informed co-location** – Southern and national funders that are making grants in the same area (geography, issues, constituency, etc.) know about each other's work, share information and perhaps foster relationships between their respective grantees. Funders support their own grantmaking strategies, but are able to coordinate across those strategies if the need or opportunity arises.

**Strategic alignment** – Southern and national funders agree to adopt joint or complementary grantmaking strategies to meet a common goal.

**Targeted co-funding** – Southern and national funders deliberately but independently make grants to the same program, organization or issue.

**Pooled funding** – Southern and national funders contribute to a multi-strategy collective fund.

It was beyond the scope of this project to gather information on existing cooperative grantmaking initiatives among Southern and national funders. However, the data does point to possible entry points for collaboration. Of the 463 groups and/or projects that engaged in social justice work across the four states in this study, only 11 percent (53) of them received funding from more than one foundation. This means that there are potentially scores of organizations that would be new to Southern and national funders alike in the four states. This opens up an opportunity for some “informed co-location.”

Of the 53 groups that received a grant from more than one funder, two-thirds of these received grants from both national and Southern foundations. This presents an opportunity for “strategic alignment” and “targeted co-funding” to enhance the strategic coordination of grantmaking to the groups.

GSP has information on which foundations are funding which groups in the four states and hopes to use this knowledge to proactively make connections that may lead to different levels of strategic co-funding. However, any funder interested in doing this can easily look at their grantees' list of funders to find out who else is supporting them and arrange a meeting.

# conclusion

## The major takeaways from this report are:

- There is a great need to increase social justice work in the South to improve social, economic and political outcomes for impoverished and marginalized communities, regionally and nationally.
- The barriers that limit funders' support of social justice work in the South can be overcome.
- The opportunities for strategic partnerships between and among Southern and national funders on social justice work are abundant, but require deeper relationship building and moving beyond comfort zones around strategy and capacity building.

As stated in the introduction, the nation is at the crossroads of progress and stagnation. Through strategic partnerships and a renewed commitment to social justice in the South, national and Southern funders can help ensure the country chooses the path of progress. "As the South goes, so goes the nation." Let us go forward together.

## endnotes

- 1 The Foundation Center, 2010. Based on all grants of \$10,000 or more awarded by a sample of over 1,000 of the largest U.S. foundations circa 2006-2008.
- 2 The 13 Southern states are Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana and Texas.
- 3 Census Estimates Show New Patterns of Growth Nationwide (4/5/12), <http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/population/cb12-55.html>
- 4 The Best and Worst Cities for Jobs This Fall, (9/11/12), <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jacquelynsmith/2012/09/11/the-best-and-worst-cities-for-jobs-this-fall/>
- 5 Business Facilities 2012 State Rankings: Tennessee Repeats as U.S. Automotive King," <http://businessfacilities.com/news/business-facilities-2012-state-rankingstennessee-repeats-as-u-s-automotive-king>
- 6 Christopher A. Cooper and H. Gibbs Knotts, "Defining Dixie: A State-Level Measure of the Modern Political South", *American Review of Politics* 25 (Spring 2004): 25-39
- 7 Election 2012: Voting Laws Roundup (10/16/12) [http://www.brennancenter.org/content/resource/2012\\_summary\\_of\\_voting\\_law\\_changes/](http://www.brennancenter.org/content/resource/2012_summary_of_voting_law_changes/)
- 8 Of these 200 funders, 19 were consistent supporters of social justice groups in the South; 48 were occasional supporters; 73 were rare supporters; and 57 never supported social justice groups in the South.
- 9 The conference was originally scheduled for Oct. 29, 2012, but was postponed due to inclement weather.