

The "Big Bet" Social Change Movement

04.15.19 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



One of the most hopeful developments in the past few years has been the philanthropy community's increasing openness to reexamining the roles of donors as well as organizations and to addressing entrenched problems in society including wealth inequality and social justice.

The Stanford Social Innovation Review (SSIR) is a treasure of thought leadership for social change. In its Winter 2016 issue, the editors published a lengthy article titled *Making Big Bets for Social Change*, challenging readers to address this paradox: "Why does such a large gap exist between what donors say they would like to achieve with their philanthropy and where they actually make their biggest bets? And how can we close it?"

The Bridgespan Group's William Foster was a lead author of that landmark piece from a few years that "has been receiving more attention, ... and is increasingly used as a framework by philanthropists and nonprofit leader alike."

Now he turns his attention to participate in – and introduce – a new series by SSRI for Spring 2019: Unleashing Philanthropy's Big Bets for Social Change.

"Big Bets": The Time Has Come

Mr. Foster wrote the first article, *Introduction to Unleashing Philanthropy's Big Bets for Social Change*, to set the stage for this new forum to build on the momentum from the Winter 2016 article and "inform the current debate on big-bet philanthropy."

He gives an overview of the history of the "big bets" phenomenon including important demographic trends rocking the philanthropy establishment as well as significant challenges.

The Bridgespan Group has participated in this "big bet" movement for several years and has gained experience and understanding about its issues and problems. From this work, Bridgespan has learned of the pivotal role that "big bets" have played over many decades in "propelling major social

advances, from eliminating age-old infectious diseases to securing civil rights....”

Nevertheless, recently, there have been seismic demographic and societal changes at work that have radically changed the philanthropy landscape. The large institutional foundations in the United States that dominated 20th century philanthropy – and “**played an outsized role in**” it – are declining in influence, in large part “...as a consequence of unprecedented wealth accumulation and the rise of new philanthropists over the last two decades.”

In addition, “...looking at the gifts of all U.S. donors to causes anywhere in the world, the **large majority of major gifts still** go to universities, medical research, or cultural institutions.” While this is good – “these gifts strengthen important pillars of a vibrant and educated society and advance scientific frontiers” – “few of these institutional gifts are focused on poverty, justice, or other social change goals.” The paradox, though, is that donors say these goals are the most important reason for their charitable giving.

Research on “Big Bets”

SSRI introduces the latest research on the “big bet” movement by way of two articles. First, ***Becoming Big Bettable***, by Mr. Foster along with Bridgespan’s Gail Perreault and Bradley Seeman, is for nonprofits and nongovernmental organizations that want to attract and receive large philanthropic support. It presents guidelines by which social-change leaders can better position their organizations and causes.

Many prospective donees approach the “big-bet” grant process with a single storyline that rarely succeeds; that is, “the problem is enormous, you should care about it even more than you do, our organization is terrific, and more money will allow us to do more important work.”

According to these authors, this is “not only a communications problem, it is a strategy problem.”

There are many donors who want to make a “big-bet” impact with their wealth, but they “are stymied by a lack of compelling opportunities.” The answer is in training social-change leaders to present their causes as “shovel-ready” opportunities.

Second, in ***Reimagining Institutional Philanthropy***, another set of Bridgespan authors – Alison Powell, Willa Seldon & Nidhi Sahni – tell foundations how to refocus their giving for more impact on society’s problems.

In addition to the decline in market share by institutional foundations in recent years, there “is a sense that ...[they] are not living up to the full potential of the assets and influence they do have.” They have succumbed to “fossilized thinking” while the “rate of change in society accelerates.” For decades, there has been no “outside force requiring them to change and few variations on the basic operating model to inspire innovation.” That has, of course, all changed.

Series Articles

The articles comprising this **SSIR forum** are impressive. In addition to the first three already cited, they are (with links):

- ***[Big Gift, Big Impact](#)***
- ***[Big Bets Are Important. But So Is a Big Heart.](#)***

- . [Renewing Common Purpose and Collective Action](#)
- . [Empowering Nonprofits](#)
- . [Hacking the Bias in Big Bets](#)
- . [Doing More With Big Bets](#)
- . [Learning From Competition](#)
- . [From Promising Model to Major Investment](#)
- . [Investing in Population-Level Change](#)
- . [US Donors' 2017-2018 Gifts of \\$25 Million or More That Targeted Social Change](#)
- . [Profiles of Big Bets](#)

Conclusion

"Today," Mr. Foster concludes, "we stand at **a pivotal moment** in the history of philanthropy." We must understand the challenges as well as the opportunities in order to move forward productively.