From Los Angeles, More Evidence That Inequality Is a Rising Issue for Funders

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Did Darren Walker start a philanthropic revolution when he pivoted the famous and influential Ford Foundation to focus exclusively on combating inequality in all its forms?

Well, let's not get ahead of ourselves. But since Ford's much-discussed shift last year, inequality has definitely become a more salient issue among funders—and, for some, the dominant issue.

Last month, we wrote about how the San Francisco Foundation revamped its grantmaking to focus on inequality, especially in terms of race and wealth. The Chicago Community Trust is another local funder that moved inequality way up on its agenda, along with another priority that Walker helped legitimize—offering more general operating support.

Now comes news that the Los Angeles-based Weingart Foundation is also moving the fight against inequality front and center. In a recent message, its president, Fred Ali, and board chair, Monica C. Lozano, committed Weingart to base all policy and program decisions on "achieving the goal to advance fairness, inclusion, and opportunity for all Southern Californians—especially those communities hit hardest by persistent poverty."

Like Ford, Weingart is taking a broad approach to the equity challenge, targeting disparities in a range of areas, including the economy, race, education, health and human service systems, and criminal justice. As with Ford's shift, there's also an element of repackaging here, since Weingart—founded 65 years ago—has long supported nonprofits that fight poverty and expand opportunities for people in Southern California.

Another parallel: The shift at Weingart comes after listening to a lot of community concerns, much as Walker circled the world talking to Ford's grantees and others. As we've reported before, Weingart has long been a standout on the listening front. This is a funder that's regularly hosted input sessions to better understand local needs and what it can do about them. More importantly, it's actually *used* this feedback to shape grantmaking priorities. Unsurprisingly, Ali and Lozano cited the concerns the foundation was hearing in explaining the new shift. Local nonprofits have been telling Weingart that the safety net is eroding and that SoCal is increasingly becoming a place of inequality. That same story, of course, could be told in many parts of the country.

So what does all this mean for grantseekers in Los Angeles?

The foundation is taking a little time to review its internal polices, practices and culture to adapt to its new exclusive focus on inequality. That said, you can expect to see some big changes in how Weingart works with nonprofits and what it funds. Starting in 2017, Weingart will focus all of its resources on organizations that serve low-income communities deeply affected by inequity.

Here's a quick overview of what you can expect to see starting next year:

- Large unrestricted grants in low-income, unequal communities
- Support for policy change
- Program-related investments to put more of Weingart's resources to work
- Weingart board and staff members stepping up as leaders and advocates
- Experimental strategies and new ideas
- New targeted initiatives as yet unannounced

Although this is a whole lot of change to take in, the foundation's leaders stress that some things will stay the same for nonprofits that have come to rely upon Weingart's support over the years. Their recent announcement said Weingart wouldn't be abandoning its "responsive grantmaking" practices, and that it will still award multi-year unrestricted operating support grants.

Weingart says it will keep listening, too, soliciting input and feedback as it pursues this new direction. In fact, if you're in L.A., mark your calendar for Tuesday, September 27, which is when Weingart hosts a teleconference to answer questions about its new grantmaking strategy. Register now.

In the meantime, learn more about the Weingart FY2017 Program Plan here.