



**SEMI-ANNUAL CONFERENCE
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A Debate on Impact: Single-Issue vs. Multi-Issue Organizations

Tuesday, January 24, 2012
1:30 pm – 3:00 pm

Session Organizers:

- Vanessa Daniel, Executive Director, Groundswell Fund
- Shira Sapterstein, Deputy Director / Program Director, Women's Rights and Reproductive Health, The Moriah Fund

Facilitator:

- Heidi Dorow, Program Officer, Wellspring Advisors

Panelists:

- Vanessa Daniel, Executive Director, Groundswell Fund
- Masen Davis, Executive Director, Transgender Law Center
- Randall Miller, Senior Program Officer, The Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund
- Eveline Shen, Executive Director, Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice

Sponsors:

- Groundswell Fund
 - The Overbrook Foundation
 - The Moriah Fund
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Team A: Multi-Issue (Vanessa Daniel, Eveline Shen)

Team B: Single-Issue (Randall Miller, Masen Davis)

Heidi introduced the main questions and themes of the session:

Is more impact achieved by funding a single issue or through multi issue work? Is there more impact achieved by funding single issue organizations or multi issue organizations? More impact funding a single issue within a multi issue organization? What is most impactful? What reaches the most number of people? Which allows social change to happen faster? Which is more cost effective?

Each team was given the opportunity to make an opening statement, rebuttal, and brief closing remarks.

Team A: Multi-Issue

- Vanessa:
 - Single issue organizations are narrowly focused and have weakened and fragmented the social justice movement.
 - There are three important tools that are not available to single-issue funders but are available to funders using a multi-issue approach:
 - 1) Grassroots social movements
 - Multi-issue organizations are better equipped to make use of grassroots organizations because single issue organizations are less relevant to the average person and too concerned with their own agenda.
 - 2) Cross-movement alliance building
 - Multi-issue organizations support various causes and therefore have a broader support base among individuals and other social organizations.
 - 3) Electoral power

Team B: Single-Issue

- Randall:
 - Buzz words of the day include cross-movement building, intersectionality and multi-issue funding. These things are “in” right now although we do not necessarily know what these words mean.
 - There are continuing “unclearities” in philanthropy itself. Multi-issue funding covers up these “unclearities” and makes it more difficult to distinguish between population-based work and issue-based work, effective evaluation, etc.
 - We should start by knocking down some key assumptions:
 - “Organizations in the field lean towards multi-issue organizing”: Although people may be more involved this way, organizations are not naturally organized in this way.
 - “Organizations either have the desire or capacity to engage in cross-movement funding/multi-issue advocacy”: This is false.
 - “Private and public funding is what keeps people working in silos”: This is false.
 - “Single issue advocacy often works in silos, which is bad and inferior”: This has not been proven.
 - “The only effective model of achieving social change is by organizing widely diverse people to engage in collective action”: This is false.

Team A: Rebuttal

- Eveline
 - Used the example of the campaign for/against gay marriage/proposition 8 in California to show how single-issue campaigns are ineffectual.
 - The Christian right expanded their campaign to include other right-leaning issues to most effectively leverage the support of the population.
 - Our side framed gay marriage as a single, stand alone issue and failed to connect it with economic security, providing benefits to non-married spouses, etc. We also did not make connection with communities of color. Our failure to make this a multi-issue fight is what ultimately defeated us.

Team B: Rebuttal

- Masen:
 - An organized grassroots base, cross-issue funding, etc. are all important, yet investing solely in multi-issue approaches leaves out those who are historically most marginalized.
 - It is harder to influence larger, wealthier multi-issue movements with many diversely interested parties involved.

- We need the single-issue organizations to build power and draw attention to particular issues.
- Multi-issue groups need single-issue groups for their depth of expertise
- Multi-issue groups cannot easily document their effectiveness. Single-issue funders are clearer on where there money is going, what it is doing and how effectively it is doing it.

Team A: Closing Remarks

- Eveline:

- The majority of human rights funding goes to single-issue advocacy work. These are mostly the larger organizations that often ignore the needs of communities of color.
- Single issue advocacy makes us vulnerable to wedge strategies and peels off parts of our base.
- We do not win unless we are linking our issues and bringing together diverse interests.
- Single issue advocacy is passé and does not make strategic sense in this globalized world where power is more de-centralized and complex.
- Multi issue organizations provide the way to support and leverage social movements that provide the policy changes that we need.

Team B: Closing Remarks

- Randall:

- “Strategic focus,” “measurable impact,” “lasting effect,” “real change in people’s lives” – we should all reflect on these terms.
- Is this debate really hiding a bigger elephant in the room? Is this a stand-in for a more heated debate on how/when/where social change strategies are generated and who directs these strategies?

Small Group Discussion Reflections:

- This is all a continuum and all part of the same game. Sometimes it is strategic to use a multi-issue approach sometimes better to use a single-issue approach.
- Single-issue groups can definitely effectively push multi-issue organizations to think about particular things and play a really important role. They complement one another.
- There is a false dichotomy between single-issue and multi-issue approaches. We all use both approaches.
- There is a scarcity of resources, which might mean groups will have to partner up and help other organizations and hope that this will create a sense of solidarity across issues and strategies.
- The approach an organization takes depends on whether they are providing advocacy or direct services. Direct services will almost always be single issue while advocacy organizations will tend to want to work across movements.
- Our group discussed identity versus issue – and a single-focus approach falls between these.
- Evolution of issues leaves room for both approaches. Deciding on a strategy as a funder is less important than the lasting impact.
- Funding strategy on most campaigns falls between single-issue and multi-issue approaches.
- At present more funders are starting to set more of the strategic direction of their funding. Multi-issue organizations have to make the case that their work fits within funders’ strategic directions, which is often difficult.
- Probably multi-issue versus single-issue is a false dichotomy and there are strategic places for both, but in terms of funding, there is a growing drive among grantees and even funders to narrow the focus of their work, particularly in the economic recession.
- On the issue of “winning” – Regarding the issue of marriage equality and the death penalty, most victories have come in the court. That momentum feeds the ability of groups to move issues forward, build a public base, etc. The single-mindedness and narrow focus of these

court challenges are necessary for these types of issues to build the momentum necessary to produce lasting social change.

- The most salient point here is the wedge issue. You may get short term campaign victories but are you sacrificing the long-term social change movement?
 - Randall: Both are worthy goals. Not enough people recognize the importance of the short term impacts.
 - Vanessa: The key question is balance – Is your campaign victory at the expense of base-building groups that are multi-issue or can you maintain both simultaneously?
 - There is also a “do no harm” imperative here. While both short-term, immediate victories and long term campaigns are important, the short term goals should, hopefully, further the social change movement, but at the very least, should do no harm to the long term social change movement.

Wrap-up:

- Vanessa: We should really put this debate in the context of what is the most effective for building lasting social movements.
- Masen: We really do need both approaches. We are stronger together. Strategic grantmaking can leave out really critical issues and organizations that do not fit that narrow funding directive.