Philanthropy in the Irish Migration NGO Sector: An Enabler of Political Equality?

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Anheier and Daly (2008) have drawn attention to the lack of scholarship exploring the political nature of philanthropic foundations. Foundations are political, they suggest, because of their singularly independent status as privately-endowed institutions operating beyond the control of members, shareholders or the public at large, but also, because the space in which they operate is shaped and inflected by the political ideologies, norms and policies of the state in question. Starting from the premise that decisions regarding the distribution of resources are inherently political, this paper seeks to advance our understanding of foundations as political entities through an exploration of a particular site of philanthropic intervention, namely the migration NGO sector in Ireland. I use the term ‘migration NGO’ to mean those non-profit organizations working to promote migrants’ rights through such means as advocacy, campaigning, community organizing and strategic litigation. My specific concern is with the role of foundations in promoting or frustrating political equality. Put differently, I wish to evaluate if and how the funding strategies of the two largest foundations active in the Irish migration NGO sector contribute to a more equal distribution of political influence in a macro sense as well as between those individuals and organizations concerned with migrants’ rights.

While private donations, including grants from philanthropic foundations, constituted just 10.5% of monies received by Irish non-profit organizations in 2007, compared with almost 60% from state sources (Healy, 2009), the importance of philanthropy within the sector under scrutiny in my study is far greater. Two limited-life foundations, the Atlantic Philanthropies (AP) and the ONE Foundation (ONE), represent the primary source of core funding for eight of the largest and most high-profile NGOs working on migration-related issues, easily dwarfing the limited subvention of the state. Since their entry into the migration field in 2002, AP and ONE have had a transformative impact on the sector, helping to facilitate a rapid expansion in the scale of work undertaken by such organizations as the Immigrant Council of Ireland, the Irish Refugee Council and the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland on matters ranging from immigration law to work permit regulations, workplace exploitation, trafficking and asylum policy.

The paper draws on doctoral research which involved semi-structured interviews with foundation and NGO staff together with documentary analysis of organizational texts. Rooting my analysis in the work of a number of political philosophers, I argue that political equality, that is to say, equal access to and influence within the political system - which I take to include such institutions as parliament, the courts, the civil service and avenues of public deliberation such as the print and broadcast media - matters because of the positive material outcomes that can be gained through engagement with that system. Critically, however, political equality also matters because of the symbolic importance attached to political expression (Baker et al, 2004) and because it is one of the key ways through which the principle of equal respect can be implemented (Brighouse, 1996). I suggest that by resourcing organizations that promote the interests and perspectives of people currently marginalized or disparaged within the policy-making process, AP and ONE help counter some of the structural inequalities which inhibit access to political influence (see Baker et al, 2004; Young, 2000; Phillips, 1993) and make a contribution to democratic justice at a macro level.

I also raise the possibility, however, that the criteria underpinning AP and ONE’s choice of grantees within the migration sphere, which privilege such attributes as organizational leadership, strategic focus, track record and governance, have exacerbated political equality in certain fundamental ways. The paper asks
whether the establishment of a cadre of highly professionalized, high-capacity organizations with privileged access to financial, social, cultural and intellectual capital helps create the conditions for differentiated access to the policy process between those organizations in receipt of philanthropic monies and those that are not. It further considers the implications of this for organizations founded and led by migrants themselves.

In pursuing this avenue of enquiry, I wish to highlight a practical challenge facing progressive foundations by demonstrating how the pursuit of one egalitarian ideal (positive policy change for migrants) may come into tension with the achievement of another (more equal distribution of political influence). I conclude the paper by considering if and how this trade-off might be mitigated.

The contribution of the paper rests with its integration of political theory with philanthropic practice. It builds on and moves beyond existing analyses of foundations' roles in Ireland, which have to date privileged questions of definition and classification (Donoghue, 2004; 2008), towards an exposition of how those roles are played out within a particular sphere of civil society, and in relation to a social group which continues to experience entrenched patterns of political exclusion.

References


