Rationing and Philanthropy: problems, principles, practices

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Rationing is an important tool in addressing ‘equity’, ‘goodness’ and ‘fairness’ in the distribution of resources (Broome 1999); in its traditional sense of ‘a regular provision’ and ‘a controlled distribution’ (Oxford English Dictionary 2009), it offers the possibility to achieve the best outcome with a limited set of resources. However, fuelled by media frenzies about the withholding of necessary goods and services (e.g. Entwistle et al. 1996), rationing has become increasingly perceived in economists’ terms as ‘a restriction of supply’ (Oxford English Dictionary 2009). In light of such value-laden, negative connotations, direct reference to rationing has frequently been avoided; instead it has been paraphrased and euphemised as ‘resource allocation’ (Matas 2009) or ‘targeting priority recipients’ (Bennett and Chanfreau 2005).

While over the last few years there has been a move towards acknowledging and debating rationing in a number of fields, most prominently healthcare, such explicit discourse has been largely avoided in philanthropy. One reason for this might be that the difficult and controversial choices implied by rationing are in stark contrast to the cosy imagery implied by philanthropy’s meaning of ‘practical benevolence’ and ‘love of mankind’ (Oxford English Dictionary 2009). Although the avoidance of such debate and a lack of explicitness might act as a smokescreen that implies that no rationing is taking place (Light 1997), rationing is already an implicit part of philanthropic practice: philanthropic organisations usually focus on one niche to the exclusion of all others. The focus might be on a geographic area, as in the case of Trust Africa or the Concern India Foundation, on specific groups of people, as is the case with the Musicians’ Benevolent Fund or the Royal National Institute for Deaf People, or on parts of the animal kingdom, as illustrated by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Furthermore, as the Scottish philanthropist Sir Tom Hunter illustrated in a lecture to the Institute for Philanthropy, rationing decisions are key challenges in foundations’ day-to-day reality: what does one do with the available resources and how does one choose between different eligible recipients (Hunter 2005). Such dilemmas are aggravated by the current economic climate where philanthropic organisations face the paradox that they are expected to help in times of need yet simultaneously struggle themselves to manage their own situation (Harrow and Pharoah 2009). Instead of depending on unarticulated, implicit criteria and decision-making approaches in philanthropy, all of which are less likely to be consistent, fair, or transparent (Bennett and Chanfreau 2005), there is a strong argument for an explicit rationing debate, both from a practical and a theoretical perspective.

In our paper, we start to address this issue. Using a thematic analytic approach adapted from the works of Attride-Stirling (Attride-Stirling 2001) and Braun and Clarke (Braun and Clarke 2006), and drawing on a recent literature review and ongoing empirical work in the United Kingdom, the article addresses the problems, principles and existing practices in relation to rationing within the philanthropy field. The first part of the paper outlines the existing terminological and conceptual confusion surrounding prominent rationing concepts, such as Utilitarianism or Triage, and highlights the practical challenges philanthropic organisations have to face when thinking about rationing. These include the fair chance/best outcome problem, the priorities problem, the aggregation problem and the democracy problem (Daniels 1993). Picking up on these problems, the second part of the paper outlines existing rationing principles that have been advocated and used within healthcare to address these issues. In combination, these two parts provide a conceptual framework that informs and acts as the organising lens for paper’s third section. Using grantmaking foundations in Scotland and England as case studies, the final section examines how rationing takes place on the ground, the extent to which such approaches are implicit or explicit, and how they correlate to existing rationing principles.
References


