

# **The Peace and Social Justice Program: Goals, Expected Outcomes, and Results**

## *A Report to the Ford Foundation*

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## **I - Introduction**

Mary McClymont asked me to interview program officers (POs) and directors in the Peace and Social Justice (PSJ) program area, with the idea of working toward "a more clearly articulated and realistic set of overall PSJ program goals or expected outcomes by 'aggregating upwards' . . . by learning about how program officers talk about the goals and strategies . . . of their respective portfolios." The purpose of the exercise was to help PSJ create "a more realistic set of expected outcomes," to "articulate strategies" for accomplishing them, to "bring focus...and better explain and communicate this work to their colleagues," and to "undertake learning exercises, reviews, and evaluations" to help assess and communicate better the impact of their work. We agreed that I would do this by having conversations with POs about their most successful initiatives, trying to understand retrospectively what reasonable expected outcomes might be.<sup>1</sup>

As the interviews proceeded, a set of impressions started to emerge that required me to cast my net more widely than I had anticipated.<sup>2</sup> In a minority of cases, POs did identify verifiable outcomes regarding some of the initiatives in their portfolio--outcomes that might be

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<sup>1</sup>In what follows, I quote directly or indirectly things that POs said to me. I have not, however, used names and, in some cases, I took a few liberties so as to disguise the identity of the speaker. For those who prefer not to have this protection, and recognize their statements to me, I would be happy to attach names and/or make corrections.

<sup>2</sup>It should be noted that much of my conversations with directors and deputy directors focused on their prior experiences as POs, though not exclusively. My understanding of what "POs" said, then, include these observations.

used in the future as rough benchmarks. At the same time, it was difficult to aggregate up to "an overall PSJ mission" from these conversations, or a set of reasonable expected outcomes, or a set of benchmark indicators. This was due to the differing nature of the different portfolios (governance vs. human rights vs. international cooperation, and worldwide vs. region- or country-specific programs [a few of the latter being inherited in the recent re-organization]). Some POs themselves volunteered that any set of specified outcomes would have to be specific to each portfolio or even grant, and could not be aggregated across POs, let alone across the whole PSJ program.

Despite the dispersion of types of projects and the PO-centered focus of grant development, three or four goals or, at least, *types* of expected outcomes did seem to emerge from, and run across, these conversations (described below). But some of these statements of outcomes or goals were really about means rather than ends, about inputs or instruments rather than outputs, and/or about process rather than results. This happens frequently in organizations, particularly in the public and nonprofit sectors, where expected outcomes, let alone what caused them to happen, cannot be easily specified or verified. This causes people to fall back on specifying the more easily identifiable means or instruments as signs of movement toward goals, rather than the goals themselves. Sometimes, and as seems to occur at PSJ, this designation of inputs, instruments, and means as a proxy for ends is based on a view of causal relations that is widely held among like-minded people--outside as well as inside the organizational world.<sup>3</sup>

Although the specifying of means (or inputs) as ends is common, it creates somewhat of a problem when the process is implicit rather than explicit, and implicitly-held assumptions are made about causal links--assumptions that may or may not be accurate.

There is no separate evaluation unit or function at the Foundation, and seemingly little outside evaluation of PSJ initiatives. At the same time, the way PSJ grants get developed, and grantees are chosen or rejected, is influenced by a combination of the nature of the PO's job and work environment and the fact that many come to the Foundation with clear ideas of what the problem is, and how it can be addressed. Most of what POs know about the outcomes of their grants, then, must come from their own observations and those of their grantees. In fashioning new grants, specifying expected outcomes, and monitoring existing grants, this is the knowledge

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<sup>3</sup>Some of the the observations throughout this report probably apply to the Foundation as a whole, and not just to PSJ. Since my conversations were limited to the PSJ program area, it was not possible for me to discern which factors were PSJ-specific and which were Foundation-wide. Mostly, and conservatively, I identified them as characterizing PSJ, though several of them probably pertain to the Foundation as a whole.

that POs draw on. It is a rich experiential knowledge, augmented by the well-tuned 'ear to the ground' that Foundation officers have.

I was quite impressed with the strength of PSJ's staff, their articulateness, the way they reason about their decisions, their truly remarkable understanding of the worlds in which they work, and the finely strategic way in which they think about the problems they are addressing. At the same time, I was struck with the relative lack of formal and independent evaluation feedback in helping POs to specify verifiable expected outcomes and assess impact. Because of the strengths of the staff, however, it would seem that some immediate progress toward identifying verifiable expected outcomes could be achieved by recognizing and trying to make some marginal changes in the way PSJ works. This would help it to become more of a 'learning organization' and, hence, an organization that can more easily identify desired outcomes *ex ante* and verify them *ex post* in a way that feeds into the thinking about future grantmaking.

This report is divided into four sections: (1) current practices and thinking among FF staff about *goals, outcomes, and benchmarks* (Section II); (2) the structure of the PO *job and work environment* and the way it affects learning and goal-setting (Section III); and (3) the thinking on and practice of *evaluation* at PSJ, and its relation to the forming of expected outcomes, the verification of them (Section IV).

## **II - The Thinking about Goals and Expected Outcomes**

At the most general level, PSJ staff seem to share the (somewhat overlapping) goals of promoting a vibrant democratic society by strengthening the institutions of 'civil society,' reducing social and economic injustice (including racism and gender discrimination), strengthening humans rights (political, social, and economic, and including a separate emphasis on women's rights). To the extent that progress in these areas is strongly affected by what governments do, the goal of strengthening the quality of governance is also an important goal. In this sense, the concern about governance is somewhat derivative of the others, which serves to circumscribe it to--with a few exceptions, the strengthening of nongovernment institutions that will hold government accountable. (More on this later.)

The above-stated goals are obviously too vague and abstract for purposes of forming concrete expectations about outcomes, setting these as criteria for funding grantees, and verifying progress in these terms--let alone attributing any such progress to PSJ's support. PSJ staff replace these more abstract formulations, in part, with more instrumentally defined goals. The instrument, in serving as a kind of shorthand for the goal itself, actually becomes a goal of

its own. This makes it difficult to separate out the goal itself from the instrument and the belief about causation. In the six subsections that follow, I try to disentangle them for the purposes of better understanding what to do.

## **1. Communication, linking, and aggregating upward**

A large number of the statements made by PSJ staff about what they want to achieve with their grants relate to facilitating communication and greater interaction between like-minded grantee organizations, or between the a grantee organization and its affiliates, members, and potential constituents. To a certain extent, this goal is an example of an instrument that has turned into a goal itself. For this reason, and because this goal seemed to be the one most shared among PSJ staff, I start with it here.

With respect to this particular goal, POs portray their work as a kind of marriage broker--linking up parties that it thinks should get together and otherwise would not, and pressing them to do so. Such linkings are viewed as desirable not only because they increase the flow of information about problems and solutions that such organizations are working on. More importantly, PSJ urgings on this front express a belief that such contact and interchange will build strength that any one organization acting alone could not achieve. A set of communication-promoting grants, in this view, will add up to something important, and certainly to more than the sum of a similar set of grants to isolated organizations.

This view, and the corresponding approach to grantmaking, seems stronger than it was when I did some work for the Foundation in the mid-1980s. In part, it seems to reflect a reaction to its opposite--the "lack of significance" that results from working with "isolated" and small organizations. It also seems to be the flip side of the current dilemma facing PSJ--namely, the devolution of policymaking to the states, and its requiring of more decentralized actions (discussed later). The devolution development poses a particular challenge to the Foundation, given its long history of supporting important national organizations (many of which are the so-called flagship organizations, like NAACP, NOW, etc.). Linking organizations from the bottom up, in this new context, is seen as avoiding the pitfalls of, on the one hand, supporting organizations that know how to work only at the national level and do not have a strong membership base or ear for what is happening "out there" at the state level--and, on the other hand, supporting many isolated "grassroots" organizations that are too local and unconnected to amount to anything.

Although PSJ staff do not express it this way, these views represent a theory of how to achieve social change--namely, that progress in the goal area is best achieved by aggregating individual organizations. The theory also seems to assume something about harmony. Namely, that achieving harmony between different organizations, or having them see their problems as similar to other groups they normally perceive as different or of no interest to them, is a realistic and desirable end to pursue, and not an uphill battle in itself. These assumptions and causal beliefs are not necessarily accurate, or at least not so as a general rule.

Would this view of promoting change have explained the success of the U.S. civil rights movements in the 1960s? Or the women's movement in that same period? Or the highly successful social movement of the 19th and early 20th centuries by U.S. women (then still unenfranchised) in favor of veterans' and children's benefits, as analyzed by Theda Skocpol? Although my knowledge of these histories is not sufficient to answer these questions, it is important to raise them for those who can. For example, the successful women's movement of the 1960s was restricted in many ways--as I learned during my week at PSJ--to middle- and upper-middle-class white women and *their* issues. Currently, of course, PSJ and others perceive this as too narrow, excluding of, and irrelevant to, many of the concerns of lower-class and non-white women. But in the 1960s, at an earlier stage of organizing, this very narrowness and lack of diversity may have represented--with the benefit of hindsight--one of the ingredients of that earlier stellar *success* of the women's movement. Namely, what we would now call narrowness gave strength and focus to people who were drawn to the cause precisely because they *were* like each other and, hence, *unlike* others.

One could raise parallel questions, for purposes of illustration, about the comparison between today's NAACP of the 1990s and that of the 1960s. In the 1960s, the NAACP and the civil rights movement more broadly were not known--at least in retrospect--for being inclusive with respect to women in leadership positions and women's issues. Would PSJ have been right in the 1960s, in terms of a strategy of potentiating effective social change, in insisting that the NAACP and the civil-rights movement be more inclusive of women--and spend time linking up to women's groups and articulating their interests? Are the lessons of the 1960s success of the NAACP consistent with the current approach to reducing racism that is implicit in PSJ's support of NAACP efforts to be more inclusive, more linked up to certain "excluded" African-American groups like inner-city youth?

More generally, and as PSJ staff themselves report, many NGOs resist getting together to share their experiences, let alone collaborate. But this kind of independence and stubborn-mindedness often characterizes the histories of strong NGOs, let alone of strong social movements. These histories often point to just the *opposite* factors in explaining the strength of

civil groups in acting effectively: homogeneity rather than diversity and inclusiveness, narrow focus rather than broad, and an energizing us-vs.-them view of those not like them.

PSJ's emphasis on fostering linking and communication between groups might find more solid justification in terms of the literature of cross-cutting cleavages (or, similarly, Granovetter's strength of weak ties, or Locke's polycentric vs. vertical or horizontal networks). These contributions attempt to understand the conditions under which progress toward reducing social conflict and exclusion is made. To generalize about their findings all too briefly, the possibility for harmonious outcomes is increased when people belonging to certain homogeneous groups also engage in activities involving membership or less formal linking ("weak ties") to other groups. It is the nature of these links, and whether they exist in the first place--cutting across their different identities and placing them in more than one grouping--that determines whether progress will be made, rather than their membership in one group to which they have a strong tie. It is not that the groups add up to a whole, let alone a whole that is harmonious and greater than the sum of its parts. Rather, the multiple identities of people within *non-diverse* groups creates intersections between otherwise isolated, and potentially adversarial, groups that otherwise would not occur.

This set of discoveries, and the empirical work in which they are grounded, might appear to come closest to an empirical justification from history for PSJ's strong belief in facilitating the linking of groups. But if one were to draw a strategy for action from the cross-cutting explanations, it would distinctly not suggest making the groups themselves more diverse.

Another body of recent literature raises additional questions about the "aggregating upward" approach, this time with respect to improving organizational performance. This literature could also be of help in bringing empirical and historical evidence to bear on the issues facing PSJ grantmaking. Much of the recent literature on industrial restructuring, together with a current of longer-standing studies of organizations, suggests that *non-collaboration* between groups may not be that bad--or at least, a much looser form of collaboration than that usually thought desirable. These studies, mainly of large firms (and public-sector organizations, to a lesser extent), reveal that rivalry and competition between groups, organizations, and units within them--rather than collaboration--often produces better results. This kind of competition means that more than one organization will be working on the same thing, which transforms our view of redundancy and overlap from a negative to a positive one. These findings have guided much of the attempts to improve performance, both in large firms and in the public sector more recently, through decentralization.

These bodies of evidence, though not necessarily applicable in literal terms to the world of PSJ's grantmaking, raise questions about the implicit theories of change behind that

grantmaking. More constructively, they suggest alternative ways of thinking about paths to effective social change that do not require aggregating-upward as a prerequisite. At the least, one needs to ask whether the reluctance of grantee organizations to share experiences or collaborate is something that PSJ really wants to cajole grantees away from--whether it represents a grain against which PSJ should work? Or is it something to listen to and respect, to judge as being consistent with strength? The point of raising these questions is not to suggest that they contain immediate answers. Rather, PSJ should be asking of its staff, of evaluators, and of history whether there is evidence to support the notion that the "linking" and "aggregating-up" approach to achieving difficult social changes is effective, and whether it is the best that PSJ can do.

Asking such questions is, in part, the goal of an outcome-specifying exercise--even if the result is not clear answers, but putting these questions in the minds of staff when they try to specify verifiable outcomes. In certain ways, however, asking such questions is also the role of an evaluation function--whether formal or informal--and not necessarily that of operations staff, which has other more pressing tasks occupying its mind. (More on this later.)

## **2. The convenor vs. the facilitator**

A second instrument-turned-goal that emerged from my conversations was that of the PSJ "convenor" of different parties that otherwise might not come together. This kind of story appeared much less frequently than those about urging grantees into communicating and linking activities. Although it seems, at first glance, to be a variant on the linking goal, it is actually distinctly different, in a way that is illuminating.

Two examples of "convening," which in themselves differ substantially from each other, serve to illustrate the point. One relates to the issue of domestic violence, and involved the bringing to the table by the (then) PO of three sets of actors who, if not adversaries, had certainly never sat down with each other in the same room--namely, women's groups, the police, and the American Medical Association. The other "convenor" example involves a new initiative of the Innovations-in-Government (IG) program, in which the PO has sought to convene a handful of major corporate partners, with the purpose of devising a set of actions that will contribute toward reducing the high distrust of government that prevails among the U.S. public today. Each partner takes on a project conducive to its particular product or service--a high-circulation women's magazine, for example, agrees to do profile stories of successful women in government.

At first glance, the differences between these two examples might seem more significant than their likenesses. The actors convened around the discussion of domestic violence are, in many ways, adversaries, at least on the issue of women and domestic violence. The corporate representatives are just the opposite: although not necessarily linked to each other formally--each is from a different sector--they are all from the corporate world, which makes them more similar than the professional/economic backgrounds of people coming from the women's movement, the police, and physicians. The corporate initiative, moreover, does not require that--at the end of the discussion--people collaborate with each other, or even agree to a common agenda or to face the public with a single stand on a particular action. The domestic-violence meeting does, at least if the result is to be successful. The corporate case, thus, seems significantly easier--one has to persuade people separately, individual by individual. This does not mean it is an easy task--merely, that it does not require that those who come to the meeting initiate an ongoing collaboration among themselves or even need to come to agreement with each other.

The similarities between these examples, however, are more instructive than the differences--at least with respect to illuminating the previous goal of interlinking grantees with various other actors. First, the convening goal starts with a discrete task in mind, which is conceived as a step toward resolution of a particular problem: in the domestic-violence story, a first-time coming together of important actors in the problem area who have the potential to be adversaries; in the business-partnerships initiative, a distinct self-devised "assignment" for each member at the meeting (not requiring, therefore, action or agreement as a group)--devising a public-trust-inspiring campaign suitable to that corporation's product or service. This contrasts with the inter-linking goal, in which the goal is the setting up of a *process* of getting together that is *ongoing*.

Second, and as a result of the above, the expected results of the convenor role are more easily specifiable and verifiable than the those of the inter-linking role. Interim results can be easily verified as the initiative moves along--what happened at the meeting, who agreed to do what, what was agreed to as the next step. This ability to specify and verify results in a piecemeal or divisible fashion, in turn, makes it possible for POs to continuously fine-tune and re-define expected outcomes. This is because the convening process itself generates information about what outcomes are possible to realistically pursue, and also alters the probabilities that one or another course of action is feasible. This information is not known before the process starts, nor is the exact nature of the change in probabilities that will be brought about by the convening process itself.

All this means that the initial expected outcome, as set forth in the RGA, cannot be as realistic or as specified as will later be possible. Re-visiting the expected outcome so as to fine-



tune the goal and re-assess it is not only possible with this particular kind of initiative, but it is key to achieving the desired results. Though this process may seem to burden the already complex task of grantmaking, it is also exactly what students of organizational behavior (particularly James March) have observed in watching how organizations actually set goals (as opposed to how people think they *should* act): they act first, and the information resulting from that action leads to informed goal-setting. (Or, as advised in a Brazilian song of the 1960s that reversed several well-known aphorisms, "act twice before thinking.")

Iterative outcome-setting, verifying, and re-setting was also clearly apparent in the stories told to me by POs who had played central roles in convenor initiatives. The desired outcomes, the actual results, and the next desired steps came out loud and clear. The stories about inter-linking initiatives, in contrast, had the opposite quality--even when told by the same POs. There seemed to be no clear expected outcome, or a sense of how it might be verified--perhaps, in some instances, not even in the minds of the PO himself or herself. This resulted from the diffuse nature of the goal, its ongoing nature, and the inability to link the instrument (the linkings and gettings-together) to any particular desired outcome or even event.

At least some POs themselves had misgivings about the nature of the outcomes that might result from their encouraging grantees to communicate more with each other and their affiliates and members. They worried NGOs might simply do what they had been doing before and describe it as the "new" inter-linking; or that grantee reporting to the Foundation of such gettings-together might signify meetings or other activities that represented only "cosmetic" or superficial changes, out of which nothing significant was set in motion. In turn, some POs also worried that determining the veracity and authenticity of changes reported by grantees to PSJ, or induced by PSJ's cajolings, would be a difficult task. Difficult, especially in contrast to the more event-specific, more narrowed coming-together of the convenor initiative--which occurs in one place and at one moment (or a set of several distinct moments) in time with the PO present. This leads to the third and last difference between the convenor and interlinking approaches.

The PO as convenor was a more aggressive, proactive, and in-control person than the PO "linker." The convenor had a clearly-developed prior idea of what should happen, and the concrete form it would take. He or she seemed to be pushing all the relevant actors until it happened, or working hard to breathe life into a fledgling or tired grantee organization. The convenor often said, "we" did this, "we" did that. When I first heard this, I mistook this "we" for meaning "the Foundation and I," a kind of variant on the royal "we." But more often than not, it meant the PO together with a key and like-minded leader in the grantee community. This "we" was "scheming," in the most involved and strategically clever of ways, to make things happen.

In these particular tales, there was often a slight pause before the "we," as if the person

speaking had to stop and change an intended "I" to a less vain-sounding "we." I didn't find these "we's" vain or pushy-sounding. To the contrary, I was impressed with the powerfulness of the PO-storyteller in these particular stories--in the sense of starting with a clear idea of exactly what needed to be done, at least as a first step, having a strategy of how to proceed and being confident of its correctness, and being in a position to *direct* or mastermind the process. Granted, these storytellers tried to tone down the power they had, felt, or exerted--because it is somewhat inconsistent with the culture of the Foundation. But these stories had a particular thrill for them, it was clear--they were excited about them, and proud of their results. (I, also, was taken with these stories, partly because the desired results seemed so clear and hence tantalizingly within reach.)

The stories of facilitating inter-linking conveyed a different kind of actor (even when told by the same POs). In the latter, the take-charge quality of the convenor stories was nowhere to be seen. In contrast to the PO as convenor, the PO as facilitator of inter-linking is *not* supposed to have clear idea of the expected results and a focused short-term plan of how to do so. The facilitator cannot be the strong presence, even if behind the scenes, that is represented by the convenor's "we." He or she is modest about his or her role, non-directive, and permissive--like trying to gently to suggest to one's own growing children what they should do, without at the same time appear to be directing their lives.

In the inter-linking stories, the convenor's certainty about strategy and expected outcomes was replaced with a kind of resigned agnosticism about being able to either specify or verify expected outcomes, and a kind of self-effacing modesty about PSJ's ability to have significant impacts in areas where so many other factors were operating. In this same vein, more than one person said with strikingly similar phrasing, the Foundation's role was not to take a position on an issue (especially a controversial one) and not to work toward the enactment of such a view. This would be "intervening." But it was also exactly what the convenors *were* doing. In the linking cases, the goal was to facilitate people getting together to articulate their *own* views better, and to be able to pressure the accountable authorities more effectively for what *they* would decide they wanted. In these cases, PSJ's role was that of a "mere" facilitator and enabler, like the facilitator who is brought in to run a meeting: ideally, this person is not versed in the subject matter, does not hold a position on the issues or, at least, certainly does not reveal that position.

In explaining the strategy behind the interlinking initiatives and urgings, as noted above, many POs expressed the belief that stronger and more effective civic associationalism would result if local grantee organizations linked more to each other (otherwise they would remain weak), and if national organizations related more to their state affiliates in order to better know

their constituencies (otherwise they would remain irrelevant). But few POs seemed to believe as passionately in the projected outcome as the convenors did, nor did they possess as clear and concrete an idea of what action would lead to what outcome.

The above description is not meant to convey that POs were critical of the projected link between getting people together and broader goals. Indeed, they seemed to accept it. But they were also less engaged with these grants, less excited about them. This appeared to result from the different structure of the two approaches, described above, with respect to the verifiability of results, the concreteness with which expected outcomes could reasonably be specified, and the convincingness of the projected links between cause and effect.

I, obviously, liked the convenor stories better. They gave a clear sense of what was expected, the exact nature of the outcomes along the way, and the clear causal link. They also conveyed a picture of the Foundation having an important impact, through cleverly conceived interventions at the margin and at crucial moments. I quickly developed respect for, and confidence in the persons telling these stories, and admired PSJ for finding and hiring them. These impressions could well be wrong, however, in terms of how successful or meaningful these interventions actually were. It could simply be the compelling passion and intelligence of the storyteller, the seeming clear causal chain and verifiability of results, and the way these stories lend themselves to riveting tellings that make them sound more convincing than the more diffuse facilitator stories. The latter may actually have generated, or be in the process of generating, more significant results.

The point of this contrast between convenor and linking grants, then, is not that one is better than the other, though some will come to that conclusion. Rather, one approach lends itself more to both specification of desired outcomes, verification of results and, as a consequence, fine-tuning along the way. The convenor stories, with their explicit theories about cause and effect and their clear strategies, could easily be put to the test of verification and, perhaps, should be.

The problem of the linking stories, in contrast, is twofold. First, they require the specification of verifiable outcomes, and that may not be possible. (Or the specification of verifiable outcomes may induce superficial changes in grantees and their reporting or, even worse, a distraction of grantee activities from more meaningful and less verifiable work.) Second, they are based on a theory of cause and effect--that linking up distinct organizations with each other will add up to something more powerful than the mere summing of the individual parts. This assumption is not necessarily confirmed by the bodies of evidence noted

above from outside the realm of these grants--the evidence from history, evaluations, and the organizational literature. More basically, then, the linking grants and their justifications are in need of a raising of questions about the *implicit* theory of change they embody. Is it true or not? Are there more effective ways of achieving the goals that linking is supposed to achieve?

### **3. Nongovernment organizations: issues vs. organizations**

As apparent from but distinct from the above discussion, much of PSJ's work seeks to support the development of NGOs as an end in itself. This is reflected in the grants devoted to core support and to "capacity building." The justifications for this emphasis, of course, see the NGO as an instrument, not an end--the end being one of those difficult-to-verify broad goals of creating a more just and inclusive society.

NGOs are also the point of entry for PSJ's thinking about government, with a few exceptions. (One exception is the Innovations in Government Program.) Governance will be better, fairer, and more inclusive, that is, if there is a more articulate, well-informed, and demanding set of organizations outside it demanding accountability, and suggesting better alternatives. In one sense, the decision to focus on the NGO aspect of the issue of governance can be seen as a quite pragmatic breaking off of a manageable piece of the governance issue to work on. This choice may also be consistent with the Foundation's comparative strengths, size of operations, and staff experience.

In another sense, the belief in building NGOs also reflects an explicit theory of causation that is widely held currently, and is similar to that of Robert Putnam's--namely, that rich civic associationalism leads to good governance, and not vice versa. This causal explanation, though seemingly a truism by now, is not uniformly accepted by those who have looked at the evidence. Or, at least, the evidence suggests a two-way causation that makes it difficult to specify either government or civil society as the independent variable. Theda Skocpol, for example, offers a counter-explanation to Putnam's for the "decline of civil associationalism" in the United States, pointing to the withdrawal of public support rather than structural factors, like television, that cause people to have less of a need to come together. Lester Salamon, in a short paper I picked up at the Foundation, makes an argument on another plane that involves causal explanations analogous to Skocpol's. He shows how NGO significance in the U.S. waxed with the rise of federal-government expenditures in the years of more interventionist governments and higher spending in social policy--and then waned severely, starting with the Reagan years, in the years of reduced public spending and increased antipathy to public-sector intervention.

These arguments and evidences lead to the raising of two questions regarding PSJ's thinking and portfolio. First, it seems limiting to narrow down on NGOs as the angle from which to improve government performance in the areas of concern to PSJ. With respect to PSJ's ultimate goals of increasing human rights and reducing social and economic injustice, that is, supporting NGOs may be the most effective approach to the problem in some instances, but not in others.<sup>4</sup> This is one instance in which letting the means to an end become an end in itself is problematic because it may, through this slippage, displace the *real* end.

The second reason to raise questions about the assumed causal link from NGOs to good governance is not to open a debate about what the relationship actually is, but to talk about the *effect* that this belief has on PSJ thinking. To assume that better and more NGOs lead to better governance in the goal-areas of PSJ--whether the assumption is true or false--seems to drift into the assumption that the activity of "building NGOs" in general will have desired effects in the goal areas. This seems to lead logically to a further drift into two more assumptions. One is that NGO capacity-building is in itself a valuable activity because it will also have the desired effects in the goal areas. The second is that important established NGOs (including the "flagship" organizations) are worthy of support merely because they, after a long struggle and past victories, have achieved a rooted existence and because it is necessary to enshrine this kind of representation in a permanent organization, if it is to be effective.

It is not that any of these assumptions are wrong in any particular case under consideration. But the logical drift from one assumption to the next makes it difficult to specify desired outcomes. The chain of assumptions is so long and so nested, that is, that it becomes difficult and seemingly unreasonable to specify an outcome (e.g., an identifiable improvement in human rights) as a verifiable result of something that PSJ does. As POs say and worry, it takes a long time (and, "what if it takes longer than we think so that what we perceive as no outcome is simply undetectable progress toward one?"); it is impossible to specify a verifiable outcome; and even if there is success, how do we know it was us rather than something else that caused it? (I have less trouble with this latter kind of outcome--what's wrong with being associated with a good thing, if only on its coattails?).

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<sup>4</sup>It should be noted, at the same time, that PSJ seems to be playing an important moderating role in certain sectors of the NGO community that have adamantly anti-government stance (some of the human rights groups are an example). This stance and its rhetoric sometimes clouds the ability of these groups to think strategically, and makes it difficult to get them to sit down with government and negotiate in situations where negotiation and compromise might generate significant gains.

On the one hand, many evaluators and students of organizations share these concerns about the real difficulties and even danger of specifying and verifying outcomes for certain types of activities, and about attributing causes to certain outcomes. On the other hand, this kind of puzzlement and confusion about specifying and verifying outcomes is fed by the widely pervasive belief that the mere existence of strong organizations (nongovernment, in this case) leads to progress toward PSJ's particular goals. It is not the belief about causality that I challenge--at least for these purposes--but the slippage from it that has turned instruments into goals. The instruments-turned-goals, in this case, seem to be precluding PSJ's entertaining of various ideas about directly supporting experimentation and other efforts in the public sector and other realms.

#### **4. Does movement toward strong organizations mean progress?**

The assumptions about NGOs laid out above can be seen as a specific case of a more general assumption: progress cannot be made in reducing a problem unless there is an organization in which the struggle for change can be permanently housed. This may be true in many cases. But the assumption precludes approaches to thinking about PSJ goals that do *not* involve building and strengthening organizations, let alone a particular form of organization or a particular organization well established for its past victories.

Some solutions of problems require one-shot interventions, or a convening of persons in a loose structure that requires only a short or medium-term life. Histories of progress on social issues, moreover, often show the focus of organizational strength shifting through time from one organization--previously dynamic but subsequently phlegmatic--to another that has come up, often by surprise, from behind. (Is the Nation of Islam vis-a-vis the NAACP an example?) Or these histories show shifts of a struggle for social progress from an organization to a more loosely-organized group outside it, and perhaps even in opposition to it. Organizational life cycles often show brilliance and innovativeness in the beginning, and stodginess or exclusiveness later on. That's why the focus in long histories of social progress often shift from one actor to another--or from an actor that has become successfully institutionalized to a more inchoate, rowdy and perhaps oppositionist reform fraction, inside or outside that organization.

Finally, histories of the reform of organizations--especially those that have become out of touch with their constituents or unchanged in the face of changed times--often show them reforming in response to a crisis. Some of those crises involve a viable challenge from another movement or organization or looser movement. Others, involve the loss of funding from donors.

Perhaps one of the lessons to be learned from such histories is that the best thing one can do for a cause is *not* to fund the latter successful organizations continuously. Or, at least, it may make sense to be on the watch for these up-and-coming organizations, though weaker than the original, with an eye toward supporting the rise of such competitors, while at the same time funding the older entity. This may be a stronger approach toward assisting the greater accountability of an existing organization than the more direct cajoling of it, as practiced at PSJ, in the desired direction. Though this suggestion may seem convoluted, a variation on this actually occurred in the U.S. Model Cities program in the 1960s. State and municipal governments objected strenuously to the federal government's bypassing them by channeling funds directly to NGOs, as part of the Maximum Feasible Participation initiative. In order to overcome the resulting political opposition from the states, the federal government was forced to continue its funding of similar programs to these governments, even though it was not happy with their ability to respond to the new challenges of the program and to innovate. In the end, the program's parallel lines of funding to the new NGOs and existing programs provoked a competitive response from many of the "stodgier" local and government agencies. They said that they could just as "easily" do what the NGOs were doing--and "even better." (This is described in Dale Marshall's chapter on this period from her edited volume, with David Leonard, on decentralization.)

If one assumes that supporting NGOs is equivalent to serving the cause of social justice best, this somehow precludes asking the kinds of questions, and thinking about the kinds of alternatives, that these histories reveal. In addition, it precludes raising the same questions about "accountability" with respect to NGOs that are so central to PSJ's thinking about governance. The theory behind that thinking assumes, in effect, that the best way to bring about improved accountability of an institution, as well as of its performance in general, is to subject it to *outside* demands for such improvement from its constituents. Support that helps articulate and strengthen these outside demanders, hence, will lead to improved accountability and responsiveness.

PSJ's approach to accountability among the NGOs it supports is distinctly different: it seeks directly to cajole them into accountability, rather than to subject them to outside pressures that pull them in that direction, as in the examples noted above. Why does PSJ's implicit theory of the best way to bringing about accountability in public-sector organizations not apply to other organizations, like NGOs, as well? It is not only that two differing implicit theories of bringing about accountability underlie PSJ's thinking about NGOs as *vs.* government. But, in the same vein, accountability of NGOs in itself seems to be much less of a concern than it perhaps should be. All organizations, that is, need to be subject to some outside pressures for accountability. In

the case of NGOs, it is as if they are assumed to be somewhat exempt from this concern because they are to be supported for the fact that they inherently and genuinely represent a cause. Is continued funding, in sum, the best way to get an organization to change? And, what is the best way to serve a particular cause, independently of long-term support to an organization?

## **5. Government as instrument?**

Before closing this particular line of questioning, I wanted to note that there are clearly a few other important factors inherent in the Foundation's work that lead to the strong emphasis on NGOs in PSJ's portfolio, and the NGO-based view of the governance issue. These factors operate independently of the view that NGO strength leads to the reducing of problems in the area that PSJ cares about.

One often hears at the Foundation that the reason it works much more with NGOs than with government institutions is that government has access to so much more funding than anything the Foundation could provide that there is no way the Foundation could have an impact by funding an initiative involving government; the second, and less important reason sometimes given is that it is difficult politically for government to experiment--that is, to fund something that would be appropriate on a scale that is small enough to be suited to a foundation grant.

Although this explanation seems reasonable, there are nevertheless exceptions--namely, in which the Foundation did or does support public-sector initiatives or experiments--and the particulars are instructive. There is something about these exceptions, in fact, that is exactly opposite to the image of a David-like foundation facing a Goliath-like large government. Without Foundation support, that is, the logic and the politics of large government did *not* allow these particular initiatives, usually proposed and backed by a small group of inside reformers, to take place. It is not clear, then, that the assumptions behind the justifications for an absence of PSJ interest in drawing pieces of some public institutions into its initiatives are accurate. Certain opportunities to be effective in this way are, perhaps, being missed.

There is another factor that reinforces the tendency not to think about government (or labor or universities or business) as a possible actor in PSJ initiatives. A good number of POs come from the NGO world, where they are well networked, and may well not have the same networks in other institutional worlds like government. This is not trivial, since the remarkable outside networks in which PSJ staff is embedded are key to their being able to function so well.

Also influencing the outcomes being discussed here, government institutions and officers often have less interest in meeting with a foundation officer than do NGOs. This has a particular variation in developing countries, where as one PO pointed out, government officials "couldn't



care less" about having an appointment with a staff member of the Ford Foundation; NGOs, in comparison, "can be sure to return phone calls promptly." And to the extent that government agencies *are* looking for outside support, they are angling for big donor funding.

Working with NGOs as distinct from government, in short, seems to make one's work easier (particularly if that's where one's networks are), allows one to wield more influence on the grantee and, not insignificantly, makes one feel wanted and appreciated! These are important and legitimate influences on the shape of PSJ's portfolio, and are difficult to tamper with. At the same time, it is important to recognize that these influences contribute toward driving the choice of grantees and the development of networks, as well as the analysis of the problem to be addressed. As the above-cited PO said, "sometimes you wonder if you're financing something totally marginal just because that's where you were able to develop the networks."

The point of these observations is not to suggest that a PO who is well networked in NGOs need simply add one or two more large institutional worlds onto his or her networks. This would be at great cost to the quality of the first network. Rather, I want to draw attention to the fact that because the role of NGOs is so central to the PSJ mission statement, and because many POs come from the NGO world, the network gets defined according to the type of *organization* rather than type of *issue*. An issue-oriented network or approach to thinking about a new initiative would cut across different types of organizations and persons, rather than focusing on one. It will be looser and more informal--formed as it is by links among like-minded persons in certain issue-areas that run *across* the divides of NGO, public-sector, university, and business. We know, however, that informal networks are often as strong and effective as formal networks, and sometimes moreso. The existence and informality of these issue-defined networks may make the task of networking across these various divides less daunting than it might seem.

The point of raising these questions is also not to say that PSJ would do better to have a larger percentage of its portfolio going to government (or universities or business institutions) relative to NGOs. Rather, there is something about the PSJ mission as currently articulated (including the instrument-goals it drifts into, and the inherent features of the job noted above) that is preventing people from asking the "prior" questions around any particular problem or grant initiative: namely, what combination of actors? (NGOs, government, private-sector, academic)--doing what?--would help serve our ultimate goals in this case?

## **6. Workers as workers**

A similar set of questions can be raised about other sets of organizations--universities, business associations, or labor unions and other associations of workers. I was struck with the absence of labor unions as grantees or as even as mere actors being consulted in PSJ's portfolio, and asked several POs about it. The absence was particularly striking with respect to the areas of human, social, and economic rights, especially since PSJ has associated itself strongly with the struggle to include "economic rights" in the internationally accepted definition of human rights.<sup>5</sup> Even in governance, where public-sector unions are in many cases key to improved accountability, one particular PO's participation on an interesting AFL-CIO commission to foster labor-management cooperation at the state and local government level with the aim of improving government performance--and of documenting successful cases of such cooperation--is as a private citizen, and not a Foundation officer.

Why wouldn't certain labor unions or locals, or organizing attempts in this direction, be considered as among the important actors in the area of at least economic rights and governance? The question is particularly timely now, given the recent emergence of interesting and innovative moves in labor organizing in the United States, often at the local level. With PSJ's support for organizing around human rights in terms of various bases for commonality of interest--race, gender, issue, place or community--it would seem that the place people work represents an equally important commonality. Why would PSJ, which in other areas seems connected to new actors and new developments in its field, have not run into some of these cases, be interested in and knowledgeable about them, and be thinking about ways to support them?

The answer to the question has several parts. The part that fits my previous line of argumentation--that is, with respect to issue-defined vs. organization-defined approaches to grantmaking--is that PSJ sees the strengthening of NGOs as the centerpiece of a strategy to improve human rights. For reasons that are not totally obvious, the current discourse about NGOs and civic associationalism in general simply does not include labor unions and other worker associations in that category. There is no reason, therefore, for them to be on the "screen" at PSJ unless someone deliberately puts them there. This is another variation on the difficulty that occurs when, as discussed earlier, the instrument (strengthening NGOs) to a goal (improving human rights) turns into shorthand for the goal itself.

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<sup>5</sup>My discussion of this issue is limited by the fact that I was not able to talk to the PO who is handling some new initiatives in the area of labor. At the same time, however, the point I am making relates to the defining of issues across a range of actors in different institutional worlds who are relevant to a particular initiative--rather than including that previously non-included institutional actor in a *separate* network under the responsibility of a particular program officer. Needless to say, the new initiatives in the labor area--regardless of their separateness--constitute an important step in the direction I am suggesting here.

Another reason for the exclusion of worker associations from the category of nongovernment organizations is that, to many people, labor unions mean the institution of "Big Labor" and all the problems associated with that--corruption, non-democratic decisionmaking, overly centralized national organizations not responding to "grassroots" needs, the turning of a blind eye to the challenges of global competition and a digging in of heels against needed reforms and, most relevant to PSJ, not incorporating or attending to the needs of minorities, women, and unskilled workers. But doesn't this critique share important features with the critique being made of the "flagship" NGOs supported by PSJ--like the NAACP and NOW? In these latter cases, the problem behavior, far from spurning PSJ interest, has drawn Foundation support--in a concerned way that is patient and tolerant, hoping to nudge such organizations toward more desirable behavior.

For PSJ to lend support to certain labor initiatives might also be problematic in that it would seem to be taking a stance on a conflictual and dividing issue--labor-management disputes--which might be awkward for the Foundation. But doesn't the support for the international NGO rights groups that, among other things, campaign against sweatshop labor amount to the taking of such a stance? The only difference seems to be that PSJ's support around this issue is to NGOs and not labor unions. Labor-management conflict, actually, need not be the piece of labor's new dynamism that PSJ relates to. The current rage in industrial relations, after all, is "labor-management cooperation" and "partnerships" in re-structuring for global competition. Some successful corporate re-structurings were achieved through just such cooperation (others, of course, were not).

More significantly, and as illustrated above, one of the Foundation's comparative strengths lies in playing the role of a neutral convenor of parties with different interests--bringing them to the table, getting them to listen to each other's positions, and to negotiate and compromise. PSJ already plays this role, for example, in the area of international cooperation--supporting the negotiations for a "third room" (NGOs, women's groups, environmental groups) in the upcoming Caribbean and Central American trade negotiations in Caracas. Why wouldn't it do the same when the actors are associations of workers, rather than NGOs?

If there were nothing interesting to relate to in the labor movement today, PSJ's lack of involvement would be understandable. But in certain ways there is more of an awakening in certain pieces of the labor movement with respect to issues of concern to PSJ--particularly greater inclusiveness of women, unskilled, and minority workers--than, for example, in some of the large NGOs it supports.

Three final considerations explain the inattention to labor. One has to do with the lack of networks among most POs in this area, which means that bringing in actors from labor would

require much more time than bringing in new actors from the networks with which they are familiar. A second has to do with what some POs perceived as a lack of support from, or interest on the part of, Foundation management.

The third consideration relates to what might be called "portfolio drag" or "portfolio inertia." This manifests itself in various ways, not restricted to this example, and hence I discuss it separately in the following section. Suffice it to say here that portfolio drag means that, although POs have bold visions of initiatives they would like to undertake, they end up enacting a small part of those visions because of the drag on their time (and enthusiasm) from "old" grants, including those inherited from previous POs. Hence those who expressed interest in linking up to the dynamism in labor today said that the demands on their time (and enthusiasm) of the "inherited" parts of their portfolios (as well as the time required for other new initiatives), precluded their looking into this new area.

In closing this section, then, I would like to bring attention back again to the problem of organization-defined rather than issue-defined statements of how to achieve PSJ's goals--and the way instruments (the organizations, or a certain class of organizations) get turned into goals, sometimes to the detriment of the goal itself. If the subject of labor unions and other workers associations were explicitly addressed at PSJ and a negative decision arrived at, this would be better than the seeming inadvertence and implicitness of the current outcome.

### **III - The Program Officer**

As in most organizations that grant or lend money, whether small or large, the person who puts together grants or loans is central--has the most power and the most prestige. The way this person carries out his or her work, and responds to the pressures, incentives, and disincentives of the work environment, is key in determining the shape of the organization's program, its quality and, hence, its impact. The formation of goals and instruments, therefore, are often driven by the way the operational officer works, and not vice versa. This may not be the way people think goal-formation *should* take place, but it is how it actually happens.

In many organizations, non-operational staff are formally charged with the fashioning of goals and instruments, and evaluating and fine-tuning them as information comes in--policy staff and, secondarily, evaluation staff. But evaluation staff never have the prestige that operational officers do in most organizations. (As one PO said, in paraphrasing the general wisdom on this, "if you're really good, you're doing programming, not evaluation.") Those who are drawn to work in evaluation, no matter how outstanding the credentials they bring to their jobs, must

nevertheless work in an environment where they are considered to be second-class. This in itself turns away those with first-class credentials and an interest in evaluation; this causes evaluation units, in turn, to not be as outstanding as they might which, again, gives further credence to the view that evaluation jobs are not as prestigious as operational work. Policy-defining units or individuals often suffer from this same dynamic, though less so than evaluation units.

At the Foundation, program officers are even more involved in goal-defining events because they are given considerable autonomy, because they are often hired with particular strength and experience in the subject matters they work on, and because there is no evaluation unit or other outside source of ongoing and independent reporting that challenges them with findings about past or ongoing projects. (I am not speaking only of the kinds of challenges that come from "troubled" projects; POs seemed aware of such immediate problems, often commissioning evaluations to pinpoint the problem. Rather, I speak of evaluation results that give rise to challenges about how one might re-think and fine-tune the thinking about goals and instruments.)

Because of the centrality of the program officer's work, it is important to say a few things about that part of their work environment that influences the process of forming goals, instruments, and their constant re-evaluation. Some of these factors make the formation of goals and specifiable outcomes more difficult than they need to be. In some cases, moreover, the problem influences are actually the flip or darker side of the Foundation's strengths. This makes them somewhat difficult to discern, obscured as they are by their bright strong side. It is not obvious how to reduce these flip-side constraints, since there is always the danger, in so doing, of reducing also the very strengths to which these weaknesses are bound. These problems are nevertheless worth tackling: they are more within the Foundation's control than outside factors, or problems generic to all organizations, and hence are more easily subject to modification. At least some of the suggestions about how to direct a mission-forming and outcome-specifying process that arise from this part of the discussion, then, should be relatively easy to put in place, and some involve only marginal changes.

The discussion of this section is divided into four categories: (1) discussions about substance; (2) writing and its discourse; (3) "portfolio drag" or inertia, and future orientation; and (4) taboos and the culture of "being nice").

## **1. Discussions about substance**

The most common theme that ran through my conversations with this disparate set of persons, portfolios, and approaches, was a complaint. This despite the fact that I was not asking about problems or encouraging gripes, and most of these conversations involved POs talking animatedly and enthusiastically about their work. The complaint was simple: POs did not have enough conversations about the substance of their work--particularly with fellow POs in their program area and with their directors. They wished their directors would engage them more around these matters of substance, saying such encounters usually revolved around administrative matters and writing details. More than one reported a particular meeting with their director in the past that stood out in their minds because the director had challenged them about a grant and pushed them to think about what they were doing. They recalled having had stimulating discussion on these occasions, which they often pondered over afterwards and which caused them to think differently about something.

With respect to their fellow POs at PSJ, a fair number of POs expressed a desire for small meetings devoted exclusively to one or a related set of their grants. Some with strong subject expertise wished they would be invited to meetings in other program areas outside PSJ where similar initiatives were being discussed that were of relevance to their expertise. (Only one or two, however, expressed a need for the corollary--namely, subject experts from other program areas in meetings about *their* projects--though they agreed it was a good idea if asked about it.)

Most people also had clear ideas about what kinds of meetings or interactions did *not* serve this purpose. They were threefold. First, although POs seemed to get along well with their fellow POs and interacted with them easily on an informal level, they said that these conversations did not serve this particular need--revolving, as they did, around administrative matters, shop talk, or plain griping. People also said that everyone was "too busy" to discuss substantive matters--that their colleagues (as well as they themselves) were not available for spending time on such conversations, or that the person wanting the interaction felt it was an imposition to take his colleague away from his work, or that the person himself was too busy to go into a colleague's office and discuss an issue. The ease of informal communication at PSJ, then, did not translate into the kind of interaction people most wanted--namely, *formal* meetings around their grants. This is an interesting finding, given that much of the literature of organizations discusses the importance of *informal* communication and networks, and the danger of stressing formal communication to the detriment of informal communication.

Second, people expressly wanted meetings focused on and organized around *their* particular projects or project problems. They were less wanting of meetings organized around a substantive theme, including those in which the Foundation has recently brought in outside experts to talk about a particular topic. (This did not mean they did not like the latter meetings

which, they reported positively, have been more frequent recently and which, some said, were helping the Foundation to becoming less of a "closed culture.") But they wanted the subject of the meeting to be *their* project--the point of entry to a substantive discussion--even though this would (and should) often lead into a discussion of the larger issues in which the project was embedded.

Most POs pointed to the "officers" meetings as the "only" formal occasion on which the kinds of substantive discussions they wanted took place--namely, when substantive questions were raised about their proposed grants. But they did not see these meetings as serving this purpose well. They take place at too high a level, involve too many people, and often do not include colleagues in their units who are working on similar matters; they are also convened too late in the grantmaking process, when things have been set in concrete and it is difficult to undo them. At this stage, it is imprudent and awkward to express uncertainties or consider alternatives--that would be to shoot oneself in the foot. Officers' meetings are called for only about 10% of the grants, moreover, and less than half the POs attend any particular meeting.

Third, and finally, people wanted meetings around their grants to be small and informal--not "big productions" with many people attending, and not requiring considerable advance planning.

I found these expressed needs surprising and intriguing, because of the impressions I had formed of Foundation POs during this visit and on previous occasions. Mainly, they seemed remarkably articulate, knowledgeable, and reflective about the worlds in which they were working. They had well-formed strategies in their minds, clear ideas about what they thought they should be doing, and strong opinions and agendas for action. They were engaging, congenial, passionate about their work, and stimulating to talk to. They had important pre-Foundation work experience, and they seemed confident about what they were doing. I imagined them, in short, as embedded in a work world of constant substantive interaction (as well as action)--more, I thought enviably, than my own at M.I.T!

In trying to understand how all this could lead to a longing for discussions of substance, let alone challenges on substance from one's boss, I came to feel there was a flip side to all this that involved having no place to express doubts, raise questions, not know, or not be sure of what to do. (Though I did not discuss this explicitly with the persons I interviewed, because it wasn't yet fully formulated in my mind, fragments from a few of these conversations helped me to think it out.)

When POs first come to the Foundation, their relationship to the "outside world" from they have come and to which they have strong links has now turned into one of a potential funder--not only of someone's distinct project or organization but also, more diffusely, of

possible future support for an as-yet-unspecified activity. This subtly changes their relationships to people outside--they are now more sought after and, as a consequence, have to create a certain distance, to not say anything that unintentionally signifies an openness to support in the future, and to not show uncertainty about what they think is best.

Contributing to the same effect is the "pushiness" of existing grantees, who may have clearer ideas than the PO of exactly what they want, and who may dominate the subject matter with more articulation, certainty, and facts than the PO himself. Again, this is not the kind of interaction that allows for the kind of uncertainty that is necessary to a puzzling over the portfolio one is funding and the raising of questions about possible alternatives. In terms of substantive interaction, then, the new PO's relationship to the outside world brings with it the need for a place to "hide" from that very world--to be less certain and to mull over possible alternatives out loud. Obviously, the Foundation should represent that place. But inside the Foundation, an unrelated set of factors, otherwise very positive, keeps that from happening, and works in the same direction as the new relationships with the outside: the autonomy, the high esteem in which POs are held for their former professional lives, the confidence placed in their opinions, and a culture of "being nice" (see below). All this adds up to "no place to hide"--namely, to be uncertain.

The factors discussed in the following subsections also seem to contribute to absence of discussions of substance, and the felt need for them. I proceed to them now.

## **2. The writing and the discourse**

The Foundation is known for the attention it pays to producing well-written, well-argued documentation--internally as well as externally. Writing abilities are important in recruitment. It is striking, therefore, to see the extent to which writing is viewed by POs as distinctly *not* the instrument through which "real" communication or learning takes place. Indeed, writing--and the attention at the Foundation dedicated to crafting it--is viewed as taking precious time away from communication about "real" things, and from "real" work. Several POs referred to the attention paid to writing dismissively as "crossing the t's and dotting the i's," in contrast to the "substantive" conversations they wanted.

POs do not see the things they write--grant applications, grant and portfolio descriptions--as a serious expression of what is actually happening in a particular grant or set of them. They dismiss these writings, and their common discourse, as convenient ways of dispensing with annoying tasks that keep them from their work. They express frustration with the attention paid



to writing, and the extent to which they feel it distracts from, or comes to substitute for, "substantive" communication. They did not dispute my impression of a disconnect between the way their grants appear on paper and the way they describe and analyze them in conversation. They agreed that their own written descriptions of grants and grant experience--and their resort to the language of "empowerment," "civil society," and "participation"--represented an easy *lingua franca* that reads as bland and vague. One PO called this language the "lowest common denominator." (At least one PO saw the discourse as itself seriously flawed, for not taking "power" into account.)

One particular conversation with a PO touched on the issue of goal-setting and -verifying in another way. This person clearly articulated a set of expected and verifiable outcomes with respect to one of her grants in progress. When I asked if these expected outcomes had been stated in the RGA, she said "not exactly," but that they could probably be "inferred" from it, at least with hindsight. She explained the lack of clearer precision in the project documents as resulting, in part, from the fact that the RGA represents, in part, a "massaging" of the grantee's original proposal to meet the Foundation's criteria and use its language; the grant document, in turn, represents a further set of modifications to meet legal and administrative requirements. Not only can the final result therefore stray from the grantee's original proposal, but the grantee itself might not have absorbed or truly bought into these changes. Because the grant documents can therefore convey at least two sets of expectations and commitments, it may be difficult to identify, from the written record, a single set of clearly-identified--and truly "bought-into"--set of outcomes and commitments against which one can go back to subsequently and, fairly, compare to the actual results. The point is, then, that there is something structural about commitment to paper of a grant--something different from imprecision or lack of clear directions--that keeps verifiable outcomes from being clearly stated in writing at the beginning.

I found these reactions intriguing because they represented the opposite result of what the attention to writing intended--namely, better communication about what the Foundation does, and better communication between staff and management and between the Foundation and its trustees. Similarly, it was ironic that the task of writing had drawn, for convenience sake, on a discourse of empowerment, participation, and civil society that, in turn, had turned that discourse meaningless in these particular writing exercises. And this from the pens of those who believe most in the values and goals expressed by this discourse. These portrayals of writing and its obscuring effects on strategic thinking seemed to represent, again, the flip side of one of PSJ's strengths: the articulateness and reflectiveness of its staff.

In a sense, then, PSJ possesses a strong *culture* of writing, underlain by a dismissive view of writing as an instrument of communication taken by its very writers--the POs. They see

speaking and listening, in turn, as the instruments of *genuine* communication about the issues at hand. These observations would be no more than of passing curiosity if it were not for their negative implications for the task of increasing PSJ's ability to learn, specify outcomes, and verify progress.

First, and positively, the writing at PSJ--in its current form--doesn't convey to others the concreteness, the use of benchmarks for progress, and the instances of learning that I heard from at least some POs when they *spoke* about the same things. Second, and less positively, the common recourse in PSJ writing to the discourse of empowerment, participation, and civil society creates bad habits. Even though it serves as a convenient shorthand and conveys a set of widely-shared values, it allows people to not really think about instruments, benchmarks, and lessons when they are writing. And this happens regardless of whether they are doing so in their verbal exchanges, which they often are or can easily do, where "real" communication takes place.

These comments suggest a cautionary note against choosing the seemingly obvious approach to this particular problem--namely, to ask POs to work at better expression of what their grants are about. This would not be an unlikely response at the Foundation, precisely because of the strong culture of writing. The challenge this problem poses, rather, is to recognize the central role of the program officer in any lesson-learning exercise (as opposed to a policy or evaluation staff), while at the same time structuring these exercises in a way that is consistent with these officers' strengths and modes of operating.

The response to this challenge could take various forms. One is to facilitate more *verbal* exchanges between staff on these issues (one form of such exchange is exactly what POs, as described above, are asking for). Another approach is to have other, non-operational people--writer types--do the writing, by interviewing the operational people about lessons learned. Yet another approach might involve a freeing up of POs' time from tasks involving the writing and its editing, in order to create time for the more formal versions of verbal communication that they want.

A final possible approach relates to the orienting and training of new staff. At orientation meetings, PSJ might ask experienced POs to *talk* their way through a past grant or set of grants, highlighting problems that came up and how they were solved, lessons learned ("now I do X and no longer do Y because of the following experience: . . . "), etc. These individualized presentations of situations (as against providing general rules of thumb) may be more of an approximation to the "tacit" or hands-on form of learning that is considered most effective in this and many other kinds of jobs. Such an exercise could also be an effective way for the particular

PO making such a presentation to reflect on his or her own experience and its implications for future grantmaking.

### **3. Vision, future orientation, and portfolio drag**

*Vision* is what PSJ wants its POs to bring to bear on moving their portfolios in a direction in which each grant is a piece of a larger initiative that is inspired by a vision that includes, among other things, an indication of desired results and a way to verify whether they have occurred. *Future orientation* is an expression that came up in many of my interviews, often more than once. POs used it to explain the pressure on them to "move money"--to keep the flow of grant applications moving--and how this crowded out other activities, reflections on past experiences ("looking back"), and curiosity-inspired searching. "Portfolio drag" relates to the portfolio that new POs inherit from the previous officer, or that on-board POs inherit when other POs leave and their portfolios are distributed among those who remain, or when staff responsibilities are re-organized. (A significant chunk of all POs' portfolios seemed to be inherited--roughly one-quarter to three-fifths, and the number of grantees handled by each PO seemed to range from 25 to 75.) These three subjects are quite different and don't necessarily belong together, but with respect to the issue of specifying and verifying outcomes, they are difficult to disentangle.

PSJ's goal of eliciting the kind of vision desired for these more-encompassing initiatives, let alone the results-specifying and -verifying exercises, seemed to be encumbered by both the future and the past--that is, by the effects of future orientation and portfolio drag. Future orientation and portfolio drag are generic aspects of most organizations that have to make grants or loans--each organization having its own particular variant of these phenomena. I do not point them out here, then, with the idea that they could be gotten rid of or reduced significantly, but rather with the idea of understanding how to work within or around them. I describe them only to the extent that it is necessary to understand the effect they have on the learning and result-specifying exercises at issue here.

Several POs had, or were clearly capable of developing and acting on, the kind of vision that PSJ wanted to stimulate. To a certain extent, however, the expression and development of this vision was being crowded, or even crowded out, by a combination of future orientation and portfolio drag. Most obviously, managing an existing portfolio, and putting together new additions to it--the job of a grantmaking officer--takes up considerable time. POs perceive only too keenly, and to a great extent correctly, that the "bottom line" with respect to their

performance relates to their ability to present new, fundable proposals. Although this is obvious for organizations like the Foundation, the way POs adapt to these constraints is less obvious. And it is more than just a question of "not having enough time." (After all, working on new project proposals not only takes time but represents key opportunities for developing and exercising vision.)

I was struck, in my conversations with POs, with two aspects of the way their work at the Foundation started and evolved. First, some of them said, they often came in with clear ideas about what they wanted to do when they were hired by the Foundation but, as the demands of the existing portfolio and of "pushing out the grants" made themselves felt, they seemed to give up on at least a piece of what they thought they could and would do. In some of these cases, as a result, certain grants or sets of grants were clearly not consistent with their vision-- behind its times or against its better judgment. Or, POs themselves mentioned areas they thought were important, new, and exciting to develop but did not because of the considerable investment of time it would take.

Second, and in a similar vein, I was struck with how several POs spoke with particular passion and cleverness about a few grants or initiatives within their portfolio. In these cases, they had usually played a highly active role vis-a-vis grantees and other significant actors. This seemed to contrast with a more passive, business-as-usual, live-and-let-live "affect" around big chunks of the rest of the portfolio, which had a certain "average" quality to it, as well as the implicit strategy behind it. Indeed, in some cases, the "average" part of the portfolio seemed to be not consistent with the analysis of the problem revealed by the more "interesting" initiatives.

Some grants, of course, can safely do with much less attention and hard thinking--"they work pretty much by themselves," as one PO said. In order to be manageable, moreover, any portfolio of this size *needs* a certain number of grants that are "easy" and will not demand much attention. In this sense, the "average" grants could be seen as part of an efficient strategy of a portfolio manager to make his job manageable. This interpretation, one would think, might apply particularly to the inherited portfolio, since POs are not as invested in the grants created by others as in their own. This conjecture is not particularly obvious, however, in that one might expect just the opposite: POs would gladly use any justification to clear the portfolio of old grants to make room for something they can fashion themselves, which would represent their own talents and tastes in grantmaking. But continuing the old grants represents a "lower cost" in time than the new initiatives. The cast of characters is better known and the course of action is well charted. In addition, there are often strong defenders of the old grants within the Foundation (not to mention outside), sometimes among staff and managers that are senior to the

PO. This can make any attempt to *not* renew old grants risky in terms of the disapproval of one's superiors, or at least of the time-consuming task of convincing them.

The differences between the favorite and average parts of PO portfolios can be described as a kind of "split-level" or "split-personality" effect. Most POs, that is, already engage in at least some quite strategic, innovative, and results-oriented thinking around certain initiatives (a small minority) and act quite proactively *vis-a-vis* their grantees. At the same time, the rest of the portfolio seems to be driven by something totally different--namely, attempts to make their jobs manageable. This leaves a kind of vacuum with respect to vision and strategic thinking in the rest of the portfolio. Into this vacuum, instruments-turned-goals and the agendas and pressures of grantees seem to rush in.

The split-level nature of PO portfolios also suggests that PSJ's interest in behaving more like a learning organization--and in specifying outcomes and verifying results--does not simply inhere in getting POs to think and act more strategically. They may be already doing this with their favored few grants. But because of the attempt to manage the demands on their time and the top priority they perceive from management on getting out grants, it is not easy to get this thinking applied to a significant part of the rest of the portfolio. The challenge, then, is not simply or necessarily to run exercises that get people to think more strategically or comprehensively, but to get this thinking to encompass a significantly larger number of projects while still allowing POs to manage their work.

#### **4. The culture of being nice**

Two additional factors that contribute to the drag of the past portfolio on POs' capacity to expand their strategic thinking. One is the Foundation's "culture of being nice"--as at least one PO phrased it. In the course of our conversations, three or four POs spoke about the issue of not renewing a grantee's grant in terms of its "not being nice." Even if it were justified, some said, it was hard after such a long relationship to just go and cut off a grantee organization. Some spoke in terms of feeling guilty about such cuttings-off. They noted that a particular grantee might well cease to exist if they ended a grant, and that some grantees represented causes that were important to support. In many cases, they said, there was no other such organization around, or no other donors who financed this kind of activity.

Although these concerns might well constitute valid reasons for continued support in some cases, they could equally be considered grounds for *not* renewing a grant--especially to a long-standing grantee. An organization that cannot attract other funding, especially after

longstanding Foundation support, may be the sign of an absence of results, suggesting that it is time to look at other ways in which to serve the end that this particular organization was meant to serve. The POs with whom this subject came up, however, almost always expressed the former view (namely, that the inability to stand on one's own merited continued funding), and never the latter view.

The "culture of nice" seemed also to be inhibiting another process that would be necessary to the development of critical thinking around grantmaking. Some POs seem to feel that, in the culture of the Foundation, to raise questions about their peers' grants is "not nice"--and bespeaks a certain disloyalty to one's workmates. (One PO, who was particularly struck with the culture of "nice" at the Foundation, compared it unfavorably to that of the organization from which she came, where people challenged each other and debated on everything--from the way to achieve women's rights to the placement of the water cooler in the outer office.) At the same time that POs seemed to feel comfortable with the culture of being nice, or at least honor-bound to respect it, they were also longing for the kind of interaction with their peers that would involve *not* being nice--i.e., raising questions about each other's projects.

Another inhibiting factor on POs' translating their visions more into grantmaking seemed to be the perception of certain distinct tabus about areas in which grants could not be made. Labor and gay rights are examples that came up more than once. At the same time, these tabus seemed to be shrouded in a certain mystery--as if passed on through corridor conversations with work colleagues, rather than through clear directives from management. As a result, POs seemed not to be sure whether, when, and where the tabus actually applied within the Foundation (they had heard conflicting stories), and where they came from and why they existed. Even the strongest-minded and most proactive POs seemed to have a certain resigned and hands-off attitude toward the tabus--a lack of interest in challenging them.

All organizations, of course, have to draw some limits and place strictures on their operations. But because these particular instances seemed shrouded in uncertainty, there was an absence of thinking about these matters among a group of professionals that in every other way seemed to have clear ideas about their work. Since the tabu areas were mentioned by POs who had wanted to work in these areas but hadn't even tried, or had initiated only minor initiatives and hadn't gone further, it was clear that they were having a certain inhibiting effect on innovative activity--together with the other factors mentioned above.

## 5. The challenge of devolution

This section on the program officer's work and work environment ends with an illustration of the way in which some of the organizational factors described above may lead to a kind of "stunting" of more of more innovative and strategic thinking in PSJ. The example relates to the issue of devolution.

The current turn toward devolution in the United States and elsewhere has stirred hard thinking within PSJ about grantees and grantmaking strategies. Several POs talked about the need to think differently as a result of the decentralization of policymaking from the federal government to the states over recent years. In commenting on this change, some POs chided themselves or their grantees for not understanding soon enough that this phenomenon could not be turned around, and/or for spending too much time trying to make it not happen--or turn it back--rather than responding by adapting their grantmaking strategies to it.

As part of this reflective and self-critical process, some POs noted that having a strong voice on the East Coast--and particularly inside the Beltway, in the national press, and at the White House--was no longer, in certain ways, "where it was at." In contrast to the more centralized past, an East-Coast and national-level presence of grantees would not guarantee the importance and impact that it once did. The national-level presence was not translating easily, moreover, into a meaningful new relation to what was happening "out there" in the states and at a more local level. This recognition, in turn, kindled further questioning about the particular challenge of this task: the national-level focus was easier, because it involved working with one organization, or set of organizations, that had come to have--partly through the help of Foundation support--a national presence and, therefore, impact.

With the locus of decisionmaking moving to the states, the question of how to have impact was less clear. With 50 states involved, where did one begin? How did one work on these several fronts with the same staff and budget? And how could one not dissipate one's efforts and hoped-for impacts by supporting myriad local, and hence potentially inconsequential, endeavors? In brief, then, the devolution dilemma seems to have led to a creative tension at PSJ about the need to move in a more decentralized direction in grantmaking while, at the same time, not making the proverbial mistake of funding small and isolated local groups that "don't add up to anything."

In this vein, more than one person referred to a PSJ (or Foundation-wide) decision to look at the sum-total effect of existing grants in several states--to see if they added up to anything, if there was a synergy generated by them as a group. Texas was the first such assessment (and

only one so far?) to be made and the answer to the question about adding up was, disappointingly, no. As told to me, the story pointed to, among other things, the fact that grantees did not know or communicate or work with each other--meaning that this was one of the important causes or symptoms of the disappointing results.

The Texas assessment is fueling another round of questioning about how to "go with" devolution and become more decentralized in grantmaking strategy, and in a way that promises better results than the "isolated" grants made thus far. As noted earlier, struggling in this way with devolution led to the turn toward grantmaking that was supposed to support local initiatives in an "aggregative" way--getting grantees to talk to each other, and building their capacity to do so. This is where the "stunting" threatens, perhaps, to take over a process that has involved, so far, a recognition of major change and an attempt to respond strategically to it in grantmaking. There seems to be a tendency toward a closure in thinking about the larger issue of how to go with devolution that is premature. Some suggested explanations follow as to how this happens, how it relates to the issue of specifying outcomes and verifying them intelligently, and what could be done to re-open the questioning about devolution in a way that brings the process to a satisfactory conclusion with respect to strategic thinking about grantmaking. The Texas example makes it easier to illustrate what I am suggesting, even though I have not read the study nor am I current on the next steps in the assessment.

These suggestions start with the choice of Texas for the first of these state assessments. Perhaps Texas was not the best choice, for obvious reasons. Because the state is so large, strong, and complex, it might well be the most difficult for the Foundation to have an impact. For the first of such assessments, one might want to choose an easier case--a smaller state, or even a suspected success-story state--in order to try to understand how an impact is achieved when it actually *does* happen. Even with success stories, the causal sequence that brought about the impact is often not understood, partly because people focus on documenting and proclaiming the success rather than understanding what caused it.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the Texas portfolio is presumably dominated or overshadowed by one impressive and successful grantee--the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation (TIAF). Many successful organizations of this nature typically do *not* link up to other such organizations. A study of the Texas grantees, then, may be dominated by the large, success-story grantee, and the dice are loaded against a finding of synergy by the very nature of organizations like TIAF.

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<sup>6</sup>Because successes tend to be attributed to popular beliefs about what leads to what, moreover, people often attribute the success to the wrong causes, or ignore causes that--though less obvious or congruent with popular beliefs--may be more within the funding-organization's power to influence than other causal factors.



This leads to the broader question, and second point, I would raise about PSJ's focus on "aggregation" and synergy among grantee organizations, or among their affiliates. There seems to be an assumption about how outcomes occur that is implicit in the question raised in the Texas (and subsequent state) assessments, and that may cloud the ability to discern other kinds of desirable outcomes, or movements on a path toward them. The concern about synergy, and the "premature" conclusion about the importance of "aggregating up," seem to close off the search for and hence discovery of possible alternative (or parallel) paths to desirable outcomes--namely, those that do not involve aggregation or communication, or work with grantee organizations that are not necessarily interested in this kind of engagement but, like TIAF, may be capable of achieving impacts in other ways. The aggregation and synergy perspectives also seem to shut off the possibility that some grantees and grantee initiatives will turn out better than others and that this is something that cannot be known at the beginning. This means acknowledging that some groups will have better strategies, results, circumstances than others--and that the latter need to be culled out along the way--rather than drawn into an ever-larger, aggregating-upward net with the strong ones.

Identifying grantee organizations with better strategies, and culling out the less interesting ones is, in certain ways, the opposite of synergy and aggregation. Good results and important impacts occur in such cases because of the effect of *one* particular approach or grantee *because* it is different from the others, which sometimes includes being standoffish. To enhance that effect does not mean necessarily to do so through dissemination or aggregation. It may mean narrowing in on that grantee or initiative and helping that organization identify and take the next step that would heighten its particular success--a next step that may involve something other than aggregation or dissemination. An example of such an identification process comes from Paul Osterman's recent evaluation of TIAF's Project Quest. (Excuse the example from another program area, although PSJ does support other TIAF initiatives.)

In a generally highly positive assessment, the Osterman evaluation closes with a set of challenging questions about Project Quest's future and the applicability of its approach by other groups. Mainly, he notes that the number of jobs created after so much time and effort is still relatively small (800), and the cost per job high. These are the kinds of questions that should be asked with respect to a next stage of Project Quest. The Foundation can play an important supporting role in this, as it did in funding this kind of evaluation. These questions and steps should precede concern over TIAF's ability to relate to other organizations or to disseminate its story, or at least this particular aspect of it. Moving in this direction, in other words, requires a certain *disaggregation* in thinking about TIAF--as distinct from making links from TIAF to other IAFs and to other grantee organizations in Texas.

PSJ's focus on aggregation and linking to the exclusion of other possible paths to good outcomes, in conclusion, seems to bring up short an important process of questioning before it plays itself out properly. Fortunately, this section's discussion of organizational factors suggests opportunities to make changes that could enhance, rather than abort, the process.

This section, and its ending with the devolution issue and the Quest example, reveals how difficult it is to separate out the task of how PSJ could become more of a learning organization and specify and verify outcomes, from the subject of evaluation at PSJ and the Foundation in general. The criteria to be found for specifying goals and outcomes, that is, must come from knowing what has been learned about past and current grantmaking. This leads directly to the subject of the next section--evaluation.

## **IV - Evaluation**

I did not originally conceive of this task as involving an assessment of PSJ's evaluations or evaluation capacity, nor did I ask questions about evaluation per se. The material for the section, however, emerged out of POs' discussing which outcomes were reasonable to expect of their grantmaking, and how they knew if progress was being made toward them. As part of this line of inquiry, I asked whether they could think of any instances in which their thinking about and/or fashioning of their grants had been influenced by any particular evaluations of their or other grants at the Foundation--or, more broadly, by outside evaluation or research findings on these types of initiatives.

Most POs talked about learning in a more direct and informal way than evaluations and research. They kept their "ear to the ground"--an expression used several times--especially with respect to the opinions of important others like members and affiliates of grantee organizations, other possible constituents, and other donors. They also paid attention to self-evaluations carried out by grantee organizations of their own programs, sometimes at PSJ's behest. They sometimes commissioned evaluations of their grants, though on rare occasions and only for "troubled" projects, in order to find out exactly what the problem was. The results of these problem evaluations, however, did not seem to be disseminated to others or used as the basis for a general discussion about this class of troubles among grantees and the lessons to be learned. Some POs noted the irony that they, and others at PSJ, never did evaluations of their successful grants, in order to understand why they worked well. Almost no one, finally, responded affirmatively to my question about whether the findings of any evaluation or outside research had affected their thinking about grantmaking. A few people cited particular grants in support of research, but

could not think of any particular finding of this research that helped them think out their grantmaking.

As a result of this particular set of responses, it became increasingly difficult to separate the subject of mission-stating and outcome-specifying from that of evaluation. I came to think that mission-stating exercises might not yield much of value if they could not be informed by learnings from existing and past grants. It seemed that certain evaluation exercises, if structured for the purpose of informing future grant-making, might lead to more grounded, realistic, and convincing demonstrations of learning and statements of desired results, at this point, than a stand-alone mission-stating and benchmarking exercise.

Before starting, it is important to note that in questioning POs on this subject, I was looking for an understanding of how PSJ staff learn from experience, and how that learning informs their grantmaking. Although I use the term "evaluation," it does not apply simply to formal evaluation exercises, or a formal evaluation unit or evaluation officer. More generally, my own thinking about this subject has been strongly influenced by the works of March and others, which show--as discussed in a previous section--that successful goal-setting exercises in organizations are the result of an iterative process in which action, in certain ways, *precedes* intelligent goal-setting, rather than vice versa. This is because there is not enough information at the beginning to set goals intelligently and realistically. Goal-forming, then, must be an ongoing process--rather than once-for-all--that requires the ongoing assessment and re-assessment of goals after action has generated the information necessary to do the job better. It is for these reasons, and in this spirit, that the findings and suggestions presented below are so closely linked to the task of goal-setting.

There is nothing PSJ-specific to many of the evaluation-related findings noted below. They are common to many organizations that spend funds. But there was one aspect to these findings that *was* unusual. In most organizations, operations officers frequently dismiss evaluation as irrelevant to their work, burdensome and creating of troubles, superfluous in light of the understanding they already have of their grantmaking world, and as carried out by professionals who are not close enough to the process to understand it or who are not sufficiently sympathetic. At PSJ, in contrast, several POs stated that there was little evaluation and there should be more of it. Just as unusual, they seemed to assume that they were the ones who should be doing evaluation, felt embarrassed that they were not, and expressed inadequacy about how to do it. One or two said that they "wanted to learn how." These comments should not be interpreted as meaning that POs felt stymied in their work by what they saw as the paucity of evaluation. Only a few expressed something akin to this view.

Several POs noted that there was no formal evaluation, or even a question-raising process, around closing grants--a process that might assist in the specification of goals for new projects. One example referred to was the recent closing of 20 community-foundation grants, and the absence of a discussion about what they represented--both in terms of the past and the future, despite this having been such a large area of grantmaking. Others pointed dismissively to the missed opportunity for reflection represented in the form they had to fill out when grants closed out. They described this as a ritualistic exercise of little import to anyone, including supervisors, which they usually delegated to their assistants, to be based on a reading of grant files.

The best way to carry out evaluation may not necessarily be to give that responsibility to operational staff. But the fact that POs expressed interest in evaluation that is unusual for operational officers seemed to represent a strength, in the sense of making the task of tying evaluation to goal-setting easier. The obstacles that POs repeatedly noted to their doing evaluation work, then, seem to be worth understanding. They help lay a groundwork for concrete suggestions, regardless of whether one entrusts POs or others with evaluation responsibilities. Although some may interpret these expressed difficulties as excuses, smokescreens, or defensiveness--which they may well be, at least in part--it is worth taking them at face value for purposes of this discussion because they provide a concrete basis for working toward improvement in this area.

PO comments on evaluation, and the reason there was not more of it, fell into the following three categories.

## **1. Knowledge and time**

Many POs said they "didn't know how to do" evaluations. They knew people with "subject expertise," they said, but not with "evaluation expertise"--independently of the subject matter. They talked of the difficulty of finding good consultants, and seemed to believe there was a well-known evaluation methodology for these kinds of initiatives that was unfamiliar to them, and of whose practitioners they were not aware. They felt themselves not linked into a network of people who do this kind of work--as opposed to their links into subject-matter and advocacy networks--nor did they feel capable of judging who was competent and who was not.

For the same reason, POs felt that the task of commissioning an evaluation, which already seemed time-consuming to them, would be even moreso--numerous phone calls, and precious time taken away from grantmaking to spend preparing for and briefing the evaluator.

Some said they wished that the Foundation would maintain a network of consultants specialized in evaluation, which would save the time of doing this kind of search. A few POs thought it was strange that the Foundation did not have in-house evaluation expertise--mentioning other foundations that did (Kellogg, MacArthur, Pew, for example).

The distinction made by POs between subject expertise and evaluation expertise (their networks being in the former and not the latter) seemed somewhat artificial. I thought people might have been thinking of subject experts as being insiders and advocates of certain positions or types of organizations, rather than "outsider" experts--once-removed, like historians of social movements or of particular regions or countries. It was also significant that POs were not saying that evaluation was *not* their responsibility as programmers, and that someone else at the Foundation should be doing it--something they might have been justified in arguing. After all, the skills and talents required to do good programming are quite different than those necessary to do helpful evaluation--or, at the least, it is difficult to combine them in the same job.

## **2. The demand for evaluation**

POs also said that evaluation was really not "on their screen" because of the strong future-oriented direction of their work, the priorities conveyed to them through their superiors (getting the grants out), and the lack of a strong demand for reflective thinking by management. "Why should we look at old closed-out projects," some said in describing attitudes, "when the new ones are different?"

On the one hand, it seemed unusually positive that POs expressed a need for evaluation, and a desire to take some evaluation under their wing. On the other hand, it seemed that evaluations might be better, and have a greater impact on future grantmaking, if they were conducted by outsiders--either outside the Foundation, or outside the programming task within the Foundation, or both.

## **3. Is good evaluation possible?**

Several POs expressed a kind of agnosticism about evaluation, speaking of the difficulty of establishing what actually happened in any particular case in terms of impact or progress toward goals, and of establishing cause and effect. The difficulty of attribution usually came up in the context of their questioning whether or not one could attribute a key role to the Foundation in any particular outcome, given the large number of forces that bear on progress toward goals

like reducing human rights' abuses, reducing racism, increasing equality of opportunity, etc. (There was even a hint that to attribute cause--at least attributing cause to Foundation support--was somewhat immodest and crude, not in keeping with the low-key image portrayed by Foundation staff of their influence [with the exception of the convenor stories].) They were equally concerned about the possibility for spurious or counterproductive application of evaluation findings or benchmark indicators based on such findings.

For example, to the extent that POs conveyed to their grantees that interaction between headquarters of membership organizations and their constituents was key to certain desired outcomes, they wondered whether these grantees would then tend to report having had such interactions to please the Foundation. It would be difficult to tell if the reported interactions were that different from what the grantee had been doing previously; if indeed there was something different, it would be difficult to know whether the new interactions were really meaningful in terms of results.

These concerns are genuine and well grounded. Most evaluators worry about them all the time, and methodologists of evaluation research are constantly struggling to improve the methodology of discerning impacts and finding the independent variables. The counterproductive effects that benchmark indicators may have on the behavior of staff in organizations, moreover, are well known and documented. Good evaluators are cautious for this reason about the kinds of indicators they suggest, or about suggesting certain kinds of indicators at all. I found it strange, however, that these well-known difficulties were seen as reasons to be skeptical about evaluation in general, and about using it as a tool of learning and improving grantmaking. The POs' understanding of these possible counterproductive effects, however, should inform the work of any evaluation not run by them.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>This section, and report, ends rather abruptly in order to facilitate catching a plane to Brazil. Most of what I wanted to say in this section is already recorded.