

Charity or Change?

By Jay Wilkinson and Sophie Pritchard



Though no-one knows for sure, it was supposedly the artist Banksy who came up with this image. If so, as someone who has accumulated significant personal wealth from his politically radical art pieces, it's easy to make a statement such as, 'keep your coins, I want change.' In reality it's hard to imagine anyone in the position of the man in the stencil asking for anything but money to meet their own basic needs for survival. Yet the message remains a powerful one: unless there are changes in the political and economic systems which cause inequality and injustice, reliance on charity may be the only way of plugging the gap, but even if your circumstances are grim, it's important to want something more than that. This article will explore what is meant by 'charity' and 'change.' It will look at why charity is so problematic, as well as the need to work together to bring about systems that mean charity is not the only recourse to meeting needs when other systems fail.

So what's the meaning of 'charity'?

Charity can be understood in two main ways. The first definition is, 'the voluntary giving of help, typically in the form of money, to those in need' [definition from Oxford Languages]. On the surface level, this makes the giving of charity something very simple; a basic kindness - that when one person sees a way of helping someone in need, they straightforwardly assist that person. Charity can certainly be given with the spirit of solidarity, where it's understood that it's mainly due to complex historical and political factors that one person is on the giving end and the other at the receiving end, and that another roll of the dice could lead to the giver also experiencing the need for charity. However, it can all too quickly become a way for the people who are giving the charity to feel good about themselves, or even superior to people in need.

This can lead to acts of charity which are patronising, unhelpful, and divorced from what people's needs actually are. Those with high levels of wealth – such that they are able to act as philanthropists who can make large donations – can even project the way they feel the world should be ordered onto their charitable giving. For example, Bill Gates uses some of his vast fortune for philanthropic causes, the power of which have the capacity to undemocratically shape public policy through projects of 'creative capitalism' that supposedly improve the lives of poor people, but actually hugely benefit private interests.¹ And when we look at which causes the richest people support, it's clear to see they are not looking to redistribute wealth but to benefit their own class and exert their power over others. In 2016 there were 246 organisations that received million-pound donations from the wealthy, the most popular causes being higher education (universities), foundations, overseas, and arts and culture.²

This leads to the second definition of charity as, 'an organization set up to provide help and raise money for those in need' [also from Oxford Languages]. There are a plethora of charitable organizations in the UK, which come in all shapes and sizes. This makes it very difficult to generalize about all charities, as the ethos and values vary so much between them. Some charities would maintain that they are very much about change rather than just creating dependence on charitable giving, such as 'Tools for Self-Reliance,' which refurbishes tools for tradespeople to create a livelihood within a number of African countries. However, there are a number of tendencies which charities have that lead them to be a counter-force to change:

- Charities may help individual circumstances, but this can detract from the need for communities to make a full-on challenge to the systemic injustices they are facing.
- Charities are often undemocratic and divorced from the grassroots communities they are dealing with, so make poor choices around what's needed. More than 60,000 charity trustees are called John or David, which is symbolic of how the average trustee is a white man in his 60s, and these are the people who shape the direction of a charity. Only 3% of charity trustees are women of colour³.
- Charities are often unaccountable, meaning that if they make a mess they don't clear up after themselves, and it's easy for money to be fraudulently syphoned off or mis-spent on high overheads and over-paid chief executives and directors.
- Charitable trusts, foundations and local authorities increasingly offer money for projects which they themselves have defined, meaning that money must be spent on certain things within a certain timeframe. Charities find themselves writing funding applications to prove they meet the funders' criteria rather than focusing on what the community actually needs. The result of this is that a group or community will be restricted to doing what the funder thinks is for the best. This issue is further compounded when large charities working across communities out-compete smaller, grassroots groups for funding but then subcontract out to those groups because they rely on them for their connections. The community then ends up having the least power, with the charity and the funder pulling all the strings.
- Many large charities are funded by the state, the corporate world and the rich. As Arundhati Roy powerfully writes, "Non-Governmental Organisations give the impression that they are filling the vacuum created by a retreating state. And they are, but in a materially inconsequential way. Their real contribution is that they defuse political anger

1 See <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/bill-gates-foundation-philanthropy/>
2 See <https://philanthropy.coutts.com/en/reports/2017/united-kingdom/findings.html>

3 See <https://www.acevo.org.uk/2020/08/getting-on-board/>

and dole out as aid or benevolence what people ought to have by right.”⁴

- There is an institutional flaw within the charity sector, which means that even if a charity sets up with only good intentions, it becomes within the interests of a charity for the cause that they are addressing to keep existing. This is because if the charity actually succeeded in addressing the root causes of a problem, there would no longer be any need for its existence, leading to redundancies for all the people that run the charity (when was the last time you heard a charity say, ‘we’re wrapping up as we achieved what we set out to do’?).

Hmm...none of that sounds very good. So what about the ‘change’ option instead?

The points made so far could lead anyone to feel that it’s better not to make donations of any kind in case they are unhelpful or the money is misspent. There’s also the overwhelm and compassion fatigue from requests for money coming from all directions, and the ineffectiveness of the ‘scattershot’ approach, in which you make small donations to a whole bunch of organizations in the hope that you’ll feel better, but observe that nothing really seems to change – all of which could lead to a permanent sense that it’s best to keep your money to yourself.

However, the aim of this article isn’t to leave people with the impression that they should tighten up the purse strings. The aim of the article is to encourage people to spend more time considering the direction of travel that their money is sending the world in, rather than either throwing money at something so as to feel better, or keeping money for individual and family use only. If we want to see a world which is more equal, just and sustainable, where people are empowered by democratic processes and have access to the resources they need, we need to fund that change. Not only that, but we need a whole lot of us who have some extra wealth to be doing this, because none of us have the wealth of Bill Gates and other capitalist philanthropists.

Absolutely key to funding that change is that money goes to emancipatory projects which are *community-led*. This is to say that the groups and communities which are on the frontline of injustice, discrimination or oppression need to be the ones who lead a struggle. This is because unlike the charities that project onto individuals and communities what the charities *think* is needed, those communities will collectively have the best sense of what needs to happen, as well as having the strongest motivation for working to change the systems which are causing those experiences of injustice, discrimination and oppression. In that way, charity is never going to cut it. We need to fund the change.