



## Philanthropic Foundations as Agents of Justice in Global Sustainability Governance

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This article brings into focus three contested concepts - philanthropy – power – justice - to critically assess how private philanthropic foundations shape the content and practice of justice in global sustainability governance. The author asks: What does this direction of private money into supporting global justice really mean?

The three dimensions of justice (subject, substances and principles) of five justice theories falling within the Western liberal tradition (utilitarianism, cosmopolitanism, capabilities, libertarianism and critical perspectives) provide a framework for the empirical analysis of three foundations.

Using a critical interdisciplinary approach to studying language in relation to power and social issues (critical discourse analysis), the author analyses how three representative private foundations frame justice in their documented work supporting the United Nations 2030 Agenda

Practitioners across the field gain insight into the multiple political implications of foundation work in justice within decision making processes for global sustainability.

[#Foundations](#) [#GlobalJustice](#) [#SDGs](#) [#Governance](#) [#CriticalAnalysis](#)

### Background

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### Context



- **Foundations significantly contribute to the UN Sustainable Development Goals and explicitly seek to advance global justice through their work.** This article (1) defines foundations as agents of justice that exercise power within a context that does not uniformly accept the status quo of underlying relations of power; and (2) critically examines their justice frames to understand what justice means to them in the context of global sustainability governance.
- **Justice is defined by three criteria: who is concerned** (the unit of moral concern), **what is the concern** (substantive justice such as well-being, inequality, basic needs, freedom of expression, individual rights, exclusion, etc) **and what is most important** (principles of justice such as freedom or equality, etc). **These criteria are assembled for five justice theories considered to hold different expectations.**
- The **five justice theories** fall within the Western liberal tradition:
  - 1) **Utilitarianism** – greatest happiness for the greatest numbers;
  - 2) **Cosmopolitanism broken down into global egalitarian** – distributive fairness globally and **global minimalists** - minimum resources necessary for human survival and basic human rights;
  - 3) **Capabilities** – opportunities to live a dignified life;
  - 4) **Libertarianism** – Free exchange;
  - 5) **Critical perspectives** – recognition of the marginalized, representation of political voice, redistribution of resources globally.
- Applying the 3 criteria of justice (**subject, substance and principles**), the author interprets 3 foundation narratives in terms of how they fit one or several of the theoretical justice approaches, categorizes them, and points to what this signifies for the status quo.

# ERNOP Research Note

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## Take aways & Learnings



- **The analytical tool of archetypes is used to identify similar characteristics among the wider number of foundations and possible common justice interpretations.** The three selected philanthropic foundations represent the archetypes of a private foundation (the Gates Foundation), a legacy Foundation (The Ford Foundation) and a foundation with roots in civil society (The Foundation for a Just Society).
- The author’s analysis categorizes each foundation (See Table 2 from the article). **The Gates Foundation’s justice norms are categorized as Libertarian** addressing the individual level, seeking technological innovation and working through markets. Justice is operationalized as a business concern and not a vital political concern, implicitly accepting global capitalism.
- **The Ford Foundation is categorized as following a mix of Cosmopolitan justice norms using human rights and a Capabilitarian approach.** The foundation has a people-based approach focused on marginalized communities, addresses inequality and its causes, and takes a rights-based approach within the existing global economy framework.
- **The Foundation for a Just Society is categorized as aligned with critical perspectives norms demanding broader structural transformations and collective action.** The focus is on self-determination and combatting discrimination through social, political and economic empowerment.
- The author points to the absence in these examples of a focus on resource distribution, parity and non-Western approaches to justice embedded in the SDG aspirations.
- By exploring the variable justice frames applied by these representative foundations, the author draws attention to the political implications of philanthropic foundations directing private money towards supporting global justice and how collectively foundations may influence global sustainability governance.

Table 2. Justice frames of three archetypal foundations with the 2030 Agenda

	<i>Bill &amp; Melinda Gates Foundation</i>	<i>Ford Foundation</i>	<i>Foundation for a Just Society</i>
<i>Dominant justice frame</i>	Libertarianism	Cosmopolitanism and Capabilities	Critical perspectives
<i>Subjects of justice</i>	Individuals on the basis of self-ownership	Marginalized communities and groups on the basis of human dignity	People subjected to structures of injustice
<i>Substance of justice</i>	Inequality, poverty, disease	Opportunities to develop human capabilities and freedoms	Discrimination in the economic, political, and social dimensions of life
<i>Principles of justice</i>	Freedom through the market	Human rights	Structural transformation but not explicitly adopting the language of parity

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