Voluntary Sector Review • vol XX • no XX • 1–11 • © Authors 2026
Print ISSN 2040-8056 • Online ISSN 2040-8064 • https://doi.org/10.1332/20408056Y2026D000000074
Accepted for publication 17 April 2026 • First published online 25 May 2026

policy and practice

Justice in philanthropy as problem spaces: reflections from research and practice

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Drawing on a scoping review and practice reflections, this article reframes justice in philanthropy as a set of four problem spaces that need addressing: just and sustainable systems change, equitable resource distribution, inclusivity and empowerment, and contextual sensitivity. We show how ambitions collide with portfolio realities, allocation rules, retained authority, and context-blind metrics, and encourage a tripartite focus on maintaining, relinquishing, and aligning to facilitate reflections and engagement with the area.

Keywords social justice • foundations • reflexive practice • equity • systems change

To cite this article: Alborough, L. and Jung, T. (2026) Justice in philanthropy as problem spaces: reflections from research and practice, *Voluntary Sector Review*, Early View, DOI: 10.1332/20408056Y2026D000000074

Introduction[1]

What is the relationship between philanthropy and justice? What does justice require of philanthropy? How does and should philanthropy engage with these requirements? These questions are hardly new. The complex relationship between philanthropy and justice is longstanding and well-rehearsed. Over the last few years, it has been raised in numerous contexts, including race (Scott et al, 2020; Irfan, 2023), faith (Fauzia, 2017; Sciortino, 2017; Drezner, 2024), gender and identity (Drezner and Garvey, 2016; Dale and Plastino, 2022), the environment (Gruby et al, 2021; García, 2023), corporate behaviour (Giardina, 2010; Thomassen et al, 2020), and health (Blunt, 2022), as well as criminal justice (Bryan et al, 2015), law (García, 2023; Harding, 2023), politics (Eğilmez, 2012; Aidoo, 2021), and development (Novelli et al, 2016; Hodgson, 2020). Taken together, these studies illustrate philanthropy's multivalent positioning, as both a driver of reform and a reproducer of inequities (see Morvaridi, 2013; Blunt, 2022), and signal persistent tensions that this article seeks to surface more systematically.

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Recognising that philanthropy can be both oppressor and enabler (Eğilmez, 2012), prominent concerns point to philanthropy's Western-centricity and link to colonialism and capitalism (Morvaridi, 2012; Irfan, 2023; Drezner, 2024), the origins, accumulation, and use of philanthropic resources (Ahmad and Khadse, 2022), the power structures and dynamics inherent in philanthropy (Morvaridi, 2013; Hodgson, 2020; Blunt, 2022), and the role and responsibilities of philanthropy to address meaningful systems change (Paarlberg et al, 2022). Accompanying practical guidance for addressing these challenges has, however, been scant and scattered, with a notable lack of engagement by ethicists (Martin, 1994).

While the last few years have seen the publication of various frameworks, manuals, and workbooks offering insights and instructions for navigating the terrain (Paarlberg et al, 2022; Irfan, 2024; PHILEA, 2025), their underpinning approaches raise a number of questions. Rooted in a tradition of knowledge integration (Elsbach and van Knippenberg, 2020), they tend to follow a 'jigsaw-puzzle' approach that assumes an accumulative view of knowledge: 'if you get everything sorted out and placed in the right way, you can demonstrate how the picture should look' (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2020: 1293). While such an approach is useful for mapping insights and ideas, its wider utility for, and applicability to, questions of philanthropy and justice is less clear: both are widely considered to be essentially contested concepts, concepts that are multifaceted, appraisive, and legitimately open to divergent definitions and perspectives over time (Gallie, 1955; Martin, 1994; Daly, 2012). As Daly (2012) and Martin (1994) both emphasise, such contestation is not a flaw but a defining feature that calls for continuous ethical and conceptual negotiation rather than convergence. Thus, pursuing an integrative approach seems to contradict, and try to circumvent, their constitutive contestability. To overcome this, we propose a problematising perspective as an alternative.

A problematising perspective directs attention to an area's underlying assumptions, their articulation, evaluation, and potential alternatives (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2020). Following the argument made by Levin (2020), that academia should focus on offering frameworks that allow for reflection on, and discussion of, the content associated with widely used terms, our argument is that the focus should not be on resolving the tensions that questions of justice in philanthropy present, but to identify and articulate them as problem spaces that require sustained interrogation and negotiation, as arenas for cultivating an ongoing capacity for reflexivity, critique, and adaptation. Based on a scoping review of academic literature on justice and philanthropy, we identify four overarching problem spaces underpinning the discourse on justice and philanthropy. These are: just and sustainable systems change, equitable resource distribution, inclusivity and empowerment, and contextual sensitivity. Drawing on first-hand practice experiences of working in the foundation world, we interrogate and reflect on how engagement with these problem spaces currently plays out, the seeming disconnects they present, and ways in which they might be addressed.

Approach and key findings: identifying problem spaces of justice and philanthropy

To identify tensions inherent in the literature on justice and philanthropy, and what overarching problem spaces they present, we undertook a scoping review (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005). Using the terms 'justice' and 'philanthrop*' in either the title,

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abstract, or keywords we searched Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) as databases that offer both extensive coverage of the literature as well as complimentary and interdisciplinary sets of insights (Mongeon and Paul-Hus, 2016; Kumpulainen and Seppänen, 2022).

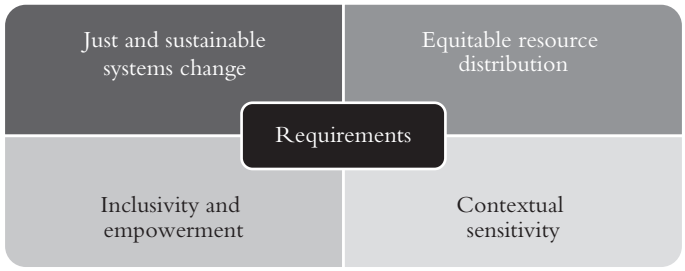
Publications needed to be published in an academic journal and written in English. This resulted in an initial set of 135 papers in Scopus, and 142 in WoS. Both sets were imported into the Endnote reference manager software and checked for duplicates, leading to a combined set of 201 unique references. For each of these a manual review of their title and abstract was undertaken to ensure alignment with the review's focus. Of these, 59 were selected for inclusion in the review, of which 53 could be accessed.

Using a thematic analysis approach (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Guest et al, 2012), each paper was read in full. Using the iterative process outlined by Attride-Stirling (2001), each paper was examined to identify, chart, and cluster prominent and recurring themes. On that basis, we arrived at the four themes outlined in Figure 1. We offer these not as a synthesis to be completed, but as recurring areas of tensions, that is problem spaces, that structure challenges and choices in relation to justice and philanthropy.

The first problem space points to the expectation that justice philanthropy needs to promote *just and sustainable systems change*. Focusing on achieving justice as well as addressing injustice, both contemporary and historic (Morvaridi, 2013; Mpofu et al, 2021; Paarlberg et al, 2022), the idea is that philanthropy is in a unique position to challenge and change existing power dynamics and institutional frameworks that sustain social, economic, and environmental injustices and work towards more just ones. How (in)justice is to be understood here is an area that warrants further unpacking. While reference is made to restorative, reparative, (re)distributive, recognitional, procedural and environmental justice (Thomassen et al, 2020; Gruby et al, 2021; Paarlberg et al, 2022; Irfan, 2023), there is limited theoretical unpacking or conceptual integration of these ideas, or reference to and engagement with wider philosophical debates on the topic. This space thus problematises the assumption that private, asset-based institutions can pursue structural change while remaining insulated from the systems and structures that generated them. It surfaces tensions between long-horizon transformation and organisational cycles, between claims to neutrality and the normative work of altering rules.

The second problem space identifies the importance of *equitable resource distribution*. The equitable allocation and distribution of resources across populations and geographies is perceived as a cornerstone for promoting fairness and addressing

Figure 1: Problem spaces in the literature on justice and philanthropy



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disparities in philanthropy (Ashley, 2014; Hwang and Young, 2020; Ahmad and Khadse, 2022). As part of this, questions are raised as to whether and how historic inequities in resource distribution should be addressed as priority issues. Here, the problematisation locates 'equity' in the allocation architecture rather than in intentions. Tensions arise between remedial aims and prudential rationales, between reaching recipients and managing transaction costs, and between redistribution and routines that recentre incumbency.

The third problem space, *inclusivity and empowerment*, emphasises the importance of a diversity of voices and views in philanthropy (Azevedo et al, 2021; Drezner, 2024). It highlights the need to embrace and include all communities, groups, and populations, particularly those who are vulnerable or marginalised, in philanthropic efforts (Dale and Plastino, 2022; Easterling et al, 2022), to provide them with opportunities to be part of and actively engage in the philanthropic process, and to support them in developing their own specific solutions to the challenges they face and are trying to address (Scott et al, 2020; Gruby et al, 2021). This space problematises the conflation of voice with power by asking where decisional authority sits. Pointing to the issue that philanthropy, particularly in the foundation form and contrary to its portrayal, can be perceived as being based on a licence granted by the public (Cohen, 2008), it highlights frictions between fiduciary accountability and power-sharing, speed/consistency and participatory deliberation, and professional expertise and lived experience.

The final, fourth, problem space provides an essential underpinning for all of the above. It is focused on the importance of *contextual sensitivity*. It asks those interested in justice philanthropy to acknowledge, consider, and work with, rather than against, the specific cultural, economic, environmental, geographic, historic, political, religious, and social context(s) within which philanthropy takes place or will take place (Sciortino, 2017; Hwang and Young, 2020; Mpofu et al, 2021; Irfan, 2023). To address these, a focus on, engagement with, and understanding of 'community' is considered to be absolutely essential for justice philanthropy. While the opportunities for justice philanthropy through a diversity of community-focused lenses are offered – from participatory (García, 2023) or democratised grant making (Hodgson, 2020), to community philanthropy (Easterling et al, 2022), community centric practices (Fauzia, 2017; Lita, 2021), and community-led initiatives (Scott et al, 2020; Gruby et al, 2021) – the precise way in which the resulting notion of justice philanthropy should be integrated and operationalised remains open. Here, context is treated as constitutive rather than peripheral, challenging standardising logics that travel across places. The tensions are between comparability and fidelity to place, between rule uniformity and warranted exception, and between operating at distance and the epistemic demands of proximity.

Against these tensions, our contrasting vantage points illustrate how they materialise in organisational life – sometimes reinforcing, sometimes straining, stated commitments.

Implications for practice: interrogating problem spaces from a practice perspective

Reflecting on these themes from a practitioner's standpoint highlights both the aspirations and contradictions that a move towards justice philanthropy may entail,

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echoing what Hodgson (2020) and Paarlberg et al (2022) identify as the persistent gap between normative ambition and operational reality in the field. To this end, we draw on personal experience that reflects Salamon's (1987) notion of 'philanthropic particularism': it ranges from working within one of the world's largest private health research funders endowed with over £36 million and distributing around £2 billion annually to serving as a trustee of a very small charity raising and distributing roughly £8,000 annually for youth vocational training in Africa. The former employs nearly a thousand staff and operates through structured governance frameworks; the latter has no staff and is overseen by trustees based in the United Kingdom who make all the funding decisions, albeit informed by consultation with African partners. Alongside, teaching on philanthropic practice and research in fundraising add a further lens through which to observe the intersection of theory and practice.

Drawing from practice insights across these vantage points, the four themes mirror narratives from within the philanthropic sector and practice literature, even if justice philanthropy itself is not always explicitly talked about. More notable is those four themes' uneven translation into practice. As outlined above, determining how to embed justice into philanthropic practice remains an ongoing challenge. Many philanthropies increasingly claim to pursue systems change work, moving beyond project-level outputs to influence policy, shape the particular ecosystems in which they fund, and try to intervene in more upstream or strategic ways (see Reid, 2024 for examples). Yet, the contradiction remains that such ambitions are often sustained by endowments invested in global markets that reproduce the very inequitable systems that they claim to address (Hill and Proctor, 2020). This mirrors Blunt's (2022) critique of domination in global health philanthropy and Morvadi's (2013) analysis of welfare governance, both of which expose how philanthropic power can perpetuate dependency while professing reform. Smaller-scale philanthropies, often faced with the same contradictions, lack capacity to fund larger scale work to alter and influence systems. These thus find themselves often alleviating immediate hardship or localised development – funding education, health or livelihoods – but doing so within the constraints of existing structures rather than transforming them. Both forms of philanthropy thus reveal the difficulty of aligning conceptual intent with reality: systemic change can be more easily spoken about than achieved, especially when one is part of and reliant on the system itself.

The question of equitable resource distribution also highlights tensions. Foundations and individual philanthropists have begun to diversify, experiment with unrestricted and long-term funding, and consider investment strategies that align with justice-like narratives (for example Lloyds TSB Foundation; Esmee Fairbairn Foundation; Justice Funders). Yet, allocations still seem to disproportionately flow to large established recognised organisations who on-grant, raising questions about whether redistribution is meaningful or even achievable (see, for example, TNLCF, 2024). Similar dynamics are traced in Ashley's (2014) study of rural grant inequities and Hwang and Young's (2020) examination of community-level variation, both of which point to organisational routines as obstacles to equity. At the small end, for example, trustees of the small African fund referred to above wrestle with decisions about which individuals or groups to support. Community consultation informs choice, but the authority to allocate remains at a distance. Here too, equity is shaped by positionality and the power of being the ultimate owner of the resources. Resource distribution in

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practice remains the 'gift' of the philanthropy and remains subject to the obligations and inequities inherent in the gift (Alborough, 2019; Lewis, 2025).

Efforts towards inclusivity and empowerment illustrate similar patterns. Mechanisms such as advisory boards, consultations, engaged research and process development and co-creation seek to amplify community voice. Yet, in both large and small philanthropy ultimate authority remains concentrated with philanthropy staff, executive and trustees, who frequently remain socially, economically and physically distant from those affected by funding decisions (Montgomery, 2021). Participation is encouraged, with many philanthropies exploring how to embed and include participatory and democratised granting methods into their practice, but these too tend to remain at the fringes and require control of the implementation, thus, challenging meaningful transfers of real decision-making power (see Friend and Ahmed, n.d. for an example). This aligns with Drezner's (2024) and Dale and Plastiono's (2022) findings that participatory approaches in philanthropy often encounter constraints where empowerment is aspirational rather than structural. The aspiration of inclusivity therefore runs the risk of collapsing into consultative practices that do not, and perhaps cannot, cede meaningful control, thereby reproducing traditional hierarchies of giver and recipient (Alborough, 2019). This dynamic reflects what Ebrahim (2016) identifies as a structural skew in non-profit accountability, where mechanisms such as participation and consultation tend to serve upward accountability to funders rather than downward accountability to communities with decision-making authority remaining concentrated among those who control resources. Comparable concerns about token participation have been raised in community philanthropy contexts (Easterling et al, 2022), underscoring the resilience of hierarchal accountability models.

Contextual sensitivity is increasingly recognised as essential yet often undermined by the imposition of external frameworks borrowed from Westernised corporate practice and social governance (Lewis, 2025). In global foundations, corporatised metrics of efficiency, risk, and impact seem to be applied across diverse geographies, communities and cultures, emphasising the accountability, reputational, regulatory and business requirements of the foundation itself rather than those engaged with. This reproduces what Sciortino (2017) and Fauzia (2017) describe in Southeast Asian and Islamic philanthropy settings, where imported governance logics often marginalise local epistemologies of justice: reporting expectations or funding cycles and approaches that might appear rational in corporate head offices in London, New York, or Geneva, are likely to be ill-suited to contexts outside these spaces. This can also apply to smaller philanthropies. The African fund, though close in its intent to local need, still embodies distance: trustees in the United Kingdom interpret and decide, informed by consultation but not embedded in context. This illustrates the persistent and almost intractable 'proximity problem' recognised by many philanthropies: those making resource decisions are far removed from those living with their consequences (Montgomery, 2021). As Lewis (2025) argues, such distance can produce a subtle 'soft authoritarianism' in institutional philanthropy, where procedural uniformity overrides contextual nuances. Taken together, these reflections corroborate the tensions identified in the literature, from structural complicity (Morvaridi, 2012; Blunt, 2022) to participatory limits (Dale and Plastino, 2022; Easterling et al, 2022), highlighting that the pursuit of justice within philanthropy remains a process of negotiated situation practice.

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Concluding thoughts

Having identified and interrogated a set of recurring problem spaces that underpin justice and philanthropy, a consistent set of disjunctures between the promises, potentials, and practices of justice in philanthropy presents itself. Systems-change rhetoric meets the reality that many foundations' financial footing remains tied to the very systems they seek to challenge, while smaller actors face capacity limits that keep them close to mitigation rather than institutional change. Efforts to rebalance resources are tempered by ingrained habits, whether on-granting to established organisations, restrictive terms, and due-diligence/reporting expectations that channel funds towards incumbents. Inclusion is widely encouraged yet rarely accompanied by a transfer of decision-making authority, leaving consultation in place while power remains with executives and trustees. Commitments to context are strong in principle but often seem diluted by corporate logics and physical distance, as standard metrics and timelines travel poorly across places and problems. What follows from this is less a call for new frameworks than for alignment between intent and the very ordinary individual and institutional levers that are already in place and that philanthropy controls. Treating the terrain this way matters. It directs attention away from premature synthesis and invites a discipline of appraisal. For each space, foundations should be honest about their limits as well as ambitions, and ask: (1) what in our present practice merits being maintained as it is; (2) what requires deepening or extension if our claims to justice are to be credible; and (3) what should be relinquished or redesigned because it works at cross-purposes. We name these three tasks maintain, deepen, and relinquish to avoid any misleading imagery of precision, and to keep attention on reasons and rationales, as well as the principles and perspectives, that need to be navigated and negotiated.

While our framing offers a way of approaching justice in philanthropy, it remains necessarily partial and bounded. First, the scoping review was restricted to English-language, peer-reviewed sources indexed in Scopus and Web of Science. This risks reproducing a geographic skew of philanthropic scholarship towards Western and anglophone contexts (Wiepking, 2021). Second, the practice reflections, while intentionally reflexive, draw on a single scholar-practitioner perspective, and are therefore illustrative rather than representative. Third, our analysis operates primarily at a structural and institutional level, and does not engage with questions of individual motivation or the broader normative architecture of non-profit accountability. Work drawing on Babula et al (2020) and Ebrahim (2016), for example, could usefully extend the analysis by engaging more directly with questions of motivation and accountability. In addition, while the problem spaces are presented as analytically distinct, their interactions and internal tensions merit more sustained examination, as does their interrogation from within non-anglophone perspectives.

Note

[1] This article was developed as part of the ERNOP Safe Spaces for Philanthropy 2025 initiative.

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Funding
The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Research ethics statement
Ethical approval was not required for the present study because the research does not involve human or non-human participants.

Conflict of interest
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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