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From Projects to People: Addressing a Donor Funding Imbalance

Donors are always calling for innovative thinking, so why not show a little inclination to innovate themselves?

By Ken Banks | April 22nd, 2015 | [Link](#)

Bill Siemering was about to jump in his cab to make an airport pickup when his home phone rang. It was the vice president of the MacArthur Foundation. "I was shocked," said Bill, "when he told me I was being awarded a MacArthur Fellowship." That phone call proved to be the turning point of his life.

He never did make that airport pickup.

Years before, Bill had been the director of programming of National Public Radio (NPR), where he had created the first signature program in public radio, *All Things Considered*. He had also crafted NPR's first mission statement, and while vice president at WHYI-FM in Philadelphia, he was instrumental in bringing Terry Gross and *Fresh Air* from a local to a national audience. Not bad, you might think.

Despite blazing a trail, though, Bill had eventually found himself out of work; at that time, there just weren't many opportunities in his sector. As he put it: "I'd spent over 30 years practicing the art and craft of my profession and had no way to use it. I felt like a pianist who lost the use of his hands." Out of frustration and the need for a job—any job—he started training to be a driver for a car service at Philadelphia airport. He was about to go on his first driving assignment when he got the MacArthur call.

Each year, about 25 people get that call, receiving a no-strings-attached gift of \$625,000 (paid over five years) in the process. The [MacArthur Fellows Program](#) is not a reward for past accomplishment, but an investment in a person's originality, insight, and future potential. What it does, in many cases, is free up the individual financially—pays off a mortgage, covers school fees or living expenses, and so on—giving the fellow total freedom to take risks, be bold, and pursue their dreams for the benefit of human society without limitation.

MacArthur Fellows are a broad-based bunch. In 2014, a physicist, a cartoonist and graphic memoirist, a lawyer, a composer, an engineer, a saxophonist, and a poet, among others, joined their cohort. It's the breadth of the award, the many different disciplines it touches, that makes the program so inspiring and effective. The only restriction is that all fellows need to be residents or citizens of the United States.

For Bill, the fellowship allowed him to return to public radio and broaden his sights. "It enabled me to make the transition from domestic to international media development," he said. "I have no

idea what I would be doing had I not received the fellowship when I did.” Bill went on to found [Developing Radio Partners](#) (DRP) and dedicate his time to the development of radio programming across the developing world. Through DRP, he has relentlessly focused on supporting community radio, mostly across Africa.

MacArthur Fellowships are somewhat unique in the nonprofit world. There are a handful of other initiatives, such as the [Shuttleworth Foundation Fellowship Program](#), but other than that direct support for the individual is rare.

Rather than supporting a specific project or idea, these programs tend to focus on supporting the person. In the business world, this approach isn’t so rare. Many investors happily admit that they tend to invest in people and teams, not products or ideas. “People are the great competitive advantage”, asserts Marty Zwilling, a veteran start-up mentor in Silicon Valley.

But the nonprofit sector is largely interested in products and ideas. It doesn’t matter who has them, as the hundreds of online global development competitions and challenges testify. The problem is, these investments in products and ideas, however helpful and generous they may be, almost always miss one important thing—investment in the person.

I can’t help but wonder what the global development sector might achieve if it diverted a little more attention and resources to the thinkers, the thought leaders, the innovators. Imagine if a large, private foundation picked half-a-dozen people working on global problems—people with a track record of vision, thought-leadership, and execution, working and living anywhere in the world—and really got behind them?

Sure, it’s risky. But then again, so are many of the other bets donors make. Many projects fail despite the due diligence and careful consideration. Real impact is rarely known or measurable. Donors are always calling for innovative thinking, so why not show a little inclination to innovate themselves? Let’s have a little disruption in the donor space.

Investing more in people would increase the chances of having a positive global impact, and the costs would divert only a fraction of the tens of billions spent each year. It could unleash multiple projects, products, and ideas—ones that might not have materialized otherwise—from people who have already shown they can deliver. And it would give a clear signal that people matter and acknowledge that people drive change, not ideas.

A private foundation, or group of foundations, should find it easy enough to pool a few million dollars each year to develop a “global development fellows program” to support a dozen or so of the best leaders and thinkers in the field.

Without his fellowship, Bill might have exited the sector for good. And there’s no doubt that many others like him are out there, with a great deal to give and no means to give it. The global development community can’t afford to lose people like this. If it really does want to be innovative and is really serious about tackling some of the biggest problems facing the world today, recognizing the need to do a little more “investing in people”—and then doing it—would be the best signal yet.