



Speech by Rip Rapson:

A Big Pivot: Shifting Climate-Resilience Work to Include Urban, Low-Income Opportunity

A talk with Kresge's Climate Resilience and Urban Opportunity Initiative grantees.

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Editor's note: The Kresge Foundation's Environment Program hosted a peer-learning event Jan. 26-28 in Berkeley, Calif., with grantees from its Climate Resilience and Urban Opportunity Initiative. As part of the event, Kresge's president and chief executive officer took part in a conversation with Marian Urquilla, a consultant to the Environment Program. This conversation has been condensed and edited here.

It was so interesting to look at the backgrounds of the folks in this room and to read the description of the sessions you're going to be walking through. This is a just phenomenal cross-section of experience and talent and perspective. For someone like me, who has been in the environmental field for the better part of 25 years, it's really inspiring.

So before I say anything at all about Kresge, I just want to thank you all for taking the time and, more importantly, doing the work you do. I think this represents the kind of forward look into what we really need as a society; the kinds of coalitions, the kinds of subject matter, the interdisciplinary work you guys are doing that is going to redefine how well we actually come at these questions.

In many ways, Kresge meets you where you are already working. For the better part of a quarter of a century we focused on a fairly narrow band of work, which was to invest in buildings. And there was a lot to be said for buildings. You could do green buildings, you could do buildings that were innovative in one way or another.

But seven or eight years ago, we came to the belief that we had to figure out the core values of philanthropy we could bring to the work that might actually add value to a human services field, to an environmental

field, to a health field or to a community development field.

Putting Low-Income Opportunity Front and Center

And over the last number of years, what we've evolved is what we call an urban opportunity framework: We have a north star – advancing low-income opportunity in cities – with which all of our programs are aligned. For folks in this room, that probably sounds so basic. I mean, if you're not working on low-income opportunity and you're not working in disinvested communities, what's the point if you're a philanthropy that's privately endowed and has the discretion to do that sort of work?

But for us, it was a big shift. It made for a really interesting portfolio of work at Kresge, because we had a Human Services Program team that was focused all day, all week, on low-income opportunity and trying to create the supports people need in order to connect to pathways of opportunity.

Similarly, with our Health Program team we were looking at the disparities that come out of where people live or their life circumstances. But for the Environment Program team, we sort of sat on the shoulder of that work. Lois DeBacker, the managing director of the program, had come to us from the Mott Foundation, where she had structured a really sophisticated and thoughtful program. And so I thought, "Well, maybe what we need to do is just sort of migrate Mott south to Kresge." And, sure enough, Lois set up a very thoughtful early program having to do with renewables and all sorts of things that we might want to look at.

But as we increasingly brought into clearer view this notion of urban opportunity, of low-income opportunity in cities, Lois asked the question – we all asked the question – of whether it might not make sense to step back and take another look at that Environment Program. It wasn't a step away, necessarily, from the good work that we had been doing, but an attempt to understand whether there wasn't a way to put low-income opportunity front and center in the program. So Lois and others on the team spent the better part of a year working with our board; we actually set up a specific work group to work with the staff, and they developed the program as we currently know it.

It was a very unnatural act to take a program that in many ways was a little bit technical – focused on mitigation, on lots of different dimensions of adaptation – and zero it in on the kinds of complex, cross-disciplinary work that you all are doing in order to truly give voice to low-income people in determining the future of their worlds, or your worlds – of all of our worlds in a climate-induced environment.

So it was a big pivot, and I think the fact that you are all here and engaged in these kinds of conversations reinforces my sense that it was a pivot we really needed to make.

Using an Interdisciplinary Approach

One of the consequences of that pivot is a move to deeply complex, interdisciplinary work. If you're focused largely on technical solutions in the environmental field, you can sort of work alone. And I think some really good work is being done all across the country through that channel.

But if you're trying to understand how a community, or a set of communities, can reposition themselves to face the future in a very different way – both to mitigate the causes of climate change to avoid making the effects worse, and to adapt to the changes already underway – you've got to throw into the pot all of the kinds of things you guys are talking about: transit policy, health policy, community development policy, land-use policy. It's very complicated stuff.

I think the community development field really struggles with this question. We can pay lip service to it, but these are very different systems, they're very different bodies of expertise, there are often very different political constituencies.

So I think it is a huge challenge for our team to actually try to get its hands around what it means to integrate these different systems in a way that has enduring impact.

It's sort of the sister question to working across sectors.

It's tempting to work in sort of a philanthropic zone. We give grants, we make loans, we convene, we commission research – and we hope that, somehow, in all of that we land on some points that really move the needle on big issues. But at the end of the day, unless you fully embrace issues of market forces, unless you fully embrace issues of public policy and unless you fully embrace issues of nonprofit capacity – you know, the other sectors – you really are working in a vacuum.

Four Qualities of Philanthropy

This is probably old hat to many of you, but I think sometimes we forget there are a number of qualities that philanthropy possesses, in different measures in different circumstances, but when combined give it a really

unusual perch.

One is the ability to sort of step back and see things as a whole. It's an enormous privilege when you think about it. It's almost like being an academic. You can kind of stand back, look for the connections among things, try to arc toward a different kind of horizon line and have the kind of patient capital you need to get there. That, in and of itself, can be paralyzing: you can end up admiring problems until they sort of move by you. It's a quality that forces philanthropy to be much more integrative in its approach, to try to understand how things do connect that may not, on the surface, seem to be connected.

Second, we have this extraordinary ability to take risks. It's almost like being social venture capital. And when you think of philanthropy being able to help stay a step or two ahead of where markets are or pave the way for markets to move into spaces they've not traditionally been comfortable in, that risk-taking ability is huge.

Third, philanthropy has this broad spectrum of tools it can use. To be sure, we make grants – but we can also convene, we can also commission research, we can also make loans, we can make equity investments. Philanthropy's toolbox is extraordinarily broad in a way the other sectors aren't.

The fourth, and probably most important: We can focus on folks who have traditionally been left out of the economic and social mainstream.

Each one of those things is not particularly profound, but when you combine them it becomes a remarkable suite of qualities that makes philanthropy stand in a unique social position.

I've often thought of philanthropy not as part of the nonprofit sector per se, but almost its own sector, because it can kind of mix and match. When it takes a long-term view, it's acting a little bit like the academic sector. When it's investing its capital, it's working a little bit like the private sector. When it's using all these tools, it's looking a little bit more like the public sector. And when it's focusing on low-income opportunity, it's behaving much the way the nonprofit sector does.

I think one of the challenges for philanthropy is to understand in what circumstances and what combination those qualities and potential approaches can help unlock problems in ways that perhaps a single sector can't. And we're blessed in America to have philanthropy of all different sizes and configurations that take

different pieces of those questions and put them back together differently. For a large, privately endowed philanthropy like Kresge, it's a huge privilege to be able to move on all those fronts simultaneously.