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# Philanthropic Foundations as Agents of Justice in Global Sustainability Governance

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Private philanthropic foundations—nongovernmental, nonprofit organizations with assets provided by donors for socially useful purposes—have become key political actors in global sustainability governance. Their collective efforts amount to over USD 112 billion for the implementation of the United Nations (UNs)'s ambitious plan to deliver on seventeen interconnected Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This corresponds to about a quarter of governmental contribution through official development assistance for the same purposes. Many of these foundations implicitly or explicitly aim to foster global justice, through, for example, empowering women, reducing inequalities, and promoting democracy. They thus act as justice agents shaping the substance and practice of justice in global sustainability governance. But what does this direction of private money into supporting global justice norms really mean? This question deserves scrutiny, especially against a context of diverse and contested meanings of justice *and* because philanthropy—beyond an act of giving—is often an exercise of power. Using critical discourse analysis of texts produced by selected foundations that are key funders of the UN Sustainable Development Agenda, this paper examines how private foundations frame global justice and with what implications for sustainability governance.

Les fondations philanthropiques privées - organisations non gouvernementales à but non lucratif dont les actifs sont fournis par des donateurs à des fins d'utilité sociale - sont devenues des acteurs politiques clés de la gouvernance mondiale de la durabilité. Leurs efforts collectifs s'élèvent à plus de 112 milliards de dollars pour la mise en œuvre du plan ambitieux de l'ONU visant à atteindre dix-sept objectifs de développement durable (ODD) interconnectés. Cela correspond à environ un quart des contributions gouvernementales apportées par le biais de l'aide publique au développement aux mêmes fins. Nombre de ces fondations visent implicitement ou explicitement à favoriser la justice mondiale, par exemple en renforçant l'autonomie des femmes, en réduisant les inégalités et en promouvant la démocratie. Elles agissent ainsi en tant qu'agents de justice façonnant la substance et la pratique de la justice dans la gouvernance mondiale de la durabilité. Mais que signifie réellement cette orientation de l'argent privé vers le soutien des normes de justice mondiale? Cette question mérite un examen approfondi, en particulier dans le contexte de significations diverses et contestées de la justice et parce que la philanthropie - au-delà de l'acte de don - est souvent un exercice du pouvoir. Cet article s'appuie sur une analyse critique du discours des textes produits par une sélection de fondations qui sont des participantes clés au financement du Programme de développement durable de l'ONU et examine la manière dont les fondations privées définissent la justice mondiale et ce que cela implique pour la gouvernance de la durabilité.

Las fundaciones filantrópicas privadas (organizaciones no gubernamentales y sin fines de lucro que utilizan los activos que les proporcionan sus contribuyentes con propósitos útiles para la sociedad) se han convertido en actores políticos claves en la gestión de la sostenibilidad global. Sus esfuerzos colectivos equivalen a USD 112 000 millones aproximadamente para la implementación del ambicioso plan de la ONU que plantea cumplir con 17 Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS) interconectados. Esto equivale a alrededor de un cuarto de la contribución gubernamental a través de la Ayuda Oficial al Desarrollo para los mismos propósitos. Muchas de estas fundaciones tienen como objetivo implícito o explícito promover la justicia global a través de, por ejemplo, el empoderamiento de las mujeres, la reducción de las desigualdades y el fomento de la democracia. Por lo tanto, actúan como agentes de justicia que configuran el fundamento y la práctica de la justicia en la gestión de la sostenibilidad global. Sin embargo, ¿cuál es el significado real del uso del dinero privado en el apoyo de las normas de justicia global? Esta pregunta debe analizarse especialmente en un contexto de significados diversos y cuestionados sobre la justicia y teniendo en cuenta que la filantropía, más allá de ser un acto caritativo, suele representar un ejercicio del poder. Mediante el análisis crítico del discurso de textos producidos por fundaciones seleccionadas que financian la Agenda sobre el Desarrollo Sostenible de la ONU, este documento analizará cómo las fundaciones privadas construyen la justicia global y cuáles son las implicaciones para la gestión de la sostenibilidad.

## Introduction

Many scholars argue that we live in the “golden age of philanthropy” (Hay and Muller 2014; Jung and Harrow 2015; Reich 2018), where private foundations assume central political roles alongside or even instead of states in what is termed global governance. Being simultaneously the product of and response to resource asymmetries within a global political economy of capitalism, foundations' political role derives primarily by filling a gap in resource provision directing private money, time, and energy, to solve the world's biggest problems.

A key domain where private foundations are active today is the field of sustainable development and specifically the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Private foundations are recognized by the United Nations (UN) and governmental agencies for their unique contribution to the 2030 Agenda as “an entirely new, innovative, and responsive resource...” (Maartens and Seitz 2015). Their financial contribution to the 2030 Agenda during the period 2010–2015 amounts to approximately USD 112 billion, equivalent to a quarter of the total contribution made by governments through official development assistance (ODA) for the same purposes.<sup>1</sup> The Gates Foundation alone provided USD 24.39 billion during the same period,

<sup>1</sup>Own estimate based on data provided by the SDG funders on both ODA and foundation funding. More recent data show an increase in foundation funding but lack an update on ODA funding (accessed January 31, 2018) <http://sdgfunders.org/sdgs/dataset/historical/>.

comparable to the total ODA contribution by the Netherlands.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, private foundations, are “reshaping the development landscape like never before” (OECD 2018).

Underpinning these interventions are explicit attempts to advance global justice through, for example, empowering women, fostering democracy, and enabling equitable access to resources. Yet, the global justice agendas that are advanced through private foundations need to be critically examined. This is because philanthropy beyond an act of giving is an exercise of power (Sridhar and Batniji 2008; Partzsch and Fuchs 2012). Scholars warn that directing mass fortunes to the less privileged without challenging underlying relations of power will only serve to perpetuate dependences that eventually maintain the superior position of the powerful (Avelino 2021). This is especially important in the context of critiques regarding the solutions sought by the UN in addressing sustainability concerns, which tend to favor the status quo and are regarded with skepticism, especially by indigenous peoples whose own views tend to be sidelined (McGregor, Whitaker, and Sritharan 2020).

Crucially, we lack an understanding of foundations as agents of justice in global governance. Indeed, with few exceptions (Reich 2018; Betsill et al. 2021), foundations have been mainly examined for their contributions to problem-solving in particular issue areas, such as health and education, and within specific countries (Anheier and Daly 2007; Bishop and Green 2008; Ferrare and Reynolds 2016). Only recently, political theorists, especially in the United States, have started to theorize the political role of philanthropy as organized activity in relation to the state (e.g., Gross 2016; Sckocpol 2016; Farley, Gross, and Smith 2018; Reich 2018).

Building on this literature, this paper examines how three archetypal foundations active in the 2030 Agenda frame justice in their programs and grant-making activities. The paper, thus, contributes to emerging debates about the role of organized philanthropy in world politics and how it responds to today’s most pressing problems.

### Operationalizing Justice

In order to distinguish empirically foundations’ justice frames, the paper develops criteria deriving from political theory that can enable systematic empirically grounded research (see also Biermann and Kalfagianni 2020). These criteria are the subjects, substance, and principles of justice (table 1). These criteria have been operationalized for a set of five theoretical approaches to justice that convey a comprehensive range of different expectations regarding what justice means in global (sustainability) governance: utilitarianism (greatest happiness for the greatest numbers) (Bentham 1907; Singer 2011; Crisp 2014), cosmopolitanism (distributive fairness globally; minimum resources necessary for human survival and basic human rights) (Beitz 1979; Caney 2005; Brock 2009), libertarianism (free exchange) (Nozick 1974), the capabilities approach (opportunities to live a dignified life) (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2000), and critical perspectives (recognition of the marginalized, representation of political voice, and redistribution of resources globally) (Fraser 2008, 2009).

#### *Subjects of Justice*

The paper examines how private foundations define their subjects of justice, that is, their units of moral concern.

Do they address individuals as in utilitarian and libertarian approaches or do they extend subjects to communities and groups? Is their understanding of the subject based on the former’s ability to feel pleasure and pain as in utilitarianism, affectedness by international institutions as in egalitarian cosmopolitanism, common humanity and human dignity as in minimalist cosmopolitanism and capabilities approaches, self-ownership as in libertarianism, or subjection to governance structures as in critical perspectives?

#### *Substance of Justice*

Further, the paper examines which substantive justice concerns are present in foundations’ programs and how they are prioritized and/or balanced by private foundations: material well-being and happiness (utilitarianism); inequality in liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and environmental benefits and burdens (global egalitarianism); basic needs and human rights (global minimalism); human capabilities and freedoms, which include among others bodily health, affiliation such as showing empathy to others, education, freedom of expression irrespective of gender, race, religion, etc. (capabilities); individual rights and entitlements (libertarianism); economic, political, and social structures creating exclusion, oppression, and dependencies (critical perspectives).

#### *Principles of Justice*

The paper also examines which principles of justice are underlined as important by private foundations:

- (a) whether private foundations are concerned with maximizing human well-being (utility) as in utilitarian approaches;
- (b) whether private foundations are concerned with correcting the arbitrariness of one’s life expectations due to factors beyond their control as in egalitarian approaches; and if so, whether they try to address this problem by distributing their wealth prioritizing the least advantaged members of society (difference principle) internationally; or whether private foundations argue with global minimalists in favor of a minimum set of protections and entitlements, that is, that everyone should enjoy *some* equal basic liberties and that everyone should be protected from real or probable risks or harms;
- (c) whether private foundations underline as important not simply the distribution of various goods or resources but also how these goods or resources are transformed into the capacity of individuals to function in lives of their own choosing. Thus, whether justice for private foundations is served not only through equal distribution of opportunities but also through their effective utilization by the most vulnerable members of societies as in the capabilities approach;
- (d) whether private foundations emphasize the libertarian principles of (1) justice in acquisition, (2) justice in transfer, and (3) rectifications in case of violations of (1) and (2), and argue against state intervention and in favor of market-based solutions;
- (e) whether private foundations argue in favor of justice as participatory parity in the social, political, and economic dimensions of life as in the critical perspectives. In this context, private foundations would fight against (1) misrecognition of vulnerable groups due to social status and identity, (2) misrepresentation of political

<sup>2</sup>Own estimate based on data provided by donor tracker (accessed February 7, 2018), <https://donortracker.org/country/netherlands>.

**Table 1.** Criteria to identify justice norms in a comparative manner.

<i>Criteria</i>	<i>Cosmopolitanism</i>			<i>Libertarianism</i>	<i>Critical perspectives</i>
	<i>Utilitarianism</i>	<i>Global egalitarians</i>	<i>Global minimalists</i>		
	<i>Greatest happiness for the greatest numbers</i>	<i>Distributive fairness globally</i>	<i>Minimum resources necessary for human survival and basic human rights</i>	<i>Free exchange</i>	<i>Recognition of the marginalized, representation of political voice, redistribution of resources globally</i>
Foundations identify subjects of justice	On the basis of individual ability to feel pleasure and pain	On the basis of global interdependence among different political communities	On the basis of human dignity	On the basis of individual self-ownership	On the basis of communities' subjection to structures of oppression
Foundations underline as substance of justice	Material well-being and happiness	Humanists On the basis of common humanity	Human capabilities and freedoms (e.g., bodily health, affiliation, education, freedom of expression)	Individual rights and entitlements determined historically	Economic, social, and political dimensions of life
Foundations underline as principles of justice	Maximization of utility	Priority (distribution to most vulnerable globally)	Equality	Freedom through the market	Parity

voice, and (3) maldistribution of economic benefits and burdens.

A limitation of the approach delineated here is that all five justice theories fall within the Western liberal tradition. Thus, non-Western, postcolonial, and indigenous justice theories are omitted. The reason for this exclusion is mainly practical: given that foundations active in the 2030 Agenda are almost exclusively Western-based, it is less likely to find representation of references to indigenous intellectual traditions, for instance. However, it is worth reflecting on what is missing, especially as these traditions have a different understanding on the issue of recognition. Thus, while in Western liberal thinking recognition gives a group voice, in colonial studies recognition is also seen as a way of further domination. This is because working through the medium of state recognition and accommodation masks the continuous power effect, which is the dispossession of indigenous peoples from their lands and self-determined authority (Coulthard 2014). Indeed, recognition occurs only in a limited way, by giving indigenous communities self-governance rights in particular territories *within* the political and economic logic of the nation state (Watene and Merino 2018). Likewise, recognition only occurs once it poses no threat, such as the recognition after eighty-nine years by the Canadian state of the 1818 treaty recognizing the hunting and fishing rights of the Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg, when these activities were no longer the fabric of economic life (Simpson 2017). An extension of the current framework to include these and potentially other missing perspectives would be an important future addition.

### Methodology

The paper focuses on three foundations that can be considered archetypes of different foundation organizational forms, namely family, legacy, and charitable foundations. They are the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Foundation for a Just Society (FJS). The use of archetypes as an analytical tool is useful here in identifying justice interpretations that may be common across foundations sharing similar characteristics. For example, family foundations whose endowment derives from capitalist market structures are more likely to frame justice in ways that support these structures, such as libertarianism. Legacy foundations' endowment also likely derives from capitalist market structures, but their history may play a role in how they frame justice today. Legacy foundations may have originally been set up and funded by individuals or families but are currently separate entities and governed by professionals. Charitable foundations tend to have close links to civil society and are thus more likely to frame justice in ways that support broader systemic transformations, such as critical perspectives. The three foundations have been selected on the basis of their participation in the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development from the SDG Funders website, a website hosted by the UN making data on philanthropic investments available. All three foundations are top donors of the 2030 Agenda, have a global scope in their activities, and explicitly pursue justice in their grants and funding programs for sustainable development.

To uncover empirically which meaning of justice is emphasized and which is silenced by these foundations, the paper uses critical discourse analysis (CDA; Fairclough 2003; Wodak 2009). CDA aims to understand and unravel the strategies by which ideas, concepts, opinions, and norms be-

come plausible and appear as natural to the recipients. CDA constructs contextual meaning through the use of interpretative methods and reflection, wherein the researcher cannot be a neutral observer and must move back and forth between theory and empirical data (van Dijk 1993). This also involves giving further scrutiny to the text by reading between the lines and linking disconnected units of content (Morgan 2010).

The paper utilizes the most recent (2020–2021) private foundations' websites, annual reports, and documents with references to justice, for identifying their norms of justice along the three dimensions of subjects, substance, and principles of justice.

### Analysis

#### *Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation*

The Gates Foundation is a family foundation currently run by trustees Bill and Melinda Gates. Warren Buffet, a trustee until 2021, became involved in 2008 when he announced that he would donate his entire fortune to the Gates Foundation. The foundation trustees make all decisions concerning the foundation and have a final say in its operational business (Sridhar and Batniji 2008). The foundation was established in 2000 with an initial donation of USD 16 billion (Gates Foundation 2018). Today, it is the biggest private foundation in the world with total assets of USD 48 billion, at the end of 2018, 1,489 employees, and offices in China, Europe, India, and Africa, besides the headquarters in Seattle (Gates Foundation Factsheet 2020).

The justice approach predominately pursued by the Gates Foundation is libertarianism. Concerning *subjects of justice*, the focus is on the individual as repeated in various occasions in the foundation's web pages and reports. For example, the foundation sees "individuals not issues," seeks to "unlock the possibility inside each individual," and improves the quality of life of "individuals around the world" (Gates Foundation 2020). These are individuals who belong to the poorest members of the human population, as well as those who were born in places that lack the conditions to support a long, healthy life. However, most importantly, they are those who can be empowered by having access to the financial, technological, and educational tools to lift themselves out of poverty. There is thus a subtle belief in self-ownership, ingenuity, and ability for progress.

The *substance of justice* is stated in the central banner of the foundation's website as "fighting poverty, disease, and inequity around the world" (Gates Foundation 2021). The foundation recognizes that the gap between the best and worst-off globally is very large and it needs to be corrected. Poverty, health, education, and, more recently, environmental concerns are the main strategic areas the foundation focuses on. This language appears as cosmopolitan egalitarian and to some extent capabilitarian but is so only on the surface. Indeed, the foundation does not problematize the underlying roots and structural causes of inequality that may require resource redistribution to the poorest. It focuses instead on where it believes it can have measurable impact, which, in turn, determines the domains and geographies of funding. As a result, it is the "middle poor" that benefit from the foundation's funding while governments with dwindling resources try to attend to the poorest (Eikenberry and Mirabella 2017).

Regarding *principles of justice*, the foundation, in line with libertarian thinking, focuses on technological and market-oriented solutions underlined by an entrepreneurial spirit

(Gates Foundation Strategic Investment Fund 2020a). The foundation enables work that delivers new seeds and vaccines, modern technologies and techniques, and innovative market solutions. The latter is realized in particular via the foundation's Strategic Investment Fund, which uses the foundation's investments to accelerate growth and stimulate private sector innovation and investment (Gates Foundation Strategic Investment Fund 2020b). Overall, the foundation's approach to justice reflects what is termed "philanthrocapitalism," that is, the use of business-like strategies to harness "the profit motive to achieve social good" (Bishop and Green 2008, 6). Indeed, a key claim of philanthrocapitalism is that altruism is a useful business strategy and that the more financially profitable and market-savvy an organization is, the more social good it will inevitably create (McGoey 2012, 193).

The implications of such an approach are that the wealthy are able to maintain the status quo within the neoliberal context (Eikenberry and Mirabella 2017). Ultimately, this means the rejection of alternatives that take a critical stance against global capitalism (Birn 2014), and the pursuance of justice as a business opportunity rather than as a vital political concern.

#### *Ford Foundation*

Ford Foundation is a legacy foundation. It was established in 1936 by Edsel Ford, son of Henry the founder of the Ford Motor Company, with an initial gift of USD 26,000. After Edsel's death in the mid-1940s Henry Ford II, Edsel's eldest son, assumed leadership of the foundation and, together with H. Rowan Gaither and the then seven-member board committee, decided to make the Ford Foundation an international philanthropy (Ford Foundation Origins 2020). In 1953, the foundation moved from Detroit to New York in order to fulfil its new international character, and its headquarters remain there today. It is now an organization independent of the Ford family, with sixteen board trustees from four continents. The foundation has an endowment of USD 12 billion and an annual operational budget of USD 500 million. Darren Walker is the foundation's tenth president.

The Ford Foundation adopts a mix of a rights-based cosmopolitan approach and a capabilitarian perspective on justice. The foundation believes "in the inherent dignity of all people" (Ford Foundation 2020). It adopts less of an individual-based understanding of *subject* and more of a people-based approach. The emphasis is on marginalized communities and groups because of gender, ethnicity and race, people with disabilities, and indigenous peoples and communities. Natural resources and climate change also feature prominently but less as subjects and more as places where indigenous and rural communities face severe environmental damage and social harm but also are recognized as indispensable environmental stewards (Ford Foundation Challenging Inequalities 2020).

The *substance* of justice is inequality in different aspects of life, underlying many of the issues considered important by the capabilities approach: "inequality based on gender, race, and religion. Inequality of opportunity, and education. Political, social, and cultural inequality. And even the rather unequal experience of globalism" (Ford Foundation Darren Walker 2020). The foundation also reflects on the causes of inequality. It explicitly recognizes "entrenched cultural narratives that undermine fairness, tolerance and inclusion," "unfair rules of the economy that magnify unequal opportunities and outcomes," and "unequal access to government decision-making and resources" as key drivers of inequality

(Ford Foundation Challenging Inequalities 2020). The Ford Foundation and particularly its current president Darren Walker also use the language of affiliation through empathy and imagination as important underlying conditions for justice, in line with the capabilities approach. For example, in his Nancy Hanks Lecture on Arts and Public Policy, Walker argues that while everyone needs food in order to survive, everyone also needs beauty and art in order to feed their senses. Art creates empathy and "empathy is necessary for justice," says Walker (Ford Foundation The Art of Democracy 2020).

However, the foundation does not go so far as demanding parity across these dimensions as the critical perspectives would. Instead, as *principles* of justice it adopts a civil and human rights approach, more closely related to a cosmopolitan perspective of justice. The rights approach is entrenched in the foundation's history of supporting public defenders of racial inequality, Native Americans, and women's rights since 1952. Today, the foundation places particular emphasis in securing the land rights of rural communities in many countries in Africa, Latin America, and Indonesia (Ford Foundation Challenging Inequalities 2020). It makes the links between indigenous rights and success of climate change mitigation efforts. It highlights the work of environmental activists and defenders and collaboration with governments and business actors to "reduce illicit finance, corruption, tax evasion, and environmental crimes associated with the natural resource sector, and to redirect associated savings toward programs that help reduce inequality" (Ford Foundation Indigenous Rights 2020). The foundation further works toward defending the rights of collective bargaining for workers and strengthen workers' rights and power and convenings (Ford Foundation Reclaiming Innovation 2020).

Adopting a rights-based frame to justice can create synergies both with social movements and with the current UN system, which also supports human rights as a means to achieve sustainable development objectives (UNSDG 2022). However, the critiques toward the UN approach to sustainability and justice noted previously are not necessarily alleviated by the Ford Foundation's approach to justice. Specifically, while a rights-based approach can give voice and benefits from extraction to marginalized communities, it does not question the broader frame of extraction and exploitation so as to lead to transformative sustainability governance.

#### *Foundation for a Just Society*

The FJS is a charitable foundation with roots in civil society. It was established in 2011 by Audrey Cappell who brought together a group of women to "achieve a world without discrimination" (Foundation for a Just Society 2020). The foundation's board comprises six women from different backgrounds and areas of expertise, ranging from artists to school teachers, with Cappell, a writer and women's rights activist, as president. It has twenty-four staff members, with the majority being women (nineteen out of twenty-four). To date, the foundation has provided USD 133 million in grants. It provides annually grants in the size of USD 50,000–500,000 for up to three years to projects that work through the transformation of communities and countries. The foundation claims to work very closely with its grantees and those facing injustice seeking solutions from those affected instead of providing solutions top-down.

The FJS adopts primarily a critical approaches perspective on justice. Similar to Ford, FJS's *subjects* of justice are

**Table 2.** Justice frames of three archetypal foundations within 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>	<i>Libertarianism</i>	<i>Cosmopolitanism and capabilities</i>	<i>Critical perspectives</i>
<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

people most affected by injustice, especially due to gender, race, and identity. However, the emphasis here is more on the subjection of these people to structures of injustice and less on the premises of human dignity. FJS is a strong advocate of the rights of women, girls, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex (LGBTQI) people, and those facing racial discrimination. The foundation strives for “self-determined lives” but not in the libertarian understanding of self-ownership. Rather self-determination is understood in the form of political and economic empowerment and social and cultural recognition.

The *substance* of justice is discrimination in the economic, political, and social dimensions of life. Economic justice, freedom from violence, sexual rights and health, climate justice, food sovereignty, movement building, local resources, and capabilities are all areas that have been funded by the foundation. One important area of FJS’s work is putting on the map the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex (LGBTQ) community in West Africa, in collaboration with other private foundations, including the Ford Foundation. Homosexuality and lesbianism are punishable by monetary fines, long-term imprisonment, and even death in many West African countries. Accordingly, a key priority of FJS is both securing LGBTQ people’s access to basic institutions, such as health care, and enabling their political organization and mobilization.

The FJS operates under the *principle* of structural transformation. The cornerstone of its work is feminism in an expansive antiracist form, which provides the broader framework for action against injustice in the foundation. The foundation further emphasizes its work in collaboration with civil society movements based on the values of trust, cooperation, and solidarity. It underlines that real impact takes time and is against a quantifiable approach to measure progress. Instead, it calls for “brave philanthropy” by supporting those who work collectively, “working *with* and not *for* communities,” and promoting the accountability of foundation work (Foundation for a Just Society Stories 2020).

While advocating for structural transformation, FJS does not explicitly adopt the language of parity. Nonetheless, its emphasis on grantee-driven approaches and its close links with activists and civil society on the ground could challenge dominant structures of misrecognition and misrepresentation of vulnerable groups and their voice.

A summary providing an overview of the analysis is provided in the [table 2](#).

### Conclusion

The relationship between philanthropy and justice demands scrutiny. The basic institutional structure of any society is determined by what it considers as just legal, political, and

economic arrangements and thereby has a profound effect on the lives of those who are subject to it. Yet, while political theory has focused on explaining what justice *should be* in view of different theoretical approaches, what is missing is how justice *is* constituted empirically. This paper provided an analytical way to study justice and an empirical investigation of philanthropic foundations as agents of justice.

The paper showed that philanthropic foundations act as agents of justice albeit in diverse ways and with manifold political implications. Libertarian justice norms invite responses on the level of the individual, (technological) innovation, and markets. Cosmopolitan justice norms invite human rights approaches. Critical perspectives demand broader structural transformations and collective action. However, we should also reflect on what is silenced. Thus, demands in favor of resource redistribution to the most vulnerable are not clearly articulated. Parity in the economic, social, and political dimensions of life is also not explicitly addressed. And non-Western epistemologies and ontologies of justice are absent. This limits significantly the aspirations of sustainability governance as expressed in the 2030 Agenda aiming to “leave no one behind.”

Given foundations are not a unitary actor, there is an urgent need to further examine both the underlying justice frames of the broader global philanthropic foundation field and their consequences for shaping the normative structure of global sustainability governance. This constitutes not only a new research agenda but also a fundamental political concern.

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