

What Will Philanthropy Be Called Upon to Do?

No one can predict the future, and no one knows that better than those of us who help organizations prepare themselves for it. At Global Business Network, we work with organizations around the world, looking for the long-term implications of current trends in business, of course, but also in the natural environment, in demographics, in technological change, and in political currents, among other themes. Based on that work, we can see a number of new external challenges that could emerge in the coming decades that will test philanthropists' best strategies or create new needs for donors to address.

The forces in the world around philanthropy are changing the world of philanthropy itself. But those forces, and more, will also call on philanthropy in new ways too, because they will generate new challenges and opportunities that will require philanthropic responses. For example:

When historians look back at us from the vantage point of the early twenty-second century, they will appraise our work not by its efficiency and effectiveness but by our boldness in confronting the major, epoch-defining challenges of our day.

James Allen Smith
Senior adviser to the president, the J. Paul Getty Trust

- Baby boomers are just now entering the years when they will begin to retire in large numbers. As they age, they will transform many things, from the demands on social-service and health-care organizations to the pool of volunteers for nonprofit work.
- The rate of AIDS infection in the U.S. is rising most quickly among low-income African-Americans and Latinos, which will reshape domestic efforts to address healthcare among the poor, affect community economic development, and complicate efforts to address homelessness a decade from now.
- Media and communications technologies are creating whole new ways to organize and inform people at almost any scale. The number of channels of information will keep growing, the likelihood of highly tailored, narrowly defined niche services will increase, and consolidation will probably continue. This will change philanthropic work in every area where people have messages they want to spread, audiences they want to reach, or constituencies they want to mobilize—which is to say, everything.
- Starting around 2010, a growing number of the 6.5 million prisoners jailed in the U.S. since the 1980s and serving prison terms of 25 years or longer will begin to be released back into the general population as middle-aged people with limited opportunities. Many of them are poorly educated, and most are ineligible for Social Security benefits.
- Overseas, AIDS in Africa is killing millions of adults and creating a very large group of orphans (over 14 million and growing) in some of the world's poorest nations. AIDS is also spreading in Russia, India, and China—large populations that have barely begun to respond to the threat it represents.
- The gap between rich and poor continues to grow globally, and international economic development efforts will take place in the face of this growing gap. As Harvard's Juan Enriquez has pointed out, the growth of an economy based on knowledge intensifies the enduring problem. In the early twenty-first century, someone working in the world's wealthiest nation is about 390 times wealthier than someone working in the poorest. In 1750, the ratio was 5 to 1.

These long-term trends will affect philanthropy and its role in countless unpredictable ways. Depending on your interests as a giver, they could affect the issues you care about, the organizations you support, and the strategies you employ.

There are also real possibilities that lie just over the horizon. They are not certainties like demographic changes already underway, but prospects that knowledgeable observers suggest could come about in the next generation. How would your strategy or giving change if, for example:

- People begin to routinely live to 100? Current breakthroughs in medical science, genomics, and biotechnology suggest that the extraordinary gains made in life expectancy in the last 50 years could accelerate in the next generation, creating a unprecedented phenomenon: people routinely living healthy, productive lives through their nineties or beyond. If so, it would affect social-service programs, education, job training, healthcare, and more.
- A deadly new pandemic emerges? What if a disease, one new to science, that took advantage of the many ways we are globally connected, and was harder to decode than SARS, appeared, even as global health systems are swamped by AIDS?
- The rapidly shifting racial and ethnic makeup of the United States changes domestic politics much more quickly than predicted?
- Global warming tips into sudden and dramatic climate change? The geological record provides strong evidence that in the past, significant climate change can occur within the space of 10 years if conditions are right.
- Surprising new patterns of global human migration emerge? Educated Chinese could begin to return to China, for example.
- Terrorist attacks increase in frequency in the U.S. and other Western nations?
- Pollution-free energy sources are developed and introduced into widespread use?

None of these possibilities is so implausible as to be unimaginable or not worth considering. While not every one of them affects how philanthropists would meet the challenges they would like to address, each of them offers an example of how outside events, far beyond your control, can change the conditions for your philanthropy.

While no one can tell you what *will* happen, you can develop your ability to foresee what *might* happen, especially if your philanthropy is focused on long-term issues and you want to make a lasting impact. Many business organizations do this on a regular basis as part of their strategic planning.

A good place to start is to read more—and to consult different sources than you do routinely. To the right are a few of our favorite resources for helping you understand both the forces shaping the future and the tools available to help you prepare for it.

Excerpted from *Looking Out for the Future: An Orientation for Twenty-First Century Philanthropists*, by Katherine Fulton and Andrew Blau

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For more information, visit www.futureofphilanthropy.org

As the Future Catches You: How Genomics & Other Forces Are Changing Your Life, Work, Health & Wealth, by Juan Enriquez, Crown Business, 2000. An insightful and accessible look at how technological progress might unfold and the ways it might impact our social and economic futures.

“Chicken Little, Cassandra, and the Real Wolf: So Many Ways to Think About the Future,” by Donella Meadows, *Whole Earth Review*, Spring 1999. Available online at www.wholeearthmag.com. An overview of the pros and cons of various ways of thinking about the future.

Future Survey, edited by Michael Marien. An invaluable newsletter published by the World Future Society, summarizing scores of books, reports, and articles designed to help readers identify important trends that could shape the future in substantial ways. To order, call (301) 656-8274, or go to www.wfs.org/fsurv.htm.

High Noon: 20 Global Problems, 20 Years to Solve Them, by J.F. Rischard, Basic Books, 2002. An overview of what Rischard argues are 20 of the world’s most pressing global problems and proposals for new approaches to address them. If you want to address the most urgent planetary issues in your lifetime, this is a great resource to stretch your thinking.

Inevitable Surprises: Thinking Ahead in a Time of Turbulence, by Peter Schwartz, Gotham Books, 2003. A fast-paced overview of current trends and future possibilities that Schwartz argues will generate “inevitable surprises”—major discontinuities that will feel like a surprise to those who experience them, but that are embedded in trends visible today.

Post-Capitalist Society, by Peter Drucker, Harper Business, 1993. Still the essential overview of the transition to a knowledge society that is transforming every corner of our lives. Drucker explores the implications for citizenship, organizations, governments, schools, and the social sector.

What If? The Art of Scenario Thinking for Nonprofits, by Diana Searce and Katherine Fulton, Global Business Network, 2004. Available online at www.gbn.com/whatif. A guide for those who want to develop new ideas, create better strategies, and improve their learning about the issues they care most about.

What’s Next: Exploring the New Terrain for Business, by Eamonn Kelly, et al., Perseus Publishing, 2002. Excerpts from 50 interviews by Global Business Network on a range of important topics—such as geopolitics and governance, cultures and society, science and technology, and environment and sustainability—that will shape the next decade. The implications of the ideas are relevant to organizations across all sectors that want to anticipate rather than merely react.