

Is equity the new coconut water?

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In the past couple of years we have seen the meteoric rise in the consumption of coconut water. Cold, refreshing coconut water. Drinking some is like being punched in the mouth by a tropical breeze. Coconut water is now everywhere. People drink it before and after working out. It's added to everything, such as fancy smoothies made with flaxseed and goji berries. It's flavored with mango and pineapple juice. Coconut water is delicious. And it's excellent for hangovers. Not that I would know from experience or anything.

Recently we have also seen the rise in "equity." I don't know about you, but in Seattle, the term "equity" has become ubiquitous. You can't walk down the street without hearing someone saying something like, "Equity. Equity, equity, equity. Blah blah community engagement Seahawks equity." Funders are incorporating the terminology and concepts of equity more into their work. People are having summits on it. Strategic plans incorporate it. It's included now in many organizations' set of basic values. "Equity" will become one of the top baby girls' names soon, believe you me (If I had three daughters, I would name them Equity, Charity, and General Operating Funds).

Honestly, it's really refreshing that everyone is talking about equity; as refreshing as an ice-cold carton of organic coconut water. Equity is about restoring balance to the world, and is that not what our field is about? We who are in this field are the Jedi Knights of our society; we bring balance. So it's awesome that everyone is now explicitly talking about it.

However, as excited as I am, I've been seeing a lot of instances where there is significant talk around equity, and yet the implementation falls far short of what the concept actually is. I call this "Dissonance In Equity" (DIE). Here are some examples:

- The City leverages levy money specifically to fund struggling schools that have high populations of low-income students and students of color. To allocate the funds, they force these schools to write 30-page grants, and score them on a rating scale, and the schools with the highest scores receive funding, which creates a "Hunger Games" situation where struggling schools are pitted against one another for scarce resources. (See "[Which comes first: The equity egg or the accountability chicken](#)")
- A foundation incorporates equity language into its marketing material and strategic plans. Yet its practices for awarding funding remains unchanged, and many smaller, community-based nonprofits and projects, especially those led by communities of color, still have little chance to access funding.
- A foundation has "capacity building" among its priorities, but will not award funding to organizations that do not yet have sufficient capacity, based on funder-initiated definition of capacity. This leaves out hundreds of nonprofits led by marginalized communities that are doing going work but don't fit neatly into the standard definition. (See "[Capacity Building for communities of color, the paradigm must shift](#)")
- A large nonprofit has the mission of empowering communities of color and closing the achievement gap among kids of color, but all or most of its staff are white.
- A collective impact backbone organization is formed around equity, but it diverts and absorbs funds from community-based organizations that are addressing the basic needs of marginalized communities through direct services.

Equity has become the next coconut water: refreshing, new, trendy, full of electrolytes, good for you. But this can be somewhat irritating. People all over the world have been drinking coconut water for thousands of years with very little attention. And now it's everywhere. Sadly it feels co-opted and warped, the natural sweetness of the coconut nectar tainted by the slight bitterness of cultural appropriation and mainstream manipulation. Seriously, what sort of abomination is organic mango-flavored coconut water?!

The danger with a fad is that we don't stop to think deeply about it, because we know it will be replaced with something else. When we drink coconut water from a carton, we don't stop to think who picks the coconuts, where they grow, are growers getting paid fairly, does it affect the environment etc. Real coconut water doesn't come from a carton with a dainty tin foil lid that you can easily peel off. It requires someone to hack through the tough layer, to puncture the hard shell. It is difficult work and sometimes dangerous. I know from experience growing up in a country that drinks a lot of it. The peddlers I meet who sell coconut water on the streets work long hours, their legs thin from riding their bicycles laden with hundreds of pounds of coconuts, their knives and hands blackened by the sap from the coconuts they have to hack all day under the blistering tropical sun.

At this early stage in the development of equity as a mainstream concept, the dissonance is understandable. We are all still trying to grasp what equity is and what it means for our field. But there are too many instances of dissonance out there that if we don't stop to reflect, there is danger of "Equity" doing more harm than good, since it can lull us into a false sense of security. True equity requires us not to just throw around concepts at summits and sprinkle terminologies on websites and strategic plans, but to reevaluate our beliefs and practices and definitions and board and staff composition and leadership and hiring practice and funding allocation processes and who is at the table and who set the table in the first place, etc. It requires us to change our ways of doing things. If we want true equity, we must, among other things:

- Invest significantly in marginalized communities to lead the efforts to address problems, even though in the short run they may fail more often, since it is inequitable to use short-term success as the only rationale for how to allocate funding
- Provide more support and resources for marginalized communities to compete for funding, since it is inequitable to expect them to compete on the same level right away
- Differentiate application processes for organizations of different budget sizes, since it is inequitable to force small nonprofits to compete with larger nonprofits that have full-time development staff and grantwriters.
- Change the definition of capacity, leadership, and other concepts so they are more inclusive, since it is inequitable to force everyone to conform to status quo definitions
- Gather community input and support and fund the recommendations provided, since it is inequitable to just cherry pick the ideas that match our pre-set agenda
- Support community-led organizations, even if the organizations leading these efforts don't have a track record, since it is inequitable to expect them to build a track record if no one will invest in them
- Take risks and hire passionate and hardworking but less experienced people from marginalized communities to be on your staff and board and support them to achieve leadership roles, since the current hiring norms are inherently inequitable and oftentimes prevent professionals from marginalized communities from advancing

Achieving equity will be hard as hell and will require the willingness to throw the familiar out the window and to take risks.

It would be very sad if the concept of Equity, now that it has finally been given some time in the limelight, to be one of these Bright Shiny Objects that dissipate with time (See "[The frustration with innovation: Bright Shiny Object Syndrome and its effects on the nonprofit sector.](#)") That would be as sad as Star Wars Episode III Revenge of the Sith, where the Jedi Knights—the bringers of balance—are hunted down one by one and destroyed. Equity has always been and will always be the main purpose of our field. To that end, we cannot let equity be the new coconut water. Or kombucha tea. Or kefir. Or whatever other trendy drinks people are imbibing after hot yoga. Equity must be more like coffee. It must jolt us awake. It must make our hands and our hearts shake. It must course through our veins and keep us constantly alert.

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