

Systematic Change Problem of *The Self-Help Myth*
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I pledge that I have neither received nor given unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work. Caroline Schiavo

Abstract

Erica Kohl-Arenas' *The Self-Help Myth: How Philanthropy Fails to Alleviate Poverty* recounts her work in which philanthropy fails to alleviate poverty. She illustrates three case studies in California's agricultural industry in Central Valley, observing immigrant farmworkers and their communities, during the 1960s, 1990s and 2000s, as well as conducting interviews with nonprofit leaders and foundation executives. These studies are compiled with research conducted during Kohl-Arenas' time as a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley. The findings reflect the efforts of foundations to provide funding to farmworkers and agricultural communities, showcasing the disparities between collective poverty and economic inequalities. She holds foundations accountable for the growing divide and contradiction that applauds them for alleviating poverty, but prevents marginalized communities from undergoing activism, change, and reform for long term growth and sustainability. Utilizing problem analysis, intervention design, and effective measurements, this book engages in the problem of systematic change, further representing how the landscape for nonprofits is an ongoing life cycle for a civil society. The value of this book serves to educate and inform readers on where the self-help myth fails and to what extent philanthropy is directly and inversely related to poverty and a system of inequality.

Summarizing *The Self-Help Myth*

Erica Kohl-Arenas' *The Self-Help Myth* highlights California's agricultural industry studying immigrant farmworkers. She uncovers the inability of foundations to provide long term relief for farmworkers, citing the problem of systematic change, and instead deepens poverty and creates divisive relationships between nonprofits and foundations. As an ethnographer, Kohl-Arenas brings a plethora of knowledge about society, cultures, research collection and organizational advocacy. She highlights the contradiction of philanthropic foundations, where "Foundations are bizarre beasts" committed to the betterment of the world with their wealth, demonstrating the concept of the diverse and negotiable self-help framework, yet their capital is created out of the inequalities they propose to eradicate (1). At the annual meeting of the Council on Foundations, Kohl-Arenas becomes intrigued by juxtaposing low-paid food-industry workers to serving the professionals in attendance. This brings readers to the heart of self-help's ideology that poverty is "the result of social and economic isolation" which keeps the impoverished mired in homelessness, preventing them from changing behavior (2). Kohl-Arenas features many foundations, namely the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Kinney Foundation, Ford Foundation and others that cannibalize potential programs that are "disrupted by ideological and political limits presented by foundations" (166). Kohl-Arenas implies that foundations undertake systematic change for the betterment of the whole community, not just isolated issues, to provide a better path for middle class attainability with respect and human dignity.

Addressing the institutions that manage the poor agricultural community conditions, Kohl-Arenas explains three cases: the compromises of Cesar Chavez, the activist and labor leader, who creates philanthropic allies or "movement institutions"; early 21st-century

foundation-driven “collaborative initiatives”; and guaranteeing mutual prosperity under the “win-win” model. These recount foundation intervention to acknowledge migrant farmworkers poverty, social policy reform, and agricultural economics. Funding culture is “an unimaginative environment where everyone is fearful of confronting growers ... as the best way to help themselves”, which shamefully places farmworkers in a compromising situation to collaborate with farm communities or become community organizers to advocate civic concerns with fear of retribution (167). This forces migrant communities to seek funding according to foundation executive needs to be politically neutral, while maintaining their programming priorities. While Kohl-Arenas explores new ideas outside of the Central Valley which are striving to decrease poverty and increase agricultural prosperity, she suggests extending conversations across the food industry, not just farmworkers to obtain a larger base of stakeholders. While this self-help philanthropic and radicalist approach focuses on helping individual behavior, resolving conflict, and enriching farms, it does not transform the relationship between farmworkers and employers, and immigrants continue to be marginalized. Kohl-Arenas sheds light on society’s politically entrenched economic system, questioning if inequity and poverty can, indeed, be alleviated by foundations.

“Three Pillars” of Change

An examination of problem analysis, intervention and measurement design is necessary to provide viable solutions for social policy reform and change for migrant farmworkers. This systematic change of individual behaviors, notably farmworkers and their collective interests cannot happen overnight, and without placing change of the system, in jeopardy. Systematic change is necessary, which needs to be executed properly to avoid constraining individual freedoms and endangering social values, as it runs the risk of undermining the inherent good

foundations play in society. Many social values are threatened due to inequality, profiling, exclusion and capitalism which deny poor people the right to aid or other types of networks and assistance. Change comes at a cost, which needs to be planned for by focusing on problems, intervention, and measured evaluation with data to minimize impact to those vulnerable.

The key problem in reducing inequality and poverty are not necessarily the same, placing foundations in a paradox as they often transform the lives of the impoverished, but disregard the need to improve economic conditions. These misplaced strategies and problems of foundations take center-stage and lack the directives to solve all of the social issues of a community, but channel funds only for community-based services and training for its members. In doing so, foundations fail to deal with the underlying economic conditions that create poverty and institutional injustices. Kohl-Arenas emphasizes that foundations are genuine about their civic engagement in creating “pathways to citizenship” for migrant farmworkers. However, when foundations commit funds to farmworkers, they are required to abide by established protocols and criteria that are inflexible and discredit the Central Valley community they hope to improve. Also, social and emotional problems are not taken into consideration, nor are the financial, physical and environmental abuses and loss of human dignity expressed by migrant farmworkers. During Kohl-Arenas’ attendance at the Western Foundation annual conference, she notes that a frustrated Latino immigrant worker attacks, ““How can you work with growers when children are sick with pesticides? Campesinos [farmworkers] are sleeping in cars. People are hiding out [from federal immigration raids]””, alluding to issues that are ignored and displaced, deepening migrant insecurities (123). So, although foundations bring attention to the inequities of the farmworkers and encourage partnerships between the agricultural communities, there is

rising poverty, causing an unstable workplace where coalitions deteriorate, destroying initiatives that these same foundations are encouraging, causing more conflict and racial divides.

In regard to intervention design, “theories of change” strategies are utilized to discuss institutionalization, civic participation, mutual prosperity and connecting philanthropy through inequity to poverty. Each case study serves as a policy for this design. Civic participation mandates nonprofits to produce certain outcomes over a five to ten year period through regional foundation partnerships, with failure pinpointed to its collaborative, but compromised funding campaigns. Participation can be seen as a myth to commence new campaigns by investing in the farming community, but “incapable of addressing the long-standing structural inequalities experienced by valley farmworkers and immigrants”, as well as secondary organizations and the grant recipients who aid in community organizing. The “win-win” intent, also known as one of mutual prosperity, relies on open collaboration and communication to build strong economic development and incentives. Filipe Cordero, the founding program officer of the Farm Worker Community Building Initiative, “was inspired by the “win-win” approach and eventually lobbied to obtain \$50 million from the Immigrant Participation Collaborative, to address the healthcare of farmworkers, to improve their own lives and boost production by learning new skills (125, 130). Although this intervention recommendation was supposed to improve conditions through immigrants’ own efforts, “it did not address labor contracts, abuse of undocumented workers, and the mental issues of worker isolation and sexual abuse of women in the field” (134). Meetings are had, data is collected, reports are compiled, but as one mental health service provider exclaims “I’d rather see funds go directly to address what is going on in the fields” (134). California is one of the largest agricultural areas and change and intervention is necessary, along with infusion of capital and long-term economic relief and immigration reform. Kohl-

Arenas states that “Relationships between private foundations ... and other regional stakeholders have solidified a limited understanding in addressing enduring poverty and inequality”, although future ideology has taken root and change is possible (170).

To measure the effectiveness of these processes, the fit between program outcomes, needs, and goals must be defined. This book discusses a potential short-term outcome, nonprofits are duped into funding ventures. In American society, foundations and corporations tend to invest in wrongful campaigns towards grantees. Therefore, nonprofits are compelled to be more accountable to their providers, than those they assist. A medium-term outcome involves only the social change of system being implemented, but not the individual. This can be applied to the Central Valley when the inequality of the agriculture community is bettered, but the increase of individual poverty still remains. When the full process of change is applied, a long-term solution allows social change of the system and individuals to exist in harmony. “Reframing Nonprofit Organizations” theorizes that “nonprofits and voluntary organizations can open spaces for creating social change, while at the same time constraining individual freedoms” (27). This demonstrates the failure “to address any of the systematic political-economic relationships that laid the groundwork for poverty”, backing Kohl-Arenas’ claim.

The Book’s Utility and Value of Systematic Change

In conclusion, this book advances the common good by illustrating a community of impoverished farmworkers in California’s wealthy, Central Valley region and the foundation industry’s ineffectiveness implementing systematic change. Kohl-Arenas highlights that current local grassroots initiatives are well financed, but their self-help ability to advocate and organize is hindered and controlled by their supporters and program officers. This capacity building is the most common negative side effect of foundations dealing with the lengthy framework and

reporting requirements, both of which prevent grassroots workers, such as farmers from engaging in innovative benefits. The importance of Kohl-Arenas' research provides a wake-up call that foundations need to continually plan for strategic systematic change and re-evaluate their civic engagement and intentions, to deliver programs that take into consideration all facets of a community to truly alleviate poverty and provide upward mobility for the good of mankind.