

CARNEGIE Results

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Special Note.

Carnegie Corporation in South Africa: A Difficult Past Leads to a Commitment to Change

As we approach the tenth anniversary of the first democratic elections in South Africa, this overview of the Corporation's grantmaking in that country reveals how the foundation's support of efforts focused on a post-apartheid government were aided by earlier work that had unintended consequences.

In 1927 when Carnegie Corporation president Frederick Keppel and Corporation secretary James Bertram visited South Africa to explore possibilities for grants, they found a country blessed with a variety of climates, rich valleys, rugged mountains and fertile plains. South Africa, with its stark, often haunting beauty, has been called a kind of African Eden. Its people are Zulu, Indian, Xhosa, Boer, British, Ndebele, a diverse cultural mix. Possessed of an abundance of natural resources, the Union of South Africa, then a self-govern-ing colony of Great Britain, would have seemed to be the setting for immense promise and possibilities for all its citizens. But in the country where Keppel and Bertram were greeted as high-ranking official guests, a white settler minority had proscribed the rights of the African majority. Racial segregation laws separated the races. Only whites, one-fifth of the population, could vote or work in the highest-paying jobs. African resistance to these harsh realities was growing, but largely ineffective.

The discovery of diamonds and gold had transformed the economy, catapulting it into the modern, industrial era. The brutal Boer War (1899–1902)—in which the British fought to wrest control of the region from the Dutch, German and Huguenot descendents of the first settlers—was history, but remained a seething wound in the memory of most Afrikaners, who had, nonetheless, made peace and a pact with the British to govern the country.

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1970s and maintains a keen interest in the African continent. She also founded and serves as president of a literary nonprofit organization, The Zora Neale Hurston/Richard Wright Foundation.

*In researching this article, Golden worked with materials from the Corporation's archives; published accounts such as *Creative Philanthropy: Carnegie Corporation and Africa 1953-1973* (Teachers College Press, 1976) by E. Jefferson Murphy; and interviewed individuals connected with the events discussed.*

Editor's Note: Andrew Carnegie created Carnegie Corporation of New York in 1911 to "promote the advancement and diffusion of knowledge and understanding," a mission that has often led the foundation to support in-depth research and analysis of issues that affect the life of our nation and our interactions with other countries in an increasingly globalizing world. But we are also concerned with funding projects that can help us understand, in a more immediate way, trends and changes that may influence both domestic policy and international relationships. This issue of Carnegie Results highlights three current Corporation grantees whose efforts illustrate how scholarship and dialogue can add breadth to our perspective on current events while also contributing to our ongoing struggle to understand the roots of conflict and explore solutions that may lead to peace. Work is ongoing at all three organizations, but as these profiles suggest, the results are already having an impact on those at the frontlines of policymaking.

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As representatives of the foundation that had been created by Andrew Carnegie, one of the world's most respected philanthropists, during their month-long visit to all four provinces—Cape Province, Orange Free State, Transvaal and Natal—Keppel and Bertram were feted in all the major cities by the country's highest level officials, from Prime Minister J.B.M. Hertzog and former Prime Minister Jan Smuts, to the white South African elite in business, education and politics.

Dr. Keppel would not have met with members of South Africa's native population, but it is likely that their disadvantaged position would have been hard to ignore, as was the sensitivity of the South African government to criticism of its racial policies.

Although this was the first formal visit of Corporation officers to South Africa, prior to the establishment of the Corporation in 1911, Andrew Carnegie had made generous gifts to several South African communities, among them Vryheid and the town of Harrismith, for the construction of libraries, an endeavor that became a hallmark of Carnegie's world-wide philanthropic efforts.

Despite the glaring inequalities in opportunity for whites and blacks that he witnessed, Dr. Keppel, upon his return, recommended to the Corporation's board of trustees that \$500,000 (more than \$5 million in today's dollars) be appropriated for education grants in East, Central and South Africa, with the largest share of the funding going to programs in the Union of South Africa. The first grant, made in 1926, helped to establish a school in Kenya dedicated to the practical training of Africans as supervisors in rural education. In South Africa, where Corporation funding was already supporting technical education for "coloured" and Asian students, whites would be the beneficiaries of these grants, but Keppel, not unmindful of the needs of South African blacks, expressed the hope that early support for white advancement would produce "resulting goodwill and associations which would help to legitimize and make more effective whatever work the Corporation might do on behalf of black advancement."

The Corporation had established an impressive record of grants to black colleges in the American south. Andrew Carnegie was an enthusiastic and generous supporter of the famed black educator and founder of Tuskegee Institute, Booker T. Washington. But while support for projects supporting the improvement of the degraded lives of Southern blacks was to become a recognized and signature effort of

the Corporation, Keppel's hope for the foundation's role in South Africa would not be realized for nearly sixty years.

The Carnegie "Poor White Study"

The Corporation's work in South Africa through the mid-20th century had the effect of earning Carnegie Corporation enormous credibility with the white minority South African government, but the relationship was purchased at the expense of the black majority. Indeed, the first major program supported by the Corporation in South Africa symbolized the inherent contradictions and tensions that existed between the foundation's actions and its officers' hopes for a brighter future.

The Carnegie Commission of Investigation on the Poor White Question in South Africa—which produced a report known as the “Carnegie Poor White Study”—began its work in 1929, and was at that time the largest and most complex social science study ever conducted in Africa. More than a sociological inquiry, this investigation was to become a watershed event in South African social and political history.

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Seen through a 21st century lens, the term “poor white” seems laden with the race-conscious implication that Europeans were expected to have a higher standard of living than the native or “coloured” populations. For several decades, beginning in the late 1880s, Afrikaner politicians had watched with growing alarm as a segment of the white population, despite artificially imposed racial advantages, slid, generation after generation, into unmitigated poverty.

Fully a third of the Afrikaner population, mostly rural landless farmers, much like the black population, had been untouched by the economic expansion of the previous decades.

Because the study was designed to become a model for future such inquiries, two American sociologists, Dr. Kenyon L. Butterfield and Dr. C.W. Coulter, were retained as consultants. The Poor White commission was made up of white South African academics, members of the clergy and political and welfare activists who were dedicated to the uplift of the nearly 300,000 Afrikaners mired in a level of poverty that threatened the future of white political solidarity.

The urban, educated men and women who made up the commission journeyed to remote Cape farming areas across the open veld, the country’s expansive, hundreds-miles-long grassy plain and into the bushveld, dry flat country covered mostly with scrub. Traveling 30,000 miles during the year of field work, the commissioners interviewed itinerant farmers, hunters and sharecroppers and their families living in dilapidated dwellings or existing shelterless on open stretches of land. The commissioners broke bread with their informants and on occasion were pressed to stay overnight in their meager homes.

These poverty-stricken men and women were Afrikaans-speaking descendants of the voortrekker (pioneer) Boers who, beginning in the 1830s, migrated into the interior of the country to escape British colonial law and the native population. They considered themselves a white nation in black Africa. And their religion convinced them that they were God’s chosen people. The commissioners were Afrikaner nationalists as well, separated by class from their informants but deeply committed to their uplift as a way of strengthening white political power.

The study gathered statistics and facts. It also captured the voices and

personal stories of impoverished Afrikaners. But the plight of the native population was ever present and shadowed the intent and implementation of this massive project, even leading commissioner E.G. Malherbe, a prominent educator, to observe in one of the many articles he wrote assessing the process and findings of the study, that “What we have on our hands today is the *poor black problem*, a problem of greater magnitude and complexity than ever the Poor White Problem was.”

The resulting five-volume report, issued in 1932, was met with widespread praise, publicity and public discussion in newspapers, journals and among scholars, private citizens and government officials. The news paper *Die Burger* editorialized in favor of a national conference to mobilize support for the commission’s recommendations, which emphasized the importance of keeping poor whites from falling behind other whites. The report also argued for the development of a State Bureau of Social Welfare to coordinate education, vocational, and health programs. With unprecedented swiftness the Poor White Study spawned a movement uniting the destinies of privileged and downtrodden whites.

At national conferences in 1934 and 1936, Afrikaner political and social activists used the Poor White Study as a guide for creating blueprints to solidify Afrikaner economic and political dominance. A National Bureau of Education and Social Research was established within the South African Department of Education. The Poor White Study and the response to it was widely recognized as an important factor leading to the rise of the National Party, whose slogan in the 1948 general elections it won was, “The white man must remain master.”

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Thus, two decades after Frederick Keppel's visit to South Africa, the Carnegie Corporation-funded Poor White Study had proven to be one catalyst for the construction of the apartheid government. Dr. Keppel's postscripted nod to the dire circumstances of black South Africans notwithstanding, The Poor White Study created a questionable legacy that Carnegie Corporation would in future years seek, with considerable success, to alter.

Facing Apartheid

In the years following World War II, Carnegie Corporation did not undertake or support any projects in South Africa that matched the scope and impact of the Poor White Study. Still, it continued some work there: from 1948 to 1969, for example, through its Travel Grants program, over three hundred South African businessmen, artists, lecturers, journalists and humanities specialists visited the United States—until the 1970s, the vast majority of them white.

In the decade of the 1960s, while African nations across the continent achieved independence from colonial rule, apartheid became more and more entrenched, even as the policy isolated South Africa from the international community.

Apartheid had become a complex, intricate network of laws that prevented blacks from living in certain areas without special permission. It banished blacks to barren, inhospitable Bantustans (often referred to as "homelands"—impoverished territories set aside under apartheid for black South Africans and slated for independence; in 1994 these areas were reabsorbed into South Africa) to eke out a living. It meant the separation of husbands from wives and children unable to legally reside in the same areas. It represented a separate and vastly unequal set of opportunities for blacks and whites. And its hallmark was wrenching poverty that imprisoned millions of blacks who were the majority of the country's population.

Against this backdrop, Corporation president Alan Pifer, who served as Carnegie Corporation president from 1967-1982, observed that during this period, "We saw little organized activity that the foundation could support. Given the fact that there were so many other opportunities to assist blacks directly in Tropical Africa, the South Africa program did

not look like a good use of our resources.” Pifer had a long and significant history with the Corporation and its Africa programs, having worked for nearly twenty years with the foundation’s Commonwealth Program, as it was then known, which funded higher education institutional and faculty development on the continent.

Pifer was driven by a deep commitment to social justice and racial equality, continuing and intensifying the Corporation’s support for efforts to eradicate the historical results of racism in America and in Africa. In the mid-seventies, Pifer reinstated Corporation involvement in South Africa after a long period of hiatus. Avery Russell, who joined the Corporation in 1970 and eventually served the foundation during her 30-year career as both director of publications and as a program officer, and who worked closely with Pifer on many of his speeches and articles says, “Alan very clearly led the staff on issues of equality and social change. He invested Carnegie Corporation with the living spirit of social justice. And he believed very much in figuring out how to use the law in South Africa to fight the apartheid system. Everybody believed South Africa would have to change. We just didn’t know when.”

In 1973, when Alan Pifer returned to South Africa for the first time in over a decade to attend a meeting of the United States-South Africa Leader Exchange Program, he met members of a small, educated, professional class of black South Africans who were the nucleus of a black leadership group. These doctors, entrepreneurs and professionals had acquired education and training in their fields within the separate and unequal system of apartheid education. They were highly motivated, talented and were among the best and brightest members of the native population. Clearly, these were the future leaders of a non-racialist South Africa and Pifer wanted the Corporation to work with them to facilitate peaceful change.

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Advocating a philosophy of constructive engagement, Pifer hired David R. Hood, a lawyer and former dean of the University of Hawaii law school, to direct the Commonwealth Program and revitalize the Corporation's South Africa projects, with an emphasis on funding challenges to apartheid in the courts. The Corporation's return to South Africa was a response to and coincided with the heating up of guerilla war tactics waged against the South African government by the African National Congress (ANC) and an increase in bannings, arrests and jailings of anti-apartheid activists. During this period of fervent anti-apartheid struggle and militant government repression, Winnie Mandela, Nelson Mandela and Steve Biko headed a growing list of internationally known black South Africans who symbolized the struggle for freedom.

On June 16, 1976, demonstrations in the black townships collectively known as Soweto gave a new face to the resistance against apartheid—the face of children. Thousands of high school students took to the streets to protest compulsory use of Afrikaans in the schools. Police opened fire on the students killing thirteen-year-old Hector Petersen and at least three others. The uprising that followed spread to other parts of the country leaving over 1,000 people dead, most of them killed by police.

In response to increasingly brutal government repression, Carnegie Corporation, along with the Ford Foundation, supported the formation of “public interest law” projects that challenged apartheid policies in the courts through The Centre for Applied Legal Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, and the Legal Resources Centre, which opened offices in several regions of South Africa.

The dedicated activist lawyers working for these projects found loopholes in the dense, though not seamless design of apartheid laws governing issues of housing and residence. They challenged bannings and arrests and found ways to score victories for South Africans for whom the law had been an enemy. Founded in the turbulent era of anti-apartheid activism, these organizations survived to have a lasting impact on South African society.

Interviewed in the Carnegie Corporation Oral History Report, *Voices from South Africa*, Geoffrey Budlender, co-founder and currently

national director of the Legal Resources Centre (LRC) says, “The LRCs played a significant role indirectly in South Africa becoming a democracy under law with a Bill of Rights. At a time of high repression, we were saying, ‘let’s go to court,’ and that made a lasting contribution that can’t be measured. It was very important that Ford and Carnegie took the risk of supporting these projects.”

And Arthur Chaskalson, chief justice of the Constitutional Court of South Africa who was also LRC’s first director concluded, “These programs had a very profound impact on how law could be used to change society. They gave people the opportunity to stand up and claim their rights.”

The Second Poverty Study

In 1982, the Corporation initiated another major study of poverty in South Africa, which was known as the Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa. Says David Hood, “The second poverty commission was a way to close the books on the first poverty study. The intention was to create a document that revealed what life under apartheid really meant.” Initiated during the presidency of Alan Pifer, the second poverty study was carried out during the tenure of his successor, David Hamburg, who served as president from 1982 to 1997. Fifty years had passed since the Poor White Study and most black South Africans endured a level of poverty much more acute than that suffered by the Afrikaners whose conditions had been examined earlier.

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Francis Wilson, a respected economist at the University of Cape Town and Director of the South Africa Labour and Development Research Unit at the university, coordinated the commission. Wilson recalls, “I worked from a political position opposed to apartheid and felt that the study could not take place without black South Africans being a part of it.”

From its conception and inception, the second poverty study was much broader and less conventional in its scope than its predecessor. It actively sought the “understanding and participation of those communities that have to endure poverty.” Nearly three hundred academics, political and social activists and humanities specialists were consulted for the study, and it brought together black, coloured, English and Afrikaner groups working collaboratively in a manner that heralded the country’s future and established a model for multi-racial inquiry and cooperation.

While the first poverty study focused only on poor whites living in South Africa, the second study examined the effects of poverty on all groups residing within the southern African region, including Botswana, Lesotho and Namibia. The level of poverty revealed by the report was devastating and extensive. In Ciskei, a black “home-land,” a researcher found elderly people living in darkened hovels, sitting on ragged, filthy beds and with no food on their shelves. Malnutrition was common. In Orange Free State, 800 residents of a black township were forced to share 12 open-pit toilets, which had led to an outbreak of infectious diseases, all easily preventable under sanitary conditions. An unemployed worker in Lesotho told the researchers “We just sleep in the wilderness. You sleep without having eaten and you get up without having eaten. Tomorrow you go and look for a job, you don’t get it, you come back. When you come back you go about uncovering rubbish bins thinking, ‘Could it not be there is something that has been thrown in here, just a little something that I can chew?’”

A week-long national conference held at the University of Cape Town in April 1984 launched the inquiry’s formal reports. Academics from 22 southern African universities were among the 450 people in attendance at what Carnegie Corporation board member Ruth Hamilton recalls as “quite a grand affair.” Board members and trustees traveled to South

Africa for the conference, meeting in a number of cities with scholars and activists who had contributed research.

In an address on the final day of the conference, Carnegie Corporation president David Hamburg evaluated the historical and contemporary role of the Corporation in global North-South relations, and in the development of South Africa. Hamburg praised the poverty study's architects for "under-taking this path-breaking research with so much vision, compassion, intellectual discipline and courage," and acknowledged the legacy of the first poverty study, which failed "...to recognize fully the humanity of black Africans."

The final report, *Uprooting Poverty: The South African Challenge* (W.W. Norton and Company, 1989) summarized the findings and recommendations of the conference and was written by Francis Wilson and Mamphela Ramphele, a medical doctor and founder of community health centers in the Eastern Cape and the former North-Eastern Transvaal, and at the time a senior research officer in the Departments of Anthropology and Pediatrics at the University of Cape Town. (Ramphele is now a managing director at the World Bank.)

Rich in personal testimony, the report addressed the history of conquest, slavery and political repression that bound blacks throughout the region, as well as the countless day-to-day indignities and struggles faced by men, women and children for whom poverty was a generational inheritance.

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Despite a hostile reception from the ruling National Party, the findings of the report were disseminated widely throughout the South African press and internationally. Francis Wilson says, “The report helped to inform the policymakers of the 1990s. Many people involved in the inquiry went on to assume leadership positions in the current government. It created a climate of informed opinion about poverty in South Africa and when the ANC came to power, they made the point that eradication of poverty was part of their agenda.”

Working in the Context of Democracy

The transition to a democratic, multiracial society in South Africa was powerfully symbolized in April 1994 with the overwhelming victory of the ANC at the polls, and a month later with the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as president of South Africa. Freedom fighters had become power brokers and shapers of a new national consciousness that repudiated the divisions of the past.

This transition ushered in a new government committed to addressing the historical disadvantages that had stunted the lives of black South Africans. Educational reform was at the top of the list for the new government, a concern that meshed with the focus of Vartan Gregorian, who became president of Carnegie Corporation of New York in 1997. A distinguished educator and former president of the New York Public Library and of Brown University, Gregorian redefined Corporation programs, especially those in Africa, to have a greater focus on higher education as a tool of development.

Thus, the Corporation’s International Development Program (IDP), a successor to the Commonwealth Program, began partnering with South African educational institutions. IDP has been a major funder of the enhancement and restructuring of higher education in South Africa: universities, the development of libraries and women and gender equity issues are the primary foci of the program.

Narciso Matos, IDP chair and previously the secretary general of the Association of African Universities, says of the Corporation’s programs in South Africa, “When we started our engagement in South Africa in 2000, the new government stressed that they wanted to create a unified, non-segregated university system. They wanted to maintain the

academic excellence of the historically advantaged universities while bringing the historically deprived universities up to standard.”

South Africa, along with several other sub-Saharan African nations, became a major beneficiary of one of IDP’s recent initiatives, The Foundation Partnership to Strengthen African Universities. Launched in April 2000, the initiative created a consortium of philanthropies—Carnegie Corporation, the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation—all committed to assisting African nations to realize the potential of their universities and colleges as tools for social change and economic growth. Partnership members have pledged \$100 million over five years to strengthen African universities.

Thirteen South African universities and technikons receive support as part of the strengthening African universities program. Funded projects include teacher training in math and science; encouraging gender equity; and partnerships between historically advantaged and historically disadvantaged universities. The Corporation’s long history of supporting libraries in South Africa also continues, with enhancement programs in three provinces and three municipalities that provide a wide range of supports from books and journals to the training of librarians, all aimed at creating replicable models of excellence and access.

Says Matos, “Our ultimate goal is to impact society through universities. For me, it’s very satisfying to see the number of countries like South Africa, where universities are thriving; by keeping these beacons of hope alive we are helping to make a huge difference in Africa.”

Adds Rookaya Bawa, a South-African born Corporation program officer overseeing the foundation’s efforts to revitalize selected African libraries (which currently focus on South Africa, Botswana and Kenya), “Perhaps what is really needed now is a long-term effort to promote social, economic and educational opportunities in South Africa in a way that will have a positive effect on the disadvantaged population that is as impactful and long-lasting as the damaging effects of the original poverty study were.”

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For nearly a century, Andrew Carnegie and Carnegie Corporation of New York have played an integral role in the turbulent history of South Africa—as a colony and an independent nation; as a country divided against itself; and as a multi-racial democracy. Spurring sociological inquiry; inspiring a political movement; encouraging peaceful transition to democracy; recognizing and responding to the oppression of the black majority; these are the results of the efforts initiated by Frederick Keppel more than eighty years ago. The record is not unblemished. A complete balancing of the apartheid and post-apartheid Corporation legacies is not possible. But the Corporation’s commitment to progressive change in South Africa remains strong, as does its dedication to fulfilling the mandate of its founder, Andrew Carnegie, which was to follow a course of philanthropy that will do “real and permanent good in this world.”

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