



Luis A. Ubiñas

**EDITORS' NOTE** Luis Ubiñas was selected for his current post in 2007. Prior to joining the Ford Foundation, Luis was a director at McKinsey & Company. Luis serves on several nonprofit, government, and corporate boards, including the Advisory Committee for Trade Policy and Negotiation, the UN's High Level Task Force for the International Conference on Population and Development, and the board of the New York Public Library. He is a graduate of Harvard College, where he was named a Truman Scholar, and Harvard Business School, where he graduated with highest honors. He is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** The Ford Foundation ([www.fordfoundation.org](http://www.fordfoundation.org)) is the second largest philanthropy in the United States with over \$11 billion in assets and \$500 million in annual giving. The foundation operates worldwide, with offices in Asia, Africa, and Central and South America.

### Has the mission for the Ford Foundation evolved over the years?

The root of the mission has remained constant, but the institution has evolved. The Ford Foundation is a seminal, global institution with an unparalleled history. The foundation's support for Head Start, for public broadcasting and *Sesame Street*, and the work in civil rights and in equal access to educational opportunity – which has made a profound difference in the lives of millions of people is remarkable and inspiring. This legacy of accomplishment dates back three-quarters of a century. It is this potential for impact that drives us every day. I have been at the helm at Ford for 10 percent of its existence and we won't know the full extent of the influence of the work I have led for decades, because we know that achieving social change requires long-term commitment.

I can't think of many other organizations that have had and continue to have that kind of lasting impact on the lives of people around the world.

# A Foundation for Social Justice

An Interview with  
Luis A. Ubiñas, President, Ford Foundation

### How does the focus for the foundation remain sharp when there is so much need?

There is a set of ideas we serve at Ford: ideas embedded in the legacy of the institution, including some of its founding documents, and guiding and touchstone ideas.

We talk about the idea of a social justice foundation, a foundation dedicated to the notion that if you work as hard as you can, you should have opportunity to contribute to society and to make a difference in the world. That basic idea of access to opportunity, access to the ability to labor for the common good and, in the process, progress individually, is what allows societies to prosper and is the guiding principle for all of our work.

So we have programs that encourage people to work and save, programs that encourage people to stay in school, and programs that encourage people to meet their civic responsibility to participate in the body politic.

The notion that everyone should be afforded the opportunity to contribute is deep within the legacy of this institution.

### Have you been able to establish clear metrics and track impact in each of those areas?

We do an enormous amount of work that requires both qualitative and quantitative understanding of progress, and it is essential to strike the right balance between them. For example, in our Expanded Learning Time work, we are on the one hand, qualitatively building public support, public awareness, and broad-based engagement in the idea that American children should be in school more than the five or six hours a day that they currently are allowed.

At the same time, we're making sure through quantitative measures that there are kids in those schools, that the number of schools offering expanded learning time goes up from under 1,000 to over 2,000 over a matter of a few years; that the number of children in those schools goes up from under one million to over two million; and that those kids then are shown to be doing far better academically, as they are.

It's that balance between qualitative and quantitative that is absolutely essential to thoughtful evaluation. Losing that balance means losing long-term the kind of aspirational achievements that are central to the kind of work philanthropies can do.

### What role should social media play in this effort?

In a world where communities can organize across geographies on a scalable basis at exceptionally low cost, technology is absolutely

essential to what we're doing. We can bring people together on issue after issue on these scalable digital platforms in ways that would have been impossible 15 years ago; we can use platforms that already exist that we don't need to create ourselves: Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and others that are as open to nonprofit and civil society ideas as they are to any other idea – and they can scale from 10 people to 10 million people in short order, increasing the impact of the work exponentially.

### Is it challenging to remain innovative at your size and scale?

We have such global reach, such depth of reputation, built over decades of stewardship from past board leaders, that we have the privilege of seeing some of the most innovative opportunities out there across continents and countries.

We also have the advantage of a global network of offices, staff, and partners who share with us the best, most innovative ideas on a routine basis.

### How do you utilize partnerships in these efforts?

Soon after I arrived, we reorganized the work of the foundation around 34 institutional strategies with clear goals and developed approaches for accomplishing those goals, and resources sufficient to propel impact. The initiatives themselves were interwoven around the idea of social justice and a focus on poor and marginalized communities.

Every one of these strategies had a partnership model as one of its elements. We asked, in every one of our 34 initiatives, not just which other foundations we could work with but how we could work more deeply with business, government, and other elements of civil society.

### Do you take the time to reflect on what the Ford Foundation has accomplished?

For any organization to thrive, it is imperative that individually and institutionally there be time to step back and reflect: to ask, every day, what we can be doing better or differently, and what we're missing. Without those moments of reflection, an organization will not grow. We have institutionalized these moments of reflection in a series of learning meetings, annual reflection discussions, and other opportunities where we can step back and consider our work and its impact.

### When this opportunity presented itself, did you know it would be a good fit?

The Ford Foundation made such a difference in my early life, so to make a transformative difference in the life of the organization – in a sense to repay my debt to the institution – has been not just remarkable but deeply gratifying. ●