

AFRICAN REGIONAL PHILANTHROPY

Time to take off?

Akwasi Aidoo

Why do people give to others? I believe there are two primary conditions that impel philanthropy: a moral concern to help and the opportunity to make a difference. The first of these has always been present in Africa. Its cultures and societies have inspiring traditions of sharing and solidarity. Within families, communities, ethnic groups and countries, it is these 'sharing traditions' that often sustain the collective spirit and survival. This spirit has been strengthened and extended by the migrations, forced and voluntary, of Africa's last 40 years of turbulent independence, which have shown repeatedly that the 'other' is really 'one of us'.



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The second condition is stimulated by the current waves of regional integration and democratization across the continent, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. In East, Southern and West Africa, the pace of economic integration has increased significantly in the past few years, offering new opportunities for support and solidarity across borders. As governments harmonize economic policies (for tax incentives, for example), regional markets grow, businesses and people cross borders more easily, and civil society organizations reach out to their counterparts in other countries, an enabling context for regional philanthropy is beginning to emerge.

Such regional philanthropy embodies two closely related imperatives. The first is the transfer of philanthropic resources from richer African countries (eg Nigeria, South Africa, Botswana, Kenya, Libya) to poorer and more vulnerable neighbouring countries (eg Liberia, Mozambique, Mauritania, Somalia). This entails a wide range of interlocking enabling policies, from reforms of tax and banking laws to public advocacy and free movement of people. The second imperative is the emergence of continent-wide philanthropic institutions that are capable of mobilizing and managing funds from across Africa and the African diaspora for philanthropic goals anywhere on the continent.

Overcoming dependency

A recent meeting of a few (but growing number of) African philanthropic organizations in Jinja, Uganda, gave a glimpse of the many challenges and obstacles that stand in the way of this new field. The most fundamental challenge is to overcome the dependency syndrome that underlines Africa's

development experience. Africa is the only region of the world where the scale and scope of poverty has increased over the past decade. This, coupled with the large number of fragile or failing states, has cast the continent in a stark dependency role. External institutions, governments and funders have generally played a dominant part in resolving conflicts, and even the most stable countries tend to rely on external development assistance.

Even major Africa-inspired development initiatives, such as the Lagos Plan of Action in the 1980s and the more recent New Partnerships for African Development (NEPAD), have hinged on external funding. The Lagos Plan, for example, recommended that 'the volume of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to African least developed countries should immediately increase substantially, in real terms, so that these countries can realize economic and social changes and make real progress in the present decade' (p77).

In spite of this state of affairs, external development assistance to Africa has diminished in real terms over the past three decades, and there is no reason to expect substantial increases in the foreseeable future. The challenge that this diminution poses must and can be met from African sources.

There are precedents. In 1958, when the French colony of Guinea was deserted by the French for voting in favour of independence in a referendum, the newly independent government of Ghana gave the colony £10 million to survive. In 1976, during the oil boom, Nigeria gave US\$80 million to establish the Nigeria Trust Fund at the African Development Bank (ADB) to assist in the development efforts of poorer ADB members. The fund was replenished with \$71 million in 1981; today it has a total resource base of nearly \$500 million. Other more recent examples include South African assistance to many neighbouring countries and Libyan development assistance across Sub-Saharan Africa.

What role for the NGO sector?

It is perhaps in the non-governmental sector, however, that the most strategic and innovative initiatives in African regional philanthropy might arise. Though this is an undeveloped field, we are beginning to see new regional philanthropic organizations.

One is the African Women's Development Fund (though funded from outside Africa at the moment),

which conducts fundraising and grantmaking to strengthen women's empowerment initiatives across Africa from its base in Ghana. A second example is the South Africa-based Gifts of the Givers Foundation, which recently mobilized over \$800,000 from South Africa for Darfur. A third is the emerging Africa-wide operating foundation, Trust Africa. Currently based at the Ford Foundation, this will begin its autonomous development in about a year from now.

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Trust Africa (originally called the Special Initiative for Africa) is conceived as a resource for finding African solutions to critical regional challenges. It pursues a

three-part strategy to achieve this. The first involves supporting civil society organizations and inter-governmental agencies to work together in using Africa's regional treaty system to advance peace and security, regional integration, and inclusive policies on citizenship and identity. The second is disseminating innovative local solutions to those challenges with potential for adaptation across borders.

The third element, that of developing Africa-wide sources of support for regional philanthropy, is cutting-edge in its vision but also the most challenging in practical terms. The diverse national currencies are weak and fluctuate wildly in value; investment climates and tax incentives for cross-border giving are unfavourable; legal frameworks and regulatory institutions for philanthropic governance are either non-existent or non-operational.

In addition, public appreciation of the benefits of regional philanthropy is generally hampered by residual xenophobic sentiments in some richer countries (eg South Africa and Kenya) towards poorer countries (eg Zimbabwe and Somalia). Paradoxically, this xenophobia does not extend to the question of supporting neighbouring countries or Africa as a whole. For example, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that even though many ordinary Ghanaians or Nigerians might be hostile towards Liberian forced migrants, they remain supportive of 'helping' to stabilize Liberia.

This reality points to exciting possibilities for regional philanthropy, given the appropriate institutional vehicle and strategies. In a nutshell, this is the promise of Trust Africa. @