

Our Giving

African philanthropy and the narrative divides

Aaro

Owe

Takaful

Ukub

Owirano

Undungu

Ilimo

Kujitolea

Waqf Khayri

Ukusisa

Mrimo

Qogelela

Hama

Bataka

Asun

Lillah

Ubuntu

Say these words. Say them again.

These are our words. These and many others.

Our language of solidarity.

Our language of giving.

Our language of mutual support.

Our language of reciprocity.

Our language of collective humanity

Our language of love.

The *TrustAfrica Shaping the Future Fellowship* is a funded short-term opportunity embedded within TrustAfrica's work program to give space for reflection and knowledge production on key themes related to the future we want for Africa. It is structured into three categories:

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Abstract

Philanthropy is an intrinsic part of African identity. It is embedded in everyday practices, rooted in solidarity, reciprocity and collective humanity, and expressed in a variety of organic and institutional mechanisms. Despite considerable advocacy and knowledge building on the continent, the dominant global narrative of philanthropy – top-down, transactional, professionalized and monetary based – remains unchanged; and African philanthropic narratives continue to remain marginalized.

This paper seeks to (i) reflect on the everyday manifestations of African philanthropy and the ways in which these are embedded in social relations, (ii) make more visible the range and depth of corresponding philanthropic language and terminology on the African continent, and (iii) interrogate the narrative divides and internal limitations that mitigate against inclusion of African giving within the dominant global narrative. Ultimately, it argues for a new global philanthropic narrative, rooted in multiple and varying geographies, practices and ideas.

Keywords: African philanthropy; narrative divides; solidarity; ubuntu, global philanthropy narratives

Preface

As a South African, I see philanthropy all around me. I have learned it from practices and traditions embedded in my family and my community, observed it deeply rooted in African identity and understood the intrinsic value it plays in our diverse societies. As someone who has also worked professionally in the institutional philanthropy sector for over two decades, I have seen how institutionalization continues to dominate philanthropic narratives and how, despite increased efforts on the African continent to make the former visible, the two worlds of philanthropy rarely meet.

As a TrustAfrica Senior Philanthropy Fellow through the *Shaping the Future Fellowship*, I have been provided with an opportunity to draw on my personal and professional experiences, to interrogate both lived experience and observed reality, and to bring together reflections that have emerged out of multiple conversations with colleagues and friends, both within the African continent and outside of it, regarding some of the critical questions and issues in philanthropy today. Two papers have been produced under this Fellowship; this paper, reflecting on the divisions between the different narratives of philanthropy and the implications for a revised global narrative, and a second titled [*Philanthropic Privilege and Constituency Agency: Ideologically Rethinking the Role of Institutional Philanthropy*](#), together with contributions to a joint publication, [*Understanding Resilience in International Development*](#).¹

I take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to TrustAfrica for the time and space to explore these ideas in more depth. While this work is supported by TrustAfrica, all opinions are my own.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss, debate and deepen the reflections in this paper. I can be reached at halimamahomed@gmail.com

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¹ Knight, B. Sahaj, C. et al (2022)

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The African philanthropy narrative

Historically, and in modern times, philanthropy, and in particular African philanthropy, has functioned as a glue that binds humanity, promoting solidarity and integration. It is the energy that animates collective action, unity, and self-reliance as well as the transformation of economic and social relations. It builds social cohesion through its emphasis on creating bonds and bridging difference.²

There is no singular expression of African philanthropy. Diversity, plurality and interwovenness in conceptualization, expression and objectives are fundamental elements to contend with and any discussion on narratives must take account of them and recognize that both the act of giving and the gift itself both hold a value. The majority of the giving on this continent is embedded in everyday practices and traditions. This giving, by ordinary people, is steeped in notions of solidarity, collectiveness and reciprocity; it is woven within everyday practices and an integral part of social relations - rather than an afterthought once you have excess.³

We see these ideas of solidarity expressed in a range of age-old practices, from pooling monetary savings to supporting individual and/or community investments through collective contributions of cash and kind - in times of celebration, crises and death; we see them in time-bound lending of productive agricultural assets (without any financial or interest return element); in pooled labor for asset development and contributions to communal grain saving schemes.⁴ We see them in community-focused bequests and gifts and importantly in a myriad of practices that are a part of everyday life - like the elderly women who regularly take on the responsibility to bathe newborn babies or the individuals who volunteer to undertake mourning and washing rituals for the deceased. We see them in diaspora/village/hometown

² Aina & Moyo (2013)

³ ibid

⁴ Murisa in Aina & Moyo (2016); Maposa, Fowler, Oliver Evans, & Chao (2005)

associations that migrants establish to support each other as well as their extended families and broader communities; in successful people regularly contributing to family and to community initiatives in their place of birth; in the voluntary care work when someone is ill and in the village development committees and in the multiple types of resources that underlie community organizing, civic action, social movements and people-led resistance. We see these in giving to mosques, churches, traditional associations as well as local and national organizations; in giving of the self – of time, expertise, knowledge, goods, social capital, labor, assets, emotional support, mediation and money.⁵ We see these in giving from a place of scarcity as well as abundance, giving often from what you have, not what you have ‘left over’.⁶ **These are the dominant expressions of giving in Africa – but they are not the dominant narrative.**

Over and above these, we have a range of giving mechanisms that have been adapted or evolved from embedded practices. While not new, current discourse refers to these along the lines of community action networks, mutual aid networks and giving circles. We also see a range of initiatives which are leveraging technological platforms to facilitate crowdsourcing. For most, these terms, however, are alien – what people are doing today is building on what they or their communities were doing yesterday.

Then there is the giving which takes place through legally constituted philanthropic organizations:

There are a range of community-based philanthropic organizations – some of these are locally registered associations that seek to primarily harness community resources for development activities, but they rarely call themselves philanthropic organizations; others establish as community trusts, community development foundations or community foundations. Some of these rely on both community and external resourcing, and several see resourcing as but one part of a broader set of roles played by the institution.⁷

⁵ Mahomed (2013); Maposa, Fowler, Oliver Evans, & Chao (2005)

⁶ Mahomed & Bofu Tawamba (2022)

⁷ Hodgson & Knight (2012); Sivio Institute (2022)

There are also private, high net worth and family philanthropy that takes place through both institutionalized (foundations/trusts etc.) and non-institutionalized channels⁸ as well as corporate philanthropy that takes place through the corporate entities themselves or via establishment of corporate or community trusts. And then there are a set of independent private African foundations that have been established/endowed with, or rely significantly on, international funding sources but are led by Africans. While the legally constituted philanthropic institutions are but one element of a much larger African philanthropy sphere, it is on them that the dominant narrative still focusses. Why?

African philosophy and practice of giving⁹

Before we can answer that, we must first make more visible the narrative of our everyday giving. The term philanthropy is not part of our popular discourse, nor is it readily understood or translated on the African continent. Notions of help and charity are the simple everyday English usage. Yet we know that philanthropy is a foundational element in African societies. Philosophically, we understand the idea of giving through terms such as *Ubuntu* which are rooted in the idea of collective humanity, solidarity, mutuality and compassion, expressed in the Zulu idiom *Umntu Ngumuntu ngabantu* (I am because you are).¹⁰ But our language and practice of giving is both diverse and complex and if we are to advance our narrative it is vital that we name and recognize the multiple terms, expressions and nuanced practices of giving that make up that complexity.¹¹

Terms in Swahili such as *Kufaana* (to be of help); *Kujitolea* (to volunteer or sacrifice), *Kusaidiana* (assisting each other), *Kutoa* (giving) *Kuchangia* (to contribute) and *harambee* (all pull together); terms such as *Rubatsiro* in Shona and *Ncendo* (*uncendo*) in Ndebele which link help to a broader notion of humanity;

⁸ UBS & TrustAfrica, 2014

⁹ The indigenous terms and their meanings in this section have been drawn from: Aina & Moyo, 2016; El Daly, 2000; Mottiar & Ngcoya, 2016; Maposa, Fowler, Oliver Evans, & Chao, 2005; Osabuohein E & Oluyomi, n.d.; Rwandapeadia, n.d., personal conversations and lived experience.

¹⁰ Aina in Aina & Moyo, 2016; Mottiar & Ngcoya, 2016

¹¹ These are just some of the many terms that have been documented in studies of African philanthropy. Moreover, at present these terms are scattered over multiple resources, but are not reflected collectively.

Arabic terms such as *Takaful* (mutual social assistance), *Al Ata al Ijtimaa* (social giving), *lillah* (giving for the pleasure of god) or *fard kifaaya* (duties incumbent on the community as a whole); terms such as *ubudehe*, a Rwandan practice of collective action and mutual support, or the Setswana term *letsema* (contributing what you can to one in need) or expressions of volunteerism in terms such as *undungo* (brotherhood) and *Ujaama*, used in Tanzania. These are just some of the ones reflected in existing philanthropic studies – there are many more and it is important for our narrative that we explore and make visible what these are.

While the terms above express broad sentiments underlying giving, there are also a variety of specific terms that refer to particular types of giving behaviors and practices, showing diversity and depth in these giving systems. For instance, pooled labor to provide mutual support in agricultural or building activities is referred to as *Aaro* in Yoruba, *Mrimo* in Tanzania, *ilimo/ilima* in Nguni. In *Ilimo*, the recipient also provides food and drink. In Chitumbuka (used in northern Malawi) *Ovwirano* refers to pooled labor during harvesting time and *Urimizgo* refers to pooled agricultural support accompanied by the provision of food by the one receiving help.

Ukusisa (in isiZulu) is a practice where givers will lend part of their property/assets to recipients for a period of time, but the recipient benefits from keeping the fruits of the loan even when the asset is returned – for example, providing cattle for breeding and milk. *Ukubona* is a zulu tradition of visiting the ill and, in Islam, this is considered to be part of *sadaqah* (charity).

The Nama in Namibia differentiate between */khobe* or */khubi* (help given for small, everyday needs) and *!hams* (emergency collective contributions – for example in the case of fire or death, but even weddings); and help given to relatives – in times of happiness and sadness – is also referred to as *hama* (in shona) and *izilobo* (in Ndebele).

Peer-to-peer rotating savings, credit, insurance and/or investment systems are known by a variety of names from *chamas* (Kenya) to *stokvels* (South Africa), *esusu/etoto/asun* etc (Nigeria) *Tontines* (Senegal) *Chipele Gunyu* (Malawi), *Idir* (Ethiopia), *Qogelela* (Zimbabwe), *merry go rounds* (Kenya) *Ukub* (Eritria) and *Ayyuto/Hagbad* (Somalia). There is much variety in what these are used for: any one or a combination of savings, credit, micro-insurance, and investment functions. It is important to mention, however, that these groups of givers are bounded by relations of trust and that the groups can (and often do) serve functions beyond monetary gain – from solidarity support to sites of discussion on personal, socio-economic, and political issues as well¹². To see these as simply economic vehicles would be a gross understatement of their value and the role they play.

Likewise with support at time of death, which varies from direct contributions of food, money and other social support to burial societies which serve as a form of collective insurance. Food and aid at funeral times are reflected in terms such as *Bataka* (Uganda), *Chema* (in Shona) and *Zibuthe* (in Ndebele) and in mutual savings and insurance practices like *Ndalama zapamilo* (Malawi). In Matabeleland, Zimbabwe, burial societies formed by migrants outside the country play multiple roles, also at times contributing significantly to infrastructure at home.¹³

It is important to note that reciprocity is an element in many practices, but it is not always a given, nor always expected. For instance, the term *Ukwenena* is a form of exchange where the recipient may intend to reciprocate but the giver knows that it may not happen and contributes anyway. In the Nama community, *ondjambi* refers to voluntary work to help those who cannot fend for themselves (aged, sick etc.) with no expectation of return. And the agricultural support practice of *owe* is used in Nigeria to assist those in need, elderly, and chieftains. *Ukwenena* (in isiZulu) refers to the borrowing of goods or money – but goods are not expected to be returned, while money is returned or compensated in kind. It

¹² Ghemray (2021)

¹³ Muzondidya & Chiroro in Aina & Moyo (2016)

is also not uncommon for support to be extended to people outside of these pooled savings groups in times of need, this despite them not having contributed.

Nor is giving simply for immediate needs. Maposa et al (2005) reflect how giving is both used for survival as well as transformation/progress, giving as “part of a larger community-based approach toward socio-economic diversification through resource or asset mobilization”. We also see examples of this in terms like *ukusisa*, *aarto* and *ilimo* mentioned earlier but also in concepts like *waqf khayri* (a charitable endowment trust to benefit society) and *sadaqah jaariya* (giving that will continue to benefit others after one’s death). We also see it in diaspora contributions that include immediate needs but also are directed towards infrastructure and a range of productive assets.

Then there are religious terms of giving which are also diverse. Beyond the *waqf*, there are terms like *lillah* and *sadaqah* (different type voluntary contributions for the pleasure of God), *zakat* (a mandatory donation of a portion of excess wealth) and *Nuzur* (donations made if an oath is broken) which are used by Muslim communities in many parts of the continent. Tithes to the church are called *ushur* (in Egypt) and *chapa mwezi* (a monthly tithe in ChiTumbuka) and *Muthoro* (annual tithe in ChiTumbuka) and *Okweshumi* (in isiZulu), *zaka* (in swahili) and *idamewa* (in yoruba). There are many more that need to be reflected.

Understanding the narrative divisions

Terminology is important. Most Africans either do not recognize, identify with, or understand the term ‘philanthropy’. They do not use it to describe their own giving behaviors or see it in the ways that the dominant discourse promotes as a default - top-down, institutionalized, from rich to poor. The term often has connotations of rich men and largesse. This default use of the terminology of philanthropy is based

on a global North¹⁴ narrative - that seeks to set apart and celebrate scale and professionalization, which roots legitimacy in monetary worth, validates giving based on multiple degrees of separation, and discounts civic action that is not in a form it identifies with or in pursuit of a goal it aspires to. This is not to say that there are not practices existing in the Global North that may look different – but rather that this is the dominant narrative in the global North and is in contrast to the African narrative outlined earlier. To move toward enabling a more inclusive understanding of philanthropy globally, it is vital that we reflect on the narrative divisions which continue to limit recognition of African philanthropy within the dominant global narrative.

Degrees of separation

While the forms of giving vary, it is important to reflect on the importance of relationships rooted in solidarity, trust and reciprocity which in turn mean that giving often includes or is aimed at people one knows directly or who are connected to the giver in some way. A northern discourse of philanthropy, however, demands several degrees of separation, exemplified in global measures of philanthropy that are based on asking how often and how much you give to a *stranger*? In an African context, that is NOT the question. That very question excludes a significant part of giving in a context where notions of family and kinship in African societies have very broad implications; where kinship, affinity and proximity strongly inform help relationships. Giving in Africa tends to begin with family, and here we need to recognize the importance of very large extended families— and broader community members - for instance, in Ndebele and Shona societies¹⁵ kinship can include nuclear and extended family as well as others not related by blood or who are part of the community of origin. In some countries, non-family help relationships are significant.¹⁶

¹⁴ We are referring here to the *Political Global North* as a frame of power within the context of global power dynamics – and recognize that the term is contested.

¹⁵ Muzondidya & Chiroro in Aina & Moyo, 2016

¹⁶ Maposa, Fowler, Oliver Evans, & Chao, 2005

Within this context, contributing to the education of a cousin's daughter, setting up a feeding scheme for child-headed households in the community, sharing your home with a friend's son who has just migrated from the village or loaning a tractor to a neighbor for ploughing are, in our definition, all forms of giving. Yet, because these are not 'strangers', they are not counted in a northern narrative, which dominates the discourse in the field.

Institutionalization

In Africa, a significant proportion of giving takes place through associational activity. As Murisa notes,

African society is dominated by associational activities – in many cases these forms of solidarity have been replicated in urban areas through formations such as burial societies, savings clubs, and associational activities within religious groups whose main purpose revolves around promoting solidarity and collective economic agency.¹⁷

These types of associational mechanisms vary in structure, process and legal constitution - from loose to highly organized; from networks based purely on mutual accountability to those that use refined systems and structures for record-keeping and transparency to legally constituted fora; from professionalized civic organizations to non-registered movements; from entities that use basic rotational collection and disbursement mechanisms to those that make use of banking and other financial sector savings and investment products , and from those that arise in response to specific immediate issues to those that are ongoing or that have a long-term asset-building goal. These go beyond a monetary basis and can encompass giving that includes time, labor, expertise, and/or other assets, or that blend the above modes or leverage these associational spaces to discuss issues of importance to them or as sites for enabling solidarity and individual or collective agency.

¹⁷ Murisa in Mahomed & Coleman (2016)

Many of these groups are rooted in trust networks, and while they are highly organized, they are rarely legally constituted. They thus do not meet the “global north” test of institutionalization and are not considered as fitting within that philanthropic narrative. The nomenclature around what is institutional again follows a northern construct. It should be said, however, even some fora that are legally constituted are not always recognized as giving mechanisms in that Northern narrative, for several reasons mentioned earlier.

The philanthropy discourse is obsessed with formal institutions – both as donors and as recipients. Grounded in a mantra that “professionalized” equals “progressive”, this narrative enforces a particular notion of what is acceptable, and this does not have validity in many global South contexts. Furthermore, what counts as institutionalized is also dictated by this narrative. So, only legally registered entities are seen as “institutions”. Anything else is deemed “informal” a problematic term that increasingly takes on connotations of being haphazard, unorganized and ad hoc, or without direction or strategy. That discourse seeks to other such systems as “less than” and significantly marginalizes how African giving systems are bound in notions of African identity.¹⁸

Channels of giving

Moreover, the narrative that Africans do not give to institutions needs to be challenged at several fronts. Recognizing that the vast array of organized activity described above is de facto institutionalized is a fundamental element of this challenge. Beyond this, however, there is also the larger conversation about religious institutions and the roles that faith-based or faith-inspired associations and formalized institutions play in mediating and dispersing giving. From instructions on offering sacrifices to the ancestors in times of celebration and hardship to mandatory giving of *Zakat* and tithes to voluntary giving for places of worship and faith-based educational institutes; from giving to religiously inspired welfare or development organizations to bequests for social/community benefit; from everyday giving to help

¹⁸ Moyo, in Aina & Moyo (2016)

others to the establishment of formal trusts or foundations - religiously motivated giving is a significant element in giving on the continent. The majority of this giving happens through - or to - local faith-based entities and, whether legally registered or not, these are trusted local institutions. Khan (2005), for instance, describes Islamic giving in South Africa as mediated through “sophisticated networks (both formal and informal)”. The dominant narrative is that Africans don’t give to institutions when, in fact, their institutional giving is primarily to institutions they trust – like the diaspora/ hometown associations; the local civic entities or traditional association or the mosque or church or even local development organizations that, while religiously inspired, work on a range of development activities. Much of the dominant philanthropy discourse has neglected the role of religious institutions and faith-inspired development institutions in giving. They are rarely included in conversations or invited to gatherings of philanthropy colleagues. This is true even on the African continent.

Reciprocity and agency

Whilst we acknowledged the global nomenclature on civil society, we also pursued any Africanist appreciation of the meaning of civil society not only as a site of contesting and mediating the influence of power but as one of organic solidarity and collective agency.¹⁹

While it may indeed be easier to make money than it is to give it away effectively, there is ample scope for African philanthropists to interrogate normative understandings of philanthropy. This would facilitate a re-envisioning of philanthropic efforts in ways that celebrate African notions of giving and recast African recipients of philanthropy as dignified participants in the exercise of social justice.²⁰

¹⁹ Murisa, in Mahomed & Coleman (2016)

²⁰ Mottiar (2013)

In many African societies, we are each other's safety nets. Without romanticizing everyday giving and recognizing that it has its own challenges – from reciprocity as power and obligation, pressure from within, below and above, capture and distortion through patriarchy and state appropriation and/or destruction of certain African giving practices,²¹ overall there is a need to recognize how values of collective responsibility, community solidarity, reciprocity and mutual support not only underpin so many giving behaviors but serve as a basis for collective agency within a framework of dignity. In African societies, giving is rarely about just the gift itself; the act of giving, the understanding that underlies it, the mechanics that enable it - all hold significant value.

Reciprocity is an important value in African giving systems, yet in the northern discourse of philanthropy, it is not considered as part of philanthropic behavior - for in that narrative, if a benefit will accrue to the giver at some point, then it is not deemed philanthropy. And so burial savings schemes where members contribute to a pot and draw from it in times of death are not recognized. Neither are rotational saving, investment, and credit clubs. Neither is the pooling of labor during harvesting or to build a community asset. The idea that the giver will benefit, directly or indirectly, either in the near or far future, excludes these collective activities from the dominant definition.

But let's interrogate the idea of mutual benefit a bit further. When a HNWI sets up a private or family foundation in the U.S.A, she essentially transfers money from her private bank account to a foundation bank account. She still controls the funds, and she benefits in the form of a tax concession – in other words, there is a degree of benefit from the gift. If a HNWI has a building named in his honor after a large donation to a university; or has mainstream and philanthropy media heap praise on him when he donates to a disaster, there is a reputational benefit. A person who makes a religiously motivated bequest in the belief that they will be rewarded by God has a notion of an eventual benefit returned. If a corporate

²¹ See Patel in Mottiar & Ngocoya (2016); Stuffer in Mottiar & Ngocoya (2016), Daly in Aina & Moyo (2013), Murisa (2018) and Ngodi-Houghton & Kingman in Aina & Moyo (2013).

entity donates as part of its marketing program, to obtain a ‘license to operate’ or serve as reparations for damage done to natural resources, the idea of reciprocity and self-interest are still there; it is just in a different form.²² Insisting that altruism only happens in a context of no mutual gain or self-benefit – while ignoring that benefits that are inherent in the dominant discourse - is used to maintain an exclusionary northern narrative that does not match even the global North’s reality.

Remittances

It is now well established that remittances to the African continent are significant, but the links between remittances and philanthropy require further nuance and interrogation. One element of the dominant northern discourse is that remittances are monetary transfers to family and not counted as philanthropy. While there has been increased discussion and evidence building on the scale of remittances through formalized money transfer channels (noting that there are significant transfers happening through other systems like the *hawala* systems and other personal and organized networks), the question that requires more intense scrutiny is what part of remittances are considered sustenance for family and what part are considered philanthropy. This is not easily separated, for two reasons. The first is how kinship and family is viewed in African societies - there are funds directed to immediate family members, but there may also be allocations towards broader extended family, community initiatives and issues that have benefit beyond the immediate family. The second is that often remittances can be sent to benefit both. In some experiences of Zimbabwean diaspora giving, both the giver and recipient know that the money is to be shared. Take the example of a Zimbabwean migrant who buys medicines and vaccines to send home for the animals owned by his family, as well as those of his neighbors – knowing that the animals’ good health is mutually dependent.²³ A related question is how African diaspora giving happens - through a range of legally constituted mechanisms as well as personal / communal networks, and while these are starting to be included in the philanthropy conversations, they are often still seen as remittances, in the

²² With acknowledgement to Gerry Salole for his ideas on the notion of reciprocity in the professionalized philanthropy sector

²³ Muzondidya & Chiroro (2016)

narrow definition . Lastly, it must be emphasized that equating remittances simply with consumption is flawed – remittances are used for a range of purposes – from consumption to production, from asset investment to enterprise development.²⁴

Downgrading charity²⁵

*First, we reduce complex patterns and traditions of giving into a word we recognize – charity – and then, when people use it as a word of value, we now dismiss the word; and in doing so, dismiss the multiple manifestations that have become associated with it.*²⁶

There is an emerging and very concerning professionalized discourse on philanthropy that discounts ordinary giving. Even the word “charity” is now being seen as ‘less than’. In pushing for “strategic”/ “impactful”/ “outcomes-based” / “catalytic”/ “social justice” philanthropy, the discourse has disregarded and diminished everyday acts of giving. The question is not about whether any of these above terms has resonance or value – or the merits of one over the other - but about how we lend meaning to what we do. While believing in the importance of giving that asks why things are the way they are, there is fundamental value in the role and value that everyday giving plays, both in its symbolic significance and in the gift itself.²⁷ The issue here is not about one over the other but about the ways in which discussions on these professionalized terms (i) assume a moral superiority over everyday charitable giving , (ii) see institutionally mediated and highly planned giving as the holy grail of philanthropy with everything else needing to be steered towards that goal; (iii) reflect an either-or framing that lacks nuance about how people simultaneously embody multiple giving behaviors through different forms and mechanisms, (iv) delegitimize giving to people one knows and (v) fail to recognize that in many contexts, the term charity is used for a range of giving behaviors – whether through individual, pooled or institutionalized mechanisms or whether addressing immediate relief or longer term goals. The refrain of “That’s not

²⁴ ibid

²⁵ This section is adapted from a prior article by Mahomed (2012): “Giving Charity a Bad name”, originally published by Alliance.

²⁶ Mahomed (2012)

²⁷ ibid

philanthropy... that's just charity" seems to be increasing - and a term generally used to describe a plethora of different types of giving has suddenly become something to look down upon.

The distinction between charity and philanthropy has taken on elitist connotations that further a northern narrative. As we continue to enforce this distinction, and do so on the basis of superiority, both moral and otherwise, we do a great injustice to the variety and scale of individual giving that occurs on this continent by ordinary people - irrespective of target, strategy, or motivation - under the rubric of charity. We need to be much more conscious of how we reflect and add meaning to our practice without diminishing valuable existing giving mechanisms

Stratification

While the Northern discourse has sought to compartmentalize and stratify different types of philanthropy - based on origin, direction, institutionalization, intention, immediacy, longevity and/or planning – to name but a few, it is important that we begin to develop a narrative that reflects how many of these categories actually intertwine, complement, or build on each other. We need to advance a discourse that is not polarized by categories of mechanism, origin, or intention.

We see giving on the African continent manifested in a range of ways: from individuals to individuals, from individuals to groups, from groups to individuals; from groups to groups, from individuals and groups to legally constituted institutions²⁸; from those who have an abundance of resources and from those who face daily struggles and all the strata in between. Giving is multi-directional, inclusive of vertical (from wealthy to others) and horizontal (peer to peer) to all the interwoven directions between.²⁹

²⁸ African Philanthropy Network (2013)

²⁹ Maposa, Fowler, Oliver Evans, & Chao (2005)

As we explore these separately, we also need to think about the multiple intersections between the legally constituted and de facto institutions, the organized and ad hoc, the institutional and individual.³⁰

We also need to better reflect how giving behaviors from the same source are mediated both through individual and institutional mechanisms. For instance, the HNWI who sets up a foundation for formalized giving yet continues to send funds to his home town or village or the young woman who contributes time, money and other resources when someone – who is not a member of her burial society – dies, while still paying her monthly dues to the burial society or the retired teacher who provides literacy lessons for young children in her town while simultaneously donating to an educational rights NGO or the elderly farmer who loans his cattle for breeding and also contributes surplus seeds to a communal grain store.

Scale and strategy

The emerging narratives about philanthropy in Africa are about an increasingly knowledgeable and confident assertion of African capacities to give, not only to help, but also to transform and seek to address the root causes of injustice, want, ignorance and disease.³¹

The everyday African giving narrative for the most part, is about small amounts of money – to individuals, to families, to communities to trusted local institutions. Alone they seem tiny, but collectively, they reflect significant levels of giving. The dominant Northern narrative associates giving with scale – large amounts, made to benefit large groups of people - and these small acts of giving are often marginalized.

Nor is African giving just ad hoc. Maposa et al³² reflect on how giving is linked to rules, sanctions and rewards and Fowler³³ reflects on five different dimensions of consideration in horizontal philanthropy.

³⁰ Mahomed, (2013)

³¹ Aina, in Aina & Moyo (2016)

³² Maposa, Fowler, Oliver Evans, & Chao (2005)

³³ Mottiar & Ngcoya (2016)

African giving practices are both responses to immediate issues as well as strategically planned – but rarely recognized as such because notions of what is valued as strategic have been influenced by dominant philanthropic narratives. Moreover, while there is significant giving to address immediate issues, we need to interrogate the place of individual and communal asset-building within giving behaviors (from educating a cadre of graduates to seed storing to establishing communal development associations); we need to look at the role and forms of endowments which exist in several parts of the continent (these include *waqfs* which can provide for a range of immediate and longer term issues) and we need to interrogate how immediate support is part of building up longer-term development strategies. For instance, burial societies that are often used to raise money for infrastructure³⁴ or the *Ukub'* in Eritrea, where women in communities form a credit-based system through money contributions, and further discuss socio-political and socio-economic affairs that affect them,³⁵ or the organized contributions around healthcare and education that will provide longer-term community and societal benefits. People give to those they know and trust, both individuals and institutions and, predominantly at the local level. Giving at the national level happens, though this is a much smaller percentage. This is however, seeing some small increase with newer generations of givers.

Recognizing Limitations

There is an important gap that must be noted, however. The institutions that are not usually the object of this everyday giving are those that are engaged with macro-level systemic and structural changes – national policy, advocacy, litigation, research, etc. – particularly on rights-based issues. It is here that the absence of local giving is keenly felt – and the challenge is twofold:

1. not to compete with everyday organic giving practices and so shift money away from local communities, but to complement this with exploration of the levers that will encourage involvement, engagement, and resourcing (of different types) with initiatives and actions that

³⁴ Muzondidya & Chiroro, in Aina & Moyo (2016)

³⁵ Ghermray (2021)

seek to build space for local agency and power to influence and shape the demands around structural changes at local levels - but also connecting to societal levels.

2. to explore, within the larger institutionalized philanthropy space, how to encourage work that seeks to link and locate the immediate and the structural in a more holistic manner.

It is also important to note here, however, that we must not romanticize cultures, traditions and practices, but recognize that there are, within all cultures, practices and traditions that are harmful. We must remain aware of practices that do harm or reinforce inequities – in both professionalized as well as embedded giving practices - and reflect on these as we deepen our narratives.

Looking internally

Our own Field Building

Beyond exclusionary Northern narratives, however, we must also look internally at our own field-building priorities. At the field-building level, several issues warrant reflection:

Questions must be asked about how knowledge production is resourced and whose knowledge production is centered, recognized, and legitimized. Resourcing for philanthropy infrastructure in Africa has been minimal relative to the kinds of infrastructure support we see in the global North and while it is increasing, there is still a long way to go. In the past, resourcing has also been influenced by Northern conceptions of philanthropy, resulting in knowledge production and education programs that add on context to Northern narratives, rather than those centering African narratives. While we are now seeing the emergence of African-centered narratives in knowledge production, the legacy of the former is still very present, and the latter has much ground to catch up.

As is the case generally, resourcing for global issues is directed to Northern institutions, and Southern institutions receive resourcing primarily for local/national/continental issues. And so, resourcing for global narratives of philanthropy still go to global north institutions and African institutions are then asked to feed into the former. While they provide local data and contextual nuance, the knowledge framing underlying these processes is often centered on a Northern narrative – and this is extremely problematic. Moreover, in a resource-scarce environment, the majority of the external support is for the kind of work and the types of fora that are familiar in the Northern infrastructure, for knowledge building that can feed into regional and global comparative studies and for low-hanging fruit that can be measured within Northern constructs. In global studies / reflections, adaptation and contextualization are being given some increased attention – but the core framing still remains a Northern one.

There is also sharp disjuncture between our dialogue and our field-building focus. Who is included in or excluded from philanthropy conversations is a critical challenge to entrenching our narrative. If we continue to have agenda-setting and knowledge-building conversations where we are consulting only a portion of the “philanthropic sector” (read institutionalized philanthropy sector) then we are reinforcing the Northern narrative that begins with, and is dominated by, the default actors. We need to think much more broadly about how to include the philanthropic spaces that we know exist – like the associations of rural farmers who are setting up de facto community philanthropy groups in the Casamance or fora that are supporting investment *chamas* in Kenya or the community associations in Zimbabwe that pool resources for local development or the *waqf* institutions in South Africa or research centers that explore rotational savings and credit associations or the myriad religiously motivated philanthropic organizations. We need to look at financial studies of how low-income households spend/allocate money, anthropological studies of rural communities and their traditions of help, sociological studies that reflect on religious manifestations of brotherhood or social safety nets and historical studies on traditions and customs in birth and death. It is in these – and in oral testimonies – that we will find the nuance and depth of our expressions of giving. At the moment, we are self-selecting according to a Northern default. Expanding our narrative, however, has to begin with our own inclusive field-building practice.

Moreover, the definitional framework that we have been actively pushing has not translated into enough practical field-building action on the ground, though in recent years this is starting to change. The majority of the available resourcing in the last 20 years has gone towards enabling institutionalized philanthropy – bringing together, supporting, strengthening and building knowledge on giving mechanisms that are legally constituted, celebrating HNW givers, encouraging more ‘strategic’ philanthropy, measuring institutionalized giving, building professionalized services, toolkits and know-how on establishing Northern-style foundations, providing networking fora and services for professionalized philanthropic institutions and advancing legislative frameworks that incentivize institutionalized giving. All of these are important and have a place in the field-building arena, but the reality is that despite emphasizing the centrality of our narratives and expressions of giving, we have not invested enough in further prioritizing knowledge building and field building on these narratives.

Having said that, we must absolutely recognize the important advocacy and knowledge-building work on these issues. At an advocacy level, this narrative is emphasized regularly in our convenings and discussion spaces on African philanthropy, but we need to do more to embed this narrative into the global narrative on philanthropy in such a way as to transform it. For now, the Northern narrative is still the default, and we need to do more to challenge it and demand space for discussions that reframe the global discourse, not just the African discourse.

At a knowledge-building level, fundamental conceptual work has been done to establish the value of African philanthropic narratives and its foundational elements. For instance, see Aina & Moyo (2013), Maposa et al (2005), Mottiar (2016), Mati (2016), Murisa (2018), Habib & Maharaj (2007), El Taraboulsi-McCarthy (2013), El Daly (2000), Fowler (2019) El Taraboulsi (2013) and others. As well, the Centre for African Philanthropy and Social Investment is now providing a much-needed knowledge building boost to this, as are institutions like the Sivio Institute and TrustAfrica. But we need to do much more to understand and reflect what these expressions look like in practice, to popularize the notion of an

inclusive discourse that people see themselves reflected in and to build an evidence base that is valued – and valued on our own terms. Again, there are efforts to begin to build the stories, but they are a small part of the work. We need to invest significantly more resources into spotlighting and lifting up our expressions of giving and reflecting on these as evidence building within a larger narrative.

Our narrative of giving, however, is not just that giving is about more than money, it is about centering value.³⁶ And so, developing new global narratives requires that we begin to reflect what it is that we value and how we analyze, measure and assess it, on our own terms. Our terms of value reflect solidarity, community, and agency – and no monetary measurement can do justice to those. It's time we asserted reflections of our giving in ways that have meaning to us – and make these equally legitimate reflections of value. This is fundamental to the centering of African narratives. We need to reflect these narratives in ways we understand and recognize ourselves, not just in ways the Northern academic or development / philanthropy communities recognize. The validation has to be internal first.

The global philanthropy narrative has focused on philanthropy as “money”. Whether the practice is aligned to this or not, the narrative on philanthropy – and by implication its analysis, measurement, and assessment of impact - have been primarily monetarily focused. Measuring monetary giving by individuals, groups, and institutions, within our expanded narrative, is one element, and in and of itself makes an important contribution to the evidence base. The figures alone we would be talking about here are substantial. But our giving goes far beyond money and our valuation of it needs to do so too. We have bought into the notion that in order to feed into the global discourse, and legitimize our notions of philanthropy, we have to be validated by the standard of monetary measurement used in the global north. How we legitimize our giving, on our own terms, is an important conversation that needs to be taken forward.

³⁶ Murisa, in Mahomed & Coleman (2016)

What are we advocating for?

If we recognize and value the range of existing giving then, as a sector, we need to be mindful of what we are advocating for. So many of our calls are about professionalization and institutionalization – about giving to formally registered entities, giving through formally registered entities and creating an enabling legislative environment for professionalized giving. Again, these are worthwhile, but we need a much more nuanced approach which:

- a. recognizes the value of people’s organic and embedded giving practices – both for their symbolic roles of building solidarity and for the direct impact of the giving act;
- b. does not romanticize and recognizes its limitations and tensions;³⁷
- c. seeks to understand and build on practices, without trying to transform, replace or professionalize. There is room for a variety of giving strategies and behaviors; and
- d. understands where the resources for societal-level systemic and structural change can be cultivated and explores how to do so in ways that are meaningful to people.

An African narrative only or a new global discourse?

While this paper has focused on how African philanthropy is different from the dominant discourse, it does not assume that these conceptualizations and manifestations should be confined to Africa. If a similar perspective were applied in Asia or Latin America or in other societies that share strong familial and communal bonds, there may very well be several areas of close alignment. We need to consider other worldviews that resonate with *ubuntu*: practices of mutual aid and collective humanity in Indonesia encapsulated under the term *gotong royong*; the notions of *ayllu* and *wachu* in Peru which are being revitalized by indigenous societies in Bolivia and Ecuador and of the *swadhyaya* in India, a process of self-study and self-development that “contends that one is impoverished without the other”³⁸ and even differentiated forms of philanthropic expression in the United States³⁹. There is therefore an important

³⁷ Maposa et al (2005)

³⁸ Ngoya & Mottiar, in Mottiar & Ngoya (2016)

³⁹ Aina, in Aina & Moyo (2016)

conversation to be had about whether we are advancing an African philanthropy narrative exclusively or whether we are also advancing this narrative as a means to transforming the dominant global narrative to one that is more inclusive, contextual, and truly global. It is vital that we advance what our African narrative of philanthropy looks like, but it is also vital to recognize synergies elsewhere that reflect narrative alignments rather than narrative divisions. It's time for a new global narrative on philanthropy – one which is rooted in our multiple and varying geographies, practices and ideas.

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