

Shifting currents in African philanthropy

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Reflecting on African philanthropy as a homogeneous topic is like trying to climb more than one mountain at the same time. Impossible. First, the formal philanthropy sector in Africa, though relatively small, is pretty diverse. It's a landscape of private, corporate and family foundations, public trusts, corporate social investment units, community foundations and intermediary agencies.



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I use the word 'sector' very lightly, however; in fact little is known about this field as a whole. While information exists on particular parts of the sector and in particular countries, no pan-African studies have been completed (though efforts are under way to remedy this). We know bits and pieces about bits and pieces.

Second, until a few years ago, there was no coordinating or convening entity for African philanthropy, and levels of communication within and between parts of the sector depended on the initiative of individual institutions or initiatives. As a result, much learning happened in forums outside the continent. With the advent of the African Grantmakers Network (AGN) and a few regional/sectoral initiatives like the East African Association of Grantmakers and the South African Community Grantmakers Leadership Forum (SACGLF), as well as the work of the Global Fund for Community Foundations in Africa, this is beginning to change, but there is still a long way to go.

Finally – and here I come back to my hesitancy about the word 'sector' – African philanthropy involves a much greater range of players than has been traditionally recognized. First there is the smaller, more formal set of philanthropic institutions referred to above. Then there is the larger, but much more prevalent, set of diverse practices, mechanisms and traditions of giving – from *merry-go-rounds* (rotating savings and/or credit associations) to communal asset building mechanisms such as *harambee*;¹ from provision of assets such as oxen or equipment for farming to communal grain savings schemes for those who are in need. These and other systems of mutuality and reciprocity, though embedded in African societies, have been largely ignored or deemed inconsequential to mainstream philanthropy.²

Given these circumstances, generalization is clearly impossible, but looking back on the last year and in particular at two meetings, the AGN Assembly and a meeting on social justice philanthropy in Africa and the Arab region, there are several emerging developments that I believe are worth reflecting on.

A call for going back to basics

'These conversations are very different to the conversations I have with my colleagues at the AGN,' remarked a colleague at an international philanthropy gathering last year. Increasingly, it seems, a number of our global philanthropy discussions have leapt beyond the core substantive issues – as if they had been resolved – and determined that strategies and tools are now what we need to look at. We talk about social entrepreneurship, impact investing, venture philanthropy, innovation, collaboration and the like – all important and worth discussion. But does our focus on debating the merits and limitations of strategies and tools distract us from examining whether we have got the fundamentals right?

Looking back at the recent AGN Assembly, what was both exciting and challenging was that the fundamentals were brought back centre-stage. Jay Naidoo questioned whether philanthropists are prepared to speak truth to power and the role of philanthropy in supporting local voice and agency; Theo Sowa challenged us to be accountable for the risks we ask others to take, and to be more explicit about using philanthropy to change power relations; Yao Graham talked about the role of philanthropy in maintaining an elite consensus. The tenor of these and other conversations was critical reflection, asking the hard questions about our work and challenging our accepted practices.

More prominence to social justice philanthropy

There has long been a slowly brewing question around whether our philanthropy is, in the long term, adequately geared to changing the status quo and to addressing the drivers underlying social, economic and political inequalities. While the number of foundations that work on such change is relatively small, there has been a growing discussion on philanthropy and social justice, which in many ways was brought to the fore last year. In the AGN Assembly, some of the dominant threads were supporting, strengthening and amplifying local voices and movements and changing the contexts within which they are heard; a push for a turnaround in philanthropic priorities and practices so that local agency is the main determinant in setting development agendas; and a call for the examination and reconfiguration of the nature and distribution of power relations in philanthropy and

society. The call for a more just society, and the role of philanthropy in advancing this, as opposed to maintaining the status quo, was loud and clear.

The meeting on social justice philanthropy just before the AGN was also a significant starting point for more collective conversations. Recognizing that such conversations had been happening in silos or within and between individual organizations, this meeting sought to use the space as a first step to bringing together a variety of different perspectives, from Africa and the Arab region, to reflect on a broad set of questions: what do we mean by social justice philanthropy? How is the practice different in our contexts? What are the trends and issues, challenges and contradictions, in our practices and our contexts that we need to examine and engage with? How do we build knowledge and develop a discourse on social justice philanthropy that is relevant and meaningful to our contexts? While this meeting was focused on initial exploration of these and other core questions, there is significant interest in widening and deepening the space to develop a more collective and integrated learning platform and knowledge-building agenda.

Developing our own narratives

'If we don't tell our own stories, someone else will,' said Theo Sowa. Until not long ago, use of the term philanthropy in Africa automatically meant formal, legal, institutionalized giving – primarily top-down; almost always about money, and at considerable scale. Slowly, this is changing³ and new narratives are emerging that reflect systems, practices, traditions and mechanisms of giving that have long played a fundamental role in Africa. These narratives put forward aspects of giving that reframe how we understand what is termed as giving, where it originates, how it is channelled, and the extent of its scope, scale and impact. A brief look at some of the general terms underlying them is telling.⁴ *Ubuntu* – 'I am because you are'; *harambee*, translated as 'all pulling together'; and *ilima*, which means 'coming together to help those without' – all reflect a notion of giving that comes from solidarity and recognition of our shared humanity. They call upon us to question not just the assumptions but the foundations of existing narratives in several areas.

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Language

Where the word 'philanthropy' has no literal translation, we need to reframe our understanding of it through additional lenses, for instance solidarity and reciprocity. How does this affect our analysis of the nature of giving? How does that change our understanding of the practice and impact of giving? What are the implications for how we think about advancing philanthropy in Africa? Most importantly, how best can we support these without destroying them?

Interpretation

Even when we use the same language, interpretation varies. Take the term 'social justice philanthropy'. Discussions last year reveal a variety of understandings, each with its own set of implications for purpose and practice and several of which are markedly different from the dominant narrative. For instance, they challenge the distinction often maintained between giving directed at root causes and symptoms; instead, a more holistic approach is advocated. Another example is the word 'charity'. Increasingly dismissed in some philanthropic circles as having negative connotations, in Africa the word has accumulated connotations that have become synonymous with a giving culture and the negation is not one so easily made.⁵

More than money

It's not just about the money. Money matters, but it's one component. The giving of time, assets, influence, expertise and labour, as well as a variety of simple and complex individual and communal arrangements, all play an important role. Moreover, in a number of community-based philanthropic institutions, efforts to strengthen and harness leadership, capacity, assets, agency and trust take equal precedence. If we take these into account, what does that tell us about both the extent of giving in Africa and the role such giving systems play in the development of our communities?

New patterns of giving

Flows are not just vertical (from wealthy to poor) or horizontal (from poor to poor), but a range of things in between. Moreover, contrary to popular belief, poor people do give to institutions; and individual and collective giving takes a variety of directional forms and different levels of scale. As we explore these, we need to think about the intersections between the formal and informal, the organized and ad hoc, the institutional and individual. What do these patterns of giving tell us about why people give? How can developing these new narratives help us to strengthen, support and expand giving in Africa?

In light of these and other issues, there is a strong argument that while continuing to learn from and engage with the global philanthropy discourse, it is imperative that we develop our own. I daresay these untold and unrecognized narratives exist in other parts of the world. It is time to pay more attention to exploring, understanding and engaging with them and developing our own discourse so that the way we work is embedded within the realities we seek to change.

Bridging divides: bringing Egypt back to Africa

'Why are you here?' the moderator at the opening session of the AGN Assembly asked the audience. 'I'm here to bring Egypt back to Africa,' said Marwa el Daly, who was later announced as the recipient of the inaugural AGN award. Her words reflect a growing sentiment among philanthropy institutions in Africa about the need to bridge the intra-continental divide. The Assembly and the social justice philanthropy meeting brought out the impact of differences that context, culture, tradition and religion have played and also a recognition that there are things that provide significant opportunities for learning and sharing: on philanthropic traditions, practices and challenges; on the impact of opening and closing civic spaces; of the roles local philanthropy can play in contested spaces; of building local agency within the global aid agenda, to name a few.

Diaspora giving: changing what counts

'Why is it that when a group of youth in the US give money to build a well in Africa it's called philanthropy but when a group of Africans in the US do the same it's called remittances,' asks Wanjiru Kamau Rutenberg. The issue of diaspora giving is a subject for growing debate that is also challenging us to examine conventional understanding of diaspora outflows. Empirical studies to explore this have only just begun but the emphasis on recognizing that not all diaspora outflows are remittances, that such giving needs to be factored into our discourse, and of the role that diaspora giving does and could play in Africa is an important milestone.

Whose agenda?

Development funding in Africa has long been dominated by the international aid system, with power in development partnerships too often vested in the North at the expense of African ownership and agency. In the last few years we have seen renewed energy and interest

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in African philanthropy, from inside and outside the continent. African-led philanthropic institutions are emerging to reclaim the development agenda and there is an increasing call for transparency and accountability for the use of philanthropic funds, irrespective of origin. A topic that calls for tough questions and hard reflection, the currents in African philanthropy are slowly shifting to begin to engage the nature of power imbalances in the field.

Where to next?

Bringing together philanthropy in Africa as a field is very much a work in progress. On the one hand, our nascent stage puts us at a disadvantage in terms of knowledge, data, systems and communication. On the other, there is space to reframe our own history and narrative of giving so that it is rooted in our practice and relevant to our context. In doing so, we can build a more independent civil society and strengthen and support local voices, local agency and local power in the design of development agendas.

But we can do so only if we make a deliberate investment of material and intellectual resources in it. We need to support and strengthen the cadre of African philanthropy practitioners and advocates, create spaces for continuous mapping, reflection and analysis on practice and impact, and invest in institutionalizing philanthropy as a field of inquiry. We need to strengthen efforts to develop our own discourse; explore, identify and strengthen local giving patterns; open up the spaces to institutions and practices beyond the 'usual suspects'. We need to be inventive about exploring new ideas and models that not only speak to but leverage our contextual peculiarities and strengths. We need to develop a level playing field for engaging with the global philanthropy arena.

Last but not least, we need to constantly call ourselves to account on the 'why', 'how' and 'to what end' of our philanthropy. We need to be always asking ourselves the most important question: to what extent are we building a field that is geared towards the development of a just society? @

1 *Harambee* in Kenya has been much debated due to politicization of the practice at one time, but this is slowly reversing.

2 See Halima Mahomed, 'Reframing African philanthropy', *YouPhil*, 3 December 2012. www.youphil.com/en/article/05978-reframing-african-philanthropy

3 Susan Wilkinson Maposa and Alan Fowler (2009) *The Poor Philanthropist*; Adam Habib and Brij Maharaj (eds) (2007) *Giving and Solidarity*; TrustAfrica (forthcoming) *State of Philanthropy in Africa*; Jenny Hodgson and Barry Knight (2012) *A Different Kind of Wealth*.

4 Bhekinkosi Moyo (forthcoming) 'Trends,

innovations and partnerships for development in African philanthropy' in *State of Philanthropy in Africa*.

5 Halima Mahomed, 'Giving charity a bad name', *Latest from Alliance*, 26 October 2012. <http://philanthropynews.alliancemagazine.org/giving-charity-a-bad-name>