

What alternative models of development and philanthropy do we need to build local agency and power?

Based on discussions at a convening in Johannesburg, South Africa on June 22, 2018

Introduction

This report is based on discussions at a convening of 37 individuals from the philanthropy and civil society space. Majority of the participants were from South Africa, but the discussions also included others from outside the country. The convening was held on 22 June 2018 in Johannesburg and co-hosted by the Ford Foundation Office for Southern Africa and Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace (PSJP). The purpose of the convening was to (i) reflect on the limitations of mainstream development aid and philanthropy in addressing the power structures that perpetuate poverty, marginalisation and violence and (ii) discuss alternative models/approaches in development and philanthropy that enable local agency and challenge existing power dynamics – focusing both on what exists as well as what needs to change. This discussion, which spanned just half a day, was the first in what is hoped to be a series of conversations exploring this topic in more detail.

The following report presents the key themes emerging from the discussions. While it is focused on the discussions pertaining to South Africa and the African continent, we note that the convening also included a few participants from [other emerging economies](#) namely India, Brazil and Russia, who shared some of their experiences on models of philanthropy that are challenging the top-down ‘Anglo-Saxon narrative’. These include the rise of community foundations in Russia, of social justice foundations in Brazil and of individual giving in India. In all three places it was noted that philanthropy is still punching below its weight and is skewed toward service delivery, but that models that indeed shift the power do exist.

Are funders part of the problem?

‘There is something wrong in the way we do things and yet we continue to do things in the same way. Why do we keep doing thing the same old if it is troublesome?’

The discussions were built on a forthright acknowledgement of dissonance between ‘rhetoric and practice’ in philanthropy. ‘While the rhetoric in philanthropy is framed around concepts such as alternative, best practice and business unusual, when we look deeper, what you hear is not what you get in philanthropy’ argued one provocateur. ‘Agency’ without a doubt emerged as the sine qua non of effective philanthropic practice

for social transformation. As one participant said: “Philanthropy needs to catalyze agency, no transformation can happen without agency.’ However, the participants’ experience reflected that at present philanthropic practice is in fact undermining agency by dismantling/ interfering with organic action in communities. It was further noted that “we don’t know enough about how things operate at local level, yet we intervene in ways that make sense to us.

Several reasons for this dissonance emerge from the discussions:

- **‘A problem of trust’:** Participants acknowledged that philanthropy suffers from a ‘social crisis’. ‘There is no trust of the communities that we seek to benefit’. Philanthropic practice at large is informed by this lack of trust and results in undermining the voice, agency and organization that already exists within communities.

This problem of trust pervades the philanthropy sector itself. ‘We recognize strategy at the highest level and implement it irrespective of what’s happening on the ground’ argued one participant. For example, it was pointed out that while many private foundations try to have decisions informed by those they work with, such processes are inherently constrained by strategic framing decisions and narratives are that have been pre-determined. Another manifestation of the lack of trust of local models, approaches and ideas is the pervasive modelling of new philanthropic institutions based on structures that work in the global North. One participant reflected: ‘Why do we do that? Is there such lack of creativity in our spaces? Are we part of the problem ourselves?’

- **‘The first thing we are protecting is ourselves’:** Not for the first time, there was a call to interrogate the motives of foundation staff. It was said that ‘we fund those we like, those who make us look good to our bosses.’ Participants identified a risk-averse tendency in foundation staff while recognizing that a lot more flexibility exists with philanthropists (the owners of the money) themselves. ‘As long as you are talking to people who are protecting their jobs’, suggested one participant, ‘you are going to face severe limitations. They will not drive the reformist agenda.’ ‘Philanthropy’s limitations in funding that which makes it “uncomfortable” or which they cannot anticipate/control the outcomes of is a critical element in this.

A participant making grants in communities with money she raises from other donors articulated the limitations of implementing programmes with someone else’s money – implementation which required practices that are misaligned with her own values. Accountability to the donor means she must ask certain questions of the communities she serves that have resulted in ‘erasing trust on several occasions’. She was emphatic, ‘I often struggle to sleep at night. I play the lotto because I don’t want their [donors] money. I want my own money and [to] use it based on my experience.’ The erosion of trust in this case is a fallout of ‘moving money that’s not ours.

Alluding to cases of sexual misconduct at Oxfam and Save the Children that have come to light recently, as well as the crisis in governance in South Africa of, again, sexual misconduct and also bribery and corruption, participants pointed to the failure of the field to be bolder in addressing the ‘crisis in values’ in the field and use their [personal agency to insist upon change](#). ‘We need to shame and call each other’s bad behavior...and pull it’s principles back to the floor,’

- **‘Money has an ideology and it is never neutral’:** A critical problem with philanthropy and its undermining of agency is related to the origins of the money. ‘We cannot divorce the question of philanthropic dollars and how they are generated.’ ‘What is the development agenda we bring? Is it defined by capitalism? Where do the resources come from?’ There was a question whether an agenda driven by ‘guilt’ undermines ‘agency’. In similar vein, the motives of corporate philanthropy were also probed. ‘Corporates fund what drives their own agenda.’ An over-emphasis in education funding was related to the creation of a future market for corporates. This results in philanthropy pursuing ‘patronizing’ and ‘colonial’ frameworks that take power away from people.
- **‘It’s a power trip’:** There was also a call to ‘recognise the individual ego-driven way’ in which philanthropy is practiced. ‘We fund where the action is, where the limelight is’, argued a participant, calling attention to the donor tendency to fund what is popular and safe. There is also an acknowledgement that philanthropy is over-valued and romanticized. ‘Anyone who gives is elevated to a pedestal of sanctity, even if the giving is to nefarious ends’. Another participant pointed to the sense of ‘entitlement and arrogance’ that accompanies donors because they have money.
- **‘Agency is being undermined by philanthropy becoming smarter’:** It was pointed out that ‘giving is not framed with an understanding of socio-political factors that created the wealth and the inequality’ while there is a growing insistence on ‘technical experts’ who talk of ‘social labs’ and ‘prototypes’ while undermining the voices of people actually affected by the problems. “The people affected by philanthropy are being moved to the periphery”.

Another aspect of this is the way philanthropy collaborates on big projects delivered by INGOs, leaving out smaller NGOs working at the grassroots. ‘What happens when donors bring their power together and become a block? It sounds counter intuitive but they are also looking to big NGOs to deliver. What happens to small messy social justice NGOs?’ However, this was noted with caution as the responsibility for this lay as much with big civil society ‘that defines the agenda and are able to shape donor policy because of the access they have to it.’

Philanthropy’s role as an agent of social change

It was affirmed that philanthropy is but one player in the ecosystem of social transformation and there was a call to ‘recognize who we are as that agent of change.’

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‘We are brokers’, said one discussant. Participants pressed that philanthropy’s role in the ecosystem be reimagined from this standpoint; to think about how philanthropy can use its power to give other people agency. ‘What is the power we have as individuals? How can the relationships we build create change?’ In order to play this role effectively, there were suggestions for doing things differently both at an individual or organizational level but also collectively. An over-arching theme was the idea that the values of ‘solidarity, respect, love and *ubuntu*’ that brought us to this work are under threat and that there was a need to get ‘rid of egos’ and reinstate the ‘values’ in giving. Further suggestions that emerged on how to do this are summarized below:

1. *Question our practice*

There was a call to take ‘a much more critical analysis of our work and enable joint action anchored in values’. One participant argued, ‘the main issue is how. How do we practice philanthropy? In order to close the dissonance between philanthropic intentions and practice, the discussions pressed on one key aspect of effective social transformation work and that is the assumption that **every community has assets**: an ‘organic level of organization’, ‘power and competence’. Funders must ask themselves:

- ‘Is our giving strengthening organizing at the local level?’
- ‘How do we genuinely take into account the voice of the community in shaping our strategies?’
- ‘How do we leave capacity for institutions to flourish long after we’ve gone?’

This self-interrogation was extended to civil society organizations (CSO’s) as well. How can CSOs be accountable first to the people they serve rather than overwhelming focus on compliance to donors as the critical issue i.e. how can it practice ‘constituency accountability’ instead of ‘donor accountability’? There is a need to further interrogate the power relations between CSOs and the communities they seek to serve.

2. *Diversify strategies and approaches*

There was a call to recognize that social justice work requires a more broad and interconnected set of activities than is currently being supported. There is a concern that social justice work has predominantly come to mean litigation and policy advocacy, and that a broader and more balanced approach, which also places emphasis on understanding what civic engagement means in our contexts, and supporting that, is needed.

- a. Agenda-less’ funding - The importance of supporting and enabling “local organizing” was raised as critical strategy and a proposal to establish an “agenda-less fund that would support local organizing for its own sake” was put forward. This engendered the start of a debate which requires further interrogation.
- b. In the face of the limitations of philanthropy in enabling deeper change, there was also a call for flexibility in supporting alternative spaces and structures: social movements, alternative flatter structures and

networks of organising and mobilising. Said one participant: 'Social movements is the way to go, it brings energy, works with emergence and brings an element of fluidity.'

- c. Responsiveness: there was a call to greater flexibility and responsiveness. The argument was made that by the time philanthropy goes through its systems and processes, people on the ground have already responded and the situation has moved, with philanthropy then playing catch-up.
- d. In all of this, there was also a recognition that communities cannot be romanticized and that we need to find ways to work with local communities without feeding into the power hierarchies at play within communities.

3. *Use our power to influence*

There was a call to draw on the strength of networks to change the conditions of philanthropic practice. 'How do we use our power as philanthropic actors to change and influence each other?' A proposal was made to bring different cohorts in a room together – for instance six high-net-worth donors with six community activists - to facilitate cross fertilisation of values and ideas.

4. *Agitate*

One participant reminded the group of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s words, 'Philanthropy is commendable, but it must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the circumstances of economic injustice that make philanthropy necessary.' There was a call to agitate at the level of the foundations as well as civil society, to question 'whose money are we taking and under what conditions?' and to exercise the power to refuse money. 'There is a need for collective action, a strike, to say that we are not going to be complicit. It's time to draw a line in the sand and say no more of this.' It was asserted that 'individual fundraising' be used as a tool of 'resistance' by NGOs and fundraising foundations. 'The more we can raise resources (not money), the less people will be able to tell us what to do.'

5. *Share our stories*

There were indications that several alternative philanthropic approaches and strategies which shift the power to communities are already underway and there was a proposal to share these practices widely. 'We have to stand up, talk and document how we are different, that we do shift the power.' There was also a call to define alternative measures of success and share '...this is what we have achieved, and this is why it's important.'

6. *Bring in new and diverse voices*

There was wide agreement that philanthropy needed to listen to new voices that were not present in the room, particularly those from a younger generation. 'The younger generation are going to force us into the space we do not want to enter' and that 'we need ways of lifting up this cohort of youngsters'. There was also a call to talk to people we disagree with, not just those we are comfortable with. As well, it was emphasised that philanthropy needs to seek partners based on a

philosophical no-how – not just a technical know-how and that “philanthropy needs to have conversations with those who do not hold power but who hold value”

7. *Emphasize leadership and institution building*

Our current ways of funding are not geared towards the long game and must change to substantively support long term institutional strengthening (rather than propping up of institutions short term) and leadership and skills development of the next generation of leaders. As well

Conclusion

This discussion was not the first of its kind but it was deemed critical as an opportunity to bring several people together who’ve been having such conversations, to talk about the dissonance within the work. It enabled a reflection of some hard truths about philanthropy and on how philanthropy can truly enable power and local agency both at the level of our individual practice and as a field. This meeting should be seen as a small start to this collective conversation, but not an end. There was a call in general to think further, individually and collectively, about ways of moving this agenda and these discussions forward.¹

For more information and/or to share your thoughts and ideas on this report contact info@psjp.org

¹ Following these discussions, recognizing that the momentum generated at that discussion warrants a continuation of the conversation and the space to explore in more depth, the ideas that emerged as well as enable new inputs into the discussion, The Ford Foundation, PSJP, and the Mott Foundation are organizing two follow up conversations. The first conversation will be held in September 2018 and the second in November 2018 at the APN assembly.