Philanthropy, local agency and power: Alternative strategies and approaches (Part II)

Reflection based on discussions at a convening in Johannesburg, South Africa, in September 2018

1. BACKGROUND

In September 2018 the Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace, the Ford Foundation and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation co-hosted a 1.5 day convening in Johannesburg entitled *Philanthropy, Local Agency and Power: Alternative Strategies and Approaches*.[1] The meeting brought together 30 participants working in the civil society and philanthropy sectors - including funders, activists, and critical thinkers - with the following objectives:

- To reflect on the limitations of existing philanthropic practice in enabling local agency and power in South Africa.
- To share experiences of interacting with philanthropy, both positive and negative, and distil lessons that could point towards alternative ways of working.
- To explore and interrogate the assumptions and ideas underlying some alternative strategies and ways of working that emerge in conversation, and which could provide lessons for consideration.
- To establish the appetite for ongoing engagements to learn together and to advocate for and popularise emerging and effective philanthropic strategies and models that enable local agency and power.

This document provides some overarching reflections on the discussions that took place at the convening from the perspective of the facilitator.[2] The first section focuses on key themes to emerge in respect of a critical examination of current philanthropic practice, whilst the second section outlines some possibilities and alternatives for the future.

2. CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON PRACTICE

The discussions circuited a range of issues fundamental to the identity, purpose and position of philanthropy at this particular juncture in South Africa. The emphasis was

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[1] This was a follow up to a previous convening on the same topic that had taken place in June 2018.
[2] These reflections do not represent an exhaustive account of the discussion that took place, rather, they provide a partial perspective on some of the dominant themes to emerge from the vantage point of the facilitator, Melanie Judge.

on key aspects of philanthropic practice, including its role and impact on civil society and on wider community efforts for systemic change in the face of persistent social and economic injustices.

2.1   Exercising power

Participants engaged with the range of ways in which power is exercised through philanthropy, and the effects of this on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social justice struggles, and on the possibilities and limits of social change. A strong focus of the discussion was on the dynamics of power, particularly in light of growing pressures both from within and outside of philanthropic institutions, necessitating increased recognition of:

- Problematic assumptions about the inherent goodness of philanthropy and its capacity to have solutions for, and to be able to solve, complex social problems.
- How power is often described as being 'out there', whereas it is enabled and maintained by both activists and funders.
- The multiple layers of power between NGOs and funders, within NGOs, and between NGOs and the communities and beneficiaries they serve.
- There is no single narrative of philanthropy and power, and power is enacted in ways that are both positive and negative.
- The tendency to hide power, as opposed to putting power on the table.
- The harm philanthropy has caused and the need to take responsibility for this.
- How funders might feel coopted, and also be trying to effect change within their institutions in the face of very real constraints.

Institutional philanthropy needs to be contextualised within a wider landscape of aid flows in which its power is relationally situated. It is an incisive player that has acted in highly politicised ways, for example during the anti-apartheid period, because of its ability to intervene in narrow points and shift things significantly.

Centrally, philanthropy wields political, ideological, social and monetary influence that can set and shape social change agendas, determine what strategies and issues are deemed priorities, and command resources in support of these. It also directs the extent to which democracy is understood to be connected to communities and local actors, and can determine what issues and forms of social change are legitimated. This is a closed system that is risk adverse. Moreover, knowing what the problems and the answers are, and investing in particular forms of knowledge that then shape the paradigms in which civil society operates, enables philanthropy to exert control over change processes. In shaping dominant narratives in respect of what the key social problems are, and the solutions these require, it determines what are viewed as possible and appropriate ways of responding. Some key effects of this exercise of power are:

- Influencing how civil society structures itself, its theories of change and operating principles and processes.
- Keeping people locked into particular ways of thinking about social change.
- Legitimising racism and other forms of oppression, with particular voices being amplified and others ignored.
- Depoliticising movements for change.

There is sometimes an exaggeration of the influence of philanthropy that works in its own interests and creates cultures of dependency. The exercise of its power can also be used positively when it is more participatory and defers to the communities it seeks to support. Being conscious and cognisant of the relations of power in which philanthropy is entangled, and the part of individuals within that, is considered critical.

2.2   Context and politics

There is little knowledge of the politics that underpin particular philanthropic institutions or the value propositions that drives the work. The current moment demands consideration of the identity, role and purpose of philanthropic endeavours and their relationship to wider struggles for local agency and justice. The focus here should be on relocating philanthropy more closely to the context in which it seeks to intervene. Grounded in a commitment to, for example a practice of dignity and emancipation within a Southern African historical context, institutional forms of giving may come and go such that accountability is better linked to particular political commitments. Therefore, the emphasis should be on the substance of philanthropic practice and politics, rather than on its forms and structures.

2.3   An unresolvable contradiction

Unequal distributions of social, economic and political power, around which society is structured, have produced massive wealth accumulation in which philanthropists are implicated, whilst at the same time they seek to ameliorate the conditions this inequality has created. Whilst there is a rise in philanthropic donations to head off social revolution, the masses of people remain impoverished, and organising, in light of the instability created by neoliberalism, is becoming increasingly difficult. Given that philanthropy is a product of inequality, heightened local agency and power effectively threaten its very existence. This contradiction cannot be eradicated nor resolved, and so the emphasis should be on learning to manage it in the interests of the majority of the people. Accountability, transparency and greater public participation, are to be leveraged as part of that process. This also relates to calls for a redistributive agenda on the part of both new and old philanthropy, in light of the lack of accountability structures in the field.

2.4   Anxiety and discomfort

At the present moment there are high levels of discomfort and anxiety about the role and position of funders. There is also cognisance of the real constraints funders face in being able to change philanthropic institutional cultures from within, and the mounting pressure in respect of how to manage the contradictions. In this context, the question is how one provides meaningful support within the limits of institutional strategies and head office demands. Central to this is the principle to 'do no harm', noting too that harm has already been done and raising the challenge as to how that might be addressed. There are also high levels of anxiety in the social justice sector more broadly, with intensified conversations in respect of donor approaches and the uses and abuses of power across the board. As a consequence of this, there is increased attention on donor practice and the urgency for transformed modes of engagement and more positive deployments of power, as well as on exploring how power might be ceded in order to advance civic control and agency.

2.5 The field of play

This concerns a clear understanding and articulation of the various formations within the wider field in which both philanthropy and civil society operate. It is about defining what is meant by "NGOs", "communities" and "funders", recognising that we are working with a multiplicity of form and structure, and that what agency might look like is not singular nor is it only found in one location. Whilst the present discussion was focused on institutional philanthropy, it is important to differentiate the various modalities of philanthropic giving and the distinctions amongst these, along with other types of funding practice.

2.6 The state of civil society

What does civil society look like when the money's not there? And, when civil society organisations (CSOs) come and go, what does it mean for our understandings of civil society? Such questions spark the necessity for an interrogation of the current state, and envisaged role, of civil society. Moreover, the distinction between philanthropy and civil society is to be problematised in that there are forms of philanthropy that are also forms of civil society action. The lexicon of donorship, through notions of 'upscaling', 'replicating' and 'impact', have distracted civil society from what is needed in respect of change and have a strong impact on what organisations set themselves up for, as well as why and how they might fail. There is a need to explore the state of civil society, in its various manifestations, and how it can be mobilised to strategically direct philanthropy and its accountability.

3. EXPLORING POSSIBILITIES AND ALTERNATIVES

The emphasis is an existential one - namely to rethink and reimagine the role and relationship of philanthropy to struggles for local agency, power and justice, and the themes that follow offer possibilities and alternatives for doing that.

In locating philanthropy within a broader social context, and considering possibilities for practice that challenge some of the dynamics described in the previous section, the following points were highlighted:

- Alternatives are to be based on robust critique and an understanding of what philanthropy has done to, and for, community organisations, NGOs, and social movements and their constituencies.
- The need to navigate complex terrains and multiple levels of organising that are distinct from what has been seen in the past, and in which change is not a linear process.
- The urgency to reimagine the role of communities and civil society in the context of a shifting socio-political landscape.
- Awareness that a past journey has led to the present discussions on philanthropy across the African continent, and appreciation for how the conversation has moved, deepened and become more consistent over the past decade.

- Noting that high levels of mobilisation have been achieved without money being central (e.g. Fees Must Fall), demonstrating what alternative change processes could look like.

3.1 Taking risks

Philanthropy has become risk adverse to the point that it has been disabling, and this is partly linked to the depoliticisation of donor organisation (related to the need to be seen *not* to have politics). There is a need to re-inject politics - as distinct from party politics - into the donor space in order to ground the work in values and principles-based agendas. This also relates to how emerging and younger voices can be supported, recognising that change is coming from new sites of politics. A necessary shift in emphasis here is towards *context* and *politics* and away from philanthropy's normative focus on *structure* and *money*.

3.2 Putting communities at the core

The very idea that funders can advance local agency and power is to be questioned, and the attention redirected towards what's happening at the level of community structures, participation and democratic contestation. Here, civic politics is important in that communities can determine the necessary strategies and actions for change, whilst guarding against how this kind of local agency can be undermined by NGOs. The establishment of accountability processes, for both people and structures, can help call out and counter abuses of governance and power within NGOs and community organising.

With the community as the core focus, institutional philanthropy should be shaped by community activism, considering that both donors and NGO workers have multiple identities and are also members of particular communities. Here the challenge is to think about communities beyond being constituted on the basis of geographies alone, but also on the basis of values alignment, shared political goals and issues, and other forms of identification or common cause. Whilst there is a tension between NGOs and funders around development agenda setting, this should be devolved to communities, including refusing forms of support that are not aligned to their values or needs. Community activism already exists and needs to be built upon, for there is no empty space that NGOs need to be sent to fill. Pre-1994, communities could more firmly dictate the funds that came in, however through the NGO-isation of movements in which NGOs have become the voice of communities, this agency has been diluted. Rather, NGOs lend technical support to communities, enabling them to take power back in respect of engaging the state, and providing the support to do so. One approach is to collaborate with the various forms of local agency already in place by accompanying communities in ways that are non-transactional. Funding strategies should not be set elsewhere, instead, they need to emerge from within the struggles of communities which are not structured in neat silos such as 'economic justice', 'gender justice', 'land justice' etc. Both donors and NGOs need to review issues systemically, rather than in terms of dislocated 'sectors'.

Dealing with the overconcentration of funding in particular areas and organisations, and undoing "social justice monopolies" is of concern. Also, grants might endorse toxic

patriarchal cultures and the normalisation of violence against women in communities requires safeguarding policies that take into account that movements and organisations are not outside of the dynamics of violence.

There is an inclination to represent communities as homogenous, however intracommunity complexity is connected to agency and diversity is key here. There is internal debate and contestation, and this is to be supported rather than trying to project communities as uniform. There is an opportunity for creative approaches to listen to what communities want, rather than being led by what is perceived as 'useful' and 'efficient' to meet a predetermined idea of development. However, community gatekeepers are able to articulate local issues in the language of donors, and can capture resources through individualising their relationships with funders and arresting control over the resources and the debates. There is also a tendency to reduce community participation to protests that are represented as increasingly violent whereas issues of public participation, accountable and transparent governance, and the right to information, are at the core of protests. Yet, community issues are packaged and portrayed in a frame of pain and victimhood, rather than as sites of power and resilience. In this context, NGOs are to be kept accountable in respect of their work in, and with, communities.

3.3   Embracing uncertainty
The danger of donor certainty has been fuelled by funders needing to find their niche, to focus efforts, and to establish neat causalities for social ills. This has narrowed the ability to deal with the current space of fluidity and uncertainty. Systems of certainty - such as the idea that change will take a particular form in 5 years time - work against donor abilities to be relevant and responsive. Funders are encouraged to experiment, act, learn and fail, rather than being bound by certainty and the need for single answers.

What does solidarity look like in practice? How do we support those who are already gathered in struggle? How do we learn from the thinking and doing that is already taking place and from where new strategies are already being generated? There is a comfort in operating on the premise that one is delivering a solution. The opposite of certainty is required: *"Rather than managing the delivery of what we know, is can we acknowledge that we do not know, because it's from not knowing that new understanding emerges".* If there is no acknowledgment of what we don't know, this is deeply connected to maintaining power. Perhaps the emphasis is less on what is given, but more on acknowledging and naming what has been taken – through development work - such as people's dignity, humanity and agency. From this perspective the response might then be to consider how to support agency in ways that place dignity at the core of donor practice.

3.4   A vision for social change
"The limitation is thinking that funders are the ones that make things happen… that we need to be there in order for things to happen". A starting point is a contextual analysis that considers the wealth of knowledge that resides with those most affected by injustice. There is a need to identify the values that shape the work through critical reflection on one's own modus operandi, and this requires a level of vulnerability to

confront what has failed and think outside the certainty of logical frameworks. Central to this is a necessary reliance on the wisdoms of those most impacted by the issues, and a shift towards supporting those at the coalface of injustice rather than positioning funders or NGOs as leaders of a struggle.

A clearer vision is required for what a radically altered landscape might look like, and for how systemic change might happen. This includes an analysis of how change happens, along with a deepened understanding of its methodologies - as a basis for informing how donors can then accompany, support, and be in solidarity. How philanthropy is aligned with specific causes, linked to wider demands for structural transformation, also challenges the manner in which the sector has been set up to do its work. This invites an interrogation of where and how social change happens so as to guide which sites of struggle one might support.

3.5   Legitimacy beyond numbers

Democracy is increasingly measured through capitalist ideas of frequency and quantity. This is replicated in philanthropies that emphasise 'majority opinion' or quantity over substance, and prioritise technicalities over democratic processes. Philanthropy can support legitimate voices to be given a democratic competing chance to determine agency and power without reproducing impunity. This requires an approach to legitimacy that is not about the *quantity* of people, but rather about quality, politics and content. There is a crisis of legitimacy within philanthropy itself, as well as in relation to what counts as legitimate issues, voices and organisations, and this impacts on how the possibilities for intervention are defined. Less emphasis should be given to structures and resourcing, and more to the values and contexts of local struggles.

3.6   Participatory approaches

Participatory grantmaking can be about ceding power, and about making locally-grounded decisions that are driven by activists. It can move decision making from western dominated, global spaces closer to local, participatory, activist-determining spaces that enable an increased appetite for risk and trust. People rooted on the ground are able to better assess which risks to take. Activists can increasingly take charge through supporting a range of participatory methods of funding as a means to yield power. This means bringing diverse marginalised communities to the decision making table in respect of where, how and why grants are made. Ensuring accessibility and inclusion is more expensive and time intensive, as is building consensus across diversity, but the outcomes are more equitable and participatory. However, there is a lack of documentary evidence of the impact of participatory grantmaking versus traditional funding models, and thus a need for case analyses to evidence what works. There should be a move away from transactional funding models toward longer-term strategic partnerships and the rejection of top down models in favour of participatory processes that co-create change agendas.

3.7   Grounded in values

Having values in place and planning out their operationalisation is key. This enables more decisive action to be taken against the collusive nature of power and supports the capacity to refuse particular things (certain forms of funding, particular

actions/behaviours). Clear and explicit values are also a way to manage the expectations of partners. Building ecosystems for change, around common value systems, such that no one organisation is at the centre, can also shift power dynamics. The assumption of shared values needs to be problematised. Coalitions have come and gone due to such assumptions. The operationalisation of values (i.e. defining what a particular value looks like when put into practice) that are then made transparent, allows for these to be measurably tracked. There has been a failure to call bad practice out in the sector, including the behaviour of individuals. This requires systems of internal control to enable public calling out, and clearly articulated values can facilitate breaking the silence around power abuses. Values are also the basis for assessing donor practice such that donor critique by civil society can be protected. See Appendix A for a participant brainstorm of key values towards transforming philanthropic practice.

3.8   Supporting self-organising

Funders are not the vanguard, rather they should support movements and communities to lead their own struggles, and to shape the terms of that struggle and the forms of activism it requires. Central to this is how philanthropy might contribute more actively towards movement building, which, by its very nature, is a slow process. The focus here is on nurturing and supporting the self-initiative of communities (broadly defined) with self-organising and voice as central components. Similarly, NGOs should not be positioned at the forefront of community struggles, rather, they should assume a support role in which community voice remains central as that is where the challenge to the system is being mounted. This means NGOs should not speak on behalf of those affected, rather they should facilitate communities themselves to shape the public discourse on particular social issues.

"You can't throw an NGO at what is happening in communities". NGOs can amplify the agency of a community and should situate themselves within broader political struggles. The tension between NGOs and social movements is tangible and an analysis is needed on what has worked and what has gone wrong. Consideration is to be given to the strategic perspective of NGOs in connecting themselves to legitimate, existing struggles in communities. This will determine their useful purpose into the future and whether they survive or not. Despite the limitations of NGOs in effecting radical social change, one must caution against their delegitimisation. There are multiple forms of civil society expression and NGOs have an important role to play. One suggestion is for civil society activists to jointly shape a country strategy that identifies political priorities in response to key social issues, and around which donor support can then be directed.

3.9   Holding to account

More formalised accountability mechanisms can be put in place between civil society and philanthropists, driven by the former, with champions in the space making a call for this. This can be enabled through regularised spaces for mutual accountability where donors are assessed by those they claim to serve, and people, structures and decision-making processes are held to account. There is also a need to develop a practice around what accountable donorship looks like.

4.   TAKING THE CONVERSATION FORWARD

Broad ideas about how the conversation might be taken forward include:

- *Continued engagement:* Continuing with reflection spaces and multi-layered conversations, and expanding the participation therein; encouraging writings on funder practices that challenge dominant narratives; and locating future conversations in the existential crisis of legitimacy that faces both NGOs and donors.
- *Working within:* Actively confronting the vertical challenges within foundations and considering how to bring the conversation back into these structures, mindful of discomforts and constraints; and drawing on consistent local pressure to support this.
- *Evaluate and document* the impact of various forms of community engagement within philanthropy – what it is, how it has been implemented - and interrogate indicators of benefit and success.
- *CSO dialogue:* Mobilise a cross-sectoral dialogue to explore civil society agendas and resourcing, and to review philanthropic support. This could include a civil society summit focused on the crisis in leadership and strategy in post-apartheid South Africa as a strategic connection point and as the basis for engaging donors as a collective.
- *Enable risk:* The call to donor communities to demonstrate a willingness to take risks alongside civil society, and exploring how CSOs can assist funders in incubating ideas on what risk taking could look like.
- *Act and learn:* The commitment of the donor community to implement discreet alternatives, and to share and reflect amongst themselves about related learnings.

Report by Melanie Judge
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This report is based on discussions held at a second convening in a series of conversations hosted by PSJP, the Ford Foundation and the Mott Foundation exploring the themes of local agency and power in philanthropy.

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

APPENDIX A:

A BRAINSTORM OF VALUES FOR ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

- Mutual accountability.
- Working with a gendered lens.
- Applying intersectionality.
- Putting ideologies and values on the table at the outset.
- Being conscious of people's vulnerabilities.
- Anticipating backlash.
- Accepting that the process will never be linear and viewing disruption positively.
- Reorienting philanthropy toward movements and communities (not to the exclusion of NGOs), requiring the de-bureaucratisation of processes.
- Transformative (or liberatory) approach to philanthropy: Recognising that the future state is unknown when you begin, and is determined through trial, error and humility, and can't be managed in a linear and time-bound way. It requires beginning with uncertainty and challenging existing strategies that seek to know the problems and know the solution.
- Getting money to people closer and faster, thus bringing local needs and funding in more direct proximity.
- Placing more trust in community partners.
- Having a greater appetite for risk and failure.
- Sustaining support: Donors seeing themselves as members of the communities they seek to support, and thinking together around ethical transitions and exits informed by shared responsibility.
- Respectfulness: Funders seeing themselves as part of an ecosystem of work, and as allies to a bigger process in which they are not in charge; and respecting differences and contestation.
- Listening as a political act: For funder to listen more.
- Facilitating intentional and respectful connections with less concern about the outcomes such that those connections are not conditional.
- Consultation: Existing strategies are to be reshaped through consultative approaches.
- Developing flexibility and responsiveness within donor systems and procedures.
- In for the long haul: Not being seduced by quick wins.
- Increased sharing of practice amongst donors themselves.
- More inclusive and accessible relationships between donors and beneficiaries (not just concentrated at directorship levels).
- Increased transparency in respect of funding flows and donor decision-making (that is traceable and against which accountability can be upheld).