

BEYOND US AND THEM

By Hope Chigudu

Social movements are increasingly important to the process of change, but their relationship with institutional philanthropy has often proven a difficult one. What are these difficulties and how can they be resolved? Drawing on a recent paper by Halima Mahomed, [Institutional philanthropy and popular organising in Africa : some initial reflections from social movement activists](#), Hope Chigudu considers these questions and both she and Mahomed suggest some answers.

Movements and their different shades

For a long time it has been about us and them. Them - registered, formal, legitimised representatives of the masses: us - often informal, unregistered, unstructured and mostly grassroots in ways that seem to make our efforts and knowledge nothing more than 'grassroots and anecdotal'. But this us understands the importance of strengthening our voices and building trust, our collective organizing power, assets and capacities with or without external funding. And the existence of this us is proof of ordinary people's agency, our refusal to be nothing more than the outcome of our pasts; we carve the paths that make sense for our existence.

Fundamental to every aspect of our work is understanding, building, confronting and transforming power with the realization that the promise of equality cannot be fulfilled without mobilizing and amplifying our voices, knowledge and numbers for sustained pressure and influence on policies, institutions and social norms. So we continue to resist and to challenge unjust power dynamics on the one hand, and build our own transformative power on the other. We do so in the ways that feel most authentic and because we cannot be pinned down, they call us movements; social movements.

Srilatha Batliwala says that social movements are forms of collective action that emerge in response to situations of inequality, oppression and/or unmet social, political, economic or cultural demands. They are comprised of 'an organised set of constituents pursuing a common political agenda of change through collective action' (Batliwala 2012: 3)¹. They are not inherently progressive. Religious

¹ Batliwala, S. (2012) Changing their World: Concepts and Practices of Women's Movements, 2nd Edition, Toronto: AWID

fundamentalism, neo-Nazism and ethnic nationalism have all been rooted in and propagated by social movements.

Movements differ from formal organizations in a variety of ways including founding principles, core strategies and agendas for impact, leadership, power dynamics and agency, area of focus, sources of funding, accountability, attitudes to inclusion, visibility, the use and forms of collaboration and knowledge. They also differ in terms of the development paradigm they follow; some are people-centred, and others institution or money-centred. Despite these differences, there is a shared understanding that what makes communities stronger and bolder—organizing, resilience, clear analysis, strategic action, unity—also makes them safer when combined with holistic protection. Movements are vital for both power and safety - offering the collective clout of people acting together and the sense of belonging and safety nets necessary in an unequal and discriminatory world.

Social movements have been increasing in numbers and activity on the continent especially where traditional NGOs are deemed to have lost any connection to the grassroots. Recent history has shown that they remain a significant force for challenging inequalities and exclusion in society and for proposing new models for more egalitarian social, economic and political relations. For example, women's movements have led the way in pushing forward progressive agendas and challenging gender-biased social and cultural norms at a popular level as well as in law, policy and institutional practice, with tremendous strides made in establishing formal equality and in shifting thinking and social practice in the past half century.

Nevertheless, this piece is not about whether social movements are better or worse than NGOs, nor is it a piece of advocacy for the support of social movements rather than NGOs. Instead, it is a sharing and reflection from the perspective of a few of the many social movements on the African continent.

Within the institutional philanthropic gaze

The reflections in this paper are built on the provocative article entitled [*Institutional Philanthropy and Popular Organising in Africa: Some Initial Reflections from Social Movement Activists*](#) by Halima Mohamed. Acknowledging the paucity of knowledge on the relationship between social movements in Africa and private philanthropy, she collected the experiences of activists from 13 different movements across eight African countries. This was supported by interviews with 16 individuals from philanthropic institutions and other movement funders. In the article, she explores in depth the stories of African movements. I am part of one of those movements and this piece is written from our perspective but it also draws on the voices of the other 12 as well as my experiences with the

interactions between social movements and philanthropy. From this point on, when I say 'I' or 'we', I am identifying myself with those movements.

The movement voice: hopes and fears

First, it's appropriate to declare both my hopes and my fears. I say fears because early on, much of NGO organizing functioned like social movements. It was rooted in the experiences of the people, critical of the state and demanded accountability and transparency. As the importance of this civic role grew on the continent, the significance of resourcing such efforts also grew. It was not long before NGOs (the larger ones at least) were well oiled machines with clear

articulations of their work. Perhaps it's the biased view of an outsider, but something shifted along the way. As NGOs wiggled out of the grip of authoritarian state leadership they moved firmly into the grasp of equally dictatorial philanthropic institutions who made their financial support conditional on set ideas of what NGOs must do and how they must do it. Once outside institutions are conducting research and generating 'best practices' for groups on the ground to implement, then something is clearly unravelling.

I note somewhat bitterly but realistically, that money remains a constraint and truth in most movements, and constitutes a real gravitational force pulling them towards the centre. Why is money instead of human qualities seen as the definition of value, why is this corporatisation of service taking place? Why are movements constantly having to chase after money and funders - what haven't they done to help donors understand?

I am not averse, in principle, to receiving financial support. However, the nature of the relationship within which support is given, the level of independence over decision-making that accompanies it, and the resulting conditions are critical. The introduction of external financial resources into movement activities inevitably affects the relationships of power, decision-making and accountability. Sections of movements may be required to establish themselves as legal entities, with forms of governance and hierarchical staffing systems which differ from how decision-making and power is distributed in the movement as a whole.

The policies of institutional donor funding can also affect a movement's ability to voice its full political position. So, as I said, I fear that if we, as social movements, are coming under the gaze of institutional philanthropy, we might suffer the same fate of bureaucratization and be obliged to bend to the will of funders and the power they wield in the way that NGOs too often have. Conditional funding with all its demands can make us forget to meet four criteria expressed by the acronym 'ours' – (a) owned, (b) useful, (c) robust and (d) simple. I admit that money is important, but it is not central. Energy is the primary force, and money supports the process rather than leading it so it's essential to continue using my

own 'voice' and to have the space to apply my own contextual and historical experiences.

In the words of Choudry and Kapoor (2010) who beautifully articulated the state of knowledge production by movements,

... the intellectual work that takes place in movements frequently goes unseen, as do the politics, processes, sites, and locations of knowledge production and learning in activist settings ... many powerful critiques and understandings of dominant ideologies and power structures, visions of social change, and the politics of domination and resistance in general, emerge from these spaces and subsequently emphasize the significance of the knowledge-production dimensions of movement activism.

Engagements with philanthropic institutions that are not built on this foundational understanding tend to lack the kind of respect for movements that is required for providing meaningful and effective support. Failure to recognise movements for what they are often leads to one-way power flows that do not take account of the agency of activists, seeing them as passive in relation to funders. These power dynamics can easily block a movement's ability to flow and function on the edge. The movement turns away from its path, it becomes institutionally rooted, anonymous and bland, its heart eaten away, or riddled with conflict and confusion.

After explaining to a philanthropic institution the collective ways in which we in our movement work, they were concerned about our lack of a centralized decision-making system. They were accustomed to the model of one director they could identify, parade all over the world and hold accountable. If that was what was needed to access the support, then surely it would be harmless to offer the funders the 'leader' they were asking for...wouldn't it?

Fortunately, I was lucky to have learned from the experience of a fellow movement in Tanzania which had grabbed the attention of funders. They identified a hero from the movement and took them to meetings and conferences around the world to talk about their movement, which seemed ideal for its growth at that moment; it created an opportunity for more funding and profiled the movement in ways that made the state pay attention. Before long though, accountability had shifted away from the movement base to the funders, the core focus of political land rights had been watered down into service delivery and rifts had been created between them and other movements which they had begun to view as competitors for funding. I knew, therefore, that if my well planned and operationalized systems of functioning and decision-making did not suit the funder, the relationship was not going to work.

Long before I came to the notice of philanthropists, my efforts existed and I had various ways of resourcing my work. However, as the grip of capital on our

societies continues to intensify, it is harder to challenge heavily resourced initiatives with limited resources. Ways of resourcing movements therefore require more attention including a deeper look into relationships with institutional philanthropy. So what can be done to support philanthropic institutions and movements and build healthier relationships or to assist those funders who are truly invested in movement support to adjust their systems and approaches accordingly?

Beyond the purview of this research

Mohamed's article engages pan-African scholarship on the relationship between social movements and institutional philanthropy; she discusses the dynamics of institutional philanthropy and its demands on movements and the ways in which they influence activist agendas. Additionally, she explores the different kinds of support that exist for the work of African movements, through collaborations and African philanthropy. She delves deeply into social movements to understand the ways in which they are formed, structured and how decisions are made. In this process she examines i) the nature of movement resourcing (both internal and external to the movement); ii) reporting and accountability; and iii) who is setting the agenda. Following this examination she identifies gaps and shares a brilliant examination of the kinds of support that are currently needed, and central to these are the practices she believes funders should consider supporting. These include:

- political education;
- collaboration, connection and solidarity between movements;
- international advocacy and awareness of the movements and the issues;
- legal protection and support beyond high-profile leaders;
- training in movement building and other contextually relevant issues;
- support for movement leaders to reflect, refresh and learn from others;
- independent accessible resources under movement control or within a collective funding pot;
- support for layers of community organizing that precede movement emergence; and
- learning from movement practice and experience.

Beyond the scope of Mohamed's article, but critical moving forward are the ways in which institutional philanthropy's approaches may be lacking and the ideas and reflections within their institutions that uphold the same kinds of values that social movements are seeking in their societies: treatment of people with respect and dignity, acknowledgement of agency, respect, transparency and accountability. There are institutions that are deliberate and conscious in their efforts and the task for them is to keep pushing themselves further. As for the others that have not begun such work, their challenge is to live by the values they claim to hold and to do the hard work they are asking of those they are supporting. Mohamed makes an important contribution by tasking institutional philanthropy to pay

attention to the ways that movements need to be supported that philanthropy has not yet recognised. What also needs to be brought forward is greater reflection by philanthropy on the ways that it can be harmful to the work of social movements.

What's possible?

Relationships between donors and movements are complex. Can philanthropy support movements in radical and revolutionary ways? Can it offer support in ways that might involve its eventual redundancy, ways that understand that the very dynamic of givers and recipients is itself problematic and while it might be necessary in the short term, it cannot continue to go unchallenged? Timescales present a challenge, as social movements intersect with institutional programming or funding for change. Short-term donor timeframes tend to conflict with longer-term movement agendas and timescales – and, hence, resourcing needs.

Philanthropy organizations typically find measurement a struggle. Most movements commonly deal with 'intangibles' – trust, dignity, hope, etc – factors that enhance 'quality of life', but which do not figure in the economist's toolbox. However, movements are often doing better than they think and their management systems usually capture what is important. There is much scope to develop such management systems, starting from the strengths that movements have.

With all that has been said about the impact institutional philanthropy has had on civic organizing, there is no doubt that there are many ways in which it can advance the work of movements that are not invasive, directive or which detract from their efforts. The questions we should be concerning ourselves with are about how the philanthropic sector can be revolutionized to work in conscious, empathetic and transformative ways. Mahomed's essay points us to some clear patterns and issues. If we operate from the premise that internal reliance and dependence are core to movement resourcing, and that movement support and strength is not just about money, but about a philosophy of independent action, self-reliance and agency, what then are some of the ways in which the philanthropic sector can show up differently in support of civic resistance and action? Below are a few suggestions:

- Meeting movements where they are; institutional philanthropy must take time to understand the movement and its ways of working, decision-making and agenda-setting.
- While there are some easier issues to support, the political and often dangerous work of movements is essential and must be supported without de-politicizing it.

- There must be ways of better supporting movements that do not pit them against each other in competition for resources.
- It is essential for funders to have honest conversations about power and status and to avoid the damaging pretence of equality with the groups they support .
- Funders need to appreciate that those most affected (for example, women who are poor, indigenous, rural, HIV+, LBTI, young, old, those affected by the intersecting oppression of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality and certainly those who challenge the powerful) are also the people with the greatest motivation and clarity to lead transformational change. They have wisdom, courage and creativity that is often unacknowledged and that they draw on to survive and navigate many forms of oppression, and which can become reservoirs of power for change.
- History teaches us that fundamental change is made possible through the sustained demands and organized action of movements over time. One-off funding can't sustain a movement. Long-term commitment is vital.

My story is not one of right and wrong, or assigning blame. It's about the challenges that movements face in advancing our work, acknowledgement of the agency and efforts of communities and a questioning of the relationships with philanthropic institutions in the hope of opening up conversations that can lead to the truly transformative philanthropic models that are not about perpetual dependence but about contributing to sustainable, self-determining efforts by movements. Maybe I am just a dreamer, but I find no shame in believing in possibilities. Philanthropy cannot be the solution for movements and community organizing across the continent, but in the present moment when money exerts a grasp on the levers of change and inequality exists, a better alignment between movements and institutional philanthropy is needed. That is precisely what Mohamed's paper begins to do by identifying the sites of fractures and prompting debate on how this relationship can be examined more closely to advance the agendas of social movements.

About the author

Hope Chigudu is a feminist activist with decades of experience in feminist movement building and feminist leadership development. Over the years, she has honed her skills in organizational development, and the health and well-being of individuals and the collective; a holistic approach where people are the focus and their needs, emotions, and senses are supported and enhanced as outlined in the book she co-authored with Rudo Chigudu: *Strategies for Building Organizations with a Soul*. Hope's homes are Uganda and Zimbabwe.

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