

Developing a Collective Framework and Agenda to Advance Social Justice Philanthropy in Africa and the Arab Region: A Convening

A Reflection Piece Prepared by Alice L. Brown¹

Originally Presented: October 2012, Revised and Expanded: January 2013

“True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Introduction

In October 2012, TrustAfrica, the Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace Working Group and the African Grantmakers Network hosted a convening in collaboration with the Global Fund for Community Foundations and the Arab Foundations Forum. The aim of the convening was to explore a framework to develop and deepen work on social justice philanthropy in Africa and the Arab region. I, along with two others, was asked to prepare a reflection piece for the convening that would be used to provoke and stimulate a discussion amongst the participants. With that mandate in mind, I structured my original contribution around themes pertaining to dilemmas, tensions, observations and warnings in the context of defining and understanding social justice philanthropy in Africa. The following paper is an edited and revised version of that reflection piece.

The Definition Dilemma

In exploring a framework to develop and deepen work on social justice philanthropy in Africa, perhaps we need to start with a definition of “philanthropy” and then move from there. According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, 2011 Edition, philanthropy is “the desire to promote the welfare of others, especially through the donation of money to good causes.”

Against this background, what is social justice philanthropy? How does it differ from what some have called “traditional” philanthropy? Who practices social justice philanthropy? And who gets to decide what it is, what it is not and whether it is actually being practiced? Furthermore, are these definitions and labels even useful and relevant? Should we not simply try to promote giving, in all its various manifestations, shapes and forms, and recognize that individuals and institutions will have

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different reasons for giving, different mandates, different agendas and come from different and varied perspectives? What is “good practice” in the context of social justice philanthropy and who gets to decide? These were but some of the questions that came to mind as I pondered this assignment. And, in my reflections on them, I don’t want to be a theorist or a purist. Moreover, and perhaps, most importantly, I do not want to get tied up and strangled by definitions and debates about definitions.

Yet, although I don’t want to get bogged down in a definitional quagmire, I do believe that it is helpful to have a foundation, a general basic working understanding, of what social justice philanthropy is....or could be. But even as I accept this assertion, I also need to make a confession: in this instance, I feel a bit like the late U.S. Supreme Court Justice Stewart Potter who, in a decision involving obscenity and the limits of freedom of expression, wrote that “hard-core pornography” was hard to define, but “I know it when I see it.” Similarly, I may not be able to provide one clear, concise, all inclusive and generally accepted definition of social justice philanthropy but, I know it when I see it!

By way of illustration: funding in support of the South African-based Section27 and its efforts to help ensure access to quality education for all South Africans is social justice philanthropy. Contributions that assist the Center for Social and Economic Rights in Nigeria to work with communities who have been illegally and forcibly removed from areas in which they have lived for generations is social justice philanthropy. And monies that enable Haki Elimu to facilitate engagement of Tanzanian parents and learners in transforming schools and influencing policy making and practices to advance participation, accountability and transparency is yet another example of social justice philanthropy.

For purposes of this paper then, I will rely on an understanding that the practice of social justice philanthropy recognizes that discrimination and poverty must be addressed and that people who are disadvantaged or underrepresented need to be actively and productively engaged in processes that affect their lives. I will rely on an understanding that social justice philanthropy “...represents a grant making philosophy that advocates principles of social, economic and political justice and directs funding towards work that promotes the collective interest of disadvantaged or underrepresented groups.” “Central to the concept is the belief that poverty is caused by inequitable allocation of resources and access to power in society and that disempowered groups should be given the tools to challenge existing structures as well as voice in decisions that affect their circumstances.” [See Social Justice Philanthropy, An Overview. By Aileen Shaw for The Synergos Institute, August 5, 2002]

Still, even in recognizing that there is a sub-set of philanthropy that distinctly and purposefully works to end injustices, I also know that there is giving that either is, or sees itself as being, neutral or not directed towards changing, fundamentally, the status quo. Yes, there is transformative philanthropy but there is also simple charitable giving.² There are progressive approaches to philanthropy and there are conservative ones. And, perhaps, all are needed. Different responses will come from different sources. Humanitarian aid: is it charity or social justice philanthropy? In a world replete with poverty, deprivation and overwhelming need, in addition to discriminatory practices and beliefs

² I say this without judgment or, with as little judgment as possible. There are, relatively speaking, progressive approaches to philanthropy and conservative approaches and, it must be acknowledged that these types of descriptions and judgments can depend on where one stands on the political spectrum: right of center, center or left of center.

and injustices, can we afford to be overly righteous and judgmental about the types and sub-types of giving?

In the context of this paper, I assume that I am writing for an audience that wants to promote an advocacy campaign -- of sorts -- to proselytize and bring more converts on and from the African continent to fight for social justice and practice social justice philanthropy in Africa. Surely we are not engaged in an effort to form an exclusive, elite, closed club with limited and restrictive membership. Clearly, we want to engage, involve and galvanize as many people as possible; we want to convene a broad gathering. With this in mind, and as we move towards a common definition or understanding of social justice philanthropy, we need to be mindful of the potential problems inherent in doing so. At times, by defining, one excludes. And, on occasion, this may be exactly what one wants and needs to do. But, I suspect that there are also times when we inadvertently close ranks and alienate potential partners and supporters. If the mission is to expand and grow social justice philanthropy in Africa, then we need to recognize the potential pitfalls here.

Consequently, I would argue that we need to approach this campaign without arrogance or high-minded, heavy handedness. We need to be mindful of the different and various manifestations of philanthropy generally and even social justice philanthropy specifically. We need to advance social justice philanthropy without diminishing the charitable work of others. Accordingly, as we try to move towards a common definition or understanding, we need to be broad minded and practical as we mold and shape this consensus. We can discuss, we can debate, and we can argue, cajole and try to persuade, as we should. But we should do so with some humility and grace.

In the final analysis, while recognizing the limits and pitfalls of typecasting and categorizing: I stand by my assertion that it does help to have a working definition or understanding of social justice philanthropy if for no other reason than to know what it is we are advocating for. In knowing this, we may be able to take advantage of opportunities to convince less systematically-focused givers and donors, both individual and institutional, to give greater attention to inequality, inequity and other manifestations of social injustices and their underlying structural origins. With a working definition or understanding, we can advocate for philanthropists and would-be philanthropists to direct their giving at trying to get at the root causes of these disparities and deprivations and not simply the symptoms thereof.

The Roles We Play

Over the course of their lives and careers, many proponents of social justice philanthropy have held different and, sometimes, simultaneous, roles and positions in this grand pursuit of fairness, equality and freedom from want. We have been grant seekers, grant recipients and grant makers. We have been staff members of civil society organizations, managers, board members and advisors. We have been supporters of, and advocates for, social justice causes and organizations that promote social justice goals. Furthermore, we may have also been financial contributors, if not “philanthropists” in the most rarefied and refined meaning of the word, who have supported numerous social justice causes.

With this reality in mind, I would admonish us to be careful that in the midst of this multiplicity of roles and positions, we avoid circumstances wherein we take on too many simultaneous roles or inappropriately assume roles in manners that are contrary to the tenants of social justice. We

should avoid the temptation or urge to orchestrate or dictate agendas that are not ours to control and in ways that are problematic. One of the hallmarks of social justice philanthropy is the empowerment of those most closely affected by an issue or problem seeking to be addressed. Hence, we need to be mindful not to usurp authority, decision-making, control and power from others who are more legitimacy and authentically placed to take on certain aspects of campaigns for social justice. We need to navigate and manage our roles in ways that respect and promote dignity, agency, autonomy and self-sufficiency.

The tension: Local vs. Foreign Sources of Support for Social Justice Philanthropy

The reality is that a significant portion of the funding for social justice philanthropy in South Africa comes from foreign sources and I suspect that this is also the case in other parts of the continent. So, as we call for more African donors to engage in the practice of social justice philanthropy, let us not neglect the continuing need to call upon and work with foreign and international sources of support, existing and potential. This must be done from a practical point of view but also, I would argue, from a political and philosophical one. The reality is that we live in a global village and the connections and interconnections between citizens, civil society organizations, governments and the private sector - - at local, national, regional and transnational levels - - are extensive, deep, complex, complicated, multi-layered and multi-dimensional. Across geographic borders and demarcations of sovereignty, there are, among other things, rights to be protected, responsibility to be taken, liability to be adjudicated, mutual dependency to be acknowledged and solidarity to be promoted. Accordingly, in our mission to develop a collective framework and agenda to advance social justice philanthropy in Africa, let us not inappropriately and hastily limit or curtail our engagements and interactions with international actors who are fellow-travellers or could be convinced to become so.

In fact, there may be lessons to be learned from international and global philanthropies; lessons both on how to....and how not to function as a professional grant maker with a social justice mission. These lessons could be related to the mechanics of grant making, the systems needed to be transparent and accountable and the establishment and maintenance of proper governance structures, to name a few. What are the lessons we can learn from our international partners? Especially in light of declining external sources of support: What practical tasks can we ask our international partners to assist with as we craft our messages and attempt to convince more Africans and those interested in the well-being of Africa that their help and involvement is essential to achieve social justice outcomes?

The Observation and Warning

The observation that I want to address is one centered on impact. In the context of supporting and promoting social justice philanthropy, we need to take on issues involving assessment and evaluation in an informed, enlightened manner. We need to counter some of the more narrow thinking out there that either makes impact analysis simplistic or inappropriately and unproductively punitive. We need to try to counter some of the thinking that leads to overly-ambiguous expectations, incomplete analysis and unrealistically limited, ineffectual and outdated interventions. After all, in the realm of social injustice and human rights violations, we are dealing with deep seeded problems that call for (i) carefully crafted strategies that can and must evolve and adapt over

time as conditions and circumstances change and (ii) long-term commitments to these types of interventions.

In the same vein, those of us who are social justice philanthropists or represent these types of philanthropies need to engage, or continue to engage, in frank, candid and informed conversations with the recipients of our funds. We need to make sure that they understand the purpose of evaluation and impact discussions and requirements. I know, for instance, from my experience at the Ford Foundation that some grantees in the public interest law and human rights community felt that these impact/evaluation processes were diversionary, unnecessarily time consuming and built to penalize. These human rights practitioners and activists just wanted to get on with the important and often difficult work in which they were engaged. With finite human resources, limited – and sometimes, fickle – financial support and compelling, urgent and sometimes, life-threatening circumstances, these practitioners and activists felt hard-pressed to dedicate substantial amounts of time and energy to evaluation and assessment exercises.

In these instances, social justice philanthropists and those who represent them need to help our grantee partners understand the rationale and motives behind our impact and evaluation inquiries and requirements. Here, we need to let them know that we are all on the same team but obviously playing different positions. We need to assure them that these are not trivial punitive processes geared simply to reprimand or revoke funding but rather, analytical tools used to fulfill our fiduciary duties and check regularly to make sure that we are investing in interventions and supporting activities that will move our collective agendas closer to manifestations of social justice. And, in doing this, we also need to make sure that the measurement standards we apply and require are appropriate, fair, realistic and accurately targeted.³

Further, as we promote the legitimacy of evaluation and assessment interventions, social justice philanthropists and their kin need to do their homework too! We need to develop and use meaningful, fair and progressive impact and evaluation tools and we should not engage in useless, meaningless widget counting or exclusively activity-driven evaluation processes. Moreover, we should avoid false or exaggerated attribution. Yes. There have been times when donors have taken more credit than they should for progress or “success” and, in a similar vein, there are times when donors play fast and loose with causation. It is true: ‘Success has a thousand [parents], and failure is an orphan.’

In trying to expand and enhance the field of social justice philanthropy in Africa and gain more converts to the cause, social justice donors and their representatives will also have to be clear that poverty, abuses to the human body and spirit and sundry other societal inequities are long-standing and deeply problems that won’t necessarily be significantly reduced, alleviated or eliminated in the short-term. They won’t be “solved” within a one, two or even, three-year grant cycle. Thus, if we are going to promote social justice philanthropy, then we must also promote patience, commitment and an understanding of the necessity to be involved for the long haul. Unfortunately, there are no “quick-fixes” and we need to speak to donors and their boards and trustees (and those who may be

³ Indeed, I would endorse an approach to impact evaluation wherein social justice philanthropists and their grantee partners work jointly to come up with standards and measurements that are appropriate, fair, realistic and accurately targeted!

recruited to these ranks) in a frank, candid manner about the need to understand the required longitudinal nature of our interventions.

Particularly as we try to persuade those who come from for-profit business backgrounds who may have different, and more constrained, notions of the bottom-line, success, timelines and measurements, it would be prudent to try to preempt misunderstanding and premature disappointment and disillusionment by speaking straightforwardly about realistic outcomes and results that can be measured within short, medium and long-term time frames. Now, that is not to suggest that there is no accountability and benchmarking. That is not to say that there should be no evaluation of the efficacy, effectiveness and merits of interventions. But these processes and concomitant funding decisions must be balanced, fair and realistic.

In bringing these reflections to a close, I will end where I began with a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Those of us who are committed to (a) human rights, fairness and equity and (b) philanthropy that supports social justice must keep these words in mind: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."