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Can
**community
giving
transform
philanthropy?**

New perspectives on funding social change

COMMUNITY PHILANTHROPY IN AFRICA;

THE GIFT THAT KEEPS ON GIVING

The Western narrative on philanthropy does not rhyme with the reality of everyday giving that is embedded in African cultures. A new generation of African researchers and practitioners is reframing the narrative so the communities and organisations are at the heart of a model that embraces agency, ownership and trust. By being accountable to their constituencies instead of foreign funders, communities and organisations on the African continent can grow their own inclusive development.

by Marlies Pilon

As a young girl growing up in Johannesburg, Halima Mahomed witnessed the spirit of philanthropy in her community. In her parent's house, they welcomed strangers and those in need. 'Like a neighbour who needs food or has to go to hospital,' she recalls.

This culture of giving was ingrained in African societies, seen through acts like lending equipment, sharing food and land, and caring for the sick and elderly. The concept of collective care was evident as communities and extended families took care of each other.

Next to *safari* and *hakuna matata*, the most famous word Africa gifted the world is *Ubuntu*. It's part of the Zulu phrase '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*,' meaning 'a person is a person through other people' or 'I am because we are.' In Xhosa, it is usually meant more philosophically; 'the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity.'

Its philosophy feels very similar to that of philanthropy. Philanthropy is a combination of the Greek words '*philos*' (loving) and '*antropos*' (humankind), meaning the love for others and the wish to advance mankind. Who are your loved ones? Who can count on you? And who supports you in times of need?

After completing high school, Mahomed pursued a degree in Development Studies at the University. She later joined the Ford Foundation, where one of the programmes she worked on was '*Strengthening philanthropy in Southern Africa*.' Inspired by this, she decided to learn more about philanthropy and the role of giving for a better and just world. But when she searched for universities in South Africa that offer courses in philanthropy, she hit a wall.

'Twenty years ago, not a single university in Africa offered philanthropy as a field of study. The word itself is imported and not used in the streets. I was raised in a culture of giving, yet there were only a handful of people on the continent with both the experience and academic background in philanthropy.' Despite lacking a supervisor in philanthropy at her university, she turned to colleagues at the Ford Foundation for guidance.

Through her research on philanthropy and social justice in South Africa, she noticed stark differences between Western and African approaches to giving. In the West, philanthropy revolved around monetary donations from affluent individuals or corporations, with a formal and bureaucratic top-down approach.

This has implications for other forms of giving. Mahomed realised that when someone in South Africa wants to establish a philanthropic foundation, they often look to models from Europe and/or the US. 'You look at the hierarchical and bureaucratic models and systems they use. As you incorporate those, you also import a certain worldview which determines who controls the money, decides what gets funded, and how the impact and value are measured.'

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As a result, people on the receiving end often have little say in what is given to them. Colonialism and the dominance of Western discourse on giving further marginalise, ignore, and understudy locally embedded and diverse African giving traditions. Because these everyday forms of giving don't officially 'count,' they are swept under the umbrella of 'informal economy.' This leads to the assumption that they don't exist or hold any real value.

The narrative on the value of African giving is changing. Halima Mahomed is now a TrustAfrica Senior Fellow on African Philanthropy and a consultant and researcher on philanthropy in Africa. Over the past two decades, she has worked alongside a diverse community of researchers, activists, and organisations such as the African Philanthropy Network (APN), TrustAfrica, and the Centre on African Philanthropy and Social Investment (CAPSI).

Together, they are shaping new narratives on African giving that embrace the notions of trust and solidarity. Their goal is to foster a deeper comprehension of both the existing and potential forms of institutionalised African philanthropy, while also recognising the significance of everyday acts of giving. 'The role of institutional philanthropy is to be in service of the agency of justice-based constituencies.'

Besides tending to her two young children, she dedicates much of her time to exploring the various African giving traditions. She critically examines the dynamics of privilege, power, and agency within the existing philanthropic system, acknowledging how these factors paradoxically hinder its goal of creating more equitable societies. While she doesn't discredit official philanthropy, she believes it could have a greater impact and value if approached differently.

This critique is not new, but the window of receptiveness and transforming the concept of giving is more open now. It aligns with current global discussions on the effectiveness and neo-colonial tendencies of international development. Aid has traditionally been presented as an act of kindness, providing economic and social development to Africa.

However, it often comes with strings attached—political influence, economic interests, and resource exploitation. African organisations must meet strict bureaucratic requirements and adhere to formal rules and frameworks to qualify for a specific grant or call. Unfortunately, these requirements often overlook their unique ideas, values, and realities.

Who decides the rules of the game? To receive the gift of development, receivers need to learn to speak the language and models of giving that are alien to their realities. There is a saying in the Netherlands, 'don't look a gift horse in the mouth,' meaning that one cannot critique a gift. Instead, be grateful that something is gifted to you (even if that means you are now the owner of a sick horse with bad breath). A gift is never really just a gift.

Local organisations and civil societies relying on foreign funding often face credibility challenges. They are accountable to

Total cross-border resources in the Global Philanthropy Tracker 2023 represent a combined 61% of the world population and 85% of the world's total GDP. The Global Philanthropy Tracker was launched in April 2023 and is a first-of-its-kind research project. It bridges the gap between an increasing need for philanthropy and the lack of knowledge about the scope of cross-border giving. It puts on the map new kinds of money flows that are normally not as visible. It was created by Una Osili, Associate Dean for Research and International Programs at the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy.



Halima Mahomed

foreign donors rather than their constituents. This allows African leaders to dismiss them as Western mouthpieces, leading to a crack-down on civic space and democratic institutions. The legitimacy of Europe and the US is undermined by Brexit and the growing influence of China, Russia, and far-right movements. Coupled with the ongoing exploitation of natural resources, the situation becomes increasingly complex.

These communities also have ties to the diaspora, which contribute significant funds to the continent. In some cases, such as Zambia, this can make up nearly thirty percent of the national GDP (World Bank 2022). Global remittances in 2020 exceeded the combined amount of official development assistance (ODA) and foreign direct investment (FDI) by three times (UN 2020).

It's not just about the amount of money sent back 'home,' but the impact it has on people's lives. Almost half of all global remittances go directly to rural families who have the autonomy to decide how to use it. In contrast, international development assistance is often inefficient. Only ten percent reaches the intended communities and local activists due to bureaucratic processes and intermediaries.

Preserving the integrity of international aid is crucial to serving the needs of people, rather than the interests of countries in the Global North. With Africans now holding influential positions in global philanthropy, there is an opportunity to challenge the system.

Research by Mahomed, in collaboration with TrustAfrica in Senegal, shows that everyday forms of African giving are deeply embedded in social relationships. These forms foster agency, trust, and accountability, which foreign aid organisations and philanthropic foundations cannot replicate.

Mahomed: 'It's important to recognise that there is already significant funding on the continent, supporting our priorities through philanthropy. The key to institutionalised philanthropy in Africa lies not in increasing the amount of money, but in the principles behind its allocation.'

'We have African institutions like TrustAfrica, Africa Philanthropy Network (APN), and the Kenya Community Development Foundation (KCDF) driving progress towards a more equitable continent. Some began with international funding but now have a blend of international, national, and local resources. KCDF even assists communities in establishing their endowments.'

For over a year, Mahomed, in collaboration with TrustAfrica, Urgent-Action Fund Africa, and other organisations, has initiated a collaborative effort to unite individuals in Africa's civil society and philanthropic sector. The objective is to present a fresh narrative framework and guiding principles for the advancement of Pan-African and feminist philanthropies.

These were discussed during the East African Philanthropy Network in Zanzibar in July 2023. Shaun Samuels also hosted a workshop at the conference in Zanzibar and recalls the refreshing atmosphere from his home in South Africa. 'This meetup was unique,' says the Executive Director of SGS Consulting.

'We focused on systems change, greater youth involvement, feminist philanthropy, and what we mean by shifting power. It emphasised our authentic African values, recognising our values, relying more on research and writing, and finding innovative ways to collaborate. The idea of leveraging existing resources instead of constantly seeking funding from foreign sources set the tone in Zanzibar.'

Samuels is highly experienced in establishing community foundations, developing support organisations, and addressing the challenge of fostering community philanthropy. Southern African community foundations actively empower grassroots communities to leverage their resources for sustainable development. Trust and a deep understanding of local communities are key for community foundations to inform their programming effectively.

For Samuels, traditional philanthropy, while well-intentioned, often falls short by lacking community ownership and the opportunity for social-driven development. 'Community philanthropy, on the other hand, is a game changer. It encourages communities to utilise their existing resources to tackle their challenges, including money, time, skills, volunteering, networks, and trust.'

Giving for a more just world is a fascinating way to explore societal questions. Is the goal of development to become self-sufficient? Is philanthropy merely a temporary solution to systemic unfairness? What motivates giving? Samuels says it is important to understand African giving through the lens of reciprocity.

There is an element of reciprocity in the sort of giving that builds trust and glues communities together, he says. 'That is the most impactful outcome in and of itself. He highlights the concept of 'Black Tax' in South Africa. 'Imagine you have just finished university with financial help from the whole community or a 'super granny.' Your white friends will plan their futures in the context of their privilege.'

'But as a black person, you can't think along those lines because you come from an extended family that expects you to give back, just as they gave to you. In other words, you have to look and give back while advancing your career. You have to help. This raises the question, is it a duty or is it being philanthropic? We are giving language to our African forms of giving because all giving, in whatever form, is giving with love.'

Both Samuels and Mahomed underscore that changing the narrative is not about downplaying one form of development or philanthropy over the other. Rather, it is about recognising and validating the multitude of everyday practices of giving that are already present, strengthening each other. One problematic issue Samuels sees is community philanthropy supporting local NGOs.

'Because there is still so much distrust around the management of resources and corruption, it would depend on the attitude of the local NGO if a community is willing to contribute. It is what the community perceives in the lifestyles of the NGO leadership and staff, and how they are spending resources, that often reinforce negative stereotypes.'

That is why community foundations are important as they are place-based. They focus on supporting communities to unlock their assets and to use these assets to leverage giving by vertical, formal sources. Community foundations are equipped to approach businesses and high-end donors to encourage them to co-invest with communities in local development. For instance, they can say this community took matters into its hands and built the building, now they need money for the roof to complete the project and ask for your help.

To be sure, Mahomed says this new narrative is not just about some tweaks to an existing system. 'Philanthropic institutions might say *okay, we are shifting power. I am changing my grant term from one year to three years.* Or they call it 'decolonising' when they move from project grants to proposal grants, or make grants a little bit more flexible.'

'But the underlying system stays the same. The donor party usually still decides what the problem is, what the theory of change looks like, and what the rules of the game are. All those things are not done together with the constituents in the project who have expert knowledge in their lives. That is what needs to change.'

The world may have heard of *Ubuntu*, but the global conversation should focus on its specific cultural shapes and forms. 'Words like *'undugu'* and *'ujamaa'* represent notions of brotherhood and support. *'Aaro'* refers to pooled labour during harvest or building time, while *'ukusisa'* describes the time-limited lending of cattle with the option to keep the offspring. All these forms of giving enable neighbours to build upon what they have received from others.'

This way, African philanthropy has the potential to add value to the current official giving system by infusing it with notions of solidarity, ownership and trust. Community foundations and community philanthropy bring communities together to address local issues. Through this process, they become more aware of their rights and their collective power.

Grassroots organisations are also joining this process, becoming proactive in demanding rights and holding local governments accountable. When local NGOs are rooted in place and accountable to their loyal following, they can rebuild trust and credibility for a strong civil society.

Shaun Samuels

