



PHILANTHROPIC PRIVILEGE AND CONSTITUENCY AGENCY

**Ideologically Rethinking
the Role of Institutional Philanthropy**



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Abstract

Philanthropy is intrinsically linked to ideology – about how the world works, about belief systems, about the role of philanthropy itself. Accordingly, transforming the system of institutional philanthropy demands an ideological underpinning, not just a practice-based one. The last few years have seen several narratives around philanthropic transformation emerge. This paper reflects on these in relation to African philanthropic narratives, explores some of the tensions and the changes in the institutional philanthropy field, and identifies some implications for how these play out on the African continent. Ultimately, while recognizing that some significant shifts have indeed taken place in the sector, the paper (i) reflects that the majority of institutional philanthropy has yet to grapple with the ideological aspects underpinning transformation of the system, (ii) argues that an ideological reconceptualization of institutional philanthropy's role, one that positions its privilege in service of the individual and collective agency of its constituencies, is critical to the transformation of the sector, and (iii) then reflects on what agency as a lens requires of the institutional philanthropy sector.

Keywords: Institutional philanthropy; Africa; privilege, power, agency, positionality, ideological transformation

Preface

I have had the privilege of spending more than two decades working for, consulting to, and building knowledge on philanthropy, both internationally and on the African continent, and while my experiences over the years recognize the important social justice gains that have emerged through philanthropic support, they have increasingly raised some very fundamental questions around the status quo within the institutional philanthropy sector, the privilege we hold and the need for a fundamental revisioning of the role of institutional philanthropy vis-a-vis its constituencies.

As a TrustAfrica Senior Philanthropy Fellow through the TrustAfrica Shaping the Future Fellowship, I have been provided with an opportunity to draw on my personal and professional experiences, to interrogate both lived experience and observed reality and to bring together reflections that have emerged out of multiple conversations with colleagues and friends, both within the African continent and outside of it, regarding some of the critical questions and issues in philanthropy today. I recognize that I am part of the privileged sector I reflect on in this paper and that my own privilege and positionality¹ in turns shapes my reflections and may even limit them. I put forward these reflections in the spirit of humility and with the aim of adding to the discourse on what transformation of philanthropy could look like - and I welcome the opportunity to discuss, debate and deepen the reflections in this paper. I can be reached at halimamahomed@gmail.com

Two papers have been produced under this Fellowship; this paper, reflecting on the role of philanthropic privilege vis-a-vis constituency agency and a second, titled, [Our Giving: African Philanthropy and the Narrative Divides](#), together with contributions to a joint publication, [Understanding Resilience in International Development](#)². I take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to TrustAfrica for the time and space to explore these ideas in more depth. While this work is supported by TrustAfrica, all opinions are my own.

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¹ Positionality is the social and political context that creates your identity in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability status. Positionality also describes how your identity influences, and potentially biases, your understanding of and outlook on the world. (Dictionary.com)

² Knight, B. Sahai, C. et al (2022)

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Introduction

Philanthropy is intrinsically linked to ideology – about how the world works, about belief systems, about the prioritization of the individual or the collective, about the role of philanthropy itself. We see it in the worldview of *ubuntu*³, collective humanity, reflected in everyday giving and solidarity and we see it in the multiple manifestations of institutionalized giving that we call the philanthropic sector. Philanthropy can be – but is not always – a good thing. Conservative funding for right wing agendas is also philanthropy, as are good intentions that exacerbate injustice. The why and the how of philanthropy both matter and they are inextricably linked.

The progressive institutional philanthropy sector – here I refer to the legally constituted institutions that deploy private resources to societal welfare – have helped to secure many gains towards a more just society. These gains cut across geography and issue - and we must acknowledge the value this sector has brought towards achievements to advance a more just world but, as a system, it is also doing significant harm as it pursues its goals. As a sector, we must step back and reflect on whether the dominating institutional philanthropic premise – its worldview and its understanding of its role - is in fact perpetuating a more unjust society, even while attaining progress in particular areas.

The last few years have seen several narratives around philanthropic transformation emerge. This paper reflects on them, explores some of the tensions and the changes in the field, and identifies some implications for how these play out on the African continent. Ultimately, while recognizing that shifts have indeed taken place in the sector, it argues that a reconceptualization of institutional philanthropy's role, one that positions its privilege in service of individual and collective agency⁴, is critical to transformation of the sector and to the ideological change needed to make this meaningful.

The macro context around civic space

Any discussion of the philanthropic sector must be located within the context of the moment. It is a context that includes increasing threats to the broader civic space on a number of fronts⁵, especially to progressive and rights-based agendas for change, as well as to those leading these efforts. A context where the Covid-19 pandemic has compounded multiple injustices, deepened inequality and provided an excuse for further clamping down on rights to expression and dissent. Global governance systems are ostensibly increasing spaces for civic participation in discussions but simultaneously narrowing the actual influence of lived

3 Drawn from the Zulu idiom *Umntu ngumntu ngabantu* which means you are because I am - in Aina & Moyo (eds) (2013).

4 When talking about agency, I refer to the ability of people to make their own decisions about the kinds of lives they want to lead and the existence of the enabling circumstances for those decisions to be taken forward.

5 The latest Civicus Monitor (2022) reflects that only 3.1% of the world's population live in countries with an 'open' civic space.

experience in agenda setting; and the global politics of power and economics of extraction are reinforcing development divides rather than addressing their root causes. In addition, significant long-term philanthropic support for a conservative agenda is rolling back hard-won rights and the role of high-net-worth philanthropy is increasingly being questioned – from inordinate influence on global issues in some cases to ceding power upwards to the State in others – all with significant repercussions for progressive civic action.

It is, however, also a context in which progressive change is increasingly being led by those outside of the professionalized civic spaces – by local organizing fora and movements that have been claiming ground and voice in agenda setting, and which have been serving as sites of collective agency for those most affected by injustice. These are much more vocal about the contradictions and limitations of the existing ‘development and aid’ architecture and are demanding alternative forms of engagement. New configurations of rooted civic alliances are emerging, calling for change from the ground up and are forging broader and multifaceted strategies to influence socio-economic and political agendas - and we are seeing some shifts in support of these from within institutionalized philanthropy.

Interrogating the limitations of the dominant discourse

On civic space

Intuitively, we all know that anyone can engage in civic action. Formal civic institutions (what we refer to as the non-profit sector) are one small part of civic space which in fact, in Africa, is dominated by people-led organizing - organizing that is taking place at many different fora and levels, from movements, civic committees, voluntary associations, mutual aid networks, community organizing hubs and village associations, among others. These civic groups engage in multiple ways – protests, research, advocacy, welfare support and many things in between – sometimes opposing official systems, sometimes collaborating with them and at other times, doing both simultaneously. Across the African continent, we have seen people-led mobilizations play a vital role - in providing much needed safety nets and in offering solidarity action, but also in raising the issues, voices and concerns that often get lost when mediated through the lenses of formal civil society – and in leading efforts for systemic change.

On the African continent, popular movements for change have long served as sites for a more just society, but many of them have not been visible outside the continent or recognized as movements within a Northern framing. The #GambiaHasDecided movement was central to ousting a long-serving dictator. The Y’En A Marre movement was instrumental in getting the Senegalese president to withdraw proposed constitutional reforms that would extend his power. Lucha, a movement in the Democratic Republic of Congo advocates for social justice and accountability in a context where peoples voices on these issues are being suppressed.

The Amadiba Crisis Committee in Xolobeni, South Africa has been countering extractive sector dispossession in the midst of targeted assassinations. These and many others are representations of people's agency and power, and it is important not only that we begin to recognize the role they play, but also reflect on institutional philanthropy's role in relation to them.⁶

We should not, however, get stuck on "mass movements" as the only other occupant of civic space. Movements are often preceded by significant levels of local community organizing and are built on years of activism by constituency leaders and on-the-ground networks in a diversity of fora – they are one part of, and one manifestation of, civic action. Philanthropic discourses that jump from highly centralized non-profit organizations to people-led mass movements, while discounting the larger system of civic action that exists around these are not just problematic, but harmful to social change.

It might seem obvious now, given the increased philanthropic attention being paid to movements, and the corresponding emergence of shifts in approach and/or practice by some philanthropies, but over the years, the majority of institutional philanthropy has taken a very narrow view on the civic space – and specifically on which parts of the civic space to support. In large part, we have prioritized support for a neatly packaged idea of civic space - formations which are registered, professional, often hierarchically organized, with high-profile boards and strict systems of upward governance and accountability. These are formations that are in our mold, which leave us with a sense of comfort and highly managed risk. We know they will rock the boat, but not too much; we know that their strategies are within what we deem acceptable modes of opposition, and their risk profile (and consequently ours) is limited; we know we can get the professional reports and audited financials that serve as our hallmarks of trust and, we know we can often exert some form of influence – directly or indirectly - on what they can and can't do through how we structure our support.

And so, too often, we have tended to prioritize form over function⁷, seeking to professionalize modes of dissent and resistance to forms that are acceptable within our constructs or that align with our strategic plans and theories of change. The mechanics of funding often limit and dictate not just the nature of the spaces we support but also the nature of activities that constitute progressive action. Instead, we should first be asking what are the spaces that have grounded legitimacy with those bearing injustice, and then explore how to first support those as the basis for agenda setting, irrespective of institutional form - rather than designing strategies for change based on narrow conceptions of appropriate civic formations. Where we begin matters.

On narratives of philanthropy

Philanthropy in Africa is multifaceted. Institutional philanthropy – the formal, legally constituted professional entities, are but one small part of a much larger philanthropic sphere that is dominated by individual giving.

⁶ Mahomed (2020)

⁷ Acknowledgement to Graham Philpott at the Church Land Project for this framing.

The latter is embedded in everyday life, rooted in African identity and broad relations of affinity, and founded on notions of solidarity, reciprocity and mutuality, reflected in a sense of collective humanity: ubuntu. Here, it is not just the gift that counts. The act of giving has significant value in social cohesion and agency. Relegated to the traditional/indigenous realms of discussion – these everyday manifestations of philanthropy range from individual to collective, from emergency support to highly organized strategic giving, over a wide range of mechanisms, to kin and strangers, inclusive of giving that includes much more than money. This giving often happens in a context of resource scarcity rather than excess. While these manifestations dominate African giving, they are rarely recognized in a Northern discourse that focuses predominantly on top-down, hierarchical, institutional giving. On the African continent, these manifestations sit alongside the more formal, institutional giving mechanisms that are molded on Northern models - and any discussion of African philanthropy or the changes that need to happen must be grounded in this multiplicity. It is thus vital that we recognize and contextualize our discussions of institutional philanthropy within this broader philanthropic narrative.

A few important points need to be highlighted here. The first is that this framing need not be specific to the African continent, and we must consider the need to explore other cultural and indigenous worldviews that may align with the notions of collective humanity, solidarity and reciprocity as fundamental underpinnings of social identity⁸ but have not been reflected on from a philanthropic lens. These, too, need to be part of a redefined global narrative of philanthropy that includes the multiple philanthropic manifestations that exist across the globe.

The second issue is that discussions on philanthropy tend to use the term philanthropy as shorthand for institutional philanthropy. As a consequence, the discourse, and critiques about how to support the sector and what needs to change within it wrongly assume that these can be generalized across all types of philanthropy. The everyday manifestations of giving in Africa don't need to be changed and professionalization is not always the answer; in fact, it may risk destroying them. Instead, the social role they play and the way the formal sector builds on and connects with these roles and practices needs to be better understood.

The third issue here is that, even when talking about institutional philanthropy in Africa, we have to recognize that the sources of funding are not always from the continent. While the majority of African philanthropy institutions are High Net Worth (HNW), family, corporate and community philanthropies who derive their assets or income from African individuals or African-owned entities, the last few decades have also seen the establishment of several private and community philanthropy entities that are led by Africans but have been endowed by or rely primarily on international funding sources, or have a significant percentage of international funds in their portfolio. Led by Africans, premised on African priorities and closer to the ground, many of these seek to work in ways that are contrary to the dominant philanthropic approach and are forging new paths to build solidarity through philanthropy. They are independent entities in theory, but in practice, several find that they also need to constantly navigate the issue of international donor influence on their own

8 Ncgoya & Mottiar in Mottiar & Ncgoya (eds) (2016).

agency.

Lastly, even in the institutional philanthropy sector, geography alone is not a determinant of good practice. While we are seeing efforts by some professionalized African philanthropies to approach their work from a perspective rooted in agency and solidarity with African agendas, a significant percentage of the formal philanthropy institutions on the continent have internalized approaches, mechanisms, norms and standards from the global North that directly or indirectly reinforce inequity, even while trying to address it. There is a long list of inherited approaches and practices that many stand firmly behind, without giving enough attention to the negative repercussions of these on the issues we believe in and on those who are suffering the brunt of those issues – and without critically examining what flexibility we might have as independent institutions, situated within different legal regimes, to do things differently.

For the most part, our practice is modelled on bureaucratic systems that place inordinate hardship on those doing the work of social change on the ground. Many demand systems of accountability that center funder interests and efficiency; prioritize processes that are not rooted in the priorities of those living the injustice and narrow what is seen as the legitimate civic space. Too often, these ways of working entrench existing power and inequity⁹ even while advancing programs to address the same.

The reflections on the institutional philanthropic system in this paper, therefore, are not necessarily geographically divided. Instead, they are based on ideological approaches to the role of philanthropy, and we must be cognizant that, while we often easily critique Northern philanthropic models, we must also acknowledge our own complicity in replicating them on the African continent.

On the dominant narratives of philanthropic transformation

Critiques of institutional philanthropy have increased in the last few years and the flaws of the system and its role in social change have been more widely publicized. While some critiques have been focused on practice, others argue that the dominant approaches, structures and relationships in philanthropy have either severely limited the advancement of a more just society or have deeply exacerbated injustice - and propose remedies for this to change. Calls for decolonization, localization, shifting power, 'Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), trust-based philanthropy and countering white supremacy now pervade progressive philanthropy conversations and have led to significant exploration and introspection on the 'how' of philanthropy. Looking at the emerging discourse on these, a few broad issues need to be highlighted.

First, these narratives of change rest on the incorrect assumption noted above that all philanthropy needs to be changed and don't distinguish between the formal, institutional philanthropy sector and organic everyday philanthropy. And so, we easily talk about decolonizing philanthropy as a blanket requirement without making

⁹ Mahomed & Bofu-Tawamba (2022)

explicit that the organic systems of African giving were never colonized in the first place – and thus have no need of being decolonized. Likewise, we talk about shifting power in philanthropy without recognizing how African philanthropic systems are rooted in solidarity and often serve as forms of building power and agency. We talk about localization of aid and philanthropy without acknowledging that these organic systems already work from the ground up and of DEI without reflecting that African giving systems are reflective of a deep democratization of philanthropy. We talk about how white supremacy deeply influences philanthropic systems without reflecting that organic African giving systems are rooted in centuries of culture and practice and that the gaze of white supremacy is not embedded in its core - but in the external marginalizing of its relevance or attempts to professionalize it. We talk about trust-based philanthropy without acknowledging that organic systems of African giving are rooted in trust-based networks. In failing to distinguish, we reinforce dominant narratives of philanthropy and further erase or relegate these organic expressions. So, we need to be explicit in our conversations – that when we are talking about these terms and the changes needed, that we are indeed referring to a specific kind of formalized, hierarchical segment of philanthropic giving – and not the whole.

Second, in practice, several of these discourses still center philanthropy and philanthropy's narratives of what change looks like. With some exception, many of these focus on changes within the existing system without questioning the foundations of that system and whether a new system is needed. To address the heart of the critiques, the centering must begin with the external goals – around personal and political agency and organizing power of the constituencies we support – and then reflect on how our internal philanthropic systems need to be dismantled and reconfigured to be in solidarity with that.

Third, we must recognize the level of appropriation taking place. These discourses are being used ubiquitously but, they are not always accompanied by in-depth examination and realignment of philanthropic approaches, structures and practices - and so we see an increase in performative philanthropy¹⁰ – where philanthropic institutions are committing in principle to progressive change agendas but with limited concomitant action.

Fourth, for the most, these discourses are limited in reflecting the nuance of multiple and intersectional identities of philanthropy professionals and the implications of this for how power is managed within philanthropic systems. Geography, race, class, and/or gender tend to take on oversimplified binary positions in the philanthropic transformation agenda without enough exploration of how these identities intersect or how affiliation with one of these identities does not automatically imply subscription to a transformed philanthropic approach - or to an inherently harmful one.

Fifth, those who hold money and power – at multiple relative levels - are still deciding what the parameters of change look like and then inviting others into those conversations, which they have often had no or limited influence in designing. This inherently limits the nature and scope of the transformations that are taken forward. On the African continent, this dynamic becomes more complex. There are those who replicate this

10 Ali-Mohammed (2021)

process themselves with their own constituencies. On the other hand, African philanthropies are still too often being invited into global philanthropy conversations where parameters of change have already been set.

It is time for progressive African philanthropies to assert narratives of change that are owned by us and meaningful to our context. These narratives must center on organizing our power and emphasizing our agency. We can no longer look at transformation of philanthropic and development agendas in a framework where those who hold power determine what power is shared, decolonized or localized, and the extent to which this translates into practice. We must focus on pan-African philanthropic fora that decentralize money as a source of coercive power and root power in our constituencies as primary agents of determining what change is needed.¹¹ Based on this centering, we then need a critical examination of the dominant narratives of philanthropic transformation to reflect what elements within these align with our own narratives and what elements are harmful to it.

Lastly, for the most part, the development of these discourses remain primarily within the professionalized philanthropy and non-profit sector. Constituency movements, communities and activists – those who carry the burden of these systems – must have a bigger hand in shaping these discourses. Moving forward African narratives of change requires a concerted and politicized Pan-African approach which bridges the disconnects between local, national and continental, where we locate agendas for transformation in the realities of the constituencies we are meant to be working for.

On the language of ‘local’

What all of these discourses have in common is the emphasis on the ‘local.’ I am not talking here about the localization discourse, which is a specific framing– highly contested - to devolve implementation of international aid. Suffice to say here that many of the critiques on localization raised in the humanitarian discourse apply in the philanthropic sector and there is a real danger that we have co-opted a term, the implications of which can easily reinforce inequality and preserve the status quo.

Beyond the critiques, however, there is some recognition that local is a relative term and needs some qualification here.¹² It can mean recipient country/geography or recipient population/community, but even in this recognition, there is still a neutrality to the term that can do much harm. There is power at all levels of society, including at the local level and our discourse needs to take more note of how the priorities for change don’t just need to emerge from the local level but need to emerge in ways that are informed by, and advance the rights of, those that society has most marginalized, silenced and excluded - at whatever level of local is being discussed.

11 Mahomed & Bofu – Tawamba (2022).

12 Peace Direct (2022)

So, if our goal is that development be locally led, who are we really talking about? How do we think about possibilities of elite capture at the local level or the role of patriarchal systems in influencing local decisions? How do we integrate cultural norms, the racial dynamics of power or dominant economic worldviews into who makes local decisions and how? What does it mean to prioritize the local when entrenched systems of caste, ethnic and/or class exclusion provide very real barriers to inclusion? Or when citizenship and nationalism dominate who gets preference in local agendas? The ways in which the terminology of localizing is being used in our discourse implies a homogeneity in levels of power, deprivation and access (or lack of it) to resources at the local level in relation to the entities and systems doing the "localization." We know that this is not the case. Nuance is vital in our discourse.

Among many implications, one is that we now talk about the power and potential of local philanthropy as the solution - and yes, it is absolutely essential that we talk about it and advance it, but we do so in a contextual vacuum that (a) assumes that all local philanthropy will operate differently and (b) does not reflect a deck that is stacked against that potential. Now, the argument for the value and impact of African philanthropy differs, depending on which local we are talking about. At an institutional level, we make the argument that philanthropic institutions led by Africans are more in touch with the realities of the issues and challenges and are better able to be led by those they are trying to support. We can argue that they themselves know first-hand the harmful effects of dominant development paradigms and it is a natural consequence that their practice would be different.

However, at the heart of philanthropic transformation is the issue of enabling space for people's power, voice and agency, and while geography brings us one step closer, it is no guarantee that the frameworks and systems that stifle power, voice and agency will be automatically addressed. It is the philosophy and approach behind the philanthropy that matters. African philanthropic institutions are not homogeneous and can vary significantly in their relationship to issues of power and agency. We have many African philanthropic institutions that have adopted harmful development theories, approaches and practices from the global North, and philanthropic entities that do more damage in how they attain their funds than the good they do through their philanthropic gifts, or that adopt a position of neutrality and devolve power upward to the state, in their own interests, but not necessarily in those of broader society.

We are, however, also seeing an increasing number of African philanthropic organizations being unequivocal about how their practice represents an ideology that is different; an increasing number of institutions that are committed to engaging with those they serve on the basis of trust, solidarity and dignity; institutions being very vocal about the inequities of the dominant development system. We are seeing an increase in constituency-led institutions that, through their ways of working, are serving as critical spaces for ownership, voice and agency. And we are seeing a small but increasing number of institutions broadening their support to include, or ally with, a wider range of civic actors than the existing development space has traditionally been comfortable with. It is here we find a space for supporting people and fora that are not in our professional development mold - movements, civic committees, community organizing and other activists-led formations. Many of these entities are still a work in progress; they are not perfect, but they do represent a building of

alternatives – and in doing so they are showing up the glaring fissures in the dominant philanthropic systems. It is here that one avenue of potential change exists – and in the process, as these increase, the possibility of dismantling existing harmful development systems.

A deck stacked against the ‘local’: recognizing the systemic constraints

We should not, however, make the mistake of romanticizing this in a context where the deck is significantly stacked against us. We cannot talk about the potential and influence of local philanthropy to “decolonize” or develop new systems without also talking about the overwhelming influence of the global philanthropy and aid system that is still in ascendance. Any conversation about supporting space for local philanthropy must as the flip side of that coin, talk about the harmful ways in which the international philanthropy, aid and development systems, limit the impact of the local. For instance, with majority of international funding to Africa still being directed to and through institutions that are located outside the continent,¹³ and given power to make decisions on our behalf, local philanthropy faces a momentous challenge.

We cannot talk about the potential of local money, organizations and agendas while the majority of international philanthropy puts its money into global north organizations that develop global agendas and frame global discourses. We cannot talk about how local philanthropy can support grounded agendas without recognizing that the international development and philanthropy systems have already decided the frameworks of the global problems and how they should be addressed – from women’s rights to climate justice to illicit financial flows, to the very notion of the question “development for what?”. Support directed at the local level allows limited power to decide between a set of alternatives, but very little agency to reimagine new alternatives. The international philanthropic system, even when it is being progressive, is rigged. We need to have international and local philanthropic investments in constituency-led global south narratives, discourses and knowledge-building that influence the framing of global agendas, not a tweaking of western narratives to make them global.

There is another related issue we need to reflect on. While we are seeing a swing to focus on local solutions, too often, we see a focus on the local in ways that place the burden of change at the local and restrict its influence at the local level and without enough discussion on how to connect those to broader systemic changes needed in ways that are meaningful to those we are meant to serve - not in ways that we, the philanthropic and development sectors, deem appropriate. The linkages between these are not prioritized enough. In the push for the local in these ways, majority of our philanthropic privilege, and the system that maintains it, has remained untouched.

¹³ Layode, M, Schweir, J & Hayi-Charters, J (2021).

Reflecting the shifts in the system

Today, if one were to look at the current discourses of philanthropic change, it would seem as though there are significant shifts taking place in the philanthropic system and that these are taking place at considerable scale. Very few sectoral conversations happen without discussions on one/more of decolonization, localization, DEI, trust-based philanthropy, movement building and shifting power. While we are seeing some changes in practice, in many cases, there is an element that is missing: transforming our philanthropic sector is both political and personal – yes, it is about transforming institutional systems and practices but it's also about fundamentally challenging values, culture, worldviews and beliefs underpinning these. The work of the former cannot happen in depth without the latter. When it comes to changing practice, we have to be careful that we aren't simply tweaking individual practices without addressing the deep-seated ideological reasons why transformation in our philanthropic system is needed. So, is the sector really changing? The answer is a complex one, and I will try to reflect on three broad types of changes in the system, while bearing in mind that nuance and complexity cut across these, and that they are not mutually exclusive.

First, we must acknowledge that there have been spaces of fundamental change in the philanthropic system. We now see a cluster of philanthropic institutions, in different parts of the globe, who hold a drastically different view on how the philanthropic system should work; whose fundamental premise is to work in ways that are in solidarity with those who live injustice; institutions with a fundamentally different positioning of their privilege. We see this in some feminist funds, in some racial equity funds, in some community philanthropies, in some movement funds, in some activist-led participatory funds and in other configurations of solidarity / agency-based resourcing. Ideologically different, many of these are walking the path by doing it; there is no one size approach or practice.¹⁴ These institutions are still a minority in the overall scheme, but it is important that our discussions acknowledge their existence and that we do much more to focus on learning from them, understanding how they work and understanding the ideological and value basis upon which their work is positioned.

Second, we must recognize that change is neither linear nor uniform and different institutions may initiate one or more of a series of changes, some simultaneously and some iteratively. Many philanthropic institutions now include a diverse mix of individuals and how any single individual's combinations of identities play out in decision-making varies considerably, sometimes reinforcing inequities, sometimes addressing them and sometimes doing both simultaneously. The positionality of individuals with decision making power is an important factor to consider here. Some institutions may give considerable leeway in decision-making to programming staff on the ground and/or hire expertise from the civic space in programming roles or include specific constituencies in their staffing - and this has significant influence on the strategies and theories of change and sometimes, even on who is brought into the funding room. Some have created advisory boards, consultative committees and other participatory practices to help inform how they understand issues. All of

¹⁴ Sigamoney, V (2022)

these are progressive changes, and absolutely necessary ones. And while these changes have, in many cases, brought about shifts in programming, these reconfigurations are too often still happening in ways that allow the institution to remain fundamentally unchanged in how it sees its philanthropic role and that, too often, still mediates (albeit to different degrees) the voices of the constituencies they serve, even when they are part of the philanthropic system.

Looking at the third level of change, there have been specific shifts in practice in certain parts of the sector. The Covid pandemic contributed to the loosening of restrictions in many organizations. These have included one or more of: simpler application and reporting requirements, loosening of grant conditions, longer grant timeframes, some additional flexibility in grant funds and some moves to more operational/general support and more leeway in program approaches, targets and timelines within some operational foundations, as well as the provision of additional emergency funding by many philanthropies. Some of these changes were crisis responses and in force only at the peak of that crisis while others have remained as longer-term ways of working. All of these changes are important, but they are only one set of the broader changes that civil society has long been demanding. As important as they are, addressed in isolation, they tweak at the margins while leaving our privilege untouched.

The reality is that while these changes are valuable, too often, they occur after the fact:

After our philanthropic institutions have decided how they define collective good in society and what theory of change will achieve that.

After the decisions about what issues and levers of change are most deserving of attention.

After the strategy development processes and formulations of what constitutes impact.

After the decisions on what kinds of civic space are the bearers of that change and deserving of - or professionalized enough - to support.

After the biggest decisions have been made; then we adapt our approaches and practices to provide ease, flexibility and trust – which we reflect as significant progress. These parameters of change are defined. And they are significantly limited.

In other words, while acknowledging there have been some important examples of progress on substantive and transformative changes, many funders have sought to address visible practices without dealing with the fundamental contradictions within the system; and so, they still retain control.

I want to delve here into some of the ways in which this manifests in practice:

We focus on extending the term of the grant from one year to two or three without meaningful conversations about what support over a much longer-term horizon looks like and how our position of privilege can be used to advance that change agenda over time. For the latter requires that we have some certainty of commitment to the cause at hand – but we know from experience that in our constantly changing institutional strategic processes, long-term support at the outset, even in principle, is not always a feasible assumption for many funders.

We hold one-off /sporadic consultative meetings to inform our strategic thinking but stop short of developing embedded mechanisms where strategies can be co-created with our constituencies or where those constituencies can continue to question whether our eventual refined and consolidated strategies are still in touch with their realities and the changes they want to see – both in what we fund and how we do so.

We shift additional resources from projects to flexible or general support, but we do this primarily with those who align with our theories of change, whose work builds into our impact metrics and who often represent hierarchical, professional institutional structures that we are comfortable with. Many radical changes are emerging from civic spaces that are not part of the professional non-profit sector, but we still have not explored enough what it means to support those spaces as sites of agency or what it means to support diverse civic action in ways that connect and build, rather than segmenting based on form. To do this, we need to consider whose voices and perspectives are excluded by our processes.

We take on the localization framing by setting aside funds for small grants, but then many times overwhelm them with bureaucracy and tag on capacity building that is geared to helping them fulfil our requirements. In most cases, these ‘localization’ pots seldom integrate our support on the ground with the support we provide to higher-level institutions, and, in terms of funding scale, they are rarely more than a small percentage of our overall spend. We put some money into participatory funds, collaborative pots, “locally controlled” pooled funds and “experimental” localization initiatives that seek to put resources and decision-making into the hands of people on the ground, but when the majority of our budgets are still programmed in ways that entrench our own narratives and reinforce the dominant system, letting go of a small percentage is only limited progress.

We “experiment” with inclusive mechanisms but if we are committed to inclusion as a principle, then experimentation must make way for fully committing. Moreover, we couple experimentation with evidence building that is framed through our own lenses of progress and impact rather than asking those we are supporting to define progress.

We say that we commit to more inclusive philanthropy, but we decide what we want to listen to, who we want to listen to and how often, and on what issues - based on our own narratives of what the problem is. It’s rarely a blank slate and ultimately, whatever the consultative process, for the most, it is we, institutional philanthropy, that makes the final decisions.

We talk in principle about mutual accountability, but this usually means that we are more transparent about who we fund and for how much, not why we decide to support them in the first place. Nor do we have frank conversations about how leadership changes, institutional politics, impact frameworks, bureaucratic systems, risk profiles or internal politics limit the kinds of issues and spaces we can support.

We talk about intersectional programming – but this is still far from the norm. A recent Human Rights Funders Network report analyzing intersectional grantmaking in rights-based funders showed that the majority

of human rights grants address one issue and focus on one population¹⁵. Of more than 27,000 human rights grants analyzed, only 22% were intended to benefit more than one population, 21% addressed more than one issue and fewer than 5% of human rights grants reference three or more identities. Moreover, intersectionality in practice often shows up as different philanthropic programs working together on ad-hoc initiatives – instead of an intersectional analysis underlying the foundations of the joint programming approach over a long term. We need to do much more to understand what the experience of lived intersectionality of our constituencies demands in terms of how we support justice-based efforts.

Intention aside, we often inadvertently instrumentalize those we support to advance changes on issues we think are the most vital. This is not about whether the work these institutions are engaged in is relevant, but rather about how our support to them is premised on alignment with our own institutional priorities and can easily end when our priorities change. Even when we support mass movements, for the most, we rarely support them because they are sites of agency. In many cases, we support them only when issues they highlight align with thematic agendas we have already prioritized internally.

We have structured our systems and processes around the notion of efficiency and impact – our efficiency and our impact; without enough consideration as to what this means for those we support or for the progress of their work. This approach fundamentally shapes how restrictive or supportive our practice is. We then center our own impact models and look for evidence that we're on the right track. But what would it mean for our programming and practice if we brought in lessons from institutions that are working differently: if we thought about ways to build the narrative of impact iteratively, based on what those doing the work value? If we redesigned our notions of scale to reflect depth rather than just breadth or if we assessed our impact not in relation to our own priorities, but to our relevance to those we support?

Ideological change: privilege and agency

I cannot accept the definition of collective good as articulated by a privileged minority in society, especially when that minority is in power.¹⁶

Wole Soyinka's words feel very apt in examining the problems within the institutional philanthropy sector. It is vital that we recognize institutional philanthropy represents a privileged minority and that we think about the nature of the power that is held within the philanthropic system. While philanthropic power is by no means absolute or uncontested - critiques of the system abound from inside and outside - the system has been built to work in a specific way and we have largely continued to allow it to do so. It is a system that, for the most

¹⁵ Thomas, R & Miller, K (2022)

¹⁶ Soyinka in Gates, L.S. (1975)

part, despite individual intention, is positioned above, as a privileged minority, rather than at the same level, in solidarity with, those who are on the frontlines of social change and those bearing the brunt of injustice. This privilege and positioning bring with it a system of power and influence that we must interrogate not just in its processes and mechanisms, but in the light of what we consider a just society to be, how we attain such a society and what our role in that is.

Ultimately, while we are seeing some marked transformations within parts of the sector, for the most, we still see incremental changes which allow our privilege to remain untouched. These reflect that while strategies and tactics and even models are open for change, the system itself is not, even while recognizing the efforts of individuals within it to bring about change. Changing the system requires a fundamental transformation of the way in which we view philanthropy. That means an ideological transformation, not just a practical one. Until we ideologically reposition whose agency is central to informing this work, our position, our privilege, and our power can, despite good intentions, do much harm.

Amartya Sen¹⁷ talks about development as enabling people to live the lives they have reason to value and ensuring that the capabilities to attain that that are in place. As philanthropic actors, we do not give agency, but we can work in ways that (i) enable space for people's individual and collective agency to determine what a just society looks like, (ii) work in ways that address the barriers inhibiting that agency and (iii) ally with what emerges from those processes. For the most, in our current ways of working, we rarely do any of these deeply enough. Constituency agency is considered, but often does not lie at the base of our work. Our top-down narratives of change, processes of operation and focus on issue-based interventions often crowd out and inhibit both agency as well as rooted and intersectional social justice agendas.

The conversation about philanthropic power is a critical one but I want to suggest that power is not the start of the conversation, instead, philanthropic privilege is. Philanthropic power can be ceded, shifted, shared, multiplied and built – and each of these has different implications for our philanthropic practice, but until and unless we interrogate how we position our privilege, and the roles this privilege enables us to play – in fundamentally different ways – the extent of that ceding, sharing, multiplying and building will continue to be limited. Changing how much power we have in a philanthropic relationship at any given point does not necessarily change the longevity of the system's privilege or the institution's privilege. Only by examining the role our philanthropic privilege affords us, reflecting on what elements within that privilege help or harm, and what elements need to be dismantled, can we truly begin to address transformative relationships.

American author Ijeoma Oluo writes: “when we identify where our privilege intersects with somebody else's oppression, we'll find opportunities to make real change.”¹⁸ How we use our privilege is directly linked to how we position our role in this work of advancing a just society. It is in this nexus that Ijeoma talks about, that we, who have philanthropic privilege, may find both the greatest challenge, but also the greatest possibility for

17 Sen, A (2001)

18 Oluo, I (2018)

transformation. Repositioning our privilege - not above, but in solidarity with – our constituencies so that our role is to center the agency of those living the injustices as the core of our work then becomes vital.

So what does agency as a lens require?

That we see our role as inherently political so that we position our privilege and power in service of the long-term collective organizing power¹⁹ and political agency of our constituencies, in relationships of solidarity that are de-instrumentalized and de-commoditized. This positioning also includes a recognition that if our institutional and legal configurations prevent such an approach, we need to explore how to move our assets and resources to those better positioned to do so.

That we de-center our institutions, our strategies, our impact, and our legacies –and, instead, allow space for entirely new structures to shape the narratives and agendas of what a just society looks like. Even if those structures exclude us. And then we co-create with them if/what appropriate allyship looks like, and if/where our privilege, expertise and influence can be of value in their agendas. There is an important role for external experts, philanthropic resources, institutional civil society and the formal philanthropy sector, but if these are not working with and guided by those they are meant to serve, our efforts to create a just society will remain limited.

An openness to reconfiguring our systems and structures to support (directly or indirectly) the diversity of civic spaces addressing injustice and understanding how our bias towards professionalism reinforces a politics of exclusion that inhibits the agency of our constituencies.

That we let go of the siloed programming approaches we use to make sense of our work and look instead at resourcing social change in ways that recognize how (i) multiple systems of oppression compound each other, and (ii) multiple identities and characteristics can simultaneously elevate privilege and reinforce injustice or build collective gains - and then foreground the lived experience of our constituencies in decision-making.²⁰

That our reflections and assessments of impact are a much more nuanced and dynamic exercise informed by constituency views of what is valued as progress, how that is assessed and what is useful to know.

That even the narratives of what needs to change in the philanthropic system cannot be set alone by those holding the reigns of privilege within the system. This is not about whether or not these narratives have value but about recognizing that our narratives, ideas, and analyses should not be the starting point. Whose perspective is centered in narratives for philanthropic change is an important issue to interrogate.

And finally, that we actively work to dismantle the roots of our privilege. We talk about how to cede control over the fruits of our privilege but we don't engage deeply enough on deconstructing and dismantling the source of that philanthropic privilege and the power that it affords us: the inequities underlying the financial

¹⁹ JASS (2022)

²⁰ *ibid*

system, how our money is made, what it is invested in, what tax regimes govern our profits, the ethics of the business practices that increase our assets at the expense of the incursion on people's rights, or the global governance systems that further the inequities which we profit from.²¹

Agency as a lens demands that we use our access and privilege to transform the very systems that grant us access and privilege. Dismantling that privilege means that we cannot talk about solidarity with constituency agency if we continue to retain a system that perpetuates dependence on us; if we are not willing to reconsider our own endowments and whether the goal of constituency agency is better supported through ensuring the maintenance of those endowments or whether alternative processes of asset sharing and asset redistribution to constituency fora may provide a much stronger impetus for transformation. We cannot talk about transforming the philanthropic system without fundamentally addressing the foundations of our privilege and the ways in which those foundations further the inequities and injustices that we are trying to address.²²

These are not easy shifts to make – but for systemic change to happen out there, it must first happen in here. Our institutional philanthropy system is inherently inequitable. But how we choose to position our privilege need not be so!

21 Mahomed (2017)

22 Villanueva, E (2018)

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