



Advancing the field of African philanthropy: notes from a convening¹

The challenge of meaning

A starting point for the Global Fund for Community Foundation's recent philanthropy convening in Africa was the drawing of a distinction between African philanthropy as philanthropy *of* Africa, and as philanthropy *for* Africa. In the same way, an array of researchers and practitioners has argued that there is a critical distinction, particularly in Africa, between 'philanthropy of community' and 'philanthropy for community'.² Characteristics of the former are seen to include variations on self-help or mutual aid mechanisms, where notions of reciprocity or even obligation arising out of belonging are far more deeply rooted than representing merely survival or coping strategies in times of hardship. Studies of philanthropy in East, Southern and North Africa³ highlight a wide range of social institutions and associations including home town associations, burial societies, savings clubs, tribal networks and so on all of which place 'giving' or 'helping' at the heart of their operations. Philanthropy *for* community might include not only the external charity organizations, but also family, corporate and personal foundations now expanding rapidly in Africa. A more contested example of philanthropy 'for' community is the community foundation.

There has been ample criticism of efforts to impose particular models of organized philanthropy on Africa, most notably US-style community foundations. However, the debate has moved on; worldwide there is a greater plurality of models of community foundations around core elements of local ownership and control; mobilizing of local resources (financial and non-financial); and grant making to meet local needs and opportunities. A dividing line continues to be that of the relevance or centrality of an endowment, but the really important questions for the GFCF with regard to understanding and interpreting African philanthropy in the sense of the philanthropy of community (accepting that Africans establishing and giving through foundations is clearly an element of the philanthropy *of* Africa) are succinctly posed by Wilkinson-Maposa⁴:

- Can organized philanthropy, including community foundations, be a vehicle for validating, facilitating and supporting the efforts of communities themselves?; and

¹ These notes summarise the outcomes of meeting of African philanthropy practitioners and thinkers convened by the GFCF (with grant support from TrustAfrica) in May 2008 in Naivasha, Kenya.

² The most extensive work on this is *The poor philanthropist: How and why the poor help each other*, Susan Wilkinson-Maposa, Alan Fowler, Ceri Oliver-Evans and Chao F.N. Mulenga, The Southern Africa-United States Centre for Leadership and Public Values at the Graduate School of Business, University of Cape Town, 2005.

³ See for example, Dimensions of philanthropy in southern africa: an overview, Bhikinkosi Moyo; The Challenge of Philanthropy in East Africa, Connie Ngondi-Houghton and Andrew Kingman; Marwa el Daly Philanthropy for social justice in Egypt; all forthcoming, 2008.

⁴ Susan Wilkinson-Maposa, *The poor philanthropist: the paradox of giving*, 2008.

- How can the knowledge and practices of poor be used to greater advantage in effective and sustainable organized philanthropy interventions?

An important and provocative talking point to emerge in the Africa convening was a sense that people and organizations investing in 'philanthropy development' in Africa have over-emphasised particular models of organizational 'good practice', particularly in terms of governance (stress on rotation, terms of office, diversity etc), the role of founders or key individuals, transparent decision-making and so on. In so doing, we have under-emphasised local relevance, soft leadership, informal networks, and impact. In addressing Wilkinson-Maposa's questions, we need to be aware of this further challenge put by one of the participants in Kenya:

- Is the questioning of 'northern' models a fair challenge or an excuse to continue in inefficient or unaccountable ways?

For Wilkinson-Maposa and others, building philanthropy *for* communities (institutions of organized resource mobilization and giving) in ways that take it closer to the mechanisms and traditions of giving that define philanthropy *of* community will mean grappling with daily realities (school fees, food security, seeds, burials, insurance etc) that are the focus of philanthropy *of* community. Clearly, community philanthropy models in which a small group of people – however 'representative' – decide on which good cause (probably a local charitable group, registered, with accounts and 'accountability' etc) will receive a small grant, is far removed from dealing with such daily realities. This raises a further question about the roles of community philanthropy organizations:

- Is grant-making necessarily the most appropriate mechanism for community foundations? What other roles in resource mobilization and allocation (social support networks, etc) could community foundations play?

Perhaps it is possible to build philanthropy institutions at community level that can use the language and systems familiar in local giving, and to meet similar needs from pooled funds; however, if we do this, can community philanthropy at the same time meet the challenge of relevance beyond the individual?

The challenge of relevance

Perhaps the greatest challenge in relation to philanthropy of community is that of relevance beyond local coping. Giving amongst people with little 'keeps the lid on poverty' just as much as it speaks to a deeply rooted culture of mutual aid and reciprocity. A key theme in the East Africa philanthropy convening was if and how African philanthropy could more effectively grapple with structural and systemic issues of poverty and injustice. Although in the debates there were calls to recognize the social justice potential of a well-timed 'charitable' gift, in the main, participants found that too much African philanthropy remains irrelevant in the context of social justice.

- Is it fair or realistic to expect community philanthropy organizations such as community foundations to really 'get relevant' and respond to issues such as climate change?
- Is it possible to become more relevant in the wider context *and* more effectively engage with and respond to local traditions of giving?

It may be that we are expecting too much of any one type of philanthropy organization. Christa Kulijan⁵ has suggested that it might be better to encourage social justice organizations to move into philanthropy rather than trying to encourage philanthropy organizations to take social justice work seriously.

- Does the blurring of distinctions between social justice movements or groups and philanthropy organizations offer a new 'model' or risk undermining legitimacy?

Perhaps the answer to these questions of relevance might in part lie in addressing the challenge of identity.

The challenge of identity

The notion of 'community' is contested; the AU is increasingly viewing the African Diaspora as a sixth region of the continent, and it has been widely reported that remittances now outstrip foreign direct investment in Africa. A large proportion of all remittances is for extended family needs, but it might be argued that this is an extension of the philanthropy of community system – a suggestion strengthened by the fact that remittances beyond immediate family are made not only by the rich. Other than family and extended family, remittances tend to be focused on clan, tribe, home-town or particular institutions, again emphasizing philanthropy of community. However, the emerging research into African Diaspora giving⁶ also points to the linkage between the Diaspora and organized political movements, the development of new institutions (health, education), support for legal and rights organizations and so on. The suggestion emerging is that just as the notion of 'community' is stretching, so too is the very notion of philanthropy of community; in other words, whilst for citizens of a particular place dealing with daily struggles of an often brutal life giving is an essential coping strategy, for their friends and family who traveled, giving represents first an obligation and second a chance to forge change. These lines of thought lead to an important question.

- If 'community' is a contested concept in Africa (internal and external Diasporas etc) what does a more flexible definition of 'community' mean for the structures and processes normally associated with community foundations?

The challenge for investors

The Global Fund for Community Foundations is investing in the development and expansion of community philanthropy. The issues outlined above are at the heart of debates within the Fund's leadership and constituency about the core purpose and focus of the Fund. However, there are a host of subsidiary issues or challenges, many raised in the Africa convening, that the Fund also needs to address. In particular, these are the *how* questions:

- How best to support the development of African philanthropic leaders whose grounding is in the philanthropy of Africa?
- How best to support the development of resource organizations?
- How can community philanthropy organizations tell their stories more effectively?

⁵ Christa Kulijan, *Philanthropy and equity: the case of South Africa*, Harvard Global Equity Initiative, 2005

⁶ Sara Rakita, *African Diaspora Philanthropy*, 2007