Liberation Alliance
Africa

Are we on the Cusp of a Beautiful Rupture?

A Compendium on Building Community Power in Philanthropy in West Africa

July 2025

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A Note from Liberation Alliance Africa

Our work over the last three years has taken us through knowing both as a political act and as a deeply embodied experience. We continue to walk the path of knowledge as a liberatory practice, embodying this by exploring the radical act of creation, insisting that our worldview holds value, our experiences are valid, and we will no longer be defined by outsiders. To properly situate us in this compendium of exploration, dreams, and permutations created by our Community of Practice, it is important to reiterate the unlike hegenonic construction of knowledge as something that is owned, controlled, and used to control others, our work does not oly reject this approach, it honours collective knowing, thinking and rigour. Liberation Alliance Africa adopts a community of practice approach to our work as a way of insisting that the most radical epistemic action we can take is to name our experiences, understand them and create the worlds we want to live in. This means that we do not think, learn or create in isolation. In a world where African knowledge, particularly African women's knowledge, is pushed aside to sustain centre/periphery narratives grounded in subjugation, othering and destruction of endogenous knowledge and ways of knowing. A feminist community of practice to us represents a move away from a top-down approach to knowledge creation and sharing, acknowledging the rigour, labour and expertise of African women and feminists in world building.

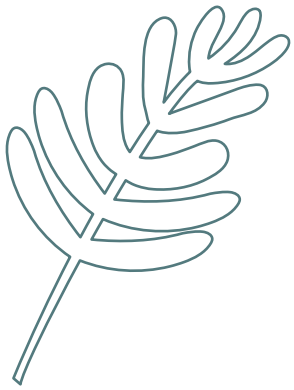
The Compendium: Are we on the Cusp of a Beautiful Rupture? Created by a Community of Practice (CoP) organised by Liberation Alliance Africa, explores community philanthropy through a decolonial feminist lens. In the inception phase of the project, we envisioned a community of practice that centres on collective mindsets and capabilities for joint action to deliver a radical, collaborative, and action-oriented process where people can produce knowledge from their realities and use it as a basis for decision-making power. Grounded in principles of care, collective leadership, and critical inquiry, the CoP brings together feminist scholars, scholar-activists, and practitioners from across the continent and the diaspora for the critical work of sense-making,

world-building through movement-building, knowledge production, research amplification, and advocacy.

The journey of this compendium started with a two-day workshop followed by months of exchange, storytelling, and co-writing among CoP members. The three briefs in this compendium provide knowledge and epistemological support for social movements and organisers in West Africa to deepen their strategy and capacity to challenge institutional philanthropy and influence the power landscape. The CoP members used a historical and decolonial feminist approach to explore existing knowledge and efforts on community philanthropy through the lived realities of organisers, social movements and feminist activists in West Africa to engender critical consciousness-raising.

Each brief explores community power-building as a non-linear process that is profoundly relational and based on elevating individual and collective narratives and memory to awareness, action, and agency. As a compendium, it establishes community power as an effective strategy for a radical shift in power and resources, and a future where movements, not institutions, define what liberatory and communal philanthropy looks like.

In Solidarity,
Omolara Oriye and Oluwatobiloba Ayodele



Brief One

Exploring Giving in West Africa: Conversations on Memory, History, and Obligation

Exploring giving in West Africa allows us to question the origins of giving, the motivations behind helping others, the different ways of giving that have shaped and continue to shape our socialisation, and what has morphed into a larger chain of social interaction. In this brief, we categorise the theories of giving into three frameworks: altruism, reciprocity, and mutual aid.

By definition, altruism refers to individuals helping others even when it incurs a cost to themselves, potentially driven by empathy or a sense of obligation. Reciprocity suggests that people are inclined to return favours or help those who have helped them, fostering a sense of social cohesion and mutual support. Mutual aid highlights the cooperative efforts where individuals work together to achieve a common goal, benefiting each member involved.

Through these frameworks, we explore both historical and contemporary manifestations of giving. Historical, because we believe `it is in our memory and history that we know who we are. Contemporary, because we recognise the impact of colonial residues and imperialism in our ways of being. While the discussion on giving is expansive and unique to each context, we have provided evidence and knowledge from the West African context.

African Communal Structure and Giving Practices

Traditionally, giving in West Africa is rooted in collective values, where each individual is expected to contribute to the well-being of their community. This form of support, seen in shared farming, communal child-rearing, and caring for the sick, was less about wealth redistribution and more about maintaining social balance.

“African society was built on communal ideas, shared ownership, and common existence,” writer and historian Joseph Ben Kaifala says. “Therefore, everything that was happening in society was based on the community. That is why when you look at spatial settings before the European and colonial settlers, families built homes that were communal, with huts facing each other.”

Oral history and African writers speak about the giving practices of families in these communities. A common thread across most West African giving practices was gifts given by community members to their chief. In the Mende community in Sierra Leone, the people called the chief "Maada" meaning grandfather, a title that signified not only his political authority but also his responsibility to care for, protect, and provide for the community as a familial elder would. In this way, the chief's wealth was for communal care.

"The chief's household became a social safety net. If you do not have food to eat at home, you go to the chief. If you were so ill that your family couldn't treat you or they were unable to cure you, they went to the *poro* society for men or the *bondo* bush for women, as the case may have been. If your neighbour hasn't eaten, the community must ensure that the neighbour eats. Communities come together if a family cannot successfully farm. They help one another during farming seasons so everybody can produce for the community's well-being," Kaifala adds.

The family, the community, and the secret societies were how they took care of one another.

Gender Dynamics in Traditional Giving

Patriarchy in African societies positioned men as the visible providers, and this visibility often meant their contributions were more publicly recognised. Men were expected to provide for their families through farming, hunting, or trade. At the same time, women transformed those provisions into care, preparing food, distributing it equitably, and ensuring that everyone, including visitors and the vulnerable, was fed. These roles were not only about survival but also about upholding social and moral obligations within the community. However, this did not mean women lacked agency or value in giving. In fact, women's contributions, though often less publicly acknowledged, were central to the functioning of communal life. Women-led mutual aid groups, mobilised care networks, and managed food systems and household economies.

"Patriarchy is a power dynamic, and power dynamics make the powerful try as hard as possible not to appear to be a victim. So it would have been very hard to see a man begging in the typical African community because he is viewed as the provider," Kaifala says. "Therefore, welfare was mostly targeted

“Women-led mutual aid groups, mobilised care networks, and managed food systems and household economies”.

towards women, children, and the stranger. Even if you are a man, as long as you are a stranger, they provide for you in a stranger’s land. But in your society, in your community, as a man, you are expected to be a provider, so to be a beggar is a huge shame on you. Again, *Things Fall Apart* is a very good book to illustrate it. This is why the relationship between Okonkwo and his father, Unoka, was not working. Unoka wanted to be a freeloader, drink, play music, and have a good time. But that’s not how men were supposed to be in that society. The man was supposed to be Okonkwo. You must fight, be a champion, make a big farm, produce a lot of food for your family, and sell to the next village.

“What you do as a man if you were in need is to go to the chief and say, ‘This year, I don’t have any seeds to plant. Could you loan me?’ You can change your circumstances to provide for your family and community.”
Colonialism both reinforced and restructured these gender dynamics. Colonial administrations legitimised male authority by rewarding male leaders with goods and power in exchange for loyalty, narrowing the definition of legitimate giving to what men could offer through these new power structures. At the same time, colonial gender norms erased many of the public roles women played in communal care, further entrenching the idea that women were passive recipients rather than active givers.

While patriarchy shaped who could give, how, and with what recognition, it is also important to recognise the breadth of women’s contributions and the ways they exercised power through care, even within restrictive structures. In traditional societies, giving was often gendered, but it was also communal, with everyone contributing to welfare through the roles assigned to them.

Socialisation of Giving

A Yoruba proverb says, *"Eni taba se lore, to o ba dupe, bi olosa koni leru lo ni,"* which is loosely translated as "If we receive an act of kindness and do not show gratitude, we are like a people robbed of our belongings." This proverb highlights the reciprocal nature of giving and of how giving and gratitude are perceived in some West African societies. Cultural norms significantly shape expectations around giving and receiving, dictating appropriate and expected behaviour in various situations.

However, it is important to comment on how the forms of giving—altruism, reciprocity, and mutual aid—vary according to the level of socialisation, cultural norms, and gender roles. These norms, often passed down through generations and reinforced by family and social groups, influence everything from who is responsible for care within the family to the level of gratitude expected in return.

Cultural norms significantly shape expectations around giving and receiving, dictating appropriate and expected behaviour in various situations.

For example, women are often expected to give selflessly within families and communities, particularly in caregiving roles, without the same expectation of recognition or reciprocity that men may receive in other spheres of life, such as economic transactions or public service. This gendered division of labour in giving reflects broader social norms that prioritise men as providers and women as nurturers, often without acknowledging the essential and labour-intensive contributions women make.

Giving in many pre-colonial West African societies was not only a cultural norm but also a structured practice embedded within well-established social institutions. Age grades, kinship networks, and social groups played a central

role in reinforcing the values and expectations of altruism, reciprocity, and mutual aid. From an early age, children were socialised into systems that taught them who to give to, when, and how. Boys and girls were inducted into age-based cohorts that carried specific communal duties, ranging from farming for the elderly to organising collective rituals and redistributing food during festivals. These practices were not optional; they were guided by oral traditions, customary laws, and rituals that framed giving as both moral and necessary for communal cohesion.

The process of socialisation was deeply gendered and multi-generational. Women's groups, such as the market and trade groups, among the Yoruba or Umuada (patrilineage daughters) in Eastern Nigeria, were responsible for mutual aid, economic support, and spiritual well-being. Men's societies, warrior guilds, and age-grade associations often enforced obligations around giving through initiation rites and public accountability. Elders acted as moral anchors, guiding younger generations through stories, proverbs, and lived experiences. This structured transmission of values ensured that giving was not merely a personal virtue, but a communal practice embedded in identity, status, and survival. It is this intricate system of socialisation that colonial influence disrupted, replacing reciprocity with extractive charity models and weakening the intergenerational transmission of indigenous giving norms.

The arrival of European powers and colonial systems introduced capitalist ideals that reshaped giving into a transactional act. Colonial administrations and missionary structures introduced Western, hierarchical models of charity that positioned Africans as passive recipients rather than active givers. The communal ethos of altruism, reciprocity, and mutual aid was gradually replaced with individualistic, donor-driven agendas. Institutions that once taught and reinforced giving, such as age-grade systems, women's associations, and local spiritual networks, were sidelined or actively dismantled. In their place, colonial governments and churches established schools, religious missions, and bureaucratic welfare systems that redefined what it meant to give, to receive, and to belong.

In the capitalist framework, giving often becomes linked to financial success and social status, with men more likely to be recognised for such contributions. On the other hand, women's unpaid labour in caregiving, though crucial, remains undervalued and often overlooked, reinforcing gender inequalities. This shift has not only altered the nature of giving but also its associated values, transforming it into a commodity that can

be bought, sold, and measured in terms of monetary value rather than the emotional and social bonds it once represented. The result was not only a disruption of traditional values, but a reordering of power—one that delegitimised African modes of generosity and replaced them with a paternalistic logic that persists in many forms of aid and philanthropy today.

Contemporary Challenges and Black Tax

"When the white man came, he gave you rum, and you sold your brothers and sisters. Gifting became a quid pro quo kind of thing," Kaifala says. "You were expecting something for what you gave in return, which was never part of the African society. We were a communal society; we welcomed visitors and strangers. The Christian idea is that when I was homeless, you gave me a home, and we did that. Unfortunately, the white man came with a different idea, so our caring and giving values became what they used to infiltrate our societies.

"The trade in rum, guns, and other commodities for enslaved Africans, and the practices of colonial administrators rewarding Africans with titles and imported goods in exchange for loyalty and access to resources, are examples of transactional giving practices introduced by the coming of the white man to African societies."

This transactional logic eroded communal caring systems. This shift has also contributed to what is commonly known as the "black tax", the expectation that individuals who achieve financial stability must shoulder the burden of supporting extended family and community members. While this practice reflects the enduring communal spirit, it can also place overwhelming pressure on those seen as providers.

The notion of "black tax" is rooted in Western capitalist ideology, not indigenous communal traditions. It imposes a sense of philanthropy as an obligation, driven by notions of success and subsequent repayment to one's community. However, the ethic of care and mutual responsibility in indigenous West African contexts was an organic and intrinsic value, cultivated from childhood within the communal fabric. One did not wait to be materially successful to contribute; rather, contribution was determined by one's capacity and not by surplus.

The notion of "black tax" is rooted in Western capitalist ideology, not indigenous communal traditions. It imposes a sense of philanthropy as an obligation, driven by notions of success and subsequent repayment to one's community.

"In the African community setting, you may not be a wealthy person but you could be a great farmer and you contributed. The medicine lady in the village didn't wait to be compensated to realise that this child needs urgent treatment. So they will themselves observe a child in the community and speak to the mother, 'I have observed this child, I think something is wrong. Let's give this child this kind of medicine.' So it was not this black tax idea, which in the western capitalist sense is encouraging people to give back to the communities where they have emerged and succeeded. Whenever you hear about taxation, there is an undertone of compulsion.

"Nobody came to your door looking at you badly because you had twenty-five bushes on the rise and didn't give your neighbour. Or say you will provide something for the 'Bangura family' because their farming wasn't entirely successful this year. You know that when the visitor arrives at midnight, and you don't have an extra room, you can knock on the chief's door."

This starkly contrasts with "black tax", where success often relies on systemic inequality, and philanthropy is a moral response to benefiting from structures that impoverish others. Within such systems, those who ascend are often burdened with guilt and social expectation to "give back" not from a place of communal ethic, but from an individual moral debt shaped by systemic failure. In effect, those who rise from poverty become de facto welfare providers, not because society honours them, but because the state has abdicated its duty.

Dreaming: Towards Community Power in Philanthropy

Reflections on giving contribute to our dreams and reimaginations of present philanthropy. We recognise that community power in philanthropy involves a shift from the traditional "top-down" grantmaking to a "power with" approach where communities actively participate in identifying, designing, and implementing solutions. This shift happens when philanthropy engages with community as an institution of its own rights, knowledge, and experiences. Community philanthropy continues to play an important role in reimagining philanthropy and shifting power towards collective liberation. Community philanthropy organising is shaped by a deep understanding of cultural and social dynamics, reaffirmation of collective responsibility, solidarity, and the desire to build liberatory futures.

This growing understanding of community philanthropy reflects both continuity and change. On the one hand, it reflects the cultural imperative to give and care for one another, a long-standing tradition in many West African societies. On the other hand, it signals an adaptation to contemporary contexts marked by urbanisation, globalisation, and evolving forms of governance. Community philanthropy offers a way to organise giving while still grounded in community power, voice, and values. To understand the full picture of giving today, it is essential to recognise how efforts to institutionalise community philanthropy are deeply entangled with both historical legacies and modern aspirations.

"So what we can do is, if many of us from a community need a healthcare facility, we should do that instead of caring for each individual family," Kaifala says. "If there's a water problem in our village, instead of bringing water to our individual families, let's come together and dig a well for everyone. That way, everybody will have water. Nobody cries to anyone for water."
A Krio proverb says, "*Wan foot pot nor dae cook for Jamma*," meaning "A single-foot pot cannot cook for a big crowd." "*Gomoloa gomobo*," a Mende proverb says. "Only a giver gives to a giver." Our future must be built on care, responsibility, and shared success principles.

Summary

Giving has always been intertwined with the African existence. As highlighted in this oral narration of history, in many West African cultures, giving is not just an expression of generosity; it is woven into social structures, cultural values, and collective identity. Aare Afe Babalola speaks of the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria and the age grade system, where members of a certain age group choose specific dates to work collectively on each member's farmland to ensure an increase in harvest, which benefits the entire community. The Aare speaks of the wealth accumulation by the chief as a gift from villagers, which was meant for the community. The Oba, the Yoruba chief, and the Maada, the Mende chief, were similar in their responsibilities of caring for their subjects.

The emphasis on giving as an act of care in pre-colonial Africa was not limited to financial support; it encompassed shared responsibility, mutual support, and social cohesion. Community philanthropy challenges the saviour mentality, centres care, promotes equal access to resources, and holds systems accountable to the citizenry.

As this brief has shown, giving in West African societies has long been rooted in values of solidarity, mutual care, and collective accountability, values that predate and often stand in tension with dominant philanthropic models. With current efforts to reimagine and decolonise philanthropy through community-led approaches, flexible funding, and care-centred practices, deep structural inequalities are reflected in the daunting reality that only 1.9% of all global charity reaches women and girls, and a mere 0.1% – 0.35% goes to Black women, girls, and trans people. We must build upon African values of giving as a foundation for a more just, inclusive, and community-centred future. This is not a call to romanticise the past, but to reclaim and redefine giving—who defines it, who leads it, and what purposes it ultimately serves—as a liberatory and cultural act rooted in the lived realities of everyone on the margins.

****This brief is a small offering in the ongoing work of remembering who we are, how we care for one another, and how giving practices have evolved. It is a memory box. A place to hold questions. An attempt to recover what was lost and to imagine how we might return to ways of giving that centre dignity, shared responsibility, and joy. We offer this as a conversation starter for those in philanthropy, activism, community, or simply anyone who has felt the weight of giving or the ache of being overlooked.*

Acknowledgments

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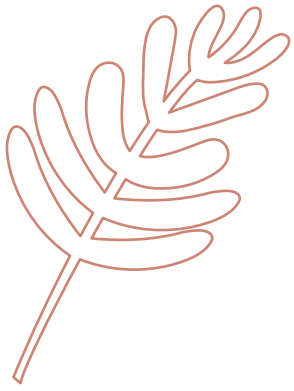

Brief Two

Locating African Feminist Movement in Philanthropy Conversation

According to the West African Civil Society Institute, the rise of institutionalised philanthropy in Africa is attributable to the intensifying social, economic, and political challenges, including poverty, insecurity, and governmental issues. The polycrisis referred to by WASCI does not occur and is not sustained in a vacuum. This work explores, amongst other ideas, the linkages between the politics of aid and the polycrisis. Understanding the place of contemporary philanthropy in an emerging world and locating feminist activism in the responses to the polycrisis allows us to interrogate the origins of philanthropy and its role in actualising liberated futures. Exploring the origins and sustenance of this polycrisis is not out of place, and understanding the politics of aid provides us with critical perspectives for our liberatory politics.

Non-profit organisations and international aid in Africa can be traced back to the arrival of missionaries and their engagement in charity, which focused on providing education and health services. The missionaries and other voluntary organisations were essential weapons in the ideological warfare that sustained colonialism. Through their work, they spread the rhetoric that colonisation was a "civilising mission, and therefore it was good for Africans." Colonisers deployed voluntary welfare provisions to gain social control, which was considered apolitical and consequently immune to criticism. Missionary activities formed a significant early wave of what could be termed "philanthropy". Adu Boahen states in *African Perspectives on Colonialism* that these missions were not neutral; they served to undermine indigenous belief systems, cultures, and social structures, acting as agents of cultural assimilation.

Walter Rodney details in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* that the so-called "provisions" made by Western missionaries were essentially weapons of mass production of inequality—grossly inadequate and disproportionately benefiting the colonisers and a small African elite. The focus was on extracting wealth, not on genuine human development.

Early Western philanthropic organisations, such as various charitable trusts and foundations emerging in Europe and North America, also began to direct some attention towards Africa. These were often fuelled by reports of poverty and disease disseminated through colonial channels and missionary accounts,

which obscured and distorted the causes of the poverty reported. Part of the colonial project was the framing of poverty and deprivation as a consequence of the failings of Africans themselves, as opposed to being a result of the colonial societal structures.

After colonialism ended, voluntary organisations replaced their civilisation rhetoric with a development agenda while retaining their founding ideologies. Both ideologies continued to view poverty as a moral failing and approached these issues through the lens of charity and paternalism. Western philanthropy's narrative on "alleviating immediate suffering" often lacked a deep understanding of local contexts and operated within the existing colonial power dynamics. Mahmood Mamdani, in *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, writes that the colonial state created a binary of "civilised" and "uncivilised", which often framed African needs through a Western lens, perpetuating dependency rather than fostering self-reliance.

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Neoliberalism and The Politics of Aid

As explained above, missionary activity played a role in hijacking the practice and narratives of contemporary philanthropy in Africa. During the colonial and early post-colonial periods, missionary organisations were central to providing education, healthcare, and social services, often filling gaps left by colonial governments. But these were never neutral acts of charity. Instead, they were deeply political tools for shaping colonised societies in the image of the West, exerting socio-epistemic strongholds that promoted Christianity, Western education, social norms, and economic systems.

Building on this legacy of external influence, the 1980s brought a new wave of philanthropic intervention through implementing the IMF Structural Adjustment Programs in countries in West Africa, including Nigeria and Ghana. These programmes, enforced by international financial institutions, mandated significant cuts to public spending, especially in education and healthcare, leading to the deterioration of social services. Simultaneously, Structural Adjustment Programs pushed for the privatisation of state-owned enterprises, triggering mass unemployment and deepening poverty across the region. These policies effectively excluded low-income individuals from receiving essential care, entrenching inequality and weakening public health, education and social safety net outcomes. The legacy of SAPs has reshaped West Africa's aid landscape, reinforcing external dependence and weakening national institutions.

Meanwhile, neoliberalism was being introduced gradually in the United States, beginning with the fiscal reforms of the 1970s. In the early 1980s, under Ronald Reagan's administration, neoliberalism became visible in its transformations of the social realm. This marked the beginning of the dismantling of the social safety net. Like the reforms of Margaret Thatcher, his counterpart in the United Kingdom, Reagan's reforms relied on violent and oppressive state tactics, such as the mass firing of striking air traffic controllers, as a move to crush organised labour, which stood in the way of neoliberalism.

Philanthropy today often functions not to build autonomous futures but to manage the consequences of neoliberal reforms. This forms part of the polycrisis, where overlapping issues (inequality, unemployment, weak institutions) stem from a single ideological root—prioritising market-based solutions over a people and planet-centred development.

Aside from these consequences of aid from the Global North, rooted in neocolonial power dynamics and external political agendas, the mechanism of offering aid in West Africa has been profoundly disrupted. It is important to note that missionary philanthropy was not exclusively white; African American missionaries also brought religious frameworks to the continent, particularly through education and medical work. As outlined in an analysis by Fozia Irfan, missionary-led institutions contributed to the marginalisation of local philanthropic knowledge systems because of their embeddedness in a colonial structure which erased indigenous knowledge systems and ways of being.

Aside from these consequences of aid from the Global North, rooted in neocolonial power dynamics and external political agendas, the mechanism of offering aid in West Africa has been profoundly disrupted.

Post-independent West African countries witnessed the rise of local NGOs and community-based organisations, which stepped in to fill the void left by weakened state structures in critical health, education, and social welfare. However, these organisations largely depended on external donor funding, leading to what critics call the NGO industrial complex. In this system, aid often serves donor priorities more than community-defined needs. As Manji and O'Coill argue, many modern NGOs replicate the logic of missionary work by reinforcing power imbalances and determining development trajectories from outside the continent. This dynamic undermines local autonomy and deepens dependency. Ultimately, this reinforces a system in which African governments and grassroots organisations are more accountable to international funders than to their people. It strips away self-agency and removes communities' power to define and direct solutions rooted in their cultural, social, and historical contexts.

However, the rise of indigenous NGOs and civil society organisations demonstrated a growing capacity within Africa to address its challenges. Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement exemplified how local initiatives rooted in African knowledge and participation could achieve significant environmental and social impact. Her work highlighted the limitations of top-down, Western-led approaches that often failed to engage with local communities. Contemporary African thinkers like Achille Mbembe in On the Postcolony offer profound insights into colonialism's enduring legacies and how they continue to shape the relationship between Africa and the West, including philanthropic endeavours. Mbembe's work encourages a

critical examination of power dynamics and how Western interventions can inadvertently perpetuate neo-colonial forms of control.

African societies have rich traditions of communal support, reciprocity, and care for the vulnerable. Historically, and in modern times, philanthropy, particularly African philanthropy, has functioned as a glue that binds families and societies alike, providing a basis for collective dreaming and action, unity, and self-reliance. African philanthropic practices are embedded in communal philosophies such as Ubuntu, which emphasises interconnectedness, mutual care, and collective responsibility. Ubuntu's assertion that "I am because we are" aligns with the ethics of care, reciprocity, and relationality that feminist theorists have long upheld. Ubuntu highlights principles that mirror feminist calls for interdependent and just systems of support. Giving in most African cultures is embedded in everyday practices and traditions. This giving is steeped in solidarity, collectiveness, and reciprocity, practised as an integral part of social relations, rather than an afterthought brought on by excess. African society is dominated by associational activities. In many cases, these forms of solidarity have been replicated in urban areas through burial societies, savings clubs, and religious groups whose primary purpose is to promote solidarity and collective economic agency.

Indigenous social welfare systems were underpinned by concepts like Ubuntu, which emphasise shared humanity. Western philanthropy often overlooks or actively undermines these existing systems, imposing its models and creating a dependency on external aid. The philanthropy discourse is preoccupied with formal institutions. This preoccupation arrogantly assumes that "professionalised" equals "progressive", and predetermines and enforces a particular notion of what is acceptable without regard for the peculiarities and differences in the Global South context.

Across the continent, feminist scholars and activists continue to critique how traditional NGOs and donor aid structures consciously and unconsciously perpetuate imperialism, replicate colonial dynamics, and dilute the transformative power of feminist and liberationist work. The proliferation of NGOs and their overreliance as intermediaries for both aid and advocacy have, in many contexts, depoliticised struggles that should remain rooted in systemic critique and reimagination. Instead of addressing structural injustice, donor aid often funds projects that are apolitical, technocratic, and shaped by Western development frameworks. This fosters a philanthropic logic that privileges service delivery over justice and accountability to donors over

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solidarity with communities. In Zimbabwe, for instance, women's organisations have increasingly shifted from radical, confrontational feminist activism to donor-friendly, project-based work. This transition is often marked by a preference for non-confrontational initiatives, such as small-scale economic empowerment, while more politically charged efforts like challenging patriarchal state structures or confronting violence receive less support. The influence of aid funding plays a key role in shaping these priorities, as donors often favour initiatives that produce a measurable impact over time-consuming, politically risky organising.

This pattern is not limited to Zimbabwe. Across the continent, feminist movements have experienced the political instrumentalisation and institutionalisation of their work through the logic of aid and NGO frameworks. Movements become professionalised, grant-dependent, and risk-averse. The insistence on performative and cosmetic inclusivity, often guided by donor mandates, has led to pressure on women to include men in organising spaces, compromising hard-won safe spaces and diverting resources away from women-led mobilisation. In this context, aid becomes complicit in undermining feminist organising even as it purports to support it. In Sudan and South Sudan during the 1960s and 1970s, midwifery, nursing, and teaching jobs were held mainly by women who formed strong unions that acted as incubators for feminist activism. These working women, empowered by collective action and rights discourse, actively spread the message of women's liberation. However, by the 1980s and 1990s, the collapse of trade unions and privatisation led to widespread unemployment and displacement. Many women were forced into informal, low-paid work like vending and domestic labour, which fractured their solidarity and diminished their collective political power. The once vibrant women's movement lost its capacity for unified action amid the social and economic upheaval. Today, the

civil space in the Horn of Africa is dominated by NGOs, where international donors largely shape gender equality rhetoric. This NGO-isation of activism has depoliticised women's movements, turning many organisations into passive spaces focused more on competing for resources and publicity than on challenging the root causes of women's oppression. The result is a constrained political space where liberation is replaced with livelihood programming and resistance is softened into resilience.

What Do We Do About Neoliberalism and Its Hold on Contemporary Philanthropy? A Radical Redistribution and Reimagining?

The post-independence era witnessed a shift in the landscape of Western philanthropy in Africa. While the flow of aid continued, new actors emerged, including government aid agencies (like USAID and DFID) and larger international non-governmental organisations (INGOs). The focus shifted primarily to education, health, and economic development. However, critical perspectives from African scholars continued to challenge the underlying assumptions and impact of Western philanthropy. Thandika Mkandawire and Charles Soludo in *Our Continent, Our Future: African Perspectives on Structural Adjustment* critiqued the conditionalities attached to aid and how Western interventions often served the interests of donor countries rather than genuinely empowering African nations. This highlights the linkages between neoliberalism and philanthropy, underscoring the role of aid in undermining local governance and establishing a cycle of dependency.

The challenge, then, is to reimagine philanthropy not as an end but as a tool that can be radically restructured, reimagined, or bypassed altogether to serve liberatory movements, not manage them. It is imperative to retain the right to reimagine a future where resourcing is grounded in care, interdependence, and radical trust, not transactional aid as covert tools of neocolonialism and expansionist agendas. There is a need to continuously articulate philanthropic relationships with an embodied recognition of imperialism and neocolonialism and how they shape North/South engagements. In navigating this, we must attest to admittance and embrace critical awareness to understand what philanthropy truly looks like for Africans. From there, knowledge-building grows, especially as many young activists gravitate toward NGO spaces, believing they hold space for their hope for

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a free world. Finally, correction follows, involving deliberate decolonisation actions—insisting that our bodies are primary sites for liberation and freely allowing new information into our perspectives. And this reimagining must be both soft and firm; strategic, yet also alive. A beckoning. A return. This is not only a forward leap but a circling back to what has always been ours: knowledge systems of care, solidarity, and self-determination—a sharing of what we have remembered and are still remembering. In becoming critically aware of the infiltrations we must eradicate now, we open ourselves to the wisdom of the past, as we imagine again and again.

Where are African Feminist Movements in This Philanthropy Conversation? A Feminist Analysis of the Polycrisis and the Politics of Aid

In a world increasingly shaped by intersecting crises—economic precarity, climate disaster, political instability, and militarised conflict—African feminist movements stand as some of the most vital sites of resistance and imagination. Yet, when it comes to the global conversation on philanthropy, their voices often remain peripheral, their strategies decontextualised, and their demands for justice diluted. As the world navigates a polycrisis, it is imperative to ask: *Where are African feminist movements in the philanthropic conversation?*

This question is not just about representation or inclusion. It is about power,

extraction, and funding mechanisms that enable and constrain feminist liberation work. In *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, the authors from INCITE! Women of Colour Against Violence offer a scathing critique of the nonprofit industrial complex (NPIC), outlining how philanthropy often serves as a mechanism of co-optation, regulation, and depoliticisation of radical movements. As African feminists, our analysis must extend this critique into our specific geopolitical and historical context, interrogating the complicity of global philanthropy in perpetuating the very systems of harm it claims to alleviate.

Much of the philanthropic capital that funds feminist initiatives in Africa originates from the Global North, often from governments, private foundations, and corporate entities that simultaneously profit from and perpetuate structural violence. This duality mirrors what *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* critiques as the inherent contradiction within philanthropic aid: it emerges from systems of extraction and dispossession while positioning itself as benevolent and redemptive.

Consider the billions donated by extractive industries or tech giants whose business models rely on surveillance, labour exploitation, and ecological destruction. These are the same industries whose global operations destabilise African economies, displace communities, and render many women and gender-diverse people vulnerable to systemic harm. Yet, their charitable arms are often celebrated as saviours of women's rights. African feminist movements must challenge this contradiction, rejecting narratives that frame philanthropy as neutral or apolitical.

Moreover, the NGO-isation of feminist activism—a process thoroughly dissected in The Revolution Will Not Be Funded—has created a dependency on funding cycles, donor reporting requirements, and success metrics that do not align with movement goals. For African feminist groups, this has meant adjusting radical praxis to fit donor expectations, compromising long-term movement sustainability and political clarity.

Across the continent, feminist movements have experienced the political instrumentalisation and institutionalisation of their work through the logic of aid and NGO frameworks.

African Feminist Responses and Resistance

Despite these constraints, African feminists have not been passive recipients of funding regimes. Across the continent, movements are experimenting with alternative resource models, emphasising solidarity economies, collective care, and autonomous resourcing. Initiatives such as UAF-Africa, AWDF, and FRIDA | The Young Feminist Fund have emerged to shift power in philanthropy by centring feminist values of trust, redistribution, and accountability to movements rather than markets.

In line with *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded,* many African feminists are articulating what it means to be uncompromising in the face of co-optation. This means rejecting funding with extractive expectations, insisting on participatory grantmaking, and foregrounding political education within donor relationships. It also means naming the systemic root causes of violence—colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy—even when doing so risks biting the proverbial hand that feeds.

The tension between financial sustainability and political integrity is not easily resolved, but African feminists demonstrate that it is possible to hold complexity without dilution. The praxis of care, resistance, and collective leadership informs their approaches, offering a model that is not only resistant to the co-optive tendencies of philanthropy but also generative in imagining what truly liberated resourcing could look like.

In the Tradition of Our Resistance

Feminist-inflected communal models and solutions across West Africa are already in motion by initiatives like Harambee~Ubuntu, a Pan-African feminist platform that challenges the dominant donor-driven development model by insisting on care and radical trust. Similarly, ISDAO (Initiative Sankofa d'Afrique de l'Ouest) is a West African fund supporting LGBTQI+ and feminist organising across Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and Nigeria. ISDAO embraces participatory grantmaking, rejecting the redundant approaches of mainstream philanthropy and ensuring communities directly shape funding priorities. The African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) also exemplifies feminist, African-led philanthropy, supporting women's rights organisations through accommodating and long-term grants that respect the autonomy of grantees. Adeso's Proximate Fund advocates for shifting power to local organisations by challenging the global aid industry's colonial roots. Additionally, the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) reinforces the ability of local civil society actors and calls for structural reforms in the current colonised philanthropic spaces. Although global, the Foundation for a Just Society (FJS) prioritises grassroots feminist movements in Francophone West Africa and offers resources to organisations often excluded by traditional funding systems. These initiatives in solidarity are rooted in justice, local knowledge, and the dismantling of neoliberal development frameworks.

The philanthropic sector must be reformed to be part of, rather than an obstacle to, feminist liberation. The first step toward decolonising aid is to shift decision-making power to local actors in the Global South, in this case, West Africa. This means ensuring that communities and organisations directly affected by aid are no longer treated as passive recipients but as co-creators of solutions. Local NGOs and indigenous networks must be centred in all stages of project development, from the design phase and planning to implementation and evaluation.

Secondly, resources must be significantly redirected to locally rooted organisations. Currently, most funding is funnelled through large international NGOs and institutions based in the Global North, and often, regional organisations that gatekeep access and attach contracts to these local groups without transferring power. As oxymoronic as it sounds, a decolonised aid model would directly fund grassroots initiatives, remove intermediaries that

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dilute impact, and trust local actors with core, long-term, flexible funding. This shift is not just ethical, it is strategic, as local organisations have a deeper understanding of context and more sustainable approaches to change.

Redefining the metrics of success in aid and philanthropy is essential. Many current models are shaped by donor timelines, overly technical indicators, and short-term outputs that fail to account for deeper, structural transformation. Decolonising aid requires moving away from a culture of projectism and towards a practice rooted in solidarity, care, and long-term social justice. The Global Fund for Community Foundations notes that this also involves valuing relational accountability over bureaucratic performance and ensuring that impacted communities can define success on their terms.

The Revolution Will Not Be Funded reminds us that movements were never meant to be sustained by the institutions they seek to dismantle. African feminists are reclaiming the power to define their resourcing on their terms—not as charity, but as reparations; not as partnership, but as political alignment. In this moment of polycrisis, African feminist movements are not at the margins of the philanthropic conversation—they offer a blueprint for radical reimagination. The task before us is to listen, align, and act accordingly.

Acknowledgments

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Brief Three

Are We at the Beginning of a Beautiful Rupture? Reflections on the Role of Black and African Feminist Funders in These Times

The money flowing into West Africa from philanthropy comes with heavy strings attached and often serves to sanitise or NGO-ify feminist movements. As we face unprecedented and compounding crises, with foreign aid at its lowest levels for many states, and democracy in decline, are we witnessing a rupture that could open the door to re-shaping a reality rooted in liberation and justice? Or are we at a point of no return, where inequity and oppression are aided by all the systems we know? If so, what could philanthropy's role in this be?
We argue that, for philanthropy, a business-as-usual approach will keep us in the cycles of neoliberalism; further, that, as we have always seen, feminist movements will continue organising and resisting even as philanthropy flounders. However, to meet this moment, philanthropy must change, and can look to the diverse constellation of feminist funders, several based in or with deep roots in Africa, demonstrating that there is another way to navigate philanthropy whilst staying accountable to feminist movements.

The Current Funding System Has a Deeply Rooted, Racialised Trust Gap

We are witnessing an all-encompassing backlash on the rights and freedoms (both perceived and real) that decades of organising have afforded women, girls, and gender-expansive people. For every incremental step forward, the gatekeepers of power have doubled down to hold onto their power, and we are seeing this in real-time, at both macro and micro levels.

At the nation-state level, several countries have reduced or drastically cut their foreign aid funding, a sizeable amount of which went to organisations led by and for women, girls, and gender-expansive people. The Budget Cuts Tracker shows that between 2023 and 2025, the total aid budget will reduce by close to 73 billion USD. This conservative estimate factors in the cuts by the US (accounting for nearly 25% of aid in Africa), the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, and France.

Foreign aid has never been the conduit to liberation, and we are not suggesting that. However, these cuts mean that thousands of people across

West Africa will face even more challenges accessing affirming LGBTQ+ spaces, and safe and appropriate health services, including life-saving vaccinations, abortions, contraception, and other sexual and reproductive health services. As with everything, those most othered by the states' default will feel this impact most acutely.

Feminist organising is a proven factor in transforming society for everyone. Despite this, philanthropy has never moved enough sustained or sizeable funding to the needs of women, girls, and gender-expansive people and organising. In 2022, just 8% of private philanthropy went to gender work, with even less specifically to feminist movements. The proportion of philanthropic funding allocated to Black feminist movements is alarmingly lower. In the Black Feminist Fund's report *Where is the Money for Black Feminist Movements?*, between 0.1-0.35% of all philanthropic funding went to Black women, girls, and gender expansive-led organising. Fifty-nine per cent of the Black feminist organisations surveyed had never received core funding, 81% did not have funding to meet their organisational goals, and 53% had no funds for the next financial year. When the Black Feminist Fund took a regional survey, only 0.08% of the Official Development Assistance (ODA) funding specific to gender went to organisations led by African women, girls, and gender-expansive people, with the rest going to international NGOs and multilateral institutions. Funding from both public and private institutions, for the most part, goes directly to organisations based outside the continent, despite never-ending talks of shifting the power and localisation. According to the Black Feminist Fund's report, "The current funding system has a deeply rooted, racialized trust gap." When combined with philanthropy's ongoing failure to fully grapple with the intersecting layers of oppression, the result is clear: Black women, girls, and gender-expansive people are consistently left out and left behind.

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Taken together, these funding gaps threaten to reverse hard-won progress in health, education, economic and climate justice, and social justice more broadly. Furthermore, they accelerate the erosion of rights and freedoms, making life untenable for those most othered, and ultimately for us all.

The socialisation of autocracy, authoritarianism, and the sweeping anti-rights agenda did not happen in a vacuum with money funnelled into research, tracking, narratives and communications, lobbying and more. Using religious, social, political, judicial, and social levers of power, the financial backers of the anti-rights agenda recognised long ago that to effectively maintain the neo-liberal order and to impede gender justice, every part of the ecosystem needed to be resourced well and infiltrated. Though (intentionally) difficult to track, it was estimated in 2020 that US-based anti-rights groups have sent at least 280 million USD to campaigns against women and LGBTQ+ communities since 2007, and 54 million USD to Africa alone.

In May 2025, Nairobi, Kenya, hosted the "Pan African Conference of Family Values". This conference, unsurprisingly, had backing from conservative donors in the US and Europe. The so-called "family values" they espouse oppose abortion and sexual and reproductive rights, and are anti-LGBTQ+. It is no surprise that from East to West, many African states have introduced or passed punitive and draconian anti-LGBTQ+ laws under the guise of tradition and cultural values, despite these agendas being heavily resourced by forces outside of Africa. Looking primarily at the money, we are losing.

Black Feminist Movements Hold the Line. Will Philanthropy Catch Up?

We, who have always been pushed to the margins, carry the spirit of generations of women, girls, and gender expansive people who, despite never having the state, abundant resources or institutional backing on their side, organised, resisted and achieved extraordinary gains under violent systems. The freedoms and possibilities we experience today, though threatened, are the result of their relentless struggle. What we do have now, that our ancestors did not, is a growing and diverse constellation of feminist funders, born from our movements, rooted in our struggles, and accountable to us. Not to institutions preserving and protecting their wealth, and not to stock markets, but to the vision of justice. This changes everything. This

powerful juncture offers an opportunity to build a more liberated, just, and life-affirming system, flanked by feminist funders.

And there are many. These feminist funders exist within a determined, politically clear, and resilient ecosystem across this continent and in the diaspora. They fund in radical and innovative ways, based on their deep listening of movements and the courage to respond in ways that are relational and trust-based. Black feminist funders understand that creating programmatic strategies that do not centre the lived experiences of their grant partners will not yield the effective transformation that these communities require. These institutions disrupt traditional, top-down models of philanthropy by centring community leadership, trust-based grantmaking, and intersectional feminist principles.

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The Black Feminist Fund, for instance, gives out long-term (eight years), sizeable and flexible funding for Black feminist movements globally, ensuring that Black feminists themselves are making funding decisions, thereby challenging traditional philanthropic norms about what's possible, who's fundable, and who can make the funding decisions. Purposeful adopts a girl-led funding strategy, exemplified by its Karo Kura Resilience Fund in Sierra Leone, which enabled adolescent girls to allocate resources in their own communities, shifting power directly into the hands of those most affected. The African Women's Development Fund leads with a feminist movement-building approach, offering core and programmatic funding, and investing in grantee partner capacity, nurturing African women's leadership and organisational resilience. The Sankofa Initiative (ISDAO) operates with a community-led governance model, where LGBTQI activists across West Africa shape both its strategic direction and funding decisions. Its flexible

grants to informal groups, including sex worker-led collectives, demonstrate a commitment to decolonised, grassroots resourcing that meets movements where they are. Collectively, these funders practice solidarity-based, intersectional funding that affirms autonomy, sustains organising, and actively redistributes power within philanthropic ecosystems.

What is often referred to as "intermediary funds"—feminist-led funds typically based in Global South countries where the vast majority of their constituencies reside—are doing the powerful work of supporting movements. These funders understand that large, unrestricted, multiyear and sizable grants are what is needed to build and enable flourishing social justice movements on the continent.
Too often, grassroots organisations are overburdened with donor reporting expectations while receiving far too little support. Africa-based donors advancing feminist, gender justice and queer liberation understand how to resource movements from a place of shared context and solidarity. Black feminist donors often have lived experiences and cultural insights that align with the movements they support. This allows for funding that is not only more relevant but also rooted in care, trust, and mutual understanding, prioritising long-term movement-building over short-term outcomes.

Feminist funders fundamentally shift power in philanthropy. By controlling financial resources, Black feminist donors challenge traditional, often Western-centric funding models. They challenge the face of philanthropy as a rich white male benefactor, and decentralise power, enabling more autonomous decision-making for African feminist movements and ensuring funding strategies are shaped by those closest to the issues.
Black feminist donors also sustain intersectional and radical organising by prioritising the interconnected nature of gender, race, class, sexuality, and other identities. This means they are more likely to support bold, transformative work that may be overlooked by mainstream donors, such as organising led by queer, rural, or young feminists.

Returning to Our African Roots of Giving

It is within African societies and cultures that we can find our own language and practices of giving that will be the foundation of our revolution. Longstanding money practices like *esusu*, a traditional, community-based

savings and loan system that is widely practised in many parts of West Africa and global diaspora communities, illustrate our ancestral roots of communal giving. *Esusu* is both a financial tool and a social safety net, reflecting deep traditions of communal reciprocity and resilience.

Even when we leave Africa, we do not lose those roots of giving. Today, much has been written about the significant impact of diaspora remittances in upholding entire communities, providing lifesaving care in times of emergency, and providing shelter, school supplies, and medical aid in the face of high unemployment, economic downturns or natural climate catastrophes. When we examine the best strategies for supporting our movements in Africa and the diaspora, it is clear that we are best positioned to respond to our own problems. It demonstrates our capacity to support each other beyond Western models of "charity", which too often assume one group as powerless beggars, and another group as powerful, but benevolent givers, all while sustaining the violent structures that have made this possible in the first place.

At this critical juncture, philanthropy can continue with the default of bureaucratic violence, reproducing the very harms it claims to alleviate. Or, funders can choose to move into a different role, one of humility, solidarity, and commitment to social justice movements who have always known the way forward and are building the worlds that will make philanthropy (and wealth accumulation) obsolete.

Black feminist movements are not waiting. We are building, resisting, and imagining new futures, even when under-resourced, even when constrained by systems never designed for us. The question is not whether we will continue; that much is certain. The question is whether philanthropy will finally follow our lead. There is a blueprint. Feminist funders, many rooted and in deep relationships with movements across West Africa, are already modelling what it means to fund with care, accountability, and political clarity. They remind us that it is possible to work inside philanthropy without being consumed by its worst tendencies. We've shared these examples in this essay as both proof of what's possible and an urgent call to funders: the time to act—and to fund boldly—is now.

Acknowledgments

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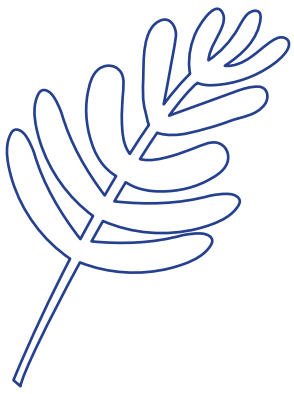

Are we on the Cusp of a Beautiful Rupture?

A Compendium on Building Community Power in Philanthropy in West Africa

July 2025

Liberation Alliance Africa