CRITICAL CONVERSATION

BEYOND RHETORIC

**TRANSFORMING PHILANTHROPIC/
DONOR PRACTICE NOW!**

ACT UBUMBANO

ACT Ubumbano's 'Critical Conversation' - Beyond Rhetoric: Transforming philanthropic/donor practice now! has been a long time in the making and was a key moment that saw years of critique, self-reflection, discussion, and frustration with philanthropic/funding practices come together in one space.

It was not a moment of resolution.

Its purpose was to remind us that we know what is wrong, we have heard this all before, we know what must change and, in addition to talking, we should start doing. It was not a new conversation, nor did it intend to offer any new insights, but rather was a call to move beyond the comfort of the 'fireside chat' into the 'crucible of practice'.

From the outset, it was agreed that it was impossible to frame this as a philanthropy or donor practice conversation only because the 'act of giving' is informed by a history and practice of charity that has differentiated those who help from those who receive help. Those who help have power (they control resources and thus get to make decisions), while those who are helped are often regarded as being in need and without agency (and are therefore supported, empowered, developed, capacitated, and aided).

And although this ideological position has shifted quite substantially, the evidence—the structures, shape and flows of power in the development sector—still speak to an untransformed system.

While the conversation spoke to philanthropic practice specifically, it offered a broad critique of the ideology and practice of development, within which donorship is a strong and, some would say, defining force. It was a frank exposition of power and how power shapes and is shaped by the transactional relationships between actors in the sector. It was a conversation informed by experience—as community organisers, recipients of grants, grant makers, evaluators, and people who are concerned that we have become too comfortable with the rhetoric.

One of the panellists, Graham Philpott, framed the challenge thus:

> ... *It is not about what they gave, but more deeply about what they took – 'they took our dignity'. Is it about how they gave, their stipulations, their intentions, the amount, the frequency, the conditionalities? Maybe – but more profoundly, it is about what they took – they took our dignity....*

Ongeziwe Badli shared inputs from community-based organisers' reflections during two Solidarity Action Learning Events, which were consistent in their critique of the power relations in the sector. They spoke of their dependence on the donor community: of being ignored unless their work responds to donor imperatives rather than the real needs of their communities; of the fickleness of funding that gets withdrawn when the donor arbitrarily and, often without warning, changes focus; of the complex, often unreasonable and expensive compliance procedures; and of the growing distance between the reality of people engaged in struggle and the perceptions and expectations those who control resources. Similarly, in her opening remarks, Halima Mohamed framed two perspectives from interviews she'd done that clearly illustrate peoples' experience of the donor/recipient relationship:

> *I exist when I have an idea for a project. For the rest of the time, practically, I do not exist.*
>
> *It is not a relationship. It is just people collaborating on an activity.*

This, whether many practitioners find it palatable or not, is how philanthropy and donor practice is perceived by the people it sets out to help.

Whether we look to the challenges of climate change, or widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo as it manifests in protest, or the unpredictable nature of politics, current philanthropic practice is inadequate for an increasingly unpredictable and unstable environment. The false certainty and linearity of

the donor-provided frameworks within which organisations are forced to operate if they want to access funding has resulted in a sector that lags change. Halima noted that:

> The heart of our conversations have been reflecting on how dominant approaches, structures and relationships in philanthropy have either severely limited the advancement of a more just society and, in other cases, deeply exacerbated injustice - and what needs to be done for this to change. ...Looking only at the discourse in the philanthropic sector, one can easily assume that there has been a momentous shift. The reality, we know, does not bear that out.

These frameworks are pernicious. While the philanthropic sector in recent years has had an increasing focus on innovation and adaptability, the way in which they decide on what works and what they fund is still based on 'evidence we believe in'. In other words, the philanthropic community—the army of very well-paid technical experts and advisors in their employ—define for themselves what success looks like, and then

they go out and find it. And this is a best-case example! Often, the philanthropic community sets out to create the change that it itself defines, using their power to determine what and how the organisations they partner with respond to particular challenges that are of interest to the donor. While Halima went on to point out the contradictions of this practice:

> We shift additional resources from project to flexible or general support – but we do this only with those who align to "our" theories of change, whose work builds into "our" impact and who represent hierarchical institutional structures that we are comfortable with – they rock the boat, but not too much. They organise—and they show dissent—in ways that we see as appropriate.

and Graham described this power in relation to the practice of giving,

> We have professionalised this generosity / philanthropy, funding and made it our business to be the subjects that set the trends, the methodologies, the indicators; and we

have provided the labels for our objects (OVCs, beneficiaries) so that we / they are clear about their place in the world-as-it-is. We have become much more organised in taking people's dignity.

both challenge practitioners to think about their role in perpetuating practices and systems of injustice:

This cannot be the generosity, the charity, the philanthropy, the funding relations that we can be aligned with. A generosity and social order which is nourished by death, despair and poverty. We cannot enact a generosity that perpetuates the injustice to which it is responding. There is no place for a philanthropy that uses the means of an unjust system and practice (a system of death, despair and poverty) to ameliorate the effects of that system, in the name of some greater end—it just leaves a lot of beaten people.

This is a critique of how the broader development sector functions, but not one that lets the practitioners of philanthropy off the hook. Grant makers are powerful actors in the system because of the freedom they have to use their 'own resources' to effect change, and their ability to, based on successful experimentation,

influence less agile institutions like the state and multilateral agencies. While they enjoy this power, philanthropy has been remiss in attempts to create radical change, citing limitations on operations as the reason for not acting in a more creative way. The truth is, many of the limitations that grant makers put forward as reasons for their inertia are self-imposed because these are often within the scope of their internal policy and governance systems. This was clearly evidenced in the global response to COVID-19, where, in a

time of global crisis, perhaps in recognition of our shared destiny and common fragility, all the things that we thought impossible were suddenly realised. Funding was shifted to core costs; organisations invested in the comfort and care of their staff; reporting requirements were simplified and reduced; and, most importantly, investments were made into people's humanity and dignity without question or concern. Organisations that were not traditionally 'welfarist' were suddenly able to pay for food, provide shelter, and invest in psychosocial support. Organisations were suddenly allowed to provide what was needed to communities of people and support those communities to do what was needed—without the hand of compliance laying heavily on their shoulders. In the COVID-19 crisis, the sector rediscovered a more human way of interacting and being.

And now, as the world remerges from this (still ongoing) crisis, this way of being, this humanity we had found again, is at risk of being lost. Instead of leaping forward boldly with radical new experiments to shift and disrupt, there is a pressure towards and slow but steady drift back into past practice. This cannot be acceptable

to any of us. We have to moving beyond these tokenistic experiments towards bold action to create real change.

The conversation saw a call to develop *"a philanthropy of doers [which] expresses and affirms dignity, abandons the agency and power of the resourced and [places these] in the hands of those who struggle directly [who have nothing]"*. The philanthropic practice that must be aspired to is unapologetically political—a politics that squarely locates practice in the service of the struggles of formations of people who are seldom heard or seen. Beyond practice, this political philanthropy must interrogate and challenge the systems in which it is located, and the values and beliefs that proscribe our choices—or in many instances, our lack of choice.

But how do we get to this new practice?

This was, is and always will be a conversation about power. Our practice cannot be disassociated from it. In every act of philanthropy, we have to consistently interrogate and integrate a healthy appreciation of and facility to work with power because, in the words of Paolo Freire:

1. Our thanks to Anne Harley of the Centre for Adult Education (UKZN) for pointing us to this reference.

Any attempt to 'soften' the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed the attempt never goes beyond this. In order to have the continued opportunity to express their 'generosity', the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this 'generosity', which is nourished by death, despair and poverty. (Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 1971, chapter 1[1])

This calls on us to 'de-centre' our own perspectives and needs in order to respond more effectively in support of the struggles of people at the frontlines of change:

> *Power is not a zero sum game, and we need to be thinking much more about centring the power of those who live the injustices and then figure out what allyship and solidarity mean in that context. This could mean many things—enabling spaces for the power of our constituencies to strengthen, spaces for other perspectives on social change to flourish, or for new systems that fundamentally challenge our ways of being and doing. Perhaps it is time we focus on the alternatives as the centre.*

Given the experience of many actors in the sector, the question of the design and function of the development system must be questioned. The persistence of what feels like deliberately created dependency must be challenged. This challenge has to be framed around the recognition that:

· Money IS power, and that philanthropic practitioners must take responsibility for how they exercise that power.

· The changes in relation to who makes

decisions are insufficient. It does not matter enough that 'the people who sit at the table change' when the house in which the table is located is crumbling all around us.

· We must move beyond safe experiments. Yes there has been some progress, but it is insufficient. We cannot continue to tweak the system: "experiments with 5% or 10% of our resources are not enough". Risks must be taken to 'prove and be believed'.

· Funding can be the basis for solidarity, but is fundamentally insufficient without strong relationships founded in common purpose and understanding. Current practice, while speaking very eloquently to the idea of partnership, is at best 'a collaboration on a project'.

These, and perhaps a few more realisations yet to be made, should drive us in a direction that shapes a new and different kind of philanthropy that responds to the calls listed below—none of which can be considered even remotely new or ground-breaking because they have been said repeatedly for at least 30 years (and probably longer). The challenge is to act with urgency to finally respond to repeated calls for action:

1. Simplify the processes and procedures of funding. This applies to the whole funding cycle, from application through to compliance. The reach and capability of civil society is hampered by the limitations of systems that exclude because of the restrictions of language, writing ability, and overly complex and redundant compliance. Donors have to develop a bigger risk appetite if the radical change they expect to see is to be realised.

   We set aside funds for small grants, but overwhelm them with bureaucracy and tag along capacity building that is geared to helping them fulfil our requirements or add on clauses on support being accompanied by guidance.

2. Build relationships on trust. If the donor community wants to do better, it will need to invest more, providing the time to know and understand who they are working with. The investment in relationship building that allows partners to think, plan, act, and learn together is invaluable:

   We talk about intersectional programming – but our analyses informing our programming

needs to do much more to understand what lived intersectionality demands of how we support justice-based efforts.

3. Fund what is being done, not what you think should be done. Practice in a manner that gives life to the belief that formations of people directly engaged in struggle are best placed to determine their own needs. Embedded in this call is a critical self-awareness of the role, positionality, and limits of understanding of practitioners:

   Those we say out loud like: Our constitutions don't allow us to work this way, this is what good practice is with global funders, or legally we are obliged to undertake this level of detail. But constitutions can sometimes be changed where there is enough political will. Scale is not the arbiter of good practice. And the laws we have actually demand only certain elements— the rest we have willingly instituted from an imported compliance and trust-deficit mindset.

4. Fund flexibly, support experimentation and learning. Adaptability is increasingly valued, but the systems and processes of grant making do not support these approaches—the systems and practices lag the rhetoric:

And then there are the rationales that we don't often say openly enough. About not being comfortable with the reputational risk that may emerge, about how institutional dynamics or leadership ideas limit the nature of our strategies or how brand relevance or politics influences what we can be seen to support or not.

5. Fund for the long term. While it is commonly

accepted that large-scale social and behavioural change takes time, grant periods often do not reflect this. Funders attention spans are short, decisions are often driven by 'new ideas and approaches' that result in rapid shifts in strategy which leave partners stranded.

...we tweak the grant term from one year to two years. But ask the black feminist fund and they will tell you that they are aiming for eight-year grant trajectories because the research shows that that is the kind of long-term investment needed to begin to build strong foundations for change.

No one expects this to happen overnight, but there are real concerns about the lack of urgency and movement in respond to longstanding calls for change. To successfully move forward, we have to begin to recognise and accept that it will take time and it will cost (probably a lot) to work in this way. But we must also accept that, if we are able to enable more autonomy that results in more confident action to shape the world in the interest of those most affected and least visible and heard, that it will be worth it.

The article was written by Allan Moolman, who facilitated a Critical Conversation between panelists Halima Mohamed, Ongeziwe Badli, and Graham Philpott. Present in the room and online were over 100 philanthropy and social justice actors, and their contribution to the conversation is acknowledged.

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