

How to ensure equitable philanthropy in Africa

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Research supported by Vodacom Foundation, Safaricom and the Vodafone Foundation reveals why donor resources for Africa tend to go to Northern-based rather than African-led civil society organisations. Vodacom Foundation will continue the conversation at this year's Trialogue Business in Society Conference.

Among the many devastating effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, approximately 115 million people fell below the poverty line in 2020, according to the [World Bank](#) – most of them situated in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

There is little doubt that African countries have been among the hardest hit – but although donor funding increased during the pandemic, just [5.2% of US foundation funding for Africa](#) currently goes to African-led non-profit organisations (NPOs). This is common among Northern-based donors, who prefer to support international organisations with reach and influence, but not necessarily an intimate knowledge of community needs.

Such philanthropic barriers mean that local NPOs find their efforts hampered or restricted. Many international NPOs receive generous funding that may or may not 'trickle down' to local implementing partners, which are usually viewed as 'foot soldiers' rather than leaders. This outlook limits impact and compromises Africa's ability to reach the Sustainable Development Goals.

'Decolonising' philanthropy

The 2021 report, '[Barriers to African Civil Society: Building the Sector's Capacity and Potential to Scale Up](#)', supported by Vodacom Foundation, Safaricom and the Vodafone Foundation, investigates the barriers facing African civil society, and suggests that philanthropy should be 'decolonised' and that local NPOs should be capacitated to scale up and lead with the support of the private sector, local philanthropic organisations, and research institutions.

Looking at case studies in five African countries – Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa – the report highlights some of the challenges local NPOs face, from their own lack of agility and weak leadership or governance systems to the restrictive regulatory environments put in place by governments.

It also points out that indigenous civil society organisations are largely disempowered by the current donor funding model – they are invariably monitored or controlled from a distance and cannot compete with international NPOs for resources or skilled staff. An example of this is that donors may insist that consultants from their own country monitor and evaluate programmes in African countries.

The report calls for Northern-based donors to "reimagine their grant-making, rigorous guidelines and procedures, organisational norms, and management systems" to level the playing field for local NPOs. Currently, they create dependency rather than fostering transformation, and fail to give local NPOs space to develop long-term strategies or improve their own financial management systems. Funding tends to be project-specific, which means NPOs have no budget to train staff or investigate ways to become financially sustainable.

Northern-based NPOs are called on to be more flexible, innovative, and mindful of the African context in which they operate.

The role of the private sector

The report says the private sector must have the courage to pursue and support controversial issues as they often speak to a vision of the countries we want to live in. It further says companies should think innovatively and not behave like traditional

donors, which tends to constrain NPOs.

In Africa, the private sector is slowly coming to look at NPOs as partners, but there is work to be done – the relationship is still “top-down and dictated by the private sector”, according to the report. However, companies and NPOs can collaborate across several areas, particularly corporate social investment (CSI), facilitating joint programming that really delivers impact. NPOs can function as a bridge between companies and communities – something already evident in South Africa, Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria.

Vodacom has been working closely with its implementing partners in civil society for many years and has been instrumental in assisting some NPOs to grow from feeding schemes to community ICT hubs, where children receive sandwiches while their parents learn how to use computers.

It is important that NPOs learn to become agile without losing sight of their core mission – something companies like Vodacom can assist with.

A key theme at the Trialogue Business in Society Conference

To better understand how to change the donor-recipient narrative in Africa, Vodacom is sponsoring the theme ‘Equitable philanthropy’ at this year’s Trialogue Business in Society Conference, which takes place on 10 and 11 May. The topic, which will be unpacked on 10 May, will build on the research report and examine how donors, companies and NPOs can work to make philanthropy on the continent more equitable and inclusive.

CEO Shameel Joosub will deliver the executive overview of the topic, as he did at last year’s conference.



Shameel Joosub

The keynote speaker will be Mallence Bart-Williams, a Sierra Leonean-German social entrepreneur and the founder of Freetown-based creative collective Folorunsho. This ‘sharity’, initiated with street children in Sierra Leone, takes homeless children off the streets and places them in schools by harnessing their creativity, without relying on donor funding. Her most recent initiative, Female Innovation Lab, provides Freetown-based young women who have lost their homes and families with skills to foster their burgeoning entrepreneurship.



Mallence Bart-Williams

Bart-Williams’s keynote address will be followed by a discussion on whether it is Africa’s responsibility to liberate itself from international donor dependency, featuring the ‘Barriers to African Civil Society: Building the Sector’s Capacity to Scale Up’ report author, Bhekinkosi Moyo, of the Centre for African Philanthropy and Social Investment (CAPSI), report research advisory board member Takalani Netshitenzhe of Vodacom, and Sello Hatang of the Nelson Mandela Foundation.

For more information about the Trialogue Business in Society Conference 2022, and to register, visit:

<https://trialogue.co.za/business-society-conference-2022/>.

The Trialogue Business in Society Virtual Conference is presented in partnership with: Vodacom, Nedbank, MTN SA Foundation, Rand Water Foundation, Capitec Foundation, Sanlam Foundation and Volkswagen South Africa.

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