

WINGSForum Power and the Role of Philanthropy

Plenary session: central themes and ideas

WINGSForum is the preeminent global conference on philanthropy — offering a rare opportunity for a truly unique collection of philanthropy associations, support organisations, funders and academics from all regions of the world to network, learn from each other and deeply explore how philanthropy can make an ever-greater contribution to social impact and civil society building.

The in-person WINGSForum had to shift from November 2020 to 2021, and a series of virtual experiences is filling the gap. As part of this online series, on 24 November 2020 we welcomed a panel of voices from all sides of philanthropy, including the co-author of the international bestseller ‘New Power’, and leaders in community activism as well as corporate philanthropy. They discussed and debated how power plays out in the philanthropic and nonprofit world, and what the strategies and practices are that can begin to shift these dynamics. Key highlights from the event can be found below.

1. WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OLD AND NEW POWER?



“In philanthropy, we invest in ideas, in people and communities that we hope will work to transform these power relations - we hope - for the better”.

Jessica Horn

- Old power is leader driven and top down. New power is more open and shared.
- The failings of the old power world in philanthropy are obvious. How do we shift to a world where we create structures in a new power way?
- New power engages with social movements, which means philanthropy needs to change the way it makes grants, as well as its systems and processes.
- While we often hear about ‘empowering people’, we hear less about those ready to redistribute their own power. The new power leaders are typically not those in old power leadership positions.

2. WHERE CAN WE SEE BRIGHT SPOTS OF POWER SHIFTING?



“Civic engagement is not something workshopped, it is practiced, embodied and performed”.

Moukhtar Kocache

- The Covid-19 crisis has ignited a spirit of volunteerism and encouraged those in places like Sri Lanka to find new ways to build communities alongside holding the state accountable for its failings.
- The Black Lives Matter movement popularised the notion of ‘leaderful’ movements, which is a new way of thinking about leadership that is more scalable.
- Initiatives like Giving Tuesday have no overarching hierarchy and no centralised infrastructure that belongs to one person. Participants share values not rules.

3. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE KEY CHALLENGES FACED BY PHILANTHROPY?

“Our problems are not technical but political”.

Moukhtar Kocache

a. The nature of philanthropy

- Philanthropy exists as a paradox: it is part of a privileged top-down structure but needs to work to leverage this to address structural change.

- The sector needs to work out its relation to power, particularly in the current climate of upheaval and change, and realise its possibility of creating community resilience, resistance and survival.
- Traditional foundations are not good at new thinking about power. Catalysing grassroots agencies to take part in experimental collaborative movements is not a current skill set of most foundations. It takes time to build something new alongside the trust of communities.

b. Complex environments

- Philanthropy and NGOs are perceived by many in the Global South as foreign agents.
- Foreign aid in some regions of the Global South has embedded unequal relationships and eroded civil society in favour of professional NGOs. There are less social movements and these are now harder to build.
- Now, there are multiple approaches to philanthropy - including personal philanthropy, corporate philanthropy, foreign aid, and large foundations - which can leave grassroots organisations confused.
- In a time of change and adjustment, the Covid-19 crisis has made all challenges present in complex environments even more acute.



“It is about holding power structures accountable if we want to work ourselves out of a job”.

Ambika Satkunanathan



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4. WHAT STEPS CAN PHILANTHROPY TAKE TO REDISTRIBUTE POWER?

a. Thinking about social change differently



“We need to find a place of dialogue, to first listen rather than immediately prescribe”.

Vidya Shah

- We need to embrace nuance - one new way of thinking about social change might be to think about the interchange between movements and institutions. What can they learn from each other, and how can they feed and support each other?
- If we are going to build these new power movements, we need to build learning ecosystems where we are all informing each other and learning from each other.
- The ethical issues at the heart of philanthropy need to be openly discussed by all who work in a foundation.
- In places where there is rapid growth in personal and corporate philanthropy, as well as CSR initiatives, civil society organisations (CSOs) are starting to be treated as service providers. We should endeavour to promote CSOs as organisations with a deep understanding of social development on the ground.

- We need to examine where and how the wealth held by foundations was created and whether we can repair any damage it caused.
- Investment portfolios need to embody our values.

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“How do we not just distribute the participation, but distribute the power?”

Henry Timms

b. Question who has the agency to make decisions

- In some places in the Global South, through philanthropic activity and aid there has been trauma and the colonisation of the spirit, mind, and language. We must address this in order to move forward.
- Funding in some regions has stripped away the agency of people and turned them into recipients, taking individual leaders from their communities and turning them into professional NGO workers.
- Philanthropy in the Global South - such as in places like India - needs to match that of foreign funders. Outsiders need to question whether they themselves have a role in encouraging homegrown philanthropy.

c. Fund in new and different ways

- The process of grantmaking by communities is both a process and an objective.
- Philanthropy needs to invest in work that others are afraid to support; take risks; and erode the power of gatekeepers.
- We need to see ourselves as more than just a grantmaker, and seek out impactful community work and help those organisers navigate the world of grants and investments.
- Abolish discretionary funds which are antidemocratic in their nature.
- Take a systems view of issues and help governments implement services better, alongside investing in social protection systems.
- Increase giving rates within the philanthropic sector to build infrastructure and resilience at the community level.
- Fund with a long term perspective: 5-10 years is not long enough in development anymore.

d. Critically engage with participatory grantmaking

- Outsource at least parts of budgets to decision making outside of the institution, and create community philanthropy opportunities for grantees.

- We need to see investment at scale and foundations need to make bigger bets on participatory work. This will enable us to try more new things.
- Larger governance and capital superstructures are obstructing new kinds of models emerging. There are lots of challenging governance questions about running decentralised models that we need to take into account.
- Participatory grantmaking should be seen as one component, not a revolution.

“Bringing together the strength of institutions and the energy of movements is key to scale”.

Henry Timms

The WINGSForum will continue to be a space to hold these kinds of challenging conversations. Find out more about our online and in-person events by visiting the [WINGSForum website](https://wingsforum.org) (wingsforum.org)

Imagine, They Plead

Imagine, They Plead.
Grantees as Equalantees
Not as Recipients.

Nor as Dependents
Trussed up loads for life and death
But as space sharers.

Imagine them right.
As Bestowers of knowledge,
Philanthropic-wise.

Moving on their own
With you as Accompaniers
To the bright future.

Then... No power game
But a flat field belonging
To all who work it –

Imagination
For Generations, christened:
Sustainanthropy.



by Akwasi Aidoo,
written for the WINGSForum

