

Trust as Strategy: Reshaping Global Philanthropy

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We are living through a moment of opportunity, particularly in the context of Africa–Europe relations. As the global order continues to shift, we are seeing increased engagement between the two regions. This is especially evident in the fields of women's funds and philanthropy, where new conversations are emerging around how European funders can directly support African women's funds and grassroots organisations, rather than relying on intermediaries or subsidiaries.

There is real potential here to strengthen ties. With South Africa taking a leading role in the G20, Africa has a unique opportunity to bring its own ways of knowing into global conversations. This is particularly true in how we think about economics, gender, and equality. In the philanthropic space, we must ask: how can we support women, girls, and LGBTQ+ communities in ways that are rooted in trust and dignity?

This is the premise of trust-based philanthropy - an approach that centres respect, mutual accountability, and the recognition that local actors are best placed to know what their communities need.

Learning from the Past

Historically, philanthropy in Africa has been shaped by European processes, procedures, and reporting frameworks. The approach was often rigid, top-down, and detached from context. Funding decisions were driven more by bureaucratic requirements than by local realities. If we are serious about forging more equitable relationships, this needs to change.

This is not to ignore Africa's own challenges around governance or transparency. But there are practical steps we can take to begin reshaping these dynamics. European actors who hold power and influence must be willing to engage differently, moving away from narratives of deficiency and dependence.

Too often, funding proposals hinge on traumatic stories, what some have called "trauma porn". In other words, stories that portray African women as perpetual

victims in order to justify support. This framing not only limits dignity but also obscures the power, knowledge, and agency that exist on the ground.

Instead, we should be creating vibrant and thriving spaces for mutual learning. Yes, the EU can fund programming in areas such as gender-based violence, LGBTQ+ rights, or climate justice, but it must do so in ways that acknowledge and trust the expertise of African organisations. This includes moving away from unnecessarily rigid reporting systems and towards co-created outcomes that reflect shared values and locally led solutions.

The Role of Values

This shift raises an important question: is there a fundamental disconnect between the values underpinning global philanthropy and the values held within African societies? Or is there room to adapt and align these values in ways that foster more just and reciprocal partnerships?

For too long, many philanthropic flows to Africa were channelled through entities based in the Global North, particularly in the United States. But this moment invites a new approach, where African organisations can claim their space and bring forth their own frameworks for understanding gender justice, climate justice, and social transformation.

This is a two-way street. There is certainly space for European actors to share their knowledge and experience. But more importantly, it is time for Europe to listen. Africa is not a monolith. It is a continent of rich diversity, with multiple identities and ways of being. Engaging with that complexity is essential.

Simple Steps Forward

In my own sector, philanthropy, one of the simplest yet most powerful changes we can make is to fund those working on the ground in solving the issues directly. Women's and girls' organisations in Africa are doing incredible work. They should not need to rely on fiscal sponsors or intermediaries based elsewhere. We must move toward direct, trust-based partnerships.

The shifting global order only heightens the urgency of this work. As new alliances form and old power structures evolve, there is space to rethink how philanthropy operates and question who it truly serves.

Lessons from Elsewhere

The Chinese funding model, for instance, offers an interesting contrast. Chinese development cooperation has largely steered clear of imposing conditionalities or prescriptive metrics. While we should remain attentive to how Chinese soft power might evolve over time, so far, the experience has been different. Funding is less focused on control and more open to letting recipients decide how to use resources.

That's not to say accountability isn't important. It absolutely is. But accountability can coexist with trust. Working in a trust-based way doesn't mean giving up oversight, rather it means recognising that local actors have the knowledge, experience, and legitimacy to lead the work.

Reimagining Relationships

Ultimately, we share common values: justice, equality, inclusion, dignity. A trust-based approach means centring those values in our partnerships. It means shifting from a mindset of monitoring and control to one of co-creation and collaboration.

Reporting, in this context, becomes a shared exercise in reflection, and not a one-sided audit. It asks: what are the outcomes we hope to achieve together? How can we track progress without reinforcing power imbalances?

If we want to build more equal, resilient, and responsive philanthropic ecosystems, we must begin by trusting the people closest to the work. It's time for a new kind of relationship between Africa and Europe. Moving forward we need to ground philanthropy not in extraction, but in partnership.

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