

African philanthropic institutions are demonstrating how donors can more effectively foster independent action and strengthen movements for change. This different approach may hold the key to durable development on the continent.

Although many donors recognize that top-down approaches and solutions that are not rooted in context are less likely to succeed, few manage to include partners and beneficiaries in decision making in very meaningful ways. One of the exceptions is [TrustAfrica](#), an independent foundation based in Africa and led by Africans. It was established in 2006 to practice a kind of philanthropy that not only benefits Africans but actively supports their agency.

It is also the subject of a new book, [Claiming Agency: Reflecting on TrustAfrica's First Decade](#). As the book's editors, we sought to understand what this kind of African philanthropy looks like in practice and what difference it has made. In our analysis, five elements stand out:

1. It is geographically rooted

A key premise is that it makes a difference to be based on the continent. TrustAfrica staff support and enable the work as opposed to just resourcing it from afar.

In a chapter about its work on international criminal justice, legal expert and writer Humphrey Sipalla describes how having an African funder working on the issue transferred a sense of legitimacy to its civil society partners and created spaces for an African narrative to emerge. Working together, the funders and partners came to recognize the need to make heard the voices of the victims who had survived crimes of atrocity and to advance African-led justice processes. Doing so brought new momentum to the fight against impunity, as seen in last year's special court to try Chadian leader Hissène Habré, where victims were among those who testified.

Similarly, reflecting on TrustAfrica's work in Liberia and Zimbabwe, attorney and philanthropic consultant Alice Brown notes that 'its position on the frontlines allows it to be an integral part of the strategising and co-creation of solutions alongside civil society and other democratic actors.' But as these examples suggest, it took more than being geographically rooted; it required actively reaching out to constituency voices to inform those funding decisions.

This relinquishing of power has, for instance, been reflected in the institution's approach of using convenings and knowledge building as the basis for developing collective agendas and funding priorities. This helps to ensure that resourcing decisions are based on the reality of local issues and priorities.

2. It actively advances agency and devolves power

Supporting fully the idea of agency requires relinquishing power to one's partners – the power to determine priorities and solutions, the power to represent and speak on behalf

of constituents, and the power to create knowledge and set agendas. Above all, it requires a commitment to enabling partners not only to be heard but also to exercise their influence.

This relinquishing of power has, for instance, been reflected in the institution's approach of using convenings and knowledge building as the basis for developing collective agendas and funding priorities. This helps to ensure that resourcing decisions are based on the reality of local issues and priorities. In her chapter on resourcing women's rights, feminist author and analyst Hakima Abbas views this as putting the work in context, but, as she also points out, convenings alone are not enough to enable the priorities of those most affected to emerge: it is also takes a concerted effort to reach out to marginalized communities in order to provide resources and enabling mechanisms for their voices to be heard.

The ongoing challenge for philanthropy, even when moving beyond the networked, more visible organizations, is to constantly explore which are the non-institutionalized voices that need to be included. Indeed, their invisibility and lack of access is often a key part of their problem in the first place.

Sometimes, despite awareness of these voices, bureaucratic processes or difficulties in dealing with accessing disparate voices can result in the establishment of internal barriers within philanthropic institutions. When this happens, the ability to hear and listen to these voices requires a different way of working, an opening up to views that challenge our comfort zones.

3. It resources civil society and movement building

Linked to efforts to expand and include multiple voices is the issue of movement building. This involves supporting a cadre of African organizations and individuals that can speak with a shared voice, develop collaborative agendas and advance collective policy positions. Several chapters highlight TrustAfrica's contributions to movement building. In Zimbabwe, for example, Alice Brown sees this playing out in collaborative efforts to advance constitutional reforms.

Writer and activist Fambai Ngirande reflects on how a movement-building approach has greatly helped to advance a more contextualized reflection of the illicit financial flow (IFF) challenge in Africa. Abbas argues that women's rights movements require quality resourcing, the kind that is possible only when funders apply a movement-building lens that is also African. Thus the funding itself needs to have a pan-African ideological base and an intersectional focus.

4. It recognizes that the control of resources is more important than the source of funds

Tendai Murisa, TrustAfrica's executive director, emphasizes that the geographical source of the funds is not the ultimate enabler – or dis-enabler – of agency. Foreign funds enabled rather than distorted TrustAfrica's agency, and in turn the agency that was supported on the ground. As Humphrey Sipalla argues, the fact that donors have an

agenda 'does not necessarily mean that they act to the detriment of African agency'. In essence, it depends on how that agenda aligns with local priorities and how flexible it is.

Fambai Ngirande's chapter on stemming IFFs from Africa shows how funds initially provided by a Western donor, through TrustAfrica, supported research and led to the articulation of a distinctly African agenda with input from across the continent. This new point of view attracted new constituencies, led to a multi-country people's campaign and is being advanced at the African Union.

In the absence of their own long-term sustainable resources, TrustAfrica and institutions like them find themselves navigating a tricky place: needing to advocate for and negotiate their own agency with their donors while simultaneously aiming to ensure that they devolve the power this agency brings with it.

5. It navigates being a recipient and disperser of funds

Institutions such as TrustAfrica are often both recipients and dispersers of funds, which places restrictions on their own agency.. In turn, as a funder, it must also be mindful of the way in which its own funding processes can have a constraining effect on the agency of its partners. One important implication is that it limits their ability to plan and strategize together over a multi-year period. Another is that it may prohibit follow-up activities that could expand shorter-term gains into longer-term victories. In some cases, these funding parameters have affected a partner's ability to retain its staff or jeopardize its ability to survive as an institution.

A further consideration is that such funding restrictions can, at times, act as a barrier to more flexible and proactive work, with funded institutions playing what Abbas calls 'a firefighter role' rather than developing longer-term preventative strategies. In the absence of their own long-term sustainable resources, TrustAfrica and institutions like them find themselves navigating a tricky place: needing to advocate for and negotiate their own agency with their donors while simultaneously aiming to ensure that they devolve the power this agency brings with it.

A critical issue: the need for long-term funding

The need for reliable, long-term funding emerges as a major issue in these chapters. Promising movement-building work slowed considerably when donors ceased their funding, when the grant terms expired or when donors changed funding priorities. Several authors conclude that African philanthropic institutions need to have their own independent resources that they are able to use in a flexible way that is responsive to needs they see on the ground.

To be sure, African resources could easily replicate the power structures and modalities of the international aid system or international private philanthropy. What really matters is the way in which the funds are used: an approach that is rooted in locally dictated priorities, with decisions being informed by those most affected.

Why this kind of philanthropy matters

TrustAfrica has advanced transformative change in pursuit of two larger ends. First, to support the development of narratives, positions and priorities that reflect the realities of those suffering from injustice, and second, to use them to push for a more grounded understanding – at the seats of power – of the challenges being faced on the ground. This results in more contextualized and locally defined solutions that are transformative.

Our book aims to add further evidence of the unique value of African-led philanthropy. In turn, we hope that it yields lessons for other philanthropic institutions – in Africa and in the global north – that foster African agency and transformative change.

For institutions such as TrustAfrica such change means taking positions that may not be popular or widely accepted, and challenging dominant power relations that have long sought to define not just who sits at the decision-making table, but what issues are up for discussion. Locally informed narratives and positions often tend to disrupt prevailing orthodoxies, and so institutions seeking transformative change must consistently reflect on how to both challenge the systems and yet still retain influence within them.

At the heart of these examples is using leverage to diffuse power rather than centralize it. The ultimate aim is to shift the balance of power relations from elites to people on the ground. That is African agency at work.

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[Claiming agency: reflecting on TrustAfrica's first decade](#) is edited by Halima Mahomed and Elizabeth Coleman, published by [Weaver Press](#), Zimbabwe.

The forthcoming issue of *Alliance* magazine has a special feature on the [rise of community philanthropy](#).

Lead image: Stone Circles of Kerr Batch, Gambia.