

Alliance

For philanthropy and social investment worldwide

Funding African movements? Philanthropic revolutions needed first.

By Halima Mahomed

#Occupy; #BlackLivesMatter, #TimesUp – hands up if you are familiar with these movements. [Le Balai Citoyen](#), [Lucha](#), [Y'en a Marre](#) or [Abahlali baseMjondolo](#). How many have heard of these? What about the [Calama Revolution](#) or [Oromo Protests](#) or [#ThisFlag](#)? Unless you're directly involved in funding in their geographies, I wager, not as many hands.

Each of these, however, have played or continue to play fundamental roles in mass -based action demanding political, civic and socio-economic rights. Each of these is based on the African continent. Yet not a single one, or any of the other multitudes of African-based movements, is referenced in any of the literature on philanthropy and social movements to the best of my knowledge.

Granted, discussions on philanthropy and social movements has only begun to receive more prominence [recently](#) . While several debates on philanthropic support for movement building are underway in places like the United States, with new webinars, analytical publications and 'how to' articles and guides circulating – the conversation is only just emerging on the African continent – and even that, at a very nascent level. Literature reflecting potential or existing connections between philanthropy and movements in Africa appears non-existent.

The lack of engagement with social movements is arguably one of the biggest blindspots in African philanthropy. Change on the African continent is emerging from social movements. Alternative sites of protest, politics and activism are gaining traction as frontrunners in the fight for a more open, free and just society. New configurations of civic-led movements are playing an instrumental role in challenging political, social and economic abuses of power, at great personal risk. At the same time the organized and professionalised civil society spaces which are typically supported by philanthropy are losing momentum, relevance and connectivity to those whose interests they are meant to be working for.

While we have no systematic evidence on the funding trajectories of the newer social movements, anecdotal evidence and informal conversations reflect that most have run on their own steam, with contributions of money and time from their members playing the biggest resourcing role. In some cases, the movements themselves have not been open to external philanthropic support, for instance, as with Lucha, which is resourced through contributions of

its membership and is wary of external interference and loss of independence. Some have risen so swiftly that funding was not even a consideration.

In rarer cases, movements have had a mix of resourcing. For instance, Abahlali baseMjondolo initially functioned through efforts and contributions of its members but today is supplemented by support of an NGO working alongside it and an international funder supporting it directly. Its agenda and mode of operation, however, has been seen as too risky and too political for big donors to support. Major local philanthropy has stayed away.

Others, like #FeesMustFall relied on contributions of those within the movement and solidarity support from broader society as primary resourcing for its actions. Some local and international institutional philanthropies played an indirect role by supporting their grantees to assist on the consequences of those actions for instance, legal support for those arrested, or medical support for those injured or evidence building and advocacy on the issue.

But it's fair to say that institutionalised African philanthropy has not systematically engaged directly with such movements as a part of a broader support of a civil society eco-system. African philanthropy has been conspicuous by its absence especially when movements are demanding political reform or challenge the political status quo. The threat to self-interest, risk of the unknown, the top-down nature of such philanthropy; bureaucratic systems and ideological values, or a conviction that external funding poses a fundamental threat to organic movements, are a few of the factors at play.

There are of course exceptions, for instance, the well-known Treatment Action Campaign, which challenged the South African state on provision of AIDS treatment receives a mix of local and international support. But even here local philanthropy did not get involved at the peak of its fight in the early 2000s. Rather that effort was member led and then supplemented by support from international philanthropy.

In recent years, more often than not, each time a new movement emerges or an existing movement gains prominence somewhere in Africa – progressive philanthropy located in the continent appears to experience a quandary. It is silently cheering on the cause for social justice but is unsure if, where and how to engage. There have been small pockets of direct support and interest, but these are extremely few, and often linked to particular moments or convergence of interests (for instance as with the #ZumaMustFall movement, which saw business interests opposed to President Zuma's leadership get involved in a campaign for the African National Congress to recall him and replace him).

What is really needed is long-term funding support to movements directed on their own terms, funding to enable learning, joint action and solidarity that goes beyond single movements and, support to enable collective movement infrastructure spaces, leadership support and resource control. It is way past time that institutional philanthropy in Africa begins to ask itself some very critical questions: what are the assumptions and biases which continue to direct their resourcing to safe and professionalised civil society spaces which are in their own mould? What are the ideological lenses that prevent a much broader eco-system approach to their resourcing? Why are bureaucratic requirements – often unnecessarily imposed or adopted from elsewhere – used as a

critical excuse in their inability to fund movements? What kind of gate-keeping role does the nature of their resourcing play? Whose voices are they privileging as acceptable to lead broader civil society efforts directed at social change – and whose voices are they deeming inconsequential?

These considerations are perhaps even more important in the case of foreign support for African social movements. While still a miniscule percentage of foreign institutional philanthropy, there now appears to be increased international interest and some newer entrants to the movement resourcing space. On the one hand, this can be welcome news, on the other, warning signs are aplenty. Can the theory and practice of movements developed elsewhere – and the nature of philanthropic support that could accompany it – be easily applied in Africa? And yet, so little is understood about the nature of movements in Africa (which are not by any means homogenous) and the extreme fluidity of contexts many operate in; much less about the ways in which philanthropy could, should or should not engage, or the factors that it needs to think about differently if it does.

There is a dire need for a contextualised analysis of movements on the continent and the role of institutionalised philanthropy in this space. Funding social movements in Africa cannot be a cut and paste scenario based on knowledge, experience and practice developed outside of the continent.

Conversations with several people involved in or part of movements on the continent bear this out. Not only is a contextual analysis often absent from movement building discussions and overtures from foreign funders, but that there are so many cultural, traditional and other historical factors (positive and negative) that movement funders may not be familiar with or think about when getting involved.

Worse, it is rare for such funding approaches to come without strings – either overt ones which can sometimes be more easily rejected or much more subtle ones that become weaved in along the way and which become more difficult to discard as relationships increase with time and philanthropic support becomes less dispensable. There are important questions for movement funders engaging in Africa to think about. What does solidarity look like in the absence of decision-making power on resourcing? What does support for agency look like when movement funding analyses are not ahistorical and de-contextualised? What does movement infrastructure look like in spaces of high volatility and extreme fluidity of contexts? What does downward accountability look like when resources are raised elsewhere? What does it mean to balance being an activist grantmaker without interfering in movement dynamics? And lastly, what does it require for funding to not just follow movement moments, but to think about the many steps before that i.e. what does support for community organizing look like in African contexts? These, and many others require deep deliberation.

Ultimately, social movements themselves are a microcosm of society and bring along their own biases and power dynamics – just as any other civil society configuration does. While most of the movements we have seen emerging in Africa in recent years are progressive rights-based movements, we should note there are some right-wings movements also taking root. These tend to be on the fringe and have not gained prominence or mass support seen in the US and Europe

but that could change. Not much is documented on these and they are not part of the analysis of this article but suffice to reflect that not all movements on the continent are inherently centred around a left leaning conception of equality and justice.

Without romanticizing social movements in Africa, there is a real need for institutional philanthropy to be much more deliberate in contextually understanding the role of movements in progressive social change. Our philanthropic institutions also need to be much more cognizant of the ways in which their philanthropic practice itself needs to change so that the voices of rights-based movements more deeply inform their discussions, debates and practices.

Movements may or may not lead to revolutions and the jury is still out on whether revolutions can be funded, but one thing is certain: if institutional philanthropic practice itself is not revolutionised, it may soon find itself increasingly irrelevant to the transformative social change which the African continent so deperately needs.