



For the People, By the People

(By Jacqueline Asiimwe, CEO, CivSoure Africa)

I had the distinct pleasure of being among 40 international delegates that attended the UK Community Foundations Conference. The conference was held in Manchester, UK from 11th to 13th October 2022.

As a Philanthropy Support Organization, CivSource Africa is on the cusp of starting work to support community foundations in Uganda to thrive. Thus, it was with anticipation, excitement and curiosity, that I attended the UKFC. I was excited to learn from and meet other organizations in the philanthropy ecosystem.

The first interaction for international delegates was a visit to Forever Manchester, which is a community foundation. It was fascinating to hear their journey of growth and change in the over 2 decades that they have existed, and to hear all the work they have supported in

their community. One statement that stayed with me was the fact that the work of community foundations is putting citizens and communities at the center of models of development. This can seem rather obvious, but for the longest time, development has been received and experienced as top-down, often disconnected sets of interventions by well meaning people, who may not always understand or listen to community voices and aspirations. The community foundation then becomes a critical space to turn normative development paradigms on their head, in a way that recognizes, honors and maximizes community agency.

In describing the work and potential of a community foundation, the CEO of Forever Manchester invited us to think about and observe bees in a hive - all working together, each equal to the other, unlocking the power of place and the pride of place in making change happen. I left the conversation buzzing with ideas about working with community foundations.

Forever Manchester spoke about the ethos of their grant making - “we don’t want to be a grant maker that does things TO people, but one that does things WITH people.”

Grant making that is done ‘to’ people is top-down. The grant making narrative focuses on what is wrong with people. It focuses on indices of deprivation. It sees people as needy, problematic and deficient. It relies on outside experts and thus creates dependency. It is a glass half full mindset. This kind of grant making is the seedbed for the ‘saviour mentality’ in grant making.

In contrast, grant making done ‘with’ people sees the abundance of knowledge, experience, talent, skills and dreams of people. It makes community the focus and the cause. It is about creating a different tone and type of funding and is not just about making grant documents and processes similar. It is a deep examination of the way we see and respond to communities.

On the afternoon of the first day of the conference, I attended a breakout session where we were discussing equity, diversity, inclusion and beyond. The reason I signed up for this conversation is that CivSource is curating conversations about race/racism in development aid in Uganda and how to address the attendant issues. In attending this workshop, I wanted to hear how others are tackling these issues which have become pressing in the philanthropy and development sector.

Part of the conversation was about the language we use when we have these conversations, and what it might look like to be more inclusive. One participant suggested that we think of and use the word 'Welcome.'

I found that suggestion interesting, and these are the thoughts that I wrote out about the word welcome:

- Come as you are
- Open to everyone
- Everyone matters, everyone is important
- Welcome to the table, welcome to recreate the table
- Welcome shown on the way we listen
- Welcome in the way we speak
- Welcome in the way we lead
- Welcome in the way we hold power
- You are all welcome and all of you is welcome.

I left that conversation challenged to think about and create a culture of welcome in the work that I do, in the way that I lead and in the way that I interact with others.

My final thoughts as we ended the conference were on importance of relationship building in the process both of grant making and working with communities. Central to relationship building is the skill and posture of listening. And listening takes time and is also about giving time. It is important to get to know the leaders of the community foundations we are working with. It is important to get to know their communities and the change they are trying to create. It is important to understand the heart of the leaders. It is important to understand their journey so far and to work with them through a process to articulate a vision for the change they desire in their community. It is important to see the community as an intertwined connection of people, neighbors, streets, and to understand how all these strands fit together, both now and for the better future we intend to build together.

This may all sound obvious. But it was a good reminder that building the right foundation is important.

