

# From charity to strategic giving:

## the quest to bring about long-term change in the Middle East

Catherine Roe [www.linkedin.com/in/catherine-roe-00801474/e](http://www.linkedin.com/in/catherine-roe-00801474/e)



Catherine Roe

I first visited the Middle East in 1993 as the new Director of the Said Foundation, embarking on a quest to discover how we could work more effectively there. I was tremendously ignorant but something happened on that first visit which was to fuel the persistence that lies at the heart of impactful philanthropy and that would later underpin the Foundation's programmes – I fell in love with the region of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine. It has been an enduring love.

The giving I witnessed at that time and for many years afterwards was inspired by generosity, similar to the hospitality I have always received in the region, even from people in dire circumstances. But in the main it was charitable, not strategic – informal, short-term, filling gaps left by governments in service provision, providing handouts to the poor (especially at Ramadan), with little emphasis on capacity building. There was a liking for funding buildings and supporting orphanages. Cheques were written to projects that were not clearly defined; little was expected in the way of reporting; and monitoring was rare. Philanthropy responded to social problems but did not seek to address them.

A quarter of a century on, I see a huge diversity of philanthropic activities. It is not easy to generalise but it has become more institutionalised and professionalised as philanthropists seek to make a real difference in their societies. This makes for more



Photo credit:  
Jean Pierre Tarabay

engaged, rigorous and strategic philanthropy that is focused on long-term impact and on creating systemic social change in the region. Many donations remain anonymous but, as more foundations are established, their work inevitably becomes better known, setting a valuable example that encourages others to take a similar approach.

**Many donations remain anonymous but, as more foundations are established, their work inevitably becomes better known, setting a valuable example that encourages others to take a similar approach.**

Many things have driven this changing pattern of giving, not least a growth in the number of people with the wealth to make substantial and long-term philanthropic interventions. More than anything, the realisation has dawned that the intractable, complex and urgent problems of the region can't be addressed with a sticking-plaster approach to philanthropy.

A recent example of innovative and transformational giving has been Maroun Semaan's hugely generous and inspiring endowment of the American University of Beirut's (AUB) Faculty of Engineering and Architecture. I was fortunate to work on this gift and set up the Maroun Semaan Faculty of Engineering and Architecture Trust, having been brought in to provide experience of different philanthropic models, including how to bring about sustainable change in university settings.

The Trust was set up in 2017 to oversee Maroun Semaan's gift to AUB, the largest in its history and possibly the largest to any university in the Middle East other than from a royal family. Maroun Semaan was intent on bringing about systemic social change. Trained as an engineer, he saw engineering, in its multiple manifestations, as key to helping the region overcome its problems (including environmental degradation, too little business creation, huge unemployment, humanitarian responses to conflict, post-conflict reconstruction, and so many more). His vision was to help AUB's leading Engineering and Architecture Faculty to advance its capabilities in ways that also addressed the region's problems. He did this by:

- Agreeing a vision and set of transformative objectives, working in close collaboration with AUB and responding to the vision of Faculty members themselves
- Giving his entire gift in the form of an endowment to ensure that the transformation he sought was sustainable in the long-term

- Putting in place a set of principles and mechanisms for oversight of the endowment designed to ensure that transformation is not only sustainable but dynamic, responding to new challenges and priorities over time
- Setting up the Trust to hand over the endowment progressively to AUB as progress is made and impactful ways of spending the income from the endowment are modelled
- Agreeing a permanent oversight body that will review progress indefinitely.

All these aspects of the gift, and especially the way they work in combination, are innovative and are already enabling the Faculty to bring about transformational change.

One example of this change is of professors being trained and classrooms reconfigured to encourage design thinking in students. The intention is to produce students who are, as before, excellently educated in their engineering fields but who also think creatively and critically, not only about how to solve problems but how to frame them. This is a pioneering and much-needed approach in Middle Eastern education. Students are responding with great enthusiasm and academics elsewhere are asking how they too can innovate in this way.

**Students are also now being assisted to think entrepreneurially and to incubate their ideas – vital steps on the path to producing graduates who will set up their own businesses, create jobs and help diversify the economies of the region.**

Students are also now being assisted to think entrepreneurially and to incubate their ideas – vital steps on the path to producing graduates who will set up their own businesses, create jobs and help diversify the economies of the region.

A third example of change is of professors, in a competitive process, being given more time and, in some cases, equipment to support their research, addressing a critical need for the region's universities (which focus heavily, even exclusively on teaching) to produce more and higher quality research as well as research that addresses the problems of the region.

In short, the gift is extraordinary, in its generosity, in the novelty of the way it is structured to be dynamically transformational, in its sustainability and in the deeply engaged and collaborative way it was developed with AUB. Maroun Semaan was a hugely successful entrepreneur. His strategic donation reflects these talents – talents also informed by a lifelong belief in

giving back, to his region, his country of Lebanon and to the university that gave him his start in life.

### **Conclusion**

Very sadly, just weeks after the gift agreements were put in place and the Trust was established, Maroun Semaan died. The impact of his gift is still emerging and will continue to emerge for many years to come. What he wanted to achieve was nothing less than the creation of a body of leaders and of learning that could help Lebanon and the region to move towards sustainable economies and resource allocation, to help solve not just today's problems but, in a way, tomorrow's problems today. He has left a legacy that is true to his own motto: "In order to change a nation, you start with education."

*Catherine Roe has over 25 years' experience creating, developing and leading foundations and advising philanthropists and not-for-profits. She began her career as a British diplomat, specialising in multilateral negotiation. As European Correspondent, she was responsible for the coordination of European Political Cooperation and led on the Common Foreign and Security Policy chapter of the Maastricht Treaty.*

*Catherine is a member of the Global Leadership Council of the Saïd Business School and a trustee of the Saïd Foundation, the Horizon Foundation and the International Institute for Strategic Studies. Previously, she has served on the boards of the Saïd Business School, national literacy organisation Coram Beanstalk, Hammersmith and Fulham charity Doorstep Library and the Prisoners of Conscience Fund. With leading major gifts fundraising consultancy More Partnership, Catherine has also worked with a number of not-for-profits to help them articulate the difference they make in the world and the ways in which philanthropists can support their mission.*

*Catherine has a Masters in History from Oxford University, an MBA from London Business School and a Masters in Middle East Studies from SOAS.*