

# Humility matters: building a future we can all live with

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**“Development then entails disseminating this modern, scientific, and sophisticated knowledge to inform and uplift the rural masses. Knowledge flows in one direction only – downwards – from those who are strong, educated and enlightened, towards those who are weak, ignorant and in darkness.”**  
Robert Chambers 1983, p. 76<sup>1</sup>

The question that underpins this article is simple, if uncomfortable: when establishing philanthropic priorities and identifying our impact, whose voices do we value? Robert Chambers may have written the above quote nearly 35 years ago, but it remains a worthy challenge to any and all who look to work in the human rights space, especially those on the funding side of the equation.

Philanthropy is filled with the strong, educated and enlightened. Generally speaking, we are all here because we want to make a positive difference to the world; we know that we are privileged and we hope to use that privilege to help those who have not had the same advantages as we have in life. Some of us bring wealth, others bring business acumen, still others bring innovative ideas and strategies. We take what we have and we use it to help build a better world.

Chambers challenges us to think about whose ideal world we are building.

At its heart, the issue of human rights centres on power and how best to balance it so that each of us can live meaningful and fulfilling lives. Human rights are not just about what we are owed, but also about our obligation to curtail the reach of our power so it doesn't restrict the rights of our fellow humans.

When philanthropists work in the field of human rights, we walk among those who are already disempowered and disenfranchised. This means that the inherent power dynamic that underlies our actions and decisions becomes supercharged.

Funders have assets that they may choose to spend according to their own agenda, and the funded must act in ways to attract that funding. This power allows funders to encourage recipients to make positive changes to their organisational strategies, such as considering and identifying the impact of their activities. However, impact assessments of this nature are inherently top-down. At their core they are upwardly accountable, taking direction from the funder in assessing desired outcomes, metrics and goals and communicated as a means of attracting funding or resources.

## **Empowering disadvantaged populations**

By contrast, among rights-based development theorists and practitioners there are increasing calls to take steps to mitigate this dynamic. They argue that when dealing with disenfranchised populations, it becomes



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more important to directly engage the disempowered in the agenda-setting process.

This doesn't mean fully reversing the flow of knowledge. But it does mean putting measures in place to allow participants to have a real and meaningful say in the shape of their future and how we collaborate on creating it.

This changes the place of impact in philanthropic activity in a human rights context. Instead of establishing and communicating value addressed only to the third sector, the government or the tax-paying public (whether as recipients attracting funding or philanthropists establishing their own value through the impact of their initiatives), the target audience for our value statements need also to be the recipients and beneficiaries of our activities.

The value of pivoting in this manner is twofold. Firstly, it is a direct channel for philanthropists and other funders to facilitate empowerment for disadvantaged populations. If longstanding and sustained impact is the objective of our work, then we need to look at opportunities for passing the mantle of our activity to the people we seek to help and embed the capabilities within their communities wherever possible. That means they will need the skills, knowledge and incentive to engage meaningfully with civil society. It also requires that our efforts are spent on strategies that can secure the buy-in of our intended successors.

An example of this sort of programme design can be seen in the Australian organisation, Indigenous Community Volunteers (ICV). On the invitation of Indigenous Australian communities and Nations, ICV works to develop programmes that meet the objectives agreed with community leaders and are sensitive to their cultural and socioeconomic circumstances. One example of their work is a community education programme in Ali Curung, which centred on the connection between dog health and human health. Ali Curung is 'dog country' and dogs have significant cultural importance to the people of Ali Curung. ICV was able to successfully leverage the resonance of dogs to achieve diverse outcomes including improved attitudes to hygiene and animal welfare in a way that worked 'through culture' rather than against it such as by simply trying to 'enlighten' the population. Because of this stakeholder consultation, ICV was able to improve buy-in from the community and produce a meaningful programme that respected its beneficiaries and their perspectives.<sup>2</sup>



Funders can seek out similar programmes and organisations that already directly engage communities in identifying programme objectives, or they can look at proactively including communities at various stages of funding initiatives. This could include incorporating stakeholder consultation in designing grant rounds, assessing potential grants, or shaping funding strategies. Not just as lip service, but providing them with a genuine say in these activities. We could, and should, also seek their localised expertise in planning and performing impact investments.

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This brings me to the second advantage to involving beneficiaries in strategic implementation of human rights philanthropy. As stated previously, the philanthropic community brings with it strategic and business expertise. The communities and individuals

who experience human rights abuse or failures have localised expertise – expertise on their lives and their cultures and what resonates for them and their communities. They know better than we the social and historical context of their lives. By incorporating their voices in the conversation about what changes need to be made, we are presented with an opportunity to learn from them. Knowledge stops being a one-way street when we take the time to listen to what they have to say and act accordingly.

This means humbling ourselves to accept that they may have different attitudes or objectives, or understand the world in a different way to what we accept as fact. Often we may make assumptions about traditional knowledge and its relative value without considering the processes involved in that knowledge production. One example of this can be seen in the story of Yacouba Sawadogo, who turned around what was popularly held by Western experts to be land inevitably lost to desertification in North Burkina Faso by using traditional farming techniques such as zaï (a process that includes digging small holes in the

ground). His solution is simple, cheap and scalable and has rehabilitated tens of thousands of hectares of previously arid land.<sup>3</sup> If we stop to listen to other voices that have been silenced by disadvantage, who knows what else we could learn.

Beyond this, when we open up our ranks to encourage the traditionally disenfranchised to contribute in shaping our agendas, strategies and attitudes, we help to lay the ghosts of philanthropic paternalism and particularism to bed at last.<sup>4</sup>

### Conclusion

Philanthropists and funders that are willing to work in the field of human rights have an opportunity to evolve how the sector approaches impact assessments and funding strategies. By encouraging communities with reduced access to human rights to directly engage in funding processes, be they LGBTQI locals in our cities or communities on the other side of the world, we can be confident of our value and the voices that shape our claim to it.

<sup>1</sup> Chambers, R. 1983, *Rural Development: Putting the last first*, Florence, Taylor and Francis.

<sup>2</sup> For more on ICV see: KPMG 2015, *Economic and Social Impact of Indigenous Community Volunteers (ICV) Activities: Case study – communities of Ali Curung and Pinjarra*, KPMG, available at <http://www.icv.com.au/socialimpact/>, accessed 14 December 2016.

<sup>3</sup> For more on Yacouba Sawadogo see: <http://www.108ofilms.co.uk/yacoubamovie/>, accessed 15 December 2016.

<sup>4</sup> As introduced in Salamon, L.M. 1987, 'Of market failure, voluntary failure, and third-party government: Toward a theory of government-nonprofit relations in the modern welfare state', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, vol. 16, pp. 29-49, DOI: 10.1177/089976408701600104.

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