

# WINGSForum Power and the Role of Philanthropy

## Workshops highlights

WINGSForum is the preeminent global conference on philanthropy — offering a rare opportunity for a truly unique collection of philanthropy associations, support organisations, funders and academics from all regions of the world to network, learn from each other and explore how philanthropy can make an ever-greater contribution to social impact and civil society building.

The in-person WINGSForum had to shift from November 2020 to 2021, and a series of virtual experiences is filling the gap. As part of this online series, on 24 November 2020 we hosted a plenary session on 'Power and the Role of Philanthropy' and subsequently held workshops for our members on the same topic. These gave WINGS members the chance to explore the themes of our [plenary session](#) in more detail. Workshop participants were given the opportunity to share personal experiences of power dynamics at play in their own work, and discuss practical steps that can be taken to try to address these imbalances.

### KEY THEMES AND IDEAS

#### 1. IN WHAT WAYS DO YOU SEE POWER DYNAMICS GETTING IN THE WAY OF PHILANTHROPY?

##### a. Internally within philanthropic organisations

- Old power models continue to be guiding behaviours inside foundations and approaches tend to be top-down and bureaucratic.
- Traditional foundations that do not change will become increasingly irrelevant as society changes around them.
- There is an absence of a culture of trust within organisations, as well as externally with grantees and communities.
- Conflicting dynamics between field-based staff and senior gatekeepers (who tend to be less agile).
- Complicated measurement and evaluation systems.



##### Key takeaway

How can we relearn our relationship to power and see it as a tool at the service of facilitating equity?

##### b. Externally and with regard to philanthropy's interaction with other stakeholders and sectors

- Structural issues invisibly embed a culture of inequality in our society.
- Donor interests determine best practices for a project or community, with a lack of understanding of the local context.
- A lack of funding for networks, which limits the capacity building of fragile social purpose organisations.
- The stereotype of the Global North being seen as the experts and the Global South seen as beneficiaries.
- Traditional philanthropy expects to respect the status quo rather than disrupting it.



##### Key takeaway

Why is philanthropy not required to be as transparent and professional as it requires the NGOs it funds to be?

#### 2. EXAMPLES OF POWER BEING DISRUPTED

##### a. Changes taking place within philanthropy

- A movement towards diversifying the composition of boards.
- The beginning of more funds to indigenous-led funds or community-led foundations, as a way to shift power to community-led solutions.
- Regular updates during the pandemic from philanthropy networks and NGO umbrella organisations has strengthened trust, cooperation and efficient collaborative working.
- Participatory grantmaking, but this can be tokenistic and we need to recognise it is not a silver bullet solution.
- [CEP Grantee Perception Report](https://cep.org/assessments/grantee-perception-report/) (cep.org/assessments/grantee-perception-report/)
- New initiatives like Giving Tuesday.
- The flexibility shown by foundations that has come about as a result of Covid-19.
- Building an infrastructure of 'intermediary' funds that have the expertise to put communities at the centre.

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## b. Wider societal shifts

- The Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements showing that individuals make up movements.

## 3. ACTIONS THAT CAN BE TAKEN



### Key takeaway

Where do we need to put our energy on – building knowledge and learning or creating pressure and accountability?

## a. Learning and reflection

- Reflect and adjust our own individual roles and relationship with power.
- Spend greater time and investment in donor collaboratives and conversations.
- Create a shared playbook/collection of stories with positive outcomes that have successfully created incremental shifts.

## b. Changing approach or language

- Frame philanthropy as action and volunteerism – not just money.
- Help beneficiaries move to becoming agents of change and use an assets-based community approach to help bring in those who are marginalised.
- Move beyond the language of a ‘partnership approach’ and embed it.
- Take into account in-kind and human effort contributions from the organisation you are working with, and the community. Celebrate these as part of the project.
- Ensure the narratives and stories we tell are honest, balanced and healthy. Encourage donors to see themselves as important allies in social transformation.
- Encourage NGO assertiveness.
- Build trust through long term relationships which extend beyond when there is a current grant.

## c. Practical initiatives

- Approve annual leave from the bottom up – either by the lower level of an organisation or the grantees.
- Insist on core funding, which is essential in creating resilient organisations.
- Use structures that listen to grantees anonymously like the CEP Grantee Perception Report, or having prizes from grantees to their best donors.
- Include in foundation’s professional training an emphasis on the importance of listening to the needs of grantees.

## d. Tools

- Workshops
  - Use formats that break individuals out of traditional thinking and bring in new perspectives e.g. bring together your board members and communications staff.
  - Hold cross-sector workshops where everyone gets to know one another on a personal level.
  - Adaptive leadership workshops strengthen relations and provide a practical tool for consulting each other on challenges.
- Use technology as an enabler to level up power relationships by ensuring vulnerable populations have access to digital communications.



### Key takeaway

Creating shifts is an iterative journey, it doesn’t happen in one step.

The WINGSForum will continue to be a space to hold these kinds of challenging conversations. Find out more about our online and in-person events by visiting the [WINGSForum website](https://wingsforum.org) ([wingsforum.org](https://wingsforum.org)).

## Imagine, They Plead

Imagine, They Plead.  
Grantees as Equalantees  
Not as Recipients.

Nor as Dependents  
Trussed up loads for life and death  
But as space sharers.

Imagine them right.  
As Bestowers of knowledge,  
Philanthropic-wise.

Moving on their own  
With you as Accompaniers  
To the bright future.

Then... No power game  
But a flat field belonging  
To all who work it –

Imagination  
For Generations, christened:  
Sustainanthropy.



by Akwasi Aidoo,  
written for the WINGSForum

