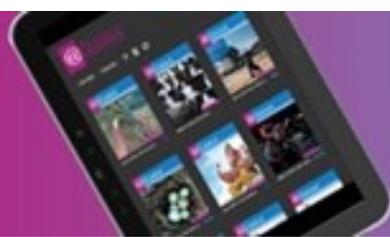


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Delving deeper into power

Michele Fugiel Gartner

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Article featured in the December 2013 issue of Alliance magazine

My kudos to *Alliance* for taking on the topic of power and philanthropy. It's not a topic that we often wade into very deeply, and, as Peter Buffett's op-ed in the *New York Times* showed, once the surface is scratched a multitude of perspectives and opinions emerge. Power in philanthropy seems like that irksome little dust bunny that we'd rather sweep under the rug.

What I found fascinating about the *Alliance* articles was how quickly we default to a conversation about power dynamics that reflects, rather than refines, the structures we have built in 'western' philanthropy. We talk about the chasm between two sides: funders and grantees, private foundations and community, philanthropists and beneficiaries. This conversation gives us an opportunity to identify our role within existing power structures. It doesn't ask us to understand that role. It lets us off the hook from really acknowledging and understanding our privilege, allowing us to simply hide out in the prescribed roles of hero or victim.

It was only the article by Mahomed and Moyo that brought forth the critical perspective that I believe we need to take when examining power and philanthropy:

‘... many philanthropic institutions have emerged from segments of society that are elite and urban or from the private sector; or have been created by international actors with a particular approach. Together these have developed a narrative of philanthropy – from rich to poor, through formal institutions, based on money and individual giving at scale. This is far from what philanthropy in Africa is actually like ...’

In our narrative on philanthropy, we speak about power in the way we’ve created it. We try to change the structures within our system, rather than reflecting on whether it is the system itself that needs changing. We have professionalized ourselves, and in doing so we have cemented how we see the world. We wave away more traditional notions of giving: reciprocity, transactional relationships, embodiment of spirit, the notion of reflexivity – that by giving to you, I reflect what I see, but your participation in the gift equally reflects your view and from that, I change. There are thousands of cultures and ways of giving that ‘western’ philanthropy could learn from, that could improve us.

As an industry, we have much more to learn from others than from ourselves. Exporting philanthropy as we’ve designed it and then bemoaning another culture’s ‘lack of philanthropy’ because we don’t understand it smells too much like the colonial past that we purport to have moved beyond. I highly applaud Alliance and the authors who have taken on this topic and look forward to the rest of us rising to the occasion.

Michele Fugiel Gartner

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1 December 2013

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