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Building an Understanding of African Philanthropy in Higher Education

Antony Mbandi, MA, Head of Partnerships and Alumni Relations, Strathmore University Business School

African philanthropy has a huge potential to become the catalyst of growth on the African continent if well channeled and utilized. According to the World Wealth Report 2024, the financial wealth of HNW individuals in Africa reached over USD 1.8 trillion in 2023, 120 percent higher than the USD 0.8 trillion in African HNW individuals' wealth in 2008 (Capgemini Research Institute, 2024). The number of African HNW individuals more than doubled from 2008 to 2023.

With the rise of new wealth, African philanthropy is beginning to take a central role in development and sustainability and is increasingly informing policy processes at national levels. For example, in 2009 the government of Liberia established the Liberia Philanthropy Secretariat—a platform for linking national priorities with philanthropic resources (Kanani, 2011). In 2015, the African Union launched the African Union Foundation to mobilize voluntary contributions in support of the Africa Agenda 2063.¹ It is important to note that philanthropic institutions across Africa often do not make reference to the Africa Agenda 2063 but are focused on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which they foresee as a source of possible funding from the West.

Sampling some regions in Africa, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) is in the process of developing a framework for the inclusion of philanthropic activities in supporting its regional integration agenda (Southern Africa Trust, 2016), while the Rwandese government has developed a strategy to engage philanthropy in implementing Vision 2020 (Moyo, Nkhalamba, & Kagoro, 2010). In South Africa, the National Treasury and Department of Science has conducted studies mapping current collaborations between philanthropy and government, primarily in areas of education and health. The result is the development of a mechanism or strategy for government to formally collaborate with philanthropy in a coherent way. Kenya and Ghana have

¹ To read more about the Agenda 2063, visit <https://au.int/en/agenda2063/overview>

collaborated with the United Nations Development Programme in its Post-2015 Partnership Platform for Philanthropy to establish their own philanthropy platforms (Grady, 2015). It is crucial to reframe the statement of “closing the space for civil society” with opening the space for philanthropy to thrive. As this happens, it is clear that Africa is not ready yet in terms of capacity, policy framework, and shift in development thinking. But the time is ripe to change approaches, especially with a new generation of Africans who are growing in wealth and with a sense of nationalism.

Some individuals have transformed the philanthropy space in Africa: for example, Tony Elumelu created the idea of Africapitalism as a way of rallying African-led solutions to social development. Tony Elumelu first introduced the term Africapitalism in 2011 and has since outlined the concept in leading media outlets across the Western world. The concept is one of the four pillars of the Tony Elumelu Foundation (TEF).² In addition, TEF has established the Africapitalism Institute, a pan-African think tank dedicated to the promotion of the philosophy through applied research with an inclination to the transformative role that the private sector can undertake in developing Africa. Examples of other individuals who have applied a Western approach to philanthropy include Strive Masiyiwa who supports young entrepreneurs, Mo Ibrahim who supports good governance, and Hasmukh Patel who is involved in education and humanitarian assistance. Mr. Patel’s work is well documented, having used his vast resources from Mombasa Cement to feed the hungry and homeless in Mombasa.³

Efforts by a number of African Philanthropists have focused on improving education and creating opportunities for youth through seed capital. These initiatives are celebrated, but not clearly structured under a framework that is well recognized by the context of our culture, which views giving as a private agenda. Structured giving needs transparency and accountability and hence public participation, which from an African cultural perspective is seen as a show of opulence. It is also important to note that initiatives such as the Tony Elumelu Foundation and the Mo Ibrahim Leadership Award have also been structured with studies driven by universities in the northern hemisphere and therefore may not reflect a functional setup in the African context.

² For more information on the Tony Elumelu Foundation and its work, visit <https://www.tonyelumelufoundation.org/research-publications>

³ For more information, visit <https://www.kenyans.co.ke/personality/hasmukh-patel>

Giving to HEIs in Kenya

The major source of funding for universities in Africa is government. This is driven by the fact that most universities are public universities. On the other hand, private universities generate most of their income from fees. However, a majority of Kenyan public and private universities are reeling under huge debts that have greatly affected operations. This has been precipitated by the lack of adequate government funding. A report presented to Kenyan Parliamentarians in 2022 indicated a funding gap of KES 74 billion (equivalent to over USD 627 million) for public universities in FY 2022-23, which is about 37 percent larger than the funding gap of KES 54 billion (equivalent to over USD 458 million) in the previous fiscal year (Oduor, 2022). The funding gap exists not only in public universities but also in private universities. As a result, universities across Kenya are being forced to secure exorbitant commercial financing, which in turn drives up the cost of higher education and dramatically decreases the number of deserving students seeking an opportunity to attend institutions of higher learning.

In terms of philanthropic giving to universities, there are only a handful of notable individual donors. Examples of such individuals include Dr. Manu Chandaria, through the Chandaria Foundation, which has been instrumental in multiple infrastructure projects in public universities,⁴ and Dr. Vijoo Rattansi, through the Rattansi Educational Trust,⁵ which has provided millions in scholarships for needy students in universities. These are not the only ones, but they stand out. Moreover, this shows a clear indication that there is a potential growth for philanthropic giving to universities. There have been other local institutions known to give to universities but the data are scant.

Moreover, there is a huge funding gap for research at both public and private HEIs, which is an area that could be supported through philanthropic funding. Some challenges exist to actualize this. Key to those challenges are trust building, being able to create connections with potential donors, being able to showcase the impact of the work, and an adequate capacity to leverage on alumni networks.

Some of the universities have started engaging with alumni, albeit with little success. Key to the issues they are facing is being able to offer a value for alumni to remain connected with their alma mater. Most of the current engagements have been ad hoc, with most universities lacking long-term strategies due to lack of resources.

⁴ For more information, visit <https://eahf.net/dr-manu-chandaria>

⁵ For more information, visit <https://www.rattansieducationaltrust.or.ke/Images/index.htm>

Furthermore, cultural perspective remains a major stumbling block to philanthropic giving in Kenya since there is very little planned giving to universities and to other charity work, for that matter. There also is a major gap in knowledge and awareness, which addressed could be a solution to the cultural barrier, and this could change perceptions of giving in the next generation.

To increase philanthropic giving in universities, there will be a need to build on the alumni networks, highlight impacts, build trust, and leverage on technology.

Concluding Thoughts

It is fundamental to understand that philanthropy in the African context is viewed as a constitutive part of civil society. This has created a level of confusion and hindered individuals and corporations from getting involved in philanthropy, since the mandate of civil society organizations to foster human rights and government accountability do not constitute the definition of philanthropy, but rather a call to action through activism. This approach does not foster innovation, and those putting resources into civil society visualize it as “sinking funds,” yet philanthropy is a catalyst to change the lives of individuals in most cases with a return on investment in the long term.

We need to develop systems and structures that study and document better cases of African philanthropy—what we can term as legacy building of African Philanthropy. This can be done through research, teaching, public awareness, and engagement in policy formulation to achieve developmental change focused on African giving/charity. It is crucial to deliver resources in this space to address the pressing needs of an effective giving structure across Africa with a focus on universities. In a matter of speaking, we will need to institutionalize African philanthropy for giving to grow.

Additional Resources

To read more about philanthropy and higher education in sub-Saharan Africa, visit <https://globalindices.indianapolis.iu.edu/index.html>.

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