

Advice to future donors in Africa: Work with the grassroots

Local organisations bring valuable insights and perspective for donors



Girls at a clinic discuss contraception © Malcolm Quigley/ Maverick Collective

Sarah Murray

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In supporting good causes in Africa, philanthropists must decide whether to meet immediate needs such as emergency relief or put their money into longer-term programmes. They must also decide whether to fund international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or invest in local groups.

In the past, donors often preferred to give to large charities headquartered in the US or Europe that direct funds to African countries, but this route is becoming less popular, according to Guy Cave, managing director of Geneva Global, a philanthropic consulting firm.

“It’s anecdotal, but the older philanthropists are more attracted to those brand NGOs like Oxfam, Save the Children or the Red Cross, whereas younger philanthropists can be more interested in a particular cause or area,” he says.

Rather than only funding large emergency relief organisations at a time of crisis, donors are becoming more interested in supporting local organisations, says Jean Paul Warmoes, executive director of the [King Baudouin Foundation United States](#) (KBFUS), which helps US donors give to African and European non-profit organisations.

Mr Warmoes believes this strategy can have a powerful impact because of the local knowledge that smaller organisations have about what it takes to find long-term solutions to problems.

Supporting smaller organisations does, however, bring its own challenges, he says. “In African countries, they might be registered as a local charity with the ministry in charge of that sector. But a lot of countries don’t have the resources to continuously make sure those charities are doing a good job.”

Moreover, the organisations may lack the resources to meet donor reporting requirements, including legal and regulatory obligations. “It can be difficult for local civil society organisations to be able to satisfy those basic requirements,” says Michael Mapstone, head of the CAF Global Alliance, part of the UK’s Charities Aid Foundation. “That’s one of the biggest challenges of a donor wanting to fund a small organisation.”

One solution — an approach KBFUS often uses on behalf of its clients — is to find larger, better-established partners that can direct funds to local charities then report back on how those funds are being spent. Another option is to club together with other donors. For example, members of the Maverick Collective, a network of philanthropists who invest in projects that benefit girls and women, share knowledge about their philanthropic activities. This makes it easier to identify the most effective local charities and to understand which initiatives are having the biggest impact.

“When trying to understand what the issues are and to gain confidence that you’re dealing with the right organisations, working with other people in a team or network gives you that additional support,” says Joanna Walker, head of private clients at the Charities Aid Foundation.

Recommended One charity is going to get a \$100m donation — but how to choose? Three ways to tell if you’re an effective philanthropist Don’t spread the love with your Christmas charity giving Whether a donor is working in a giving network like the Maverick Collective, with a philanthropic adviser, or going it alone, consultants in the charitable sector stress the importance of conducting research, becoming familiar with problems on the ground and getting to know the leaders of the organisations they support.

If it is not easy to phone the head of a non-profit organisation based in Africa, there are other ways to do due diligence, says Jacob Lief, chief executive and founder of Ubuntu Pathways, which helps vulnerable children in Port Elizabeth’s townships in South Africa’s Eastern Cape province.

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“A transparent organisation will list its funders,” he says. This makes it possible to contact individuals who are already supporting the charity to ask them about their experiences with the organisation. He also warns against taking an overly broad approach when giving on the African continent.

“South Africa is different from Kenya or Nigeria, with totally different problems,” he says. “Philanthropists with the most success tend to really focus their giving — not just on the geography but also on [the sector] they are interested in, whether that’s health or education.”

Above all, says Ms Walker, donors need to do research to fully understand the problems they want to tackle and which interventions are most likely to address them effectively without negative or unintended consequences. “All the best philanthropists have become subject experts on the issue they’re trying to address,” she says.