

# GUEST ESSAYS CIVIL SOCIETY & THE PRIVATE SECTOR

## WILL THE NEW SOUTHERN PHILANTHROPY LIVE UP TO ITS POTENTIAL FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE?

– INGRID SRINATH<sup>1</sup>

From Nigeria to India, China and beyond it would seem that philanthropy is entering a new golden age. Every few months brings news of another billionaire making a substantial pledge towards addressing a pressing economic or social issue. Corporate social responsibility (CSR), in a variety of forms, is booming, whether driven by government fiat, as in India, or by consumer, employee and competitive pressure. It isn't just the quantum of resources being pledged that has grown significantly, however. Levels of ambition too have soared. Merely 'doing some good' or supporting a few worthy organisations, for instance, is no longer the norm. Any 21<sup>st</sup> century philanthropy worth the name must aspire to 'transformational change' it seems: eradicate one disease, or several. Reinvent education. Eliminate hunger.

On the face of it, it seems there are more billionaires, more pledges and more resources across the board, suggesting real momentum towards solving some of the world's most persistent problems, and, one would expect, a thriving, vibrant civil society. Alas, this is not always necessarily true.

### CHALLENGING TRENDS

Peering past the congratulatory headlines and glitzy galas, it is critical to recognise the surging inequalities in income and wealth that fuels much of the new global south philanthropy. It's equally important to discern the real distinctions between resources allocated in

---

<sup>1</sup>Ingrid Srinath is the founder Director of the Centre for Social Impact and Philanthropy at the Ashoka University in India. She has also served as Secretary General of CIVICUS and in a variety of roles at a number of civil society organisations in India. The views expressed here are her own and do not represent those of any of these institutions.

accordance with the needs and wishes of those whose benefit is sought, versus those allocations of resources that are driven chiefly by the desire to acquire commercial or political advantage, or to launder tainted reputations.

A few key trends bear recognition. Much of the new philanthropy in emerging economies stems from fortunes built in the technology and financial services sectors that have boomed in the era of globalisation. These philanthropists, to the extent that generalisations are valid, are relatively young, with global scale vision, experience and networks and an entrepreneurial mindset. Their preference is for market-based approaches and quantifiable outcomes. Their time horizons are relatively short and they are even more highly engaged with strategy, planning, execution and evaluation in their philanthropy than they are in their business ventures. The style of philanthropy practised by previous generations of philanthropists – review competing proposals from a variety of civil society organisations, write cheques, await reports, persist with strategies for decades with slow progress toward tangible change, if any – are anathema to the new generation of technocratic funders.

A second discernible trend is the high premium placed on innovation. There is apparently only limited interest among new philanthropists in the global south in investing their resources in existing models, even where these are proven and could possibly benefit from an infusion of greater resources. Coupled with a strong desire for authorship, this pattern has both positive and negative impacts. On the one hand, it affords opportunities for many different approaches to be tested. Failure is quickly embraced and pivoting to new strategies is welcomed. On the other hand, tried and tested routes to change are starved of investment, fail to benefit from the entrepreneurial energy and public attention focused on more novel interventions, and often languish forgotten or ignored.

The focus on innovation also prioritises technology-driven solutions over more complex political approaches, a distaste for which marks many emerging philanthropists. The often naïve belief that complex social problems that have defied solution for millennia are simply awaiting the application of models and attitudes from the private sector can, paradoxically, limit the realisation of the very scale and sustainability that are most desired.

Equally, an unwillingness to engage with messy human processes and political players can limit the range of thematic areas on which the new philanthropists focus their attention. It is easier, in the short term, to build models without having to negotiate with entrenched interest groups and the power dynamics between them. This privileges fields amenable to such an approach, such as education, healthcare, financial services and livelihoods, over those that necessarily require grappling with political systems, including issues relating to human rights, accountability, governance, electoral and campaign finance reform, or patriarchal, casteist or racist power structures. Despite the greater sums of money available, therefore, impact can be considerably diminished. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the clampdown on civil society space and basic democratic freedoms that CIVICUS knows all too well. Most of the new philanthropists in the global south tend to steer clear of issues and organisations that might be construed as politically sensitive or that risk government censure.

## GUEST ESSAYS

## CIVIL SOCIETY & THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Ideological blinkers too can limit success. The fervent faith in the efficiency of the market and market mechanisms to allocate resources is sometimes surprising in its intensity. Similarly, there is often a peremptory dismissal of solutions that require collective organising and action from those who claim their credo is ‘whatever works’.

All of these skew the allocation of the vast new sums of money and other newly available resources provided by global south philanthropy away from the most marginalised groups who, unsurprisingly, have the least access to technology and markets and whose exploitation and oppression have deep, complex roots. The poorest, most remote, most historically disadvantaged among us remain excluded, and indeed are further disadvantaged, by interventions that prioritise technological or market solutions. Likewise, many of the things that many of us believe make life worthwhile – arts and culture, solidarity, compassion, empathy and our natural environment – find negligible reflection in the calculus of effective altruism.

### LOOKING FORWARD

As with any generalisation, however, it’s true that some of the new philanthropists choose to zig when their peers zag. These few bring their energy, ambition and innovation as well as their money and voice to less popular causes: governance, media independence, strengthening the civil society ecosystem, defending basic constitutional rights and freedoms, LGBTI rights, labour protections and supporting indigenous communities resisting displacement and the destruction of our environment, for instance.

Making connections between the most progressive philanthropists and the activists and movements that most need support is, or should be, a key priority for national and international networks and platforms. Platforms and modes of communication that transcend the divides of world views shaped by radically different life experiences are in short supply, especially as media echo chambers cut us off from each other. We need also to find ways of working together to build a strong narrative about the role of civil society and philanthropy in upholding the core values of our societies and the hard-won rights that are their embodiment.

In the face of resurgent tribalisms around the world, the growing barriers introduced by states against civil society’s receipt of international funding and the greater domestic focus of many international donors, it is local philanthropy that must increasingly take responsibility. New philanthropists must face demands to use their individual and collective influence to amplify the concerns of those rendered voiceless, invest in building civil society resilience, foster solidarity and coherence across the many divides, old and new, that confront us, and evolve and uphold exemplary norms of transparency and accountability. Whether or not global south philanthropists rise to these challenges will determine the strength of the social fabric as well as the fate of democracy itself in many countries across the global south.