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PHILANTHROPY AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: PERSPECTIVES OF MAJOR PHILANTHROPIC ACTORS IN NAIROBI, KENYA

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Abstract

This paper examines how major philanthropic actors in Nairobi, Kenya, understand their roles in driving social change. Rather than focusing on why wealthy individuals give, it explores their conceptions of responsible philanthropy, particularly regarding moral obligations, community participation, and resource mobilisation. Guided by interpretivist and constructivist philosophies, the study adopted a case study design involving ten purposively selected philanthropic actors, including philanthropists and individuals involved in philanthropic decision-making within foundations, trusts, nonprofit organisations, businesses, and social-impact initiatives. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

The findings reveal four interconnected dimensions of philanthropic engagement. First, participants understood philanthropy as a relational practice grounded in values and relationships. Second, they emphasised strengthening individuals and communities rather than fostering dependency. Third, they highlighted community agency, particularly people's capacity to lead initiatives and make decisions affecting their lives. Finally, they viewed financial and non-financial resources, including skills, networks, good governance, and institutional support, as complementary instruments for achieving sustainable change. Accordingly, philanthropy was understood not merely as financial giving but as a broader process of social transformation.

The study's reliance on self-reported perspectives from ten philanthropic actors in Nairobi limits the generalisability of its findings, while the absence of independent outcome assessments prevents conclusions about the measurable effects of their interventions. Nevertheless, the study advances scholarship on elite philanthropy by distinguishing motivations for giving from understandings of social transformation. Practically, it suggests that philanthropy should be evaluated not only by the resources contributed but also by donors' sense of responsibility, their support for community capabilities and agency, and the quality of their relationships with recipient communities. By presenting qualitative evidence from an under-researched African context, the study offers an original perspective on how philanthropic actors understand their roles in advancing lasting social change.

Keywords: *African philanthropy, Social Transformation, Altruism, Social Exchange*

INTRODUCTION

Research on elite philanthropy shows a strong link between giving and social identity and relationships, and the potential for major philanthropy to give individuals significant social influence (Ostrower, 1995; Maclean et al., 2021). Bekkers and Wiepking's (2011) seminal study of more than 500 peer-reviewed journal articles, concluded that charitable giving is influenced by eight perspectives, including altruism, personal values, perceived efficacy, reputation, and awareness of need. Maclean et al. (2021) add that wealthy individuals may give in expectation of recognition and influence.

In Africa, philanthropy takes many forms and is shaped by practices of giving, reciprocity, and solidarity, calling for a broader awareness of African gift giving as relational and historical (Fowler and Mati 2019). In Kenya, Mati (2020) suggests that philanthropic behavior results from the interaction between individual agency, personal experiences, and the broader social and institutional context, including faith and African philosophical worldviews. These relational notions of responsibility also echo Gyekye's (1996) writings on communal and individual values in African societies.

African philanthropy is attracting scholarly attention, but the field is still under-theorized and not sufficiently represented in mainstream philanthropy discourse (Mati, 2020; Zakeyo, 2025). Existing research has documented the determinants of giving in Kenya and explored the

motivations, practices and constraints influencing high-net-worth philanthropy in Africa but has paid little attention to how high-net-worth individual philanthropists (HNWIPs) themselves understand and define their role as philanthropists. There is therefore a lack of empirical knowledge about how wealthy people see their responsibility for solving social problems, promoting human dignity and contributing to the sustainable social transformation of their immediate environment.

The study was undertaken in Nairobi County, Kenya. The county is both the national capital and the country's largest urban and commercial center (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2024).

This study therefore asks:

How do major philanthropic actors in Nairobi understand their contribution to social transformation in Nairobi?

The study focuses on participants' perceptions of their role in social transformation, not on the value of their philanthropy. This distinction matters. These donor accounts offer insights into how philanthropic actors define and rationalize their work and do not necessarily, by themselves, indicate whether or how recipient communities are empowered, or whether the social change they seek actually happens.

The study contributes in two related ways. Empirically, it provides qualitative evidence from key philanthropic actors in Nairobi to help create more context-specific accounts of African philanthropy. Conceptually, it makes an explicit distinction between philanthropic motivation and philanthropic role in social transformation. Motivation concerns why an actor gives, while philanthropic perceptions about their role concern how an actor thinks about giving with resources for social purposes.

The results reveal four interrelated dimensions of philanthropic roles, including stewardship, responsibility, capability, community agency, and contribution beyond financial capital. However, this knowledge also reveals a significant tension. A philanthropist's power to support community agency can be the same power that enhances their influence over priorities, interventions, and definitions of desirable social change. The study thus views philanthropy not as a gesture of donor benevolence or effectiveness, but as a specific mode of donor understanding, positioning, and contributing to social transformation.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Motivations for Philanthropy

Many studies have examined philanthropy and the factors that influence giving. In their review of more than 500 studies, Bekkers and Wiepking (2011) identify eight primary motives for giving: awareness of need, solicitation, costs and benefits, altruism, reputation, psychological benefits, values, and efficacy. These mechanisms provide a helpful starting point for understanding why people give and support. Ostrower (1995) found that the philanthropy of rich donors is determined by identity, religion, ethnicity, status, and relations to the elite. The study, which draws on interviews with affluent donors in New York, also finds that there is no single donor motivation for elite philanthropy but rather a variety of motivations. .

Another key aspect of major philanthropy is that it has the potential to influence and wield power. Maclean et al. (2021) examine the relationship between elite philanthropy and the exercise of elite power and suggest that large-scale philanthropy can expand donors' influence beyond the economic domain in the USA and in the UK. The present study, carried out in Nairobi, raises a pertinent question that philanthropic forces pose to themselves: what responsibilities come with this increased capacity to act?

This study seeks to understand philanthropists' perceptions of their role in social transformation and the perceived obligations associated with using private financial and non-financial resources for social good. Thus, philanthropy's perceived contribution is viewed as a matter of role perception rather than as evidence of donors' responsibility for using funds, or, indeed, as evidence that the funds produce the outcomes donors intended.

African philanthropy and Social Transformation

Fowler and Mati (2019) suggest that African philanthropy extends beyond traditional institutional approaches and includes the practice of gifting. Their analysis emphasizes the historical and relational dimensions of giving, highlighting both horizontal and vertical social relations in African philanthropy. Similarly, Mati (2020) critiques theories of philanthropy that are divorced from the social context. He argues that philanthropic behavior results from multidirectional interactions among agency, individual experiences, and socio-institutional structures, with faith, African philosophies and worldviews, and socioeconomic conditions as key elements. The arguments are akin to Gyekye's (1996) consideration of communal and individual values in African social thought. Communitarian responsibility does not deny the individual but rather provides a philosophical framework for thinking about the nature of individual interests and responsibilities in relation to social contexts.

This study treats these views as an empirical question rather than as a purported trait of African societies. Instead of subsuming all references to family, faith, Ubuntu, lived experience, and community obligation under a single cultural explanation, it treats and analyzes them as distinct sources of responsibility.

Social transformation is generally understood as a process of changing the structural, social and institutional conditions that constrain human well-being, dignity and opportunity (O'Brien, 2012; Park et al., 2012). Modern scholarship highlights that transformation is not only about charitable relief, but also about empowerment, systems change, community agency and sustainable social value creation (Dees, 1998; Patton & Richardson, 2024; Hietschold et al., 2023). Increasingly, the philanthropy world has focused on how strategic giving, collaboration,

and social entrepreneurship can help enable long-term societal change rather than short-term assistance. This study explores how philanthropists perceive the contribution to social transformation.

Theoretical Framework

The moral bases of philanthropy can be understood through the altruism theory advanced by Batson, (2011). According to this theory, when people experience empathic concern, they may be motivated to help improve another's welfare (empathy-altruism hypothesis). The theory is particularly relevant because philanthropy is often tied to vulnerability, experiences of need, or empathy for others. These experiences can help explain an individual's sense of responsibility towards others and the need to help. However, altruism cannot by itself dictate how contributions ought to take shape. Two actors can share similar concerns about a disadvantaged community yet advocate very different responses. One might focus on provision; another on education, institutional strengthening, enterprise, or policy change. Thus, altruism helps shed light on the moral motivation for stewardship, but it is not a complete model of philanthropic relations.

The Social Exchange Theory offers a complementary perspective by focusing on relationships rather than motivation. Blau (1964) examines processes such as reciprocity, imbalance, and power in analyzing social exchange. His work treats exchange and power as closely related aspects of social relationships. This was later expanded by Emerson (1976), who identified exchange within the context of social interdependence and dependence. Reciprocity takes different forms. Molm (2010) demonstrates how different forms of reciprocity influence the formation of trust and solidarity in social-exchange relationships. In the context of philanthropy, this focus points to relationships that are integral to the transfer of resources. Expectations of participation, trust, accountability, and responsibility can be part of giving. These questions are particularly important when there are significant disparities between donors' resources and the resources needed by organizations or communities to whom the donors are willing to donate.

Altruism Theory and Social Exchange Theory are therefore used here in a complementary manner. Altruism can be used to describe the moral dimension of perceived responsibility, Social Exchange Theory to discuss the relational dimension of philanthropy, and perceptions to describe what philanthropic actors feel they are morally responsible for.

METHODOLOGY

Research design and orientation

The study employed an interpretivist and constructivist lens, as it was concerned with understanding and interpreting what it means to participants to be philanthropic. A qualitative inquiry was therefore suitable for exploring the meanings participants ascribed to responsibility, relationships, and social contribution (Creswell & Poth, 2024). A qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018) was used for the study. The geographical context was Nairobi County, and the experiences and stories of individual philanthropic actors served as the primary units for exploring stewardship. The study was undertaken in Nairobi County, Kenya. Nairobi was purposively selected as an information-rich setting rather than as a statistically representative proxy for Kenya's 47 counties. The county is both the national capital and the country's largest urban and commercial center, generating 27.5% of national gross value added in 2023 (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2024) and thus having the potential to host a large number of philanthropists.

Participants and sampling

The study population was High Net Worth Individual Philanthropists (HNWIPs), defined as wealthy people who had made significant philanthropic contributions, with at least KES 12.9m million (or roughly USD 100,000 as at October 2025) publicly known for social causes. Because the number of HNWIs is not publicly known, the study used purposive and referral sampling to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study (Noy, 2008; Palinkas et al., 2015).

The study involved ten philanthropists from diverse backgrounds, including international development, hospitality, nonprofit and social-impact leadership, engineering, entrepreneurship, manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, and institutional philanthropy. They have engaged in philanthropy across education, youth development, health, livelihoods, gender equality, environmental sustainability, mentorship, and community development.

Due to the hard- to- rich nature of the study population, ten out of 45 prospective participants took part. Purposeful sampling was used as it was considered appropriate when a qualitative researcher is seeking information-rich cases, and referral approaches are appropriate when the qualitative researcher seeks to gain access to participants via social networks. Sample adequacy was considered through information power. According to (Malterud *et al.*, 2016) a focused aim of participants with highly relevant experience, and an intensive analytic strategy can justify a smaller sample. Adequacy was therefore judged by the relevance, richness, and explanatory contribution of the accounts rather than by numerical representativeness.

The participants represented a variety of work and philanthropic environments. P1 had experience in philanthropic-trust leadership and social enterprise and was interested in international development; P2 was engaged in the work of a personal family foundation focused on youth mentorship; P3 had experience leading a community-based social-impact organization; P4 brought engineering and business experience to philanthropy; P5 worked in a family foundation; P6 had a wide range of experience in the nonprofit and international-development sectors; P7 was a leader of an education foundation; and P8 and P9 both had experience leading grant-making efforts in family foundations. P10 was an owner of a pharmaceutical company and head of the family foundation.

Data generation and analysis

The data came from semi-structured interviews, each lasting about 60 to 90 minutes, supplemented by organizational documents and public records. Documentary evidence supported the contextual and triangulating information and was not considered a standalone assessment of the claimed social impact. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview transcripts, following Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis. Qualitative data analysis was iterative and began during data collection. Overlapping data collection and analysis allowed early insights to inform subsequent interviews while preserving openness to new meanings as suggested by (Eisenhardt, 1989). The researcher transcribed audio recordings, checked them against the recordings, and prepared them for analysis. The researcher used reflexive thematic analysis to identify and interpret patterns of shared meaning across the data. The process involved familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, developing initial themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 34, 52). NVivo 15 software was used for qualitative data analysis. pants' accounts.

Initial codes generated from the data included problem-solving (20 references), internal motivation (15), new trends in philanthropy (12), faith influence (10), access to education, empathy, and compassion (6 references each), parental values and external motivation (3 references each), role models in the family and resilience (2 references each), as well as international experiences, local roots and cultural identity, and other emerging issues (1 reference each). After generating the initial codes, the researcher examined patterns of shared meaning across the data to identify broader categories that captured related concepts. The analysis yielded nine preliminary themes: Family Influence and Legacy (5 references), Global Exposure and Local Identity (2 references), Education (13 references), Purpose and Motivation (18 references), Innovations (17 references), Social Transformation (13 references), and Values and Ethics (22 references). The findings were organized according to the study objective. This objective, which examined participants' perceptions of social transformation, generated themes relating to education, empowerment, values, and social responsibility. The findings were then grouped around four interrelated patterns; responsibility, capability, agency, and contribution beyond money.

Trustworthiness and confirmability.

Trustworthiness was addressed through the use of transparent and traceable analytic procedures while demonstrating the rigor of thematic analysis as suggested by (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). Dependability was strengthened through an audit trail recording coding and theme-development decisions in NVivo. Confirmability was supported through reflexive note-taking and peer debriefing, while detailed descriptions of the cases and their contexts enabled readers to judge the potential transferability of the findings. The researcher conducted member checking by contacting participants to clarify or confirm interpretations of their accounts. This member checking supported an accurate and respectful representation of participants' perspectives as advocated by (Birt *et al.*, 2016).

Transferability and Reflexibility

The study addressed transferability by providing detailed information about the study setting, participants, sampling approach, and philanthropic experiences, allowing readers to judge whether the findings are relevant to other settings. Rather than suggesting that the experiences of HNWIPs in Nairobi can be generalized to all philanthropists, the study recognizes that qualitative findings are shaped by their context. Drawing from Lincoln &Guba (1985), the emphasis was on getting thick description, enabling readers to assess how meaningfully the findings may apply to comparable contexts.

The researcher applied reflexivity, recognizing the role of his values, experiences, assumptions, position, and interactions in shaping the research process and interpretation (Palaganas *et al.*, 2017). The researcher maintained reflexive notes during data collection and analysis to record expectations, emotional responses, methodological choices, and emerging interpretations. The researcher used open-ended questions and follow-up probes, reviewed transcripts alongside audio recordings, and considered alternative interpretations and divergent accounts.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Tangaza University Ethics Review Committee, and participants provided written informed consent. Identifying information has been removed, and participants are identified numerically as P1 to P10. Due to confidentiality obligations and the possibility that individuals in prominent philanthropic roles may be identifiable, the qualitative data is not made public.

FINDINGS: HOW MAJOR PHILANTHROPIC ACTORS UNDERSTAND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

In most cases, philanthropy was seen to go beyond giving money. The perceptions about the role of philanthropy drew four interrelated themes. First was moral and relational responsibility to contribute, second was a commitment to build capability rather than maintain dependency, third was to strengthen the agency of recipients and communities, and fourth was to contribute professional and institutional capability in addition to money. These themes are not social outcomes that the participants have set themselves, but understandings of responsible philanthropy.

Philanthropy as moral and relational responsibility

Philanthropic responsibility was typically found in personal experience, relationships, and moral commitments. The source of this sense of responsibility differed from case to case. P2 highlighted interpersonal relationships and intergenerational knowledge transfer and

P3's philanthropy was linked to empathy and lived experience and direct engagement, while P6 highlighted Ubuntu and intergenerational change and P9's philanthropy as focused on family values, faith and the philosophy of Gandhian ideals.

P4 traced his orientation toward philanthropy to family socialization:

> *"I grew up in a very philanthropic home. I can talk of my mother being the perfect example of philanthropy; she influenced me to help as much as I can." (P4)*

P6 connected responsibility to earlier experiences of vulnerability and receiving assistance:

> *"When I was growing up... when I lost my parents, I went through not so good times together with my other siblings... I also know what that also feels like when you do not have a support system... just like I was supported and guided at that time, then I would want to give it back." (P6)*

Participants therefore understood stewardship not simply as possessing resources, but as a responsibility grounded in biography, relationships, and moral commitments.

Philanthropy as building capability rather than sustaining dependency

Participants also identified their role in relation to what philanthropy should enable. In all cases, taking responsibility for giving was linked to building longer-term capability rather than continuing to depend on philanthropic provision. This orientation manifested in P1's institutional sustainability, P3 and P4's skills and livelihoods, education in P5 and P7, and systems in P6 and P10.

P1 expressed this distinction directly:

> *''The problem is that people tend to wait for donations, for food or for a politician to rescue them. I soon realised that simply writing cheques to purchase baskets of food is subsidising poverty not correcting it. I believe that my role is to support sustainable business models where the community owns the business and makes a living." (P1)*

The finding is not that relief necessarily breeds dependency. Instead, participants conceptualized stewardship responsibility in terms of capability, education, livelihood, skills, community ownership, and institutional sustainability, which they felt offered more opportunities to become self-reliant.

Philanthropy as strengthening community agency

A third dimension concerned the role communities should play in social transformation. Participants viewed beneficiaries as potential agents of change, not just recipients of resources. P3 focused on dignity and first-hand engagement; P6 connected with Ubuntu; P7 adopted a community-led process, and P8 highlighted African-led processes, trust, and power shifts in the relationships of philanthropy.

This understanding is put succinctly by P6:

> *"They're not the recipients in the traditional sense anymore. They can also help to transform their own lives." (P6)*

P7 similarly described educational philanthropy in terms of its anticipated longer-term effects:

> *"Sponsoring a child through vocational school or university is more than simply paying school fees. It can break the cycle of generations. When that young person gets a job or starts a business, they lift up their entire household. That is how real change happens." (P7)*

These accounts show an emerging association between philanthropy and the capacity to help individuals and communities influence their own future. Again, the difference between perception and the outcome is key. The study alone does not show that the recipients of these interventions saw these as empowering or that the changes that were hoped for came about.

Philanthropy as contributing more than money

Finally, participants understood philanthropy as more than financial capital that philanthropic actors could offer. Their varied professional experiences led to the identification of different resources: strategic leadership and partnerships (P1), mentorship (P2), direct experience of social impact (P3), technical expertise (P4), institutional philanthropy (P5, P9), policy and development expertise (P6), community mobilization (P7), grantmaking and trust-based approaches (P8), and governance and systems thinking (P10).

P4 made this explicit:

> *"Money is the easiest thing to give, but if it is given alone, it is the least effective," he said. What I really bring to these social initiatives is board level governance, financial discipline and market linkages. I do not sit in an office in Upper Hill moving money. I go to the field and design the operations strategy with the local leadership." (P4)*

P8 also described the systemic engagement of philanthropy:

> *"I think of it as from a perspective of changing systems. It is related with changing the views and ideology of a community." (P8)*

Financial capital was thus seen as one of several forms of philanthropy, alongside expertise, governance, mentorship, professional networks, and institutional capacity. This finding also reveals a tension: the resources that enable donors to sustain support for community agency may simultaneously give donors more opportunity to shape decisions about priorities, strategies, and the definition of desirable change.

Philanthropy is therefore perceived not as transferring resources alone, but more about participants' own understanding of how those resources should be deployed and what relationships philanthropic action should seek to enable.

DISCUSSION

From philanthropic motivation to stewardship

The first contribution of this study is to elaborate on philanthropists' perceived contribution to social transformation. Many studies seek to answer the question, "Why do people give?" For example, Bekkers and Wiepking (2011) distinguish between a number of mechanisms that underlie charitable behaviour. The Nairobi findings extend this question by focusing on the responsibilities that philanthropic actors perceive to accompany giving. This difference is reflected in participants' experiences with family influence, their own vulnerability, their faith, Ubuntu, and their responsibility toward others. This is consistent with Mati's (2020) analysis of Kenyan philanthropy, which shows the interconnectedness between individual experiences, agency, faith, African philosophical worldviews, and socio-institutional structures.

Part of this pattern can be understood in terms of Altruism Theory. Batson (2011) offers a theoretical framework for understanding how empathic concern can lead to other-oriented helping motivation. However, the present findings suggest that helping motivation does not determine the preferred intervention method.

The idea of stewardship raises an analytical question about what follows once the decision to give has been made. The question that arises is what responsibilities the philanthropic actor feels arise from giving. In the current study, participants' responses included responsibility for their capabilities, responsibility for their community, and the use of their own influence and professional resources.

Capability and agency as criteria of responsible philanthropy

The second contribution concerns what participants saw as the outcomes responsible philanthropy can enable. Across cases, participants identified education, skills, livelihoods, institutional sustainability, and community ownership as ways of increasing capabilities. This aligns with the African philanthropy scholarship, which views giving as more relational than transactional. Fowler and Mati (2019) highlight the multiplicity and relationality of giving in Africa, while Mati (2020) points out that reciprocity and obligation are significant aspects of the Kenyan philanthropic landscape.

Social Exchange Theory elaborates on this explanation. Exchange relations involve not only resources but also interdependence and power (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976). Molm (2010) also finds that reciprocity structures can affect trust and solidarity in exchange relationships. This relationship-based approach provides context for the importance participants attributed to the role of intended beneficiaries. They preferred to view their philanthropic relationship as not just:

$$donor \rightarrow resource \rightarrow recipient$$

but increasingly as one in which communities should possess some capacity to participate in, own, or sustain processes of change. Importantly, this should not be interpreted to mean that recipient agency eliminates power asymmetries. The donor's ability to provide or withhold important resources remains consequential.

Beyond money: hyperagency and donor power

The first way this ties into the research on elite philanthropy is that participants viewed themselves as giving more than simply dollars. Hyperagency, which has been defined by Schervish (2003) as the ability of those who have wealth to make choices among the various alternatives available to them; but also, the ability of these individuals to define the parameters and opportunities for action. The definition of hyperagency was consistent with how participants described their own governance expertise, their networks, their roles within institutions, their professional knowledge, and their system thinking.

Nevertheless, such knowledge or skill should not be assumed as something that is always a sign of good management. In their research on top-level giving in the United States and the United Kingdom, Maclean and others (2021) showed that big donations were connected to how powerful people use their influence and can bring power to rich people and big charity groups at the expense of their recipients or beneficiaries. Even though their place of study is different from Nairobi, the main idea they talk about is important for understanding the results. This leads to what's known as the philanthropists' paradox. While participants report having the expertise, networks, governance, and engagement to be assets that help them enhance capability and community agency, these same resources can increase the philanthropists' ability to:

- select social priorities;
- choose organizations and initiatives;
- define acceptable interventions;
- establish performance expectations; and
- determine what constitutes sustainability or success.

Thus:

Giving without strings attached does not necessarily mean giving up donor power. It does not suggest that participants lack commitment to community agency. Instead, it calls for philanthropists to understand their role as both a responsibility and a form of power that needs to be exercised with wisdom.

Viewing Altruism and Social Exchange Theory in philanthropy

These results also help show the relationship between Altruism and Social Exchange Theory. Altruism Theory mainly points out the side of how people see responsibility. Participants feel an urge to give, and this urge can be traced to their life stories, their empathy, past vulnerability, and care for others. Social Exchange Theory works at an abstract level. It shows how this sense of responsibility is built through relationships focusing on reciprocity, participation, ability, reliance and the power that participants give to it.

In this study, these two theories work together. Altruism can give meaning to the feeling of responsibility while

Social Exchange Theory can explain the relationships that let that responsibility happen. Philanthropy can therefore be seen as the sense of responsibility that people who give feel about their contributions. This view does not try to claim that either Altruism or Social Exchange Theory fully explains philanthropic behaviour.

Theoretical contribution: philanthropic contribution as role perception

The study's main theoretical contribution is the level of analysis used to understand the difference between motivation and social outcomes. It examines how philanthropists view their role in contributing to social transformation. This adds to studies on giving and why people give resources (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011). Maclean et al.'s 2021 work shows the influence and strength of big philanthropy. This paper adds another angle, including the cultural, historical, and relational nature of giving common in African philanthropy research. It also offers a view from the perspectives of wealthy individuals. The study therefore asks four questions about philanthropists' contributions to social change:

Responsibility
Why am I responsible for contributing?

Capability
What should my contribution enable?

Agency
What role should communities play in changing their circumstances?

Contribution
What should I bring beyond money?

The main point is not that elite giving is the way to help everyone. Instead, it shows that to understand giving, we must look at how donors see the duties that come with their ability to give. This approach focuses on giving and the way elite giving shapes the way donors think about what they owe. By studying elite giving in this way, we gain insight into elite giving and its impact.

IMPLICATIONS

Implications for philanthropy research

The results indicate that researchers must analytically separate perceptions of a philanthropic role from the motivation to give. Although donor motivation studies are important, they do not always account for variations in how donors build relationships with both organizations and communities after a resource donation. Future research could thus compare philanthropic actors with the same motivations but different understandings of stewardship. Comparative studies of philanthropy in other African cities and countries could determine if responsibility, capability, agency, and multidimensional contribution are a recurring phenomenon. Most importantly, community and recipient voices should be added to donor accounts. This would be important in determining if stewardship practices mentioned by donors as empowering are similarly experienced by the intended beneficiaries.

Implications for philanthropic practice

The four dimensions provide philanthropic actors with practical questions for reflecting on proposed interventions:

Responsibility: What values and experiences shape the priorities being selected?

Capability: Does the intervention strengthen capabilities beyond immediate provision?

Agency: How are community members involved in identifying priorities and shaping implementation?

Contribution: Which non-financial capabilities does the donor bring, and when might their involvement constrain rather than strengthen local agency?

The final question matters because active donor involvement is not automatically empowering. Expertise should complement, not automatically displace, community knowledge.

Implications for nonprofits and philanthropic intermediaries

Philanthropic intermediaries may benefit from explaining, in the case of major domestic philanthropists, how their proposed interventions help enhance capability, community involvement, governance, and sustainability. Intermediaries can also help establish processes for community voice, clear decision-making, and mutual accountability between the donor and the supported organization.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study's findings were limited by four factors. First, the empirical setting is limited to ten purposively selected actors in Nairobi. The results are therefore intended for analytic rather than statistical generalization and do not represent Kenya's or sub-Saharan Africa's wealthiest people. Second, the study examines perceptions of donors' roles as reported by the donors themselves. Social desirability or retrospective self-presentation may affect perceptions of contribution to change. Third, the study does not measure impact at the beneficiary level. When participants talk about self-reliance, empowerment, intergenerational change, or systems change, they are reflecting donors' interpretations, not necessarily demonstrated results. Future research should therefore use longitudinal and multi-perspective approaches involving beneficiaries, recipient organizations and communities. Cross-country or cross-county studies could examine whether the four stewardship dimensions transfer. Further research could explore the tension in this study between donor agency and recipient agency by examining how community actors may feel when actively engaged in philanthropy, both enabled and constrained.

CONCLUSION

This study asked how large philanthropic players in Nairobi see their role in social transformation. Participants described their role as more than giving money and saw connections between their work and four parts of change: doing the right thing; building relationships; helping

people build better skills; letting communities take charge; and giving more than cash.

This distinction advances knowledge of elite giving by separating motivation from actual perception about their contribution. It is not just about "Why do philanthropic actors give?" but also "What does it require of philanthropic actors to make the decision to give?"

In this study, social transformation was viewed as allocating resources to interventions that build capability and agency, and adding professional expertise, governance, institutional experience, networks, and financial capital. But the same skills used in social transformation can also empower donors. The desire to increase recipient agency thus lives side-by-side with ongoing imbalances of philanthropic power. Major philanthropy thus cannot be understood only in terms of how much money is donated and to whom; it also depends on how philanthropic actors define the responsibilities, relationships, and forms of agency they think should be attached to that money.

The study concludes that philanthropic stewardship is a moral and relational construct of responsible philanthropic action, not evidence of effective social change. How much these ideas become real in terms of respect, control and lasting change is something that needs to be checked and it needs the voices of the people that charity is supposed to help..

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