

Believe in the power of communities

Nina Blackwell

Community philanthropy is one of the most potent mechanisms for sustainable change in Africa. We aim to prove it by creating a theory and practice of support for community-based organizations (CBOs), enabling African CBOs to become community grantmakers, and by shaping international thinking on community philanthropy.



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For almost two decades, Firelight has sought to build the capacity of African CBOs giving them the power to build better, more effective solutions for children and youth, to advocate for change in child or youth-centered policy, and to change the lives of the children around them.

We have seen the incredible power of community philanthropy over and over again and in a number of ways: contributions from community members to a CBO not only reduce dependency on outside help, but are the ultimate manifestations of local buy-in and involvement. Individuals and groups who help shape, and in other ways contribute to, programmes feel a greater sense of identity and power. Their voice and agency is increased many times when they are able to fund and drive social change in their own community. A CBO that is enabled by community contributions also has greater transparency.

We have seen results. Our CBO partners have leveraged our grants in almost every community, matching Firelight's contributions by at least 20 per cent and sometimes up to 100 per cent with contributions from

the people around them. They have also used our funds to successfully support community-driven lending circles, table banking and social funds in myriad contexts.

Firelight also looks for ways to establish community philanthropy on a more formalized basis by enabling local African organizations to become community grantmakers in their own right. These community grantmakers work with Firelight to provide small grants matched with local,

intimate mentoring and leadership to smaller CBOs. This strategy was put into action with a \$25,000 grant we made in 2003 to the Jerusalem Children and

Community Development Organization (JeCCDO) in Ethiopia. Today, JeCCDO is granting over \$3 million to smaller community-based organizations in Ethiopia. It joins 12 other successful community grantmakers that Firelight has enabled across eight countries – Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, Lesotho, Malawi, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe.

But despite this commitment, we know that challenges exist. Many external donors look for outcomes that are programmatic or thematic, rather than holistic, making the argument for indigenous capacity building and indigenous philanthropy a complex one. Many communities in Africa have been the recipients of gifts from outside donors, making it hard to convince them that local communities can contribute to their own change. For many local communities, giving to an institution – like a CBO – is less familiar than giving directly to another individual. Community grantmakers might be strong, but they – like their grantees – need the right kind of networks, advice, training and information to be successful. Finally, we know first-hand that the sector is in need of demonstrable evidence that community-based solutions and the community contributions that fund them actually work.

Firelight is moving to a new phase of working with CBOs in Africa. We are building a theory and practice of support for indigenous CBOs. This work aims to contribute significantly to the growth of our grantees and to their effectiveness as systemic indigenous changemakers. It will also contribute to the global conversation around the effectiveness of community-based organizations and community-based solutions. One critical part of this will be support for community contributions and community philanthropy as a means of initiating and sustaining the measurable change that CBOs seek to make. Another will be the building of empirical evidence that community solutions and community contributions really do work to create sustainable and measurable change in the lives of children and youth. We will do this because of our unwavering belief that community philanthropy is an indispensable catalyst to the sustainable change in Africa that the world envisages through the Sustainable Development Goals. We believe in the power of community to seed, succeed, sustain, scale, shift systems and continue to affect children's lives long after we have gone. @

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