

# BRIDGING PHILANTHROPY AND RIGHTS

**G. Ananthapadmanabhan & Shambhavi Madhan**

- *A journey between activists and foundations* •

## ABSTRACT

*Despite recent growth in philanthropic giving in the Global South, there remains a gap between development and human rights funding, with preference being given to the former. This article argues that the gap between these two paradigms should close, as it has done in the Global North, although philanthropy in that region is not without its challenges. The authors argue that the responsibility for this shift lies not only with philanthropic foundations, but with activists too.*

## KEYWORDS

Philanthropy | Global South | India | Development | Human Rights

Recent years have seen considerable growth in philanthropy in the Global South. In India, the total funds for the development sector have grown at a rate of 9 per cent over the past five years, increasing from approximately INR 150,000 crore in 2011 to INR 220,000 crore in 2016.<sup>1</sup> This growth has primarily been due to private contributions, which constituted 32 per cent of the total contributions to the development sector in 2016, up from 15 per cent in 2011. Although a significant amount of funding has been directed towards rights and entitlements of people from marginalised communities, little of this is explicitly framed as contributions for the advancement of human rights. Bridging this gap is a journey that is at a nascent stage in India, and continues to be a work in progress in many other parts of the world.

Philanthropists in India mostly operate under the development paradigm. They fund work that seeks to include underprivileged or marginalised populations in economic development by improving their access to basic services like education and healthcare. This approach embodies an impatience to develop along these lines, and is indicative of a hierarchy of issues/needs. Problems like hunger and lack of access to clean drinking water occupy the top tiers, while human rights violations and lack of access to justice, which are seen as less urgent or as relevant only to a minority, are relegated to the bottom tiers. Arguably, a framework like Amartya Sen's Capability Approach could be used to tie together the various social, political and economic issues that marginalise or exclude certain communities.

For rights activists, the interconnectedness between these issues is immediately visible. However, the language used by activists to communicate this is vastly different from the language familiar to funders. This can make these conversations incomprehensible at best, and alienating at worst. In the Global South, though the line between rights and entitlements is very thin, work on one frequently bleeding into the other, a pronounced human rights framework is mostly absent in the perspective of philanthropists and the programmes they choose to support.

There are then a number of disconnects between philanthropists and a rights framework in the Global South. Global North philanthropies are at a different place in the journey than their Global South counterparts, but far from free of issues.

For example, foundations struggle to invest their endowment funds in line with their mission and values. There has been considerable outcry in recent years, opposing fossil fuel investments of foundations, and encouraging these organisations to invest in greener companies.<sup>2</sup> These campaigns have been quite successful, as evidenced by the hundreds of foundations worldwide that signed the pledge to divest from fossil fuels, including Rockefeller Brothers Fund and Children's Investment Fund Foundation. However, this struggle does not end with only fossil fuel divestment, and needs to move towards proactive investments of endowment funds in mission-aligned organisations and programmes. An example of an organisation adopting such an approach to investment is the Heron Foundation, which is working towards achieving 100 per cent mission-aligned investment.

Additionally, Global North philanthropists who fund organisations advancing human rights, with the possible exception of those in North America, are external looking and usually tend to focus their efforts in Global South countries. While this monetary support is needed in the South, it is also demonstrative of a tendency to focus on human rights violations and inequalities in other countries, at the expense of taking ownership of those in one's own. This shares a mutual causality with existing Global North-Global South power equations, and is therefore detrimental to the advancement of human rights in the long term.

Complete alignment between philanthropy and a rights framework is a long journey and far from finished. Some developments that have pushed this journey are the people moving from human rights organisations to foundations. In India, as more foundations open their doors to people from a human rights or civil society background, they are able to diversify their perspectives and approaches to grantmaking, creating lasting change in how grantmaking is done and who it supports.

Additionally, while language and articulation form an important part of human rights discourse, it is necessary for rights activists to develop the ability to speak to philanthropists in a language they understand, connecting human rights and development frameworks. If these partnerships are to be forged, activists will need to work through the discomfort of altering discourse to suit the needs of philanthropists, while exploring ways to push philanthropy to adopt a rights-based approach. Though this puts the burden of bridge-building on the activists, existing power dynamics *vis a vis* money and influence call for this first step.

In short, there is enormous overlap between the goals of philanthropists and those of human rights activists. However, in order to achieve these goals, philanthropists need to understand that human rights and development goals are inextricably linked, while human rights activists need to find ways to help them get there.

## NOTES

1 • Arpan Sheth, Deval Sanghavi, Anant Bhagwati, Srikrishnan Srinivasan and Pakzan Dastoor, "India Philanthropy Report 2017." Bain and Company, March 4, 2017, accessed December 10, 2017,

<http://www.bain.com/publications/articles/india-philanthropy-report-2017.aspx> .

2 • DivestInvest, Homepage, 2017, accessed December 18, 2017, <https://www.divestinvest.org/>.



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