Decolonising philanthropy

‘Colonial’ philanthropy and rooting out the assumptions that underlie it
Decolonising philanthropy
The end of condescension

Features editor Andrew Milner outlines some of the central issues that need addressing for ‘decolonising philanthropy’ to have real meaning

The word ‘decolonisation’ was apparently first coined by German economist Moritz Julius Bonn in the 1930s to describe the process of withdrawal by colonial powers from territories they had previously occupied. However, as the following pages demonstrate, colonisation is also cultural and psychological, determining what forms of knowledge and attitudes are given preference in the former colonies, once independent. Hence, a legacy of colonialism is created which has an enduring effect on the post-colonial country and its people. The term decolonisation, too, has taken on a wider meaning of freeing of minds from colonial ideology.

The term ‘decolonising philanthropy’ is credited to writer and activist Edgar Villanueva, who discusses the issue in this special feature on page 46. In 2018, Villanueva said in an interview, ‘colonisation has a lot to do with philanthropy. Organisations and individuals who invest money need to understand the trauma that exists because of how wealth has been accumulated. We must own our part in perpetuating colonising dynamics in order to really practise grantmaking and investing with a lens of racial equality.’

I have two ideas to add to this. Some forms of colonialism are easy to spot – people of one nation or race take possession of the territory of another and impose their laws, values and institutions on it. These have attracted the most attention but there are other forms of exploitation beyond the seizing of political control and the source of these can be internal as well as external. Most of us in whatever societies we live are the inheritors of ideas and attitudes, imposed on us or inculcated into us, of a dominant social class. Despite the processes of democratisation and social mobility, these attitudes persist. Is it too much of a stretch to see this as a form of colonialism?

Second, in some parts of the world, the colonists have not gone away. They have stayed and shaped the countries in question. What are the implications of decolonisation for this ‘settler colonialism’?

These are some of the questions considered in this special feature. They are too big for us to expect to find answers within the space of a handful of articles, but we can at least stimulate the debate.

Ultimately, colonialism in the wider sense – whether internal or external – is made possible by a sense of superiority: a feeling, conscious or unconscious, that one group’s intellectual and cultural habits, its technological achievements, sexual mores, table manners or whatever, should be given preference to those of another. This has not always been banished. Perhaps what we need beyond giving back or giving up is an end to the condescension that makes this senses of superiority possible.

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Lead Article
From conceptual apprehension to functional progress

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Though the term is increasingly bandied around, what does ‘decolonising philanthropy’ mean and how does it work?

Reading the term ‘decolonising philanthropy’ is likely to evoke mixed feelings. Some may feel energised or hopeful, while to others the idea might cause feelings of frustration, apprehension or discomfort. This special feature presents contributors from philanthropic practice and scholarship with an important opportunity to not only unpack the concept of decolonising philanthropy, but to highlight what best practice in this space looks like.

As guest editors from the academic sector, we also aim to use this space to demystify the often unwieldy conceptualisation of decolonised philanthropy. Indeed, many in the sector from elite donors down to grassroots community organisations may be practising decolonised forms of philanthropy unknowingly. But primarily, we aim to inform and stimulate further dialogue around the issue, as it is an essential step towards a broader paradigm shift in the sector.

Decolonising embedded power structures
As has been widely established by scholars and practitioners alike, colonisation extends far beyond the occupation of a foreign land by force. Nowadays, the colonial relics that must be undone are societal, economic and often psychological.

Philanthropy operates within and through these residual structures, and its role and immense power is being challenged. Increasingly, those involved in the sector are acknowledging that while philanthropy has...
undoubtedly contributed to the upliftment of communities over many generations, acts of generosity should not absolve the individuals from accountability for undesirable consequences of their actions. But beyond simple accountability lies a further set of trickier questions. How should prominent philanthropists distribute the power that naturally comes with being a wealth creator? What can the philanthropy sector do to deploy financial capital in ways that put social justice and equality at the core? To what extent can local actors influence how philanthropists use their enormous social capital, often a result of individual wealth and/or social class?

While a significant portion of global philanthropy is dedicated to addressing the symptoms of poverty and inequality, decolonising philanthropy must focus on changing the underlying systems of our society. Given the inherent power asymmetry between the funders and ‘beneficiaries’, decolonised philanthropy must focus on breaking the perennially reinforced cycles of hierarchical oppression.

One important power dynamic to tackle is the frequent lack of domain knowledge philanthropic funders possess. There are persistent debates about how much knowledge and experience philanthropists should have of the social issues they are trying to solve before they intervene. Philanthropy initiatives can have long-lasting effects on social practices and social structures in particular areas. All too often, the lack of adequate knowledge about specific communities and an underappreciation (or underutilisation) of community wisdom leads to increased challenges or potentially failed programmes. For example, technology is often thought of as the holy grail for problems in education and many philanthropic organisations fund tech-based solutions. But communities that are not prepared through capacity or infrastructure for large-scale technological advancements are often unable to maintain these programmes, which often leads to termination of support. For a funder, this may be a brief lesson learned before pivoting to a different area, but the impacts of such funding withdrawals can have deep, long-lasting effects on the struggling communities, most particularly students at the heart of the programmes.

The left-over architecture of colonialism
As Edgar Villanueva notes in his book, *Decolonizing Wealth*, and discusses in Peer Dialogue on page 46, philanthropic organisations across the globe perpetuate the
social architecture left behind by colonialism, a trend visible at all levels of the sector. In many instances, funding priorities are donor or founder-centric rather than based on community needs. Furthermore, governing boards for philanthropic foundations and trusts are often completely unrepresentative of the people and communities their activity is meant to serve. A prominent example of this is the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which, from 2006 until recently, famously numbered only Bill Gates, his ex-wife Melinda, the late Bill Gates senior, and Warren Buffet as trustees. Given the foundation’s enormous power and influence, particularly in formerly-colonised nations which rely on their funding to meet public health and poverty eradication benchmarks, this lack of board-level representation of any relevant thematic or geographic area was even more glaring. In 2022, the foundation appointed several new trustees but has still faced warranted global criticism over their decades of unrepresentative governance.

Readers of this special feature will be able to cite innumerable further examples of philanthropic governance structures which may not be fit for purpose. But how can we analyse these problematic governance issues through a decolonial lens? Some may see a lack of governance diversity as a minor concern in light of the vast funding these organisations and individuals provide towards addressing pressing global concerns. But in practice, an unwillingness by philanthropists to transform governance will result in long-term colonial legacies and top-down power structures remaining in place, severely inhibiting the sector’s potential to move beyond reactive, symptomatic support to combat prominent socio-economic challenges.

Systemic challenges require systemic solutions
The inherent power imbalances in philanthropy form one of the longest-standing challenges for the sector. The relationship between a donor who has the money and a receiver who needs the money will always skew toward asymmetry, so how can philanthropists and practitioners tackle this ever-present but often unspoken imbalance? For example, funders frequently have disproportionate sway over the operations of non-profits they fund, which in many cases includes the imposition of stringent reporting requirements and a push to change a non-profit’s practices despite the local organisation having long-term field experience. Though philanthropy is often touted as a promising alternative to ‘mainstream’ institutional aid, in such instances philanthropic actors risk mimicking the harmful colonial practices commonly found in multilateral funding. These prevailing donor-centric models perpetuate a dynamic of ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’, in which the ‘haves’ effectively set the expectations of the relationship, further limiting the potential for systemic change.

A further hindrance to transformational change throughout the sector is the reluctance of some larger donor organisations to rid themselves of colonial practices that preserve the current status quo. A 2021 report commissioned by the Vodafone Foundation revealed the extent of barriers to African civil society organisations being able to secure funding and operate effectively. A key finding was that while certain prominent international philanthropic organisations were prioritising changes towards more localised models, in many cases this involved opening up in-country offices. Rather than generating greater local empowerment and funding distribution, the funder’s head office would distribute to their in-country office, severely limiting the opportunities for long-standing organisations to attract the funder’s support. Moreover, the newly minted in-country offices often poached talented personnel from local organisations that could not match their salaries or benefits. In this way, philanthropic actors can easily find themselves preserving existing power structures and damaging...
hierarchies, whilst believing they have done something transformational. It is crucial therefore for philanthropic organisations to understand that making a model seemingly more representative does not inherently make it decolonial.

To this latter point, we must recognise the growing number of prominent philanthropists from former colonies and the enormous social, economic and political influence they wield. In many instances, these individuals have been practising philanthropy through one-off donations or advocacy for specific social causes but are increasingly encouraged to formalise their giving. One major concern is therefore how new philanthropists create their trusts and foundations, who advises

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them, and what practices they adopt. In most cases, the guidance they receive is from northern counterparts or consultants with an encouragement to model their philanthropy on colonial framings. As a recent report from the Cambridge Centre for Strategic Philanthropy notes, while philanthropists’ intention to alleviate social issues is commendable, it must be acknowledged that truly decoloned philanthropy calls for more than just an increased number of representative non-white philanthropists, if these individuals are potentially recreating harmful practices in their home countries. Philanthropists and philanthropic organisations must support a progressive restructuring of their own operating models, with the goal of bringing about transformative change. This requires an intentional and critical engagement with issues of power and change, a deeper understanding of how wealth is accumulated and an acknowledgement of how colonial systems and mindsets continue to thrive in both implicit and explicit ways.

So what does decolonising philanthropy mean in practice? While there are unfortunately no silver bullets or quick-fix solutions to such an entrenched issue, existing research and the subsequent contributions in this special feature uncover the following ways in which philanthropic practices and donations can be decolonised:

1. **Empower the communities.** Philanthropy should acknowledge its own advantages, privileges and power dynamics, and work alongside the communities and individuals who are closest to the problems. Active solutions involve co-creating philanthropic strategies, with regular inputs and feedback from local organisations and communities, where the focus is on building resilient societies and addressing the power imbalances that have existed for hundreds of years.

2. **Focus on the historically marginalised groups.** Decolonising philanthropy must involve an intersectional lens that takes into account issues of gender, age, caste, religion and ethnicity. Philanthropists should prioritise inclusion of the most vulnerable groups in a particular society, and incorporate them into the strategy and design of all funding initiatives.

3. **Internal diversity and transparency.** Philanthropists and funders can begin the broader decolonising process by looking internally. Are grantees and local communities involved in the funder’s decision-making? If not, creating a space within a foundation’s governance structure for diverse local voices is a crucial first step.

4. **Trust the process without controlling it.** While working towards long-term social transformation through trust, partnership and flexibility is not an easy process, philanthropists can use these opportunities to create collaborative and horizontal relationships with the communities they support – communities that are most affected by social inequities. Investments in building trust with partners will also enable minimising compliance procedures that can often be onerous and costly.

The following contributions to this special feature examine what decolonising philanthropy looks like in practice, using insights from organisations all around the world. Is the needle moving towards the practices highlighted above? What countries and institutions are at the forefront of decolonising philanthropy? What examples are there of decolonising practice by foundations? What forms have these taken, what has the experience been like and how successful have they been? Our special feature examines many of these questions through the lens of diverse stakeholders including philanthropists, funders and grantees, thought leaders, non-profit executives, and philanthropy think-tanks. We hope that these discussions and more prescriptive examples can aid the sector in further advancing this conversation beyond the page and into practice.
Growing decolonisation

At 13,000 feet above sea level, Bolivia’s windswept Altiplano region is a notoriously difficult place to grow crops. That vulnerability also makes it an appealing place for well-intentioned scientists and NGOs to work, testing solutions to help end hunger and save lives in the Andes.

This familiar scenario can miss a key point: the people who have farmed this land for centuries have an intimate understanding of the weather patterns in this corner of the world. They can tell by observing the ways animals are behaving or clouds are spreading across valleys if the growing season is going to be wetter than usual. And they can make informed decisions for their communities and their livelihood, integrating new understandings and practices with their experience.

There’s a question of principle as well as practice at stake here. ‘While the term “decolonising philanthropy” is newer to the field, McKnight has been working for years to embed its equity and inclusion principles into our approach across our programmes and the broader foundation,’ says Kara Inae Carlisle, vice president of programmes at the McKnight Foundation. ‘A prime example is through our global agroecology work that brings together farmers, researchers and scientists in Africa and South America to engage in communities of practice with peers from across the world.’ Foundation president, Tonya Allen, agrees: ‘I think about using McKnight’s resources in a way that is reparative. We strive to create healing in communities where wealth was extracted.’

The foundation’s International Programme supports farmer research networks (FRNs) to promote a more equitable system that gives smallholder farmers and farm communities a voice in our collective future. Since 2013, the foundation has supported 30 farmer research networks ranging in size from 15 to more than 2,000 farmers.

Farmer research networks show us that agriculture, food systems, equity and our planet are intricately connected. When local farmers have a say in the health of their food, water and resources, and share their knowledge, they are a force for global change. They can create healthy, sustainable food systems that feed families, mitigate climate change and improve the livelihoods and resilience of entire communities.

This kind of co-creative, power-sharing work is what decolonisation looks like in action.
Farmer research networks in action

In addition to promoting greater equity, farmer research networks help increase sustainable agroecology practices. These networks bring together farmers, research institutions, development organisations and others to improve agriculture and food systems for all. In a co-created process of sharing and building knowledge, these networks seek ecological solutions tailored to specific regions, considering local farmers’ needs, priorities and wisdom – including those of women and other historically marginalised groups.

For example, in the Altiplano, smallholder farmers collaborate with a researcher in La Paz to identify weather and climate trends using traditional forecasting methods – in this case observing cloud cover – and also analysing data from 16 weather stations across the Altiplano. Farmers share these findings with each other on a WhatsApp group, democratising access to data and analysis.

In Malawi, FRN member Monica Nkweu describes another example of local collaboration. ‘Researchers introduced doubled-up legume interplanting. We also brought in our own Indigenous knowledge – we plant maize with pigeon peas to attract ants. The ants feed on the fall armyworms that attack our maize. This is our own biological control.’

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These relationships among farmers, researchers and NGOs place equal value on science and Indigenous and traditional knowledge. They are also a powerful antidote to the history of the Global North in the Global South, extracting valuable resources and then giving on its own terms. In 2021 we collaborated closely with the Global Alliance for the Future of Food in the release of The Politics of Knowledge: Understanding the evidence for agroecology, regenerative approaches, and indigenous foodways. One of their key findings was that to create equitable, sustainable food systems we need to decolonise and democratise knowledge systems within education, research and innovation.

Enhancing farmers’ ability to access and adapt agroecological innovations and build community also builds power, and can improve their productivity, food security and resilience.

Above: Sorghum hybrid parent seed producer in Mali.
Farmers participate fully in the research process and share ideas and innovations widely throughout their networks.

In the arid Maradi region of Niger, the Women’s Fields project is testing the efficacy of readily available fertilisers, including human urine, and teaching women in other regions how to do the same. In Ecuador and East Africa, farmers are working to manage crop pests without relying on chemical pesticides. Farmers are collaborating with researchers in western Kenya to improve the formula for bokashi, a compost made from food waste, and in Burkina Faso to enhance the productivity of bambara, a groundnut that is an important source of protein. Female farmers in villages in West Africa have successfully tested and selected pearl millet seeds to cross-breed so that they can be grown in areas of low fertility.

The key principles
We found that several key principles were integral to the success of the farmer research networks. First, farmers should come from a diversity of experience and participate in the whole research process. Second, the research should be rigorous, democratised and useful, focused on practical benefits to farmers and their particular contexts. And third, the networks have to be truly collaborative and facilitate learning and knowledge sharing.

One of the greatest challenges to farmer engagement has been the legacy of conventional top-down research and extension practices. Ingrained historical social, cultural and educational norms have perpetuated dynamics that have marginalised farmer agency and knowledge, while favouring that of researchers, professors, scientists and those with formal education and high levels of literacy in a dominant (colonial) language. Farmers had been taking advice from various types of external advisers for years and often lacked the social legitimacy, personal confidence and skills to engage as equals. To shift these dynamics, researchers and farmers alike had to be willing and able to engage in new types of relations. Many FRNs intentionally chose researchers who were committed to participatory processes to try to build more horizontal relationships among equals.

‘This kind of co-creative, power-sharing work is what decolonisation looks like in action,’ says Kara Inae Carlisle. ‘It’s not easy, and it takes a commitment to nurturing authentic relationships over time.’

The FRN experience has taught us that it is possible for funders to initiate, support and participate in a successful community of practice comprising its grantees. Long-term investments in convenings and facilitation is important for building trust and establishing working relationships. Funders must also be prepared to relinquish some control over outcomes, because by design these communities of practice create collaborative and horizontal relationships, where local practitioners have a seat at the table and can take turns leading. Of utmost importance is a commitment to listening, learning and adaptation and a dedication to shifting colonial structures and mindsets.

‘Addressing historical political and social systems that are compounded by racism, colonialism and patriarchy is daunting and overwhelming – especially if you work at a foundation and you just want to do some good,’ says Tonya Allen. ‘But we have to put in the work. Inequity must be addressed with radical love, and we must combine radical love with knowledge, authentic relationships, change leadership, power and persistence.’

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Inflation is rising at its fastest rate in decades. Around the world, economies of all sizes are reporting a cost of living rise not seen for generations.

The reasons behind this are varied however it is unlikely to subside quickly, so investors need to be alert to the ongoing challenge long term inflation may bring.

What’s happening?
As economies reopened after Covid-19 vaccination programmes, supply chains struggled to meet demand, pushing prices higher.

Many initially believed this would subside quickly: economies often experience a spike in inflation after a recessionary or crisis period as conditions return to ‘normal’. However, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and subsequent international sanctions have caused further disruption to supplies of some food products and, most notably, oil and gas.

The longer hostilities continue, the more likely it is that we could experience a longer period of high inflation, or even ‘stagflation’ – an unsavoury combination of low or no economic growth and high inflation.

Mercer’s 2022 Global Not-for-Profit Investment Survey found that inflation is the second biggest concern among global not-for-profit (NFP) investors, cited by 50% of respondents.

Achieving an inflation-plus target is going to be difficult in 2022, and potentially over the next couple of years. While you may have a long-term investment horizon, it is still important to review strategic objectives and spending assumptions over the coming years as thoroughly as possible.

These three steps can potentially help enhance your investment portfolio and seek to protect against long term sustained higher inflation.

1. Reconfirm your investment strategy and spending objectives
If your strategic objectives are linked to inflation, take time to review them and any related spending assumptions to make sure they are still viable. You could model the impacts of spending changes on your portfolio, and consider whether these can be adjusted. It might also be appropriate to put spending under more frequent review.

While inflation should eventually return to lower levels, it could be helpful to test how viable your current objectives are if inflation remains higher for a longer period. Similarly, scenario analysis exercises can indicate how your portfolio may perform in different environments and what effects any changes may have.

2. Understand your inflation exposures and how to improve resilience
Knowing what’s in your portfolio and how it will behave will help you plan. You could consider adding new asset classes to increase diversification and add inflation sensitivity.

Our NFP survey found that 61% of respondents were considering adding private markets over the next two years. The survey also determined that asset classes such as real estate and infrastructure can provide diversification and inflation sensitivity.

Depending on your governance budget, multi-asset strategies may be the best way to access these options.

3. Engage with your investment managers and advisors
This year has been extremely testing for many managers and it is important to understand why. Analysing performance drivers will help you look through short-term downturns to longer-term objectives. Engage with and challenge asset managers to ensure you’re confident they can navigate this landscape.

Consider reviewing your governance structure to ensure it is skilled and sufficiently resourced to maintain regular oversight of investment providers. An investment sub-committee could help this, as could enlisting the support of a third party.

Outsourcing investment oversight or an ‘extension of staff’ engagement model can be a useful strategy. It can help an organisation to maintain detailed oversight of providers, can enable access to quality managers or new asset classes and also help you potentially reduce overall costs through lower costs or fees.

If you would like to discuss how we can help you review your portfolio in the current market environment please contact us at MercerInvestmentSolutions@mercer.com or Amit.Popat@mercer.com

To read the full paper visit www.mercer.com/not-for-profit.

Amit Popat
Head of Not for Profit, Europe and IMETA
In Profile

Decolonising philanthropy

Below is a snapshot of some of the organisations globally which are working to provide a practical context to decolonising philanthropy.

Decolonizing Wealth Project

Founded by Edgar Villanueva, author of Decolonizing Wealth: Indigenous wisdom to heal divides and restore balance, the mission of the Decolonizing Wealth Project (DWP) is to disrupt the flow of capital through education, radical reparative giving and narrative change (see Peer Dialogue on page 46). The project aims to build a world where racial equity is the norm and new systems ensure everyone can live their best lives, thrive in their cultures, and bring about healing from generations of colonial trauma. It works in three main ways:

First, shifting philanthropic giving practices: DWP advises funders and philanthropists on how to equitably redistribute wealth, and through their funding vehicle Liberated Capital (see below), move money through a reparative model. Second, healing and education: DWP creates and facilitates decolonised resources, tools and spaces that promote personal and organisational transformation, and healing to advance diversity, equity and inclusion. Third, narrative change: DWP uses the power of storytelling traditions to bring visibility and change to issues affecting Black and Indigenous communities, engaging global brands and international publications.

decolonizingwealth.com

Liberated Capital

A donor community and funding vehicle aimed at moving resources to Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) communities which have historically been marginalised by philanthropy and other forms of investment. Liberated Capital grantee partners are BIPOC-led initiatives working for transformative social change. Grants are offered monthly to support these organisations with unrestricted funds to support general operating costs, on a trust basis.

tinyurl.com/dwp-liberated-capital

InteRoots

InteRoots is based on the idea that ‘a community knows best what it needs, what it already has, and the challenges that must be overcome to bring about lasting change’. It connects local initiatives with resources they identify as critical for success, and funders with the opportunity to invest in communities not connected to traditional philanthropic structures. It offers project planning support, fundraising, project workshopping, facilitation of access to targeted resources, and donor consultancy and engagement. Its goal is to work with projects and supporters to develop sustainable, community-run enterprises.

interoots.org

Liberation

Funded by its supporters, Liberation began life in 1954 as the Movement for Colonial Freedom. Following a name change in 1970, it opposes neo-colonialism, economic exploitation and racism, including military aggression by the great powers. It also opposes economic warfare through blockades and sanctions, along with the economic exploitation of the developing world by multinational corporations. It champions the rights of asylum seekers, migrant workers and other minorities facing racist discrimination and opposes detention without charge and other attacks on human rights imposed in the name of fighting terrorism.

liberationorg.co.uk
Calala Fondo de Mujeres

(Alala Women’s Fund)
A fund based in Spain with a remit including Central America and founded in 2009 to support and promote women’s rights. Among its campaigns and areas of interest are the rights of Latin American women migrants in Spain to encourage their involvement in feminist movements, to make their voices heard to institutions, strengthen their struggle against racism, and support and participate in the networks they create so that women migrants can have the kind of living conditions everyone has a right to demand.

tinyurl.com/calala-womens-fund

Cultural Survival

Cultural Survival and the Indigenizing Philanthropy Series
Cultural Survival supports Indigenous peoples to advocate for their rights – human rights, the right to participate and have a voice, the right to practice their cultures and speak their languages, the right to access the same opportunities as others, and the right to control and sustainably manage their assets and resources. The Indigenizing Philanthropy Series is a five-part article series accompanied with a webinar and toolkit to provide a framework on how to transform and indigenise philanthropy. The authors aim to shed light on how philanthropy can take a serious, introspective look at its colonial roots and take authentic actions to remedy its future.

culturalsurvival.org

Equality Labs

Equality Labs is a Dalit civil rights organisation dedicated to ending caste apartheid, gender-based violence, Islamophobia, white supremacy and religious intolerance. Using community research, political base-building, culture-shifting art and digital security, Equality Labs centres the leadership of South Asian caste-oppressed, queer and religious minority communities in the ongoing redefinition of South Asian identity in the US, across the diaspora, and in home countries.

equalitylabs.org

The West Yorkshire Racial Justice Network brings together individuals, communities and organisations from across this region of the UK to promote racial justice and undertake and encourage ‘holistic economic spiritual and cultural repairs to end racial injustice and address legacies of colonialism’. Activities include what it calls pastoral work (one-on-one support to strategise and move ideas and challenges to action). A recent example is working with the Sanfoka Africa study group, an educational community seeking to empower people by redistributing knowledge of African history.

racialjusticenetwork.co.uk

The Baring Foundation
The Baring Foundation will be committing a minimum of £3 million of new funding over the next five years to support a focus on racial justice in its grantmaking. Additionally, Baring’s International Development Programme which focuses on the rights of LGBTI people especially women in Africa, will actively consider the legacy of colonialism as part of a strategic review. In a blog post on the foundation’s website, Baring chair, Lucy De Groot writes: ‘We recognise the systemic nature of racism in the UK and its connection to colonialism and slavery. The foundation cannot ignore the impact of this on our own work, culture and practices.’

tinyurl.com/baring-programme

Dismantling Racism Works (drworks) is a web-based workbook and other resources developed by a group of trainers, educators and organisers. The workbook of the same name as the site is at the heart of these resources and takes users through definitions of racism, the history of the race construct and the assumptions underlying it.

dismantlingracism.org

Colonial Countryside

Funded by the UK’s National Heritage Lottery Fund and the Arts Council England, Colonial Countryside is a child-led writing and history project working with 100 primary school pupils, 16 historians and 10 commissioned writers to explore the African, Caribbean and Indian connections at 11 properties of the National Trust. For example, the owners of the properties may have been plantation owners, colonial administrators, or investors in slave-ships. The project will result in an illustrated book of short stories and poems, to be accompanied by accessible historical commentaries.

tinyurl.com/national-trust-project
Peer dialogue

Stepping into a new kind of power

Renowned author, philanthropy expert and principal of Decolonizing Wealth Project and Liberated Capital, Edgar Villanueva explains to guest editors Shonali Banerjee and Urvi Shriram* why truth, reconciliation and repair are key concepts in decolonising philanthropy

Shonali Banerjee: There is sometimes a disconnect between the conceptual debate and what decolonising philanthropy means in practice. How can we see on the ground what changes can be made?

Edgar Villanueva: Decolonising philanthropy for me has both an intellectual and an emotional aspect, which is something that is often missing from conversations around equity. I think there are ready-to-go things we can use to begin the process of decolonisation, then there are longer-term, more difficult things. We put out a journal last year called Money as Medicine to support funders thinking about how to decolonise wealth, taking seven steps to healing and applying those steps in family, community and at work. So it can seem complicated, but it’s also as simple as holding the mirror up and examining how colonial dynamics might be at play in your work. The second thing is to make space for those conversations and when you actually make that space, it becomes easy to see opportunities for movement. Decolonisation may feel radical but I don’t think it is. When you get into the work, it becomes an obvious, necessary step, it’s something we must do. I think this is modern philanthropy at its best and I encourage all funders to engage in the practice. When we are moving resources to community, there’s a lot involved and to do it without analysis or thought around how we might be perpetuating harm is philanthropic malpractice.
SB: Decolonisation can be seen as very political and philanthropic organisations feel reluctant to tackle it head-on because they see it as a fire-starter rather than, as you said, the bedrock of modern philanthropy. From your experience, how do we get the needle moving among people who have the best intentions, but might not be ready to call it decolonising philanthropy out loud?

EV: For me, it’s remembering what philanthropy is all about. In the professionalisation of philanthropy, we have lost the deepest meaning of the word, which is love of mankind. If we embody that and we want to help people, we need a holistic understanding of, and response to, the entire history of those people. When you think about equity, there’s low-hanging fruit – diversity in our governance, our staff and leadership, and in the beneficiaries of the funds. And we all should be thinking about our investments. This is really just standard operating practice. The colonisation of philanthropy goes a bit deeper, and what could be a little frightening for some folks to talk about, is the idea of ownership and understanding power. These are conversations we have to have within philanthropy if we want to have an impact. Beyond diversity, we have to think about relationship. Colonisation was a major breakdown in a relationship and decolonisation should be exciting because it creates an opportunity for us to examine the historical relationship we’ve had with communities, take ownership for how we’ve fallen short, and think about repairing those relationships so community is an authentic place of reciprocity.

It creates an opportunity for us to examine the historical relationship we’ve had with communities, take ownership for how we’ve fallen short, and think about repairing those relationships so community is an authentic place of reciprocity.


Left: DWP is a member of the Global Circle of Reparations and Healing, which in August held a summit meeting in Accra, Ghana.
SB: That’s an eloquent way of phrasing something that is often difficult to articulate. We have contributors to this special feature from all over the world, particularly in global growth markets – Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia. When it comes to decolonising philanthropy, there are clear power shifts needed where funding comes from northern donors. But there are also local philanthropists emerging in these markets who sometimes don’t realise that they have a role to play in decolonising philanthropy, yet are often imposing relics of colonial thinking on their own philanthropy. Do you have any thoughts on that?

EV: In my writing, I often say colonisation is like a virus, and this was before the pandemic and we all know too well now how quickly viruses spread and how pervasive they are. People of colour are not immune to this virus. In philanthropy, there’s so much concentrated power and folks who might hold that power can internalise the oppression that they may have experienced or that they’ve seen modelled, and it’s very easy for us to replicate those practices. I talk in my book about the challenges I’ve faced with leadership in philanthropy and some of the places I worked were actually led by people of colour. So we all need to be engaged in healing because colonisation finds its way into every sector everywhere. Often the beauty of diversity is that many of us come from cultural practices of giving and of being in a community but these have not been appreciated in mainstream philanthropy. As a Native American, I had to leave my worldview at the door and assimilate to a very different view of money and giving. After struggling with that for 20 years, it finally occurred to me that the best way to do this work was to tap into my Indigenous worldview. There’s an opportunity for us all to think back to the ways that our love and support have been passed down. We can bring that to our philanthropy. That’s really what decolonisation is all about. It’s not pushing aside or unlearning colonial ways of being, it’s going back to pre-colonial times and understanding and appreciating the cultures that are in our DNA. That’s not only going to make you a better philanthropist, it’s going to make you a better person.

SB: I think that’s such a crucial point. In our research at the Cambridge Centre in different global growth markets, and I’m sure in Urvi’s research as well, we see that philanthropy is not a new concept; it has been around for centuries and it stems, as you were saying, from cultural and religious values. One of the things that is a priority for both Urvi and me is this intergenerational wealth transfer. This younger generation has different education, different approaches. Do you think they can play a catalytic role in decolonising philanthropy?

EV: I have worked with very dynamic young people who make me feel excited about the future. My experience with next-gen philanthropists is that there is a clear analysis around intersectionality and what’s needed,
and an urgency and a willingness to take risks. Willingness to change – in equity work, diversity work, decolonisation, however you want to think about it – is really about change management, so those sorts of orientation are helpful. I don’t want to write off the older generation. I have been in many conversations with first generation wealth holders who’ve been eager to change; I was in a meeting yesterday and there was a sense of almost an apology needed to the younger generation because they have inherited a mess. I’ve seen older people having an awakening and wanting to say what they were doing for a long time wasn’t working. So I’m inspired by the younger generation, who in many ways are better equipped, and we must trust them. We must relinquish power to them because they will be leading us into the future, but I’m also inspired by the older generation who show that it is possible to change position and get behind a more progressive agenda, understanding that the problems that young people are having to face now are complex and that they’ve contributed to them.

SB: Absolutely. Something else I’m fascinated about is the intersection between the decolonising philanthropy dialogue and the practice, and trust-based philanthropy, which has really taken off in the last year or two. Where do you think the concept of trust falls in the decolonising space?

EV: There’s a deep connection between the two frameworks. Going back to our earlier point around relationships, trust is essential to a healthy relationship. A lot of trust-based philanthropy is focused on the donor and their practices, which we absolutely talk about but one core element of decolonisation which goes a bit deeper is truth, reconciliation and repair. I don’t want to diminish the powerful effects that trust-based philanthropy has but what I’ve experienced with a lot of institutions we’ve worked with who want to begin trust-based practice is they often neglect this critical element. If you want to build trust, you need to examine the past, take ownership of the wrongs you’ve committed and think about repair. It’s no different from a relationship between two people. If I harm a friend or a partner and I refuse to acknowledge that and just show up with flowers and say, ‘from here on out, we are going to trust each other’, I promise you, there’s not going to be trust.

The fact that only 8 per cent of grant funding has gone explicitly to community organisations led by people of colour working in communities of colour is a gross mistake. We must acknowledge that we have perpetrated white supremacy in lots of ways: by not being diverse, by not adequately resourcing organisations and communities of colour, by using our endowments in ways that have been harmful, adopting practices that have been extractive and colonial. When we take ownership and we say we’re sorry for that, we can move to a place of repair and on the other side of that repair, true trust is going to come. We’re going to release criteria for reparative philanthropy with examples of many funders that we’ve worked with who have engaged in that work to demonstrate its impact and its importance.

Urvi Shriram: There is so much overlap between a lot of these frameworks – trust-based philanthropy, decolonising, proximate philanthropy, philanthropy for social justice. Essentially, it boils down to giving the power to the people who are closest to the problems and letting them advocate for themselves. How do you change the dialogue and merge these different narratives into one?

EV: I talk about effective modern philanthropy in terms of redistribution because it offers an opportunity to give up power. I’m hard pressed to find a philanthropist who has completely given up their power and we need to help people imagine what that’s like. We set up Liberated Capital, a reparations-based fund and the requirement is that you give up all of your power. You don’t get to tell us where to put the money, you don’t get to select the grantees, all those decisions are made by community. It’s called Liberated Capital because we are liberating the community to define for themselves what is needed, and to advocate for themselves, but also liberating the philanthropists in ways they may not understand until they give up that power. The 500 donors at Liberated Capital can focus on learning. We hold healing ceremonies with them, we equip them to support and engage their family members in conversations about race, power and wealth. They are becoming a tremendous asset to this movement around equity and racial justice. We’re not taking power, we are shifting it to the community and inviting them to step into a new kind of power.

*Unfortunately Urvi Shriram was suffering from Covid-19 at the time of the interview and takes only a limited part.
Global View

Community-driven solutions to the colonial mindset

The key to decolonising philanthropy is to build authentic partnerships with communities

At Forbes Marshall, since the late 1960s – from the time of the foundation of our factories – we have lived the philosophy of being a meaningful contributing member of the society and community we are part of. Our Theory of Change further emphasises our overarching goal: to foster equity, inclusion and well-being by catalysing resources and building meaningful partnerships. We do this in two ways, by increased awareness, access and agency among the communities we work with and by fostering growth in just and equitable action, leading to positive and sustainable systemic change in the social sector.

Our approach is to work together with local stakeholders to understand the needs and challenges they themselves articulate. Together, we look at how a particular intervention will enhance the quality of lives in small or other ways; how impact will be understood, what have been challenges in the past, whether the intervention is innovative, whether local leadership will play a key role in making change happen; and finally and importantly, the factors that will help the intervention be a sustainable one.

One example of how we have helped catalyse community-driven solutions is our long-term support to Teach for India’s social entrepreneurship incubation programme, which supports local leaders working in education in remote areas of the country. Ganesh Birajdar, for example, who founded Learning Companions wanted to enable children of the Bharwad community (a nomadic tribe in Maharashtra, whose migration causes their children to have unstable or no education) to access quality educational inputs.

How we work
Our support is typically twofold – we support programmatic costs for three years and we provide support to internal organisation capacity-building, based on needs articulated by the founder.
or organisational team. More often than not, we have found that this approach allows the organisation to find other supporters, as well as helping to scale their work and approach.

One of the key lessons we have learned is the importance of listening to voices on the ground. They know best what are the optimum solutions to make positive change happen for themselves; our role needs to be to support them and provide them with a voice. Building trust and providing platforms for transparent and clear communication are key enablers in helping objectives see the light of day. Through working in this way, we have also realised the significance of the expression ‘decolonising philanthropy’.

**The real significance of decolonisation**

India, of course, has a long history of British colonialism but as other articles in this special feature have argued, colonial practices don’t cease when the colonisers relinquish political control. We have come to realise that decolonising philanthropy does not simply mean moving away from models of traditional charitable giving introduced by the British in India, but moving away from patriarchal forms of giving which really enforce existing status and which can occur within democracies that have long outgrown political colonialism.

Critical to the decolonising approach is the strengthening of organisations and this realisation, combined with obvious need, has also conditioned our response to recent developments. During the pandemic, the resilience of the whole world was tested and unfortunately the social sector was severely hit. NGOs, especially small to mid-sized ones, struggled with basic issues like funding, paying salaries to their team, retaining space for their offices which all directly or indirectly affected the causes they were serving. It was a pivotal moment in which we realised the importance of strengthening organisations internally. Hence was born our key focus area: building the resilience of the social sector. Here, we support cohorts, fellowships, leadership development interventions and overall capacity-building programmes for NGOs, in order to help build their internal processes. We also provide small amounts of unrestricted funding to NGOs.

Building trust and providing platforms for transparent and clear communication are key enablers in helping objectives see the light of day.

Over the last three years, too, we have tried to implement sustainable social change through our shared value approach, through which we address both business needs and community aspirations simultaneously. We have had several requests to support young engineers from economically vulnerable families, especially from semi-rural areas, enhance their skills and find jobs. We had conversations internally to understand where there were gaps and challenges in our own business. One such is where we have maintenance obligations but the installation is remote and our teams could not travel easily. Partnering with local NGOs, we have identified and trained batches of engineers located in different parts of the country, particularly where we have large installed sites. To date, 96 per cent of the engineers are employed with contractors or have become entrepreneurs.

Finally, a decolonial approach must not simply palliate the status quo in unequal societies – in other words, in virtually all present-day societies. A recent community-need-driven initiative has been the Social Compact aspiring to ensure greater dignity and equity for one million informal workers, working with ecosystems of companies across the country. In India, longer term social security and health benefits do not exist for most informal and daily wage workers. The pandemic brought the gravity of the situation starkly to the fore – key outcomes we are now working towards are dignified living wages for all and ensuring safety and health benefits are accessible, irrespective of the nature of employment. A mobile facilitation centre has been set up in partnership with another company, enhancing awareness among migrants and daily wage workers on government schemes and helping them access them; including supporting them on wage redress issues.

Learning Companions

Above and left: The Forbes Foundation-supported Learning Companions Initiative works to improve the learning experiences of children in India.
Still waiting to see the human face

Despite political and economic change in South Africa, philanthropy is yet to play its full part in the creation of a new, decolonised, order

In 1978, Black Consciousness leader and anti-Apartheid activist Steve Biko spoke of his dream to: ‘In time... be in a position to bestow on South Africa the greatest possible gift - a more human face.’ There’s still a long way to go to truly realise this. Despite shifts in the circumstances of many, including a growing and increasingly affluent Black middle class, for the majority of Black people, material change remains elusive. Similarly, we are yet to realise the ambition to provide the world with an alternative to entrenched views and practice. The philanthropic sector in South Africa, where we might expect to see more visible signs of a ‘more human face’, is little different from the rest of the world.

Colonialism is essentially a process of centralising power and agency and relegating all else to the periphery. The centre accumulates the resources – of all kinds – of the periphery, processes them and redistributes them to the periphery to be consumed in the form the centre decrees. Systems of colonialism are enforced through the overt use of coercive power – physical, social and psychological.

A new order
The project of decolonisation is not simply to replace the centre with the periphery, rather, it is to create a new and different order, built on an alternative ideology that forces us to recognise each other’s humanity and our own interdependence.

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been unable to give a ‘more human face’ to philanthropy. Instead of seizing the opportunity to make philanthropy redundant through their business practice, for example, by translating profit into fair wages for workers or adopting business practices that minimise social and environmental harm, Black philanthropists adopt the common maxim that we should be ‘accumulating now and distributing (a small proportion) later’.

A deficit model
A deficit model persists, where many practitioners believe that their interventions are critical to creating change. Nothing could be further from the truth. Communities of people come together all the time in response to issues that are important to them, whether donors are involved or not. People are not sitting waiting for saviours; they are making plans, building strategies and acting together to address what they perceive as injustices, and it is critical that the work of philanthropy support these actions and strategies directly.

That is not to say that practitioners must blindly acquiesce in the demands of community. They have a responsibility to engage critically with the thoughts and ideas put forward by the community, but also to remember that they are outsiders. They may offer a new and different perspective, but not necessarily one their partners will agree to. Ultimately, choosing a course of action, arrived at through respectful consultation, is the mandate of those facing the challenge directly.

Three realisations
In order to practice in a different and hopefully more effective manner, philanthropic practitioners need to look again at their beliefs and adapt their practice to be true to the call to decolonise philanthropy. The first, and most important realisation that practitioners must have is that their decisions and actions have consequences for broader society of which they are members.

A second critical realisation is that while they may control some material resources, the knowledge, praxis, access and trust relationships that enable change sit with others. They have to make an explicit commitment to learn from and work together with others more skilled and knowledgeable than they are. Linked to this is the idea that change happens with or without them and that their role in creating change is that of supporter and enabler.

The third realisation is that the resources they control give them immense power, a power that must be acknowledged and managed. It cannot be ignored. Practitioners must take responsibility for the power they hold and use it with discernment.

These realisations are valueless if we do not translate them into the following practical actions. First, spend time building trust, listening and understanding what people want prior to establishing the funding relationship. Good programmes are built on trust, open relationships and critical engagement between partners. Second, fund experimentally with the intention of allowing people engaged in action to learn and develop their ideas. Come to terms with the idea that project failure is critical to future successes and that there is no substitute for experiential learning. Third, fund people not programmes. Recognise that the largest cost any organisation will have to cover is time. People need the time to think, reflect, act and learn to implement effective programmes. Finally, simplify compliance. It takes time and in an environment of high trust, compliance procedures can be minimised.

It is through these actions that we might start to see the realisation of Biko’s dream, and a truly decolonised, alternative philanthropy practice.

Left: Steve Biko’s dream is still to be truly realised.
The transition from colonial to nationalistic

India got its freedom from British colonial rule in 1947. Since then, the country has been striving for the well-being of its people through various welfare schemes and social sector initiatives. As it marks its 75th year of independence, the country strives to be self-sufficient in all aspects of human life by reducing its multilateral and bilateral reliance and encouraging wealth redistribution mechanisms from within. Measures such as promoting Atma Nirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India), mandating corporate social responsibility contributions from Indian industry and encouraging civil society to raise domestic funds are all initiatives to make the country more self-sustaining.

For centuries, India has had a rich culture of informal giving for religious or spiritual causes and for community development. The 19th century saw the emergence of more organised forms of philanthropy, with increases in wealth that came about with industrialisation, followed in the 20th century by a rise in the number of local community organisations tackling poverty and increases in donations by wealthy families. Many trusts and family foundations were established which have contributed tremendously through the institutions they created. But it was not until the 1980s that a rights-based approach started emerging in India. This approach challenges the colonial mindset to philanthropy. It focusses on community-driven solutions that empower people by building their capacities, by realising their rights and by strengthening civil society through meaningful partnerships.

Domestic philanthropy

Through trusts and foundations, family philanthropists (UNWIs and HNIs) and a large number of small retail givers now contribute in a big way to supporting the government in addressing India’s developmental challenges.

India-based domestic philanthropy has a huge potential to transform the social sector in the country and create an equitable, just society by challenging age-old structures and norms. Several philanthropists, along with giving financial resources, are also working on building the institutional capacity of non-profits they support, on building long-term partnerships, providing risk capital to encourage innovation and on embracing practices that encourage community-driven solutions. They are gradually moving away from the traditional mindset of charitable giving to taking a more systemic approach to philanthropy.

The role of CSR

Since 2013, with India becoming the first country to legally mandate corporate social responsibility (CSR), CSR funding has steadily grown both in absolute terms and in its contribution to overall private giving, which, according to Bain & Co increased from 12 per cent in 2015 to 23 per cent in 2021. This has been a very significant move away from traditional models of charitable giving to a more sustained approach to ensure the contributions to the social sector from Indian industry. India like many other countries is facing a huge financial gap to achieve its Sustainable Development Goals and all hands on deck are required to address this gap.

A crucial part in transforming the mental map of communities and nations – and hence in inculcating a decolonial mindset – is played by education. The SRF Foundation, formerly known as the Society for Education and Welfare, was set up in 1982 as the CSR arm of SRF Ltd, a leading multi-business entity
engaged in textiles, chemicals, packaging films and engineering plastics. Drawing inspiration from its founders, the late Sir Shri Ram and the late Dr Bharat Ram, who believed in contributing to society through education, SRF Foundation is dedicated to the transformation of education in the country. Sir Shri Ram had set up the Shri Ram College of Commerce (SRCC) in 1926 and established one of India’s few all-women colleges, the Lady Shri Ram College for Women (LSR), in 1956, at a time when society did not afford women the freedom to pursue their own dreams.

He was among the earliest industrialists in the country who could foresee the usefulness of an organised approach by the country’s business community. He left no stone unturned in helping to realise the dreams of independent India by the setting up of new lines of industrial units, establishing institutions that still play a key role in the growth of modern India.

Born out of the vision of its founder, Padma Shri, the late Mrs Manju Bharat Ram, the Shri Ram Schools were established in Delhi NCR in 1988. They run under the aegis of SRF Foundation and promote a system of progressive and inclusive education in the country. The foundation believes in working with communities and partners in meaningful ways that lead to sustainable positive change in the country. It works as an implementing agency for the parent company SRF Ltd, as well as for partners, channelling its energy into removing the inequalities in society by working collaboratively with government schools, headmasters, teachers, parents, students and other involved agencies. SRF Foundation also works in the areas of preventive healthcare, natural resource management and affirmative action on a sustainable basis.

This has been SRF’s humble way of contributing to causes that are important to our society and vital in a democracy that has long outgrown political colonial influence. The hope is that this trend towards a nationalistic and decolonial approach in philanthropy only intensifies in the future.

India-based domestic philanthropy has a huge potential to transform the social sector in the country and create an equitable, just society by challenging age-old structures and norms.

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Is decolonising philanthropy making headway?

The colonial mentality has infected the practice of philanthropy in Brazil, but there are transformative ways to overcome it.

Philanthropy has traditionally been framed around a colonialist extractive rationale. Coloniality of power is a term coined by Aníbal Quijano to characterise the typical pattern of global domination in the modern capitalist system, the origin of which lies in the European colonialism of the early 16th century. Throughout the colonial process, Europe adopted the pretension that it was a centre of civilisation, more advanced in the development process not only of politics and economics but also of the human species itself.

According to Quijano, this is also experienced in the domination ‘of the models of control of subjectivity, culture and especially in the production of knowledge’. Quijano identifies the following as the most important elements of Eurocentrism: a) a particular articulation of dualism (precapitalist/capitalistic, non-European/European, primitive/civilised, traditional/modern etc) and a linear, one-directional evolution from a state of nature to modern European society; b) the rationalisation of the cultural differences between human groups by means of the idea of race; and c) the distorted-temporal view of all those differences by seeing non-Europeans and their culture as anachronisms.

The colonial mentality in philanthropy
This Eurocentric and colonising view is expressed in hegemonic philanthropy in different ways. Firstly, there is an enormous disconnect between those who make decisions on funding and those who receive donations/grants. Normally, people living in countries and conditions that are a far cry from those they are intervening in, make decisions on agendas, suitable budgets, best solutions and priorities for movements and local communities. In general, these decision-makers do not represent or reflect the communities they intend to support in terms of either race, class or gender.

Philsanthropic coloniality is also extractive in that local organisations and community leaders are obliged to share their strategies, knowledge, detailed profiles of their members and quarterly, six-monthly and/or...
annual reports on their actions. Conversely, there is little transparency about how much money is being donated or donors’ strategies and criteria. Sometimes it is not even known who the donors are.

All this is an expression of a hegemonic philanthropy that aims to determine which local agendas are relevant, which movements deserve support, which solutions are the best ones and how they should be reported on. Furthermore, there is a constant production of dualities and consequently of inequalities: between us, the funders and those who are receiving funding; between us, the citizens of democratic constitutional states, and those who are defending rights in developing countries or countries with dubious democracies; between us, who know the best questions to ask and who report properly, and the people receiving funding who need better training.

The case of Brazil
Brazilian philanthropy has felt the impact of coloniality. There are clear signs of this in the concepts, practices and forms of activity in the field. According to the GIFE Census, one of the principal studies on Brazilian philanthropy, corporate and family philanthropy have mobilised a significant amount of funding. In 2020, for example, approximately $1.4 billion was invested in the social field. However, the research shows that Brazilian philanthropy is more a doer than a donor to civil society. Only 16 per cent of social investors are funders who give resources to third parties. The majority operate their own programmes. In addition, GIFE’s data also shows that political minorities are not the priority, given that only 5 per cent of the philanthropic organisations affiliated to GIFE directly fund initiatives focused on the issue of race; 9 per cent on women; 3 per cent on LGBTIQA+ communities and 4 per cent on disabled people.

The fundamental starting point for moving towards promoting decolonised capital in the field of Brazilian philanthropy is that it must be seen as a movement of permanent deconstruction and as a way of working in the social reality, without the imposition of ‘top-down’ solutions, by strengthening voices and acknowledging the power of communities in seeking their own solutions to the problems they face. Increasingly, the practice of trust-based grantmaking has been showing a way to work strategically towards recognising the power of territorial initiatives and of political minorities struggling to access rights. Theme-based community funds and community foundations, that are members of the Brazilian Philanthropy Network for Social Justice – who work in the field of local independent philanthropy – have been providing crucial grantmaking to NGOs, grassroots organisations, social movements and rights defenders in Brazil.

Breaking away from the legacy of colonialism
In this way, the network’s members seek to carry out a different kind of philanthropy. Grantmaking to grassroots communities means that the focus is on acknowledging the strengths of civil society organisations, thus contributing to bringing about transformations at many levels. The crux of the work lies in strengthening civil society organisations working on access to citizenship rights and the recognition of political minorities. As such, it is breaking away from the structures and understanding that are the legacy of colonisation.

The process of decolonisation is concentrated on disconnecting from the colonial, extractive and exploitative characteristics of the past. It involves radical transformation rooted in new alliances between territories and social actors, with no room for a return to the former state of conformity with material, symbolic colonial power. A truly decolonised philanthropy must seek no less than this.
Home-grown philanthropy models wanted

Decolonising attitudes towards philanthropy needs more than a change of practitioner. It needs a thoroughgoing change of practice.

Philanthropy in the Middle East has grown against a backdrop of institutionalised humanitarian aid in chronic conflict zones with deep-rooted needs. This aid, largely driven by northern models of donor-led decision-making, has crowded out risk appetite, innovation and the ownership of communities, citizens and even governments.

For many corporate sustainability initiatives, it is considered less risky to blindly give away a percentage of profits to an international aid agency, while government development funds and private philanthropic organisations see it as more innovative to adopt a framework used by an international non-for-profits, than to invest in grounded – and less costly – local models. It is easier to let our regional problems be resolved by institutions with far greater brand power and budgets, than by the shy capital of a single visionary or a humble crowdfunded effort among friends. Strikingly, whilst billions of dollars (for unfortunately, we must speak in metaphorical terms due to the dearth of data and transparency) have been spent in the Middle East, we have little high quality and public literature, reporting, and data sets to show for it.

It is from this poor track record that strategic philanthropy and social investments in the Middle East must deliver not only positive change, but also mindset transformation.
Establishing a Research & Development unit at The Zovighian Partnership became a clear pre-requisite for our family-owned social investments platform to initiate strategic and crisis response efforts. Our highly participatory research brings diverse local voices together to design localised governance and decision-making in environments where only they can be considered the true experts.

Empowering benefactors and constituents enables trust-based data collection and analysis. Research becomes more than just a means to serve as students of community wisdom. It becomes the entry point to building long-term social capital and re-building trust. The return on investment is immeasurable.

To enter a new environment research first requires a deep mindfulness and awareness. As researchers, we work and re-work our sense of self. We consider as a team what we think we know, what we think we do not know, and start to question what are the blind spots that can create risks. We also question and re-question our roles as co-researchers, co-operators, co-reporters, and co-auditors of our interventions. It is hard to challenge the received wisdom of North-based research methods that state that best practice is when a researcher stays neutral, distant and clinical. True, we should not impose, but how can we collect deep data if we are not invested in building trust and a deep sense of responsibility towards our constituents? We ensure we annihilate any researcher-led and funding-led power dynamics and expectations that we might unknowingly be bringing with us when we go on the ground.

With a young and agile R&D team that has never got used to doing things on repeat and regurgitate mode, we work with the communities we are serving to map out their own power dynamics as well as ours. This ensures that we do not reinforce soft and hard power that might affect who we collect data from and what type of data we collect. Our participant recruitment strategies are responsive, regularly tested, and deeply inclusive to ensure that no one falls through the cracks. We care for the outliers, for they might speak a truth that the average or majority would never be able to voice. With communities as co-decision-makers, we build in an openness for the questions we do not know we need to be asking. Our methods allow us to unlock the most critical data surprises. Those are the moments when we see most clearly and agonisingly most humanitarian and philanthropic interventions were bound to fail.

Human-centred research that is community-led transforms hard social investment decisions into very clear plans of action. This makes deep community research the centrepiece of any authentic and effective local governance system. Only with high quality and heartfelt evidence can we ensure that the wisdom of communities drives the programmes, intervention priorities and funding agendas of our philanthropy and humanitarian service.

What shocks us every time is learning that these community members have never been meaningfully consulted before. Why does the world not listen to those who live and suffer in crisis? How many untold billions of dollars do we continue to wrongly spend? The Middle East continues to face generations-old conflicts and deep-rooted problems that are the antitheses to a peaceful and flourishing society. But this region is also unknowingly a test bed for research innovation and community-centred governance that can transform how we do philanthropy and humanitarian work around the world. We just need to break our old habits and start deeply listening for a change.

Our highly participatory research brings diverse local voices together to design localised governance and decision-making in environments where only they can be considered the true experts.
The reciprocal route to actioning decolonisation

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Philanthropy needs to give Indigenous sovereignty a higher priority to achieve a fundamental and long-lasting difference
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ince 2008, The Circle on Philanthropy (The Circle) has been supporting Indigenous peoples, communities and organisations to transform the settler philanthropic sector in Canada by incorporating Indigenous ways of giving and committing to invest in the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples. In response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report on the legacy of Indian residential schools in Canada, The Circle, through its Declaration of Action sets out to decolonise wealth in a Canadian sector that originates from the accumulation of wealth from stolen land, dispossession and violation of Indigenous peoples’ rights. Violations such as the early surveying of land which forced most of the Indigenous communities in Canada on to 2 per cent of its land mass – a significant barrier to their ecosystems, culture, language, spirituality, identity and well-being. A violation against Métis scrips that often were unobtainable and also interrupted and displaced Inuit communities during resource extraction such as the gold rush. The impact of these violations continues and has taken many forms of policy and legislation since the constitution of Canada came into being.

Community, family and private foundations need to reflect on their origin stories to understand how their resources and wealth began, which in most cases derives from the exploitation of land, resource extraction and displacement of Indigenous peoples from their land, culture and spirituality. Predominantly white-dominated boards and senior leadership roles still make decisions on behalf of Indigenous communities, which undermines their well-being and autonomy. The philanthropic and charitable sector continues to benefit from extraction and appropriation of Indigenous knowledge, stories, wisdom and work without sharing power or resources with Indigenous leaders and their communities. We encourage organisations to go through a process of learning about reciprocity and what this means for Indigenous-led organisations and their work. It is not enough to engage diverse voices. Organisations need to understand and support Indigenous sovereignty as a higher priority.
PiR is committed to transforming the sector’s white supremacy characteristics and practices towards collaboration, power sharing, partnership and transformational relationships.

**Partners in reciprocity**

Since time immemorial, Indigenous communities have held and maintained our laws and authority to ethically steward resources and thus have a responsibility to equitably redistribute wealth. Our work is to support the relearning of knowledge that is in alignment with Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, of caring for the land and future generations. The Circle works to maintain and amplify Indigenous forms of wealth redistribution and to radically transform how settler philanthropy supports Indigenous-led innovations, movements and Nations. One of those ways is through our Partners in Reciprocity (PiR), a peer learning fellowship programme.

This year, The Circle welcomed 11 teams to our second cohort. After almost half a decade of deep reflections and conversations, Circle CEO, Kris Archie and four other women set out to develop a space for co-creation and intentional learning. PiR was not an overnight creation, but rather a deep response to decolonisation. The fellowship is a 12-month learning commitment. The Circle invites staff and board members from settler philanthropic organisations to join with a team from their organisation with different positional power. PiR is an experiential programme that expects participants to put into practice the learnings, impact strategy and policy. We also invite organisations to prioritise the participation of their Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) staff and board members.

On a deeper level, PiR is also a space to share participants’ journeys and to reflect on what went well and what the challenges are. In this learning, the undoing of white supremacy and its behaviours is also prioritised. PiR is committed to transforming the sector’s white supremacy characteristics and practices towards collaboration, power sharing, partnership and transformational relationships. We want to address the sector’s fear of conflict and invest in collective leadership to learn together and relate to each other in reciprocity.

PiR is a call for accountability while challenging and naming white supremacy that shows up in philanthropic work. An important conversation during PiR is ‘White Supremacy Culture and Pivots’ which is given as individual peer homework. The responses from the homework are analysed and disseminated to the cohort during the programme.

As PiR faculty member Kelly Foxcroft-Poirier puts it, ‘white supremacy will have us believe the myth of the lone leader, in ways that are harmful to ourselves and to others – but reciprocity and this way of working in peer support helps us all understand and live into the truth of interconnection and interdependence... Complex systems work requires all of us, a whole system operating and giving its gifts openly and freely.’

**Shifting power through leadership**

We also seek to amplify the leadership of Indigenous and equity-seeking organisations in creating, transforming and finding innovative solutions to complex issues of our time. Our aim is to find them, fund them, and more importantly let them lead. This has been one of our biggest, and boldest dreams, to grow our community of practice to transform the sector, and shift power and leadership.

Through PiR, we offer questions, tools and space to invite a courageous practice of thinking and doing differently. Kris Archie shares, ‘The Circle does not set out to lead the decolonisation of philanthropy as it is the work of those who benefited from the violence of colonisation, but rather we are here to transform the sector so they [the people in it] take responsibility for their harmful behaviours that are limiting the settler philanthropic sector to change from within.’

We invite our members and the settler philanthropic sector to join us in listening and learning from Indigenous philanthropy, investing in Indigenous leaderships and Indigenous-led work towards Indigenous sovereignty and our collective liberation.