



Charles Keidan (l.) en Rien van Gendt

Filantropie quo vadis? (2 en slot)

Charles Keidan over filantropie in het komende onzekere decennium

Door: Rien van Gendt

21-05-2026

(Social) impact Interview

Filantropie-expert Rien van Gendt en Charles Keidan, voormalig hoofdredacteur van Alliance Magazine, delen een lange geschiedenis. Beiden zijn nu lid van de redactieraad van platform Wereld van Filantropie. Tijd om terug te blikken, maar vooral vooruit te kijken. Een interview in twee delen over een toekomst vol uitdagingen en mogelijkheden. Vandaag deel 2.

Rien van Gendt: Our democracies are being challenged by authoritarian leadership styles of governments in power, by fake news, one-liners. Democracy functions thanks to an informed society, but big tech platforms have less incentive to platform rigorous and reliable content.

Should foundations consider an informed society, and the quality of the public discourse, as an overarching element of their spending policy even if reinforcing democracy is not part of their official mission? You could argue that executing your mission with respect to education, health, culture etc. as a foundation has no material effect if there are no proper provisions to have access to independent news, a quality press and an informed society.

What is your opinion?

Charles Keidan: 'I agree 100%.'

'I predict that the question of whether and how philanthropy funds public interest media will become central to European philanthropy in the next 2-3 years. There will be an explosion of interest in this topic just as funding to tackle climate change took off a decade ago.'

'Philanthropy has a choice: safeguard European democracy now through investment in public interest media. Or pick up the pieces later.'

'I'm hopeful that our field will rise to the challenge. I'm writing to you on my return from a gathering of foundation leaders where the topic was discussed. The CEO of Fondation de France, Axelle Davezac, who co-organized the gathering, [made the point](#) that the debate is moving in this direction. The question, she noted, is no longer just about whether philanthropy is generous or effective, but about its role and responsibilities within our democracies.'

'I think many foundations leaders would agree with that and appreciate the imperative to act.'

'Now we need to roll out a menu of attractive options: multi-year investments in public interest media funds; opportunities for media ownership with appropriate governance structures respecting the separation between investors and editors; community foundations backing local news; media infrastructure, research and training. Philea runs the Journalism Funders Forum, Geneva University has a [Philanthropy and Media Initiative](#) led by Gilles Marchand, the former head of Swiss Public Broadcasting Corporation. The Media Forward Fund is distributing 15 million Euros for public interest media in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Philanthropy has the talent and resources. If I had the money, I'd treble or quadruple their budgets overnight and see what happens. That would give opponents of liberal values and democratic ideals something to worry about.'

'Until then, the question remains: why is there so little funding for public interest media when the fate of European democracy depends on it?'

Would you like to see non-media funders get involved?

Keidan: 'On your point about how non media funders can get involved, consider these angles. If you're a climate funder, you should back the best-in-class specialist climate media or the climate reporting beat at a national title. If you're a health funder, consider backing investigative journalism on the subject of public health and how and why anti-vaccine conspiracies are propagated online. All of this can and should be done so long as careful attention is paid to respecting editorial independence.'

Is it a tall order to ask philanthropy to do this as we witness growing distrust and criticism of philanthropy in the media?

Where does that come from and how should philanthropy position itself? Is distrust and criticism related to philanthropy as such (what is its added value, what is its license to operate?) or is distrust/criticism related to the mega-rich people as the personification of philanthropy? In other words, is critique focused on philanthropists instead of on philanthropy?

Keidan: 'The challenge to philanthropy's legitimacy is real and is inextricably bound up with inequality. Oxfam published a report in January which **claimed** that the world's 12 richest billionaires own more than half of humanity and just 56 people hold more wealth than 27 million people in the UK. The growing concentration of wealth is an unavoidable backdrop to today's philanthropy. In such a scenario, we can't expect people to be grateful for crumbs off the philanthropists' table. The default is rightly turning to scrutiny not gratitude. And demands for a more just and equitable economic system.'

But why should institutional philanthropy get the blame for this?

Keidan: 'I note the distinction in your question between mega-rich people as the personification of philanthropy and philanthropy itself as an institution. I see where you're coming from. But I think that line of reasoning too often collapses into the suggestion that philanthropy is not itself bad and in fact, 'everyone is, or can, be a philanthropist' and therefore philanthropy is a virtue and not a problem.'

'I think that critique distracts us from the issue we need to face which is wealth concentration and gross inequality. Yes, we all can and should be philanthropic. Yes, philanthropy is the act of giving for the public good based on a love of humanity and philanthropy has a deep democratic legitimacy.'

'But that's not what critics are taking issue with. Rather, they want to know whether money has been accumulated legitimately, whether it's been taxed appropriately, and whether sufficient resources are being returned to society through philanthropy. They also want to know where philanthropic capital is being directed, by whom and for what purposes and, ultimately, the influence or power being exercised in the process. I think there are good answers to most of these questions but you can't answer them if you don't ask them of yourself in the first place!'

'These are the first order questions we need to address. Too few foundations are self-conscious in that regard.'

Okay, so how do you think philanthropy should act right now in the face of this criticism?

Keidan: 'There are things it should do and things it shouldn't do.'

'The first thing a foundation should do is articulate its own political philosophy in relation to the above questions. Philanthropy shapes democracy through its decisions about what counts as the common good. It should be explicit about its role and agency.'

'Second, philanthropy should increase its [payout rates](#) – the proportion of assets donated or contributed through grants, initiatives or operations. In the US, Canada and Australia, there is a legal requirement to contribute 5 per cent each year. I think that's a good policy because the payout requirement acts as social contract between foundation and society. In return for our standing and special status, we are required to give back a minimum amount. That should apply to Donor Advised Funds too.'

'Across Europe, our data about foundation spending is so patchy that this debate is barely on the horizon. Where we have data, for example in the UK, we can see that some of our largest foundations are paying out between just 1 and 3 per cent of their multi-billion pounds of assets. The rest of the money is invested in global capital markets earning handsome fees for money managers. These practices are damaging in several ways. They result in insufficient resources being invested in our social infrastructure at a critical moment, they erode the social contract between philanthropy and society, and they increase the perception that we are self-interested elites. It's something our field should take far more seriously.'

'And that brings me to my third point, we need a push for more transparency both about spending and investments but also about the wider [operating model](#) for philanthropy. Philanthropy media titles like World of Philanthropy play an important role in that regard.'

'The job of institutional philanthropy is to answer these questions and demonstrate to the public and society the value it adds. Through the whole philanthropy system, we need the highest possible standards: we should treat philanthropy as deep responsibility – our care for our society just as we care for our family - and not a lifestyle accessory.'

And what should philanthropy avoid doing?

Keidan: 'Avoid being defensive in the face of these searching questions and embrace the challenge head on.'

Have foundations sufficiently changed their philanthropic practices to adequately respond to the complex and diverse challenges in our society?

I observe that foundations often want to respond to contemporary complex problems, but that they do not change their style of grantmaking sufficiently. For me this would require: increase your spending; more institutional funding than just project funding; intensify your cooperation with other funders; engage the people/communities you serve more strongly in your strategy and spending decisions. Your opinion is welcome.

Keidan: 'Progress is happening, but it is insufficient. But my own thought is that philanthropic practices, while critical, are actually, second order questions. Once your sense of responsibility and commitment is deeply felt, you can find the right methods and techniques. There are no shortage of organisations and consultants these days telling us what good funding practice looks like.'

Van Gendt: I fully agree with you that questions regarding the license to operate are more relevant than questions about the craft of grantmaking, the technicalities. However, I am finding it difficult to deal with foundations that subscribe to the relevance of philanthropy addressing the poly-crisis of our democratic society, while they continue to fund limited projects instead of processes of systemic change

Keidan: Yes. I sometimes observe discussions of this kind at philanthropy conferences. It can be infuriating! We talk in generalities about poly-crisis and specificities about small projects. I imagine the cognitive dissonance is as frustrating to newcomers as it is to those of us who have been around for longer. But as long as we're part of a field open to dialogue, debate, and give and take, we can make the case for more to flow to the most systemic approaches to the issues of our time.

Een duurzame relatie

Rien van Gendt en Charles Keidan leerden elkaar twintig jaar terug kennen toen zij leiding gaven aan respectievelijk de Britse Pears Foundation en de Nederlandse Van Leer Foundation. Daarnaast was Van Gendt een van de oprichters en vervolgens voorzitter van de Alliance Publishing Trust, waar Keidan vervolgens ging werken als executive editor van *Alliance Magazine*. Nu beiden zijn verbonden aan het platform *Wereld van Filantropie* is de cirkel rond.

Over de auteurs

Rien van Gendt is lid van de Redactieraad van het journalistieke platform Wereld van Filantropie.

Abonneer je op ons gratis Journaal:

<https://www.wereldvanfilantropie.nl/nieuws/filantropie-quo-vadis-2-en-slot>

© This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

E-mail adres

Schrijf je in