Wereld van Filantropie



Sarah Rank

Grantmaking door de ogen van grantees

Onderzoek grantmaking bepleit grotere rol voor kennis en ervaringen grantees

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(Social) impact Interview

Sarah Rank onderzoekt hoe grantmaking in de praktijk werkt. Ze benadrukt dat de kennis en ervaringen van grantees een grotere rol moeten krijgen in onderzoek én praktijk, om beter te begrijpen wat werkt en inzicht te krijgen in vraagstukken rond macht en de relatie tussen fondsen en grantees. Dit interview is onderdeel van een reeks waarin onderzoekers relevante inzichten voor de filantropische praktijk delen.

What is the main focus of your research, and why does it matter for philanthropic organizations?

My research looks at how philanthropic grantmaking is practised: what shapes the decisions foundations make, how grantmaking processes and relationships are structured, and how those choices are experienced by grantees. A particular focus has been whose knowledge informs how we understand good grantmaking.

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Why do I do this?

Well, because social change is a collective endeavour. It depends on different actors bringing different forms of knowledge, experience, resources, and capabilities to the table to help shift the needle on key issues. Grantmaking is a relational system. Yet, currently, grantmaking systems are largely designed and researched from the funder side of that relationship, and I see this as a problem because it risks not taking account of the knowledge and experience of a critical stakeholder – namely grantees – who are essential to advancing those shared goals.

By listening to grantees, we are able to better understand how grantmaking practices actually work and what they enable or constrain. This provides a more holistic understanding that can support both funders and grantees to work more effectively towards social change.

How can academic research contribute to philanthropic practice?

I want my research to serve a practical purpose. I come from practice myself, and I recognise that often we are working on intuition and anecdotal evidence, which can lead to inefficiencies and ineffective practices. When resources are finite, that matters. At the same time, I feel that research can too often seem removed from reality and inaccessible to those who could benefit from its insights.

I therefore want to contribute to closing the distance between research and practice. Researchers can bring evidence, comparison, and a degree of distance from day-to-day organisational pressures, while practitioners bring knowledge about what is actually feasible, contested, or changing within philanthropy. Bringing those perspectives together can help researchers ask more relevant questions, while also producing research that has real practical value.

What tension or dilemma do foundations struggle with most when designing their grantmaking practices?

One of the central tensions is between maintaining appropriate accountability and control, and giving grantees enough flexibility and trust to do their work well. Foundations have legitimate responsibilities around stewardship, governance, and understanding what their funding achieves. But the systems built around those responsibilities can also create significant burden, constrain innovation and responsiveness, and leave grantees absorbing costs and managing the consequences when funding is withdrawn, sometimes undermining previously hard-won progress.

The challenge is therefore not to choose between accountability and trust, but to think more carefully about what proportionate and genuinely useful accountability looks like.

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There are growing calls to reform grantmaking and adopt more relational approaches. How strong is the evidence base for these approaches, and what do we still need to understand better?

There is certainly growing evidence that aspects of grantmaking such as flexible, longer-term funding, responsiveness, and stronger relationships matter not only to grantees, but also to whether grants can nurture positive and sustained social impacts. But I think we should be careful about claiming that the evidence base is more developed than it is.

My systematic review of 442 peer-reviewed studies found that research on grantmaking remains fragmented and predominantly focused on foundations themselves. Different aspects of practice have been examined in different places and for different purposes, but we still do not have a comprehensive picture that brings this evidence together and points us towards a clear north star, or agreed benchmark, for what good grantmaking looks like. That picture is made even more incomplete by the relatively limited attention given to grantees and even less to local communities.

So, there is still a lot we need to understand: how different approaches operate across contexts, which practices enable the greatest impact, and, more fundamentally, what the social consequences of different grantmaking practices and conditions actually are. We also need to understand the barriers to foundations adapting their practices, particularly where doing so may require them to relinquish some control or redistribute decision-making power.

What is one common assumption about grantmaking or foundation–grantee relationships that you think deserves closer examination?

One assumption worth examining is that foundations can adequately judge the quality of their grantmaking primarily from their own vantage point. Funders can know whether a process works administratively for them, but grantees hold different knowledge about what those same processes require, enable, or constrain in practice. Neither perspective gives us the whole picture.

If we want a fuller understanding of how grantmaking works, grantee experience needs to be treated as a source of knowledge about the system rather than simply as feedback on it.

What gives you optimism about the future of philanthropy?

What gives me optimism is the willingness I increasingly see within philanthropy to question practices that have often been taken for granted. Conversations about trust, power, participation, funding duration, reporting, and the real costs of delivering social change are now much more visible. There is also greater recognition that good intentions do not automatically translate into good funding practices.

The opportunity now is to move from that willingness to question towards building a stronger evidence base about what different ways of working actually change.

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What is one thing you would like philanthropic organizations to rethink or do differently in how they approach grantmaking?

I think philanthropy needs to be more willing to interrogate the power built into grantmaking itself. Foundations hold considerable authority to decide which issues are prioritised, whose knowledge is valued, how success is defined, and ultimately how resources are distributed. Those arrangements are not neutral, and in many contexts they also sit within much longer histories of colonialism and inequality that have shaped whose expertise is recognised and whose is marginalised.

For me, listening to grantees is central to asking those uncomfortable questions. Bringing grantee knowledge meaningfully into the design of grantmaking is therefore not simply about gathering better feedback or becoming more relational. It is also about being willing to examine whose voices shape the system and whether authority needs to be held differently.

Meer informatie: https://givinginsights.nl

Sarah Rank is PhD-onderzoeker aan de University of Queensland, waar ze onderzoek doet naar grantmaking en de relatie tussen fondsen en grantees. Voordat ze aan haar promotieonderzoek begon, werkte ze ruim vijftien jaar in internationale samenwerking, in strategie- en programmafuncties.

Deze interviewreeks wordt inhoudelijk ondersteund door Giving Insights. Giving Insights Exchange brengt onderzoekers en professionals uit de filantropische sector samen om de uitwisseling tussen wetenschap en praktijk te versterken.

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