



The world of philanthropy is changing

Answers are in the hands of European philanthropy. Our liberal values should guide us

Door: Charles Keidan

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Filantropie Opinie

The globalisation of philanthropy has been one of the most interesting – and to philanthropy watchers – exciting developments over the last two decades. At first tentatively, and then with gusto, philanthropy sectors broke into life everywhere. Explosive economic growth proved the hand- maiden of philanthropy industries from the Gulf to Asia while university centres and civil society activism powered dynamism and critical thinking across Africa and Latin America.

Philanthropy journalists could observe the light or shadow – depending on your angle of vision - of big philanthropic institutions emerging into clearer view: the legacy giants of Tata, the sovereign wealth of Temasek and the mega-philanthropy of the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charitable Trust. We could indulge in breezy speculation about whether it was Singapore or Hong Kong at the epicentre of Asia philanthropy.

That particular contest was settled with an easy win for Singapore. But who would wager against Shanghai and a second coming of Chinese philanthropy over the next two decades?

A parallel story could be told about the Arab world where the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia battled to be the exemplar and destination for Gulf philanthropy – notwithstanding missiles from Iran threatening to disrupt the stability upon which its financial and philanthropic industries depend.

These developments allowed a small but growing number of us in the philanthropy media to paint a picture of emerging market philanthropy, one of rises, falls and rivalries in real time, of potential and possibility, and engage new readers from Asia to Africa in the process.

But have we painted with too broad a brush? Has the coming of age of philanthropy in the global south accelerated an unfortunate and unfair sense of doom, gloom, and decline in Europe?

It's fashionable in progressive circles to contrast an idealised version of philanthropy in the global south with a negative view of western philanthropy wrestling with post-colonialism and a loss of self-confidence. The movement to 'Shift the power' was part of the clamour in philanthropy circles to re-distribute wealth from north to south.

There is no suggestion that calls to 'decolonise philanthropy' were un-necessary. It forced us to ask ourselves hard questions about resource extraction, reparations and global capital. These questions should continue to be asked. Self-interrogation is a good thing.

But has the pendulum swung too far? Have we forgotten some of the qualities which distinguish European philanthropy, qualities which actually compare favourably to philanthropy elsewhere?

Perhaps we need more give and take in our analysis of today's philanthropy predicament? In that spirit, it's worth reminding ourselves that European philanthropy is embedded in countries which are by and large liberal, democratic, and pluralist. From Scandinavia to southern Europe, we have vibrant civil societies, and guaranteed rights to peaceful assembly and association, and free expression underpinned by the European Convention on Human Rights - often mediated by national human rights legislation.

Of course, there are huge, and potentially existential, battles to fight across Europe to prevent authoritarian populism sweeping across the continent. But let's remember the starting point. In Europe, we need philanthropy to defend our freedoms. In authoritarian regimes, they need philanthropy to create it in the first place.

And those freedoms simply do not exist in new philanthropy hotspots like the UAE, Saudi Arabia or Singapore. The stability of these countries depends on the curtailment of freedoms including freedom of speech. Our stability depends on the proper and lawful exercise of them. We live in democratic states. They live in police states. And this point is almost entirely absent in the global philanthropy conversation.

Philanthropy across Europe is poised to play a critical role in defending our liberal values and democratic societies. Not enough of it for sure and some will be doing the exact opposite. But there are strong institutional traditions which should give us cause to recognise Europe's strengths and qualities across the world of philanthropy.

A key battleground will be in defence of public interest media – a critical component of a healthy democracy. Look at the role of the [Media Forward Fund](#) in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Or the [Limelight Foundation](#) in The Netherlands funding liberal journalism across Europe.

Or take the issue of climate change which is facing the spectre of backsliding by governments on both sides of the Atlantic. It was British philanthropy which pioneered the global climate philanthropy commitment now signed by hundreds of organisations worldwide.

These efforts are imperfect but the direction of travel is right. They should be nurtured and built upon. Having the right philanthropic infrastructure in place is important and it's maturing across Europe. Philea in Belgium is a progressive force unifying foundations and donor bodies across the continent. The Netherlands based [European Research Network on Philanthropy \(ERNOP\)](#) is at heart of European philanthropy research advancing knowledge, supporting practitioners and helping our field grow from its base at VU University in Amsterdam which also hosts a centre for philanthropic studies – a place where I had the privilege to spend time as a younger philanthropy practitioner with two of today's leading European philanthropy scholars, [Pamala Wiepking](#) and [Rene Bekkers](#).

The criticism which philanthropy in Europe has rained down on itself – including it must be said in some of my own writing - has kept us on our toes. But we must not lose the power, agency and belief that philanthropy is, or at least can be, a force for good which can change society for the better. Here in Europe, we need to fund, champion and fight for the liberal, universal, and humanitarian values at home and abroad. Conversations about trust-based philanthropy and debates about funding practice are necessary but hardly sufficient without a clear vision of what we want to achieve.

That's why this is the moment to recover our confidence, rise to the challenge and fight for our values. If Europe's philanthropies can do that, then they will have every claim to lead the way for global philanthropy in the years ahead.

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