



AFRICA
Grantmakers'
Affinity
Group

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CONVERSATIONS WITH AFRICA GRANTMAKERS

**REFLECTIONS ON NAVIGATING
ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS**

“ AGAG HAS BEEN SHAPED AND SUSTAINED BY THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN PART OF ITS EVOLUTION... THEY HAVE DEMONSTRATED THE POSITIVE INFLUENCE THAT CAN HAPPEN WHEN COLLEAGUES COME TOGETHER IN A WELCOMING AND INCLUSIVE SPACE.”

— Niamani Mutima

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INTRODUCTION

The work of the Africa Grantmakers' Affinity Group (AGAG) is grounded in the belief that a global network of diverse, knowledgeable, and connected grantmakers will help to grow and strengthen the impact of private philanthropy targeting Africa. For two decades AGAG has been a gathering place for a diverse community of grantmakers based inside and outside of Africa. 2020 marked two decades of our work. We took advantage of this important milestone to learn how grantmakers navigate their roles and relationships.

Conversations With Africa Grantmakers: Reflections on Navigating Roles and Relationships presents snapshots from our conversations with a diverse group of 17 individuals currently or formerly working as grantmakers with responsibility for grants targeting Africa. They reflect the diversity of those who have been a part of the AGAG network, and the themes reflect those that are inherent in grantmaking. As a dynamic network AGAG has been shaped and sustained by the people who have been a part of its evolution. They have demonstrated the positive influence and results that happen when grantmakers come together in a welcoming and inclusive space with colleagues funding outside of their respective grantmaking interests.

Thank you to those who participated in the interviews. We hope their reflections will provide useful perspectives for new grantmakers who are developing their own practice and insights that resonate with those with more experience.

Niamani Mutima
Executive Director

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To mark the 20th anniversary of the Africa Grantmakers' Affinity Group (AGAG), we wanted to learn more about the grantmakers who have been part of AGAG's network, and how they navigate their roles in the grantmaking process. The grantmaking staff of a funding organization are its primary public face and source of information about the organization's funding priorities. Their role is central in the internal process that reviews and determines who and what get funded, the external relationships with potential and actual recipients, and building collaborations with colleagues from other funding organizations.

Conversations With Africa Grantmakers: Reflections on Navigating Roles and Relationships presents snapshots from our conversations with a diverse group of 17 individuals currently or formerly working as grantmakers with responsibility for grants targeting Africa. They reflect the diversity of the AGAG network. They were born in different countries and come from

different backgrounds; they work for different types of funding organizations, including ones headquartered in Canada, South Africa, and the United States. They have a range of titles, some more senior than others. But all have had key grantmaking responsibilities and extensive experience in funding organizations working in communities across Africa.

In this report, we use "grantmaker" to refer to the individual program staff person and "funding organizations" to refer to the organization they represent. We have featured excerpts from our conversations with these grantmakers about their experiences and insights. We hope these reflections will provide useful perspectives for new grantmakers as they evolve their own practice, along with offering a view of their work that may resonate with experienced grantmakers.

The following is a sampling of their reflections that we organized across four themes:

NAVIGATING ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS

- **Few of these grantmakers started their careers intending to work in philanthropy.** Many of them previously worked in academia or for NGOs. Others worked for funding organizations in roles other than grantmaking, and a couple characterized this career move as accidental. We also heard from grantmakers who took a more intentional approach to working in philanthropy.
- **Grantmakers are often seen as the primary arbiters of funding decisions.** Many discussed the challenges they face in influencing strategy and funding decisions, especially within organizations that are hierarchical and where leadership has limited knowledge about the communities they are funding. Although none of those interviewed expected to have complete autonomy about who and what gets funded, some shared the constraints under which they operate, reflecting how little power grantmakers can have on specific funding decisions.
- **Many grantmakers said their experiences have taught them to embrace the “messiness” of the process.** Several grantmakers acknowledged the power dynamics inherent in grantmaking that can hinder candid conversations and preempt the important two-way learning that can help to balance these dynamics and enable the formation of real partnerships.

UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

- **Listening and learning are ongoing fundamentals if grantmakers want to understand the dynamic contexts in different countries.** The issues and actors are complex in every situation, but especially for those working outside of a familiar environment. Regardless of their individual backgrounds, most grantmakers emphasized that continuous learning is both a responsibility and a benefit of working with a range of different organizations and colleagues seeking positive change.
- **Grantmakers underscored the importance of exposing themselves to different opinions and perspectives.** They emphasized that the organizations they fund provide important sources of information and analyses. However, they are one part of a broader landscape of sources about the forces and actors who are shaping current situations.

FORMING COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

- **There are numerous informal and formal ways grantmakers funding in Africa work together.** The grantmakers we spoke with described options ranging from seeking advice to engaging in shared learning to being a part of pooled funding efforts. All of these can be valuable, successful, or challenging experiences but collaborative efforts help to advance the funding goals of their organization and their own professional development. For grantmakers based in different countries, other grantmakers based in the countries where they fund are a valuable source of information and understanding about the local context. This is especially true for those funding organizations without offices or an ongoing presence in the countries where they fund and grantmakers new to funding or interested in funding in Africa.
- **Most grantmakers found that building strong collaborative relationships can prove difficult.** Many factors can impede collaboration, such as the different regulations, structures, and operating principles that govern philanthropy within and between countries. The reality that most funding organizations establish their priorities and strategies without extensive consultation with other funding organizations or stakeholders, and the demands to demonstrate the impact of their specific funding investment often leads funding organizations to view their support in isolation.
- **Funder networks are valuable resources for collaboration and learning among grantmakers.** The individuals we spoke with highlighted the importance of networks of funding organizations for building collaborative relationships and providing opportunities for grantmakers to get to know and learn along with others. AGAG has played an especially unique role in providing a forum that helps to connect diverse funders based inside and outside of Africa.

UNDERSTANDING CHANGE

- **Grantmakers emphasized the importance of understanding how the changes within the philanthropic sector impact their work.** Learning from experience and using those insights to shape practice is an ongoing process. Grantmakers described growing recognition that funding programs can do harm when decisions about what is needed are made for people rather than by and with the people who will be affected. They also spoke about the positive impact of more diversity in the leadership and grantmaking staff of funding organizations, including those from Africa involved in funding in Africa. In addition, they cited the growth of grantmaker networks and philanthropy support organizations across Africa.

- **Grantmakers increasingly recognize the importance of supporting organizations that are anchored in their respective communities.** When the majority of funding goes to organizations headquartered outside of Africa it does not help to strengthen or sustain new or existing civil society infrastructure. Those we spoke with voiced that this approach also ignores Africa's large youth population, who are creating organizations and movements that reflect their priorities and aspirations for a greater role as change agents.
- **Some grantmakers voiced concern about issues in philanthropy that still need attention.** Among those shared was a critique of the agendas, attitudes, and narratives about Africa that shape the grantmaking process. All of these can engender perspectives that must change to build real partnerships and make an impact on the issues funding organizations are trying to influence. Additionally, the desire to show immediate results runs counter to the understanding that significant change requires long-term investments.



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