

Philanthropy at a time of change and uncertainty: a global scan

As COVID-19 started to take hold of countries and regions around the world in Spring 2020, SIX began developing a global scan exploring the most innovative ways philanthropic organisations around the world have been pivoting in order to support grantees and communities now and in the future.

We wanted to better understand the picture of global philanthropic responses to COVID-19 and its effects, across time and space - not just in Europe or North America.

What we discovered

The examples in the following pages are not meant to be representative of the countries from which they come. Rather they are 'snippets' - small examples that give us indications of the complex global response to these complex global challenges.

General reflections

What we did before a crisis is who we are in a crisis

A crisis is no time to rethink the fundamentals. The DNA of an organisation often kicks in when urgent and rapid response is required, but many important things may also get forgotten in fast changing times. The risk is where parts that need to change with the times solidify, or revert back to established patterns as soon as a crisis is over.

● South Korea

“Other than things getting postponed/cancelled, the strategy of the foundation has remained the same; no massive changes. Our origin is in civil society so we are actively involved in civil society conversations on COVID-19.”

● South Africa

“Not everyone in the team is an activist - some feel we should be more urgent and respond rapidly with more advocacy and money; and others think we started out in one type of philanthropy, let’s say venture philanthropy, and need to stay how we started.”

● United States

“Relationships are so important for moving quickly and strategically and for helping us in not doing more harm accidentally, but it’s harder to build relationships in crisis so we have to be intentional.”

“We have been struck by how we were operating before has not changed (e.g. types of grants we give, our responsiveness, our openness). Our challenge now is for foundations doing things differently to not see all of this as disaster response, but as new norms of practice.”



Past crises prepare us for future ones

It's important to recentre the conversation around places where philanthropy has been dealing with disasters and shockwaves for many years, as they have robust coping mechanisms and approaches that many organisations in the Global North are still struggling to get right.

- **Serbia**

"There were huge protests in July related to the COVID-19 crisis, which followed a reintroduction to the curfew. Our activists are dealing with unpopular topics - some of them face serious threats. This has presented the double crisis of women's rights and COVID-19."

- **Zambia**

"Philanthropy is familial in Zambia - when HIV/AIDS hit the country in the late 80s, people's investments went because of the loss of one individual who their money went to."

- **New Zealand**

"Christchurch earthquake was devastating and continued over five years. This really affected the social life and mental health in that region - no one wanted to go out and lots of the arts spaces crashed. Then the Christchurch shootings... how do you prepare now so you can be prepared for disaster funding? what do you do before a crisis hits, now that a crisis hit, and to prepare for future crises?"

- **Haiti**

"We're always responding to community needs - the hurricane and earthquakes in Haiti put the foundations in place for our level of responsiveness."



Rapid response is not the only way

“Easier said than done” describes the realities of trying to make rapid response work for several organisations where coordinating efforts around rapid response were difficult or whose organisational strategy did not accommodate this entirely new way of doing things.

- **Kenya**

“We did have conversations to set up rapid response grants - they haven’t come to fruition, bilateral negotiations are taking longer than we anticipated.”

- **Canada**

“We are known for system change support, but will the board feel comfortable working on emergency response to help organisations working at horizon 2 and horizon 3? Could they see this as a launchpad going into the future?”

- **Russia**

“Initially our idea was to start a rapid response fund - swift, easy grants to all sorts of NGOs - but it didn’t work that way. Donors didn’t want to pool funds, donors wanted to fund things on their terms, helping specific groups of the population, and instead of focussing on the sustainability of NGOs, they wanted to focus on emergency response to people who are vulnerable - still short term service delivery...”



Staying in touch requires creativity and imagination

Many participants used low tech options to stay in touch, especially in the context of zoom fatigue or digital exclusion. This acted as an informal way to fill the gaps of information which filling in a form couldn't do. But the expectations around keeping up to date needed to change too - but this can easily be interpreted wrong or have negative impact.

- **Singapore**

"We try to find and fund gaps by talking to existing partners, doing desk research, knowing the areas very well. We have a WhatsApp group we regularly communicate to our beneficiaries on."

- **Haiti**

"We created a Whatsapp network for local community outreach organisers and receive lots of photos, questions, daily updates."

- **Zambia**

"We're working with LOOP (a UK based startup) who build low tech feedback mechanisms for recipients of aid like grantees, citizens, communities."

- **Serbia**

"Now we are communicating a bit more - to make sure everything is alright, what adjustments are needed, are things going as planned, etc., but we don't want to overburden people with additional information; some people need space!"

Crisis is an existential event

As the lives of grantees changed, so did those of foundation staff - often at a deep level. Mindsets and attitudes were shifting into new forms of awareness about the undiscussed topics, the disparity of privilege within teams and between foundation employees and their grantees. New questions were being asked that didn't have easy answers...



Kenya

"Changing the mindset of employees and partners who are in the middle classes to take care of vulnerable people and to think beyond their immediate frustrations, e.g. limited wifi spots, etc.,"



South Africa

"Because of our team demographics, we've really had to think about how we work differently. We already had a lot of the hard conversations which COVID-19 and BLM brought up again for us."



United States

"We are realising conversations about risk have bias baked in, and there's hiding behind due diligence so as not to have conversations around these things..."

"COVID-19 is raising bigger ethical and moral questions... People of colour in this country are affected by the crisis because of all the ways we haven't addressed the systemic roots that have led to these different outcomes..."



Working with government is more necessary than ever

The role of philanthropy in politics is highly debated, but in COVID-19 times, every foundation we spoke to had some relationship to government. Some worked with, some worked instead of, and some worked despite what government was doing.



Canada

"One foundation we work with is on the call with the mayor at least once a day - there's a feedback channel there."



South Korea

"The government's COVID-19 response has been strong and good, so the general mood in civil society is to support the government's direction (rather than be in the driver seat at the moment). We're thinking about where the gaps lie and supporting that..."



Ghana

"We have dwindling resources in civil society so we must work closely with government, but we also must hold it to account on behalf of the sector and to have a voice in deciding what should be done, how and who benefits. Government has also used the need of urgent action to push a very direct agenda, e.g. looking at assembling as a constitutional right and how it has been curtailed."



Malaysia

"The crisis gave us an opportunity to coordinate with government agencies and other partners for faster dispersal of funds."



Surfacing the tensions

Long term vs. short term support

Most advocate for long-term grants, but in a crisis, what we think works better and what actually works better may not be the same. Some foundations were able to mobilise money far quicker due to their shorter grant cycles. On the one hand, this was necessary, but on the other, many important processes which often take time, cannot be accommodated in a crisis.

● United States

“After the recession hit over a decade ago, we reduced our grants from 5 years to 2 years, which then gave us the flexibility around money in crises like these.”

● Brazil

“We realised a lot of our funds we had committed to systemic change, which we now wouldn’t be able to spend, because costs to convene look different. So we were saving money from this pillar and realised we could easily put it in relief. So we did this right away.”

● Russia

“All this extra COVID-19 funding is short-term, emergency and delivery funding, very little of it is strategic and many organisations are going to face a difficult time quite soon.”

● Haiti

“We did a regional planning process looking at what the different priorities, challenges, needs and assets are. This took us 2.5 years. This was not a donor-driven process, but a community driven one.”

● Ghana

“Funders want results and outcomes, but COVID-19 is about having a long breath, staying in relationship in good and bad times.”



COVID-19 vs business as usual

COVID-19 is both a problem and a symptom of long-established ills which were simply exacerbated in this crisis. So is COVID-19 response a means or an end? Mobilising entirely behind COVID-19 begs the question, "how much COVID framework is too much?" especially when important issues become sidelined or, worse, slip under the radar. Many marginal groups still demand to be seen.



Kenya

"We have almost entirely mobilised behind the 'COVID' response. We have produced a global COVID-19 response framework for all our foundations focussing on prevention, flattening the curve."



United States



Ghana

"Parliament are focussed on COVID-19 which might be taking attention off other key policies and laws that should be monitored and implemented by civil society. Moreover, large donors are looking into COVID-19 work, which means other important work may be shelved unless you can link it to COVID-19."



Russia

The President met with NGOs at least 3 times this year, during COVID-19, which brought a new appreciation for the value and work of the NGO sector. And after every meeting, he launched new policies to support NGOs."



Making sense vs making change

Reflective capacity is often seen as a luxury, especially in a crisis. However, our ability to make sense of the moment helps to avoid serious mistakes and build on what's already working. But learning how to operate amidst ambiguity and uncertainty takes a special leadership, mindset and behaviour that not all possess.



Serbia

"We're careful to give analysis and critique because we're still very much 'in it'"



South Africa

"We're trying to make sense of hyperlocal actions which at the moment seem scattered."



Germany

"We're uncertain as our decisions now might very quickly become wrong."



Brazil

"We are always obsessed with getting better; every year we have goals about how to improve our grant making process, etc., and this year we are realising our initial expectations and predictions would no longer come into play and our outcomes will look completely different."



Kenya

"We have to remain unattached to what we thought we were going to do and how we thought we were going to do it - it does need a little courage and boldness (but not recklessness)"



What's emerging

New dynamics, decisions and organising

An unprecedented year for so many, it will be crucial for the sector to audit what has changed for the bad or the better. Much should be welcomed, but as new dynamics emerge, we should be careful not to throw away due process and precaution and to think carefully about what and how norms get created.

● United Kingdom

“We’re being contacted almost daily by other foundations around how to reach BAME communities. They are really uncertain with how to deal with the new dynamic that’s emerging.”

● United States

“How does the crisis push on trends like participatory grantmaking, trust-based funding, equity funding...”

“Our challenge now is for foundations who are doing things differently not to see this as disaster response but new norms of practice.”

● South Africa

“We’re having to be more intersectional - that’s been interesting. Venture philanthropy from the perspective of gender and societal roles, for example.”

● Singapore

“Lots of foundations have moved to trust based philanthropy. We’re thinking about how we do a post mortem and get them to continue the practices they were forced into during the crisis.”



New roles and ways to mobilise existing assets

Learning more about the roles that funders play is a leverage point. Despite many changing roles, (e.g. advocacy, educator, catalyst, collaborator, influencer), they can only play one well at any one time, so knowing how you sit and fit within the ecosystem, and how to bring the board along with you takes careful thought.



South Africa

“We’ve also taken on an advocacy role, which came easy to us given our networks. But how do core funders feel about that?”



Haiti

“We’ve had incredible impact because of our approach which has been resonating with people. There is a yearning for this amongst the people we have been able to attract in our regional network... the strong, independent vision of community leaders.”



Russia

“We’re doing more advocacy for better donor practices - this is our own personal mission.”



United States

“We’re seeing our strength in national philanthropy - using our voice in broadcast and print media to centre the theme of equity.”

“What do we see right now in front of us? What’s the history that informs this? And how do we prevent that harm?”



The changing face of philanthropy

The current model of global philanthropy is debated as a western import. Precarity of funding sources have amplified the turn towards local and place-based philanthropy, but these require entirely different ways of thinking and behaving. Questions also get raised like, where is the philanthropy of international donors supposed to serve? And who's in control of the money in the country?

● Serbia

“We have two approaches to develop further. One is around local philanthropy and engaging with local businesses more, and the other is engaging more with the diaspora.”

● Kenya

“The notion of the community foundation is more important and powerful than ever. So much funding for civil society has gone to issue based civil society, but place based seems like a more important approach.”

● Haiti

“The way philanthropy has been developed was from the global north. We need to create a culture of systematic philanthropy in the global south and start connecting it to local traditions and culture.”

● Zambia

“We don't know if DFID will remain here or what kinds of programmes it will have here going forwards, so that's why we wanted to localise the effort to building local philanthropy. There's been a huge shift in team thinking towards mobilising communities to come with their own resources - development can be from here.”

Preparing for the future

COVID-19 response must be additive, self-reflective, and in constant detective mode about accidental harm, shadow sides, long-term implications and hidden costs. We must create forums and exchanges to ask new questions about philanthropy and community power, about investments as well as grants, and about the issues we must confront before it's too late.



South Africa

"Dawning realisation that this won't go away"



United Kingdom

"We're starting to see what the future world would look like, so getting stuff to the second horizon feels important."



United States

"Needs to be about short and long term change - as we think about resilience AND recovery, we need to also be responding to crises like these in the future, e.g. climate change, natural disasters, other forms of policy change that could really have devastating consequences."



Brazil

"We would like to invest in and change the portfolio around future scenarios... Philanthropy is traditionally interested in scaling new solutions to historical problems - this creates incremental change.. The better investor is the one who can predict the future; what are the challenges we are going to face and how can we adapt to it?"

