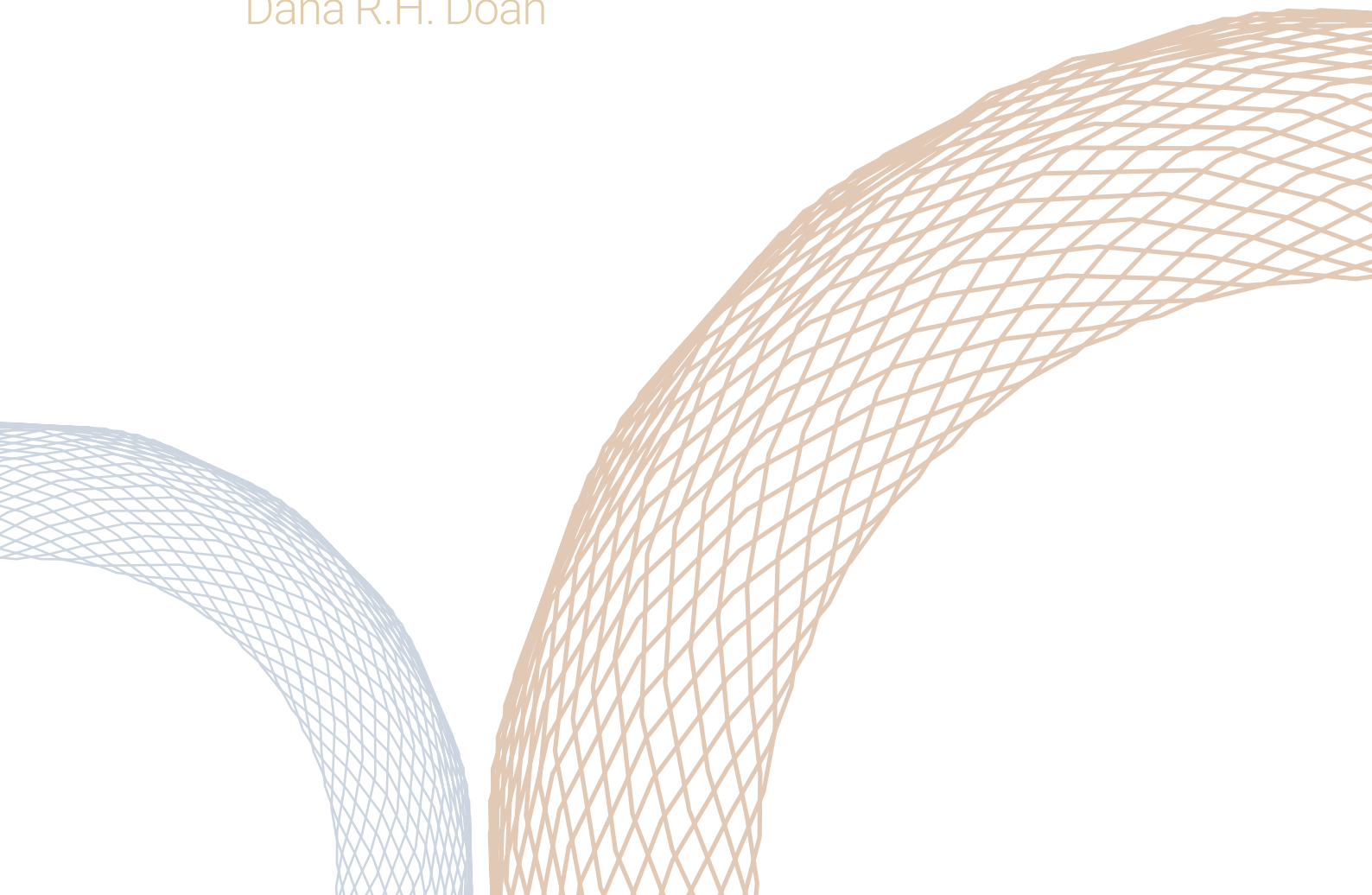




What is community philanthropy?

A guide to understanding and applying community philanthropy

Dana R.H. Doan



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Introduction

Community philanthropy has its origins in long-held practices of exchange, mutual aid, solidarity, and community development. ‘Local people helping each other by sharing resources for the common good,’ is an inclusive and caring practice that is found in most, if not all, cultures and communities.¹ Nevertheless, despite renewed attention to the concept of community philanthropy among both nonprofits and philanthropists, there is limited guidance for those who wish to apply or invest in community philanthropy approaches. This observation is based on my own personal experience trying to understand and apply a community philanthropy approach to my work with grassroots organizations in Vietnam. It is also based on my review of the literature available on this topic, including research from academia as well as practice. Although there is a growing body of literature focusing on community philanthropy, the guidance that currently exists presents different understandings about the concept. This paper summarizes my review of the available literature and seeks to clarify, for those that may be working in the field of development, what it means to practice community philanthropy.

1 Effective Communities Project, 2005; Kilmurray, 2015

Renewed calls for community philanthropy

The importance of community-led development is enshrined in several international development agreements: the Paris Declaration (2005), the Accra Agenda (2008), and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (2015). Each of these global agreements call for increased local ownership and the alignment of donor resources in support of country objectives through local systems, including governments, foundations, and civil society. Nevertheless, less than 2% of humanitarian funding has gone to local nonprofits.² Citing a ‘tyranny of experts’, there are countless examples of development programmes that have been designed for, rather than by, local communities and the subjugation of local knowledge and leadership, which as the evidence show – time and again – results in a lack of local accountability, growth in dependency, the exacerbation of existing inequalities, and ineffective or unsustainable programmes.³

As these critiques grow, long-held practices such as mutual aid, grassroots development, and participatory development are gaining renewed currency.⁴ The importance of locally-led development becomes particularly important today, as an increasing number of country governments express concerns about the influence of foreign aid.⁵ Together, examples of failed development efforts and closing civil society space, combined with the promise of locally-led development contribute to renewed attention towards the concept of community philanthropy.

Community philanthropy is not an organizational form, it is a practice

When people mention community philanthropy, it is not uncommon to hear the term automatically equated with community foundations. Although it is assumed by many scholars and practitioners that community foundations are engaged in community philanthropy, I would caution against equating a particular organizational form with a practice such as community philanthropy. There are two reasons for precaution. First, community philanthropy is a universal practice that originated long before the first community foundation was established in Cleveland, Ohio in the early 1900s.⁶ Second, community philanthropy is a process rather than an organizational form.⁷

Community philanthropy relates to various conceptions of philanthropy, including: grassroots philanthropy, engaged philanthropy, participatory philanthropy, horizontal

2 van der Zee, 2015; Hodgson & Knight, 2016

3 Building Movement Project, 2017; Ruesga, 2011; Deaton, 2013; Easterly 2013; Kothari & Minogue, 2002; Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1994; Gilbert, 2013a; Mitchell, 2002

4 Sachs, 2005; Deaton, 2013; Easterly, 2013; Fowler & Wilkinson-Maposa, 2013; Cochrane, 2012; Ruesga, 2011; Civicus, 2018

5 International Center For Not-For-Profit Law, 2016; Civicus, 2018

6 Kilmurray, 2015

7 Pond & Hodgson, 2018

philanthropy, social justice philanthropy, indigenous philanthropy, place-based philanthropy, and co-production.⁸ These concepts share similar norms and values, such as: reciprocity, solidarity, social cohesion, self-reliance, and interdependence. Such concepts are present in traditional practices from around the world, such as South Africa – *Ubuntu*;⁹ Kenya – *Harambee*; Ireland – *Meitheal*; the People’s Republic of China – *Renqing*; and a number of Latin American countries – *Buen Vivir*. And, in North America, Native American tribes have long practiced mutual aid, regularly engaging in the practice of pooling and reinvesting their resources to protect and strengthen their communities.¹⁰ It is a strategy often employed by migrants, who leverage their resources in the face of adversities so common to displacement.¹¹

The above mentioned – and other – examples of community philanthropy have presented in a variety of organizational forms, including, but not limited to: identity-based funds, giving circles, community foundations, religious federations, youth banks, volunteer groups, and cooperatives.¹² That said, I would argue that it is not the form but the process that determines whether or not community philanthropy is present. Too narrow a scope, or too narrow a focus, on an organizational form limits our understanding of the role that community philanthropy practitioners play – and have the potential to play – to ‘harness local giving in service of development and social justice.’¹³ Moreover, although locally-led development may have been a founding goal for the first community foundation, only a small percentage of today’s community foundations are engaging in community philanthropy as defined in this paper.¹⁴ In reality, some community foundations have found themselves deferring to funders at the expense of their mission, while many others have found themselves focusing on their own organization’s survival at the expense of the needs of communities they were set-up to serve.¹⁵

Looking beyond community foundations, a variety of institutional forms hold potential for fostering community philanthropy. What makes an organization suited to this process is a commitment to shared norms, with a focus on both the means and the ends of such an approach.¹⁶ Norms fundamental to community philanthropy, include: reciprocity, solidarity, transparency, obligation, and trust.¹⁷ Similarly, to achieve a strong community, to live in harmony with nature, or to increase well-being in a community, organizations that seek to catalyze community philanthropy are often engaged in the following norms and practices:

8 Ruesga, 2011; Lynn & Wisely, 2006; Fowler & Wilkinson-Maposa, 2016; Suarez, 2012; Mottiar & Ngcoya, 2016; Aspen Institute, 2014; Ostrom, 1999; Pestoff, 2006; Phillips, 2018.

9 Ubuntu: Moyo, 2016; Ngcoya & Mottiar, 2016; Harambee: Copeland-Carson, 2007; Moyo, 2016; Meitheal: Kilmurray, 2015; Renqing: Yang, 1994; Wang et al, 2008; Buen Vivir: Merino, 2016.

10 White, 2004; Berry, 1999

11 Fadiman, 1997; Min, 1992

12 Franklin, 2017; Pond & Hodgson, 2018; Wilkinson-Maposa, 2018

13 Gilbert, 2018: 18

14 Sacks, 2014; Graddy & Morgan, 2006; Mazany & Perry, 2014; Joseph, 2016

15 Kilmurray, 2016; Guo & Brown, 2006

16 Knight, 2017: 64

17 Fukuyama, 1995, 2001; Etzioni et al, 2004; Pentland, 2014; Phillips, 2018a

Socially embedded Socially embedded organizations are able to define issues based on community priorities; appreciate local assets – 'taking what we have to make what we need'; and operate at the most local level of interactions.¹⁸

Prioritizing relationships Relationships are first and foremost in community philanthropy. And community philanthropy works to facilitate relationships by building bonding, bridging, and linking capital within local communities and between local communities and the sources of external resources, because trusting relationships develop from repeat, honest, and reciprocal interactions.¹⁹

Co-producing Organizations that co-produce give voice, control, and attribution to the individuals, families, and communities they serve in the design, delivery, and evaluation of their programmes.²⁰

Focus on root causes The pursuit of structural or systemic change alongside short-term fixes is essential, and helps to ensure that no harm is done along the way.²¹

Honest, intentional, neutral conveners and facilitators Organizations seek to facilitate multi-stakeholder relationships among key stakeholders by offering objective knowledge, expertise, and understanding while taking care of the small details, such as meeting dates, times, and other logistics.²²

Pooling of resources Community philanthropy involves the identification, valuing, and pooling of the diversity of available resources, ranging from financial and human capital to cultural and moral capital.²³

Enlightened leadership Organizers that foster curiosity, creativity, and civic dialogue; that identify shared interests and capture agreement on critical issues; and that convince those with power to share it with others are community philanthropy organizations.²⁴

Today, many philanthropic organizations report an interest, or a stated objective, to empower individuals and groups to raise their voices and become active players in efforts to solve problems or envision a new reality within their communities. But only those intermediaries that are engaged in the above described norms and practices can be called community philanthropy intermediaries. The organizational form is relevant only in so much as the form can either foster or inhibit such practices.

18 Knight, 2012; Martinez-Cosio & Bussell, 2013; Putnam et al, 2004; Blackbelt Community Foundation; Pond & Hodgson, 2018; Mazany & Perry, 2014; Knight, 2017: 134; Gilbert, 2018.

19 Putnam, 1995; Woolcock, 1998; Putnam et al, 2004; Pentland, 2014; Fukuyama, 1995, 2001.

20 Martinez-Cosio & Bussell, 2013; Pond & Hodgson, 2018; Hodgson, Knight & Mathie, 2012; Wilkinson-Maposa, 2018; Phillips, 2018a; Knight, 2017

21 Martinez-Cosio & Bussell, 2013; Pond & Hodgson, 2018; Gilbert, 2018; Harrow & Jung, 2016; Edwards & Sen, 2000

22 Mazany & Perry, 2014; Majic, 2011; Eikenberry, 2009; Knight, 2017

23 Mazany & Perry, 2014; Joseph, 2016; Yang, 1994

24 Mazany & Perry, 2014; Burns & Worsley, 2015; Martinez-Cosio & Bussell, 2013; Putnam et al, 2004; Edwards & Sen, 2000

Defining community philanthropy

In reviewing academic and practice based literature on community philanthropy, one may encounter a number of definitions and descriptions.²⁵ There are similarities and differences across these various attempts to define and describe community philanthropy. In general, they reveal a collaborative process that involves the identification and enhancement of resources already within a community. The importance of balancing or 'shifting' power dynamics comes up in several articles, alluding perhaps to why many definitions emphasize community leadership or community control over resources to be deployed in a community, regardless of the origin of such resources.

There is an ongoing debate as to whether the 'community' that is referenced in the term community philanthropy, refers to a geographic place or something else. Most of the articles, whether intentional or not, allow for a broad interpretation of the term community, suggesting that it might refer to a shared geography, identity, value, interest, culture, faith, or another shared trait or experience.

For me, the description offered by Pond and Hodgson (2018: 5) comes closest to an operational definition. They write: 'community philanthropy is both a form of, and a force for, locally driven development that strengthens community capacity and voice, builds trust, and most importantly, taps into and builds on local resources.' Nevertheless, I find that this definition could go a bit further, in order to clarify the desired goal. Locally-driven development is the means but it is not the end. For this reason, I propose a modest amendment to the Pond and Hodgson definition:

Community philanthropy is both a form of, and a force for, locally driven development that strengthens community capacity and voice, builds trust, and most importantly, taps into and builds on local resources, **which are pooled together to build and sustain a strong community.**

Evaluating community philanthropy

It is beyond the scope of this article to propose an approach to evaluating the effectiveness of community philanthropy. Instead, I merely set out to introduce the goals and measures cited in the literature relating to community philanthropy.

Articles referred to different goals for pursuing community philanthropy. Some of the goals were stepping stone goals, designed to change values, norms or behaviours. For example, ensuring that people have agency or that they have a sense of belonging (Phillips, 2018b; Enns et al, 2014; Hodgson, Knight & Mathie, 2012). Others goals were

²⁵ I came across 13 articles that attempted to define or describe community philanthropy. These definitions and description are accessible in the longer version of this article.

long-term, such as poverty reduction or environmental sustainability (Etzioni et al 2004; Knight, 2017; Merino, 2016). In other cases, however, a combination of short and long-term goals were presented. For example, building assets, capacities, and trust for stronger communities (Pond & Hodgson, 2018; Hodgson, Knight & Mathie, 2012; Gilbert, 2018; Wilkinson-Maposa, 2018).

A number of different measures, or indicators of progress, were described in the literature on community philanthropy. The table below presents the various measures that were mentioned, and attempts to categorize them into process versus outcome measures (e.g., whether the measure evaluates the means to the end or the desired end itself):

Measures	Process	Outcome
Increase in cooperative values: trust, respect, social justice	■	■
Increase in cooperative behaviours: change in policies, build connections, listening, sharing, capacity building, advocacy, participation, inclusion	■	■
Change mindsets: hope, sense of community/belonging		■
Strengthen relationships: type, quality, quantity	■	■
Feedback loops: community feedback, impact, utility	■	
Marginalized communities are stronger: assets, capacities, trust		■
Communities are stronger: assets, capacities, trust		■
Improved equity (gender, race, etc.)		■
Poverty reduction: human needs are met, overall well-being		■

Sources: Hodgson & Knight, 2010; Martinez-Cosio & Bussell, 2013; Edwards & Sen, 2000; ECP, 2005; Hodgson, Knight & Mathie, 2012; White, 2016; Phillips, 2018b.

As may be evident by the above list of measures and preceding description of goals, community philanthropy organizations can have different goals, which would require different approaches to measuring progress. It is my hope that this section calls attention to the need for organizations to be clear in their purpose and in the measures they will use to support good governance and effective decision-making throughout implementation.

Conclusion

Despite a long history and renewed interest, the concept of community philanthropy is not well-understood. Meanwhile, those who are working deep in the trenches of community development, and are looking to community philanthropy – as a locally-driven process focused on leveraging local assets, capacities, and trust – lack clear guidance for their work. This paper aims to provide guidance to those who are engaged and interested in community philanthropy.

Community philanthropy intermediaries view themselves as taking a long-term approach by building strong communities through the fostering of norms and practices that produce cooperative behaviours. This goal can best be achieved when organization leaders are socially embedded, prioritizing relationships, co-producing with members of their community, focusing on the root causes, serving as honest and intentional conveners, and demonstrating enlightened leadership. This approach, by community philanthropy organizations, is relevant to communities of place, identity, culture, interests, and the like. It also applies to external resource providers, which would benefit from focusing their efforts on building local assets, capacities, and trust so that communities can realize their own visions for the future.

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About the report

This is a shortened version of a longer paper by the same author, which has been adapted specifically for community philanthropy practitioners. To read the longer version of the paper, please contact Dana R.H. Doan (danarhdoan@gmail.com).

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Published in August 2019.

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A company limited by guarantee. Registered in Northern Ireland No. NI073343

Registered charity number XT18816

Section 21 Company (South Africa):
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