

Alliance
For philanthropy and social investment worldwide



Illuminating the Invisible: Social Impact Infrastructure Organizations

**Insights from an exclusive
ten-part series**

A study commissioned by Propel Philanthropy, supported by WINGS, into the work of SIIOs and the contribution they make to the philanthropy sector across the world.



Contents

- Introduction 5
- Improving and increasing philanthropy 9
- Advocacy and representation 13
- Influence 17
- Changemakers 19
- Community and relationship building 21
- Building ecosystems 23
- Collaboration 25
- Leadership and thought leadership 31
- Skill reinforcement and collective learning 33
- Changes in the role of SIOs:
from service provider to leadership 35
- Growing diversity of the field –
ecosystem rather than infrastructure 37
- Challenges 39
- Achievements 48
- Aspirations 53
- Ways forward 56
- Appendix 59

Introduction

This study has been commissioned by Propel Philanthropy, supported by WINGS, into the work of SIOs and the contribution they make – frequently unsung and underestimated – to the philanthropy sector across the world.

It draws mainly on a series of conversations with leaders of SIOs published by Alliance magazine which can be found [here](#), but also reinforces its arguments from other sources, some of which are mentioned in the text. We have adopted this predominantly qualitative approach in order to give a more rounded picture of SIOs than a statistical review would present, and of the many elements that are involved in their work and their day-to-day operation by speaking to those who are closest to them.

What is an SIO?

We have chosen in this report to use the term Social Impact Infrastructure Organisation (SIO) as it covers the considerable breadth of those organisations serving or supporting philanthropy, the non-profit and civil society sectors, in fact, the social sector, broadly construed, from foundation umbrella bodies, charitable, development, and human capital builders, social investment accelerators, leadership trainers, philanthropic media platforms, giving campaign platforms and the rest. As one contributor to this report points out, the field is growing and diversifying and even the small sample of our informants includes a broad range of organisational types and activities. Other terms might appear in what follows – philanthropy support organisations, infrastructure bodies, ecosystem bodies, etc – but the umbrella term SIO should be taken to include all of them.

The SIO contribution

It's impossible to imagine a functioning philanthropy sector, whether on the institutional or individual level, without an accompanying ecosystem. The bodies that comprise it provide information, expertise, training, the possibility of collective action, influence and, in short, the cement that binds the sector and makes it possible to think and speak of it as a sector. As a result, through their work, they have brought vast amounts of money and resources into philanthropy. To take only two examples, the Giving Tuesday campaign and the Giving Pledge are mechanisms that have raised billions of dollars for a whole range of causes.

Despite this, that contribution could be much more considerable. It often passes unnoticed or is taken for granted and, as this report, shows, they remain underfunded and therefore often unable to fulfil their considerable potential. Some of the reasons for this neglect will be discussed below, but the purpose of this study is to help make the case for SIOs by illustrating the value they provide to the sector.

Their contribution is assessed under a number of headings:

- Improving and increasing philanthropy
- Advocacy and representation
- Influence
- Changemakers
- Community and relationship building
- Ecosystem building
- Collaboration
- Leadership and thought leadership
- Skill development and peer learning

Following this assessment, the report considers the challenges they face, the achievements they have to their credit in spite of this, their ambitions and some indication of their potential. It ends with some remarks about what is needed and a call to action for funders.

It will be apparent that these categories overlap. While providing a means of assessment, analytical frameworks can distort the picture and readers are asked to bear this in mind.



“Maybe this is one of the challenges of fundraising because the nature of our work – infrastructure – is invisible.”

Rose Maruru

Identities and roles

Before giving an account of the various roles SIOs play and the value they provide, it's worth observing, first, their own perceptions of the functions they fulfil and, second, that very often, they are the only organisations in the field doing this. As already noted, SIOs embrace a wide range of activities and organisational types and the interview sample illustrates this. WINGS is a meta-network, a network of foundation networks, with a long reach, through its members, to *their* members. At a different point on the spectrum is Generation Pledge which works exclusively with inheritors of wealth. There are many shades of activity in between. Karen Ansara¹ of NEID Global notes: 'We're not philanthropic advisors, we're not helping each philanthropist determine their individual strategy, but we're the connectors to the resources that help them do it.' Dasra, in India, sees itself as a 'bridge builder'. Neera Nundy, its founder, identifies two main engines to its work: working 'with non-profits through collaboratives on one hand, and working to make philanthropy more strategic by advising and helping families and corporates on their giving journeys, on the other.' She also points out that Dasra has subsequently evolved to being what she describes as 'a systems orchestrator' – bringing together people and groups to make collaboration happen.

EPIC-Africa has one of the clearest conceptions of its role of all the respondents. Rose Maruru, its co-founder and CEO, believes it is building the ecosystem of African philanthropy through 'conducting research and producing data, knowledge, and actionable insights about African civil society organisations (CSOs)...Our research makes it possible to draw new insights about African CSOs and paint a more granular and complex picture of the sector. This knowledge is necessary if we want to create a more enabling environment for the philanthropic sector.... In this sense, we are about using data to tell the story of the sector. And with the data we already have, there is a lot to tell!' She goes on: 'The anchor of our work is the African CSO Platform, which will launch this summer... It is the culmination of our five-year engagement with 6000+ CSOs from 46 countries. These CSOs have told us what they need and want. They need information and services, more exchange with peers, and opportunities for alliances and investment in building their institutional capacity. The African CSO Platform has been designed around these needs.'

Identity and the range of activities SIOs undertake can sometimes also present a challenge.

Rose Maruru believes that 'organisations doing this work are grappling with what to call ourselves, some use Philanthropy Support Organisation as their label, others call themselves Social Impact Support Organisations, and still others are now using a more recent appellation – Social Impact Infrastructure Organisations.' Moreover, there is a potential knock-on effect of this puzzle, one which might affect their ability to survive and prosper. 'Maybe this is one of the challenges of fundraising because the nature of our work – infrastructure – is invisible.' Both of these points will be discussed further below.

Jackie Asiimwe of CivSource Africa which functions as an enabler of increased funding to community-based organisations in Africa, a leadership trainer/enabler and a collector of narratives of African giving, speaks of the contrast of being at the same time a grantmaker and an adviser: 'It's like you have two heartbeats. You're trying to interpret for donors that are not from your continent, from your culture, the nuances of how to give in dignified ways. At the same time, you are caught up in raising your own funds to do the work that needs to be done and you're in the very system that you're trying to change.' Again, this is a bind that many SIOs are caught up in and will be discussed in the section on challenges below.

¹ A list of all those interviewed for the Alliance platform and their organisations appears in Annex 1.

Improving and increasing philanthropy

At their most basic, what all SIOs are trying to do is to increase the amount of philanthropy and improve its practice. As Jackie Asimwe observes: ‘CivSource is not one thing but several things having these two aims: Philanthropy that works and civil society that thrives.’



Benjamin Bellego, Executive Director of WINGS also speaks to this when he says that the simplest answer to what WINGS is trying to do is ‘growing philanthropy and making it more effective and transformative around the world.’

Karen Ansara describes NEID Global as ‘the connective tissue that brings them [funders] together to learn about what each is doing, to share their expertise and information, and to collaborate so that they end up giving more, and giving more effectively... our foundational mission has always been to increase the flow of international philanthropy from the US.’

Instituto MOL in Brazil spans a number of the general purposes that many SIOs would recognise and subscribe to, as its founder, Rodrigo Pipponzi says: ‘We need to understand how to change the behaviour of Brazilians and how we can foster trust in civil society in Brazil. We need to understand how we can improve the laws to create a better ecosystem for donations, we need to have more data on the philanthropy ecosystem so people can better understand the world of giving and can make better decisions.’

Generation Pledge provides an interesting example, as they seek to go beyond philanthropy: ‘it’s not only moving some money,’ says Maria Feffer Oelsner, ‘it’s figuring out how to change the whole flow of money within the economic system.’ Generation Pledge sees itself as working in ‘the metaspaces... the infrastructure of capital... it’s figuring out how to change the whole flow of money within the economic system. That’s why we say that we have to make a change in the mindset of multi-generational wealth, of private wealth.’



We need to understand how to change the behaviour of Brazilians and how we can foster trust in civil society in Brazil.”

Rodrigo Pipponzi



Many people that fund in Africa really don't know the context and the nuances of the cultures. As an organisation that does, we decided to play this broader role within the ecosystem."

Jackie Asiimwe

Uniqueness

At their most basic, what all SIOs are trying to do is to increase the amount of philanthropy and improve its practice. As Jackie Asiimwe observes: 'CivSource is not one thing but several things having these two aims: Philanthropy that works and civil society that thrives.'

A characteristic of a number of SIOs is that they are doing things that no-one else is doing, something else which adds immensely to their value. Perhaps the clearest example of this is provided by WINGS. As Executive Director, Benjamin Bellegy says: 'WINGS is a unique and I would say a critical piece of the philanthropy ecosystem globally, in the sense that it's the only network that, at the global level, brings together all sorts of actors that are helping the philanthropic and giving sector to grow, to be more collaborative, to be more transformative. We also have a unique and very diverse constituency because we cover the entire spectrum of philanthropy.'

Talking of the motives of her and her co-founder in setting up Generation Pledge, Marina Feffer Oelsner points out: 'we started to see that there was a demographic that was really neglected: inheritors.' Rose Maruru believes EPIC-Africa occupies a similarly niche role: 'Our research, data, and the insights that emerge are of interest to others, for example, researchers, consultants, and even journalists seeking a civil society perspective on what's happening in a particular country. Right now, there's nowhere for them to go, and it's all word of mouth, 'asking around'. It's also important to note that its uniqueness extends also to its range – EPIC-Africa seeks, in time, to work across the whole

continent which would increase the ability of those using its services to draw comparisons in data from the range of African countries.

Of the Centre for Asian Philanthropy and Society (CAPS), Ruth Shapiro says: 'What we set out to do when we created CAPS was to increase the quality and quantity of private social investment. This is our mission but with the very clear premise of basing our work on what incentivises and works in the Asian context. I don't see many others that do that specifically.'

Finally, Jackie Asiimwe says that CivSource's advisory work 'is shaped by the fact that many people that fund in Africa really don't know the context and the nuances of the cultures. As an organisation that does, we decided to play this broader role within the ecosystem.'



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Rose Maruru



Advocacy and representation

A crucial role for many SIIOs, especially those who unite funders under an umbrella is representation, both to the sector itself and externally to other actors.

This is vital in enabling them to pursue an advocacy role with government, both for a more conducive environment and for policy changes that the sector as a whole can get behind. WINGS, for instance, has become ‘the collective voice for philanthropy at the global level, which was a role nobody was playing, because there was a crying need.’

Nick Deychakiwsky of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, one of a limited number of committed infrastructure funders, also speaks of the need for representation and a sense of corporate identity. The Foundation’s long-standing support for philanthropic infrastructure dates from ‘a core realisation of the need for us all to try to work together, not only on policy but on how we do our work – on effectiveness, transparency, on accountability, on how the sector finds its place within society.’

Walter Veirs, also of Mott sums up the value of representation and collective action: ‘From a policy advocacy point of view, your policy outcomes are better when you are collaborating as a field, you can come up with a better understanding of what works and what doesn’t, and you speak with a more unified, a more representative voice, so you can be more successful in getting your policy positions across... on the policy experience, it’s very clear, we need to tell our story together through joined up advocacy.’

Speaking to the state

Relations with government are critical on a number of counts. First, as our respondents recognised, government is the most powerful force when it comes creating social change. Ruth Shapiro points out that ‘[Asian philanthropists] care about what their governments think and they work with government very closely because they know that that’s the way to get things done, regardless of the type of governance type, meaning whether or not it is a communist regime, a democracy or something in the middle.’

Neera Nundy, too, notes Dasra’s role in bringing different stakeholders into the work of social impact and that ‘a key one of these is the government. We recognised that if our systems in India were really going to change on the ground, the quality of government systems needs to be improved and strengthened, whether that’s in education or health or whatever, and having a platform approach is also a way that we are able to engage on policy with governments.’

Moreover, as Benjamin Bellegly notes, ‘there’s massive potential to leverage philanthropic money, which is very small, to influence governments who can create a difference in society at a much greater scale than philanthropy can.’

As an example of the sorts of benefit stimulating cross-sector cooperation can bring he cites ‘the creation of a SDG Partnership Platform [in Kenya] [which] has helped coordinate efforts from business, philanthropy, development funders and government and generated a pipeline of funding of more than 150 million USD in just three years.’

It is not just a matter of money. Representation allows philanthropy to be taken seriously by governments when it comes to decisions which affect the whole of society. He points to the framework partnership agreement WINGS has just concluded with the EU: ‘We are already present in different spaces at the UN, the EU, the OECD, through our member, Philea, at the Financial Action Task Force, among others. We are starting to be invited by governments to provide advice on how to create a more conducive environment for the field.’ At the end of the 2022 Effective Development Co-operation Summit in Geneva, USAID and 14 governments expressed their commitment to support localised aid practices. But there is also a level beneath that: ‘as well as representing the sector globally, we’re helping our members to do their own advocacy, because most of the policies and regulations for philanthropy and the partnerships that can happen between government and philanthropy are at the national level, rather than global.’

What Ruth Shapiro describes as CAPS’ flagship policy piece ‘is a study that we do every two years called the Doing Good Index, which looks at the factors which enable or impede the giving and receiving of all types of private social investment across the region. And in that study, three of the four sets of main indicators have to do with government policy – regulation, tax and fiscal policy, and procurement policy. So in that sense, we very much try to talk to government and point out that the social sector... is pretty much aligned with government....we understandwhich policies help to incentivise that kind of action, and we help governments understand that as well.’

Creating a more favourable giving climate

As Benjamin Bellegly also notes, the second kind of advocacy role SIOs can play is to advocate with governments to create more favourable conditions for philanthropy. In addition to campaigns orchestrated by the European Foundation Centre (now Philea) on a European foundation statute and on easing cross-border giving in Europe, there are examples of this kind of lobbying from Brazil, where IDIS has been involved in a long-running campaign to create legislation which would encourage the use of endowments for philanthropic purposes.

Infrastructure bodies can provide the political clout, the sense of solidarity and the ability to sustain the kind of long campaign necessary to bring about legislative change.

Resisting government incursions into the non-profit sector

The third way in which infrastructure and other support bodies can provide representative muscle is in orchestrating the response to government hostility or attempts to restrict to the non-profit sector. ‘We see a growing trend of shrinking civic space,’ says Benjamin Bellegly. ‘The sector is ill-equipped to address that and to push back against it.’ Neera Nundy endorses this. Indian philanthropy and civil society continues to labour under the burden of the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act: ‘if our regulatory environment became less constrained, if certain kinds of taxes were introduced, that would unlock a lot more money, but very few of us are engaged in trying to change that. It’s a difficult environment right now....there’s more need than ever to be collective, to come together so you actually don’t get called out and that you have strength in numbers.’

Walter Veirs speaks of this, too, when he talks of the Mott Foundation’s original motive for funding for infrastructure, in the 1960s.

There was a realisation, he says, ‘at that time... that the sector was not very well prepared to defend itself and how quickly the legislative body could change the rules which would affect profoundly the space in which philanthropy operated.’ The moral is that, even where philanthropy appears to enjoy a privileged position, it has to be capable of defending its interests, should the need arise, and infrastructure bodies are uniquely positioned to do that.

Finally, Mott’s Mamo Mohapi notes: ‘In many African countries, it’s really difficult for people to engage on issues with the government if they don’t have strong infrastructure and the ecosystem that enables that to happen and because, in many instances, the state is not supportive of civil society, funding from the state can be limited.’

It’s also worth noting as an adjunct to this representative function is increased visibility for individual organisations when they band together. A 2022 UPF report, [The COVID-19 Crucible](#), notes, ‘Collaborations enable small groups to be seen and heard.’ An example UPF gives is the [Regional Education Learning Initiative](#) (RELI), a network that seeks to improve education practices in three countries, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. One member noted during a webinar that ‘it wasn’t until individuals came together that they could get local, and over time, national governments to take them seriously.’

Influence

A related way to advocacy and representation in which SIOs provide value to the sector is through influence. Often, this works directly through members or clients.



Maria Feffer Oelsner describes how, ‘when we’re talking to people about how to go about impact effectiveness, we know that choosing a cause area is one of the most important things that one has to do, so we help them. We offer them a process where they will go through their values mapping, where they’ll be exposed to comparisons between different cause areas, so they know what possibilities are before they go ahead and make their decisions.’ She gives a striking example of the way organisations like Generation Pledge can create a multiplier effect through their advice. A pledger from Guatemala who initially wanted to set up an endowment for an already-wealthy university was through the advice and experience that Generation Pledge was able to call on to use ‘his social capital, his political capital, his position within the university to bring [J-Pal\[1\]](#) to Guatemala, so we expect the impact to be huge.’

In addition, through their umbrella role, for instance, in bringing together grantmakers, national and regional foundation associations can produce a ‘cascade’ effect in the sector, helping to disseminate experience and ideas among members and beyond. This is particularly true in associations of associations, like United Philanthropy Forum (UPF) in the US.

Dave Biemesderfer of UPF notes that UPF comprises: ‘95 regional and national philanthropy associations and networks, or philanthropy-serving organisations, who collectively represent over seven thousand funders across the United States.’ He adds: ‘Each of our members has a different slice of the sector, so our strength is bringing them all together and we have to determine which issues are cross-cutting and that a lot of our members have an interest in.’

In terms of what WINGS is trying to do, Benjamin Bellegy sees three areas of impact: ‘the first area of impact is influencing ourselves, the second is influencing other actors, especially policy-makers, and the third is building ecosystems.’ It’s also important to remember that WINGS, too, is a meta-association that casts a wide net. In addition to its own 200-plus members, its indirect influence must be taken into consideration, too with members themselves being membership networks. As Benjamin Bellegy points out, through these, they ‘reach more than 100,000 foundations and philanthropy actors across the globe. That is potentially very powerful in terms of how we influence our own sector, how we ignite collaboration within it and with other actors including governments.’

Another example of exerting influence is offered by Insituto MOL. As Rodrigo Pipponzi points out, it works ‘with 17 different retailers, and I’m talking about the biggest retailers in Brazil – ...and I have come to understand through working with these platforms for the last 15 years, that we have the opportunity of changing the mindsets of those leaders so they can improve their work around philanthropy. The CEOs of those companies started calling and saying, “I want to do more. I want to set like some social investment programme in the company, I want to hire a consultant to drive the social investment strategy in my company.”’

Data and information, too, has a big role to play in influencing the sector beyond members or constituent groups. The level of analysis that the African CSO Platform, for instance, can provide has far wider implications. It can ‘begin to unlock a lot of other opportunities that are currently out of reach for individual CSOs. Aggregation also strengthens CSOs’ advocacy with governments for a more enabling environment. The transformative power of data and knowledge is what really gets us excited, and that’s part of our long-term vision for what the African CSO Platform can enable.’

Changemakers



Many SIIOs increasingly see themselves not simply purveyors of information either passively or actively, but as in the van of social and environmental change.

Benjamin Bellegy makes this point explicitly: WINGS is ‘not a service-based or contractual organisation. We really see ourselves as changemakers....The first benefit is really the ability to shape the global agenda, to collaborate with others towards a change agenda.’ He adds: ‘If we want to really create deeper change, we think philanthropy should not remain simply a sector that fills gaps left by government or market, but actually helps trigger transformation.’

He speaks of WINGS’ linking ‘advocacy for investments in infrastructure to the debates around localisation – if we want bottom-up processes of development and social change, we also need to localise resources. They are there, but we need to invest in them and support them. So we developed all these areas of works because we see there is a huge need, and a fantastic potential within this network.’

Dave Biemesderfer of UPF notes that ‘working through this network of networks can really drive impact and lead to change because it’s not a top-down approach, it’s a networked approach.’ Karen Ansara of NEID Global gives one practical example of the way in which SIIOs are trying to do this: ‘We have convened a commission to focus on how we can move the global philanthropic sector towards more racial equity in our philanthropic practice, so that’s core to our work right now. But also we’ve become aware of indigenous-led philanthropy so we had a giving circle focused on investing in funds led by indigenous people and we just concluded an economic justice giving circle because we’ve become more aware of the fact that the lack of worker rights, the lack of a voice in the political system, in the taxation system often leads to suffering and poverty.’

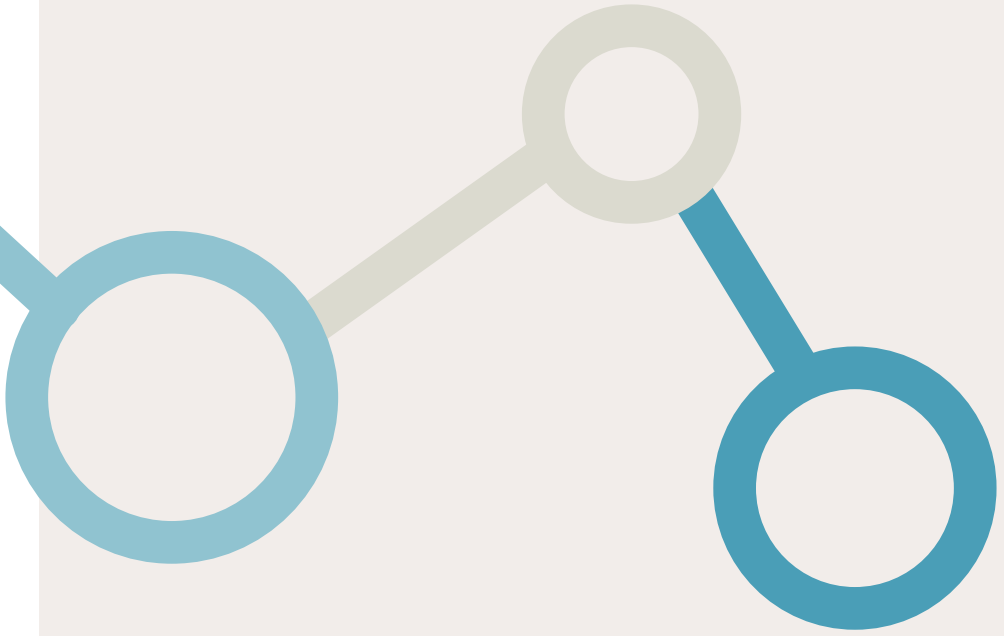
Ruth Shapiro also speaks of ‘trying to create systemic change to build greater accountability and transparency which we believe will help organisations be more trusted in society and enable fundraising.’



If we want to really create deeper change, we think philanthropy should not remain simply a sector that fills gaps left by government or market, but actually helps trigger transformation.”

Benjamin Bellegy

Community and relationship building



Another central feature of the work that SIOs do, especially among their own subscribers, is building relationships. This was apparent from the interviews, both explicitly and implicitly, in the language the interviewees used to talk about their work.

Ruth Shapiro notes that ‘the relationships are critical in every Asian economy. They’re not transaction-based, they’re relationship-based.’ Karen Ansara describes NEID Global as; ‘building a community of donors, so our efforts are focused both on learning about issues as well as learning about each other....I have always felt, and this has played out in practice, that the community is the most important thing that we are building. People come for the programming, but they stay because of the strength of the community.’

Moreover, the relationships can be crucial in bringing and keeping people together. Karen Ansara also talks of the difficulty of finding individual donors and the importance of networks in this regard: ‘A lot of them are hidden behind donor advised funds, for instance, so the network aspect is really critical to make individual connections to donors who are giving in the international space. You need to partner with other donor networks and philanthropy serving organisations to help uncover those folks because we all have something to offer to help them be stronger.’

There’s something more to the idea of community for NEID. It’s a means to an end. The community is the nucleus of the movement. As Karen Ansara puts it: ‘it’s about moving from community to movement.’

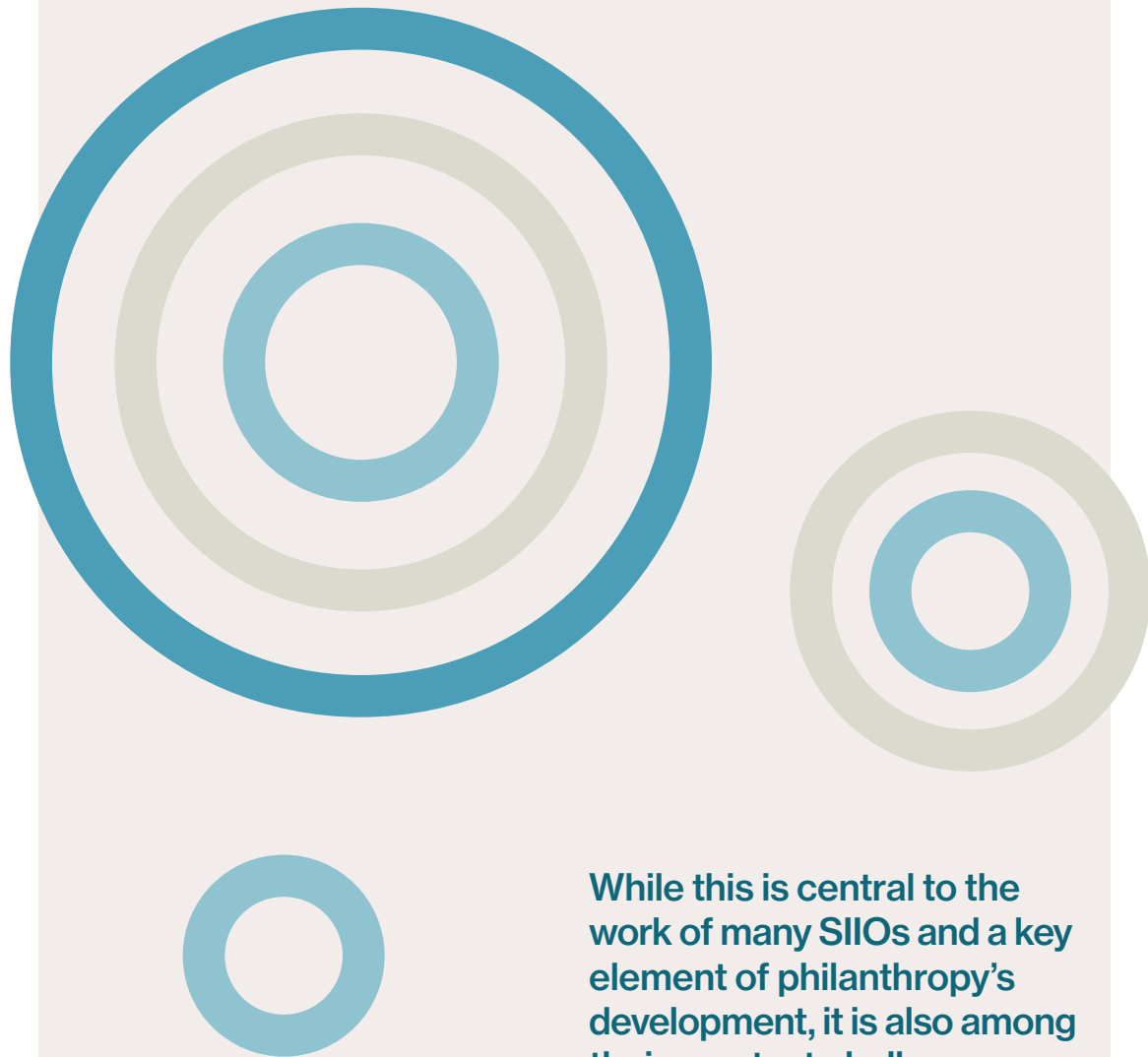
Perhaps the clearest example of the importance of creating a community is furnished by Generation Pledge. ‘We are a community.’ says Maria Feffer Oelsner. ‘We say that we’re doing the work as trusted advisors, community facilitators and peers....We explain to prospective pledgers that it’s a long-term journey, so expectations are set at the beginning. Once they come into the community, they will find education, advice and support.’ Like NEID Global, community is a key step in creating a movement. ‘We wanted to create a community for inheritors,’ says Maria Feffer Oelsner, ‘because at the end of the day, we’re looking for a strategy that will shift culture, so it has to be a movement.’



it’s about moving from community to movement.”

Karen Ansara

Building ecosystems



While this is central to the work of many SIOs and a key element of philanthropy's development, it is also among their greatest challenges.

'Almost nobody is investing in these local ecosystems,' says Benjamin Bellegy, but 'if we want effective collaboration within our sector, more progressive norms, if we want better regulation, etc, we need organisations who are going to do that on behalf of the sector, and of course we need investment for them to do it.'

The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation is one of the exceptions in this regard and Nick Deychakiwsky speaks of the importance of the local element in guiding Mott's thinking about ecosystems: 'when you're local, you see how you can't just address one thing, you have to look at it holistically... It's not just about making the work happen, but about creating organisations that would care about a broader field.' Walter Veirs describes the Foundation's approach: 'we didn't pick an issue, we looked at the space and said: "Okay, what do people need to organise around the things that are most important to them?"'

Another organisation that is explicit about this element of SIOs' work is EPIC-Africa. According to Rose Maruru, 'EPIC-Africa is helping to strengthen the ecosystem for civil society and philanthropy to thrive in Africa. I guess you could say that we're ecosystem builders.'

But Nick Deychakiwsky's point, above, about a local vision being crucial to seeing the need for a robust ecosystem is an important one, appreciated as such by others in the study. Jackie Asimwe of CivSource notes, 'We've done interesting things around enabling the local ecosystem of philanthropy by working with community foundations and supporting them to grow and to be better through researching what local philanthropy looks like,' and Benjamin Bellegy speaks WINGS' linking 'advocacy for investments in the field's infrastructure to the global debates around localisation and were successful in promoting the idea among development funders that if we want bottom-up development, we also need to localise funding and resources.'





Collaboration

Collaboration is now centre-stage in any discussion of philanthropy and its role. Goal 17 of the SDGs is specifically about partnership and it has become almost a truism within the sector that the solution of what is referred to as the polycrisis will require all sectors to put their heads – and their resources – together.



we can accomplish much more together because no foundation ever has enough resources to make something happen alone.”

Nick Deychakiwsky

SIOs are crucial to such partnerships, often both encouraging and enabling collaboration (in virtue of their roles as platforms) and modelling it at the same time. Moreover, as an article in SSIR put it: ‘The expectation that collaboration can occur without a supporting infrastructure is one of the most frequent reasons why it fails. In the best of circumstances, these backbone organizations embody the principles of adaptive leadership: the ability to focus people’s attention and create a sense of urgency, the skill to apply pressure to stakeholders without overwhelming them, the competence to frame issues in a way that presents opportunities as well as difficulties, and the strength to mediate conflict among stakeholders.’

Nick Deychakiwsky says much the same, perhaps a little more pithily: ‘we can accomplish much more together because no foundation ever has enough resources to make something happen alone. Even the Gates Foundation says we have to leverage money. So, if we want to make something happen, we are always trying to get others to come in, and one of the ways to do that is if you have infrastructure organisations that provide platforms where we can more easily find our peers, develop relationships with them and then figure out ways to collaborate.’



Breaking the siloes

This role of creating and/or enabling partnership is particularly crucial not only in forging cooperation within a sector which tends to be fragmented, but also in allowing individual philanthropists and philanthropic organisations to straddle the boundaries between sectors. Karen Ansara notes one of NEID's roles is to 'bring together... different populations, the professional staff of foundations, individual donors who are working out of donor advised funds or out of a family foundation. We also bring in impact investors and philanthropic advisors – all those in the ecosystem who can teach each other and be role models for each other about how to do more and do it more effectively.'

CAPS, too, is 'try[ing] very hard to traverse traditional boundaries, and the world is moving in that direction anyway.....the boundaries between the three legs of the stool, so to speak, are morphing anyway, and we see ourselves right in there, helping people to navigate that change.'

There are three main ways in which SIOs can be instrumental to collaborations: through the relationships they create among like-minded peers, through the ready-made platforms they provide; and as drivers and instigators of potential cooperations.



We really believe in the power of PSOs to lead change and increase impact in the sector.”

Dave Biemesderfer

'Relationships don't just happen'

Relationship and community building (see above) can naturally lead on to collaboration. Marina Feffer Oelsner notes that: 'one of the things that we're very intrigued about after the global gathering is how do we support collective action in a more intentional way, as we heard there is an appetite from our community for such a thing.'

Dave Biemesderfer, too, highlights both the importance of collaboration and the importance of SIOs' role in making it happen: 'we created United Philanthropy Forum because the PSOs in the US needed to have a network where they don't just learn with and from each other, but also have space to partner and collaborate. We really believe in the power of PSOs to lead change and increase impact in the sector.'

He offers a formula for successful collaboration: initiatives need: 'a common North Star... data and information about the work they're doing... information resources they can give to their foundation members... [and] financial resources, so every initiative we do has an element of re-granting to support their capacity for that issue.'

They need support in communicating the issue through their network, they need ongoing programming support to learn about how to do this issue well, they need ongoing networking with their peers to learn what's working and what's not in different PSOs, and they need metrics to assess their own success. There needs to be some kind of PSO working group or task force that's leading the work.' All these are things which PSOs can supply or facilitate.

Walter Veirs' experience of pooled funds tells him that these often come about when 'you have a trusted relationship with your peers in the foundation field, somebody has an idea, they look for partners and they turn to people they know and people they have a relationship with, whose programmes they understand and whose values they align with. And you have an infrastructure on which to realise your collaboration. Two recent examples of this dynamic for me are the European AI & Society Fund Society Fund and Civitates, which are both based at the Network of European Foundations.' He goes on: 'That's something we shouldn't take for granted. Those relationships don't just happen, and if you're not part of that ecosystem, you might not have that opportunity to participate in those things.'

Platforms

As an aid to this kind of collaboration, of course, is that infrastructure organisations can provide a basis on which to build it. As Walter Veirs says, ‘one benefit of a strong and dynamic set of infrastructure organisations is that there are partners with whom we can work on a range of related issues.’

Rodrigo Pipponzi sees Instituto MOL very much as serving this sort of platform-building function in Brazil: ‘Instituto MOL has to have in its mission the role of being an agent that gathers the actors to drive common agendas, which we lack in Brazil. We have major organisations, and each one is working individually to address one part of the structural problem, but we need to do it together. At Instituto MOL, we bring together both mentalities, the third sector mentality and the business mentality, and this mix is very powerful.’

Drivers

But perhaps the key role for SIIOs in collaborations, is not only offering the preconditions in the shape of an existing basis (relationships, an organisation), but the ability to initiate and drive them. Rodrigo Pipponzi has a story to illustrate the potential of this: some years ago, Instituto MOL started discussing the idea of a one per cent pledge in Brazil, where companies of all sizes commit to donating at least 1 per cent of their net profit. They discussed the idea with IDIS, GIFE and Movimento Bem Maior and, between them, they brought together 26 organisations which resulted in the likely launch of such a pledge the beginning of next year. ‘We had a workshop last month and we invited six big companies in Brazil to work together with us to develop the pledge and those companies are probably going to be the funders and promoters, as Salesforce is in United States. For me, this is an example of the power of this collective work.’ Like Neera Nundy, he sees the role of Instituto MOL as being both prime mover and backbone of such a collective: ‘that’s where I see Instituto MOL’s role as bringing together the collective.’

WINGS’ Philanthropy Transformation Initiative and the #PhilanthropyForClimate movement are both good examples of the ways in which SIIOs can initiate collaboration. ‘Through these kinds of initiatives,’ believes Benjamin Bellegy, ‘we’re able to help our members embrace big issues in a more structured and sustained way and that’s urgently needed.’ He points out that ‘634 foundations have already signed the climate commitment and we are starting to build a community to share and document practices, and to monitor how those who sign evolve in their practice. And we’ve started bringing together philanthropy at global events on climate such as COP.’

Forty-four networks were engaged in developing the international commitment, so that’s potentially really powerful in terms of influencing the field.’

For Neera Nundy, Dasra’s most important function is in enabling partnership and collaboration: ‘being in partnership side by side with NGO leaders, to help them achieve their dreams of scale and being able to influence a different group of philanthropists, those wealthy individuals who might speak a different language and feel disconnected from what’s really happening on the ground. Being able to bring these two together to ultimately focus on impact has been our greatest contribution.’



634 foundations have already signed the climate commitment and we are starting to build a community to share and document practices, and to monitor how those who sign evolve in their practice.”

Benjamin Bellegy



Leadership and thought leadership



Part of the change in role and orientation SIOs are undergoing is that they are increasingly front-runners in bringing innovation and ideas into the field.

A report by TCC Group in 2020 notes: 'As frontline partners for grantmakers, PSOs also function as close observers of trends across the philanthropic sector. They are often the first call for funders with questions outside of their immediate expertise or seeking to respond to unanticipated challenges, whether these are localized and/or issue-specific concerns, natural disasters, or national political change. Oftentimes, PSOs enable funders to be responsive and timely in ways that may differ markedly from their institutionalized approaches to grantmaking.'

WINGS, given its global reach and prominent position, is one of the SIOs that best exemplifies this. As Benjamin Bellego remarks, 'one of the newest things that WINGS has engaged in is trying to build global movements to influence our field's norms and practices [through the Philanthropy Transformation Initiative and the #PhilanthropyForClimate movement mentioned earlier].'

There has been a lot of reflection and constructive criticism of the sector for many years, but there was no place where it all comes together. You have people working on trust-based philanthropy, on impact investing and how to use and leverage resources differently, and on many other cutting edge issues, and we believe something needs to be done to bring all that wisdom together – good practices, frameworks, tools, data – and make it easier to access for the mainstream sector and not just for small circles of convinced funders.'

A key issue to surface in philanthropy as elsewhere in the last few years is that of racial equity. According to the UPF report cited elsewhere, 'BIPOC-led PSOs with a long history of centering racial equity were key leaders in being advocates for centering racial equity and fighting against racism in philanthropy's response to the pandemic' and, in general, the report contends, 'Leaders of PSOs increasingly recognize their important role in pushing philanthropy to center equity – racial equity in particular – in its work, practices and policies.'



There has been a lot of reflection and constructive criticism of the sector for many years, but there was no place where it all comes together.”

Benjamin Bellego

Skill reinforcement and collective learning

Though this is one of the most traditional of SIO offerings, skill development and peer learning remains among the most vital.



As Karen Ansara, of NEID's members: 'they're exposed to other sectors, other organisations, other donors, and what we find is they often expand their giving into other areas. When you hear a peer talk about why they give to a certain organisation to solve a certain problem, that is so much more effective than reading a report or a news article. The Hewlett Foundation came out with a [report](#) a few years ago that showed that the most effective donor education is peer-to-peer.' [The operative passage from the report runs:

'A primary role of Philanthropy Support Organizations is to provide opportunities for funders to learn from their peers—the single most trusted source of practical knowledge for grantmakers. 83% percent use conferences for learning and making decisions. Conferences where peers can interact face to face and select sessions relevant to their work, are also cited by 83% as the "primary way" they seek out information.']

As Benjamin Bellegy puts it, 'something needs to be done to bring all [the] wisdom together – good practices, frameworks, tools, data – and make it easier to access for the mainstream sector and not just for small circles of convinced funders.'



When you hear a peer talk about why they give to a certain organisation to solve a certain problem, that is so much more effective than reading a report or a news article."

Karen Ansara

Implicit in what's already been said about the increasing tendency of SIIOs to see themselves as changemakers and to take a larger view of their role is a change in both their self-perception and the perception of them by others.



Changes in the role of SIIOs: *from service provider to leadership*

Dave Biemesderfer of UPF puts it like this: 'There's been a shift from just serving members to trying to have an impact on, and a leadership role in, the field. Twenty years ago, with the regional PSOs particularly, there was the sense that members pay their dues, we give them back services and that's all we do. Now, there's much more understanding that we have to have a voice, we have to have a point of view about what philanthropy can and should be doing and to be a leader in the field to make that happen.'

A UPF report from March 2022, **The COVID-19 Crucible** puts some more flesh on this: 'PSOs have become more transformative, less transactional: PSO board and staff leaders increasingly think and talk about their PSO as a unified community rather than an organization and its members. In turn, more PSOs are approaching member financial support as investments in mission-critical efforts rather than dues in exchange for services. This shift parallels the increasing emphasis on PSOs' networking (collaborative level of work) and advocacy (collective level of work) roles during the pandemic.'

'Partners in addressing big challenges'

Walter Veirs agrees and also thinks this traditional view has been an enemy of fundraising for SIIOs: 'there is a perception perhaps that infrastructure organisations are just service organisations. But, in reality, many are increasingly partners in addressing big challenges and big issues. All over the world, I think we're seeing that really happen.' He concludes that you have to 'see infrastructure as part of solving big challenges and big issues. 'It's not a place where you go just to have a bit of exchange with your friends.'

Generation Pledge was deliberately set up so that it would not be on a transactional, this-in-exchange-for-that basis. As Maria Feffer Oelsner explains, 'we set up Generation Pledge as an organisation that is not a membership organisation on purpose, because this demographic is very used to being seen as having money stamped on their forehead, and we're here to develop something over the long term where intimacy and trust is really the most important asset because we're going to have to do things collectively. If they see us as service providers, the energy exchange is completely different.'

Even if SIOs wanted to maintain a transactional approach, the trend of events is against it. The philanthropy field itself is changing and diversifying and it would be impossible to cater to them all in terms of service provision.



Growing diversity of the field – ecosystem rather than infrastructure

More importantly, diversifying their own approach to take account of the needs of the field enable SIOs to play the part they can potentially play, argues Benjamin Bellegy: ‘we have also diversified a lot because our understanding of the infrastructure for philanthropy has diversified a lot, with non-traditional players playing a critical role – social media or even private family offices and other types of players are critical enablers for giving and for philanthropy... The main idea is to bring together all the field builders and influencers and the catalysts of change in the sector. And that’s why we now prefer to talk about a support ecosystem rather than a static infrastructure, as it better captures this diversity of players and the need for them to collaborate.’

This also a feature for CivSource which is supporting the non-institutional elements of civil society. In fact, this has been one of the elements of its work that Jackie Asimwe cites as a success: ‘A lot of funding was going to structured forms of civil society, and we’re saying that civil society is organised differently. So, rather than try and fit people or organisations into a box, how about we meet them where they are and support what their vision is for their community?’

Supporting local philanthropic institutions

The use of infrastructure to develop a philanthropic culture is also important. As Nick Deychakiwsky explains a long-term objective of the Mott Foundation is ‘to help support the creation and strengthening of local philanthropic institutions, the most successful strategy is to start with what we call a national-level community foundation support organisation that then helps create a movement within a particular country.’ This has informed much of Mott’s work in the community foundation field, leading them to fund national support organisations, like European Community Foundation Initiative that can provide, for instance, ‘seed grants or funding for technical assistance to get things going.’



The main idea is to bring together all the field builders and influencers and the catalysts of change in the sector.”

Benjamin Bellegy



Challenges

Measurement and attribution: the midwife syndrome

A problem which besets the philanthropy sector in general and SIOs in particular is the difficulty of ascribing effects to interventions. The particular compounding difficulty faced by SIOs is that they often operate at a remove from their intended effects. Benjamin Bellegy admits that ‘the kind of impact we have is long-term and collective, and sometimes less tangible. That’s a common challenge to all of us,’ and as Karen Ansara acknowledges, ‘it’s almost impossible for us to track the ultimate impact on the ground because there’s so many causal factors.’

And demonstration of impact is what most donors are seeking. Rodrigo Pipponzi wonders: ‘how can I prove to you as a donor that the 300,000 Reais that you put into Instituto MOL really moved the needle in the culture of giving in Brazil?’ This is compounded by a lack of good information on philanthropy in Brazil (the same might be said of other places, through Rodrigo Pipponzi was one of the few who made it explicit): ‘The main research that we have is Pesquisa Doação Brasil is every two years and it lacks a lot of information.’

He adds: ‘I think 90, 95 per cent of the donors in Brazil are driven by direct indicators and that’s why most of them fund projects directly.’ Neera Nundy feels this, too. ‘People are hesitant to give because you don’t feel like you’re really changing lives when you’re funding an organisation like ours.’

Dave Biemesderfer, though, argues that direct attribution debate is flawed where SIOs are concerned: ‘Wondering whether to pay dues to a regional PSO or to fund a non-profit providing early childhood education is a false dichotomy, because, yeah, you can give a grant to a single non-profit, but what about investing in the PSO to bring together a network of education funders who can work together to advance early childhood education, to change policies to make early childhood education better, and to assess what’s working or not?’

And Jackie Asiimwe sees signs – albeit slow – of change in this attitude: ‘A midwife... will tell her story by talking about the babies she delivers even though they aren’t her children and sometimes it’s better to point to the babies – to point to funding coming to organising, or to donors who are starting to think of capacity building in different ways, or to changing language. All those are little things that over time, because we’ve been in this field and done this work, are shifting.’

From achievers to enablers

All respondents were aware of this challenge, but most are developing their own forms of measurement and/or are seeing their effectiveness in different ways. Benjamin Bellegy observes that: ‘the kind of change we’re able to bring is different from that of an NGO when they build a school in a specific location for instance, but the potential impact is enormous. There’s an incredible multiplier effect working through networks. It’s true that it’s challenging to harness, but that’s because we’re not used to collaborating.’

He argues that, ‘the whole sector needs a mindset shift from seeing us as “achievers”, to seeing us as enablers. We still have the mindset that we are organisation X and we’re going to deliver Y. As an enabler, you aren’t attributing change to yourself alone, you understand that you’re contributing to a much broader change and that you’re not going to have full control over it.’

WINGS is also mindful of the need to seek a different way of assessing impact and has made some progress in this direction: ‘With DAFNE, we developed the 4Cs framework a few years ago and its purpose is to help these kind of organisations articulate and assess their impact around four areas – connection, capacity, capability and credibility.’

Karen Ansara notes impossibility of tracking direct impact on NGOs and communities, 'so, what we track primarily is the impact on our members... we do an annual survey where we assess our member satisfaction with the programming, but also their sense of community, how strong they feel bonded to the community because that's the driver of all we do. So, we have developed a baseline and we are now measuring the increase – hopefully – in each of our members' philanthropic output globally year-to-year.'

And it's important to bear in mind that the contribution of SIOs is not always to be measured in terms of money or results for individual organisations or communities. Benjamin Bellegly talks of 'collective impact. It's not about attribution, it's about contribution, and it's also long term... For a long time, we were focussed on the needs of our clients and constituencies and we haven't learned so well how to think of impact and to articulate and evaluate it.'

'We work closely with our pledgers and with partners,' says Maria Feffer Oelsner, 'with humility and understanding that there is a limit to track effectiveness.' Within those constraints, though, Global Pledge tries to 'gather information about how the pledgers are deploying capital and influence when and where it makes sense.'

They are also actively seeking more objective ways of measuring the work that their pledgers do: 'Something that we're starting now,' she says, 'is an offering called Impact Cycles where we help them [GP's community] map their polycapital and develop a plan of action, which we review after a certain period of time, to understand what worked, what didn't.' They have also 'created, vetted and tested the LEB model that stands for Look, Envision and Build for consistent effective deployments, as well as the polycapital framework to map the different forms of capital an individual has.'

The anecdotal element

There is also much anecdotal evidence to be taken into account. Dave Biemesderfer affirms the value of this: 'We have lots of great stories about the impact we've had and telling those stories is the best way to help them understand the importance of the work that we do and that our members do.'

'For now, we gather the stories of the people that we work with,' says Jackie Asiimwe, 'that's our main way at the moment, but we know that at some point we have to have more scientific ways of measuring the work that we do,' but as she goes on to point out, stories carry conviction and provide a way to illustrate the work that SIOs and the value they offer: 'why not tell stories; which we do through our podcast, reports and stories on our website?'

It's little-known and little-acknowledged, so why don't we contribute to being part of that telling that story of African generosity and giving?'

Much of this anecdotal evidence is also furnished by the communities of SIOs themselves. Karen Ansara relates some examples from NEID Global's members of the value they find in membership: 'It's giving the young woman in her 30s who has just inherited the leadership of her family fund the opportunity to meet people who are 20 years further down the road and to develop her whole grantmaking portfolio based on the wisdom she's gleaned from others. It's seeing the couple who were professors at a local college inherit a fund and make seven million dollars a year in grants to grassroots organisations they never would have heard of without NEID, and this is by their own testimony.'



'with humility and understanding that there is a limit to track effectiveness.'

Maria Feffer Oelsner

'Money, money, money!'

Without exception, though, respondents cited funding as their most immediate challenge to putting their plans into operation. 'Yes, obviously,' says Ruth Shapiro, 'more money, more staff, more hours in the day.'

Moreover, the need to chase money puts the leaders of SIOs in the classic NGO bind – they have to fundraise to keep the organisation running, but this takes their time and energy away from what they see as their real job. 'Sometimes, I wake up thinking nobody told me fundraising was an all-day everyday job, because it is!' says Jackie Asiimwe, feelingly. The fact that CivSource is in the same boat as the CSOs it supports, though, has an unexpected side benefit: 'they absolutely know that you know their struggle. You understand their fragility and their vulnerability so, when we are co-creating solutions, it's from that perspective.'

Maria Feffer Oelsner also sees her fundraising work as competing with 'my capacity to focus on growth for the community.' She adds 'I think that within the demographic of inheritors, there is a lot of conservatism still. We have to identify those who really have a deep desire for impact....growing the community is not always easy because we have to search for these people.'

Money, of course, is not an end in itself as Benjamin Bellegy points out: 'We do need more money, but money is only a lever that will then allow other things to fall into place.'

Instituto MOL provides a counter-example: from its model of donations from Editora MOL, Instituto MOL has its own fundraising platform and, interestingly, it has produced its own momentum. Rodrigo Pipponzi notes that: 'Money still comes to Instituto MOL from the donations to Editora MOL and the good news is that it's not two per cent any more, it's five per cent, because the retailers wanted to do more so it was kind of an organic process for us to create the fund, and then Instituto MOL.'

Even so, MOL is not immune from the challenges all of its fellows face: 'when we decided to scale the work that we have in Instituto MOL, we needed more money – the five per cent that comes from the fund is not enough. We need more like 50 per cent and it's very challenging to raise that because it's so hard to get money for this kind of work.'

'Where we have not succeeded,' believes Rose Maruru, 'is to do this work at a faster pace and at a bigger scale, and that has to do with funding, purely with funding. It has been very difficult to get this work funded.'

She sums up the general position: despite its value, EPIC-Africa will find it difficult to sustain the work it is doing: 'we're still unique, but without funding, we will be hard pressed to demonstrate our unique contributions at the scale that is needed to really establish EPIC-Africa as the anchor social impact infrastructure organisation on the continent.'

However, as Benjamin Bellegy implies, there are resources beyond money that are equally important. For WINGS, it is the engagement of a broad section of their members in the issues they are raising but also what he terms 'a collective aspiration, a collective vision' in order to mobilise that engagement. For WINGS, one of these is its global nature; 'we have the challenge of making sure that everything we do continues to speak to all these constituencies in all these different contexts.'



We do need more money, but money is only a lever that will then allow other things to fall into place."

Benjamin Bellegy

Recruitment

Another key challenge is recruitment, which goes hand in hand with limited resources. In fact, Ruth Shapiro describes talent as, 'my second biggest issue because we are unique in that we work both wide across an entire region and deep, so we need to have a very open mind to what's really happening. For example, there were recently elections in Thailand, what are the implications for the third sector? We need people who can stay abreast of all those things and who can analyse and write about them in English.' However, she adds that CAPS has been 'pretty successful. I believe that reports coming from Asia should be just as good as any in the world and fortunately, our team has been able to prove this to be the case.'

Others make the link between funding and the attraction and retention of staff explicit: 'We need to have world-class professionals,' says Maria Feffer Oelsner, 'which is both expensive and crucial.'

Dave Biemesderfer points out: 'We are very people-intensive organisations. More than half of my budget is salaries and benefits. So it requires investment and there's always a challenge in getting enough resources to bring in the people you need... I don't know that enough funders understand that.'

He also notes what he calls 'the business model challenge, finding the right model to ensure you're financially sustainable and can do the work you want to do.'

Karen Ansara, too, speaks of the need for staff and technological resources. She hopes to create internationally focused NEID communities across the US that can unlock international funding because they provide a place where those reluctant to give can get the support they need. Creating those communities will mean additional staff. To reach the individuals donors whom she describes as 'the bulk of the giving overseas...and to mobilise them and to make them more effective, you have to build out the infrastructure, you have to provide some staffing to support them, and to connect them you need the online infrastructure. We need more investment, we need more staff. Particularly we need at least part-time staff on the ground in these geographic hubs, because facilitating in-person connections is really key to building long-term relationships and the community.'

However, the battle to keep staff with the right skills is one some see themselves as slowly winning. Ruth Shapiro believes this to be the case, as we have seen, so, too, does Neera Nundy: 'We are like this revolving door but finally, we've figured out how to keep at least a few of our leaders.'

That being said, she concedes: ‘the talent war that you hear about on the corporate side also exists in India and we are competing with international folks that have deeper, stronger budgets, so it’ll always be a challenge and we don’t build careers very well in our sector.’

Rodrigo Pipponzi cites a number of problems specific to Brazil. ‘We don’t have many legal incentives to encourage donations,’ he says and notes, too, ‘a big problem of trust in Brazil, towards institutions, towards the government, and of course, towards the third sector, so people lack trust in social organisations.’ He argues the need to, ‘invest much more in data, in research, in understanding the field so we can create those common agendas.’



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Rodrigo Pipponzi

‘Hidden behind a wall’

The funding problem comes largely from the fact that infrastructure remains a difficult sell to funders. Mott itself is a committed and long-term funder of infrastructure, ranging from the local – Michigan Nonprofit Association, the Council of Michigan Foundations – to the national – Council on Foundations, Independent Sector, National Council of Nonprofits and United Philanthropy Forum, Candid – to the international – Philea, the Donors and Foundations Networks in Europe, the Africa Philanthropy Network, the Africa Philanthropy Forum, WINGS and CIVICUS, and the International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law and the European Centre for Not-for-Profit Law. Their support thus embraces not only a wide geography, but infrastructure over virtually the whole range of activities.

Why do so few others follow suit? Nick Deychakiwsky puts it like this: there is often money available for supporting the development of sectoral good practice, ‘there are plenty of funders who want to focus on just that, and their money runs out when it gets to the things that don’t show tangible results as quickly and easily, like research and policy advocacy.’

He believes that ‘it’s having the patience to not be so focused on: what’s my immediate result? It’s understanding that this is something that needs to be there over the long term, and to be nimble and able to respond when called on.’ He concedes that, ‘We probably haven’t cracked the nut on good messaging yet for this.’

In Rose Maruru’s phrase, infrastructure for funders is too often: ‘like plumbing hidden behind a wall.’ Dave Biemesderfer agrees and believes that a fundamental difficulty is that funders don’t really grasp the importance of infrastructure: ‘I think that the roles that PSOs play is much broader than some funders understand. Sometimes funders will just see philanthropy associations as putting on conferences or providing programmes and the work is so much more than that.’ He makes a crucial point when he says: ‘There needs to be more funders who understand that core to them trying to achieve their own foundation missions is the leadership and the partnership of different PSOs in the sector.’

For Karen Ansara, the struggle is in ‘convincing the larger foundations in the sector to support the infrastructure because if we want to solve global problems, we have to reach these individuals who are the bulk of the giving overseas.’

She goes on, harking back to the discussion about attribution, ‘the big foundations want metrics. They want to measure what happens on the ground, understandably. What’s the ultimate impact of your work for that farmer in Nigeria, for that woman in Bolivia? ... It’s just harder to convey that the infrastructure, the staffing, the systems, are what make the music in a network – and facilitate the ultimate work on the ground.’

Above and beyond other challenges, the battle to convince funders is key, believes Rodrigo Pipponzi. The structural issues he mentions earlier ‘trust, data, behaviour, laws, public policies, those are the verticals that we need to work on,’ but ‘first of all we need to understand donors’ behaviour and to show them that you can put 80 per cent of your money here, but put 20 per cent here in more strategic aims, because if we do that, the 80 per cent will be much bigger in the future.’

Funding in silos

A major problem for Rose Maruru in attracting funding for EPIC-Africa's work is the blinkered attitude most funders adopt: 'My experience of trying to fundraise for this work has been that funding structures are organised vertically and in silos – health, education, climate change, etc – and rarely make provision for cross-cutting initiatives like strengthening the ecosystem.'

She identifies a second challenge in relation to funding: 'infrastructure is a public good – like a road. So this poses the free rider problem! Ideally, the nature of this work lends itself to a multi-funder approach because once built, it will benefit everybody. We need some champions to carry this message and mobilise other funders.'

Mamo Mohapi points the lesson of what committed funding can do to support SIOs: 'Where Mott has been active in supporting philanthropy infrastructure, we have seen a growing sector, and a very vibrant sector.'

If I take the example of South Africa, when we started off, there wasn't a philanthropy infrastructure organisation at all that focused specifically on promoting philanthropy, and Mott along with Ford were involved in initial conversations in the country about whether there could be a network of philanthropic organisations... Today, we have a very vibrant philanthropy network in South Africa, partly because Mott stayed in there and walked the journey with this group.'

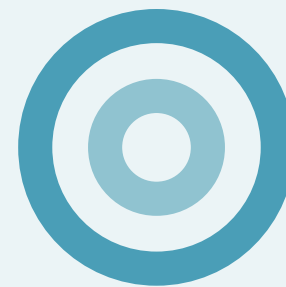
However, she also points to a particular problem in regard to Africa: 'it is still mostly the US or European foundations that understand the value of these networks. There aren't yet that many African philanthropists providing core support for philanthropic infrastructure.'



Ideally, the nature of this work lends itself to a multi-funder approach because once built, it will benefit everybody."

Rose Maruru

Against and in spite of these various challenges, must be set some substantial and significant achievements by SIOs, not only those in the present study, but among the whole breadth of the philanthropy ecosystem. A few are presented here.



Achievements

We have already noted the climate movement launched by Philea and a number of national networks in Europe, WINGS supported take global and 634 foundations have already signed the climate commitment and, as Benjamin Bellego observes, 'we are starting to build a community to share and document practices.'

Dave Biemesderfer cites UPF's work on the 2020 US census, which had two goals; for philanthropy both to advocate for a fair and accurate census count and to invest more in ensuring it. 'We leveraged about 300,000 dollars in philanthropic investment compared to more than 250 million in government and philanthropic investment in the 2010 census that could be attributed directly to the work of our initiative....We were also able to show a huge increase in advocacy for a fair and accurate census count tied directly to our initiative. Almost all of our regional PSO members, 96 per cent, engaged in advocacy around the 2020 census, and nearly all of them attributed that increase in advocacy to the work of our initiative.'

In the case of NEID Global, Karen Ansara points to ‘the US\$650,000 we’ve given through giving circles is one form of impact we can measure, but those contributions are just the tip of the iceberg because the members participate in the circle and then their ongoing giving is influenced so that they’re personally giving more to those particular grantees or that sector.’

Generation Pledge’s bespoke approach to its community members is both labour- and cost-intensive, but shows measurable results, and argues Maria Feffer Oelsner, more than repays the investment: ‘if we look into what we cost and what we influence, it’s really worth it. Just to exemplify the leverage that we have, for every US dollar that Generation Pledge receives – only talking philanthropy without considering polycapital – we have unlocked US\$440 of additional capital.’

Nick Deychakiwsky, from a funders’ standpoint, cites another very specific example of what the support of an SIO achieved: ‘When the pandemic hit, the legislation to provide what were called paycheck protection program loans in the US was initially only being written to support for-profit businesses, and the National Council of Nonprofits spearheaded a move to ensure that non-profit organisations were written into that legislation, which meant that during the pandemic, a lot of non-profits were able to keep their doors open because they were getting that.’

(According to data from the Small Business, National Nonprofit Council secured \$50 billion from Congress in forgivable PPP loans for non-profits’ Covid-19 relief and guided more than 100,000 organisations in learning how to access those loans, which helped preserve 6.2 million non-profit jobs.)

Outside the scope of this report, The Giving Pledge has collected more than 241 billionaires’ pledges (2023 figures from the Pledge’s [website](#)) to give away most of their wealth in their lifetimes or in their wills. Pledges are estimated to total US\$600 billion. As noted above, the GivingTuesday campaign raised USD2.47 billion in 2020, 2.7 billion in 2021, and 3.1 billion in 2022 in the US alone. A WINGS [study cites](#) a multi-stakeholder platform involving SIOs in Kenya (prominent among which are the SDG Philanthropy Platform and Netfwd) which raised between 2017 and 18, USD 34.6 billion, compared to the USD 33 billion raised in the previous year.

The Council on Foundations and its partners motivated [806 foundations](#) to pledge increased, less restrictive multi-year giving during Covid-19. Confluence Philanthropy a membership network of private, public and community foundations; family offices; individual donors and its partners have attracted equity, inclusion, and diversity signatories with a collective USD1.89 trillion of assets under management.

The list could be prolonged indefinitely, but what these examples show is the size and range of the concrete benefits SIOs can provide to the sector, out of all proportion to their own size and limited resources.

Less tangible achievements

And there are many intangible benefits cited by the interviewees, too. Neera Nundy points to Dasra’s success in its facilitator role: ‘We started giving circles 15 years ago, bringing families together and putting money into a circle which could then support the growth of organisations and non-profits and that was us in our bridge-builder and intermediary role. That experience helped give us a lot of fuel and ability to build and support some of the most impactful organisations. 20 years later, you have Magic Bus, Educate Girls, Unga, Ashvi Padsara and so on that we can be proud that we played a part in a small way in their growth and impact.’

As Dasra’s single most effective initiative, she singles out 10 to 19, a collaborative they started on the issue of adolescent and pre-adolescent girls: ‘It’s really targeting girls’ leadership, but we focused on coming together and agreeing on a number of things – first, keeping girls in school would be one of the key outcomes, another would be delaying first pregnancy, a third was trying to delay marriage and a fourth was looking at agency and employability. The collaborative and the way it worked started to break down those barriers and revisit the way our sector worked, which was in distinct areas like education, health, and so on, to starting to think more cross-sectorally and to really be accountable on outcomes. I see that as a real success and a turning point for us in shifting how we were thinking.’

Rose Maruru cites the [African CSO Excellence Awards](#) in 2018/19 as one of EPIC-Africa’s most signal achievements: ‘This was our proof of concept.’

“
[...]the GivingTuesday campaign raised USD2.47 billion in 2020, 2.7 billion in 2021, and 3.1 billion in 2022 in the US alone.”

Many thought-leaders had told us that African CSOs would not be willing to share information about themselves.... Yet, over 1,000 CSOs registered, with close to 400 groups, from 45 countries, completing what was a long and rigorous questionnaireEven more encouraging was the diversity of applicants – some large, well-known African CSOs applied, and so did some very small, totally unknown, community-based groups. Clearly... there is a hunger in the sector to be seen, to be heard, to connect with others and to be recognised.'

She goes on: 'We believe that infrastructure is critical to enabling the systems change that CSOs and funders seek. We were a pioneer in highlighting this and the need to do something about it....Now, it's becoming a subject of discussion in ongoing conversations on the continent, a recent one being the UAF–TrustAfrica initiative on Reimagining Pan-African and Feminist Philanthropies. We can call this an achievement because we helped to bring the issue to the fore....We've helped to switch up the conversation and I feel good about that. There are differences in this part of the region from the rest of the world and we need to understand what motivates both governments and companies and philanthropists in a different way. I think that idea is starting to really take hold.'

Ruth Shapiro points to CAPS' Doing Good Index which 'is our flagship policy piece... It's being used and cited globally. There are many that are in effect copying it now which is a compliment.... In terms of our applied work, we can very much see how our work has changed the behaviour of philanthropic organisations in the region. That's very rewarding.'

In connection with the limitations on their resources, it's interesting to note that a few in the sample cited the simple fact of existence and/or growth as an achievement:

UPF for one – as Dave Biemesderfer says, 'the fact that we got created and went from that network of 33 regional PSOs to now 95 regional and national PSOs that is now figuring out ways to use that network to work collectively to make a difference is itself a big achievement.'

For CAPS, too, this is an achievement, according to Ruth Shapiro: 'The first is our very existence 10 years on, because I think this gets back to Propel Philanthropy's intention in funding this study. I feel with many of these organisations, certainly with us, it's like the Starbucks model – people didn't realise they needed a speciality coffee until they did. There are very few independent research organisations in Asia.'

SIIOs and the pandemic

The pandemic, in its own way, also highlighted the importance of the work of SIIOs. Mamo Mohapi describes its effects in Africa as 'definitely a crisis that didn't go to waste, particularly for infrastructure organisations, because they saw the opportunity to demonstrate their value. If I take the example of the East Africa Philanthropy Network, who really put themselves out there and made themselves available to funders as they were figuring out how to respond to the pandemic, as a result, there's now a lot more interest in supporting them.'

Benjamin Bellegy argues: 'It was very clear that the countries that had a strong philanthropy infrastructure were able to advocate for the sector to be included in the response from the government. In countries that did not have such an infrastructure, such as India for instance, philanthropy was often left out, and sometimes even hindered in its operations and wasn't able to play its role in responding.'

Walter Veirs also highlights 'the role of the infrastructure broadly during the pandemic, both in terms of policy work that was done in different places, but also in the way resources were mobilised and ideas were shared, there was great solidarity among practitioners across the field.'

Echoing Benjamin Bellegy, he also notes: 'there's so many places where there is no infrastructure, there's no ecosystem and in those places, we saw less money mobilised, poor policy frameworks for the sector and for philanthropy.'

For Rose Maruru cites two significant reports EPIC-Africa published in 2020 and 2021 on the impact of Covid-19 on African CSOs. 'The reports filled a critical gap and became a reference and were published in both English and French.'

Further to this, the UPF reported cited earlier notes that: 'More than 9 in 10 PSO leaders believe their PSO's response to the pandemic had a positive effect on how members perceive their organization's value. ... Our programming went from 80 programs in a given year to 120, a 50% increase, with no increase in staff,' one PSO leader said. "And it was member and sector driven."



We believe that infrastructure is critical to enabling the systems change that CSOs and funders seek.'

Rose Maruru

All saw the direction of travel they wanted to take over the next few years and that, although they are currently punching above their weight, there was more they could do.



Aspirations

Rose Maruru puts her finger on both the opportunity and the challenge SIIOs have: 'we have big ambitions. In two years' time, we would want to have significant and stable funding to realise these ambitions, which include having the largest database of African CSOs. Our target is at least 20,000 organisations. We have the technology, we have the networks and partnerships, we have the credibility, and we have legitimacy as an African organisation. There's no question that we can do it. But we need more resources to do so and do so fast.' The operative word here is 'resources'. More will be said about this below.

'We have 86 pledgers from 24 different countries,' says Maria Feffer Oelsner and while she professes herself happy with this number at this stage, she says, 'we're ready to grow. This year, we decided to fundraise in a more intensive manner than we have done before... In ten years, we would like to have a community of thousands of pledgers committed to this movement. Many billions of dollars shifted, but aiming towards the trillions of dollars, and obviously that's not going to happen only through the philanthropic commitment of our pledgers, but because we're tapping into how to unleash capital in different institutions, such as governments, to really capitalise on polycapital to solve our major challenges.'

'Where do we see ourselves?' wonders Jackie Asimwe. 'I think it's tripling our impact. We have a footprint in eastern Africa and southern Africa, it's growing, but we want to see our work spread throughout Africa.'

Karen Ansara wants NEID Global to be 'the go-to place for global philanthropy from the US... We want to grow this movement by building communities of internationally-focused donors in various parts of the US, so we want to have clusters of folks in five cities within two years.'

Last year, Dasra launched the Giving Pie, 'a network of families that are in philanthropy and want to distinguish between family giving and corporate giving and it shows how giving that stems from the power of family values can be transformational. We have 200 families now in this network and in the next decade, I'd like to see the space of family giving developed far beyond just ourselves and private wealth management.'

Real families backing innovation and transformation is important,' says Neera Nundy. This is particularly so in India where external philanthropy is being squeezed and 'there are big challenges with funding grassroots organisations... ten years from now, we'd like to be able to support more community-led organisations, even if it's with small amounts of flexible funding over a five-year period. I would hope by the end of five years, we've helped almost 500 organisations grow in a way that is building community resilience.'

Rodrigo Pippozzi believes that 'we can change the behaviour of individuals, not only in society, but also the leaders of companies. It's that work that you have to keep hammering all the time. People have to listen, to read about this, to talk about it all the time so they understand that donation is a civic act, it's not something that I do once in my life or twice in my life and I'm clean. It's something that needs to be a big part of your life...I think we have the power through communication and as a social impact group with the voice that we have to change behaviour. That's a long-term project. It's not something that we're going to build in one or two years.'

Frustrations

While the interviewees were aware of, and keen to celebrate, their successes, they also had a number of frustrations, often related to the challenges they face.

‘Things don’t move as fast as we hoped,’ said Benjamin Bellegy. ‘Generally speaking, our field tends to be slow to move and the world we live in does not allow for that any more.’ This was a common source of frustration. ‘The work is so slow,’ said Neera Nundy. ‘Sometimes you wonder, are we really making a difference? Are we pushing enough or are we all flocking to the same organisations and the same things and that is a question I always ask....I’m sure we could do more,’ she lamented.



Sometimes you wonder, are we really making a difference?”

Neera Nundy

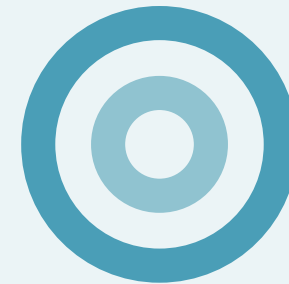
In Africa, too, Rose Maruru has ‘been disappointed with the slow recognition – and slow support – of this work. The failure to fund African-led infrastructure has left a gap that is being filled by Northern groups who might well crowd out local organisations that have been doing this work with little support.’ She adds another source of discontent: ‘we’re also disappointed that localisation is not encompassing the whole ecosystem, it must go beyond finding local implementing partners. It should also include organisations that can provide locally grounded advice, ideas and solutions.’

‘How else can we say it?’

The inability to convince funders of what infrastructure organisations really need is inevitably frustrating. ‘While there’s a lot of conversation and understanding that transformative funding needs to be long-term and unrestricted,’ says Jackie Asiimwe, ‘what continues to happen is more short-term project funding. What else do we need to do? How else can we say it?’

Karen Ansara adds another frustration: ‘Frankly, one of my disappointments is that philanthropy serving organisations, particularly donor networks, are often in competition with each other. We don’t collaborate enough. We’re in competition for dollars and we’re in competition for members.’

As we have seen, most of the interview sample have big ambitions but, to their exasperation, are hindered from pursuing them by lack of resources.



Ways forward

In terms of what funders can do, Mott’s experience is instructive:

‘One of our strategies,’ says Walter Veirs, ‘was to fund NGO resource centres, which were basically infrastructure for anyone who wanted to learn how to start an association in their community or at national level – they could provide training, information on fundraising or project management, on how to register an organisation, those sorts of things.’

Another thing is the need for a nucleus – Mamo Mohapi speaks of this from the West African experience: ‘there needs to be something there that people can rally around, otherwise it doesn’t take shape.’

‘An ongoing thing that needs to be there constantly’

The real lesson for Nick Deychakiwsky is this: ‘It seems to be popular nowadays to describe what philanthropy does as finding problems and coming up with solutions... infrastructure is not a problem to be solved, it is an ongoing thing that needs to be there constantly. Sometimes, there’s not much for it to do because maybe the policy environment is good, or things are coming along very well and philanthropy is doing its job. But there are times when a crisis hits or challenges come up, and if you don’t have this kind of thing in place to be able to respond and react, you feel the need.’

Mott's experience of supporting infrastructure suggests to Walter Veirs the need for: 'time and patience. A long period of time, a lot of patience. And finding different ways to engage. You've got two different ways of doing so as a funder. You can provide funding, obviously, and you can participate by going to conferences and joining working groups and all the things that are offered by different infrastructure type organisations, and, where appropriate, be active in the governance of those bodies.'

Nick Deychakiwsky has a caution for the SIOs themselves: 'it's important to gently be always asking our infrastructure organisations to be mindful of how well they're serving and who they're serving.'

Rose Maruru voices what most of the others feel: '[committed funders] can champion this work to help bring others on board to share the cost. Without a vibrant ecosystem, the impact of individual funders is likely to be limited and difficult to sustain.' And, in response to the crowding out of nascent local organisations by external funders she talks about above, she is 'calling on funders to support local infrastructure groups. Especially at a time of localisation and listening to people who are most affected.'

One point to consider in the pursuit of increased resources may be – for some – the use of member contributions.

In 2021, the Board of Women Moving Millions decided to launch a **member contribution model**. This has had a number of effects: the organisation was able to add to its senior team, producing the ability to pursue bigger partnerships and complementary revenue sources, leading in turn to membership growth, enhanced member programming, and the strengthening of its advocacy and influence objectives.

There is an evident need for better, more persuasive, ways of expressing the contribution that SIOs make and it's worth mentioning again in this context WINGS' four Cs framework – connection, capacity, capability and credibility – as a way to make progress in this area. Others in the study point out the value of storytelling, of collecting the anecdotal evidence.

Summing up: 'we can do more!'

But the prime need is to convince funders that investing in the ecosystem is a need, not a luxury.

Neera Nundy's remark that 'I'm sure we could do more,' has a wistful ring to it but it could also serve as a call to the sector. SIOs, notwithstanding difficulties in demonstrating the results they achieve, are producing big results, as this report has tried to indicate and are punching well above their weight. However, they could do – and want to do – much more with greater support.

'We can do more if we do it together,' says Rose Maruru, echoing Neera Nundy. 'We can inspire more if we're talking to each other. We can do it better if we're learning from folks on the ground.....If we want to make change happen, we've got to invest in the infrastructure to do it.'

What's more, SIOs and the contribution they can make have never been more urgently needed.

Benjamin Bellego speaks of 'existential threats which should trigger a realisation that we can't just incrementally improve the effectiveness of our interventions, we need to deeply rethink and have more of an all-hands-on-deck approach..... we can't fight the multiplication of issues with the addition of solutions. That's also true for networks and support organisations.....We need to move to a multiplier mindset and that takes investing in networks, trusting others, taking risks, building bridges with markets and with government or helping social movements.'



Without a vibrant ecosystem, the impact of individual funders is likely to be limited and difficult to sustain."

Rose Maruru

Finally, let's return to the ecosystem metaphor that many of the respondents invoked. It seems especially appropriate to expressing what SIOs do. *National Geographic's* website describes an ecosystem as 'a geographic area where plants, animals, and other organisms, as well as weather and landscape, work together to form a bubble of life.... Every factor in an ecosystem depends on every other factor, either directly or indirectly.' In other words, for philanthropy to function, it requires the presence and the complex interaction of all the other elements. And we are all learning the cost of neglecting or abusing the ecosystem we all depend on as human beings.

'The cause of all causes'

Rodrigo Pipponzi has a fitting last word: 'I don't believe that you can change anything if we don't have those structure organisations. There are more than 800,000 social organisations in Brazil, that are addressing local and particular causes, but we need this layer of structural organisations. If we make philanthropy stronger, for sure we're going to have more money being directed to the social organisations. So I love to say that philanthropy is the cause of all causes because it really is.'

Appendix

People interviewed for this study:

Benjamin Bellegy,
Executive Director, WINGS

Dave Biemesderfer,
United Philanthropy Forum

Jackie Asiimwe,
CivSource, Africa

Karen Ansara,
NEID Global

Marina Feffer Oelsner,
Co-founder, Generation Pledge

Mamo Mohapi
Nick Deychakiwsky
Walter Veirs } Charles Stewart
Mott Foundation*

Rodrigo Pipponzi,
Co-founder and CEO, Instituto MOL

Rose Maruru,
CEO, EPIC-Africa

Ruth Shapiro,
founder and CEO, Centre for Asian Philanthropy
and Society (CAPS)

The full interviews from which much
of this report is drawn are available at
www.alliancemagazine.org/propel-philanthropy

*These three were interviewed together

Considerations for Funders

1 Join **WINGS** and consider participating in its Funder's Working Group. This group convenes grant makers and donors across the globe to build a thriving social impact ecosystem

2 Contact **Propel Philanthropy** to learn how to join its ecosystem-building funders group

3 Meet with leaders within SIOs you trust and believe could achieve meaningful impact. Find out what they need to grow their work. You may find the cost is less than you expected

Resources

Stories of Impact: Peter Brach, founder of Propel Philanthropy, shares stories on how he and others gave modest grants and achieved significant results.

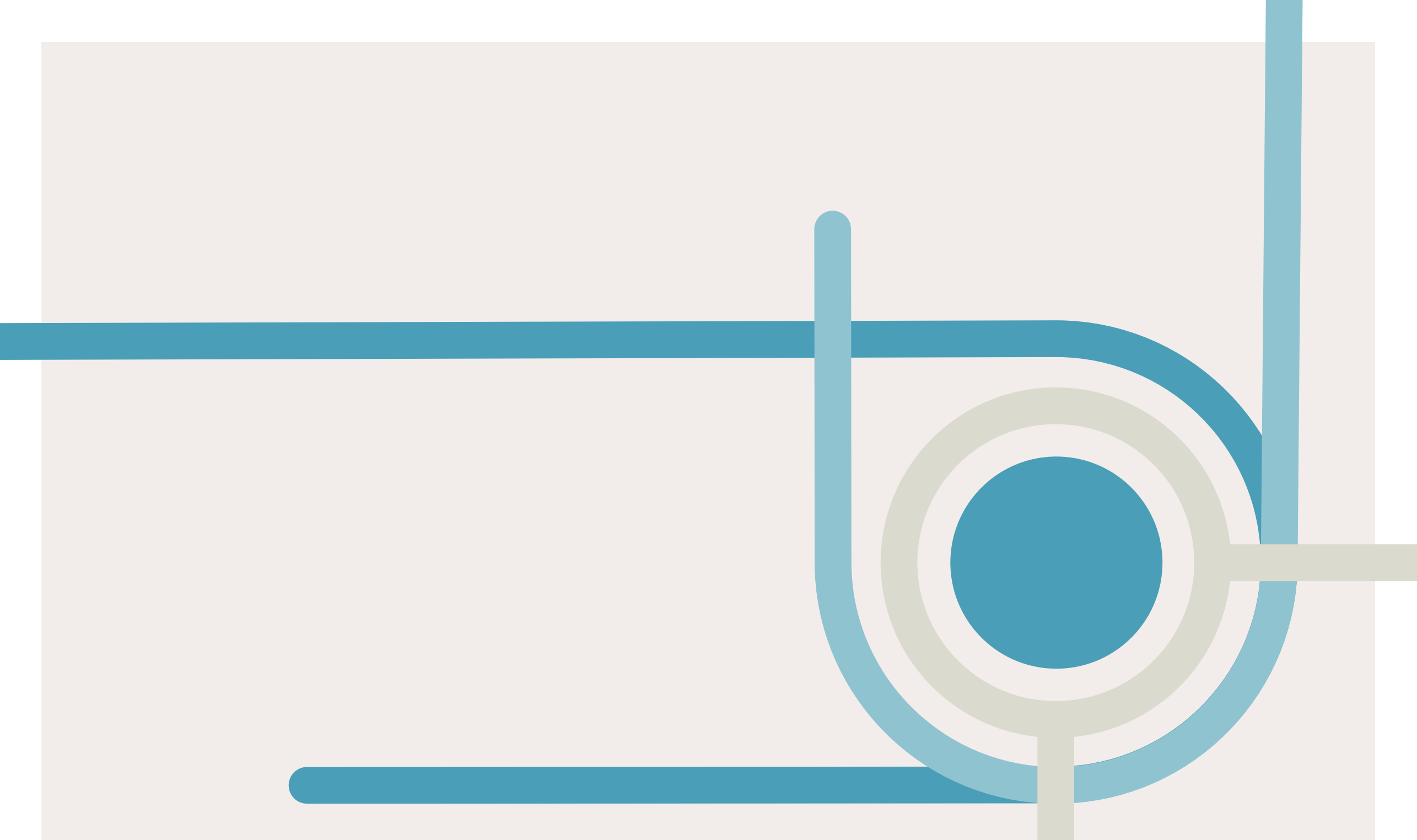
An Overview of the Financing of National Social Sector Infrastructure Providers: This report was commissioned by the

The Covid-19 Crucible: This report provides extensive information on how philanthropy support organizations within the United Philanthropy Forum convened, collaborated, and shared information to address the pandemic.

Impact of the PSE in India, Kenya, and Russia – Country Case Studies: This report, released before the Ukraine invasion, spotlights the growth of social sector ecosystems in these three countries over twenty years, outlining impacts, lessons learned, and the perspectives of multiple stakeholders.

Donor Education and Organizing: A 2020 Snapshot: This extensive report provides many insights into SIOs focused on donor education. Readers will find information on diversity, equity, and inclusion, how these organizations perceive and support effective giving, challenges they face, and much more. The only caveat is that the social sector has evolved considerably since 2020.

For a more in-depth exploration, we recommend delving into Propel Philanthropy's **Stories of Impact**.



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