SHIFTING THE FUNDING PARADIGM: TOWARD TRUST-BASED PHILANTHROPY IN AFRICA

A policy brief examining how donor structures reinforce dependency and what a trust-based alternative looks like in practice.

Executive Summary

For decades, international development and philanthropic funding in Africa have been dominated by rigid, top-down compliance models. While designed to ensure fiscal accountability, traditional donor structures frequently impose high administrative burdens, restrict operational flexibility, and reinforce historical power imbalances.

This policy brief analyzes how conventional grantmaking practices inadvertently constrain African civil society organizations (CSOs) and grassroots movements. Drawing on field evidence from rights-based, health, and humanitarian interventions, it outlines the core pillars of Trust-Based Philanthropy and offers actionable recommendations for donors, practitioners, and civil society actors seeking to build resilient, self-sustaining ecosystems across the continent.

The Challenge: How Traditional Donor Structures Reinforce Dependency

Conventional philanthropic and aid frameworks often operate on high-control, low-trust assumptions that restrict the agency of local organizations:

- **Transactional & Short-Term Resourcing:** Restrictive, single-year grants tied strictly to pre-determined project activities prevent grassroots organizations from building organizational reserves, investing in talent, or planning for long-term institutional sustainability.
- **Heavy Administrative & Compliance Burden:** Complex narrative and financial reporting requirements disproportionately strain small, community-led initiatives, forcing them to divert limited capacity away from programmatic delivery toward compliance management.
- **Risk Aversion in High-Risk Settings:** Traditional risk frameworks view political instability, shrinking civic space, or informal organizational structures as threats rather than realities. This systematically excludes frontline youth, women, and informal movements operating outside legal frameworks.

- **Top-Down Priority Setting:** Donors frequently define outcomes and indicators in capital cities, treating local organizations merely as implementation vectors rather than strategic partners with contextual expertise.

The Trust-Based Alternative: Core Pillars in Practice

Trust-Based Philanthropy addresses these structural inequities by rebalancing power dynamics between funders and grantees, prioritizing long-term impact over rigid procedural compliance:

- **Unrestricted, Multi-Year Funding:** Providing flexible core operating support allows organizations to address emerging needs, invest in institutional infrastructure, and retain talent.
- **Streamlined & Participatory M&E:** Replacing dense, output-only compliance matrices with flexible feedback loops, qualitative methodologies (e.g., Most Significant Change), and participatory evaluations that measure real community impact.
- **Holistic Security & Well-Being Support:** Recognizing that activists and organizations face intense physical, digital, and psychosocial pressures, trust-based resourcing embeds duty of care, security technology, and mental health resources directly into core funding.
- **Shared Decision-Making & Co-Creation:** Shifting power from international review panels to local movements by involving grantees in strategy design, indicator selection, and resource allocation.

Field Evidence: Comparative Models

Operational Dimension	Traditional Compliance Model	Trust-Based Alternative
Funding Structure	Restricted, project-specific, short-term (12 months).	Multi-year, flexible, unrestricted core support.

Risk Management	Risk transfer to local partners; strict compliance controls.	Shared risk-taking; flexible contingency and security budgets.
Monitoring & Evaluation	Standardized, top-down quantitative output targets.	Participatory co-design, narrative learning, real-time feedback.
Reporting Requirements	Rigid quarterly narrative and financial reports.	Streamlined reporting, oral check-ins, or shared learning formats.
Power Dynamics	Donor-driven priorities; transactional relationship.	Horizontal partnership; grantee-led strategy and governance.

Recommendations for Action

For Donors & Philanthropic Institutions:

- **Shift to Flexible Core Support:** Allocate most funding portfolios to multi-year unrestricted grants, allowing local partners to direct funds where they are most urgently needed.
- **Simplify Application & Reporting Processes:** Streamline documentation requirements, accept shared reporting formats across donors, and adopt conversational update mechanisms.
- **Absorb & Share Operational Risk:** Build dedicated contingency, legal, and mental health funds into grant budgets, particularly for partners operating in restricted or hostile civic spaces.

For Civil Society & Field Practitioners:

- **Advocate for Real Costs:** Articulate the full institutional cost of programming, including operational overhead, staff security, and capacity strengthening, rather than underfunding core operations.
- **Document Alternative Evidence:** Utilize participatory and real-time data collection methods to demonstrate how operational flexibility directly improves community outcomes.
- **Build Collective Bargaining Platforms:** Form regional networks and communities of practice to push back collectively against extractive donor practices.

Conclusion: Mapinduzi's Reflection on Shaping the Practice

At Mapinduzi, these policy insights reflect both our institutional methodology and our day-to-day work alongside grassroots movements, international partners, and major donors. Grounded in human-centered evaluation and real-time learning, we view trust-based philanthropy not as a compromise on accountability, but as a far more accurate and effective framework for achieving sustainable impact.

We publish this policy brief to share where we stand as a firm, actively working to dismantle extractive donor-grantee dynamics, promote equitable power-sharing, and advance resourcing models that truly center African leadership and civil society.