

The Building Blocks of Open Philanthropy

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Recent outpourings of support to worldwide natural disasters notwithstanding, as human beings we still tend to care closest to home. Bound by locality, we have grown used to trying something out on a small scale, getting it “right” and then find ways to share it with others, disseminate our ideas, or replicate what we have built. These have been the holy grail of “scalability” efforts in the nonprofit and philanthropic world as well as in commercial innovation. Decades of public and philanthropic strategy and countless millions of dollars have gone into pilot projects, target communities, evaluation and dissemination efforts. We wonder why nutrition programs that worked in South Africa fail in South Philadelphia, and media reform efforts from Tennessee fall flat in Texas.

Instead of continuing to build local and go global, we need a new set of practices and frameworks that will allow us to build for global, and adapt for local use.

Let’s take some examples from the scientific, commercial and cultural domains. The Wellcome Trust funds the SNP Consortium Ltd, public access database of human genome data, open to all, customizable according to local need or special interest. Podcast software builds the tools, the Internet is the exchange, and everyone who wants to broadcast their own little piece of information supplies the content. And musicians from anywhere can quickly learn the basics of a genre and riff it into something indigenous. There is a common set of protocols that allow musicians and artists around the world to communicate and learn from each other. Then local customization is encouraged. Art thrives and travels because it works with and breaks shared protocols. The famous poet e.e. cummings was known for breaking every rule of poetry, something he could only do because he knew the rules in the first place. It is the local adaptation of universal codes that keeps cultural expression vital and relevant.

In our quest to continuously understand what works, how and why, philanthropy is starting to reconsider many of its basic operating assumptions. In the coming generation our challenge will be to build common protocols that will allow local communities to use global systems for idea exchange. No longer about building small and hoping for big, it’s about building for big and allowing the small to emerge.

Seven philanthropic building blocks connect to create the system that will allow this to happen—what I call **Open Philanthropy**.

- 1) **Facilitate adaptation, don’t hinder it.** Codes and protocols are not mandates. They are not ways of doing something, they are the pieces that must be put together in order to do something. Think of LEGO™ building blocks. Countless structures can be built from these simple blocks because the pieces – in a multitude of shapes and colors- all connect using a common set of posts and holes.
- 2) **Design for interoperability, local specificity will follow.** We need to build the core notes of exchange –knowledge, position and passion, and loyalty to a cause. Think of it as using the same kinds of cultural systems that let two or three enthusiastic sports fans get 100,000

other fans to stand and “do the wave.” It takes only a small catalyst to get one going because three key protocols are in place: 1) people know how to do it (knowledge); 2) they’re in the right position to do it (position and passion), and 3) peer pressure to cheer (loyalty to a cause). A small act creates a big movement.

- 3) **Build for the poorest and 4) Assume upward adaptability.** We must design social actions for the least resourced situations. Solutions that work in the toughest conditions can also apply in areas where greater resources are available. The principle of “building for the poorest” is beginning to take hold in philanthropy. Recently The William and Melinda Gates Foundation announced support for research on vaccines that don’t need refrigeration or needles, as well as those that are effective with a single dose. Vaccines that need no refrigeration are critical for poor communities in tropical climates. Once such vaccines exist, there is nothing to stop them from being useful in places with refrigeration – they can easily be “adapted up” the resource chain. We know that this doesn’t work in reverse – things built for the rich may be incapable of being adapted for the poor.
- 5) **Creativity and control will happen locally.** Think of the way communication, production and distribution is now broken into digital bits, zapped around the world to where small pieces of work can be done most efficiently, and then recombined at the final stage. It’s Henry Ford’s assembly line on a global scale, where the nuts and bolts have been replaced by digital ones and zeros. As the means of sharing information, producing and distributing information or goods, and bringing resources where they are needed change, the laws (the codes, or the digital ones and zeroes) for doing this work must also shift. Almost every tool in the philanthropic toolbox may soon be produced, distributed or rated according to the new codes. Organizations that depend on these tools can be ensured a significant role in creating them if investments in access and diverse capacity are made now.
- 6) **Diversity is essential.** Diversity of information, experience, background, and participation will be critical to building open philanthropy. The best ideas often emerge from masses of attempts; diversity ensures multiple approaches to a problem. Social solutions will need to be locally sensitive, culturally and economically specific, even as they develop and disburse across global codes of exchange; diversity of opinion contributes to the likelihood of finding highly adaptable solutions.
- 7) **Complex problems require hybrid – or three sector – solutions.** Relationships among the public, private and community structure are shifting across the globe, reframing the debate from one of private ownership to common good. Recent US rulings and laws (public structures) holding file sharing companies liable for copyright infringements that were facilitated by their systems will immediately dampen innovation in commercial services (private sector). But the real innovation lies elsewhere—with individuals who simply want to share (community sector). Philanthropy too, in the next generation, must seek to define social innovations that capture the best of all three sectors. Ideas may be incubated in the community sector, evaluated by market tests, and ultimately monitored and shared by licensing systems that accurately reflect the source and movement of ideas.

Thinking about social programs in terms of their core, interoperable functions will allow them to capitalize on global exchange systems and thrive on local adaptation. This approach just might improve upon some other vexing realities with today's philanthropy. For example, philanthropy has invested millions of dollars on evaluation and communications, but fairly universally bemoans the impact of those investments.

But imagine this. If programs were designed to be globally applicable and locally adaptable, and access to information about these programs was a parallel strategy, the key questions about what works, for whom, and where would be answered, albeit from a different source than we've come to expect. Those programs that worked would be used, they would be modified, the adaptations shared again, more adaptation, and so on, eventually revealing at least three things:

1. Successful ideas and strategies would be widely copied and reused/adapted (answering the "does it work?" question);
2. The core principles would reveal themselves as more and more adaptations were tried and as users tagged their adaptations (answering the "what works?" or "best practices?" question); and
3. Who was involved (answering the "who used it?" question.)

The best part is that this can be tried without diverting current philanthropic funds from local work. The dollars to divert are those spent on evaluation and replicability. Philanthropy can divert the funds now used to prove something works and get others to adopt it to help the communities they work with capitalize on these new rhythms of exchange. This in turn, begins to distinguish core code from local adaptation, high quality programs and strategies from those of lesser value or smaller applicability, and could eventually lead us toward measures of effectiveness that are drawn directly from the work of the organizations themselves.

Philanthropy needs to find ways to keep pace with the pace of change. The equation for the future is fundamentally different than that of the past – rather than build small and hope for big, it is time to think big to go small. It is time to think about there, for it is also here.