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Ebola a blueprint for African philanthropy in COVID-19 crisis

Philanthropic responses to the COVID-19 crisis in Africa should be guided by the blueprint that Ebola provided in West Africa, said Carl Manlan, chief operating officer of the EcoBank Foundation in Togo. He was one of three speakers in the final session of the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Africa Month Virtual Symposium.

The 27 to 29 May virtual series provided a platform for a broad range of discussions on African innovations, governance and developmental issues in the fight against the pandemic. It was hosted by the African Union's Peer Review Mechanism in partnership with the UCT Convocation and the Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance.

Manlan's co-speakers were Bongwiwe Mlangeni, chief executive of the [Social Justice Initiative](#), and Bulelwa Ngewana, executive director of the [Open Society Foundation for South Africa](#). Dr Bhekinkosi Moyo, chair of the African Centre on Philanthropy and Social Investment at the Wits Business School, was the moderator.

Manlan said that vast resources were to boost Africa's response to and recovery from the pandemic. While Chinese technology titan Jack Ma's huge donation to the continent's fight was an enormous gesture of philanthropy, it also illustrated China's levels of industrialisation and ability to shift resources to other countries in need. But African-based philanthropy lacked not only these resources but the infrastructure to elicit and manage this scale of giving. A different model was needed to harness micro donations using innovative financial technologies.

"A number of solidarity funds have been created in Africa, but we need to look at the blueprint that Ebola provided. Through the African Union, we set up a fund to fight Ebola in three countries in Africa. African philanthropists and leaders raised US\$34 million at the time and individuals across the continent could donate through an SMS campaign.

"Six years later, this campaign allows us to move money across the continent in a different way. Digital platforms and banking innovations [are important elements] in how we look at micro donations – not only in the context of citizen engagement to pool resources for health or for COVID-19, but eventually to find a way we can support micro enterprises on the continent."

This is where the jobs are, he said. "And the best form of philanthropy is the one that creates jobs. When people have access to decent jobs, there are things they can do to take care of themselves."

Historically, Africa already had models in the form of stokvels and other African equivalents. "Communities have always pooled their resources," Manlan said, "but the question is: Can we do this at scale?" He said the African Union had launched a citizen engagement campaign targeting one million Africans in the diaspora, with the aim of each one contributing at least US\$1.

"It is the start of something we should all support – and that support will get us to think about how we ensure micro enterprises that employ the majority on the continent to provide the resources we need – not only to weather the storm that is COVID-19, but to start to move into the formal space. The formal space is important because we need to broaden governments' fiscal space." He said that COVID-19 had accelerated some of the changes we thought were not possible, like the use of mobile and e-banking, and remote working.

The Ebola outbreaks had also facilitated a Pan-African approach to fighting COVID-19, he said. The Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention was one example of that.

"This did not exist when we had the Ebola outbreak in 2014–16 in West Africa. It was inaugurated in 2017 and had been very active in fighting Ebola in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and is now at the forefront of the COVID-19 response in Africa."

He added, "These elements at continental level are extremely important because corporations, philanthropists and individuals all have a role to play in ensuring that COVID-19 is a catalyst to accelerate change in Africa." This change must encompass social justice, which should be central to the continent's response, said Mlangeni.

"This is not something that's been highly prioritised by the wealthy and those in positions of authority because they are focusing on the crisis itself ... It's our job as civil society to come out there and make this a priority."

The food economy is an example of why collaboration, partnership and inclusivity are vital in determining the way ahead.

"In the beginning, communities were excluded [in planning] food distribution," said Mlangeni. "But they are now coming back [to the table] because they are better positioned to do those kinds of things. High net worth individuals thinking about philanthropy must recognise the importance of forming partnerships with communities, working closely with them and letting them drive the solutions."

Philanthropists' focus had to shift from the individual and community to systemic and institutional issues, Mlangeni added.

"Address unequal society. There's an over-reliance on government to solve problems and philanthropists are not taking the opportunity to become catalysts for greater change."

Mlangeni said that South African corporates donated between R8 billion and R12 billion last year with an annual increase of between 5% and 7%.

"But most of the funding goes towards social welfare and education – and even in the education space it's mostly about issuing bursaries. It does not yet address the systemic issues and social justice."

The country needed regulations to increase corporate social investment in social justice work and a wealth tax, "so that we can see more distribution of funds towards the promotion of well-being, especially now". And the temporary broadening of the social grant system should be introduced long-term and the amounts increased to cover millions of South Africans living below the poverty line.

"This can be done via a wealth tax. COVID-19 definitely does open this space for those kinds of initiatives."

In the wake of the virus, the Open Society Foundation is also allocating funds to mitigation efforts, "pushing as much money through the door as possible", said Ngewana. Only two months into her job when COVID-19 struck, she is enthusiastic about what philanthropy can achieve in a starkly unequal society.

"This is when grantees are regarded as collaborative partners in seeking and co-creating solutions rather than just having a financial relationship with the foundation," she said.

"This pandemic is offering us opportunities to become collaborative and innovative in finding solutions that best suit us as a continent ... But South Africa is still so unequal that funding needs to be able to ensure the survival of the sector and go to areas that are not as well funded as others. Most of the corporate social responsibility budget in South Africa goes towards education. But there are other sectors that need resources, as this virus shows us very clearly, such as the health sector."

COVID-19 had exposed the fundamental limitations of many sectors, which included philanthropy.

"As executive director of a philanthropic organisation, I've been concerned about the impact of the virus on civil society as a sector and the viability of civil society to build resilience through this pandemic and recover because it is the one sector that is fragile and needs most support."

One of the best things that has come out of this pandemic, Ngewana said, is the collaboration between philanthropic foundations.

"We're talking to each other more often. We're ensuring that we leverage resources so we can support as best we can. We also realise government can't do this alone and needs to be regarded as a partner. This means that civil society and our grantees must be at the table when decisions and policies are being made that affect the communities at large."

Ngewana had also asked grantees to shape their grants towards COVID-19-related activities and support, especially if they had been unable to spend their money because of the lockdown.

"We will continue to hold government to account for the stark inequalities that are still part of the South African economy.

"That can't be allowed to continue. This virus has allowed us to press pause, reset and rethink how we are doing things, why we are doing them and finding the best way of achieving the best result in a timeous way."

Story By: Helen Swingler [Words:1364]

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Issued by the Communication and Marketing Department

Thami Nkwanyane

Media Liaison and Monitoring Officer

Communication and Marketing Department

University of Cape Town

Rondebosch

Tel: (021) 650 5672

Cell: (072) 563 9500

Email: thami.nkwanyane@uct.ac.za

Website: www.uct.ac.za