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A global consultancy  
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BRIEFING

# How do philanthropic donors engage with governments?

JULY 2024

## About this series

The **'Political philanthropy? Perspectives on engaging with governments in the Global South'** series was produced as part of a learning partnership between the Open Society Foundations (OSF), OTT and INASP to jointly explore effective models for supporting progressive government reformers in the Global South. The series examines various aspects of philanthropic engagement with governments in the Global South, focusing on economic advisory work. It aims to distil learnings and offer insights to philanthropic organisations considering such engagement. The series draws on desk reviews, key informant interviews, consultations with an advisory group, and the project team's own experiences.

This briefing was compiled by Jojoh Faal Sy, from an original document, **'How do philanthropic donors engage with governments? A review of donors' models for government engagement'**, by Marcela Morales.

## About OTT

OTT is a global consultancy and platform for change. We support and strengthen the work of research organisations, foundations, governments and others in support of better-informed decision making. We are made up of two parts – OTT Consulting and On Think Tanks – known collectively as OTT.

Our consultancy work focuses on developing tailored solutions to specific challenges. Through services spanning research, learning facilitation, strategy and evaluation, we partner with organisations to drive evidence-informed change.

On Think Tanks is a leading global source of information, support and community for people working in, with and funding think tanks. We create a space to connect, learn and exchange knowledge, ideas and resources.

## Acknowledgements

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Any errors or omissions that remain are solely the responsibility of the author(s).

## Overview

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In the face of the world's pressing issues – pandemic recovery, as well as any number of different conflicts and social crises – philanthropic organisations can no longer afford the luxury of apolitical posturing. Their role in bolstering civil society – particularly in upholding the rule of law and fostering democratic values – has become crucial. Good governance and transparency continue to be essential for establishing and evidencing an organisation's legitimacy in a politically conscious role. Key informants interviewed for this review noted that many foundations are expressing a keen interest in engaging in dialogues and partnerships with policymakers, recognising these collaborations as foundational for effective policy development.

Exploring the landscape of donor–government engagement reveals a complex and nuanced ecosystem. This briefing paper presents insights on what makes for effective engagement with governments on the part of philanthropic donors, specifically in the economic advisory realm. Based on the literature review and key informant interviews discussed in the [full review](#), this brief highlights some forms that these engagements take in the context of philanthropic efforts, drawing out the hallmarks of effective engagement. It then proposes strategies for philanthropic organisations that are considering meaningful government engagement. Overall, it draws attention to the crucial role philanthropic organisations can play in shaping policies and fostering sustainable development through strategic government engagement.

## The practice of philanthropic donor–government engagement

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For the purposes of this briefing paper, philanthropic donor–government engagement refers to the purposeful collaboration between philanthropic organisations and government bodies aimed at advancing government reforms and strengthening public-sector initiatives. In an economic advisory context, philanthropic support to governments represents a broad spectrum of collaborative practices, including embedded technical assistance, expert advice, participatory and learning spaces, and political funding. Philanthropic entities also foster political innovation by identifying and backing creative solutions that make political systems more inclusive and responsive. Crafted around both donor and government priorities, these engagements are typically adapted to fit the unique political, social, and economic contexts of each setting.

## BOX 1. TYPES OF DELIVERY

This box summarises some of the varied strategies and methods philanthropic entities employ to drive positive change within governmental systems.

- **Expert advice:** A process whereby specialised knowledge and insights – in various formats – are provided to governments by external individuals or groups with extensive experience or education in a particular field. This engagement typically involves advising governmental bodies on a range of issues, including policy development, economic strategy, legislative reforms, and programme implementation.
- **Embedded technical assistance:** A hands-on approach whereby experts are integrated within government institutions, such as ministries or delivery units, often in real-time, to provide expertise and foster capacity-building from the inside. It aims to achieve deeper institutional change and sustainability by allowing advisers to learn the unique context and challenges of the institution and tailor their support accordingly.
- **Participatory and learning spaces:** Platforms designed to assemble high-level public officials, such as presidents or ministers, with dual objectives: 1) to share experiences pertinent to their governmental roles and 2) to collaboratively tackle topics in order to further specific causes or agendas. Known by various labels – such as communities of practice, learning partnerships, and expert forums – these spaces are characterised by shared learning experiences and a collaborative ethos.
- **Political funding:** A nonpartisan financial commitment towards organisations, campaigns, and individuals within the political system, designed to foster a more representative and functional government (Merril & Murdoch, 2020). This approach, particularly recognised in the United States and increasingly across Europe, prioritises systemic reform over partisan victories or ideological dominance, and includes supporting political innovators.

In any setting, however, philanthropic donors engaging with governments must deftly navigate a landscape infused with political considerations. As one interviewee noted, *‘no interaction with government – however technical or limited in duration – is immune to the influence of political forces.’* In the realm of government engagement, neutrality is a myth; every action taken by philanthropic organisations is like a walk along a political tightrope.

This inherently political landscape contributes to the challenge of drawing out best practices for engagement, as philanthropic actors often collaborate with governments in ways that are not publicly disclosed. The review found that evidence on how best to partner with governments is scarce, making it challenging to glean insights from documented sources. What does exist tends to focus on the supply of evidence, rather than on what strategies and practices were effective.

## Recognising the challenges

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Donor–government relationships hold great potential for societal benefits – but present philanthropists with several challenges, as revealed by [the review](#) and consultations with experts.

**Successfully navigating cultural and political dynamics is a critical hurdle in donor–government engagement.** Insights from expert interviews reveal that the struggle to maintain neutrality varies in form and intensity across different nations. Some philanthropic organisations encounter specific challenges, often stemming from perceptions associated with their founding backgrounds or the influence of notable affiliated individuals, which can cast doubt on their intentions and neutrality. The consequences of being perceived as partial are profound: when a philanthropic organisation is viewed as biased, its efficacy and ability to collaborate effectively with governments may be undermined. These varying levels of openness and opposition necessitate astute strategic planning and execution of philanthropic initiatives.

**The time-limited nature of philanthropic engagements also presents a significant challenge,** particularly when working with progressive governments operating under tight deadlines and short political cycles. Short-term projects often necessitate a solution-driven approach, aimed at addressing immediate needs and achieving quick wins – often at the expense of broader, systemic reform. Additionally, progressive governments, often constrained by a short assurance of tenure, may not have the luxury of time to implement the comprehensive reforms required. This urgency can create a challenging environment for philanthropic donors who aim to support sustainable and systemic change. Alongside this, philanthropic donors often encounter tension between their role and the government’s expectations regarding current and future financial support. Failing to manage these expectations can complicate the dynamics of the partnership and the overall impact of the engagement.

**Determining the most effective level at which philanthropic donors should engage with policymakers is also a nuanced challenge.** Conventional wisdom often suggests that higher levels of engagement, such as with presidents or ministers, are more likely to lead to policy change. However, the findings of this review revealed that while national-level connections are valuable, the real need for support often lies at regional or local-authority levels. Pluralistic political systems especially offer multiple points of influence, such as local, regional, and legislative bodies, as well as public opinion and grassroots movements. Deciding which level of engagement will be most effective and how best to support it requires going beyond the status quo.

## Key elements influencing effective engagement

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Insights from the literature and consultations with experts have identified a number of elements that contribute to effective engagement with governments.

**Demand-driven support – with an emphasis on aligning philanthropic action with the needs and objectives identified by government partners – is a key strategy in philanthropic engagement with governments.** This approach requires advisors to immerse themselves in the unique challenges faced by each government, fostering solutions that are both innovative and attuned to the intricacies of the local context. It is a move away from generic responses, towards a more engaged and collaborative form of problem solving that is sensitive to the specific conditions of the environment.

**To influence policy effectively, philanthropic entities must be adept at ‘working with the grain’** – operating in harmony with existing political structures and norms. Engaging with political entities does not necessitate partisanship, and philanthropic efforts should not be driven by the fortunes of specific candidates or parties (Alt-Haaker & Zels, 2023). By understanding the motivations behind political actions and aligning policy objectives accordingly, philanthropic foundations can work towards outcomes that serve the public interest without showing favouritism. The goal is to foster political behaviours that are conducive to public welfare, which in turn promotes an environment of equity and inclusion for citizens.

**The establishment of robust partnerships built on trust is paramount in philanthropic engagement with governments.** Similarly, working with government officials at various levels often requires a commitment to long-term engagement and proximity. For example, an informant recounted how a government advisor, through longstanding relationships within the ministry and across different levels of government, became a trusted figure. This points to how organic relationships – supported by philanthropic efforts and cultivated over time – can position experts to offer well-informed, timely guidance to governments. Another informant highlighted the importance of government engagement being bolstered by partnerships with various actors, such as experts, universities, and think tanks. These collaborations are crucial not only in forming trust-based relationships that facilitate open dialogue, but also in contributing to capacity-building within government institutions.

**Flexibility, adaptability, and a long-term, iterative approach are increasingly recognised as crucial for philanthropic organisations.** Responding to shifting realities on the ground and adapting to evolving policy landscapes is essential. For instance, when faced with challenging political conditions that hamper close collaboration with governments, some philanthropic entities opt to shift their engagement strategy to working with civil society organisations and the private sector, rather than withdrawing from the country altogether. This way they can continue to build a constructive presence, strengthen civil society frameworks, and support public officials

at subnational levels, all while laying the groundwork for future engagements with the government. Demonstrating a commitment to flexibility and iteration ensures that philanthropic interventions can weather political instability and sustainably contribute to the public good.

## Opportunities to add value

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As philanthropic organisations contemplate deeper engagement in governance reform, prudence dictates a strategic approach that leverages existing strengths while mitigating inherent weaknesses. By leveraging their stature for systemic change and democratisation, philanthropic organisations are in a unique position to add value and really push forward sustainable development agendas.

The philanthropic sector stands on the precipice of an era where **the sharing of experiences and strategies in government engagement is not just valuable – it is vital for the collective advancement of the sector**. By documenting and disseminating methodologies and outcomes, philanthropic organisations can provide insight for similar organisations navigating the complexities of policy influence.

**Political innovation involves leveraging creative solutions and grassroots movements** – such as JoinPolitics and Brand New Bundestag – to enhance political systems, making them more inclusive, participatory, and responsive. Political innovation, which philanthropic organisations can help to nurture and scale, is an area of fertile ground for those working towards systemic reform.

**Engagement between philanthropic organisations and political parties offers a strategic opportunity to influence change from within the political system**. By supporting parties that are seeking to rejuvenate their platforms and operations, philanthropic organisations can help bridge the gap between citizens and their representatives. This is not about taking sides, but about strengthening the political process to become more inclusive and representative.

**Another area where philanthropic organisations can add value is in enhancing institutional and political adaptation skills among policymakers**. This encompasses methods such as compromise and advocating for incremental changes that collectively move the needle towards more effective governance. Philanthropic actors, with their expertise and resources, can support training programmes and workshops that develop these critical skills among government officials and political leaders. This should be a long-term investment in the stability and adaptability of political systems, contributing to a more dynamic and responsive governance landscape.

**Subnational levels of government often have a direct impact on citizens' daily lives, and philanthropists can play a crucial role in driving reform at this level.** These subnational engagements can also serve as pilot projects for larger-scale reforms, offering a testing ground for innovative approaches that could later be scaled up. Both the literature and the expert feedback gathered for this review suggest that such localised efforts not only increase the immediacy and impact of philanthropic work, but also help to build a resilient foundation for broader governmental reforms.



## References

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