



A global consultancy
and platform for change

How do philanthropic donors engage with governments?

A review of donors' models for
government engagement

MARCELA MORALES H.
JULY 2024

About the Project

As part of a learning partnership, the [Open Society Foundations](#) (OSF), [OTT](#) and [INASP](#), are jointly exploring effective models for supporting to progressive government reformers in the Global South. Through consultations, reviews and participatory workshops, OTT and INASP have documented learnings and identified best practices for using government engagement and political philanthropy to bolster progressive reforms. This Review is informed by some of these learnings and is part of the series '[Political philanthropy? Perspectives on engaging with governments in the Global South](#)'.

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

The authors wish to thank the various experts whose insights and experiences contributed to this review. We would also like to thank the project's advisory group for their guidance and feedback throughout this process. Their input strengthened the quality of this work. We are also grateful to the staff and consultants at the Open Society Foundations and On Think Tanks, for their assistance in facilitating interviews and providing access to resources. We also extend thanks to Jojoh Faal Sy for editorial support and Magda Castría for design and typesetting.

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

About this Review

The primary goal of this review is to provide clear guidance based on the experiences of philanthropic donors engaging with governments, specifically in the realm of economic advisory. We aim to identify effective practices and understand the spectrum of engagement levels and methods.

The review is organised to address key questions and to acknowledge the exploratory nature of this subject, where limited written evidence exists. We recognise the challenge presented by the typically private nature of donor-government interactions, which often leads to a lack of formal documentation. Through internal consultations and expert interviews, we have collected insights into these engagements, which are usually informed by the tacit knowledge of practitioners and policymakers rather than recorded evidence.

This review was guided by the following topics:

- Insights from the literature on effective philanthropic support to governments.
- Frameworks and tools to guide donor responses to government requests.
- Patterns in philanthropic responses to direct government requests for assistance.
- Strategies for effectively meeting government needs for support.

The review is structured to provide a roadmap for understanding philanthropic engagement with governments. It begins with a summary of key findings, offering a short overview of the primary outcomes. The initial section explores the concept and practice of engagement, defining its scope and discussing its practical application. This is followed by an examination of the factors that lead to effective engagement, where best practices and successful strategies are identified. The final section outlines potential opportunities for stakeholders when considering engagement, spotlighting areas ripe for impact and collaborative effort.

For more information contact: mmorales@onthinktanks.org

Recommended citation:

Morales, M. (2024) *How do philanthropic donors engage with governments? A review of donors' models for government engagement*. OTT. Available at www.onthinktanks.org

Table of contents

Executive summary	5
Contentious: The reality of government engagement	5
Prudence: Hallmarks of effective engagement	6
Momentous: Considerations to practising engagement	7
1. Donor-government engagement in practice	8
1.1. What do we mean by donor-government engagement	8
1.2. What approaches are used: Types of delivery	11
1.3. What challenges exist	19
1.4. Optimal levels of engagement in policymaking	22
2. Key elements influencing effective government engagement	24
2.1. A trend towards assertion	24
2.2. Demand-driven support	25
2.3. Working with the grain	26
3. Walking the tightrope: Opportunities to add value	29
References	31

Executive summary

This review seeks to provide a roadmap for understanding philanthropic engagement with governments. Through internal consultations and expert interviews, we have collected insights into these engagements, which are usually informed by the tacit knowledge of practitioners and policymakers rather than recorded evidence.

Contentious: The reality of government engagement

The landscape of donor-government engagement viewed through the lens of philanthropic efforts reveals a complex and nuanced ecosystem. A synthesis of the landscape mapping underscores the highly context-specific nature of the process, with limited evidence of effective engagement practices and diverse practices found across organisations.

- **Purposeful collaboration for reforms:** Donor-government engagement sets out a deliberate partnership between philanthropic organisations and governmental entities. This collaboration is aimed at enhancing government reforms and strengthening public sector initiatives, with philanthropic support extending beyond technical assistance to include a wide range of approaches. Crafted around both donor and government priorities, these engagements are typically adapted to fit the unique political, social, and economic contexts of each government. They demonstrate the variety of methods and strategies used by philanthropic entities and underline the importance of context in determining the most effective approach.
- **The challenge of limited evidence:** Philanthropists often collaborate with governments in ways that are not publicly disclosed. Evidence on how best to offer economic advice to governments is therefore scarce, making it challenging to glean insights from documented sources. What does exist tends to focus on the supply of evidence, rather than on effective strategies and practices of engagement.
- **Navigating political landscapes:** All aspects of government interaction are subject to political forces, making it essential for philanthropic organisations to align any engagement to public interest and policy, while also considering the long-term goal of strengthening institutions and promoting equitable governance. For these organisations, engagement with government is an intricate endeavour that prerequisites a nuanced understanding of the political landscape.
- **Expert advice and political dynamics:** Providing expert advice stands as a prominent engagement strategy as philanthropic organisations often possess or have access to a wealth of specialised knowledge. When they provide expert advice, these organisations engage in a symbiotic relationship with governments, supplying insights and analysis that can inform and shape effective governance. This exchange is particularly valuable when it is demand-driven, ensuring that the

expertise shared is directly responsive to the articulated needs and strategic goals of government entities.

- **From advisory to system reform:** In addition to providing expert advice, the review identified several other forms of engagement between philanthropic organisations and governments. These include embedded technical assistance, where advisers are integrated within government institutions to offer direct support and capacity-building. Philanthropic entities also foster political innovation by identifying and backing creative solutions that make political systems more inclusive and responsive.
- **Political philanthropy as a strategy:** Political funding, or political philanthropy, focuses on supporting systemic reforms within the political system rather than specific parties or ideologies. This approach is exemplified by initiatives that aim to improve the representativeness and functionality of governments and is becoming increasingly prevalent not only in the U.S. but also in Europe, with challenges around transparency and the explicitly political nature of the engagements.

Prudence: Hallmarks of effective engagement

Effective engagement between philanthropic organisations and governments relies on several hallmarks, each contributing to the success of donor-government collaborations. These hallmarks include strategic partnerships, a keen understanding of the ‘golden period’ of influence, and context-aware methodologies. Philanthropic entities must demonstrate adaptability and discretion, tailoring their strategies to align with the nuanced needs and perceptions of government partners, all while maintaining transparency and accountability.

- **Beyond the apolitical posture:** Given global challenges like pandemic recovery and social crises, philanthropic organisations are taking a more assertive stance in policy influence, recognising that neutrality is not a viable option. They are actively shaping policy and supporting civil society, particularly in upholding the rule of law and democratic values.
- **Multifaceted roles of philanthropic organisations:** Effective engagement necessitates that philanthropists adopt diverse roles. These roles encompass championing marginalised voices, endorsing research-driven insights, and facilitating dialogues among stakeholders. This multifaceted approach underscores the importance of maintaining a balance between independence and influence when supporting policy development.
- **Contextual sensitivities and perceptions:** Philanthropic organisations often exercise caution to avoid the perception of unduly influencing government policy, as policymakers are wary of external influence. However, in some settings, external expertise and philanthropic involvement in specific projects can serve to enhance a government’s image as innovative and receptive to new ideas. To make the most of opportunities, engagement strategies must be adaptable, discreet, and sensitive

to the perceptions and priorities of government partners. While the challenges are significant, these types of engagements offer opportunities to contribute meaningfully to more representative and functional governance structures.

- **Navigating difficult terrain:** Philanthropic organisations must navigate the sensitive political landscape cautiously. The consultations highlighted that these organisations typically steer clear of overtly politicised issues, particularly in the economic domain. Instead, they engage with a broader spectrum of actors, encompassing civil society and the private sector, often focusing on education, social protection, and governance issues such as human rights, transparency, and democracy.
- **Demand-driven engagement:** Philanthropic organisations are increasingly acknowledging the significance of adopting a demand-driven approach in their government engagements. This involves aligning initiatives with the specific priorities and needs of government partners, ensuring that solutions are tailored to the unique challenges and contexts of each governmental landscape.

Momentous: Considerations to practising engagement

Philanthropy is inherently linked to policy and politics because it has the potential to enact change within these systems. As philanthropic organisations contemplate deeper engagement in governance reform, prudence dictates a strategic approach that leverages existing strengths while mitigating inherent weaknesses. By leveraging its stature for systemic change and democratisation, philanthropic organisations could influence governance reform meaningfully, using a combination of strategies, including:

- **Strengthening democratic processes:** As global political landscapes shift and democratic structures face challenges, philanthropic organisations have a critical role in protecting and strengthening democratic processes. This involves active participation in shaping the systems within which societies operate, going beyond traditional non-partisan support.
- **Sector leadership through experience sharing:** Philanthropic organisations interested in political engagement could support and influence the sector by sharing experiences, methodologies, and outcomes. Adopting greater transparency can help the sector operate more effectively and adapt its strategies for greater impact.
- **Diffusion of political innovation:** Philanthropic organisations can embrace and scale political innovation by supporting the incubation of political talent and the development of progressive policies. Investing in initiatives that cultivate new political leaders and foster citizen engagement can revitalise democracies and redress disenchantment with existing political structures.
- **Building institutional credibility and adaptability:** Philanthropists can add value by engaging with political parties to support the rejuvenation of their platforms, making the political process more inclusive and representative. They can also invest in capacity-building initiatives that enhance the adaptation skills of policymakers, promoting incremental changes for effective governance.

1. Donor-government engagement in practice

This section of the review sets out to explore the various modalities of engagement that occur between philanthropic donors and government entities.

We initially reviewed the literature to identify common practices of donor engagement with governments. Despite a wealth of information on technical assistance, there is a gap in understanding the complex nature of these engagements, the dynamics at play, and their contextual variations. To bridge this gap, we engaged with experts and those with first-hand experience working with governments to draw out the nuanced experiences and lessons learned.

This section begins by establishing a clear definition of what constitutes donor engagement from a philanthropic standpoint. The section then focuses on the challenges inherent in donor-government engagement. These challenges can take many forms, from navigating bureaucratic hurdles to aligning donor objectives with government strategies, and the delicate task of ensuring that engagement remains transparent and accountable.

1.1. What do we mean by donor-government engagement

For the purposes of this review, donor-government engagement refers to the purposeful collaboration between philanthropic organisations and government bodies aimed at advancing government reforms and strengthening public sector initiatives.

Philanthropic support extends beyond mere technical assistance, representing a broad spectrum of collaborative practices that are tailored to the unique objectives of the donors and the needs of the recipient governments. This collaboration may manifest as direct involvement in policy formulation and implementation or take on more consultative or advocacy-focused roles.

An interviewee highlighted the goal of these engagements as aligning philanthropic initiatives with public interest and governmental goals, thereby ensuring mutual benefit and societal advancement. These engagements are inherently adaptable, crafted to suit the distinct political, social, and economic landscapes of each government and demonstrate the variety of methods and strategies employed by different philanthropic entities.

The diverse nature of these collaborations emphasises the critical role of context in shaping the type and effectiveness of support provided. Philanthropic actions and investments are made in an environment where they intersect with governmental policies, objectives, and the ever-changing terrain of political will. Understanding the political dimensions of these engagements is crucial, as it underscores the complexities and the underlying power dynamics involved.

What is political? What is philanthropic?

Philanthropy is inherently political; it is not merely about supporting a worldview but actively shaping society according to a desired vision.

Philanthropy is a powerful force with real-world impact, going beyond mere support to actively sculpting the fabric of society. It is a field where bold ideas compete and ideologies vie for influence, a space where philanthropic vision and action collide with diverse schools of thought (Hayman, 2017, Surmatz, 2023). Change is driven not by passive agreement but by the vigorous advocacy of those beliefs, each fighting to steer the course of a collective future.

For philanthropic actors, grasping the political essence of their work is pivotal, particularly in government engagement (Surmatz, 2023). The idea that decision makers act purely for the public good is often challenged by the interplay of various interests, where evidence can be swayed by political agendas (Parkhurst, 2017; Dercon, 2023, Dercon, 2022). Acknowledging that decision-making is influenced by both evidence and entrenched worldviews is critical (Broadbent, 2012).

Philanthropic organisations can forge stronger, more effective alliances with government bodies by understanding the country’s institutional framework and ensuring their contributions resonate with both public policy and need. This means coming to terms with the ‘elite bargain’, the give-and-take among a nation’s powerful that shapes policies and influences how resources are allocated, setting the stage for transformative reforms (Dercon, 2022; Pinnington, 2023).

Embracing the intricate political context of philanthropic work highlights that change is seldom straightforward and often builds up over time (Hayman, 2017). ‘Working with the grain’ involves adapting to the political climate, which may involve gradual steps and aligning with current power structures (Edom, 2018). It is about navigating complex moral landscapes and making calculated decisions.

For example, in many countries, political intermediaries form the backbone of the governance and social fabric. These figures, often known as “political fixers”, “middlemen” or “gatekeepers” often bridge the gap between governments and actors seeking to create change, skilfully navigating the intricate and deep-seated patronage networks that pervade the political landscape (Dercon, 2022; Dercon, 2023). Their substantial influence stems from their deep-rooted ties with political entities, government bodies, and community circles.

In contexts where formal institutions are weaker or struggle with public trust, these intermediaries become the linchpins of program implementation, information dissemination, and even the equitable distribution of state resources. They are the

catalysts of electoral support, the mediators of community disputes, and often the facilitators of public service delivery.

Yet, the role of these intermediaries is fraught with complexity. While on one hand, they streamline processes and offer a path through bureaucratic mazes, on the other, they sustain a system rooted in personal allegiance and patronage. This dependency on intermediaries can foster a self-sustaining cycle where the established order is upheld, consolidating power and resources in the hands of the few, often at the expense of formal rule of law and inclusive governance.

BOX 1. PHILANTHROPIC ENGAGEMENT AND POLITICAL INTERMEDIARIES: LESSONS FROM GHANA'S TRANSITION

The transition of Ghana to a multiparty democracy in the 1990s provides a vivid example of the nuanced role political intermediaries play in the evolution of governance structures – an essential consideration for philanthropic organisations. During this period, figures akin to political gatekeepers emerged as crucial conduits between the populace and the government, guiding the democratic process and facilitating essential negotiations.

These intermediaries, including President Jerry Rawlings and other political elites, were instrumental in adopting a series of compromises to balance the need for stability with the impetus for reform, ultimately leading to a peaceful transition of power. Philanthropic organisations observed and supported this process, recognising the importance of aligning with influential local actors who could navigate the complex socio-political landscape.

The experience in Ghana highlights for philanthropic organisations the delicate act of engaging with political intermediaries. While these figures can be pivotal in achieving reforms and rallying public support, their involvement also reflects and can reinforce existing patronage dynamics within the political system. The challenge lies in leveraging the unique positioning and influence of such intermediaries to facilitate positive change while working towards a governance system that is equitable and not overly reliant on individual power brokers.

Source: Dercon (2022, 2023)

This landscape poses a significant conundrum for philanthropic organisations aiming for development that uplifts societies and fosters equitable governance. It necessitates a thoughtful balance – leveraging the efficacy of intermediaries to achieve short-term goals while steadfastly working towards strengthening institutions for a more equitable and sustainable future.

In any setting, regardless of complexity, 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.”* Every aspect of engagement, from the selection of experts to funding sources, has the potential to shape the reception and effectiveness of the advice given. This means that donors must carefully

manage the optics and the implications of their involvement, as every detail can impact the outcome of their efforts (The Bridgespan Group, 2016). In the realm of government engagement, neutrality is a myth; every action taken by philanthropic organisations is a walk along a political tightrope.

Recognising that politics is an inextricable component of all government engagement sets the stage for a deeper exploration of the primary modes through which such engagement can be enacted.

1.2. What approaches are used: Types of delivery

From direct collaboration to more nuanced forms of influence, philanthropic entities engage with government bodies in a multitude of ways. This can involve working alongside governments to complement and bolster their efforts or engaging in more critical capacities that challenge and seek to reshape existing policies and public services. The forms of engagement range from direct collaboration with government officials to operating through intermediaries like NGOs, coalitions, and other non-profits, each with distinct objectives and methodologies.

This section will explore the varied strategies and methods philanthropic entities employ to drive positive change within governmental systems that were identified in this review.

Embedded technical assistance

Embedded technical assistance is a hands-on approach where experts are integrated within government institutions to provide expertise and foster capacity-building.

Deepening institutional impact through embedded technical assistance

This method contrasts with traditional technical assistance, which is delivered externally and often involves advisers providing reports, recommendations, or training without direct involvement in day-to-day operations (The Reality of Aid, 2016). For example, traditional technical assistance might involve international consultants conducting workshops or offering policy advice from a distance, while embedded technical assistance would have these consultants working alongside local staff within a ministry to implement changes in real-time. Embedded technical assistance aims for deeper institutional change and sustainability by allowing advisers to understand the unique context and challenges of the institution and tailor their support accordingly.

Integrating expertise with delivery units

The rise of embedding technical experts within ministries via delivery units has been a notable trend over the past two decades. This model capitalises on situating specialists within the governmental fabric, promoting in-house knowledge transfer and organizational evolution. Funded by philanthropic donors, these schemes enable a seamless integration of best practices and innovative methodologies into government operations.

BOX 2. ODI'S BUDGET STRENGTHENING INITIATIVE

ODI's Budget Strengthening Initiative (BSI), an embedded form of technical assistance, showcased its potential by playing a pivotal role in brokering fiscal decentralization reforms within the Ugandan government. Amidst a broader political climate focused on regime survival, the BSI adeptly navigated the existing political landscape to tailor reforms that, while constrained, sought alignment with entrenched governmental logic, often at odds with pro-poor outcomes.

Technical Assistance Beyond Traditional Models

Distinct from its primary donors, the World Bank and the UK, the BSI's unique position within the Ugandan government allowed it to become deeply integrated into daily governance and public service delivery. More than just advisers, BSI personnel were involved in the minutiae of policy implementation, earning a reputation as indispensable insiders. Their hands-on involvement transcended typical consultancy roles, embedding them within the very fabric of the Ministry of Finance's operations.

Building Trust and Navigating Politics

The BSI's effectiveness hinged on its ability to build and maintain trust, leveraging its technical credibility and long-term engagement in the Ugandan context. Notably, the BSI benefited from the global reputation of the UK development think tank ODI, enhancing its legitimacy. Simultaneously, it accrued social capital through enduring relationships, exemplified by the BSI's lead advisor, who had cultivated strong connections within the Ministry over nearly two decades.

Source: Cox & Robson (2013); Pinnington (2023), internal consultations

Balancing skill transfer and strategic support

One interviewee highlighted the dual benefits of this model. On one hand, it ensures a direct channel for skill and knowledge transfer, fostering an environment conducive to skills development. On the other, it maintains a strategic 'safe distance' for philanthropic funders, supporting governments in making evidence-based decisions without overstepping into direct governance.

However, governments, especially in low- and middle-income countries, face the enduring challenge of attracting and retaining specialised civil servants, a predicament exacerbated by limited resources. Embedded technical assistance addresses this gap by focusing on the professional growth of civil servants, targeting specific areas where technical skills are lacking.

BOX 3. THE ODI FELLOWSHIP SCHEME – SPOTLIGHT ON THE SCHEME’S IMPACT ON ECONOMIC POLICY

The ODI Fellowship Scheme exemplifies the embedded technical assistance approach by placing young professionals with specialised knowledge in economics and international development directly into government ministries of low-income countries. The intent is to bolster their development strategies from within.

From 2015 to 2020, the ODI Fellowship Scheme was empowered with £23 million in funding, with the lion’s share contributed by the UK’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). The Scheme deploys economists and statisticians on two-year assignments, focusing on specific regions or themes like antimicrobial resistance and financial inclusion. Over six months from August 2020 to March 2021, more than 1,000 fellows were actively engaged in the field.

Within the ODI Fellowship Scheme, fellows have made substantial economic contributions to the governments they serve. For instance, fellows in Papua New Guinea developed critical economic forecasting models, and in Myanmar, their insightful property tax analysis successfully boosted state revenue. In South Africa, their expertise in municipal borrowing policy furthered the National Treasury’s fiscal strategies.

While primarily funded by the FCDO, the program also benefits from the support of a range of donors including the UK Office for National Statistics, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), Namibia Nature Foundation, Comic Relief, Fleming Fund, and Edtech Hub.

Focus on Debt Management in Uganda

In Uganda, the establishment of a Debt Management Department within the Ministry of Finance became crucial as the country’s engagement with various debt markets grew. An ODI Fellow was instrumental in this phase, joining the department at its inception in 2015. With no prior processes or trained staff in place, the Fellow’s first-year focus was on reforming the system of primary dealers, working alongside the Central Bank to foster a domestic debt market, and establishing a comprehensive domestic debt database. In the subsequent year, the Fellow shifted to capacity-building, educating colleagues on new systems and domestic debt concepts through formal weekly training. This capacity-building initiative culminated in the development of a Contingent Liability Section to manage the nation’s loan guarantees. By the end of the Fellow’s term, the department was well-equipped with a functioning domestic debt team, showcasing the sustainable impact and success of the embedded technical assistance provided.

Source: Ecorys, 2021

Impact and limitations of embedded technical assistance

The ODI Fellowship Scheme has been acclaimed for its role in enhancing the capacities of host institutions. An Ecorys (2021) evaluation noted that Fellows not only aid in the direct development and implementation of policies but also fortify the broader institutional frameworks. The mutual learning opportunities provided by the scheme have been significant, with many Fellows transitioning to influential roles within the development sector.

However, the embedded technical assistance approach, particularly in the economic sector, is not without its challenges. There is a scarcity of evidence supporting the efficacy of such embedded approaches, especially in the economic field, leading to concerns about their capacity to generate long-term institutional capacity rather than merely replacing it (Cox & Norrington-Davies, 2019; Nastase et al., 2022; Nastase et al., 2021). There is a worry that instead of building lasting capacity, embedded technical assistance may inadvertently serve as a stopgap that fills immediate needs without fostering sustainable skills or systems within the host institutions.

This review also found that the perception that embedded technical assistance models are sometimes “pushed” by funders rather than organically adopted by governments has been discussed. However, an interviewee noted that the reality is more nuanced. Embedded units are seldom unilaterally imposed by funders; they usually emerge from extensive negotiations and a deep understanding of a country’s institutional context. This recognition gives credit to the host governments, underlining the importance of their proactive engagement in setting up such programs.

One noted issue is a Global North bias concerning who is sent as ‘experts’ and what experience is deemed relevant. This often results in young economists, with limited experience, being placed in advisory roles where their influence can be disproportionate to their experience. While these individuals might provide vital support, the perception and acceptance of their expertise can vary greatly depending on the context.

Expert advice

Expert advice as a way of engaging with governments refers to the process where specialised knowledge and insights are provided by 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 program implementation. The objective is to leverage expert knowledge to inform decision-making processes, improve public sector efficiency, and foster informed, evidence-based governance (Mendizabal et al., 2012). Expert advice can be delivered through various formats such as consultations, reports, workshops, and in direct collaboration with government officials and agencies.

The political dynamics of expert advice

The review reveals that expert advice, while seemingly technical and neutral, carries intrinsic political implications. An informant from the review noted the common misconception of “*equating technical expertise with neutrality*,” underscoring that the provision of advice, even from external experts, is inherently political within the context of national policymaking.

Literature on the subject asserts that the acceptance of evidence-based economic advice by policymakers is not a given. Governmental priorities often extend beyond economic development to include maintaining power and managing opposition, as explored in the works of Dercon (2023) and other scholars (see for example, Nastase et al., 2020, 2021).

This underscores the significance of understanding the prevailing ‘elite bargains’ that shape the policy landscape in any given country.

Philanthropic donors typically engage in the provision of expert advice by acting as facilitators, according to the internal consultations conducted for this review. They support these engagements by underwriting the costs for experts to travel and meet with policymakers. However, while funders may pay for these services or act as a liaison between governments and experts, such arrangements are not without their challenges. An informant cited the case where a high-level former British official was favoured as an advisor in Pakistan, funded by FCDO, illustrating how donors can serve as connectors. The choice of an external advisor, however, led to internal friction within civil society, some of whom felt sidelined by the lack of consultation across government departments.

The review also brought to light the various ways foundations support expert advisory roles. The Aga Khan Foundation, for instance, provides advice on climate change, while the Ford Foundation has been involved in economic advisory roles in the past. High-profile figures like Jeffrey Sachs and Hernando de Soto have offered their expertise on economic matters, facilitated by institutions like the US Institute of Peace.

The review revealed varying reactions to foreign economic advice. In India, there was an initial embrace of expertise from figures like Jeffrey Sachs, which later shifted to a preference for indigenous knowledge from the Indian diaspora. In Malaysia, while foreign economic advice was initially welcomed, ultimate decision-making returned to local experts. In contrast, countries under IMF programs or dependent on regional development banks tend to be more receptive to international advice, signalling the IMF’s catalytic role in encouraging external expert consultation.

It is uncommon for philanthropic organisations to engage directly in the provision of advice to governments, opting more often to fund initiatives or to facilitate connections to experts. However, the Brenthurst Foundation presents an interesting exception. Actively involved in advising governments, the Brenthurst Foundation embodies a proactive stance in political consultancy, setting it apart from its peers (Box 4).

BOX 4. THE BRENTHURST FOUNDATION’S ADVISORY ROLE IN AFRICA

The Brenthurst Foundation stands out as a unique example of a philanthropic organization directly engaged in providing governmental advice. Established by the Oppenheimer family in 2004 following the Brenthurst Initiative, the Foundation has dedicated itself to spurring economic growth and development across Africa.

Operating at the behest of African governments, the Foundation offers counsel on economic transformation, underpinned by the philosophy that economic growth is key to achieving prosperity and political stability. The Foundation distinguishes itself by sharing international best practices with African leadership, aiming to inform and shape policy for enhanced economic trajectories.

While the Foundation maintains a public-facing approach, showcasing its expertise in institutional reform and economic success, detailed information on specific government engagements remains limited. Despite the Foundation's active publication and presentation endeavours, including opinion pieces in renowned media outlets like the New York Times, critiques have emerged. Some media outlets have raised questions about the Foundation's involvement in Zambia's economic reforms, sparking discussions about the reliance on external advisers over local technocrats and potential conflicts of interest (M'membe, 2022; Africa Intelligence, 2022).

Participatory and learning spaces

The review has identified the creation of participatory and learning spaces as effective mechanisms for engaging with government officials. These platforms are designed to assemble high-level public officials, such as presidents, prime ministers or ministers of finance or economy, with dual objectives: to share experiences pertinent to their governmental roles and to collaboratively tackle topics to further specific causes or agendas. Known by various labels such as Communities of Practice (CoPs), learning partnerships, and expert forums, these spaces are characterised by shared learning experiences and a collaborative ethos. The success of these spaces hinges on participant-led agendas, independent of funding organisations, and a well-defined purpose for engagement. The main challenges in these initiatives are maintaining engagement over time and ensuring that the environment fosters a dynamic exchange of knowledge that can be enriched and operationalised.

These initiatives are more frequently observed within international or multilateral bodies, such as the World Bank Gender CoP, which primarily engages finance ministers. However, there are also CoPs led by autonomous organisations where philanthropic donors participate indirectly, preferring to support these initiatives through partners who execute them. An illustrative case is the Club de Madrid, which links former democratic presidents, prime ministers, and high-level officials in a forum that utilises the collective expertise of its members to provide strategic policy advice (Box 5). This initiative has garnered support from philanthropic entities like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Ford Foundation, demonstrating a successful model of indirect donor engagement.

BOX 5. CLUB DE MADRID'S DEPLOYMENT OF HIGH-LEVEL EXPERTISE

The Club de Madrid consists of former democratic leaders, including presidents, prime ministers, and senior officials. It functions through a membership model, coordinated by a specialised secretariat, and is dedicated to the proliferation of democratic principles globally by drawing on the rich experience of its members.

Members maintain influential connections to their nations, facilitating effective engagements and the provision of tailored assistance to governments in need of their expertise. With its capacity to form panels of experts from its membership, the Club harnesses a vast reservoir of knowledge and experience.

Source: Club de Madrid (n/d); internal consultations

While participatory and learning spaces as a means of engaging high-level officials are commonly employed, concrete evidence of their efficacy is scarce. An interviewee highlighted that these spaces offer the opportunity for high-level officials to assimilate and later apply the expertise acquired. However, the success factors of such spaces, defined by participant-driven agendas and a clear, targeted engagement strategy, remain elusive. The primary challenges are sustaining engagement over time and ensuring that such spaces don't become transient in their influence. High-level officials frequently face time constraints, and as noted by the interviewee, these forums may not represent the most direct route to impacting government policies. Instead, they are seen as ancillary tools that bolster other philanthropic initiatives.

The review also recognised think tanks as crucial intermediaries in promoting government engagement. These organisations are adept at convening spaces for dialogue and learning, potentially serving as the initial step to establishing communication with government officials. An interviewee indicated that in scenarios where there is governmental hesitance to accept “*external advice from philanthropic donors*,” think tanks may be more favourably positioned to convene discussion spaces or public events, thereby imparting evidence and best practices to policymakers. Yet, as the interviewee conceded, this approach is the “*scenic route*” to policy transformation, often slower and without guaranteed influence on policy adoption.

Political funding

Political funding, also referred to as political philanthropy, is characterised by a nonpartisan commitment of financial resources toward organisations, campaigns, and individuals within the political system, to foster a more representative and functional government (Merril & Murdoch, 2020) (Box 6). This approach, particularly recognised in the United States and raising increasing interest across Europe, prioritises systemic reform over partisan victories or ideological dominance.

According to the Unite America Fund (2020), the essence of political philanthropy lies in its focus on rectifying the political system itself, rather than securing electoral majorities for a particular party. The Unite America Fund report of 2020 details how political philanthropists in 2018 directed \$154 million towards the election of reform-oriented candidates and the passage of 18 reform ballot initiatives. These initiatives, including efforts to end partisan gerrymandering in five states, aim to instil better incentives in the electoral process and elevate the quality of elected leadership.

However, political foundations sometimes face criticism for potentially serving as backdoors for donors, including corporate and foreign entities, who are legally restricted from making direct campaign contributions. An example cited by Influence Watch (2022) involves the Clinton Foundation reflecting the nuanced scrutiny political philanthropy may encounter.

BOX 6. SELECTED EXAMPLES OF POLITICAL PHILANTHROPY

- **Arnold Ventures:** Arnold Ventures has made significant investments, totalling US\$40 million in 2016 and 2018, toward ballot initiatives that target election reforms such as ending gerrymandering, opening primaries to independent voters, and instituting ranked-choice voting across seven states. These initiatives have the potential to induce lasting changes to the electoral system, influencing future elections and candidate incentives.
- **Quadrivium:** Founded by Kathrin Murdoch, Quadrivium is an organization dedicated to democracy reform, responding to the challenges posed by political dysfunction. Murdoch aims to build a cross-partisan network of political philanthropists, strategically channelling resources to enhance the effectiveness and reach of the reform movement.
- **DaVita's Initiatives:** Ken Thiry, the former executive at DaVita, has actively supported ballot initiatives in Colorado with a US\$18 million investment. The initiatives have reformed primary elections, established independent redistricting commissions, and placed restrictions on political gerrymandering within the state constitution, setting precedents for electoral fairness.

Source: Unite America Fund (2020)

In the context of philanthropic engagement with political systems, the review indicates that the cases observed within the United States represent some of the most overtly political involvements.

This brand of engagement, while holding the potential for efficacy, also presents challenges – particularly its explicit nature and the difficulty in maintaining transparency. As such, this model stands as a blueprint to inform aspects of governance reform, yet it simultaneously brings to light the complexities and necessitates a cautious approach.

An emerging 'ecosystem of political innovation' in Europe is beginning to address the deficiencies of the political system and collectively seek solutions to reinforce and rejuvenate democratic principles (Durieux & Klein, 2023). The examples are manifold and two broad categories have been identified:

- Initiatives that groom new political leaders for electoral candidacy, such as Brand New Bundestag¹ and Join Politics² in Germany, Tous Elus³ and the Académie des Futurs Leaders⁴ in France, or Fantapolitica!⁵ in Italy.
- Organisations dedicated to identifying and implementing effective means for individuals and communities to mobilise and build political influence, like Démocratiser la Politique, which focuses on the under-representation of the working class in French politics and aids their active participation for authentic representation in the electoral and political realm.

A recent event on the synergy between philanthropy and politics highlighted the significant obstacles these political innovators face. Despite their impactful and ambitious initiatives, they are confronted with persistent scepticism from some funders, the complexities of expanding their work across a continent with a myriad of legal codes and political systems, feelings of isolation, and the lack of a framework to exchange best practices and experiences across different nations.

In addressing these challenges, the importance of organisations already embedded in this type of work cannot be overstated. For example, the Multitudes Foundation was conceived specifically to overcome these barriers by providing financial support to initiatives at different growth stages, offering practical and strategic assistance, and creating a community of practice for political changemakers to strategise and learn collectively (Durieux, 2023).

Support networks for such endeavours include Luminate, Daniel Sachs Foundation, Democracy in Media, and Robert Bosch Stiftung (Keidan, 2023; Mair, Mena, & Özcelik, 2023). These organisations fund a range of initiatives, all underpinned by the shared conviction that a reimagination of politics – towards more inclusivity, humanity, and optimism – is crucial. They understand that systemic change, in any area, is greatly accelerated when political leaders, backed by the trust and support of their communities, can bring their expertise to bear on ambitious policy agendas that have a tangible impact on improving lives.

1.3. What challenges exist

Donor-government relationships hold great potential for societal benefits, but navigating these relationships is not without significant challenges. The review and consultations with experts have brought to light several key challenges that philanthropists face.

¹ For more information on New Bundestag: <https://brandnewbundestag.de/en/landing-page/>

² For more information on Join Politics: <https://www.joinpolitics.org/>

³ For more information on Tous Elus: <https://touselus.fr/>

⁴ For more information on L'Académie des Futurs Leaders: <https://www.academiedesfutursleaders.com/>

⁵ For more information on Fantapolitica!: <https://www.fantapolitica.org/>

Perception of neutrality in donor-government engagement

The preservation of neutrality in philanthropic endeavours, particularly within highly politicised environments, poses a complex challenge in donor-government relations (Alt-Kaaker & Zels, 2023). 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 when engaging in economic-related activities in certain countries. These challenges often stem from perceptions associated with their founding backgrounds or the influence of notable associated individuals, which can cast doubt on their intentions and neutrality.

The consequences of being perceived as partial are profound. When a philanthropic organization is viewed as biased, its efficacy and ability to collaborate effectively with governments may be undermined. This apprehension to form partnerships is not uniform; it significantly differs from nation to nation, influenced by each country's unique political and cultural sensitivities. For instance, nations with stringent regulations on foreign involvement in their domestic affairs, like Malaysia, are known for their cautious approach or even resistance to collaborating with some international philanthropic groups.

Responses to philanthropic involvement are also dictated by the specific dynamics of each country. As noted by an informant, the receptivity to philanthropic efforts varies greatly, with some countries being more welcoming than others. The level of openness or opposition, especially concerning economic initiatives, is shaped by a multitude of factors, including historical ties, and prevailing political climates.

The successful navigation of cultural and political dynamics is a critical hurdle in donor-government engagement. Strategies that are effective in one context may not translate well to another, highlighting the need for flexibility and an appreciation for local distinctions in philanthropic methods (Fiester, 2017).

As revealed through discussions and informant insights, the political landscapes of various countries influence how philanthropic organisations interact with governments. Some administrations may publicly acknowledge support from these entities, using it as a symbol of advanced governance, while others might view such involvement as an intrusion on their sovereignty or a disruptive force in domestic matters.

An informant has highlighted the contrast in government openness, citing examples like Colombia or Brazil, where governments are eager to emphasise their collaboration with external experts. This inclination to leverage expert advice denotes a desire to be perceived as progressive and prepared for future challenges. Nevertheless, the informant also indicated that the willingness to accept external advice can fluctuate depending on the sensitivity of the issue and the specific timing within the broader political context.

These differential responses necessitate astute strategic planning and execution of philanthropic initiatives. Organisations must possess the acumen to discern political and social signals within each country and adjust their strategies accordingly. A failure in this aspect can lead to a loss of trust and potential labelling of the philanthropic organization as an outside actor exerting influence, rather than an impartial partner striving for shared objectives. It underscores the essential nature of cultural adeptness and an understanding of local realities as vital competencies for philanthropic operations in the global sphere.

Navigating political philanthropy

In line with the issues raised concerning perceived neutrality, philanthropic foundations have traditionally been reluctant to engage in political activities or be viewed as political funders (Barbe, 2023). However, there is a pressing need for these organisations to address political elements if they are to effect substantial systemic change.

This reluctance to engage politically was a key topic at a recent industry event, where leaders within the philanthropic sector acknowledged the complexity of funding political initiatives while maintaining a stance of neutrality. Despite the history of transparency issues, the presenters highlighted the importance of philanthropic engagement in democratic and political systems change. The challenge, as they articulated, is to engage in this necessary work in a way that is detached from the conventional mechanisms of lobbying and removed from narrow self-interests.

Philanthropic organisations are thus faced with the task of walking a tightrope: they must find ways to support change within political systems that are aligned with their mission yet remain non-partisan and objective. The difficulty lies in reconciling the need to be involved in inherently political processes with the obligation to uphold the trust placed in them as neutral entities dedicated to the public good.

The nature of engagements with governments

The time-limited nature of philanthropic engagements 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 rapid results. However, informant insights have stressed that such projects may not delve deep enough to effect lasting change within complex social and political contexts.

The duration of engagement, as pointed out by interviewees, is also inextricably linked to the political rhythms of the countries in question. Electoral cycles, cabinet changes, and shifts in policy directions all play pivotal roles in shaping the course of philanthropic engagements. Political realities can either constrain or enhance the capacity of philanthropic initiatives to bolster meaningful reform.

There is also the delicate task of balancing immediate results with long-term goals. Progressive governments, often constrained by the short assurance of tenure, may not have the luxury of time to implement comprehensive reforms. This urgency can create a challenging environment for philanthropic donors who aim to support sustainable and systemic change.

Interviewees have highlighted that the windows of opportunity for philanthropic influence are often fleeting, necessitating swift action when progressive leaders come into power. Expert advice during these critical junctures is vital but must be supported by parallel efforts to develop capabilities at various levels of governance.

Short-term focus on problem-driven technical assistance

The review highlights a significant challenge for philanthropic donors using a problem-driven approach to technical assistance: the tendency to prioritise immediate project needs over long-term institutional change. This approach rightly values the reliance on local actors and their expertise, as they are often best positioned to identify the needs and suitable responses within their context. However, a repeated concern raised by interviewees is the risk of technical assistance efforts being too narrowly focused on short-term projects. This focus can lead to an overemphasis on quick wins at the expense of broader, systemic reform.

The review showed that without a robust on-the-ground presence and a foundation of trust that is cultivated over time, technical assistance can become disproportionately aligned with the short-term objectives of government actors seeking support. This misalignment may result in assistance that addresses the immediate requests and desires of these actors, rather than the underlying, systemic issues that need attention for sustainable change.

Additionally, the review illuminated the challenge of managing expectations concerning the continuation of funding. Philanthropic donors often encounter tension between their advisory role and the government's expectations regarding financial support. There is sometimes an assumption or hope for additional funding from philanthropic organisations, which can complicate the dynamics of the partnership and the overall impact of the technical assistance provided.

1.4. Optimal levels of engagement in policymaking

Determining the most effective level at which philanthropic donors should engage with policymakers is a nuanced challenge, as insights from this review and interviews have pointed out. Conventional wisdom often suggests that higher levels of engagement, such as with presidents or ministers, are more likely to lead to policy change. The underlying assumption is that proximity to the centres of government power translates into greater opportunities to inform and shape policy.

Political science research has frequently emphasised the influence of elite networks and access in determining policy outcomes. Direct access to high-level policymakers allows for the provision of information and the cultivation of relationships that are instrumental in influencing decisions. Additionally, theories of agenda setting support the notion that those in close contact with top decision makers can significantly affect which issues are prioritised on the policy agenda.

However, the review revealed that localised challenges and regional disparities require a more complex approach. While national-level connections are valuable, the real need for support often lies at regional or local authority levels. These subnational entities play critical roles in the reform process, with their openness to support varying widely (The Bridgespan Group, 2016).

One informant underscored that philanthropic organisations frequently focus on high-level politicians, which can facilitate policy adoption. Yet, they noted that engaging with policymakers at subnational levels might offer unique opportunities for change. This was especially true in decentralised systems, where subnational governments possess both the autonomy and resources to make impactful decisions.

Another interviewee acknowledged the importance of engaging at the national level, particularly for economic issues that typically fall under the purview of national governance. Simultaneously, they emphasised the significance of working with technocrats, suggesting that philanthropic support to enhance the skills and abilities of these individuals is critical for the successful implementation of reforms.

The challenge for philanthropic donors lies in navigating this complex landscape. Access to high-ranking officials does not guarantee influence, as policymakers are subject to a myriad of inputs and constraints, including legal frameworks, bureaucratic procedures, and the need to maintain public support (The Bridgespan Group, 2016). Moreover, in pluralistic political systems, there are multiple points of influence beyond the highest levels of government, such as local, regional, and legislative bodies, as well as public opinion and grassroots movements.

Therefore, philanthropic donors must strategically determine where their engagement will be most effective, whether at the national or subnational level and how to support the technical expertise necessary for sustainable policy development. This requires a nuanced understanding of the political environment and a flexible approach to engagement that can adapt to various entry points and levels of influence.

2. Key elements influencing effective government engagement

Philanthropic engagement with governments is evolving amidst a landscape rife with challenges, prompting a strategic reevaluation of how these interactions are conducted. Interviewees from recent consultations have noted that philanthropic organisations are increasingly acknowledging the political dimensions of their work and stepping away from the sidelines to actively shape policy and drive impactful change.

2.1. A trend towards assertion

In the face of the world's pressing issues – pandemic recovery, conflicts, and social crises – philanthropists can no longer afford the luxury of apolitical posturing. Interviewees have emphasised that a more assertive stance in policy influence is imperative. Their role in bolstering civil society, particularly in upholding the rule of law and fostering democratic values, has become crucial. By understanding the range of advocacy strategies, philanthropic organisations are realigning their activities to drive social change effectively, considering their resources and constraints.

At the 2023 European Research Network on Philanthropy (ERNOP) conference, a forum that convenes thinkers in the field of philanthropy, Volker Then of Fondazione AIS delivered compelling insights. He argued for a pivotal role of advocacy in enhancing the societal impact of philanthropy. Advocating for a new paradigm of legitimacy, he then suggested that philanthropic entities draw upon their depth of specialised knowledge and their significant policy contributions as a foundation for their legitimacy – a sentiment that resonated with other attendees.

To assert legitimacy and effectiveness, philanthropic organisations must adopt multifaceted roles – this is a sentiment echoed by the interviewed experts. They must champion marginalised voices, offer specialised expertise, endorse research-driven insights, facilitate dialogues among diverse stakeholders, and leverage their foundational freedoms of expression and association.

The notion of the apolitical foundation is on the wane, a point that interviewees agreed upon, though it remains the prerogative of each organization to determine its level of political engagement. Good governance and transparency continue to be pertinent in showcasing a foundation's legitimacy in a politically conscious role. Many foundations, as interviewees noted, are expressing a keen interest in engaging in dialogues and partnerships with policymakers, recognising these collaborations as foundational for effective policy development.

In a landscape where sector boundaries are increasingly interwoven, philanthropic entities are urged to maintain their distinct roles and independence. Yet, as interviewed

experts have underscored, they must also embrace their potential to contribute to policy development and forge partnerships with public actors. These principles, as distilled from the consultations, serve as recommendations for philanthropic actors to confidently embrace their newfound political agency as they endeavour to shape policies that profoundly impact societies around the globe.

Against this backdrop, insights from the literature and consultations with experts have identified several key elements that contribute to effective engagement with governments. These elements, while not comprehensive, highlight significant priorities and considerations that philanthropic foundations may consider as they seek to collaborate effectively with governmental entities.

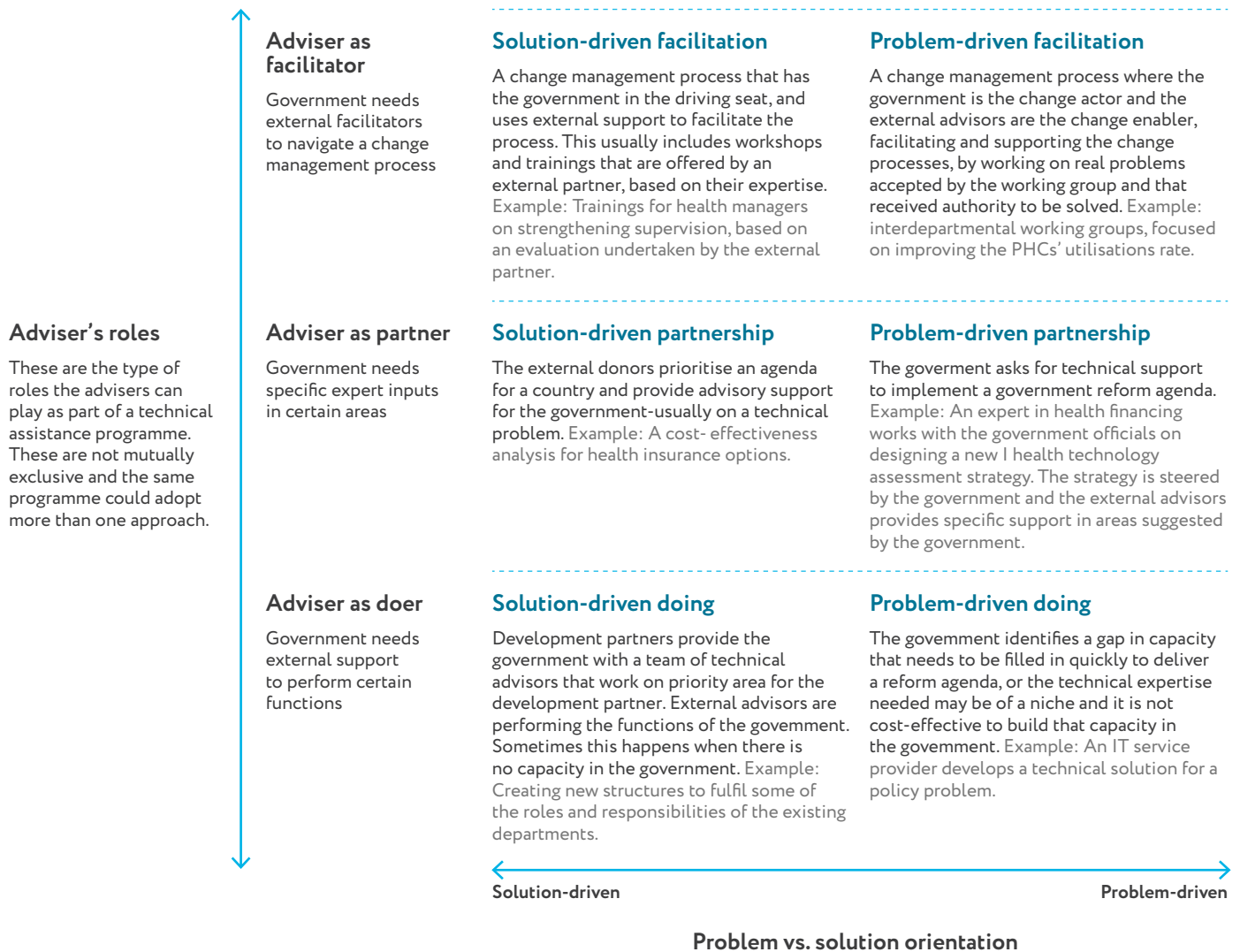
2.2. Demand-driven support

Demand-driven support is a key strategy in philanthropic engagement with governments, emphasising the alignment of philanthropic action with the distinct needs and objectives identified by government partners. This approach requires advisers to immerse themselves in the unique challenges faced by each government, fostering solutions that are both inventive 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.

Figure 1 illustrates the differences between demand-driven and supply-driven approaches using the example of providing expert advice. In a demand-driven scenario, the expertise offered is a direct response to the articulated needs of the government, ensuring that the advice is relevant, actionable, and customised to the situation at hand. For instance, advisers might work with government officials to understand the nuances of a local economic issue, helping to devise a strategy that leverages local strengths and addresses specific barriers.

In contrast, supply-driven support often involves the provision of expertise or solutions that advisers believe to be beneficial, regardless of whether they have been explicitly requested or if they align with the government's priorities (Nastase et al., 2022). These solutions are typically based on general best practices or theoretical models that may not factor in the unique political, social, and economic conditions of the government seeking assistance.

Figure 1. Technical assistance policy options



Source: Nastase et al. (2020)

Expert advice, when employed in a demand-driven context, serves as a collaborative bridge between the knowledge of the advisor and the operational realities of the government. This contrasts with a supply-driven approach where expert advice is dispensed more unilaterally, with less consideration for the government's specific demands or the intricacy of the problems faced.

2.3. Working with the grain

Navigating the complex terrain of local politics and power dynamics is a crucial aspect of philanthropic engagement with governments. To influence policy effectively, philanthropic entities must be adept at 'working with the grain' – operating in harmony with existing political structures and norms. This sophisticated approach allows

philanthropic efforts to integrate more seamlessly with ongoing political processes, ultimately fostering sustainable development.

In the context of local politics, understanding the power networks and how they intersect with various business interests is critical. Philanthropic organisations must seek feasible paths to advocacy within the constraints of the current political climate, always aiming to support progress while maintaining respect for the established balance of power. An exemplary case of this approach was seen in Tanzania, where Benno Ndulu, the former governor of the Bank of Tanzania, counselled against radical reforms in favour of gradual, domestically grown policies during his advisory tenure to President Nyerere in the 1980s (Dercon, 2022). This strategy recognised the importance of sustainable politics as the bedrock of economic stability.

Moreover, engaging with political entities does not necessitate partisanship. Philanthropic efforts should not be driven by the fortunes of specific candidates or parties (Alt-Kaaker & 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.

Embracing flexibility, adaptability, and iteration

Flexibility, adaptability, and an 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. This agility in strategy allows philanthropists to stay attuned to changing needs and political dynamics of the contexts in which they operate.

Adopting an iterative approach – a continuous cycle of planning, action, reflection, and revision – facilitates the refinement of tactics and approaches, ensuring that they remain effective over time. Such an approach is vital for maintaining relevance, especially in regions experiencing political turbulence or where government engagement is impeded by restrictive policies.

Interviewees conveyed that maintaining a long-term commitment, even amidst political uncertainty, requires a flexible stance. For instance, when faced with challenging political conditions that hamper close collaboration with governments, some philanthropic entities have opted to recalibrate their focus, rather than withdrawing from the country. By shifting their strategy to work with civil society organisations and the private sector, these organisations 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.

Such adaptability not only speaks to the resilience of philanthropic organisations but also to their commitment to the long-term goals of capacity-building and institutional

strengthening, even when the political climate is not conducive to direct engagement. This commitment to flexibility and iteration ensures that philanthropic interventions can weather political instability and continue to contribute to the public good.

Forging and valuing partnerships

The establishment of robust partnerships is paramount in philanthropic engagement with governments. Recognising that in certain contexts, government structures may have limitations or are affected by historical patterns of clientelism, a pragmatic and collaborative approach is essential. Progress is often contingent upon the ability of all parties, particularly societal elites, to engage in learning and adapt for the sake of long-term economic and social stability.

Interviews conducted throughout the review process have repeatedly emphasised that partnerships built on trust are fundamental for philanthropic organisations. Working with government officials at various levels often requires a commitment to long-term engagement. By being present within the country – funding research and facilitating connections with experts and academics – philanthropic organisations can establish a rapport with policymakers that precedes formal collaborations or the signing of agreements.

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. These relationships, cultivated over time, meant that when advice was sought, it was this advisor who was approached. This underscores how organic relationships, supported by philanthropic efforts that connect experts with policymakers and fund research, can position these experts to offer well-informed guidance to governments.

Another informant highlighted the importance of a multi-faceted approach to engagement with governments, indicating that it needs to be bolstered by partnerships with various actors such as experts, universities, and think tanks. Such a manifold approach is instrumental in enriching the interactions between philanthropic organisations and governments, fostering a more comprehensive and effective collaboration.

Philanthropic organisations and governments together form a vital alliance in the realm of development assistance, with partnerships serving as vital conduits for knowledge exchange, resource sharing, and expertise. In a world facing complex challenges, the synergy between these entities is a powerful agent for driving sustainable development and reinforcing government capacities. Taddese's (2021) framework on evidence-to-policy partnerships provides a model for understanding how these multifaceted relationships can fortify the provision of advice and support to government entities.

These partnerships are crucial not only in forming trust-based relationships that facilitate open dialogue but also in contributing to capacity-building within government institutions. Through knowledge transfer and technical training, philanthropic organisations play a significant role in enhancing the skills and capabilities of government officials, thus enabling them to implement and manage policies effectively.

3. Walking the tightrope: Opportunities to add value

The engagement of philanthropic donors with governments inherently carries a political dimension. The work of philanthropy is often intertwined with policy and politics, not just because it operates within systems shaped by government decisions but also due to its potential to enact change within these systems. Philanthropy, by its very nature, influences the political environment by supporting initiatives that align with its mission – whether that lies in public health, education, or environmental conservation, for example. This interaction with politics is not just inevitable; it is crucial for the advancement of societal goals.

The relationship between philanthropy and political change is complex and multifaceted. As political landscapes shift and the structures of democracy come under threat globally, the need for philanthropic organisations to protect and strengthen democratic processes has never been more pressing. This goes beyond the traditional realm of non-partisan support; it is about actively shaping the systems within which societies operate.

Based on this review and the consultations, the following are opportunities where philanthropic organisations could add value:

- **Experience sharing and sector leadership:** 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. This transparency is not merely about showcasing success but about providing a comprehensive view that includes challenges and learnings, which can empower the entire sector to operate more effectively and with greater impact.
- **Embracing and scaling political innovation:** The concept of political innovation presents a fertile ground for philanthropic organisations to nurture and scale. Political innovation involves identifying and implementing creative solutions to enhance the political system, making it more inclusive, participatory, and responsive. Initiatives like JoinPolitics and Brand New Bundestag provide insights into how philanthropists can support the incubation of political talent and the development of progressive policies (Alt-Kaaker & Zels, 2023). These groups demonstrate the power of grassroots movements and the potential of philanthropy to catalyse significant social change.
- **Political party engagement and institutional credibility:** The engagement of philanthropic organisations with 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, philanthropists 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.

- **Adaptation skills and compromise in policymaking:** Another area where philanthropies can add value is in enhancing the 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. Philanthropies with their expertise and resources, can support training programs 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 government engagement for comprehensive reform:** Engagement with subnational governments is an opportunity ripe for exploration. This level of government often has a direct impact on citizens' daily lives, and philanthropies 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. The literature and expert feedback 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

Africa Intelligence. (2022, June 13). *Brenthurst Foundation plays promoter of North American interests in Lusaka*. Retrieved from Africa Intelligence: <https://www.africaintelligence.com/southern-africa-and-islands/2022/06/13/brenthurst-foundation-plays-promoter-of-north-american-interests-in-lusaka,109791389-art>

Alt-Kaaker, H., and Zels, S. (2023, December). *Non-partisan but not impartial*. Retrieved from Alliance Magazine.

Andrews, M., Pritchett, L. and Woolcock, M. (2012). *Escaping capability traps through problem driven iterative adaptation (PDIA) - CID Working Paper No. 240*. Boston: Center for International Development, Harvard University.

Andrews, M., Pritchett, L. and Woolcock, M. (2015). *Doing problem driven work*. CID Working Paper. Center for International Development at Harvard University.

Barbe, A. (2023, December). *The business of anti-democracies*. Retrieved from Alliance Magazine.

Broadbent, E. (2012, June). *Politics of research-based evidence in African policy debates: Synthesis of case study findings*. Retrieved from Evidence-based Policy in Development Network: <https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/9118.pdf>

Cornish, L. (2020, February 19). *Making Australia's humanitarian assistance fit for the future*. Retrieved from Devex: <https://www.devex.com/news/making-australia-s-humanitarian-assistance-fit-for-the-future-96591>

Cox, M., and Robson, K. (2013). *Mid-Term Evaluation of the Budget Strengthening Initiative*. Retrieved from Agulhas: <https://www.oecd.org/derec/unitedkingdom/Evaluation-Overseas-Development-Institute-Budget-Strengthening-Initiative.pdf>

Cox, M., and Norrington-Davies, G. (2019). *Technical assistance: New thinking on an old problem*. Open Society Foundations, Agulhas Applied Knowledge.

Club de Madrid. (n/d). *Club de Madrid: A World Alliance for Democracy*. Retrieved from: https://clubmadrid.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Institutional-Brochure_Club-de-Madrid_2023_Digital.pdf

Dercon, S. (2023). *The political economy of economic policy advice*. Oxford: Centre for the Study of African Economies, University of Oxford.

Dercon, S. (2022, June 6). *In praise of African technocrats*. Retrieved from African Arguments: <https://africanarguments.org/2022/06/in-praise-of-african-technocrats/>

Durieux, S. (2023, December). *In pursuit of trust: Interview with Daniel Sachs*. Retrieved from Alliance Magazine.

Durieux, S., and Klein, J. K. (2023, December). *Reimagining politics: the need is urgent*. Retrieved from Alliance Magazine.

Edom, G. (2018, December 13). *When is going with the grain making the problem worse?* Retrieved from LSE Blogs: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2018/12/13/when-is-going-with-the-grain-making-the-problem-worse/>

Ecorys. (2021). *Evaluation of the ODI Fellowship Scheme: Learning Brief*. ECORYS.

Faustino, J., and Booth, D. (2014). *Development Entrepreneurship: How donors and leaders can foster institutional change*. ODI.

Fiester, L. (2017, July 27). *Reflections on engagement: Lessons from philanthropic-government relations in policy reform*. The Atlantic Philanthropies: Atlas learning project: <https://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/research-reports/reflections-on-engagement-lessons-from-philanthropic-government-relations-in-policy-reform>

Greenhill, R. (2006). *Making technical assistance work for the poor*. Action Aid.

Hayman, J. (2017). *Philanthropy Is Politics -- Don't Let Anyone Tell You Different*. Retrieved from Forbes: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jakehayman/2017/11/05/philanthropy-is-politics-dont-let-anyone-tell-you-different/>

Influence Watch. (2022). *Bill, Hillary, and Chelsea Clinton Foundation*. Retrieved from <https://www.influencewatch.org/non-profit/bill-hillary-and-chelsea-clinton-foundation/>

Johnson, P. (2021). *Global Philanthropy Report*. Harvard Kennedy School.

Keidan, C. (2023, December). *Should philanthropy be more political?* Retrieved from Alliance Magazine.

Le, L., Anthony, B., and Bronheim, S. (2016). A Technical Assistance Model for Guiding Service and Systems Change. *Journal of Behavioural Health Service Research*, 380-395.

Mair, J., Mena, S., & Özcelik, M. (2023, December). *Prevention is better than cure*. Retrieved from Alliance Magazine.

Mendizabal, E., Jones, H., and Clarke, J. (2012). *Review of emerging models of advisory capacity in health and education sectors*. ODI.

Merril, M., and Murdoch, K. (2020, August 6). *How philanthropy could fix America's broken politics*. Retrieved from Fortune: <https://fortune.com/2020/08/06/american-politics-2020-elections-campaign-reform-political-philanthropy/>

M'membe, F. (2022, January 27). Lusaka Times. *Who are these friends of the President running the Brenthurst Foundation?* Retrieved from <https://www.lusakatimes.com/2022/01/27/who-are-these-friends-of-the-president-running-the-brenthurst-foundation/>

Nastase, A., and French, B. (2020). *Reimagining technical assistance: What role should technical advisers have in supporting government reform?* Oxford Policy Management.

Nastase, A., Rajan, A., French Ben, and Bhattacharya, D. (2022). *Towards reimagined technical assistance: The current policy options and opportunities for change*. Gates Open Research.

Nastase, A., Rajan, A., French, B. and Bhattacharya, D. (2021) *Technical assistance: A practical account of the challenges in design and implementation*. Gates Open Research.

OECD. (n/d). Evaluation of the Technical Assistance provided by the IMF. In *Technical assistance in Cambodia, FY 1998-2003* (pp. 7-29). Paris: OECD.

Parkhurst, J. (2017). *The politics of evidence: from evidence-based policy to the good governance of evidence*. Abington: Routledge.

Pinnington, R. (2023). To go with or against the grain? Politics as practice in the Budget Strengthening Initiative, Uganda. *Global Policy*, 1-13.

Surmatz, H. (2023). *Foundations' role in shaping policy*. Retrieved from Philanthropy and Politics.

Taddese, A. (2021). *Meeting policymakers where they are: Evidence-to-policy and practice partnership models*. CGD.

The Bridgespan Group. (2016). *A philanthropist's guide to working with government and local communities*. Retrieved from <https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/philanthropists-guide-working-with-government>

The Reality of Aid. (2016). *Technical cooperation as an aid modality: Demand-led or donor-driven*.

Unite America Fund. (2020, July). *The case for political philanthropy: Why big bets to fix politics will help fix everything else*. Retrieved from <https://docsend.com/view/g2y24sufb44n9jd9>

Ward, A. (2017). *Designing Technical Assistance Programmes - Guidelines for development practitioners*. Vivid Economics.

Webster, D. (2011). Development advisors in a time of cold war and decolonization: The United Nations Technical Assistance Administration, 1950-59. *Journal of Global History*, 6(2), 249-272.



**A global consultancy
and platform for change**

www.onthinktanks.org

