



**What is open philanthropy?**

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**A CSI THINK PIECE**

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Driving to Stellenbosch yesterday, Darius asked me: "In a nutshell, what do you mean when you say open philanthropy?" It was a good question. The words 'open' and 'philanthropy' have been tumbling out of my mouth side-by-side for over a year now. Yet, they've always expressed an intuition, and not a clearly honed concept. Nothing like an explain-this-quickly-in-the-car gauntlet to help with clarity.

My initial shot at a one liner for Darius was: "like the **Cluetrain Manifesto**, but for philanthropy and social change." While this wasn't quite right, it had a kernel of rightness. Cluetrain is about the need for corporations to be transparent, network-centric and engaged with customers in a very honest and human way. It's also about the emergent opportunities, quick feedback loops and ability to gauge needs and demands in real time that come with this kind of social connectivity. Philanthropy and development need more of these things, to be sure.

The other link is around the nature of corporations (and philanthropic orgs) with industrial era management cultures. These organizations thrive on thick planning documents (or funding proposals) that try to predict the future, locking everyone involved in a forced march towards a rigid goal. They have impermeable boundaries between 'us' and 'them', eschewing the kinds of fuzzy edges make it possible to hook into broader economic and social ecosystems. And, of course, they rely heavily on control-based management (supervision, deliverables, audits) rather than enablement (coaching, outcomes, learning).

In Cluetrain, industrial-brained companies are at best ineffective, and more likely doomed. The problem is, philanthropic organizations and development funders, without the watching eyes of the market, can be ineffective for a very long time without ever being doomed. And, ineffective they are. One need not be an expert in philanthropy to know that large numbers of grants contribute little or nothing to the social outcomes they are meant to catalyze. In most parts of the world, the response has been to lock down grantmaking even more, adding more planning, more supervision, more rigid evaluation. At the same time, the most creative and interesting social change organizations of our time are becoming more amorphous, more network-like and more informal (read **Paul Hawken's *Blessed Unrest*** for useful insights on this). The result is that a great deal of grantmaking is not only ineffective in itself, but also that it rarely connects with the people and organizations that have the most potential to make our world a better place.

The point of open philanthropy is to reconnect social investment and social change. It's something that many people are intuitively poking at, but that we are not yet having a conversation about. In small ways, you see it in: **IDRCs** attempt to replace 'evaluation' with '**outcome mapping**'; **Skoll** and **Omidyar**'s efforts to create online communities around their philanthropy (or whatever they call it); and, the **Metcalf Foundation**'s efforts to use networks as a way to surface ideas and define collective strategy. All of this

comes from an intuition, an itch. There is some sense that words like open and philanthropy might mean something together, even if we haven't said it yet. With the Shuttleworth Foundation generously offering me the title of Open Philanthropy Fellow, I guess one of my jobs is to take a crack at some of this saying. The best place to start for me is with a doodle. I just did this one on the plane:



Building on the notes above, the idea is pretty simple. Most philanthropy is disconnected from creative social change. We need to respond with an open philanthropy approach that backs inventive social change agents. And, extrapolating from experience and intuition, the three strategies to try out are: openness and transparency; network-centric-ness; and emergence and leverage. Let me quickly dig into these strategies.

The idea of 'open and transparent' is the most obvious. Make sure everything you do and fund is open licensed (the Shuttleworth Foundation does this). Use blogs for the majority of grantee and program officer reporting, cutting back on internal reports that no one outside the organization ever sees (tried this with telecentre.org, to mixed effect). Use wikis for planning and documentation (lots of people doing this). The point here is not only to put outputs of your efforts into the commons, but also to create a real time narrative that people can engage with and learn from. This is harder than it sounds.

Being network-centric is the next step. This isn't just about funding networks, which many funders have done, often to poor effect. In fact, it's most importantly about being 'in the game' as a part the natural networks that you work with, and getting out of the habit of acting like an outside voice giving directions or making judgments. Anyone in the social change game will be familiar with the vibe of funders standing at the back of the

room or outside the circle of conversation. A network-centric approach starts with not doing this (very Cluetrain-ish) kind of thing. It then extends to listening to the ideas and energy flows in the networks and movements where you want to a difference. And, once you're good at this, it should also include monitoring the quality of connectedness, and doing things (paying for plan tickets, supporting meetings, making introductions) where necessary to strengthen the mesh within the network. In the end, much of this boils down to being a good friend and peer with the change agents you are working with. This is the main idea we've been testing with telecentre.org. It has worked in some ways, and not in others.

The third strategy is around emergence and leverage. Part of this is about listening for good ideas and watching for strong leaders, backing them with very small amounts of support, and then seeing what happens. As they succeed in small ways, you back them more. And so on. The other part is looking across the ecosystem for gaps, and filling them (as opposed to trying to make your own big, siloed splash in a particular area). While these are in some ways separate ideas, they really do make up one strategy. They are about the way you actually make your social investments (or grants) by listening rather than planning. This is probably the toughest thing to do well, both because we're addicted to big ideas with detailed plans, and because the grant administration systems that we have built up in foundations and governments make it almost impossible to be nimble, responsive and iterative. My guess is that it's worth pushing these envelopes, as they are likely to yield the kinds of innovation and social change that we have so long said we are looking for.

Okay, that's brain dump #1 on open philanthropy. It feels good to get it out. Tons of unanswered questions still hang, but that's okay. It's time to loop some of this back into the Shuttleworth Foundation theory of change. And, assuming I am not crazy, it's time for you all to hack away and evolve this idea with me. I'm up for this. Are you?