

# ‘Walking the talk’



**Don't just state your values – live them.** Romy Krämer of the Guerrilla Foundation and Kavita Ramdas, independent philanthropy adviser and founder of KNR Sisters Consulting who also has long experience of institutional philanthropy, discuss their views on transforming philanthropy with guest editors, Erin Ganju and Michael Alberg-Seberich.

**Erin Ganju: To start, could you share a bit about your own backgrounds?**

**Kavita Ramdas:** I began my career in philanthropy with the John D and Catherine T MacArthur Foundation, then I led the Global Fund for Women, which was a very different experience. I think all of us who work in philanthropy should first have to raise money. And then I ran the Ford Foundation office in New Delhi before I came back to the US and worked with another women's rights organisation, Madre, and then, the Open Society Foundation. Most recently, I was CEO and president of a family foundation, from late 2021 to early 2022.

**Romy Krämer:** Before I started setting up the Guerrilla Foundation with the funder, Antonis Schwartz in 2016, I'd experienced philanthropy only from the perspective of a grant seeker. This gave me a healthy criticism of institutional philanthropy and the ability to not be restricted by 'how it should be' when building the Guerrilla Foundation as a funder for European grassroots social justice movements.

**EG: What do you see as the most important ways in which foundations are being challenged to meet the moment?**

**KR:** You don't have to be a Marxist to understand that the accumulation of capital in the hands of a small group of people is what makes philanthropy of the kind we have today possible. For me, there was a huge contradiction from the beginning. I grew up in the Global South and my first experience of philanthropy was getting a scholarship to study in the US – on the one hand, it was inspiring that individual women would give to support other women to learn, but at the same time international students would get trotted out as examples of philanthropy. It represents the gross inequality that exists in our world. I think it's important for those who work in this field to recognise that we're dealing with huge contradictions. Even though I've done it now for a long time, there are moments when I feel like a hypocrite. At the same time, all revolutions have been funded. Gandhi was funded by Birla, an Indian industrialist. I feel we have to be more honest about the fact that we deal with these contradictions and to face them in ways that are more respectful to the people with whom we are trying to do this work to change our world into a more equal and fair place.

**RK:** I agree 100 per cent and I think we need to fund more revolutions. I guess the challenge for transforming the sector is, how do you not get co-opted? I see a couple of issues for grantmaking organisations apart from the obvious dissonance between investment and grantmaking strategies. First, we're looking for a level of professionalism in grantees – which is a major challenge to money flowing into grassroots social movement organisations that are key drivers of change but receive only minuscule funding. People need resources to do that kind of work but don't have time to construct the perfect theory of change, write lengthy reports, etc. Second, mainstream philanthropy shies away from funding learning and exploration – why are only white men in start-ups



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allowed to ‘fail forward’? Another challenge is that funders are looking for innovation. We have so many solutions, we’re just not giving them money in a sustainable way so that people can plan over several years. Then there is the issue of programme silos that prevent intersectional movement building. Guerrilla is one of the few funders focusing on what I think are really the basics – systems change, movements, funding people and not projects. The last point is the fear of being political. Funders on the right fund right-wing politicians unabashedly, they fund disinformation campaigns, they fund radical religious groups that target LGBTQI people, that work against abortion, and they are winning. We have to implement a political strategy, too.

**KR:** My big learning about how differently you could fund came when I left MacArthur and moved to the Global Fund for Women. I felt it should not be a Northern-based foundation that gave money to women in the Global South, but a foundation that was really owned by the women of the Global South. It was my first experience in trust-based philanthropy. At the MacArthur Foundation, I often felt my job as a programme officer was to read proposals and find the holes in them – this theory of change is weak, they’re too small, and so on. Yet one grant application at the Global Fund was from five

women in rural Peru who signed their request to start a literacy centre in their community with thumb prints. Five years later, we got a final report in which they signed their own names. You want impact evaluation? That’s it! That is so rare in private philanthropy and it used to be much more common in what we call public foundations, because they could take more risks but I think it’s much rarer there now, too.

**Michael Alberg-Seberich:** Do you also see positive developments, examples where there is change happening?

**RK:** Definitely, there is more of a structured discussion around trust-based and participatory grantmaking than when I started. When we co-started FundAction in 2017, it was one of the very few participatory funds in Europe. Now there’s much more interest – Joseph Rowntree just released their grassroots social movement fund, for example. That gives me hope, though I have to remind myself, it’s a tiny bubble and many don’t walk the talk. The more powerful narrative is that of philanthrocapitalism, of effective altruism, impact measurement and linear theories of change – I hear that a lot when I speak to people with wealth who are just getting into philanthropy. That kind of bullshit does not challenge but cements the power that these people have in deciding what the important issues are, what theory of change makes sense and where money should flow. This needs to stop.

**KR:** For me, Mackenzie Scott’s giving has been a bright light. The fact that the gifts have been given to groups as general support without restrictions. We on the left have really suffered from this lack of making long-term, serious investments and as you say, Romy, if you’re going to try and give people who haven’t had a voice a voice, then it’s political, you’re talking about power. What is depressing is that she’s still often the only one. Another bright spot is public foundations, particularly feminist funds, and also the fact that in Canada, the government has put money into the Equality Fund, because this distinction between governments and

philanthropy is also problematic. The reason private philanthropy has such vast resources, is because the wealthy are not sufficiently taxed.

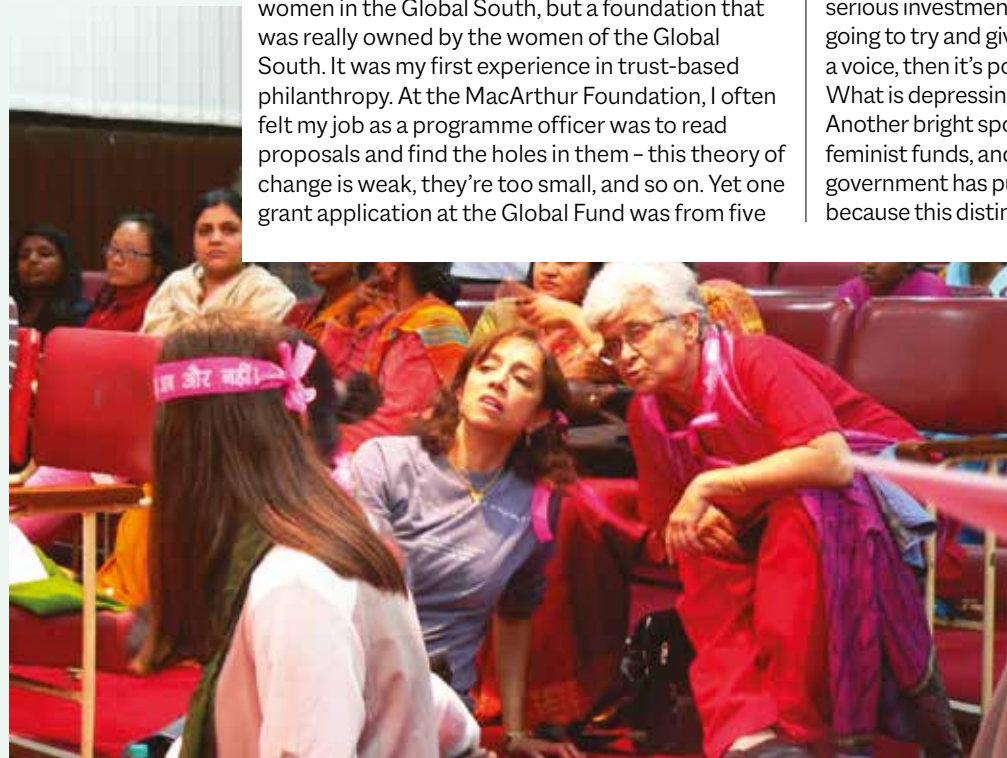
Finally, the participatory piece of this is so important. It isn’t enough to put a few grantees on your board. I would like to see legislation, whereby if foundations are getting a tax break, they need to have 33 per cent activists and social justice leaders on their board – at least. We should not allow the Gates Foundation to get away with the situation where there were three people on their board. You would never give a grant to a non-profit organisation if there was a husband, wife and their best friend as the board members.

**EG:** What are some of the practical things in a foundation that you can do to drive this change?

**RK:** I want just to take one step back – for me, the bright light is initiatives like Resource Generation in the US, Resource Justice in the UK and Resource Transformation in the German-speaking countries (see p56), organising people with wealth to talk about redistribution because if you have money, it’s been extracted from society. It’s important to make that clear and that discourse hardly ever happens in institutional philanthropy. Then, what you can do as someone in a funding organisation depends on its size and your position. It’s been comparatively easy for us to transform Guerrilla.<sup>1</sup> We started with a classic private foundation hierarchy – me, as managing director, above that the funder, and a small team. Now, we’re transforming our foundation into a participatory and collective endeavour in line with our values and political goals. We’re moving towards self-organisation, towards abolishing leadership, and we decouple wealth from power. People in our funders circle, which is a collective body that resources the Guerrilla Foundation, join knowing they do not get decision-making power. They join to redistribute, learn and to participate in other ways. For me – and to your point, Kavita, about legislation – it should be impossible to run a foundation in a non-participatory way.



**KR:** In the US it’s even worse. Foundations are at least minimally regulated, but today, even really wonderful philanthropists are giving their money through LLCs which are basically private companies. There’s no accountability, no transparency, nothing. And I find it very strange that there’s all this discussion about efficient giving, measuring impact, etc, for non-profits but there’s no corresponding measurement of transparency on the other end. On the question of what you can do inside foundations, first, foundations must show more courage. In India, a foundation had made a grant to a journalist who was challenging human rights violations and promoting religious tolerance. Years later, that former grantee was being politically persecuted, but lawyers were more worried about protecting the foundation. Even the most committed foundations often fail to stand



**Left:** Kavita Ramdas with the late feminist activist Kamla Bhasin at a meeting of 1 Billion Rising in 2013.

**Above right:** Kavita attends a gathering of women for peace and anti-nuclear activism organised by the Ploughshares Fund.

**Right:** Training weekend held by Lallab, a feminist and anti-racist Guerrilla Foundation grantee.





CollectiveY?!

Left: Collective Y?!, a Guerrilla Foundation grantee from Lithuania working on LGBTQIA+, gender, economic, climate, media and democratic issues.

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in solidarity with the activists they support when the going gets tough. Second, is on being more transparent with the communities we serve. At the Open Society Foundations, many of us pushed for 'walking the talk' more. We were asking grantees to reflect on issues of inclusion and diversity, but we were less willing to look at whether we apply the same principles that we demand of our grantees. Those are two things we can begin to do as foundation leaders that demonstrate a different approach.

**RK:** I recently met someone from a very big German corporate foundation who was talking about them funding systems change, so I asked him what do you fund that fundamentally challenges the basis of your existence as a foundation? He couldn't name one project! We have to be prepared to work ourselves out of existence if we really mean what we say about changing the system. Losing our jobs is nothing compared to the risks being run by the people working for social justice.

**MAS:** Romy, interestingly, risk is one of the issues that goes through most of the pieces in this feature, whose risk is it and of what kind?

**EG:** Another common theme of the special feature is collective impact, the idea that we can do more together, but it's difficult. Do you have examples where that has worked well or some of the core principles of working together?

**KR:** I think the most impressive examples of collective impact have been inside the feminist funding movement. A long time ago, the Ms Foundation for Women was looking at issues around economic power for women and for workers and it was difficult to try and persuade the relatively conservative board members at the MacArthur Foundation at the time to fund in this space. But because it was a group of funders and we were putting a relatively small amount of money into it, it gave the foundation a chance to put its toe into something that they thought was too political. If it's done well, it can increase the tolerance for risk. I would contrast that with the early experience of the ClimateWorks Foundation, where the funders came together before working closely with climate activists, and certainly not climate justice activists. While that has changed over time, with its support for Greenpeace, a good example of collective impact would have funders and the people who are making the change jointly making decisions, as is the case with the Global Greengrants Fund, currently headed by Laura Garcia. If collectiveness is only on the side of the people with money, and does not include the people who have the expertise and who are taking the risks, it does not work.

**RK:** I completely agree. In 2016, we got together with a couple of other funders to set up FundAction and, being new to philanthropy, I thought that's how we work. Only later was I disappointed to find out that it was absolutely unique for a big fund to work with a tiny organisation like mine to design a participatory fund that is now run by activists. Collective impact sees participation as a tool, not a political goal. There's no idea of fundamentally transforming power relations in society.

**KR:** We are completely unwilling in progressive philanthropy to understand that all social change is deeply political change, yet the right totally gets that this is about power. So I strongly agree that we have to be willing to be much more direct, and I agree with you, Romy, that that also includes us at a personal level. If we're not willing to challenge colonialism and sexism inside our organisations, then we're not going to be willing to challenge it inside the sector as a whole.

**MAS:** What's your key takeaway for how foundations can focus on their own internal transformation?

**RK:** Two thoughts: don't make your internal transformation the only focus and forget the people that you're actually accountable to. There is a very big funder out there that has been doing that for the last three years and I think it's destructive, with people living three years of insecurity over whether this

organisation is going to keep funding their ecosystem or not. Guerrilla completely transformed most of its processes and setup in the last year and still made more grants than the year before. It was extremely stressful but it's our responsibility to give out that money. The other is, create organisations that live their values and their political goals and build them in their structures. Before coming to this call, I had a very difficult conversation with a team member. We have to build organisations that can hold tension and make space for people as whole humans. I respect them for who they are and believe we have to find a way to do this together and so I'm living that value.

**KR:** A really important takeaway is the willingness for philanthropy to be more exposed. That includes allowing people to apply for funds. The thing that drives me crazy is when funders say they don't want to go to an event because people are going to ask them for money. Why work in this field? If you can't find ways to be open and listen to people, you're erecting a fence and saying: we are privileged, we will decide who we want to give money to, and nobody can ask us for money. We've already closed ourselves off from the people we claim we want to serve. ●

1 [tinyurl.com/guerrillaresourcingtrial](https://tinyurl.com/guerrillaresourcingtrial)

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