



Lessons from the field: the experience of the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund

This is the first in a series of Q-and-As with a number of different organizations working with young people – whether as community foundations, local grantmakers or specialist NGOs.

The Nelson Mandela Children's Fund (NMCF) is a South African grantmaking fund based in Johannesburg. Like many community foundations, the Fund acts as a bridge between philanthropic resources and the many needs of South Africa's children and youth. It has a diverse funding base, which includes local individual and corporate donors as well as international funders. It is a grantmaker which has, over the years, adopted an increasingly activist approach in its work, born out of a sense that 'charity' will only achieve so much and that real and lasting change will be achieved only by addressing root causes of South Africa's social problems.

The NMCF was established in 1995, a year after Mandela became South Africa's first democratically elected president. Mandela, who had spent 27 years in prison for his political beliefs, pledged to donate a third of his salary to the Fund, with the dream of provide a brighter future for some of the country's poorest youngsters. Today, the NMCF is respected as one of South Africa's leading philanthropic institutions and one of the strongest proponents of children's rights in the region. It has built up an endowment fund in excess of U.S. \$45 million and has an annual grantmaking budget of around U.S. \$1.4 million.

Over the last 15 years, the Fund has evolved significantly, moving from a welfare-oriented approach aimed at providing support for individuals and organizations to address the immediate needs of children and families¹ to its current position as a leading children's rights 'activist development organization with grant-making capacity'.² The recent launch of the Fund's current strategy has seen it further consolidate its role as a leading proponent of children's rights in Southern Africa.

¹ Initially adopting a primarily humanitarian response, the Fund did not have a clear programmatic basis underlying its funding. In 1999, recognizing the limitations of a welfare-based approach, the Fund conducted an extensive review of national and regional policies on children and youth, identified several significant policy gaps, evaluated its portfolio of projects and internal procedures, and then carefully defined the programme intervention areas it would pursue. In 2000, it launched its new strategy, Sakha Ikusasa, with its core focus on 'changing the way in which society treats its children and youth'.

² NMCF Sakha Ikusasa III Strategic Plan: 2010–2015. *Giving Voice and Dignity to the African Child*.

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Despite its size and its function as a national (and sometimes regional) grantmaker, the NMCF has much in common with many community foundations:

- It is committed to supporting the development of voices, leadership and institutions at the community level
- It believes that resources must be channelled to and directed by development processes that are both driven and owned by the community
- It seeks to mobilize a diverse range of resources locally (as well as globally), has made significant gains in building an endowment pool for its self-sufficiency and has been involved in efforts to instil and advance philanthropic practice among the next generation of leaders

So, with the NMCF as an experienced grantmaker fully and exclusively focused on targeting issues affecting young people, we wondered what some of the lessons and experiences were that community foundations – perhaps smaller in size, new to youth issues or normally more focused on broader community issues – might find useful.

A couple of strategies and lessons stood out as worth sharing:

1 Make space for young people's perspectives *within* your organization

Real engagement happens when you institutionalize young people's voices and perspectives in various different ways within an organization, rather than treat 'youth' as a project or a programme. This could mean making space for young people's participation in decision making (whether at the project or even board level) or in the design and evaluation of projects, rather than just seeing them as 'beneficiaries'.

2 Look for platforms for youth engagement beyond your own organization

While individual grants and trainings are an important part of the menu of support that a grantmaker like the NMCF can provide, it's important to look beyond an organization's internal focus and think about how to engage effectively across a wider audience. Promoting and advancing discussion and debate on issues affecting young people across a broader range of partners (so, for a community foundation, among other 'non-youth' grantees), as well as advice on possible ways of engaging with them in programmes and decision making can both ensure a 'connectedness' across a range of diverse programmes and also encourage linkages across different interest groups.

In the case of the NMCF, this kind of approach has played out in several different ways. In the context of its grantmaking support to organizations, the NMCF engages with its partner organizations specifically to think about and make space for youth engagement in organizational processes and decision making. This has played out in several ways, for instance:

- At the Umtapo Centre, a South African community development NGO, a grant from the NMCF included a specific focus for the organization to reflect on youth issues – it

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has resulted in Umtapo becoming one of the few NGOs that deliberately engages with and includes young people in the process of developing its strategic plan

- At the Field Band Foundation, which uses music as a way to engage with civic issues, 80–90% of the current trainers have come up from the ranks of their youth groups
- The Education with Enterprise Trust, which uses economic and enterprise models to focus on development, also specifically encourages young people to engage, initiate or participate in projects on issues prevalent in their communities
- At ADAPT, which addresses the issue of child abuse, young girls have used the medium of poetry to promote a ‘best fathers’ campaign as a way of promoting intergenerational dialogue
- In another organization, young people have now formed their own youth committee, which acts as a parallel committee to the board and holds the organization to account on its activities, progress and impact

3 Think of a youth engagement strategy as an investment that can fulfil more than one purpose

The Efeng Bacha initiative of the NMCF, for instance, was established in 2003 as a space for young people to learn about and engage in grant making for child- and youth-headed initiatives. It has now evolved into a platform through which its youth participants engage in campaigns on issues relevant to them (e.g. the group made a submission in response to the Draft Children’s Act, highlighting the portions of the act that they, as young people, saw as problematic). Beyond this, however, it also provides the opportunity for these young people to bring in the voices of their peers through a process which both encourages dialogue and debate within the group and also motivates these young people to then go out and have discussions with their peer groups and bring that feedback back to the NMCF so that it can be used to inform and improve their own programmes.

The spin-offs from this programme did not end there. In February 2011, a significant milestone was achieved when three members of the original Efeng Bacha initiative launched their own fund called ‘Sandisa Ubuntu’ (which means ‘we are expanding humanity’), dedicated to supporting the provision of, and access to, good quality education. One of the founders of this fund explained what had motivated them to set up the fund: *‘When I am 21 years old, I don’t want a big party or a silver key; I want to see 21 schools, renovated, with facilities at which young people can access good quality education.’* The fund will operate as an independent fund, but will receive support and mentoring from the NMCF.

4 Create spaces and platforms that enable young people to express their views and connect with each other

A meeting room, some snacks and a light touch on the facilitation are one way of providing creative space for young people to engage with each other. The NMCF has also used two specific instruments to do this: youth parliaments and youth roundtables. In 2008, as part of

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the celebrations marking Nelson Mandela's 90th birthday, the NMCF hosted a Youth Parliament, which took place across South Africa and in five other Southern African countries. This initiative included 1,500 young people, who were brought together in groups to reflect on and discuss social issues through music, painting, poetry and dialogue. The Youth Parliament is not yet an annual event although the Fund is exploring the idea of making this an annual activity that could serve as a starting point for the further development of ideas raised here. On a smaller scale, on the occasion of Nelson Mandela's birthday, the NMCF also hosts smaller roundtables in the spirit of the youth parliament. Such spaces, complemented with the use of innovative artistic mechanisms and multimedia may be useful to explore even within small localised areas.

Direct from the practitioner

Mampe Ntsedi, Programme Specialist at the NMCF, has learned a number of things about youth engagement programmes that she feels other community philanthropy institutions embarking on this kind of programme for the first time might want to hear:

When working with young people, it is vital to be where they are at. This is not just about putting yourself in their shoes and thinking what they think, but about opening up the space for them to explore – based on their thinking and on the information you share with them. Too often, we give guidance and information and we don't allow them the space to unpack it and engage with it.

Engaging with youth needs to be a core and integral part of an organization's activities, not a separate project. It needs complete organizational buy-in, commitment and understanding.

Allow young people the space to test out and innovate. Too often, we try to make them like us and then we lose the innovation they bring.

Resources – financial, human and technical – must be given with an understanding of the context, must be age appropriate and at a level that is manageable.

Be willing to grow with the young people at their pace. Don't stop their growth; rather allow it to happen naturally.

Let go of your comfort zones. Young people may come in with different ideas and different ways of doing things – and because that's not the way we have always done things, at times this leads to fear and uncertainty on our part. Don't let fear block you from letting them innovate. Set broad parameters, but give them space to explore.

Listen listen, listen. When you listen, you give space for the process. You have to trust that, when you listen, the idea that develops will have a life of its own. You need to listen and allow it to grow – how it grows, depends on how you nurture it.

Give advice but don't direct. Let young people make their own decision so that, when they implement it, they know it is their own.

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Reflect on the process and, importantly, give young people the space to reflect.

Let them lead. They have the capacity to do so. They may not have the exposure and the experience, but they do have the capacity to lead. Recognise this and support it.

Nelson Mandela Children's Fund

<http://www.nelsonmandelachildrensfund.com/>