

Abstract for review

European Research Network On Philanthropy
8th International Conference Copenhagen, July 13-14, 2017

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Dilemmas of a growing strategic-philanthropy community in Israel

Reference:	48430507
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Keywords:	strategic philanthropy, public opinion, characteristics, tools and practices
Topic:	Foundation roles and strategies
Theme of abstract:	
Research method:	Other
Geographical focus:	Single country (Other countries)
Type of article:	Practice paper

Abstract:

Israel, like other nations worldwide is facing growing inequality gaps, multi-cultural conflicts and threats on fundamental human rights, and to some extent, on democracy itself.

While constantly addressing these social challenges, the young philanthropic community in Israel is engaged in critical discourse regarding its scope of influence on governmental policies, the level of trust verses the level of animosity it meets from the public and the tools and practices it must adopt to address the social challenges in an effective manner.

Deliberations regarding these matters are held as part of the newly founded annual Israeli conference for philanthropy. The main goal of the conference is creating a space, opportunity and platform for Israeli philanthropists and Israeli professionals in the field (i.e directors and senior management of large philanthropic foundation) to come together for an on-going open, somewhat critical discussion about the unique characteristics of Israeli philanthropy.

These leading philanthropists and professionals are debating how unique attributes of being an Israeli shape the practice of their philanthropy. Elements such as trauma and multiculturalism,

innovation and entrepreneurship are found to infuse a pro-active type of philanthropy in Israel. Pro-activity is reflected for example in the tendency of philanthropists to establish their own non-profit to supply services or tackle a social problem.

Other important dilemmas these deliberations raise stem out of the notion of negative public opinion regarding philanthropy in Israel. The public is acknowledged as the ‘silent partner’ based on public expenditure embodied in tax incentives. This understanding leads to deliberations on how tools and practices such as transparency, research-based operations and outcome and results evaluation may affect the public's trust in strategic philanthropy.

The issue of the public's opinion raises another set of questions focused on the direct influence strategic philanthropy may have on policy or governmental allocation priorities. On the one hand there seems to be a need for best practices and new models of partnerships with government; on the other hand, the need for checks and balances or ethical guidelines to follow arises.

In the paper I introduce these insights and discuss them in light of current trends in strategic philanthropy and theoretical arguments regarding the role and practice of philanthropy in liberal democracies.

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