

# ERNOP Research Note

Academic articles on philanthropy through a practitioner lens



[Full article](#)

## Philanthropic foundations in the global policy arena

Janis Petzinger - University of St. Andrews | Tobias Jung - University of St. Andrews | Kevin Orr - University of St. Andrews

This article offers a critical examination of how foundations shape global policy and introduces a theoretical framework to analyse their influence in this domain.

The key question can be expressed as follows: 'How do philanthropic foundations influence the global policy arena?'

The authors conclude that the work of foundations in the global policy arena, which is fluid but influential, dampens the influence of external. This should remind scholars of the relevance of exploring the potential promises and problems of philanthropy's role in policy shaping.

[#Foundations](#) [#Philanthropy](#) [#Networks](#) [#GlobalPolicy](#) [#PragmaticSociology](#)

## Background & Context



- **The role of philanthropic foundations in global policy, where they tend to be subliminal players exerting influence, is underexplored.** This article (1) critically analyses that role, labelled as 'soft' transfer of policy, in the sense of a subtle and indirect way of pragmatically influencing policy; and (2) proposes an approach that theorizes philanthropic foundations within the global policy environment.
- **The global policy environment is described as an 'agora', as it blends the characteristics of a marketplace and the public sphere,** a space where state and non-state actors converge to, contributing with ideological and value-based justifications to their work, and therefore to policy building.
- **Philanthropic foundations are among the non-state actors** working in this space in decentralized networks, as partnership brokers providing resources and facilitating relationships.
- **They are a governing and ideological force in this space, undertaking two functions:** (1) **coalition building**, and (2) **establishing institutional aid mechanisms for aid delivery.** By establishing partnerships and using their resources to support certain initiatives (eg. global health and agriculture, international development, education) foundations gradually shape the thinking and priorities of policy-makers and the public, thereby influencing policy outcomes in an indirect but effective manner.
- Acknowledging the limits of existing theories of foundations (eg. typological theories), **the authors propose the French pragmatic sociology of critique (FPSC) to frame philanthropic foundations** as members of networks with other players, as composite and fluid setups with an ideological character, operating in the global policy agora and there building partnerships and co-constructing reality.

# ERNOP Research Note

Academic articles on philanthropy through a practitioner lens

## Take aways & Learnings



- Adopting the FPSC lens, **the authors propose the use of Grammars of Worth (GoW) as a framework to analyse how foundations employ different 'grammars' or logics to legitimize their actions and influence in global policy.**
- By **applying the GoW to US policy and advocacy group AGRA**, based in Kenya and funded (among others) by the Gates and Rockefeller foundations, the study illustrates how these foundations (1) operate within situations of policy creation, and (2) bring to the particular 'agora' their normative ideologies therefore serving as co-constructors of agrarian policy in sub-Saharan Africa.
- The justifications for AGRA's policies contain multiple GoW** (see table 1), showing how **policy is softly transferred through different ideas and norms, making foundations "worthy" for more than one reason, and appealing and persuading to different actors, making their value proposition simultaneously justifiable and vague.**
- Foundations' outputs in the 'agora' are linked to other organizations' outputs, strengthening their influence, and highlighting the relevance of the partnership creation as a form of policy in itself.**
- While there was evidence in AGRA of internal critical reflection that generated changes in making policy; external critiques against AGRA and its policies were dismissed by AGRA – including the foundations - evidencing how **foundations may weaken the influence of external critique and sustain their influence in the global policy agora.**

Table 1:

Legitimizing global policy influence - the AGRA illustration

GoW Grammars of Worth	Related to ...	Examples from AGRA strategy report (2023)
Market	<i>free competition between individuals and ascribes worth to wealth and winners</i>	<i>Our work in inclusive markets and trade will help build a 'pull' factor bringing farmers and businesses into a positive, sustained cycle of commercialization and reinvestment (AGRA, 2023: 5)</i>
Inspired	<i>singularity, creativeness</i>	<i>Through our policy and state capability work, we will support governments to create an enabling environment for private sector involvement in agricultural transformation (AGRA, 2023: 5)</i>
Domestic	<i>esteem and reputation</i>	<i>Leveraging trusted relationships with farmers to start selling inputs (AGRA, 2023: 4)</i>
Civic	<i>collective welfare</i>	<i>AGRA has continuously evolved to tackle the constraints affecting the livelihoods of Africa's smallholder farmers (AGRA, 2023: 5)</i>
Industrial	<i>technical efficiency</i>	<i>AGRA intends to build strong, efficient, and robust seeds systems that give farmers timely and affordable access to appropriate, quality varieties with traits for better yields and pest and disease tolerance (AGRA, 2023: 18)</i>
Fame	<i>renown</i>	<i>We have credibility as an African-led and Africa-centric institution, opening doors to provide guidance to the highest level of leadership (AGRA, 2023: 5)</i>

ERNOP Research Notes provide easy-to-read, practice-oriented summaries of academic articles on philanthropy and are written by practitioner experts. This ERNOP Research Note 2024/07 is published in March 2024 and has been written by Raquel Campos Franco from Universidade Católica Portuguesa. More information can be found at [www.ernop.eu](http://www.ernop.eu).