

COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION IS LOCAL WORK: A CASE STUDY OF THE DALIA ASSOCIATION

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INTRODUCTION: THE DALIA ASSOCIATION'S APPROACH

The small Palestinian village of Saffa was the site of Dalia Association's first pilot of community-controlled grant-making back in 2008. At first glance, the methodology didn't make much sense. Why would we give small grants when the need was so great? Why would we give unrestricted grants when the risk was so high? Why would we expect the community to contribute so much when Palestinians are devastated by occupation, dispossession and colonisation?

As Palestine's community foundation, Dalia approached the problem differently from traditional donors who are looking for some kind of return on investment. Dalia is not a donor: the funds that Dalia mobilises already belong to the Palestinian community. Dalia holds them in trust and facilitates transparent, democratic and accountable use of the funds, but it is the community's right and responsibility to decide how they are used.

This might sound like the same 'participatory approach' that is fashionable in development circles, but it is not. Dalia's commitment to community-controlled grant-making is based on respect for the right of Palestinians to control their own resources. Community controlled grant-making is an expression of resistance

- to the Israeli occupation and to dependence on aid, both of which undermine Palestinian self-determination.

Starting from the premise that Palestinians have the right to control their own resources, Dalia Association stopped focusing on how communities use grants and focused instead on the processes they use to make decisions. We realised that decades of occupation and aid dependence have harmed self-confidence, trust and the social fabric. To build these up, we decided:

- Grants must be small (in Palestine, this means US\$1,000-4,000). Small grants encourage communities to mobilise local resources in creative ways (rather than by inflating prices to make a 'local contribution' appear on paper). Small grants don't lend themselves to profiteering and waste.
- Grants must be unrestricted. If grantees have to submit a proposal, they will ask for what they predict will be funded or default to what they know how to do already. Unrestricted grants give space for groups to grapple with their own priorities, as long as they are under no time pressure to decide.
- Grantees must work together. Treating every grantee as a separate entity misses the point of funding communities, where people live together. Having grantees work together creates discussions bigger than those around projects or activities, and opens up opportunities to transform relationships.

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

Much was learned from the pilot in Saffa (documented in a film available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fu9RHVfKFto>), and the community controlled grant-making methodology has been refined in each successive implementation. Innovations that have been introduced include:

- Dalia now asks for a financial report that shows the local contribution alongside the grant. This helps communities realise they are far less dependent on aid than they thought.
- Sometimes Dalia asks grantees to put up local resources in order to become vested in their grant. This helps communities put a value on the local resources, such as volunteerism, use of facilities and in-kind support, that they have learned to devalue. They begin to seek community involvement in order to earn grant funds, thus expanding participation.
- Dalia now establishes a community monitoring committee made up of villagers. The grantees learn that they are accountable to the community, and the community realises that it has a right to monitor its own community institutions, and a responsibility to support them. Good practice helps community members to trust their own institution and paves the way for more local giving.
- After a round of grants (which takes nine months to a year), villages are offered a 'village fund'. If

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they can raise US\$3,000 from local individuals, companies or the diaspora, Dalia will match it with US\$3,000. This gives each village US\$6,000, kept in a dedicated sub-account at the community foundation, to use according to their own priorities. One village decided on a revolving loan fund for small businesses. Other funds are being organised by women's groups.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

But there is so much more that needs attention in future rounds of grant-making. For example, although it is the right of communities to decide how funds are used, more attention should be paid to increasing the likelihood of success by traditional measures, since this is how grantees judge themselves and are judged by other community members. For example, if a group of women decides to raise chickens, they should visit other chicken projects, both successful and unsuccessful, before they commit. The risk here is that Dalia expands beyond grant-making to project implementation, which could result in duplication with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community based organisations (CBOs).

Also, there needs to be a whole new strategy for bringing in the local private sector and diaspora. The challenges are huge: lack of trust in local capacity, a tendency toward religious giving, a narrow orientation towards charity as traditionally defined, anti-terrorism policies that make transferring funds risky and expensive, and more.

Finally, there remains room for improvement in the decision-making process. Currently, there are two community-controlled grant-making programmes. In 'The Village Decides' villagers are invited to an open meeting, where they vote on which of their local groups they want to invest in, and then they decide how to allocate the available funds among the groups chosen. The process is democratic and transparent, but it doesn't necessarily transcend traditional lines of conflict. Communities need to be challenged and supported to move beyond the personal, familial and political alliances that divide communities, and instead invest their trust, effort and resources in initiatives that build community cohesion and capacity. In 'Women Supporting Women', groups of women apply for funds and the applicants select the grantees. Again, although the process is democratic and transparent, the women don't always vote on the basis of well thought out criteria. They need to be challenged and supported to think about the funds they control as a weighty responsibility, and as something to do well what they often criticise donors for doing badly, rather than as a way to show loyalty.

Local communities can't address these challenges on their own, but fortunately, they don't have to. The global Palestinian community is strong and diverse and some enlightened international donors recognise the value of supporting community philanthropy. Local organisations such as Dalia Association can build the visibility and credibility of community philanthropy over time, learning as we go. Community transformation is not a project, and nor can it be packaged into a three-year strategy. Local organisations - with the commitment to work over generations - are best positioned to do this work.

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