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CIVIC ECOSYSTEMS, MILLENNIALS AND THE FUTURE OF PHILANTHROPY

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RATIONALE

Conventional approaches to resourcing social change are based on a clear demarcation between resource providers and beneficiaries and a narrow understanding of resourcing as, essentially, the provision of financial support.

Millennials are upending these assumptions and changing philanthropy in important ways. They are seen as both more disruptive and more engaged compared to previous generations of philanthropists, more impact-driven but also more values-driven in their giving and engagement with social causes.

Using the concept of civic ecosystems as a lens for analysing these developments allows us to explore some of the trends that will shape the future of philanthropy in the coming decades and consider their implications for resourcing social change.

SCOPE

This collaboration explores the future of philanthropy as the millennial generation moves from the margins to the centre of philanthropic practice. The vast amount of wealth millennials are expected to inherit and generate in the next few decades gives them the leverage to reshape philanthropy in their own image.

What that might look like in practice can be glimpsed from a growing body of research and analysis that highlights some of the distinctive characteristics, attitudes and behaviours of millennials:

- They seek more active and direct engagement with causes and organisations they support financially compared to earlier generations
- They tend to be more connected and collaborative and like to see themselves as part of a ‘community’ or ‘movement’ for change
- Their giving and support for social causes is driven by data and impact, on the one hand, and alignment with their values, on the other
- They are more likely to deploy a range of assets at their disposal such as their own time, skills and networks, in addition to their financial resources

An ecosystem lens allows us to identify and analyse some of the key trends associated with the rise of millennial philanthropy. We can track how millennials are disrupting and changing the resource provider/beneficiary relationship as they become more embedded in the civic ecosystems they support in various ways, and we can consider how other affected actors are adapting or likely to adapt.

An ecosystem lens is also useful to understand how millennial philanthropy challenges established understandings of resources and resourcing. Millennials realise that at certain times in their lives they can have greater impact by employing their skills, networks and connections rather than their wealth. They tend to approach social change with the view that these impact assets are fluid and the particular combination will fluctuate over time as some assets become more important than others.

What this means is that millennials feel genuinely connected to the causes they support and intend to engage deeply in the journey to impact. But they are not always interested in making a donation and considering it job done. They want to engage and get involved. The implications for beneficiaries are far-reaching. While they are gaining access to more diverse resources and potentially more committed supporters, they are also facing new expectations and pressures that could be quite disruptive and difficult to manage.

The concept of civic ecosystems allows us to consider the impact of millennial philanthropy on a range of civic actors, ideas and practices. Millennial disruption can have both positive and negative effects, intended as well as unintended consequences. In fact, the same millennial traits that may benefit civic ecosystems in some ways – the expectation to get more involved in the efforts of beneficiaries, for example, or the reliance on data for measuring impact – may also be problematic and harmful in other ways.

INSIGHTS

This collaboration seeks to generate two types of insights. Firstly, to foster understanding of the trends that will shape the future of philanthropy as millennial giving and engagement with social causes becomes more important. Secondly, to consider how these trends may affect civic ecosystems in different domains that rely on philanthropic resources and draw out some of the broader implications for resourcing social change.

In practical terms, we can use these insights to develop strategies for individuals and organisations to navigate the transition and manage some of the disruption caused by the rise of millennial philanthropy, for example how to adapt to pressures for greater engagement and involvement. We can also raise awareness among millennials that these kinds of pressures can be quite disruptive for beneficiaries and may end up hindering their efforts to bring about social change.

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