



Maths and Society Seminar

The gift economy as a starting point to explore
alternative narratives and practices in
philanthropy and beyond

Reflections from The Playground@ODS

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Introduction

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Her work focuses on supporting progressive initiatives in monitoring, evaluation and learning, strategy development and organisational development. Through the ODS Playground, she co-leads the development of alternative practices to decolonise consultancy and research more specifically and the development sector in general.

Her academic background is in organisational psychology and international relations, with her Doctorate research having applied an intersectionality lens to investigate how whiteness as a global structuring property plays out in the transnational lives of privileged migrants as they navigate post-colonial power structures that are still shaped by coloniality. Prior to this, Zdena worked for several organisations including Khulumani in South Africa, a social movement that was founded by survivors of apartheid who were left out of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, UNPO on minority rights, Save the Children on Europeaid fundraising, and Seefar on migration.

Introduction to the Gift Economy

- Characterised by offering goods and services to other members of the community without the expectation of monetary reward.
- Motivated by several factors,
 - Altruism,
 - Gain of societal status
 - The hope for reciprocity in the future or a sense of mutual obligation
- The gift economy challenges classical economics assumptions that people or organisations seek to maximise profit.
- It places greater value on qualitative relationships between inter-dependent people rather than the quantitative trade of goods and services.

North-South money transfers- Remittances/HTAs as part of gift economy/ philanthropy/ localised development aid

- There are different situations in which the gift economy manifests and several factors that drive it. Among these are the socio-cultural, historical or contemporary circumstances of individuals and communities.
- Migration context sets interesting example and focus on the phenomenon of remittances as part of the gift economy.
- Migrant communities in all parts of the world are familiar and or somehow involved in the gift economy through remittances.

North-South money transfers- Remittances/HTAs as part of gift economy/ philanthropy/ localised development aid

- In 2022, the 4 top remittances receiving countries were India, Mexico, China, the Philippines in descending order (World migration report, 2022).
- India received more than USD 111 billion , being the first country to surpass the 100 billion mark.
- Mexico has been examined as a case study in remittances in several studies.
 - In 2022, Mexico's dependence on remittances reached a maximum of 4.0% of its GDP.
 - This migrant philanthropy exceeds foreign direct investment and dwarfs overseas development aid (Merz and Chen 2005).
- It can be argued that the way that migrant philanthropy is organised can be much more effective than FDI, ODA or traditional forms of philanthropy that flow from the global minority (global north) to the global majority (global south), also because they are not limited to household transfers

North-South money transfers- Remittances/HTAs as part of gift economy/ philanthropy/ localised development aid

- The HomeTown Associations (HTAs) of Mexicans have been examined by several researchers, practitioners and policy makers.
- HTAs are organisations that allow immigrants from the same city or region to maintain ties and materially support their places of origin.
 - E.g. Mexicans immigrants in the United States, who come from a particular region in Mexico, form an HTA, or a diaspora organisation and make coordinated efforts to support their region/town back in Mexico.

North-South money transfers- Remittances/HTAs as part of gift economy/ philanthropy/ localised development aid

At the policy level, here we see the different interests of the sending country, in this case Mexico, and the receiving country, in this case the US.

Sending country

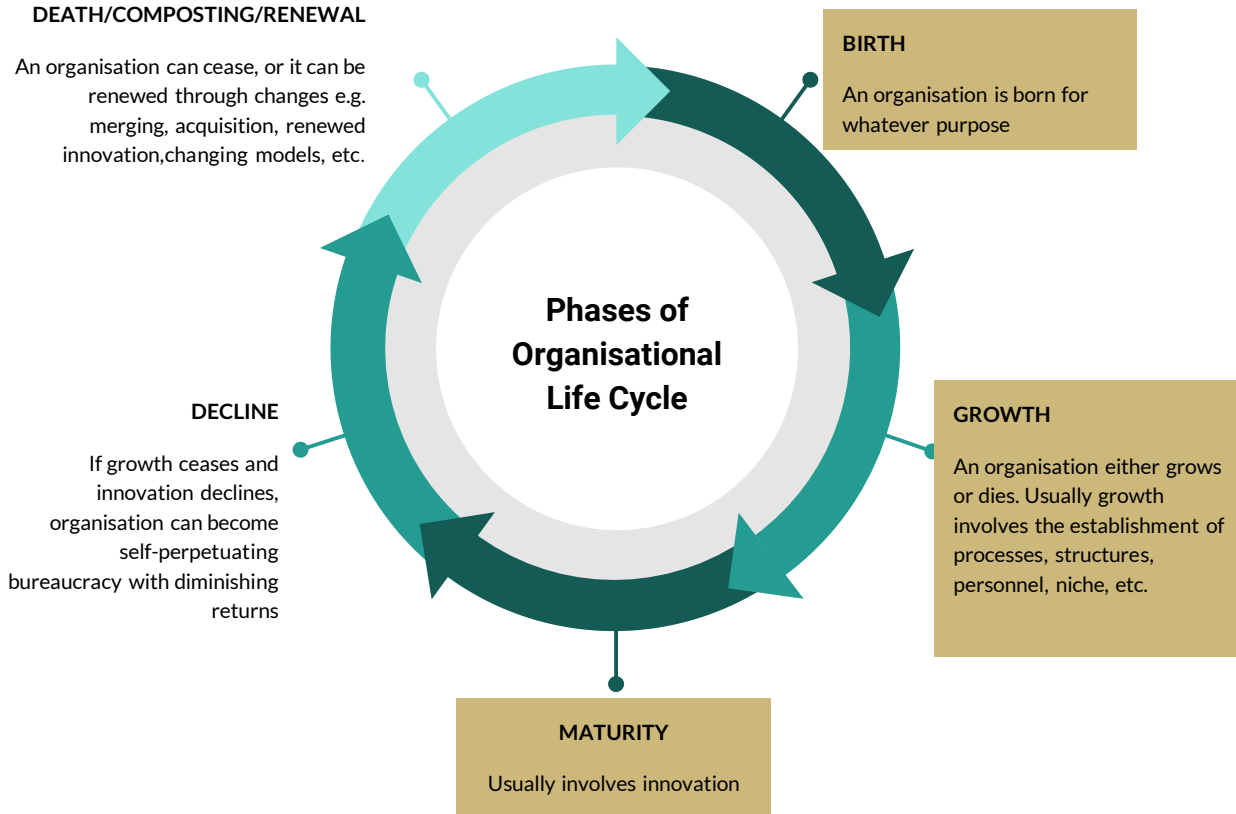
Interest in the role of diaspora contributing to development through remittances or return of skilled professionals

Receiving country

Of the view that HTAs create insularity of the migration community and become an obstacle to their integration.

This view is inaccurate as research shows that there is a positive correlation between the integration of immigrants in the receiving country and their ability to contribute to their home country in remittances or otherwise.

North-South money transfers- Remittances/HTAs as part of gift economy/ philanthropy/ localised development aid



HTAs can start as informal grouping but can mature over time to become more formal organisations which collect membership fees and fundraise through for activities such as organising cultural events and festivals whose funds are directed towards small scale hometown development projects that can include building clinics, cultural centres, etc. back in their countries of origin.

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There are several lessons we can learn from this:

- 1. This type of philanthropy/that drives the gift economy challenges the dominant narrative about how and why philanthropy flows- which is that profits are first made and then the excess is given out.**
 - Remittances, individual/through organised forms e.g. HTAs are based on giving from a place of scarcity, not only excess (Halima Mahomed 2024).
 - Comes from a place of solidarity more than excess.

North-South money transfers- Remittances/HTAs as part of gift economy/ philanthropy/ localised development aid

Other dynamics related to transnationalism and social position:

- E.g. one of the characteristics of transnational migrants is that they exist in 2 or more places at the same time and occupy more than one social position at a given moment.
- This means an immigrant can occupy a low social position/have a low social status in the country of settlement.
- Through involvement in HTAs and this type of philanthropy, they begin to occupy a higher social position/higher social status in their country of origin.
- Here taking part in gift economy/philanthropy is a means of gaining social status
 - This motivation is not very different from traditional philanthropy

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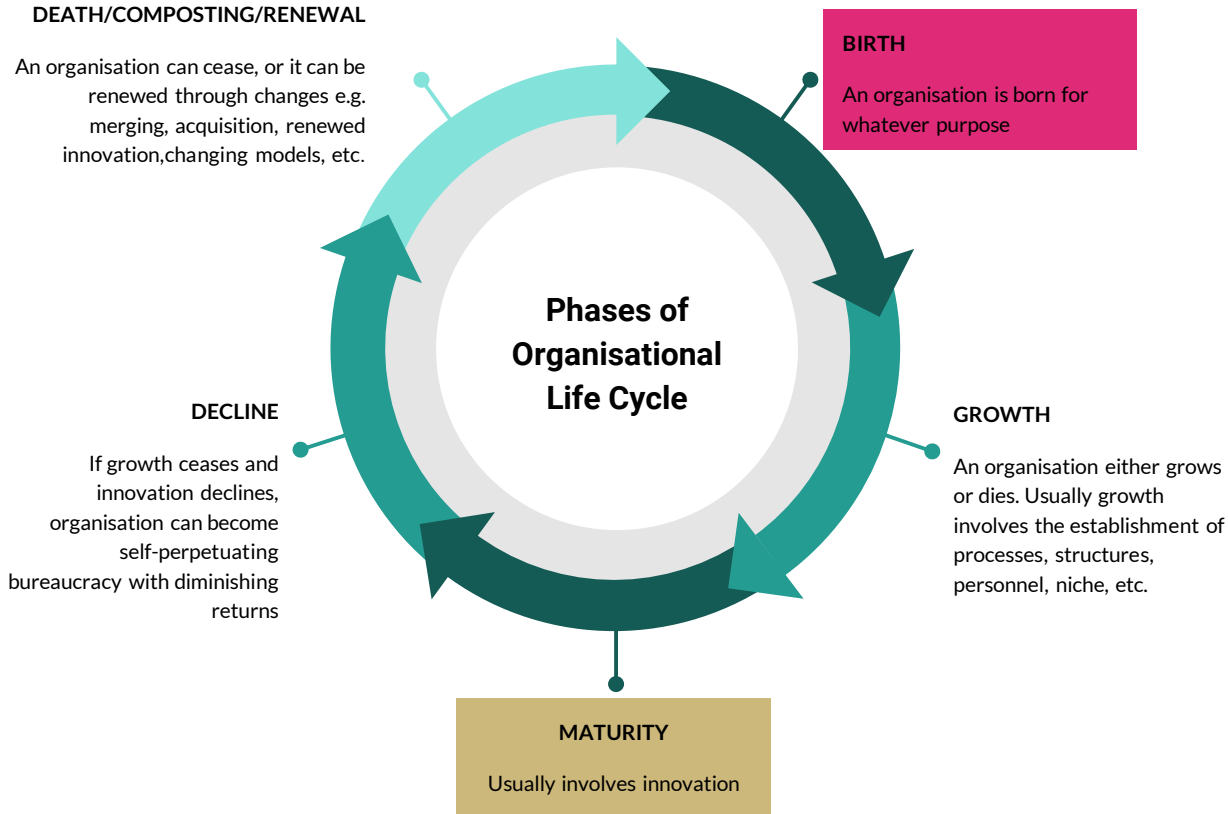
2. The concept of collective identity.

- An understanding that 'my existence is intertwined with yours, my progress is intertwined with yours, my liberation is intertwined with yours, I am because you are.
- Collective identity and collective humanity are important, even more so in relation to contexts where external pressures are extractive and/or exploitative, both at a national level and international level if you look at global political-economic systems and legacies of colonialism and apartheid (Halima Mahomed 2024).

Problems with the dominance of narratives/models/data/metrics

- What is philanthropy?
- Are models of philanthropy such as remittances sufficiently analysed next to development aid or the work of INGOs?
- Dominant narratives and models persist
 - They have a geography and a biography
 - The problem is that what is measured is seen and hides and underlying diversity and complexity of reality
 - If what lies beneath the dominant models, e.g. if only the contributions of what counts as development aid is measured, the analysis that comes from there before prioritised over other kinds of analysis
 - Result of this is that we don't get the best outcomes nor formulate the best policies

Reflections from the Playground@ODS



Traditional consultancy working with NGOs in M&E, Strategy and Organisational Development

Becoming an employee owned cooperative

Recognition of the limitations of our model

- No time to reflect on learnings
- Limitations to ToRs
- Working within the same system we are trying to challenge in terms of frameworks, worldviews, perpetuating coloniality

Creation of a space to reflect, learn and create alternatives that feed into our practice to eventually change the way our practice looks like from what it looked like at Birth

What does coloniality and the dominance of certain narratives, models, data and metrics mean in practice

In NGO/Philanthropic work:

- Fixed ideas of who builds capacity and whose capacity is built

In Philanthropic programme design:

- Imposition of language, definition of terms, design that is disconnected to socio-historical and cultural realities of contexts

In evaluation work:

- Global minority evaluators leading evaluations in the Global majority using global minority frameworks

In research:

- Extractive practices based on fixed ideas of who is the knower
- Where is information collected and where is it processed?

Development of Alternatives

Working with like-minded, critical actors to develop alternatives and feed alternative practices back into our practice to change it:

In philanthropy:

- Challenging donor-grantee power dynamics that lead to imposition of worldviews and evaluation frameworks through the development of a learning practice

In evaluation, OD and research

- Documenting our experiences on how coloniality plays out and the challenges of 'localisation' and how to decolonise consultancy through writing papers.
- Working with global majority partners in evaluations and research projects that concern their contexts
- Making shifts in research methodology, including inception briefings with participants to validate relevance of research questions; sensemakings at the end of data collection to co-analyse findings

In general consultancy practice

- Trying to break out of the limitations of the competitive model to more collaboration

What are we learning from Alternatives

It becomes increasingly clear that there are dominant models that are based on systems that have since gone through the decline and death stages and these models no longer serve the needs of our present world.

Learning practice gives Philanthropy organisations an opportunity to shift from Monitoring and Evaluation as a method of control to learning which feeds into strategic decision making and realistic programming.

Gives grantees opportunity to actually learn from their work outside of superficial indicators that are imposed by their donors

Helping us to mature and innovate into becoming an organisation whose services are consistent with the challenges of the sector as it stands today.

Conclusion and Next Steps

- To attend to our shared global problems, we need global solutions
- This means bringing to the surface the worldviews, practices, ways of being of those who have been marginalised, colonised, ignored
- Questioning dominant models and striving for more granular understandings of reality beyond that which hides the diversity that lies beneath it
- In the Playground, we will continue to develop alternatives.
- We are building coalitions in and outside of civil society to push for these alternatives;
- We would very much welcome challenges, suggestions, questions and collaboration as part of our Playground

Thank you!

