



THE HASANAH FORUM 2025

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Concept Note

Philanthropy that Listens: Bridging Intent with Intervention

“To bring about change, you must not be afraid to take the first step.

We will fail when we fail to try.” - Rosa Parks

Introduction

A singular truth echoes good intentions – but no matter how noble, intention *alone* cannot change lives. Time waits for no one, and neither do the crises that demand our action. In a world as interconnected as ours, the stakes are too high for delayed action or inaction. The systems that perpetuate inequality, poverty, and environmental degradation are formidable, but they are not insurmountable. Philanthropy has the potential to forge connections and dismantle these systems and build pathways to equity, sustainability, and opportunity. **The key though, lies in moving from *intention* to *intervention*.**

Since its inception, each edition of **The Hasanah Forum** (THF) has deepened the focus on systemic justice aiming to explore the intersection of philanthropy, systemic reform, and impact-driven strategies in a rapidly evolving global context. In 2021, THF started its journey to urging a mindset transformation from charity to justice – in underscoring that the foundation for all philanthropic work is structural inequality. In 2023, THF sought to drive this movement of justice-based philanthropy and bring together diverse stakeholders in charting a course towards that.

In continuing its legacy of difficult yet critical questions in responding to challenges that are emergent today, The Hasanah Forum 2025 underlines a sense of urgency for philanthropy to be bold and take steps given the emergent crises: economic shocks, humanitarian challenges, climate change, and even failing democracy.

Holding on to justice in the context of crisis

The global philanthropic landscape is marked by profound challenges and opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored deep societal vulnerabilities, while ongoing climate crises, economic inequities, and geopolitical conflicts – from wars to regional tensions – have created a complex web of challenges. Added to these are the generational shifts with a rapidly ageing population necessitating a shift in government expenditure and an expanding workforce necessitating skilling and preparation towards a tech future that is rapidly evolving. All these

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unforeseen events and crises can exacerbate inequalities and erode the foundations of justice and dignity for affected and vulnerable populations.

While a natural reaction to these crises would be a deeper, more concerted investment in funding and intention towards supporting communities to emerge stronger, on the contrary, there seems to be a *normalisation of inaction*. The recent changes in US presidency have meant a decline in aid¹, and growing backlash against particularly diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts² with many companies following suit without fear of any repercussions. The decline in funding and focus towards addressing these complex social issues will not only result in further marginalisation of individuals and communities who are already at the brink, but is also concerning as these mean a retreat from prior commitments to social justice. The time to intentionally advance the social justice agenda is *now*, as we continue to “confront efforts to dismantle initiatives and organisations that offer hope, support, and encouragement to individuals who are far too often downgraded to a ‘lesser than’ status, we must acknowledge the uncertainty of how this movement will ultimately affect us”.³

Thus, in an era where political will and international diplomacy are pursuing a polarising path, philanthropy will have an even greater role to step in and seek collaboration from the private sector to sustain the momentum for a sustainable future. Philanthropy should find ways to respond, not only with immediate relief, but with long-term strategies that address systemic inequities and promote sustainable peace.

Expanding human freedoms and capacities

Nobel laureate Amartya Sen’s “*Development as Freedom*” offers a profound and transformative perspective on development, arguing that true progress is achieved when individuals gain the freedom to live the lives they value. Rather than focusing solely on economic growth or income, Sen emphasises the importance of expanding human capabilities and removing barriers that limit opportunities and choices.

Over the last few decades, philanthropy has been seen as a crucial connector in responding to interconnected issues of economic deprivation deepening inequality, challenging democratic norms posing a threat to human rights and fundamental freedoms, climate emergency pushing vulnerable communities to the margins and food insecurity, etc. These situations demand that philanthropy transitions from passive funding to proactive, equity-focused interventions. Trends and conceptual frameworks, be it systems change⁴, trust-based philanthropy⁵, decolonising

¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/25/us-suspends-new-funds-for-aid-programmes-excepting-israel-and-egypt>

² AssociatedPress. (2025, January 24). *Companies are rolling back DEI efforts, citing costs and backlash*. TIME. Accessible at <https://time.com/7209960/companies-rolling-back-dei/>

³ Crisol Beliz, Emily Doeblér & Jennifer Lawson, *Evolution and Challenges of Social Justice Philanthropy in a Polarized Era*, 11 Trends In Philanthropy For 2025, Dorothy A Johnson Centre for Philanthropy

⁴ Corner, J. (2019, March 5). *Systems change and philanthropy*. Alliance Magazine. Accessible at <https://www.alliancemagazine.org/feature/systems-change-and-philanthropy/>

⁵ Trust-Based Philanthropy Project. (n.d.). *Trust-Based Philanthropy Project*. <https://www.trustbasedphilanthropy.org/>

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philanthropy⁶, and so on, all seem to give more power to communities in shifting decision-making; identifying the role of several stakeholders in addressing complex social issues; and finally, emphasising the need for adaptive strategies that embrace complexity and prioritise resilience over quick fixes. Private sector actors are increasingly called upon to adopt justice-centred strategies to ensure their interventions align with broader social good rather than merely meet regulatory requirements.

Over the last editions of THF, we have delved deep into establishing philanthropy's role as leveraging on several entities – including: government, private sector, individuals – in identifying blind spots, but also creating an enabling environment for community organisations to thrive and promote a culture of social inclusion. We have also talked about strategies to balance and mitigate power imbalances between grantees and funders in 'ensuring equitable partnerships with grantees'.⁷

As philanthropies and funders, a key imperative is to build and support a strong and informed civil society that supports and advances social change. Hence, in enabling this, listening to how grantee organisations and communities are seeing and experiencing the shifts; testing our assumptions around understanding communities and their issues; testing our giving practices and approaches; and strategising bottom up as much as top down will help us respond more effectively.

Sen's central thesis is that freedom is both the primary end and the principal means of development. By 'freedom', he refers to the ability of individuals to make choices in areas such as health, education, political participation, and economic opportunity. Poverty, he argues, is not merely a lack of income, but a deprivation of basic capabilities and capacities – a state where people are unable to achieve essential functions like being well-nourished, educated, or participating in community life.

Sen's insights reinforce these trends, emphasising the importance of enabling individuals to exercise agency and make meaningful choices. For philanthropy, this means understanding from grantee organisations gaps in meeting the objective of shared goals of social change and thereafter investing in expanding capabilities of all actors and communities. Giving funding is solving only part of the problem – what needs to be addressed is also *where* and *how* can philanthropy invest in building and enhancing delivery capacities.

Strengthening community capacity is pivotal for fostering resilience and enabling transformative, grassroots-led change.⁸ Philanthropy, in collaboration with cross-sector partners, can invest in initiatives that prioritise community-led solutions, ensuring that local actors are equipped to drive long-term impact.

⁶ Davies, R. (2022, January 13). *Edga Villanueva: Decolonizing philanthropy, Philanthropisms*. Accessible at <https://www.philanthropisms.com/1862997/episodes/9845990-edgar-villanueva-decolonizing-philanthropy>

⁷ Hirsch-Holland, A. (2023, October 2). *The tensions in philanthropy's agenda for transformation*. Alliance Magazine. Accessible at <https://www.alliancemagazine.org/analysis/philanthropys-agenda-for-transformation/>

⁸ FSG. (2024, January 9). *The future of social impact: 2025*. <https://www.fsg.org/blog/future-of-social-impact-2025/>

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The Malaysian Story

Malaysia's socio-economic landscape presents a microcosm of both challenges and opportunities for philanthropy. Despite its status as an upper-middle-income nation, the country grapples with significant inequalities. The Department of Statistics Malaysia reports that 20% of households from the middle-income group (M40) slipped into the bottom-income group (B40) during the COVID-19 pandemic⁹, accentuating economic vulnerabilities. Absolute poverty rose to 8.4% in 2020, reversing years of progress. Compounding these dismal figures, a recent study by Khazanah Research Institute has questioned the economic stratification of B40, M40 and T20 and recommended revising these categories to B20, M50 and T30 based on expenditure patterns of the citizens. For a country aspiring to be high income, it would be concerning that only the top 30% of the population (T30) exhibit middle-class spending patterns, while the mid 50% of the population (M50) swing between essential and aspirational expenditures, which should be deemed as a sign of 'vulnerability and not economic stability'.¹⁰ Such studies present insights for policymakers, as they demonstrate effects of economic transitions on populations so as to develop policy measures which speak to current realities.

Most recently there have been attempts by government to improve social infrastructure¹¹ including more targeted rationalisation of subsidies, increase basic income, promote skilling programmes. The Ekonomi Madani Framework, launched in 2023, seems to be the bedrock defining Malaysia's future economic development with the twin thrusts of 'raising the floor and raising the ceiling aiming to introduce economic prosperity and equitable wealth distribution to improve the quality of life of the rakyat (citizens)'.¹²

These economic disparities are compounded by systemic issues such as inadequate social protection, unequal access to quality education, and limited healthcare coverage. Environmental challenges, including severe flooding and deforestation, further exacerbate the vulnerabilities faced by marginalised communities. However, such uneven development patterns are not unique to Malaysia and can be witnessed across Asia.¹³ On the other hand, Asia's economic growth potential and demographic dividend are opportunities in sustaining an equitable future.

Sen's framework in *Development as Freedom* provides a critical lens for understanding these challenges. He posits that development should be viewed as an expansion of people's capabilities, enabling individuals to lead lives they have reason to value and move beyond a narrow economic lens. This perspective calls on viewing development as moving beyond

⁹ New Straits Times. (2021, September 27). *Over half a million M40 households are now B40, says PM*. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2021/09/729370/over-half-million-m40-households-are-now-b40-says-pm>

¹⁰ Gregory Ho Wai Son & Dr. Suraya Ismail, *Searching For The Poor And Middle Class In Malaysia*, Working Paper 06/24, December 2024

¹¹ Hazim, A. (2024, October 18). *Malaysia raises monthly minimum wage to RM1,700 beginning Feb 1, 2025*. The Edge Malaysia. Accessible at <https://theedgemaalaysia.com/node/730725>

¹² The Economic Outlook 2024, Ministry of Finance, accessible at <https://belanjawan.mof.gov.my/pdf/belanjawan2024/economy/economy-2024.pdf>

¹³ Lim, S.H. (2025, January 14) *The Asian philanthropy renaissance: Forging sustainable development*. World Economic Forum. Accessible at <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/01/the-asian-philanthropy-renaissance-forging-sustainable-development/>

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addressing immediate needs and to focus on dismantling systemic barriers that restrict freedoms – philanthropy can be a valuable partner with governments to address these gaps.

Malaysia also holds unique strengths that philanthropy can leverage. The nation's diverse cultural fabric and active civil society provide fertile ground for innovative, inclusive solutions. By centring local knowledge and amplifying grassroots voices, philanthropy can ensure that interventions are contextually relevant and sustainable. Drawing from its history of multicultural collaboration, Malaysia is well-positioned to become a leader in justice-driven development.

THF 2025 – Listening keenly to advance equity and build the ecosystem

The forum, as always, will reflect on the critical role of diverse actors – from governments to private enterprises – in aligning efforts towards justice. By emphasising resilience, collaboration, and adaptability, THF 2025 seeks to set a benchmark for philanthropy that goes beyond traditional giving to tackle the root causes of inequality.

In many cases, this would need a radical shift in thinking that would reduce grantees' overall reliance on philanthropy¹⁴ towards sustained, deeper impact – this could be in rethinking funding mechanisms, be it organisational development grants, investing in organisational capacities, mobilising and engaging communities to inform and decide on issues that are localised and crucial to their well-being.

Woven around the themes of People and Institutions, People and Society, and People and Leadership, THF 2025 will be guided by the following questions:

- How can philanthropy serve as a catalyst for systemic reforms that address deep-seated inequities?
- What does it mean to developing capacities and how can philanthropies best support in acknowledging and leveraging community assets?
- What strategies can balance short-term relief efforts with long-term transformational goals?
- How can philanthropy expand freedoms and capabilities, as outlined by Amartya Sen, to empower communities?
- How can businesses be more responsive, and invest and collaborate in solving complex problems?
- What mechanisms can bridge gaps between communities and decision-makers to foster participatory governance in advancing shared goals?

Conclusion

The Hasanah Forum 2025 invites participants to reimagine philanthropy as a driver of systemic justice and sustainable impact. Drawing on insights from Amartya Sen's *Development as Freedom*, the forum emphasises the importance of expanding human capabilities and freedoms as central to development. By bridging intent with action, amplifying underrepresented voices, and fostering bold collaborations, THF 2025 seeks to catalyse transformative change. Against

¹⁴ 11 Trends in Philanthropy for 2025

<https://johnsoncenter.org/blog/11-trends-in-philanthropy-for-2025/>

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the backdrop of global crises, wars, and geopolitical tensions, the forum calls on all actors – including the private sector – to uphold justice as a guiding principle in their interventions. This forum is not just a convening of stakeholders but a call to action – to envision and create a world where equity, dignity, and justice are at the core of every philanthropic endeavour.

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