

**TRUSTING OUR AFRICAN PARTNERS**  
**A note on an underemphasized aspect**  
**of USA for Africa's legacy**

By Mark Randazzo

Over the last decade or so donors, foundation program officers and others within the philanthropic community are increasingly responding to long-standing critiques of traditional development approaches and the ways in which grantmakers have historically made decisions and administered funds. While these issues have been on the table for some time, there is now stronger momentum and greater potential for change than ever before.

Principles and approaches refined and advocated for through notions of a ["trust-based philanthropy"](#) emphasize the importance of funding relationships grounded in trust and partnership, calling on funders to provide unrestricted grants, focus on the broader picture, and support leaders, institutions, and movements rather than specific issues or projects. These approaches allow grantees to focus less on fundraising and more on their work while also retaining the flexibility to shift strategies in the face of changing contexts or opportunities. And they increasingly challenge the power dynamics between international development agencies and funding institutions on one hand, and the organizations doing the work, on the other.

By 1987, as USA for Africa (USAfA) deepened its engagement with emerging leaders in the African NGO community and moved beyond its initial focus on emergency relief largely led by UN agencies and international NGOs, it began channeling more of its funding directly to African NGOs, community groups, and national or continent-wide networks. These funds were often provided through "block grants" and general support, reflecting a strategic shift that included strengthening institutional capacity and supporting local advocacy within the field. In doing so, USAfA anticipated many of today's "trust-based" funding practices - a forward-looking dimension of *We Are the World's* legacy that remains largely overlooked.

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The creation of the Forum of African Development Organizations (FAVDO) in May 1987 marked a significant milestone for voluntary organizations across the continent, uniting them in a concerted effort to address the challenges facing their communities. Influenced by FAVDO's call for African-led development, USAfA quickly became a key ally, supporting this new network of development actors.

Between 1987 and 1990, USAfA provided FAVDO with over \$500,000 to expand its reach and network, while allocating nearly \$5 million in core funding to a wide range of African NGOs and associations, including first-time grants to new organizations supporting women and youth groups, farmers associations and artisanal fishing cooperatives and others. USAfA also supported dialogue between African and non-African development organizations, contributing a \$250,000 grant for a multi-year series of exchanges between FAVDO and InterAction, its US NGO counterpart, focused on the evolving role of African organizations in development.

One of the most emblematic initiatives anticipating elements of a trust-based approach came in 1990 when USAfA, in what it believed (mistakenly, as it turned out) would be its final funding round, took inspiration from the MacArthur "Genius Awards," allocating over \$2.6 million in "Significant Achievement Grants" (SAGs), the majority of which went to African NGOs and associations.

Rather than soliciting proposals from grantees, USAfA staff and long-time advisors independently assessed and selected some twenty six organizations based on their reputation and impact, then informed them that they had received a SAG. Grants ranged from \$50,000 to \$250,000, and were given with minimal strings attached—funds were to be used "as the grantee saw fit" to support work that benefited not only their immediate constituency but the wider community as well.

This approach to SAG awards and to USAfA's allocation of block grants between 1987 and 1990 was notable, and while current funding from proceeds from the iconic *We Are the World* recording are much more modest, most of USAfA's current funds are still allocated to African groups through general support grants.

Today, there is increasing recognition in the philanthropic sector that an approach which "accompanies" organizations as "partners" rather than seeing them solely

as grantees strengthens relationships that promote dialogue and shared learning, helping funders better understand the challenges faced by those doing the work, and respond more flexibly. Furthermore, it eases the paperwork burden on often underfunded, yet highly committed local organizations, allowing them the flexibility to make decisions and adapt to changing needs, to focus on their core mission rather than administrative tasks.

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Highlighting USAfA's early support for trust-based funding models over three decades ago not only complements the organization's better-known emergency relief efforts, but also brings attention, in ways that remain relevant within and beyond philanthropic discussions today, to a key aspect of *We Are the World's* legacy: USAfA's commitment to respecting the agency and leadership of African civil society organizations as key actors in the development process.

*~ Mark Randazzo, July 2025 (A current USA for Africa board member, Mark served as the organization's West & Central Africa Coordinator from 1987-1990).*

*The original 1990 memo outlining the SAG award process can be seen here:*  
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-roXgM85LhRAjJ0J1GPYt0fzPmoZYfTfIEPFaRFKDJg/edit?usp=sharing>