



How African NGOs Grow

By Niloufer Memon, Julia Standish-White, Nkanyiso Hlongwa, Dominique Wells, Mikal Kooiker, and Bradley Seeman

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Introduction

Many African nongovernmental organisations (NGOs)¹ are well run, are deeply rooted in their communities and countries, and deliver powerful impact on the continent. “We are able to demonstrate governance and accountability on par with any [international] NGO,” says Dave Clark, The Aurum Institute’s group COO. “But we do so with much lower overhead, *and* we are local.” [The Aurum Institute](#) is a South Africa-based organisation that has grown over the past 26 years to inform policy with scientific research and to deliver HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis prevention, care, and treatment services on multiple continents.

Yet organisations like Aurum, which are growing, innovating, and delivering real results, operate in an environment of funding scarcity and uncertainty. How have their revenue strategies adapted to reflect those challenges? We set out to learn more about how these NGOs found the funding they needed to grow and sustain themselves. Our team analysed revenue data from 85 NGOs in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa with budgets over \$1 million and interviewed leaders of 33 large NGOs in those countries. (See “[Appendix 1. Research Methodology](#)” on page 15.)

What we found is that although only a small share of international funding for the African social sector goes to African NGOs, those NGOs that have seen significant growth rely overwhelmingly on international sources. These sources include both philanthropy from outside Africa (foundations or high-net-worth individuals) as well as bilateral (foreign government) and multilateral (e.g. World Bank) donors. Amongst the NGOs we interviewed, over 90 percent rely on philanthropic, bilateral, or multilateral funding from outside Africa for most of their revenue.

To be sure, although this research focuses on how African NGOs grow, we do not mean to imply that budget size equals impact. At The Bridgespan Group, we have worked with and observed small organisations with modest budgets that drive outsized impact in Africa. But for some NGOs, growing and sustaining a larger budget have been critical to achieving that impact.

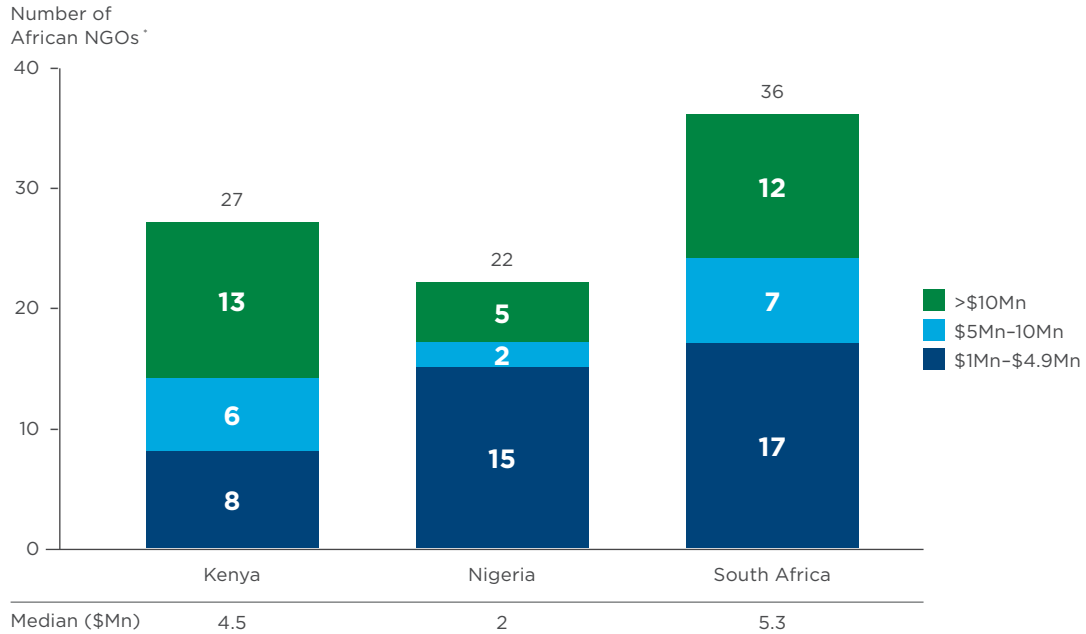
This article reports on five key findings from our research:

1. International funding fuels the growth of African NGOs.
2. NGOs have adopted tactics specific to accessing international funding.
3. Domestic funding helps NGOs in South Africa much more than in Kenya and Nigeria.
4. Flexible funding is relatively scarce but can be catalytic.
5. African NGOs often seek to broaden their revenue mix to sustain their growth.

Big Looks Different in Different Countries

The median budgets of the 85 larger NGOs for which we found financial data differ significantly: larger Kenyan NGOs have a median annual budget of \$4.5 million; larger South African NGOs, \$5.3 million; and larger Nigerian NGOs, \$2 million (see [Figure 1](#)).

Figure 1. Nonprofits by revenue size for each geography



* This relates specifically to African NGOs where revenue data was available.

Source: The Bridgespan Group's 2024 research on funding of African NGOs.

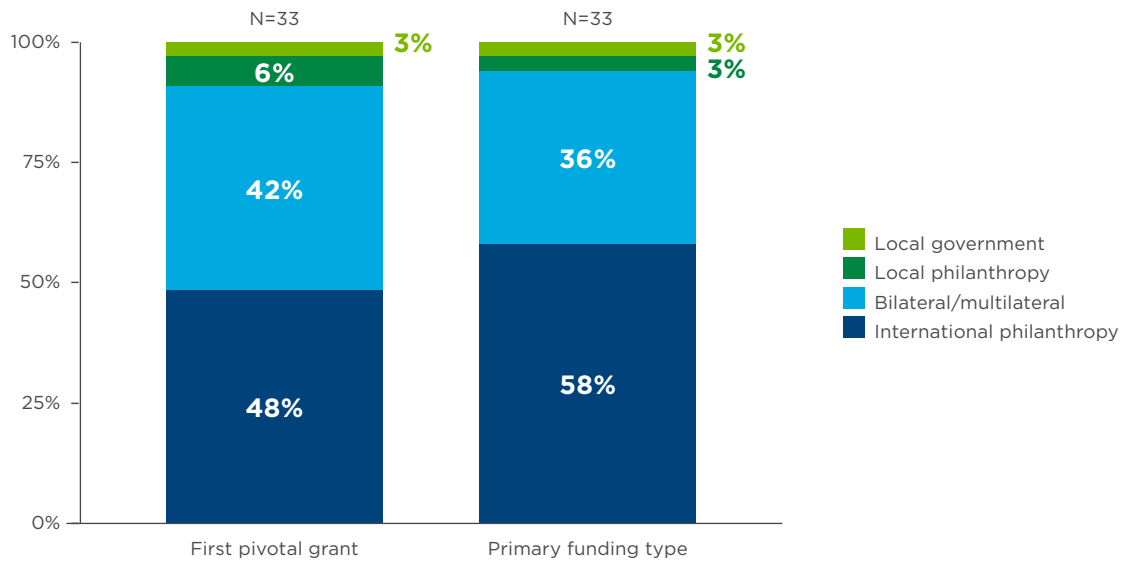


Key Findings

1. International funding fuels the growth of African NGOs

Across the 33 NGOs we interviewed for this article, over 90 percent rely on funding from outside Africa for most of their revenue (see [Figure 2](#) on the next page). That funding came from a combination of international philanthropy and official development assistance (ODA) from bilateral or multilateral government sources in roughly equal parts. If you consider that nine times more ODA flowed into the three countries of focus than from international philanthropy in 2022, it becomes clear how important international philanthropic funding is for African NGOs that strive to grow.

Figure 2. Key revenue sources for NGOs interviewed



Note: Nonprofits per country: Kenya (10), Nigeria (10), South Africa (13).

Source: The Bridgespan Group's 2024 research on funding of African NGOs.



This funding is arriving in the context of larger conversations about “localisation,”² or the increase of funding and power of local organisations and leaders, the proximate voices with the knowledge, experiences, relationships, and power to drive change in their communities. And whilst aid agencies struck a “Grand Bargain” in 2016 to provide 25 percent of their funding to local organisations, progress to date from ODA sources such as the US Agency for International Development (USAID) has fallen short.³ For their part, a few large international philanthropies are adopting localisation strategies, but it remains to be seen whether the field will make a broad-based shift.

Consider [BudgIT](#), a Nigerian nonprofit founded in 2011. The organisation uses an array of technology tools to explain the national budget and public spending to citizens in simple terms, with the primary aim of increasing transparency and accountability in government. It works not only in Nigeria but also in three other West African countries – Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Having started with an initial team of three staff members, BudgIT has now grown to 95 staff. Its current annual revenue is \$4.5 million – which is larger than the median for Nigerian NGOs. Funding growth is important to BudgIT. “We aspire to be one of Africa’s leading civil tech organisations and to be at the forefront of civic innovation and impact,” says Oluseun Onigbinde, cofounder and director.

Approximately 85 percent of BudgIT’s funding comes from US foundations, with the largest current donors being the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the MacArthur Foundation. Its first large grant – \$400,000 per year for three years – came in 2014, from Luminare, part of Omidyar Network. This flexible grant helped the organisation to launch a new platform that allows it to track and report on service delivery in local communities, strengthen its transparency work, and begin building the capabilities of government.

Like BudgIT, 90 percent of the organisations we interviewed across the three countries received a “first pivotal grant” from a non-African funder. (The “first pivotal grant” was a grant that, whatever its size, was described by the NGO interviewee as a significant early milestone in the NGOs’ growth trajectory). About half of these first pivotal grants came from philanthropy. There was a wide range of donors, and only three philanthropic donors (the Gates Foundation, Luminate, and The ELMA Foundation) were mentioned more than once.⁴ The remainder received their first pivotal grants from bilateral or multilateral donors – 10 different governments or multilaterals in all. HIV/AIDS funding from the US government accounted for five of the 14 first grants, four in South Africa and one in Nigeria.

PEPFAR, The US President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief

[PEPFAR](#) has historically been one of the largest bilateral funders in Africa – with over \$1 billion per year going to the three countries discussed in this article. It has been an important source of funding for South African NGOs. Five of the nonprofits we interviewed (four in South Africa, one in Kenya) described PEPFAR as accounting for over half their annual revenue. Over time, PEPFAR’s funding strategy has shifted from an emergency initiative to deliver HIV treatment services to a programme with a wider focus on health system strengthening and sustainability. Most PEPFAR funding goes to countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

One example of an organisation that received its first large grant from a bilateral funder – and continues to rely heavily on this category of funding – is the [Desmond Tutu Health Foundation](#), a South African NGO formally established in 2004 that combines research with community development programmes to address HIV/AIDS and related health outcomes. The foundation has an affiliation with the University of Cape Town and functions in that capacity as the Desmond Tutu HIV Centre. Its current annual revenue is \$10.5 million. The organisation received its first large funding grant from the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) to carry out clinical trials for HIV treatment.

“This was back in an era of AIDS denialism in South Africa,” says Linda-Gail Bekker, the CEO of the foundation. “So we had to look to the Global North for funding. We were already working with communities and opinion leaders, gaining understanding, establishing ourselves as HIV experts. We were amongst the first in South Africa to use antiretroviral treatment, so we wrote a research proposal and got our first funding from NIH for a clinical treatment trial.” This kind of project-specific funding from the US government has historically made up 70 percent of the organisation’s funding, though the share has recently dropped to about 50 percent. “Right now, the foundation brings in a higher stream of revenue than the centre,” with significant funding from the Gates Foundation and several European foundations, “though it waxes and wanes.” (See the section titled [“African NGOs often seek to broaden their revenue mix to sustain their growth”](#) on page 11 for more on how NGOs are thinking about changing their revenue mixes.)

2. NGOs have adopted tactics specific to accessing this international funding

Given the need to focus on international funding sources, the NGOs we interviewed have adopted tactics specific to this category of funding. These tactics often reflect the burden of conforming to the practices of funders from outside Africa. It is our hope that funders adapt the NGOs' practices and embrace norms that ease the way for local leaders and NGOs with close ties to communities.

Building and sustaining relationships by leveraging personal connections and existing funding networks. Consider the example of [Afrika Tikkun](#), a South African NGO focused on ending child poverty and youth unemployment. It has strong connections to the Jewish community in South Africa as well as in the United States, United Kingdom, several European countries, and Australia. Rather than relying on the foundations that traditionally fund work in Africa, or bilateral or multilateral funders, Afrika Tikkun gets its revenue mainly from a combination of the founder's family company (whose donation is flexible) and from its fundraising networks in other countries – much of it comprised of corporate funding.

"We've built a relationship with CEOs in the US, France, Germany, and other countries," explains Executive Deputy Chairman of the Board Marc Lubner. "Each of these international partners will decide what programme of Afrika Tikkun's they'll back. Donors in each country build an affinity for a particular programme. And each year we bring executive fundraisers from each of these countries, so they can see first-hand what we're doing, so we can hear from them and talk together and build rapport."

Establishing US or UK registration to facilitate fundraising. Approximately half of the NGOs we interviewed had such registrations. And in Kenya, almost all of the NGOs we interviewed had such registrations – underlining that country's role as a common entry point into Africa for international funders. Sometimes, establishing registration in the home country of the international funder is a requirement for receiving a grant. It can also assist with funders' due diligence, improve credibility with prospective international funders, and potentially help an African NGO access a wider range of individual or foundation givers in the Global North.

Hiring and building a team that reflects the skill sets needed. Depending on the kind of work they do and their funding strategy, organisations may hire staff with strong communications and marketing skills to conduct donor outreach and management, or they may employ grant writers skilled in addressing the requirements of philanthropic, government, or multilateral funders.

The Kenyan NGO [Food for Education](#), which provides schoolchildren from vulnerable communities with subsidised meals, relies on international philanthropy as its primary funding source but is also seeking to develop bilateral and multilateral funding as an important

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DR ÉLIANE UBALIJORO, CEO, CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL FORESTRY RESEARCH AND WORLD AGROFORESTRY

secondary source. To build capacity in both categories, Food for Education recently grew its fundraising team from two to seven members, developing the capacity in the United States to secure funding from high-net-worth individuals and to more effectively seek bilateral and multilateral grants.

Or consider the skill sets needed by the [Center for International Forestry Research and World Agroforestry](#), which works at the intersection of climate, food, and related concerns. The product of a 2021 functional merger, the centre is a global research and development organisation, headquartered in Indonesia and Kenya, that employs over 800 people and works across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe. “If you’re based in Africa,” says Dr Éliane Ubalijoro, the organisation’s CEO, “you need strong global connections to access international funding – whether it’s philanthropy or bilateral funding. We’ve worked to develop our grant writing, storytelling, and communications capabilities so that we can compete with the best.”

Establishing sufficient credibility with funders to move from being a subgrantee to a direct grantee. Some of the NGOs we talked to started out in what would become significant funding relationships as a subgrantee to a large organisation – usually an international NGO. “Many large international funders will give a grant to a global organisation and then that organisation will subcontract to smaller ones like us,” explains Vivianne Ihekweazu, managing director of [Nigeria Health Watch](#), a health communication and advocacy organisation that advocates for better health for Nigerians. “Our focus on health advocacy communications is an advantage since many health grants have a communications component. Once you have a subcontract, you need to build a track record. Much of our growth has come from building relationships and gaining trust with people through the work that we do.”

For example, Nigeria Health Watch first started receiving funding from the Gates Foundation through a subcontract to an international organisation. “But unlike some, Gates *does* fund local organisations, and after a couple of years we were funded directly,” says Ihekweazu. The Gates Foundation is now a major funder for Nigeria Health Watch, supporting work in many areas, including primary health care and maternal newborn and child health as well as other health issues in Nigeria.

3. Domestic funding helps NGOs in South Africa much more than in Kenya and Nigeria

Our first two findings – the overwhelming dominance of international funding as a revenue source for African NGOs and the NGOs’ efforts to develop specific tactics to access this funding – apply across all three countries we studied. The role of domestic funding, however, is very different for NGOs in South Africa than for those in Kenya and Nigeria.

Domestic funding is the largest revenue source for only two of the 33 NGOs we interviewed across three countries – and both are South African. Although most South African NGOs we interviewed rely on international funding for the majority of their revenue, domestic philanthropy, corporate, or government funding can play an important role in their growth and sustainability.⁵ Indeed, all but one of the 13 South African NGOs we talked to had received a notable amount of domestic funding. For some, domestic funding helps support work or build organisational capacity that international funders won’t pay for.

[SmartStart](#), a South African NGO founded in 2015 and focused on early learning, relies on international philanthropy for most of its revenue. But domestic funding – both from philanthropy and the South African government – is a vital secondary revenue source that has been important to the organisation’s growth. “Our first grants mainly came from South African foundations that have long supported early childhood development and were looking for scalable solutions,” says CEO Grace Matlhape. “They were the founders of SmartStart and invested at risk on us to grow a new organisation that would approach early childhood development differently. We wouldn’t have been able to grow as fast as we did without these first South Africa funders.” Moreover, the funding was for three years, and it was largely flexible – critical elements in allowing SmartStart to use the funding to build a strong foundation for future growth.

In South Africa, philanthropy sometimes provides vital “growth capital.” “Having this initial funding for three years was so important to us,” explains Matlhape. “It helped us build a culture of innovating and taking risks. And it allowed us to build our programme model – which provides a strong value proposition that attracts other donors, including donors from outside Africa.” SmartStart has also been able to access funding from the South African government, which now provides almost as large a share of its revenue as South African philanthropy.

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GRACE MATLHAPE, CEO, SMARTSTART

The [Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator](#), a South African NGO that works to advance employment and economic outcomes for unemployed youth, is the *only* organisation in our three-country sample to rely on national government funding for a significant portion of its funding. Harambee also runs smaller-scale operations in Rwanda, where it likewise works with the national government. Its initial funding came both from local philanthropy (the Yellowwoods Foundation, which helped start Harambee) and a sizeable early grant from the Jobs Fund, a South African government funding mechanism.

Harambee’s reliance on major funding from the South African government has not precluded it from also accessing international philanthropy, with sizeable recent grants from Co-Impact and MacKenzie Scott.⁶ This combination of funding has allowed Harambee to grow at a rate of 5 to 10 percent per year and to jump from placing hundreds of youth per year in jobs and work experience programmes to placing thousands per year.

In contrast, amongst the 20 NGOs we interviewed in Kenya and Nigeria, only one mentioned domestic philanthropy as part of its funding mix, and only a few mentioned national governments. There is, however, broad consensus on the importance of government support and buy-in to scale up work across multiple countries. And, even if government grants are few, other kinds of support from different levels of government within a country can play a big role in the growth of some African NGOs. Organisations we interviewed mentioned examples of governments providing free office space, assistance with building infrastructure, or subsidies.

Previous [Bridgespan research](#) suggests that only a small percentage of African philanthropy goes to African NGOs.⁷ Instead, African philanthropists tend to pursue impact by donating to the public sector or channelling funds through their own operating foundations, which work directly to address issues that the donors care most about.

4. Flexible funding is relatively scarce but can be catalytic

Most of the funding received by the NGOs we talked to is restricted by the funder – tied to a specific set of activities or goals. Only seven organisations amongst those we interviewed get most of their revenue as flexible funding, either unrestricted or lightly restricted.⁸

Yet repeatedly, we heard how flexible funding – even if it made up only a small portion of the organisation’s total revenue – has allowed African NGOs to develop their capacity and strengthen their resilience in ways that are hard to do with restricted funding.

Most of these flexible grants come from international philanthropy. One example of this type of funding is the Ford Foundation’s Building Institutions and Networks, or BUILD, initiative, which provides multiyear general operating funding combined with targeted organisational strengthening support. [LEAP Africa](#), a Nigeria-based NGO we interviewed, which focuses on developing ethical youth leaders across Africa, used BUILD funding for strategic planning, back-office operations for their expansion plans, talent acquisition, and leadership development. LEAP credits these investments with helping strengthen their capacity and attracting additional international funding.

The NGOs we talked to that had been able to access flexible funding described several ways in which it has built their organisations.

Developing and testing models for impact. Flexible grants (mainly from South African funders) gave SmartStart the time and flexibility to develop a strong model for early education and to access international donors. Without that flexible funding, it might have had to focus much more on satisfying shorter-term programme outcomes more typically required by funders.

Creating space for strategic planning. [mothers2mothers](#), a South African NGO that works in 10 African countries and employs community health workers to provide health care, used a large flexible grant from MacKenzie Scott for several purposes, including developing a strategic plan that provided a new direction around country expansion. “It was a huge gift to us to have not only the space to write a strategic plan but also the funding to start implementing it,” says Chad Rathner, the organisation’s COO.

Building financial stability and organisational resilience. Four of the NGOs we interviewed have used flexible funding to start endowments to create more sustainable revenue mixes over the long run. An example is the Nairobi-based [African Population and Health Research Center](#), which receives the majority of its funding from project-specific research grants, mainly from international

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JULIUS MBEYA, CO-CEO, LWALA COMMUNITY ALLIANCE

philanthropy and bilateral funding agencies. But flexible funding, first from The Rockefeller Foundation, then from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (combined with a low-interest loan from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation), allowed it to build up enough capital to buy land and build its own campus. That initial investment has paid off year after year, both in lowering facility costs and creating a stream of flexible revenue through rent.

“I am a big advocate for unrestricted funding,” says Julius Mbeya, co-CEO of [Lwala Community Alliance](#), a Kenyan organisation focused on advancing community-led health across the country. “Funding that focuses only on achieving specific outputs may help with the immediate problem, but it doesn’t build an organisation that’s going to grow and provide long-term solutions. You see over and over again that organisations that have been able to define their own pathways are the ones that drive change globally.” Lwala has been fortunate to receive flexible funding through funders such as those in Big Bang Philanthropy (a donor collaborative comprising private and corporate funders) and others.

One of the African NGOs we interviewed, [Ubuntu Pathways](#), is a rare example of an organisation receiving most of its funding in flexible form. Ubuntu provides an integrated support system focused on health, education, and social support in the townships of Gqeberha, South Africa (formerly Port Elizabeth). But its funding journey has hardly been a straight line. Its initial large-scale funding came from a mix of bilateral and multilateral organisations and international philanthropy. As the organisation grew and reflected on its impact, it made a deliberate decision to focus less on reaching scale-up targets and more on seeking flexible funding. This strategic shift caused it to move away from bilateral and multilateral funding and to substantially reduce its budget.

“Today, we do better with \$6 million in unrestricted capital than we do with \$10 million in restricted funding. We built the ability to say no and turn down funding. Most organisations can’t do that.”

JACOB LIEF, COFOUNDER, UBUNTU PATHWAYS

Today, the great majority of Ubuntu’s funding comes in flexible form from a mix of international philanthropy and South African donors. “It took us three years to wean ourselves off that restricted funding,” explains Ubuntu’s cofounder Jacob Lief. “Today, we do better with \$6 million in unrestricted capital than we do with \$10 million in restricted funding. We built the ability to say no and turn down funding. Most organisations can’t do that.”

5. African NGOs often seek to broaden their revenue mix to sustain their growth

Given the overall scarcity of funding for African NGOs, as well as the risk of shifting funder priorities, most of the NGOs we spoke to do not want to become too dependent on a single category of funding. Some have devoted a lot of effort to broadening or shifting their revenue mix – sometimes by choice, sometimes by necessity.

One example of a shift caused by necessity is the experience of [Wildlands Conservation Trust](#), known as WILDTRUST, a conservation-focused South African nonprofit created in 2004 through the merger of two other organisations. Previously, it relied heavily on funding from the South African government for large-scale restoration projects, as well as local

corporations. However, in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the government withdrawing funding and redirecting it towards the pandemic response, leaving WILDTRUST with a big funding gap. The organisation refocused its efforts on international funders – philanthropy and bilateral and multilateral funders. Today, half of the organisation’s funding comes from these sources.

Several other interviewees – particularly those with a lot of funding from the US President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR (see [“PEPFAR, The US President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief”](#) on page 6) – expressed concern about their organisations being so dependent on a single foreign source. “We have a huge dependence on American money,” explains one leader whose organisation relies mainly on PEPFAR and other government agencies in the United States. “We are now trying very hard to diversify our income.”

Other NGOs we spoke to have chosen to shift their revenue mix to unlock more funding, pursue greater flexibility, or reduce risk. “Bilateral and multilateral funders are the biggest source of funding in Africa,” explains Katherine Potaski, chief advancement officer of the Kenyan NGO [Shining Hope for Communities](#), or SHOFCO, most of whose revenue comes from international philanthropy. “So we’re dipping our toes into it. We’re hiring someone who has the expertise to focus on this type of funding. We understand that this funding can be restrictive, but our funding mix is already getting somewhat more restricted anyway.”

Yet for others, the often-restrictive nature of bilateral and multilateral funding is pushing them to seek other revenue sources. We have already seen how Ubuntu Pathways made the decision to wean itself away from bilateral and multilateral funders. They are not the only ones.

“In the early 2000s, we grew a lot. A lot of the funding that allowed us to grow came from bilateral and multilateral funders like USAID and UN agencies,” explains Hamda Hersi, programme coordinator of [Adeso](#), a Kenya-based NGO that undertakes its humanitarian and development work through a mix of global systems change and direct service programming in Somalia. “But we made a strategic decision to move away from bilateral and multilateral funding due to its restrictive nature. We were chasing funding. So today it’s a much different mix. Our funding is mainly philanthropy now, and we don’t get any bilateral or multilateral funding.” In other cases, NGOs may continue to seek and receive bilateral and multilateral funding, but, like the Desmond Tutu Health Foundation, they have built up international philanthropy as another important revenue source.

And finally, some of those we interviewed noted the risk of being over-reliant on a single funder. Some learn to live with the risk, but others have sought to reduce it. The Kenyan NGO Lwala Community Alliance ensures that no single funder makes up more than 30 percent of its two-year budget. “If you have one funder that contributes much of the budget, then their agenda becomes your agenda,” explains Lwala’s Julius Mbeya.

A New Look at How Nonprofits Get Really Big in the United States

The Bridgespan Group's [research on nonprofits in the United States](#) – focusing on organisations with annual revenues of \$50 million or more that were founded since 1990 – showed both differences and similarities to what we found in Africa:

- Virtually all funding for US nonprofits is domestic. Indeed, so small is the amount of funding from outside the United States that none of the 297 organisations in our data set seem to rely significantly on it.
- These large nonprofits grew to their current size mainly by focusing on a single revenue category rather than diversifying across categories of funding. Over 90 percent of the organisations in our US study have a dominant revenue category; on average, that category makes up 90 percent of total revenue.
- Some organisations in our US study also have an important secondary category: almost 40 percent have a secondary source that makes up 10 percent or more of their total revenue.
- The four most prevalent funding categories are, in order of size, government, programme services/earned revenue, corporate, and philanthropy. For most nonprofits, their revenue mix is fairly stable over time.
- Similar to the African NGOs in our research, an especially important practice for US nonprofits that want to raise money to achieve significant scale is building dedicated capabilities and infrastructure to tap into the one or two revenue categories it is focusing on.

An Opportunity for Funders and NGOs

Not all African NGOs seek to grow. Indeed, many are working to sustain and deepen their impact within their current budgetary footprint. And almost all of them are operating in an environment where the revenue they depend on is scarce and sometimes insecure, and comes from outside Africa.

The strength of the 33 NGOs we spoke to in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa underscores that there is an enormous opportunity for funders who want to make a difference in Africa. We are publishing this article at a moment when the conversation around localisation is growing amongst international philanthropists and ODA funders. Some already are aggressively pursuing the opportunity to direct a larger share of their funding – and less-restricted funding – to African NGOs. In practical terms, this might mean a funder making a grant to an African NGO without the track record of an international NGO, revisiting the way it looks at budget size as an indicator of organisational strength, substituting some degree of trust for rigid programme metrics, or turning a one-year grant into a three- or five-year grant. And whilst African philanthropists may continue to pursue impact by funding the public sector or their own operating foundations, they can also support the high-impact work of African NGOs – for example by providing pivotal early grants or potentially catalytic flexible grants.

There are promising practices for African NGOs, as well. They can find a large NGO partner to open access to funding sources they cannot yet pursue directly. They can build relationships and develop networks that bring them into contact with international funders and build fundraising teams with the specific skill sets needed to attract and sustain international funding. In South Africa – and perhaps someday elsewhere, too – they also can tap into an array of domestic funding sources. And when they do get access to some flexible funding, they can use it to achieve key longer-term goals like improving their programme models or strengthening key elements of their organisational infrastructure.

There remains much to do to break down the historical barriers that hold African NGOs back from reaching their full potential. And for African NGOs – with their distinct role in the African civil society ecosystem and their proximity to the communities they serve – that potential is enormous.



Niloufer Memon and **Nkanyiso Hlongwa** are partners working in The Bridgespan Group's Johannesburg office, where **Julia Standish-White** is a manager and **Dominique Wells** is a senior associate consultant. **Bradley Seeman** is an editorial director in Bridgespan's Boston office. **Mikal Kooiker** worked on this research whilst seconded to Bridgespan's Johannesburg office from Bain & Company.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Research Methodology

We set out to create a list of 150 nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) that had surpassed a budget size of \$5 million in key countries in Africa. This provided us with a starting point from which we could study their funding models. We applied an initial set of criteria to surface organisations for further study, which we adjusted through the research process to reflect the nature of the data we were finding and our main research questions; we thus developed the following research parameters:

- **Geography:** South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya because they are the largest economies in sub-Saharan Africa and have the largest and most mature social sectors on the continent
- **Size threshold:** \$5 million initially, lowered to \$1 million to surface more organisations
- **Founding year:** No restrictions on the founding year
- **Exclusions:** Hospitals, universities, churches, political parties, and labour unions

During our preliminary research, we generated a database of 161 NGOs, based on a combination of internal knowledge of The Bridgespan Group, secondary research (e.g. D&B Hoovers, Foundation Maps), grantee databases from prominent funders (e.g. Children’s Investment Fund Foundation, Yield Giving, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation), funding databases (e.g. Foundation Maps), and referrals from sector experts. We prioritised larger, “locally led” nonprofits; therefore, the list is not necessarily representative of the entire nonprofit landscape in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. Many nonprofits with international roots (i.e. international NGOs) or origins are not represented in the database.

Within our database, we sought to compile the following data:

- Estimated budget size (based on secondary research)
- Categorisation of the NGO as “locally led” or “foreign-led.” For the study, we deprioritised “foreign-led” NGOs and we focused on: (1) organisations that work at a local or national level within one country and that are headquartered in that country and (2) African-led organisations with operations across multiple countries within Africa and that are headquartered in an African country
- The primary and secondary (if applicable) focus areas (e.g. health)

That left us with a list of 85 organisations for which data were available. From the large data set, we created a shortlist of organisations that reflected a fair range of “large” nonprofits that might be open to having an interview with Bridgespan and sharing details on their funding models. The sample consisted of nonprofits across a range of budget sizes, categories, focus areas, and theories of change.

We then set a target to interview leaders from 30 nonprofits (10 per country) that have scaled beyond the “big” threshold in each country. For Kenya and South Africa, “big” was defined as \$5 million; for Nigeria, we set the threshold to \$1 million. In addition, during the interview process, we asked for referrals to additional leaders to interview. In the end, we

interviewed 33 leaders of “big” local NGOs⁹ in the three countries we studied, seeking answers to the following questions:

- Could you share some context as to how your organisation was established?
- When did you receive your first sizeable grant?
- What is your current budget size?
- What is the current mix of restricted/unrestricted funding?
- What is the current mix of funder types?
- What is your current primary funding type (funder and type, restricted/unrestricted, percentage of funding)?
- What is your ideal future funding mix (in terms of percentage split and target funding types)?
- Does your organisation have any foreign registrations?

Appendix 2. List of Interviewees’ Organisations

Kenya

- **Adeso** envisions a world independent from aid and which relies on the resourcefulness and capabilities of its people. It advocates on behalf of the communities it works with, giving them voice on a local and international stage and promoting better ways to deliver effective humanitarian aid and contribute meaningfully to policy discussions on issues that affect African communities.
- **African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC)** is an international research and policy organisation focused on conducting policy-relevant research on health and development. APHRC is headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya, has a West Africa Regional Office in Senegal, and conducts projects across 35 African countries. It consistently ranks as the top policy organisation in domestic health policy in Africa.
- **African Wildlife Foundation (AWF)** is an Africa-focused global conservation nonprofit headquartered in Kenya. Focusing on large conservation landscapes that are essential to securing the future of Africa’s wildlife and a prosperous future for people, AWF employs an integrated approach to conservation including land use planning, education and capacity building, development of conservation enterprise to improve livelihoods, and applied research.
- **Amref Health Africa** is the largest Africa-based international NGO, reaching over 35 African countries. Focused on primary health care, its mission is to foster community-led health systems and address social determinants of health to enhance African communities’ well-being. The organisation invests in the health and empowerment of women and young people as catalysts for change.
- **The Center for International Forestry Research and World Agroforestry (CIFOR-ICRAF)**, the product of a functional merger, is a global research and development organisation, headquartered in Kenya and Indonesia, with a global staff of more than 800 people working across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe. It harnesses the power of trees, forests, and agroforestry landscapes to address the most pressing global challenges of our time—biodiversity loss, climate change, food security, livelihoods, and inequity.

- **Food for Education** is a health- and education-focused Kenyan nonprofit. It leverages cutting edge technology such as its “Tap2Eat” mobile platform to enable public primary school children access to nutritious food.
- **LVCT Health** is a Kenyan-headquartered NGO registered in 2002 that designs and implements innovative HIV prevention and treatment approaches, and reproductive health, sexual and gender-based violence programmes reaching vulnerable populations in Kenya. LVCT services have enabled millions of individuals to receive HIV prevention services, with over 300,000 currently receiving life-saving antiretroviral therapy and related services.
- **Lwala Community Alliance** is a Kenya-founded, Kenyan-led organisation which unlocks the potential of communities to advance their own comprehensive well-being. It trains community health workers to bring services closer to their communities, strengthens community-led accountability mechanisms, and partners with governments to adopt policies and practices that strengthen health systems.
- **Shining Hope for Communities (SHOFCO)** is a grassroots movement that catalyses large-scale transformation in urban slums by providing critical services for all, community advocacy platforms, and education and leadership development for women and girls.
- **TaRL (Teaching at the Right Level Africa)** is a Kenya-based nonprofit that works with governments and other partners across Africa to adapt, embed, and implement an educational approach based on teaching students at their actual learning levels, rather than the level recommended by the curriculum. It supports partners working to address the learning crisis in Africa through this evidence-based solution to improving education quality.

Nigeria

- **BudgIT** focuses on promoting civic engagement by leveraging technology to improve transparency regarding state budgets and public spending. It has reached over 25 million citizens, supports 45 public institutions, and coordinates the Open Alliance, a network of 110 local/hyperlocal civil society organisations in West Africa. BudgIT organises data for citizens, journalists, and civil society to hold the government accountable.
- **CDD West Africa (CDD)** is an independent research, training, advocacy, and capacity-building organisation. It was established to mobilise global opinion and resources for democratic development and provide an independent space to reflect critically on challenges posed to democratisation and development processes in West Africa. CDD envisions a West Africa that is democratically governed, economically integrated, and promotes human security and people-centred development.
- **Connected Development (CODE)** focuses on empowering marginalised communities with access to information by leveraging innovative technology tools to close the feedback loop between grassroots communities and the government. It tracks the utilisation of government funds to enhance effective democratic governance and accountability, and advocates for the execution of the intended projects through their “Follow the Money” initiative in 11 African countries.

- **[The development Research and Projects Centre \(dRPC\)](#)** is an intermediary nonprofit with a mission to strengthen the organisational and technical capacity of civil society organisations, and to design and implement transformative and sustainable development interventions which engage government and address the needs of the vulnerable and excluded, such as women and girls.
- **[FATE Foundation](#)** is a business incubator and accelerator with a goal to enable aspiring and emerging Nigerian entrepreneurs to start, grow, and scale their businesses. It works to harness the high potential entrepreneurship culture of Nigerians to spur job creation, economic development, and social impact.
- **[LEAP Africa](#)** is committed to raising leaders that will transform Africa through interventions for young people that bridge the gap in leadership, education, employability, and entrepreneurship. By developing a generation of leaders and change agents equipped to tackle leadership and socio-economic challenges head-on, it aims to foster a continent rich in inclusive and sustainable growth. It focuses on two major pillars: galvanizing African youth towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and mobilising youth-focused organisations in Africa to accelerate the development of youth leaders under 35 years in the public, private, and social development sectors.
- **[Nigeria Health Watch](#)** is a nonprofit health communication and advocacy organisation that seeks to advocate for better health for Nigerians. It works to actively engage and support the government in raising awareness and increasing knowledge on a wide range of health issues in Nigeria.
- **[Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre \(PLAC\)](#)** is committed to strengthening democratic governance and citizens' participation in Nigeria. PLAC works to enhance citizens' engagement with state institutions, and to promote transparency and accountability in policy and decision-making processes. The main focus of PLAC's intervention in the democratic governance processes is on building the capacity of the legislature and reforming the electoral process.
- **[Solina Centre for International Development and Research \(SCIDaR\)](#)** works to accelerate positive health, social, and economic outcomes through effective programme design and implementation, capacity building, implementation science, and research to drive policy change and reforms across human development sectors.
- **[Teach for Nigeria](#)** is working to develop a movement of leaders across Nigeria who are committed to ending educational inequity. It recruits and train graduates who are then placed to teach in underserved schools during a two-year fellowship. The fellows also commit to undertaking various community or classroom projects during the fellowship. Alumni are supported to build on their teaching experience to effect long-term, systemic changes within the education sector and beyond.

South Africa

- **[African Leadership Academy \(ALA\)](#)** is an educational institution that seeks to transform Africa by identifying, developing, and connecting the next generation of leaders. During a two-year residential programme, students study African Studies, Entrepreneurial Leadership, and Writing & Rhetoric alongside a rigorous A-level syllabus. Since its founding, ALA has graduated almost 1,500 alums from 46 African countries. While most leave the continent for university, the majority return to the continent for their careers.

- **Afrika Tikkun** is a South African NGO that focuses on ending child poverty and youth unemployment through a unique cradle-to-career child and youth development skills training and placement process. Each year approximately 20,000 children and youth are engaged in the development cycle, leading to productive career pathways.
- **The Anova Health Institute** is a health care NGO with a specific focus on HIV. Anova influences groundbreaking work on HIV and is known for its innovative responses to increase access to quality HIV care and treatment in the public sector. It focuses on the clinical management of HIV in key populations and research on clinical and social aspects of HIV.
- **The Aurum Institute** works to generate evidence for policy and translate policy into practice to positively impact the health of communities globally. It partners with governments, the private sector, and civil society to research, design, and deliver high-quality care and treatment to people in developing communities.
- **Desmond Tutu Health Foundation** combines research with community development programmes to address HIV/AIDS and related health outcomes through treatment, prevention, and training aimed at specific population groups such as adolescents, LGBTQI+, men, and women.
- **Harambee Youth Accelerator** works to advance employment and economic outcomes for unemployed youth. It also runs smaller-scale operations in Rwanda, where it likewise works with the national government. In South Africa, since its inception, Harambee has supported nearly four million youth through its free platform, SA Youth, and has enabled over one million work opportunities for youth since inception in 2011. In Rwanda, Harambee has supported over 30,000 youth and enabled over 6,000 work opportunities for youth.
- **mothers2mothers (m2m)** provides integrated primary health services care to families who need it most, delivered by women living with HIV employed as community health workers. It now operates at hundreds of health centres and communities in 10 African nations and has reached over 16 million people since 2001.
- **The Networking HIV and AIDS Community of Southern Africa (NACOSA)**, together with a network of over 1,000 civil society organisations, works to build strong, equal and healthy communities free from the burden of HIV, AIDS, TB, and gender-based violence. It does this by strengthening community systems, mobilising and managing resources, facilitating networking and collaborations, providing and enabling access to services, and advocating, learning, and sharing collectively.
- **Reach Digital Health** leverages simple technology such as SMS and WhatsApp to empower individuals in their health journeys, support health workers in building their resilience, and provide critical data and insights to health administrators to drive health-system change.
- **Right to Care** is a nonprofit dedicated to providing essential health care services, particularly in the fields of HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases, and health system strengthening. The organisation's mission revolves around improving the health and well-being of individuals and communities by ensuring access to high-quality health care services. It also has a presence in Lesotho, Zambia, Malawi, Namibia, and supports activities in Eswatini.

- **SmartStart** seeks to close the gap in access to quality early learning for 3- to 5-year-old children. It recruits, screens, trains, and supports groups of unemployed women to set up early learning classrooms in their homes and incubates them to become sustainable micro social enterprises delivering quality early learning using SmartStart’s evidence-based curriculum. It currently has over 9,800 franchisees reaching 80,000 children every week.
- **Ubuntu Pathways** provides an integrated support system of health, education, and social support in the townships of Gqeberha, South Africa (previously known as Port Elizabeth). Ubuntu’s cradle-to-career model has helped over 2,000 orphaned and vulnerable children on the pathway out of poverty.
- **WILDTRUST** pursues the realisation of its vision of “a thriving and resilient world” through two core programmes. **WILDLANDS** focuses on conserving terrestrial biodiversity, and empowering and uplifting communities through training as well as the protection of wildlife. **WILDOCEANS** focuses on marine conservation by advocating for healthy oceans, promoting marine protected areas, and increasing protection for endangered species, amongst other conservation efforts.

Endnotes

- 1 We define “African NGOs” as those with an Africa-based decision-making “locus of power.” Characteristics that indicated the locus of power included the organisation’s headquarters location, the composition of its leadership team and board of directors, its decision-making structures and norms, and the focus of its work on the ground. For more detail, see Mosun Layode, Jan Schwier, Siya Hayi-Charters, Maddie Holland, and Soa Andrian, *Disparities in Funding for African NGOs: Unlocking Philanthropy for African NGOs as a Pathway to Greater Impact*, African Philanthropy Forum and The Bridgespan Group, July 2021.
- 2 See for example, Sabina Robillard, Teddy Atim, and Daniel Maxwell, *Localization: A “Landscape” Report*, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, December 2021.
- 3 David Ainsworth, “[5 Things We’ve Learned About Localization](#),” Devex, 27 March 2024.
- 4 Philanthropic funders mentioned as providing a first pivotal grant were the Bernard van Leer Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Co-Impact, Draper Richards Kaplan Foundation, Echoing Green, The ELMA Foundation, Ford Foundation, Luminate/Omidyar Network, MacArthur Foundation, Newman’s Own Foundation, Pershing Square Foundation, The Rockefeller Foundation, Segal Family Foundation, and World Wildlife Fund.
- 5 South Africa’s domestic philanthropy sector is largely driven by state-led efforts to regulate and incentivise philanthropic activities by the corporate sector. The government has introduced new policies like Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE), which has resulted in corporations contributing towards initiatives within the social sector. Across our sample, some South African NGOs noted receiving corporate funding, but the corporate sector did not feature as the primary funding source.
- 6 Bridgespan has had the privilege of advising MacKenzie Scott. Some of the other organisations and funders mentioned in this report are also current or prior Bridgespan Group clients.
- 7 Jan Schwier, Craig Wallington, Maddie Holland, and Wendy Magoronga, *The Landscape of Large-Scale Giving by African Philanthropists: A Research Brief*, The Bridgespan Group, June 2020.
- 8 By “lightly restricted,” we mean funding that might be targeted at broad categories like capacity building or programme development but leaves the organisation with great flexibility about how to spend the money to create the most impact within those broad categories.
- 9 “Local NGOs” refer to organisations headquartered in one of the three countries we studied, with an African leader and a locus of power in Africa. Characteristics that indicated the locus of power included the organisation’s headquarters location, the composition of its leadership team and board of directors, its decision-making structures and norms, and the focus of its work on the ground.

THE BRIDGESPAN GROUP

BOSTON 2 Copley Place, 7th Floor, Suite 3700B, Boston, MA 02116 USA. Tel: +1 617 572 2833

JOHANNESBURG Bridgespan Africa, The MARC, Tower 1, 3rd Floor, Corner Maude and Rivonia Road, Sandown Johannesburg, South Africa. Tel: +27 11 012 9280

MUMBAI Bridgespan India Private Limited (registered address), 11th Floor, Platina, G Block, Plot C 59, Bandra Kurla Complex, Mumbai, 400051, India. Tel: +91 022 6628 9624

NEW YORK 333 Seventh Avenue, 11th Floor, New York, NY 10001 USA. Tel: +1 646 562 8900

SAN FRANCISCO 88 Kearny St., Ste. 200, San Francisco, CA 94108 USA. Tel: +1 415 627 4500

SINGAPORE The Bridgespan Group, Sponsored by Bain Singapore, 38 Beach Road, 15th Floor, South Beach Tower, Singapore 189767



www.bridgespan.org

contact@bridgespan.org
contactindia@bridgespan.org

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