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guest perspective from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

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The need to embrace a more community-centered approach is of utmost importance, and yet continues to be a challenge for philanthropy. Too often our efforts have been overly reliant on funding international partners, since approaches at the local level often require the development of new relationships, adjustments to timing for implementation, as well as expectations for scaling the work.

These are barriers that impact our ability to attain long-term, meaningful and sustainable change. At the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, we are looking at what it will take to increase funding to local NGOs and CBOs as part of a diverse mix of partners that also include international NGOs and multi-lateral organizations given the complementary roles that each play to effect change at community, national and global levels.

It's true, community-driven approaches do require greater upfront investment, in both time and in resources to identify new local actors and models. But if we say we want to support and help create a better future for all (but especially people in the most vulnerable circumstances), then we must be mindful not only of what we fund, but whom we choose to fund and how we go about it. A more thoughtful approach pays off in a multitude of ways – for us and, most importantly, for the people and communities we serve.

Community-driven approaches require intention. At the Hilton Foundation we have decades of learning and experience in grantmaking, but there are often several layers between us and the communities we seek to serve – particularly in international settings. It is becoming increasingly clear that this means we're sometimes unable to see or hear what communities know they need and want. We risk missing opportunities to form effective partnerships with community actors that build upon their assets and agency, to the detriment of the long-lasting change we seek to achieve.

We can diversify our grantmaking portfolios, by increasing investments in local leaders and organizations. In this way we can help disrupt an inequitable international development system in which too few resources are reaching those who are based locally and best placed to serve their communities. When people are seen and heard in their own voice, have presence and power at the tables where decisions are made, are deeply engaged in program design and funding decisions, and receive more direct funding from foundations and donors, we will see faster progress, greater capacity, and more sustained impact.

But we need to listen harder and build better feedback mechanisms, thereby leveraging our collective untapped potential and discovering innovative solutions that change systems to benefit communities that have been historically disadvantaged.

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power and decision-making with local actors that include both civil society and government leaders. We're playing a new role, making space for the communities we work with and taking more time to listen and to follow their lead. An example comes from our partnership with Siaya County Kenya is an example of this. Governor Cornel Rasanga Amoth has made young children a priority, developing and implementing a multi-sectoral action plan involving and aligning a range of public and private resources and organizations.

We have learned that engaging with and investing in local leaders from the beginning and hearing their ideas for action is paramount to identifying sustainable solutions in communities. It is local people and organizations who must lead the way forward, and we can learn from them what is possible. We call on international organizations to shift their role and lead from behind, supporting local actors with knowledge and skills as needed to enable local leadership. All of this requires time and effort to build trust and to disrupt business as usual. We believe, as the research from Firelight shows, that the effort is well worth it as the result will be greater impact and sustained change.

We know that we're not alone in these efforts and that we are at the beginning of a journey. We vow to continue learning together with our local and international partners.

We hope that these reflections contribute to these efforts and help other funders to realize that we should not make perfect the enemy of the good, and that now is the time to step up and change how we work towards our collective goals.

Lisa Bohmer (Director, Global Early Childhood Development) and Shaheen Kasim-Lakha (Director, Strategic Partnerships)
Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

PS – if you are interested in how communities and community-based organizations need us, as a sector, to change our approaches to support change that is locally rooted and owned, and to emphasize greater allyship, check out Firelight's ground-breaking report Community-Driven Systems Change: the power of grassroots-led change for long-term impact and how funders can nurture it. The findings and tools align with what we are learning with our community partners, and we encourage others in the philanthropic sector to engage with them.

Lisa Bohmer leads the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's Global Early Childhood Development initiative, working in concert with government, other funders and grantee partners to improve caregiver well-being and early childhood development outcomes in Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania and the United States. Bohmer has more than 30 years of experience with programs, research and grantmaking in the areas of early childhood, HIV and AIDS, maternal and child health, reproductive rights, and the empowerment of women and girls.

Shaheen Kassim-Lakha leads the development and implementation of external engagements, including collaborations with peer funders and local, national and international partners, to unlock resources and shift policies that enable the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation to multiply its impact. In her previous role as

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communities affected by HIV and AIDS, blindness prevention and education, and disaster relief and recovery.

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