Examining the Perceptions of Major Philanthropic Actors about Their Role in Social Transformation in Nairobi, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study examines how major philanthropic actors in Nairobi County, Kenya, understand their responsibilities and perceived contributions to social transformation. It considers how personal experience, moral identity, faith, Ubuntu ethics, and concentrated donor agency inform roles that participants describe as extending beyond financial giving.

Design: The study used a qualitative embedded case study within an interpretivist, constructivist paradigm. The bounded case was domestic major philanthropy in Nairobi County. Ten major philanthropic actors constituted embedded participant units through which the case was examined. Participants were recruited through criterion-based purposive and referral sampling. Semi-structured interviews lasting 60-90 minutes were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, with donor and organization affiliated documents used for contextual corroboration rather than independent outcome verification. Altruism, social exchange, Ubuntu, and hyperagency served as sensitizing concepts.

Findings: Participants described four interconnected dimensions of philanthropic role perception: (1) biographical, relational, and faith-grounded stewardship; (2) strengthening capability and reducing dependency; (3) promoting community agency and opportunity; and (4) catalytic hyperagency and systemic transformation. These dimensions represent donor accounts and intentions, not independently verified social outcomes.

Research limitations/implications: The study involved ten Nairobi-based philanthropic actors recruited partly through referrals. Participants' net worth was not independently verified, and the study relied primarily on donor self-report. Documentary materials were largely donor- or organisation-affiliated, and beneficiaries were not interviewed. The findings are therefore analytically transferable rather than statistically generalisable and should be interpreted as donor perspectives. Comparative, longitudinal, and multi-stakeholder research is needed.

Practical and social implications: Philanthropists, nonprofit organisations, and policymakers should distinguish donor intentions, programme outputs, and independently assessed outcomes. Community participation, shared decision-making, transparent accountability, and responsible transition planning are necessary if philanthropic practice is to support rather than constrain community autonomy.

Originality/value: The study provides a context-rich account of a difficult-to-reach group of domestic major donors in Nairobi. It integrates altruism, social exchange, Ubuntu, and hyperagency to show how moral purpose, relational expectations, cultural responsibility, and concentrated donor power coexist in participants' accounts.

Keywords: Domestic Philanthropy; Major Donors; Ubuntu; altruism; social exchange; hyperagency; Nairobi; Kenya

1. INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

Research on elite philanthropy has long examined how wealthy donors deploy resources, exercise discretion, and shape social priorities (Maclean et al., 2021; Schervish, 2003, 2005). Much of this scholarship has developed in Western or Global North settings and has emphasised mechanisms of giving, institutional arrangements, status, and donor identity (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011; Ostrower, 1995; Wiepking, 2021). Less is known about how wealthy domestic donors in African settings interpret the moral and social responsibilities attached to wealth.

African giving is plural, relational, and historically situated. It is often embedded in communal obligations, kinship, religious conviction, and Ubuntu-oriented understandings of interdependence (Fowler & Mati, 2019; Gyekye, 1996; Mati, 2020). Although research has examined African gifting, civil-society environments, and social-enterprise motivations, limited qualitative evidence explains how major domestic donors understand stewardship, authority, and accountability in relation to communities.

This study addresses that gap by asking:

How do major philanthropic actors in Nairobi County perceive their contribution and stewardship role in relation to social transformation?

The study investigates donors' interpretations and intentions; it does not independently evaluate whether funded interventions produced sustainable beneficiary or community level outcomes.

The study makes two major contributions. Empirically, it provides a context-rich account of ten domestic major philanthropic actors, a difficult-to-reach population in Nairobi County. Conceptually, it identifies four interconnected dimensions through which participants described their roles: biographical, relational, and faith-grounded stewardship; strengthening capability and reducing dependency; promoting community agency and opportunity; and catalytic hyperagency and systemic transformation. The analysis treats these dimensions as donor role perceptions rather than verified effects.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Altruism theory explains helping behaviour through concern for the welfare of others (Batson, 2011). Schervish's (2005) account of identification-based altruism adds that major giving may arise when donors identify with people, causes, or experiences that become incorporated into their moral self-understanding. Altruistic motives reflect a desire to improve others' lives, give back to society, act on moral convictions, and find meaning through service. Smith (2009) identifies three perspectives: egoistic altruism, in which giving anticipates reciprocity; egocentric altruism, in which the giver gains satisfaction from another person's happiness; and alter-centric altruism, in which decisions are shaped by concern for others. These perspectives show that altruism may combine self-interest, empathy, and responsiveness to other people's needs.In this study, participants' accounts of family influence, vulnerability, faith, and stewardship are interpreted through that lens.

Ubuntu complements altruism by locating moral responsibility within a relational account of personhood and communal obligation (Fowler & Mati, 2019; Gyekye, 1996; Mati, 2020). The philosophy presents human identity and flourishing as relational achievements rather than exclusively individual possessions, (Mugumbate *et al.*, 2024).

Social exchange theory highlights the relationships, expectations, and forms of reciprocity through which giving is organised (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976; Molm, 2020). Philanthropy is not necessarily a one-way transfer: it may involve trust, recognition, accountability, access, identity, and continuing relationships. This perspective does not imply that every gift is self-interested. Rather, it helps explain how moral concern may coexist with relational and reputational benefits (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011).

Hyperagency adds an explicit analysis of power. Wealthy donors may possess unusual freedom to select problems, allocate resources, choose partners, and influence organisational agendas (Schervish, 2003). Major donors often bring expertise, networks, and hands-on support, not just money. While this can strengthen

nonprofit strategy, it can also give donors significant control over what organisations prioritise and how they measure success (Carpenter, 2001; Schervish, 2003).

Taken together, altruism clarifies stated concern for others, social exchange explains relational organisation and reciprocal benefits, Ubuntu situates giving within communal responsibility, and hyperagency reveals concentrated agenda-setting capacity. The resulting framework treats elite philanthropy as simultaneously moral, relational, culturally situated, and power laden.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design and orientation

The study adopted an interpretivist, constructivist orientation to understand how participants made sense of philanthropic responsibility and social contribution, a methodology extensively described by (Creswell & Poth, 2024). A qualitative embedded case study design was used (Yin, 2018). The bounded case was domestic major philanthropy in Nairobi County during the study period. The ten donors were embedded participant units that provided different perspectives on the broader case; they were not treated as ten statistically comparable cases. The principal unit of analysis was donors' role perception, expressed through interview accounts and contextualised by relevant documents.

Study location

Nairobi County was selected as an information-rich setting rather than as a representative of all 47 Kenyan counties. It is Kenya's capital and largest commercial centre, and Nairobi City accounted for 27.5% of Kenya's gross value added in 2023 (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2024). The geographical boundary enabled close examination of philanthropic actors operating within a concentrated corporate, nonprofit, and institutional environment, while limiting claims to that context.

Study population and sample selection

The study involved 10 major philanthropic actors based in, or undertaking substantial philanthropic activity in, Nairobi County. Participants were selected because they had experience in major giving, foundation leadership, or sustained funding of social initiatives, including reported contributions of at least KES 12.9 million, approximately USD 100,000 as of October 2025. This threshold was used for recruitment only, as participants' personal wealth was not independently verified.

Because no reliable sampling frame existed, purposive and referral sampling were used to identify participants with relevant experience in philanthropic decision-making and implementation as proposed in (Noy, 2008; Palinkas et al., 2015). Ten of the 45 people approached participated. Recruitment ended when the sample provided sufficient information richness and variation for the study's bounded research question.

Participants represented a range of professional sectors and supported initiatives in education, health, livelihoods, youth development, gender equality, environmental sustainability, mentorship, and community development. Descriptions were intentionally broad to protect their identities. The findings are analytically informative but are not statistically representative of all wealthy philanthropists in Kenya.

Research instruments

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews lasting 60-90 minutes. Interviews explored philanthropists' biographies, motivations, definitions of social contribution, decision-making, relationships with implementing organisations and communities, perceived outcomes, challenges, and accountability. Interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed, and checked against the audio. Documents and public records relating to participants or their organisations were reviewed to contextualise stated priorities, activities, and timelines.

Documentary analysis was used cautiously. Because many materials were produced by donors, foundations, or affiliated organisations, they were treated as organisational representations rather than independent evaluations.

Documents could corroborate dates, programme descriptions, or stated strategies, and could reveal gaps or inconsistencies, but they were not used to prove sustainable social outcomes. No claim of independent impact triangulation is made.

Data analysis and Triangulation

Interview transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis. Analysis involved familiarisation, initial coding, development of candidate themes, review and refinement, definition and naming, and production of the analytical narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2021, pp. 34, 52). Coding was primarily inductive and semantic at the outset, followed by more interpretive analysis informed by altruism, social exchange, Ubuntu, and hyperagency. NVivo 15 supported data organisation; it did not generate themes.

The researcher first coded segments relating to biography, motivation, faith, education, governance, dependency, dignity, opportunity, community participation, business expertise, and systems change. Code frequencies were used only as organisational aids and not as indicators of conceptual importance. Candidate themes were developed around shared patterns of meaning, checked against the coded extracts and complete dataset, and revised to ensure internal coherence and distinction. This process produced the four dimensions reported consistently in the findings, discussion, and conclusion.

Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, themes were treated as interpretive constructions rather than objective categories waiting to be discovered. The researcher maintained reflexive notes on assumptions, emotional responses, theoretical commitments, and alternative interpretations. Discussions with scholarly peers were used to challenge interpretations rather than to calculate intercoder agreement. Participants were contacted for factual clarification where necessary; this process was not treated as a guarantee of interpretive truth (Birt et al., 2016).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was supported through an audit trail documenting recruitment, interview decisions, coding, theme development, and revisions in NVivo; sustained engagement with the transcripts; use of illustrative quotations; explicit attention to negative or qualifying evidence; and thick description of context and sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive memoing and peer discussion. Transferability rests on readers' assessment of contextual similarity, not statistical generalisation.

Reflexivity

The researcher acknowledged that disciplinary background, assumptions about philanthropy, and interactions with elite participants shaped data generation and interpretation (Palaganas et al., 2017). Reflexive practice included recording expectations, considering how access and status may have influenced interview responses, and testing donor-centred interpretations against alternative explanations involving reputation, control, community autonomy, and institutional power.

Consistent with thematic analysis, themes were seen as interpretive analytical constructions not as objective categories that exist independently and simply need to be found. The researcher's own disciplinary background, personal assumptions about philanthropy, and the way they interacted with participants all had an impact on both the coding process and the development of themes. Throughout the analysis, reflexive notes were kept to record choices, emerging assumptions and possible alternative interpretations.

Ethical considerations

The study received approval from the Tangaza University Ethics Review Committee. All participants provided written informed consent. Pseudonyms P1-P10 are used, and potentially identifying details are reported at a broad level. Interview transcripts are not publicly shared because the small, visible population carries a heightened risk of deductive identification. Data were handled in accordance with applicable requirements of the Kenya Data Protection Act, 2019.

The study received approval from the Tangaza University Ethics Review Committee. Participants signed a form confirming they understood the study. Personal details have been concealed using pseudonyms. Participants are referred to as P1 to P10. To protect privacy and because people in charity roles might be known, the qualitative data is not shared publicly. Data were handled in accordance with the applicable requirements of the Kenya Data Protection Act, 2019.

4. FINDINGS

The analysis identified four interconnected dimensions through which participants understood their philanthropic roles. Each dimension is supported below by illustrative quotations, but the quotations evidence donor perceptions rather than beneficiary experience or independently measured impact. Variation and tensions within the accounts are noted where relevant.

Dimension 1: Biographical, Relational, and Faith-Grounded Stewardship

Participants commonly located philanthropy in family socialisation, experiences of vulnerability, faith, and communal obligation rather than describing it only as financial transfer, tax planning, or public image. These narratives support an interpretation of giving as moral identity and relational stewardship. They cannot, however, establish that such motivations were exclusive or unaffected by reputational and organisational interests.

Participants viewed philanthropy beyond financial donations, getting tax reductions or promoting their own image. Instead, they saw philanthropy as a spiritual or community-based responsibility. This view came from how they were raised in their families, from times when they felt weak or in need, from their beliefs, and from African traditional values of helping one another because of co-existence, popularly called *Ubuntu*.

This view was supported by Participant 1, who linked his approach to transformation to the communal values instilled during childhood:

"We were taught to share the little we have… especially in places where there were many challenges," Participant 1

Participant 4 linked their approach to giving to maternal influence and family values:

"I grew up in a very philanthropic home. I can talk of my mother being the perfect example of philanthropy; she influenced me to help as much as I can." (Participant 4)

Participant 6 shared about his experience of early bereavement that made him highly vulnerable from childhood. According to him, this increased a sense of empathy that kept shaping his commitment to helping others.:

"When I was growing up.. When I lost my parents, I went through not good times together with my other siblings.. I also know what that feels like when you do not have a support system.. Just like I was supported and guided at that time then I would want to give it back." (Participant 6)

Faith and spirituality also emerged as key themes in the study findings. Some participants viewed giving not only as an act of charity but as a moral obligation to steward resources responsibly. Participant 2 explained that spirituality heightens awareness of societal needs and compels action: *"Personally, I'm a believer and I'm equally spiritual. So that makes me see what others need… that motivates me to go out to share what I have."* On the same breath, participant 7 described giving as an act of faith reinforced through lived experience: *"I felt a conviction to do so… I gave the little I had… and somehow it came back to me… I believe every time you help it gets multiplied."*

Participant 6, reflected on how supporting vulnerable individuals generated strong personal meaning, drawing on her own lived experiences:

"I know what it feels like when somebody walks with you during difficult times… so when I see another person rise again, it gives me a lot of fulfilment." Participant 6

Participant 9 reflected on how encounters with developed cities challenged his assumptions: *"When I saw developed cities… I asked myself, 'What is wrong with us?'… and that challenged me."*

Dimension 2: Strengthening Capability and Reducing Dependency

Participants often contrasted short-term relief with approaches they believed could build capability. Some described uncoordinated handouts and passive relief as potentially reinforcing dependency. This was a donor interpretation rather than a directly assessed community outcome; the study did not test whether cash transfers or relief programmes produced dependency in practice.

Participant 1 challenged relief approaches, arguing that passive handouts can perpetuate vulnerability rather than build self-reliance:

"The problem with classic charity in Nairobi is that it creates a cycle of waiting. People wait for the grant, the next food drop, the next politician. I realized that if I just write checks to buy food baskets, I am subsidizing poverty, not solving it. My mandate is to fund enterprise models where the community owns the business and earns their own living." (Participant 1)

He further described meaningful change as residing in the creation of enduring structures:

"It is not just about giving; it is about building systems that can sustain themselves long after we are gone… creating institutions and partnerships that outlive individual efforts."

Participant 10 situated transformation within health and nutrition ecosystems:

"For me, social transformation is when you fix systems… whether it is nutrition, health, or supply chains… so that communities can function better even without constant external support." Participant 10

Participant 1 explained that impactful philanthropy requires creating sustainable institutions rather than isolated interventions:

"It is not just about giving; it is about building systems that can sustain themselves long after we are gone… creating institutions and partnerships that outlive individual efforts," adding that "the future of transformation in Africa will depend on Africans taking ownership of their own development agenda." Participant 1

Participants maintained that meaningful contribution requires structures that uphold dignity and involve community members as partners, micro-entrepreneurs or customers rather than as passive objects of charity.

Dimension 3: Promoting Community Agency and Opportunity

Participants associated social contribution with education, vocational training, mentorship, confidence, and opportunities for economic participation. They described community members as partners or contributors rather than passive recipients. Because beneficiaries were not interviewed, the analysis reports this as donors' understanding of agency and does not assume that communities shared the same definition or experienced greater decision-making power.

"They are no longer recipients as they were seen traditionally. They are also able to contribute to transforming their lives." (Participant 6)

Participants frequently identified education, vocational training, and mentorship as pathways to long-term capability. Promoting human dignity was viewed as a core value, and that community agency grows with skills development. Participant 7 described how educational sponsorship can alter the trajectory of a household:

"*Sponsoring a child through vocational school or university isn't just about paying school fees. It breaks a cycle. When that young person gets employed or starts a business, they uplift their household. That is how real transformation happens."* (Participant 7)

Dimension 4: Catalytic Hyperagency and Systemic Transformation

Consistent with Schervish's (2003) concept of hyperagency, participants described contributions beyond money, including governance expertise, financial discipline, professional networks, and market access. These resources may support organisational capacity, but they may also concentrate decisions in donors' hands. The dimension therefore captures both perceived catalytic capacity and the power to define priorities, partners, and acceptable forms of change.

Participant 8 emphasized the importance of shifting power toward communities and local actors:

"Transformation means shifting power to communities… allowing them to define their priorities and control resources," and observed a broader cultural shift within the sector: *"Historically philanthropy has been very Western-led… but now there is more trust in African-led organizations and local knowledge."* Participant 8

Participants also described setbacks as opportunities for reflection and adaptation. Participant 4 explained:

"When we meet challenges, it is always best to rest than quit. We always go back to the drawing board. Assess what worked out what did not work out and what we can do to improve." (Participant 4)

For Participant 9, long-term transformation was closely tied to institution-building and national development:

"We must build institutions that serve society… not just today but for generations… that is how a nation transforms." (Participant 9)

Looking at the results, one can deduce that participants perceived their role in social transformation as multi-dimensional and deeply relational. Their sense of impact and fulfilment was strongest when they were able to witness tangible transformation in individuals' lives, empower others through education, mentorship, and opportunity creation, strengthen communities through collective action and solidarity, and contribute toward sustainable systems and long-term structural change. The findings suggest that participants increasingly perceive philanthropy not as episodic charity, but as a strategic and values-driven process aimed at producing enduring and transformative social outcomes.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Extending Scholarship on Elite Philanthropy

The study findings support Ostrower's (1995) argument that elite philanthropy is woven into identity, relationships, and moral self-understanding. Findings also show the existence of strong communitarian traditions. For the Nairobi-based HNWIPs in this study, philanthropy was not seen as a way to save taxes or keep status, as noted in earlier studies such as (Maclean et al., 2021), but as a matter of Ubuntu ethics and faith-based stewardship. The four dimensions, promoting dignity, empowerment, systemic change, and moral responsibility, give a picture of philanthropic purpose that goes beyond how much money is given or which cause is chosen.

5.1 Extending Scholarship on Elite Philanthropy

The findings extend scholarship that links elite philanthropy to identity, relationships, and moral self-understanding (Ostrower, 1995; Schervish, 2005). Participants' accounts also reflected communitarian and faith-oriented traditions associated with Ubuntu. Rather than demonstrating that Nairobi-based donors are unaffected by tax, status, or reputation, the study shows that participants foregrounded stewardship, dignity, capability, community agency, and systemic ambition when explaining their roles. These are discursive priorities, not verified outcomes.

5.2 Integrating Altruism, Social Exchange, Ubuntu, and Hyperagency

Altruism helps explain participants expressed concern for welfare and dignity; social exchange explains how

giving is organised through trust, accountability, identity, recognition, and continuing relationships; Ubuntu frames wealth within interdependence and communal responsibility; and hyperagency highlights the unequal capacity of wealthy actors to select problems and shape solutions. The theories are complementary but also expose tensions. A donor may express genuine concern while receiving relational or reputational benefits, and an Ubuntu-oriented claim of shared responsibility may coexist with highly individualised agenda-setting power.

5.3 Donor Power, Community Autonomy, and Accountability

Participants frequently presented speed, flexibility, business discipline, and direct involvement as philanthropic strengths. Yet the same features can enable donors to define needs, select partners, set timelines, and evaluate success without equivalent community authority. The findings therefore reveal a tension between catalytic discretion and participatory legitimacy. Claims of empowerment require attention to who controls budgets, assets, programme design, data, and exit decisions.

The study does not assume that relief necessarily creates dependency or that market-linked approaches necessarily produce autonomy. Dependency and empowerment are empirical questions. They depend on factors such as community decision rights, ownership, skills transfer, affordability, availability of alternatives, public responsibility, and the duration and predictability of support. Beneficiary and community perspectives are essential for assessing these conditions.

5.4 From Resource Provider to Perceived Contributor of Social Change

Participants understood their roles as extending beyond resource provision to governance, networks, mentoring, and strategic influence. This interpretation shifts attention from the amount donated to the processes through which philanthropic decisions are made. It does not establish that donor involvement produced transformation. A defensible assessment would distinguish inputs and activities from outputs, short-term outcomes, and sustained community-level effects.

Three questions follow from the findings: *Does the intervention respect and strengthen community agency as defined by community members? Does it build capability without displacing public responsibility or constraining local choice? How are donor expertise, local knowledge, and shared governance combined, and who remains accountable when priorities change?*

The findings show that philanthropy cannot be understood just by looking at altruism. Participants said they cared about welfare and saw their giving as a moral duty in response to social need. Their stories also showed that giving is shaped by relationships, culture, strategy, and power. Altruism theory helps explain why they said they cared about others' well-being. Social exchange theory, on the other hand, points to the rewards people get- like reputation, social connections, personal identity, and psychological satisfaction- when they give. Ubuntu offers a view placing philanthropy in a framework where people are deeply connected, where responsibility is shared, where dignity matters, and where community well-being is central. Hyperagency focuses on the power that wealthy individuals have to set social goals, direct large amounts of money, pick partners, and shape development plans.

The findings suggest that major-donor philanthropy cannot be understood through altruism alone. Participants framed giving as moral responsibility, but their accounts also revealed relational benefits, cultural commitments, strategic preferences, and concentrated power. The value of such philanthropy should therefore be assessed not only through resources and intentions, but also through decision-making authority, community-defined priorities, accountability, and independently assessed outcomes.

6. CONCEPTUAL AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Philanthropic Role Perception as an Analytical Category

Donors' perceptions of their roles constitute a useful analytical category alongside motivations, demographic characteristics, and donation patterns. Participants described themselves as stewards, strategic partners, institution-builders, moral actors, and catalysts. These self-understandings may shape problem definition, partner

selection, time horizons, evaluation, and relationships with communities. They should be analysed as interpretive and justificatory frameworks, not as direct evidence of impact.

These self-understandings matter for analysis because donors may shape how donors spot problems, pick interventions, work with communities, judge success, and decide how long donors will help. Future philanthropy research should look at not why wealthy donors give but also how donors see their authority, duties, accountability, and ties with the communities they help. At the time, these self-perceptions are not direct proof of social impact. They are better seen as frameworks that donors use to explain and justify their philanthropic actions.

6.2 A Four-Dimensional Framework for Understanding Elite Giving

The four dimensions are: (1) biographical, relational, and faith-grounded stewardship; (2) strengthening capability and reducing dependency; (3) promoting community agency and opportunity; and (4) catalytic hyperagency and systemic transformation. They provide a context-sensitive account of how these ten participants described their roles. They are not universal traits of wealthy donors in Kenya or Africa, and each requires testing against beneficiary, community, implementing partner, and public-sector perspectives.

The framework gives a starting point for more research, but its reach must be carefully limited. The dimensions show patterns in the stories of the ten donors in this study. They are not traits of wealthy donors in Kenya or other African contexts. More research must find out whether the four dimensions repeat, shift, or mean different things for different donor groups, sectors, regions, and cultures.

The dimensions should also be examined critically rather than treated as inherently beneficial. For instance, what a donor thinks empowerment means might not match what a community believes about being in control. Also, the way a donor wants to bring changes might focus more on some problems or answers than others. So future studies need to look at how the four parts are understood by donors, the people who get help, the groups that run programs, local leaders, and government groups.

6.3 Integration of Altruism, Social Exchange, Ubuntu and Hyperagency

The integrated framework explains different layers of the same phenomenon. Altruism addresses stated concern for others; social exchange addresses relational organisation and reciprocal benefits; Ubuntu addresses interdependence and communal responsibility; and hyperagency addresses concentrated discretion and agenda-setting power. The framework avoids reducing philanthropy to either selflessness or self-interest and makes power an explicit part of interpretation.

Ubuntu broadens the view by placing giving in a context of shared humanity and collective duty. It suggests that people are connected and helping others is not a personal choice but a responsibility tied to community. In this view giving becomes an act of belonging, not an individual effort.

Hyperagency, on the other hand, brings attention to power. It focuses on how wealthy donors have the freedom to act, with limits shaping which issues get funding, which groups get support, and what kind of change is seen as valuable. This highlights how influence and control can be unevenly distributed. These theories work together, although they do not always align. Ubuntu values shared responsibility. Hyperagency shows how some individuals have outsized control. Altruism may look noble, but it can also be tied to personal gains, like status or relationships.

An integrated approach avoids treating philanthropy as selfless or purely selfish. It allows for a complex understanding where moral purpose, cultural beliefs, identity, social bonds, strategic thinking, and unequal power all play a role at the same time.

6.4 Implications for the Conceptual Model

The conceptual l model distinguishes four levels: donor antecedents, philanthropic practices, contextual and

power conditions, and perceived contributions. Donor antecedents include biography, faith, moral identity, cultural values, and strategic preferences. Practices include resource allocation, partner selection, governance, community engagement, monitoring, and exit planning. Contextual conditions include community decision rights, institutional capacity, public policy, donor control, and funding duration. The reported dimensions sit at the level of donor role perception; independently verified outcomes require separate beneficiary evidence and longitudinal evaluation.

Donor antecedents	Philanthropic practices	Context and power conditions	Evidence boundary
Biography, faith, moral identity, Ubuntu-oriented values, strategic preferences	Resource allocation, partner selection, governance, community engagement, monitoring, exit planning	Community decision rights, donor control, institutional capacity, public policy, funding duration	Four dimensions are donor role perceptions; sustainable outcomes require beneficiary evidence and independent longitudinal evaluation

The link between donor intentions and social outcomes is not automatic. It can be shaped by community participation, local institutional capacity, donor control, public policy, the capability of implementing partners, accountability mechanisms, and how long and consistently donors provide funding. Therefore, the model should identify dignity, empowerment, systemic change, and responsibility as parts of what donors say about their roles than as outcomes that are checked independently.

6.5 Practical Implications for Philanthropists

Before committing capital, philanthropists should state their stewardship principles and establish mechanisms through which communities can shape problem definition, resource allocation, programme governance, monitoring, and transition. The findings support seven practical questions:

The following questions can help make philanthropy more thoughtful and responsible:

1. Dignity and control: Does the plan treat the people in the community with respect? Does it consider what they know, what they care about, what they can do and their basic value as beings?
2. Problem statement: Who said there was a problem, and who chose the solution? Were the people in the community involved before the plan was made?
3. Power to decide: What power will the people in the community have over what gets done, how money is spent, how things are carried out, how progress is watched and how results are judged?
4. Right fit: Does the plan deal with the reasons behind the problem, like unfair rules or systems? Does it just help for a short time?
5. Lasting effect: What skills, money, help, and support will the community still have after the money from the foundation runs out?
6. Responsibility: Are there ways to check on the plan for the people who gave the money, or do they also let the community check on the plan, ask questions, and make changes?
7. Donors should not presume that long-term funding creates dependency or that earned income produces empowerment. Effects depend on decision rights, asset ownership, skills transfer, affordability, governance, funding duration, and access to alternatives. Donors should distinguish activities and outputs from short- and long-term outcomes, and should use community-defined indicators, confidential feedback, and independent evaluation where feasible.

Philanthropists should not think that making money on their own always helps people feel more powerful. Whether the help from the foundation makes the community stronger or weaker depends on things like how much control the community has, who owns the things they use, how skills are passed on, how things are run, how long the money lasts, and what other help is available. Philanthropists should also tell the difference between what an organization does, what people say is helpful, and what is actually proven to work. Numbers of people helped, money given out, buildings built, or training sessions held can show that work is happening;

however, they do not show real change that lasts.

6.6 Practical Implications for Nonprofit Organizations and Social Enterprises

Nonprofit organisations and social enterprises seeking domestic capital should demonstrate community legitimacy, governance capacity, transparent administration, credible evaluation, and realistic continuity plans. They should also retain sufficient independence to challenge donor assumptions, report adverse or null findings, and adapt interventions using community evidence. Administrative and safeguarding costs should be treated as necessary capacities rather than automatically characterised as inefficiency.

6.7 Implications for Policy and the Philanthropic Ecosystem

Kenyan policymakers and philanthropic intermediaries should recognise the complementary roles of the state, civil society, communities, social enterprises, and private philanthropy. Domestic philanthropy may provide flexible or catalytic resources, but it cannot replace the state's obligations to provide public goods, protect rights, and ensure equitable access to essential services.

An enabling environment should combine proportionate regulation with transparency, governance, and public accountability. Public–philanthropic partnerships should define decision rights, funding responsibilities, evaluation standards, data ownership, community participation, and transition arrangements. Alignment with national and county priorities should not permit wealthy donors or private foundations to set public agendas without scrutiny.

Philanthropic intermediaries can support due diligence, shared evaluation standards, transparent co-funding, and access for smaller community-based organisations. Independent monitoring and community-defined indicators would help distinguish donor-reported success from evidence of social benefit.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The following limitations define the scope within which the findings should be interpreted.

7.1 Geographical and Sample Scope

The study included ten purposively selected donors in Nairobi County. The sample supported in-depth interpretation but was not designed to represent all wealthy individuals or philanthropists in Nairobi, Kenya, or sub-Saharan Africa. Nairobi's concentrated corporate and philanthropic networks may also differ from other counties, towns, and rural settings.

7.2 Referral-Based Recruitment and Network Homogeneity

Referral sampling may have produced network homogeneity because participants could recommend individuals from overlapping social, professional, religious, or philanthropic circles. This may have reduced exposure to less visible donors, dissenting views, or different philanthropic practices.

7.3 High-Net-Worth Classification

Participants' classification as high-net-worth individual philanthropists was based on the study's recruitment criteria, self-identification, reported giving, and organisational roles. Assets and net worth were not independently verified. The label is therefore analytical rather than a certified financial designation.

7.4 Perceptual Focus and Absence of Independent Outcome Verification

The study examined donors' self-reported motivations, intentions, and accounts of practice. It did not independently establish beneficiary-level or community-level effects. Claims concerning dignity, empowerment, reduced dependency, systemic change, and sustainability should therefore be read as donor perceptions unless supported by separate evidence.

7.5 Limited Beneficiary and Community Perspectives

Beneficiaries and community representatives were not directly interviewed, and implementing-partner and public-sector perspectives were limited. The study cannot determine whether these groups shared donors' definitions of need, agency, success, or sustainability. Donor accounts must not substitute for beneficiary experience. This limitation is particularly significant because donors and beneficiary communities may define needs, agency, success and sustainability differently. Without community evidence donor accounts should not be treated as substitutes for beneficiary experience.

7.6 Self-Report and Social Desirability Bias

Participants may have presented their giving in socially desirable terms or emphasised successful intentions and activities over failure, conflict, or unintended consequences. This risk is particularly relevant to accounts of faith, responsibility, dignity, altruism, and empowerment.Participants may also have emphasized the intentions and achievements of their philanthropic activities while giving less attention to unsuccessful interventions, unintended consequences, community resistance or tensions with implementing organizations.

7.7 Documentary Evidence and Triangulation

Documents produced by donors, foundations, or affiliated organisations were useful for contextual corroboration but were not independent impact evaluations. They may reflect organisational reporting priorities and reputational interests. Documentary evidence was therefore used to check dates, programme descriptions, and stated strategies, not to prove sustainable outcomes. Documentary evidence should therefore be described according to what it contributed to the analysis, such as corroborating timelines documenting activities, contextualizing philanthropic strategies or identifying areas of inconsistency. Donor-affiliated reports should not be presented as proof of sustainable social impact unless they contain credible independently collected outcome evidence.

7.8 Researcher Reflexivity

Reflexive thematic analysis recognises that the researcher's background, assumptions, theoretical commitments, access relationships, and interactions with participants influence interpretation. Reflexive notes and peer discussion made these influences more visible but did not eliminate them. The findings should therefore be understood as interpretations developed through engagement with participants' accounts rather than as neutral categories discovered independently of the research process.

7.9 Future Research Directions

Future research should use comparative multi-county and cross-country designs; include donors, beneficiaries, community leaders, implementing organisations, public officials, and intermediaries; and follow initiatives longitudinally. Mixed-methods studies should combine qualitative accounts with independently collected indicators and community-defined measures of dignity, agency, well-being, and success.

Further priorities include examining unsuccessful or discontinued initiatives; testing how donor power, community decision rights, and governance arrangements shape implementation; comparing donor-led, community-led, state-led, and jointly governed models; and investigating how wealth composition, generation, gender, faith, and professional background influence philanthropic role perception.

8. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how ten major philanthropic actors in Nairobi County understood their roles in relation to social transformation. Their accounts were organised around four dimensions: biographical, relational, and faith-grounded stewardship; strengthening capability and reducing dependency; promoting community agency and opportunity; and catalytic hyperagency and systemic transformation.

Participants described combining financial resources with business experience, governance knowledge, profes-

sional networks, and strategic involvement. They often contrasted capability-building with short-term relief. These claims represent donor perceptions and intentions. The study did not independently establish that the initiatives reduced dependency, strengthened community autonomy, or generated sustainable social outcomes.

Integrating altruism, social exchange, Ubuntu, and hyperagency shows elite philanthropy as morally framed, relationally organised, culturally situated, and power laden. Moral concern may coexist with relational benefits and reputational value, while communal responsibility may coexist with concentrated donor control. This tension is central rather than incidental to understanding elite philanthropy.

The study's contribution is therefore interpretive and bounded. It explains how participating donors described and justified their roles while identifying the need to examine who defines priorities, controls resources, owns data and assets, and remains accountable when funding ends. Future assessment should incorporate beneficiary evidence, community-defined outcomes, independent evaluation, and longitudinal analysis.

The manuscript does not claim that participants achieved social transformation. It offers a framework for investigating how donor intentions, practices, power, and context may shape perceived contributions, and for testing whether those perceptions correspond with community experience and sustained outcomes.

9. DECLARATIONS AND COMPLIANCE STATEMENTS

- Funding: The author received no specific grant for this research from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or nonprofit sectors.
- Conflict of Interest: The author declares no competing financial or personal interests that could have influenced the work reported in this article.
- Ethics approval and informed consent: The Tangaza University Ethics Review Committee granted ethical approval. All participants provided written informed consent. Data were handled in accordance with applicable requirements of the Kenya Data Protection Act, 2019.
- Data Availability: The qualitative interview transcripts are not publicly available because of commitments to participant confidentiality. Subject to ethical and confidentiality restrictions, inquiries may be directed to the corresponding author.

10. AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author used Elicit, Gemini, Grammarly, QuillBot, Microsoft Copilot, and Paperpal for editorial support, including grammar, clarity, tone, and citation checking. The author designed the prompts and critically reviewed, verified, and revised all outputs for contextual and scholarly accuracy. The author retains responsibility for the originality, integrity, analysis, interpretation, and final content. No artificial intelligence system was used to fabricate data, generate findings, or replace human analysis.

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