

TAI FUNDER CALL SERIES: PHILANTHROPY ENGAGEMENT WITH GOVERNMENTS



The Trust, Accountability, and Inclusion Collaborative (TAI) is hosting a series of funder learning calls on models for engagement with and support to government reformers in the Global South. Discussions will focus on how engagement with governments affects the work of philanthropy and why it matters. We are presenting practical examples of what works and what doesn't and brainstorm together on the critical role of philanthropy.

Case Two: Exploring opportunities and challenges of more political philanthropy – lessons from economic advisory work

21st of November 2024

The second call was **co-hosted with [OTT Consulting](#)** and focused on **lessons from a [study](#)** on how philanthropic organizations can collaborate with governments, with a special emphasis on **economic advice to governments**. The discussion included **practical examples** of successful and unsuccessful cases and aimed to brainstorm about the **critical role of philanthropy** in government engagement.

SPEAKERS:

- Marcela Morales, Associate at OTT
- Luis Godoy, Program Manager at the Open Society Foundations - Economic and Climate Prosperity
- Vaqar Ahmed, Team Lead at FCDO's Aawaz Program, Oxford Policy Management (OPM)

Marcela Morales presented the study that OTT developed in collaboration with the Open Society Foundations (OSF) and the International Network for Advancing Science and Policy (INASP). The [study](#) focuses on how **philanthropic organizations can effectively support progressive government reformers in the Global South**, particularly through economic advisory work.

The study emphasizes that **political philanthropy is an emerging field** where philanthropies engage with politically sensitive areas like economic policy, health, and education, and collaborate directly with political actors such as governments and political parties. The study questions the traditional notion of neutrality in philanthropy. While traditional philanthropy has focused on technical assistance and capacity-building, **the study confronts readers with the fact that engaging with governments in any way is inherently political.**

The study identifies **types of political philanthropy: providing expert advice, offering embedded technical assistance within government institutions, direct support to political actors, and funding participatory spaces for collaboration among political figures.**

However, every approach comes with its own challenges, including the risk of advice being ignored, instrumentalized for political gain, or duplicating government efforts, with the advisory space often being dominated by a small, homogenous group of advisors. Successful engagement requires adopting diverse roles, ensuring demand-driven, context-specific support, fostering trust-based partnerships, and being ready to act swiftly during political transitions.

Philanthropists can add value by **sharing experiences, scaling political innovation, identifying strategic entry points, engaging local governments, and increasing transparency through documentation.**

[FOR MORE DETAILS CHECK MARCELA'S PRESENTATION](#)

Luis Godoy introduced the work that OSF is doing with governments in the **Global South**, focusing on **green industrial policy** and the intersection of **economic transformation** and **climate action**.

OSF has launched the **Economic and Climate Prosperity Opportunity** program, aiming to support **green economic policies** and **equitable economic transformation** in countries in **Latin America** (Brazil, Mexico), **Africa** (South Africa, Senegal), and **Asia** (Indonesia, Malaysia).

Luis highlighted the **demand-driven** nature of OSF's engagement with governments, including its efforts to support governments in advancing **green industrial policies** that align economic growth with **environmental sustainability**. It is at too early a stage to yet assess effectiveness.

He also discussed **OSF's Economic Advisory Facility**, an internal unit that helps connect **expert advisors** with governments pursuing **green economic reforms**, particularly in countries outside OSF's core geographic focus. This facility fosters **knowledge sharing** and **collaboration** between governments and experts to drive **inclusive economic policies**. The facility is building on learnings and finding of [the learning partnership](#).

Vaqar Ahmed drew attention to the **limited scope of philanthropic interventions in South Asia**, which tend to focus on sectors like job creation, education, health, and more recently, natural disasters and migration. These interventions are often not informed by broader frameworks like the SDGs or local agendas, and there is limited engagement across both supply and demand-side work at the political, government, and civil society levels. Additionally, philanthropists tend to prioritize central government perspectives, with little engagement with subnational or local governments, leading to incomplete or weak stakeholder engagement.

Vaqar contrasted traditional philanthropists with newer ones, such as those from China, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, noting differences in their approaches to sector selection, intervention design, and local partnerships. He stressed that successful partnerships often involve long-term capacity-building efforts, like those of the Cargill Foundation, which focuses on "hand-holding" support over 10 to 15 years and partners with local social enterprises rather than relying on government or NGOs. However, philanthropists face significant challenges, including skepticism from governments, overly stringent regulations, and complex approval processes that increase transaction costs. Vaqar **called for collaboration among philanthropists and governments to address these regulatory barriers and navigate the complex environment in South Asia.**

During the discussion section of the call, [WINGS](#) shared that strengthening government-philanthropy relationships being one of their priorities, WINGS recently held a Regional Policy

Dialogue in the Latin America and Caribbean region. They asked participants to map the examples they were aware of and WINGS will be happy to share the paper (to be finalized in the next months).

Participants reflected on different forms of engaging with governments:

- > Some funders directly support advisors to engage with high-level government officials, often operating discreetly and behind closed doors. Others, particularly those seeking to avoid more politicized spaces, focus on funding collective spaces for learning, such as CoPs or collaborative platforms.
- > [Club de Madrid](#) provides a platform for fostering advice to governments by bringing together former heads of state to share experiences. The organization deploys expertise where needed or requested and is funded by philanthropic actors and other contributors.

Last but not least, the discussions touched upon the accountability questions. This [OTT's paper](#) discusses this topic and offers practical examples.

The call emphasized the evolving role of philanthropy in **political engagement**, particularly in terms of supporting government reforms in the Global South. The key takeaway is the need for **strategic, demand-driven, and flexible philanthropic engagement** that acknowledges the political dynamics at play and creates space for **innovative solutions** to global challenges.