

In conversation with Tsitsi Masiyiwa:

Philanthropy driven by experience and a deep faith

Tsitsi Masiyiwa's story shows how a simple desire to help can evolve into a strategic approach to philanthropy.

Tsitsi Masiyiwa is one of the most exceptional philanthropists that I have had the pleasure of meeting. During our hour-long video call, it became clear to me that she is not only concerned with transforming lives in her native Zimbabwe, but also wants to improve philanthropy on the African continent. She spoke openly and charismatically with me about how her journey began.

As a young woman starting a family, she had aspired to having "an amazing marriage, where the husband comes home in time for dinner." However, having married a very energetic and inquisitive entrepreneur, what she got was a far cry from that. Her husband had discovered a new telecommunications technology, but the government would not grant him the license to operate, so he took them to court. She asked him how long the legal battle would take, because she did not think it was a smart idea to sue the government. "He promised me three months," she says. In the end, it took five mentally and physically exhausting years, which she considers the most difficult part of her personal journey. Sadly, this coincided with the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Zimbabwe, during which she lost very close family members and employees.

Getting involved

Moved by her experiences and driven by her deep faith, Masiyiwa decided with her husband to support children who had lost their parents to HIV/AIDS by personally funding their education. In the beginning, the funding was very limited, as her husband did not have a big salary. So they built their own support mechanisms for the children from scratch. But one day, when the license finally arrived and they began to earn more, the couple expanded from supporting 100 to over 10'000 children in just a few years. In addition, the telecommunications company's management decided they would take a certain percentage of their revenue and invest it in this philanthropic work. To date, Strive and Tsitsi Masiyiwa have given scholarships to over 350'000 orphaned and vulnerable children as well as academically gifted students.



Tsitsi Masiyiwa

When I asked her about the purpose of her philanthropy, she reflected and said: "My motivation was really a combination of what I had lost, and the pain that I saw first-hand. In the short term, I found a way to channel my grief by helping children who had been orphaned by HIV/AIDS. I feel very blessed that my husband shares the same compassion and purpose for giving."

New structures, new fields of activity

She went on to explain how they expanded and developed their philanthropy. "When we started, our giving was very emotionally driven. You see the need, you're heartbroken, you make a commitment and *then* the paperwork follows. But over time, we grew from a very small core group to a skilled team and developed better structures to support our work. Our philanthropy is catalytic, because the resources are limited, so you need to be very strategic in what you give, and it's something we learned along the way." Masiyiwa is the Founder of the Higherlife Foundation, whose primary goal is to invest in human capital development to support thriving individuals, communities and sustainable livelihoods. She also established Delta Philanthropies, a UK charity, as a vehicle for impact investing and grantmaking. Their work spans education, global health, rural transformation and disaster relief and preparedness. In addition, Masiyiwa and her husband have been signatories to the Giving Pledge since 2014.

As an African philanthropist, Masiyiwa advocates for local funding and the empowerment of local communities. In her experience, philanthropists are sometimes driven by their emotions and think they know what the community wants only to end up spending valuable resources that could be used more effectively and efficiently. "Philanthropists often give money but are not engaged in actually understanding the lives, culture and pain points of the community they are trying to serve," she tells me. The importance she places on listening and engaging with local communities is evident in her work.

Philanthropy from Africa, for Africa

Masiyiwa is a founding Board member and Chairperson of the African Philanthropy Forum, which promotes homegrown philanthropy and inclusive development in Africa. Although it is very common on the continent to help extended family members, she also encourages philanthropy that is more strategic. "If we can have more people, especially those with the means and resources, give back to their continent, I think we can again help our countries out of poverty and become middle-income economies".

Masiyiwa lives abroad, but her love for her country and continent remains strong. "I haven't lived in Zimbabwe for the last 20 years or so, but I talk as if I am there every day – as if I breathe and eat Zimbabwe and Africa every day." Today, she is grateful for the incredible life she leads, for the fact that she has a loving husband and wonderful children, and that she finds joy in doing the most rewarding work: giving young people a platform to fulfil their God-given purpose in Zimbabwe and beyond. I am grateful that she shares her story and acts as a role model to inspire many other philanthropists.

Article by: Nina Hoas, Head of LGT Philanthropy Advisory
Photo: generously provided by Tsitsi Masiyiwa