

The Bellagio Initiative Daily Report

A singular view of the Summit's proceedings on

Tuesday 22 November 2011

More Questions than Answers

by [Asif Saleh](#), Director of Communication and Social Innovation Lab, [BRAC and BRAC International](#)

So do we have all the answers after two weeks of great brainstorming, talks and networking? Hardly. But that was never the point. This two-week Bellagio Initiative Summit set an ambitious agenda for itself to discuss the future of philanthropy and development in this fast-changing world. It ended with everyone vowing to continue the work that had started. The summit brought together world's leading thinkers, activists and development workers from the field of philanthropy and international development as the role of philanthropy is becoming very important in international development.

In the concluding day, the themes that resonated across different meeting rooms continuously were trust and risk. The day started with three breakout sessions on Trust, Finance and Risk. You cannot solve social issues if you are not innovative and willing to take risks. But how much risk is allowed by philanthropic organisations which fund some of these initiatives? How would one get the financing when increasingly the funding market is getting tighter? As the funds get tighter, trust and confidence among partners become a key challenge. How can that be enhanced? All of the three groups reported an array of solutions ranging from new opportunities through connectivity, improved communication, diaspora philanthropy, changing of 'the matrix' before making a grant etc. The solutions were wide and varied. But did they go deep enough?

Zia Khan, Vice President, Strategy and Evaluation for the Rockefeller Foundation, seemed to disagree in the panel discussion of the day. 'What are the consequences of not being risqué for a foundation?' he asked. There aren't any. As a result, he suggested more work is needed to analyse and understand why certain decisions are made the way they're made. Pesh Framjee, Head of Non Profit, Crowe Clark Whitehill, chimed in saying that we focus too much on the downside of risk but not at all on the upside of risk and of missed opportunities. 'What about risk for the people? Are we thinking about them?'

A Twitter question highlighted the other theme that resonated – Trust. Trust between development partners – foundations and NGOs – and trust between people and the NGOs. There remains clearly a lot to do in that field. But everyone agreed that there is no other way then communicating more effectively both between partners and with the people the organisations actually serve. Are we going to leave documents in the website and call it transparency or will we really actively engage the community through effective communication?



A new participant joined the panel today -- Samia Nkrumah, a Member of Parliament in Ghana. Her words came right on cue, as if we needed someone to give us a reality check on the purpose of our work. She talked about her experience in Ghana's hard to reach areas and how easy it is to forget them in the pursuit of growth.

Having just returned from East Africa before this conference, where I visited a number of BRAC projects, I could relate to this more than ever. I remember the faces I have seen -- the young, smiling teenagers who were cramped in a small room at an adolescent club in Jinja looking for new skills; the micro-loan borrowers on the outskirts of Dar-es-Salaam looking for savings mechanism; the young, new mother who walks miles with her yellow tank to get some water in South Sudan; or even the faces of those landless farmers in Sylhet, Bangladesh. These are the people -- the most vulnerable yet resilient -- whose wellbeing is what we work for. On one hand, it's a great thing but on the other hand the responsibility is overwhelming.

For every single opportunity that is missed, for every single innovation that cannot be scaled, it is these people's wellbeing that suffers. That IS the consequence. Beyond all the numbers and the strategies and the conferences, there are real lives that are affected by our actions or the lack of them. As soon as all of us, who work in philanthropic organisations or with the implementers at the last mile internalise this fact as part of our value system, the greater urgency we will feel to collaborate, coordinate and innovate in this field.

Two years ago, I left London and a job at Goldman Sachs to work in Bangladesh with that sense of urgency. I am heading back to Dhaka with a renewed vigour today. I go back from beautiful Bellagio with more questions than answers. I believe that's a good thing. These questions and the sense of urgency will force me to be innovative and collaborative in this process.

- [Watch](#) Heather Grady of The Rockefeller Foundation, Neelam Makhijani of The Resource Alliance and Lawrence Haddad of the Institute of Development Studies discuss game changing ideas that have come out of The Bellagio Initiative Summit.
- [Read](#) coverage from the 'Bellagio Summit Closing Plenary: Synthesis and Framework for Future Action'.
- [Comment](#) on Adrian Sergeant's Poverty Matters blog, 'Philanthropy should be a risky business', on the Guardian's Global Development website.