Governance in Philanthropy

Building Resilient Health Systems Through Philanthropy

BY NOOR ZUBERI

Why sustained investment, local trust, and smart governance must define the next era of health philanthropy.

Introduction

Access to quality healthcare is a fundamental human right, yet millions of people across the world are denied access to care at the most critical times, often due to armed conflict, natural disasters, financial hardship, social stigma or, in the worst cases, a lack of a cure.

Despite global health spending hitting approximately $10 trillion (2021, WHO), access to healthcare continues to be inequitable. Furthermore, while the COVID-19 pandemic ushered in unprecedented funding to healthcare systems around the world, global funding for health is continuing to decline steeply, with health aid projected to drop from $80.3 billion in 2021 to $38.4 billion in 2025 (Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation). Philanthropy steps up to fill invisible gaps:

Decline in Global Health Funding

(Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation
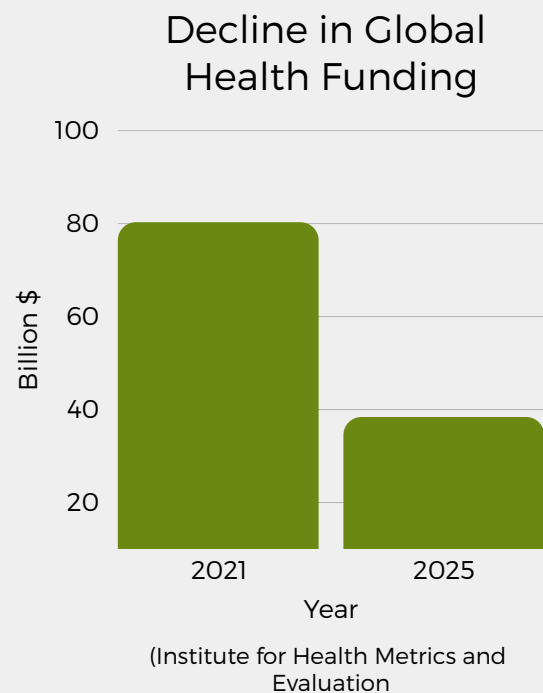
- When the world faces unprecedented conflict and climate-driven health emergencies
- When the cost of care increases and becomes inaccessible for more and more people
- When there is a demand for bold investment in research and innovation for illnesses that are currently incurable
- When the mental health of communities is being challenged

Philanthropy not only acts as an emergency responder but also provides a longer-term, sustainable investment, based on rooted relationships built on trust, accountability and good governance.

From Emergency Relief to Responsible Action

Conflict, natural disasters, and climate shocks disrupt care, displace populations, and create unprecedented medical needs. According to WHO, nearly 300 million people require humanitarian assistance, and one in five children is directly affected by conflict. In these unpredictable contexts, philanthropy plays a critical role in supporting frontline efforts, bridging resource gaps, and enabling rapid responses. But effective action also hinges on strong governance, foresight, and trusted local partnerships. To act responsibly in high-risk and fast-moving environments, donors must:

- Understand how to manage misinformation in complex settings
- Navigate regulatory and access constraints
- Maintain governance and transparency under pressure
- Cultivate local partnerships based on trust
- Practice ethical, adaptive grant making

Applying good governance practices while giving in times of crisis avoids chaos and misuse of funds and ensures that beneficiaries receive the maximum benefits of aid.

In-Action: Bahrain deploys medical team to aid Syrian earthquake survivors

In February 2023, following the directives of His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, the Royal Humanitarian Foundation (RHF) Bahrain and the National Committee for Supporting Earthquake Victims in Syria and Türkiye signed an MoU with the Syrian Doctors Syndicate. The agreement, supported by the Bahrain Medical Society, mobilised a team of volunteer Bahraini doctors to provide treatment to injured earthquake victims in Syria and deliver essential medical supplies.

This initiative demonstrates the value of formal agreements (MoUs) to define roles, responsibilities, and shared objectives between national and local partners. It also underscores the importance of working through trusted institutions to coordinate resources, ensure accountability, and maintains transparency in humanitarian medical interventions during crisis.

Backing the Future: Philanthropy's Role in Health Innovation

Long-term strategic investment by donors can change the paradigm from response to preparing health systems to be resilient, responsive to needs, and future-proof. Research and innovation are the core of this shift, building new initiatives, technologies, and treatments to overcome evolving health challenges and close long-standing gaps in care. It also requires support through collaboration across sectors and by investing in sustained funding models.

A significant number of donors are already embracing this long-term approach in a variety of areas and leveraging investments to create the next generation of care, not just providing funding for treatment but making it possible to discover new ways to support health systems.

While considering giving towards research and development, it is also important to follow good governance practices, ensuring the research is ethical and fair, and ensuring the processes and results are transparent increases the credibility of the data. Additionally, governance builds long-term viability and accountability for projects..

In Action: ZC4H2 Research Foundation

In response to the lack of available information and treatment options for the ultra-rare condition ZC4H2 Associated Rare Disorders (ZARD), John and Catherine Paul, residents of Dubai, established the ZC4H2 Research Foundation in 2018. At the time, only a handful of cases had been identified globally, and there was minimal research underway.

The Foundation is a private, non-profit entity registered and audited in the Netherlands, with a U.S. chapter established in 2022. Together, both chapters operate globally to support scientific research into ZC4H2 and ZARD. This initiative highlights how targeted, family-led philanthropy rooted in transparent structures and accountable governance can drive progress and innovation in neglected and underfunded areas such as rare disease research.

In Action: King Faisal Specialist Hospital & Research Centre (KFSHRC), Saudi Arabia

The King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Centre (KFSHRC) in Riyadh exemplifies a leading tertiary care facility, renowned for innovation in research and technology and in delivering specialised healthcare. In 2021, KFSHRC was declared an independent, non-profit foundation following a Royal Decree, as part of Saudi Vision 2030, giving the hospital more financial and administrative independence. Now, philanthropic opportunities, as well as the opportunity for strategic funding of research and innovative collaboration, in fields like oncology, organ transplantation and genetics, have been created.

Each of these examples demonstrates how philanthropy, either individually, institutionally, or government-aligned, can open possibilities for long-term health innovation.

Reaching the Margins: Closing Gaps in Everyday Care

Access to affordable, quality healthcare is still out of reach for millions of people, especially those from developing countries or those who are migrant or blue-collar workers. Rising costs, fragmentation of delivery systems, and structural gaps in funding are compounding global health inequities.

In 2022, almost 47% of philanthropic grants were directed towards health and population health needs in developing countries (OECD). Yet, wide disparities remain, particularly at the intersections of income, geography, and legal status.

As philanthropists create solutions to immediate needs, they can also promote and fund long-term change through solid health systems, local care models, and responsible innovation. These solutions are accelerated with digital opportunities like telehealth and AI-based diagnostics. These opportunities, however, come with their own risks, such as data privacy, surveillance, and digital exclusion.

To ensure access to healthcare is fair, philanthropists and practitioners need to implement governance mechanisms to monitor impact, prevent misuse, and align interventions with community needs. For digital tools, governance is key to ensuring privacy, fairness, and accuracy.

Philanthropic strategies related to equity will need to prioritise two interdependent goals: expanding access while also assuring accountability around how care is designed and delivered. Already, this twin goal can be recognised in the locally rooted programming that is taking root in the Gulf.

In Action: Pakistan Medical Centre (PMC), UAE

The Pakistan Medical Centre opened in August 2020 as the GCC's first not-for-profit multispecialty healthcare provider offering free and low-cost treatment to underserved members of all nationalities. Based in Dubai, it has a broad base of community donations and philanthropic partners. It serves thousands of low-income people, many of whom come from blue-collar backgrounds.

This model shows that health access, dignified care, and high-quality care can be provided by community-run, transparent governance and systems of health that are outside of the state system.

Putting Mental Health on the Map

Despite increasing awareness, funding for mental health is grossly insufficient, almost always under-prioritised in budgets and philanthropy portfolios alike. The World Health Organization conservatively estimates that anxiety and depression alone cost the global economy more than $1 trillion a year in lost productivity, and current funding levels across the globe lag a more than $200 billion shortfall.

Stigma, weak infrastructure, and cultural care models limit access to care in many communities, particularly for youth, workers, and those affected by crises.

Philanthropy has a unique opportunity and obligation to address existing challenges by framing mental health as a systemic issue, not a discrete intervention. This means support that extends beyond treatment to prevention, policy innovation, and accessible care systems that include schools, workplaces and communities.Strong governance is crucial to ensure mental health care remains ethical, safe, and respectful of privacy, with clear oversight in place.This initiative is already taking root in the region through small, community-led efforts that are deeply situated within local cultures and contexts.

In Action: Whispers of Serenity Clinic, Oman

Oman's inaugural private mental health clinic, Whispers of Serenity, has quickly become a regional frontrunner in awareness-raising and access and has become a regular partner of local corporates donating subsidisation to therapy sessions and public awareness campaigns. In 2023, the clinic's "Not Alone" initiative extended its support cross-border to communities in Morocco that were affected by earthquakes and set up a specific messaging line for those who were affected.

This model illustrates how local philanthropy can provide both agility and ethics to respond to crisis and destigmatise mental health through culturally competent care.

Key Areas for Investment in Philanthropy:

- Understand mental health as a systemic, social, and economic issue rather than a personal issue
- Address the funding gap through flexible, multi-year funding to local providers and grassroots initiatives
- Support prevention through community-based, place-based, school- and workplace-based interventions
- Governance in digital tools: data privacy, transparency in AI decision making, and access equity

As philanthropy actors in the region consider alternative giving portfolios, mental health must leave the margins and become a strategic, trustworthy, accountable, and holistic approach to well-being for all.

Conclusion

Philanthropy most often appears at the worst of times, when health systems are under stress from conflict, disaster, displacement or economic pressure. This form of rapid, responsive giving saves lives, and it is hard to overstate its importance. But the role of philanthropy doesn't stop when the crisis wanes. Its impactful opportunity lies in what comes after: building the systems that make healthcare more equitable, inclusive, and resilient for the future.

Whether funding frontline services, funding research, or investing in historically neglected areas such as mental health, philanthropy can do what others won't. It can take risks, support innovation, and target those who have been too far under the radar. Good Governance ensures philanthropic capital is used in an ethical, smart and sustainable approach, ensuring maximum benefit to the communities.

The examples emerging from the Gulf region and beyond show that strategic giving can do more than help fill gaps. It can help to build pathways to access, to dignity and to resilience. In order for this to take hold, the next era of health philanthropy must be driven by three pillars: sustained financing, local accountability and safekeeping, and smart governance. In doing so, there is certain to be a healthcare future that leaves no one behind.

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