

IPASA's journey through the coronavirus crisis

By Sarah Rennie

The first Annual Review of South African Philanthropy was launched in October 2019 at the Independent Philanthropy Association of South Africa's (IPASA's) Annual Symposium. At the time, the association was already planning and looking forward to its 2020 Symposium, presciently entitled "Philanthropy in the New Normal". Little did anyone know. This year, the launch of the review will be virtual, allowing the organisation to reach a much larger audience through technology.

Adapting to the new constraints required in response to the spread of the Covid-19 virus, IPASA has been conducting its business virtually for much of 2020. Even more importantly, it has recognised that the crisis sparked by the coronavirus has galvanised the philanthropic sector towards connecting and working with each other on a different level to address the scale of the issues faced. In this regard, IPASA has played a key role in bringing funders together, harnessing the sector's commitment and willingness to collaborate during this time.

At the end of 2019, IPASA held a strategy session to set a path for the next five years. In reflecting on the strange, new journey that has now been undertaken, it is worth holding up a strategic "mirror" to see whether the sector has been blown off course by the present crisis or whether it has deepened its determination to stay true to its purpose.

IPASA's mission, "To promote, support and advance philanthropy in South Africa by extending its reach and impact", is underpinned by four core values of trust, transparency, inclusivity and collaboration. It has three main goals, which are:

1. To grow strategically an engaged community of members, who have high levels of satisfaction in their IPASA membership;
2. To influence and learn from a wide, complex network of relationships with other entities engaged in independent philanthropy, locally and internationally, and to develop key partnerships within the sector; and
3. To advance knowledge and improve practice in the philanthropy sector in South Africa by curating and disseminating knowledge affecting the philanthropy sector, and by providing niche, member-focused practical learning opportunities.

The Covid-19 virus and the attendant lockdown presented a number of specific challenges to independent philanthropic trusts and foundations. These have included: managing volatility in their investment portfolios and understanding likely income scenarios; communicating with existing partners and grantees as programmes have been postponed or reshaped; understanding the impacts of the crisis on their own work environment and staff; responding to a high number of emergency and new grant requests; and seeking information from experts to understand the impacts of the crisis on their particular areas of focus.

Many funders faced the twin difficulty of, on the one hand, a drastic drop in income and the value of their endowments, producing uncertainty over future income and, on the other, the knowledge that the sectors and beneficiaries that they supported needed more support, including grant funding, than ever. Many philanthropists have dug deep and responded in recognition of the huge scale of this crisis.

Since March 2020, IPASA has convened numerous weekly virtual meetings, initially of its members only before moving quickly to open these to other interested funders; funding intermediaries; funding advisors; and other key role-players in the sector.

In the first post Covid-19 meeting on 20 March, the discussions centred on how philanthropists can and should respond to immediate, urgent needs, both medical and humanitarian. There was a deeply felt sense of urgency but also a recognition that the sector was travelling in uncharted waters. The collective knowledge of the members, and their networks, was essential to a rapid response.

And those joining the IPASA platforms acted quickly: establishing a set of guiding principles for funders on how best to respond to the crisis; and providing opportunities to fund credible, far-reaching and impactful emergency responses. A number of members moved to release emergency funding for humanitarian relief, medical equipment and testing and food provision.

An immediate, obvious response by funders was to reach out to their existing partners and grantees to learn how the crisis was impacting on them and to identify their organisational needs, as well as those of their beneficiaries. Funders also relaxed their funding policies and practices, providing the flexibility required to meet their beneficiaries' needs. This included re-structuring grants to make them general purpose; agreeing to changed programme timelines; and easing reporting requirements. In many cases, funder and non-governmental organisation (NGO) partners worked together to reconceptualise projects.

It soon became apparent that there was a high demand from members and the broader funding community to meet regularly to learn about the shifting impacts of the virus on their focus areas of interest, and to connect with other funders in the same space. The regular virtual meetings that were established as a result have been well attended as donors have sought to understand what the impacts of Covid-19 are on, for example, basic education; higher education; early childhood development; food security; and the environment – to name a few of the areas of concern for funders. IPASA has convened regular meetings to focus on such specific areas, providing inputs from experts who are able to map out the systemic impacts and government plans, and engaging other leaders and innovators. These meetings have allowed funders to ask important questions about current large-scale initiatives and what is happening “on the ground” and provided a forum for them to share updates from their own networks and projects.

The crisis has made it clear that, by regularly convening a wide network of funders, experts and leaders across the philanthropic sector, as well as in thematic areas of particular concern, IPASA was able to help funders make difficult decisions more quickly. Given the levels of interest and participation, it seems that IPASA was able to fulfil a unique role and make an important contribution during this time.

Reflecting on IPASA's objectives, it would appear that the new work undertaken by the association during this period has cemented its strategic purpose and endorsed the goals it set out in 2019. It also seems clear that IPASA and its members and partners are unlikely to return to old habits and activities. The new ways of convening; sharing knowledge; focusing on particular areas and issues of concern; and harnessing the wide networks that are available, have opened the door to more powerful, effective collaborative efforts across South Africa's philanthropy sector.

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