



COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS AND THE PHILANTHROPY ECOSYSTEM:

PERSPECTIVES FROM MALAWI AND ZIMBABWE

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List of Acronyms

CBO	Community-Based Organisation
CDF	Constituency Development Fund
CF	Community Foundation
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PO	Philanthropy Organisation
PSO	Philanthropy Support Organisation
PVO	Private Voluntary Organisation
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
US	United States
ZHI	Zimbabwe Health Interventions

1.0 Introduction

Community philanthropy organisations, also known as Community Foundations, are at the forefront of addressing local needs in Malawi and Zimbabwe. These organisations have varying levels of formalisation. They serve as critical catalysts for mobilising local assets, promoting community participation, and addressing deep-seated development challenges. As external aid flows are diminishing across the continent, these organisations are increasingly tasked with bridging gaps and fostering resilience through locally rooted solutions. The withdrawal of major donor support, particularly USAID, has left critical funding gaps in social services, such as health and education, in both countries. In Malawi, USAID (2025) was a major funder of health interventions, supporting programs in HIV and AIDS, maternal and child health, and disease prevention across all 28 Districts. In March 2025, the United States (US) government terminated contracts worth US\$230 million (K400 billion) under USAID, triggering widespread disruption. Districts like Lilongwe, Blantyre, Mangochi, Zomba, and Mzimba were among the hardest hit due to their concentration of USAID-supported health initiatives or programs. Regionally, Community Foundations in Zimbabwe, Malawi,

and Zambia experienced indirect shocks as intermediary NGOs collapsed, severing technical support and funding pipelines essential for local grant making and youth-led initiatives.

With the support of WINGs, we implemented a project focused on strengthening the community philanthropy ecosystems in Malawi and Zimbabwe. In this report, we present our findings based on various tools that we used to gather data, including face-to-face dialogue held at different intervals. The initiative started from an ongoing questioning of whether citizens in seemingly poor countries like Malawi and Zimbabwe (based on Gross Domestic Product [GDP] and per capita income) can effectively mobilise their own resources to respond to local community needs.

The philanthropy sector is an ecosystem of various entities, including philanthropy organisations (POs), Community Foundations, giving circles, philanthropy support organisations (PSOs), donors, and support and infrastructure, which, when reinforced, have the potential to drive transformative change. Ecosystems are, by their very nature, characterised by mutual interdependence.

1.1 Rationale

Our work was and remains focused on building national networks of community philanthropy organisations. Best practice from elsewhere has already demonstrated the enormous role of a collective in securing benefits for the members, inclusive of a conducive operating environment. When analysed in isolation, community philanthropy organisations may look insignificant in comparison with the challenges within communities. There is reason to believe that the synergies that emerge from establishment outweigh the cost of doing the work and will raise the profile of this genre of organisations. In many instances, we were surprised by the fact that organisations doing similar work in different places did not know of each other. If organisations that look like each other are unaware of the existence of others, there is a strong possibility that other possible allies, like donors, may not be aware of the existence of these organisations. Yet several studies have already made the case to go beyond single actor analysis and focus on relationships or ecosystem-based approaches, especially when it comes to dealing with wicked problems, development and wellbeing. Comprehensive mapping of the landscape is crucial for strengthening the industry, enhancing collaboration, and unlocking its full potential for sustainable community development.

Furthermore, the existing funding challenges possibly suggest the need for a renewed focus on ecosystem building

and strengthening, where Community Foundations and local philanthropy play a central role in development. Creating systems and synergies that dismantle long-standing models of financing that perpetuate cycles of dependency, loss of autonomy and a quick-fix approach to development projects.

However, there is limited information about the ecosystem in which these organisations operate. The hypothesis is that the ecosystem comprises donors, government entities, non-profits, and the private sector. However, how they work together or complement each other is often poorly understood. Many organisations work in silos. When organisations focus on their own programs, goals, and funding streams without connecting meaningfully with others doing similar work. This can lead to duplication of efforts, missed opportunities for collaboration, and wasted resources. For example, two Community Foundations might unknowingly run similar programs in the same district, but never share tools, data, or lessons learned. As FundsforNGOs (2024) explains, silos limit innovation and reduce collective impact.

There exists limited dialogue across the sector. Donors usually engage with various government departments and the more visible international and national NGOs. However, engagement with community philanthropy organisations is rare. They are, in some instances, seen as implementing or last-mile service providers. Yet there is a critical need

for governments, donors and the bigger NGOs to consult these local organisations, given their deep understanding of their communities. The lack of engagement is partly due to power dynamics, competition for funding, and a lack of platforms for honest exchange. When dialogue is missing, organisations do not learn from each other, and they struggle to align their efforts. The Center for Effective Philanthropy notes that contemporary challenges like shrinking aid and rising local needs require collaborative thinking and shared strategies (Arrillaga, Yang & Im, 2025). As a result of the different complexities within the philanthropy ecosystem, key dynamics like power relations, resource flows, and informal networks remain invisible, making it difficult to coordinate efforts or build sustainable systems of support.

1.2 Background and Context

As already mentioned, we have been working on understanding the philanthropy ecosystems in Zimbabwe and Malawi. The various entities working at times in isolation from others represent potential for a dynamic and resilient ecosystem where informal and formal structures, community-driven initiatives, and various partnerships converge to address development challenges. While distinct in their historical and political contexts, both nations share a common thread: a deeply ingrained culture of giving that emphasises community solidarity and mutual aid. Informal forms of peer-to-peer

(horizontal) philanthropy have long been the bedrock of social support in both countries. The philanthropy ecosystem in Malawi and Zimbabwe is a dynamic network that, in most cases, has broken links of actors all working to address critical community needs. Based on our observations, Community Foundations are locally rooted institutions that are playing a pivotal role in mobilising resources, building social capital, and engaging with diverse stakeholders. However, the ecosystem faces significant challenges, including limited funding, coordination gaps, and infrastructure weaknesses. This study uses approaches designed to (i) identify key actors and their interconnections, (ii) understand the role and positioning of Community Foundations, (iii) assess ecosystem strengths and challenges, and (iv) explore aspirations for ecosystem strengthening.

The research focused specifically on the perspectives and experiences of Community Foundations, recognising them as key actors of the broader community philanthropy environment.

The survey was designed to achieve three (3) primary objectives:

1. To identify and analyse the various actors that Community Foundations engage with, thereby defining the structure and dynamics of the ecosystem.
2. To understand the role played by Community Foundations in the philanthropy ecosystem.

- To identify the strengths and challenges existing in the philanthropy ecosystem to reinforce it.

Community philanthropy is characterised by a powerful, locally led approach to development, where resources, decision-making, and agency are held within the community itself (Doan, 2019).

2.0 Methodology

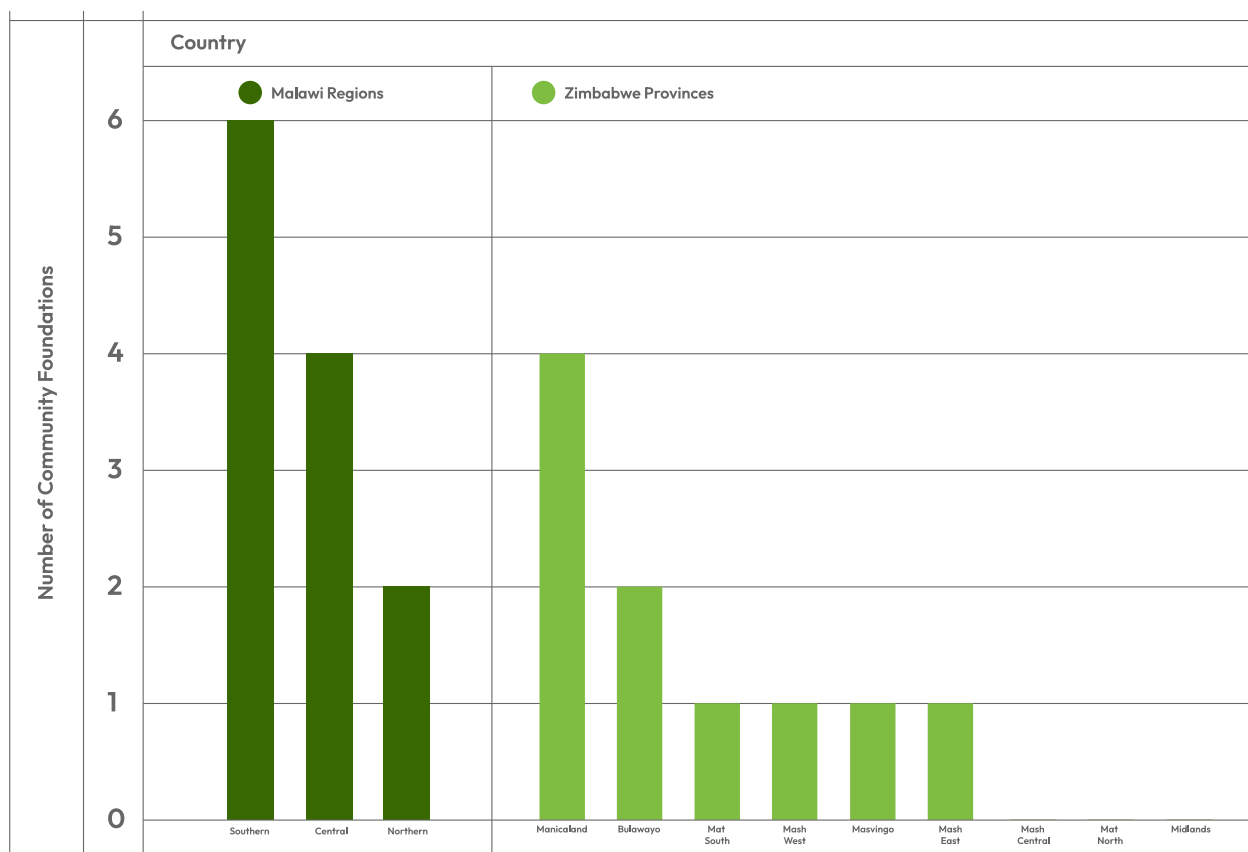
The research employed a comprehensive online survey designed to capture both quantitative and qualitative data from Community Foundations across Malawi and Zimbabwe. From 2024 to 2025, a total of 23 Community Foundations in Malawi (12) and

Zimbabwe (11) were identified. Two national networks were developed and formed the basis of the survey population. Of the 23 Community Foundations, 22 responded to the survey (one organisation in Zimbabwe did not provide an answer).

3.0 Findings

3.1 Organisational Profile

Organisations that responded to the survey are spread across the two countries, with representation from Malawi's three (3) regions (Northern, Central and Southern) and Zimbabwe's six (6) provinces (Bulawayo, Manicaland, Mashonaland East, Mashonaland West, Masvingo and Matabeleland South).



Source: Survey data of Community Foundations in Zimbabwe and Malawi (Aug 2025)

FIGURE 1: GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS

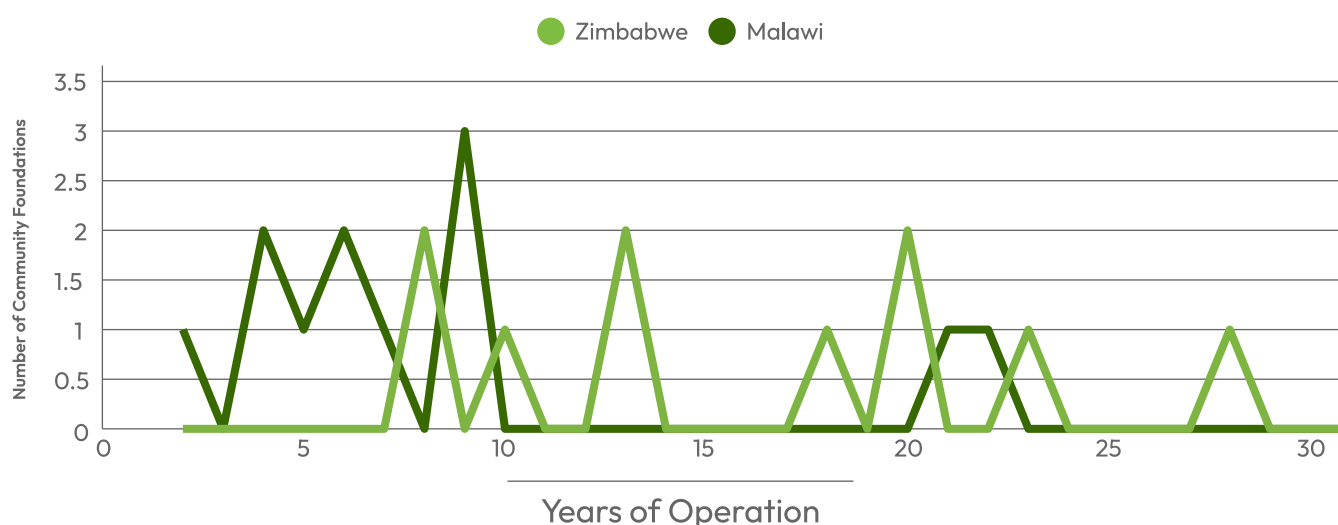
The Community Foundations surveyed have been in operation for an average of 11 years, with the oldest, the Community Foundation for the Western Region of Zimbabwe, established in 1998, and the newest from Malawi, the Ndakwera Community Foundation, established in 2024. The study shows that, generally, most Community Foundations in Zimbabwe were established earlier than those in Malawi. The results also show that Community Foundations typically have few full-time staff members. They also have volunteers who help with the organisation's operations and program implementation. Organisations in Malawi have an average of 4.6 full-time, contracted employees, whereas in Zimbabwe, the average size is 5.3 employees. Interestingly, in Malawi, three (3) organisations have no full-time, contracted employees.

In Zimbabwe, 9 (90%) are registered as trusts, and 5 of these have applied to be a Private Voluntary Organisation (PVO), and the last organisation says they are registered as a

community-based organisation. When annual budgets were analysed, it was noted that most Community Foundations (90%) have modest budgets (converted into United States Dollars). The lowest annual budget recorded is US\$8,500, while the highest annual budget is US\$500,000. Zimbabwean organisations tend to have higher budgets than Malawi organisations.

3.2 The Role of Community Foundations in the Ecosystem

The study reveals that Community Foundations in Malawi and Zimbabwe play multiple roles within their respective ecosystems. The most identified roles are those of implementing initiatives, resource mobiliser, and convenor. Most organisations (86%) indicated that they are implementers of initiatives in a community. They stated that they provide direct service delivery and implement programs to address various community needs. They also indicated that they work with vulnerable populations, and two organisations in particular work with



Source: Survey data of Community Foundations in Zimbabwe and Malawi (Aug 2025)

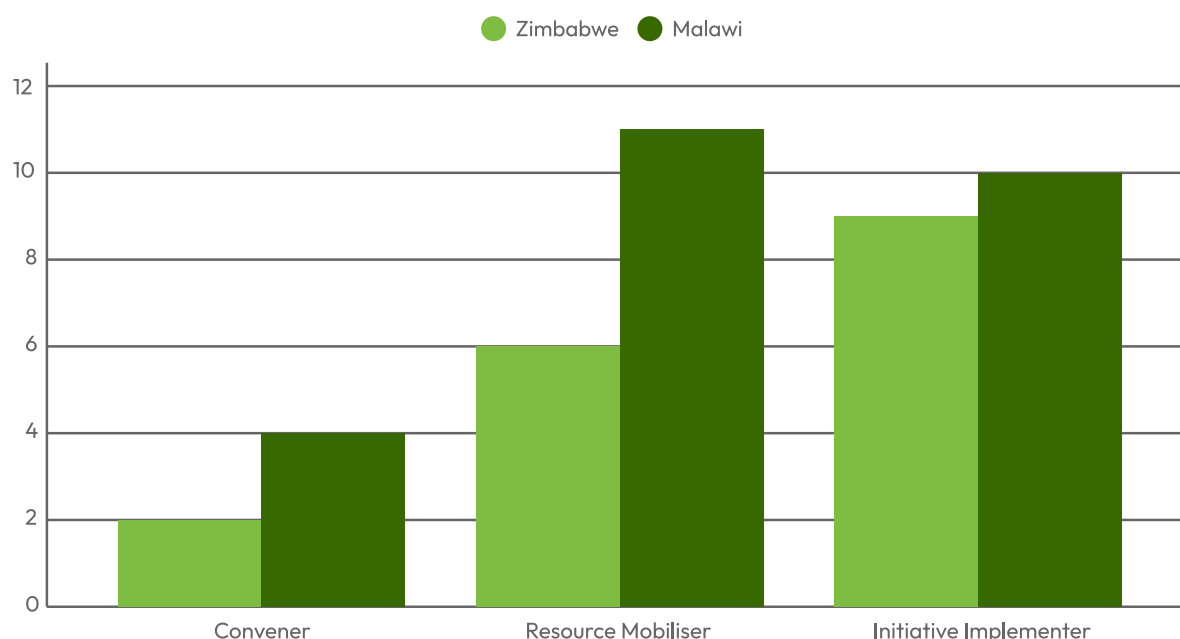
FIGURE 2: YEARS IN OPERATION

people living with disabilities. Results also show that 77% of respondents indicated that they mobilise resources, raising funds from diverse sources, including international donors and individual givers in the community and beyond. They also indicated that they play a catalysing role of connecting communities to resources and promoting a local giving culture.

Lastly, 27% indicated that they play a convenor role, bringing stakeholders together and creating platforms for dialogue and collaboration. Through the convenor role, they facilitate collective action towards addressing systemic issues. However, among the Community Foundations that indicated they play a convening role, they highlighted the problem of resource scarcity as a barrier to fulfilling this role and bringing stakeholders together. This suggests the necessity of

strengthening the philanthropy ecosystem to map community assets that can contribute to organising convenings to facilitate discussions.

According to the study, it is evident that Community Foundations are a vital component of the community philanthropy ecosystem as they assume multiple roles. Some of the challenges Community Foundations face in playing their various roles are also indicative of the absence or lack of capacity in specialised infrastructure organisations to provide the much-needed support and to assume some of the roles. While Community Foundations demonstrate resilience, this also indicates potential overextension and the need for a more robust ecosystem with more apparent role differentiation and coordination.



Role of Community Foundations

Source: Survey data of Community Foundations in Zimbabwe and Malawi (Aug 2025)

FIGURE 3: ROLE OF COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS IN THE PHILANTHROPY ECOSYSTEM

3.3 The Philanthropy Actors: Mapping the Ecosystem

The Community Foundations were asked to identify and rate various actors that would be instrumental in the philanthropy ecosystem in their country. The survey enquired about 13 different types of actors. These included: individual donors, local businesses, other Community Foundations, intermediary organisations, international foundations, government agencies, nonprofit organisations, academic institutions, media organisations, and religious organisations. In Zimbabwe, the actors rated as most important are other Community Foundations, media organisations, and individual donors. In Malawi, the highly

rated actors are intermediary organisations such as Mudzi Connect, government agencies, and international foundations. This suggests a more externally networked ecosystem, where formal partnerships and donor relationships play a central role.

3.3.1 Highly Rated Actors as a Whole

Community Foundations were asked to rate the importance of each actor type and indicate their current and desired partnerships. The results showed that intermediary organisations are generally viewed as very important actors in the philanthropy ecosystem, providing a bridging function and capacity-building support

Rate the types of actors on how important they are in the philanthropy ecosystem.



Source: Survey data of Community Foundations in Zimbabwe and Malawi (Aug 2025)

FIGURE 4: IMPORTANCE OF OTHER ACTORS

for Community Foundations. Respondents also highlighted that these intermediary organisations are also critical for connecting grassroots organisations to resources and networks.

The relationship with other Community Foundations was also analysed, and the results show that 77% indicated that other like-minded organisations were very important to their work. They noted that peer organisations offer mutual support and learning opportunities, which are essential for knowledge sharing and collective action. They also stated that interactions with other Community Foundations have created a sense of community among these organisations. Many organisations (77%) also highlighted that other nonprofit organisations are critical to their work on complementary issues such as education, health, and water and sanitation, among many areas of focus. They serve as implementation partners who also provide specialised expertise and community connections, widening the reach of the Community Foundations' work. Since Community Foundations are also involved in fundraising, 73% of those studied indicated that international foundations and individual donors play a critical role in financing their work. They noted that both players are the primary sources of financial resources, which also attracts other resource mobilisation efforts and sustainability initiatives essential for long-term sustainability.

Other vital actors in the philanthropy ecosystem of Community Foundations are media organisations and government agencies. The results showed that 73% of organisations indicated that media organisations are very important for their work, while 68% indicated that government agencies are also very important. They noted that media organisations have been instrumental in increasing the visibility of their work and have assisted in advocacy efforts related to various aspects of their work. Government agencies are reported to largely shape the regulatory framework affecting Community Foundations' work and are potential funders. In Zimbabwe, for instance, in 2010, the Zimbabwean Parliamentary Constituency Development Fund (CDF) was introduced as a mechanism to support community-level development projects and improve service delivery across Zimbabwe's parliamentary constituencies (Ncube, 2024). However, while government agencies are viewed as necessary for policy formulation and systems change, they are responsible for either creating an enabling or constraining environment for the philanthropy ecosystem to thrive.

3.3.2 Moderately Rated Actors

During the study's piloting, other key actors, including academic institutions, financial advisors, and corporate or business foundations, were also identified as important supporting entities in the philanthropy ecosystem. These were incorporated in the main study, whose results show that 59%

of Community Foundations indicated that both academic institutions and financial advisors are essential to their work. They highlighted that academic institutions have the potential to provide them with research and evidence-based knowledge critical for the understanding of their work and operating environment. They also indicated that financial advisors are essential as they provide capacity building and training on financial literacy and investments, indicating a growing recognition of the need for economic sustainability. However, respondents expressed that, as much as financial advisors and academic institutions are essential to their ecosystem, there is limited current

engagement, suggesting that the two actors provide untapped potential to collaborate with Community Foundations to advance development.

The private sector, particularly local businesses, has been gaining spotlight through their contributions to the philanthropy ecosystem. Over half (55%) of organisations also rated the business entities as very important. These actors are emerging with great resource potential to support various Community Foundations initiatives. However, several Community Foundations indicated that there is limited engagement with corporate foundations and that engaging them is vital for



Source: Survey data of Community Foundations in Zimbabwe and Malawi (Aug 2025)

FIGURE 5: IMPORTANCE OF ACTORS TO THE PHILANTHROPIC ECOSYSTEM

resourcing and in building and strengthening the philanthropy ecosystem.

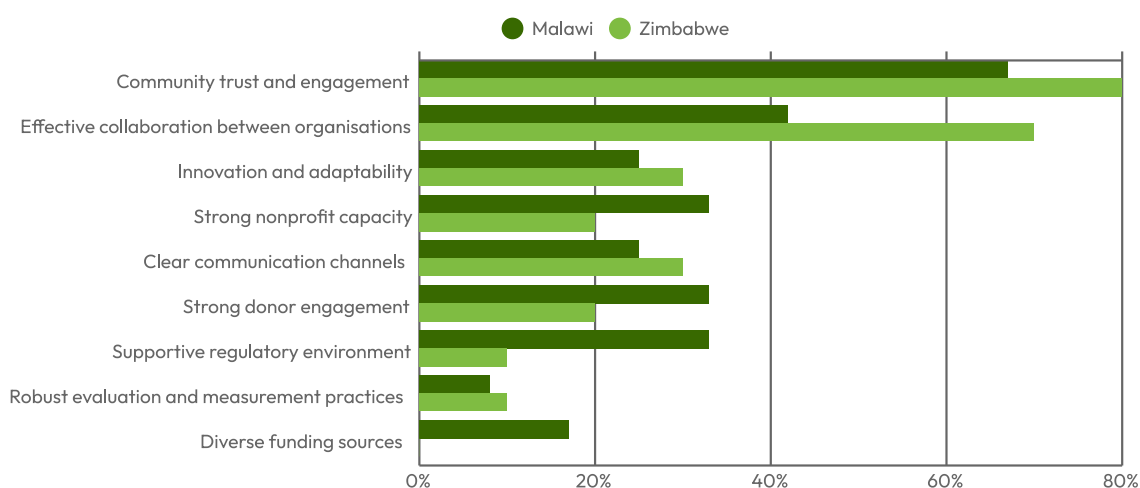
Other critical actors, as identified by Community Foundations, are religious organisations, with 55% indicating that they are very important. They noted that historically, these entities have been significant in philanthropy, with many seen as advancing community development. Religious organisations have, over the years, secured strong community trust and mobilisation capacity.

3.3.3 Current Partnerships and Aspirational Actors

When asked to rate their current relationships in the philanthropy ecosystem, 50% of organisations in Malawi rated them strong compared to only 20% in Zimbabwe. The greatest strengths of these relationships in both Zimbabwe and Malawi are community

trust and engagement, and the effective collaboration between organisations.

A gap analysis reveals several essential patterns in the existing partnerships and aspirations. The study showed the existence of strong alliances among Community Foundations and other nonprofit organisations. Some local individual donors and volunteers have forged strong partnerships with Community Foundations. A few organisations indicated that they have strong partnerships with international foundations. When asked about the desired partnerships, Community Foundations stated their desire to engage and work with government agencies, aiming to exceed the current level of collaboration, which is currently very limited. Only one organisation from each country did not interact with the national body that governs their operation. In Zimbabwe, 90% of the organisations say that



What are the greatest strengths of the relationships that currently exist?

Source: Survey data of Community Foundations in Zimbabwe and Malawi (Aug 2025)

FIGURE 6: STRENGTHS OF EXISTING RELATIONSHIPS

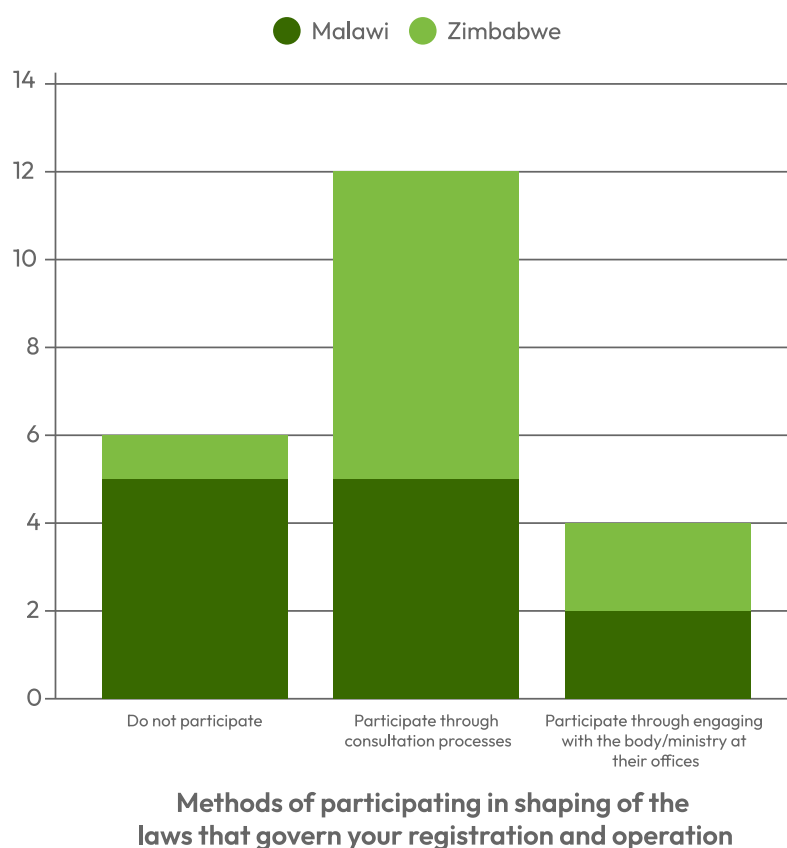
they have participated in shaping the laws that govern their registration and operation, and in Malawi, only 58% have participated. The engagement is mostly through consultative processes (78% in Zimbabwe, 71% in Malawi), with the other organisations engaging directly with the ministry at their offices. In Malawi, 80% of organisations do not participate because there is no room for their participation; in Zimbabwe, the one organisation does not participate because they do not know how. Just below half (45%) of Community Foundations indicated that they have collaborated with government agencies.

All the Community Foundations indicated a high interest in engaging with businesses and corporate foundations. Others have

also noted that corporate and business foundations are scarce, and access may be limited. In Zimbabwe, for instance, the most well-known corporate foundation is the Higherlife Foundation, which mainly supports access to education. They also identified academic institutions and recognised their value, although there are currently limited connections. The gaps in engagements highlight the need for strengthened ecosystem infrastructure to facilitate new connections and nature partnerships.

3.4 Information and Communication Patterns

Community Foundations primarily rely on online platforms and databases (95%) for information, a dominant preference that



Source: Survey data of Community Foundations in Zimbabwe and Malawi (Aug 2025)

FIGURE 7: POLICY FORMULATION PARTICIPATION METHODS

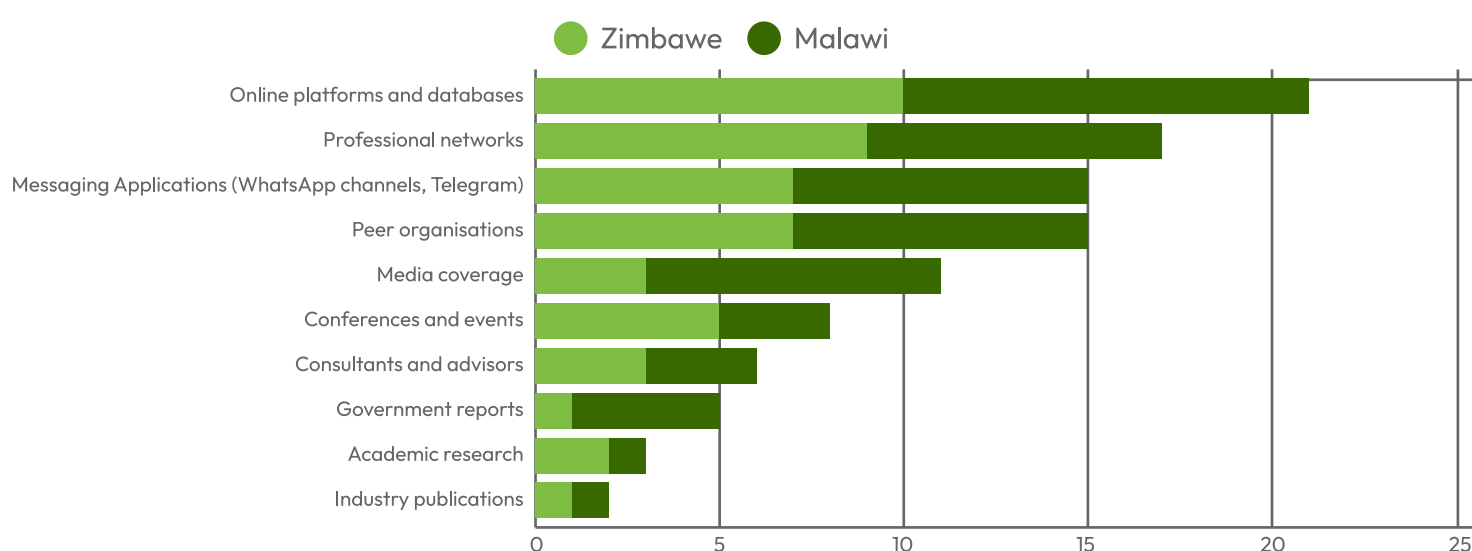
indicates a significant shift towards digital information seeking, despite challenges with access and quality. This is complemented by strong engagement with professional networks (77%) for trust-based, peer-to-peer knowledge exchange and informal learning. Furthermore, informal channels are paramount, with peer organisations and messaging applications like WhatsApp and Telegram (both 68%) being equally utilised for real-time, accessible, and affordable communication, while media coverage (50%) serves as a key source for sector trends.

In terms of communication, respondents indicated that universal methods such as phone calls (100%) are used for their personal, immediate nature to overcome digital divides. They also indicated that they make use of emails (91%) for professional communication.

In-person meetings and social media (both 82%) are equally important for relationship-building and public engagement, while messaging apps (73%) and virtual meetings (68%) facilitate real-time coordination and cost-effective geographic reach. The overwhelming prevalence of phone calls and messaging apps highlights a focus on cost-effective, personal communication that accommodates connectivity constraints. In contrast, the lower use of professional platforms (27%) and formal reports (55%) indicates a clear need for more structured knowledge management and professional communication infrastructure.

3.5 Collaboration Patterns

Community Foundations indicated that they collaborate with other actors in one way or another. The majority (64%) of foundations



Where do you typically get information about opportunities and trends

Source: Survey data of Community Foundations in Zimbabwe and Malawi (Aug 2025)

FIGURE 8: INFORMATION SOURCES

indicated that they collaborate regularly, which is quarterly, with different actors, while 18% indicated that they engage occasionally, sometimes once or twice a year. The frequency of collaboration is, to an extent, dependent on the need for cooperation and the nature of the initiative philanthropy actors need to work on.

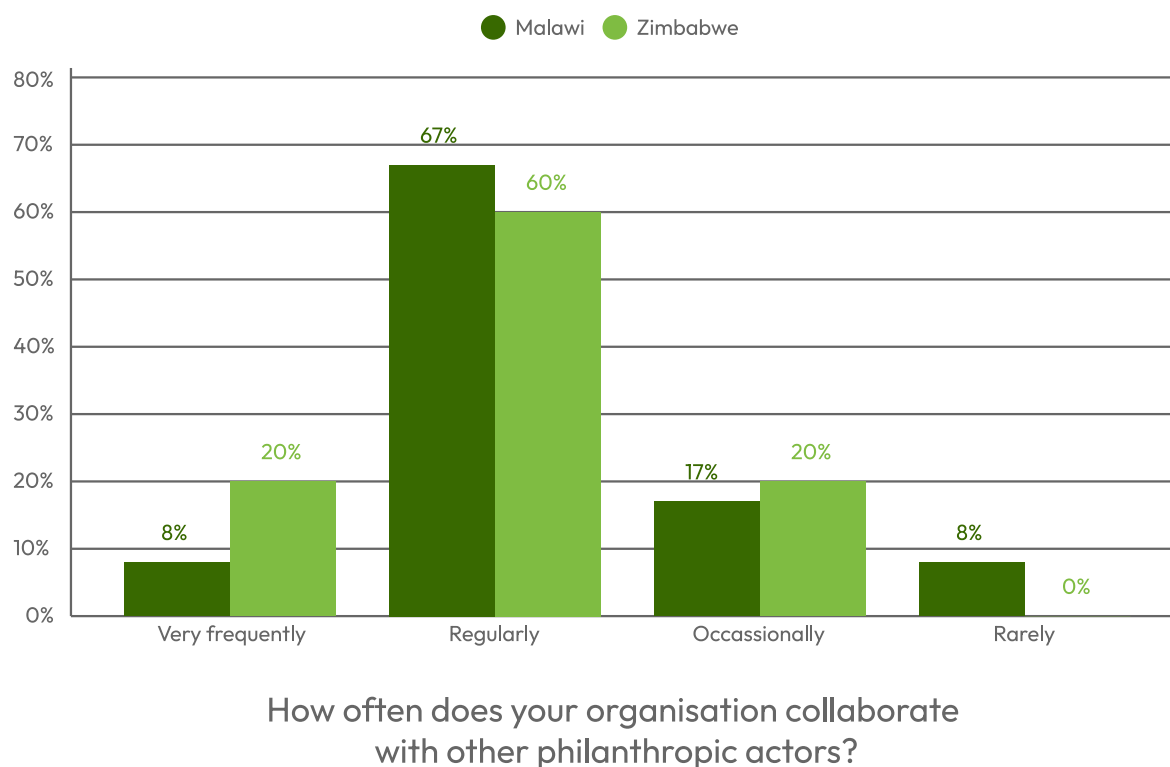
The rate of collaboration also indicated that organisations are tapping into opportunities for collective action, cross-learning, and peer learning. The survey results show that organisations collaborate with other actors for capacity-building programs (95%), indicating a strong commitment to equipping communities with skills and knowledge. The different areas of collaboration, as marked by 64% of respondents, involve joint funding opportunities and the sharing of research and

knowledge, thereby pooling resources for a greater impact. Collaboration on research and knowledge was reported to help build a collective evidence base and share insights and best practices.

Other foundations (55%) also indicated that they have collaborated around resources to optimise limited assets, particularly in construction projects, which has proven to be efficient. Other areas of collaboration, as noted by the respondents, are policy advocacy (50%), event co-hosting (45%), and strategic planning (45%).

3.6 The Quality of Relationships in the Ecosystem

The study examined the quality of relationships within the philanthropy ecosystem in relation to Community



Source: Survey data of Community Foundations in Zimbabwe and Malawi (Aug 2025)

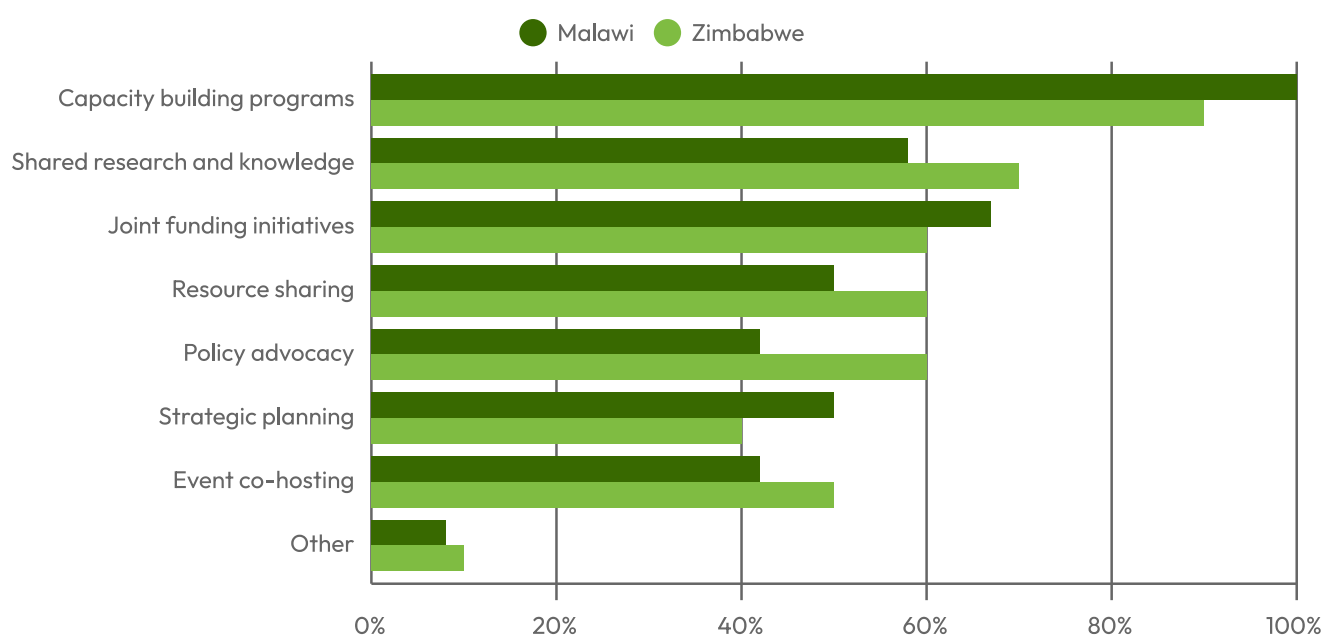
FIGURE 9: COLLABORATION FREQUENCY

Foundations. Most Community Foundations (91%) report having at least mildly strong to strong relationships within the ecosystem, indicating a solid foundation for collaboration. However, only about one-third (36%) describe their relationships as truly strong, suggesting room for deepening connections.

3.6.1 Ecosystem Relationship Strengths

Despite the ecosystem's resource constraints, Community Foundations identified several critical strengths within their philanthropy ecosystems. The majority (73%) of the organisations highlighted that high levels of community trust and engagement exhibit the greatest strength in the philanthropy ecosystem. Trust and engagement serve as the most significant assets for strengthening the ecosystem. The advantages that Community Foundations have in catalysing the philanthropy ecosystem are that they have

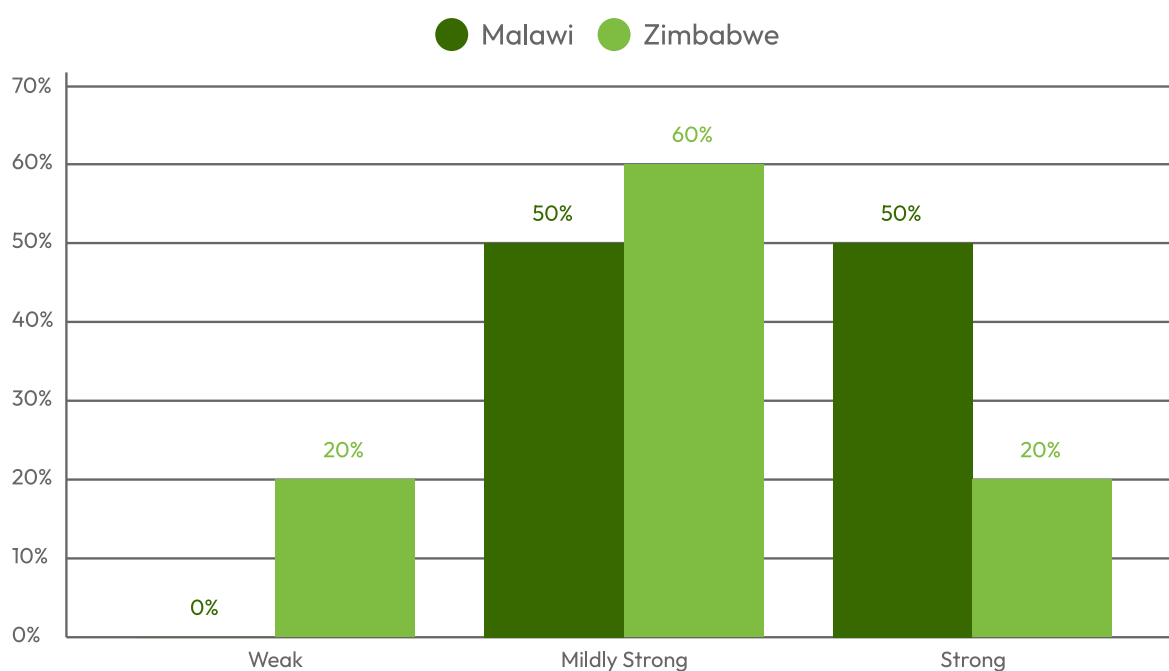
(i) deep community roots and legitimacy, (ii) strong relationships with the community, (iii) local knowledge and cultural competence, and (iv) authentic community representation. Organisations also indicated that collaboration among other Community Foundations was high, as indicated by 55% of the respondents. They noted a willingness to work together and an existing collaborative culture that can be expanded to incorporate other ecosystem actors. Other areas, such as strong donor engagement (27%), innovation and adaptability (27%), non-profit capacity (27%), and communications (27%), had a few organisations identify these as strengths within their philanthropy ecosystem. This presents a significant opportunity for organisations to learn from one another on ways to strengthen the philanthropy ecosystem.



What types of collaboration do you engage in?

Source: Survey data of Community Foundations in Zimbabwe and Malawi (Aug 2025)

FIGURE 10: TYPES OF COLLABORATION



How would you rate the relationships that you have?

Source: Survey data of Community Foundations in Zimbabwe and Malawi (Aug 2025)

FIGURE 11: RELATIONSHIP QUALITY IN THE PHILANTHROPY ECOSYSTEM

3.6.2 Ecosystem Diversity

An assessment of ecosystem diversity was conducted from the perspective of Community Foundations. The majority (77%) view their ecosystem as moderately to very diverse. Further analysis indicated that 36% stated that their ecosystem is very diverse, while 41% indicated that it was moderately diverse. A few (23%) felt that the ecosystem in which they operate is somewhat diverse. The difference in perspectives presents an opportunity for promoting inclusive ecosystem development. Based on previous results, the responses also indicate that diversity comes in mapping the actors and identifying potential roles each can fill. However, there is also a need to bring together or engage the various actors towards the goal of advancing philanthropy for improved human welfare and development.

3.7 Key Challenges and Barriers

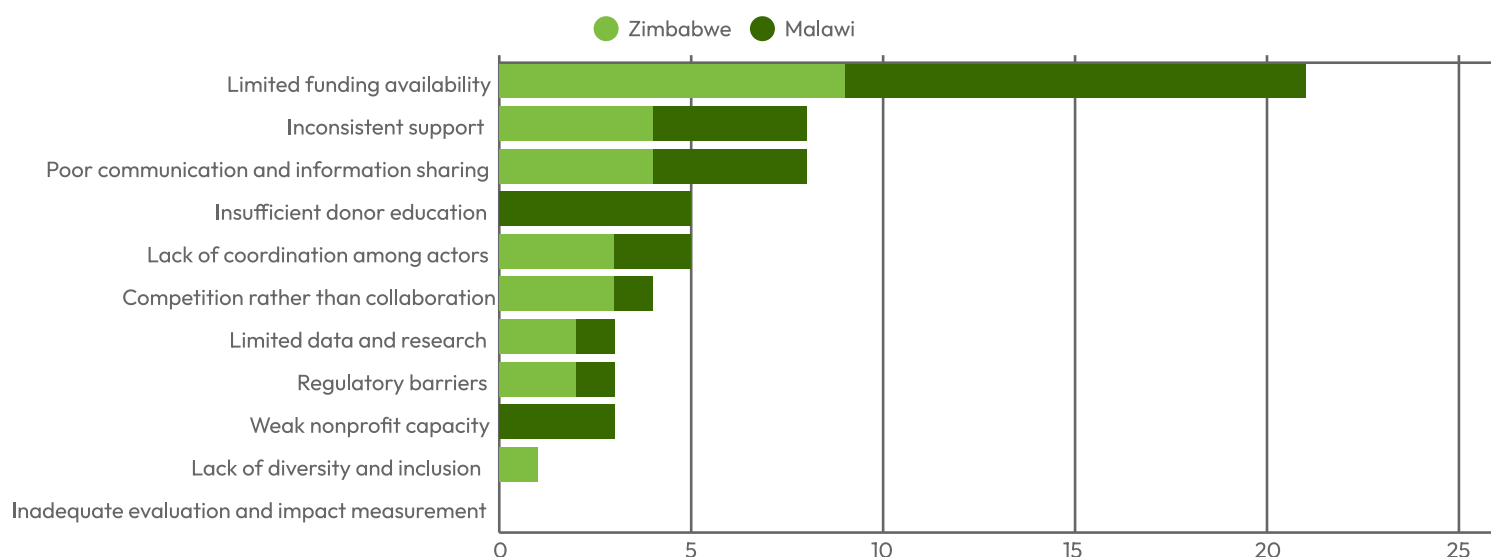
The study also sought to understand the challenges that affect the philanthropy ecosystem. The majority (95%) of foundations highlighted that limited funding and resources hinder collaborations. Most organisations experience funding inconsistencies, such as relying on community contributions, small grants, and occasional support from partners. This shows the importance of planning to give and strengthening resource mobilisation models to finance activities. Another challenge noted was poor communication and information sharing, indicated by 36% of organisations.

Other challenges mentioned are limited diversity and inclusion in some areas, and a lack of evaluation and impact measurement of interventions in which various actors are

involved in advancing philanthropy for change. In Malawi, poor communication systems were reported to hamper efforts of collaboration, as connectivity is sometimes a challenge, as well as a lack of visibility to showcase the existence of the organisations and their impact. Additionally, challenges in regulatory barriers were highlighted, especially in the case of Zimbabwe, where the legal frameworks affecting Community Foundations' operations appeared to be uncertain. In April 2025, the Government of Zimbabwe enacted the Private Voluntary Organisation Amendment Act of 2025, forcing organisations that were not registered under the law to reregister within 90 days of enactment. The law is unclear on cash donations and other fintech that support giving, as it states that donations should only come through recognised financial institutions. Such regulatory frameworks

hinder the giving and the strengthening of philanthropy in the country.

Considering regulatory frameworks, results show that Malawi has various ways of registering community philanthropy organisations, with some indicating that they registered as a Community-Based Organisation (CBO) under the Ministry of Gender, Community Development and Social Welfare in Malawi. Another form of registration is through the Companies Act as a 'Private Limited by Guarantee'. Meanwhile, in Zimbabwe, only one organisation was registered and operating as a PVO, while the rest were registered as Trusts, and they are now required by law to transition to PVO status to ensure compliance and to continue operating.



What are the most significant challenges facing the relationships?

Source: Survey data of Community Foundations in Zimbabwe and Malawi (Aug 2025)

FIGURE 12: SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES

In terms of the laws governing registration in Malawi, the following three laws were identified: the Trustees Incorporation Act of 1962, the Companies Amendment Act of 2013, and the Non-Governmental Organisation Act of 2001. When respondents were asked if they also play a role in influencing policies

and laws that affect their work, 73% of the organisations indicated that they do take part. They noted that they participate either through the consultation processes (55%) or through engaging with regulatory bodies (18%).



4.0 Aspirations for Ecosystem Strengthening

4.1 Vision for a Stronger Ecosystem

Community Foundations articulated compelling visions for a strengthened philanthropy ecosystem. Key themes include:

1. Inclusion and Equity

"An ecosystem that is inclusive, transparent and has a joint corporation between grassroots Community Foundations and local nonprofits, donors, and public institutions. It would prioritise equity by directing resources to underprivileged communities, amplify diverse voices, and build capacity through knowledge-sharing and joint initiatives." (Luso Langa Community Foundation, Survey Aug 2025)

2. Collaboration and Partnership

"An ecosystem comprising of a strong donor base (including individual givers and corporate givers), effective Community Foundations, effective collaboration and partnership, inclusivity and diversity, strong communities and well-connected systems leveraging on the strengths of the different players." (Community Foundation for the Western Region of Zimbabwe, Survey Aug 2025)

3. Increased Coordination and Alignment

"A stronger philanthropy ecosystem would be characterised by increased collaboration, transparency, and accountability among stakeholders, with a shared vision and goal, and a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion, ultimately driving greater impact and positive change." (Manica Youth Assembly Trust, Survey Aug 2025)

4. Sustainability and Resilience

"An ecosystem where players listen to each other and listen to the voices of the people, and can sustain its activities without the worry of resource shortage." (Children of Hope Organisation, Survey Aug 2025)

5. Community- Centred Approach

Multiple foundations emphasised that a thriving ecosystem is one in which communities are involved and where collaboration with communities is prioritised in decision-making. Additionally, they indicated that grassroots contributions should also be considered to promote ownership and leadership, thereby fighting dependency.

4.2 Priority Initiatives for Strengthening

Looking ahead, Community Foundations were asked to contribute ideas for strengthening the philanthropy ecosystem in their respective countries. They identified specific initiatives that would most help strengthen the ecosystem.

TABLE 1: LOOKING FORWARD - PRIORITY INITIATIVES

Priority Tier	Initiative	Initiative's contribution
Tier 1: Critical Priorities	Regular Convenings and Networking Events (91%)	Create platforms for connection and relationship building Share learning and experiences Address isolation and fragmentation Build trust and collaboration Foster ecosystem identity
	Joint Capacity-Building Programs (82%)	Strengthen organisational capabilities collectively Peer learning and mentorship Develop common competencies Build collective capacity
	Collaborative Funding Platforms (77%)	Reduce costs through shared programs Pool resources for greater impact Reduce competition for funding Create sustainable funding mechanisms Enable collaborative grant making Build local giving culture
Tier 2: High Priorities	Mentorship Programs (55%)	Support new and emerging foundations Transfer knowledge and experience Build leadership pipeline Create support structures Strengthen succession planning
	Technology Platforms for Coordination (55%)	Enable virtual collaboration Overcome geographic barriers Improve information sharing Enhance coordination Create shared digital infrastructure
	Research and Knowledge Sharing (45%)	Build evidence base Document learning and best practices Inform decision-making Demonstrate impact Support advocacy
Tier 3: Moderate Priorities	Shared Database of Opportunities and Resources (36%)	Improved access and exposure
	Policy Advocacy Initiatives (23%)	For creation of improved operating environments

4.3 Gaps Requiring Attention

Community Foundations identified several gaps in ecosystem participation, including the need for more active actors. They indicated that, while they interact with government agencies, there is a need to prioritise greater engagement with government agencies to influence policy and facilitate access to resources. There is a need to involve local leaders, including traditional and civic leaders, in community mobilisation. They also highlighted the realisation of the role

of research institutions and private sector companies in supporting initiatives and generating evidence-based knowledge that showcases philanthropy in Africa. Individual givers, although providing haphazard giving, were also identified as playing a role in influencing and strengthening local giving culture and domestic philanthropy. International organisations were also identified to provide platforms for global connectivity and to share some best practices in other parts of the world.



5.0 Comparative Analysis of the Community Foundations in Malawi and Zimbabwe and their Philanthropy Ecosystem

Despite their distinct contexts, Community Foundations in both countries demonstrate remarkable alignment in their core challenges, shared values, and common aspirations. The most pressing universal challenge is overwhelming funding constraints, cited by over 90% of respondents in each country, which is compounded by significant communication gaps, infrastructure deficits,

and a shared need for overall ecosystem strengthening. Community Foundations in both countries share similar values, including a community-centred approach, a strong commitment to collaboration, and a focused dedication to equity and inclusion, all driven by a common desire for long-term sustainability.

In terms of their aspirations, these organisations express nearly identical goals for strengthening the philanthropy ecosystem. Over 90% of organisations indicated the need for regular convenings and networking opportunities, while more than 80% advocate for joint capacity-building initiatives. 75% aim to develop collaborative funding mechanisms. These common trends indicate the need for cross-border learning and strategic partnerships. However, the two countries also exhibit differences in their ecosystems' needs and contexts.

TABLE 2: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS IN MALAWI AND ZIMBABWE

Key Differences		
Aspect	Malawi	Zimbabwe
Geographic Pattern	More dispersed across regions	Concentrated in specific hubs
Organisational Age	Newer (average of 9 years)	More established (average of 11 years)
Main philanthropy ecosystems actors	Religious organisations, local leaders	International foundations, government
Collaboration Style	Community-based, informal	More structured, formal
Key Challenges	Rural access, connectivity	Economic volatility, regulation
Strategic Focus	Grassroots mobilisation	Systems change, policy
International Links	Developing	More established

6.0 Conclusion

Malawi and Zimbabwe have deep roots of African philanthropy, characterised by mutual aid and reciprocity. Like other African countries, the two countries show a history of solidarity and collaboration. Both Malawi and Zimbabwe face deeply entrenched systemic challenges such as poverty, inequality and weak public service delivery that have persisted for decades. There are no straightforward solutions to fixing these wicked problems. Could community philanthropy organisations be the elusive silver bullet in the ecosystem? They have emerged as vital actors, stepping in to mobilise local resources, building trust, and responding to community needs. Their rise in both countries is not accidental but rather reflects a growing demand for locally anchored solutions that are more responsive, inclusive, and sustainable.

The ecosystem mapping study conducted reveals philanthropy landscapes that show pockets of collaboration with gaps in areas such as involving other actors in the space. Community Foundations in Malawi and Zimbabwe serve as epicentres of community philanthropy, as they interact with various actors. Community Foundations exhibit

undeniable deep-rooted community trust, a vibrant culture of collaboration, and a clear commitment to learning. These organisations highlighted aspirational visions for an inclusive, transparent, and well-connected ecosystem that prioritises community voice and locally led change.

However, realising this vision requires a deliberate and strategic response to the overwhelming challenges they face, primarily the pervasive funding constraints that threaten sustainability and amplify competition. The path forward, therefore, is not one of creating something new from scratch, but of incrementally strengthening what already exists. This necessitates coordinated investment in the essential pillars of a thriving ecosystem: enhancing connectivity through regular convenings, building capacity through joint learning, fostering deeper collaboration through pooled resources, developing critical infrastructure, and prioritising long-term sustainability through local resource mobilisation for endowment building.

Effective ecosystem building requires patient, long-term investment in relationships and infrastructure, not quick fixes. It must be grounded in a thorough understanding

of the local context, co-created with and owned by local actors, and implemented with flexibility. The foundational step is investing in connectivity, which enables the collective action needed to address shared challenges.

In conclusion, the essential elements for success are already present. Community Foundations possess the deep roots, the resilience, the collaborative spirit, and a clear-

eyed vision for the future. What is needed now is the collective will to match their readiness. With strategic investment, coordinated action, and a steadfast commitment to empowering local actors, these Community Foundations can evolve from isolated entities into a powerful, interconnected network capable of unlocking immense potential and driving sustainable development across Malawi and Zimbabwe.



7.0 References

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About SIVIO Institute

SIVIO Institute (SI) is an independent organisation focused on ensuring that citizens are at the centre of processes of socio-economic and policy change. It aims to contribute towards Africa's inclusive socio-economic transformation. It is borne out of a desire to enhance agency as a stimulus/catalyst for inclusive political and socio-economic transformation. SIVIO's work entails multi-disciplinary, cutting edge policy research, nurturing citizens' agency to be part of the change that they want to see and working with communities to mobilise their assets to resolve some of the immediate problems they face.

SIVIO institute has three centres/programs of work focused on; (i) civic engagement (ii) philanthropy and communities and (ii) economic development and livelihoods. In the process SI addresses the following problems:

- » Inadequate performance of existing political and economic system
- » Increasing poverty and inequality
- » Limited coherence of policies across sectors
- » Ineffectual participation in public processes by non-state actors
- » Increased dependence on external resources and limited leveraging of local resources