Event Report
Prepared by Initiative for Community Advancement

Day 1: Thursday, 14 May 2026

Introduction

The Southern Africa Community Foundations Gathering, held from 14–16 May 2026 in Johannesburg, South Africa, convened practitioners, emerging Community Foundations, and organisations engaging with the Community Foundation model across Southern Africa. The gathering brought together practitioners, emerging Community Foundations, and supporting organisations from Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Co-convened by Jeremy Maarman (Initiative for Community Advancement) and Shaun Samuels (SGS Consulting), the programme created a strategic space for learning, reflection, exchange, and co-creation around the future of community-led development in the region.

Across Southern Africa, Community Foundations are increasingly emerging as critical local infrastructure for a new generation of development rooted in trust, solidarity, local ownership, and long-term accountability. At a time when traditional donor funding is tightening, civic space is under increasing strain, and development challenges are becoming more complex, the role of locally rooted and community-accountable institutions has become even more significant.

The programme was intentionally designed to move participants from relationship-building and shared understanding toward applied learning and practical co-creation. Through gallery walks, masterclasses, regional ecosystem mapping, peer exchange, and facilitated group work, participants engaged both the conceptual and practical dimensions of building financially resilient, locally rooted, and community-accountable Community Foundations.

The Learning Programme aimed to:

- Build a shared understanding of the Community Foundation model and its relevance within the Southern African context;
- Create space for peer learning, reflection, and the sharing of organisational journeys, assets, challenges, and aspirations;
- Strengthen understanding of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) as a foundation for local philanthropy;
- Map regional actors, assets, gaps, opportunities, and collaboration pathways; and
- Identify practical approaches for sustainability, resource mobilisation, resilience, and regional collective action.

Beyond the immediate learning objectives, the programme also sought to lay the foundation for a sustained regional Community of Practice. It is envisioned that this Learning Programme will evolve into an annual signature convening that anchors continued collaboration, learning, and collective action among Community Foundations and partners across Southern Africa.

Opening and Framing of the Learning Programme

Day One of the Gathering opened with a framing session by Shaun Samuels that set the tone, spirit, and intention of the learning programme. Participants from across Southern Africa were welcomed into a collaborative learning space designed to deepen understanding, strengthen relationships, and collectively reflect on the evolving role of Community Foundations within the region.

The facilitator emphasized that the gathering was not intended to be a traditional conference, but rather a participatory and reflective process grounded in peer learning, shared experiences, and collective meaning-making. Participants were encouraged to engage openly, critically, and honestly with one another around the opportunities, tensions, and realities shaping community philanthropy and locally led development in Southern Africa.

The session outlined the overall flow of the programme and highlighted key thematic areas that would guide the discussions over the three days, including:

- Community-led development
- Community Foundation identity and practice
- Asset-based and place-based approaches
- Local resource mobilization and stewardship
- Ecosystem building and regional collaboration
- Community agency, accountability, and sustainability

The facilitator also emphasized the importance of grounding discussions in the lived realities of communities across the region and creating space for Southern African experiences to shape emerging thinking and practice around Community Foundations.

Keynote Address Mamo Mohapi - CS Mott Foundation

The keynote address reflected on the growing significance of community philanthropy and Community Foundations in advancing locally driven development across Southern Africa. The address highlighted the importance of strengthening local leadership, community ownership, and collective action in responding to social, economic, and environmental challenges facing communities in the region. Mamo opened with the story of a teacher in a rural community called Mamokgena who, recognising that the children in her care needed more than a classroom, opened her home to them. This story of one person choosing to say "your future matters to me" was offered as the essence of community philanthropy: transformation that begins not with grand institutions or vast sums of money, but with people choosing to invest in one another.

Three ideas were offered as signposts for the future of community philanthropy in the region. First, that wealth must be rethought, as communities possess many forms of wealth beyond money: social capital, indigenous knowledge, voluntarism, solidarity, the creativity of young people, and the leadership of elders. Community foundations are uniquely positioned to recognise and mobilise these wider forms of wealth, giving institutional expression to the spirit of Ubuntu as a development principle.

Second, that trust is the most valuable currency. The strongest community foundations are not necessarily the largest or best-resourced, but those with the deepest relationships. In uncertain times, trusted local institutions become anchors of stability.

Third, that the future of African development must be shaped in Africa. Community foundations matter because they are rooted in place, accountable to their constituencies, and able to adapt as realities change.

The speaker concluded with a set of orienting questions for the gathering: How do we build institutions that outlast individuals? How do we engage younger generations in civic life? How do we use technology without losing human connection? And how do we respond to climate change while protecting the most vulnerable? Lasting change, the address affirmed, rarely begins in distant boardrooms. It begins in communities, in relationships, and in people who decide they will not wait for permission to shape the future.

Introductions through the gallery walk

The gallery walks served as an interactive and participatory introduction session where organizations shared their work, community contexts, approaches, and experiences in community-led development and philanthropy. Organizations from Zimbabwe, Malawi, Mozambique, and South Africa presented examples of how they are mobilizing communities, supporting grassroots initiatives, and strengthening local ownership of development processes.

Presentations highlighted a wide range of community-driven initiatives, including:

- Community grantmaking

- Youth and women empowerment programmes
- Climate change and sustainable agriculture initiatives
- Education support programmes
- Community endowment building
- Social enterprises
- Community giving circles
- Football tournaments and cultural events as fundraising mechanisms
- Community-based accountability and governance systems

A recurring theme throughout the gallery walk was the importance of community participation, trust-building, collaboration with traditional and local leadership structures, and the recognition that communities already possess assets, knowledge, and systems that can drive development when properly supported.

Participants also reflected on common regional challenges, including:

- Limited local resources
- Donor dependency
- Poverty and unemployment
- Climate-related vulnerabilities
- Weak infrastructure
- Governance and policy barriers
- The need for stronger local ownership and sustainability mechanisms

Despite differing contexts, participants identified strong common values across their work, including dignity, solidarity, accountability, participation, and local leadership.

Shared Understanding of Community Foundations in Southern Africa

The session focused on building a shared understanding of what Community Foundations are and what they mean within the Southern African context. Through facilitated group discussions and thematic table engagements, participants critically examined the meaning, purpose, and defining characteristics of Community Foundations. The discussions surfaced both areas of consensus and areas requiring further reflection.

What the Room Agreed On

There was more convergence than expected across the following principles:

- Place-based identity: a community foundation is defined first by geography. The community it serves must be clearly bounded, and people within that geography must be able to identify with it. The principle articulated was going 'inch wide, mile deep' rather than kilometre wide and inch deep. Breadth without depth does not produce accountability.
- Community agency: a CF exists to give effect to community priorities, not to substitute its own or those of its funders. The locus of decision-making must always rest with the community.
- Non-partisanship: independence from government, business, and party-political influence is foundational and non-negotiable, though the realities of registration law in different countries complicate this in practice.
- Local governance: community members and their trusted representatives must be meaningfully involved in governance, not merely consulted as an afterthought.
- Stewardship and trust: the CF holds resources on behalf of the community. Transparency and accountability are not optional features but the very basis on which trust is built and maintained.
- Convening across difference: bringing together different groups within the defined community, across age, identity, and interest, is itself a core function of the community foundation.
- Capacity strengthening: building skills and leadership in community-based organisations and community members directly is broadly accepted as a core role.

The Grey Areas

Four areas generated sustained debate and were named as grey areas requiring ongoing discussion rather than easy consensus:

Program versus project delivery

There was real discomfort about community foundations that implement programs, and at the same time there was honest acknowledgment that some foundations have had to move in this direction simply to survive. The distinction the room worked toward: a CF can implement programs, but those programs must strengthen community and grantee capacity. A CF must not deliver projects that put it in competition with the organisations it is supposed to be supporting. The practical formulation: build the capacity of the committee that will construct the school block. Do not construct it yourself.

Donor-driven thematic focus

When a donor arrives with resources attached to a specific theme, the temptation is for the CF to absorb that priority as its own. The room was clear that the CF's role in such a moment is to mediate, not to decide. To take the opportunity to the community. To let communities exercise their agency in determining whether and how to engage. The CF does not own the issues. The community does.

Government interference and independence

Participants from several countries described ways in which legislation and registration frameworks give governments varying degrees of power over board composition, appointments, and organisational direction. This was acknowledged as a live and present threat to independence. A key insight: the type of legal registration a community foundation chooses is not a bureaucratic detail; it is a strategic decision with direct implications for how much independence the organisation can actually protect.

Geographic scope

How large or small can a community foundation's geography be? The answer was not a rule but a principle: the geography must be one that people genuinely identify with, and focused enough that the foundation can develop real depth of relationship and accountability rather than surface coverage of a vast area. A practical solution for strong sub-local identities within a larger geography: establish a named fund within the larger community foundation, rather than creating a separate institution for every locality.

Place versus interest

A specific and productive debate arose from the example of two community foundations in Tamale, Ghana: one place-based, one organised around Muslim women. The consensus: place should be the primary organising principle. A community foundation organised around a single identity group becomes exclusive by design, whereas a place-based foundation must bridge divides and be inclusive of all groups within the geography.

Launch: SDG Toolkit for Community Foundations and Local Development

The SDG Toolkit for Community Foundations and Local Development was officially launched as a practical resource aimed at helping Community Foundations connect local development work with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Research conducted across participating countries revealed that many community-led initiatives already directly contribute to multiple SDGs, even where organizations may not explicitly frame their work within SDG language.

The toolkit was developed to:

- Strengthen understanding of the SDGs
- Help Community Foundations align local initiatives with SDG indicators
- Support community-based monitoring and reporting
- Promote locally generated evidence and accountability
- Increase community participation in development tracking processes

Discussions also highlighted several limitations of current global SDG frameworks, including:

- Weak incorporation of community agency
- Over-reliance on government self-reporting
- Limited contextual flexibility
- Challenges in linking local realities to global indicators

Participants were introduced to a youth-led SDG tracking application currently under development by young people from five Southern African countries. The application aims to support local data collection, reporting, and community-based evidence generation using mobile technology.

The toolkit and accompanying facilitator guides are being translated into multiple regional languages, including isiZulu, Chichewa, isiNdebele, and Swahili, to increase accessibility and contextual relevance.

The launch reinforced the importance of developing African-led knowledge systems, tools, and innovation platforms that reflect local realities and strengthen grassroots participation in development processes.

Key Takeaways from Day 1

1	**Shared understanding of Community Foundations is emerging**

There was strong convergence across participants that Community Foundations are locally rooted, community-led institutions focused on mobilising and stewarding resources to respond to community priorities.

2
Context matters in defining "place-based" development
Participants emphasised that Community Foundations cannot be separated from their local realities. Language, culture, geography, and lived experience all shape how development is understood and practiced.

3
Clarifying what is non-negotiable vs context-specific is critical
A key learning was the importance of distinguishing between core principles (non-negotiables) and flexible practices that vary by context.

4
Community-led data and SDG alignment must be strengthened
The SDG Toolkit discussion highlighted the need for stronger community ownership of data, tracking, and evidence.

5
Innovation, youth leadership, and collaboration are driving the sector forward
The launch of the SDG Toolkit demonstrated growing local innovation, particularly led by young people.

Day 2: Friday, 15 May 2026

Asset-Based Community-Led Development (ABCD)

The ABCD masterclass facilitated by Sadi Motsuenyane introduced participants to Asset-Based Community-Led Development as a practical methodology for strengthening Community Foundations. The session reinforced the principle that communities are not defined by needs alone, but by existing strengths, relationships, and assets.

What ABCD Affirms

- Everyone has gifts; there is no person without something to contribute. Inclusivity is not just about counting heads but about creating the conditions in which every person's contribution can actually be made and heard.

- Communities are not empty vessels waiting to be filled. They already possess strengths, knowledge, relationships, and resources, both tangible and intangible.

- Assets include the tangible and the intangible: land, networks, culture, time, skills, passion, indigenous knowledge, and the connectors who hold a community together.
- The ABCD triangle of people (individual gifts and talents), associations (collective power), and institutions (economic anchors) works together to mobilise local assets.
- Relationships build community. Indigenous practices of collective action (ilima, litima, ukurima) are examples of ABCD already in practice across African communities. ABCD is not a Western import. It is a reclamation

The SOAR Framework

Rather than SWOT, which pulls attention toward weaknesses and threats, ABCD uses SOAR: Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results. The appreciative enquiry approach asks not 'what are your problems?' but 'what works well here?' and 'what do you aspire to?', because aspirations, when unpacked, reveal priorities more productively than problem lists, and they do so from a position of community agency rather than institutional supplication.

The Mapping Process

Before any program or intervention, ABCD requires mapping what the community already has: the people (gifts, skills, talents, including the connectors who know everybody and can see the linkages), the associations (formal and informal groups that build collective power), the institutions (schools, health centres, community foundations, the economic anchors), and the natural and physical assets available and potentially underutilised.

This mapping is not done to communities. It is done with communities, led by communities. And the process of doing it is itself transformative; communities see themselves differently as a result of articulating and documenting what they already have.

The Leaky Bucket Tool

One of the most practically resonant tools introduced was the leaky bucket, a way of helping communities understand how money flows in and out of their local economy. The core insight: when communities buy outside rather than locally, wealth leaks away and does not circulate. When local enterprises are strengthened and local procurement is supported, money multiplies within the community rather than draining out of it.

The leaky bucket also illuminates the role of the community foundation: to build the capacity of local enterprises so that communities can produce locally, buy locally, and create their own employment. The community foundation is not the answer to community poverty. It is the institution that helps communities find and use their own answers.

There was broad agreement across every table that ABCD should become part of CF strategy, not remain an interesting idea from a workshop. But with an important condition: community foundations must first do this work on themselves. The shift from a needs-based to an asset-based orientation is not a technical adjustment. It is a cultural transformation, and it has to happen inside the organisation before it can be facilitated outside it.

Specific commitments and asks from participants included: a dedicated multi-day practical ABCD training programme for CFs and CFSOs across the region; peer learning exchanges between CFs practising ABCD; and the development of ABCD tools grounded in African knowledge systems and local languages.

Shaping the Continental Community Foundation Agenda: Collaboration and Networking

This session, facilitated by Jeremy Maarman (ICA), explored Southern Africa's positioning within the broader continental Community Foundation movement and upcoming global engagements, including the Mombasa conference. The discussion highlighted the importance of coordination and representation, particularly as multiple global and regional platforms emerge. Participants reflected on the need for coherence in how African Community Foundations engage externally and define their collective voice.

Four Truths Shaping This Moment

- The shift away from external aid is structural, not temporary. USAID is not coming back. But the more significant insight was that the aid was not reaching real communities in the first place; it was absorbed by large intermediary organisations. This is a clarifying moment. Community foundations, built at the most local level, are precisely the infrastructure that should have existed all along. The moment to make that case is now.
- October 2026 is a founding moment. The Mombasa convening is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to make the case, loudly and collectively, that community foundations are the localised development infrastructure the entire sector has been calling for.
- No one is coming to save us. The spirit named for this moment was that of Mamokgena, the teacher who looked at her students, understood that they needed support, and did not wait for someone else to provide it. She acted. That spirit is what Southern Africa takes to Mombasa.
- Civil society is facing a legitimacy crisis. As organisations professionalise, they risk becoming distant from the grassroots they claim to serve. Community foundations, accountable to a defined place and embedded in local relationships, are positioned differently. That is not a limitation. It is a competitive advantage

What Southern Africa Brings

- Shared conceptual clarity, hard won over days of rigorous work, about what a community foundation is and is not.
- Grassroots, place-rooted movement with real relationships in real communities across five countries.

- A culture of giving and collective action that is indigenous to this continent, not imported, not borrowed, not dependent on external validation.
- Trust built through showing up consistently, transparently, and in alignment with values, even when resources were constrained.
- A growing and practical pathway: CBOs and NPOs can evolve into community foundations, and this movement can support that journey.

Asks for Mombasa

- A substantive masterclass on ABCD and grassroots grantmaking practice, run as a working session rather than a presentation.
- Space to bring Southern African intellectual capital to the continental table, rather than arriving only as recipients of frameworks developed elsewhere.
- Long-term and genuinely flexible donor relationships, the kind that allow CFs to follow community priorities rather than funding cycles.
- The development of a continental structure for community foundations, owned and governed by African practitioners.
- A coordinated plan to get as many CF representatives as possible to Mombasa.
- A collective articulation of the vision for African communities: what do we want, together, for the communities we serve?

Narrative Reframing

A call to actively reframe how African communities are depicted and described was made by one participant. The shadow of the dominant narrative, depicting African communities as places of deprivation, dependency, and need, continues to shape how funders, policymakers, and the media engage with the continent. Community foundations, as the institutions that know communities most intimately, carry both the credibility and the responsibility to challenge that narrative.

The question put to the room was practical and strategic: what are the photos we take and publish about African communities? What story do we tell? How do we deliberately build a counter-narrative rooted in what we know to be true: that communities are asset-rich, resilient, relational, and capable?

Decolonising Development

The decolonisation of development was named as both an intellectual and a practical agenda. The observation was made that many so-called Western development models are built on African knowledge and African practices, simply translated into other languages and given other names. Ilima. Litima. Ukurima. The practices of collective action and mutual support that ABCD describes have always existed in African communities. Reclaiming them, naming them in our own terms, and building development practice on them is not a retreat from rigour. It is an act of intellectual and cultural recovery.

Briefing: Young Practitioners' Community of Practice

This session introduced the Young Practitioners' Community of Practice (CoP), a structured initiative aimed at positioning young people as co-creators of tools, frameworks, and knowledge products for the sector. The initiative was framed as a deliberate shift in power and practice: "This is not an attempt, it is a process to get our young practitioners to take the lead in developing tools, guidelines, and frameworks."

The CoP will focus on developing deliverable outputs, including a toolkit for grassroots grantmaking and Community Foundation practice, drawing on experiences across Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. A key philosophy guiding the initiative is intergenerational collaboration, rather than replacement: "It doesn't mean if you are younger you are more innovative but we are creating space for young people to co-create across countries."

The session also emphasized visibility and recognition of young practitioners, including profiling their contributions and linking their work to continental platforms such as Africa Venture Philanthropy Alliance, Africa Philanthropy Forum, and other global convenings. The day closed with a clear intention: to strengthen collaboration, deepen African-led knowledge systems, and build a more coherent, sustainable, and youth-inclusive Community Foundation movement across Southern Africa and beyond.

It was announced that the inaugural COP cohort of approximately 10 to 12 young practitioners drawn from all five participating countries, will convene from 18 to 22 May, hosted by Valley Trust in the Valley of a Thousand Hills, KwaZulu-Natal. Their task is explicitly deliverable-based: not a workshop, not a talkshop, but a co-creation process that ends with a usable product. The ambition is for this cohort to present their work at the continental Mombasa convening, and for the COP to become a recurring, twice-yearly feature of the Southern African community foundation movement. Young people here, the facilitator affirmed, are not the leaders of tomorrow. They are the leaders of today.

Key Takeaways and Reflections

1. **Community Foundations must be clearly defined within an African context**
A central reflection was the need to move beyond imported definitions and build shared clarity on what Community Foundations mean in Southern Africa.

2. **Ecosystem strength lies in Africa's existing assets, culture of giving, and relationships**
Participants consistently highlighted that Community Foundations build on strong traditions of solidarity, reciprocity, and community giving.

3. **ABCD reinforces a shift from needs-based to asset-based development thinking**
Transformation is enabled through trust, relationships, and locally grounded facilitation rather than external solutions.

4. **There is a growing call for African-led systems, tools, and narratives**
Participants expressed the need to design their own frameworks, including calls for "Africanisation" and decolonisation of development practice.

5. **Youth leadership is emerging as a strategic force for sector innovation and continuity**
Young practitioners are being positioned not as future leaders, but as active co-creators of tools and frameworks today.

Day 3: Saturday, 16 May 2026

Sustainability, Next Steps and Regional Continuity

Panel Discussion: Financial Architecture and Sustainability for Community Foundations

Day 3 opened with a panel discussion on financial architecture and sustainability, moderated by David Barnard, a consultant with over 25 years of experience in the African NGO and philanthropy sector. Five community foundations from across the region presented their sustainability models, offering candid, practical accounts of what it takes to build financially resilient community philanthropy institutions in Southern Africa.

The session drew on lived institutional experience rather than theory. Each organisation represented a distinct approach to sustainability, shaped by its own geographic context, founding history, and community relationships. Together, their stories offer practical reference points, not blueprints to be replicated wholesale, but frameworks to be contextualised, adapted, and built upon.

Case Study 1: Micaia Foundation

Country	Founded	Model
Mozambique	2009	Hybrid Social Enterprise Model

Micaia Foundation was established in 2009 in Manica Province, an area marked by both ecological richness and structural economic marginalisation. Its founders, including Milagre Nuvunga and Andrew Kingman, asked a deceptively simple question: what if communities were not beneficiaries of development, but owners of it? Today, Micaia operates as a dual system. On one side is the Foundation, which provides grants, scholarships, research, and capacity building to more than 100,000 people. On the other is Eco-Micaia Limited, a social enterprise platform housing three commercial ventures designed to generate revenue that flows back into community development.

The first expression of this model was Ndzou Camp, established in 2010 on communal land near the Mozambique–Zimbabwe border. Built within a conservation landscape where elephants move freely, the lodge took a full year of dialogue before construction even began. "We had to be sure the community understood what it meant to host tourists, not just that they wanted the income," Daniela explained. The revenue model reflects that shared ownership: 60% of income goes directly to the community, 40% to Eco-Micaia. Even during COVID-19 and cyclone disruptions, when tourism collapsed, the system adapted rather than collapsed, shifting to training use and modified payment structures.

A second pillar is Baobab Products Mozambique, now one of Africa's leading organic exporters. The company purchases nearly 400 tons of baobab annually from over 3,000 women harvesters. Crucially, those women are shareholders, holding 20% equity in the company. Women who once exchanged harvests for shoes now earn consistent seasonal incomes and participate in a formal value chain.

The third enterprise, Mozambique Honey Company, began with an external investor who recognised the untapped potential of local beekeeping systems. "We must look for social investors," Daniela noted. "Because banks charge more than 30% interest. Social investors come at 10%. So, we must look for this group." Today, the honey business supports around 1,000 beekeepers, most of them women, operating through cooperative structures.

Across all three enterprises, one logic holds: community participation is structural. The lesson from Micaia is not simply that business and development can coexist. It is that when communities are positioned as co-owners of value chains, the distinction between the two begins to dissolve entirely.

Key Lessons
• Social and commercial objectives can coexist when rooted in community participation and local ownership.
• Sustainable enterprise development requires patience; strong supplier ecosystems must be built before financial returns can emerge.
• Social investors, rather than commercial banks, are better aligned partners for mission-driven enterprises.
• Choosing the wrong investor can threaten the entire enterprise; due diligence on mission alignment is essential.
• The asset-based community development mindset, seeing community needs as opportunities rather than deficits, is foundational.

Case Study 2: Zambian Governance Foundation (ZGF)

Country	Founded	Model
Zambia	2009	From Donor Dependence to Diversified Sustainability

By 2015, the Zambia Governance Foundation, established in 2009 as a joint mechanism by corporate partners to support civil society and democratic governance in Zambia had been reduced to two funders. By 2017, it was down to almost nothing. Staff had their salaries halved. Skilled people left. The entire organisation was running on three members of staff. For many institutions, that is the end.

"We were very low. I will not lie. It was a very different point. You had a lot of resistance, and you just had to commit to the cause." But ZGF did not end. What happened instead is one of the most instructive stories of institutional reinvention in the region.

ZGF was established by a group of corporate partners who came together to solve a problem: Zambia's civil society needed support, and no dedicated funding mechanism existed. They pooled resources, built a governance structure, hired a CEO, and began making grants to organisations working on democracy and governance. For a while it worked well. ZGF acquired its own property buying rather than renting, a decision that gave it a physical anchor it would later need. The founding board was strong. There was a clear mission.

Then the corporate partners began to drift. Some felt ZGF had moved beyond the governance agenda they had originally backed. Funding contracted. By 2015, the organisation that had once been well-resourced was barely surviving.

A conference in South Africa in 2016 was the turning point. The CEO, Barbara Nöst, who had led ZGF since its founding and would remain its only executive leader for fifteen years came into contact with new thinking about community philanthropy in Africa. Then came a chance encounter at a meeting in Kenya that changed everything. "One of our board members went to a meeting in Kenya. And there, through interactions, she was able to attract some funding coming to ZGF. She got a card, gave it to the CEO of ZGF who then contacted Jenny Hodgson, of the Global Fund for Community Foundations. That became our lifeline."

Jenny opened a door that would reorient the entire organisation. ZGF launched its new direction publicly in 2018 at an event pointedly themed 'From Dependency to Ascendency' at the Alliance Française in Lusaka, drawing 150 participants. The reorientation was not cosmetic. The organisation rebuilt itself around three pillars: civil society, community development, and developing the field of African philanthropy.

What makes ZGF's sustainability story distinctive is not the large programme it eventually secured but how it survived the years before that, and what discipline it maintained even after. "We never looking for huge money every time. I am deliberate about it, we do not cancel the small relationships. Get a little money here, get a little money there. And make sure the relationship lasts longer than any single grant." — Jackson Kalipenta.

Consultancy became a lifeline. A group of anonymous professional donors, which ZGF calls the Kalulu Project, has provided small but consistent funding across multiple years. International relationships, built through attendance at webinars, conferences, and sector gatherings, brought in funders who would never have found ZGF otherwise. When the Zamkanda funding arrived, the CEO was sceptical. Too much money, she said. Too risky to depend on. Despite receiving it, ZGF kept every other income stream active.

What ZGF Would Tell Anyone Starting Over?

"Vision and leadership. You know what I'm saying. Strong founders who know what they want to achieve that really helped us survive. Because even when we went under, there was someone who could see the vision on the other side."

And what to avoid: never let one funder account for more than 60% of your budget. And if you are going to try a social enterprise, make it a separate entity with professionals running it.

He paused, then added something that had the whole room nodding: 'A seed must die before it can germinate. Going under was almost like a seed that had to die so that we could discover our real mission on the other side.'

Key Lessons

- Sustainability is not only financial; strong governance, committed leadership, and mission clarity are equally essential pillars of resilience.
- A funding crisis, navigated with vision, can catalyse an organisation's most important strategic reinvention.

- Relationships are the most undervalued resource in fundraising; consistent sector participation generates connections that no proposal process can replace.
- No single funder should account for more than 60% of organisational income, regardless of grant size.
- Vision and leadership from founders and leaders who know what they want to achieve are what sustain an organisation when resources fail.

Case Study 3: Community Foundation for the Western Region of Zimbabwe (CFWRZ)

Country	Founded	Model
Zimbabwe	1998	Community Endowment Building Through Local Ownership

When Buhle Ndlovu talks about the endowment fund at the Community Foundation for the Western Region of Zimbabwe, she does not reach for financial language. She tells the story of a whale.

'A whale,' she explained to the Johannesburg gathering, 'goes offshore. The fishermen go in and cut off some pieces of meat. But they do not kill it. And so the whale goes back into the ocean or the sea, waiting to regenerate.'

> *"We are saying to the communities: we want to build this kind of fund. But what we use is the proceeds from that fund. So, the communities understand it is a huge thing that we are looking at. We are not looking at the chicken that lays the golden egg, because they know what happens to that chicken." — Buhle, CFWRZ*

The communities of western Zimbabwe know what happens to the chicken that lays golden eggs. They kill it. CFWRZ's entire endowment strategy is built on persuading communities to build a whale instead. The Community Foundation for the Western Region of Zimbabwe (CFWRZ) did not begin as an imported idea. It began with a local question: how do we build something that cannot be taken away? Its roots lie in Qogelela, a Ndebele tradition of collective resource pooling, where communities contribute to shared systems of survival.

From this tradition, more than 50,000 community members, many of them rural women contributed to an initial endowment of approximately US$8,000. It was small in monetary terms, but enormous in meaning: ownership had been local from the beginning.

At the centre of CFWRZ is its endowment fund, Insika Yabache, "the community well." The metaphor is intentional. A well must be protected, not consumed. "We are not looking at the chicken that lays the golden egg," explained Buhle Ndlovu. "Because they know what happens to that chicken."

Then came 2008. Zimbabwe's hyperinflationary collapse wiped out the financial value of the endowment almost entirely. But the institution did not disappear. Its relationships, governance structures, and physical assets remained intact. In the aftermath, the organisation confronted an uncomfortable truth: it had drifted away from its core principle. In its effort to respond to immediate needs, it had begun to prioritise project implementation over endowment protection.

Rebuilding required a return to discipline. Today, CFWRZ balances immediate community interventions with long-term capital preservation. The endowment is no longer treated as an account, it is treated as infrastructure. Its survival story rests on a simple insight: financial capital can disappear overnight, but social capital endures.

Key Lessons

- Community ownership, demonstrated through tangible local contributions, builds the institutional legitimacy that attracts and retains external donors.
- Endowment preservation must be the explicit, protected core of a community foundation's mandate; project implementation must never displace it.
- Balancing immediate community needs with long-term endowment growth requires clear policy and deliberate allocation mechanisms.
- Physical assets provide resilience that financial savings alone cannot: properties survived the 2008 crisis when the endowment did not.
- International community foundation models must be contextualised in language, metaphor, and governance to work in African settings.

Case Study 4: The Valley Trust

Country	Founded	Model
KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa	1951	Leveraging Property and Community Assets for Sustainability

In the Valley of a Thousand Hills in KwaZulu-Natal, The Valley Trust has been working with communities since 1951. What began as a rural health initiative has evolved into one of South Africa's most enduring development institutions. The Valley Trust's most distinctive sustainability feature is also its oldest: property. Over the decades, the organisation accumulated a substantial portfolio of land and buildings in the Valley donated by departing sugar mill owners, built by supporters, constructed around the evolving needs of the community it served.

Today, property income generates approximately 55 to 60% of the Valley Trust's total revenue. Volunteer houses renovated into guesthouse accommodation. Vacant offices rented to local businesses. A conference hall and seminar rooms let out for community meetings and weddings and parties. The former maternity waiting home is now an overnight facility called the Garden Camp, housing university research groups and construction workers and choirs practising for regional competitions.

And then there is the government clinic itself, the direct institutional descendant of the clinic Halley Stott opened in 1950. It is now run by the government Department of Health. And the government pays rent to the Valley Trust to use the space.

"The previous activity of the clinic has been handed over to government. Now it is run by the Department of Health. And they are one of our biggest tenants," said Sindi Mkhize, the Executive Director of the Trust.

For many years, the Valley Trust had relied heavily on USAID which at its peak provided 70% of the organisation's total budget. When USAID began its South Africa exit in 2020, shifting resources to countries where it had established fewer local partners, the Valley Trust lost the majority of its operating budget almost at once.

"We had to go back to the total budget. Our property became the main supporter. We learned a hard lesson about what it means to put all your eggs in one basket and how it feels when that basket is taken away."

It was the crisis that revealed what the organisation had been quietly building for decades. The land was still there. The buildings were still there. The community relationships, the reason people left bequests to the Valley Trust from retirement homes in the UK, the reason churches made annual contributions, the reason retired nurses and teachers and accountants turned up to volunteer their expertise were still there.

She described receiving an email from someone she didn't know, saying that their aunt had passed away and left £2,000 for the Valley Trust. It is not a large amount. But it is a story about what seventy-five years of consistent, values-driven presence in a community looks like when translated into financial terms.

Sindi's philosophy of sustainability: "Saving money is as important as making money. If we run an event, we don't spend on things we can get donated. We call our friends. We only spend when we cannot find another way. And because we are an NPO with a Section 18A tax exemption, we are not paying for that. As an NPO, that should be a rule."

Over 75 years, trust itself has become an asset: bequests, volunteer expertise, and community contributions now form part of its operating reality. The lesson is simple but powerful: sustainability is built not only in funding cycles, but in land, relationships, and time.

Key Lessons

- Physical assets accumulated through donation, investment, and strategic management over decades can become the primary sustainability spine of a civil society organisation.
- Donor diversification is not optional: no single source should ever account for 70% of an organisation's income.
- Seventy-five years of consistent community presence generates financial returns in the form of bequests, giving, and volunteered expertise that cannot be replicated quickly.
- Recognising and maximising existing assets (a vacant building, unused land, a conference space) is more immediately accessible than seeking new external funding.
- Saving is making: the discipline of minimising expenditure through in-kind contributions is as financially significant as income generation.

Case Study 5: uThungulu Community Foundation (UCF)

Country	Founded	Model
Richards Bay, KwaZulu-Natal	1999	Building a Long-Term Endowment Model

Simpiwe Mbatha has been with the uThungulu Community Foundation long enough to remember when the endowment was R5 million. He watched it grow, through patient investment and disciplined governance, to more than R40 million over a period of fourteen years without a single withdrawal. Not one rand taken out. That is an extraordinary institutional achievement.

Richards Bay is one of the most economically significant cities in South Africa, home to the deepest natural harbour on the African continent, a massive coal export terminal, and a concentration of heavy industry that generates enormous wealth. The question, in the mid-1990s: how do we make sure this economic activity actually reaches the people living alongside it?

A steering committee brought together business leaders, traditional leaders, and community representatives. They studied the community foundation model in the United States. They visited Nairobi to understand how it was being adapted in Africa. They went to the local amakhosi, the traditional chiefs and earned their support.

"Before the launch, the steering committee decided that on the part of the board, there must be a representative from the business sector, and there must be other community leaders. And then His Majesty was invited. And during the blessing ceremony, His Majesty gave an opportunity to make an appeal and the community, they would donate," said Simpiwe.

Each year, his Majesty the King of the Zulu Nation gave his blessing to the Foundation and made an appeal to the business community. Each year, corporates responded. It was not merely a fundraising mechanism. It was a demonstration of cultural legitimacy, a signal, in one of the most traditional parts of KwaZulu-Natal, that this institution was sanctioned by those whose sanction mattered most. The Foundation launched in July 1999 with an endowment of R5 million, built from corporate contributions and matched funding. An operational partner, CSMO, covered the Foundation's running costs for its first eighteen years — meaning that every rand of endowment growth could stay invested, untouched. By 2016, the endowment had grown from R5 million to more than R40 million.

"The advice from our fund advisor is that for the endowment to remain sustainable, we must not exceed 5% of the investment fund that we have. Up until COVID, we started withdrawing at R2 million. But before that, from 1999 to 2016 we did not touch it at all," explained Simpiwe.

His Majesty passed away in 2021. With him went the annual fundraising ritual that had underpinned UCF's relationship with local corporates for twenty years. The Foundation is now working to build new fundraising structures to replace what was, by any measure, an exceptional and contextually specific mechanism.

Simpiwe was candid about the threat his organisation faces. It does not come from outside. It comes from within. The endowment's size has created pressure from board members and founding community leaders who have been associated with UCF for its entire 26-year history. Some of them are beginning to ask: we have been here all this time. When do we benefit?

"I am fighting them. Because I know that governance failure is the biggest threat to community foundations. It doesn't matter how big your endowment is if the board is not protecting it. There are those who've been in the foundation for quite a number of years and they've never benefited anything, so they are saying they want a share. That is the biggest threat I am facing right now."

UCF is currently constructing a technology and innovation hub that will serve the community's young people and generate rental income for the Foundation. "After twenty-six years, we are still learning. Still adjusting. Still taking baby steps sometimes. But we are still here. And I think that is what sustainability looks like," said Simpiwe.

Key Lessons

• An endowment, built patiently and protected through disciplined governance, is the most powerful long-term sustainability instrument available to a community foundation.

• Contextualisation is essential: international CF models must be adapted to local cultural, political, and economic realities to gain authentic legitimacy.

• Traditional and cultural authority, when genuinely engaged, can be a fundraising mechanism of extraordinary effectiveness, though this is deeply contextual and relationship-dependent.

• Governance failure is an existential threat that no level of financial strength can protect against; board transitions must be planned and managed with care.

• The work of explaining endowment principles to boards, corporate partners, and community members is permanent and must never be assumed to be complete.

Cross-Cutting Lessons from the Sustainability Panel

Drawing together the five presentations, moderator David Barnard identified common structural features across organisations with very different contexts, founding histories, and sustainability models:

- Sustainability emerges not from a single strategy but from the patient layering of multiple income streams around a solid institutional core: governance, mission clarity, community trust, and leadership.
- Leadership was identified as either the most enabling or the most limiting factor in every organisation's trajectory. Vision sustains organisations through their hardest years.
- Community trust is both the foundation's primary asset and its most important protection. It generates financial returns (bequests, giving, volunteer expertise) that no funding proposal can replicate.
- Diversification is not a goal to be engineered in a crisis; it is the natural outcome of institutional depth built over time through consistent community presence.
- The leaky bucket applies to organisations as well as communities. When expertise and resources are consistently sought externally, the sector leaks its own intellectual capital. The five case studies demonstrate that significant knowledge exists within the movement itself.

Overview of Organisational Support Needs and Contributions

As part of the engagement process during the Southern Africa Community Foundations Gathering, participating organisations were invited to reflect on both their support needs and the areas in which they are able to offer support to others. This exercise was designed to strengthen peer learning, deepen collaboration, and promote reciprocal capacity building across the network of Community Foundations and partner organisations.

Organisations were therefore tasked with identifying:

- The key areas where they require technical, institutional, or strategic support to strengthen their work; and
- The skills, expertise, and resources they can contribute to support the growth and sustainability of other organisations within the network.

The responses highlight both common challenges such as institutional strengthening, fundraising, governance, and sustainability as well as a strong willingness among organisations to share practical experience in areas such as community mobilisation, social enterprise development, grantmaking systems, and capacity building.

Southern Africa Community Foundations Gathering – Support Exchange Register

Organisation	Needs	Offers
RISE FOR PHoKA	Building a sustainable social enterprise; institutional policies and frameworks; connections with institutions, learning exchanges and funders; training for board and staff; conceptual clarity on Community Foundations	Hosting international volunteers; website development for CBOs; online fundraising campaigns; social media awareness strategies
The Valley Trust (CF)	CF establishment capacity building; grantmaking systems (ABCD approach); increased internal resource allocation; fundraising support and donor linkages; strategic communication; mentorship; conceptual clarity on CFs	Venue support for CF meetings/events; access to audiences for research; sharing institutional lessons
Mudzi Connect	Social enterprise establishment; documentation of success stories; conceptual clarity on CFs	Grantmaking experience; development of CF support tools
Tshwane Leadership Foundation	Structuring as a Community Foundation; strategic positioning as a CF	Partnership building; social enterprise development (spirituality and work integration); Urban Ministry and Leadership training; conceptual clarity on CFs
Western Region Foundation (WRF)	Endowment diversification; communications and storytelling; ABCD capacity building; CF fundraising; conceptual clarity on CFs	Co-facilitating CF sustainability processes; CF learning spaces; community mobilisation; financial management systems setup

Initiative for Community Advancement (ICA)	Match funding; endowment building training; communications and marketing; digital grant tracking platform; donor management systems; CF training	Peer learning exchanges; PMEL frameworks; founding director experience sharing
LU SO LANGA Community Foundation	Institutional strengthening; ABCD practical skills; M&E tools; matching grants; website management and rebranding	Regional CF networking; community mobilisation skills
Micaia Foundation	Cross-country exchange platforms; grantmaking systems and coalitions; ABCD training; regional strategy development	Social enterprise sustainability experience; local resource mobilisation training; international network engagement
Kankole Community Foundation	Donor grants and material support	Skills development training; sexual abuse prevention; drug abuse awareness programmes
Kaluluzi Community Foundation	Donor grants; networks and partnerships; resource mobilisation support	CF conceptual clarity; youth training and skills development; child protection training; women's empowerment support
Zambia Governance Foundation (ZGF)	Tools to monitor CF growth; ABCD implementation support	Community-led development training; dissemination of learning materials; participatory governance approaches
Chinzete Community Foundation	Capacity building programmes; global networking; national associations	Local resource mobilisation; asset mobilisation strategies; development of supporting tools
Uluntu Community Foundation (Zimbabwe)	Core funding and sustainability; governance strengthening; M&E systems; staff/board/volunteer capacity building; fundraising and partnerships; communications and storytelling; ABCD alignment; endowment building	Peer learning exchanges; training and skills development
Grassroot Action and Support Organisation (GASO)	Social enterprise funding; capacity strengthening; mobilisation and fundraising strategy	Contextual fundraising using culture; stakeholder engagement strategies; CF conceptual clarity
uThungulu Community Foundation	Sustainability strategy for R20 million endowment; reducing donor dependency; long-term organisational sustainability	Peer learning and mentorship; operational systems and policies; sustainability lessons
Nyankanga Community Foundation	Capacity building programmes; global networking	CF tools and frameworks; resource mobilisation strategies

Closing Reflections and Key Takeaways

The 2026 Southern Africa Community Foundations Gathering produced something that most gatherings do not: genuine conceptual clarity, hard-won through hours of detailed and sometimes uncomfortable work. The room debated, disagreed, refined, and eventually landed on shared language that participants can carry back to their own contexts and bring to the continental table in October.

Five threads ran consistently through every session of the gathering, and they are the threads that the movement now carries forward:

- Place is the anchor. Community foundations derive their accountability, their identity, and their legitimacy from a defined geography that people genuinely identify with. This is not a bureaucratic distinction; it is the foundation of everything.
- Assets, not deficits. The shift from needs-based to asset-based thinking is not a technical adjustment. It is a cultural and philosophical reorientation, and the sector must model it before it can facilitate it in communities.
- Trust is built slowly. Whether between a CF and its community, between practitioners across countries, or between a donor and a CF, trust is the currency and it accumulates through showing up, consistently, transparently, over time.
- The movement is real. After this gathering, Southern Africa arrives at the October 2026 convening with shared language, shared concepts, shared tools in development, and shared resolve. That is the beginning of showing up as a movement.
- The moment is now. Not eventually. Not when conditions improve. Not after the next planning cycle. The financial infrastructure of community-led development is needed now, and community foundations are that infrastructure.

Way Forward: From Reflection to Action

The gathering does not end with insight alone. It opens a clearer pathway for collective action across the sector.

1	**Strengthen peer learning and exchange** There is value in formalising structured peer learning between community foundations in the region — particularly around endowments, enterprise models, governance systems, and leadership transitions.

2	**Invest in leadership and governance systems** Given the centrality of leadership, there is an urgent need for deliberate investment in board development, succession planning, and governance strengthening as core sustainability tools.

3	**Deepen work on income diversification models** Further exploration is needed on practical pathways for diversification, including social enterprise, property-based income, local philanthropy, and blended finance models that reduce vulnerability to single funders.

4	**Build and protect community trust systems** Community engagement should not be treated as a programmatic function but as an institutional asset. Mechanisms for transparency, participation, and shared decision-making must be strengthened.

5	**Document and share African-led practice** The case studies presented in this gathering demonstrate the value of African-generated knowledge. There is a clear opportunity to systematically document, publish, and circulate these experiences across the continent.

Participating Organisations

Participants from the following organisations attended the 2026 Southern Africa Community Foundations Gathering:

- Micaia Foundation, Mozambique
- Zambian Governance Foundation (ZGF), Zambia
- Community Foundation for the Western Region of Zimbabwe (CFWRZ), Zimbabwe
- The Valley Trust, South Africa
- uThungulu Community Foundation (UCF), South Africa
- Initiative for Community Advancement (ICA), South Africa
- Mudzi Connect
- SGS Consulting
- Mott Foundation
- Ford Foundation
- Uluntu Community Foundation
- Luso Langa Community Foundation
- Rise for Phoka
- City of Tshwane

Program: Regional Community Foundation Learning Programme
Event Photos: thestratum55.pixieset.com/southernafricacommunityfoundationsgathering
Event Video: Google Drive — Event Video Recordings

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