UK Panel Session
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This panel session asks how foundations define and meet their commitments to those they fund and to wider society.

In different ways, the papers suggest that offering something more than money is in part, or even largely, the answer. This is so, whether it's offering support for capacity building, as Cairns and Chambers describe; whether it's encouraging funders to *stretch* further, as Harrow and Pharoah suggest is both possible and necessary; or whether it's adding value to grant-making through the range of strategies described by Leat and Kumar.

The papers indicate growing momentum behind the idea that 'grant-making' is about more than making grants. I've observed this development in my research too, which focuses on individual rich donors, rather than foundations, and where the most cutting edge 'new philanthropists' are in part defined by their insistence that they do far more than just hand over cash, and are often very dismissive of those they view as careless, arms-length, cheque-writers.

But the emergence of any consensus should probably always make us a bit nervous, so I will begin by questioning the assumption that a sign of being a serious and committed funder necessarily involves ranging beyond the original brief of grant-making. And then I'll make two briefer points about what is meant by 'commitment' and how accessible this agenda is to the wider foundation sector.

The consensus that offering 'more than money' is the right thing to do, is nicely summed up in Leat and Kumar's paper, when they suggest that grant-makers have a concern that simply doling out money means they're just acting like "over-indulgent aunts". That comment makes me wonder if this urge to 'add value' is wholly driven by instrumental reasons, or is also about the wish to be seen as a "good funder". There is an extensive sociological literature on gift-giving which notes that exchanges involving *only* money are widely perceived as the worst kind of transactions – they feel impersonal, cold, calculated, and uncomfortable for both giver and receiver, especially within relationships that are meant to involve compassion and care.

The gift-giving literature repeatedly notes that money is not an equal member of the gift world. For example, in his book ‘The Philosophy of Money’ , Georg Simmel points out the particular inadequacy of money as a gift, and notes that it is a sign of refinement to make the money value of a present as imperceptible as possible. In our daily lives, we all know the difference between receiving a well-chosen present versus a book voucher, which is a thinly disguised ‘cash gift’. The reason that buying gifts for loved ones is so stressful is because we are judged by the *thought* that appears to have gone into the gift, rather than just its price tag.

So if thoughtfulness is the hallmark of excellent giving between family and friends, why shouldn’t the givers of grants try to re-package their transactions in a way that diverts attention away from their actual financial value and emphasises instead their genuine commitment and concern for the welfare of the recipient, their organisation and wider civil society?

Yet the process of deflecting attention from the hard currency involved in grant-making, may in some ways represent a backward step. The desire of modern funders to offer assistance to recipients and monitor the spending of their money has echoes of the idea of scientific philanthropy from over a century ago. This approach rejected the simple dishing out of cash in favour of what the Charity Organisation Society (COS) called, “relief plus a plan”. Poor recipients only got money if they accepted intervention in their household budgeting. So might any trend towards offering advice as an integral part of a grant, indicate a revival of distrust in management and economic decisions making by poor organisations and poor people, rather than a sign of strengthened commitment to them?

And I wonder if the attempt to shift the focus *away* from money and onto the additional help that’s on offer, is in part about our ongoing discomfort with the implications of inequality, power and control that are involved in purely money exchanges?

You might think I am over-egging this point, but the attempt to dismiss the importance of money in philanthropic exchanges can reach ridiculous levels, with charities insisting that however much money a donor gives, what really matters is their input of ideas and encouragement. I read a quote to that effect from a charity chief executive who'd received over $20 million from one donor, and I don't think it's overly-cynical to suggest we know which he'd choose if given the choice between only the $20m or only the very good advice and support offered by this donor.

Of course, these papers don't suggest that the extras matter more than the money, though they might be read as implying that the debate is about the *form* these 'extras' take, rather than whether there's evidence that *any* sort of value-added strings attached model delivers better results than no-frills grant-making. It'd be interesting to hear of studies which include a control group of organisations that *only* received money, alongside those that received different forms of support so we could better answer that question.

I will end with two final two points on the idea of commitment and how accessible this agenda is to the wider foundation sector.

The panel points out that commitment is an ambiguous concept – commitment by whom, to whom and for what end?

Cairns and Chamber's paper finds that the funder's rationale for offering additional support includes a desire to ensure good use of their money. That sounds to me a bit more like surveillance than support. It is not unreasonable for the funder to want to know their money is well spent, but it may well be stretching the definition of 'commitment' to include it in that approach.

The same paper also notes that the reason people apply for grants is to get money, and that they accept the 'extras' with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Which makes me wonder if commitment can be something you're obliged to accept whether you want it or not?

Finally, all three papers do a great job of describing the many different ways that grant-makers can add value, before, during and after the transfer of funds. Yet do we know whether giving 'more than money' is typical or the exception? The grant-giver studied by Leat and Kumar is the biggest in the UK, and the Trust in Cairns and Chamber's paper is anonymised but I'd hazard a guess it's relatively large. Yet Harrow and Pharoah point out that the foundation sector includes a very small number of big organisations and a long tail of much smaller organisations. It would be interesting to explore any correlation between the size of the grant-maker and the extent of commitments of this sort that they can offer.

If ‘added value’ is a way of stretching the impact of grants and comes to be considered a defining feature of being a good and committed funder, can all foundations aspire to it, or just the usual elite few?