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Developing an International Philanthropy Dataset: Reflections from the 2025 Global Philanthropy Environment Index

Abstract

This research note reflects on the making of the 2025 Global Philanthropy Environment Index (GPEI), *an international index that assesses the enabling environment for philanthropy across 95 economies. Philanthropy is an umbrella concept that encompasses diverse meanings and traditions worldwide, and research on global philanthropy is often relative rather than absolute when comparing across differing legal, political, and social contexts. This reflection explores: 1) the challenges of undertaking comparative research 2) the process of developing an international philanthropy dataset, and 3) the practical benefits of comparative philanthropy data.*

Keywords: global philanthropy; community-engaged research; local expertise; international datasets

Introduction

Similar to food and music, philanthropy is a language that can build bridges between cultures and peoples. Philanthropy is an umbrella concept that encompasses diverse meanings, practices, and moral languages of generosity and giving worldwide. Expressions of philanthropy demonstrate closely held personal values that are shaped by long-standing traditions and current environments. And, the study of philanthropy helps to surface the multiplicity of meanings and build these bridges.

Nevertheless, the study of cross-cultural and global philanthropy is a complex endeavor. The word "philanthropy" does not translate consistently across languages and cultures; global North-South power dynamics permeate the research; and the application of findings benefits from local expertise. These issues raise several questions, including how to build research on philanthropy across different cultures and traditions while mitigating power dynamics. Indeed, these issues make it difficult, albeit not impossible, to engage in comparative research and build international datasets.

This research note[1] first describes the challenges associated with undertaking comparative research. Next, it details the process of developing the 2025 *Global Philanthropy Environment Index* (*GPEI*)[2] and efforts undertaken to address these issues. Finally, key research findings are shared from the 2025 *GPEI*, alongside use cases from research and practice.

Discussion

1. Challenges of Comparative Research

Philanthropy is diverse in meaning, motivation, and practice through space and time.

Its meanings and uses have varied over the centuries. For example, within Western traditions, the meaning and use of philanthropy transitioned from philosophical inquiries into human consciousness to expressions of the universal love of humankind.[3] In recent years, philanthropy has often been measured by acts of goodness.[4]

Nevertheless, modern academic studies on philanthropy reveal a lack of consensus regarding its purpose and nature.[5] For example, "voluntary action for the public good"[6] is a definition that emphasizes the voluntary nature and external expressions of philanthropy. On the one hand, this definition addresses earlier debates about motivations for giving and removes presumptions of pure altruism or egoism.[7] On the other hand, it does not adequately capture obligatory religious giving via zakat, tzedakah, and tithing. Nor does it capture restraint from bad actions as philanthropic, a partial definition which resonates

3   Marty Sulek, "On the Modern Meaning of Philanthropy," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (2010): 193-212, https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764009333052.
4   Shariq Siddiqui, "Muslim Philanthropy: Living Beyond a Western Definition," *Voluntary Sector Review* 13, no. 3 (2022): 338–54, https://doi.org/10.1332/204080521x16366613535698; Sulek, 193-212; Pamala Wiepking, "The Global Study of Philanthropic Behavior," *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 32 (2021): 194-203, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-020-00279-6.
5   Sulek, 193-212.
6   Robert Payton and Michael Moody, *Understanding Philanthropy: Its Meaning and Mission* (Indiana University Press, 2008).
7   Dwight Burlingame, "Altruism and Philanthropy: Definitional Issues" (Indiana University Center on Philanthropy, 1993).

with nearly half of the general American population.[8]

In public discourse, the term philanthropy is oft associated with the idea of being wealthy, famous, White, or male, and current studies measure philanthropy in narrow ways, thereby omitting local contexts where communities are generous but by different standards.[9] These connotations make the history of some people visible – typically those who are White, wealthy, elite, powerful, or exceptional.

Research on philanthropy is also responsive to gathered and available data. Thus, it often measures tangible outputs as a proxy for understanding philanthropy, such as monetary donations to nonprofit organizations. Critical perspectives suggest that the current philanthropic narrative is a "gross oversimplification of numerous, well-written, well-documented histories of the American nonprofit sector"[10] and invite a broader lens for uncovering invisible philanthropy and measuring "dark matter."[11] The study of global philanthropy simultaneously adds complexity and offers recourse for building a broader lens for what gets measured.

Diverse terms and meanings of philanthropy pose challenges in building an international dataset.

The varied terms to describe philanthropy are a major challenge when building an international dataset and employing a standard questionnaire. The term philanthropy does not readily translate across all languages or reflect cultural norms. These terminological and definitional tensions surfaced in several contexts.

For example, as several *GPEI* experts and readers point out, in the Arabic language, there is no direct translation for "philanthropy." Alternative terms include sadaqa, which refers to the non-obligatory giving of time, money, and positive gestures, or refraining from harmful actions. Sadaqa has its roots in Islamic religious tradition, emphasizing positive relationships and is associated with compassion, intentionality, and trust.

For further example, in Kenyan society, the Swahili term "harambee"—meaning "all pull together"—is better suited to describe everyday actions of

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8   Shariq Siddiqui, Rafeel Wasif, and Afshan Paarlberg, "Broadening the Definition of Philanthropy: Understanding U.S. Citizens' Embrace of Muslim Philanthropic Traditions," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* (July 2025), https://doi.org/10.1177/08997640251348652.
9   Tyrone McKinley Freeman, *Madam C.J. Walker's Gospel of Giving: Black Women's Philanthropy During Jim Crow* (University of Illinois Press, 2020); Edgar Villanueva, *Decolonizing Wealth: Indigenous Wisdom to Heal Divides and Restore Balance* (Berrett-Koehler, 2021); Wiepking, 194-203.
10   Billie Sandberg, "Critical Perspectives on the History and Development of the Nonprofit Sector in the United States," in *The Nature of the Nonprofit Sector,* eds. J. Steven Ott and Lisa Dicke (Routledge, 2021), 27.
11   David Horton Smith, "The Rest of the Nonprofit Sector: Grassroots Associations as the Dark Matter Ignored in Prevailing 'Flat Earth' Maps of the Sector," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (1997): 114–31, https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764097262002.

helping others and advancing communities.[12] Philanthropy is a less recognized term, and it misses the cultural norms where people show up for others in times of need, when a relative passes away, or where harambee is the underlying spirit for new fundraising apps and platforms.[13] Similarly, in Ugandan society, philanthropy is better recognized as social connectedness through performing good actions and being present and engaged with the community in times of celebration and need.[14]

Despite these roadblocks, cooperative global research is crucial for surfacing and embracing these conversations, refining terms, and communicating the variations and value of philanthropy around the world. Often, qualitative inquiry is employed to ask how philanthropy is understood within and across traditions. Scholars like Weipking[15] argue that international research on philanthropy should be conducted collaboratively, ensuring that forthcoming research and data-driven policies and practices are based on a more authentic understanding of what philanthropy means globally. The 2025 *GPEI* embraces this challenge. Rather than prescribing a certain definition or form, it combines quantitative and qualitative inquiry to investigate the conditions for engaging in philanthropy while providing adequate space for experts to infuse their localized understandings and practices of philanthropy into the research.

2. Developing the Global Philanthropy Environment Index (GPEI)

The *GPEI* is a robust example of an international dataset on philanthropy. The *GPEI* adopts community-engagement principles in producing the research. Partnerships with country-level experts are integral to the research. Ultimately, this approach is aimed at better representing local contexts and the multiple meanings of philanthropy.

Community-engaged research emphasizes the importance of key stakeholders throughout the design, research, and dissemination.[16] Based on prior research, community-engaged research tends to fall on a spectrum, from more to less embedded approaches. The most embedded approaches offer continuous opportunities for deep, collaborative engagement, while the least

12   Catherine Mwendwa and Nicanor Sabula, *The 2022 Global Philanthropy Environment Index Kenya* (2025).
13   Grace Maingi, "Philanthropy in Kenya: The Mobile-Money 'Harambee' Spirit," *PANL* (Nairobi), May 9, 2024, https://carleton.ca/panl/2024/philanthropy-in-kenya-the-mobile-money-harambee-spirit/#:~:text=One.
14   Dennis Kilama, *The 2025 Global Philanthropy Environment Index Uganda* (2025), https://hdl.handle.net/1805/48051.
15   Pamala Wiepking, "The Global Study of Philanthropic Behavior," *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 32 (2021): 194-203, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-020-00279-6.
16   Nina Wallerstein et al., "Power Dynamics in Community-Based Participatory Research: A Multiple–Case Study Analysis of Partnering Contexts, Histories, and Practices," *Health Education & Behavior* 46, no. 1 (2019): 19S–32S, https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198119852998.

embedded approaches offer infrequent opportunities for often shallow, one-directional forms of engagement. Community-engaged research also tends to focus on actionable questions that aim to influence policies and practices.[17]

When these philosophies are applied to a global research project like the *GPEI*, community engagement is navigated through collaboration with local and regional experts—experts who understand the histories, cultures, and languages that shape philanthropy in their communities. Thus, the *GPEI* is facilitated by the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy (hereafter 'School'), and each stage of research and dissemination is deeply informed and guided by global partners. Key actors include the *GPEI* project team, country and economy experts, expert scorers, regional reviewers, and the Global Advisory Council. Their complementary tasks and involvement are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: 2025 *GPEI* Actors

Actor	Role/Description
Project Team	Recruitment, quality control, feedback in comparison with desk research, coordination between all experts, formatting, publication, community-building
Country and Economy Experts	Complete questionnaire; respond to feedback from school, regional reviewer, and GAC; attend regional review meeting; final decisionmaker in accepting scores and narratives; authors of country reports; 1+ per country
Expert Scorers	Complete scores only questionnaire, for comparison against scores from country experts; new in 2025
Regional Reviewers	Receives all draft country reports, expert scorer feedback as an additional comparison point, host meeting with all countries in region, provide synchronous and asynchronous feedback; write a regional report based on trends and respond to feedback from the project team and GAC
Global Advisory Council (GAC)	Provide strategic guidance for steering the project and dissemination; review all *GPEI* scores and provide feedback; represent various countries and regions around the world

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17   Wallerstein et al., 19S-32S.

Research production is outlined below in Figure 1. It involved six steps and spanned nearly 18 months from start to publication. It involved multiple layers of feedback and validation, gathered from various perspectives.

The 2025 *GPEI* retained the core elements of recruitment, data collection, and a multi-layer review process from the prior 2022 and 2018 editions. It also refined some earlier processes. Before recruitment for the 2025 *GPEI*, feedback sessions were held with prior experts and global partners. From these conversations, two areas were prioritized for improvement. First, seven new economies and one new region were added[18], to provide mapping of less represented areas around the world. Second, in-country expert scorers were introduced in pilot countries, to facilitate in-country validation.

As an initial step, between November 2023 and February 2024, country and regional experts were recruited from the 95 countries represented in the *Index*. Experts were recruited based on their extensive experience living and working in the field of philanthropy in their country of expertise. In some countries, like Ireland and Liechtenstein, recruitment was straightforward. The term "*philanthropy*" was more well-known, and country experts had participated in prior editions of the *Index*. Several countries were also added to the *Index* based on suggestions and outreach from local experts. For example, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia were added to the *Index* because local experts recognized the absence of their countries in the *GPEI*. This gap restricted knowledge, understanding, and awareness of what philanthropy looks and feels like in the unique philanthropic landscape of the Baltics in the post-Soviet era. They further understood that their inclusion in an international dataset like the *GPEI* would help develop a baseline of philanthropy in the region, broaden their understanding of philanthropy, and offer a comparative lens to philanthropic environments around the world.

Recruitment in other countries proved more difficult, at times because the term "philanthropy" was less about collective action in its fuller sense but instead held a narrower meaning of exclusivity and wealth. In countries like Iran, publicly available data was more limited, meaning that country experts would need to find creative ways. Ultimately, the recruited experts had deep connections across the country and conducted confidential stakeholder interviews to ensure the reliability of scoring and responses. In-group identity, language fluency, and trust were key factors in gaining access to this original fieldwork.

In addition, the School recruited additional scorers in several countries. This pilot effort enabled further in-country validation from diverse professional and regional perspectives, rather than relying on a single country representative.

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18   The seven new countries and economies include: Bahrain, El Salvador, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, The Bahamas, and Uganda. The new region is the Baltics, comprising of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.

Some highly motivated experts, such as those in Kuwait, Jordan, and Bahrain, recruited their own teams to debate and discuss scores, providing further in-country validation for their responses. Expert recruitment and data collection spanned several months, and several one-on-one conversations were held between the School and prospective experts, to collaboratively determine the suitability of the prospective expert and project scope.

Once participation was confirmed, experts completed an 11-question, standardized instrument to measure the enabling environment for philanthropy and provide rigorous, comparative international data; the instrument had been validated in prior editions. This process took place between February and September 2024. Overall, the questionnaire was designed with broad language to capture diverse meanings and practices better. For example, in the survey, the term 'philanthropic organization' (PO) refers to a form of non-market, non-state organization outside of the family that provides services for the public good. It includes the following: foundations, community-based organizations and village associations, professional associations, environmental groups, advocacy groups, cooperatives, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, mutual entities, labor unions, societies, research institutes, online social-purpose portals, and other types of non-governmental organizations relevant to each country. While each type of organizational structure may not be applicable in every country, the categorical latitude allows for representation of philanthropic organizations in their different forms and structures.

Experts completed this standard questionnaire using a scale of 1-5 (lowest to highest) for scoring the factors that ease or restrict the enabling environment. Experts weighed in on the 1) regulatory, 2) political, 3) economic, 4) socio-cultural, 5) fiscal incentives, and 6) cross-border giving environments. In addition to quantitative scores, experts provided narrative evidence to justify each score. There were also optional questions asked of experts for additional insights, such as emerging trends for philanthropy and the role of philanthropy in response to climate change.

Figure 1: 2025 *GPEI* Community-Engaged Process

Country Expert Questionnaire (Feb. - Sept.2024)	>	Internal Review (March - Sept. 2024)	>	Regional Review (May - Nov. 2024)	>	Global Advisory Council Review (Nov. 2024)	>	NEW! Additional Collective Feedback at In-Person Gathering (Nov. 2024)	>	Final Scores (Feb. 2025)
NEW! Pilot – scoring only survey in select countries		*Includes comparison against desk research*		*Includes comparison against desk research*						

Source: Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy

Following data collection, the School compared each expert's response against internally conducted desk research. Furthermore, countries were also grouped together into 15 regions, and a regional review was held for each region. These regions include: Balkans, Baltics, Canada & United States, Caribbean, Central Asia & South Caucasus, Central & Eastern Europe, East Asia, Latin America, Middle East & North Africa, Northern Europe, Oceania, South & Southeastern Asia, Southern Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Western Europe. While three regions chose to conduct asynchronous reviews due to scheduling and time zone conflicts[19], all other regional reviews were held virtually and facilitated by a regional expert who possessed deep knowledge and experience in philanthropy in the region. These meetings created space for dialogue across country borders, surfaced common themes, and overall generated excitement and ideas. In the sub-Saharan Africa review, for example, there was common agreement regarding the strong influence of election and political rhetoric in philanthropy. While the conversations in the Oceania regional review also touched on elections, other themes emerged, such as fundraising harmonization, aging populations, and intergenerational wealth transfers, signaling more developed and professionalized sectors. In each regional review, the conversations were lively, supported in-region networks, and surfaced similarities and differences in ways of describing, imagining, and promoting philanthropy.

Next, the global advisory council convened, reviewed scores, and raised questions where they recognized global anomalies and disparities. Using this feedback, several approaches were taken. In some countries, additional local peer review was solicited to gather more in-country feedback to share with country-level report author. In other cases, regional reviewers were invited to further weigh in on the scoring or narratives of a country. In all cases, country experts were provided with feedback on their initial draft; some feedback involved suggested score changes, while other requests were made for additional narrative justification. To ensure that country experts were respected for their deep knowledge and experience in the country and to mitigate power dynamics, country experts were given the final word on scores and updated narratives.

After all scores were finalized, the School aggregated the findings from each country and economy to produce a global report. On May 28, 2025, all 111 reports were publicly released[20], and the School hosted a celebration among *GPEI* contributors to uplift and recognize each partner for their work, and

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19   Asynchronous reviews were held for the following regions: Canada & United States, Middle East & North Africa, and Latin America.
20   Findings for each country are published as separate report through IU *Scholarworks*, for a total of 95 country-level reports. There are also 15 regional reports. The school aggregates these findings at a global level and shares global trends and themes in one global-level report. Combined, these reports total 111 reports.

to encourage dialogue across borders. One author exclaimed that she was so excited to meet and be in the same space as other participants from all around the world. Following the launch, feedback sessions have been held in various formats, including one-on-one, group, and survey formats, to gather insights into research barriers, critiques, and disparities.

3. Findings and Use Cases

At a global level, generosity remains rather universal. Based on the 2025 *GPEI* data, fourteen of fifteen regions have favorable socio-cultural conditions (score or 3.5+), where religion, helping attitudes, and deep-rooted cultural traditions are positive, and this condition has remained favorable and stable across all three *GPEI* editions (2015-2017, 2018-2020, 2021-2023). Even in the Latin American region, where the regional score is less favorable, there is extensive variation to consider and innovative solutions to overcome challenges. For example, in Mexico where corporate philanthropy is gaining importance, there is an opportunity to foster public trust through partnership and programming with businesses. And, in Brazil, there is an opportunity to build upon favorable political momentum to improve public narratives and understanding of philanthropy and giving. Additional detailed findings can be found in the 2025 *Global Philanthropy Environment Index* Global Report.

Looking ahead, climate change and professionalization are noted as key emerging trends for philanthropy in the majority of countries represented. Through a special spotlight in the global report, the perspectives of *GPEI* philanthropy experts were shared, regarding their perceptions of philanthropy's role and response to climate change. In aggregating the global findings and working with local experts to bring these into conversation among relevant stakeholders, comparative research from an international dataset is welcomed, providing the opportunity to make relevant comparisons and generate ideas from inspiration around the world.

In fact, since its release, comparative data from the 2025 *GPEI* have been useful in communicating trends, inspirations, and cautions among a variety of audiences. For example, the *GPEI* has been used in lunch and learn funder workshops, civil society research presentations, and policymaker educational programs. It has also generated regional dialogue among leaders, for example in Latin America and the Caribbean, looking for new ways to unlock philanthropic potential within local contexts. Further, it has been adopted in some classroom modules as comparative, case studies. Ultimately, comparative data from within the same research study allows for comparative conversations across research, policy, practice, and teaching.

Conclusion

Overall, this research note unpacks: 1) the challenges of undertaking comparative research, 2) the process of developing an international philanthropy dataset, and 3) preliminary 2025 *GPEI* findings and uses.

The 2025 *GPEI* uses a community-engaged process with emphasis on local expertise in developing and disseminating a global dataset on the enabling environment for philanthropy. This international dataset relies on partnerships with 173 experts from around the world—individuals with in-depth knowledge about the philanthropic landscape in their country or region, who often integrate the research into local practice and policy conversations. In a global project, community engagement requires strategies that mitigate power dynamics and are inclusive of diverse cultural, political, and societal norms. Community-engaged research offers rich data alongside a network of engaged and diverse stakeholders who are invested in using their co-created research to build public and government understanding of sectoral values.

A critical takeaway from the *GPEI* is that there are many different understandings and practices of philanthropy around the world. Elevating local expertise from across the globe onto global platforms provides an opportunity to engage in conversations around more inclusive terms and definitions, and to challenge existing power dynamics in this space. There are also varying levels of data availability, which underscores the need for local expertise to develop nimble and evolving approaches to gather information.

Further, there are questions about who decides what philanthropy means, what gets included, and how it is measured. These foundational questions have implications for knowledge produced and associated narratives. For example, in countries and cultures where informal and less professionalized ways of giving are dominant, does a research instrument provide space to capture these norms? By shifting the emphasis to who conducts the research—people on the ground with the expertise—the diversity of philanthropy can be better understood. Ultimately, when local experts are gathered, they bring these understandings to the global stage and help societies bridge the meaning and recognition of the diverse moral and socio-cultural dimensions of philanthropy worldwide.

About the Author

Afshan Paarlberg is a lawyer and interdisciplinary researcher who engages in policy-driven work on philanthropy, nonprofits, and access to justice. Afshan is an assistant research scholar with the IU Lilly Family School of Philanthropy and served as 2023-2025 Director, Global Philanthropy Indices. She was previously awarded a Fulbright Fellowship during 2024–2025, hosted by the University of British Columbia Centre for Migration Studies with the support of Fulbright Canada, and a Global Philanthropy Fellowship during 2023–2024, supported by the Giving USA Foundation. She is also a PhD candidate, examining how immigrant-oriented nonprofits bridge access to justice across legal deserts.

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