



The Role of UAE Institutional Philanthropy in Driving Development at Home

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Executive Summary

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is internationally recognized as a leading humanitarian donor, with its philanthropic sector closely intertwined with the country's foreign aid architecture. While this global orientation has been documented, it has also shaped the dominant narrative through which UAE philanthropy is understood. One that often foregrounds cross-border giving and that, in turn, makes philanthropic activity within national borders less analytically visible. This policy paper addresses this imbalance by examining the role of community-focused philanthropic foundations in the UAE and their societal contributions.

The paper argues that domestic philanthropy constitutes a distinct and important component of the UAE's development model. Operating within a context of strong state capacity and extensive welfare provision, philanthropic foundations do not substitute for public services, but function as embedded institutions that invest in locally specific needs, pilot innovative interventions, and contribute to long-term development. The analysis highlights four key findings. First, community-focused foundations display diverse operational models shaped by emirate-level priorities yet broadly aligned with national development objectives. Second, their mandates are predominantly development-oriented, reflecting the limited need for relief interventions in a high-capacity welfare state. Third, these foundations act as institutional mediators between traditional charitable norms and contemporary philanthropic practices. Fourth, domestic philanthropy operates within a distinctive environment, shaped by varying data practices, evolving regulatory arrangements, and a global discourse that has tended to emphasize cross-border giving. The paper concludes with targeted recommendations aimed at strengthening the coherence, legibility, and institutional maturity of domestic philanthropy. The scope of this effort is to contribute to a more accurate understanding of the UAE's philanthropic model in which community-based philanthropy and international humanitarian engagement are mutually reinforcing.

Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) frequently tops international rankings for humanitarian aid and foreign development assistance, earning recognition for its global reach (Benthall & Lacey, 2014; Tok, 2015). In

2025, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), through its Financial Tracking Service (FTS), ranked the UAE as the fifth largest contributor of humanitarian aid (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2025). This reputation extends to the country's philanthropic sector, especially as several of its most prominent foundations

not only run their own initiatives overseas but also contribute significantly to the UAE's broader foreign aid efforts (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

The UAE's institutional philanthropic sector is relatively young, reflecting the country's own recent formation. Prior to the start of the 21st century, a non-profit sector was present within the UAE, but this was primarily inhabited by associations and clubs working on a wide range of issue areas (Researches & Statistic Unit, 2000). The number of institutional philanthropic foundations, by comparison, was relatively small. These included the Cultural Foundation, the Zayed Foundation for Charity and Humanitarian Works, and the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Humanitarian & Charity Establishment, to name a few. From the early years of the 21st century, however, the UAE started undergoing an expansion of institutional philanthropy (Sherif, 2008; Ridge & Kippels, 2016; Johnson & Rahim, 2018), reflecting a wider trend taking place across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (Kuttab, 2016; Eckert et al., 2021). A prominent expression of this growth has been the increase in the number of philanthropic foundations, the backbone and most visible form of organized philanthropy (Anheier & Leat, 2013; Johnson, 2018). Today, the UAE's philanthropic sector is seen as an influential model across the Arabian peninsula and beyond (Coutts, 2016; Amlot, 2023).

Scholars and practitioners ascribe the growth of UAE institutional philanthropy to several factors. Most notably a strong tradition of giving, the country's continued economic development and wealth accumulation, and heavy leadership involvement in encouraging private giving, including through personal initiatives (Sherif, 2008; Johnson & Rahim, 2018). This paper adds that the institutionalization of giving in the UAE must also be understood within the broader context of the Gulf's robust aid sector, which emerged in the early 1960s and expanded rapidly following the petrochemical price explosion of the early 1970s (Cotterrell & Harmer, 2005; Tok, 2015; Lowi, 2019). As this aid architecture expanded, it produced organizational models, reporting practices, and norms of large-scale giving that contributed to the creation of an enabling environment for the emergence and subsequent expansion of institutional philanthropy. In this sense, UAE institutional philanthropy can be

understood, to a certain extent, as having developed within, and been shaped by, the country's aid sector.

This relationship reflects a long-standing blurring between state and private efforts in the provision of assistance beyond national borders: one that does not collapse the two spheres but keeps them structurally interlinked (Tok, 2015). This interlinkage is visible in the country's official foreign aid statistics and reports, which list funds delivered abroad by UAE-based philanthropies alongside government disbursements (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). While this legacy does not fully explain why many Emirati philanthropies operate beyond state boundaries, it helps account for both the scale and visibility of their cross-border giving, which has disproportionately been the focus of scholarly and practitioner attention.

Notably, the focus on cross-border philanthropy is not unique to the case of the UAE. It ties in with the broader literature on philanthropy as a tool of diplomacy and soft power (Moran, 2023; Youde, 2019), and the growing recognition, within the scholarly field of international relations, on the involvement of philanthropic organizations and philanthropists in shaping the global agenda (Cutler et al., 1999; Hall & Biersteker, 2012). Possessing extensive resources and networks, and operating with far greater agility than "heavy" bureaucratic government structures, philanthropies are increasingly emerging as international actors in their own right with a seat at the global governance table. The United States (US)-based Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, recently renamed the Gates Foundation, remains a prime empirical example, with scholars depicting its influence and growth over the years as both a product and reinforcer of the neoliberal model (Evans & Sewell, 2013).

Without questioning the importance of this body of work, it can contribute to an overshadowing of the notable philanthropic efforts that take place within countries' own borders. In the context of the UAE, philanthropic foundations operating at the national level, many of which have been established in the past two decades, play a critical role in the nation-building process. This includes addressing community needs, preserving cultural heritage, strengthening social cohesion, and rallying volunteerism. Often founded or patronized by members

of ruling families and prominent business figures, these organizations complement the government's extensive welfare system by fostering civic engagement and, when needed, support in addressing developmental gaps. Yet, these philanthropic actors remain underrepresented within the narrative on UAE philanthropy. This creates a two-fold knowledge gap. First, it obscures how Emirati foundations contribute to national social development and cohesion. Second, and as a consequence of the first element, it distorts our broader understanding of UAE philanthropy. Practically, this may lead to incomplete or misinformed policy discussions.

This policy paper contributes to addressing this gap. Drawing on findings from a broader doctoral research project that explores the institutionalization of philanthropy in the UAE from the mid-1950s to the present day, the paper examines the contemporary role of local philanthropy within nation-building efforts. What emerges is an understanding of domestic philanthropy as a development-oriented, state-embedded ecosystem. Specifically, one that is locally grounded yet nationally aligned, focused on social investment rather than relief, and shaped as much by welfare-state capacity and cultural norms of discretion as by formal, predominantly foreign institutional design. At the same time, the analysis shows how scholarly and practitioner-generated narratives on UAE philanthropy have tended to privilege cross-border giving, rendering domestic philanthropic activity analytically less visible despite its structural significance.

The paper proceeds as follows. It begins by situating contemporary philanthropy within the UAE's longer traditions of giving, providing a brief overview of how Islamic charitable practices and pre-federation forms of redistribution have laid the groundwork for the pervasive culture of generosity seen today. It then outlines the emergence and expansion of institutional philanthropy from the early 2000s onward. After presenting the methodology guiding the analysis, the focus turns to philanthropic foundations operating within national borders and the key findings that inform this study. Building on these findings, the paper concludes with a set of recommendations aimed at enhancing the visibility, coherence, and institutionalization of domestic philanthropy, followed by reflections on limitations and directions for future research.

For the purpose of clarity, this paper understands "institutionalization" as the process through which something, in this case philanthropy, is incorporated into a structure, whether this be a system, an organization or society (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.; Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Institutional philanthropy, therefore, refers to the transfer of resources from a donor to a recipient through a formal intermediary. The formal intermediary is, most commonly, an organization that operates under a clear governance and within a regulated framework, distinguishing it from ad-hoc or informal charitable giving. This approach loosely aligns with the structural approach proposed by Salamon and Anheier (1992). In fact, according to the two scholars, a defining feature of structurally formal non-profit organizations is their private character, i.e., their separation from the state (Salamon & Anheier, 1992). In the UAE, as research indicates, such delineation is not applicable (Sherif, 2008; Johnson & Rahim, 2018; Ridge & Kippels, 2016; Ridge et al., 2019). State and philanthropic domains are deeply intertwined, rendering public/private distinctions analytically inadequate.

Background

Traditional Giving and the Roots of Modern-Day Emirati Philanthropy

The UAE's culture of philanthropy is deeply rooted in long-standing traditions of generosity. Well before the emergence of the UAE federation in 1971 and the rise of philanthropic institutions, charity was conducted through Islamic forms of giving, including *zakat*, *sadaqah*, and *waqf*. For centuries, these practices, mandated or encouraged by faith, have provided social safety nets and communal support mechanisms across Islamic societies (Singer, 2008). Although these traditional giving channels continue to represent important sources of funding for social causes, new visible giving institutions have emerged, one of which being the figure of the philanthropic foundation (Ibrahim & Sherif, 2008; Eckert et al., 2021).

Historically, acts of benevolence by leaders reinforced these traditions and were integral to state-building efforts. A notable example is the late HH Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, who was renowned for his personal generosity well before the country's formation. In the

1950s and 1960s, as the ruler of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Zayed financed several community projects, from improving irrigation systems to building markets, as a means to uplift the livelihoods of his people (Boustead, 1963; Henderson, 1960; Davidson, 2009). Today, the legacy of Sheikh Zayed’s generosity is strongly felt and celebrated through dedicated initiatives and philanthropic institutions. For example, every year since 2012, on the 19th day of Ramadan, the UAE commemorates Zayed Humanitarian Day. The day marks the anniversary of the passing of the UAE’s founding father and tributes his lifelong dedication to humanitarian work. Over the years, on this day, the UAE has been launching various initiatives and in-kind projects aimed at advancing humanitarian efforts both locally and globally in honor of his legacy (Zayed House for Islamic Culture, n.d.). A recent example is the Mohamed bin Zayed Foundation for Humanity, launched on March 19, 2025 (The National, 2025).

At the same time, traditional charity in the pre-federation era often extended beyond immediate communities. Rulers in the Trucial States supported neighboring sheikhdoms, with a well-documented example being the Trucial States Development Fund, which was established in 1965 and dismantled after the federation’s formation in 1971. A dedicated financial vehicle, it enabled the joint management and distribution of resources for the collective benefit of all Trucial States, with the aim of alleviating the wealth inequalities derived from the varying oil discoveries across the sheikhdoms (Abdullah Morsy, 1978). Such practices laid early foundations for the UAE’s ethos of cross-border giving, later embodied in its large-scale foreign aid programs. The establishment of the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development (ADFD) in 1971 marked a pivotal moment in this trajectory. To this day the nation remembers and celebrates the establishment of the ADFD as the embodiment of the UAE as a nation built, from day one, on the principle of generosity for all and as a representation of its leader’s innate spirit of giving.

Community-Focused Foundations

As this paper previously introduced, generosity beyond state borders is a central pillar of the UAE’s international identity. By contrast, philanthropy directed toward domestic causes has historically been far less visible. This relative silence is partly cultural. Islamic

traditions emphasize discretion in charitable giving, and many philanthropists continue to value anonymous, unpublicized acts of benevolence. Practically, this has meant that their contributions have been less systematically analyzed. In fact, it would be erroneous to assume that this lack of “data” indicates an absence of local philanthropy. Rather, it reflects a historically cautious approach to narrating domestic, giving, need, and responsibility.

In recent years, this narrative imbalance has begun to shift. The UAE Year of Giving in 2017 marked an important inflection point, explicitly promoting volunteerism, community engagement, and locally oriented charitable initiatives. Government-led campaigns encouraged individuals and corporations to invest time and resources in domestic causes, with generosity being depicted as something that should begin at home as well as extend abroad. This shift has been accompanied by growing recognition of social issues within the UAE that philanthropy is well positioned to address. These include support for people of determination, assistance to low-income residents, educational disparities, and the preservation of national heritage.

Methodology

This policy paper draws on research conducted as part of a doctoral project examining the institutionalization of philanthropy in the UAE from the mid-1950s to the present. The methodology combines four complementary approaches.

First, participant observation was undertaken across philanthropic events, forums, and community initiatives in multiple emirates, enabling contextual understanding of how philanthropy is practiced and narrated. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with philanthropic practitioners and academics. These interviews explored organizational missions and governance structures, beneficiary priorities, and perceived challenges, allowing for comparative insights. Third, extensive desk research was carried out, including analysis of foundation reports, legal documents, media coverage, and existing academic literature on philanthropy and development in the UAE and the wider MENA region. Fourth, archival research informing the broader doctoral project outlines, albeit modestly due

to it not being the primary focus of this paper, the context within which the country's contemporary philanthropic sector emerges.

On the one hand, the triangulation of methods enhances the analytical depth of the paper. On the other hand, it serves a very practical purpose. Namely, to help mitigate the severe lack of data and scholarly work on UAE philanthropy, even if only to a limited extent. As a result, the generalizability of the findings is constrained, as outlined in the concluding discussion on limitations.

Key Findings

UAE philanthropies operating within national borders are important contributors to the socio-economic development and social cohesion of their respective emirates and the broader nation-building efforts. These foundations typically operate as non-profit institutions with targeted missions, often focusing on specific sectors or communities within the UAE.

Emirate-Rooted Focus Within a Shared National Vision

Domestic philanthropic foundations in the UAE are characterized by a noteworthy degree of organizational diversity that reflects the country's federal structure and emirate-specific development trajectories. Foundations are typically established under the patronage of emirate-level leadership and respond to contextually defined priorities, such as educational attainment, cultural preservation in heritage-rich localities, or youth engagement in rapidly urbanizing areas. This emirate-rooted orientation allows foundations to operate with contextual sensitivity and operational agility. As noted in a previous study on state-funded philanthropy in the UAE, foundations typically dedicate the majority of their resources to a specific emirate and then to the country overall (Ridge & Kippels, 2016).

At the same time, this decentralization does not translate into fragmentation. Local philanthropic initiatives are broadly aligned with federal development frameworks, including national strategies on human capital development, social cohesion, and identity-building. Rather than acting as parallel or competing actors, community-focused foundations reinforce national objectives through locally tailored interventions. It

appears that this alignment is primarily achieved through shared leadership values and a common understanding of philanthropy as an extension of public responsibility. The result is a distinctive philanthropic architecture in which local autonomy and national cohesion coexist.

This balancing act within community-focused foundations in the UAE can also be observed at another level. Namely, these organizations mediate between long-standing traditions of charitable giving and contemporary philanthropic practice. On the one hand, they derive legitimacy from Islamic norms of generosity, discretion, and moral obligation, as well as from leadership patronage. On the other hand, they increasingly adopt formal governance structures, giving mechanisms, professional staff, strategic planning processes, and impact-oriented programming. This hybrid institutional identity allows foundations to resonate with traditional expectations of giving while meeting modern demands for effectiveness and organizational rigor. In doing so, they contribute to a broader societal negotiation between continuity and change, positioning philanthropy as a culturally grounded yet forward-looking instrument of nation-building.

In fact, it would be erroneous to conclude that the adoption of the traditional, Western model of the "philanthropic foundation" implies an automatic alignment with its operating norms. Several interviewees emphasized that internal realities, within these structures, are far more intricate. These organizations actively operate within, and carve out for themselves, an identity that reflects local contexts and values, while simultaneously adapting to what is, in effect, a foreign structural framework. As one interviewee noted, even the use of the term "foundation" in their organization's name may function more as a matter of convenience than as a precise descriptor, since their activities do not fully align with what would traditionally be expected of a philanthropic foundation in a US or European context – nor do they have interest in following that pathway. They are adopting what another interviewee refers to as the "inside out model", a way of bringing together inside (read: national) and outside (read: foreign) perspectives to best serve the communities with which and for which they work. Another case in point is ongoing discussions, within some of these organizations, on how to engage

with the *zakat*-derived funds they channel. This resonates with the nascent scholarly discussions on the topic taking place at the broader level, which holds at the core of its debates two critical inquiries: the mechanisms of *zakat* transfer from giver to recipient and the allocation of *zakat* funds (Arab Foundations Forum, 2025; Kidwai, n.d.).

Development-Oriented Missions with an Emphasis on Long-Term Social Value

Community-focused philanthropic foundations in the UAE orient their activities predominantly toward development rather than relief. This orientation is not incidental but structurally conditioned by the country's extensive welfare architecture. The UAE state provides Emirati citizens with comprehensive and generous support in areas such as healthcare, education, and housing, significantly reducing the need for philanthropic actors to engage in emergency assistance or basic needs provision at the domestic level. This, interestingly, contrasts with the large-scale relief efforts operated by several UAE foundations who direct their work abroad.

Drawing on the doctoral research underpinning this paper, domestic philanthropies consistently articulated their role not as substitutes for state welfare, but as complementary actors operating in domains where public provision is broad and standardized. Foundations therefore focus on areas where targeted, flexible, and experimental interventions can add value, such as educational enrichment, youth skills development, cultural and heritage initiatives, social innovation, and civic engagement. In simple terms, philanthropy functions as a developmental amplifier rather than a safety net. This positioning enables foundations to contribute to nation-building objectives, such as human capital formation, without, notably, disrupting the centrality of the state in welfare provision. This finding contrasts with philanthropic models in contexts such as the US or across Europe, where domestic philanthropy can assume relief-oriented or compensatory roles in response to welfare retrenchment (Clough, 1960; Nickel, 2018).

When it comes to who are the beneficiaries of domestic philanthropy, Emirati citizens remain an important and

central group. This being said, several foundations extend their reach to long-term residents and other vulnerable groups. This inclusivity reflects pragmatic engagement with the UAE's demographic realities and labor structure, particularly at the community level where social challenges cut across citizenship status. For example, in May 2025, the Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research, in collaboration with the Ras Al Khaimah Police General Headquarters, officially inaugurated the first public library within a UAE prison, a pioneering initiative for the country (Emirates News Agency-WAM, 2025).

Structural and Narrative Constraints on Domestic Philanthropy

Despite their contributions, community-focused philanthropic foundations in the UAE operate within a set of structural and narrative constraints that appear to limit their visibility and collective effectiveness. Cultural norms of discretion discourage, in certain cases, public communication and impact reporting. Data scarcity, a challenge the literature frequently notes, inhibits sector-wide mapping, coordination, and learning (Farouky, 2015; Nagy & Saleh, 2021; Della Giovampaola & Ugazio, 2024).

In comparative perspective, these constraints differ notably from those observed in countries such as the US, where high visibility, extensive reporting, and public advocacy are both expected and institutionally incentivized. In those contexts, domestic philanthropy often compensates for welfare-state retrenchment, which legitimizes overt narratives of need and philanthropic intervention; a form of engagement, however, that has not remained free from criticism (Au & Ferrare, 2014; Ferrare & Reynolds, 2016; Giridharadas, 2018). By contrast, in high-capacity welfare states, including the UAE, philanthropy operates alongside strong public provision. In this context, explicit emphasis on domestic social need is approached with sensitivity, as it intersects with broader narratives of national development and state responsibility. Consequently, UAE-based foundations often describe their initiatives in terms of enhancement, enrichment, or investment in human potential. Recognizing these dynamics as structural features of the operating environment, rather than as limitations of the philanthropic sector itself, is

important for developing policy responses that are both effective and contextually appropriate.

Regulatory environments play a central role in shaping philanthropies' activities and operational effectiveness. In fact, given the absence of a common definition, state laws on philanthropy provide practical reference points, with many countries regulating philanthropy by developing legal definitions for a "foundation" (Jung et al., 2018) or, more generally, entities present in the non-profit sector (Breen et al., 2016). In the case of the UAE, the absence of a clear, unified legal framework for philanthropic foundations may contribute to institutional ambiguity and uneven practice across emirates (International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2023; Johnson & Rahim, 2018).

Recommendations

To give better visibility and enhance the role of community-focused philanthropy as a pillar of nation-building in the UAE, this paper proposes a set of recommendations. These recommendations are premised on the recognition that most domestic philanthropic foundations are already closely intertwined with state actors and structures. The objective, therefore, is not to strengthen collaboration with the government per se, but to enhance coherence, visibility, and institutional maturity within an already state-embedded philanthropic ecosystem.

Establish a National Philanthropy Registry and Data Portal

A central priority is addressing the persistent data and visibility gap surrounding domestic philanthropy. A national registry of philanthropic foundations, hosted by a relevant federal body such as the Ministry of Community Empowerment or the International Humanitarian and Philanthropic Council, would provide an authoritative mapping of the sector without challenging norms of discretion. Rather than functioning as a regulatory tool, the registry should be positioned as an infrastructural resource: collecting basic, high-level information on foundations' missions, and thematic focus areas, with aggregated data made publicly available. A secure digital portal could allow foundations to update information periodically, while protecting

sensitive operational details. Participation could initially be encouraged through incentives, such as eligibility for national recognition initiatives or inclusion in official reports, rather than mandatory disclosure.

International experience, such as the United Kingdom's Charity Commission register (an independent regulator where most charities with over £5,000 income must register and can be searched online for free, providing details on their purpose, trustees, and financial info), demonstrates that light-touch registries can significantly improve coordination and strategic planning without imposing excessive transparency demands. In the UAE context, such a registry would normalize information-sharing as a professional standard rather than an act of self-promotion, enabling policymakers and philanthropic leaders alike to better identify gaps, overlaps, and opportunities for collective impact. An annual "UAE Philanthropy Report" synthesizing these insights would further reinforce transparency as a tool for learning and strategic alignment, not visibility for its own sake.

Harmonize the Legal Status of Philanthropic Foundations

Policymakers could consider the introduction of a dedicated foundations framework that formally recognizes philanthropic foundations as a distinct organizational category, separate from charitable associations and public agencies. Such a framework should be explicitly tailored to the UAE's governance model, where philanthropy is often state-linked, while also allowing space for privately initiated foundations. Key elements could include streamlined registration processes, baseline governance standards, and proportionate reporting expectations. Importantly, the framework should lower barriers for individuals and corporations seeking to institutionalize their giving through foundations, thereby broadening participation beyond the most established actors.

Institutionalize Cross-Sector Coordination Without Over-Formalization

Given the already close relationship between domestic philanthropy and state actors, the challenge is less about initiating collaboration and more about reducing

silos and improving coordination across philanthropic entities themselves. Creating structured but flexible coordination platforms, such as thematic roundtables or periodic convenings hosted by a federal authority, would allow foundations to share priorities, align initiatives, and explore complementarities. These platforms should avoid bureaucratization and instead function as spaces for strategic exchange and mutual awareness. Where appropriate, they could facilitate multi-foundation initiatives in areas such as youth development, cultural preservation, or social innovation, allowing resources and expertise to be pooled around shared objectives. The role of the state in this context is best understood as convenor and steward, rather than partner or overseer. Such coordination mechanisms would help shift domestic philanthropy from a collection of parallel efforts toward a more integrated ecosystem, while preserving the autonomy and leadership character that underpin its legitimacy.

Invest in Capacity, Learning, and Self-Regulation Within the Sector

As domestic philanthropy continues to grow, sustained investment in institutional capacity becomes essential. Larger foundations, research-oriented entities, and public institutions should collectively support training and professional development in areas such as strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation, and organizational governance. In parallel, the creation of knowledge-sharing platforms would facilitate peer learning and diffusion of good practice. Over time, this could support the emergence of voluntary self-regulatory standards or a foundation code of conduct, reinforcing accountability as an internally owned norm rather than an externally imposed requirement. Supporting applied research on domestic philanthropy, particularly on impact, beneficiary experiences, and regional variation, would further strengthen evidence-informed practice and policy.

Conclusion

Locally operating philanthropic foundations in the UAE are an integral component of the nation's development journey. They reflect a fusion of long-standing charitable traditions with modern institutional practices, illustrating that nation-building is sustained not only through

government policy and economic planning, but also through organized generosity, community initiative, and shared social values. Operating within a context of strong state capacity, community-focused philanthropic foundations function as embedded and complementary institutions, advancing social development through targeted, locally grounded initiatives that align with national objectives.

The challenge lies in the broader narrative through which UAE philanthropy is typically understood. International rankings, foreign aid statistics, and global humanitarian branding have understandably foregrounded cross-border giving, but this emphasis has also narrowed scholarly and policy attention, often eclipsing the quieter yet institutionally significant work of foundations operating within national borders. Rebalancing this narrative, for example by making domestic philanthropy more legible through appropriate data infrastructure and shared learning, would help refine how the UAE's development model is documented, analyzed, and strengthened. This would outline how domestic social investment and international generosity are mutually reinforcing features of the same civic ethos.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This policy paper is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged and that also point toward productive avenues for future research. First, the analysis is based on qualitative methods and purposive sampling, drawing primarily on interviews, observation, and documentary sources related to established philanthropic foundations. While this approach enables in-depth institutional and contextual insight, it does not capture the full breadth of less formally documented, ad-hoc, or family-based giving practices that continue to play a significant role in Emirati society. As a result, the paper focuses on visible and publicly accessible institutional philanthropic entities and does not claim to represent the totality of domestic charitable activity in the UAE.

Second, access constraints and norms of discretion shaped the empirical material. Several foundations operate with limited public disclosure, and interview

data necessarily reflect what actors are willing to articulate within culturally appropriate boundaries. This may lead to an underrepresentation of internal challenges. Future research could address this limitation by employing longitudinal approaches or confidential case-study methods that allow for deeper examination of organizational learning and adaptation over time.

Third, the data informing this paper does not draw equally from all seven emirates, in itself a reflection of the varying levels of institutional philanthropic activity taking place. While this is appropriate for a policy-oriented paper whose objective is to paint a broad overview of the current landscape, more fine-grained research across emirates would provide a more comprehensive understanding as well as further illuminate how local political economies and demographic compositions shape philanthropic practice. Similarly, comparative studies between the UAE and other Gulf states could clarify which features of community-focused philanthropy are context-specific and which reflect broader regional patterns. Practically, this limitation entails that the generalizability of the findings deriving from this paper is to be handled with care.

Future research would also benefit from greater attention towards impact assessment and beneficiary perspectives. Systematic evaluation of outcomes, as well as qualitative research with communities served by philanthropic initiatives, would enrich understanding of how domestic philanthropy is experienced on the ground.

Bio

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