

Giving Done Right Season 5, Episode 3 - Happy Mwende Kinyili on Building a Global, Grassroots Feminist Movement

Happy Mwende Kinyili At least \$2.83 billion per year is leaving the women's rights funding sector, starting in 2025. That's big, right? Especially when we know that women's rights historically are underfunded, both in philanthropy and development aid, right. So we are getting a sliver of a sliver. And even our sliver is getting cut down even farther.

Grace [00:00:27] Welcome to Giving Done Right, I'm Grace Nicolette.

Phil [00:00:30] And I'm Phil Buchanan.

Grace [00:00:32] Today, our guest is Happy Mwende Kinyili, co-executive director of [Mama Cash](#). Founded in 1983, Mama Cash was the first international women's fund in the world and has awarded more than 92 million euros to date. We wanted to have Happy on the show to provide an international perspective on women's rights and activism. Welcome, Happy.

Happy Mwende Kinyili [00:00:53] Thank you so much, Grace and Phil for inviting me and inviting Mama Cash to what I know will be an amazing conversation.

Phil [00:00:58] Thanks, Happy. Can we start with just like a description of what Mama Cash is and how you do your work?

Happy Mwende Kinyili [00:01:07] Mama Cash started in 1983 around a kitchen table. And that's important to say it happened around a kitchen table because in that moment, there were five radical lesbians, one of whom had inherited wealth. And she came to her friends with a problem saying, folks, I got money and I don't know what to do with it because they were part of the radical left movement in the Netherlands and generally folks weren't walking around announcing that they had money. So it was a genuine problem. Like I don't know what to do with this money. And they were like oh we can help you solve it. There's a lot of other people sitting around, kitchen tables, fireplaces, name it, who are doing radical change in their context. So how do we get this money to them so that they have resources to make the change they're doing even bigger, last longer, get there faster? And from that place, Mama Cash started. So what we do to this day is we figure out in the most creative and the most accountable ways possible. How to get money to feminist activists all around the world who are creating change in their communities. And it really has people in the frontline, like folks who are doing the thing itself, not folks who were talking about or talking to people, but the people themselves. And we've been doing this for 40 years and now we're at over 150 million Euro. We've been doing that. And we could have moved double that money, I have to say, maybe even triple, because our problem isn't about how to get the money to the people. It's getting the money to us so that we can get it out to people who are changing the world. So Mama Cash is a fund. We fundraise all our income 100 percent every year we have to fundraise it and we move it to activists. More than 60 percent of our income moves directly to activists. And there's many things I'm sure we'll say about how we work, but the most exciting thing is feminist activists themselves decide who gets the grants, which is a key piece of us trying to not just move money, but also move it in radically different ways.

Grace So tell us the story behind the name Mama Cash.

Happy Mwende Kinyili So what I'm told, I wasn't there. There were, we turned 40 two years ago, and the founders were telling us the stories of how they came up with the name, Mama Cash, so they were going to the KVK, the Chamber of Commerce in the Netherlands to register Mama Cash, and they hadn't quite figured out what the name would be, they're like, we know we want to do this thing, it's going to have something to do with money, but we don't know what it would be. And they really liked this bad Mama Cass, C-A-S-S, and then the taxes, they're like, wait, what about Mama Cash instead of Mama Cass? And then the name came. But every time we go around the world saying Mama Cash, everybody connects with the name, which I find very interesting because mama, right, is, is global and everybody gets the idea of cash. So it is, I think a very aptly named organization given what we do, because we work in every country in the world. So in every country in the world, our name is translatable.

Grace [00:04:06] I remember reading, Mama Cass was part of the Mamas and Papas, I think, the band, which was really big back when you all were getting started. That's a great story.

Phil [00:04:15] I know we will want to talk about, as you already sort of mentioned, the way that you make decisions and how you figure out who to support. Before we get there, can you give us some examples of the kind of work you are supporting?

Happy Mwende Kinyili [00:04:33] I will first tell a personal story, because to explain to people, because you haven't asked me why I do this work, which is important about how the work gets done.

Grace That was going to be next.

Happy Mwende Kinyili So I'll tell a first story that will lead, I hope, nicely segue into this. So I am born, raised, and I live in Nairobi, Kenya. And I've lived here for the last two and a half years. Before that I was jumping around the world and living in different places. And I don't know how much your viewers know about what's been happening in Kenya. So starting about last year, June, July, Kenyan young people went to the streets. And this was happening last year because our president was proposing this tax bill that would, you just cannot imagine, it was bad. And folks read the finance bill and they're like, this is not going to happen because I will not be able to feed myself. And this is already in a situation where economy's receding. So many young people are unemployed. It's just things are hard and then the solution to that was let's tax people more. So people went to the streets. And I remember this one Tuesday where there'd been a lot of online mobilizing and they'd been organizing across cities and towns in Kenya, and everybody was going to show up on the streets and every part of me wanted to be on the streets. But dear Lord, I could not. Reason: I was running an audit for Mama Cash, so I could not go to the streets, and I couldn't. I was like, oh my gosh. And some of my colleagues are also based in Kenya on the streets and, I can't go because we have to do this audit. We absolutely have to pass this audit because we have to dot our I's and cross our T's. So I spent the day reading news online, watching news online and responding to questions to our auditors about how we do our annual planning and you know, organizational stuff. I remember very clearly, it was about afternoon, two, three p.m. Nairobi time, and I was feeling deeply frustrated. And then, you know what, you sit back and you do all these things you're supposed to do so you can feel better in your body. And I did that. And I had one of those obvious eureka moments, where I was like, oh, this is why I do what I do. Because Mama Cash does get money to people who are going to the protest. So there's a bunch of protestors who are out there. And to organize, they need money. They need resources. They actually need

money to bail people out of jail, pay for medical bills, make sure that people have phones that they can connect across cities. And Mama Cash gets money to those people when they need it. And the fact that I was sitting running an audit was because Mama Cash is able to be a strong, sound organization, we can get money to people and I was like, aha, that's why I do the thing that I do. And I say that as a segue into the kind of work, because we work a lot with people who otherwise would not be getting money from ordinary sources, because they're not recognized as legitimate actors. They're not within the view of other donors. They're not registered. They're criminalized in their context. There's so many reasons people just aren't able to access money, and Mama Cash steps in. And when we do that, what happens? We have a group of girls in Malawi. They're called the Green Girls Platform that we work with. And this group is led by girls and young women and their work is to mobilize their peers and communities to respond to climate change in Malawi. So there's been a lot of flooding and from flooding to drought. So there is just general food insecurity. And since 2020, we've been funding this group. And when we started working with them in 2020, there were about 150 of them. Now there's over 10,000 girls and young women who are part of the Green Girls platform in Malawi. And because of how broad this group is, the Malawian government has invited them to join their COP delegation in 2022, like recognizing how deep their reach is. And the kind of funding they got from Mama Cash, which is core long-term and restricted funding, allows them to do this level of national mobilizing. That's one example. We work with another group in Fiji. These are two examples around climate change. And small island state, Fiji is very vulnerable to floods and all things climate change. And we work as a group called DIVA for Equality. And they have been doing work with the leadership of LGBTQI plus communities to create networks across Fiji and the Pacific region to respond to climate adaptation. And what they do is they take their climate advocacy from Fiji all the way to international platforms. So DIVA for Equality has been working with the Fijian government to go to COP meetings. They're part of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, which was developed by the Fijian government. So they're front and center. They do national mobilizing and they go all the way to international mobilizing. I'll just give one last example, because there's many I could give. But in Argentina, we've been working with a lot of organizations that have been working on reproductive rights. So there's this one group, Lesbianas y Feministas who developed a hotline in Argentina in 2009. And they developed this hotline after they had spent six months training and studying with other of our partners working in Ecuador who had developed hotlines. So they go, they learn from them and they go back to Argentina and they set this up. And the hotline was really essential in rallying the public and keeping abortion reform on the public policy agenda in Argentina. So as support for abortion rights in Argentina became much more symbolized by the green bandana, other partners, some of whom had worked with Mama Cash, all came together and over years of organizing this whole wave that led to ultimately the changing of the abortion laws in Argentina. And this crossed over into Colombia and Mexico and now all these three countries have decriminalized abortion. So we fund, because of the way we fund grassroots groups that are really rooted in community, we fund them for the long haul. They're able to make change that lasts and do the work over a period because, yeah, it took 10 years to get these laws to change and they were in it, right, for the whole duration. And now the three countries have decriminalized abortion. So I could go on and on and, but I will not.

Grace [00:10:52] Well, I'm curious. I mean, the examples that you give are all around the world, and I was really struck even looking through your website about how even your board and staff are all around the world too. How do you find these groups in such different contexts and identify who to fund?

Happy Mwende Kinyili [00:11:12] I always ask the folks who've been at Mama Cash before the internet, how did you all do it? Because I find what we have to do now so much easier. So we work through what we call a movement building lens in that we connect with folks all around the world very deliberately to build networks and Mama Cash embeds ourselves in those networks. And through that, we're able to find people, people will get through word of mouth through the internet, etc, get to know about Mama Cash. And then every year we have what we call a letter of interest window that opens. So we announced to the world, if you want funding from Mama Cash, please apply. And this is a tagline that excites me. I don't know if it excites other people, but really Mama Cash will fund any feminist working on any topic, anywhere in the world. What we're interested in is funding their leadership to create change in their context. So we invite applications to come through. And each year on average, we get about 2,000 applications. This completely outstrips our ability to fund, not because we don't know how to do it, but just in terms of how much money we have in the bank that we can do this. And because we go into long-term 10-year relationships, we're not changing over our portfolio every year. So we take in a few groups and we exit a few groups each year. And so from those 2,000 applications, we can take in between 15 and 25 from year to year. And more than half of them, so over a thousand of those applications, are eligible as per our criteria, which is we fund self-led activism, so it is people who are facing the issues themselves who are applying for funding, they're working on structural change, they're structurally excluded in their context. So they're, like I was saying, they're people who for some reason or the other, they're not seen as legitimate actors, so they wouldn't access resource. And so those are the people that you're funding. So over a thousand applications fit the criteria and we fund 15 to 25. I say that because we are always ready to increase that. We are always ready to increase the number of partners we could fund. Our challenge is not finding people to fund. Never has that been our challenge. It's always the other one. Can we get enough resource to support them for the long haul? Cause we're doing this for 10 years on average once we get partners in. And the funding we provide is core long-term flexible. And we also provide what is colloquially called capacity strengthening. We call it accompaniment support, which is supporting the organization to strengthen itself so that it can do the thing it needs to do. So if they need digital security, we support them to do that. If they want to go through a strategic planning process, we support them to do that. If they wanna set up some infrastructure, so office or building, because... huge swaths of the people we work with just have no access to physical resource... We support them to do that.

Phil [00:14:07] Happy, in terms of the context for trying to raise more money so you can support more of this great work. Can you tell us a bit about how that shifted? Because obviously in the U.S. where Grace and I are right now, there's been a huge backlash to a focus on equity, a focus on rights for people of different identities, gender identities, sexual orientation, and the backlash is real. And when I talk to folks in other parts of the world working in philanthropy, I hear it's global, that it's not just in the U.S. And I spoke with someone who is connected to a lot of women's funds around the world who said it's a really hard fundraising environment. So can you talk a little bit about this kind of backlash context that we're in and how you see it.

Happy Mwende Kinyili [00:15:06] I don't know if I'm allowed to curse on this. So I will hold my tongue and try not to. That's how you describe the world right now. So yes, it's a, it's a really hard moment for those of us who deeply believe in liberation for all people because those who want only a few of us to be free are winning, they're winning right now. I don't know any other way to say it. When you talk about the funding cuts that happened in the U.S., that was this year. So Mama Cash is registered in the Netherlands and funding cuts started for us last year when the Dutch government, elections happened, now the

government has toppled, but at that time, when elections happened, it was a right-wing government that came in. And one of the first things they did was cut development aid by 1 billion euros. This was their first thing in power, like, okay, maybe third thing after they figured out how to turn on the computers. And this we're seeing is happening in country after country. Even the UK, which has a progressive government, has actually also cut its development aid. So if you look at all the UK, the Netherlands, Sweden has also done it, the U.S. has done it. A lot of private foundations that have historically funded progressive issues are also either flatlining their budgets, they're receding, or they're shutting down, literally shutting down. So because all this started in our context last year, we started pulling together some data. And earlier this year, with announcements made by the US government, based on what we can count, And with development aid and philanthropic dollars, it's not always easy to count it. But based on what we can count, there's at least, so it's more likely more than, but at least \$2.83 billion per year is leaving the women's rights funding sector, starting in 2025. That's big, right? Especially when we know that women's rights historically are underfunded, both in philanthropy and development aid, right. So we are getting a sliver of a sliver. And even our sliver is getting cut down even farther. In a lot of ways, the U.S. is just the latest actor to come onto this scene of fascism, right? There's been others who've occupied this on a stage, if I could say it before you all. So one of the things I really think is important for folks in the U.S. to know right now is that you're not the first and you're not alone. And by the you're-not-alone, meaning that one of things that the rest of the world really struggles with how U.S. people show up is the sense of exceptionalism. Like y'all are doing this thing, you're special, you're doing this day and it's yours alone. And therefore you get to solve it alone. That's a lie. That's not going to happen. We move through movement, building frames, networks. We so fundamentally believe that until all of us are free, none of us are free. So I keep saying this whenever I'm in U.S. audiences is, well, y' all may not be as invested in my freedom. I am deeply invested in the U.S. being free, in all people in the U.S. being free, I am invested in it, because if you're not free, I can't get free. So the point is not to fill a hole. The point is to build liberated worlds where all of us are free. So how can we all work together to make that possible? That's like, it's the challenge before us, but for me it's not a challenge in that let's sit down and get sad. I'm like, no, this motivates us to do something different. Because we've been critical of how philanthropy and the development funding architecture operates. We're deeply critical of it and this is a moment for us to do it differently. So how do we show up to do it that way? Places like Mama Cash, we offer a solution to actually do it differently because moving money through folks like us gets money directly into the hands of people making change. So how to make that happen?

Phil [00:19:23] So the different is more informed by folks in communities, less top down. Is that, is that what different looks like?

Happy Mwende Kinyili [00:19:34] Absolutely, because the people who've gotten us into this mess aren't going to get us out of it. So if we go, for example, like climate funding, a lot of climate funding is moving through the same governments that are corrupt. Who have gotten us into this problem of racism, patriarchy, name it, giving funding to these large institutions and saying, oh, and we're going to address climate change. They're the ones who got us into this mess. How are we giving them the money to get us out of it? It doesn't make sense. Literally, let's go to the people who are most affected, the person who's living the horrible situation and say to them, what's your best idea? Here's some money to make your best ideas come real. Let's try that, at least let's try that and see how much further we can go. And based on the work that we've been doing for the last 40 years, we have an impact report that puts out evidence of how funding folks who are directly impacted through bottom-up approaches creates not just change, lasting change. I'm not just

frustrated by from the frame of that doesn't work. It's also this evidence that other things work. So let's try those. Let's put more resource there and see how much further we'll get in this search for liberation for everybody.

Grace [00:20:48] I'm curious, you know, so much of the conversation with all these cuts globally is the idea that there is no way that philanthropy can step in to fill the gaps. And I think one worry that Phil and I share is that when that is the message to donors, there can be a sense of overwhelm, right? It's like, well, if my drop in the bucket doesn't come anywhere near meeting the needs, maybe I should just hold my fire to see where it might make a difference, but then actually collectively, then funds are then not moving or, you know, there's sort of a sense of being frozen. What would you say to donors who just feel so overwhelmed by the magnitude of the needs out there right now?

Happy Mwende Kinyili [00:21:37] When I was a kid, and I'd come to my mom in the evening because I had seven homework assignments and I had been playing too long, I just wanted to go to bed, and I was like, no, no, I got to do homework. My mom would always say, let's just start with one thing. That's what she'd say to me every time. And every time I would start with one thing, and before I knew it, I'd done my homework and then I'd go to bed. I offer my mother's wisdom up for the same reason. Let's just do one thing. I understand that sense of overwhelm. Like I'm saying it, okay, I'm not trying to figure, I don't have the money to give, but I can relate to the overwhelm and I'm like, I am 12 years old and I have too much homework and I want to sleep. I was feeling overwhelmed and frustrated. And my mom calmed me down by telling me, you don't have to solve everything, but you can solve something. And that's the advice. Don't try to do everything, do something. That's one piece. The second one is, I think there's also a call for those of us in spaces like this, so the three of us and others who are talking to donors about what is our message. While I talk about the funding cuts and talk about the very real impact they have on people's lives, I also realize that's not necessarily the place I want people to start from. Because if you start from a place of scarcity, if you start from a place of it's not enough... the mindset won't get you to where you're trying to go. What I'm interested in, and what I put a lot of energy behind is recognizing what is possible. What is the place of hope in this moment? Because I see it. I truly deeply see it when I see to the folks who are organizing on the streets of Nairobi and they're like, however bad things are, we will keep going because we are determined to make things different. That level of hope and determination is also where those of us who have funding need to be moving from, because the possibility, the sense of abundance is so much more liberating. It opens things up, so that when you're sitting and you're like, the 17 different things asking me for money, and I'm overwhelmed, that's from a place of scarcity and thinking about, am I enough? As opposed to, wow, this 17 people who are asking me for money, how do I show up and support them? That's a different frame. That's same question, but different possibilities. And I truly think that we can do something different if we just start somewhere. Everybody just start with something, do something, do one thing, finish that, do the next thing, finish that. The last thing I'll say on this is, as a fundraiser, we spend a lot of time being told, what impact will my money have? Well, I don't know if there's any other moment in history that I have been involved in funding. Where small money would have huge impact because there's just so much that needs to be done. So any money that people put in will have impact. Like if there's ever been a moment where people are stressed about, oh my gosh, how do I demonstrate impact? How do I make sure that my money does the thing it's supposed to do? I don't think there's a better moment. So yes, do it, do the next thing, move from a place of hope and abundance. And you are assured your funding will have impact.

Phil [00:25:09] I like the frame of, in a time of unbelievable challenge, a time that none of us would wish we were in, there's more opportunity to make a difference, that in a way it presents more opportunity. I mean, that's a nice way to get people started. I've been thinking as I've been listening to you and hearing about your sort of participatory approach to decision making and the way in which you really try to find folks working in community, I've been thinking about other guests we have on our podcast, you know, who have really different approaches to philanthropy. We had a great conversation recently with Mark Suzman, who runs the Gates Foundation, which very much has a model of expertise within the institution that directs the grant making choices and decisions. And I've been thinking about just what makes sense in what contexts. So for example, if you want to do something about poverty in a particular community and I live in that community and poverty, I would hope you would ask me or people like me what I think would be helpful because it's much more likely to be successful and I have real expertise about that by virtue of my life, but if you ask me, Phil Buchanan, how to create a vaccine, I don't know. I have no clue. So what is expertise? When do you need different kinds of expertise? So I'm curious whether you think about it that way, that the more participatory approach makes sense in certain contexts, but maybe not in others, or do you think it's sort of a universal thing that it's always better to have a sort of participatory approach to philanthropy. I was thinking about that because I watched a little speech you gave in which he said, you should really think about participatory grantmaking. And I thought, I want to ask Happy always, or just sometimes in certain contexts.

Happy Mwende Kinyili [00:27:22] I appreciate the example that you've drawn that is highlighting the question of what is expertise. I think we live in a world where expertise is valued in a certain way, and there's some people will walk through the door and they'll be assumed to be experts just by virtue of. And then there's certain types of things that are seen as expertise. I think lived experience for sure is important. In everything, even in the process of making vaccines because there's also, right, there's some vaccines that are made for some people and not others. And there's some decision making that goes into how that gets decided. So I do think that we do need to be questioning a lot more around the value we place on expertise. Is participatory grant making always the way to go? I think it is always important to get more than one person's brain or three people's similar brains to make decisions on things, funding in particular. So in the talk that you gave, that you're referencing that I gave a while back where I was talking about my own journey and how when I joined Mama Cash, Mama Cash was not a participatory grant make at that time. And so I was asked to make decisions about grants. Phil, you've met me in person, Grace, you haven't yet. But when you do, you will realize quickly, there's many things I have issues doing. Deciding is not one of them. I am a fairly confident human being who has opinions and has no issue voicing my opinions. And some of them, I have no business having opinions about, but a lot of my opinions are well considered. So I don't say, I wasn't saying that participatory grant making was not a thing. Being the sole decider was a challenge because I couldn't make a decision. I couldn't even make a good decision. All these things are true. But I could make a better decision if there's other people whose expertise, experience, knowledge is different from mine and we complement each other. And I do think at the end of the day, we'll get to a better decision. So the model of participatory grant making can differ, right? So the people who are making decisions about which vaccines to go live on and I mean where to put the funding to go to a vaccine are probably not the same people who had been making decisions around feminist funding and what feminist activism needs to look like. They may not be the same people but should there be more than one person, I do think that would make sense. So that would be my caveat to it. And I say this recognizing collective decision-making processes are complex, right? They're not easy. I say this as having set up quite a few collective

decision-making processes. They're time consuming, they're energy consuming, and if they're not clear, they get muddled and they get messy very quickly. But the value on the other side is always worth that effort in my view, because I honestly think we make better decisions. That's part of the reason even for us at Mama Cash, we have a co-leadership model. We have two executive directors. We are fundamentally invested in more than one brain figuring something out, because it will get us a better answer, all the time, I think.

Grace [00:30:48] Do you wrestle with the tension of having more voices, as you describe, versus the like speed of moving funds or making decisions? How do you all think about that tension?

Happy Mwende Kinyili [00:31:02] Yeah, no, I agree. I think that's a live thing. And we have peers, so for example, in the urgent action funds, who we work with very closely, the urgent action funds are a collective of four sister funds who move feminist funding to respond to urgent situations. And they don't have a participatory grant-making model similar to Mama Cash, but they do ensure that more than one brain makes the decision. And, they make decisions that, if I'm not mistaken, within a 72-hour window. So it is possible, it's just about the structure that you set up and you have people who are connected, can respond quickly and have clarity on their roles. Cause a lot of the mess and time is when folks aren't clear about what is the thing, why are we here? What are we doing with each other? That if things are clear and the system is moving, I really do think you can move quickly. But not all funds like us, for us at Mama Cash, and I say this all the time, we're not a rapid response grant maker. We're not set up to be that. So our participatory model takes a couple of months, right? Like for our biggest fund, the whole process takes a few months from beginning to end. And that's okay for us because we're not trying to be a rapid-response grant maker, but there are others who are, and they have a model of ensuring more people are involved in that decision-making, and it moves quickly.

Grace More after this break.

Grace [00:32:37] Can you describe a bit, what is it like being a co-executive director? I mean, I imagine that when it works well, it's fantastic, because like you said, another brain that brings really complimentary gifts. And then we also see sort of examples in our field where it is really hard, and it kind of collapses spectacularly. I'm curious, what do you all do? Is this a model that you recommend to others? And like, what do you do to make it work?

Happy Mwende Kinyili [00:33:06] Do I recommend it to others? I recommend it to people who are being deliberate to set up the infrastructure around the co-leads. We could have the best of intentions and really like try as hard as we can. But if we don't have an infrastructure to support the co-leads, I feel you're setting people up. And a lot of us, I think, when you talk about things failing, it's that, right? So we are all, it's good. We want to do it. It's the next level of leadership, but we're not setting up an infrastructure around it, so what I mean by an infrastructure is, how are we supporting these two people who are both, for example, very confident human beings who would like to change the world in their own particular ways to learn how to negotiate with each other? Because I don't know where you went to school, but these aren't things I learned in school, right? My negotiation happened in the playground and often it was when we're fighting with each other not having polite conversations. So these are skills that I think people actually need to learn. Emotional intelligence is another thing. My Lord, the longer I live, the more I feel like instead of people having to pass a physics test before you leave university, you need to

pass an emotional intelligence test. Like that's my next thing. If we can figure out how to do that, because there's so much around working with a co-lead that demands emotional intelligence and being able to navigate jealousy. What do you do when you're jealous of what your co-lead's is doing and you would like to be doing it? How do you have that conversation? How do, like all the more challenging emotions, I don't mean the easy ones, so when you're happy and everything, that's great. So how are you setting up a system that allows people to do that? How are you making sure the organization around it actually knows what to do when you have two people leading? Because again, our vision of an organization is at a pinnacle. There's one person at the top and that's what our brains are oriented towards so this work, we also must do with an institution to prepare it to have co-leads. So that would be my advice to people who are thinking about it, like, yes, do it and make sure you set the people up well to do it. Cause it's not an easy thing to do based on good intention. It really needs support to be successful.

Phil [00:35:19] I mean, the comment about EQ totally resonates in the sense that I think donors who have enough resources that they are relying on others to help them with their grant making, whether it be advisors at a community foundation or at a wealth management firm or foundation staff. I mean it really connects to your earlier points about expertise. They often privilege or prioritize a certain kind of expertise, like subject area expertise, in the advisors that they lean on over the EQ or the relationship building piece. Despite the fact that you're working in an ecosystem of organizations, other funders as well as organizations that you are funding, and so that relational piece is going to be so crucial for you to have the information that you need. And so I just have seen time and time again folks who I'm like, wow, you know, that person is really smart about x, but they don't know what's going on because actually they're doing all the talking. They don't how to listen. They don't know how to build trust and then they're advising the donor. And so there's just a level of disconnect or even isolation from what's really going on that impedes effectiveness and impact.

Happy Mwende Kinyili [00:36:41] That's sad, it's really sad.

Phil It is sad. Yeah.

Happy Mwende Kinyili Because there's so much more possibility if, let me come at this differently. There's a thing a friend of mine was saying to me last week, because I was saying to her, I'm so bad at networking, I hate it. I find I don't like small talk. Then she stopped me and she was like, because we, I just finished having what was an amazing conversation with somebody who were walking down the street and she's like, but did you hate that because it was somebody I didn't know and we were literally having small talk and she asked me, did you hate that experience? I was like, no, I was, it was lovely. I enjoyed it. And she said to me, but you are good at small talk. So what do you hate about networking? And then through the conversation is like, because there's something about that structure that makes me forget what I'm dealing with are people. And I forget the human to human connection because I'm so busy thinking, oh, how is this going to advance my career as opposed to, oh, here's a human being in front of me. And they're a fascinating human being full stop. I want to get to know them. And I think what you're pointing to Phil when it comes to funding is we often forget that even in the world of philanthropy, like we're so busy thinking dollars, euros, whatever, and how is this, how is my organization going to succeed? We forget, no, at the end of the day, it's about humans meeting other humans. And so how could all these people with wealth really think about how can they meet humans, talk together and figure out how, as humans, they're together going to change the world. And then each person brings a thing they're contributing.

Because one of the things that I learned quite early in my world of philanthropy, I'm like, oh, yeah, I mean, the world of philanthropy, sometimes I forget it. But one of things I learned early was we forget that people can say no to us when we give them money. We forget it, we move with an arrogance of, oh but I have the money, of course people will take it. I have had some of my most deep learnings when I was sitting with a group and they were telling me why no they were not going to take our money and I respected the hell out of that lesson because they were coming to me and saying there's so much that we could contribute there's, so much you could also contribute and it's not about a bank balance it really is about how can we as humans connect and do something. So if we were to move from that place, all of us were busy trying to change the world. If we could move from a place where we all bring things to the table, but we're all first humans, then we figure out how the things we have on the table will help us build that world together. Then I think we'll get so much fun, and get there so much faster, and have so much more fun doing it. Because I don't know how much fun sometimes it is, and I'm like, ah, I have to go do this networking event versus I just had a lovely conversation with the woman who served me tea and she told me how her morning was horrible and we laughed about it. I would like that kind of energy more in my day to day.

Grace [00:39:31] Hear hear. Your comments really make me think about that right that interplay between like funding and relationships and I think you know this that this year at CEP we finished this three-year study of the impact of MacKenzie Scott's giving on the nonprofits that she funded and I know that Mama Cash received a 20 million dollar gift from Scott in 2022 and And that's really interesting, right, because I imagine that was transformative. And yet there wasn't a direct relationship with her, right? But the funds themselves probably did a lot of good. So can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Happy Mwende Kinyili [00:40:11] Yeah, so I very fondly remember when the news got to me and we were in a management team meeting and our executive director at the time was like, we have 20 million. And I had to run around the living room with my kid looking at me like, what the hell? Cause I was excited. I was like we have a 20 million check, what? For Mama Cash, it allowed us to grow in a way that we had not managed to and not just the amount of money, but also the kind of money because it was unrestricted. Actually, our challenge was it was too unrestricted. So we had to figure out how to make it look a bit more structured for the purposes of the tax authorities in the Netherlands. So that's a good problem to have. But it increased our overall income right away because when we received the gift in 2022, and in 2022, we moved out about almost three million more in grants than we would have at the beginning of that year. And we got the news in March, and by September, the money was going out the door. And that was exciting for us. It was exciting because, for example, we were able to take in more groups. That was one thing. Since then, we've been able to increase our overall grant-making budget. So we've able to taken a few more groups each year than we'd have the year before. Another really exciting thing was our compliment work. So we had all these ideas about how we wanted to support partners to do like what I was talking about, to do the thing they need to do to set themselves up as organizations so that they could do the work they need do. But we didn't have enough funding, unrestricted funding to do that. So with MacKenzie Scott's funding, we're actually able to increase our funding going out around a compliment. So, so many more partners were able to get digital security, which is so crucial given the world we live in. More partners were able to set up financial infrastructure because they'd been talking about, yes, we would love to be able to hire a person to come and do our finances exclusively. They now had the resource to do that. This funding allowed us not just to make change, but to strengthen the infrastructure that makes that making change work possible. And the last part for us was just the possibility. We got the money in 2022. And

we moved it in 2022. And we haven't sat on any of the funding because there's some people who decided, for example, to grow their investment and endowment, to build an endowment with the funding. It made us have deep conversations of the leadership about what is our identity and what is the purpose in the world. And for Mama Cash, our purpose is not to sit on money. Our purpose is to move money. So we chose to move that money because we weren't going to invest in having it grow. Rather, we wanted to invest in people. We wanted to investment in movements so that they could grow and our change could get bigger and last longer. And that we're able to start that in 2022 was incredible for us because we'd always said, and when we'd go fundraising, we'd meet people and say, if you give us a lot of money, don't worry. We are ready to do it and we can immediately pivot. This was when we were able to prove that as true because we got it in 2022 and we moved it in 2022. And that for us has allowed us to tell a different story. Because one of the hardest things about working on women's rights, feminist issues as a women's fund is every time I open my mouth and I'm talking to larger entities, they think we're small. They think we are niche and they think that the things that we're doing just affect a small portion of the world. Everybody else is dealing with democracy. You go deal with women's rights as if democracy is not a women rights issue, but that's a conversation for another podcast. So we're not small. We're not niche. We're dealing with the issues that affect 51, maybe 57 percent of the world, depending on how you want to count it. So, of course, the things that we're dealing with are not niche, they're hugely impactful. And the question of scale, that's not relevant. We can scale. We do scale up and down as needed. Now we are needing to scale down because funding cuts, but you know, the thing I said earlier, do one thing, do something. If you all do something, hopefully we don't have to scale down and we can keep growing because movements aren't going to stop doing the thing they need to do. We just need to show up with the money like MacKenzie Scott did and support them to do that thing effectively and efficiently.

Grace [00:44:38] Wow, so am I hearing you correctly? For the 20 million, you all began to give that away the same year and you gave away all 20 million or did you use any of it to invest back in the organization?

Happy Mwende Kinyili [00:44:51] We didn't, no, we didn't give all of it out in 2022. So we broke it up because we couldn't get all of it at once because tax reasons. So, we were getting it in tranches. And the last of it we'll spend next year, over 70% of that money has moved out to movements. We spent some of it to invest in our own infrastructure. We had some investment around IT in particular. That was a big piece for us and just general institutional strengthening. But over 70 percent of that 20 million. Has gone straight out to movements. And the last of it will be going out next year.

Grace [00:45:25] That's great. I'm curious, I can imagine, I mean, this ties to our earlier conversation too, donors having the question, wow, like when you are funding grassroots groups, how do you know that the funding is being used properly or not wasted? I mean this is a topic that a lot of donors often have concerns with because right in their own mind they're worried about their own stewardship of the funds but also, you know, I think there's a lot of conversation these days about, kind of waste and fraud and all of that and because you are funding at a very grassroots level, I imagine you might get this question a lot, and you know, as you mentioned, your evidence of impact is something that you can absolutely show. So talk a little bit about that. What do you say to donors when they have questions about that?

Happy Mwende Kinyili [00:46:15] Let's figure that out for you is my answer. So we've been doing this for 42 years. We have a strong track record of finding groups, connecting

with groups and working with them through trust. So going back to what I was saying earlier, we're humans who meet other humans. That is first and foremost the way we get into any relationship with our partners. Because if we go in with, oh, we are the donor, we have all the solutions, listen to us, we've lost the plot right from the beginning. We move from a place of trust 100% of the time, we give people trust, we assume trust. And that almost always translates to people assume trust back to us. So I started off as a program officer at Mama Cash and also in my previous organization, and many groups have come to us and they've told us, oh, hell, things are going bad. This and this happened, they say it to us, not, it doesn't get discovered in an audit. Not to say that that hasn't happened, it also has. So I'm not trying to paint a picture of oh everything is great kumbaya, no people mess up. And even when people mess up, we don't go in and say, okay, things are bad, we're taking all your money, we're never gonna talk with you. We're like, no, no. Let's talk about what happened. What are we learning from this? And how can we strengthen it so that this thing never happens again? Because the one thing we know humans will do is they're human, they'll mess up. 100% guarantee, we will mess up! So instead of focusing on messing up, it's rather how do we repair when we have messed up and focus that around, we need to rebuild trust. So we will do things with you to rebuild that trust. Part of it has meant sometimes they're like, okay, we need these things to happen before we can move more money out the door. So we give you a chance. Let's do these seven things. If these seven things get done, then we'll continue funding. If they don't get done. I'm sorry. Now we give trust, but you also must be accountable. Cause it's not, again, it's not kumbaya it's like, there's a level of accountability because we are also accountable back to the donors and to the movements. So I'm not even talking about donors. We've been asked by groups, why are you funding that group? We need to be able to answer that question. So we found out this group did this thing and you're still funding them. Why? We have to be accountable to the decision we have continued to make. So we, we trust, but we also demand accountability because we are accountable. And it's a bit facetious, but really intentionally saying, work with us because we are embedded in movements. We are from movements. We are of movements. This is why we have staff all around the world. That's why we have an advisory network that is everywhere around the world. Because the logic of Mama Cash that started in 1983 was five people sitting around a kitchen table plotting and planning how to change the world, it wasn't people who are sitting in classroom having a theoretical idea about how to the world those people doing the thing themselves. And that has remained true for us. So because we are of and from the movements, we have trust, we give trust, and we are always accountable. And really we invite individual donors to work with us because we have the systems that they don't have as individuals. We can support them to make sure that we are accountable to them around their funding and that they are actually good stewards of that funding because I'm sure that's the place they're moving from. They want to be good stewards. So let's work together because we can support them to meet that goal without them needing to take on the risk of, oh, but I don't know this person. How do I do due diligence on them? Who are they? We can do that part for them and ensure that their funding is used in the ways they want it to be used.

Phil [00:49:59] Yeah, that's such a great explanation of the crucial role that you play as a sort of bridge between people who care about these issues and want to fund but don't know where to go and the organizations doing the work. As we wrap up, Happy, I mean, I've gotten to know you a little bit over the last couple of years because Mama Cash is a client of CEP's, you've joined our advisory board and participated in those conversations and been so grateful and appreciative. But I'm not sure I actually really know that much about why you do what you do, and you've mentioned a little bit about your mom's influence on you, but I think it would be great to understand how you decided to commit

your life to this work and what about your own background or upbringing led you to this career.

Happy Mwende Kinyili [00:50:51] The short answer is I applied for a job. I got it. It's the short answer.

Phil [00:50:55] Fair enough, fair enough, that's sometimes how it works, yeah.

Happy Mwende Kinyili [00:50:58] Yeah, but no, the longer and maybe more full answer, because I applied for that job. I didn't apply to go become a bank at Standard Chartered, and which I'd have gotten, but I didn't do that. I applied to a job in what for me was social change, right?

Phil [00:51:12] Well, exactly.

Happy Mwende Kinyili [00:51:13] Um...

Phil [00:51:14] Yeah, right, right.

Happy Mwende Kinyili [00:51:16] I grew up in the church. Like I said earlier, I was born and raised in Nairobi, Kenya, and I grew up in the Church. At some point in my life, I went to divinity school and the little Jesus that was in me was lost when I was there, so I don't have any religious affiliation. But I talk about growing up in a church because a lot of how I see the world was deeply informed by liberation theology, where I remember listening to people talk about Jesus and how Jesus was always on the side of the poor, and then they'd get into their father's car and go. And the church I grew up in was down the road from one of the largest, if not the largest informal settlement in Kenya, I think maybe in Africa at this moment. And we didn't talk about that. We talked about Jesus, but we didn't talk about how one of the biggest churches that, quite affluent because wealthy people were going to this church. What was the role of that church vis-à-vis the huge informal settlement down the road. And it confused me. That was one. Second, I never saw a woman preach from the pulpit. Why is there nobody who looks like me preaching from the pulpit? And the answer is because I was told the Bible. So all these things confused me, I read and I studied. And then I bumped into liberation theology and I was like, aha, that thing that we're doing was not I think what Jesus would have done or what any of the spiritual teachers would have been saying we need to do. Fundamentally, we need to be siding with those who are most unwanted, those who are most pushed, pressured, trodden, afflicted. Those are the people who we need standing by and saying to them, how can you lead us to make sure others aren't in the situation you are in. Not, how can I bring you sugar so that you can have tea? Because that's a different frame. That's not the frame of liberation theology. The frame of liberation theology is let's give you the resources to get yourself out of here and make the world different so that others are not in this situation that you are in. That made sense to me. And I discovered queer theology, black theology. I lost the Jesus, but I kept the social change. And then I was doing all this, I lived outside the country and I came back with no Jesus, but very clear that what I wanted to spend my life doing was not making things worse. I was like, I don't know how to make things better, but I am committed to not making things worse. So going to work at Standard Chartered was gonna make me contribute to making things worst. So I looked for a job and ended up working for a foundation that was working with queer people in Africa. And I was, aha, I'm getting it. And I have to say it's been a constant learning for me through the years around what can I contribute to our collective liberation? That's the question. That's my basic question. What can I contribute to our collective liberation? And the question feels more

pressured for me because I have two kids, I have a six-year-old and an almost two-year old. And before I had my kids, it was a more theoretical question than it feels right now. Right now it feels deeply practical because when I look around I can see that the world is worse today than when I was born. We are in a worse situation and we are the adults right now. So I look and I'm so committed to leaving this world better than I found it for my kids so that they have a better starting point than the one I had. And not just my kids because my kids are privileged, they're deeply privileged living in Nairobi. But all the kids around, like, what can I bring to the table that would make this world better for all kids? I remember a conversation I had with some folks I organized with a few years back, where we're all trying to envision what liberation would look like. And one of the people in the room said, for them, liberation is a full fridge where any child can open the fridge and get food. And that has sat with me. So I am like, what can contribute to making a world where every child can open the fridge and get food, just at its most basic. So that's what brings me to the work every day.

Phil [00:55:41] That's powerful, Happy, and I think you are such an inspiring force for good in the world. And I'm so grateful to you for spending this time with us today. Thank you.

Happy Mwende Kinyili [00:55:51] Thank you so much, Happy. And thank you, Phil and Grace again, for inviting me and inviting Mama Cash into the space. I enjoy talking. I also enjoy listening. Thank you for that.

Phil: There are a slew of resources about effective giving on The Center for Effective Philanthropy's website, cep.org, as well as givingdoneright.org, where you'll find all of our episodes and show notes.

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