

# What is next for philanthropy?

by **Martina Kolesárová**, Executive Director, Pontis Foundation



Whether we want to or not, we cannot change the time we live in, but we can learn much from what it tells us about our future. One of the areas affected by the pandemic was giving and donating. Although philanthropy has changed before, the last year has helped us to better understand which path it could take.

## We need to focus on bigger changes too

A part of society will still be in favor of charitable donating that focuses first of all on solving the consequences of social problems. We donate food, clothing, and finances to quickly provide basic needs or school equipment. It is important, especially if there are still people who fall through social safety nets. However, it is equally important to develop philanthropic initiatives that strive for lasting changes by tackling the root causes of problems.

Despite the fact that COVID-19 forced us to focus mainly on providing urgent material assistance, the consequences of the pandemic are increasingly making us think about deeper systemic changes. We know that unequal access to education will not be solved by tablets in schools, and poverty will not disappear as a result of providing food packages. Just as crisis hotlines will not tackle violence against women, even though they are much needed. All of these solutions respond to the consequences of the problems and, while helping in the short term, maintain the status quo in the long run. Besides, complex problems, such as a low level of education or climate change require new types of solutions and, in particular, cooperation.

According to the World Economic Forum, the economic and social effects of the pandemic will bring greater inequality and will be with us for a longer time than we initially thought. Organizations that bring innovative approaches to long-term complex societal problems and challenges can thus be very important allies not only for companies but also for governments.

## Partnership and cooperation are most important

At the beginning of the 21st century, the so-called strategic philanthropy became the mantra of technology companies and individual donors from Silicon Valley. It is often criticized, especially for the patronizing way of the "I know it all" approach to charities or non-profit organizations, and for the typical obsession with control and rigid impact measurement.

Recently, the waters of philanthropic donating have been stirred up by the activities of MacKenzie Scott, the ex-wife of billionaire Jeff Bezos. Besides investing in fields that are statistically underfunded, her donating has other atypical elements. She has donated large sums to smaller organizations with leaders who come from "vulnerable" groups, allowing the selected organizations to make their own decisions about the use of funds. According to Scott, she mainly supported organizations that "transform" the fields in which they operate.

Whether MacKenzie Scott's approach to philanthropy will be a new norm is currently difficult to say. However, even in Slovakia, many organizations took a step back from lengthy bureaucratic mechanisms during the first

wave of the pandemic. The aid needed to be quick and flexible.

Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors recommend several principles in donating: more favorable setting of the grant system for the beneficiaries of the donation, cooperation of donors with other donors, acceleration of aid through a combination of financial and non-financial support, training in systemic changes, and a change in the dynamics of power in favor of beneficiaries. The philanthropic relationship should take a form of a dialogue between the donor and the organization.

At the Pontis Foundation, we constantly search for ways in which philanthropy can contribute as meaningfully as possible to the development of Slovakia. In line with world trends, we are thus developing donating that supports not only quick solutions but also tackles complex topics that require long-term change, such as the field of education. We believe that if aid is to be sustainable, it must be based on an equal partnership that gives space to both parties. Last but not least, we believe that philanthropy should bring important capital for completely new social solutions. That is why we connect the topic of philanthropy and social innovation. We want to share our expertise and experience with others through philanthropic consulting and co-create philanthropic stories of companies and individual donors.

Last year has shown us how fragile human life can be. It can also encourage us to do more for society. And philanthropy can be the most effective way.

Martina Kolesárová has worked for the Pontis Foundation for almost six years now. She was in charge of fundraising and developing cooperation with social innovators.

She was involved in the birth of programs such as Open Future and This Is 21. In 2019 she became one of the CEOs of the Foundation. She is in charge of education and social innovation stream within the foundation and also co-manages the foundation. She started her professional career after completing her studies of History and English Language at the University of Prešov and Political Science studies at the Central European University in Budapest. Before joining the Pontis team, she worked for the British Council and the Slovak Renewable Energy Agency. During her stay abroad, she worked for a corporate social responsibility consulting firm in Tel Aviv and as a senior volunteer for Ashoka Foundation in Washington, D.C.