

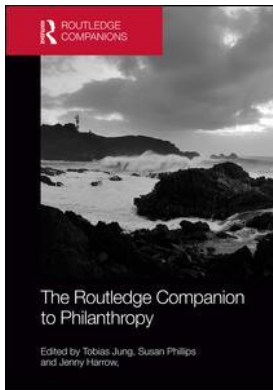
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### **Vignette: The Institutions and Expressions of Philanthropy Philanthropy as boundary spanning**

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## Part V

# The institutions and expressions of philanthropy

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# Vignette: The Institutions and Expressions of Philanthropy

## Philanthropy as boundary spanning

### Reaching in and out for a Qatar-based charity

*Aisha Faleh Al-Thani*

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Reach Out to Asia (ROTA) is a Qatar-based education and development charity. It engages in transnational philanthropy in regions where external philanthropic attention has been relatively limited and where negotiating philanthropic legitimacy can be challenging. Celebrating its first full decade of work in 2015, ROTA is a beyond-borders initiative that has also found itself strongly engaged in youth community service at home. Operating as a fundraising charity and working with a variety of partners, ROTA's mission is 'to ensure that people affected by crises across Asia and around the world have continuous access to relevant and high-quality primary and secondary school education'. With the onset of the Arab Spring in late 2010 and early 2011, ROTA's geographic funding reach experienced re-interpreted flexibility; its work has also been constrained by difficult and deteriorating security settings – in precisely the areas where its vision of access for youth to education and training is most critical. Its success has depended on an ability to navigate these difficult spaces and connect its work and profile beyond borders with its engagement at home. To this end, ROTA's strategy has been to integrate 'in-reach' with its 'out-reach' purposes, and it does so in two main ways. First, it advances its educational vision and programs in the context of particular humanitarian need and donors and recipients, while not itself offering immediate humanitarian relief. Second, it helps develop capacity while retaining sole hold of the concept of youth service within its home community of Qatar.

#### **Reaching in: Community service in Qatar**

As an international development charity, ROTA's home presence provides both continuity with, and contrasts to, its international identity and role. Qatar's emphasis on spurring its national education development and its 'National Vision 2030' of a knowledge-based economy gave impetus to ROTA's founding in 2005. It also motivated the location of ROTA within an overarching organizational parent, the Qatar Foundation. This is a private NGO founded a decade earlier to develop Qatari educational potential, both nationally and internationally, through progressive education, research and community welfare (Khodr, 2011). Given that 60 percent of Qatar's expatriate community is of Asian origin, ROTA, from its beginning, added insights into the educational needs and cultural norms of Asian peoples.

## A. Faleh Al-Thani

As much enabling as expressive, ROTA's strategy, which is part of its longer-term donor plan, has always allowed for local and youth engagement to raise awareness of education and development. This has propelled ROTA towards a significant community development role, particularly through its schools-based volunteer programme of Youth Service Clubs that encourage community service learning (Kandil, 2004). By giving voice to youth concerns, including a regional youth media initiative, and providing youth with hands-on opportunities for civic service, ROTA's success has meant it cannot coordinate enough volunteering activities for all schools and students across Qatar. Instead, it has presented plans for working with Qatar's Supreme Education Council to develop a nationwide school-volunteering national curriculum and a toolkit for use by other organizations.

Sustaining this 'reaching in' position with young education-based volunteers is demanding for ROTA, particularly for donor relations and cultivation: as donors' expectations rise that there are ever expanding opportunities at home, it becomes even more critical to channel philanthropic interest to its international work. Nevertheless, the bulk of ROTA's budget goes to its international objectives and, whilst Qatari community development efforts are steadily expanding, they still remain within ROTA's international mission. For ROTA's board, staff and volunteers, being motivated to be able to simultaneously look outwards and look inwards is a skill in its own right.

### Reaching out: A strategic balance

Qatar's increasing geo-political influence (Kamrava, 2011), and helpful brokerage role in peace and stability issues – for example, its mediation efforts in Lebanon, Sudan, Yemen and Palestine – helps sustain motivations to support ROTA from a national-international perspective. ROTA's board, donor, and managerial focus, all require constant attention to the latest geopolitical developments. For its ability to do so, enabling it to provide assistance in conflict related areas, ROTA is seen as an 'exemplar organisation' (Barakat and Zyck, 2010: 36) among NGOs in the Gulf Co-operation Council states.

Operationally, ROTA, like other Middle East philanthropic initiatives, works in what Murphy (2009) describes as the shifting spaces of governments and business. This necessitates continual review and assessment of why, where, how and with whom ROTA works, organizations which are almost always encapsulated in demanding locations, commitments and time scales. This is illustrated by ROTA's work in Pakistan's Swat district: in 2012, three years after the Government Girls High School Chamtalai was destroyed by militants, ROTA and Save The Children inaugurated a new school for 230 female pupils as part of a major educational and community development programme. Similarly attuned to regional developments, with the onset of the Arab Spring, ROTA initiated a new 'reach out to Arabia' campaign.

Now working across ten counties in Asia and the Arab Region, a distinctive feature for ROTA is its pronounced emphasis on service, irrespective of religion or ideology, and its commitment to support people, regardless of race, gender or religion. This neutrality is key to ROTA's reputation within, and beyond, the Middle East, and in both Muslim and non-Muslim philanthropy contexts. Its project strengths – supporting educational development through enhancing skills development, integrating environmental and educational concerns, using sport as an educational tool, and revitalizing language – all gain from a broad, secular stance, and further support ROTA's emphasis on local community ownership.

As part of this, it is important for ROTA to maintain its legitimacy, demonstrating that its choices of projects and locations are based on, and perceived as based on, priority need rather than religion or co-religious concerns: addressing natural disasters, overcoming the impact of wars, and helping the world's poorest nations, as identified by the World Bank. This becomes very

clear when ROTA's own credentials are challenged. For example, in November 2013, ROTA's assessment team sought, after initial desk reviews, to travel to Myanmar to examine the conditions impacting children and young people's access to quality education. ROTA focused on Rakhine state. This is characterized by weak infrastructure, high population density, low-income communities, and a variety of ethnic and religious groups. While most Myanmar populations are vulnerable, the Rohingya, an ethnic Muslim population, faced especially severe conditions (*New York Times*, 2013). After delays in finding a facilitating NGO host, eventually selecting the Qatar Red Crescent, which itself operates under Myanmar Red Cross auspices, ROTA was unable to undertake its field visit components due to an inability to gain security clearance, and has subsequently placed its proposed project on hold. Put bluntly, it appears that ROTA was (mis)perceived as a Muslim charity, helping Muslims in a religious conflict zone, thus compromising its legitimacy as a neutral player.

The need for flexibility, when working in poor, crisis-facing countries, and the reality of projects on hold, or quickly scaled down, or scaled up, are all an operating fact of life for ROTA's managers and field staff; an area where quality communication with donors is vital. With a strategy that does not provide direct funding to immediate relief or extracting people to safety, but emphasises information gathering through field assessments of the best possible education efforts in difficult circumstances, a 'patient impatience' is required by the board, donors and field staff. With Arab Spring developments, in areas such as Yemen, Egypt and Syria, some ROTA donors expected immediate action to support education, but soon recognized the value of a more calculated – and educated – response once initial conditions were understood. Programs were discontinued in Syria in 2012 with no re-entry plans until the situation had settled; while in Jordan, projects were responding to the schooling pressures of over 500,000 child refugees, with 55 schools coping with double shifts of students. In Lebanon, where one million plus refugees could not be easily integrated into public schools, facing both space and language difficulties, ROTA worked at building low-cost schools and at launching a sports education programme.

Suspension or withdrawal of programs produces its own frustrations, loss of human capital and capacity building in the medium and longer terms, alongside the immediate necessities of safeguarding of staff, children and young people through risk assessment and child protection. Motivating board, donors, staff and volunteers by maintaining ROTA's sense of progression and action orientation when projects are on hold is critical to keeping up its impetus and its impact (Harrow, 2013). For example, after projects were suspended in Syria and Egypt, ROTA is now taking different directions. In Yemen, a partnership with CARE and Silatech, a prominent Qatar social initiative for youth employment and entrepreneurship in the Arab world, has been launched to create viable alternatives to formal employment for youth. Similarly, scaling up of educational objectives is central for ROTA programs. This is especially notable where school attendance in Asia is seen as unaffordable or linked to gender and conflict issues: parental poverty then becomes the core challenge. In a Nepal programme, for example, mothers of participating children are supported through creating mothers' groups, and organizing collective savings and income generating activities, such as vegetable or poultry farming. The ability to scale has clear implications for ROTA's staffing capacity, making it essential that local project staff pass on their developing experience and knowledge to HQ staff, as well as providing career opportunities within projects and offering favourable employment conditions overall.

### **Moving forward: Mobilizing women**

Education is not solely a 'women's issue', but its role in community development and potential for change through philanthropy is often spearheaded by, as well as focused on, women.

## A. Faleh Al-Thani

As a ROTA Board member from the very beginning, my own motivation to join the board and contribute as a philanthropist has been twofold. First, I recognize the potential of education to change lives and ‘make differences’ and to do so over the longer term, supported by sound information, itself a vital component of education. Second, I have great faith in ROTA’s chairperson, particularly her commitment, which is articulated in the long-term, but not low key, message that ‘ROTA aims to ensure that education is not interrupted in times of crisis, by providing access to safe learning areas and quality education’ (ROTA, 2006).

Women’s impact on philanthropy in Qatar and the region has already been extraordinary, and there appears more to come as women’s wealth and influence grows: the real surge in women’s philanthropy is not yet realized. Hence ROTA is now aiming at engaging more women by shifting its approaches to address women’s interests and leadership styles, and attract wealthy and powerful women. For these women, the comment from the 12-year-old Nepalese pupil to her ROTA project visitors, ‘... it enables me to hope that my life will get better and thus I’ll never forget you’, is likely to be only the starting point of their philanthropic action.

## Notes

‘Reach Out to Asia’ was conceived by Qatar’s (then) Heir Apparent, His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani in 2005, and guided subsequently by ROTA’s Chairperson, Her Excellency Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad Al Thani and its board. The Reach Out to Asia website is [www.reachouttoasia.org/](http://www.reachouttoasia.org/).

Grateful thanks are expressed to ROTA’s Executive Director, Essa Al Mannai, ROTA’s Programme Coordinator, Rania Musleh, ROTA’s Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist, Abdallah Al Abdallah, and Qatar Academy pupil, Tammam Al-Ghraoui, for their willingness to be interviewed.

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