CASE STUDY

Alberto Lidji, Duke of Edinburgh
International Award

Alberto Lidji has been Director of Development at the Duke of Edinburgh’s International Award Foundation since 2013. Originally from Argentina, he was educated at Cambridge University and the London School of Economics. After a career in the private sector, focused on capital introduction into emerging and frontier markets, he ventured into the world of philanthropy and was the Head of Development and Alumni Relations at Trinity College, Cambridge, before taking up his current post. Alberto is also founder of Maximum Philanthropic Benefit, an advocacy organisation promoting impact philanthropy.

Q: Can you tell us about your organisation’s ambition and initiatives?

Sure, I’d be delighted to. The Duke of Edinburgh’s Award began in 1956 and since then more than eight million young people aged 14-24 have embarked on the Award. The Award focuses on achieving personal best through volunteering, new skills, physical recreation and an adventurous journey.

What most British people don’t know is that the Award is very much international; we have operations in 144 countries and around one million participants globally. There are approximately 300,000 Award participants in the United Kingdom.

The Duke of Edinburgh’s International Award Foundation is the umbrella organisation that oversees quality and growth across the globe. We are also active in capacity-building, so as to ensure those running the Award in different countries are as well equipped as possible to generate philanthropic support locally.

Our ambition is truly transformational. We would like to ensure that by 2026, the year in which the Award celebrates its 70th Anniversary, every single young person aged 14-24 in the world has the opportunity to embark on the Award should they so wish. There are 1.2 billion young people in that age bracket worldwide, straddling every imaginable socio-demographic background. Our ambition is clear and audacious.

Q: What support do you get from philanthropists able to make 7-figure gifts?

The philanthropists who support us at the seven-figure level are tremendously engaged with us, and it’s worth noting that their involvement with us extends far beyond financial donations. Indeed, they deploy their personal time, their intellect and their contacts to help the Award achieve great things.

Most of our major donors are part of our World Fellowship – an exclusive global network of philanthropically-minded individuals who share ideas and support the work of the Award around the world. Many become “champions” of key events or philanthropic initiatives – their input is invaluable.

At the highest level, we also have one Global Benefactor, who has been instrumental in supporting the Award, and who sets a benchmark of philanthropic excellence. Without the Global Benefactor’s support, quite simply, much of our charitable work around the world would be impossible to undertake.
More recently, we have introduced Regional Benefactors, where one key philanthropist is twinned with our regional operations in Africa, the Americas, Asia or Europe – these supporters make a multi-year commitment with a focus on their respective region.

**Q: How does the World Fellowship programme work?**

The World Fellowship is a prestigious global network that brings together generous individuals with an interest in the development of young people; it was established in 1987 to support the long-term development of the Award.

Individuals join as a “World Fellow” for a one-off donation of £75,000 for lifetime membership or as a “World Fellow Benefactor” for a one-off donation of £150,000 for lifetime membership. For those under 50 years of age, we also have a “Young Fellowship” category that enables engagement at a giving level that recognises these individuals may still be establishing their careers, and appreciates that individuals can progress to join the World Fellowship in time. It really is wonderful to have the Award grow alongside these lifelong supporters.

We hold two Welcome Lunches at Buckingham Palace every year to welcome new World Fellows – most of our new World Fellows are introduced by existing ones; we are a family. Once a year we also hold a World Fellowship Anniversary Dinner at Buckingham Palace or Windsor Castle, at which recognition pins are presented by HRH The Duke of Edinburgh to those who have recently joined. It’s also a wonderful opportunity to thank our existing World Fellows.

In addition to these events, the World Fellowship holds international “seeing is believing” trips, where our philanthropic supporters can witness first-hand the impact the Award is making across the globe.

Recently we had a World Fellowship trip to South Africa, where we flew major donors to gain firsthand insight into the Award’s work with marginalised and ‘at risk’ youth, which included a visit to a correctional facility that is delivering the Award to young inmates. It was a moving experience for donors and staff alike. The correlation between doing the Award in a prison and a reduction in reoffending makes for a very strong and compelling narrative, which our supporters very much appreciate.

The trip to South Africa was comprehensive in nature, and gave visibility into multiple facets of what we do. Their Royal Highnesses The Earl and Countess of Wessex led this trip to South Africa and were joined by President Zuma during a Gold Award Ceremony in Cape Town.

Thirty years ago, President Nelson Mandela was the founding Patron-in-Chief of the Award in South Africa, and it was truly special that we were all able to travel to South Africa to celebrate this anniversary.

**Q: Can you tell us more about your donors?**

Our donors are very diverse – they’ve established themselves through different activities, which range from the financial sector to the arts and everything in between.

The one common denominator is that they are all savvy, well-read and intellectually extremely curious, which is very satisfying because conversation is never boring. They ask a lot of questions and become experts in our work around the globe, so their input often leads to new opportunities. Geographically, they cover the globe and their age range spans from those in their 20s to lifelong supporters in their 90s.

As people become more philanthropically engaged with us, they want to explore more about how their donations are being deployed and they want their support to be in line with their personal interests and affinities. We’re very aware of this and ensure we have a bespoke approach when it comes to building relationships with each and every single one of our supporters.
The longer and deeper an individual’s engagement is, the more opportunities they have to find out more about our work. One could say that some of our supporters have now become experts in our work around the globe, since we have so many loyal supporters who have been with us for years and decades.

**Q: How do you identify major donors? How do you make initial contact and develop relationships with them?**

There are multiple paths through which we connect with philanthropists. Word of mouth is, arguably, the most potent and effective method. It is through the generous introductions facilitated by our existing supporters that many of our more fruitful conversations develop.

Our donor care and stewardship approach is incredibly important and sophisticated, and we sincerely do build personal relationships with those who support us. Not only is this thoroughly enjoyable but, importantly, it leads to our having a better mutual understanding as we tackle charitable challenges together.

We also avail ourselves of innovative ways of reaching new audiences and geographic regions. One excellent example of how we do this is our “donation-sharing model”, which enables a new World Fellow to designate 50% of their donation to a country of their choice and 50% to us on the international side, highlighting their commitment to global growth and quality.

It presents a win-win for both the Duke of Edinburgh’s International Award Foundation and for the national offices across the globe. National offices benefit from promoting World Fellowship to their local stakeholders and we benefit from having visibility and access to a new distribution channel. Moreover, this arrangement creates a virtuous cycle in local regions, since once a new World Fellow is introduced in that part of the world, their peers take note and curiosity often leads them to join the World Fellowship as well.

The Czech Republic is an excellent example of this, where the Chairman of that national office has been responsible for attracting a dozen new World Fellows and Benefactors in recent months. Everyone benefits, especially the Award Participants.

**Q: How do you encourage the next generation of donors?**

We are always thinking about “generational” dynamics. The concept of the next generation is present in everything we do because it is the philanthropists of the future who will ensure our continued success in decades to come.

This sort of thinking is manifested within the World Fellowship itself, where supporters can upgrade from Young Fellow to World Fellow and then to World Fellowship Benefactor level – these highlight the main philanthropic engagement levels that supporters embrace over their lifetime of support. In addition to this, there are various other bespoke activities in the mix.

**Q: How has your approach to major donors changed over time?**

Signing up as a World Fellow used to be seen as the end goal but now we view World Fellowship as the initial “gateway” to our family. Our World Fellows have such a wealth of experiences that having substantive, one-to-one conversations with them is of paramount importance. For many the £75,000 giving level is just right but for others, they’re interested in having conversations about higher giving levels, which are often linked to specific regions or areas of activities.
We get to know their motivations for getting involved with us and try to get to know them intimately so as to get clarity of thought on the next steps for each supporter’s philanthropic journey with us.

**Q: Do donors’ families get involved?**

Yes, very much so. It is not unusual to see donors’ families present on our international trips. We always welcome and encourage input from donors’ spouses, sons and daughters, many of whom eventually end up joining the World Fellowship at some point as well. Donors’ families are important to us, not least because many philanthropic decisions are taken at the family level these days.

**Q: Is it important to get the Board on board?**

Yes, one absolutely needs the Board on board, as it were. At the Duke of Edinburgh’s International Award Foundation we benefit from having an incredible Board of Trustees who are very supportive of the fundraising function.

I have a monthly coffee or phone call with each trustee to bring them up to speed on our latest fundraising developments and to discuss any interesting conversations they’re having with potential supporters. These monthly exchanges are invaluable and many fundraising initiatives are a consequence of that regular brainstorming.

**Q: What kind of non-financial help do donors offer?**

Our donors tend to provide support that extends beyond the financial side of things. For starters, many of our donors have completed the Award when they were younger and it’s very common for their kids to do it as well.

They also see the charity in practice because almost every event we organise for supporters has an Award component. Donors hear firsthand from Award Participants who explain what it means to them, how it has increased their confidence and how it has helped them overcome difficult situations.

Because our donors understand the Award well, and can see its employability benefits and lifelong positive externalities, they are willing to help in many other ways by, for instance, raising our profile within their companies and getting them to recognise the value of the Award when they’re screening candidates’ CVs. While our brand recognition is strong in the UK, this sort of support is invaluable for us across the globe.

**Q: How many staff support your donor programme?**

Our outfit is constituted by around 40 staff. Everyone has a fundraising mindset and the core development team is around 10 individuals. Globally, there are 68 national offices and we have a presence in 144 countries in total. In addition to staff, we are also working on a “Global Fundraising Framework” that enables the sharing of best practice and facilitates fundraising conversations across borders.

In our London office, almost every member of staff has a photo on their desk of themselves with a donor or with an Award winner who came to speak at an event, or whose experience moved them. Some pictures were taken in the UK and others in just about every other corner of the world.
Q: *What advice do you have for other charities that are seeking funds but have not yet experienced much success in attracting big donations?*

Well, if you don’t currently pursue major gifts then I sincerely believe that you should. One’s sights need to be set high. Perhaps TS Eliot captured this thinking best when he noted: “only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go”.

Unfortunately many charities are too risk averse, and that does a disservice to donors who wish to see new innovative and ambitious thinking, as well as to beneficiaries who are underserved by suboptimal philanthropic income generation and, consequently, suboptimal charitable output.

Secondly, I would say that the problem is not about finding people who can write cheques; that’s not a problem at all actually. The problem, and the challenge, is that once you knock on their door, do you really know what you’re about, why you’re doing what you’re doing in the charitable space, how your cost base is constituted and what value you’re bringing to society?

Once you can answer all those questions, be sure that you are telling the story in a very compelling manner and that you present everything well. You need to show the consequential chain of events that goes from a donor writing a cheque to a beneficiary being better off somewhere else. If you don’t then rest assured another charity knocking on the same door will.

Thirdly, embrace impact measurement. A lot of charity boards and managers are afraid to have a spotlight on how they do things – they shy away from it for fear of how they will be perceived. But in reality one should crave the opportunity to shed as much light as possible on internal operations because that is exactly the sort of confidence that a philanthropist likes to see.

If you put your cards on the table and say: “this is exactly how we do it, these are our assumptions, this is our cost base and this is our impact - everything can be scrutinised”, and you hand that document to somebody who can write the cheque, they will read it and they will love it.

In my experience, potential donors want visibility into what’s going on internally, they want assurance that the numbers stack up and they want to see a healthy appetite for risk and innovative thinking. Those are the key ingredients for a winning formula.

Q: *Do you have any final advice for others hoping to emulate your success?*

Remember that people want to be involved in transformational impact and focus on the long-term. Relationships grow over time if you manage them properly. The first major gift might take a while but it’s unlikely to be the only major gift that you get from that person – once they’ve given at a certain level, if you treat them well and can demonstrate the value they’ve created then they’re likely to increase their future engagement.

Don’t forget the power of word of mouth and that actively leveraging your senior volunteers is key. Let your major donors become champions and take ownership of some of your initiatives and events. The ones that succeed oftentimes do so because they have a strong champion driving them.

The reality is that your senior volunteers have a prominence in society and a platform from which to guide the charitable agenda forward. When you have a philanthropist who is willing to say to their friends: “this is a great initiative, how about it”, that speaks louder than almost anything and that’s the way to go.
Finally, I would say don’t make assumptions about who will and won’t support your organisation, don’t say “oh they’ll never support us”. Good causes get the attention of interesting people so it’s worth reaching out, and it’s worth aiming high.