

HIGH VISIBILITY OR LOW PROFILE?

by Jolana Novotná

Abstract: Community foundations adopt different strategies to participate in building civil society, or in establishing “public space”. The strategies are influenced, amongst other factors, by the architecture of the public space (vertical, dominating powers/horizontally acting entities), and by perceptions of civil society concept in different cultures. In some circumstances, community foundations play the role of highly visible risk-taker, in other conditions it seems to be more strategic to adopt the role of a quiet and modest mediator, acting “behind the scene”. However, all the strategies have the same goal – to make the public space more balanced.

Introduction

It is said that community foundations are among the most rapidly developing models of organised philanthropy - mainly in the US, but also around the world. If this development is significant, we may ask the following questions:

- Is it a reaction to a certain socio-economic development in which community foundations fill in gaps and play roles left by others?
- What strategies do they use to play these roles in different cultures and so participate in the development of civil society?

Community foundations can play an important role in establishing "public space"¹. Public space is the area of shared interest. It is a space metaphor for legitimacy open for everything that concerns public affairs.

Vertical and horizontal models of participation in the public space development

Let me start with a quotation from the material published by the European Foundation Centre - "Civil Society, Learning from one another":

"Concern for the collective interest should not be left exclusively in the hands of public authorities ... Yet this is precisely what has history witnessed in at least some of our societies, notably in Continental Europe common identity has very often come more from the top down than from the bottom up... Everything was channelled through political parties, the result being that only the few initially had an individual voice, with the majority consigned to the collective voice of their parties or the institutions that represented them...The public architecture of Continental Europe is no longer acceptable, given that too many people do not want to have the collective interest entirely catered for by public institutions. Political parties, once the principal source of

¹ The public space concept was developed during the Community Partnership Support Initiative Programme implemented in the Czech Republic in 1998-2001. It was funded by Open Society Fund Prague and Ch. S. Mott Foundation, and managed jointly by Open Society Fund Prague, the VIA Foundation, the Partnership Foundation, and the Community Foundation of Ústí nad Labem.

collective identity in the majority of countries, are increasingly being rejected... Happiness in the collective meaning could effectively be pursued by fostering collective action by private institutions and private organisations that exhibit a collective horizontal rather than a vertical, hierarchical identity."

I do not know, whether this is also true for cultures outside of Continental Europe, but it seems that the traditional vertical authoritative model of public space "administration" (established by elections and delegation of power to political parties and public authorities) has been complemented by active initiatives established on the basis of natural authority and trust. Community foundations may be one of those initiatives that do not dominate the public space, but are one of its participants which can ensure its openness for all the other players (businesses, individuals, interest groups, minority or marginal groups, etc.).

Strategies of community foundations

To play such a role, community foundations adopt various strategies that in all the cases we have explored in working party meetings are sensitive to all the potential public space participants but at the same time take into account individual situations, tradition and division of "clandestine power" within the society. The basic question here is, what are the strategies/qualities of individuals/organisations that are able to bring together the vested interests in the community and at the same time enjoy respect and trust among different groups within the community.

High visibility versus low profile strategies as seen during the site visits

In a society with traditional and stabilised democracy with respect to entrepreneurial spirit and individual rights such as the US, a community foundation may be strategic and adopt an image of a highly visible risk-taker promoting marginalised groups into the public space and getting them involved into civil society (an example is the Minneapolis CF promoting tolerance among various ethnic groups).

In painfully divided societies such as Ireland, it is crucial to be neutral. Board and staff must be seen to reflect the different parties and funds must be distributed equitably. The Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust exemplifies this practice. It is important not to disturb emotions and to concentrate on intangible gentle things such as relations, interpersonal skills, knowledge of community. To reconcile the conflicting parties is a high-risk activity but can be done without evoking antagonisms and controversy.

Russia traditionally respects the role of strong leaders and has little tradition of genuine democratic procedures. There, community foundations may serve as teachers of democracy. Their boards and grant-making committees are created according to a one-third principle: one-third are representatives of business community, one-third are representatives of local authorities and one third representatives of general public including established NGOs.

The one-third principle provides a balance between the interests of the business community, local government and the general public and does not allow one party to dominate a foundation's decision making. Open and competitive grant rounds are very attractive and highly visible tools for the philanthropic programmes of the business community - as Vladimír Szecuk, a businessman and a member of the board of the Tyumen Community Foundation told us. It is especially important for those businessmen who like fair play and want to avoid the accusation of seeking political advantage. Community foundations bring a systematic and dynamic approach and ensure equal opportunities. In this way, community foundations introduce a true entrepreneurial spirit into the society and take a visible stand-point to demonstrate democratic approaches.

"Civil society" and "citizen" were not familiar terms among the subjects of the British Queen. The strategies adopted by the Community Foundation serving Tyne & Wear and Northumberland had regard for the traditional structures of the society which are hierarchical and stratified. Its orientation towards donors does not mean that the foundation itself is conservative, but that it respects the constraints it works in and moves things on very sensitively. Once the community foundation has got a respected position, it can take a more outspoken stand point (In my opinion the latest annual report featuring women's activities is quite courageous in the traditionally male Geordie culture). Board members describe their role as leading donors to be more thoughtful about their philanthropy.

Agents of balance and change

Community foundations are trying to provide balance in the public space:

- * Bringing a horizontal approach to balance the vertical political structures (community foundations and other private organisations are not here to replace political parties!)
- * Involving minorities to balance the domination of majority
- * Supporting individual rights and responsibilities against the delegated rights and responsibilities
- * Balancing centre and margins, outsiders and insiders.

At the same time, it seems that the community foundations must be very sensitive to the environment they work in - sometimes it even seems that they have adopted some mimesis to be able to influence it without disturbing it too much or without losing respect of the strong holders in the community. Alternatively, they are able to be modest and humble enough to be the leader in the more and more interrelated world where people have to co-operate or co-compete to be able to live good quality lives.

Strategies themselves include balancing factors: a high visibility strategy may be used to draw attention to soft, gentle, marginalised, invisible issues, and a low profile strategy may deal with high risk and visible issues in the community.

However balance is not about standstill. It is about change and ability to deal with it. There are no definite and best solutions. No Utopias.

And this might be one of the dangers for community foundations - when they are not able to balance on the edge and enjoy it, when they try to reach a "stability", i.e. turn into bureaucratic institutions, re-distributors of funds etc.

Creativity and responding to challenges, being able to balance between low profile and high profile strategies, is one of the most important assets of community foundations.

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