

# IN BUILDING CIVIL SOCIETY, COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS SHOULD ENGAGE ALL OF THEIR RESOURCES AND NOT RESTRICT THEMSELVES TO THEIR GRANT-MAKING FUNCTION

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**Abstract:** Community Foundations bring many resources to the work we do. While Grant-making is the most obvious tool; it is only one of a number of resources that a Community Foundation can bring to bear to address the needs of our communities. The range of tools include but are not limited to the standing, reputation and independence of the Community Foundation, the clout and access of individual board members, the institution's financial integrity and management capacity, and the capacity to undertake a broad range of activities such as commission research, convene competing interests, introduce ideas and speakers from outside our communities, take groups from our community to visit other exemplary sites, celebrate and honor promising ideas and people whose values we want to encourage. This essay explores how Community Foundations of all sizes can bring to bear these many advantages on behalf of our communities and institutions.

To build civil society, Community Foundations must deploy all of their resources, and not limit themselves to just investing their grant dollars. To restrict ourselves to making grants is to unduly limit the impact that we can have, and to leave unengaged many of the most potent resources of our institutions.

Let me start by offering several reasons why Community Foundations should reach beyond their grant-making role to engage all of the resources of the Community Foundations in building civil society.

- First, and most important, our philanthropic dollars are so small in contrast to the size of the issues involved in building civil society that dollars alone cannot buy a solution.
- Second, there is no magic bullet for building civil society. Nor is the process ever completed. Building civil society is like walking to the Horizon.
- Third, while each organization can contribute to building civil society, our impact grows when we act in concert with others in this work.
- Fourth, most public response systems are organized *vertically* like silos along single interests such as health, education, housing, and jobs. But the principal issues we face in building civil society are complex, interrelated and multifaceted. They need to be addressed *horizontally*, in a way that cuts across all these neatly bounded interests. And this split between the vertical organization of most of our response systems and the need to work horizontally is an area where Community Foundations offer great added value. It may be the arena where we make our single greatest impact.

- Fifth, there are very few in the community with the capacity to bring together all the stakeholder parties and even fewer with the willpower to do this. We have a chance to play an important role here because Community Foundations are charged with looking at an entire geographic area. At our best, we serve every single constituency - rich and poor, every ethnic group, every interest group. We are responsible for every service area.  
If we are effective, we should be politically neutral, non-partisan and independent. That does not mean that we should stand for nothing. Nor that we should shy away from taking positions on difficult issues. But it does mean that we have got to be scrupulous in not becoming partisan, in not becoming solely identified with one political candidate, one political party.
- Sixth, Community Foundations are forever. We have a permanent endowment. We do not depend on annual fund raising. This “permanence” has two important consequences. First, we can afford to think long-term, to make a strategic play on issues like building civil society where the impact may not be immediately visible, and not solely respond to it as a short-term issue. Second, our permanency enables us to take bigger risks - and to fail. It is very hard for government to fail; not that it does not do it regularly and publicly. Government is not set up to fail and it is difficult for elected officials to take risks and fail. We can fail. We should fail. We do not do so often enough. There are not many people who put in their annual reports: “let me tell you of all the ways that I have failed.” Failure is not something that we do as often as we might.
- Finally, we have skilled staff that can play a brokering role. Skilled staff makes a difference. Exercising community leadership to build civil society can be expensive. If done right, it also should be modest and egalitarian. This is a little trickier. To best build coalitions we want others to get credit for the operation - government and other private agencies. This means submerging our own ego. That is not easy for many of us. But I am reminded of the wonderful phrase “if you don’t need to take credit you can pull an elephant with a thread.” Finally we have a great stake in a civil society. Our capacity to attract gifts, to make grants, to acquire and disseminate information all depends on achieving a civil society. Our work would be far more limited and pinched where the civil society was relatively undeveloped or weak.

To do this leadership work does not require a radical shift in organizational behavior or culture. Community Foundations can ease into this work. It is less about a radical change in organizational behavior and outlook than it is about moving along a continuum, a gradual shift over time to taking on more leadership as the Community Foundation gains experience, confidence, practice and money.

Relatively small institutions can and do play leadership roles beyond their resources. We have seen examples of this in our own working group: In Gütersloh, Germany the community foundation has brought together a forum for youth with little resources to begin to address youth issues. In Tyumen, Siberia the act of issuing a Request For Proposal and soliciting grants that were competitive, and in which the decisions were made on the merits in an open process, did much to advance civil society by setting a new norm. The Community Foundation serving Tyne & Wear and Northumberland was an early leader in calling attention to the problem of homelessness.

The Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust provides a wonderful example of work being done on reconciliation. There are many, many examples of foundations with limited financial resources doing important leadership work.

I want to focus on ways other than grant-making as vehicles for building civil society. Let me use the metaphor of playing poker. In some poker games in order to “open” you need “to have jacks or better,” or you need to “meet the ante.” If you have an endowment you have sufficient money to put you in the game. From now on it is all about bluffing. You may not have the money to match the big pot, but you are in the game. Even the largest of the American community foundations do not have the money to buy solutions. But they have enough to get them in the game. Money gets us in the game, but what else can we do as players? I will suggest a series of other ways in which we can play a leadership role.

- First, we contribute to building a civil society by the ways in which we build our governing board and, whom we hire as staff.
- Second, we can advance civil society through the basic values of how we conduct our daily business – are we courteous, respectful, transparent, non-discriminatory, and appreciative of the power relationship always there between grant maker and grant seeker?
- Third, we can contribute to civil society by paying attention to such simple opportunities as where we hold our meetings – in which communities, in which facilities - and publishing news and reports of our institution in languages of more than the majority community.
- Fourth we can add legitimacy and sanction to decision-making, the imprimatur that the endorsement and engagement of a Community Foundation can bring to the work others are doing.
- Fifth, we can bring to bear on the tasks at hand the individual contacts, the private networking skills of our boards and our families. In many cases that is the best thing we can do. The individuals who are leaders in our community, who sit on our boards, can make private calls to government officials, clergy, heads of businesses, media leaders to ask them to change their practices.
- Sixth, we can sponsor research.
- Seventh, we can connect our neighbors and colleagues to national experts that shift the focus and terms of our community’s discussions.
- Eighth, we can enable people from our community to visit other communities. In part because they learn something out there, but also because just the act of the team travelling together is a great way to move the agenda along. The German Marshall Fund has done this with great success for many years.
- Finally, we can bring parties together at a neutral table. This is often the most versatile and useful role open to Community Foundations. Done well, convening is a very powerful tool to move things along.

Each of these is a way in which a Community Foundation can play its leadership role and function as one of the small engines of democracy.

Our work begins by recognizing that we have a stake in a civil society, that this is never to be taken for granted or as a given, and that our work can help build this civil society.

We cannot wait to be asked to build civil society. No one asks us. We have to step up into this work and claim it.

Then we have to choose the right entry point. At any given time, there are dozens of potential ways to engage in building civil society. We need to pick the strategic ones first.

We pick a strategic entry point or program focus not only because it is important to the community but also because there are other allies working on the issue. Again, we cannot do it by ourselves. We are looking to see where the momentum is. This is all about some kind of “philanthropic jujitsu”. We are trying to change the trajectory of much bigger engines, bigger locomotives that are moving along and shaping civil society, and we are trying to hook on to them and slightly shift their direction. That is what we are about. If we can find the right entry point, the right program, the right partner, then we have the chance of making a greater difference.