

THE CHALLENGE FOR COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS WORLDWIDE: IS EVERYONE INCLUDED IN CIVIL SOCIETY?

by Emmett D. Carson

Introduction

Throughout the world, community foundations appear to have accepted that one of their distinguishing characteristics is to promote and foster civil society. While definitions of civil society vary, the concept is used here to refer to activities that engage individuals in recognizing their rights and responsibilities as citizens within a democracy.¹ At least one measure for determining how successful community foundations are in helping to build civil society is the extent to which they seek to involve and provide support for groups that are in some way shunned or excluded from fully participating in the larger society. Depending on the history and culture of the society, the excluded group may come from any segment of the society, for example: women, gays and lesbians, or religious, racial or ethnic groups.

A community foundation's civil society activities may look quite different depending on the history of the country, culture (social norms) and age of the democracy in which it works, as well as its own age, reputation and grantmaking capacity. For example, a newer community foundation working in a younger democracy may find that establishing an impartial, community-driven grantmaking process or convening disparate or opposing groups to meet to address an important community issue are powerful public demonstrations of civil society. Such is the case with both the Community Foundation of Usti nad Labem in Czechoslovakia and the Tyumen Community Foundation in Russia. Alternatively, an older community foundation working in an established democracy might provide funding and public support to important public policy issues. For example, the Community Foundation serving Tyne & Wear Northumberland in England has launched an important new initiative on homelessness, and the United States-based New Hampshire Charitable Foundation and The Minneapolis Foundation have both taken public positions on sensitive electoral issues. All are examples of community foundations promoting civil society through meaningful work within the context of their communities.

Preliminary anecdotal information suggests that notwithstanding the age of the democracy or the maturity of the community foundation, few community foundations appear willing to make the inclusion of an excluded group a major focus of their civil society activities. While including excluded groups was universally acknowledged as important, there were at least three reasons that emerged to explain why community foundations do not do more to involve excluded groups in their civil society efforts. These reasons are that it is too early in the life of the community foundation to take on the issue; the excluded group is too small to focus on at this time; and that involving the

excluded group would jeopardize future fundraising efforts from the included groups. In the sections that follow, each of these reasons is briefly examined followed by a short description of the civil society work of the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust, which provides an observable model for why the stated reasons for not including excluded groups are not sufficient.

Limitations of This Essay

This essay draws on the information and preliminary conversations of the Civil Society Working Group of the Transatlantic Community Foundation Network. It is based on ongoing conversations by the working group members with presentations from invited community foundation representatives from other countries. It is a work in progress, and the ideas expressed in this iteration are subject to change and revision as further information becomes available. The purpose of this essay is to provoke spirited discussion among the working group members and, more broadly, participants in the larger network that might ultimately help the worldwide community foundation field think more critically and act more energetically in developing ways to involve excluded groups in the civil society efforts of their institutions. This is not a rigorous research study, nor is it intended to single out any particular community foundation for criticism. With this in mind, names of specific community foundations are only used as positive examples. Lastly, no effort has been made to independently verify the information provided by discussion participants.

It's Too Soon to Engage Excluded Groups

In conversations with the working group, some newer community foundations expressed the belief that they were at too early a stage of development to focus on the inclusion of an excluded group. It was felt that it was more important to gain the trust and support of the broader community, after which the community foundation could begin to tackle more difficult challenges. These community foundations worried that with little community trust they could ill-afford to handle a difficult issue poorly or risk the community's ill-will by giving voice to or otherwise legitimizing the concerns of the excluded group. There was some agreement, however, that there are small things that a community foundation could do to include excluded groups, even at an early stage. Moreover, a lingering question remained that if a community foundation did not act to include the excluded group in its early years, how likely is it, and through what process, will such ideals and principles manifest themselves later? It should be noted that there was no belief that either older or financially larger community foundations are more likely to focus on the involvement of excluded groups in their civil society efforts.

The Excluded Group is Too Small

A few community foundations suggested that the excluded groups were too small in population size to matter. If this were true, it would seem a simple matter to include them without fear of adverse consequences. When questioned about this subject, one community foundation acknowledged that the community foundation could play a role in assisting the "minority nations." The representatives acknowledged that they had not really considered any group other than the dominant population group and committed themselves to looking at this issue in more detail upon their return. This exchange

suggests that by simply raising questions, community foundations may find ways to be responsive to population groups that they would otherwise ignore.

It Will Hurt Fund Development

Among both newer and older community foundations in established democracies, there was significant concern over the reaction of current and potential donors to a community foundation's efforts to more fully engage excluded groups in civil society. Not surprisingly, it appears that the more focused a community foundation is on increasing its assets, the less courage it is likely to exhibit in explicitly involving excluded groups in its civil society activities. One community foundation mentioned how an early effort to involve an excluded group resulted in a partially damaged reputation and a perceived loss of additional funds from previously supportive donors. As a result of this experience, the community foundation has been reluctant to pursue related areas of work. The tension between raising funds from donors who share the beliefs and biases of the dominant society with regard to the value of involving the excluded group and the moral principle of promoting an inclusive civil society generated significant discussion. It appears that even established community foundations with significant endowed assets often avoid opportunities to focus their civil society efforts on including excluded groups out of concern for the potential negative impact on their fund development activities.

A Model Example: The Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust

In some ways, it is not surprising that community foundations are reluctant to take significant strides in including excluded populations. After all, the institution's board members and staff are members of the society in which they live and are likely to share and support the dominant views, values and biases. It may be that it is only when a society has experienced the negative repercussions of what happens when excluded groups are oppressed that they have the will to address these issues.

The Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust (NIVT) was explicitly designed to allow for participation of excluded groups, in this case, Catholics and Protestants as well as women. Having endured two years of an undeclared war, the community foundation's governance structure expressly involves excluded groups as does its staff and many advisory committees. The community foundation has been publicly vocal on issues facing excluded groups, for example, victims and former prisoners on both sides of the conflict. NIVT has been established with an initial challenge grant from the British government, and has been sustained with funding largely from the British Charitable sector, and the European Union. It will be important to document how NIVT's commitment to involving excluded groups will be strengthened or weakened as it begins to focus more of its attention to fundraising and developing more traditional donor-advised funds.

If the suggestion that countries that have experienced severe repercussions from extreme social injustice proves to have merit, one would expect that the emerging community foundations in Germany and South Africa will go to great lengths to involve excluded groups in their civil society activities, governance structure and staffing. While there is anecdotal evidence that support for anti-racism and gays and lesbians is broadly

supported by the general public in Germany, there is a segment of the population that does not share this view. Moreover, it is too early to determine to what extent German community foundations have identified members of these excluded groups for their boards or staff.

Conclusion

An important measure of how seriously a community foundation views its role as promoting civil society is the extent to which it engages and legitimizes the involvement of groups that are excluded from full participation in the larger society. It appears that too few community foundations have done as much as they could do to involve excluded groups in their governing boards, staff, advisory committees, as grant recipients or participants in community meetings. The concerns that it's too soon; the excluded group is too small; or that it might jeopardize fund development, are less compelling when examined in light of the important work of the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust.

Simply adding a member of an excluded group to a committee that is concerned with a subject other than the excluded group member's identified characteristic may enable others to re-evaluate their biases and preconceptions. In other words, adding a woman to an all-male group, regardless of the subject, could go a long way in changing views about women even though the group is not meeting to discuss an issue focused on women. Other initial steps to be considered are meeting with representatives of excluded groups, developing background reading material on the excluded groups for board and staff and developing position papers on key issues of interest to, and with the support of, individuals from the excluded groups.

Community foundations are important actors in civil society. What remains to be seen is whether they are prepared to serve in this role on behalf of everyone within their community.

¹ Brian O'Connell, *Civil Society: The Underpinnings of American Democracy*, (New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1999), pp. 10-11.