

# **THE EVOLVING ARCHITECTURE OF COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS IN RELATION TO PLACE, HISTORY, GEOPOLITICS, INDIVIDUALS AND THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR AND DIFFERING EXPECTATIONS AS SOCIETY CHANGES AND COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS MATURE.**

**by Ruth Shack**

## **Introduction**

In all probability, it is just a coincidence that as democracy in its many forms is embraced in the far reaches of the global village, we are witnessing the concomitant proliferation of entities which consider themselves community foundations. The growing interest in the democratic form of governance has spawned an unprecedented high number of differing forms of that which fit the profile of a community foundation. Particularly intriguing in all of this activity is the almost simultaneous growth of actors in a global civil society which embrace the concept of local control.

It was a U.S. congressman, Tip O'Neil, who aptly stated that „all politics is local“ and universally, one can trace the emergence of community foundations in localities where residents, or a resident, seize the opportunity to organize. We are witnessing the result of whole regions tapping into global free markets, telecommunications, media and the internet; while systems become interdependent, individuals become emboldened to assert their will directly. As each learns how others live, which happens in globalization, people begin to demand what they consider is their due. In this new world, while national honor still counts, individual life and aspirations count more. Indeed, in the post Cold War era, there is a powerful pull to democratic systems and a pull to emulate democratic models.

It has long been acknowledged that the strength of the community foundation construct is its ability to fit an unfilled niche of the community in which it sits. While the first measure of the effectiveness of a community foundation is, more often than not, the size of its asset base, I contend the real value added of a community foundation is its flexibility and its dexterity in meeting the unmet needs of a geographic area. The good news of the community foundation field is there is no franchise under which community foundations operate. There are overarching rules and norms which regulate U.S. based community foundations but that which allows community foundations to do their work transcends borders and restrictions.

The concept is quite simple: Community Foundations aggregate assets from individuals, corporations and other foundations; build an endowment which generates assets; and distribute those earnings and other assets accumulated to not for profit agencies, or as they are named everywhere beyond the U.S., non governmental organizations.

When viewed quite objectively there can be no more democratic form of philanthropy than the community foundation: the collective charitable will addressing the needs of a discrete community. And when viewed as a part of the global movement we begin to realize that a good society depends upon the goodness of individuals working together in an organized fashion.

That which sees itself a community foundation is being organized in the most unlikely places because individuals, in unlikely places, realize that while we are inextricably tied one to another around the world, it is in localities that problems must be addressed. Globalization promises that we are connected in many new ways, but it is increasingly apparent that problems must be addressed and opportunities seized, first in communities and geographic spaces close to us.

Alexis de Tocqueville, of whom it has been said, is the most quoted and probably the least read expert on U.S. civic affairs, wrote of his discovery of the American benevolent traditions as unique and significant. In reality, those elements of social solidarity had been long standing manifestations of strong societies in China, Africa, South America and many other places where the recognition of mutual obligation built a powerful civic fabric. This positive model of bringing people together to sustain community is not an invention of the U.S. but rather a universal model which has been organized, codified, specialized, professionalized, named „philanthropy“ and practiced as a community foundation.

### **Bridging boundaries**

The ancient rubric of „public-private partnerships“ is fading and soon will disappear as the relationships among the civic sectors evolve.

It is generally accepted practice that government provides an array of public services and an underlying infrastructure of order, laws and justice; business fuels the economic growth and development, generating profits and establishing a financial framework for contemporary life; and non-governmental organizations, in a sense, do everything else: meeting social needs, providing care and shelter, promoting health and treating disease, providing educational depth, enriching quality of life with culture and recreation, conserving the environment and - the single largest non profit function - offering spiritual and religious involvement for a majority of the population.

Like trains moving along three parallel tracks, government, business and the nonprofit sector are all speeding forward toward the shared destination of a healthy society. They travel in full sight of one another, but each is powered by a different type of fuel and guided by a different measure of success: How fast can we go? How smooth is the ride? How many passengers can we carry? How valuable is our cargo?

Like separate trains, the three sectors of society have much in common, but each has a different perspective, based on its unique place in the landscape and the nature of its experiences along the way. At times, they cooperate, sharing resources and helping each other reach their destination. Too often, however, business leaders and government officials don't fully understand the role, responsibilities and potential of the nonprofit sector. Conversely, many nonprofit organizations are unclear about the nature and roles of government and business.

And the mingling of the three sectors makes the issues far more interesting and challenging. We traditionally envision the three sectors as a public sector driven by ballots; a private sector driven by markets; and a third sector driven by volunteers. Community foundations are increasingly bringing the sectors together in new structures and with fresh ideas.

This emerging sector is bringing together individuals and institutions that were once very suspicious of each others' motives and methods. They work together partly because of the increased potential for success and partly because of the limited scope and scale of single sector resources and single sector strategies. What better entity than the community foundation to straddle the boundaries and coordinate the communication and collaboration. Globally, community foundations are working in that space which mobilizes all energies, both public and private, for the public good. This is the use of civic engagement to build community ties.

### **Community foundations as civic players**

The heroes managing this change do not fit the profile of historical world revolutionaries. Nor are the orchestrators of this growing movement the cinema cowboys charging over the hill on a horse. They are, however, extraordinary people taking advantage of extraordinary opportunities.

In the geographical space between Europe and Asia, in a locale rich in natural, national and human resources the Tyumen Community Foundation is being nurtured by an enlightened Board which is leading philanthropy to bridge the gaps between government, business and the third sector. As Vladimir Shevchik, a Board Member, aptly described: the community foundation is „clever in getting milk from two Mothers.“

The mix of ethnicities and values, the deep historical context and the intervention of technology all enrich the field in which this Siberian based community foundation works to grow the charitable impulse to address the ever growing chasms between the rich and the poor, the resident and the immigrant, the youth and the elderly. The Community Foundation message is simply and clearly articulated: people can solve their own problems.

The Community Foundation serving Tyne & Wear and Northumberland is adroitly achieving its named mission of „serving“ the residents of this historically wealthy but economically deprived northern part of Great Britain. Here is a community foundation skillfully crafting linkages and using its discreet power to convene the appropriate parties and then facilitate outcomes using its neutral position in the community as a potent resource. The ongoing tension between grant making and donor services as described by its Director, George Hepburn, keeps a healthy self analysis fresh for the Board and staff. The questions of how to build a civil society, and even more, is it the role of a community foundation to build a civil society heightens the self awareness and scrutiny of the Board and staff.

The Community Foundation fosters memberships and investment in its work. This activity institutionalizes its accountability to those whom it serves in both the grant making and grant seeking arms of the Foundation. Access to National Lottery assets are changing the practices of the third sector in Great Britain and this community foundation is active in holding and seeking match for those resources from individuals and corporations. Another worthy example of a community foundation acting as the referee on an ever changing playing field.

The Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust, is struggling not only with the heroic mission of building a civil society across Northern Ireland, but, as well, is conflicted over the particular organizational model they wish to imitate. Taking full advantage of their access to multiple sources of resources their ability to make grants depends upon consistent governmental and corporate funding. The paucity of individual wealth in Northern Ireland has kept the Trust from seeking resources in that arena. The ethnic and gender division of the Board is a clear public image of the mission of the Trust. And the issues and divisions with which they grapple daily fashions the programs they sponsor, manage and publicize to the larger community. Here is an example of a group strongly tied to its publics through its advisory committee system, its governance and its grant making. The imperative is to build a civil society. There can be no more worthwhile pursuit than using the Trust's presence as a community development agency which is how it is described by its Director, Avila Kilmurrey.

## **Conclusion**

The advertised strength of a community foundation is, indeed, its flexibility, its ability to be the agile player in an increasingly changing society. Here is a group of civic players hard at work meeting the ever changing opportunities in communities all over the world. The community foundation can now be seen as an actor in public policy, striving to effect systemic change and working to make problems less problematic. Societies differ and yet are the same in that good people with good ideas are hard at work to make their quality of life better. Working within democratic principles, often these people will find themselves fashioning this thing called a community foundation.

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