
Seeking Inspiration: What Canadians Can Learn from the European Philanthropic Sector

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This article is the first in a series about European philanthropy. The series is published as a collaboration between The Philanthropist and The Lawson Foundation.

Canadian foundations have become increasingly adept at learning from others. Gone are the days when so many did their work in isolation, often without regard to best practice or innovation. For many years now, foundations have been on a learning path, frequently spurred by national infrastructure organizations such as Philanthropic Foundations Canada, Community Foundations of Canada, and Imagine Canada. Other influential sector voices, such as the Ontario Nonprofit Network and CanadaHelps, also often challenge them. Philanthropy in general has become more professionalized and, I would argue, more impactful.

Whether it be related to our approaches to giving and philanthropy, to the way we convene our stakeholders and connect and learn from our grantees, or how we better connect with policymakers, we have learned, and continue to learn, from thought-leading organizations outside Canada. These include the Center for Effective Philanthropy in the US or the Charities Aid Foundation in the UK. In other words, organizations that are traditionally in English-speaking common law-based jurisdictions.

But surely there are innovations and ways of working that we can learn from our counterparts outside the traditional English-speaking worldview and models. I am thinking of the experiences of mainland Europe where, after all, very similar kinds of social issues and challenges are playing out. Moreover, the current world context (particularly the situation in the US) suggests that we may now have more in common with Europe than with most other parts of the world.

Some entities, like the Chagnon Foundation and Community Foundations of Canada, have been increasingly looking to Europe for ideas and new collaborations. At the Lawson Foundation we have been keen to learn from the Norwegian experience in our work on outdoor play and its importance for child development. We have also looked to the European Venture Philanthropy Association (EVPA) for new insights in impact investing.

However, while I have no empirical data, I believe that connection to European philanthropic organizations and ideas remains relatively marginal for most of us working in the Canadian philanthropic sector.

This should not be a big surprise. We are accustomed to look at what is the most easily accessible to us – and language can be a barrier.

This bias is not limited to the philanthropic sector. When I was more deeply involved in the world of social policy here in Canada, and then with the New Zealand government, the tendency was always to look for inspiration and innovation in the English-speaking world. Many felt that the context in other places – mainland Europe, for example – was simply too different to provide any helpful or relevant insights.

The idea for curating a series of articles for *The Philanthropist* on what is happening in philanthropy and giving (and particularly the role of foundations) in mainland Europe stems from two things. First, the presence of Michael Alberg-Seberich, a colleague from Germany and the [first Community Knowledge Exchange \(CKX\) fellow](#), who spent six months at Foundation House in Canada in 2017.

I had the pleasure of many fascinating conversations with Alberg-Seberich, who opened my eyes to a myriad of interesting and innovative approaches in Germany and elsewhere in Europe and introduced me to some very interesting leaders in the European philanthropic sector.

Secondly, the idea comes from a visit I took to Philanthropy House in Brussels along with my Foundation House colleagues, Bruce Lawson from The Counselling Foundation of Canada, Jehad Aliweiwi from the Laidlaw Foundation, and Ian Bird and Leslie Inglis of Community Foundations of Canada. [Philanthropy House](#) is a shared space for philanthropy in Europe, somewhat like Toronto's Foundation House. Funded by six major European foundations, it houses a variety of infrastructure philanthropic bodies. I came back from that visit astonished at what I had heard from people working at organizations such as the European Foundation Centre, the Network of European Foundations (NEF), and the EVPA.

So, over the next year, a new series in *The Philanthropist* will present a variety of articles, mostly written by our European colleagues, but also by Canadians who have had experience learning from them.

Starting us off: a piece by Alberg-Seberich about his time as a CKX fellow and his thoughts and reflections on the philanthropic infrastructure landscape here in Canada. Alberg-Seberich became an insightful and keen observer of the Canadian philanthropic scene in a very short time. This will serve as a backdrop for the series.

It will be followed by articles on a variety of topics, including some of the common challenges facing European foundations; a look at the intermediary role that NEF plays with European

foundations; and an article on the origins and challenges of “la finance solidaire,” an interesting form of impact investing.

Bonne lecture et bonne réflexion.

Illustration by Paul Dotey