
Network of European Foundations Promotes Philanthropic Collaboration in the EU

Title: Network of European Foundations Promotes Philanthropic Collaboration in the EU

Author: Peggy Saïller

Published in: *The Philanthropist*, European Philanthropy

ISSN: 2562-1491

Date: June 11, 2018

Original Link: <https://thephilanthropist.ca/2018/06/network-of-european-foundations-promotes-philanthropic-collaboration-in-the-eu/>

Date of PDF Download: November 1, 2020

This article is the [fourth in a series about European philanthropy](#). The series is published as a collaboration between The Philanthropist and The Lawson Foundation.

Belgian visionary Raymond Georis created the Network of European Foundations (NEF) 40 years ago because he thought that foundations needed an instrument to facilitate the gathering of their forces – among themselves and with other actors. After all these years, NEF is more than just an intermediary serving European foundations, it has also developed extensive experience in launching and managing pooled funds.

Its members are convinced that NEF is an efficient launch pad for joint projects among European foundations. During the “take-off” phase of an initiative – the initial months of design and discussions – NEF offers its expertise and services until partners can commit funds and sign agreements. For example, to address the shrinking space for civil society, NEF recently incubated Civitates, a philanthropic initiative for democracy and solidarity in Europe. The fund includes more than 15 foundation partners with a budget of about four million euros over the next three years.

This article will firstly ask the questions: Why should foundations invest in partnering, especially in the European context? What is the added value of going through NEF for partnership development? It will then reflect on what we can learn from NEF’s experience in the management of pooled funds, and, finally, highlight some of the challenges facing European collaboratives.

Why “partner for impact” in Europe and worldwide?

The intention of a collaborative should be to facilitate broader sector agreement and consensus around priority issues to create a more powerful collective voice. Through effective partnership development, a foundation can scale its impact on issues that fuel its mission.

Three types of interconnected crises exist in the current European context: political, economic, and environmental. Europe will have to find brave solutions to these at a scale that requires thinking global and acting local. Climate change offers an opportunity to rebuild democracy, since the adaptation of our societies will require a reorganization of our daily lives. This paradigm shift cannot happen without the mobilization of different groups that bring diverse expertise. In this context, the set-up or reinforcement of local democratic forces will be crucial. This is where European foundations, in conjunction with other actors, have a role to play. Collaboration among foundations and other actors will be key to support progressive approaches to help revitalize European democracies. Concretely, at NEF, we have seen that foundations are increasingly aware of the usefulness of collaboration. Facing increasingly complex issues, more funders are looking for ways to reach out to their peers to increase their impact.

This sets the scene, now we can focus on one of NEF's flagship programs, the European Programme on Integration and Migration (EPIM), which is a good illustration of the European framework. Its goal is to strengthen the role played by civil society in advocating for constructive approaches to migration in Europe. When stakeholders initiated EPIM in 2005, the momentum for foundations to work jointly at the European level on migration issues seemed timely and opportune. Much policymaking had been transferred to the EU level and the topic concerned people across Europe. Today, we have confirmed the rationale for creating EPIM. In addition, the scope of opportunities for EPIM involvement has expanded with an ever-growing relevance for the issue at EU-level, where [competences](#) are constantly extended, and at the EU member state level, where the pressure to act increases attention on this issue from national governments.

Another interesting recent development involves national-level coalition building for groups of foundations interested in the issue of children on the move in Europe. Instead of launching separate initiatives in the migration field, foundations have chosen to assemble under the EPIM umbrella. These coalitions, which have grown in Italy, Greece, Germany, and Belgium, use EPIM to connect the dots at the European level with the aim of addressing policy and practice issues arising from increasing arrivals of children and youth. In Italy, nine foundations are currently working with local and national governments to scale up community solutions that help the children, with a budget of around four million euros (2016-18). EPIM provides space for exchanges, becoming a vital link between local, national, regional, and European actors who would otherwise hardly know about one another's existence.

How NEF works and what we know

As a learning organization with decades of experience, NEF has been extracting some of the best ingredients that form part of the recipe when foundations decide to work together. Some of these relate to governance structures that underpin a collaboration; others are what we call the "funders plus" approach (offering capacity development to grantees). We know that partnering requires foundation resources, but we have also witnessed the mighty return on investment that it can provide. And strategic alignment does not mean de facto dilution of focus. Just because the funders have to find a common agenda does not mean the common agenda results in broad

topics. The partners may decide to be more targeted through specific sub-funds with clear priorities and themes.

Evidence shows that collaboration needs a well-funded backbone organization. Too often, funders wish to fund a coalition's mission and its grant-making activities but are reluctant to fund staff and operating costs. These are essential core elements for coalition-building. The quality of the staff is paramount to ensure engagement from various stakeholders and build knowledge. At NEF, the "backbone organization" of the different pooled funds takes the form of dedicated secretariats. Of the 10 pooled funds currently managed through NEF, six have dedicated programmatic staff, embedded within the NEF structure. NEF itself is located within the Philanthropy House, which includes several infrastructure support organizations among its members. Through this hub, strategically located in Brussels, organizations can regularly exchange on a formal or informal basis near the European institutions.

NEF has often been described as a "small," "compact," and "flexible" organization. Currently, a core team of two people make up the back-office team in charge of supporting all programs. This means we are very close to operations. For NEF, it has always been essential not to create top down structures but rather to encourage structures that disperse leadership and decision-making based on democratic decision-making. For this, we aim to recruit staff members who come from a culture of leading collaboration. NEF has always been keen to attract young professionals and to provide them with opportunities for leadership development. Research shows that new ways of organizing that allow people to have more involvement in decisions will achieve better results. Additionally, our horizontal organizational structure fosters synergies among programs. But a leaner structure also enhances participation among foundation members of a consortium, and we believe that is a basis through which the collective intelligence of a group can emerge.

Moreover, the robust secretariats of the collaboratives have the essential task of maintaining continuous communication within the group to maintain buy-in. All this does not mean that working with NEF will be prescriptive in terms of governance arrangements. We are convinced that partnerships should also be able to grow organically and that fixing too many rigidities at the onset is counter-productive. The 2020s require agility and iteration: we advise groups to start a collaborative small, and organically grow a sustainable partnership over time.

The NEF toolbox also contains a "funders plus" approach that complements grant-making activities with targeted capacity development for grantees. This approach supports organizations of different sizes and capacities with a number of services throughout the funding cycle that are guided by grantee needs. These include training courses and connections to the field, support with convening meetings, and provision of additional knowledge resources (e.g. research). Likewise, when stakeholders collaborate on events it enables their programs and their grantee organizations to shape agendas, amplify civil society voices on strategic issues, and initiate collaboration with an even wider group of stakeholders.

We have also been advocating for the use of a theory of change, a methodology that assesses how an intervention will meet planned results in a specific context, to underpin each of our programs – a positive development that has become the norm. For example, funders gathered as part of the Joint Action for Farmers' Organisations in West Africa (JAFOWA) took time to agree on what the program seeks to achieve and to model this through a theory of change. This is a useful tool to align funders' priorities and to agree on a joint vision to attract new partners.

A theory of change enables an understanding of the social, political, and social justice context in which the issues are embedded and addresses these issues head-on.

Finally, developing a common agenda is a time-consuming, challenging process. Foundations must dedicate human resources, time, and funds for a partnership to thrive. Indeed, under a broad thematic, it can be hard for members to agree on decisions about strategic priorities. Therefore, some of our initiatives decided to work through a sub-fund approach, which lets members invest in line with their priorities. This allows an evolution from a one-size-fits-all collaborative to a flexible à la carte hub. For instance, stakeholders involved with the newly launched Civitates have, from the outset, decided to focus on two complementary sub funds: the shrinking space of civil society and the quality of information in public discourse.

We have seen significant policy impact at EU level within a short timeframe when we grant to a variety of organizations that jointly target a specific objective of a program's sub-fund strategy. For example, after EPIM funded the evidence-based network Alternatives to Detention (ATD), the European Institutions included new language in their messaging, "reducing member states' reliance on detention," which is an encouraging change. Additionally, there is a possibility of scaling up some of EPIM's ATD network through EU funding.

Challenges

Collaboratives face external and internal challenges. External obstacles mainly relate to institutional and cultural resistance to partnerships from the foundations' side. This is where the NEF mission is relevant: Georis conceived it as a tool for the sector to promote the value of collaboration. While there has been some progress in terms of institutional shifts in foundation leadership, some have struggled to integrate the concept of "diffuse reciprocity" to underpin our trade exchanges. This concept could apply to pooled funds: foundation leaders should look at the broader impact pooled funding can trigger.

The internal struggles are also worth noting because they represent common challenges, especially those shared questions that are critical to most of our partnerships. To begin with, across the board, NEF programs struggle with the same question: How do we get better at including the voices of the ultimate beneficiaries in our design and implementation? Some NEF programs have decided to prioritize this inclusion in the coming years by strengthening their efforts to encourage target groups to participate in grant-making processes. Participation of beneficiaries in stakeholder consultations, conferences, and meetings should be as common as it is to have beneficiaries on advisory panels for project proposals and in the project evaluation process.

Another question is linked to the framing of the communication and advocacy strategies of our European programs. Developing a common communications strategy that is supposed to serve a great diversity of European countries cannot work. Messaging must be adapted to each context, especially on sensitive social issues that are embedded within political frameworks. Therefore, our programs often develop country-targeted communications and advocacy strategies.

We also need to reflect on how we carry out evaluation and monitoring. Aggregating data for a program at the European level that is linked to country- or context-specific indicators is not always useful. We should carefully assess program-level indicators to avoid collecting

information that is not meaningful.

What we have also observed from our partnerships is that a European program will not advocate directly on the issues it supports. This is quite different from foundations in the United States that are more politically engaged and defend antagonistic positions vis-à-vis federal and state governments. The program staff of European initiatives are not direct advocates, shouting for specific rights. Some of the European foundations with whom we work come from very different institutional backgrounds and therefore represent different interests. Some are direct partners from governments or represent corporate interests and prefer influencing indirectly through the civil society organizations they support.

I will finish with a governance issue, namely the challenge linked to empowering members of secretariats who manage pooled funds and programs. Funders of a pooled fund should work to share leadership with the programmatic staff members. This, along with a say in the allocation of resources, goes hand-in-hand with a policy of staff development. It implies the creation of a sustainable structure that fosters staff growth. The fact that the secretariats of European Fund for the Balkans, or more recently EPIM, have long-standing secretariats is a step in that direction development. Their objective to become a “hub of expertise” that serves different actors will only be achieved if staff members are trained and empowered. For some collaboratives, long-term thinking has yet to meet long-term structures. Besides, building trusted relationships with, and among, steering committee members takes time. Changes of membership can represent both challenges and opportunities: new individuals bring new perspectives, but a collective spirit should remain.

To conclude, as an association of leading European foundations, NEF strives to be more than the sum of its parts. To reach collective impact, foundations that work through NEF decide to embrace a common agenda on the most pressing European societal issues. And what we can testify to, despite the difficulties of the European project, is that the European philanthropic sector stands united to defend core European values and the European spirit, concretely through our operational collaboratives. In these times of uncertainty, foundations will gain momentum and energy by partnering with peers, and collaboratives will save them from weathering the storm alone.