Grantmakers East Forum 2019

Tbilisi, Georgia

Plenary Write-ups

EUROPEAN FOUNDATION CENTRE, AISBL

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Opening Plenary

Vesna Bajsanski-Agic, Executive Director of the Mozaik Foundation and Chair of GEF welcomed participants to the 2019 GEF in Tbilisi by explaining that "newcomers will feel the energy from the people who come to GEF each year…but they also bring a new energy of their own." **Ketevan Vashakidze**, President of the Europe Foundation which is hosting the meeting added some local context - that 2019 has been another year for fighting for human rights due to the rise in anti-rights groups. With businesses less concerned with communities, governments becoming more authoritarian, young people are using technologies to ensure that they have a voice, and nowhere more so than in Georgia. With more and more people fighting for social rights, this year's venue is especially apt as what you see in Georgia is often a preview of what can happen in other parts of the region.

Moderator **Secil Kinay**, Vehbi Koç Foundation asked keynote speaker **Catherine Herrold**, Indiana University, what role grantmakers can play in developing civil society. Are they helping, or blurring the landscape? In her response, Catherine Herrold explained that in her opinion the role of foundations fundamentally is to support civil society, but what do we actually mean by civil society? Traditionally it meant NGOs, and philanthropy tended to fund organisations with capacity, a formal sector. But increasingly, citizen-led social justice movements are looking outside formal structures, and are rejecting organised NGOs in favour of more informal spaces.

For Ms Herrold, there is a danger that grantmakers can have a detrimental effect, albeit accidentally, in their strategies:

1) Grantmakers should be able to *facilitate* movements without *professionalising* the people organising them
2) Governments can use foreign grantmaker engagement as an easy way to discredit a movement as being backed by the "elite" or the "West", and claim that this doesn't represent "the people".

Ms Herrold explained that legitimacy has also been equated with effectiveness, using Venture Philanthropy or business language to determine efficacy. But why should wealthy elite donors dictate where funding goes? She sees legitimacy moving in the direction of social justice, and foundations are seen as most legitimate by citizens when working in the fields of freedom and social justice. Hence, grantmakers need to think of effectiveness and impact in terms of justice. In terms of affecting policy, traditional strategy for grantmakers is funding research, funding models, and being social conveners.

"*To what extent do formal policy mechanisms work? Do we in philanthropy shy away too much from the political processes that have real capacity to affect changes*?"

- Catherine Herrold

Ms Kinay pointed out that as the space for civil society shrinks, community foundations are growing. This was echoed by Ms Herrold, who stressed that this comes in three main forms:

1) Community foundations
2) Pooled funding
3) Crowd funding

Ms Herrold explained that a lot of community philanthropy focuses on foundations, but that in fact a lot of the most exciting work is taking place in smaller community groups, mobilising local resources, and using local traditions of philanthropy. Community foundations really serve as a hub, where decision making power remains local. Crowd funding is also an interesting phenomenon – especially in places where there is a large diaspora (such as the Palestinian diaspora around the world). Larger foundations can get funds through to social movements and grassroots via community philanthropy.

A great example is the Rawa Fund, a locally-led model of community development and a new way to fund Palestinian creativity. Rooted in collective community decision-making, Rawa is a funding and support model that aims to raise hope, build trust and dignity, and promote successful alternative local solutions generated by Palestinian communities. It is funded by big philanthropy, but all decision-making remains local. Rawa created community clusters with leading social change actors charged with finding priorities and applying for small grants from Rawa. In Palestine "ngo-isation" of movements has been detrimental to progress.

Large foundations being involved can be detrimental – if a large US foundation gets involved, for example, it can be seen as (just another) foreign interference, or vehicle for a foreign (western, or other) influence or ideology. Ms Herrold advised programme staff to pressure board members to keep decision making local, not with the donor foundation. In general, foundations need to let go of power and keep it in hands of social change actors.

In closing, Ms Herrold offered the following tips for grantmakers and their Programme Officers to mobilise civic spaces:

1) **De-silo grantmaking**, breaking down some of the programme areas which can be problematic, such as "human rights". She explained that governments are always in favour of foundations supporting economic development, but are less keen when it comes to human rights/democracy. Instead, she suggested terms which include bespoke sub areas, for example "local innovation" or "social justice" rather than "democracy". She also explained that it's not just about defending rights, but defending people's ability to defend their own rights. Ford Foundation's work on social equality was given as a good example of de-siloing. Look at justice, freedom, not democracy.
2) Make sure to **look for new types of grantees and community groups** as often established grantees have a closer relationship with the donor than they do with the grassroots community.
3) Think about **application and reporting requirements**. How can donors become co-learners with their grantees? Foundations should think more creatively about what they ask of grantees to be useful to both partners.
4) **Support grantees' core operating support**, which is often overlooked but essential.

Morning plenary

Moderated by **Anna Sienicka**, Techsoup Europe, the morning plenary heard from speakers discussing strategies for activism and citizen-led protest movements.

Journalist and civil rights activist **Salome Barker** described the 2019 Georgian protest movement she is involved in, a community which incorporates people from diverse backgrounds and with different views. She described it as a movement rather than an NGO, which began because of a need to protest and spread the right news in the face of subversion. Up to 20,000 people protested on the streets for 100 days. Of the three 3 demands made, one remains unfulfilled (proportional representation instead of majority government), and so the movement continues.

"*Trust is key, we were so angry that people trusted us.*"

Ms Barker explained that while the movement includes both online and offline aspects, that she personally finds it "hard to do anything without digital". Facebook is half of the country, so they use it in the last few years to coordinate protests, and the community is basically a Facebook group. It isn't the perfect tool, she explained, but it reaches so many people, which is the most important.

She recognised that it is not easy for foundations to support movements, and so diaspora giving is important (echoing the comments made in the previous night's opening by **Catherine Herrold**) – such as Georgians in the US. Ms Barker explained that "our movement was transparent – if we wanted to meet up, we just posted where on Facebook. You have to build your community and communicate with them. If you're supporting a good cause, you don't need a communications strategy". She pointed out that the movement didn't have time in advance to create a solid strategy, and explained therefore that funding mechanisms for movements need to be fast enough to react to rapidly changing situations.

Gabriella Benedek, a board member at the Roots and Wings Foundation anda member of the Hungarian Association for Community Development and the Foresee Research Group described her community foundation in Hungary which supports matching and operational grants for infrastructure almost exclusively to local projects, and connects local to international partners. Importantly, the foundation needed to be trustworthy at a time and place when so many organisations are untrustworthy.

Ms Benedek explained that in her opinion hegemony is never ideal, that we need various tools both on and offline. Tech reaches many people but not certain groups, so it is important to keep plurality, keep people in the loop who don't use Facebook, for example. She suggested that you need NGOs and movements, online and offline, for a truly healthy infrastructure, something which nearly collapsed in Hungary. Her organisation won't advise the best solution in only one direction, but rather strives to open conversation and reflection. Ms Benedek said that they allow themselves time to reflect on solutions rather than move straightaway to actions, to allow space for creative thinking. She also stressed that it is important to have a connection between people who understand infrastructure and those working on the ground. She disagreed with Ms Barker's point about strategy, explaining that "as the situation in Hungary got worse, communications strategy became essential".

Thomas Lohninger, Executive Director of digital rights NGO epicentre.works began with an overview of what digital rights are. His organisation works on legislation for online/digital rights, privacy, open internet etc. Activists rely on online platforms, and what used to be a hobby became a job.

He explained that the EU Charter of Human Rights is still a good basis for digital rights. Technology and social media are changing the way activists get their messages across, but also open up new ways to collaborate, and are new expressions of democracy. Mr Lohninger pointed out that while various free social media are accessible to activists they need to understand the business models behind them - for example Facebook is excellent for outreach, but its terms of services can be changed at any time.

> "*We wanted 500 signatures, we gave ourselves 2 months. In one week we had 500, soon we had people we had never met going to cities we had never been to, collecting signatures door to door*."

People also need to be aware of the risks and limitations of online activism, as without care actions can be found back and used against you later. In his opinion, ideally you want a platform that auto-deletes online history, but free social platforms don't specialise in this. For him, ultimately it's about fundamental ways of supporting civil society and transparency. He acknowledges that an early mistake his organisation made was not coming up with some form of membership or regular payment system, because, as he pointed out, people will get on board if the cause is just or good.

Closing plenary

Moderated by **Sascha Suhrke**, ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius, the closing plenary of the 2019 GEF consisted of a one-on-one interview with **Gerry Salole**, Chief Executive of the EFC who will stand down from his role in 2020. Mr Suhrke pointed out that GEF is the longest running EFC Thematic Network still in existence, and that this interview represented "the beginning of a long goodbye to Gerry" and a unique opportunity to look back over the development of GEF and where it could go in future.

Mr Salole began by saying that when he was first working in Ethiopia, the NGO community was "working on the ground, so hard, but had no way of communicating with the academic world which knows it so well". This hasn't really changed, he said, and these two worlds continue to be separate. He explained that he is part of the generation when NGOs became institutionalised with the NGO world coming to life in the mid-1980s with live aid, band aid, and the influx of foreign money. Mr Salole admitted that "most of what I heard this morning was very uplifting. Most of what needs to be done needs to be done at local level. I heard today a reassertion of the importance of local activism. I also heard a rejection of facile blueprint solutions. They cannot be brought in by outsiders, it needs to be local bricolage, where power rests with the people."

When Mr Suhrke asked whether foundations are (still) fit for purpose for the modern requirements, Mr Salole replied that you can't talk about foundations in a general way, because they are all truly sui generis. He claimed to have never seen organisations as agile as foundations – not all, but some. Left to their own devices, he said, foundations are excellent at being agile. As a sector, he said, we have to strive for self-regulation, we have to accept it as a tool. Some foundations are very old, and regulations make them more nervous about taking risks. The EFC Institutional Philanthropy Spectrum is trying to go beyond classifying foundations. Instead, it looks at how they are governed, where they get their resources from and how they manage them. Foundations, Mr Salole pointed out, are innovating all the time.

Looking back, Mr Salole said that so many of the 2005 GEF topics in Ukraine are still appropriate now, nearly 15 years later. As we strive for new solutions, new ways of working, Mr Salole pointed out that previous accomplishments and solutions are sadly easily forgotten by new generations. He expressed a desire to find a mechanism to archive things that have worked before as solutions are not always new.

Mr Salole continued that his biggest regret is that the sector still does not reflect the diversity of the societies in towns and cities around Europe that it works to support. It is still largely one dimensional in terms of the people working in the sector, and that until it diversifies in terms of personnel, it will always be considered "the other" by citizens.

Bringing it back to this year's event, Mr Salole explained that in foundation terms, no one apologises for not being American anymore and wants the same to be said of this region, that he doesn't want to hear people apologising for not being western European anymore. The truth, he explained, is that GEF is successful because it wants to do things its own way and has its own momentum. It is built on different opinions but if you respect one another you can differ. He said that GEF always have something to offer the mainstream EFC membership.

In his concluding remarks, Mr Salole wrapped up his thoughts after 15 years of working at the EFC:

"The most reassuring thing about European philanthropy is its tentativeness. No one is sure they are doing things 100% right. The European way is less prescriptive. But unfortunately we are also always looking at philanthropy from the perspective of the donor. The giver. We have been missing the vital importance of reciprocity. We need to recognise that we are getting something back for what we are giving.

This has been one of the best GEFs I've attended. Maybe because the conversations I've heard have had different perspectives, all relevant, and not necessarily in agreement. This is worth holding onto. This region now has a pedagogical responsibility to help the rest of Europe."