

Anja's parting reflection:

**Bielefeld lies between Brussels and Berlin, and what elephants have to do with ECFI**



I don't know how many kilometres I've travelled by train over the past nine years. But I do know this: despite the increasing unreliability of German trains and the ever-growing list of reasons for delays, every single kilometre was worth it. The ECFI journey enriched my life in ways I couldn't have imagined.

Allow me to take you back to October 2015, to an unforgettable call from Uli Reichart, head of the German Alliance of Community Foundations. I was sitting in front of a tent in the Serengeti, watching elephants, having just handed over my responsibilities at the Community Foundation in Bielefeld and indulging myself with a safari. Uli asked if I would take responsibility for something new starting in January 2016 - the European Community Foundation Initiative (ECFI).

At the time, I had 13 years of experience at the local level and some engagement nationally but no clue what working on international infrastructure would mean. ECFI was envisioned to build on what began in 1999: creating a learning network and platform to strengthen community foundations across Europe.

### **EAST AND WEST GROW TOGETHER**

The idea for ECFI emerged from earlier international exchange programs. One of the most significant was the Transatlantic Community Foundation Network (TCFN), which allowed young community foundation (CF) practitioners to learn from their counterparts in the U.S. Funded by Bertelsmann and the Mott Foundation, TCFN operated from 1999 to 2011, helping many practitioners build strong community foundations. Many practitioners are still active in the field, not at least because they benefited greatly from this programme.

When the donors stepped back, they passed on their knowledge to WINGS and the Canadians. At the same time, the European Foundation Centre (EFC) ran the Community Philanthropy Initiative (CPI), which aimed to strengthen organised philanthropy at the local level. CPI's activities ended around 2006, but the growth of community foundations in Europe, particularly in Eastern Europe, continued.

In response, the idea of a pan-European initiative took shape. What if East and West, North and South could come together in a shared learning platform? Leaders like Hans Fleisch, Boris Strečanský, and others worked on a proposal that secured funding from the Mott Foundation, as well as European donors like Bosch, Körber, and Lipoid.

ECFI officially launched in January 2016 as a cross-border initiative hosted by the Association of German Foundations, in partnership with Centrum pre Filantropiu (Slovakia) and UKCF (UK).



ECFI's first Study Visit to Germany with Stops to East (Halle and Dresden) and West (Stuttgart and Klagenfurt) already proved the value of bringing together participants from all over Europe. It highlighted the diversity of European Community Foundations while also fostering a sense of shared needs and challenges that were worth discussing among peers.

### **1+1=3**

The goals set in the first two-year proposal were ambitious, but the initial team -including Boris Strečanský, Julia Szanton, Mark Doherty/Mike Scott, Burkhard Küstermann, myself, and Caro Gleim - achieved enough to establish the foundations and secure approval for subsequent proposals, four more in the past nine years.

In 2018, James Magowan joined as Co-Coordinating Director, bringing extensive expertise, decades of experience in international philanthropy, and native English proficiency. Working alongside James was one of the most formative and rewarding experiences of my career. Sharing a job based on trust, mutual respect for each other's competencies, and complete reliability was a privilege. His "eagle eyes" for spreadsheets were as important to ECFI's success as my penchant for visuals and design. 73 ECFI NEWS editorials that we signed together and that originated from his pen are testimony to the remarkable development of the European Community Foundation Initiative and its valuable achievements.

### **GETTING THE FIAT 500 TO FULL SPEED**

A Fiat 500 was our metaphor for achieving maximum effect with limited capacity - in our case a team size of not more than 2.5 FTEs. With two drivers in control our FIAT 500 since 2018 a supporting team of powerful and highly engaged people helped grow ECFI's impact steadily. Above all, every single person brought new connections, perspectives, approaches and content and enriched ECFI's achievements. Many thanks to the people already mentioned and additionally Mihaela Giurgiu and Sabine Friedel, Kamil Szolsek, Francesca Mereta and Kathrin Dombrowski.

## **ACHIEVEMENTS IN NINE YEARS**

What ECFI managed to do in nine years is set down in reports and guides that are publicly available on the Knowledge Centre on ECFI's website. Standing out for me were the following three achievements:

ECFI has managed to become the **MAIN CONTACT POINT FOR COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS IN EUROPE**. Based on solid mapping and research, ECFI provides a growing understanding of where community foundations in Europe are, what different approaches, understandings, and contexts play a role, and where support infrastructure can be mobilised and connected. The value of this became apparent when, from February 2022, ECFI could quickly and informally connect organisations and individuals wanting to help with community foundations and organisations in Ukraine in need of assistance. Cross-border connections built during this time still last and prove their sustainability.

ECFI successfully built a **EUROPE-WIDE NETWORK OF REPRESENTATIVES FROM 26 COUNTRIES** at the local, regional, and national levels, spanning diverse linguistic, socio-cultural, and political backgrounds. This network fostered trusted relationships between people and organizations, building skills, knowledge, and expertise through connectedness. Not even a virus could halt the emerging need to meet, collectively reflect, and better understand shared challenges and opportunities. Whether it was a study visit with participants meeting for the first time or a reflection group meeting with participants who had known each other for years, as organisers we always learned that the time was insufficient to cover all topics and conversations. People working in the field of community foundations deeply value this trusted and safe space for exchanging knowledge and experiences. ECFI successfully managed to provide and sustain this space.

ECFI successfully enhanced the **VISIBILITY OF COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS** within the European and global philanthropy sectors, generating greater interest in supporting community foundations and securing the commitment of additional partners. The increasing global challenges have highlighted the critical need for local solutions. By offering a framework for community foundations to localise the global SDGs, ECFI not only helped each participating community foundation enhance its impact but also facilitated connections with other levels of philanthropy and attracted new resources to the field. For ECFI, this approach enabled collaboration with two additional partners, Porticus and the Mercator Foundation, on topics of shared interest and fostered the creation of new, long-lasting partnerships.

## **KEY LESSONS FROM NINE YEARS**

Old elephants pass on their wisdom to younger ones. Even if I am not an old elephant, I hope that some of the key lessons I made will nurture the ECFI team in the future.

- Building a Europe-wide network of representatives from 26 countries, local, regional, and national level, across diverse linguistic, socio-cultural, and political background takes time, more than I ever had expected. It needs willingness to accept differences and emphasise what we have in common.

- The most significant and lasting impact of a learning network is the personal and professional relationship it forges. These relationships outlast knowledge exchange during events and form the backbone of any successful network. ECFI is not only there to organise learning, but to create a good atmosphere that promotes relationship building.
- There are excellent approaches and tremendous experience, positive and negative ones, that are worth being shared by CFs and CFSOs among peers and ECFI is the valuable platform to share these across Europe, and beyond, to offer the safe space for trustful conversations and to make the best ideas travel around the community foundation movement. But while the network's internal expertise is rich, don't forget to think and look outside the box and allow external knowledge coming in.
- How much the knowledge is spread around Europe highly depend on the effectiveness of CFSOs. It was and is a major plus to co-design or co-host activities with national CFSOs. This is proved to be the most effective and cost-efficient way to strengthen relationships with the local level. This overcomes language barriers and helps with adaptation to the national and local context. Further to this translation and contextualisation of key publications in some of the 24 official languages in Europe is worth it to get knowledge to the local level. Let's follow on the 9 language translations of the "SDG - Wake up Call" similarly with the 'Safeguarding Roadmap for Community Foundations'.
- ECFI's work in promoting CFs on an international stage has increased awareness but needs further investment to reach new audiences effectively. Despite progress, CFs remain underrecognised as key partners in philanthropy. Continued advocacy and communication efforts are critical to amplifying their impact. Maybe it needed nine years to build the basis to start this work. It needed the experience of how difficult it is to easily explain the heterogeneity of community foundations ("Crystallizing the community foundation concept") and to set the scene for James taking over responsibility for advocacy.

## MY PERSONAL TAKEAWAYS

**Learning from the field:** The direct engagement with CFs and CFSOs provided valuable insights into the contexts they operate in, shaping strategies and activities. The first Study Visit in Germany, ECFI's European conference in Cardiff, many international conferences, they all remain as unforgettable moments to learn from you and I am very grateful for these.

**Adapting to new Horizons:** Emerging topics such as climate action, safeguarding, embracing the SDGs, opened my horizon and enriched my life. I hopefully will keep the connection and never lose the opportunity of learning from you, my national and international peers.

**Finding a balance between donor expectations on achievements, on impact stories and outcomes:** My usual approach to find individual solutions on needs was sometimes challenging but provided a great personal impact on my work.

**The trust of all of you:** The trust of Bundesverband as host organisation, the donors mainly the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and Porticus, the ECFI team and all participants and colleagues in me, will stay as unique opportunity in my life for which I am very grateful. Sometimes called “Mother of ECFI” it was always a pleasure for me to give the ECFI team, our constituency and participants in our activities, a sense of belonging. After more than 22 years working for community foundations I can’t feel differently than being part of YOU, community foundations in Europe.

## **WATCHING ELEPHANTS WITHOUT MY PHONE**

The experience of the past nine years will continue to inspire me. I’ll remain connected to community foundations at both local and international levels.

With the end of ECFI’s fourth project phase and the beginning of a promising and exciting fifth funding project phase it is the right moment to handover responsibility to the powerful ECFI team with Kathrin Dombrowski taking the lead. I’m convinced that the “Fiat 500” of ECFI will keep driving the community foundation movement forward with power and quality. I wish Kathrin, Francesca, Kamil, and James all the best as they continue on this wonderful journey.

And next year, when I return to the Serengeti to watch elephants, I’ll leave my phone behind.



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