



Transformative Learning: A Tale of Two Organisations

"Learning is a gift, a skill, and a choice." Brian Herbert

Embracing Brian Herbert's words, and with the European Community Foundation Initiative's support, Romanian Federation of Community Foundation (Federatia Fundatiile Comunitare din Romania, FFCR) and Spanish Association of Foundations (Asociación Española de Fundaciones, AEF) embarked on a peer learning journey in 2023 that transcended mere exchange of notes or sharing of tips. It was an exploration into the transformative power of collaborative learning. Our Romanian-Spanish adventure, enriched by diverse, on-the-ground experiences, underscored that **true insights spring from genuine interactions.**

This account is divided into two parts, mirroring the sequence of our study visit. The first part captures insights from the Romanian team, and the second presents perspectives from the AEF team. The numerical aspect of our journey tells its own story, illustrating the depth and breadth of our experience: 8 days of shared discoveries, 12 participants enriched by practical experiences across two countries, the active involvement of 11 community foundations (CF) and initiative groups, and countless interactions with inspiring colleagues. More than mere numbers, "the mathematics" of this journey uncovers a tapestry of cherished memories with moments of learning, celebration, and real connections.

We hope that the story of our discoveries and how they have reshaped our perspectives will ignite curiosity and foster a continued passion for learning and building connections across borders.

ITINERARY OVERVIEW

6 - 9 June 2023, visit of FFCR team in Spain

In June 2023, a four-member team from FFCR participated in the Spanish Community Foundations Conference in Valencia, organised by AEF. The team was actively involved in the conference discussions and delivered a presentation, gaining an understanding of the collaborative spirit of the network. Additionally, the FFCR team attended two Giving Circles hosted by the Horta del Sud CF and Novessendes CF, gaining insights into community engagement and strategies to stimulate local philanthropy.

- **Achieved Learning Objectives:** Events organisation for peer learning, event-based fundraising, capacity building for community foundations.

16 - 19 October 2023, visit of AEF team in Romania

In October, FFCR welcomed an eight-member delegation from AEF and its network of community foundations. The visit commenced in Bucharest with an in-depth discussion

focusing on topics relevant to support organisations, followed by a lively discussion with the extended team of the Braşov Community Foundation. In Făgăraş, the agenda included: interactions with the local Community Foundation's team and a board representative, the Youth Bank team, the village of Mandra initiative group, and visits to two community projects - "The Museum of Stories & Canvases" and DIAKONIA¹. The learning journey concluded back in Bucharest with a 'walk the talk' tour led by Cristina Vaileanu from the Bucharest Community Foundation.

- **Achieved Learning Objectives:** Strategies for enhancing local philanthropy through event-driven initiatives, gaining insights into grantmaking processes, and the development and strengthening of community foundations.

Main learnings for FFCR

INSIGHTS FROM VALENCIA: EMBRACING LEARNING & COMMUNITY

Hands-On Learning Experience Rocks!

The hands-on fundraising experience facilitated by AEF for their network of CFs in Spain was a testament to the effectiveness of learning by doing. AEF supported two community foundations in organising their first Giving Circles, which served as a practical learning platform for other CFs. This initiative not only fostered a sense of community but also transformed doubts into a can-do attitude. The experience shifted the narrative from "This isn't in our culture" to an enthusiastic "This is great, and yes, we can do it!"

Put "Community & Communion" Over "Agenda"

The events in Valencia also taught us the magic of balancing planning with spontaneity. While meticulous planning is crucial, allowing events to flow naturally creates moments of genuine joy and connection. This approach highlighted that the 'Community Spirit' is stronger than the 'Agenda Spirit,' reminding us of the beauty of shared experiences and the value of being together.



FFRC Team at Caixaforum, Valencia, June 2023

¹ The detailed agenda for Făgăraş can be found in [the link](#) provided.

On Giving Circles:

Make Them Fun & Collaborative:

It's powerful to have a diverse group, including over 40 participants from various backgrounds, joyfully declaring in unison, "Giving Circles!". Emotions ran the gamut from laughter to tears, creating a sense of unity and shared purpose beyond borders. The event was skillfully kept emotional enough to foster empathy with the causes, yet light and fun enough to feel celebratory and conducive to contribution.

Stories Drive Engagement:

The stories of the causes and their endorsers made a significant difference. These narratives brought the causes to life, making them relatable and impactful.

Preparation of Causes Is Essential:

Effective public communication and asking for support is challenging, and teaching others to do it well is even more so. However, the excellent execution we witnessed at Horta del Sud showed the long-term benefits of intensive preparation with the causes. This capacity-building process yields authentic and quality relationships with grantees, an expanding network, and increased resources. Finding this practice, prevalent among impactful Romanian CFs, mirrored in Spain was truly inspiring.

INSIGHTS FROM ROMANIA: CULTIVATING BONDING & CO-DESIGN

The Strength of Larger, Mixed Exchange Teams

We discovered the significant power in creating mixed learning experiences, combining team members from support organisations with those from their network. The value of this approach was clearly seen in the consistency and diversity of the questions and information shared. Moreover, the bonding that occurred between community foundation members and support organisation staff during this joint travel and learning journey not only strengthened relationships but also added joy and variety to our interactions.

Co-Designing Agendas and Learning Objectives with Host CFs

We recommend building learning agendas in collaboration with host CFs, starting from general learning objectives of the guests, and allowing the CFs to lead in shaping the approach. It's also crucial to encourage the host CFs to set their own learning objectives and integrate them into the agenda. The process of mutual and creatively co-designed learning enhances the experience for all parties involved.

Focusing on Valuing Hosts and their Grantees

This approach was powerfully illustrated during our visit to the village of Mandra, led by our guide and community group initiator, Alina Zară when she emphasised: *"I wanted John to see that you came to learn from us, to make him feel that what we do here is important and valuable. It's all about finding people like John, then understanding what they enjoy, what they are good at, and making them feel important"* Note: John hosts a community-museum in his garage with free entrance, showcasing anti-communist stories from Mandra, a testament to the village's vibrant community spirit.

Conclusion

The learning journey for both organisations continues beyond this report, thanks to the connections of mind and heart fostered during our journey. These bonds, created over four days of travel, early morning train rides, bus trips in freezing temperatures, and the mysterious snoring at a train station, will not be easily lost. We are deeply grateful for these enduring connections and the lessons learned!

Main learnings for AEF

ON ORGANISATIONAL MATTERS/APPROACH

CFSO Local partner is absolute key

First and foremost, the hosting Community Foundation Support Organisations (CFSOs) and their representatives, who form the working party, are the most crucial elements for success. We had the extraordinary privilege of having Andreea Alexandrov organise and participate in our visit. Her professionalism, deep knowledge of the sector, the trust community foundations place in her, and her profound commitment to our trip were absolutely key to its success. This was also made possible by the support of the FFCR, as well as some colleagues we met or didn't meet, but who were also instrumental in supporting Andreea in this endeavor.

One should never embark on a study visit without full support from the national CFSO or an equivalent organisation, depending on the country being visited.

It's vital to be very open and transparent about your capabilities and what you need from the partner organisation. Live in CFOs is demanding, we tend to put too much on our plate, and to avoid indigestion or failing to meet objectives, clarity among partners is key. AEF was aware of its staff shortage in 2023. FFCR had the human resources to contribute more, and we were all transparent from the beginning, creating a partnership where commitments were unbalanced but accepted and beneficial to both organisations.

Diversity on both ends is crucial

Having a diverse group of participants from the visiting team is essential. Our group comprised well-established Community Foundations (CFs), newly established CFs, robust initiative groups, academics, external experts, and AEF staff. This diversity guaranteed

engaging and varied conversations, as each member brought a different approach and background to the table.

The same principle applies to the host CFs. It's beneficial to involve various staff members, board members, volunteers, and program participants. While it's not necessary for all of these groups to be involved, some representation ensures a breadth of perspectives about the role of the foundation. For the hosting CFs, this can also serve as a cultural building exercise and an opportunity to reflect on their successes and failures. Additionally, they receive recognition and appreciation for their work from their visiting colleagues.



*AEF Team with Cristina Văileanu (FCB) & Ruxandra Pop (ARC)
at Little Improvements - Kretzulescu, Bucharest, October 2023*

Flexibility with purpose

Human interaction cannot be entirely planned, nor should it be. We were fortunate to assemble a group of individuals who were both interesting and interested, enriching each other with every conversation.

CFSOs, both hosting and visiting, should avoid being overly rigid in preparing discussion topics with the host CFs. Often, conversations naturally guide participants to their points of interest. However, it's crucial for CFSOs to be well-informed about the strengths of the hosting CFs and to encourage discussions around these strengths. Simultaneously, understanding the needs of the visiting CFs and identifying a few major topics of interest is important. This way, CFSOs can ensure that these critical topics are addressed in all conversations.

Space for debriefings - not just learning but also a space for building trust

It is vital to utilise travel journeys and other opportune moments to continue conversations. These instances are precious for further learning and for developing new ideas and understandings of various topics. Equally important, they provide a chance for participants to build trust amongst themselves. As a CFSO, my goal is to facilitate direct (bilateral or multilateral) connections among Spanish CFs and with other foundations. The study visit is a platform we offer for relationship building, which we hope will lead to the creation of a vibrant and active community, where AEF's involvement is not always necessary for interactions.

Including enjoyable experiences is also key

Whether it's a short tourist visit guided by a local, a meal at a nice restaurant, or a small treat, these moments provide a pleasant and pampering break for people who are dedicating their time voluntarily to this demanding endeavor.

ON THE “TOPICS SIDE”

Where do we start?

This is a recurring question for many initiative groups. Our groups repeatedly express their difficulties in starting fundraising, a challenge particularly notable in Spain. While changing the cultural context may not be immediately feasible, creativity and enjoyment are crucial. Community Foundations need to be inventive; lacking creativity implies they might not be the right group for this challenge.

- Anna Puixeu suggests starting with simple activities that don't require many resources but begin to establish the CF's presence. Both the initiative group and the first board must recognise the demands of the first year. A sizeable group with a strong personal commitment is essential.
- Take, for example, 'the list of 100': the Brasov initiative group compiled a list of 100 people to approach. These individuals were all contacted to discuss the CF concept, serving both to test the idea and to start building a support network. This approach is not only useful for new CFs but also for established ones as a method to routinely engage with potential ambassadors for the CF.

Increasing local philanthropy is not just about securing more resources for local projects and NGOs; for a Community Foundation, it is also a vital activity of 'donor education'

Romanian CFs are renowned for their sports events, which serve as pivotal fundraising opportunities for local groups. The methodology behind these events provides a platform (including event organisation, website support, and money collection) for local groups (NGOs or others, depending on the context) to mobilise people to donate to each organisation.

In Spain, the challenge is to adapt these events into a different context from sports, while maintaining the same methodology and purpose in terms of educating donors and enabling local organisations to fundraise for themselves. A food or gastronomy-related event is likely to be more suitable for Spain. By 2024/2025, AEF should form a small working group to tailor this concept for the Spanish context and have a couple of CFs pilot it. The project already has a proposed name: 'Comunidades a Fuego Lento'.

Fundraising is digital: absolute essential to have digital fundraising tools

AEF should explore options to either purchase or fund a digital fundraising tool for a certain period, one that effectively assists CFs in initiating their digital fundraising activities. If the sports event model is adapted for Spain, a digital platform will be

essential. We could potentially benefit from the expertise of Brasov CF in this area. Instead of developing a new digital platform from scratch, AEF should consider funding modifications to existing platforms or covering usage fees.

Youthbanks the CF investment for the young people of the community

All of us were deeply impressed by the youthbankers we met in Făgăraș. Their significant role in CFs was so evidently crucial that none of us harbored any doubts about the value they would add to the work of CFs in various aspects.

When the time is right, AEF plans to reach out to the British organisation to gather more information. However, following the same methodology we've applied in other learning scenarios, it's imperative that our CFs are actively involved. At least two CFs should commit to experimenting with this approach.

Conclusion

Finally, we could witness firsthand many of the practices, approaches, and realities we have learned about since the start of our Programme. We are immensely grateful for the generosity of those involved in the community foundation movement in Romania, particularly ARC and FFCR, from whom we have gained considerable knowledge over the years.

Our communities have as many similarities as they do differences, suggesting that many of these practices could be applied in Spain. The study visit provided an invaluable opportunity to understand which aspects our diverse ecosystem feels are worth exploring. Sport events, Youthbanks, and digital fundraising have emerged as the top priorities for exploration and implementation.

AEF needs to adopt a similar methodology as we did with live crowdfunding events: witnessing these practices with a representative group, providing support (both financial and otherwise) to those bold enough to try them, closely monitoring the process, and creating learning opportunities for others once these practices are implemented. **2025 will likely be the year to start to act on these learnings, provided at least two of our brave, innovative, and committed CFs take up the challenge to experiment.**