

Building a Community Foundation is a marathon, not a sprint

Interview with Ciprian Ciocan
Executive Director, Sibiu Community Foundation



ECFI - Tell us about the origin of the Sibiu Community Foundation

CC - The Sibiu Community Foundation started in the beginning of 2012 with a group of about 10 community members coming from different sectors: small business, local government NGOs. Even though it was not at all clear to us what a community foundation was, we were united by the aspiration to do good for our community, and most of all to create a new kind of culture where we would not wait for the local authorities to solve all our problems or transform our dreams for a stronger community into reality. We had little experience in fundraising but a good understanding of management and marketing principles. I believe that because our group did not build upon previous NGO experience, but rather on business sector practices helped us create a stronger, better adapted organization. We managed to organize our first marathon, with no money and our closest friends as volunteers, and raised the money we needed to register the foundation and give our first grants. Six years later, the Sibiu International Marathon has become the largest fundraising event in the country.

ECFI - What were the key points or stages in its development over the last six years?

CC - Certainly the Marathon is at the center of our business model and its evolution from a small 200-runner competition to 5000 runners, has been one of the most important processes of sustainable and profitable fundraising. We are also looking back to a 5-year experience with the YouthBank program which represented a very good grant-making school for us in the first years of our existence. In 2015, we managed to build our first grant-making fund (Știnteșcu, STEAM education) which was an important stepping stone. Earlier this year we launched our first named fund, CitySense which we built from scratch together with a IT company in Sibiu, and in a way it represents the embodiment of our experience as an organization.

ECFI - Can you give a flavour of the main activities of the community foundation today ?

CC - Surely we believe in resource based development, and it is clear to me that in the first six years we went to the places where there are resources: IT companies and the rising middle class. So there is a strong flavour of programs related to technology, Smart City or healthy living.

ECFI - What sort of social and cultural change has resulted from your work ?

CC - I think it was one of the revelations from the long process of strategic planning that we went through last year, that what really interests us, are cultural changes. Most of our strategic directions are pointing to some kind of change in the local culture, and as arrogant as that may seem, I believe it is based on our previous experience. Programs and projects, even organizations come and go, but what shapes the future of our communities the most is the culture and only by changing the culture we can hope to achieve a resilient community.

The kind of changes we have seen by now are of course related to philanthropy (which used to be a concept with a bad reputation), then regarding accountability of NGOs (we've managed to bring NGOs in the main stream, some associations have become house-hold names because of the marathon). Of course there is also more subtle kind of changes which we see in the behavior of our community members, in companies we work with and the way local authorities look at us. Even though we don't have hard research data, it is clear to us that the 3rd sector has won a lot of respect, and I am quite sure that our contribution to this change was considerable. In the future we are looking to contribute to other important areas, like the culture of innovation, collaboration

and also about bringing the different parts of our community closer together (what we call bridging the gaps).

ECFI - Community art features throughout your work - do you see this as more than aesthetic?

I think it has started to be more clear to us since we began working on Științescu, that we would not only focus on solving community problems, but rather trying to increase the quality of life in our community, by relying on the skills and passion of community members. In 2016 STEM became STEAM for us (by adding the Arts) and we gave the first two grants for projects that involve technology and art. Since then we have been trying more and more to involve local artists in our programs from creating designs for our T-shirts, building a start-gate for the marathon or trying to give grants for art installations that use technology with City Sense. Dan Perjovschi and Stefan-Radu Crețu are just two of the artists that we've worked with and next year, we actually hope to create a fund for contemporary art. We believe that art can have an important role in changing local culture, developing creativity and bringing people together. We also see art as a means to empowerment.

ECFI - What would be your three key pieces of advice for someone starting and developing a community foundation?

CC - I'm not so sure I want to give out recipes, mostly because I believe the most important thing for a community foundation is to be as much rooted in the local community as possible and adapt to the local context. So that would be the first ;-)

I believe having a bird's eye view of community needs and above all resources is very important. Especially in developing countries and communities having the ability to build on small successes is very important, closing some feedback loops as soon as possible can fuel the creation of more complex programs.

Perhaps a last advice would be to look as much as possible to the future and try to predict the opportunities you might have in order to do some good work. Challenges are also important, but being a 21st century organization, understanding emerging technology and new social behaviours can help us to build organizations that have a better chance to be relevant for our communities and not just remain frozen in hundred-year paradigms.