

September 2019

NEW COLOURS UNDER THE SURFACE: STUDY TRIP OF THE SPANISH ASSOCIATION OF FOUNDATIONS TO GERMANY AND ROMANIA

The Spanish Association of Foundations (AEF- Asociación Española de Fundaciones) is the leading membership association of foundations in Spain with over 800 members. As a public interest association under Spanish Law, AEF works not only for its members but for the entire foundation sector. AEF has followed the development that community foundations and community philanthropy have experienced over the last years and believes that community foundations offer an opportunity to increase civil society participation and to channel existing private resources for public good in new ways.

In September, Rosa Gallego, with support from the CS Mott Foundation and ECFI, brought a delegation from AEF to visit community foundations and support organisations in Germany and Romania. Here are her reflections from their initial dive into the community foundation world.

‘When I started scuba diving I realised that there was part of our world that could not be seen neither from the shore, not even from the surface of the sea. Below a blue surface that was what I have seen all my life, there was a world of bright colours, different sounds, currents, temperature changes, visibility variance ... and my own feeling of floating with no effort in the liquid element. All new, exciting, inspiring and full of life.

This is similar to what I have experienced in the community foundations study visit to Germany and Romania that for three days immersed four representatives of the Spanish Association of Foundations in the world of community foundations and its support organisations.

We started our journey in Berlin, where we learnt about the vibrant German sector, that in my view has a distinctive characteristic: the role of volunteers as the base and core of most community foundations as a way to promote civic engagement. Although the programmes differ from one community to another, based on their resources and the challenges they want to tackle, the involvement of people stands out above any other characteristics.

If I may simplify (please refer to relevant ECFI country guides for better explanations) the community foundation movement in Germany started when two individuals brought the idea from the USA, started foundations in their communities and afterwards the movement found its way through the country. The fall of the Berlin wall and reunification of Germany opened a climate of civic participation that was new and thriving, the reduction of public resources at local level was also a trigger to explore what private resources could be put at the service of the general interest of the community, and that was the fertile waters in which the concept of community foundations started to be known and used.

As the founder of a community foundation near Hamburg put it “Germans are people of clubs” almost everyone joins a club or several depending on their hobbies: one for each sport, music etc, but what her community needed was to get citizens connected with the aim of making the city an even better place to live, therefore breaking the silos of traditional social connections, and enhancing others, and all done by voluntary work. We also met foundations that leverage important economic resources that are used for supporting civic organisations or for the development of their own programmes, they may also involve volunteers, but their key characteristic is the ability to attract substantial donations and to manage them very effectively so as to be a trusted vehicle for the philanthropic activity of the many citizens. Community foundations in Germany interpret in a very flexible way the principles that are sacrosanct in other countries, and therefore diversity is one of the key characteristics of the sector.

The Alliance of (German) Community Foundations plays a central role in the support of the sector. Initially it had a role of promoting the concept, currently it is more about professionalising the sector, facilitating networking, exchanging of good practices etc. In a country where the term ‘Bürgerstiftung’ is not protected, there is a need to establish the principles that characterise an organisation so as to be considered a community foundation, and that is also central to the work of the alliance.

As for the foundation sector as a whole, and although much less numerous and wealthy than traditional endowed foundations, community foundations are adding new dimensions, characteristics and approaches, making the whole sector more diverse.

For us it was interesting to learn about the evolution of the Alliance of Community Foundations inside our sister organisation the Association of German Foundations, to understand how and why a membership association has raised and devoted resources to support a group so distinctive from its main and traditional membership. The diversity that community foundations bring benefits the sector as a whole, by adding new dimensions, characteristics and approaches.

The next learning experience took place in Romania, where the sector started its development in a totally different way. Over ten years ago an existing support organisation, ARC, and especially two women, made a reflection on the bleak future that laid ahead for the non-government sector funding. It was evident to them that with no changes and no new agents, no more resources would be available and therefore the sector would not achieve sustainability, and its weakness would be an impediment to its development, professionalisation and impact. The search for solutions to that unpromising future found community foundations as a possible tool, also here the initial inspiration came from the USA.

The distinctiveness of Romanian community foundations is that they were purposely created to attract local resources and through grant making pass them to local organisations. As both the concept of grant making and of community philanthropy were alien to the country, the strategy has been holistic, from identifying the people that could lead the creation of the community foundation, to help with all the planning process, the set-up of the organisation, both from the legal and organisational points of view, providing with funds, and after and for many years, a support and mentoring programme that covered all the needs the foundation could have. With

this method approximately every two years three community foundations have been set up and the country now has sixteen. All community foundations in Romania are run by paid professionals and their main activity is grant making. Quite different from the majority of German community foundations where only 10 % have paid staff.

The role of ARC, the support organisation behind the movement, is totally different from the one of the (German) Alliance. ARC acts more as a gardener of rare species, that does everything from planting the seed to taking care of the plant on a daily basis while the Alliance in Germany is more like the planner and guardian of a big forest.

In both countries, however, I found the support organisations, including in this case the European umbrella ECFI, was an extraordinarily well-connected network that made possible with considerable ease to plan and carry out a study visit. The infrastructure for community foundations not only supports the sector at national level, it is also well connected internationally and gives an extraordinary service to other organisations, like us. I am sure that besides the time I would have invested in preparing this, would I have needed to do it all by my own, I would have never managed to build the agenda that in less than three days that gave us such extraordinary insights. Also, it needs to be said, nothing of it would have happened without the support of CS Mott Foundation, a funder that truly believes in infrastructure and that supports it in many different and smart ways.

There is no comparison between watching a documentary in television with the feeling of immersing in the deep blue. Likewise, there is a big difference between reading reports or information on websites, compared with meeting with the people that work every day for their community and the people that work every day to support and develop the sector. In the course of two and a half days we had nine meetings with fifteen people, and the most astonishing of them, what I can say, is that there is a fascinating life taking place below the blue surface and that I hope this “community foundations dive” will be the beginning of a new adventure, the one to uncover what is below the surface in Spain.’