Community Foundation Sustainability: Co-Creating a Shared Understanding of the Concept

On 4 December 2020 ECFI organised an online roundtable with the practitioners from community foundations and support organisations on the topic of "**Sustainability of Community Foundations** – **Co-creating a Shared Understanding of the Concept**".

25 participants from 10 community foundations (CFs), 7 community foundations support organisations (CFSOs), and 1 observing foundation, from Belgium, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Italy, Latvia, Poland Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, U.K., and Ukraine, spent two hours together considering the challenges of organisational sustainability for a community foundation and identifying the questions that deserve further exploration and knowledge building around this topic.

The rountable was a kick-off event to inform series of follow-up learning activities on the topic of CF organisational sustainability considering also the context changes induced by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Community Foundation Sustainability Worskhop. Visuals Marina Roa from SenseTribe

The agenda of the meeting was informed by the work of the ECFI's Learning Lab, a structured learning space for practitioners from the community foundation field in Europe to enhance their working, thinking and making meaning of social change in their communities. Andreea Alexandrov, from the Federation of Romanian Community Foundations who has participated in the 2020 edition of the ECFI Learning Lab, shared her preliminary findings based on the Romanian case on how community foundation organisational sustainability relates to the resilience capacity of the organisation. In the other presentation, Boris Strecansky, from ECFI, provided an overview of different elements of CF sustainability on both sides of the equation: the CF as an organisation and the community environment/context in which a CF exists.

CF Sustainability - the big picture

The framework for the discussion was based on the idea of a tension between the organisational agency and the environment in which it is exercised - between what we can control and what is given.

Organisational sustainability in this framework can be seen as an ability of the organisation to adapt, beyond mere survival, to a dynamically changing environment. The adaptation may be happening across different branches and layers of organisational agency and its connections with the environment.

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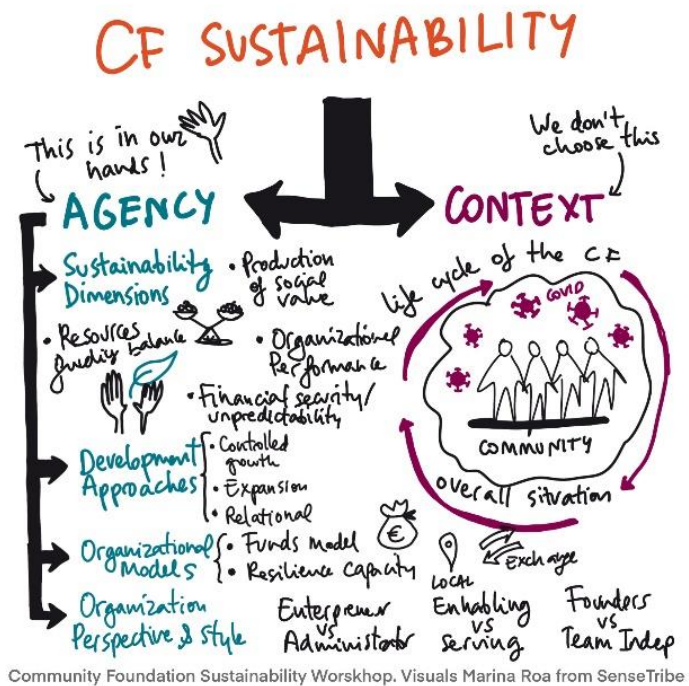
The proposed framework identifies on the side of the context identifies three elements that need to be considered: the community, the specific situation (such as Covid-19 pandemic) and the stage of development or life cycle of the CF. None of these three elements can be changed in short-term and all three put significant constraints onto the CF.
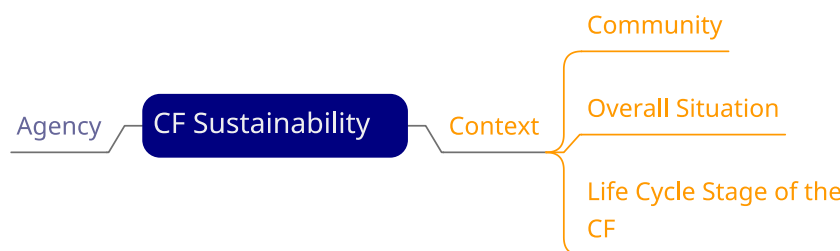
Community foundations are different from other types of community organisations due to the very fact that they are place-bounded. Unlike communities of interest or values, they cannot cross geographical boundaries and move to another space where they could find fewer challenges or more supportive environment. They need to deal with the place-defined context and environment as it is and establish and adapt themselves accordingly.

However, the adaptation does not necessarily mean pure survival, that being a necessary, but not sufficient condition. Adaptation assumes that the CF provides meaningful value to the community besides its organisational survival. It also means making conscious choices about the CF agency in a constant interaction with the community. That interaction then, also incrementally, step-by-step, changes the community.

What are the factors that play out in the CF agency? What is it that is in hands of the CF?

There are four elements around which the CF may organise and act:

i)   specific sustainability dimensions,
ii)   development approaches,
iii)   business model approach,
iv)   organisational style.

The specific sustainability dimensions include the degree to which sources of funding are in balance and secured, the public value the CF brings (or not) to the community, how good or poor is the internal organisational performance, degree of financial insecurity and unpredictability and degree to which non-financial resources and assets are mobilised.

The development approaches may fall into continuum between a) controlled growth, which is slow and may lead to stagnation but healthy economic standing, b) an expansionist approach with all what it brings and c) leveraged approach which works with third party leverage as main approach.

Sustainability
Dimensions

Development
Approaches

Business Model
Approach

Organizational
Perspective and Style

Agency — CF Sustainability — Context
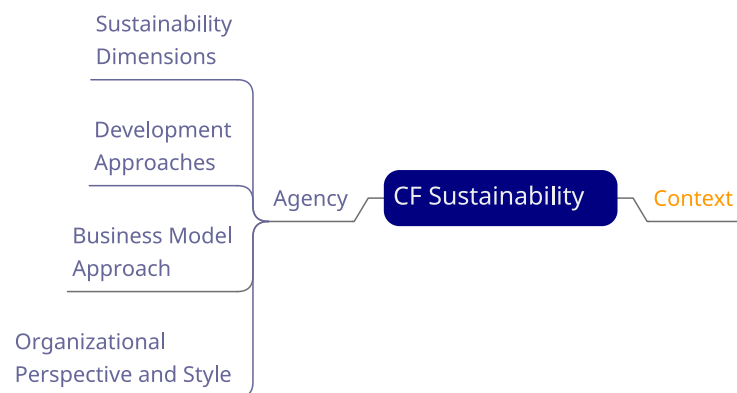
The business model approach includes the traditional revenue-focused model approach and the alternative resilience capacity-focused model which stresses the relational capital and focuses on assets and capitalisation rather than financial flows.

The organisational perspective and style include the degrees of freedom between various inflection points in organisational settings such as flexibility and control, internal and outward orientation, entrepreneurial and administrative organisational culture, enabling and serving mindset, founder's trap and team interdependence.

Prioritising and connecting the above-mentioned elements in the agency dimension with specific challenges in the context and environment may be a way to look at the challenge of CF sustainability and be more aware of what kind of adaptation is possible.

The context for this reflection is the post-Covid-19 period when many pieces of the social, economic and political order will be changing. On the top of that, the sustainability challenge has been a constant issue in those parts of CF field where the endowment model of community foundation has not been a viable option.

The role of philanthropy and community-based action and civic engagement will play out in a new situation and will have to find its renewed role and function in a new context.

Sustainability as a value proposition

In the second presentation Andreea Alexandrov made the proposition that the problem of CF sustainability can be approached via bringing value to the community ecosystem. In this approach, organisational sustainability is directly connected to the value that an organisation has in the ecosystem in which it operates. Although the CFs are varied, the case builds on the idea that the value proposition of a CF is related to serving the local community (or localism) and relationship brokering.
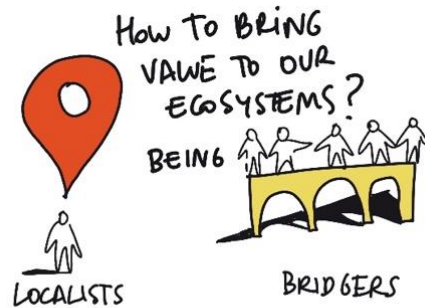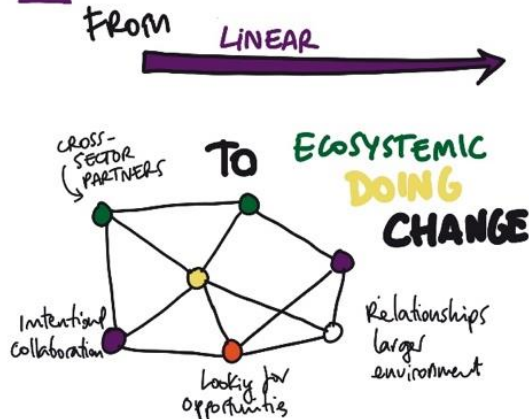

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There are two possible solutions for harnessing more through the local knowledge and action and the multi-stakeholder nature of CFs: the use of systemic thinking in interventions in the community and a greater intentionality in the way collaborative architectures are built with community stakeholders.

Andreea cited arguments for a systems approach to be applied in community:

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1. No problem is an island for itself and no organisation either. CFs need to operate with models that take the large map into account.

2. Go "glocal" – i.e. expand thinking to embrace the larger agenda i.e. SDGs and discover it on the local map.

3. There is a need of breaking the silos and intentional collaborative design. Make the Collaboration and building bridges part of the community foundation DNA and last but not least:

4. The need to shift from solving technical problems to adaptative ones.

These require involvement of many different stakeholders in the process noting that these problems cannot be solved by money alone.

Major contextual and long-term challenges to CF organisational sustainability and topics for further collective exploration and sharing

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR CONTEXTUAL CURRENT & LONG TERM CHALLENGES YOUR ORG FACES IN RELATIONSHIP TO ORGANIZATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY?

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In small groups participants identified major contextual and long-term challenges that influence their CF's organisational sustainability.

HOW TO MAKE A CASE FOR RAISING RESOURCES FOR THE FOUNDATIONS DURING THIS TROUBLING TIMES WHEN MOST OF THE RESOURCES SHOULD GO TO THE COMMUNITY
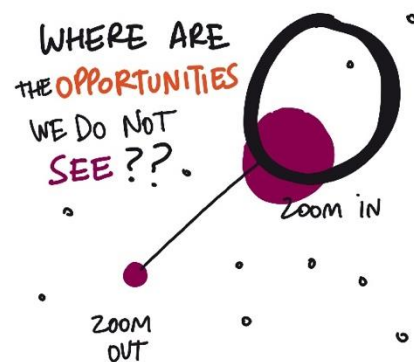
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Many challenges related to the **funding context and fundraising practices**, such as the question how to make a case for raising resources for a CF during these troubling times when most of the resources should go to the community, or the challenge of securing resources for administrative costs and for staff, when the funding streams are unstable. This category of challenges includes also the "how" component in relationship building and development with donors. For example, how to fundraise in social distancing context, how can CFs "hack" local culture in order to improve philanthropic involvement? How to effectively reach and involve the diaspora in giving?

A second set of questions & challenges was related to the shaping of the **CF relationship with the community** such as "how can CFs better connect to a bigger map"? How can CFs better respond to vulnerable communities?". Or How can CFs find out the REAL needs of main stakeholders? How to engage community members in times of pandemic and lockdowns? How to think about rebuilding the community after the lockdown and support it to re-take trust and confidence? How to identify the right resources – not only money but connections with community and other assets? How to rebuild trust among people, networks, schools and all the institutions whose legitimacy has been damaged by the pandemic? How to stay relevant in the community? What are possible assessment models for mapping needs in the community? How to involve next generation?

A third set of challenges concerned the **internal management practices focused on strategic management and choices**, but also practical management issues. For example, how to step-out from fire-fighting mode into more strategic mode and move beyond the blind spot? How to build awareness of strategic questions of sustainability of the CF among the board and staff? How to avoid underselling the value added by a CF? How to appropriately invest in assets? How to increase efficiency in networking and sharing of knowledge and resources among the network? How to encourage boards to become more

WHERE ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES WE DO NOT SEE ??

ZOOM IN

ZOOM OUT

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actively involved in sustainability? How to stay on track with the long-term impact thinking and adapt to the changing nature of things?

IS DIGITALIZATION A WAY TO IMPROVE ORGANIZATION SUSTAINABILITY OF COMMUNITY FOUNDATION ?

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The fourth category was the **digital challenge**. How can digitalisation contribute to sustainability? How can we embrace online giving, email campaigns and crowdfunding? How can we reach the diaspora online? How can digitalisation enhance engagement with, and knowledge of, the community. How can it enhance organisational efficiency and effectiveness?

What we can do together?

Participants of the meeting suggested that building and maintaining learning platform with resources and methodologies on the topic (e.g. with examples of tools and approaches to fundraising and fund development / donor engagement) would be highly desired. Also, some identified a need to establish a 'learning centre' for developing relevant skills. Another potential joint action was identified as building awareness of the relevance of the SDGs and how utilisation of the framework can contribute to organisational sustainability.

Take-aways and next steps

Based on the meeting feedback and enthusiasm for conversations on the topic we plan to repeat the online roundtable to gather more input and understanding from the field. The two sessions will help inform further peer learning meetings and other activities for interested practitioners from the CF and CFSO field around the challenges outlined above with the ambition to create a space for sharing of practical experience and for building a resource of knowledge relevant to the sustainability of community foundations.

The repeat event is scheduled for the 3rd February 2021, between 10:30 – 12:30 CET.

Please access the link to register for the event in case you couldn't attend the first one, or send the link to other interested colleagues who might want to attend:
https://forms.gle/BH7TE4atjKqxvMbu6

Participants

Kristie Deckers – Community Foundation for Limburg – Belgium
Jasna Jasarevic - Tuzla Community Foundation – Bosnia & Herzegovina
Tarik Barakovic – Tuzla Community Foundation – Bosnia & Herzegovina
Anna Omodei – Assifero – Italy
Cristina Zanardi – Canavese Community Foundation – Italy
Maria Cristina Morsellino – Community Foundation of Agrigento and Trapani – Italy
Ansis Berzins – Community Foundation Movement – Latvia
Inese Bosa – Community Foundation Movement - Latvia
Lasma Kapuza – Aluksne & Ape Community Foundation – Latvia
Andreea Alexandrov – Federation of Community Foundations – Romania
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Mihaela Gresita - Federation of Community Foundations – Romania
Beatrice Manole - Federation of Community Foundations – Romania
Ciprian-Mihai Paius - Federation of Community Foundations – Romania
Liliana Cristea – Galati Community Foundation - Romania
Alexandra Stef – Urban Education Live – Romania
Irina Novikova – CAF – Russia
Beata Hirt – Healthy City Community Foundation - Slovakia
Rosa Gallego Garcia – Association of Spanish Foundations – Spain
Alejandro Hernandez Renner – Maimona Foundation – Spain
Carles Massot – Open Society Foundations – Spain
Olka Nikolska – ISAR Ednannia - Ukraine
Kezia Jackson-Harman – UK Community Foundations – United Kingdom
Rachel McGrath – Northamptonshire Community Foundation - United Kingdom
Victoria Miles - Northamptonshire Community Foundation - United Kingdom

Facilitators

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