

A new kid on the block



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Last year LSA Bewoners took over responsibility as the support organisation for community foundations in the Netherlands. In November it hosted ECFI's first Stay at Home Study visit, which was intended to offer the possibility for others to see and hear from community foundation practitioners but also to prompt discussion around some of the challenges they face. Below Kristel Jeuring reflects on how this turned out to be a valuable 'crash course' which drew on the wealth of experience in the community foundation field around Europe, but which revealed how LSA Bewoners can build on its strength as an organisation connected into the wider community ecosystem.

'Our organisation, LSA, is the new kid on the block when it comes to being a support organisation for community foundations in the Netherlands. However as a membership organisation, we've supported and united community-led organisations for over 30 years. Our membership body changed over the years, and over time it has grown to include anything from neighbourhood councils, to community enterprises and community centres. Generally this would be a fairly organic process. When the community ecosystem would evolve, we would evolve with it. Or in some cases we would try and be a catalyst for that evolution in communities. When we became the new support organisation for community foundations for the Netherlands, it also meant that we fairly suddenly had a lot of catching up to do. How could we support community foundations towards building a thriving movement? And even though the Stay @ Home study visit might have started out for us as a way to showcase the excellent work some of our pioneering community foundations are doing ... in reality it was just as much a crash course for us as the new kid on the block. I'd like to share a few observations from the week.

Learning throughout the process

We had picked some excellent community foundations to share their stories. But in all honesty, I did not know them that well. I hadn't personally been involved with community foundations until a few months ago, so all my information was second hand. Through organising these visits I've had fairly in-depth conversations with our community foundations to really understand what

makes them unique in terms of their leadership role, their sources of funding, how they are rooted in the community, and how they organise themselves. This really helped me understand how community foundations can fit in with the wider community ecosystem and support the mission of creating thriving communities. This is essential for us, because a lot of our work consists of figuring out how our members might benefit from each other's experience, expertise and capabilities and make those connections.

Learning from the visits

Throughout the visits we kept circling back to two themes in relation to how you keep trying to develop and stay relevant as a community foundation: leadership and being rooted in the community. I found it particularly helpful to discuss these themes in the company of community foundations (and support organisations) from other countries. In part because there is an incredible wealth of experience in the international movement. But also because getting questions and reflections from people who work in a different context help you figure out what is unique about your own context.

For example, in the Netherlands we have a fairly well developed and entrepreneurial civil society at the community level. This means that as a community foundation you can take on a leadership role by being the catalyst for change, without being the organisation and or people who have to execute that change. Similarly, some of the work that is being done with participatory grant making could develop into a real democratic strength in our communities to help them thrive.

Learning for our future as a support organisation

All of all these exchanges have helped us to be more confident about our role in supporting community foundations. Perhaps we had been somewhat insecure in our ability to support when we didn't really have a thorough understanding of the sector yet. Which is probably still the case. But we can play to one of our other strengths: connecting people and organisations and working towards a common goal. Looking back at the exchanges we've had during the study visit, that is our starting point. Creating a community, that grows into movement which is connected and complementary to the wider community ecosystem.'