

Building a SDG community of practice among community foundations

by Carola Carazzone, Sept 2020



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On 21-22 September we organized the first ECFI “Connecting community foundations with the SDGs” workshop in Italy. Inspired by ECFI knowledge and expertise, 13 Italian Community Foundations got together to engage for the 2030 Agenda and learn why and how to integrate the SDGs locally in their daily work.

For both, Assifero and ECFI, it was the first in person meeting since late February and we chose the Community Foundation of Messina as an extremely meaningful place for hosting this two-day meeting. The community foundation of Messina is a champion of the system change approach and asset-based sustainable development enshrined in the 2030 Agenda at local level. It works at the intersection of local challenges that are clearly consequence of global ones - climate crisis, social cohesion, different kinds of deeply rooted inequalities, structural and institutional underdevelopment. It pilots a cutting-edge holistic strategy that practically integrates all the 17 SDGs.

But the key point here is that each and all of the 13 community foundations in the room could directly connect their own daily work with the 2030 Agenda. For example, Val di Noto CF with sustainable tourism (SDG 8, 12 and 14), Agrigento and Trapani CF with organic agriculture (SDG 2), Foqus - Fondazione Quartieri Spagnoli of Naples - with quality education (SDG 4), San Gennaro CF (Rione Sanità, Naples) with cultural welfare (SDG 11).



This cannot be taken for granted. Embracing the fact that local actions impact directly common good beyond local territories, that each and all community foundations in the world are actually key actors for 2030 Agenda is a radical change of perspective. As well as the fact that this perspective is true everywhere: in the countries that for 70 years were distinguished and labelled “developed countries”, “developing” and “developed” ones accordingly to the ‘terminology of the everlasting economic growth that today - in the climate change, global pandemic, population movements and population structural changes era - means very little (actually, never did, not even in the past).

We are grateful to ECFI for this change of perspective. Assifero tried on its own in 2015, in 2016, and in 2017, but failed. In 2015 contributing with a panel on community foundations to the Third World Forum on Local Economic Development promoted by UNDP in Turin, in 2016-2017 trying to engage with very limited results community foundations with surveys and initiatives to “explain” what the 17 SDGs were.

As Assifero, we underestimated then that the United Nations and private foundations were paying for the gap - in terms of lack of mutual understanding, trust, ability to collaborate to elaborate agendas and pursue common goals - for having worked side by side but separately, rarely interacting, for 70 years (at least until the Addis Ababa summit on developing financing in 2016). Of course, this was the case for all private foundations (corporate, family etc) and community foundations had an additional mental barrier to see the relevance of 2030 Agenda for their work: the gap between local community actions and global -United Nations Agendas as they were perceived-, that were considered as remote and alien.

Through promoting a participatory engagement, one step at a time in the last couple of years, ECFI has dismantled this perception while supporting community foundations embracing the SDGs.

The highly participatory methodology used during the workshop enables participants to develop a clear understanding of what endorsing a ‘whole of organization approach’ to SDGs means for each of their individual community foundations, why the SDGs are relevant, and how to go about embedding the SDGs in their mission, in the management of the assets



and endowment, in strategy and programs, in communications and in operations. Kudos, ECFI!

As we stand on the threshold of an epochal decade, philanthropy support organizations are confronted with an urgent need to ask the right questions, as I set out in a [blog](#) earlier this year. In front of the complexity, scale, and pace of the challenges that we are facing (and Covid-19 is emblematic in this sense) at different interconnected levels (local, national and international), philanthropy support organizations are particularly well-placed to impact the enabling environment for social imagination and social change, becoming *learning organisations*.

What is the power that lies in philanthropy networks today?

Are we ready to grasp our “window opportunity” to orient social imagination and social change?

In a recent paper, “[The Imaginary Crisis](#)” (and how we might quicken social and public imagination), Geoff Mulgan argues that the world today is facing an unprecedented deficit of “social imagination”. The concept of “being capable of social imagination” is quite interesting. Social imagination is not the ability to plan economic recovery nor to program, restore, or develop the dominant production and consumption systems or to envision new generations of technology. The “capacity of social imagination” is the ability to imagine a different and better society 30 or 40 years into the future: more equal, more inclusive, much happier, characterized by new forms of well-being with ourselves, with the communities we live in, with the rest of humanity, with the planet.

Community foundations all over the world can be formidable platforms of social imagination enshrining their role in contributing to the global 2030 Agenda and embedding SDGs in their local strategy and actions!