

Philanthropy's support to citizens' campaigns: Towards a trust-based partnership to meet our democracy's challenges

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Philanthropy: an actor of change...

- ❖ Enabling civil society to fulfil its social role by stepping up when State funding is lacking or not accessible (e.g. for informal groups, for critical actors)
- ❖ Allowing flexibility with mission driven resources
- ❖ Acting as leverage for multiple funding sources
- ❖ Taking a leap of faith: Venture philanthropy creating space for experimentations and innovation

...in constant adaptation to current challenges

- ❖ Towards longer funding period and multi-annual financial support
- ❖ Securing more core funding and increasing non-financial support for organizational development
- ❖ Incentivization and better harmonization of civil society/philanthropy/public actors partnerships
- ❖ Encouraging impact assessment and strategic reporting for structural growth
- ❖ Bringing more transparency about and better accessibility to philanthropic funding
- ❖ Multiplying participatory grantmaking

Philanthropy has a role to play in the “fights”¹ keeping up and bringing in shape democracy. Whenever people live together, tensions occur. Beyond basic human and social rights, the question of common goods and what general interest is are tricky. Even more across cultures and regions.

In our modern democracies, the state guarantees the overall legal frame and general services. However, for socio-economic reasons, many people are at the margin of the system and become outsiders of the system. Research on the role of civil society in catering for the needs of minorities and underrepresented populations as well as experiments of diverse ways of living as a society are hard to fundraise for. At the same time the **crucial role of civil society in bringing about meaningful change at a local level as well as contributing to strengthening the social fabric cannot be denied. And here philanthropies have a role to play.**

In the following we describe the opportunities and challenges we observed in the collaboration between civil society and philanthropy² in the past decade, which focusses on achieving a more democratic and participatory Europe.

What resources for what and whom?

The world of philanthropy is very diverse and the initiatives supported are also very different; however, what we can observe across the sector is that philanthropies as well as wealthy individuals can more easily bring financial support to organisations having a legal entity. They tend to support those organisations that have a social mission and are in addition recognised for serving the general/public interest (compared to for profit actors). Philanthropy finds also ways to support individuals – e.g. through fellowships/alumnae or leadership programmes; European initiatives; via national member organisations of coalitions, pooled funds, via direct support; etc. – and there is a tendency to extend

¹ Please also refer to different articles on closing civic space.

² Citizens for Europe mainly worked with private philanthropy.

funding periods or provide multi-year support. **Compared to public funding, philanthropies and individuals both afford a certain flexibility to the recipients in the way funds are used.** States on the other hand are very bureaucratic and results-driven rather than mission driven. This makes public money less accessible for small organisations, informal groups, etc.

With this said, **philanthropies have difficulties in engaging in partnerships engaging over longer periods of time** (five years or more). Also, even when they fund cross-national initiatives, the challenge of guaranteeing support to coalitions and umbrella organisations – e.g. European networks – and their national or thematic member organisations remains.

Another sphere that provides existential challenges to civil society actors is securing core support. **The recent COVID-19 related global health crisis has accelerated the need for core funding.**

The lessons learnt from practice indicate that **civil society actors need to build-in reserves**, human resources and support functions through any project they seek funding for. And at the same time, **philanthropies should continue making general operating support or core funding available** to civil society as this kind of funding has proven successful in helping organizations flourish (and sometimes stay afloat) and proves to be a **multiplier of impact when used alongside other grants.**

Beyond financial support, philanthropy is challenged to be a real partner. It can provide funds or directly engage in organisational development of its civil society partners. However, many philanthropies have difficulties in being outspoken on defending democracy (see solutions below).

Philanthropy can also be a leverage for other funding resources, especially public money.

Philanthropy supports the various roles of civil society – (social) services, watchdog, advocacy, community building, etc.³ Philanthropic support and, if possible, diverse funding models are crucial when it comes to advocacy activities as they bring independence and increase legitimacy. From another point of view, philanthropies are not always wanted as partners, given that their resources are all but neutral. What we observe among civil society actors is sometimes lack of trust in the source of philanthropic funds, while philanthropies seek civil society actors with the ability to absorb certain volumes. **Building trust over time and building up ecosystems for meaningful partnerships among stakeholders are thus important elements for a fruitful cooperation.**

There is room for stakeholders like civil society, philanthropies and state to cooperate in a more harmonious way: philanthropies can more safely engage in experimentations with civil society actors, as the risk they can afford to take with funds is higher than states. **It is commendable when philanthropies partner up with civil society in launching pilot projects with the objective for public authorities to take over the funding tested solutions in the scale up phase.** As European philanthropic means are limited, stronger partnerships between civil society, philanthropies and states are to be encouraged there where they are grounded in trust and genuine engagement and participation of independent and diverse civil society actors.

Take a step back and look ahead!

At best, philanthropies and civil society take a step back through reporting and evaluation schemes that contribute to collaborative learning and organisational development as well as to robust long-term strategizing. Engaging in a retrospective exercise gives space for internal reflections as well as collective planning and strategy building, daring to think big and taking the time to step back from the heavy every-day workload. There is scope for improvement on both ends – civil society and philanthropy – to use reporting for this instead of window dressing or hard grant exits. Finally, philanthropies do have the opportunity of supporting civil society through funding schemes for self-care.

Some challenges and solutions

³ See [Strachwitz, R. G. \(2021\). What is Civil Society? A Primer. \(Opuscula, 160\). Berlin: Maecenata Institut für Philanthropie und Zivilgesellschaft.](#)

Philanthropy cannot always directly support campaigns, advocacy, lobbying and direct actions. It does so indirectly, by supporting gatherings and setting up coalitions. It can also help developing and mainstreaming frameworks like institutionalised citizen rights. Also, **philanthropies engage with civil society through pooled funds** – the most important one on democracy in Europe being [Civitates](#) – or **increase collaboration through aligned funding** that consists of organizing a **coalition of funders and civil society actors to bring complementary pieces of funding and actions together**.

A question that is very present among civil society actors is **how to make philanthropic money more accessible**. **Transparency** from the side of philanthropies is certainly part of the answer, as well as increasing awareness about what philanthropy is and what it stands for. Also, when civil society tries to access philanthropic funds, it is important to **acknowledge the time needed to build relationships and trust** in both directions. Finally, another way of making philanthropies more accessible is through **participatory grant making** where experiments and practices have evolved a lot in the past years. E.g. [FundAction](#) might be one of the first European experiments that became an institution. Also, [community foundations](#) develop and philanthropy supports their emergence and consolidation, too. Community foundations take very diverse forms, building on assets communities have, building power by, with and for the local people.

Is philanthropy an ally of mobilisation? The so-called progressive philanthropy tries