

Consortia, Coalitions and Communication

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As the nonprofit sector expands worldwide, funders look for new ways to combine resources and reach out to grantseekers.

In 1997, the European Commission of the European Union (EU) produced a White Paper on its relationships with non-governmental organizations and foundations in Europe, "Promoting the Role of Voluntary Organizations and Foundations in Europe." The report sets out the need for a broad dialogue involving the nonprofit sector, the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions, the Economic and Social Committee, EU member states and other interested parties. This emphasis on combining institutional effort and resources is also reflected at the funding level: the formation of donor networks is a growing phenomenon, as foundations acknowledge that operating within a forum, consortium or coalition can facilitate good grantmaking.

The International Meeting of Associations Serving Grantmakers (IMAG, which had its first gathering in 1998) is one such forum. It aims to explore the context in which grantmakers operate, increase knowledge of operational issues for associations of grantmakers and build links among organizations. IMAG brings together 30 organizations, including the Association of Charitable Foundations (United Kingdom), Centro Mexicana para la Filantropia, Community Foundations of Canada, Council on Foundations (USA), Donor Forum of Prague (Czech Republic), EFC, Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers (USA), Grupo de Institutos, Fundacoes e Empresas (Brazil), Indian Centre for Philanthropy, League of Corporate Foundations (Philippines), Philanthropy Australia, and Southern African Grantmakers Association.

Regional networks help to strengthen existing contacts and build new relationships. For example, The European Foundation Centre's Funding East Grantmakers Group aims to increase the effectiveness of philanthropy in Central and Eastern Europe and the so-called newly independent states by facilitating cooperation and information exchange among foundations, and by supporting new philanthropic initiatives in the region. In South Africa, INTERFUND, a consortium of European and Canadian NGOs and foundations has been operating since 1986.

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Networks are also contributing at the user level. For example, the Sasakawa Peace Foundation has pledged to connect local Japanese communities with the rest of the world. They can also be invaluable when grants are made in a context where the infrastructure is undeveloped, and working in partnership with local organizations can be helpful to grantmaking institutions in order to produce policy synergy.

This trend is to be welcomed, but pursued with care, as consortia may decide on priorities which tie large amounts of funding to specific issues, denying others the opportunity to access funding. Also, there are contexts where consortia or centralizing networks may be inappropriate – in Eastern Europe for example, where there is a general mistrust of centralization. Grantseekers have a responsibility to clarify these sorts of contextual issues to a funder, who must then try to understand and work with them.

Other forms of communication are being facilitated by the World Wide Web, which makes information on requirements and programs in many countries readily available. In addition, frequently updated bulletins on disasters and relief efforts can be accessed worldwide through Internet sites, such as the American branch of the Red Cross disaster news Web page (www.crossnet.org/news).

Funders themselves are also playing a part in promoting the communications revolution. For example, The Web Development Fund, a project of WebLab in association with PBS Online, has been set up to "maximize the potential of the World Wide Web as a social, democratic medium capable of catalyzing new perspectives, new thinking and new relations between people" (www.pbs.org/weblab). The Charities Aid Foundation maintains the CharityNet Web site (www.charitynet.org); it is a source of information and resources for those involved or interested in the voluntary sector, and includes details of some 72,000 charities, and a site for those with an interest in corporate community involvement. The EFC Orpheus Program, through its Funders On-Line project, is helping Central and Eastern European Foundations to develop their presence on the Internet and make links with possible international donors.

Through IMAG, foundations are discussing the future promotion of information exchange among associations. Funders such as the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the Turner Foundation and the German Marshall Fund have established the Virtual Foundation (www.virtualfoundation.org). This (real) venture is a Web site which promotes small international grass-roots grants. Donors use the site

to register their interest in particular fields, and countries or grantseekers use it to place their project applications.

Several foundations are also very active in working with the media. For example, the Open Society Foundation for South Africa (a Soros foundation) has funded a South African community radio support program which aims to create a balance in the control of the media after the inequalities of South Africa under apartheid. (In fact, media and communications are a principal focus for the Soros foundations worldwide.) In the Mediterranean area, much of the initial funding effort has been directed toward work in the area of communications issues in their widest sense.

The growing ease with which funders can become aware of and get involved in new areas highlights the need for international foundations to address political, cultural, ethnic, religious, social and linguistic diversity. It is but one of the challenges facing the community of grantmakers and grantseekers – a global village in its truest sense – as these new means of receiving and disseminating information proliferate.

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