

Contribution to the 2nd China –Europe Forum october 2007
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« A plea for foundations to get together to tackle global issues »

An answer to an article entitled « The new challenges of global philanthropy, how can we do better ? », published in *Alliance* n°12 – a magazine devoted to European foundations – (www.alliancemagazine.org) june 8th 2007.

The author expresses great concern about the state of the world :

« The world is facing urgent and *complex problems* which are *global in their nature* ; ... it is facing an unprecedented *set of challenges* on a *range of issues* ... that because of their *scale, complexity* and *urgency*, represent a challenge for all organisations working for the common good » and argues that « current governance structures are not measuring up in dealing with global issues ».

He then points out that foundations being committed to working for the common good, their contribution in such matters « should be made more broadly »... all the more so as they enjoy a key comparative advantage which is « their long-term perspective because their vision is not limited by short-term electoral or business cycles » and wonders what European foundations should do to live up to their mission.

Unfortunately there is no clue on how foundations can achieve this ; and of course it is not that easy. But the danger is that once you have pronounced the words, you think you have done the right thing. Incantations are not enough.

I'll try and explain why it is not so.

1 -

One should add that foundations have two more very precious assets, ***independance and*** money, which enable them to *craft* long term visions; but it is important to stress that « longevity » and « long-term perspective » alone are not synonymous to « a vision » ;

« **A vision** » is « what should we do now, or try to stop now or start building now that will be useful for our global society in 50 years time ? » There is that **sense of responsibility** you pointed out in addressing challenges facing humanity. But incantations are not enough. « A vision » also has to do with « **strategy** » ; a clear understanding of what the challenges are, how to actually address the complexity of the problems, how to seize opportunities and build alliances.

In fact, **breaking from** the conventional wisdom and governance of foundations which imply looking for niches your own size, setting a-priori criteria for your grants and privileging fundings whose impact can be assessed in the short and medium terms . « Take risks », some might say, but « take risks before the risks take care of us ! »

If we agree on that, if we agree that it is as you mention it « beyond the capability of national governments to solve alone », and still more improbable that governments will act together... then it requires a **complete change in the evaluation process** of the foundations. *A vision, complex problems* mean working in the long term and so instead of « what is the impact of the actions we fund », we should ask ourselves: « Do we agree on the long term validity of the lines chosen ? », « Are we going in the right direction ? »

That is to say **assess the relevance of the priorities made**, and of **the way to proceed**, not the impact. Are we foundations prepared to that ? At least for a percentage of our funding...

This is the number one necessity.

2 -

The second necessity is to **give a clear definition of the words used** .

As a matter of fact, it seems that just pronouncing the words will be enough ; some sort of incantation as it were. It is not. Only when defining the words will we know whether and what we agree to network on.

What are « the problems », the « challenges facing humanity » ? What is their « scale » ? Why are they « complex » ? What does « global » mean ? Does it not mean « affecting the whole world and all countries in

the world » ? These words we hear on the radio and on television every day... each listener feels helpless.

There seems to be a **confusion** in the way words like « international » and « global » are used ; such confusion definitely leads to misunderstandings for « international » and « global » do not equate. « International funding » is clearly understood as opposed to « nationally or locally focussed foundations ». But « international » refers to a nation to nation game, to a « **geographic situation** », whereas global refers to « **the nature of the issues** » at stake in a world that is one.

These *words* were at the core of « the long term role for European foundations in addressing complex global issues »,... but what next ? Did any decision to act – think, or rethink, collect information, establish dialogues etc... follow ? Those imply motivations other than purely helping in the development of poorer countries...

A speaker at one of the round tables of the 2006 European Foundation Center's General Assembly JF Rischard received standing ovation. Here are some of the words he pronounced :

« Crisis of huge importance, playing out across borders and continents and only solvable through multi-country or global collaboration.

These include climate change, *biodiversity*, and *natural resource depletion* ; the *regulation of global systems* such as *finance* and *migration* ». There were if I remember right « 20 challenges to be solved within 20 years ».

Unfortunately, there was no follow up to these statements ; no commitment to join forces and get down to work .

3 -

The third necessity is that we should **all** sit down, draft a mapping of these problems and the reasons why they are complex ; explain how the problems we are each of us addressing can fit and be part of wider issues , « global » issues ; build a vision/visions of how we can grasp them and network to bring about **proposals** of remedies.

We can't wait for our governments to act first...

In a word draft what we, not as ordinary radio listeners, but as foundations, can **do** and... **with whom**. That is to say bring foundations to open dialogues with other stakeholders, with other parts of the world ; find out what their perceptions of the challenges and their priorities are ; because the problems are global, affect the whole planet ! Draft a common agenda – in its latin sense of « what is to be done ».

We would then better understand why the Bernheim Foundation is funding a « peace being taught in universities » programme (in which all professors are implied, whether they teach mathematics or geography); the results can't be assessed, but is it not a long-term investment ?

Or why some foundations fund work on what orientations European agriculture should be taking, both in relation to health, the environment, employment, and our relations with poorer countries.

We would then understand the urgent need of building *patiently* a **world community** in which these *global issues* would be discussed... *Peace relies on it*.

We would also better understand what each foundation is doing, become aware of how each of us – often working to alleviate present day symptoms – can contribute to delineating the root causes and the *global issues* at stake, expose them and address them... And then it does not matter whether you are big or small ; what matters is establishing who does what, as a jumping board to going higher collectively.

4 – What are the right targets – in line with « global issues » ?

My last point will be – please consider it as a goad – : what would the **whole world be funding**, where would our compassion and money go to if the HIV-AIDS issue did not exist ? The United Nations have a programme devoted to fighting it ; Bill Gates and Clinton, the superheroes of the year are rushing head on to

fight ; And the only issue the G8 agreed on yesterday was... fighting AIDS... Perhaps second in line would be the Darfour issue ; but again, symptoms only...

Whereever you turn to, in newspaper articles, the fad this year is admiration for Bill Gates and the enormous sums of money he is devoting to the AIDS issue in Africa. I do believe that if he does nothing more in his foundation, *he is not serving the public good at large*. Let me not be misunderstood.

I am by no means saying that the HIV-AIDS issue should be overlooked. I, like everybody else, have great compassion for all the people who die from it, for the widowed women and for the orphans. I, like everybody else, have great concern about the economic disruption to which it leads African countries. Some foundations very bravely and aptly attend to these problems.

But I want to make two points :

The first is that : if we do not fulfill the mission of addressing **all** the root causes of such pandemic, our efforts are pointless ; and the root causes have to do primarily with responsibility : responsibility of the governments of the countries who refuse to admit that HIV is a problem (cf article by François Ost) ; responsibility of the churches (the Catholic church for one) who refuse to have a realistic approach of the problem – condoms vs. the values of faithfulness in marriage – did they ever exist extensively even among those who speak most about them ? (cf the Pope's claims on such issues) ; the responsibility of trade and the pharmaceutical industry ; the responsibility of civil society ; to quote only some. Shouldn't advocacy on the responsibility issue be at least half of the investment because it will be 90% of the cure ? And it's no use pleading it is beyond our possibilities to do so.

My second point is that : whether we listen to some scientists who claim that viruses come and go without our knowing why and the HIV will die its normal death ; or whether thanks to massive sums of money we succeed in eradicating HIV... At the end of the day the global issues will still be the same, exposing humankind to still more deadly risks (wars for a share of energy, for a share of water ; impossibility to feed populations because of climate warming, misunderstandings because we did not devote time and money to try to know each other, and to build confidence, etc...)

5 - Let us devote 5% of our fundings to grasping « global issues » !

As a conclusion, let me suggest that we as European foundations should engage on grasping global issues in three ways :

Clearly define the meaning of the words used « challenges », « global », « complex » etc... ;

Spot and subsidise agencies in civil society able to deal with this or that issue, and **able to connect with others around the world so it is a world community that will submit proposals to worldwide concerns** ;

Issue reports, not on the impact of, but on the questions that arise, the enlargement of the networks, the leverage etc...

And therefore agree to spend a small percentage of our fundings on doing that.

Let me close by saying that I believe as the author of the article does, it is only when addressing *global problems* that foundations will move forward. The *complexity* of the issues should be our guiding line ; and we should never part without a series of « let us partner on... and devote *part of our funds* to addressing such complexity ».

Amicalement.

Françoise.

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