

Françoise Astier - Contribution to the Foundation Workshop of the China-Europa Forum – Beijing – Hong Kong 2010)
(the writer only is liable for this contribution)

FOUNDATIONS HAVE SET THEMSELVES THE MISSION OF BEING
« EFFECTIVE CONTRIBUTORS TO THE PUBLIC GOOD »
HOW SHOULD THIS BE PUT INTO PRACTISE ?

1- why it is urgent to answer this question .

Foundations are the (detainers) of **vast sums of money** . And their money power will keep increasing for at least two reasons :

one is the possibility given to corporations to use part of their benefits tax free to create and implement a corporate foundation ; the number of **corporate foundations** will necessarily grow along the years.

Who would not love to « do good » when it does not cost a penny ?

The second is the increasing number of **rich Chinese** who also are « eager to do good ».The China Daily of April 20th 2007 stated that « almost all the top 100 rich Chinese are considering the concept of charity » and further « more and more wealthy people are setting up their own charitable funds ».

Along with the foundations already existing all over the world, it will be a real hoard.

2 – « do yourself good » or « do good » ? what is philanthropy ?

see the article written by Gerry.

See European cooperation in the ACP countries

As far as corporate foundations are concerned, everybody is no doubt meaning well

I once browsed in the **missions** and the **boards** of some French corporate foundations :

I should think disadvantaged children are a must !

Air France company went as far as asking its employees to vote on where the money of the Air France foundation should go to ... an impressive majority voted for « help to poor children » (I did not make out what other possibilities had been given, for there must have been a list of suggestions) ; however what exactly is « help to poor children » ? the actions taken in this or that country seem ever so tiny compared with the necessities ...

The boards are composed of great names : top managers of the firm, famous scientists ; people whose abilities and good will cannot be doubted ; but what time do they have to really think of how best this money could be used ; will they have time to attend the board meetings ; and how many board meetings with what agenda ?

All in all, one derives the sad feeling of a type of help that is whimsical , scattered and sprinkled : **does it contribute to the public good ?**

3 -what is « the public good » ? How can foundations be effective contributors ?

1 - it is obvious that foundations that devote their money to **their community**, be it for social purposes or for art purposes , heritage, architecture, etc...improve the living of the people around them ; and therefore do contribute to the public good - in their community.

it is obvious that foundations that give **grants** to students , be it to continue their studies or to travel abroad in the form of student exchanges contribute to the public good of their community but also to a better understanding of the world , the abolition of stereotypes and ignorance , therefore to **peace in the world** : they contribute to the public good in a broader sense .

For the same reason it is obvious that all that can be done in **schools** to combat any type of exclusion / racism of all types , bring down stereotypes, calls for applause . It should be widely publicised and extended to all schools through the various ministries of education . This requires a **will** , lobbying and a lot of money .

a **group** of European foundations have taken up the challenge but they remain unfortunately too few to make it a massive fight .

*let us say it is pretty « easy » to assess what is being done in these lines : so much money given, so many doors or steeples restored, so many grants, so many schools ; and to assess how it contributes to the **public good** .*

2 – allow me now to tackle situations where the **public good is not so obvious**.

And to start with **scientific research**. My point of view will only be very general and stem from commonly heard statements .

One is « scientists carry on with research, it is up to governments and civil society to decide what they want to do with the findings ... » the problem being that civil society and governments are not necessarily able to understand what is going on and to decide (aptnly) ; lobbies are powerful ; experts not always as independant as they claim...

The second statement comes from scientists themselves who confess that at the moment the biggest masses of money (whether from governments, foundations or corporations) go into genetic research . It is the result of both a fad and a vicious circle .

Those who disagree or claim there are dangers are kindly or rather not so kindly put aside , and summoned to shut up. The research laboratories do not have to worry that much, the media will not be relays for the fears and calls for precaution of these « cautious » scientists , unless they make havoc ... Things are slightly changing ; whistle blowers is an expresion that is beginning to make its way ; however very timidly ... but how long until these individuals can speak as a bunch and **reach the statute of whistle blowers** ? only for the sake of public good .

The case of gmo foodstuff (organic agriculture in France in the 60s ...Xtian Mouchet)

it surely is worth giving for scientific research, it is not that easy however ...

the whistle blowers are often worth listening to ; only a couple of foundations have understood the challenge and want to promote their **courage** . I admit it is not easy, not easy to engage on this path ; not easy to assess ; but is it not also worth it ?

another example that has struck me as being **more difficult than it seems to assess** if it is part of your **mission** is the desire to help in case of **disasters** - the groups that work on that subject say « natural disasters ». My question « what can be done in order to prevent the so called natural disasters ? » was totally out of season . I did not register in this group . I'll be frank because we are among us, I was even told that natural disasters are a blessing , a good way of collecting a lot of money because emotion is

great ... That was a few years ago, I am not sure the subject of prevention is being tackled to day, or ever so little .

I am not saying there are no natural disasters ; I only want to underline the fact that many disasters have a human origin : land slides because of deforestation ; land made barren for overgrazing ; now « green fuel » ; sources polluted, air polluted etc ... is it not our responsibility not only to get organised to help but also to help prevent ...

this I think is **contributing to serving the public good** .

I remember once taking the example of those pesticides that ruin the health of farm hands and cause men working in the banana plantations – or strawberry plantations - to be impotent. The answer I received was unfortunately not a joke : « it is good though for foundations whose mission it is to promote adoption » ...

such examples show that when you reflect on where and how to help it can be pretty tricky ; as long as it does not provoke counter results, it is not too bad but if it is counter productive, it is a problem . Whose problem ? who in a foundation is in charge of assessing the implementation of the missions set ? that is to say, not the technical points like making sure no money has been embezzled, the figures are there etc... but making sure the consequences of the help given are not harmful ...

To go one step further we can wonder if the notion of public good is something stable or if it varies with the times . I personally think that yes it does and consequently I suggest we ask ourselves the question : « what is the public good in the 21st century » ?

4 - What is the public good in the new era of globalisation ? ?

and always the same question : what are the motivations for giving ? « **do yourself good** » or « **do good** » ? **What is philanthropy ?**

everybody is no doubt meaning well (air France : poor children)

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but are meaning well and emotion enough to contribute to the public good ? ?

you derive the sad feeling of a type of help that is whimsical , scattered and sprinkled ; dependant of the latest movie or information on television ; dependant of emotion ; whether the actions carried out with the money are relevant is another problem . I remember hearing of a corporate foundation that devotes money to autistic children : a doctor specialist of this disease was desperate to hear two buses had been taking taking some sixty autistic children to Disney land near Paris when apparently autistic children fear crowds ... but with the name of the firm on the buses ...