

### **3 Reflections on global community foundation developments**

In the three years since the last Community Foundation Global Status Report (2005) the number of community foundations has continued to show strong growth, especially outside of North America. The growth in Central and Eastern Europe has been especially strong, but the growing awareness of the concept has helped increase interest and activities in other parts of the world as well.

In 2005 the number of countries with community foundations or active initiatives was 46. In 2008 the number of countries with community foundations has grown to 51, with 4 more reporting active initiatives, for a total of 55 countries. There are 16 new countries, which are offset by the 7 countries that have been dropped from the count, leaving a net total of 9 new countries. The reasons for no longer including the seven countries vary. In several cases the information provided was premature; in others, foundations that had many of the characteristics of community foundations developed in different directions over time. The decision to drop the 7 countries was, in fact, a positive development, reflecting a growing agreement both within countries and more broadly about what constitutes a community foundation.

The numbers, however, do not reflect the qualitative changes that are taking place. For example, in the US and Canada, much of the 1990s and early 2000s was spent learning how to raise funds from living donors and how to work with donors to meet community needs. Although the trend to donor-focused organizations was never complete, as some of the commentary would suggest, there is now a swing back to a focus on the community leadership and the convening aspects of community foundations in order to build support for social change at the local level.

Around the world, as the numbers of community foundations grow, there are more successful models for new countries to draw on, often in neighboring countries, or in countries with similar giving cultures. In this way community foundations are beginning to take on similar characteristics, especially within regions. Also, as community foundations within countries work together to address common issues, community foundations are finding common ground, sharing practices, and beginning to look and act more consistently. This is not to say that, at this point in time, community foundations are establishing themselves as a global brand. In a number of the countries with more highly developed community foundation movements, a community foundation “brand” has been established. However, there are still too many parts of the world where the numbers of community foundations are low, and where they are still experimenting to find the right mix of attributes, structures and policies to fit their local cultures of philanthropy. Globally, a community foundation brand will be developed, perhaps with significant regional variations, but it will be some time before it happens. The fact that one can talk about a community foundation brand at all is itself an interesting development.

There is increased awareness of the community foundation concept globally. This is in part due to the growing number of community foundations and their growing impact on their communities. The World Bank’s Community Foundation Initiative to learn about community foundations as a tool for community-driven development also has drawn attention to the concept, as has its public promotion of community foundations in several countries and its funding for the WINGS Global Fund for Community Foundations.

Other factors are also in play, the result of longstanding efforts that are now bearing fruit. The influence of the International Fellows programs at the Center on Philanthropy at the City University of New York, which offers NGO practitioners the opportunity to study the community foundation concept, and the sharing of the concept among the Synergos Senior Fellows, are having a major

impact. The sharing of knowledge by individual practitioners from community foundation to community foundation is increasing.

One result of the increased understanding and formal and informal networking is that more organic growth is taking place. The numbers are still small, but this new development in the last three years is striking. The three new community foundations in the Middle East were all driven from the bottom-up. They were formed by three remarkable women, each an expert in the field of community philanthropy. One, the former CEO of a community foundation in the UK, is applying her knowledge to the South Sinai; another, a highly respected researcher on philanthropy in Egypt, is reviving an ancient Islamic tradition of endowed giving; and the third, an academic, has studied the community philanthropy concept and believes that community foundations can provide a way for the Palestinian people to increase their self-reliance.

Some issues for concern have surfaced in the last three years.

- It is clearer now than ever before that funders are refocusing their efforts and moving on, not necessarily to new funding priorities, but to new regions in which to support the continued development of community foundations; this is especially the case in Central and Eastern Europe.
- Some support initiatives have closed or will be closing in the near future.
- Support organizations are facing issues of sustainability, and in a number of cases are broadening their membership to include other types of grantmakers. What this will mean for community foundations is not altogether clear.

On the positive side, to counteract these trends, many countries have developed their own associations of grantmakers, which maintain strong programs to support their community foundation members. It probably is time for community foundations, especially in some parts of Central and Eastern Europe, to stand on their own and create their own support structures and learning opportunities. It may mean slower growth, but a stronger movement is the likely result. There is evidence that this is already happening in parts of CEE. There may be some exceptions. Where the number of community foundations is small and local and international support is tentative, some may not survive.

The appearance of a new global fund for community foundations has altered the way the community foundation movement is supported globally. The WINGS Global Fund already has a strong record of strategic grantmaking, and it has made a significant difference in the development of a large number of community foundations in the areas where it works. At the moment it is fairly reactive to funding proposals, although it is helping community foundations in eligible countries learn more about how the fund operates, what it is likely to fund, and how to apply in order to increase the number of successful proposals. The Global Fund is already providing critical support for individual community foundations and support organizations. In the future it may change the way support for community foundations globally is structured. It will be very interesting to see how it develops as it enters its next phase in 2009.

With the large growth in both the numbers of community foundations and countries where community foundations are taking root, it is clear that community foundations are embedded in giving cultures around the world. Their adaptability and effectiveness have been proven. Communications technologies mean that good practices and lessons learned can be shared quickly around the globe from community foundation to community foundation. As knowledge of successful initiatives is built up and shared, more successful community foundation developments will occur.

Given all the ways that knowledge is shared – through support networks, from community foundation to community foundation, by individuals, within countries and across borders – community foundations today are no longer merely actors in global civil society, but creators of global civil society as well.