

Community foundations/Slovakia – reflections after 20 years, Clare Brooks

1. **I remember very clearly the first mention of community foundations;** it wasn't quite a "*where-were-you-when-Elvis-Presley-died? moment*" but not far off. I was working in a beautiful building on Washingtonova Street in Prague when Bill White came to visit Dasa Havlova at the Civic Forum Foundation. The office had the most violent of lime-green carpets which, if you weren't used to it, could transfix you. I remember my head shooting upwards from looking at the floor when the words "community foundation" were mentioned; Bill noticed my immediate interest. As ever he was typically generous "if you want to find out more about them, then perhaps we can fix it for you and some others to come over and take a look". It happened a few years later, but thanks to an intervention by Juraj Mesik, not me.
2. **Community foundation.** A foundation for a community, a foundation run by a community. No more living in Jablonne v Podestedi (as my friends did) and having to write the Ministry of the Interior over a hundred miles away to get drains fixed (as they had had to do). A local foundation with the means to "do stuff". YES
3. **Never underestimate the power of a personal letter.** Juraj was good at writing to Bill, I'm sure that his correspondence helped Mott consider seriously how a community foundation's (now universal) appeal could be relevant to a transitioning society. I was working for Mott when the idea of a study visit came up could I go along? – *Well YES*
4. **You can have a great time with community foundations** – because they are about specific places each with its own identity and colour. In our case, the first study visit to the USA with Juraj and Susan Cleveland (who was working for Mott after a stint at the Environmental Partnership) was to California. California. *How on earth did we wangle that one?* It was with a certain degree of mischief and amusement that Susan suggested to Bill that the best research could be done in northern California - as opposed to Cleveland Ohio. It got approved. We ended up in Sonoma Valley, it was heaven. As it turned out it also happened to be pretty useful. It was from there that the proposal for the CF for Banska Bystrica was formed.
5. **I remember nervousness – pretty much from all sides - about "importing" a foreign idea to Slovakia,** but after the visit Juraj seemed clear that the key principles of a community foundation were perfectly sensible and adaptable to the Slovak context. We asked "Juraj what would you change from the US?" when we had the first Banksa Bystrica proposal in our hands. He was pretty clear that even the principle of endowment building should be embraced. **Clarity of vision** and as we say here in the UK also "*sticking to the knitting*" of what a CF is about, got Mott's initial support. You can only go with what's in place (in terms of leadership for a CF) and build from there, but the message was pretty clear: even taking into account local context, the CF model would work. And keep listening.
6. In other countries **this "endowment issue" provoked endless debate, it became almost something unnatural.** To have it or not to have it, how to get it etc. Sometimes I think we were blinded into thinking it's too hard to achieve (an early UK mantra) when I've always understood it is a natural extension of long-term donor relationships for donors who have developed (often thanks to the CF) a long-term vision for their giving.
7. And then **sometimes other things than endowment take priority,** as in '98. The community foundation just took off on a programme for free and fair elections, wasn't going to wait around during the elections and just do nothing. CFs in Central and Eastern Europe have always been stronger, I have thought, than in the UK on providing local leadership on issues that matter. In the UK we have what's called a "crowded beach" with many different

organisations and agencies vying for community development, community convening and community leadership roles.

8. **Knowledge products like Vital Signs, smart use of social media, crowd funding and social mobilisation** - Smart CFs will adapt and take these on and thrive, reinventing the CF. But the essence will probably stay the same – encouraging giving and investing locally.
9. **I remember investment options for charitable foundations across the region were pretty dire in my day. I hope they have improved.** In most countries charities are not treated with the same degree of attention as private or corporate clients. It seemed such a long way off in the early days, that a day would come when investment income significant enough to haggle over with your banker. I hope things have changed. Smart money management can tide you over a downturn.
10. **Tax is the essence of everything? Seriously?** Yes, I know we say that money doesn't matter and that community foundations can do so many things without money - but there is no getting around the fact that you have to be aware of the financial interests of donors and critically, **the professional people who advise them**. Wherever your financial centres are, that's where community foundations need to make a unified and uniform offering in excellence in client/donor care. In the future and as wealth changes, this will become increasingly important. Across Europe, there will be an increasing push for uniformity of charitable tax benefits across borders.
11. **CFs will always be about people.** You can do only so much with IT...
12. **CFs will need to continue to work together** Support your CF association. I've seen the lamentable lack of coordination and promotion of community foundations in Australia and believe the sector has been held back in its growth as a result.