REFLECTIONS FROM THE CF STUDY TRIP TO SLOVAKIA
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Overall impressions

The community foundation study trip in Slovakia, a fifth in a row, for me was a journey of wonder and delight. Apart from the early waking hours and the exhausting travelling, the organization of the visits in Bratislava and Bardejov (Blue group) was excellent, providing the visitor with rich and diverse impressions and enough opportunities for exploration and learning. This was made possible due to the efforts and commitment of our hosts Daniela Danihelova and Josef Jarina, and of course the thorough support of the organizers of the study trip.

My personal experience of these few days was dense and thought provoking, and some of the encounters were so touching, that the emotional response they evoked got deeply imprinted in my memory – especially the visit to the workshop of the NGO "Bol raz jeden clovek" in Bratislava and the pottery of the KORGUM home for mentally disabled near Bardejov. The exposure to the work of the two community foundations was so intense, that at the end of the day I felt an urge to withdraw from the social events and to spend some time on my own so that I can digest the impressions and organize my reflections.

If we consider the Bratislava and Bardejov foundations in comparative perspective, they appear quite similar in terms of their philosophy, strategy and practice. As a matter of fact, one would expect somewhat greater differences between a foundation in a big city and in a small community like Bardejov and more context-dependent approaches. These similarities can be explained in terms of the common pattern – the universal model of community foundation they follow – but also in terms of the shared values and aspirations, embedded in the mission statements of the two organizations. In both cases the mission is to improve the quality of life of the citizens by mobilizing and channeling internal resources. Unsurprisingly, the two foundations prioritize the support for vulnerable people, the investment in youth self-organization, social and cultural involvement, and the reinvigoration of traditional heritage. Another common affection is the support for creating and sustaining alternative public spaces such as the community gardens.

The major difference between the two foundations appears to be the difference in the potential scope of the served population and respectively the range of the activities: for obvious reasons Bratislava foundation enjoys larger possibilities for attracting donor funding, but at the same time has to operate in a more competitive environment. In the big city the contribution of the foundation to the community is less visible and some additional PR efforts are needed. The foundation has addressed this challenge creatively by organizing spectacular public events such as the Duck Race and popular initiatives such as "Give a

Book". Both projects attract considerable interest and support and contribute to the remarkable public standing of the organization. The Bradejov foundation sticks to more traditional fundraising strategies, relevant to the small community context – such as Beneficiary Diner, which brings together the local elites. However, some of the projects they support rank very high in the scale of creativity – for instance the organization Vita in Subirbium, which re-vitalizes the Jewish cultural and architectural heritage in Bradehov by attracting support from the descendants of the long-extinguished Jewish community in the town, who nowadays live elsewhere.

The invisible minority

The task of the researcher in this project is quite challenging: to reflect upon complex social phenomena – such as community foundations in relation to their context – on the basis of brief site visits, and to draw some valid conclusions. An approach relevant to this task would be to address those aspects of the observed reality that appear somewhat problematic or inconsistent and therefore beg for deeper exploration and explanation. One such juncture that strikes the critical observer is the disproportionate involvement of community foundations with different types of vulnerable groups in the community. Both the Bratislava and Bardejov foundations prioritize the support for NGOs and project providing services for vulnerable individuals and groups – people with mental health problems, children with learning disabilities, etc. However, one important minority is notably missing from the list of concerns – the Roma. The Roma are not just underrepresented in the process of local decision-making and almost absent from the agenda of the foundations, they are hardly present at the mental map of society shared by the people, directly involved with the development of their community. Unlike in other East European countries, where people tend to complain from the Roma or blame them for various real or imagined problems, in Slovakia they were seldom mentioned at all, as if they do not exist.

I had neither the time, nor the proper setting to explore this phenomenon, so here I can only formulate a tacit hypothesis: Roma are simply not construed as part of the mainstream community, but rater as a separate community, existing apart and on its own. I am not an expert on interethnic relations in Slovakia, but my research on stigmatization and social exclusion of the Roma in Bulgaria suggests that there are certain common models of failed communication between the majority of the citizens and the minority communities, that result in mutual mistrust, growing alienation and ultimately in ghettoization. The dynamics of intergroup relations are both culturally embedded and context dependent and need to be studied in depth in order to come up with valid explanation. What is certain is that such relational patterns are socially constructed, but quite enduring to change, since they are continuously reinforced in daily interactions to the extent that they start to appear "natural" for the participants in these interactions.

We need deeper insight in the nature of cognition in order to understand how and why human minds construe their society in ways, often experienced as unsatisfactory and unjust, and how these constructions are reified in apparently

solid reality, unyielding to change. According to modern theories of cognition, individual minds construct versions of reality, and individual behaviors are guided by these versions. Complex societies are only possible due to the capacity of their individual members to sustain such mental maps, or shared representations of society, in their minds and are act accordingly. However, this constant interplay between the social reality and the inner world of the individual often leads to confusion between what is given "by nature" and what is socially constructed and only appears to be natural. The process of naturalization, or reification of socially constructed phenomena is classically defined by Berger and Luckmann in their seminal book "The social construction of reality":

"Reification is the apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things, that is, in non-human or possibly supra-human terms. Another way of saying this is that reification is the apprehension of the products of human activity as if they were something other than human products – such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will. Reification implies that man is capable of forgetting his own authorship of the human world, and, further, that the dialectic between man, the producer, and his products is lost to consciousness. The reified world is by definition, a dehumanized world. It is experienced by man as a strange facticity, an opus alienum over which he has no control rater than as the opus proprium of his own productive activity." (Berger and Luckmann, 1991, p. 106)

Indeed, human beliefs, explanations and categorizations tend to get reified and present themselves as solid reality to our common sense knowledge, thus becoming secondary social facts, which are hardly distinguished from the 'primary' facts. In the case of minority groups this might result in enduring negative stereotypes that enable the stigmatization and even dehumanization of whole communities. Unfortunately, this tendency to objectify and ultimately reify human phenomena into non-human givens is constitutional for our perception of the social world and in order to avoid it one needs to be on the alert and scrutinize his or her own thinking – the specific kind of intellectual discipline known as second order self-refection (Bateson, 1972).

Noble calling and modest ambitions

Another inconsistency that meets the eye of the observer is the contrast between a seemingly prosperous society and the economic hardships that the visited communities claim to suffer: high unemployment and comparatively low income in the Bardejov area, less so in Bratislava. It might be the biased perspective of someone, working in the poorest regions of one of the poorest countries in Europe, but these communities appear to me pretty well doing if not opulent. However, poverty and shortage of resources takes quite a central place in the self-presentation discourse of the communities, and implicitly in their self-perception, assuming that the leaders of the foundations speak on their behalf. Of course, this might be explained as discursive strategy, aiming to engage potential donors emotionally and morally and attract funding and support. But simple explanations rarely grasp the truth – I believe that in our case diminishing the

success and boosting the problems is a genuine moral attitude rater than a cunning strategy.

This emphasis on poverty relates to the second notable peculiarity of the two community foundations: the strange blend of modesty and commitment demonstrated by their leaders and staff in a most spontaneous way. From the perspective of their achievements they appear somewhat shy and tentative in their ambitions, as if they do not deem themselves good enough to deserve a secure future in terms of receiving more generous donations or predictable external funding. Unlike in the other Central European CFs, the leaders of the Slovak foundations that we have visited find it difficult to dream about large endowments that will guarantee their operation in the long run and will enable them to widen the scope of their activities. These internally rather than externally imposed limitations beg for explanation.

This peculiar culture of modesty is expressed not only in the humble self-presentation of the organizations, but also in their policy and the way they relate to their grantees. The foundations support meaningful projects and initiatives in the community without claiming ownership or imposing their views. Indeed, the way the trips in Bradejov and Bratislava were organized clearly aimed to promote the grantees rater than the foundations themselves. This attitude of diffidence, if not self-effacement, was present to the extent that the traditional visit to the office of the host organization was skipped in both cases so that we can commit more time to the supported projects: in Bardejov the meeting with the staff was held in the hall of the Polish-Slovak house and in Bratislava – in a coffee shop in the old center. Clearly, the activists of Slovak community foundations we have met espouse the values of modest devotion to social causes: they would prefer to diminish themselves rater than to show off. This shyness, however, can be seen as harmful self-limitation of the organizational growth.

The organizational dilemma: stability vs. growth

The modest aims set by the Bardejov foundation triggered in our group the ongoing debate on organizational growth and its limits. It is relevant to foundations, which have achieved some sort of equilibrium and are well integrated, valued and respected in the community; yet operate with quite limited resources. The question is whether this situation would be interpreted as sustainability or as chronic underfunding and arrested growth. Another way to define the dilemma is whether a community foundation is bound to grow and expand or it can choose to keep the way it is with the available funding. One viewpoint is that the classical perspective of organizational development – implying growth in the scope of operations and respectively the financial capability – is directly applicable to the case of community foundations. From such a perspective the dilemma "growth versus stability" is misleading since the only true guarantee for sustainability of the organization is continuous growth. In the case of community foundations the ultimate goal should be to attain the closest approximation to financial autonomy by establishing an endowment big enough to ensure the independent funding for the core activities of the organization.

From a systemic developmental perspective however sustainability might be construed in altogether different terms. In our turbulent postmodern world the experimentation with alternative forms of self-organization is on the rise globally: social enterprises, cooperatives, eco-communities and many other hybrid forms of activist groups, organizations and networks are emerging and burgeoning. Beyond any doubt, these developments are manifestation of social innovation and creativity in response to the growing dissatisfaction with the institutional mainstream, designed after the prevailing business model. The overall feeling is that the organizational establishment in all spheres of life is failing to meet adequately the challenges of an increasingly uncertain and precarious world, precisely because it is patterned on the dominant business logic with is imperatives of functional efficiency, market expansion, profit maximization and accumulation of capital.

This brave new generation of social movements, even when they are not counter-cultural and openly subversive to the establishment, are offering an alternative set of values with far-going implications for their mission, organizational design and policy. Their diverse, yet overlapping and synergic agendas are inspired by ideals such as harmonizing interpersonal and social relations, sustaining the fragile balance between human activity and the environment, relieving the pressure of market competition on human choices, etc. Utopian as they may be, these ideas are certainly posing a challenge to the established social organization, and more important, to the hegemonic capitalist word view, to put it in classical Marxist terms (Gramshi, 2005). Unsurprisingly, considerable portion of the initiatives supported by the community foundations in Slovakia and throughout Eastern Europe are inspired by such values. And since the foundations do not exist in a void and are certainly influenced by the broader social and cultural context they abide, we can hardly expect them to cling to a purist reading of an established business model. From a broader systemic viewpoint it is pretty legitimate on the part of the CF's leadership to choose to minimize their ambitions instead of maximizing the income.

The meaning of value

One of the central foci of the debate is the contested notion of value. The business model upholds a predominantly transactional idea of value, which considers tangible and quantifiable assets and processes of the organization such as the measurable output an its cost, the amount and direction of the cash flow, the cost effectiveness of investment, etc. From a holistic and humanistic perspective however the criteria for measuring the added value of the foundation's work would not be transactional but relational: what is the satisfaction from the provided services and how the interventions enhance the quality or social relatedness (and human relations in general) and hence – the quality of life of the community members and the community as a whole. Recent anthropological research demonstrates that the rationalist notion of value, professed by the mainstream economist paradigms, is far too narrow and reductionist and fails to grasp the relational and social aspects of economic exchange (Graeber, 2001). On the basis of profound research in different

cultures the concept of value is recast as an inherent aspect of the never-ending process of meaning making, constitutive for the existence of human society. Social meaning is produced via a vast variety of culturally embedded models of exchange, aimed at sustaining human relations rater than at accumulating wealth. This process of meaning making is contingent on a shared, yet negotiable, perception of value. Indeed, the constant negotiation on the value of the exchanged products, services, gifts, ritual behaviors, performances, etc., reinforces the established relations between the involved parties, but also challenges them and thus fosters social evolution towards more complex and sophisticated forms of relatedness.

There is still another, ideological and moral dimension of this debate, which addresses more abstract and elusive issues such as the shared values that underpin organizational strategies and the broader ethical systems within which they operate and make sense. The imperatives of growth and market competition are inherent to the worldview of industrial capitalism, but this worldview itself is far from being universal. In fact, it is increasingly challenged by alternative versions of economic relations, rooted in the traditional ethics of reciprocal favors, symmetrical exchange and recognized mutual interdependence. From such a perspective community philanthropy is not just a personal act of good will but rater a response to an implicit moral obligation of the successful individuals and companies, sustaining the harmony and balance in the community. The construction of the organizational dilemma in terms of the capitalist logic of expansion and profit maximization is somewhat paradoxical as far as the core mission of community foundations – and for that matter, of philanthropy at large – is to transcend and humanize this very logic.

And while reflecting on these complex and multidimensional dilemmas, we should take care to consider to what an extent they emerge from the experience of the local actors and to what an extent they are projected, and possibly imposed, from the perspective of the theoretically tempted observer. As a matter of fact, the staff and the leaders of the foundations we visited appeared much more concerned with the daily problems and challenges they face in their noble work than with theoretical and quasi-theoretical speculations.

Servant leadership: an attainable ideal

The last section of this paper dwells on the issue of leadership. The modest and devoted attitude of the managers of the community foundations we visited suggests that they have developed, intuitively rather than purposefully, a context-specific version of servant leadership – one of the most talked about yet least explored leadership philosophies. I am well aware of the risks of labeling, inherent to any attempt for classification of the messy and contradictory human reality under the neat categories of our thinking. Therefore I will try to present in a nutshell the emerging concept of servant leadership, taking the works of Robert Greenleaf (1977) and Larry Spears (1995) as point of departure, so that the reader can decide for herself to what an extent the presented cases – or any other observed case of leadership – fits to the ideal model.

As pointed out above, boiling down the complex phenomenon of leadership to a list of characteristics is an inevitably reductionist exercise, bearing the hazards of reification and objectification. Yet it is worth considering the attributes, suggested by Greenleaf and Spears as constitutive of servant leadership. Of these 11 characteristics, some are inherent values or beliefs that servant leaders need to hold. Others are behavioral in nature and describe what servant leaders do, and some are skills that can be developed and perfected. These characteristics include *having a calling, listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, growth and building community*.

Calling

Servant leaders have a pronounced capacity to serve other people. This notion of having a calling to serve is not just value-based, but deeply rooted in human nature. Servant leaders have a desire to make a difference for people and will pursue opportunities to impact others' lives for better, even at the price of sacrificing one's own self-interests. This characteristic cannot be taught, so unless a person has a natural calling to serve, servant leadership is not a realistic or compatible style.

Listening

Servant leaders are excellent listeners. They are receptive and genuinely interested in the views and input of others. People instinctively understand that servant leaders want them to share their ideas and that these ideas will be valued and considered. Without good listening skills, many of the other characteristics described here cannot be achieved.

Empathy

Servant leaders can "walk in others' shoes". They understand and empathize with others' circumstances and problems. Leaders who are empathetic earn confidence from others by understanding whatever situation is being faced. This is a skill that comes more naturally to some people than others, but it is pertinent for all who aspire to servant leadership.

Healing

Servant leaders are people who others want to approach when something traumatic has happened. They have developed a remarkable appreciation for the emotional spirit of others and the ability to create an environment that encourages emotional mending. They are good at facilitating the healing process and others gravitate toward them when emotional needs arise.

Awareness

Servant leaders have a keen sense for what is happening around them. They are always looking for cues from the environment to inform their opinions and decisions. They know what's going on and will rarely be fooled by appearances.

Persuasion

Servant leaders seek to convince others to do things rather than relying on formal authority. They are naturally very persuasive and offer compelling

reasons when they make requests. They never force others to do things; yet they are willingly followed and asked for advice.

Conceptualization
Servant leaders nurture the ability to conceptualize the world, events and possibilities. They encourage others to dream great dreams and avoid getting bogged down by day-to-day realities and operations. They foster an environment that encourages reflective thinking and values the creative process.

Foresight
Servant leaders have an uncanny ability to anticipate future events and developments. This is not to say they are always right in their predictions, but they are adept at picking up patterns and tracing the tacit tendencies in the environment. This enables them to foresee with great accuracy the consequences of their own and other people's decisions.

Stewardship
Servant leaders often are characterized by a strong sense of stewardship. The specific function of stewardship stems from medieval times when a steward would be assigned to hone the skills and development of the young prince and thus prepare him for his reign. The kingdom relied on the steward to teach and hold the prince in trust so that he would be a successful king. In organizational context stewardship is that aspect of leadership, responsible for preparing the organization to meet successfully he challenges of the future. When we describe a leader as having a strong sense of stewardship, we refer to a desire to prepare the organization to contribute to the greater good of society. Making a positive difference in the future is characteristic of the stewardship mentality, inherent to servant leadership.

Growth
Servant leaders have a strong commitment not just to the growth of their organization, but to the personal, professional and even spiritual growth of of people. They believe that everybody has something to offer beyond his tangible contributions and are ready to offer support, guidance or mentoring. They have the capacity to connect to others' developmental needs and actively seek ways to meet these needs.

Building Community
Servant leaders have a strong sense of community spirit and work hard to foster it in an organization. A servant leader instills a sense of common spirit in the workplace, enacting his conviction that an organization needs to function as a community.

From this short overview it is clear that servant leadership is neither a charismatic grace, given to a few chosen individuals, nor a managerial technology that can be imposed from above. It is a relational phenomenon that emerges and evolves in the process of organizational and social development. In fact, servant leadership can be construed as a by-product of genuine communal engagement: the continuing co-evolution of committed individuals and their

immediate human environment. Establishing servant leadership might be an agenda for the future, but it is also present around us, in our organizations and communities in a most unobtrusive way, so we should take care to notice, acknowledge and foster its still fragile, yet vigorous manifestations.

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