

Cultural Cooperation in Europe: What role for Foundations?

Executive Summary

28 October 2003

Fondazione Fitzcarraldo

for



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background and aims

The cultural cooperation framework in Europe is currently rapidly changing. The increasing will of the arts community to cooperate and to move into a "European cultural space" is not always supported by adequate financial resources or by the existing forms of support. Furthermore the process of European Union enlargement is bringing new perspectives, actors and issues to the debate.

If the European dimension is increasingly becoming a natural arena for arts communities and their networks, the public and private national and supranational supporting institutions' policies need to develop a new framework able to cope with these ongoing developments.

An understanding of the new framework of international cultural cooperation and of its implications in terms of policies, tools and actors, a comprehensive evaluation of the experiences and practices developed in the past few years and of the key strategies set down for the near future are preconditions identified by the main public and private policy makers for defining appropriate and innovative strategies, action plans and methodologies.

The aim of "*Cultural Cooperation in Europe: What role for foundations*" is to provide private Foundations with a quantitative and qualitative analysis of support for cultural cooperation in Europe, to supply the inputs necessary for designing a framework/ environment for future action, and to offer an illustrative identification of current and possible future partners. In other words the investigation is an attempt to draw the structure of a new environment, a map of opportunities that could be part of a new cooperative model, and to help encourage best use of the available resources and strategies already committed by foundations.

Methodology and scope

The field of cultural cooperation is extremely complex, and rich in its nuances. If the concept and the definition of culture and cultural cooperation adopted are too broad, the risk is for them to become all-embracing. To avoid such a possibility and the alternative of selecting a priori an artificial reference framework, the choice adopted for this research was to take an empirical approach, in order cumulatively to map the boundaries and outline the key issues. The working process was carried out through a balanced mixture of interviews, round table discussions, questionnaires and desk research. Quantitative indicators have therefore to be viewed with caution and are used here only to underpin qualitative arguments.

In the context of this study, the term "foundation" is taken at face value, irrespective of widely different histories, legal frameworks, organizational structures, affiliations (or non-affiliation) and, importantly, funding patterns. The foundations included in the survey declare their support either for international cultural cooperation generally, or for arts and cultural organisations and programmes with international scope at national level. In addition programmes carried out by a sample of foundations supporting international cooperation in fields different from culture (e.g. core focus on civil society, education/ training, international development, scientific research) were also taken into account, with the aim of identifying examples of good practice and highlighting those programmes that nevertheless impact on culture.

A picture of the state-of-the art

The programmes offered in the European context cover a wide range of actions. In summary, artistic and cultural criteria play different roles and vary in meaning from one situation to another. Partners can be cultural operators, arts administrators, artists, citizens (in particular young people), policy makers, urban developers, scientists/ researchers/ academics. In all cases local links with grassroots organizations are sought and valued: the majority opinion is that these organisations are the ones most likely to be committed for the long-term. Within this context, the initiatives that stand out (with different impact levels and backgrounds) are those that encourage an approach

deriving from “democracy through culture” in its different aspects (e.g. society vs. culture, interculturalism, social equality, education for democracy, cultural policy). The research lists examples from a variety of sectors: mobility schemes, support for education and training processes, international think tanks, networks and networking, prize and awards. Specific chapters are reserved to the issues of integrated projects and multiculturalism/interculturalism: There is a whole range of programmes which tackle social and community issues using the arts and the media with varied emphases by linking artistic expression to social empowerment, social inclusion and urban regeneration.

Common to the official documentation and the work programmes is the search for excellence, and the effort to nurture innovation in all activities undertaken. High quality is declared and looked for through the implementation and/or support both of model projects and experimental approaches. According to official statements, foundations are willing to act as catalyst/ incubator of processes (intellectual and practical), which would possibly not otherwise come into being. The will to promote innovation is not linked to the size of the foundations. It appears that any foundation with the appropriate mentality and methodologies feels able to act effectively as an “agent of change”.

In terms of funded activities, foundations reveal an impressive energy and range of action. Exhibitions and publication and dissemination activities, alongside training initiatives are the most popular, while distribution and residencies seem to attract a much lower level of interest.

With regard to the main subsidized sectors within arts and culture, while all areas seem to be covered in one way or another, significant differences exist between performing arts and visual arts (followed at some distance by cultural heritage) and, e.g. community arts and new media.

Strategies range from short (one year only) to medium-term (four year maximum) duration. This allows for a constant updating and redefinition of programmes depending on urgent needs, strategies, short-term fluctuations and budgetary issues. This means also that the programmes implemented have to relate both to internal and external agendas and contingencies.

As a rule, most foundations do not have dedicated departments, administrative structure or budgets for international activities in general terms, let alone with regard to international cultural cooperation specifically. In many cases activities include an international focus that is carried out in a transversal way. In a few cases international issues are clearly the responsibility of the management or of the public relations department.

The task of internationalisation is often achieved through informal, non structural, almost “incidental” networking activities. Where defined programmes for international cooperation exist (when these are not a transversal task in broader initiatives), these are often implemented through bilateral agreements (involving foundations, governmental institutions and local organisations from a specific country or region). This approach can be linked to defined inherited historical factors such as an established colonial tradition, or a “cultural diplomacy” approach which acts as a driving force behind design strategies and implementation policies.

If cooperation practice is far from unusual for foundations, there is clearly a variety of obstacles that slow down the process of setting up new or stronger cooperation programmes. To a degree the same constraints are quoted as significant barriers to the construction of international partnerships. The main obstacles foundations cite over the implementation of international programmes are predominantly financial. Ranking in second position, are structural constraints, closely followed by historical/cultural and legal issues. In relation to the main difficulties/ barriers to working with other players at international level, again the primary obstacle is the availability of resources. Some distance behind follow programme and institutional differences.

Opportunities and challenges

A possible definition of cooperation

The majority of foundations state clearly that developing and/or strengthening a collaborative approach amongst foundations could be an appropriate means for enhancing support for international cultural cooperation and to act as catalysing force.

Examples of successful cooperation have a common feature, that is an approach based on knowledge, know-how and knowledge networks, and on the sharing of this intangible accumulation. This specific feature of the cooperative approach was confirmed in almost all the interviews, and was often rooted in the results of some experiences, and in the hope that some degree of coordination could reinforce and complement the respective initiatives, by leading to a stronger impact and to a reduction of the risk of fragmentation.

This understanding of cooperation does not include planning and programming within fixed schemes. If foundations are able to identify potential benefits arising from a knowledge-based cooperative approach, the risks deriving from the introduction of over- restrictive processes and paper-driven methods of cooperation are always looming in the background. Overigid planning is perceived by many interviewees as unnecessary, hampering cooperation and potentially interfering with the *raison d'être* and independence of individual foundations as well as limiting their visibility.

Thus the open attitude towards specific forms of collaboration emerges along with a certain degree of reluctance, giving rise to something that could be described as "collaboration under certain conditions".

The critical issues are the fragmentation of knowledge and experience, the impossibility of transferring know-how, and the risk of losing the accumulation of comparative experience. The risk of fragmentation is not in the implementation of similar programmes in different European regions; such duplication might even be welcomed, as it does not inevitably lead to overlapping and does not call for a joint planning.

Position of foundations in the international arena

The pressure on foundations is likely to continue increasing, as a consequence of the constraints in public resources earmarked for culture as well as of the impressive and rapid change in the patterns and structures that have formed the traditional framework of reference for international cultural cooperation.

Among the most relevant factors in this change it is worth pointing to the shift of priorities of most governments and their national institutions, the persistently negligible support for transnational cultural cooperation by the EU, the move back to a so-called "cultural diplomacy" approach, the emerging trend in supporting large flagship projects and the increasing competition coming from large public institutions looking for alternative sources of funding.

There is a real danger that the cultural sector as well as policy makers will more and more mislead themselves through wrongly regarding the role of foundations as merely a source of replacement funding against a background of declining public budgets at national and international level.

Such mistaken attitudes must be disputed in order to preserve the distinctive functions and intervention roles of foundations. Foundations need to resist a mere substitute/ adaptive role and should on the contrary work towards some form of "stability pact" with public institutions at all levels. Such agreements should be oriented towards long term processes, should avoid a focus on short term outcomes and should balance institutions' as well as foundations' goals, guidelines and working practices.

The foundations' function would then be that of advocates and promoters of long term developments, taking full advantage of the nature of foundations which makes them less subject to the complicated vagaries of political agendas and timescales and allows them to enjoy political, structural and operational independence.

Conclusions: Shaping a collaborative environment

If cooperation among foundations is knowledge-based and not necessarily rooted in particular joint-initiatives, then building / setting up a specific (ad hoc) environment seems to be an appropriate, effective and realistic way to encourage the development of shared experience and know-how. The needs emerging from this study (as well as from other research and studies carried

out during the last two years concerning the same theme of international cultural cooperation) seem to be better met by an open environment rather than by any formally constituted association.

In other words, what really seems to be important is to develop an issue-based milieu orientated towards collaborative processes rather than establishing a “club” addressed to a small circle of foundations eager to strengthen their working relationships, where the objectives and conditions for membership have been already strictly agreed in advance.

A milieu can nevertheless identify and host functions and services usually carried out by networks or associations but it differs from those kind of organisational structures.

This environment has to be primarily tailored to the needs of foundations of all kinds (grant making as well as operative) but needs to be accessible and attractive also to the foundations which are not already committed to the arts and culture or to internationally orientated activities.

Moreover it has to be a meeting point open to the variety of interested players in the field of international cultural cooperation (supranational institutions, networks, associations, umbrella organizations, arts organizations, artists, NGOs etc).

The form of such an environment could be that of a laboratory, where foundations and other players can enjoy different degrees of involvement and responsibility but which primarily concentrates on the internal needs of foundations. Within this context players who apply very different parameters but that are linked by closely-knit relations might interact productively comparing approaches and methodologies.

This environment should be also a place to discuss and identify trends, priorities, and challenges to be further debated and researched as well as the ideal platform to promote, develop and test pilot projects based on partnership and collaboration for those subjects who are willing to go beyond the mere sharing of experiences.

In a nutshell, a place mainly devoted to nurturing and supporting ground breaking processes and building conditions rather than focusing on planning policies or implementing programmes.

This approach is consistent with the current orientation of foundations and can differentiate their separate nature from that of the public authorities. However, this process of differentiation remains highly dependent on the history and funding patterns of the individual foundations and, moreover, the orientation of foundations tends to neglect cooperation with stakeholders other than foundations.

This approach might benefit boundary-breaking and cross-art form of experimental work, which is where a lot of the real energy and creativity is, but does not easily fits into the inflexible categorisation of traditional public policies as well as being disadvantaged by the mounting instrumentalisation of the “new” arts funding patterns that tend to fund the arts merely or primarily according to their social and economic impact.

All this does not call for a new organization but can be managed by a lean structure hosted within already existing organizations, nurtured by a process of strategic rethinking.

In order to build a setting consistent with this vision, some further requirements have to be taken into account while developing this environment:

- Respect for foundations’ individual features and nature: the environment must be able to meet and combine different backgrounds, missions, priorities, stakeholders’ visions;
- Reference to the needs of foundations ‘staff’;
- Use of available human and material resources within the foundations;
- Reference to cultural operators’ (end users, beneficiaries) needs;

Three possible key tasks within this environment suggest themselves:

- collection/storage of knowledge and of “antenna” experiences;
- dissemination and transfer channel;
- test bed for convergence models with institutions and for the promotion of an understanding of international cooperation as a multi-local system, where the connection between territories follows a local-to-local development scheme.

More in detail, foundations have developed internal knowledge and skills, and have built transversal "task forces" made by of experts and local players, a strong mixture of training, on-the-job experience, and cross-over skills.

Such staff can be regarded as important "exploratory antennae", able to provide a better understanding of the needs of specific communities of interest. They therefore represent an important asset for the international community. This vital function should be enhanced, firstly to gain valuable information concerning operational contexts, needs and trends in society /territories, and secondly to act as driving force in building a strong collaborative environment. Clearly these actions require coordination, information, systematic attitudes, and a well-planned learning process addressed to professional staff development. Any such training opportunity should be based on a learning partnership that again takes into account - through active participation - the triangular relationship between foundation staff, foundations' *raison d'être* and beneficiaries' needs.

The concepts of dissemination and transferability of experiences/ practices/ models/ methodologies are closely related to the function of incubator/ innovator: in this perspective innovation can lose its absolute meaning in favour of a relative and often geographically-orientated sense.

Embracing these and other challenges as a basis for open debate and a possible field of action will undoubtedly help strengthen the profile of foundations far beyond the mere international cultural cooperation arena.