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With the participation of:



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Executive Summary

This study was carried out to gain a better understanding of the role of philanthropic organizations (private or corporate foundations) in migration and asylum issues within Europe. The main findings are as follows:

The 2015 “crisis” accelerated and/or intensified the involvement of foundations (in particular those from the private sector) in the field of migration. The crisis not only created a sense of urgency, but also generated a movement of public empathy that foundations were willing to accompany and amplify. It was also seen as a challenge to Europe and its humanist values, which foundations sought to defend in accordance with their own beliefs in inclusive societies.

Foundations pursue a broad range of strategic objectives, ranging from having a meaningful impact for the target groups to supporting civil society, influencing policymaking and creating a positive narrative on controversial matters.

Foundations use a variety of grant-making approaches, often in combination, thereby demonstrating their flexibility and sense of innovation. They also support a range of actors, but with a strong preference for domestic and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Nevertheless, despite a growing emphasis on refugee representation and participation, hardly any direct support is yet provided to migrant/refugee-led organizations. Likewise, the hiring of staff with migrant/refugee backgrounds is rare.

The choice of partners reflects geographic priorities and the goal to have a meaningful impact “closer to home” and at the local level. Foundations focus their funding efforts on reception and integration conditions in Europe – in particular, within their own host/home country – rather than seeking to address movements of migrants and refugees and dynamics in their entirety. While the European Program on Integration and Migration (EPIM) has been playing a pioneering role in nurturing a European dimension to philanthropic action on migration, there is little appetite to, or attempt at, expanding legal migration pathways or addressing the causes of migration in countries of origin or countries of first asylum.

Foundations provide an essential source of funding for NGOs, either as their main source of income or as a complement to European Union (EU) funding (which is difficult to access for many). Through their grantees, and assuming the latter are effective, foundations have

a high collective impact, whether on the ground or on the policy/legal framework.

Despite engaging in activities such as supporting civil society organizations (CSOs) with an advocacy agenda, seeking to influence public policies, trying to change anti-migrant narratives, and/or defending a set of values and principles, foundations are generally reluctant to admit to inherently playing a political role. This appears to stem from the concern of exposing themselves to attacks and criticism from populist forces whose agenda stand right at the opposite of theirs. As a result, foundations refrain from engaging in direct advocacy, a position that is met with appreciation by their grantee partners.

For the years to come, foundations intend to continue investing in the field of migration, despite the relative loss of media interest and the endogenous and exogenous limitations that they face. While this continuous involvement is remarkable, the study has identified directions that the philanthropic sector may explore further to become a true game-changer in this field. Specifically:

- The externalization of EU migration policies raises the question whether European foundations should include this dimension in their own funding activities.
- Much remains to be done in terms of supporting emerging Migrants and Refugees Led Organizations (M/RLOs) and empowering primary stakeholders.
- Winning the communications battle on migration might require foundations to reconsider their aversion to risk and exposure.
- While grant-making approaches have evolved over time, as enablers, foundations should make it as easy as possible for grantees to reach shared objectives without compromising accountability.
- Despite successful initiatives such as European Program for Integration and Migration (EPIM), there is room to further Europeanize the work of foundations in the field of asylum and migration.

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Introduction

It is now widely admitted that philanthropic organizations have emerged as a relevant actor not only at the national but also international level.¹ Although the amount of private wealth redistributed for the public good remains modest in comparison with official development aid (5% according to an Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] study of 2018)², it is believed that philanthropic organizations have the potential to significantly influence global politics. That influence is exerted in at least three different ways.³ First, by investing money on a given issue, foundations have the capacity to draw attention to it and therefore shape the agenda of international affairs. Second, foundations play a role in experimenting and serving as a catalyst for new ideas and innovative solutions. Third, financial power enables foundations to serve as conference-organizers, bridge-builders and alliance-makers, thereby exerting a discreet but essential brokering role. Foundations enjoy both unique independence in selecting topics of interest to them, and the irresistible power of attraction fueled by their wealth. The drawback of this privileged position, however, is that foundations have often been criticized for exerting undue influence without holding a legitimate mandate from voters and for not being held accountable for their actions.

Arguably, this emergence of philanthropy in international relations was spearheaded by US foundations (the Carnegie and Rockefeller foundations during first half of the 20th century, the Ford Foundation during the Cold War), which continue to lead the way today – suffice is to refer to the role of Open Society Foundations (OSF) in the transition of Central and Eastern Europe or that of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation on global health issues.⁴ There are several reasons why philanthropy is more developed in the United States than in Europe, among those being that many wealthy American citizens consider it a civic responsibility to give to charity; the role of European governments in actively providing social welfare

1. See *inter alia*, C. Sellen, “Philanthropes sans frontières”, *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 85, No. 4/2020 and J. Youde. “The Role of Philanthropy in International Relations”, *Review of International Studies*, 2019.

2. See “Private Philanthropy Funding for Development Modest Compared to Public Aid, But Its Potential Impact Is High, Says OECD”, OECD, March 23, 2018, available at: www.oecd.org.

3. See T. Paulsen, *International Politics Beyond States*, Paris Peace Forum, September 2018.

4. On US foundations and the role of the Ford Foundation in promoting liberal international order specifically, see D. Walker, “Old Money, New Order: American Philanthropies and the Defence of Liberal Democracies”, *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2018.

programs; as well as greater tax incentives to encourage large charitable giving in the United States.⁵

However, philanthropy is no longer an American monopoly. In 2016, data compiled by the Donors and Foundations Networks in Europe (DAFNE) revealed that more than 147,000 registered “public benefit foundations” existed in Europe, with combined expenditures of nearly €60 billion annually, covering a wide span of societal issues at the local, regional, national, European, and international levels.⁶

While the role of philanthropic organizations in international affairs is not new, the study is focussed on the involvement of European foundations in the specific field of migration and asylum issues in Europe. Such issues are inherently transnational and considering their growing salience at the European level over the past years, it is imperative to analyze how European foundations have adjusted to this new challenge.

The objectives of the study were neither to conduct an exhaustive mapping, nor to carry out a financial audit of the money flows, but merely to better understand how European foundations address migration and asylum issues. Specifically:

- when foundations got involved in this field and why (what do they seek to achieve);
- how they operate and where (what sort of grant-making approach they favor, what sort of entities they seek to partner with and which geographic areas they focus on);
- how to evaluate their contributions (at which level and in what way);
- whether they play an advocacy or political role (how they position themselves in the public debate);
- looking forward – what to expect from foundations in the future (whether their involvement is meant to last further and increase, and if so, whether their strategic priorities may evolve).

Ultimately, the study seeks to determine whether the philanthropic sector has become an actor to be reckoned with when it comes to migration and asylum issues affecting Europe.

5. See “Who Gives More – The USA or The UK?”, Foundation Guide, June 6, 2018, available at: <https://foundationguide.org>.

6. L. T. McGill, *Number of Registered Public Benefit Foundations in Europe Exceeds 147,000*, Foundation Center, October 1, 2016.

Methodology

The study is based in part on a review of existing literature on the role of philanthropic organizations in international affairs (bearing in mind, hardly any study appears to have focused on the specific subject of this research) and more importantly, on the results of a questionnaire submitted to selected foundations.

In November-December 2020, a survey of 24 questions was developed and submitted to 23 foundations. 15 foundations ultimately participated in the study either by replying to the questionnaire (12) or by sharing their views orally via phone call (3).⁷ The majority of respondents were private or family-led foundations (9). The sample also included corporate foundations (5). Additionally, the few foundations which indicated support for migrant and/or refugee-led organizations and/or hiring staff with migrant/refugee backgrounds were invited to further elaborate on these two points.

Participating foundations were based in a number of European countries, namely Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. The sample was therefore European in nature.

Further, a (virtual) meeting was held under the aegis of Ifri on March 16, 2021, with a view to sharing preliminary findings with participating foundations, and collecting feedback and further insights.

Lastly, in order to obtain the perspectives of grantees, three coalitions/platforms of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were invited to share their views on

- how important foundations are for their activities;
- whether the current modus operandi of foundations suit their needs;
- how they assess the impact of foundations' involvement;
- whether foundations play a political role and/or should engage in advocacy;
- and what their future strategic priorities should be (put differently, whether some areas relating to migration lack funding).

The responses received have been incorporated in this study.

7. The full list of foundations which responded to the survey is available in annex.

When and Why European Foundations Got Involved in Migration Issues

The responses to the survey confirmed the hypothesis that the so-called 2015 “refugee crisis” accelerated or intensified the involvement of foundations (in particular corporate foundations) in the field of migration. While five foundations had already started funding migration-related projects or organizations between 2005 and 2015 – notably those participating in the European Program on Integration and Migration (EPIM) – half of the respondents commenced their involvement in 2015 or later. Only two foundations, both from Portugal, a country of emigration and therefore, according to them, historically sensitive to these matters, were active in this field prior to 2005.

Triggers of Involvement

Some of the respondents explicitly acknowledged the impact of the large arrival of migrants and refugees in Europe in 2015 on their funding decisions. The reasons are numerous:

- *First*, the crisis generated a sense of urgency, epitomized by the death of Alan Kurdi. This triggered the wish to launch emergency initiatives as humanitarian actors alerted to, and requested additional resources to cope with complex situations and respond to the basic needs of migrants.
- *Second*, the sudden arrival of one million refugees/migrants was met with great public outcry and induced ordinary citizens to mobilize. Some foundations were willing to support public empathy and the sense of solidarity shown by their co-nationals.
- *Third*, the crisis was seen as a challenge to Europe’s humanist values, particularly if it was to be exploited by xenophobic forces. In some way, foundations got involved as much to support migrants as to help Europe address that risk, thereby defending a certain vision of the EU and its values.
- *Fourth*, the migration challenge aligned with some foundations’ long-standing focus on inclusion, social and racial justice, and the reduction of inequalities more generally. The migration crisis therefore provided a new impetus, and offered a new field of

application for existing priorities, such as reducing health inequalities, prohibiting arbitrary detention and other kinds of abuses and discriminatory practices, and fostering human dignity and more inclusive societies. In that sense, a greater involvement in migration issues was seen as a “natural move”.

- *Fifth*, for at least one foundation from the private sector, the crisis was not only a challenge but also an opportunity – newcomers were not only seen as victims – their skills, passion and resilience could benefit the host countries, provided that these individuals received adequate and timely support. It was thought that the newcomers could stimulate economic growth and services, rather than draining it.

Strategic Priorities

The strategic objectives that foundations set for themselves are in line with the broad range of motivations described above. It goes from having a meaningful impact for the target groups to supporting civil society, influencing policymaking, and creating a positive narrative on controversial matters. More specifically, foundations aim at:

- Ensuring humane and dignified treatment of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants (at every stage of the process) through providing access to, and protection of, fundamental rights.
- Providing assistance to migrants, such as psychological support, access to health, social and professional integration (including through education) and a reduction of rights abuses.
- Supporting civil society organizations in the field of migration as well as the involvement of citizens/volunteers in welcoming and integrating newcomers.
- Helping shape migration policy, governance and practice, including through innovative approaches and projects, and by seeking better harmonization of policies at different levels (European, national, local).

Promoting a more positive and constructive narrative on migration based on values and evidence, which as a consequence, would lead to raising awareness, countering hostile opinions and promoting mutual understanding.

How European Foundations Operate

Grant-making Approaches

Among others, the purpose of foundations is to provide grants for projects or organizations. In doing so, foundations use a variety of approaches, often in combination, thereby demonstrating they are flexible and innovative vehicles. Calls for proposals are common but not the only or preferred grant-making approach. Foundations may also actively search for partners, welcome spontaneous proposals and contribute to a pooled fund.



Likewise, foundations work with a variety of actors. According to the responses received, foundations primarily support domestic NGOs, followed by Migrant/Refugee-led Organizations (M/RLOs) and international NGOs. Only three foundations mentioned supporting international organizations or UN agencies in addition to other types of partners. This suggests a preference for action taken at the local level, which is expected to have a more direct, meaningful and immediate impact.



Migrant and Refugee Representation

With respect to M/RLOs, however, additional information provided by seven foundations demonstrate that actual and direct support to these types of organizations is still nascent and very limited. While there is a clear wish to place greater emphasis on migrant/refugee participation in service delivery, community organizing and policy advocacy, at this stage, few M/RLOs are directly funded (besides small case community projects) and aside from one limited exception, foundations do not provide core funding to migrant/refugee-led organizations. Foundations, including EPIM, recognize the importance of “lived experience” and hearing the voice of the most impacted,⁸ but are still looking for the best ways to enhance migrant participation.⁹

Similarly, foundations support stronger migrant representation in paid staff, including within their own structure, but this has yet to materialize. From additional responses received from five foundations claiming to have hired staff with a migrant or refugee background, it appears that the proportion is very low (5% on average) and the people concerned are long-term immigrants as opposed to persons who arrived in Europe in the past five years

There is, however, a growing willingness to increase diversity of staff. HR departments are being sensitized accordingly. At least one foundation has adopted a diversity action plan for 2016-2021, with the objective of selecting 30% of candidates with a migrant background.

Funding Requirements

Lastly, it should be noted that besides similarities in the choice of partners, the modes of interactions of foundations with NGOs tend to vary. Key factors from the perspective of grantees are:

- the application and reporting requirements;
- whether a foundation would provide core funding or only project-based funding;
- and the duration of the grants (short-term or multi-year).

8. See EPIM recommendations to funders on closing the representation gap for people with lived migration experience in the migration sector adopted in April 2021. Available at: www.epim.info.

9. On this note, see E. Ponzoni, H. Ghorashi and M. Badran, *Towards a Structural Place for Refugee Perspectives in Policymaking* (English Summary), Institute for Social Resilience & Refugee Academy, November 2020. See also the Academy for Refugee Participation in France, a joint initiative by the Ministerial Delegation for Reception and Integration of Refugees (DIAIR), IFRI and UNHCR France. More information (in French) available at: <https://accueil-integration-refugies.fr>.

For NGOs, a suitable *modus operandi* is where a foundation provides multi-year core funding with limited (or efficient) reporting obligations. However, this is not often the case. While a few foundations operate along these lines, others may impose overwhelming bureaucratic requirements, including for small grants. Additionally, when core funding is provided, it appears to often come with limitations or directions whereas NGOs would want foundations to support their activities rather than having to adjust their plans to the donor's wishes.

Many funders have nonetheless relaxed their funding requirements as a result of the pandemic, and there is some evidence to suggest that the loosening of conditions for grant-making and the easing of restrictions on funds will continue in the future. Likewise, according to an inquiry conducted by Ariadne, more European funders are planning to prioritize core, unrestricted support for organizations in 2021 and beyond, and to provide longer-term support to help grantees develop long-term strategies and new networks to build capacity.¹⁰

10. Ariadne is a European peer-to-peer network of almost 700 individuals from 146 grant-organizations in 21 countries which support social change and human rights. See the *2021 Ariadne Forecast*, p. 10.

Where European Foundations Operate

Geographical Scope of Activities

The foundations' overall preference for local and national partners appears to derive from, and therefore reflect, the geographic focus of activities. Indeed, most of the respondents focus their activities within their home country (8) and otherwise across the EU (7). Only five foundations claim to also be active at Europe's external borders and/or beyond.¹¹



It would therefore seem that foundations tend to focus their funding efforts on reception and integration conditions in Europe – in particular, within their own host/home country – rather than seeking to address movements of migrants and refugees and dynamics in their entirety. At the time of this study, there was for instance, little attempt at expanding legal migration pathways to reduce irregular migration flows (and the human tragedies that result), addressing the causes of migration in countries of origin or, in the case of secondary movements, in countries of first asylum and therefore funding civil society organizations (CSOs) supporting migrants and refugees there.

There could be several explanations for this prioritization of the domestic and European situation:

11. The projects funded by these foundations are not necessarily related to migration issues, however. Still, it is worth mentioning by way of examples, the Robert Bosch Stiftung's [support](#) to cross-sectoral and interregional dialogue between Europe, Africa and the Middle East as well as the Fondation de France's [program](#) to develop constructive exchanges between civil societies on either side of the Mediterranean area.

- *First*, foundations may feel a duty to be useful to society in their home country, perhaps also expecting that their activities will be less subject to criticism if their wealth is reinjected at the national level.
- *Second*, foundations are driven by the search for meaningful impact which is thought easier to achieve “closer to home” than in remote and foreign countries, and was seen to be more urgent in the 2015-2016 emergency context.
- *Third*, in addition to feasibility concerns, foundations may be reluctant to be viewed as facilitating migration to Europe, such as by opening legal routes across the Mediterranean Sea or by supporting development projects which, in the short to medium term, are more likely to increase rather than reduce emigration from low-income countries.¹²

For all these reasons, foundations appear to find it more appropriate to operate at the national, or at best, European level.

The European Dimension

To some extent, European foundations seek to coordinate their grant-making activities at the European level, particularly within the framework of the Network of European Foundations (NEF). The NEF is a 40-year-old Brussels-based association that enables European foundations to work strategically on collaborative projects.¹³ It supports projects in several fields, including social inclusion, democracy and international development, both in Europe and the rest of the world. It is the only vehicle in Europe dedicated to the fostering of operational partnerships among foundations and other philanthropic actors. As of 2021, NEF comprises of 10 foundations members and hosts 7 pooled funds, including the European Program for Integration and Migration (EPIM).

Created in 2005 and still in existence today, EPIM has played a pioneering role in nurturing a European dimension to philanthropic action on migration. Its founders (all members of the Network of European Foundations) felt that foundations had to start collaborating at the European level because while migration policy was becoming an EU competency, funding for CSOs remained national. It was believed that pooling resources would have a greater

12. In this vein, Alexander Berger draws a distinction between “domestic funders” whose focus is on newcomers (not migrants who have not arrived) and “development funders” who tend to see migration as a failure in sending countries and wrongly expect development will solve the problem. See A. Berger, “What Role for Philanthropy in Opening Up Migration?”, *Alliance Magazine*, March 2016.

13. See *NEF Overview – Fiscal Sponsorship and Due Diligence*.

impact on migration and integration locally, nationally and in Europe.¹⁴

Since then, EPIM has been supporting and strengthening CSOs working on issues of migration and integration at the European level with a view to upholding the European commitment to universal human rights, social justice and the dignity of all people in the European Union; promoting gender-sensitive, inclusive and pragmatic approaches to European and national policies on migration and integration; and influencing EU policies and their national implementation in areas defined in EPIM's sub-funds.

EPIM connects actors in two ways: horizontally, by linking organizations from different countries and contexts, allowing them to increase their expertise, knowledge and network, and vertically, by encouraging grassroots and European organizations to work together and bringing local expertise to Brussels policymakers. Although the amount of grants distributed annually is relatively modest (approx. €3M),¹⁵ EPIM offers a unique platform to nurture initiatives at the European level, including cross-European projects, and to address the critical nexus between EU and national level policy-making.

The program presents other advantages to the member foundations themselves:¹⁶

- *First*, it serves as a platform for information and knowledge exchange, enabling foundations to learn from the experiences of their peers in neighboring countries and anticipate future developments in their own. This is compounded by the fact that EPIM's membership is diverse and broad, ranging from newly-established family foundations to century-old trusts, to regional or national banking foundations, to corporate foundations.
- *Second*, by pooling funds together, the program encourages its members to fund activities they would not have otherwise necessarily supported, while raising the prospect of having a greater collective impact.
- *Third*, EPIM is appreciated for the flexibility of its structure: all members are involved in the overall governance and strategy, and considered on equal footing irrespective of the size of their contribution; at the same time, each one is free to earmark its funding, in particular by selecting any of the thematic "sub-fund"

14. See Network of European Foundations, *Pooling Funds, Pooling Strengths. A Case Study of the European Program for Integration and Migration*, November 2017. This section draws in part from this study.

15. As a comparison, the European Commission distributed 52,9 million Euros in 2020 in the framework of the Union Actions of the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF).

16. Of note, most of the respondents to the survey are also members of EPIM.

it wishes to contribute to.¹⁷

- ▀ *Fourth*, and perhaps, most interestingly, EPIM provides a protective umbrella under which foundations describe themselves as braver, and therefore find it easier to take risks. This would apply to for example, funding a pilot initiative, supporting small-case emerging organizations, but also engaging in potentially controversial grant-making (it ought to be noted that some EPIM recipients have a strong advocacy agenda and/or document migration management malpractices which might backfire on their funders).

Since the purpose of the program is to support civil society organizations working on migration issues across Europe and help them contribute to European policymaking, EPIM does not pursue a global approach, nor does it seek to address the questions as to why and how refugees and migrants get to Europe. However, to some extent, and as the result of the developments in EU migration policies, EPIM gets to support projects related to the externalization of EU migration management and/or situations at the external borders of the European Union, but this remains the exception to the rule. In sum, EPIM has undoubtedly contributed to the emergence of a European philanthropic sector in the field of migration but its approach remains largely Eurocentric.

The focus on national and European territories questions whether foundations' priorities are still in line with European migration and asylum policies which are increasingly being implemented outside the EU. The so-called "external dimension" of EU asylum and immigration policies is not new and dates back to the early 2000s, when proposals from British and German governments to outsource asylum procedures in third countries were made. The partnership approach with third countries on migration matters had poor outcomes due to the lack of interest of the latter to cooperate with EU authorities on return policies. However, the external dimension reached another level in 2015-2016. Indeed, European governments' failure to agree on a common European asylum system (CEAS) and particularly on European solidarity, was an incentive to shift the management – in other words the control – of irregular movements outside the European territory. The so-called "EU-Turkey deal" adopted in March 2016 and the EU-Africa Summit in Valetta in

17. The six sub-funds cover the following issues: 1) Asylum in Europe, 2) Building inclusive European societies, 3) Children and Youth on the Move, 4) Communicating on Migration, 5) EU Mobile Citizens' Access to Right, and 6) Migration and Detention.

November 2015 were signs that, from then on, the core of EU policies on migration and asylum would not take place within the EU itself.¹⁸

To what extent European foundations' priorities are shifting along the externalization of migration management? The debate on legal pathways underlines that the situation in countries of origin and/or departure, and the situation in Europe are intertwined. What is happening in third countries can hamper domestic strategies for open and welcoming communities in Europe if migrants and refugees are not able to reach European shores. In this context, European foundations might have a role to play in improving the livelihood of refugees who may subsequently be admitted in Europe through resettlement schemes or complementary pathways such as family reunification and community sponsorship.

To conclude, the Europeanisation of migration policies in the early 2000s was addressed by a reflection on how to have a more significant impact at the EU level through collaborative efforts like EPIM. The externalization of EU migration policies – which may be reinforced through stricter border policies in a post-pandemic world – might be the next mile to reach if European foundations wish to continue to play a meaningful role in migration issues.

18. See M. Tardis, « EU Partnerships with African Countries on Migration: A Common Issue with Conflicting Interests », *Les Notes de l'Ifri*, March 2018, available at: www.ifri.org.

How to Evaluate the Contributions of European Foundations

It is not possible within the scope of this study to carry out any thorough assessment of the impact(s) foundations have, individually and collectively, on migration issues and actors. The responses received from the NGO sector and foundations themselves nonetheless provide some relevant indications. Despite the limited information received on evaluation methods, it does appear that foundations have significant impact, both direct (on the NGO sector) and indirect (through their grantees).

Direct and Indirect Impact

First, the search for impact is a shared objective of both grant-makers and grantees and one that is being given prominence over anything else. According to NGOs, foundations are increasingly interested in knowing about the impact of their grants, rather than the mere use of their financial contributions, and request their grantees to report accordingly.

Second, according to NGO respondents, foundations play an “essential” role in the field of migration and keep the NGO sector alive. This is partly due to the fact that access to EU funding is complicated and cumbersome, and rarely sufficient *per se*:

- For a number of NGOs which do not have the capacity to either abide by EU application rules, reporting requirements, or to manage the funds, resorting to foundations provide a suitable alternative.
- Additionally, most EU funding goes through Member States, which then decide whether and which NGOs should receive a portion of it.
- Lastly, EU funding rarely covers 100% of a given project but instead often requires co-funding with other donors, a situation which could lead to insolvency if no additional donor is found to fill the gap.
- Foundations therefore provide an essential source of funding for NGOs, either as their main source of income or as a complement to EU funding.

Third, except for hybrid foundations which both give grants and run programs (such as OSF), the impact of foundations is *vicarious* – it occurs through their grantees. Nonetheless, it is believed that foundations have a “huge collective impact” since many NGOs in the migration and asylum sector are dependent on them. Therefore, assuming that NGOs are effective in executing their mandate, foundations can have a high impact, whether on the ground (better reception conditions and access to basic services for migrants, including health care; professional integration; support to the creation of start-ups, etc.), or on the policy-legal framework (monitoring of asylum procedures, support to innovative projects serving as test case for policy changes such as alternatives to detention, city-to-city dialogues, etc.). That some governments take action against NGOs in return, appears to demonstrate that they are seen as relevant and effective actors.

Do Foundations Play a Political Role?

Considering the wide scope of their interventions, the essential role they play for civil society organizations, and their underlying ambition to influence policymaking at the local and European levels, it seems fair to pose the question of whether foundations play a political role in national and European society. Interestingly however, this line of query raised some discomfort. In response, most foundations insisted on being independent, non-partisan, unaffiliated and emphasized their perceived lack of legitimacy in playing any political role. They defined themselves as civil society actors and mere “enablers”.

In practice, however, foundations do engage in activities bearing a political dimension, such as:

- Selecting and supporting CSOs with an advocacy agenda,
- Seeking to counter the (anti-migrant) narrative,
- Seeking to influence public policies and contribute to the peaceful transformation of societies,
- Holding and promoting certain values (European commitment to human rights, universalism, and inclusive societies),
- Carrying out and otherwise funding policy research to inform the migration debate.

In this context, foundations may not be defined as political actors in the narrow sense of engaging in partisan politics, but their role and activities can be seen as inherently political in the noble sense of playing an active part in society. Yet, it is only when confronted with the reality of their own work that foundations would admit that their role is not as neutral as they initially described. This reluctance can be

explained in two ways. On a general level, private foundations are keenly aware of recurrent questions about the legitimacy and accountability of philanthropic actors. With respect to migration issues specifically, foundations appear even more concerned about exposing themselves to attacks and criticisms from populist political forces, whose agenda stands at the opposite of theirs. In other words, foundations are engaged in a political fight by proxy against far-right parties, but do not want it to be said or acknowledged publicly.

Concerned about getting embroiled in political controversy, foundations are generally reluctant to engage in direct advocacy (those who do so would primarily limit their role to their immediate area of operations) and would leave that work to the civil society organizations they support. This division of labor actually appears to be consensual.

From the perspective of NGOs, foundations play at a minimum, an indirect political role. Supporting “political” NGOs is in itself a political choice, as is the decision to take a stance against the mainstream opinion/general policy. Still, NGOs are adamant that foundations should *not* engage in direct advocacy, claiming this would create conflicts of interest, competition with grantees (for instance, with respect to access to policymakers), miscoordination of messages, etc. At least one respondent also noted that some foundations may seek to interfere and influence NGO advocacy, without necessarily having the tools of expertise to do so. Only in the case where a grant-making organization also runs its own programs, would it appear legitimate for that foundation to engage in advocacy. Nevertheless, the experience of the OSF in Hungary – OSF had to move out of Budapest their international operations and staff in the face of the Hungarian government’s hostility – constitutes a counterexample to many foundations and NGOs alike.

While not assuming fully the role they play, foundations are naturally aware of how polarized the migration debate is and reportedly ready to justify their involvement if needed – by placing the emphasis on the vulnerability of people. Their reluctance to engage in direct advocacy is part and parcel of a risk mitigation strategy and is met with appreciation by their partner grantees. According to NGOs, leaving advocacy to grantees may not be sufficient to protect foundations from criticisms, but foundations are aware and undertake their own risk assessment. The question remains, however, whether the attitude of denial concerning the nature of their role is sustainable and/or counterproductive over the long run.

What to Expect from European Foundations in the Future

In the years to come, it can be expected that foundations will continue investing in the field of migration. In general, foundations devote only a portion of their resources to migration issues. The majority of the survey respondents indicated allocating less than 10% of their yearly grants (7 foundations) or less than 30% (3 foundations). Only one foundation spends more than 50% of its budget to these issues. However, this percentage has increased over the past years or otherwise remained stable (it has decreased for none). Further, without exception, all participating foundations intend to continue supporting migration-related initiatives in the future.

Share of Yearly Grants Devoted to Migration Issues



Future Involvement and Activities

No major strategic shift is planned in the coming years, but some programmatic adjustment could occur, depending on each foundation's area of specialization. For instance, some foundations may put greater emphasis on access to employment (in addition to entrepreneurship); mental health and psychosocial support; migrant-led initiatives; and/or private sponsorship. Programs may also take into account contextual developments such as Brexit and the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Of note, only one foundation is considering enhancing Euro-African cooperation through a dedicated program.

On their side, and bearing in mind the limited scope of the survey, NGO respondents identified slightly different funding needs,¹⁹ such as:

- Responding to backlash against NGOs which have lost funding as a result of government policy;
- Supporting emerging NGOs (including M/RLOs) with core flexible small grants;
- Keeping focus on various kinds of discriminations against migrants, and on the specific situations of unaccompanied minors turning 18;
- On the policy level, paying greater attention to the challenges related to the use of artificial intelligence, digital rights and data protection in migration management practices (with reference notably to the EU's interoperability framework).

Constraints and Limitations

The needs are therefore never-ending and the continuous involvement of philanthropic organizations on the side of migrants and refugees despite the loss of media interest, should be considered good news. However, a sobering note is necessary in order to conclude: to their own admission, foundations face limitations in what they can achieve, which can be broadly classified in two categories.

- Endogenous limitations to the philanthropic sector (which may not, however, affect all foundations the same way) include:
 - Lack of an active ecosystem: most actors work in silos – efforts at finding synergies and setting up collaborative funding initiatives are scarce. It is important to note, however, that this comment came from one foundation which is involved in a “niche” (support to refugee entrepreneurship) and that is not a member of EPIM, the only existing European pooled fund relating to migration.
 - Lack of financial resources: as noted, migration is by far not the only priority of foundations; no foundation has made it its exclusive field of action.
 - In some cases, reluctance of staff to engage on this topic at least initially (this seems to have mostly affected corporate foundations which had to persuade and mobilize their staff when getting involved in the context of the 2015 crisis).

19. These priorities are nonetheless partly reflected in EPIM's Strategy Recommendations for the Years Ahead (4 January 2021), available at: <https://epim.info>.

- Lack of access of NGOs to decision-making processes, and lack of involvement (and funding) of younger, smaller and migrant-led NGOs: foundations acknowledge the need for greater migrant representation and participation, but have yet to find ways to make it happen.
- Exogenous limitations derive from the broader environment and refer to:
- Structural limitations: migration policy remains state-driven; hence, foundations may have a limited influence on the system of migration governance.
 - Tensions between EU member states, in particular between Western and Central/Eastern European countries but also between frontline States in the South and countries of ultimate destination in the North (such tensions affect typically the reform of European asylum policy).
 - Political environment: several foundations acknowledge that the rise of populism, political polarization and the toxicity of the debate on migration calls into question the European project and its very foundations, thereby creating a challenging environment to operate in.
 - Difficulty in changing perceptions and the “narrative”: evidence-based advocacy and appeals for respect for human rights values seem to have less traction in a context of misinformation and discriminatory discourses; hence, the need to rethink strategic communication, through value-based messaging and more effective public engagement.

Conclusion

In the past 5 to 10 years, private and corporate foundations have played an increasingly important role in migration and asylum issues affecting Europe, and one that is unlikely to taper off. As this study shows, the philanthropic sector is highly dynamic, keen to learn, exchange, develop and innovate. Its contributions are multifaceted (combining operational and policy-oriented initiatives) and multidimensional (occurring at the local, national and European levels). Foundations play a vital role for NGOs to which they provide the principal or complementary source of income, and through which they achieve a high collective impact. Foundations further seem to have found the right balance between making strong policy choices on the one hand, and refraining from engaging in direct advocacy on the other. Their reluctance to assume the political role – in the noble sense of the term – that they play is somewhat puzzling.

While the continuous involvement of the philanthropic sector is remarkable, this study has also identified directions to explore further for it to truly become a game changer:

- *First*, European foundations remain largely centered on Europe and their own domestic area. The focus is on newcomers once arrived; hence, there is hardly any attempt at addressing migration dynamics and irregular arrivals of refugees and migrants to Europe while the externalization of EU migration and asylum policies is a growing trend. It would seem sensible to adopt a more holistic approach with a view not to reducing migration, but to increase legal pathways and creating win-win solutions for countries of origin and countries of destination
- *Second*, growing attention is being given to refugee representation and participation, including in staffing matters within foundations and NGOs alike, but much remains to be done in terms of supporting emerging M/RLOs and empowering primary stakeholders.
- *Third*, the communications battle on migration has yet to be won. Foundations acknowledge that the migration debate remains “toxic”, and as a result they operate in a challenging environment. This might require reconsidering their own aversion to risk and exposure.

- *Fourth*, grant-making approaches have evolved over time with greater emphasis being placed on multi-year grants, core funding, lighter application and reporting requirements and impact assessment. Practices however vary significantly from one foundation to the other, and bureaucratic practices remain common. As enablers, foundations should make it as easy as possible for grantees to reach shared objectives without compromising accountability.
- *Fifth*, despite successful initiatives such as EPIM, there is room to further Europeanize the work of foundations in the field of asylum and migration, whether in terms of pooling resources, increasing collaboration between private and corporate foundations, learning from and exchanging with one's neighbors, developing cross-European initiatives and forcefully defending European values, rights and principles.

List of Foundations Consulted

Foundation	Country	Response to Survey	Roundtable participation
Adessium Foundation	Netherlands	yes	yes
Aga Khan Foundation Portugal	Portugal	yes	yes
Barrow Cadbury Trust	United Kingdom	yes	no
Bertelsmann Foundation	Germany	no	yes
Calouste Gulbenkian	Portugal	yes (call)	yes
Compagnia di San Paolo	Italy	yes (call)	yes
EPIM	Europe	yes (call)	yes
Fondation BNP-Paribas	France	yes	no
Fondation de France	France	yes	yes
Fondation Léopold Mayer	Switzerland	yes	yes
Fondation Sanofi-Esprit	France	yes	yes
TotalEnergies Foundation	France	yes	yes
Generali – Human Safety Net	Italy	yes	no
King Baudoin Foundation	Belgium	yes	yes
OAK Foundation	United Kingdom	yes	yes
Open Society Foundations	United States	no	yes
Porticus Foundation	Netherlands	no	yes
Robert Bosch Stiftung	Germany	yes	yes

