

TURNING 40: EMBRACING 4 DECADES OF PHILANTHROPIC COLLABORATION

By



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Most people know when they are about to turn 40. Some decide to draw the curtains and hide away, while others opt to party into middle age. Few, however, forget their 40th birthday. NEF, the Network of European Foundations, is the exception. Having failed to keep track of its ageing process, the organisation only woke up to its slide into middle age when one member of staff was doing a bit of administrative work that led her to delve into the archives.

This is doubtless a good sign about the health of NEF. Had the association felt its knees twitching and noticed the bags under its eyes getting deeper, it would have likely booked itself in for a check-up and been reminded of its advancing years. Instead, the organisation has managed to subscribe to author Aldous Huxley's "secret of genius," succeeding in carrying "the spirit of the child into old age" and, to paraphrase slightly, "never losing its enthusiasm". NEF therefore remains in the peak of health with a youthful spring in its step and, until recently, oblivious to its upcoming birthday. True to the nature of the organisation, NEF decided to welcome 40 with open arms, take stock and get ready for the next part of the adventure.

Small, compact and flexible

Political change may be afoot around the world, but NEF, described by founder Raymond Georis as a "small, compact and flexible structure," is both no stranger to adapting to shifting political and cultural environments, and sticking to its core aim of promoting philanthropic collaboration in the EU. Indeed, Luc Tayart de Borms, NEF's current Chair and Managing Director of the King Baudouin Foundation, calls the association's staff "network weavers," who "create partnerships, catalyse top down strategies and facilitate the implementation of bottom up solutions". And, importantly, "learn by doing," rather than sticking to preconceived ideas.



Luc Tayart de Borms

The organisation's first incarnation was in 1976 as the European Fund for Cooperation. Its existence was initiated by Georis, then director of the European Foundation for Culture in Amsterdam, who decided to establish an office in Brussels. Leo Tindemans, Belgian Prime Minister, became president of the new entity, and the Fund became, over the next 10 years, the prime European instrument for launching joint projects between foundations and a key player in the development of public/private partnerships.

The focus in these early years was on promoting greater understanding between Europeans via, for example, scientific projects, university exchanges and cultural activities. The Fund also held an annual conference in which young people from across Europe met to discuss the future of the continent. This activity continues today within the framework of NEF's current programmes.

The conclusion of the common market and closer ties between Western and Eastern Europe gave the EU project fresh impetus in the 1980s. The projects supported by the Fund at this time were testament to these developments, with it, for example, financing a publication aimed at opening up western eyes to Eastern European literature. The overall idea being to encourage people across Europe to understand the continent as a whole rather than as a series of very separate nation states.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall, it became important for European foundations to have a structure that could represent them at an EU level and lead thinking about fresh ways of defining international, cultural and economic relations in this brave new world. Hence, the European Foundations Centre was created in 1989, initially operating from and financed by the European Fund for Cooperation.



Raymond Georis

By the 1990s, the emphasis was on joint projects between the public and private sectors in an effort to stimulate democracy, pluralism and an entrepreneurial spirit. The Fund's programmes were extremely diverse, ranging from mobility, higher education and the development of parliamentary systems in Central and Eastern Europe. The biggest projects were co-financed by European funding streams until 1995 when European agencies were created to manage these programmes directly - at which point the Fund became independent from the European Foundation of Culture. In 1996 it became known as AICE, the International Association for European Cooperation, then in 2002 it acquired its current appellation NEF, the Network of European Foundations.

A renewed identity

This was a watershed moment that brought the organisation into adulthood and proved that it has been able to overcome the challenges and difficulties encountered along the way. One of the main hurdles, which is epitomised by the name changes, was, and is, the constant need to successfully reinvent the purpose and definition of the association depending on the specific issues of the time. Indeed many of the challenges faced by NEF are ongoing, such as that of collaboration. While it would be nice to think that there is an absence of competition between the various foundations, many small foundations need, to a certain extent, to compete to survive and connecting them to a bigger network can be nerve-racking for them and take up time and resources they do not always have. Likewise, given the changing nature of the projects we support and the fact that they always run for a defined period of time, we are only able to keep a very small body of staff and cannot really recruit long-term. This situation can pose problems of staff retention and knowledge loss with bright young things quickly moving on to more permanent posts.

Such challenges though have not impeded our work. In 2005, the most active foundations within NEF launched EPIM, a European level programme on integration and migration to help transfer national competences in this domain to the European level. The creation of EPIM was also aimed at reinforcing exchanges between non-governmental organisations so that they were better equipped to influence debate in this area. This work has grown considerably in recent years. Indeed, during the period 2016-2018, EPIM is supporting 30 foundations working on migration with funds of nearly 10 million euros.

Inspiring leadership

In the same year, the European Fund for the Balkans came into being under the auspices of NEF following the war in the former Yugoslavia. The idea here was to move away from the traditional focus of foundations on civil society and to also find ways of working with individuals, thinktanks and government officials. It was likewise important to be able to offer long-term funding to ensure that the priorities of civil society and other progressive voices continue to be addressed whatever the political situation. Hedvig Morvai, Executive Director of the European Fund for the Balkans, is clear about the importance of this partnership. “NEF is driven



Hedvig Morvai

by strong leadership that inspires the highest level of performance in our organisation, she says. “NEF invests a lot in understanding its grantees in order to provide the best tailored approach to each of them.”

This is key in an era where the need for partnerships to influence national, European and even international politics has never been greater. Indeed, eight joint funds now sit within NEF compared with four in 2013 and the organisation works with more than 60 foundations, some of whom are based in the US. And at a time when celebrity recognition seems to count for everything, NEF continues to hold this significant sway and grow in terms of its geographical and strategic reach, without being particularly well known outside its immediate circles or seeking the limelight. Indeed, NEF does not strive for public recognition or visibility, but insists that the focus should be on the initiative that is being supported.

Maturity and readiness

Turning 40 provokes an existential crisis in some people, a feeling of maturity and a readiness to tackle challenges better in others. NEF clearly falls into the latter category. What will happen in Europe, and the rest of the world, in the next 40 years is unclear. However, the rise of populism and increasing social, environmental and economic problems mean that collaboration and capability will be crucial to support constructive and progressive approaches to uphold some of Europe’s fundamental values, such as solidarity and democratic governance, and to help revitalise European democracies.

Some may question whether the philanthropic sector continues to need infrastructure support from organisations such as NEF, but we believe that the association plays a key strategic role and will remain at the heart of efforts to shore up European democracy. And we are not alone. Ten years ago, Gerry Salole, Chief Executive of the European Foundation Centre (EFC), went on record saying that: “NEF is the most exciting example of collaboration among foundations anywhere”. He says that in 2017 he still stands by this remark, insisting that: “NEF is a powerful example of concrete and strategic collaboration and joint project realisation”. Salole believes that the recent growth of EPIM’s work “stands as adequate testimony” to this vision and that NEF as a whole is an “integral part of the philanthropic infrastructure in Europe”.

He concludes on a more personal note. “I salute Peggy [Sailler] and her colleagues. We at the EFC really value their ‘can do’ attitude and regard them as some of our closest allies in the battle to make the case for organised and institutional philanthropy. We wish NEF a very happy anniversary: long may it continue.”

In short, the story of NEF thus far is how a small philanthropic fund has succeeded in metamorphosing into an indispensable European network of cooperating foundations that is not afraid of adopting to changes in its environment or of reinventing itself depending on the opportunities available.

Vive l’aventure!