Strengthening Civil Society in Southern Italy. Can Community Foundations foster an innovation process?

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The research paper will be based on the conviction that the future of southern Italy is directly linked to the sustenance of both its civil society and its sense for the community. It should be stressed how important it is to reduce definitively the gap between the advanced North and the undeveloped South. The development of a new sustainable philanthropic model might be linked to the creation of new organizations strongly connected to grassroots activities.

Since community foundations are among the most valuable and democratic vehicles to strengthen the philanthropic sector, it is the author decision to focus this research on this kind of organization. The research will be based on the belief that community foundations might have – in Italy – the double role of reinforcing the sector as well as introducing a new positive trend for southern Italy in its path to join up with the more developed part of the country. This research also derives significance from the fact that the building of community foundations in Southern Italy is fostered by the activities of the Fondazione per il Sud, a grantmaking foundation born in 2007 committed to supporting the creation in southern Italy of solid social infrastructures and community foundations.

The paper will aim at analyzing overseas successful experiences of community foundation in underdeveloped areas. The presentation and the analysis of the most challenging international experiences in underdeveloped areas aim to provide the Southern Italy emerging organizations an example of best practices created in a bottom up strategy. The paper will show how strong and institutionalized national actors played an important but secondary role in foster the development and eradication of community foundations. Thus, the paper will end with a list of recommendation to the southern Italy community foundations.

The paper, will be briefly focused on the presentation of the Italian civil society. This section aims to show that the emerging role of civil society actors in the South is fundamental for the creation of a homogeneous efficient philanthropic sector in the North as well as in the South. Moreover, the new Italian philanthropic trends seem to move towards a more strategic vision of the role that some organizations can play and the most evident case is represented by community foundations.

According to this, there have been identified the main factors of change that should occur in the process of creating community foundations. In fact, the main challenge for community foundations is to succeed in helping people to recognize the needs of others in the community and to start a help circuit that creates development and growth. This aspect involves many issues like a) the creation of a strong community framework; b) the stimulation of engaged actors, donors, and leaders; and c) asset building.

After a deep analysis of these aspects, the paper will draw an overview on the existent Italian community foundations, analyzing critically the aspects that generated these entities and evaluating the possibility to create different models of community foundations in the South, considering the differences and the peculiarities that this area presents. The focus on the emerging role of community foundations in Italy will show the capacity of philanthropic organization to be effective in local areas and to promote change in a national perspective. In this regard, the research will stress the strategic role of community foundations in countries

that show both social and economical differences and inequalities. Giving a range of examples and strategies approached by international organizations in underdeveloped areas, the research will seek to show that best practices do exist and that community foundations are more like to succeed than fail in such areas.

Starting from this point of view the paper will evaluate the eligibility of the Foundation per il Sud of being the promoter of Community Foundations. According to this, it will be sketched the structure of the foundation and its governance showing their weaknesses and strengths. Despite the fact that Fondazione per il Sud does not lack for financial resources, its strength will be evaluated on its capacity to lead creating policies and not only allocating funds.

The main question that the paper will address concerns which actors can effectively be strategic players for strength civil society in the South. Being Fondazione per il Sud an institutionalized actor it will be evaluated its capacity to be a valuable agent of change for civil society in the South, able to create new policies, take outstanding risks, foster the activity of social entrepreneurs.

The paper will be drawn after the researches undertaken since 2004 in the framework of the research activities of PHaSI Research Centre on Philanthropy and Social Innovation University of Bologna and in 2008 as fellow at the Emerging Leaders in Philanthropy program organized by the Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society CUNY.