From Ideas to Infrastructure: Why We Should Pilot and Scale Community Foundation Models

Across many communities, one truth is clear: people care deeply about the places they live in. They give time, resources, and energy to support neighbors, schools, cultural life, and vulnerable groups. Yet too often, this local generosity is fragmented, informal, and disconnected from long-term strategies for community development.

This is where community foundations come in, not as imported solutions, but as locally adapted infrastructures that help communities organize their own resources, strengthen trust, and invest in what matters most to them.

To build more resilient and equitable communities, we need to pilot and scale community foundation models that are adapted to the local context.

What Is a Community Foundation—Really?

At its core, a community foundation is not just an organization. It is a mechanism for collective local action.

Community foundations:

- Mobilize local resources (money, time, skills, relationships)
- Are rooted in a defined community or place
- Are governed by people from the community
- Support initiatives defined by local priorities
- Invest in long-term community well-being

Globally, community foundations look very different from one country to another. That diversity is their strength. There is no single blueprint, only shared principles adapted to local realities.

Why Piloting Matters

In many contexts, community foundations are still a relatively new concept. This is why piloting is essential.

Pilots allow communities, CSOs, and funders to:

- Test governance and decision-making models
- Experiment with different ways of mobilizing local resources
- Learn what works (and what doesn't) in a specific cultural, legal, and economic environment
- Build trust gradually, through visible and meaningful results

Small-scale pilots reduce risk and create space for learning. More importantly, they allow communities to shape the model themselves, rather than adopting structures that may not fit local needs.

Adaptation Is Not Optional—It Is the Point

Too often, successful models from elsewhere are replicated without enough attention to context. Community foundations cannot be "copied and pasted".

Local adaptation may include:

- Informal or hybrid structures where legal frameworks are restrictive
- Incremental fundraising that starts with small donations or in-kind support
- Governance models that reflect local traditions of leadership and cooperation
- Priorities that focus on immediate needs first, alongside long-term goals

Adaptation ensures that the community foundation is seen not as an external project, but as something that belongs to the community.

From Pilots to Scale: What Does That Mean?

Scaling does not necessarily mean creating large institutions in every city or region. Instead, it means:

- Replicating core principles, not identical structures
- Supporting multiple locally rooted funds or initiatives
- Strengthening networks of community foundations and similar mechanisms
- Embedding community foundations into the broader philanthropic and civic ecosystem

Scale can also be horizontal, more communities empowered to make decisions, and cultural a stronger norm of local giving and shared responsibility.

The Role of Donors and CSOs

Piloting and scaling community foundations requires a different approach from donors and intermediaries.

It means:

- Investing in institutional development, not just projects
- Providing long-term, flexible support
- Accepting slower growth in exchange for stronger foundations
- Measuring success not only in outputs, but in trust, participation, and local ownership

CSOs play a key role as facilitators, conveners, and bridge-builders supporting communities while resisting the urge to control or own the process.

Why This Matters Now

In times of uncertainty, economic, social, or political, communities need structures they can rely on. Community foundations help shift philanthropy:

- From short-term projects to long-term investment
- From external priorities to local decision-making
- From dependency to shared responsibility

Piloting and scaling community foundation models is not about building organizations for their own sake. It is about creating lasting infrastructure for community voice, solidarity, and resilience.

A Final Thought

Communities already give. They already care. They already act.

The question is whether we are willing to invest in models that help them do this together, sustainably, and on their own terms.

Piloting and scaling locally adapted community foundations is one of the most powerful ways to make that possible.