Origins and evolutions of the Adessium Foundation: from the inspiration of a family to an impactful Foundation

With an annual grant making of €15-20 mln, the Adessium Foundation is among the largest endowed foundations in The Netherlands. The interview with Managing Director Rogier van der Weerd explores the evolution and drivers of the Van Vliet family foundation.

29 November 2017

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Adessium Foundation is a private and independent grant making foundation, based in the Netherlands. It aspires to a society that encourages people to live in harmony with each other and with the environment. The Van Vliet family founded Adessium Foundation in 2005 out of a desire to put resources to work for the common good.

Today we have the chance to deepen the model of this impactful Foundation with the Managing Director Rogier van der Weerd.

Could you please describe the evolution and the challenges on the path that led the Adessium
Foundation from being the design of a philanthropic family to becoming a professional and strategic organization?

Our Foundation is still relatively young. It was founded about 12 years ago by a family with a background in asset management who decided to engage in strategic philanthropy. At the start, the family didn’t have a pre-defined mission but deliberately chose an evolutionary path to work out the focus areas of the foundation. They embraced an open agenda, making grants across the globe on a wide range of topics and developing a good understanding of what it takes to be effective in philanthropy. The first professional staff was hired in 2007.

We have learned that this type of philanthropy requires clear decisions on what thematic areas you want to engage in, a clear view on how you aim to contribute to social change as a foundation, and an operating model that enables you to work towards these objectives.

Today we are among the largest endowed foundations in the Netherlands. We operate three distinct grant making programs: Social Initiatives, People & Nature, and Public Interest (the latter aims to strengthen European cross-border investigative journalism and public interest advocacy organizations). Our annual grant making is in the €15-20 mln range, with a professional staff of around 15 people.

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Could you highlight the reasons behind the Foundation’s strategic choice of actively selecting potential grantees?

Like any foundation, there are a number of key characteristics that define how we operate and approach our grant making.

We take the long-term view when working on issues that are relevant and urgent for society. Because there are rarely easy and quick fixes. The vast majority of our funding goes beyond specific short term projects. We tend to engage in multi-year funding partnerships with high-quality implementing partners, typically using 3-year grants. This is, in our experience,
a very useful period for evaluating progress and for determining whether and how to continue the relationship. In some cases, this may lead to multiple renewals which reflects the long term commitment required in order to reach impact. Of course there are also situations where an initiative is successful in attracting other funding and can continue independently. Or – on the flip side – where an approach is not effective and a funding relationship is ended.

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Another characteristic is our pro-active approach to the sector. We don’t have an open application process, but we select (potential) beneficiaries ourselves. Thus gaining time and space to explore a topic, understand the “solution space” and the landscape of stakeholders and influential actors. This requires an open antenna for ideas, and the capacity to be present and engage with the fields that we operate in.

Once we have identified groups that we are interested in, we engage in exploratory conversations, make sure we understand and assess their mission, objective, Theory of Change and their capacity to deliver before considering a funding proposal. The engagement intensifies as we progress in the process. This type of due diligence takes time and effort, but this investment pays off when we end up funding as it helps develop a more strategic relationship.

Often we end up providing core operating support, or a combination of program support and functional capacity building. We think this is important for allowing the partner to achieve its institutional goals. Through active monitoring and conducting independent evaluations aimed at joint learning and development, we improve the quality of the partnerships and the impact of the work of our beneficiaries.

Although this makes us – what I would call – an engaged funder, it does not mean that we are taking the driver’s seat. It should not be us telling our grantees what to do and how to do it. We strongly believe that, at the end of the day, we are a supporter or facilitator, that enables great ideas, committed leaders and knowledgeable teams to achieve social impact.
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How does the Foundation support its grantees and what does it imply in organizational terms to go beyond pure grant-making towards building the capacity of beneficiary organizations?

Although believing in a strict distinction of roles, remaining primarily a funder, we look for a strategic and open conversation with our grantees about their strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for improvement. When we agree on priorities, we make sure there is space to invest in functional capabilities. We fund external advice or support when needed. For instance, in improving the back office – the administrative side of the organization, developing fundraising capacity, or investing in strategic communication, training & development of staff, etc.

We are also interested in contributing to external collaboration, problem solving and knowledge sharing. From our position as we have a unique perspective which allows us to oversee an entire field, or identify opportunities to apply approaches from different fields or perspectives. We are in a position to convene groups that would otherwise not find each other easily. There are many interesting examples, e.g. enabling technologists/developers to engage with social change organizations or bringing together funders and NGO’s to develop new solutions jointly. We aspire to do more in this area, it takes a serious effort to do these things in a way that adds value to the field.

What is the Foundation’s approach to social impact assessment?

We think it is a critical element of effective grant making, and apply it both to the organizations and interventions that we fund, as well as to our own programs in order to understand our impact.

We take a **pragmatic approach to impact assessment**. We operate in a wide range of issue areas and fund a broad mix of interventions depending on context (from research/investigative work, service delivery, advocacy, campaigning & awareness raising,
Given that, there is not one tool or metric that captures that complexity. We believe in using assessment techniques to gain relevant (i.e. meaningful and actionable) insight, not for measurements’ sake.

That means that in some cases that lend themselves for this, the golden standard of RCT is applied, while in other cases we can only rely on qualitative assessment and qualified expert judgement. That said, there are also examples of interventions that you fund because you are convinced that they are intrinsically valuable and serve a particular purpose. For example making it possible for elderly people who live in isolation to take part in social activity. In such cases it’s more interesting to know whether this is done efficiently, with good reach and good rating of participants than to assess long term social outcomes necessarily.

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Which are the main results and milestones the Foundation achieved during its first twelve years of activity?

In the Public Interest program the objective is to help improve and build the open democratic European society. That is quite a big and bold objective, but we’ve translated that, as an example, into strengthening “truth-seeking and investigative capacity”. In order to help society understand the major issues of our time and point to wrongdoing, injustices and the need to address these. Since 2009, we fund international collaborations in investigative journalism such as the ICIJ (International Consortium for Investigating Journalism), Journalismfund.eu, the Bureau of Investigating Journalism, etc. I’m very proud that we have been able to contribute to a vibrant culture of cross-border collaboration and innovation in international investigation journalism. With huge successes and interesting developments such as the Panama Papers (and more recent, Paradise Papers), for example.

In the Environment program (which we call “People and Nature” signalling the importance of a balance between the two), we have worked on the issue of plastic pollution since 2010. We consider this to be one of the iconic and problematic issues of our time, that exemplifies the fact that we seem to be stuck in a linear economic practice of unsustainable use of resources and waste. With devastating impact not only on oceans, coasts & marine life, but also with micro- and nanoplastics having potential harmful impact on human health. When we started
funding in this area, there was still very limited visibility and awareness of this issue, so we initially funded research and awareness raising campaigns. But we also advance solutions, across the entire supply chain and lifecycle of plastics: reduction of harmful applications (such as single and non-recoverable/recyclable plastics), application of circularity principles (re-use, recycle), and improving clean-up and waste management practices. We are seeing traction in all of these areas. Globally, plastic pollution is now a very well-known issue, discussed at all levels. We're also seeing the successful banning of problematic applications (e.g., microplastics in cosmetics).

Obviously, we just play a small and limited role in this development, but I am proud that we have been part of this and have actively sought to engage with other funders to create a globally coordinated movement. This movement started with an informal exchange of information with foundations that showed some level of interest. Over time, together with other leading organizations, we've created a more formal network of foundations and NGOs working on plastic pollution. Together, we created an international collaboration called the Plastic Solutions Fund. This is a pooled fund that aims to push the “reduction strategy” globally. We also helped to create a strongly aligned global movement of NGOs such as the “Zero Waste Movement” and others that speak to consumers, companies and governments to push them to reduce plastic use.

**Which are the plans for the future and the challenges that lay ahead?**

For us as a foundation it is important to ensure that we remain on the cutting edge and to avoid becoming complacent, thinking you have everything figured out. Keep looking at how the world is changing, keep challenging your assumptions through self-evaluation and external feedback. This is actually not all that easy and straightforward, as you grow and establish processes, well-functioning portfolio’s and comfort with how you operate. But in my view, it’s a responsibility that comes with the unique position and role you play as a foundation.

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In light of your professional background and current role, which suggestions would you provide to a new philanthropist/foundation in order to set up an effective giving strategy?

It’s a difficult but interesting question for the wide ranging of audience that you may have – private foundations, individuals, companies and corporate foundations, etc. I would offer two suggestions:

First, I think it is important to make a serious effort and think very hard about what type of philanthropy you want to engage in. Be curious and exploratory, but aim to be very aware of the roles you can play and make explicit choices about where you want to be active and how you aim to be effective. This goes back to “design choices” I was talking about earlier. Given your chosen areas of work & objectives, what is your operating model? Where do you position yourself on dimensions such as risk appetite, financial instruments, relationship with grantees, non-monetary assistance, etc. The most impactful foundations I know have defined a very coherent set of choices that define their strategies.

My second suggestion would be to think very deeply about the notion of leverage, and I mean that in the good sense of the word of course. Foundations are positioned uniquely as independent sources of founding, they can play a role that no other actor can play in terms of taking risks, allow for experimentation with new solutions to push for social innovation. In this context the notion of leverage is about “what can my money create more than just the activities or interventions that I’ve funded”. Collaboration and the forming of alliances with relevant stakeholder groups is certainly also a way that you can create leverage.

Just to give you an example: in our Social Initiatives program, we fund the Dutch system of local Food Banks – a network of non-profits that distribute free weekly food packages to people in need. It is shameful that this is needed in a rich western society like ours, but it’s a fact. One can argue that this type of service delivery is nothing more than a “band-aid” and a foundation is better off working to prevent poverty in society. Fair enough, but I think this is a narrow-sighted view. If you think from a point of leverage you can be effective in many additional ways by funding that type of work. In fact, I’m convinced you can be more effective – also on the preventive side – if you do. For instance, in our country, our government has more or less tried to ignore (let alone fund) food banks, because it is very uncomfortable to acknowledge that social welfare fails a significant portion of society. By funding food banks and allowing them to be visible and smart in communicating about their work and signalling trends that they encounter, they open the door to policy advocacy (by other organizations) and government action.
Another way in which we have tried to create leverage with our funding was by supporting a large scale food safety certification program of the food banks. This took away major risks that made potential food donors (supermarkets, processors and major brands) hesitant to offer their oversupply to the food bank system. With successful certification the volume of donated food has grown substantially.

That kind of mind-set, where you look for leverage and think about second order effects can be very useful if you want to increase your impact in philanthropy.

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