



## **21<sup>st</sup> AGA and Conference Opening Plenary speaking notes • 2 June 2010**

**Dr Rui Vilar**

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to Brussels for the European Foundation Centre's 21<sup>st</sup> Annual General Assembly and Conference, which as you know, is taking place as part of the first-ever Foundation Week. This event is unprecedented in its size and scope, featuring some 60 sessions, 20 stands, and more than 100 films revolving around what foundations do and how they contribute to the betterment of citizens' lives. The Week also gives foundations a chance to reach out and connect with stakeholders in a way that they never have before. This is a new concept but it looks and feels to be an inspired one, giving European foundations a chance to be heard, but also, and maybe equally important, a chance to listen.

Now we come to our AGA and Conference, whose theme this year is "A conversation with the institutions". This gathering could not have been more timely in light of the very serious economic challenges Europe is facing. Foundations continue to have a major role to play in ensuring the success of the European Project. The estimated 110,000 foundations across Europe collectively spend as much as the EU does on projects and programmes, and they provide employment to up to 1 million Europeans. This kind of economic weight and footprint can not and should not be ignored.

Critical to playing our part in this effort is our relationship with the EU – not only from a legislative standpoint but also regarding collaboration and finding synergies. The challenges we face today transcend local, national and even European boundaries. These challenges, along with growing expectations among European citizens, require a more collaborative approach among the EU institutions, the Member States and civil society organisations. To play our part fully in meeting these challenges, the legal and fiscal environment in which foundations operate must not be a burden but instead a facilitator for our cross-national and coordinated action.

I am delighted and encouraged that the European Union President Herman Van Rompuy will be joining us here at the conference, and that European Commission President José Manuel Barroso will be meeting with the EFC's Governing Council. This kind of dialogue is critical to getting the relationship right with the EU. We also must make efforts to understand how the EU institutions perceive us. I am especially looking forward to the upcoming presentation and debate on the Gallup survey commissioned by the EFC of MEPs' attitudes toward and understanding of foundations. I feel this poll shows we have become an established partner and stakeholder in the EU circle, but it also shows that there is still work to be done.

As you know, the EFC is in the middle of a year-long celebration of its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. We have come a very long way – long enough to learn that we still have far to go. You have already received the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Book which chronicles the long and winding road that the European Foundation Centre has traveled in its first 20 years. It demonstrates clearly the resilience and innovation that defines the EFC. We are an institution that is here to stay and we have made headway on many issues, including the European Foundation Statute. The next two and half days will be very important for us to connect in new ways with the institutions, to make our mark at European level. At the same time, we will listen well, to make sure that we are in tune with the ever-changing landscape of Europe and that we comprehend the new opportunities brought by the vision of Europe 2020.

Part of ensuring that we take full advantage of these opportunities is giving the next generation of foundation leaders the right guidance so that they have the tools and know-how to navigate the future. For the first time at its annual gathering, the EFC is organising an exciting initiative as part of its capacity-building programme to promote the professionalisation of the “next generation” of foundation representatives. Fifteen individuals who have been identified as future leaders are being guided through Foundation Week and are getting the chance to meet and get to know each other's work; to gain insight into issues relevant to philanthropy; and to meet staff of and learn about EFC member organisations.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank Luc Tayart de Borms of the King Baudouin Foundation and the Programme Committee for hosting this exciting event.

I know you are looking forward to the conference and today's debate as much as I am.