

## Foundations for success

By Ian Mundell

09.06.2011 / 04:10 CET

### **Gerry Salole on his efforts to encourage collaboration between philanthropic organisations.**

Gerry Salole trained as an anthropologist and is still a perceptive observer, particularly of the philanthropic organisations he works with as chief executive of the European Foundation Centre. "I'm a social anthropologist, but organisations are not very different," he says. "I've always been fascinated by how organisations work."

His master's degree at the University of Manchester focused on ethnicity in Ethiopia and Ghana, but his plan to do a PhD on the border between Ethiopia and Somalia was derailed by a war. Rather than wait for peace, he took on a completely different project, studying how ethnic and political rhetoric was used in a small Italian village.

After his PhD he taught, then did consultancy work that took him to refugee camps in the Ogaden – a region of Ethiopia populated mainly by ethnic Somalis. That led to an interest in refugee children, work for the charity Save the Children and then a job with the Bernard van Leer Foundation, a Dutch organisation supporting early-childhood projects. After eight years in various roles with that foundation, Salole moved to Johannesburg to run the South Africa office of the Ford Foundation.

Moving from one foundation with a tightly focused mission to another with wide-ranging interests made an impression on Salole. "It made me conscious that a lot of foundations are really quite single-minded about what they do," he says. "So, how do you get them to recognise that what someone else is doing has equal relevance?"

He even goes so far as to say that collaboration does not come naturally to most foundations. "Having serious resources at their disposal and a governance that is aloof, in a way, from political decisions gives this sector incredible hubris," he says. "It becomes counterintuitive to work with somebody else."

When the position leading the European Foundation Centre came up in 2005 he saw it as a chance to explore this phenomenon further. "I wanted to see if there was any appetite for collaboration," he says. "This is the right place to be if that is what you want to foster."

### **Autonomy**

The centre was created in 1989 to be both a membership organisation for European foundations and a repository of knowledge about their work. Although established in Brussels, it began by keeping its distance from the EU institutions, again reflecting the sector's ideas about autonomy and independence.

"But what I have learned is that you can't get on the radar in Europe unless you are in some way involved with the Commission," Salole says. "It was only after we started doing a couple of projects together with the Commission that we got on the radar." The financial crisis has also helped raise the profile of foundations. "For example, if you look at research funding in Europe, foundations do a lot of the heavy lifting and it is invisible."

Salole argues that "foundations have to be more comfortable in the limelight, and that is partly what we think our role is, to help them realise that they need to be in that space".

The global perspective of Europe's foundations is reflected in the centre's work. "There is a real interest, for example, in what is happening in China, where philanthropy is growing exponentially," Salole says. The EU is just a small part of that picture, but there are priorities.

Top of the list is the creation of a European statute that would end the need for foundations to set up a separate structure in every country where they want to operate. "We've been pursuing this for ten years now, and we think we are at the end-game," says Salole, explaining that the Commission is now ready to look at options for legislation.

A further priority is reducing the sector's tax burden. "Big foundations are spending an inordinate amount of money on VAT and this needs to be looked at, but we also realise that this is maybe not the best time to be talking about it."

*Ian Mundell is a freelance journalist based in Brussels.*

