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Summary report of the
webinar “Relations
between Private Giving &
Civil Society
Organizations: Franco-
German Insights

A Franco-German laboratory for dialogue on the relations between private giving and civil society organizations

The Franco-German webinar on relations between private giving and civil society organisations (CSOs) is part of a dual dynamic. First, it builds on exploratory work carried out in France by the French Institute for Civil Society Organisations (IFMA), which addresses a major blind spot in existing knowledge: the need for a nuanced and systemic understanding of the relationships between private giving and CSOs. Second, it extends this reflection to a European perspective, using the Franco-German relationship as a laboratory for dialogue and analysis. This choice is not neutral. It brings into conversation two structuring yet contrasting models:

- in France, a funding system shaped by the strong role of public authorities and the predominance of project-based calls for proposals;
- in Germany, a denser philanthropic landscape based on a plurality of private and place-based foundations, but one marked by significant political tensions.

Against this backdrop, the webinar did not seek to produce normative conclusions. Instead, it aimed to shift the analytical lens: moving beyond an instrumental view of funding toward a broader examination of partnership relationships and the conditions under which the civil society sector contributes to a democratic European society.

A shared diagnosis: the funder–beneficiary relationship as both a vulnerability and a lever

The discussions highlighted a cross-cutting observation: what is at stake in the relationship between philanthropy and civil society organisations (CSOs) goes well beyond funding instruments or the amounts allocated. It touches on issues of power, funding priorities, governance arrangements, organisational independence, and the very meaning of civil society action.

Several structural weaknesses were identified:

- the persistent asymmetry between funders and beneficiaries, which limits CSOs' capacity to plan over the long term and to consolidate their socio-economic models;
- the dominance of short-term, project-based funding across Europe, which fosters fragmented innovation that is rarely sustained over time;
- the blurring of boundaries between public and private funding, particularly visible in Germany in a context of growing political contestation of public support for civil society;
- evaluation practices that are often perceived as instruments of control rather than as spaces for mutual learning and the co-production of shared societal value.

Conversely, the speakers also showed that this relationship can become a strategic lever, provided it is understood and structured as a relationship in its own right: one that is embedded over time, grounded in trust, attentive to extra-financial dimensions, and capable of evolving into genuine partnerships.

Three structuring contributions of the Franco-German dialogue

FROM PROJECT-FUNDING PHILANTHROPY TO RELATIONAL PHILANTHROPY

The contributions converged around a shared critique of the dominant model of one-off, project-based support. Philanthropy aimed at social transformation calls for:

- longer-term and more flexible forms of support;
- greater attention to the “organisational health” of CSOs, including governance, human resources, and adaptive capacity;
- explicit recognition of the interdependence between foundations, civil society organisations, and public authorities.

This shift is not merely technical. It is deeply political, as it calls into question existing power relations and the collective capacity to act in a context of democratic crisis.

PARTICIPATION AND TRUST: PROMISES AND TENSIONS

Participatory philanthropy and “trust-based philanthropy” were presented as desirable horizons. They can:

- involve affected communities more closely in decision-making processes;
- transform evaluation into a space for shared learning;
- strengthen the democratic legitimacy of supported initiatives.

At the same time, the discussions highlighted significant tensions, including legal constraints, limited human resources, and the risk of compromises that reproduce “conventional” funding choices. Participation is therefore not a ready-made solution, but a demanding field of experimentation that requires collective frameworks and safe spaces for learning.

TERRITORY AS A CRITICAL SPACE FOR DEMOCRACY

Contributions from German community foundations underscored the central importance of territorial embeddedness as a space:

- for building trust;
- for fostering dialogue between social groups in contexts of political and social polarisation;
- for the early identification of democratic vulnerabilities.

These foundations do not claim to represent society as a whole. Rather, they function as long-term civic infrastructures, capable of sustaining spaces for encounter, debate, and civic engagement where public institutions are weakened.

What the webinar reveals for EuraKnow

Beyond its empirical findings, the webinar highlights several key areas of work for the EuraKnow programme¹:

- Moving from a logic of tools to a logic of relationships: examining how philanthropy–CSO relationships are concretely shaped, including their asymmetries, tensions, and potential for transformation.
- Linking democracy and philanthropy: analysing how different forms of private giving can either strengthen or undermine the democratic role of CSOs as intermediary bodies.
- Comparing European models without hierarchisation: identifying both shared patterns (such as short-termism, asymmetry, and trust-related challenges) and context-specific variables (including legal frameworks, political cultures, and territorial embeddedness).
- Creating European spaces for learning: in a landscape where practices remain fragmented, EuraKnow can act as an intellectual and relational infrastructure, fostering dialogue among researchers, associations, foundations, and public actors.

Perspectives: opening rather than concluding

This webinar confirms that the key issue is not only what philanthropy funds, but how it connects with CSOs, territories, and democracy. In a European context marked by distrust toward institutions, political polarization, and budgetary constraints, private giving cannot be conceived as a simple substitute, nor as a neutral actor.

For EuraKnow, the objective is not to promote a single model, but to document, compare, and critically examine these relationships in order to support more informed, more democratic, and more sustainable choices. The Franco-German dialogue should therefore be understood not as an end in itself, but as an initial step toward a broader European reflection on the conditions under which philanthropy can be genuinely contributive.

¹ EuraKnow is a European programme led by the French Institute for Civil Society organisations, with a planned launch in 2026. It aims to analyse the relations between private giving and civil society organisations in Europe, and to produce actionable findings that strengthen the capacities of actors across the nonprofit, philanthropic and public sectors.

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This paper was written by Amira Azaiez and Fabrice Roy (*French Institute for Civil Society Organisations*).

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