

Interview with Benoît Fontaine (Advisor, King Baudouin Foundation (KBF))

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In this interview Benoît Fontaine talks to GSI about civil society in Belgium and KBF's plans to start GuideStar in Belgium

1. How would you describe the civil society sector in Belgium and how is it different to civil society in other European countries?

Well Belgium is a welfare state and we pay a lot of taxes, which the government uses to subsidise civil society. As a result I would say that one of the main differences would be the relationship between government and civil society organisations. I will use the UK as an example. In the UK private donors, companies and individuals make significant contributions so there tends to be a greater balance with respect to income streams for civil society. As a result the philanthropic sector is more sophisticated in the UK. You will hear a lot of people in Belgium say that by paying a lot of taxes they already do what they have to do. By saying this I don't mean that there is no philanthropy market, I just mean that it is less developed than the UK.

This sometimes raises issues of independence for Belgium CSOs. For example, many organisations receive subsidies from the government, however they would like to criticise the government. I can assure you there is a lot of debate about this issue and that sometimes the public authorities object to criticism given the level of subsidy civil society organisations receive. The question is ... how independent are we if we receive money from the government? A few years ago a compact was established between civil society and government in the UK. This looked at the role of the government versus the role of CSOs. However, in Belgium it is very difficult to have consensus on what is the responsibility of the government and what is the responsibility of civil society. The model of civil society in Belgium is totally different from the UK.

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2. Can you describe KBF's civil society programme?

Until December of last year we had a specific programme on civil society. Now there is no monopoly of the civil society programme that we had before. We have 9 strategic areas of activity and we work with civil society in each of these. In the health programme, we work with for instance the Federation of Patients and in the poverty strategic area we work with a lot of nonprofit organisations in the poverty sector. The GuideStar project in Belgium is being pursued within our philanthropic strategic domain.

3. Why did you decide to pursue a GuideStar project in Belgium?

We did this because we wanted to show donors that the civil society sector is transparent and that we can account for money spent. So it is a philanthropic aim. Also we know that GuideStar helps not only donors but

nonprofits. It can help the sector to better understand itself. It is for the nonprofit inside the nonprofit so to speak. The main aim is to improve philanthropy and generosity in Belgium. We can work with GuideStar to improve the benchmark for nonprofit transparency.

4. Where will the data come from?

We paid a consultancy firm to do a feasibility study and the main conclusion of the study was that we don't have a central source of nonprofit information in Belgium, as is the case in the UK or the US. The information on nonprofits in Belgium is very disseminated. However, there is one very important source on which we can build. That is the National Bank for Belgium. This bank has the financial figures of something like 5000 big and very big nonprofit organisations, which they receive on an annual basis. So there are full accountancy figures for these nonprofits, which are not in pdf but are available in a completely digitised format and that is very important.

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At the end of last year we got agreement from the Board of Directors of the National Bank saying that they will give us the right to have this type of information and they will help us to use the data. Also, they are interested in working together with us in the future. They told us that even if they do not have all the information that we want, in the future they might ask nonprofits for more information. So we are now in partnership with them.

However, although we have access to financial information from large non profits via the Bank we don't have the information for the small organisations. Therefore, we are working with Techsoup in Belgium because they have a lot of information on 1500 small and medium size nonprofits, also in a digital format. Techsoup Belgium will be the operational partners for the entire project in Belgium. We decided that the KBF could not do all the work internally because it was too labour intensive and we could not afford to hire more staff. We also did not want to start a new nonprofit in order to manage this project. We really need to run this project with as little money as possible to guarantee sustainability.

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Techsoup will also have to be strengthened a little with additional resources. Techsoup values the GuideStar initiative because they need to communicate what they can give to nonprofits for free and they can use GuideStar to do so. We are also going to work with a large social enterprise in Belgium that employs physically disabled people. It will provide call centre services and help to collect data. We also hope to find other investors in the future.

5. When do you expect the Belgium GuideStar website to be launched?

At the moment we are working on learning how to manipulate the CTP and translating about 1400 words on the site. It is a bit labour intensive work but we have to go through it. The next step will be the pilot phase, which will include testing by 15 organisations. Therefore, we hope to launch the site by the end of the year.