Resilience and philanthropy

René Bekkers, October 25, 2015

With the year 2020 on the horizon, the recently published work programme for Research & Innovation from European Commission for the years 2016-2017 is organized around a limited set of Societal Challenges. Europe defined these challenges after a long process of lobbying and consultation with many stakeholders. Going through the list I could not help thinking that something was missing. I do not mean that the list of challenges is a result of a political process and does not seem to reflect an underlying vision of Europe. I am thinking about the current refugee crisis. The stream of refugees arriving at the gates of Europe poses new challenges to Europe, in many areas: humanitarian assistance, citizenship, poverty, inclusion, access to education, and jobs. The stream of refugees also raises important questions for philanthropy. How will Europe deal with these challenges? How resilient is Europe? Will governments, nonprofit organizations and citizens be able to deal with this challenge? In the definition of the Rockefeller Foundation, resilience is the capacity of individuals, communities and systems to survive, adapt, and grow in the face of stress and shocks, and even transform when conditions require it. I define resilience as the mobilization of resources for the improvement of welfare in the face of adversity.

Among refugees, who are seeking a better future for themselves and their children, we see resilience. Threatened by adversity in their home countries, they take grave risks by placing their fate in the hands of human traffickers, foreign police officers. They rely on each other and their inner strength, hoping that what they left behind is worse than their future. We see a lack of resilience in Europe. The continent was not ready for the large stream of refugees. Some member states pass on the stream to each other by closing their borders. Other national governments try to accommodate refugees seeking asylum, but face barriers in finding housing, and resistance from groups of citizens who oppose accommodation of refugees in their communities. At the same time we see a willingness to help among other citizens, who offer assistance in the form of volunteer time, food and other goods. Perhaps the response of citizens is related to their own levels of resilience.

Resilience is not just the ability to withstand adversity or change by not changing at all. Resilience is not just sitting it out, or a strategy based on a rational computation of risks, the avoidance of risks, or flexibility and absorption of shocks. The resilient actor adapts to new situations and grows. Neither is resilience an immutable trait of individuals, a matter of luck in the genetic lottery. Resilience has often been studied at the individual level in psychology. Resilience requires will power, perseverance, self-esteem, creativity, a proactive attitude, optimism, intrinsic motivation, inner strength, a long term orientation to the future, willingness to change for the better, risk-taking, using the force of your opponent, problem solving ability, and intelligence.

The questions for research on resilience require social scientists to study not only the response of individual citizens, but also of social systems: informal networks of citizens, social groups, nonprofit organizations, nations, and supra-national institutions. How are resilience-related traits related to philanthropy at the level of groups and systems? How can resilience among organizations be fostered? How do nonprofit organizations build and on resilience of target groups? Resilience is a very useful concept to apply to each of the societal challenges of Europe. The classic welfare state was a system that created resilience for society as a whole, reducing the need for resilience among individual citizens. The modern activating welfare state requires resilience among citizens as a condition for support. Welfare state support becomes more like charity: we favor victims of natural disasters that try to make the best of their lives and welfare recipients that are actively seeking a job.

As nonprofit organizations are trying to respond to the refugee crisis, they are also facing adversity themselves. In the United Kingdom, fundraising practices by charities have recently come under attack. In the Dutch nonprofit sector, cuts in government funding to arts and culture organizations have been a major source of adversity in the past years. Further cuts have been announced to organizations in international relief and development. In our research at the Center for Philanthropic Studies at VU Amsterdam we have asked: how willing are Dutch citizens to increase private contributions to charities when the government is lowering their financial support? Not much, is what our research shows. While some may have believed that citizens would compensate lower income from government grants through increased donations, this has not happened. When the cuts to the arts and culture organizations were announced, the minister for Education, Arts and Science said that cultural organizations should do more to raise funds from private sources and should rely less on government grants. The culture change in the cultural sector is taking place, slowly. Some organizations were not ready for this change and simply discontinued their activities. Most have decided to do with less, and see what opportunities they may have to increase fundraising income. Some have done well. On the whole, the increase in private contributions is marginal, and much less than the loss in government grants.

For nonprofit organizations, the refugee crisis poses a challenge, but also an opportunity to mobilize citizen support in an effective manner. By offering their support to the government, working together effectively, and channeling the willingness to volunteer they can demonstrate the societal impact that nonprofit organizations may have. This would be a much needed demonstration when trust in charitable organizations is low.