



Philea forum opening

May 28th 2024, Ghent, Belgium

Brieuc Van Damme, King Baudouin Foundation

Dear Friends,

I am delighted to welcome you to Ghent, in this venue with a lot of history which at some point hosted a newspaper and several organisations known for their efforts to contributing to a more just and inclusive society some hundred years ago.

Ghent is said to be one of Europe's best kept secrets. Not only does it offer a glimpse of its former medieval might and beauty, it also is one of Belgium's most dynamic places with a thriving university, economy, social life and start-up scene.

When Delphine asked me a year ago if we could have the next Philea conference in Belgium, we didn't need to think much. We were very happy to jump in but we decided to do things a bit differently as you would expect us to do. We chose Ghent, the 2024 European Youth Capital, instead of Brussels, the political capital.

Together with the Philea team, we introduced some more changes:

- instead of a call for action the philea thematic networks and communities were activated,
- the agora will allow for easier exchange of ideas and best practices

We've had to do some last minute changes to the venue because the Wintercircus has not been able to open in time, unfortunately. But the teams have worked very hard to make this Philea forum up to your high standards nonetheless. The team has shown resilience, and I want to thank them for it. You've already done a superb job in very challenging circumstances, congratulations!

We'll be talking about resilience and resilient societies more these next couple of days, as well as about trust and philanthropy, this year's theme.

As I was preparing this year's forum, I picked up Rob Reich's book "Just giving". The political scientist from Stanford says

concerns about philanthropy go back to Aristotle, and large foundations were viewed with great suspicion in the early 20th century.

For most of the 19th century, creating a foundation at one's private initiative with one's private wealth was not possible; formal authorization and incorporation by a democratic body was necessary. He takes the example of John Rockefeller to make his point.

Rockefeller's fortune was so large, and the man so unpopular, that when he sought in 1912 a federal charter to incorporate the Rockefeller Foundation with a general-purpose mission to benefit mankind, he encountered fierce resistance.

Today, however, Reich thinks foundations are too easily celebrated. There is occasional scrutiny and criticism, but press coverage of foundations is overwhelmingly positive. And it is true that recent Gallup polls routinely show philanthropists to be amongst the most admired people on our planet.

Reich continues, and I quote: "These actors deserve our scrutiny rather than automatic gratitude. One reason is that [big] philanthropy represents a type of plutocratic voice in democratic societies, private power directed at a public purpose. A second reason is [...]we need to ask what role

philanthropy should have in the funding or delivery of essential goods and services [...]". This is especially true, Reich says, given the tax exemptions for philanthropic and nonprofit organizations and their donors. The question Reich therefore wants to answer is what role foundations should play in a democratic society.

The situation is even more complex today, as democratic institutions themselves are being questioned, including in some cases their legitimacy.

Alternatives to the western political model based on the separation of powers, dialogue, pluralism and respect are gaining traction, pushed by powerful nations in a new multipolar world.

Fissures in the West's social contract have emerged, with growing discontent towards globalization and a resurgence of national identities.

Not only must we consider a lack of trust in philanthropy. As philanthropists, we must also contribute to reestablishing trust in our democratic institutions. We must critically examine our role in promoting democratic Western values and address democracy's - and our - shortcomings at the same time.

As social innovators with an appetite for risk, as societal trailblazers, it is our role to investigate how western democratic institutions can be updated to better take the concerns of the citizens they serve into account, without compromising on the core values mentioned earlier.

As foundations, we must believe in that brighter future, and strive for it with all the energy and resources at our disposal. Rutger Bregman's inspiring book and later keynote speech on moral ambition therefore comes at a very timely moment. Not only must we be idealistic and generous, he argues, we must do so with ambition and skill to maximize our societal impact.

I believe we, foundations, will have a capital role to play in the years and decades to come, because of one resource we have more of than anyone else: we have more time.

Time is on our side which gives us the possibility to dialogue, test, fail, recover, adjust and try again. Together with innovation, our extended time horizon gives us a special, indeed precious mandate.

But this license to operate relies upon one prerequisite condition: in order to be effective agents of social transformation, foundations need to build trust and gain the support and commitment of stakeholders and society as a whole.

At KBF, we have therefore launched a new program on democracy, and we will increase our efforts to contribute to pan-european projects that aim to modernize and increase trust in our democratic institutions, through initiatives such as Civitates, the AI for society fund, the European fund for the Balkans, the Data tank and the like., and we urge you to do the same if your resources allow it.

Before handing over, I would like to thank our colleagues of the Belgian foundation sector who worked hard in the hosting committee to offer our guests an attractive evening programme – starting with yesterday’s dinner at the Ghent opera – and site visits. A special thanks to Porticus and Evens foundations for their financial contribution.

I wish you all a very inspiring Philea forum, and look forward to our discussions to come, because ... if it depends on us, the Philanthropic community, the best is yet to come.

I thank and count on you.