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# Bringing European Union Grand Strategies Closer to Local Communities: The Role of Community Foundations in Substantiating EU's Strategic Thinking on Sustainable Development

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**Abstract** While the European Union (EU) asserts a global leadership position based on its grand strategic vision, its ability to keep citizens close in that endeavor proves, however, to be limited. At the same time, a good number of local communities in the EU are augmenting their impact at home and abroad, almost always without managing to capture the attention of the EU institutions, strategies, and policies. The community infrastructure that is generated presents functional approaches for addressing local sustainability challenges and is inspiring communities globally. The chapter argues that the EU's democratic deficit becomes both a liability and a vulnerability in creating and consolidating a more powerful global position and in implementing global strategies. In doing so, it reviews the experience of European community foundations in enhancing strategic thinking in local communities and explores the ways in which the two narratives, local and European, could come together to reinforce each other.

**Keywords:** • EU democratic deficit • EU as a global actor • community foundations • civil society • securty

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# 1    Introduction

The Association for the Practice of Transformation[1], a Romanian association, is supporting local communities in Latin America to develop community foundations – a mechanism that contributes to community sustainability in close to 2000 areas globally. Such a practice is driven by local communities and emphasizes the added value that European Union (EU) communities can bring when connecting with communities abroad. Yet, such a practice is not visible for the EU institutions. Paradoxically, while the EU asserts a global leadership position based on its grand strategic vision, its ability to recognize instances of citizen- and community-driven global leadership is lacking.

The EU is criticized extensively for failing to connect to citizens and local communities. A relevant body of literature relates to democratic deficit, which conceptualizes and empirically demonstrates the distance between EU bureaucratic institutions and citizens. (Jensen, 2009)  Furthermore, the EU is little understood in local communities and holds a limited understanding of local communities. A good number of local communities in the EU are augmenting their impact at home and abroad, almost always without managing to capture the attention of the EU institutions, strategies, and policies. (Cibian et al., 2023) The community infrastructure that is generated presents functional approaches for addressing local sustainability challenges and are inspiring communities globally.

In external affairs and security, EU's democratic deficit and inability to connect to local communities become both a liability and a vulnerability. They limit the EU's ability to create and consolidate a more powerful global position and implement global strategies, turning, at times, the EU into an empty bureaucratic shell. (Koenig-Archibugi, 2002; 2002) Focusing on community foundations and sustainable development, this chapter will inquire *what are the implications of the cleavage between EU institutions and local communities for the EU's foreign and security policy?*

In doing so the chapter relies on international relations, development, and sustainability literatures, exploring the inability of EU bureaucracy to understand local realities. (Cibian, 2012; Elgström, 2007; Hill et al.,, 2023) It also focuses on civil society and philanthropy literature to present the activity of community foundations in the Europe. (Cibian et al., 2023; Steffek, et al., 2007; Steffek & Nanz, 2008) Theoretically the chapter contributes to the IR English School Theory as it is instrumental in conceptualizing a transition from international society to world society. (Buzan, 2004; Dunne, 2023).

This research relies on interpretive methodology, aiming to uncover gaps in EU's ability to recognize, understand, and ascribe meaning to local community practices. Empirically, the chapter focuses on the engagement of community foundations and community foundations support organizations with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For showing the activity of community foundations in the field of sustainable development,

and consistently with interpretive methodology, the chapter relies on data collected through 15 semi-structured interviews and five focus groups between January 2022 and June 2023.[2]

The chapter contributes to existing literature by demonstrating the inability of EU institutions to recognize and augment the impact of EU local communities at a global level and shows how such inability represents a vulnerability limiting the global ambitions of the Union and its ability to provide security. Furthermore, the chapter shows how local communities are increasingly relevant actors in global affairs.

The chapter shows, based on previous literature, the challenges EU institutions face in connecting to local realities. It also reviews the experience of European community foundations in enhancing strategic thinking in local communities. The chapter then looks at the implications of the cleavage between the EU and local communities for the Union's foreign and security policy. Finally, it explores the ways in which the two narratives, local and European, could come together to reinforce each other.

## 2 EU's Global Aspirations, Local Communities, and Citizens

The EU asserts itself as a relevant power globally. (Hill et al., 2023) Furthermore, there are streams of literature analyzing the activity and impact of the European Union, including EU Studies, European Politics, European Policy, EU and International Relations (Hill et al., 2023), the Europeanization Literature, (Borsetti, 2023; de Flers & Müller, 2012; Dosenrode, 2020) norm diffusion literature, (Kolmašová & Reboredo, 2023) and others. Much less attention is paid to how the EU learns and connects to citizens and local communities (Kiernan, 1997; van den Hoogen et al., 2022). Indeed, streams of literature advanced on topics such as the EU's democratic deficit and critical literature on EU's role globally.

### 2.1 EU in the world

For decades, the EU aims to assert and retain a global leadership role. The literature explores EU's global aspirations over time and highlight the struggles the EU is going through in shaping its identity as a Global Actor. (Bachmann & Sidaway, 2009; Giusti, 2020; K. E. Smith, 2017; Vogler, 2014) The ability of the EU to transform its power into a leadership role is limited by internal struggles and complexity. (Elgström, 2007) Furthermore, given its institutional complexity, the EU encounteres difficulties to act coherently and assert a specific identity on a global level. (Amadio Viceré & Hofmann, 2023; Pishchikova & Piras, 2017; Tereszkiewicz, 2020) Internal challenges are complemented by emerging global challenges with significant impact on how EU conceives its own future. (Archick, 2017)

EU's efforts to assert itself as a Global Actor are giving some results that are recognized by the academic literature. Bradford describes the EU as a 'global regulatory hegemon' in his 2020 work. (Bradford, 2020) Furthermore, the literature shows the achievements and also challenges in EU's engagement with international organizations (Wessel & Odermatt, 2019) and international regimes. (Delreux & Earsom, 2023)

The Union has contributed to a number of areas and aims to drive on several of them. EU role in democracy promotion is explored in depth by Khakee. (Khakee, 2022) The EU attempts to lead on environmental issues (Parker & Karlsson, 2017) Parker and Karlsson (2017) analyze the COP negotiations and demonstrate diverging interest between the EU, US, and China, sowing the difficulty the EU faces in asserting its leadership. In regional terms, the EU focuses on all regions of the world, with a key focus on Africa, (Carbone, 2020; Cibian, 2020; Lopez, 2017) the EU's neighborhood, or Asia. (Singh, 2019) EU's global drive is directly affected by the current European and global crisis, a context described in the literature as a policrisis. (Newsome, 2022; Pinto, 2023) Brexit and the post-Brexit relationship with the UK have significantly altered the international standing of both actors. (Smith, 2017; Smith, 2019) Furthermore, in a global context where the pandemic has significantly affected global sustainability efforts, (Shulla et al., 2021) EU's vision for its global role are also transforming.

Recent crisis such as the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Russian war against Ukraine have changed the world we live in, including the EU's visions for its global role. Several trends are leaving a mark on EU's place in the world. Although the EU addressed the COVID-19 pandemic relatively quickly, (Boin & Rhinard, 2023) the global crisis brought by the pandemic continues to affect the Union in multiple ways. The EU finds itself in a global economic competition where it has to take difficult stances as the cases of semiconductors (Bardt, Röhl, & Rusche, 2022) and energy negotiations (Mišík & Nosko, 2023) illustrate. Such challenges makes it difficult for the EU to balance between its transatlantic commitment and economic dependence on China. (Casarini, 2022) Global rivalry is taken at the next level by the broader implications of Russia's war against Ukraine as that contributes to aligning third actors that articulate a competing version of globalization, (Benedikter, 2023)

## 2.2    EU's democratic deficit and local communities

Recent challenges are not only of an external nature, they are also internal. The EU rests on democratic principles that are under pressure. (Bayer et al., 2019) Democratic principles and the transformation of democracy gather the attention of a large number scholars, including in relation to the EU. (Pinder, 1999; Ward, 2002) Debates on visions about the EU's democracy and democratic deficit are also addressed. (Bowman, 2006; Moravcsik, 2004)

The EU is seen as a "laboratory" for studying the development of democracy beyond the nation-state. (Jensen, 2009) Authors look, therefore, at multiple facets of EU democracy, including participation, (Radtke, 2023) challenges to civil society in post-communist Member States (Hummel & Strachwitz, 2023), democratic backsliding in the EU and its Member States (MS), (Beetz, 2023) and the European democratic deficit after crisis. (Kratochvíl & Sychra, 2019) The COVID-19 crisis is assessed to impact EU's democratic deficit in a similar way to economic crises. (Sebastião, 2021).

The literature deficient looks in detail at how various institutions forming the EU are characterized by democratic deficit. A strong focus is put in the literature on the European Parliament, (Crombez, 2003; Katz, 2001; Sorace, 2018) and on the technocratic bodies of the Union, including the European Commission. (Frahm et al., 2022) Furthermore, democratic deficit is assessed inr elation to specific other EU sectors and policy areas, such as media, (Sarikakis & Kolokytha, 2019) foreign and security policy. (Koenig-Archibugi, 2002; Wisniewski, 2013)

While the EU institutions make efforts to address their democratic deficit, European citizens continue to perceive the EU as distant, (van den Hoogen et al., 2022) indicating that efforts to date need to be transformed and scaled up. Solutions are indicated in the literature by balancing input and output legitimacy, (Stie, 2021) or by brining improvements in the further development of EU institutions. (Decker, 2002)

Without doubt, an area to further explore is also the way civil society participates in governance processes. Given the aggregator role of civil society, empowering different types of engagements with the EU institutions could pave the way for more democracy. The literature looks at civil society participation in global governance (Petersmann, 1998; Steffek et al., 2007; Steffek & Nanz, 2008; Trew, 2013) and in the EU, (Rodekamp, 2013; Smismans, 2006) illustrating multiple formats in which civil society contributes to mitigating the democratic deficit.

The above section looked at democratic deficient as a phenomenon that explores the inability of the EU to connect to citizens and civil society. The next section will move to exploring how civil society and local communities contribute to sustainability.

## 2.3    European local communities' global contributions on sustainability

The EU possesses significant assets that enables it to connect globally. Some of these assets are related to the work and activity of civil society organizations in local communities. This section will explore such potential by focusing on sustainability, as it is an emerging global topic. (Shulla et al., 2021)

Local communities in the EU face similar challenges as around the world. Guided by the SDGs, civil society organizations have increased their capacity to think about and act for ensuring the sustainability of their local communities. (Espinosa & Rangel, 2022; Gellers, 2016; Hayman, 2019; Henfrey et al., 2023)

A particular type of community-led initiatives are the community foundations – organizations that focus on enhancing community capacity by impacting generosity and stimulating local action. (Mazany & Perry, 2014) Since their initial emergence in the beginning of the XXth Century, CFs have spread around the world being present now in close to 2000 areas. (Feurt & Sacks, n.d.; Hodgson, et al., 2012.; Sacks, 2000; Yang, et al., 2021) Community foundations bring an impact on community development, (Lowe, 2004) the philanthropic sector (Suárez, Husted, & Casas, 2018), and also sustainable development (Cibian et al., 2023; Këruti, 2020)

As (Hanfrey et al., 2023) present, while the contribution of community initiatives is essential to all SDGs, there remain systemic challenges to recognizing such contribution. (Henfrey et al., 2023) This limitation is also affecting the EU. While institutional global contributions to the SDGs are recognized, the EU has little capacity to perceive, recognize, and augment community and civil society leadership on the SDGs.

## 3    Data and Analysis

The surveyed literature shows a continuous concern with the democratic character of the EU and its practices. With few exceptions (Moravcsik, 2004), the literature concurs on the challenges the EU is facing in engaging citizens and civil society. At the same time, the literature shows the contribution that civil society makes to the SDGs, basically to achieving sustainability in local communities and globally.

To understand the relationship between the EU and organizations that contribute to the sustainability of local communities, we conducted participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and five focus groups. In addition, we applied a questionnaire addressed to community foundations and community foundations support organizations.
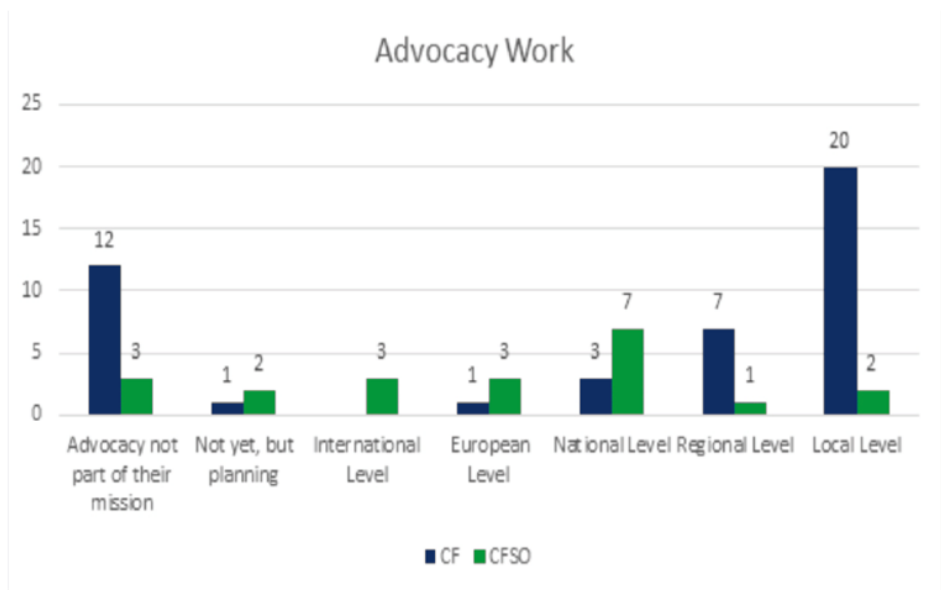
The field work and data collection took place between July 2021 and May 2023. Through the employed methods we interacted with over a hundred community foundations, benefited from 45 responses to the questionnaire, and engaged with 19 interlocutors (focus groups and interviews).[3]

Based on the above methods we collected both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data consists in a database with 45 responses from European community foundations and support organizations from 17 countries.[4]  Qualitative data has been recorded and analysed using topic coding, in order to understand the perspectives of

community foundations and community foundations support organizations on how they contribute to the SDGs and to the sustainability of their communities. Participant observation consisted in attending ten professional events such as community foundations conferences (Canada, Romania, Serbia, and the UK), workshops and seminars organized by the European Community Foundation Imitative, Association for the Practice of Transformation, Association for Community Relations, and Philea. Participant observation offered the chance to collect data about individual perspectives on sustainability and the EU, as well as on the overall perspectives on sustainability and the EU encountered in the field of community foundations in Europe.

Community foundations and community foundations support organizations expose a limited advocacy capacity and perceive, in general, that advocacy is not a top priority. In fact, a good number of surveyed (n=15) indicates that advocacy is not a part of their mission, as Fig. 1 below indicates.

**Figure 1:**   Engagement of community foundations and community foundation support organizations in advocacy work
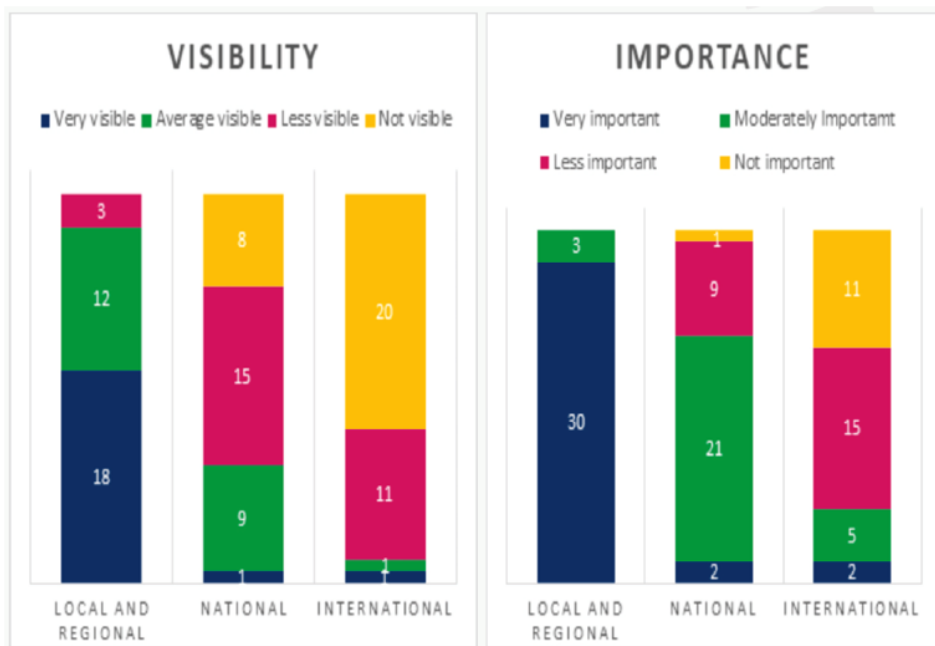


Source: authors own, 2023.[5]

This figure shows as well that from among the surveyed community foundations and community foundations support organizations only a limited number (n=4) engage in advocacy at a European level.

Furthermore, when asked respondents about the visibility and importance of their work at a local, national, and international level, community foundations perceive naturally the local level to be the most important. At the same time their attention to the international level is limited, as illustrated in Figure 2 below.

**Figure 2:** Visibility and importance of community foundations' work at three levels: local, natonal, and international



Source: authors own, 2023.[6]

These results are consistent with the qualitative and participant observation data, indicating a strong focus of community foundations at a local level and, to some extent, a detachment from the international and European levels.

At the same time, there are community foundations and community foundations support organizations that, through the SDGs, increasingly connect to the European and global levels. That is an incipient phenomenon. We encountered three organizations that have changed their vision and/or strategy to connect with the SDGs.

Overall, community foundations perceive that they contribute to strengthening the capacity of their communities which connects in multiple ways with contributions to their communities' sustainability. When it comes to connecting to the SDGs, community foundations engage once they understand how Agenda 2030 is relevant for their locality.

What we can learn from the above is that the democratic deficit of the EU is not only related to the practice of European institutions, but also to local actors that tend to be focused on their own communities. At the same time, the EU has not managed yet to find ways to rise the interest of local actors in EU affairs sufficiently.

At the same time, community foundations relate to one another globally, share good practices, and have generated a network of national and regional community foundations support organizations. The community foundation mechanism has been expanding globally through the support of local funders and the passion and engagement of motivated local citizens.

The community foundation mechanism represents a key piece of a local infrastructure for sustainability as it mobilizes resources and addresses local challenges that most often relate to sustainability. Organizations such as the Association for the Practice of Transformation, the European Community Foundation Initiative, UK Community Foundations, and others, contribute substantively to sharing the model of the community foundation across borders, in Europe and beyond. Such a significant contribution to community sustainability and the SDGs has not been recognized by the EU or by the UN. The inability of the EU to connect to the work of community foundations reinforces the argument regarding the democratic deficit, as it shows the inability of the Union to see and become a part of the lives of local communities. Such limitation indicates a challenge for the Union to comply with its own mission and values, which further undermines the solidity of EU actions in all policy areas, including its foreign and security policy. It is this gap between the EU institutions and the life of local communities that undermines EU actions that I will explore in the next section.

## 4 Strengthening EU's Global Approach Through Aligning the Union's Strategies with Local Communities

We learn from the above that local actors such as the community foundations pay attention primarily to their local communities and that the EU (as well as other international organizations) is most often not an acknowledged part local community dynamics. At the same time, we can understand that EU vision, policy, and action is an empty shell without the support of European citizens, communities, and societies. The inability of the EU to become part of the lives of European citizens and local communities represents, I argue, a key vulnerability for the Union and Member States.

## 4.1 Building synergies for a stronger global impact

Such a vulnerability is critical for the foreign and security policy of the European Union because of two interconnecting trends. First, as presented above, recent actions to contest the current multilateral system (Benedikter, 2023) are bringing a higher level of instability globally and on the European continent. Second, the advancement of digital technology enabled a cyber conflict and cyberwar (Eun & Aßmann, 2016; Mazanec, 2023) to emerge between contenders for global influence.

These two trends indicate an increasing prospective pressure on the EU both from within and from abroad, alongside a broader contestation phenomenon within the international community. (Chan, 2021; Copelovitch et al., 2020; Schmitt, 2020) The gap between EU institutions and citizens constitutes a core vulnerability given the need for concerted and consolidated action in front of such developments. Furthermore, that gap constitutes a liability for EU's global leadership ambitions.

Although there is a cleavage between EU institutions on the one hand and citizens and local communities on the other, there certainly is a common value base. Many European citizens and civil society organizations, such as the community foundations, aspire for solidarity, freedom, and peace; values that are currently under threat by claims for shaping an alternative multilateral order. Recognizing that such a cleavage exists and is often reenforced by EU practices, is a first step in overcoming this situation.

EU institutions do not have to stay away from citizens and civil society organizations. They are in a good position to revise current strategies and practices to value citizens and local communities, to connect to them, and to generate common action. Such a step is essential for a stronger global position.

Foreign policy is perceived to be outside of the reach of ordinary citizens. However, external action, robust international relations, and a specific external identity cannot be put in place and maintain without citizens. Especially so in a democracy where citizens hold power through their vote.

## 4.2 Broader IR implications

The above discussion highlights that international phenomena are transforming in a global space that is increasingly digital and insecure. Such transformation is visible in the case of the EU's claims for global leadership, where disregard for internal alignment leads to limited power and leadership. These are early traces and trends that indicate a broader shift at the level of the international multilateral system, uncovering that it is not only the level of contestation that matters, but also the level of internal cohesion and alignment. Furthermore, the chapter presents the story of local communities that matter for global

phenomena, bringing evidence for a slow transition towards a World Society as depicted by the English School. In the emerging World Society, local communities articulate international actions, becoming relevant for international phenomena. Further attention is to be paid at the way the international is transforming given the diversification of actors that become relevant in international interactions.

## 5        Conclusion

This chapter showed how EU democratic deficit manifests itself in the case of EU's relations to local communities and citizens, through the experience of European community foundations. The chapter further highlights the contribution of community foundations to sustainable development both in Europe and globally, and the relevance of European community foundations and community foundations support organizations for building a global community infrastructure for sustainability. At the same time the chapter reflects on the lack of attention given by the EU to such activities which in effect reinforce its claims for relevance on the global arena.

The EU can overcome the cleavage between local communities and EU institutions by revising its strategies and actions to reflect a deeper understanding of its own citizens. To remain a recognized global actor, the EU needs to consolidate its embeddedness at a local level by becoming a part of the lives of local communities.

**Notes:**

[1] Association for the Practice of Transformation (APT), accessible at, https://inspire-change.org/.
[2] The data was collected as a part of the … project, generously supported by C.S. Mott Foundation.
[3] The collected data was analysed in two reports published by the Făgăraș Research Institute. (D. S. Cibian, Hernández Renner, Bērziņš, & McGrath, 2022; S. Cibian et al., 2023)
[4] Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Spain, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom.
[5] Figure created by Edi Dragoș Berserman, Făgăraș Research Institute.
[6] Figure created by Edi Dragoș Berserman, Făgăraș Research Institute.

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