

**September 2024 interview with SNF Co-President Andreas Dracopoulos for *Shedia* magazine by Christos Alefantis and Spyros Zonakis**

**1. You emphasize that philanthropy should stem from a genuine desire and ability to give, in keeping with the literal meaning of the word, "friend of human beings." In other words, philanthropy must be truly selfless. What is your assessment of Stavros Niarchos Foundation's (SNF) contribution to society in light of this definition of philanthropy?**

What you're describing is also encapsulated by our driving goal of "*empowering humanity*," which distills the essence of our mission. Behind every grant and initiative we support are real people and our conviction that everyone, without exception, deserves equal access to life's essentials, to education, to culture, and to quality health care. Our sole objective is to contribute to the common good without any ulterior motive, aiming to contribute to making our world even a little better.

Since SNF was founded in 1996, we have always felt fortunate and proud to be able to provide support that has reached more than 130 countries around the world through more than 5,000 grants. And we would like to believe that our work, founded on our programmatic cornerstones of arts and culture, education, health and sports, and social welfare—areas broad enough to encompass anything—speaks for itself. We are committed to relentlessly pursuing this mission, serving the common good as far as we are able with redoubled dedication, resolution, and hard work.

**2. You have a lot of faith in partnerships and public-private sector synergies. How can these serve as tools to mitigate social inequalities, in your view?**

The problems that we as a society are facing are too complex, demanding, and multidimensional for us to tackle individually. They are, essentially, global problems: wars and conflicts, civil and otherwise; the refugee crisis; the crisis confronting democracy; climate change; social inequalities; the mental health crisis; the ascendancy of artificial intelligence; and many others. I firmly believe—and I bring it up at every opportunity—that the solutions lie in collaboration and partnerships: collaboration between public and private stakeholders, with a third-sector contribution from philanthropy, of course, as well as collaboration both within and across borders.

The Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center (SNFCC), envisioned by SNF and delivered to the people of Greece in 2017, represents the first public-private partnership of its kind in Greece. Seven years after its delivery, we are moved to see that what began as a daring idea in the depths of the socioeconomic crisis not only became a reality, but also surpassed even the most optimistic predictions for its future. The SNFCC has grown into an internationally recognized landmark in Athens, a truly open public space for all, and people feel that it belongs to them. So when I express a belief in the value of partnerships and collaboration, it's not overoptimistic. It's based in long, real experience.

**3. You talk about a "welfare society" and not just a welfare state. How exactly can society undertake the welfare work typically done by the state?**

"The Role of Philanthropy within a Social Welfare Society" was the title of the second SNF Conference in 2013, known at the time as the Annual Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF) International Conference on

Philanthropy. Our title was inspired by an article by Swedish economist Anders Åslund which advocated for a shift to a welfare society. Eleven years later, the term seems more relevant than ever. The term “welfare society” is directly related to the need for collaboration and partnerships that we mentioned earlier. It is based on the observation that the state, any state, on its own cannot resolve all the issues and meet all the needs its people face without substantial contributions from other stakeholders, without coordination between the private and public sectors, and without active participation and contributions by citizens. And lest what I am saying be misinterpreted, when I talk about contributions from citizens, I’m not referring only to financial support. Anyone can contribute in their own fashion: by sharing their ideas, by being an active citizen, by volunteering. Solutions won’t magically appear on their own. It is our duty, each as we are able, to find and implement them together.

**4. Civil society in Greece is being challenged and is dogged by mistrust. Public opinion widely holds that there is a lack of transparency, that motives are often not disinterested and above-board, and that the goal is the personal enrichment of the organizations. How can such perceptions be changed?**

What you’re describing is truly unfortunate, but it is not exclusively a Greek phenomenon. Even in countries where philanthropy is more a part of daily life, mistrust of donors’ intentions can prevail. If you look at the 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer, a survey conducted every year in some 30 countries around the world, it’s apparent that the Western world lacks trust in NGOs, even though the overall trust level in them is much higher than that in governments and the media. Unfortunately, the situation in Greece is worse, with this lack of trust deeply rooted in the Greek mindset, and indeed, corruption and lack of transparency have never been addressed with effective reform measures. It is worth noting that, according to a 2024 diaNEOsis survey, while Greeks trust traditional institutions such as the family, the armed forces, and the Church, they do not trust political parties and the media, and NGOs come last with respect to trust.

We have a long, hard road ahead of us when it comes to changing this perception. First of all, civil society organizations must serve their mission impartially, without an ulterior agenda, and with an emphasis on the transparency of their processes and on creating robust lines of communication with the public. The excellent initiative from Shedia and Higgs to organize regular meetings with representatives of civil society, which I had the great pleasure and honor of joining in June, is a step in the right direction. I would also like to mention the Transparency Initiative recently established in Greece which a number of organizations signed onto. We need more initiatives and actions in this vein. In my personal opinion, and speaking to anyone who might harbor skepticism towards philanthropy, the answer is not to distance yourself, but to get more involved. Similarly, the answer to frustration with politics is not opting out, but engaging in active citizenship.

**5. You have pushed back against the “cancer of polarization” that is plaguing Greek society. What is the remedy for this polarization and how can civil society build bridges of dialogue?**

Polarization seems to be evolving into the status quo, and the social unrest, socioeconomic crisis, pandemic, and energy crisis we have experienced make the situation even more difficult. And it is obviously not just a Greek phenomenon. We are seeing tumult worldwide, exemplified by the political situation in the US. The only remedy, in my opinion, is dialogue, real dialogue, followed by collaboration. I say “real dialogue” because the most important element of true dialogue is being able to listen to each other, even when we disagree. We must respect other people’s views, no matter how different they are, provided those views respect democratic values and human rights. And we must then find a way to work together for the common good. There is no collaboration without mutual compromise, which is also something we need to learn; nothing is more effective than a strong and broad partnership. We all need to pitch in, to the extent of our abilities, and remember to lead with our humanity, in spite of the headwinds and hurdles we face.

**6. You emphasize that SNF is here to complement rather than to replace the state. So how does the Global Health Initiative (GHI) you are implementing complement and contribute to universal access to health care?**

This is a key principle that has characterized our work since our founding and throughout our journey, and it aligns with our belief that solutions lie in partnerships and collaboration. I have often said that we as a foundation cannot replace the state—no philanthropic foundation can. But even if we could, that’s not what we would want to do. It is not our role, and it doesn’t align with our values. The \$1 billion-plus Global Health Initiative (GHI) is our largest Initiative to date, comprising over 60 grants based on partnerships in Greece and internationally. The three new state-of-the-art hospitals that are under construction in Thessaloniki, Komotini, and Sparta as part of the GHI will, like the SNFCC, be handed over in their entirety to the people of Greece with the aim of, as you mentioned, promoting universal access to health care. The Initiative is not limited to building health infrastructure and supplying equipment, though. Equally important is empowering front-line health professionals. In this area, the Initiative includes the implementation of educational programs dealing with topics like trauma and hospital-acquired infections, as well as partnerships with leading organizations around the world to promote the exchange of expertise on an international level. Only by empowering humanity can positive change be achieved, and this is how we can substantially contribute to enhancing access to quality of health services for all.

**7. A British poet once said that “Art is man's nature; nature is God's art.” Art and the environment coexist in Stavros Niarchos Park. What does this meeting mean for you and, ultimately, for this space?**

To me, Stavros Niarchos Park and the SNFCC in general represent hope—hope for the future of Greece and a glimpse of what modern Greece could be like. It is an essentially people-centered project and the backdrop to countless human stories of enjoyment, learning, inclusion, dialogue, free exchange of idea, and self-expression. It offers a necessary breath of fresh air, literally as well as spiritually, given that Athens and Greece’s urban centers in general suffer from a serious lack of green spaces, not to mention public spaces and venues for free access to art and culture. Art is one of the few remaining refuges for the soul, and it has an unsurpassed power to move us, connect us, and take us on journeys beyond the logical. It should never be taken for granted. That the instinctive need people have for art and free public green spaces is largely met at the SNFCC and that people have embraced it for themselves for their own personal reasons fills us with joy and moves us.

**8. You note that the “haves” in our country can do so much more regarding everything from stopping tax evasion to philanthropy. Do you think they should pick up where national benefactors of the 19th and early 20th century left off?**

The only possible answer is a resounding "yes." It would be both feasible and beneficial and is tied to the previous discussion on each of us pitching in to the degree we are able. Giving back for the common good is not necessarily about money, although it is important for the “haves” to give as much as they can, and in recent years even more people have been trying to give even more. Equally important is giving our time and energy through volunteering, and that is something everyone can do. Regarding your reference to the previous century, I think that times have changed significantly because needs are much more complex now, problems are often global, and solutions require broad communication and cooperation. Moreover, beyond philanthropy as it is classically understood, new models of giving, such as corporate social responsibility, have steadily come to the fore, especially over the last 20 years. As we have seen, generation Z now expects companies and brands to both operate sustainably and follow a code of ethics that makes it imperative that part of the profits be used to benefit society. But this is part of another, broader discussion on philanthropy and the values it represents, and the extent to which a grant can stray from ideals of solidarity and selflessness.

**9. A Protestant view would describe wealth as a “blessing from God,” and that contributing to society is an obligatory way of giving back. Do you feel “blessed”?**

I feel blessed by both God and my great-uncle! It is a real blessing that so many years after SNF’s founding, thanks to the bequest from Stavros S. Niarchos, we are still here as a Foundation, trying to identify current needs and to make long-term positive change, while always remaining human. In any case, I don’t think that the term “giving back” is representative of the work being done, as it implies an obligatory contribution, taking altruism and selflessness out of the picture. Every act of assistance to our neighbors should emanate from these values.

**10. In the end, is philanthropy the product of this “debt” to give back? Can there be philanthropy without empathy?**

By definition, philanthropy, goodwill towards others, cannot exist without empathy and compassion. If we take empathy out of the equation, then we are no longer talking about philanthropy. We are talking about something different, perhaps as you defined it in your previous question, an “obligatory way of giving back” or a type of self-interested investment.

If we humans retain any edge over artificial intelligence, one of the few advantages humanity has is emotional intelligence, our “E.Q.,” our ability to manage our feelings and to be sensitive towards the feelings of others. At the level of IQ, after all, you could argue that humanity is already out of the game.

**11. *The Tyranny of Distance* is the title of a book written in 1966 by Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey. It discusses how the geographical distance between Australia and Great Britain determined the course and identity of the new continent. To what extent do others define you by the fact that you live in the US?**

The physical distance that separates Greece from the US may be great, but in practice the differences between the two countries are not that pronounced. There is more that unites us than divides us. We are two democratic countries with shared ideals championing people's civil, political, and social rights and the importance of humanity, hope, and equal opportunity. The Statue of Liberty, which looks out from Liberty Island and keeps the flame of freedom alive, is a timeless reminder of the values at the heart of democracy. Sometimes, however, due to the difference in scale between the two countries, the physical distance between them offers a vantage point that helps you see issues more clearly in their true dimensions and discern solutions amidst problems.

In any case, I was born and raised in Greece, and my heart, like that of the Foundation, will never stop beating here.

**12. In New York, it would be a simpler question to ask: What makes you tick? What is it that ultimately gives meaning to your life?**

The answer is encapsulated perfectly in the expression: “Give it all you have. Every day.”

**Thank you very much!**