POLICY BRIEFING FOR FOUNDATIONS & GRANTMAKERS

European Philanthropy in 2022: A Benchmark for Foundation Strategy

What the first pan-European giving study in nine years reveals about foundation giving, peer context, and the state of the field

Based on: Philanthropy in Europe (ERNOP, 2026). Edited by Barry Hoolwerf & Johan Vamstad. Data covers 20 European countries, 2022. Lower-bound estimates throughout.

The European Foundation Landscape: Scale and Unevenness

ERNOP's Philanthropy in Europe is the most comprehensive cross-national mapping of philanthropic giving in Europe — covering individuals, bequests, corporations, foundations, and charity lotteries across 20 countries. For foundations, it provides something that has not previously existed at this scale: a common benchmark against which to understand your own position within the European philanthropic ecosystem.

€20.6bn	€6.4bn	€3.1bn	€104.5bn
Foundation giving across Europe (2022)	Germany — largest foundation sector	Switzerland — largest per capita in Europe	Total European philanthropy

Where Foundation Giving Sits in the European Picture

Foundation giving is the third-largest source of European philanthropy, behind individuals (€52bn) and corporations (€21.5bn), and slightly ahead of bequests (€8.4bn). But the €20.6bn figure is explicitly a lower bound — and for foundations specifically, the definitional constraints are significant.

> **Why the foundation figure understates reality**
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> The study defines foundation giving strictly as monetary donations derived from endowments. It excludes pass-through funding, government-originated grants, and non-endowed foundations. In countries like France and the UK, total foundation expenditure is substantially larger than what appears in this study — but it cannot be disaggregated to isolate endowment-derived giving. The €20.6bn figure captures the comparable core, not the full sector.

Country-level highlights:

- → **Germany (€6.4bn):** By far the largest foundation sector. A new national foundation register launched in 2026 may significantly improve data coherence and accessibility going forward.
- → **Switzerland (€3.1bn):** Disproportionately large for its population size. At least eight major research institutions study Swiss philanthropic foundations — the research infrastructure matches the sector's scale.
- → **Sweden (€922m):** Foundation giving is driven primarily by research funding, through major foundations with industrial heritage. The sector is large relative to GDP but structured differently from grant-making foundations in Western Europe.
- → **UK (€3.3bn):** Significant but structurally opaque — there is no regulatory distinction between operating charities and foundations in UK charity law, limiting comparability.
- → **Denmark (€1.2bn):** Strong foundation sector but data derived from 2017; the 2022 update was not available. Several Nordic countries face the same data-continuity issue.
- → **France (€1.6bn):** The figure reflects the Philanthropy Observatory's survey of approximately 59% of foundations. Total foundation expenditure in France is estimated at €16bn — the endowment-derived portion captured here is a small fraction of that.

Cause Patterns: Consistency at the Top, Divergence Below

Across countries with sufficient data, foundation giving concentrates in education and research, social services, and health. This pattern is broadly consistent with individual and corporate giving at the European level, though foundations are less responsive to crisis causes — by design.

France illustrates the cause distribution well: social actions (25%), education and research (19%), culture (19%), and health (15%) collectively account for 78% of foundation activity. The Netherlands shows a similar profile, with public and social benefit leading at 34%, followed by culture (15%) and international aid (12%).

> **What this means for cross-border grantmaking**
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> Foundation giving is strategic and mission-driven, shaped by governance structures that differ substantially across countries. Swedish foundation law constrains active, flexible philanthropic models — some major Swedish donors use alternative vehicles as a result. In Germany and Poland, corporate foundations blur the boundary with corporate philanthropy. If you operate across borders, the legal and fiscal framework in each country shapes not only the amounts but the organisational forms you will encounter.

The Data Infrastructure Problem — and Why It Matters to You

Data availability on foundation giving varies more widely than for any other source examined in this study. This is not a minor technical limitation — it has real consequences for strategy, advocacy, and the sector's ability to make the case for its own value.

- → **Several major markets have critical gaps.** Belgium lacks a comprehensive national register — best available data come from surveys by the King Baudouin Foundation. In France, individual foundation records are public, but no centralised system aggregates them. Spain has fragmented data across regional protectorates with no shared classification.
- → **Switzerland collects annual reports but does not publish them.** Foundations submit to supervisory authorities, but the data are not publicly accessible. This is a structural gap that limits the field's ability to benchmark itself.

→ **Progress is happening — unevenly.** Portugal went from no individual giving data in 2017 to a fully representative dataset by 2022. Germany's new foundation register may produce similar step-change improvements. Ireland is developing a classification framework drawing on ERNOP's methodology.

→ **Foundations are best positioned to fund what governments will not.** The report explicitly identifies the lack of a shared European philanthropy data infrastructure as a central finding — and calls for foundations, sector organisations, and statistical offices to collaborate on building it.

The Broader Philanthropic Ecosystem: Context for Foundation Strategy

Understanding where foundation giving sits relative to other sources matters for strategy. Individual giving (€52bn) dwarfs foundation giving (€20.6bn) — but foundations are more stable, more strategic, and less crisis-driven. Bequests (€8.4bn) represent the fastest-growing source where professional infrastructure exists, and several foundations now fund legacy fundraising capacity in the organisations they support. Corporate giving (€21.5bn) is volatile and concentrated, but increasingly structured through ESG frameworks that create new alignment opportunities with foundation priorities in climate, education, and health.

Engage with the research network shaping European philanthropy data

ERNOP connects research institutions and philanthropy sector organisations across Europe. Foundation associate membership supports the research infrastructure that makes strategic cross-border grantmaking possible — and gives your organisation a seat at the table when research priorities are set. The next study cycle begins in 2025.

→ **Learn about ERNOP associate membership at www.ernop.eu**