

“A seat here isn’t a medal. You have to work at it.”

Surprises, focus and ideal Board composition

What does our Foundation’s Board* do? Why would someone want to join? What is it like to be a member? And what could the future look like? We discussed these and other questions with John Atkin, who joined in 2015.

Syngenta Foundation (SFSA): What motivated you to join our Board?



John Atkin: Several aspects played a role. I’m a farmer myself, and believe strongly that every farm can be a business. Some NGO’s take a rather bucolic view of smallholder agriculture. In my eyes, however, ‘subsistence’ farming is neither desirable nor a fate – young people should be able to *choose* to farm because they see it as an attractive profession. The thought of helping ‘pre-commercial’ farmers step up to running their smallholdings as commercial operations had always appealed to me. In the past, however, I’d only observed this kind of agriculture from a distance. Joining the Syngenta Foundation Board enables me to get actively involved.

What were the other factors involved in your decision?

My wife and I run a small foundation of our own**, and I find the work of such organizations fascinating. So the opportunity to help guide a much larger foundation with more international leverage was appealing. I also felt that my skill-set complemented those of my fellow Board Members. They have great expertise in other relevant areas; I bring the most business experience to our discussions. And yes, after so many years working at Syngenta, I also enjoy maintaining my connection with the company’s wide-ranging commitment to sustainable agriculture.

What has been your most positive surprise since joining the Board?

I hadn’t realized before how much impact SFSA has! I’d heard quite a lot about our work in the [insurance](#) area, but knew much less about [Seeds2B](#) and [Agriservices](#). I am immensely impressed by initiatives such as our [Agri-Entrepreneurs](#) in India. We and our partners are enabling young rural people to improve not only their own livelihoods, but also those of whole communities.

What have you discovered that you’d most like to change?

My impression is that SFSA itself has sometimes gone unnecessarily far down the ‘business’ road. We should concentrate on what being the Foundation enables us to do best. That means innovating, proving concepts, and incubating initiatives in the first phase of growth. I don’t think our skills are put to ideal use spinning off services or starting up companies. Large-scale dissemination is vitally important. But we need to find the right partners for that, and not try to do everything ourselves.

You sit on several company Boards. How does their work compare with a foundation’s equivalent?

Company Directors and non-profits’ Trustees are similar in some ways. Both groups have wide-ranging responsibilities, and need to keep out of daily operations and management! At a foundation, however, we naturally spend less time discussing ‘Profit & Loss’ sheets. Our role is much more about advice and about support, both personally and through our networks.

What do you see as our Board’s most important tasks?

We choose the Executive Director, and it's crucial we work closely together. We also provide advice on other senior appointments, as well as on the programs. We have to take a careful look at budget allocations, and encourage the acquisition of third-party funding. Our focus has to be on the longer-term future.

How is that focus expressed?

Let me give a practical example, rather than talking generally about "feeding the world in 2050". Africa's population is not only still growing rapidly; it is also getting younger and younger. Countries with an average age of 19 already face huge challenges of unemployment. These will get much worse, unless something is done about it. So there is an urgent need for initiatives that lead to sustainable employment opportunities for the young. SFSA and partners have a valuable role to play here. So one question the Board needs constantly to ask is: How does what the Foundation is planning today help provide rural jobs tomorrow?

So should your next new member be a 'millennial'?

That wouldn't be enough of a qualification on its own. The experience that older board members bring is a huge asset to the Foundation. But with an average age of over 60, we also benefit from closer contact with millennials' thinking. In the medium term, I feel we should be looking for somebody who is young and 'IT-savvy' – as well, of course, as having a passion for development topics and smallholder farming! Other characteristics would need to complement our existing expertise.

SFSA recently announced the appointment of Paul Boateng to the Board. What is your advice to him?

Get immersed! As well as reading and discussing with colleagues and the Foundation team, immersion includes field visits. Getting out in the countryside and meeting partners and smallholders is a highpoint of our work.

What should you and your Board colleagues do more of in future?

We need to assess our own performance more rigorously. That is something that one of "my" company Boards does extremely well. Being on a Board isn't a badge of honor. It's a big responsibility, legally, fiducially and morally. One has to work at it. And that includes reflecting frequently on the difference one is making, individually and as a team.

When you have some genuinely "free" time, what do you with it?

I try very hard to keep healthy. Walking and golf help. Thanks to living in Switzerland, so does skiing. Food is a personal passion as well, as it is professionally for one of our three daughters. I'm fascinated by the whole chain 'from field to fork', and enjoy good eating. I also invest a lot of effort in keeping up to date on the huge and complex topic of food needs, production and use.

*<https://www.syngentafoundation.org/foundation-board>

**<https://www.fundraiso.ch/sponsor/john-and-beverley-atkin-foundation/>