

## 2009 SESSION REPORT

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### **Tackling poverty and exclusion together: can community foundations rise to the challenge?**

*Moderator:* David Carrington, Alliance Publishing Trust

*Speakers:* Sibongile Mkhabela, Nelson Mandela Children's Fund; Ansis Berzins, Valmiera Region Community Foundation

*Session proposed by:* Alliance Publishing Trust, Global Fund for Community Foundations, Trust for Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe

Moderator David Carrington introduced the speakers Bongi Mkhabela and Ansis Berzins, both of whom are known for their work managing foundations in countries that have emerged in recent years, each in very different contexts. The aim of the session, Mr. Carrington stated, was to foster discussion of the potent and complex dilemmas around tackling poverty and the role that community foundations can play.

Taking the work of UK community foundations as an example, Mr. Carrington noted that central to the fundraising appeal of these organisations is the claim that community foundations can be expert intermediaries: they know the needs of the community and are well positioned to ensure that funds have real local impact.

He did however caution that while community foundations are community based they are often run by 'the great and the good' of the community; by local leaders and authorities, who may even be or have among their number, the fund's main donors. As a result of this there may be issues around funding groups on the margins of society; groups who may be unpopular or a source of resentment within the community, such as migrants or the families of prisoners.

Mr. Carrington then posed the question 'Can community foundations become effective champions for disadvantaged groups in society and if so, how do they deal with the dilemmas this raises?' He went on to ask 'Can community foundations accept funds from donors without regard to how and if the donors may have contributed to the problems that the foundation is trying to solve?' and 'Will supporting unpopular groups in society be off putting to donors?'

Mr. Carrington asked Mr. Berzins to outline the situation in Latvia. Mr. Berzins gave details of Latvia as a post-soviet bloc country, with 20 years of history in trying to develop civil society. The country entered the European Union 5 years ago and has in recent months been hit hard by the global financial crisis with the result that it is now facing possible bankruptcy.

The foundation run by Mr. Berzins serves the Valmiera region of Latvia. He explained that around half of Latvia's population lives in the capital Riga or in the other main cities, leaving many rural areas with depleted populations. Money seems to reside in the cities, he commented, but there are needs and ideas in rural areas that require resources if they are to be met and developed. This has been one of the most pressing problems faced by Valmiera Region Community Foundation.

The ethnic make up of communities in Latvia has also shaped their needs. During the soviet era, people of various soviet nationalities were 'imported' into Latvia to meet the country's labour requirements. The legacy of this is a broad diversity in the make up of communities – some villages consist almost entirely of indigenous Latvians, while others are almost fully Slavic.

Mr. Carrington asked Mr. Berzins how his organisation went about identifying disadvantaged people and their needs, in order to make an impact. Mr. Berzins explained that when the foundation first began working 4 years ago, working with marginalised groups did not feature high on the agenda. A need was felt to begin with projects that would be both visible and popular within the community – as a young organisation the foundation was not ready to tackle the trickier issues and also needed raise its profile and build up credibility, both within the community and with existing and potential donors.

Mr. Berzins went on to explain that it was often hard to talk about poverty in Latvia. The very word 'poverty' is associated with 'poor' countries – Latvia wanted to be a part of Europe and the two notions were not considered compatible.

Ms. Mkhabela agreed that there was a need for organisations to develop and refine their approaches according to changing conditions. There was a time, she explained, when the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund dealt simply with all problems related to children. The fund was a personal response from Mr. Mandela to the needs of children who had approached him. Time and experience have developed and refined the organisation's approach to its work.

The Nelson Mandela Children's Fund works throughout South Africa. A particular challenge is that poverty in the country is deepening. Children are not absorbed into the education system and the result is very young poverty. Civil society in South Africa is not yet strong enough and does not have a highly organised centre.

Ms. Mkhabela also emphasised the need to avoid using labels; the danger for example in talking about 'aids orphans', the impact that being branded by this kind of language can have on a child in the long term. There is of course a challenge here, since donors, Ms. Mkhabela noted, like labels and may be interested in more immediate and easily quantifiable information, such as how many children a project has fed, than in the wider aims of a project for raising a child's prospects for escaping poverty and the long term impact that this can have on them, their family and their community. Sometimes, Ms Mkhabela concluded, risks need to be taken to ensure that the needs of the community, not simply those of the donors, are being met.

Mr. Berzins again raised the issue of the challenge that he has faced in Latvia; the difficulty in even talking about poverty in a European context – it is hard to think of poverty as existing in Europe. But it does exist and often people living in cities do not realise what goes on and how people are living in depopulated rural areas. Often the problems faced by people in these areas are as much about isolation and social exclusion, and the low expectations that this breeds, as material poverty.

Mr. Berzins named the project entitled 'One Washing Machine' as an example of the kind of small, practical step that an organisation such as the Valmiera Region Community Foundation was able to take and the wider impact that this work can have. The provision of a washing machine for use by the community not only provided a practical service, making life easier, in particular for young families and the elderly, but also proved to be valuable social resource and hub, acting as it did as a meeting point for members of the community.

Following this, questions from participants that touched on the issues of how community foundations can engage with Roma communities and the issues around value having donors sit on boards were discussed.