

2009 SESSION REPORT

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Creating equal opportunities for Roma in European societies

Moderator: Dimitrina Petrova, Equal Rights Trust

Speakers: Costel Bercus, Roma Education Fund; Nicolae Gheorghe, Reflection Group of the Freudenberg Stiftung and the Pakiv European Roma Fund; Hywel Ceri Jones, Network of European Foundations.

Session proposed by: Freudenberg Stiftung

Dimitrina Petrova of the Equal Rights Trust began the session by way of citing her personal experience. In 1999, Ms. Petrova had partaken in a Commission to investigate the violation of rights of Roma in Italy. Ten years later, she had found herself moderating this session on Roma, convened in the same place where the reality of racism and xenophobic rhetoric remain rampant. And the story repeats itself throughout Europe.

- Why is it that despite massive investment of resources, energy and will, Roma, who constitute 8-10 million people in Europe, continue to be excluded from our societies?
- How can European foundations contribute strategically to this complex and multi-faceted issue?

The session, framed as a moderated discussion, set out to address these issues.

Costel Bercus of the Roma Education Fund offered insight into the reality of the existing gap in most European countries between Roma and non-Roma, outlining how, in the case of the Roma Education Fund (REF), education was being used as an entry point to reduce this disparity. The Roma Education Fund had been, for the past four years, aiming at providing educational opportunities to the Roma population by investing in pilot scalable projects, scholarships and policy change with demonstrated successes on each of these areas.

Participants of the session were asked to share methodologies and practices that had achieved concrete results in order to serve as inspiration for others there present. Some organisations shared their own experiences, leading to a concrete recommendation to continue this exchange of views and know-how in a coordinated and concrete way.

Some of the experiences shared included the use of 'mediators' or 'intermediaries', often from the Roma communities themselves to bridge a gap between the foundations' supported programmes and/or activities and the Roma communities. However, Nicolae Gheorghe of the Freudenberg Stiftung and Pakiv European Roma Fund, warned foundations of the potential detrimental effects of supporting this type of work. According to Mr. Gheorghe these 'mediators/intermediaries' were being trained and deployed in a way that they were losing touch with their communities, which was not always apparent to the users of their services but resulted in a loss of potential grassroots activists from the Roma communities who could address issues within said communities and inspire critical thinking among them.

A series of other issues were brought up during the discussion including: how to deal with the fact that although the issue of Roma manifests itself locally, the bigger issue of perception and discrimination required a global approach, and one that does not differentiate between East and West as is often the case. The issue of the economic crisis and how this may undermine past achievements by decreasing the political will to act on this was shared as a real and timely concern for funders and organisations working on Roma issues.

The question of why foundations shy away from funding the issue of Roma or attending sessions such as these organised in the scope of the EFC Conference was also raised. One of

the reasons given was ‘donor fatigue’ of dealing persistently with a problem that did not show signs of abating. However, participants and panellists agreed the fact that the Roma needed to be part of any approach to eliminating exclusion and that any “Roma blind” approach to these issues would be counterproductive if not completely ineffective. The reality is that foundations need to react to the situation on the ground – and Roma are part of this reality. In effect, an array of options exist for foundations looking to fight exclusion, be it through arts projects, education, housing, etc as well as support for any issues where marginalised populations such as Roma find themselves at disadvantage compared to the rest of the population.

Hywel Ceri Jones of the Network of European Foundations made an appeal for foundations to benefit from the opportunities presented at this moment in time and become increasingly involved in providing strategic input which is much needed in helping set out and implement the European agenda on Roma and help breath life and vigour into the principles on Roma inclusion – a set of explicit goals set out by the European Union for achieving social inclusion of Roma.

In an attempt to build on the momentum of the session, a group of foundations volunteered to look into possibilities of further engagement to exchange know-how and become part of the process for the realistic achievement of equality Roma in Europe.