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Plenaries reports

And so it began...After a year of preparation, this year's Grantmakers East Forum (GEF) conference in the beautiful Croatian old town of Dubrovnik kicked off with opening words from GEF Chair Zoran Puljic, and the welcoming speech of Mr Borislav Vuckovic, advisor to the President of the Republic of Croatia for Social and Humanitarian Affairs. The conference continued over 2 days with 4 exciting and thought-provoking plenaries engaging participants in a number of varied discussions. Please read on to find out more:

Building Inclusive Societies

Polish journalist Wawrzyniec Smoczynski, moderator of this years first GEF plenary, started the morning with a provocative introduction. The audience was then kindly asked to answer some questions, one of them was: does civil society exist? Although 56.9% of the audience said yes, Wawrzyniec theorised that, in his opinion, it does not. Other questions were: is social inclusion possible; what is more important human or social rights; and does the state have a future?

The conclusion was that 20th century societies were built on exclusion rather than inclusion, that social rights are the ultimate challenge, and that a certain distrust of the state exists. Furthermore Wawrzyniec said that NGOs are afraid of politics and that they are slowly dying. The panellists were asked to comment on this, and to answer if indeed inclusive societies can be built. The most provocative question was: who is responsible for

Dubrovnik 2008

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Background

The Grantmakers East Forum, formerly The Grantmakers East Group (GEG) was created in 1992 by a group of European Foundation Centre (EFC) members active in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Newly Independent States (NIS). The group first met as a side event at the EFC Annual General Assembly (AGA) and Conference. However, as interest for the group grew, in pace with

building inclusive societies-governments or NGOs? Since all of the panellists were coming from different environments, the answers were quite diverse.

Alida Vracic, from the Bosnia and Hercegovinas Populari Centre for Socio-economic Studies, said that only in wartime people of her state acted as one. No one was excluded. But now the exclusion of many groups is a reality, and the State has no strategy for building an inclusive society: it is therefore up to NGOs to work on this problem. Magdalena Arczewska said that Poland has undergone transformation from communism to capitalism quite harmlessly and the biggest challenge for her country now is changing from the welfare state which has developed. Another problem is the lack of trust in institutions, and the lack of faith that they can improve the situation.

Ketevan Vashakidze, of the Eurasia Foundation said that people of Georgia still expect more from the state than from donors, but that programmes for social inclusion are not on the list of donor priorities. Furthermore, she made the interesting remark that even the NGOs whose programmes support the fight for the excluded ones, they rarely have representatives on the board, actually raising the voice for change.

Further discussion stirred and divided the gathered audience. For some inclusion means equal opportunities, while for others it is access to knowledge, or so called e-inclusion. It was also discussed what role the Church or religion plays in building inclusive societies. After some time it became obvious that the audience was divided. Some put more accentuation on the state providing the laws and other means that ensures inclusive society, and some put more emphasis on NGOs to fill in the gaps. The conclusion was that there is no easy solution to this problem. The panellists agreed that the Governments in the region are not efficient enough, and most of the NGOs are not yet delivering new solutions and new perspectives.

Discussion than turned to donors, with remarks of funding the NGOs working on inclusion. It is important to really feel the pulse and find the ones that are mission driven, and to appreciate projects that are new and creative. It seamed that the plenary had to unfortunately end at the most interesting point of the discussion, and the conclusion was that it was stuck.

Clash, Dialogue or Fusion of Cultures? The multicultural issue

developments of grantmaking in CEE and the NIS, the GEG was developed into an independent project resulting in the Annual Meeting (AM) which takes place in a different country each year.

It took much time and discussion to define what exactly the term “culture” actually refers to, and to tackle the question of clashes of cultures which this plenary was meant to address. What is culture? Is there a future European culture? Some dream of it as a cosmopolitan culture which should be an experiment for the world, while some believe that this leaves some of the cultures as invisible as they already are.

The speakers Boyan Manchev from the College International De Philosophie Paris, Timea Junghaus, curator of Roma Pavillion in Venice Biennale 2007, Milica Tomic, an artist from Serbia, and Michael Thuss, director of Allianz Kultur Stiftung, agreed during the preparation of the plenary that they would not talk about high culture. As there are so many diverse versions and interpretations of the word culture, minority cultures must utilise tools of high culture to ensure that their forms of culture are also included. Timea Junghaus explained that invisible culture has had to work, in very elite circles of culture and has had to “fight” against cultural oppression, and for the infrastructure of representation. “But where do we go to fight for this – to the European state, to the national state or to international donors” – asked Junghaus, concluding that in a definition of a cosmopolitan culture she doesn’t know who to go to.

Some of the participants defined culture as a repetitive act of art, opposed to art as an unique deed. Few more philosophical paths were explored and at the end there was still no real conclusion met. But, luckily, discussion turned to the more practical side of the central question – how to fund culture?

There was no answer found but the interesting advice offered from a contributor from the US, who commented that the US does not have a ministry of culture, and spends far less money at the federal level for culture than, as it was put, Germany as a state spends only on theatre. The idea behind that is that people find their ways to the marketplace, and so the state funds only those who need to be pushed.

Economic Development/Environmental Sustainability – a contradiction?

The very interesting video contribution from Ann Leonard was the right way to enter the discussion that questioned whether economic development and environmental sustainability contradict each other. Her “Story of Stuff” explained that the system of consumption is representative of the Americans, but could stand for Western society in general – which at this point is certainly in crisis. At this rate of consumption, she says, the

US needs 5 planets like Earth to sustain itself.

One would think that this should mean that saving the planet means sacrificing economic growth, but further discussion proved that this is definitely not so. There is not only one simple answer, but as one of the speakers Tomasz Terlecki of European Climate Organisation said, there is a lot to do and just changing the light bulb to a energy saving one could mean a lot. He reminded that climate change is happening and that people are producing too much CO2 and pointed to the analysis which suggests that investing in CO2 productivity or energy efficiency saves global economy enormous costs in future, argued that market signals are not enough to tackle this extremely important and crucial issue. In fact, there are a lot of measures and regulations that can help.

The arguments that Sam Thompson of the New Economics Foundation used are based on data which show that “we are using too much stuff, we are emitting too much CO2 and that does not make us happier.” Again, answers to such problems are, as the discussion suggested, all around us. There are many ways of making the change that is desperately needed – the third speaker Viktor explored a few, and asked himself and audience at the same time: we must think of new models of development to make more jobs, but can we stop shopping and make more jobs? “Maybe we could change the way we buy”, he suggested, admitting that he does not have an answer but is thinking of possible ones. Some participants said that it was too ambitious to create new models and that the possible solution could be to draw the lines to the existing ones.

There were some interesting responses to the questions asked on the screen. Similar numbers of participants saw climate change and the financial crisis as equally important, although the financial crisis was slightly ahead on the list. Some of the answers gave a good ground for the future thinking of donors. The answer to the question of whether grantmakers fund projects focused on climate change or on environmental sustainability show that almost the same number of donors (around 30 percent) do not fund projects on any of that, and those that fund environmental sustainability and both environmental sustainability and climate change projects.

The Critical Role of Philanthropy: Developing long-term support for civil engagement

Michael Edwards, previously with The Ford Foundation, in his latest book “Just Another Emperor?”, published in spring 2008, analyses the rise of, as he calls it,

'philanthrocapitalism' which sees non-profit organisations as business operations that provide goods and services which benefit society. Presenting his rather provocative views, Mr Edwards provoked a challenging discussion. Among other things, he argued that the new philanthropy aims to help the poor but doesn't do anything to change the conditions that caused that poverty and inequality. It ignores, he said, the fact that social movements and activism are processes and not businesses, which raises serious questions about the future of public and private responsibility.

At that point, the audience's response to the question presented on the screen as to whether they saw the growth of the new philanthropy as good and effective or bad and damaging was 63% to 4%, respectively.

The discussion that followed showed that there were some delegates who shared the speaker's suspicions, and those who didn't weren't completely opposed to his arguments. Some speakers and participants argued that they couldn't see anything so horrible about so-called new philanthropy as long as it served good causes. Thomas Eymond-Laritz of The Victor Pinchuk Foundation, cited the example of the rise of philanthropy in Ukraine. There, a few years ago, 80 to 90 percent of donors' money was American and now the so-called new philanthropic revolution has begun. After the private Pinchuk Foundation was founded several years ago, other private foundations emerged. Arguing for the new philanthropy, he said that many of the rich businessmen were visionaries, who could be visionaries in philanthropy too.

Many of the participants did not know whether they understood the division between the old and new philanthropy – they asked themselves what actually was considered as new. Some said that no matter whether you accepted that kind of labelling, one had to admit that both approaches were making big mistakes and what matters most is the results and the ideas. Some were stimulated with the thought that the approach of "throwing goods and services and not addressing the fundamental problem has to be changed" and that is what the sector needs. However, it was suggested more time would be needed to evaluate that.

At the end of the lively, sharp and honest discussion everyone was asked to answer the same question again – whether they saw the growth of the new philanthropy as good and effective or bad and damaging. The result was slightly different from the one at the beginning – this time 55% voted for "good and effective" and 11% for "bad and damaging".

Interestingly, Michael Edwards was one of those who slightly changed his mind during the two hours of discussion.

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