

Living the dream in Romania



James Magowan,
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'If ever there was a case of harnessing collective intelligence to release social imagination it is happening here' says James Magowan, who participated in the Romanian Federation of Community Foundations conference in Bucharest which celebrated 15 years since the inception of the movement in Romania. It was attended by all 18 Romanian community foundations, their support organisations, funders and partners, along with some international speakers and participants. Below, James reflects on his experience there seeing how the movement, although still young, demonstrates maturity beyond its years and having addressed and still faced with complex challenges looks forward with confidence to the future.

Two days at the Romanian national conference for community foundations provided ample evidence of how a dream in 2006, to connect people, ideas and resources to enable communities to help themselves and achieve positive change, has been realised. Back then Alina Porumb and ARC set out to test community interest in establishing community foundations. Starting from scratch, with expert and sustained support nurturing its naissance, Romania now proudly boasts a field of 18 community foundations and a highly professional national federation. Moreover, these are 21st century community foundations, focusing on civic engagement and impact, forming an essential part of civil society. They possess the knowledge and skills to perform with professionalism and empathy all functions from participatory processes, through donor relations to strategic programme implementation.

Having observed this development from afar over the years, not without awe, it was still a privilege to have had the opportunity to spend time in the company of an exceptional group of people, including those who had initiated the process 15 years ago, and others, with no less commitment, who have joined the movement more recently.

Youthful exuberance remains a key characteristic of the movement in Romania. The conference agenda however indicated a maturity beyond its years - from sessions on community builders, impact makers, visionary leaders and strategic thinkers, there were expert insights and thought-provoking discussions. Re-grouping for the first time since Covid there were many experiences and stories to share. As was the case in many countries, community foundations in Romania had stepped up, adapted, and played a critical role and have come out the other side stronger for it. In addition, community foundations across Romania acted coherently, yet specifically in their respective

localities, supporting refugees from Ukraine. These actions contributed to building the reputation and credibility of each one and of the movement as a whole, as trusted partners.

However, the conference was not about self-congratulations (with the exception of the well-deserved awards), rather it allowed for reflection on challenges, analysis of what had worked and what had not, and a chance to look ahead. It provided the opportunity to discuss global challenges and how they impact on local communities, now and in the future; to explore practices and tools; and to engage with others outside of the community foundation bubble.

A stand-out session for me was with ISCOADA a publishing platform that hosts written articles and multimedia materials that present, in a synthesized and accessible format, research in anthropology and related disciplines. Examples were presented of how this academic discipline had been connected to the practical work of community foundations in Romania, to enhance their community engagement and participation, and to analyse and present findings in meaningful ways.

Importantly also, the sustained physical and mental burden on staff and volunteers of the pressures over the last few years now followed by an economic crisis, was acknowledged and addressed with a session on well-being, which highlighted the importance of mutual peer support and recognition of the need for care for people, including space for 'micro-sabbaticals'.

There is a critical mass in the movement now to 'think, learn, stand and act together' (the mission of the federation) with confidence and purpose. Throughout the development process, those involved actively sought to learn from others around the world, to collate that knowledge and to adapt as appropriate to the local context. They too, as anyone who has had the privilege of visiting a community foundation in Romania will attest, are willing to share their remarkable journey.

If ever there was a case of harnessing collective intelligence to release social imagination it is happening here. The community foundation movement in Romania is living the dream.

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