

Hungary uncovered....

Community Foundation Conference Budapest, December 2018

... was the title of a conference that went beyond the mere exchange of facts, to which the Budapest-based, Roots and Wings Foundation had invited representatives of Hungarian civil society and German community foundations. For two days, questions about the social structures and effects of decades of politics and business on civil society were discussed.

In a joint discussion with the sociologist Csepeli, non-Hungarians living in Hungary and representatives of civil society from all over the country, the 70 participants discussed current social trends and the resulting perspectives for civil society. The primary goal was to explore challenges that arise in the expansion of civil society.

If one were to follow the explanations of sociologist Dr. György Csepeli alone, the prospects for the further development of a functioning civil society would be very poor. His research shows that the focus is on problems rather than on solutions. Or a lack of trust. A life determined by shortcomings instead of joy. Centuries of lack of national independence, late modernization, the lack of leadership in civil society and rivalries between ethnic groups have had an extremely negative effect on the fate of this small nation in Central Eastern Europe: Negative attitude. Loneliness. Selfishness. Too much of this could stand in the way of the formation of a strong civil society.

This negative picture was reversed, however, when hearing from representatives of the invited civil organisations who deal with selected social problems in very different ways. An association dedicated specifically to the development of small villages. Social activists who, despite the already outlined Hungarian melancholy and dependence on the state, are starting to found their first social enterprises and to test their work. And above all community foundations that have in addition been making a contribution to the development of civil society in Hungary since 2011. Tamás Scsaurszki, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Roots and Wings Foundation, and himself the founder of the first community foundation in Hungary, showed what successes the three existing community foundations have been able to achieve and what opportunities are foreseen for the future. Even a convinced donor, Tamás Scsaurszki, showed the participants the advantages that this new form of civil society commitment has for Hungary. He sees the great strength of this form of organisation and in the diversity and adaptability of the structure.

Three Hungarian community foundations alone, in the district of Ferencváros in Budapest, in Pécs and in Miskolc, have contributed in 2017 to more than 649 volunteers, 154 participating local institutions/NGOs/companies and 36 paid service providers establishing a network of civil society commitment which contributes to building and consolidating relationships between people and winning their trust. And not to forget the financial support that has been released for local projects to the tune of round about Euro 60.000 (HUF 19 million). Those figures show that community foundations have become active members of the local society and provide a variety of opportunities for local people/institutions to be active.

The conference will certainly help to ensure that these three community foundations as well as another district community foundation in Budapest, which is in the process of being set up, build up a common identity and have a radiance for those who are already interested in setting up a community foundation in the future. With this in mind, Roots and Wings will continue to strengthen Hungarian civil society with its support and programmes.



Photo credit: Roots and Wings Foundation

After the conference we attended the benefit evening of the Ferencvaros community foundation, founded in 2011. This will remain a very special memory. Following the principle of the "Giving Circle" coming from the UK, the Ferencvaros community foundation organised a successful charity evening for the fourth time in the district of Ferencváros in Budapest, "Franzensstadt", for and with the people living

there. Each of the three presented projects worthy of financial support. And this is exactly what the 200 or so participants of the evening probably thought and considered the three projects with balanced donations. It was fascinating how on one evening almost Euro 10.000 for three projects was raised. It was great that we were allowed to be there as German guests and were able to go home with the feeling: Hungarian civil society on the upswing!

contact: Anja Böllhoff anja@comunityfoundations.eu