

Civitas Intern,

July 30, 2008

## Post-Communism and Philanthropic Organizations:

### NGOs in East Central Europe

After living as an American and growing up in the United States, it seems that the entire world prioritizes philanthropic work. However, after spending a summer in Poland interning at an NGO, it becomes clear that this is not the case. A summer at the Academy for the Development of Philanthropy in Poland (hence the Academy) taught me much about the role of NGOs and Community Foundations. Before ending my internship at Academy I had time to discuss the specifics of community organizations in East Central Europe with the director of Academy. Unless otherwise noted, the information for this paper is taken from my discussion with Paweł and pieces of knowledge that I learned along the way.

Community organizations in Poland and throughout the Visegrad region are a rising phenomenon. This phenomenon began when Communism ended and the post-Communist era began. It was the influence of the western world (specifically the United States) and free-market entrepreneurship which started the phenomenon throughout the Visegrad countries. New to the region in the past twenty years, CPOs are an increasingly popular system, however, it is also a system which is met by opposition. The following is an understanding of what the philanthropic organizations promote and why they are met with resistance. It also discusses the role of the Academy and what I learned as an intern there this summer.

CPOs in East Central Europe are, in large part, a model based upon the United States system of philanthropic organizations and community foundations. When communism ended and a free-market economy took over, East Central European countries began to change in other

spheres of life as well. Entrepreneurship was a fundamental value of the new system of economy, and this extended to community care as well. Therefore, as the Visegrad region looked toward the west for help in development in the early 90s and sought integration with the European Union, they saw philanthropy and community organizations as a mechanism to promote community wellbeing.

The work and mission of community foundations depends upon the community in which they are apart. As one article describes the work of CPOs , they are organizations which bring people together, answer the needs of local groups of people, and support the wellbeing of communities.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, what CPOs answer are the needs of local communities. Therefore, CPOs differ on missions and goals. This is something that the director of Academy, explained to me when discussing with him the role of community foundations in Poland and the other Visegrad countries. No two missions can be alike when the needs of local communities differ across the board. Therefore, each community foundation is unique and special to each community.

There are community foundations and organizations throughout the Visegrad region. As previously described, this is a phenomenon which started post-Communism, so the population of community organizations is small compared to that of the United States. That said, it is increasing annually. As community foundations answer the needs of the community, there are also NGOs (such as Academy) which promote the work of community foundations and help develop and strengthen the prestige of community foundations.

However, what continually problematizes the work of community organizations throughout the Visegrad region is the remains of Communist thought and tradition. During

---

<sup>1</sup> Mayer, Steven E. *Community Philanthropy in Central/Eastern Europe*. Michigan: Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, 1999: 4.

communism, the government “equalized” all spheres of life. However, with this equalization came distrust in a continually oppressive government as well as one’s neighbors and acquaintances. The only group that people could truly trust were their families, as the only group that they could afford to save were themselves. Furthermore, the very term “philanthropy” was something associated with the rich bourgeoisie and those who were associated with the government. Philanthropy meant donating money, not donating time or truly working to develop communities.

Therefore, when community organizations began throughout East Central Europe, citizens met them with great opposition and distrust. As the director of the Academy described to me, there were many times and continue to be times when people laugh at the work of Academy and tell him that it is worthless and weird. Why would an organization work to help others? Why would an organization be promoting philanthropic work throughout the region? How do philanthropic organizations work if they are not just there to give money for goals prescribed by the government? These are all questions which community foundations face when working to help communities. The questions come from those in rural communities who perhaps are stuck more in tradition and distrust and don’t understand the free-market economy. Ironically, these are the same people who community foundations help the most. The obstacles created by distrusting citizens is in addition to typical hardships that most NGOs face such as raising funds, establishing a proper mission, and effectively working in a community to answer local needs.<sup>2</sup>

Despite opposition to community organizations, the work is essential to the development of communities. Community organizations answer to all spheres of life, such as youth development, company contributions, and senior citizen activation. Therefore, as governments

---

<sup>2</sup> Mayer, 17-18.

create public policy and laws and regulations, community organizations truly work to answer the local needs of a community. All Visegrad countries have answered this call to philanthropic work, however, some have a further ways to go than others. As Poland has more than twenty community foundations and NGOs such as the Academy for the Development of Philanthropy and the Foundation in Support of Local Democracy, Hungary has yet to establish community foundations but has NGOs such as United Way in Hungary. Each country, however, is working hard to promote the development of community organizations, no matter what level they are at right now.

The work at the Academy for the Development of Philanthropy in Poland is a primary example of the indispensable work of community organizations and NGOs. The Academy works to promote not only the local development of community foundations throughout Poland, but community foundations throughout the Visegrad region. In fact, Academy seeks advice and know-how from NGOs throughout Western Europe and the United States in order to develop their own work throughout the region. The work of the Academy answers the needs of many sectors of life from young and old, to social entrepreneurship and company development. The work of Academy is indispensable when it comes to answering the needs of East Central European people, whether they realize it or not.

My work at the Academy opened my eyes to the struggles of NGOs throughout East Central Europe and the amazement that philanthropic work truly brings to a region. As previously mentioned, before coming to Poland I thought that philanthropic work was the norm – that all countries had systems of philanthropy which worked to develop the community. I was ignorant and presumptuous in thinking that this was the case. After interning for the summer, conducting research in the field of senior activation, helping to create the internet website which

concerned all programs which the Academy promotes throughout Poland, writing and editing English documents which concerned community organizations throughout the region, and reading various documents and talking to community foundation members, my insight about philanthropy and NGOs in East Central Europe increased dramatically. My impressions which previously understood philanthropy as the norm changed to the realization that philanthropy is something that must continually be promoted and developed throughout a country. It is a culture, not the norm.

East Central Europe still scrambles to understand the totality of the work of NGOs, yet the organizations themselves work hard to answer the needs of the people. In the post-Communist era, countries and the community organizations are working to change the negative connotations associated with philanthropic work. This is not an easy task, however, it is necessary for better development in a free-market society and member of the European Union.

## Bibliography

Director of the Academy for the Development of Philanthropy in Poland Personal Interview. 29

July 2008.

Mayer, Steven E. *Community Philanthropy in Central/Eastern Europe*. Michigan: Charles

Stewart Mott Foundation, 1999.