

Roundtable 4 Civil Society

Lisa Jordan, Executive Director, Bernard van Leer Foundation on behalf of European Forum of Foundations for Roma Inclusion

Thank you Chair for inviting the European Forum of Foundations for Roma Inclusion. We have a team of folks here in this audience and elsewhere on the program. I am the Executive Director of the Bernard van Leer Foundation, a foundation based in the Netherlands, and a founding member of the Forum, which includes two types of partners: privately endowed foundations across Europe which have collectively contributed financial resources to creating equal opportunities within Europe for Roma communities, and Roma led initiatives such as the Roma Education Fund, and the Pakiv European Roma Fund which are everyday implementing projects that create equal opportunities for Roma.

A Roma student was once asked ' if you were minister of education for a day what changes would you make to promote education for Roma?'

This is an excellent question not asked often enough of Roma people.

I will tell you the student's answer later.

Education was stressed at the first Summit and early childhood education is one of the three areas we are urging this summit and the Council of Ministers to embrace as an EU strategic priority. It has already been stressed today by no less than George Soros, and former President Dimitrov of Bulgaria.

Prejudice and wrongly held beliefs about the Roma are on the rise in Europe. This is a second area that we are seeking partnership on. And the third is to address that critical moment in a young person's life of moving from education to adulthood and work.

We are working on these three issues:

First we are raising awareness in Europe to recognize Roma rights and to eradicate prejudice and stereotyping. Led by partners in Germany, the forum has funded some of the hard work necessary within majority populations to stop hate and reduce fear. Our Forum is moreover committed to launching a flagship transnational project to train journalists – Roma and otherwise – to influence public norms and values on inclusion, rights and inequality. We are looking for opportunities to develop this jointly and happy to discuss it over these 2 days. Talk to Be-a-ta Winkler.

On this issue, the common basic principles on Roma Inclusion lack an explicit reference to the Charter of Fundamental Rights which is now an integral part of the new EU treaty. It needs to be explicitly included, and this summit should press the Council of Ministers to include the Charter in the common basic principles.

Second, as I mentioned, the transition period from education to working life and adulthood is a time of life where explicit but not exclusive efforts are needed to ensure that Roma young adults are able to contribute their full complement of skills to society. We know from our own projects that three things – micro credit, school community cooperation schemes and entrepreneurship-education initiatives – are effective interventions to help Roma and other young people make the leap. We would urge that lessons learned within programs financed by foundations, notably the Erste foundation and implemented through the Pakiv network are scaled across Europe with use of structural funds.

Our third issue is early childhood where BVLF leads.

Early childhood is the absolute public policy best bang for the buck. I am not making this up. That is a fact backed up by two unlikely bed-fellows - hard neurological scientists who are confirming through biology, neurology and geonics that early positive interventions shape the

neural pathways of the brain. Get this right and you save yourself a lot of money later on. Hard science is accompanied by Nobel prize winning economists whom have run the numbers on social investments and this one pays off both in short term and long term. The earlier the investment the bigger the social payoff.

While Europe does make these investments for majority populations, they do not reach Roma children. Within some EU countries the health statistics for Roma children are worse than in Haiti, Bangladesh and Papua New Guinea. Under 5 mortality rates are shocking – a third above average. And I am not just discussing Eastern Europe. We are urging the EU to stress the zero to three age group by providing access to combined quality health education protection and economic support services. Combined services works best.

Even though Europe is committed since Barcelona to universal compulsory early childhood education for two years on paper, in reality throughout Europe only a handful of Roma children enjoy early education and development programs.

There is a campaign afoot to put children's rights first and say no to exploitation and discrimination of Roma children. This is an excellent initiative that requires action. We are putting our money where our mouth is. We are helping the Commission to achieve the targets set in Barcelona - 2 years of compulsory early childhood education – this is for the 2, 3 and 4 year olds with a focus on reaching minority populations. We are funding and implementing through the Forum Roma teaching assistants and classroom helpers whom have been proven to be very effective in bridging cultural divides between officials and families. Roma adults in the classrooms = Roma children succeeding in education.

Getting Roma children ready for school is only half the battle. The schools are not ready for Roma. We have excellent pedagogical training materials available in 16 languages to prepare teachers for diversity in the classroom. We are providing opportunities for mothers and children

to learn together to beef up cognitive skills amongst the youngest members of the Roma communities.

*The education facts are dismal. Around 1 million Roma children never go to school. Another million Roma are relegated to schools for children with special needs. Roma children are not mentally challenged or handicapped in any way. These local actions are pure discrimination. Roma children whom are in school often drop out due to bullying. The Forum's rights work has helped to educate Roma parents on their rights for their children which in turn has fueled many court cases – one of which has been won in Croatia proving that the placement of Roma in segregated schools is discriminatory practice.

More work needs to be done. We are thrilled with the focus on early childhood in the pilot project mentioned by Catarina Mathernova in the third plenary. The Commission could use its persuasive powers to urge member states to develop common guidelines for early childhood services with a focus on reaching the most disadvantaged. Thereafter Member States should seek to ensure that every Roma child has access to 2 years of mainstreamed quality pre-school education. This is a service that is available to almost all other children in Europe.

In sum there are 3 points of action we are committed to and seeking support from the Commission in the field of early childhood – 2 years of early quality education, common guidelines across Europe and combined services for the youngest citizens from prenatal to three years of age.

Foundations have the capacity to finance local Roma led initiatives across Europe. We can be and are very strong partners with reach to the very local levels. The local level is where the impact will be measured. Our experience demonstrates that interventions to reach the Roma communities are most effective when municipalities respond to the needs identified by Roma;

multiple needs are addressed simultaneously; and there are visible Roma role models, who own and contribute to the process of change.

Now the question of what would you do for a day if you were education minister put to the Roma student?

She said ,

“Thank you, but I would rather be the finance minister and allocate money to implement programs effectively.’