

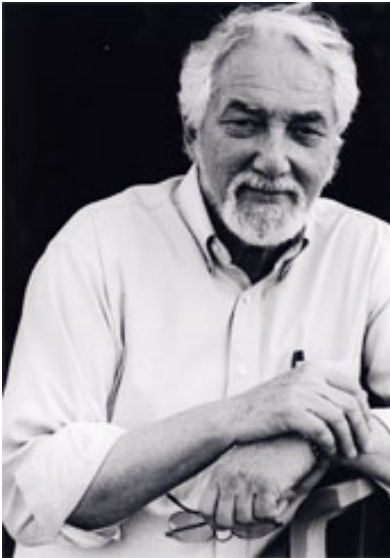


The Right Livelihood Award

for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people

András Biró / Hungarian Foundation for Self-Reliance (Hungary)

(1995)



...for their resolute defence of Hungary's Roma (gypsy) minority and effective efforts to aid their self-development.

András Biró

The Hungarian Foundation for Self-Reliance (HFSR) is the English name of Autonómia Alapítvány (literally, the Autonomy Foundation). It was founded in 1990 by András Biró, who had returned home to Budapest five years earlier after an international career as a journalist and UN consultant.

HFSR initially set itself the goal of reinforcing the overall process of democratisation in Hungary by supporting activities concerned with (i) the environment (and sustainable development), (ii) minority rights and the alleviation of poverty, focusing particularly on the Roma (gypsy) community, and (iii) the promotion of civil society and democratic processes at grassroots level. These were seen as key areas of need in the aftermath of 40 years of totalitarian government.

HFSR can best be described as an intermediary NGO and an agent of change. It has so far given about 400 grants to grassroots organisations. It has been instrumental in the establishment of two separate organisations: an environmental NGO called the Partnership Program, supported by a consortium of US foundations, which has now largely taken over HFSR's environmental work; and the Legal Defence Bureau for National and Ethnic Minorities, of which Biró is also the president. The latter aims to provide legal representation for gypsies who have increasingly become the object of racist attacks or whose rights have been infringed in other ways. In its first year, the Legal Defence Bureau handled over 100 cases.

The Foundation has now taken a leadership role with regard to the Roma within the East European region, and has received visits from delegations of Roma leaders from Bulgaria, Romania and the Slovak Republic. HFSR is now being funded to co-ordinate a four-country programme for the Roma. In each country this will provide for a Roma radio station, social leadership training and a legal defence system on the lines of that already operating in Hungary. HFSR will identify local partners for this programme. For example, the Association of Romanian Lawyers for Human Rights has agreed to create a special bureau for the Roma, who comprise about 15 per cent of Romania's population, compared with 5 per cent in Hungary.

What is unique about HFSR's work with the Roma is both its methodology and its choice of income generation as its main focus, an orientation which was determined by rapidly growing unemployment among the Roma. In the past, any assistance to Roma communities has been limited to cultural/folk programmes and educational or social assistance. SR has pioneered the idea of helping them develop their entrepreneurial skills so that some, at least, can acquire know-how, self-reliance and resources which will help their communities as a whole. The Foundation has provided grants or interest-free loans to more than 200 Roma projects. Also, around 100 Roma leaders have participated in an intensive 'Entrepreneurs Training Project' to acquire managerial skills either for non-profit or private enterprises.

Another initiative of HFSR has been 'The Tolerance Prize', awarded each year since 1992 to the representative of the Hungarian information media judged to have made the best contribution to ethnic harmony and the interests of minorities.

András Biró was born in Bulgaria of Hungarian-Serbian parents in 1925. He later lived in Budapest until the uprising of 1956, after which he went to Paris and worked on a business journal before becoming the founding editor of the FAO magazine Ceres (1967-75). After that, he was the founding editor of the environment journal Mazingira . In 1978 he moved to Mexico, where he lived and did consultancy work for UN agencies and with Mexican NGOs. Biró returned to Budapest in 1985 and continued this work until the collapse of Communism gave him the opportunity to found HFSR in 1990.

In 1996, András Biró retired from the directorship of HFSR and took up the chairmanship in the board of NEKI- MASSAG ALAPITVANY, a legal defence bureau acting in defence of the human rights of the Roma Community in Hungary. Recently he has taken up consultancy and advisory as well as evaluation tasks for international NGOs in the field of Roma projects in the region and in the Ex-Soviet Union.

Quotation

"Our projects in the last five years have reached out to approximately 20,000 women, children and men in the rural areas . . . The systematic reimbursement of loans by our partners holds up to any international comparison. It seems that our naïve trust in and human respect for our partners has not been a bad investment."

András Biró

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