

European Network of National Associations
SE Speech
22/07/09

Good morning, it's a great pleasure for me to address this first meeting of national cross-sectoral voluntary sector umbrella bodies. I'm grateful to Maureen O'Neill for hosting us here at the Economic & Social Committee. I'm also delighted to be joined by Laetitia Sedou, the coordinator of the Civil Society Contact Group. It is a great privilege for me to be here with so many colleagues from across Europe. Many of us have been working together to connect national NGO umbrellas for years, such as colleagues from Austria and Estonia; others are newer faces, like those from Portugal, Germany and Romania. Thank you for all your enthusiasm over our work and I look forward to hearing your views today. We are here today because this is the first committee week of the European Parliament and we believe it is crucial to bring the voices of our members into the new Parliament.

At NCVO, we are committed to taking an active part in European debates with the Parliament, the Commission and the Council of Europe. In part, this is of course because increasingly our members are directly affected by European legislation. It is important that we contribute to consultations and civil society initiatives like the EP's AGORA but we also think now is the time for *action*. As national umbrellas we are close to the needs of thousands of citizens across the EU and we bring the voices of so many more that cannot be with us today.

During our discussions over these 2 days and indeed over coming months, I am looking forward to finding shared solutions for a Europe that is more responsive to its citizens. I believe civil society can provide the connection to people in every country and that we, through the organisations we represent, can help make those connections. It's time for joint action!

In order to provide a start to our discussions, let me say a few words about what brought us to this point, I will cover three main areas:

1. The European context of the Lisbon Treaty and recent EU elections
2. The development of this network
3. Practical ways we can work together

1. European context

Recent years in Europe have been characterised by complex debate on internal structures and consitutional arrangements. These led into discussions around the Lisbon Treaty and many of us were active in national debates. These arrangements are important but we believe that it is now time to move forward to take *action* together so that European partnerships can deliver real tangible benefits for all our members. The current Lisbon Treaty sets out the stage for a greatly expanded EU; there are now 27 members from Portugal to Estonia. But we have still seen a democratic deficit. Let's not forget this is an

EU that is made up of people not just governments, which is why we believe the time is right for a greater role for civil society.

The key message that has emerged from the European discussions over recent years is the vital need to bring citizens and civil society into the debate, to shift to a 'Europe of the people'. The EU needs to find ways to connect to the grass-roots and to avoid being caricatured as a distant technocratic system. This has been recognised by EU bodies. As many colleagues will be aware, negotiations around the Lisbon Treaty, led to the crucial Article on participatory democracy. If the Treaty is ratified, this Article will lead to the requirement for greater dialogue with civil society and better accountability to citizens. There is now an opportunity to give organised civil society a greater role in Europe.

The role of civil society in supporting democracy is long-established: voluntary organizations foster a sense of solidarity and of citizenship, providing the essential underpinnings of a democratic society. In light of recent developments, in terms of both expansion of the EU and the democratic requirements placed on member states, this function is increasingly important.

There is no doubt that civil society organisations make an indispensable contribution to the democratic life of the Union. Firstly for many people participation in a voluntary organization may be their only experience of active citizenship outside of the normal involvement in local government and elections. But also our organisations have an increasingly profound impact on the economic

health of many EU member states, as they make up an increasingly large sector and are taking on a larger number of service delivery roles across the EU.

The need to recognise and support the role of civil society as part of the democratic process is even more apparent when we consider the recent EU elections. Turnout dropped once more in many parts of Europe and a high number of countries witnessed the rise of Euro-sceptic parties, including unfortunately the UK.

What are the reasons for this? There are a few clear trends:

- A) Understanding of EU issues remains limited, in spite of the fact that the EU has a direct impact on millions of our lives;
- B) The perceived lack of ways for people to influence the EU agenda has led to feelings of powerlessness;
- C) Where people do vote, this is mainly on national issues. So for example the UK vote was a reaction to the Labour Party's domestic agenda rather than EU wide preferences;

It is more important than ever that the EU is open to all; we believe that it is time to increase ownership of the EU process by the citizens of Europe and the organisations in our sector can play a critical role. That's why we worked with many of you over the past year to develop a Manifesto for the EU elections. We identified key areas of interest and shared recommendations to the European Parliament and each of us lobbied our MEPs. This is a first step towards joint advocacy, towards opening clearer routes for our members in each country to

access and shape EU policies. And we can build on this by connecting through our networks to many more citizens to show them how to raise their concerns with the EU.

To do this more effectively, we ask our colleagues who are here in Brussels to share their expertise with us as we mobilise our members. We would like to work with you to build clear messages that have an impact in every country as well as here in Brussels.

For those of you who do not have a copy or would like more, we have more copies of this Manifesto here today and will continue to raise awareness of it amongst MEPs

2. The development of this network

In order to take forward our messages across the EU we must work more closely together. The group of national associations that is gathered here demonstrates that we all understand the need to work together to develop cross-cutting messages for the voluntary sector.

This group has come together over a number of years, looking to have a greater impact for our many thousands of members. 15 countries have been involved in the discussion and our combined membership includes more than xxx (insert from seminar) organisations. We are delighted that so many are here today. Since 2005 this group has met informally during major civil society

gatherings, most recently in Glasgow during the Civicus World Assembly (June 2008) and in La Rochelle during the European Civic Forum (Sep 2008) as well as in Brussels. We have identified shared priorities and we are looking forward to working together in the future.

We come together in a spirit of cooperation. Of course there is no 'one size fits all' approach, each country has its own traditions and its own priorities. We need to respect these differences. But there are also clear areas where we have a shared agenda. This is why we believe that the time has come for greater cooperation on the development and advocacy role of national cross-cutting voluntary sector networks.

At the same time, it is our intention to connect to existing EU platforms. Let me be clear, as cross-sectoral bodies we look to champion generic issues for all NGOs and voluntary organisations. But we also respect the expertise of our members and their own specialist knowledge on issues such as development, culture, human rights, disability. We do not seek to duplicate or replace them or their messages but rather it is our hope to work with them to strengthen their voices for the benefit of all.

Many of NCVO's members are also members of thematic platforms here in Brussels – we understand the essential role that thematic platforms play. What we intend is that the voices of the full spectrum of organisations may be enhanced by our presence here in Brussels.

We also look to work in partnership where appropriate, to widen the impact and strengthen the capacity of existing EU-wide organisations such as the Civil Society Contact Group, Social Platform, ECAS, the European Civic Forum and CEDAG. I am glad to see colleagues from each of those groups here today and we look forward to working together on areas of shared interest.

In particular we believe that the Civil Society Contact Group plays an essential role. Laetitia is on the panel with me today and I would like to suggest that we provide a vital link for your work. You bring together so many different networks and outline shared European priorities. Now is the time for national groups to be included, we would welcome ways to integrate the national cross-sectoral networks with the Contact Group.

3. Practical ways we can work together

So let us look at practical steps forward. As Chief Executive of NCVO over the last 15 years, I have been able to play my part in bringing about a greater recognition for the voluntary sector in England. It is my view that national associations are in a strong position to reach closer to citizens and play a vital role to develop greater participation, social justice and accountability in each country of Europe.

We are now looking forward to working with partners across Europe, as we develop a horizontal network for national cross-sectoral voluntary sector associations. We are very open to learn from each other in a spirit of open collaboration. And as part of that process it is

essential that those groups that aim to represent the cross-cutting needs of voluntary organisations can meet to share their needs and specific skills.

It seems clear that there are a number of crucial areas where we can work together, these are:

- Supporting countries where a national umbrella is emerging
- Exchanging skills and capacity-building
- Developing further joint advocacy on behalf of our members

By supporting each other and developing greater shared capacity in this way, we will ensure that the full range of views and civil society themes are raised in relation to the EU.

Beyond these top-line objectives, we want to look at some of the major issues facing our members in their work. Today in our seminars, we will be discussing some of the issues that were suggested over recent months, these are: 1. the EU elections; 2. the push for a civil society charter at the EU-level; and 3. the impact of the economic recession.

1. The recent EU elections, as already outlined, need to be understood in each country so that we may develop stronger positions next time. What worked well for you? How did you get your message across? What were the biggest challenges to civil society engagement?

2. The next area that we will talk about is the importance of strengthening the frameworks that structure the relationship between EU institutions and civil society organisations. In England we have worked in partnership with government over the last 10 years to establish a robust architecture for the voluntary sector. This is framed by the Compact agreement between the government and our sector. By having a clear set of Codes of Conduct we have been able to identify reciprocal benefits and increase trust between government departments and NGOs. Currently the Compact is being reviewed and updated after 10 years. But we are aware of the need to ensure that the achievements of the voluntary sector are expanded further. We believe that it is now time for a European level framework agreement, a European Civil Society Charter. This would have two major benefits: firstly it would ensure that the voluntary sector receives the same recognition at the EU-level as it already does in some member states; and secondly the EU level agreement would ensure that all member states would need to apply the shared principles in domestic management of EU funds, such as ESF. How do each of you structure your relationships with government? What can we do to put this issue on the EU agenda?

3. Finally the economic recession is a reality we are all facing. This is a global downturn, where both the problems and the solutions are interlinked. No single country can remain isolated at this time. I believe that it is essential that the voluntary sector comes together to share its major concerns and its expertise so that we can find ways forward. What can we learn from each other? How has the

government and voluntary sector in different countries reacted to the economic downturn? What are the most effective ways to influence the EU agenda on this subject?

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to say how much I am learning by getting to know you all, the challenges you face and the ways in which you work. There may be differences of culture and we may come from quite different backgrounds, but this process is showing me the strength and diversity of civil society. It is an enriching process as we learn from each other to develop shared positions on our major priorities. I am looking forward to working with many of you in the coming weeks and months and to welcoming groups to London. We are always open to shared projects and to exchanging knowledge and good practice.

I have outlined why we think this is the right time for the voice of civil society to come to the fore, as the Lisbon Treaty and a new EU Parliament bring with them new political opportunities. I have shown how we have come together as never before in a Europe of 27 states. I have outlined what seem to be our major priorities.

So I hope it is clear from what I have said that we are looking to take *action* together on major issues and we are looking to find joint solutions.

We must now stand together as equals to support each other for the good of our members, for the benefit of society and for a more just world.