

Ten recommendations to improve EC cooperation with civil society

Meeting report

7 November 2006, 11:00-13:00

DG Development, Rue de la Science 15

CIDSE-Caritas Europa representatives:

Izabella Toth, Convenor CIDSE-Caritas Europa Co-Financing Forum

Maria Winnubst, Advisor on EU issues - Misereor

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Carine de Wilde, Programme officer India & EC co-financing unit - Broederlijk Delen

René Reusen, Financial expert Great Lakes region - Cordaid

Steffi Rosenbusch, Assistant Secretary to the Advocacy Unit - CIDSE Secretariat

European Commission representatives:

Alexander Baum, Head of Unit DEV/02 - Institutional Relations and Civil Society

Jeremy Nagoda, International Coordination Officer AIDCO/F5 - Relations with civil society and non state actors

Paola Ottonello, Policy Officer DEV/A2 - Relations with Member States and EEA States, Aid effectiveness and Non State Actors

Pieter Bangma, –Civil Society Liaison DEV/02 - EU and ACP Institutional Relations and Civil Society

Welcome

On behalf of the CIDSE-Caritas Europa delegation, Izabella Toth thanked Alexander Baum (DEV) and Jeremy Nagoda (representing Aristotelis Bouratsis, AIDCO) for the opportunity to meet with EC representatives. Alexander Baum was pleased to welcome the group and invited participants to openly discuss the recommendations of the CIDSE-Caritas Europa Co-Financing Forum.

Role of Northern NGOs

There was an initial discussion on the shift of the donor-recipient paradigm and the changing role of Northern NGOs.

CIDSE-CE: For the past few years, many reflections were triggered within the CIDSE and Caritas Europa organisations on the added value they can provide to Southern partners. Today, Northern NGOs see their role not as mere donors and project administrators but rather as facilitators for the partners. Experiences of CIDSE member organisations around the table (Trócaire and Cordaid) are that they have moved from a project towards a programme approach with more direct facilitation support to local partners. These are long-term processes that have resulted in increasing awareness in the CIDSE-Caritas Europa network of the link between programming and co-financing issues, the need to further engage in policy dialogue and, for example, to facilitate the link between partners and EC Delegations. The EC was seen as not sufficiently taking into account of the changing role and working approach of Northern NGOs, and could improve on this in the future.

A clarification was also given as to how the Forum results feed into the work carried out at CONCORD level.

Outcomes of the discussion on the ten recommendations:

1. The European Commission must **insist that national governments of developing countries work more closely with civil society actors:** this policy should be monitored in practice.

EC: This represents one of the core elements of the political dialogue to build democratic and pluralist societies and to encourage national governments to acknowledge the role of civil society.

From the EC side, the infrastructure and conditions for meaningful consultations with civil society are in place; the Cotonou Agreement and the guidelines on programming of the 10th EDF provide a good framework. The EC is doing its best, but can only encourage national governments to hold a proper dialogue with civil society. What is needed to make this exercise a success is political will and a well-organised and pro-active civil society capable of engaging with their national government in the first place; and with EC Delegations alike. For all stakeholders, this is a process of change to learn how to strengthen this dialogue.

CIDSE-CE: Northern and Southern NGOs have concerns about the meaningful involvement of civil society in the consultation processes. The EC should make more use of its role to convince national governments of the importance of cooperating with civil society. To this end, the CIDSE-CE network is working to strengthen their partners' organisational and networking capacities. An example of a kind of opportunity which can be further explored: Broederlijk Delen has had a meeting with the EC Delegation staff in New Delhi in August. They invited suggestions for representatives of the civil society to sit in a joint committee with EC Delegates, the Chhattisgarh state government representatives and NGOs. Such NGO and civil society representatives are invited to give constructive criticism about the EC-Chhattisgarh state partnership programme.

2. Consultation of civil society should not just serve as validation. **Civil society must be involved from the beginning in agenda setting and defining policy**, both in Europe and in developing countries. While we as European NGOs take our responsibility to help strengthen the capacity of Southern NGOs to engage in dialogue, support for capacity building from the European Commission is also needed.

EC: Consultation is continuously in line with the rolling nature of the programming process. One should bear in mind that the 9th EDF was the first time in-depth consultation with civil society took place. The Mid-Term Review was conducted in a very structured way, country by country, and shows that some good practices are emerging. The EC delegations have all received guidelines on principles and good practices for the participation of non-state actors in development dialogues and consultations. EC Delegations may have different approaches towards how well they work with civil society, especially given their different contexts.

3. **More spaces must be created at EC Delegation level also for information sharing with civil society on practical issues** such as programming, calls, reporting and their implications.

EC: The EC is committed to improve this information sharing and encourages civil society organisations to get in touch with the EC Delegation on questions and requests for information they might have. A list of the contact persons within each ACP delegation is available on the Europa website http://ec.europa.eu/development/body/theme/ngo/ngo_contact_en.htm. As a consequence of the deconcentration process, it is not easy to ensure that the rules of procedure are used in the same way everywhere, however EC Headquarters is observing closely and reacting pro-actively to correct any divergences or misguided actions. The EC welcomes the efforts made by the CONCORD FDR group concerning their first EC deconcentration monitoring report, soon to be followed by a second one.

4. To make full use of learning, **impact evaluations must precede new EC programming**, and civil society should be involved in the evaluations.
5. The European Commission must **make more use of local experts** (nationals of developing countries) in impact evaluations as well as in evaluations of project proposals.

EC: The EC confirmed that regular evaluations are carried out and that the results of these evaluations always are taken into account in future programming. The Commission is also phasing in systematic country strategy evaluation, but not all countries are covered as yet. However, there may be room for improvement.

CIDSE-CE: The EC should carry out more impact evaluations and ensure that they are used effectively as an opportunity for learning esp. for new EC programming. Several member organisations had positive experiences with regard to common learning. It is positive to see that local consultants are being asked by the EC to carry out evaluations. However, the time for debriefing sessions between the EC Delegation and representatives of the local partner concerned are often very short and merely a formality. More initiative could be taken to draw benefit from the available

expertise of consultants, EC Delegations and partners, to establish a dialogue for mutual learning on thematic issues of concern in the development process and the role of civil society in the country (suggestion based on recent experience following a Cordaid co-financing seminar for partners in Cameroon).

6. In the present EC financial architecture, rigid constraints hamper access to funding by European NGOs and particularly by local NGOs. Therefore, we strongly recommend that **within the new framework of the Financial Perspectives, there must be greater flexibility in conditions to allow access to local and European NGOs**, as a priority: a) less strict eligibility criteria (particularly regarding the 10-15% own co-financing contribution, and the requirement to present reference projects of similar actions in the past); b) minimum and maximum project levels appropriate for absorption capacity of eligible actors, and c) procurement rules that are realistic in specific settings.

EC: There is very limited room for flexibility within the constraints of the Financial regulation, the basis for funding applications. It is acknowledged that Southern partners receiving training are in a better position to apply for funding. The EC will probably have to consider (where and when appropriate) adjusting the rules of eligibility for Southern partners (similar to what happens now with the new Member States NGO's eligibility) and working out adequate funding mechanisms which could allow Southern partners to benefit from EC funding.

7. Many European NGOs are increasingly using a regional programme approach, while a project approach may be more adapted to local NGOs. **A variety of EC mechanisms (both project and programme) must be considered for fund management**, including follow-up to the pilot "*contrat programme*".

EC: There will be a variety of mechanisms (8 or 9) within the new Development Cooperation Instrument. However, micro credit and endowments schemes will probably not be included. A review of those mechanisms is envisaged for 2010 and will require valuable input from civil society.

8. **Discretion in the application of EC visibility rules** must be practiced, on the one hand in the interests of local ownership, and on the other hand given sensitive human rights situation in certain countries where any EC visibility could potentially have serious negative consequences for Southern NGOs.

EC: Generally, the EC visibility rules apply as a statement of ownership and the recognition that a project is funded by EU citizens. As such it is demonstrating the solidarity between the European and the Southern communities. However, common sense allows for an exception where necessary. In such a case, it is advisable to already state clearly the situation on the ground when responding to a call for proposals.

9. In the new Financial Perspectives architecture, emergency funding is a distinct instrument, rather than cross-cutting. **The European Commission must make the link between relief and development in communication channels, dialogue, and also on programme level, focusing on sustainability.** We encourage the use of good practices already in place from EC delegations and/or NGOs, for example.

CIDSE-CE: Cordaid has had a positive experience linking relief and development work with its Drought Cycle Management programme in the Horn of Africa that was used by the Dutch Minister for Development as a good practice.

EC: The European Commission is aware of the necessity to link relief and development work while acknowledging the difficulties to define where emergency work ends and cooperation starts. It would be most valuable to bring together local experts of both domains. Ideally, long-term implications of emergency/relief activities should be considered from the beginning but this has to be seen on a case-by-case basis. Several DGs of the EC (Development, Relex, Aidco, Echo) are actively working together to ensure a better link between Relief, Rehabilitation and Development. It should be noted that not all civil society organizations are active in both fields - emergency and development - which merits also more reflection on the side of NGOs and donors.

10. While we do believe that NGOs must continue to work in partnership with public institutions in Europe and in developing countries, **we reject proposals for direct access by public institu-**

tions to the future EC Non-State Actor Thematic programme. Support for local authorities and related programmes of decentralisation should be an integral part of the bi-lateral relations of the European Commission with any given state, within the Geographic Programmes.

EC: In a spirit of rationalisation and harmonisation, the NGO co-financing budget line and decentralised cooperation budget line have been replaced by a single programme: the **Non-State Actor and Local Authority Thematic Programme**. Competition between actors is to be avoided. On the contrary, the objective is to capitalise on the comparative added value of each actor while also allowing multi-actor partnerships where appropriate. A maximum of 15% is reserved for local authorities, limiting their access to funding under the programme.

CIDSE-CE: The fact to include also Northern local authorities and by doing so to create even more competition is regarded as being very problematic. The 15% rule will be closely monitored. Also, considering the higher number of applicants, there is definitely a need for more than the 200 M € per annum provided in the EC budget until 2013.

Izabella Toth thanked the EC representatives for arranging this meeting and for having a very dynamic discussion on the concerns and recommendations formulated by the participants of the CIDSE-Caritas Europa Co-Financing Forum in May 2006. Alexander Baum confirmed the EC's openness to dialogue with civil society representatives and acknowledged the engagement of the CIDSE and Caritas Europa networks in relation to EC co-financing issues.