

NGOforum09 – Cutting the Democratic Deficit through Civil Participation

First Draft - Joint Conference Conclusion and Recommendations

Introduction

The 27th and 28th of October 2009, more than 250 participants from over 30 countries gathered in Örebro, Sweden for the NGOforum09. The purpose the Forum was to discuss challenges and opportunities facing civil society in the EU taking inspiration from the democratic possibilities within the Lisbon Treaty.

The event was organised during the Swedish EU presidency with support from various stakeholders. The participants represented broad range of actors, such as the civil society, academic and the public sectors.

The Conference aimed at contributing to the ongoing dialogue on civil participation and active citizenship in Europe. It built on the legacy and key conclusions from the earlier civil society conferences during the French and Czech EU presidencies in La Rochelle and Brno. In La Rochelle specifically the expression “civic participation” was defined, which allowed the Örebro Conference to focus on “civil participation” as a tool for democracy. The NGOforum09 also took inspiration from the Brno organisers, especially from the method to create legitimacy of the conference conclusions. The Örebro Conference formulated key statements based on the debates in the plenary sessions and the deliberations from the workshops. These were voted on (yes/no/abstain) during the final plenary session in order to give input to joint Conference conclusions. This document summarises these joint conclusions.

Legitimacy of the Conference conclusions

One central issue concerning civil society and democracy at any level (local, regional, national, EU and global levels) is; who is represented and how legitimacy is created. Civil society representatives play a central role in strengthening the capacity to create legitimacy. The NGOforum09 conclusions are therefore built on three cornerstones:

1. **Conference conclusions based on the vast combined experience of the participants**, formulated a number of key statements voted on in the plenary. The vote was not based on formal representation of the organisations but rather based on the compiled experience of the participants.
2. **Legitimacy through ratification process**, through the participation by civil society organisations in a consultation process, with the opportunity to independently decide whether they support the Conference conclusions or not.
3. **Continuity through sustaining legacy**, since the Örebro Conference conclusions are based upon conclusions from the French and Czech presidency conferences. The Örebro Conference conclusions will also be put forward to the following EU Presidencies in Spain, Belgium and Hungary in order to take the process of a more democratic European Union forward.

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Key Conference Conclusions and Recommendations

With the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty a new era of democracy in the EU is ahead of us. Of vital importance is the full recognition and realisation of the Lisbon Treaty ambitions. The main theme of the NGOforum09 Conference, “Cutting the Democratic Deficit through Civil Participation”, elaborated on several topics related to the Treaty but also other key issues facing civil society and European societies at large.

Overall Conclusions

Civil Society contributes to the strengthening and building of democracy in European societies in various ways. In relation to the conference theme, the Conference would like to address decision-makers and other stakeholders in Europe highlighting the following;

The Lisbon Treaty and Civil Society

The NGOForum09 participants consider it vital that the European Union creates a broad and effective structure for a European civil dialogue. This should be based on the recognition of the importance of active citizenship for democracy in the European Union. To achieve this, the NGOforum09 recommends:

Civil society should be actively involved as an equal partner in defining and developing the Lisbon Treaty articles on democracy!

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The main conference theme was divided in to three sub-themes; democratic deficit, public health and wellbeing as well as NGO identity.

Recognising Civil Society’s work and achievements in cutting the democratic deficit

Civil Society plays a key role in cutting the democratic deficit through initiatives to strengthen democracy across Europe. Civil Society demonstrates this continuously through the development of various initiatives, projects and actions. One example is the development of the “Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation” recently adopted by the Council of Europe.

Recognising the importance and the outcomes of official civil society events during the EU presidencies

Official civil society events have been organised during the last EU Presidencies with the support from the European Commission. These events provide a unique opportunity for civil society actors to meet, exchange and deliberate on important issues in EU as well as Europe at large. These events generate concrete outcomes that contribute to EU policy development.

Conclusions Sub-theme 1: Democratic Deficit

The Lisbon Treaty highlights citizen rights to participate in the decision making process as well as the duty of the EU Institutions to be transparent and in dialogue with civil society. This offers opportunities for civil society to actively participate in the realization of the democratic process. EU needs to develop a new structure in order to balance representative democracy and the participatory democracy. Civil society plays a vital role in this context.

Civil society acts as bridges for unheard groups in democratic processes as well as support citizens to mobilize. Civil society must therefore operate in a transparent and accountable way at all levels (global, European, national, regional and local).

The NGOforum09 would like to highlight the following to European leaders and political decision-makers:

- There is a need to develop an inclusive, effective, coherent and structured European civil dialogue to ensure a vital, well-functioning and democratic society
- Recognise the specific role organised civil society plays in bridging the democratic gap and support initiatives for active citizenship in order to continue to build democracy in the EU and Europe
- For the success of the Lisbon Treaty it is crucial to actively involve civil society as an equal partner in defining and developing the articles on democracy

Conclusions Sub-theme 2: Public Health and Wellbeing

In recent years there has been an important development in how we perceive and measure progress. Inspired by the OECD Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, EU should make every effort to change the paradigm of measurement of progress from the one sided focus on the GDP to a system that includes factors of wellbeing. This change of paradigm must be allowed to influence the methods of evaluation and measurements that are used regarding NGO-public cooperation.

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The NGOforum09 underlined the importance of new ways of measuring public wellbeing. Civil society possesses unique knowledge and expertise in the area of public health. This knowledge must be seriously taken into account when measuring progress. To create healthy regions, people of all ages and cultures need to get involved in civil society and network with public and private sectors. This requires sustainable funding.

The NGOforum09 would like to highlight the following to European leaders and political decision-makers:

- Urge leaders in politics and civil society to put “wellbeing” high on their agenda, pushing wellbeing indicators as a measure of societal progress
- Urge sufficient financial and other support for a successful implementation of European Year of Volunteering 2011
- Recognize non-profit service providers working for their unique values, expertise and specificities when in internal market competition.

Conclusions Sub-theme 3: NGO Identity

Civil society actors carry various identities and play many different roles in European societies. Civil society contributes significantly to social and community development and is a driving force for democracy and welfare development. Civil society exists at all levels, but the majority of the activities take place locally and regionally where people in the community get organized around a specific cause or interest and where services are provided. Civil Society mobilizes and activates citizens, innovates new methods and solutions. It conducts activities, projects as well as delivers services. Public authorities need to acknowledge civil society and find new ways to cooperate that are equally beneficial.

The NGOforum09 emphasises the need for strengthened alliances between civil society organisations, working at cross-cutting level and bringing together initiatives from different sectors. To make visible, improve and evaluate the various NGO identities, new methods and statistics needs to be developed to measure the value civil society and NGO contributions in European societies.

The NGOforum09 would like to highlight the following to European leaders and political decision-makers:

- Call for a Statute for European Associations
- To develop structures which are specifically developed for civil society organisations and non-profit service providers and not based on other sectors
- Call for a reform of EU funding to include more flexibility, to prioritize social innovation and impact together with financial accountability to ensure a sustainable civil society
- Call for indicators to be integrated in official statistics that reflect the value of civil society
- Need to recognize the importance of a vital civil society through sufficient funding

Next Steps

This document will be forwarded to the EU Presidencies in Spain, Belgium and Hungary as well as to relevant European leaders and political decision-makers, as a contribution to cutting the democratic deficit in EU.

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