

WEAVING THE WEB – EQUAL LAYS THE FOUNDATIONS FOR A NATIONAL SOCIAL ECONOMY PLATFORM

Poland's national thematic network in the social economy brings together all 24 development partnerships in the theme as well as government and other stakeholders. This large group has not only played a major role in analysing mainstreaming the programme's results, but has been the de facto focus for the establishment of a more permanent platform for the sector. It is now devolving much of its work to four specialist working groups.

In recent times, the idea of social economy in Poland has mainly been taken to refer to its 50,000 voluntary organisations and foundations, as the co-operative and mutual families (19,000 organisations), which were co-opted by the former communist regime, have not yet fully recovered their respectability in the public eyes. Yet a new movement is growing up in certain areas, and in co-operative banking (credit unions) has been remarkably successful. Since the 90s, the potential of the social economy to help resolve the country's challenging problems of unemployment and exclusion has been recognised, and since 2000 a series of laws which have progressively structured volunteering, social firms and then co-operatives has been adopted.



The national network met during POSES, the first Polish social economy conference, in Kraków on 29 September 2006

When Poland joined the EU in 2004, EQUAL had already been identified as a major tool in rebuilding the social economy sector. Its Community Initiative Programme had already been developed, and a social economy organisation, the Foundation of Socio-Economic Initiatives (Fundację Inicjatyw Społeczno-Ekonomicznych (FISE)¹ had been involved in its drafting. Poland now has the second-largest theme D (social economy) programme in EQUAL, with a budget of €36.7 million and embracing 24 development partnerships (only the Italian programme is larger).

CIP priorities are to support the development of a Polish model of the social economy, work out the necessary mechanisms, revitalise deprived areas and bridge regional gaps. Activities include building the model, helping people to cross from the second to the first labour market, improving co-operation among actors, better instruments and mobilising local communities.

Five of the development partnerships are working to improve the institutional framework for the social economy, addressing such aspects as management skills, statistics, awareness, legal frameworks, advice services and access to finance. Six are helping new social enterprises to start up, often in trade sectors like tourism, the environment and information technology. Thirteen DPs are active in labour market integration, for beneficiary groups including Roma, ex-offenders, single parents, mentally ill, blind and autistic people. Three take a local development approach.

¹ www.fise.org.pl

NETWORK STRATEGY

Poland entered EQUAL at the beginning of the second round in 2004, shortly before the European Union's 'big bang' enlargement in May of that year. Five national thematic networks (NTNs) were set up, one for each theme. Their tasks included identifying the policy relevance of the work being undertaken by the development partnerships, creating a mainstreaming strategy, supporting the work on the ground, validating the results and making recommendations for continued financial support in Action 3 of EQUAL. More broadly, they were charged with "working out a form of effective dialogue between organisations/people implementing the programme and policy-makers". The networks' secretariat is managed by the EQUAL National Support Structure, the Co-operation Fund Foundation (Fundacja Fundusz Współpracy).²

According to Wojciech Kempisty, who heads the Co-operation Fund's Theme D unit, the network held its inaugural meeting in November 2005, and in February 2006 agreed a constitution and elected a president and two vice-presidents. The early part of the year was taken up with discussing the thematic strategy for theme D. Since then it has met approximately monthly. Its objectives, as agreed in April 2006, are:

1. To create circumstances that promote the formation and development of the social economy:
 - legal conditions
 - institutional conditions
 - conditions for social economy financing instruments
2. To promote good practices in the social economy:
 - methods to identify and replicate early tested models
 - models of social enterprise
 - good practice promoting effective use of social enterprise
 - good practice for social economy staff training
3. To increase the knowledge and public acceptance of the social economy:
 - methods of social economy promotion
 - mechanisms of social economy observation (national and regional observatories) as regards its condition, contribution to solving social problems and contribution to the national economy

The group has established four working groups, to work on legislation, promotion, strategy and the exchange of good practice respectively. Representatives of the development partnerships have been selected to take part in the various working groups, and detailed activity plans will be worked out at a meeting to be held in Jachranka in the autumn of 2007.

FORMAL AND INFORMAL FUNCTIONS

The network was set up to be inclusive. Each of the 24 development partnerships had the opportunity to appoint a representative and to nominate an expert. In addition, there are representatives of national government regional development agencies, trade unions, banks, business, non-governmental organisations and academia. "There is some work to do before all these partners, for instance the trade unions, become active in developing the social economy," says Kuba Wygnański, of the *Searching for a Polish Model of Social Economy* development partnership. The 39 full members are joined by 14 observers invited by the secretariat.

Altogether this makes a total of 53 people, which has positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, it has provided a forum at which a broad network to promote the social economy has been built. "We meet every month or so in Warsaw," says Mr Wygnański, "and probably only half the work that is done figures on the formal agenda. Because once everybody has got together in one place, on the margins of the meeting an immense amount of useful discussion takes place." In some ways, the network is the kernel of the national debate involving many thousands of organisations that are not active within EQUAL.

² www.equal.org.pl

On the negative side, at least in the view of some people, the network has inevitably devoted a lot of its time to discussion rather than action. At the start there was great enthusiasm, but the bureaucratic workload has to a certain extent suffocated other work.

For the first year of its existence a large share of the network's energy was taken up with the process of validating the work of the 24 development partnerships in the social economy theme, in order to allocate funds for mainstreaming activities. This worked by individual development partnerships proposing actions, which were then reviewed in a complex process involving experts, peers and the EQUAL managing authority. This resulted in 23 projects being recommended for continuation and only one being rejected.

The validation process was followed by a 'Results Exchange' held in Jachranka, close to Warsaw, in August. This event brought all five thematic networks together to present their activities and develop common projects for the mainstreaming phase of EQUAL.

THE SOCIAL ECONOMY SECTOR FINDS A VOICE

By bringing together such a large number of practitioners and experts from across the country on a regular basis over a sustained period, the network has become the seedbed for a permanent structure. The second social economy conference in Kraków in October 2004 saw the launch of *Stała Konferencja Ekonomii Społecznej* (SKES), the Permanent Conference of the Social Economy.³ This brings together co-operative banks, NGOs and businesses to act as a negotiating partner with the government.

This in turn led to the holding of the first national social economy meeting, POSES,⁴ in Kraków at the end of September 2006.

The NTN does not carry out lobbying on legal structures as such, but it does support its member development partnerships to work together on this activity. A map of legal structures is currently being drawn up, and efforts are under way to synchronise work on improving legislation, strengthening the sector's political voice, and above all in ensuring that the social economy has a strong position in the national development plan for the period 2007-2013. Political influence currently depends on a score or so of well-known and trusted individuals with good reputations, so in this sense the national thematic network plays a useful role in democratising the process of change.

TAKING THE MESSAGE TO THE REGIONS

As for the future, Mr Kempisty says the network will be active on three levels:

- promoting co-operation between development partnerships working on similar issues within Action 3 of EQUAL
- transferring on good practices to organisations outside EQUAL (horizontal mainstreaming)
- informing policy-makers about the innovative solutions that have been discovered, and pressing for these to be incorporated in policy (vertical mainstreaming)

It will decentralise most of the work to its four working groups, working respectively on legislation, promotion, strategy and the exchange of good practice, but will also convene 4–6 general meetings per year. A two-day conference bringing in European experts to discuss finance for the social economy is also planned.

It remains a real problem to involve policy-makers, at both national and regional levels. Development partnerships have carried out a thorough analysis of the regional operational programmes and circulated it with recommendations to the regional government offices. This initiative has met with success in some areas and so the social economy can look forward to a reasonable level of support from the Structural Funds in the 2007-2013 programming period. "Poland is probably the

³ www.skcs.pl

⁴ www.ekonomiaspoleczna.pl

EU country where this has worked best, apart from in the UK where social enterprise is part of a national strategy,” suggests Mr Wygnański.

General awareness of the social economy is steadily improving, and for instance the subject is now taught in four or five of the country’s universities. The case studies discussed at the EQUAL mainstreaming conference held in Warsaw in May 2006 are also being translated and published on the web. In the early part of 2007, under the SKES banner, Mr Wygnański plans to mount a roadshow and tour all the regional government offices to hammer home the message. “We hope be able to use the fact that we come from Warsaw to bring the regional authorities and social economy organisations together,” he says. Later in 2007 plans include a series of 16 regional meetings to put together models and good practice. It is also hoped to repeat the POSES meeting in future years.

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