ECAS contribution on the future of the EU Cohesion Policy

THE PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLE AND THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE ORGANIZED CIVIL SOCIETY

As discussed at the Civil Society Forum held by ECAS in the framework of the Open Days of the European Cities and Regions (the report is enclosed)

ECAS believes that the EU Cohesion Policy is essential for the well-being of citizens and it should be strengthened. With respect to this objective it is necessary, among others, that the partnership principle fully involves civil society organizations (CSOs) as defined in the revised regulation of the Structural Funds.

In the new Article 11 of the general regulation on the Structural Funds\(^1\) Member States have a duty to put in place a more extensive partnership, including the third sector “any other appropriate body representing civil society, environmental partners, non-governmental organizations, and bodies responsible for promoting equality between men and women”. However, the actual functioning of the partnership across the Member States shows less positive picture.

Ever since the article 11 was under discussion, ECAS and other platforms of the CSOs have advocated that contribution from the third sector is crucial to the effective operation of the EU Cohesion policy. Partnership is a way of adding value to Structural Funds operations since:

- Adapting to change and globalization depends not only on infrastructure and building competitive excellence, but also on “social capital.” Ownership of Lisbon reform objectives can increase acceptance of necessary reforms by stakeholders and citizens.

- CSOs can reach parts the market cannot reach or yet find profitable. But this does not mean that they should be regarded or regard themselves as outside the economic mainstream. Indeed, they have a larger share of the economy in terms of employment, volunteering and service delivery, particularly to vulnerable groups in society and in certain regions, than is generally supposed.

- Third sector representatives which work closely with local communities help to design local strategies, adapt policies to local conditions and take “tailor-

\(^1\) Council Regulation 1083/2006
made” initiatives. In sum, they significantly contribute to ensure the optimal delivery of the Structural Funds to the local communities.

- Partnership should increase the quality and transparency of decision-making by stimulating learning across organizational barriers and improving coordination. CSOs which propose new solutions to old problems by cutting across administrative competences are often a catalyst for this process.

- Partnership creates synergies among the actors involved and alliance between public authorities and the private sector.

- Finally, there is the need to involve civil society as the link to citizens and the way to articulate their needs.

In the framework of the last Open Days of the European Cities and Regions, ECAS undertook to examine to functioning of the partnership principle. We enclose to this contribution the full report from the event. Hereby we would like to submit to the main conclusions of these workshops to the consultations on the Fourth Report.

1. The European Commission should come up with the clear guidelines and assistance to the Member States on involvement of CSOs as partners

From the contributions at the workshops we can see that the application of the partnership principle is very uneven - some countries can boast good practices (UK, Slovenia, and Poland) but in the others the involvement of the CSOs happens only “pro forma” e.g. electronic consultations held with very short notice, no feedback from the public authorities on the CSOs contributions.

A considerable obstacle to civil society participation particularly in the programming of Structural Funds operations relates to the fact that regional authorities generally feel that they already speak for civil society and hence often see CSOs as competition. Similarly, political parties regard themselves as being closer to the grass-roots of society and hence as entitled to speak for and represent citizens. There is a clear tension there which, however, should be turned into close cooperation rather than competition for partnership to work effectively. An obstacle is also the obligation for the CSOs to “play according the rules of game”, i.e. making use of the expert knowledge, lobbying activities, media campaigns, investing the financial and human resources. Without doubt, the CSOs activities in this field need to professionalise but this will not happen unless they start to be treated as partners and see their involvement as worthwhile.

This is the time for the European Commission to act by producing a set of guidelines and making the approval of Operational Programmes subject to verification whether the partnership principle was applied and introducing sanctions where necessary.
2. The use of Technical Assistance

The CSOs representatives at the workshops agreed that the Technical Assistance is an extremely useful tool providing support to partners building their skills and capacities. It therefore creates “level playing field” and contributes to the successful partnerships. Some member states (e.g. the UK) have used this tool very effectively also in favour of the civil society sector. This is not, unfortunately, the case in majority of the Member States.

To ensure that Technical Assistance is increasingly seen as an effective tool for partnership building, EU Member States should be encouraged to follow the best practices already existing in this sense. This encouragement should indeed come from the European Commission itself who should set an example to Member States by earmarking part of the Technical Assistance available at the EU level for civil society.

3. A chapter on the functioning of the partnership principle should feature in the next Cohesion report.

In the future Structural Funds operations ECAS expects issues of governance and citizen participation to be given more prominence. Therefore, we propose that a special chapter on partnership should be added to the next Cohesion Report.

Whereas ECAS will continue the work on the examining and promoting the partnership principle from the civil society perspective this is no substitute for the Commission’s independent outlook. Such an evaluation exercise has been already done for the EQUAL and should be now done for all the Structural Funds. This would ensure that the Member States are under scrutiny and encourage them to upgrade their standards.

ECAS was created in 1990 as an international non-profit organization, independent of political parties, commercial interests and the EU Institutions. Our mission is to enable NGOs and individuals to make their voice heard with the EU by providing advice on how to lobby, fundraise, and defend European citizenship rights.

ECAS is empowering civil society with the European Union. It is an association about action as much as information, creating balance between public interest and corporate lobbying. Our work centers on 3 "C's": Civil Society, Citizens’ Rights, Citizenship and Governance.

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