

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION IN ACP-EU COOPERATION

At the October 2012 [Policy Forum on Development](#), Commissioner Piebalgs said : *As our new policy on civil society says, given the right conditions, you (CSOs) can fully play your role as actors in governance and development in helping support transparency and good governance advocacy, contributing to policy-making and to human development and inclusive growth. We are committed to helping create those conditions.*

Different recent processes and policy documents¹ reflect that new EU approach and seem to **converge in favour of a greater role for civil society especially as a key element of democratic governance and accountability.**

These papers were adopted partly as an outcome of the [structured dialogue](#) and the preparation of the Busan High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness and partly as a follow-up and response to the so called 'Arab spring'. They also come at a time when the EU is finalising its new 7 year multi-annual financial framework (2014 – 2020) that involves a review of its cooperation and external actions policies and instruments.

All these statements are very encouraging with regard to the role that the EU institutions want to play in supporting the action and the policy space of civil society in developing countries. At the same time, **there is clear evidence for an alarming increase in the number of governments in developing countries employing restrictive actions and policies**, including through the adoption of new laws, to curtail the activities of CSOs and restrict their political space.

In such a context, the key issue will be to translate the new EU approach into practice. It is not enough for the EU to support financially the activities of civil society and to put in place consultation mechanisms on its policies and programmes. If the objective is to promote a real democratic and societal change, **strong political and diplomatic action is also necessary as well as a review of certain EU policies** having an impact on the rights and livelihoods of poor populations in developing countries.

A renewed EU Policy on Civil Society

A New EC Communication on Civil Society: "[The roots of democracy and sustainable development: Europe's engagement with Civil Society in external relations](#)" was published in September 2012 followed one month later by [Council Conclusions](#).

Both documents recognise the central role of civil society in democratic governance and in building just, equitable and inclusive societies, something that was, so far, not very prominent in EU approaches towards civil society or towards governance and development. This new approach is also fully integrated in the EU strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy adopted by the 27 Member States in June 2012.

The positive points in the EC communication are:

- The right based approach reflected in many parts of the text;
- Civil society as a crucial element of any democratic system and as an asset in itself;
- The definition of civil society and the fact that it includes informal organisations;
- The importance of participation of civil society in policy processes and political dialogue;
- The importance of engaging European citizens through development education, awareness raising and campaigning;
- The complementary roles of state and civil society in social services;
- The readiness to support the role of civil society in the implementation of the Agenda for Change;
- The particular attention paid to the fact that the EU should systematically facilitate CSOs' oversight role when budget support is used, among others by allocating part of the budget support envelopes to capacity building for CSOs;
- The promotion of multi-stakeholder and multi-actor approaches both in action and dialogue.

Implementation of the communication remains a main challenge

Civil Society participation is a key feature of the Cotonou Agreement and EU cooperation with ACP countries is at the frontline of supporting the multiple roles of civil society in development and democratic governance. Under the 9th and 10th EDF, there are many examples of civil society support programmes as well as specific programmes targeting civil society in the broader governance sector on which lessons can be drawn.

Two years ago the Cotonou group of CONCORD developed a table providing an [overview of the bottlenecks preventing a full civil society participation in the ACP-EU cooperation](#). This paper, based on past experience with the programming and reviews of the 9th and 10th EDF, was discussed with EU officials during the structured dialogue.

¹ [EC communication on CSOs](#) and [Council conclusions](#)

[EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy](#) (adopted by the 27 Member States)

[EC Communication on EU support to sustainable change in transition societies](#)

The first test case for the implementation of the renewed EU approach towards civil society will be the current programming of future EU cooperation instruments, 11th EDF included. In the guidelines to delegations on the programming process it was foreseen that civil society (and other non-state actors) would be consulted on the future national indicative programmes (NIPs) and the priority sectors as well as the indicative planning for each of the sectors. It is important to note that support to civil society can be integrated in the NIPs as a fourth priority area in the case of ACP states. Together with their partners in the ACP countries, CONCORD members are undertaking an overview and assessment of these consultation processes in order to identify good practice on both official and civil society sides and to spread it across all countries.

The programming of two **thematic programmes of the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI) but also of the Intra ACP fund as well as for the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR)** are also on-going. **These programmes will complement the NIPs** by targeting civil society actors directly (CSO and Local Authorities DCI Thematic Programme, EIDHR) or by focusing on certain thematic issues of importance at global level (Global Public Goods and Challenges DCI Thematic Programme or intra-ACP funds). The CSO and LA programme in particular is an essential tool for building the capacities of civil society to play the roles foreseen in the communication and it is of utmost importance that CSOs are also consulted on the programming and implementation of these programmes and instruments.

However, for the communication and the Cotonou Agreement objectives to become reality, **the participation of civil society in the implementation of the NIPs** of ACP countries should also be upgraded. In particular, the multi-actor approach in the delivery of public services underlined in the communication is a very promising model that will not materialise without a strong push and commitment from both the EU and the ministries concerned in ACP countries. In the same way, improvements in the area of inclusive growth, social protection or in combating inequalities and discrimination highly depend on the involvement of civil society. Although support to civil society can be granted through different instruments, **it is also essential to mainstream the meaningful and structured participation of CSOs in the implementation of all priority sectors of the NIPs, including budget support².** The adequate mix between the different CSO support modalities and programmes will depend on the situation of each country which pleads in favour of a tailor-made approach.

In the communication it is also suggested that country **roadmaps for engagement with CSOs** will be developed by the EU and its Member States in view of improving *the impact, predictability and visibility of EU actions and ensure consistency and synergy*. These roadmaps, if properly put in practice, might represent a real improvement compared to the present uncoordinated and unpredictable system. Indeed, they should *be developed taking into account the views of local civil society and existing coordination structures* and they should *identify long-term objectives of EU cooperation with CSOs from partner countries and encompass dialogue as well as operational support, identifying appropriate working and funding modalities*.

Beyond consultation and financial support of civil society, much more can be done by the EU to promote the role and the political space of civil society in development through **diplomacy, political dialogue and support to political reforms** (including through development-oriented and rights based trade agreements).

The EU is clearly committed to utilise the political dialogue with partner countries to promote the respect of human rights and freedoms and an enabling environment for civil society. However, **it will be a challenge to make sure that a coherent approach is put in place in every country** as political dialogue also interferes with EU and its Member States' own political and economic interests and defending civil society space may in certain cases be judged too sensitive.

We expect members of the JPA to take a strong commitment in favour of

- Promoting a Human Rights based approach to development and an enabling environment for citizens to engage in policy making;
- Establishing multiple forms and mechanisms of dialogue between parliaments and CSOs and promoting space for civil society contribution in policy making processes at all levels including the local, national, regional and the global level ;
- Supporting the multiple roles of civil society actors in full respect of their diversity and right of initiative and being open to supporting innovative ways of action and dialogue including through multi-actor approaches;
- Monitoring the programming process at country level making sure that civil society organisations are involved and that their concerns and recommendations are taken into account;
- Promoting democratic ownership at country level so that priorities of cooperation reflect the real needs and aspirations of the ACP populations and are not influenced by European Commission and Member States own interests or only reflect priorities of the EU and its ACP state's interlocutors;
- Putting pressure on the EU and individual EU and ACP governments to increase the transparency of their national budget processes and monitoring and of their cooperation, including in case of joint programming, pooling of funding and budget support;
- Being ready to bring to the light the concerns and complains of civil society actors and to defend fundamental freedoms of association and expression and the rights of all citizens to establish 'associations' in view of defending their rights and interests and undertaking joint initiatives.

For further information, please visit <http://www.concordeurope.org/> - Tel +32 2 743 87 65

² See paper: <http://capacity4dev.ec.europa.eu/article/engaging-non-states-actors-new-aid-modalities>