

CONCORD Webinar: Consequences of Brexit: What does it mean? How should we react?

Thursday 30 June 9.30-11am

CONCORD invited four speakers to share their different perspectives on how the civil society sector in Europe should respond to last week's referendum in the UK, which resulted in a vote in favour of leaving the European Union. The hour-long webinar was moderated by Seamus Jeffreson, Director of CONCORD Europe, and can be seen in full here. CONCORD members were invited to take part by posting their comments and questions in a chat box. The contents of that box can be found at the end of this report.

- **Johannes Trimmel** - President, CONCORD Europe
- **Kathleen Spencer Chapman** - Head of Policy and Public Affairs, BOND, UK NGO platform
- **Dr. Christine Hackenesch** - Team Lead 'EU Policies for Global Development', German Development Institute
- **Adrian Bebb** - Food, Agriculture and Biodiversity Programme, Friends of the Earth Europe

Discussion

Johannes started by saying that he was shocked with outcome of the referendum but even more shocked by the debate preceding the vote. This is not a unique situation in the UK but we see that the discourse across EU countries about the EU is not the positive narrative that we would like. Johannes is also concerned about the racist reactions in the UK since the referendum. It is not clear how the process after brexit will be handled and what it means for the sector and beyond but the concern is much more fundamental than the development sector if society and common understanding of how we work in the world is fragmented. We need to go beyond development and engage in broad CS coalitions and bring back discussion about value based Europe, whoever is member of the EU. We need a society keen to develop human values and an environment worth living for.

Seamus summarised Johannes' main points emphasising that this goes beyond our sector. We need to see now how we join up with other sectors beyond our focus on global solidarity.

Kathleen started with a reminder about what the vote tells us. The result was clear but not overwhelming. The single biggest reason motivating leave voters to vote the way they did was the notion of independence, sovereignty and taking back control. Also prominent in second place was the issue of immigration and regaining control over borders. Quite a bit lower down was the next reason, the feeling of little say in the future of the EU. There are big divisions in society, but it is clear that people were not feeling heard or that their votes would make a difference. The biggest thing emerging is the feeling of divisions being exposed in



society. One division is generational - younger people voted to remain although turnout was also lower for younger people. There was a big different between regions, and between bigger cities and more rural areas. Another division is between levels of education. Inequalities in society have been massively exposed. Despite all the polling, there has been a huge sense of surprise and shock among those who voted to remain in the EU.

It is a situation of huge turbulence: a leadership campaign until 9 september; huge uncertainty about the relationship between the UK and EU in the future. Some people in the leave campaign are rolling back on promises made during campaign such as being 350 million pounds a week richer, and over immigration not going to increase. There is also uncertainty about when article 50 will be triggered. Overnight, people who are not white or not British feel less welcome in society. A strong immediate reaction needs to restate commitments to values of equality, diversity and social justice because these are under threat.

As said before, this goes beyond the development sector. There are huge divisions in the social fabric, social cohesion. The political elite is seen as out of touch with normal people. This was known to some extent but has been dramatically exposed by the referendum. A longer term challenge relates to how we can reconnect with these people.

Shorter term impacts – the immediate economic impact is a fall in the value of currency, which means there will be questions over donations from private donors and foundations. It is also worrying politically since there is currently a political vacuum and CSOs need to see what can be done to influence the future direction of a new government. BOND wants to work with the conservative party so that next leadership will be outward focusing and work across borders, to ensure the aid commitment and all issues we care about. The conversation is just starting. The British Department for International Development (DFID) attitude seems to be that the UK is part of the European Union until it is not, but not clear how that will play out politically.

It was difficult for CSOs to speak out on issues before the referendum. Charities were prevented from speaking out and this added to the closure of civil society space. There is a risk that this space will be further reduced.

Seamus thanked Kathleen for reminding others why the vote went the way it did and invited other listeners to comment on whether the reasons resonate in other countries. The shocking figure of 36% of young people voting runs alongside the fact that it is not clear what the leave camp now wants; how the new relationship with the EU should be determined. It is clear that values are under threat. CSOs are seen as part of the elite, the same political and power elite that has been voted against by many people. Do you agree? What can we do? Immediate impacts include economic (falling of pound) and political; the importance of influencing the new administration in the UK.

Adrian started by looking at how civil society should react. The referendum result has been a huge wake up call for civil society across the whole of Europe. It is clear that the level of

debate in the UK but also in other European countries has attacked the values that bind us. Civil society must reclaim space that has been taken by right wing and racist voices. It is also a wake-up call as it is a huge opportunity to champion our issues. The current system has brought about big challenges for social and environmental causes. It is great that so many discussions have been started among CSOs in recent days.

FoE wrote to the presidents of EU institutions to say that we need a new agenda and to tackle problems that mean people have so little trust of Europe. We also need to be self-critical – do we do too much EU bashing rather than giving space to the benefits of being in such a union? For the environmental sector, we have to thank the EU for our cleaner air and water.

It has already been mentioned that we need to work together across sectors. The European Social Platform has started discussions and has offered to coordinate the civil society action that needs to happen. There will be a letter from civil society bringing together people from the different sectors. This is a political earthquake but we have been slowly losing the agenda and although we did not want this, it is a huge opportunity to build the Europe of the future that we want.

Seamus picked out the main points of Adrian's intervention, highlighting the dangerous tone of the debate and the fact that the current situation also provides us with an opportunity to challenge what has been going wrong, with less attention being paid to social justice. We should note the self-criticism, we also play a role in highlighting the benefits of the European Union. We cannot do it alone, but in concert with other civil society player.

Christine opened by saying how interesting she found it, taking part in this debate. There are still many unanswered questions but it is clear that without the UK, the EU would lose a heavyweight in development, which spends 50 billion euros in aid annually. The UK also has a strategic influence in shaping development policy, with particular attention to the aid effectiveness agenda, governance, human rights and democracy, and gender. The referendum is a difficult moment for EU development policy.

If the UK government really triggers article 50, it will be important to try and use this as a window of opportunity. The European Consensus on Development from 2005 is being revised and the discussion is timely: it is an opportunity to reflect on a common vision of Europe in the world. The departure of the UK could be an opportunity to build better development cooperation.

The EU's Global Strategy has also been published and welcomed, but because of Brexit not so much attention was given to this. Within the global strategy there are some important parts on development policy and this discussion is very important to have in parallel. There are two tracks of discussion for our next steps. We need to look at how to organise this transition period. If the UK will still be member in 2018, there will be important civil society repercussions.

The second discussion needs to be about the EU after the UK exits. It is important to look at both and identify the key priorities that civil society can try to influence within the discussions. The European Consensus on Development should be one area where civil society can be particularly active and shape this discussion.

Seamus Christine reminded us that the UK is a very big bilateral donor and has helped to shape EU development policy in its 40 years of EU membership; particularly the aid effectiveness agenda. One effect is financial but another relates to issues where the UK has put its weight. We should use the opportunity to influence the way the EU does its sustainable development policy. There are two important issues – the European consensus on development and the global strategy. Christine sensibly encouraged us in civil society to focus our efforts on these key processes.

Questions

Seamus NGOs are being seen as part of the establishment that people are being critical of. How do we see ourselves on the side of and articulating the feelings of people who feel left behind and not listened to? How can global citizenship and development education help to challenge this perception of an elite out-of touch sector?

Johannes It is not easy but we see that media coverage distorts reality and represents CSOs as out of touch. We have not done enough to contradict this narrative. We have not done everything right and this goes back to the big motivation to leave - to take back control. People feel that they have no control and have no influence, they are not part of the debate and this is true of our political leaders. There has not been enough discussion about what we want to achieve with the EU, resulting in a disengagement of the leadership with citizens. This is something to learn from.

This is not just the case in the UK – we saw a similar trend in the Austrian presidential election. As civil society we have also underestimated how angry the people are. It used to be the case that when people voted for the extreme right, there was low turnout. This is no longer the case – both in UK and Austria showed that the right wing got votes with high turnout. Where global citizenship is concerned, we need to really engage with people and offer a different narrative on the Europe we want for the world we want. I do not expect the European political leadership to start a new narrative that really tackles inequality if we look at the little governments have done with the sustainable development goals so far. It is up to us in civil society to develop the new narrative and get it out to the people.

Seamus How can we engage those people?

Kathleen noted how striking it is that many of the staff in London based NGOs barely knew anyone who voted leave. We need to think hard about how to connect to people with different and diverse views. It links to our legitimacy – where do we get our legitimacy? We need to think about who we are engaging with, otherwise it is difficult to see how we will overcome this situation. Genuinely engaging means we will need to be open to very different perspectives.

Adrian agreed with everything that had been said and repeated that we have to get out of our silos. We are missing some of the bigger issue discussions and that requires talking better together, talking about bigger issues and getting out of our silos. Do we spend too much time spending our time lobbying rather than getting out to the people at the community level? We have been happy to take people's money but have not prioritised reaching out to communities. At the same time, we have to acknowledge that the political vacuum is now, and we cannot spend too much time looking internally because there is no vision of how to get out of this mess. We need to react very quickly as well as looking at changing the ways in which we are working more long term.

Seamus Suzanne from dochas has asked about the reaction of our partners around the world? We tried to get a voice from outside Europe included in the webinar it was not possible.

Christine This is a very important question but it is a bit early to have an answer as partners are trying to work out what it means. Because the UK has been very influential within EU policy, they are likely to be worried about this. Implications from the economic crisis on Southern countries include questions on trade implications; will trade agreements need to be renegotiated? Partners are certainly observing from a distance but too early for more detailed analysis.

Seamus We are here to work on behalf of those who are marginalized around the world so we need to make sure our links with them are strong. What does this mean for CONCORD and membership?

Johannes The UK leaving the EU does not mean we will stop engaging with BOND. It is more needed than ever to link up and work together for the Europe we want. Currently we have some restrictions in our legal statutes and we need to start a discussion in board to get these out of the way. Confident that BOND will stay a full member, and this indeed could extend to allow Norway, Switzerland and even accession countries to join.

The question of whether we have been ignoring issues at home and focusing on overseas development links to what we said before about global education. We cannot work overseas without engaging in strengthening values within Europe and our new strategy takes us in this direction. It is not possible to have a Europe that does not uphold these values at the same time as having proper sustainable development elsewhere. We met the new Director General of development yesterday and asked how he expected a progressive consensus with xenophobic societies.

Seamus Really pleased to start a discussion on how we are going to respond to this situation. The civil society hub (3) is the place where we can continue to discuss implications for our members. We might need a task force with other colleagues to look at the implications of the Brexit vote.

Adrian mentioned the social platform meeting at which there was a great outpouring of solidarity and support. What support can we give you in BOND? There is a feeling that CSOs in EU member states did not do enough to give a positive EU narrative for example. How can you best be supported?

Kathleen spaces such as this are really appreciated. It feels very supportive having statements of wanting to continue working together and overcome the boundaries increased by being on the path to leaving. We do need to work together to create the right kind of future in Europe and beyond. We are all European. There may be areas linked to the negotiations during which we might need particular support but that remains to be seen.

Adrian Thinking about next steps, we need to get organized, get out of our silos, work and talk together. We need a much clearer narrative and clearer demands about the political system that we have and what has to change. The big question now is how we do this across the EU and beyond. UK CSOs have a lot to do protecting what they have. We need to get organised to use this political earthquake to motivate groups across Europe to come together and build a better movement for a sustainable future for Europe.

Christine What is interesting for me in this discussion is how to better link to communities in Europe. How do we bring in groups that feel left behind? The referendum increased the need to have these discussions but the question of how to better link to society was there already.

Seamus The next steps for us in CONCORD will start with pulling together a note of this interesting discussion, also reflecting the comments, question and perspectives coming in. We in the secretariat will be active as part of civil society in Brussels to put into action some of the next steps. We will need to work with all CONCORD members so there is a link at national level. Working together we can have a renaissance of civil society. BOND remains part of our network and civil society in the UK needs to strengthen links regardless of what politicians say. Across CONCORD our working strategy remains very valid – we need to engage citizens. We have the framework necessary to work on these challenges through our thematic work hubs and committees. There is also a clear need to redouble our efforts to be in contact with our partners globally; to reconnect the issues we are passionate about across the world with the people in our communities who are very angry.

Thanks to everyone involved in the webinar.



Chat box comments and questions

Maurice Claessens (Solidar) One question on the civil society space during the campaign and its long term consequences. Kathleen (Bond) mentioned something on the charity committee being politicised and 'forbidding' charities to campaign. It would be good to explore this a bit further.

Susan McIntosh (BOND) Agree that this is a concern far beyond the development sector but do people now see the need for a far greater input and effort into development education/global citizenship education? This to address and counter the xenophobia, racism and huge range of misinformation abounding across the UK and the rest of Europe.

(Anonymous) UK CSOs have an important role to play in reconnecting with the wider civil society and community in asserting the principles of social justice, equality, solidarity and breaking down the elitist impression the CSOs present. But how do we do this?

Susan McIntosh (BOND) From a Scottish perspective I think the difference was that people here feel that they do have choice, young people (from 16 years) have been able to vote in the Scottish referendum and the Scottish Parliamentary elections (although not unfortunately this one) and they have been hugely politicised and do feel engaged in a broader and national (Scotland) debate. This has been from grassroots and debate has been encouraged as well as the ruling elite sidelined (note loss of Labour here) politicians are being held to account and they are not coming in as career politicians either. Hope this helps a wee bit to explain different perspective and result from here.

Francesco Pirelli (CONCORD Italia): To Johannes and Concord. How to ensure the presence and the continuity of our networking with BOND and UK friends in Concord? As observer? We have to launch a positive signal soon

Suzanne Keatinge (Dochas - Irish NP) Interested to hear if there's been any reactions from the global south. Maybe they have some ideas for us!

Practically, are the big UK NGOs thinking of simply moving/shifting 'resources' to access ec and echo funding from their other European offices...

And I'm hearing responses to influence leaders and policies, what ideas to re engage the public?

Areta And to add to Seamus' question: why are we seen as part of the establishment?

Mousumi Saikia (Islamic Relief) There is also an impression that NGOs have been ignoring the issues at home and focussing more on overseas development.

Katarina Macejakova (ActionAid) Katarina from ActionAid, Concord HUB 3 steering group member. One issue that hasn't been mentioned are the implications of the access to the EU funding for the UK NGOs who are the largest recipients and implementers of the EU aid (both development and humanitarian) – this may have huge implications on the development/humanitarian programmes in the south and the local CSOs. We are planning setting up a technical Brexit funding taskforce under the Concord HUB 3 to share our analyses of the EU funding implications this creates for UK INGOs, exchange ideas on possible responses to these and manage some of the perceptions this may bring in a short term (for example EU delegations being more reluctant to award grants with the UK NGOs during the transitional period). We will link up with the a more generic Concord Brexit task force (if it is set up) and with Bond and Voice to consult the TOR, etc

Tim Roosen Looking at Financing for Development the UK has indeed been a champion, as w large economy nevertheless spending 0,7% of GNI on aid, in comparison to other large economies France or Germany. In addition, the UK aid reaches almost all the developing countries whereas both France & Germany a high amount is kept in-country, there is an increase of refugie costs added.. As we 'transition' perhaps good to keep track of how the 'new'/remaining ODA leaders in the EU (France, Germany, Scandinavian countries) act, in particular whether they are to push further the decrease of aid in the form of grants, and increase the level loans and in-country costs.

Mousumi Saikia (Islamic Relief) As Kathleen mentioned, one of the reasons for people voting to leave EU is the disenfranchisement and loss of control. Do you think UK CSOs have a role to play in addressing this?

Paola Berbeglia (CONCORD Italia) For issues concerning Global Citizenship Education: the question for young people is how and why to take part to the debate on European identity, feeling that it as ours. The problem is the engagement and the inclusion on something that we perceive as "other" and we did not work enough culturally on this. Remember that articles 126 and 127 of Maastricht Treaty says that education and cultural are not included in the European process of unification.

