Conclusions and Recommendations from the CONCORD Seminar
CONCORD EU Delegations Report 2017
Towards a more effective partnership with civil society
27 March 2017

1. Introduction

The seminar was the occasion for a broad group of CONCORD members to exchange with EU institutions and Member State (MS) representatives on the way forward towards a more effective partnership with civil society at country level. Taking the findings and recommendations of the CONCORD EUD report 2017 as a starting point, the seminar aimed at exchanging good practices and discussing challenges and opportunities for EU NGOs, EC, EEAS and MS in reaching out to local civil society on two essential aspects: political dialogue mechanisms and funding for CSOs.

The report highlights the lack of knowledge on EU policies and programmes and the difficulties to access the discussion table and funding sources as outlined by a large number of local civil society actors. This represents a challenge for all actors concerned with civil society’s participation and role in development and democracy. In its report CONCORD made a number of recommendations to both EU delegations, MS representations and civil society actors, including international and EU NGOs, around:

- the necessity to improve communication and information towards civil society,
- making sure that a broad range of civil society actors are involved in consultations and dialogue mechanisms at all levels (political, thematic, through tripartite dialogue with governmental bodies or through donor coordination, etc),
- using the country roadmap as a more strategic dialogue and implementation tool,
- ensuring that the eligibility requirements and modalities used for funding are tailored to local civil society needs to allow for an effective response to realities on the ground,
- the establishment of genuine, effective and mutually beneficial civil society partnerships
- putting in place more interactive and flexible capacity building mechanisms.

For these recommendations to turn into real change will require fresh attitudes and approaches from both the EU and civil society. The objective of the seminar was to discuss openly about the feasibility of CONCORD’s recommendations and the challenges experienced by both EU NGOs and EU delegations related to political dialogue and funding. Additionally, the seminar aimed to identify more concrete recommendations and to agree on a number of issues which would need more discussion and reflection in the short to medium term in order to jointly progress towards a stronger relationship.

2. Conclusions from the discussion on political dialogue

What are the common challenges that EU, MS and CSOs face?
- It is often the same governments which are both shrinking CSO space and resistant to the EU’s political dialogue
The resource-heaviness of the EU/CSO dialogue is a challenge for both sides.

“Consultation fatigue” can affect both the EU side and the CSO side of the dialogue.

Functioning networks are needed: it is a challenge to balance the role of a network or networks as “privileged interlocutors” and on the other hand to ensure the inclusion of smaller, outlying or marginalized NGOs and groups.

EU Member States and other actors, both in capitals and at country level, are unaware of or uninterested in the Roadmap process.

Where political dialogue is concerned, “triangulation” (whereby the government, EU and CSOs all have a role to play) is not always possible (often due to unwillingness to engage on the part of the government).

Where do we have common ground?

CSO added value: local knowledge, thematic expertise, ability to address difficult topics in a culturally appropriate way, ability to advocate for EU policy coherence.

EU added value: political leverage, trade, EU’s CSO-targeted budget.

Common ground: Both CSOs and the EU are trying to raise awareness on the Roadmaps and the Roadmap process (1) through reports like the CONCORD EUD Report and the forthcoming EC (DEVCO B2) report on added value of Roadmaps; (2) through internal management and partnership structures, both by CSOs and the EU.

We are all trying to acknowledge the progress that has been made, and as CONCORD director stated about the Roadmap process, “we all believe in it!”

How to overcome challenges, how to monitor progress?

Learn from good practice, such as that seen in Cambodia, where instruments and programmes could be coordinated.

Link budget support/sectoral dialogue with political dialogue and civil society participation (cf. Tunisia).

Using a thematic approach can help allow different voices to be heard, and can help avoid fatigue, as different thematic experts will be involved.

It helps when CSOs have an identified interlocutor at the EUD (and MS embassies). This allows CSOs to be bolder and come forward for dialogue and engagement.

Feedback on dialogue is necessary: (1) It helps to avoid consultation fatigue because CSOs can see the utility/impact of their input; (2) It helps CSOs learn-by-doing how to dialogue better, be more effective.

Roadmaps are seen as valuable and can evolve into strategic frameworks for dialogue. EUDs can help to promote this evolution by being as transparent as possible about involvement in the roadmap process (for example by public notification, similar to systematic online publication of CfPs).

Concretely, for monitoring: (1) Roadmaps and Roadmap implementation should be reported upon in EUD annual reports; (2) A simple set of indicators, or measures of progress, could be set immediately, so that a few years down the line they can be used as benchmarks.

Dialogue (including the processes encouraged by the Roadmap tool) is the content of the partnership between EU and CSOs. It is important that both sides have a common understanding of this partnership.
3. Conclusions from the discussion on funding modalities

Four main challenges were raised during the discussion on the funding modalities: creating meaningful partnerships, predictability, transparency and information sharing, financing to third parties and aid modalities.

Partnership:
- There are different levels and understandings of partnerships, ranging from EU-CSOs partnerships to CSOs-CSOs ones, or with governments.
- There is a real risk for artificial partnerships being created to comply with EU requirements and due to limitative settings of funding opportunities. This in turn has the potential to impact negatively the entire implementation of the project (lack of coordination, issues around reporting, etc). There have been examples of NGOs including partners in their proposal before asking the partner.

Predictability, transparency & information sharing:
- Predictability of funding opportunities is central to create meaningful partnerships. If CSOs are informed well in advance, they can start identifying potential partners. This was the case for example with the recently launched call on education in fragile context. CSOs had known for a long time that partnering with universities or research institutes was going to be important, and it saved considerable amount of time when the call was finally launched.
- So all in all, the point is not about giving NGOs more time and increasing the 45 days for CN or FP submission. What matters is the information shared ahead of a call, in a transparent and predictable manner.
- Participants to the workshop urgently called on the EC to reinstall the forecast for in-country and global calls, which used to be available on EuropeAid webpage. Planning is key, so if there is a forecast published on time and enough information published on the requirements of the call (including partnerships), this will allow CSOs to organise themselves and hence submit quality proposals with strong partnerships. Patrice Lenormand will remind his colleagues in-house and in delegations about this good practice.

Financial support to third parties:
- It’s all very complicated at the moment. EUDs are not sure how it works as rules are changing and there is no clear guidance, and they end up asking for more information than is required. All actors involved (EUDs, CSOs, EU HQ, etc.) have a different understanding and interpretation which can create confusion.
- Patrice Lenormand suggested to have a discussion about it, and bring concrete examples to the table. While the EC can develop a guidance note to the attention of EUDs (which is apparently ready), paper will never replace face to face discussions.

Aid modalities:
- Need to balance transparency with flexibility.
- Calls for proposals are maybe the best way forward, as they ensure transparency and predictability, but they could possibly be simplified.

We need a balance of modalities reflecting the diversity of CSOs actors, but the questions is where is the balance between transparency and flexibility when moving to new aid modalities (e.g. trust fund).
4. Next Steps and the Way Forward

The immediate next steps to further the dialogue and reflection initiated at the seminar are:

- To take the opportunity of the Partnership Forum organised in July by DEVCO-B2 to have a more in-depth discussion and to further the recommendations identified above:
  - Roadmaps: monitoring and reporting on their implementation / increasing their visibility and transforming them into tools for strategic dialogue
  - Funding modalities for CS: revisiting the outcome of the ‘Strategic Dialogue’ process with regard to modalities / funding to third parties / predictability and conditions for good partnerships and consortia / framework partnership agreements
  - New funding modalities such as trust funds and their impact on CS access to funding and CS right of initiative

- For CONCORD members and their partners in developing countries to maintain the dialogue with EU institutions on civic space, enabling environment and civil society participation in the context of the PFD and upcoming meetings and consultation processes such as:
  - The EU-Africa Civil Society Forum taking place in Tunis from 11 to 13 July
  - The EU-CELAC Civil Society Forum taking place in El Salvador on 7 and 8 September
  - The EU-CS dialogue in the framework of the revision of the EU-ACP agreement after 2020
  - The ENP-South Structured Dialogue Forum in Brussels 10/11 July

- For CONCORD members to continue the dialogue with EU delegations and EU officials and with their CS partners on the basis of the EUD report and to further the analysis and reflection of what can be done better in specific contexts

- For CONCORD EUD Group to continue its reflection and maintain the dialogue with EU and MS interlocutors on ways and tools to monitor, from a civil society perspective, the implementation of the EC 2012 communication at country level with the view of increasing the effectiveness and relevance of its future monitoring work and reports.