

European & External Affairs Committee

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Title: WCVA promoting awareness and information on the European Union

For a number of years WCVA has been actively involved in promoting awareness and information amongst civil society in Wales about the European Union. Whilst this has been predominantly through the Structural Funds, WCVA has tried to develop debate around the broader issues of the Euro, governance, the role of civil society in Europe and its relationship with the EU institutions and European NGOs. We believe that Welsh voluntary organisations have a great deal to offer to the wider European agenda and we are committed to promoting opportunities for engagement.

This paper seeks to outline the ways in which WCVA is supporting Welsh voluntary and community organisations to increase their engagement with and understanding of EU issues.

Supporting the involvement of voluntary organisations in the Structural Funds Programmes 2000-2006 and 2007-2013

WCVA has a team of officers funded through European Technical Assistance who support the sector's engagement with the Structural Funds. We have delivered and are currently delivering 22 projects, including an active labour market intervention, a 'global grants' scheme (the Social Risk Fund), capacity building support for the voluntary sector infrastructure, and a Strategic Recycling scheme. WCVA has developed wide-ranging expertise in European project management and delivery, and more broadly we have looked to promote an awareness of the impact of European policies in Wales. However, funding does limit the amount of resource available to expand these activities.

WCVA has sought to keep the voluntary and community sector informed of developments in the new Structural Funds programmes 2007-2013 via its regular regional policy events and the European newsletter. In November 2004 the policy events outlined the initial thinking emerging from the European Commission and focussed on "The shape of things to come: Europe post-2006". This was followed in January 2006 by a series of events, entitled "The voluntary sector and the new European Funding Programmes – Delivering Welsh strategies through European Structural Funds". WCVA also consulted widely on the Assembly's new economic development strategy, Wales: A Vibrant Economy, which will be a key driver for the new programmes. Most recently, consultation events were undertaken on the UK draft National Strategic Reference Framework, and further events are planned in autumn to consult on the Operational Programmes.

Promoting Welsh good practice at EU level

WCVA has hosted and participated in a number of initiatives at European level, designed to share information and to discuss challenges facing the EU.

A Welsh colloquium on civil society and governance ("The Colloquium") took place in December 2002 in Brussels to ensure synergy with key developments in the EU surrounding the Convention on the Future of Europe, including: the models of governance being developed as part of the EU enlargement process, linking to the White Paper on Governance and the Commission's increased emphasis on civil society and consultation. This was organised with the support of the European Commission, the European Parliament, members of the Welsh Voluntary Sector and representatives from the Welsh Assembly Government and the Wales Office.

In March 2005, with the support of, Glenys Kinnock MEP and WCVA President, WCVA hosted an event at the European Parliament, "Strengthening Civil Society in an enlarged Europe". The event provided a timely opportunity to raise key issues concerning the role of civil society within the EU, in the context of the recent enlargement of the Union, and other current EU policy drivers: the process of ratification of the draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, the Commission's new Communication Strategy, the new Structural Funds negotiations, and the shift in emphasis of the revised Lisbon Strategy towards jobs, competition and growth and away from social cohesion. At a time when the role of civil society is being simultaneously promoted, in recognition of its key role in linking Europe to its citizens; and diminished, in terms of the reduced priority being given to social cohesion, this conference established a high level of interest in the evolving nature of civil society in the enlarged EU.

WCVA has also demonstrated a commitment to exchanging good practice with NGOs in other Member States, including a long-standing relationship with civil society organisations in Belarus.

Members of staff have also visited Poland (Network of Information and Support for NGOs-SPLOT), Slovakia (Centre for Environmental Public Advocacy), and Hungary (Non-Profit and Information Training Centre) to promote the Welsh experience of Structural Funds and to learn from the experiences of other European NGOs.

Europe Direct Information Relay

WCVA has recently joined a network of 400 outlets throughout the 25 EU Member States, where members of the public can access information regarding their rights as EU citizens.

WCVA will operate the service in mid Wales (Powys and Ceredigion), providing EU information to people at a local level.

As a channel between citizens and the EU the mission of the network is to:

- enable local people to obtain information, advice, assistance and answers to questions about the EU's institutions, legislation, policies, programmes and funding opportunities;
- actively promote local and regional debate about the EU and its policies;
- give the public the opportunity to send feedback to the EU institutions;
- assist the European institutions to improve the dissemination of information tailored to local and regional needs.

Membership of EU NGOs

WCVA is also a member of a number of European NGO networks including the Council for Non-Profit NGOs (CEDAG), and the European Citizen Action Service (ECAS), and receives information from the European Anti Poverty Network (EAPN). In March 2006 WCVA, along with its "sister councils" in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, was granted observer status membership of one of the most influential Brussels-based organisations, the Platform of European Social NGO's; this gives access to a detailed weekly newsletter, and an opportunity to work more closely with the Social Platform and its members.

Co-operation with UK 4 Nations "sister councils"

The four UK umbrella bodies representing national and regional NGOs, working on generic cross-cutting issues are:

- Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA)
- National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO-England)
- Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO)
- Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA)

As the national umbrella bodies, the "sister councils" represent a broad cross-section of UK civil society and have a diverse membership of over 6,000 NGO's in the voluntary and the community sector, with contact with many more through national and regional voluntary sector networks.

As a result of the regional and generic remit, the sister councils have been excluded from the very powerful thematic EU institutions and pan European NGO networks. Similarly, there is not an appropriate category for regional umbrella NGOs to register on the Commission's Coneccs database for consultation. This database is for civil society organisations organised at EU-level or on a thematic basis.

Over the last 18 months the sister councils have increasingly collaborated together on EU issues, to ensure that the concerns of the voluntary and community sector remain central to the EU social agenda. Specifically we have co-operated to produce a UK Voluntary Sector Manifesto for the European Parliament Elections 2004, and a joint position "Towards a Vision for the Future of the Structural Funds", which was launched in Belfast on 7 July. The sister councils visited Brussels in September 2005

to address some of the shared lobbying activities directly to Commission officials and to meet with other European NGOs to debate the joint position paper, "Civil society can put the spark back into Europe" which encapsulates our shared principles and specific policy recommendations during the UK Presidency.

During the visit the sister councils hosted an NGO roundtable, which aimed to explore ways of improving communication and collaborative working between EU level and national/regional NGOs. It was attended by EU-wide NGO representative bodies including the EAPN, Solidar, ECAS, and national/regional NGO umbrella bodies from Spain, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Austria and Croatia. Interest was established in improving communication between national/regional NGO umbrella bodies at EU-level, and in developing dialogue from the horizontal perspective of NGO umbrella bodies with the EU institutions to explore ways of improving collaborative working between EU and national/regional NGOs, to demonstrate the valuable contributions that national/regional NGOs could make to a range of policy agenda's

As a result of the initiative a joint project has been developed between the sister councils, CEDAG (a pan European NGO) and NGOs from Ireland, Austria, Slovenia and Estonia under the European Commission's 'Citizens for Europe' programme. The project, entitled "National NGOs – the 'missing link' in EU engagement", aims to promote the active participation of citizens of new EU Member States in the dialogue and reflection between European citizens concerning the ethical and spiritual values of European integration

Towards an EU Concordat?

The 4 Nations "sister councils" are also promoting the development of an EU-wide compact-style agreement between the EU institutions and civil society, an idea which takes its inspiration from our Voluntary Sector Scheme in Wales, the Compact agreements in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland and the similar models that exist in various forms in France, Estonia, Latvia and Poland. Whilst we acknowledge that such an agreement alone is not panacea, it is believed that an agreement would be beneficial to the relationship between the European Commission and civil society organisations across Europe and would help reconnect the European Union to its citizens.

A transparent process of deep consultation, led by civil society but with involvement of the European Commission and other EU institutions would be essential to ensure that all who would apply it would support the Concordat. The diversity of civil society across Europe means different models of civil dialogue and engagement have developed at national levels; however there are commonalities among them that could be drawn on when addressing the need for EU structured civil dialogue.

WCVA and the "sister councils" urge the European Commission, as part of its broader, Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate, and Transparency initiatives to take forward this proposal for a reform of the relationship between civil society organisations and the European Commission.