

NEWS AND VIEWS . . . from ICSW

The European Union and Africa

Opportunities for North–South cooperation

Strengthening civil society in Africa has been a priority in the work of ICSW since the 1980s. Recently interest for cooperation between Africa and the European Union has been growing, both between governments and official structures and between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society groups. Within ICSW, the Finnish and Tanzanian members of International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) have already initiated one North–South cooperation project. We hope that this will be the first of a growing number of mutually beneficial cooperative and development projects that ICSW can support. The time seems to be ripe if we look at recent developments and plans for cooperation.

The European Union (EU) has had special ties with Africa since the Union's inception, not least because it includes within its ranks former colonial powers with long relationships with individual African countries. The scale of the economic, governance and security challenges in Africa has prompted western governments and organizations to renew and bolster their commitments to the region. Other stimuli – positive and negative – have been provided by the 9/11 terrorist attacks and Africa's abundance of natural resources.

The EU is well-placed to capitalize on the available opportunities. But it will also be up to Africa to ensure that its relationship with the EU works. For that a genuine partnership is needed, based on shared goals, clarity and transparency. The EU–Africa Summit of December 2007 may help to achieve that goal through its launch

of an EU–Africa Joint Strategy, the culmination of a year of consultation in both continents. This Joint Strategy aims to provide something beyond the traditional North–South relationship. It intends to give people in less advanced countries control over their own development, focusing on four pillars: peace and security, human rights and good governance, health and education, and economic growth. One of the focal points is a broadened, deepened and strengthened political dialogue with African partners, including NGOs and other civil society stakeholders.

Civil society and the Europe–Africa dialogue

Governmental and supra-governmental infrastructures are gaining strength, in line with the overall stability and reduction of conflicts on the continent. The African Union was established in 2001 as a successor to the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the African Economic Community. The countries of Africa are taking a more comprehensive approach towards addressing the continent’s collective problems, primarily through the African Union but also in other important multilateral organizations such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The ICSW representatives in the African region have gained a strong foothold in the NGO initiatives that accompany these organizations and will continue to be actively involved in development initiatives in the region. Progress has been made towards establishing an African Peer Review Mechanism, an African Court of Justice and a Peace and Security Council, and on integrating the 2001 New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), which takes an African-owned approach to development.

When Portugal was holding the presidency of the EU, the Presidency Project of the Portuguese Non-Governmental Development Organizations (NGDO) Platform identified EU–Africa relations (with a formal focus on sub-Saharan Africa) as one of its top priorities, as it did in 2000, and in agreement with Germany and Slovenia, the preceding and succeeding EU presidencies. The Civil Society Forum on the Europe–Africa Dialogue was the main event of the project. It was held on 15–17 November in Lisbon and is being used as an instrument for policy analysis and debate, aimed at opening and broadening the perspectives of the dialogue between the two continents. The Forum gathered representatives from European and African civil society organizations and was structured in plenary

sessions as well as several thematic workshops. The opening and closing sessions were held in association with the Euro-African Parliamentarian Forum, organized by the North-South Centre Council of Europe. The final product of the Civil Society Forum was a political declaration and specific recommendations on the main topics tackled during the event.

Citizens' engagement

Because of the lack of knowledge of European and African issues among Portuguese citizens, the Platform – in coordination with its member organizations – organized four thematic debates in different parts of the country. The topics discussed were: governance and fragile states; development cooperation issues; migration and development; and policy coherence for development. The purpose was to widen the discussion, reaching out to different sectors and layers of Portuguese society outside the capital in order to improve knowledge and sensibility to the Europe-Africa Dialogue's different aspects, as well as to promote solidarity. The Presidency's Manifest, the document which presents the Portuguese NGDO Platform's view on some of the main issues of European-African relations and a set of recommendations for the Portuguese presidency of the EU, was an important tool in informing a wider audience and engaging interest in North-South activities between Europe and Africa. An initiative like this may also work in other European countries, whether or not they hold the EU presidency, to increase civil engagement in development issues.

Good practice

In October 2007 the executive directors and presidents of national social work councils from 17 countries of southern and eastern Africa received intensive training to strengthen their councils. The training took place in Mauritius and was organized by ICSW in partnership with the SADC Council of Non-Governmental Organizations and the Mauritius Council of Social Services (MACOSS). The training was sponsored through funding to ICSW from the governments of Finland and Sweden. The training examined the importance of strong national councils or umbrella organizations in each country, since national councils are the building blocks of ICSW membership. Participants discussed the absolute imperative of bringing together civil society interests in a common voice.

A strong voice enables civil society to balance the influences of other interest groups by representing a broad membership of thematic groups and NGOs in the fields of welfare and development. The training is the beginning of a process led by ICSW to strengthen national councils.

Note

For this article use was made of a policy brief published by the European Policy Centre (EPC) in July 2007, titled ‘The EU and Africa: coming together at last?’, in which the background, history and the state of play of EU–Africa dialogue was outlined. The full text of the policy brief can be found at the EPC website (<http://www.epc.eu>).

More information about the Portuguese NGDO Platform and the Presidency Project can be found on its website (http://www.plataformaongd.pt/site3/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogsection&id=12&Itemid=136).

More information on the plans and activities of ICSW in the field of social development can be found on the ICSW website (<http://www.icsw.org>).

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