



## **TRIALOG Central Training “Financial Sustainability of National Platforms”** Vienna - Austria, 24-26 February 2009

### **CONCORD membership and fee system: Perspectives of national platforms Minutes of the discussion\***

The participants used cards of different colours to write down:

- The perceived advantages of CONCORD membership
- The main challenges for platforms regarding CONCORD membership
- The added value that New Member States' (NMS) platforms bring, and could bring, to CONCORD

#### **Advantages of CONCORD membership**

The cards clearly show that the joint policy/advocacy work is valued most highly, followed by the overall advantage of being part of a European network and being present at EU level. Here the complete grouped listing of replies:

Policy/Advocacy: Influencing policies, coordinated policy influence, impact in policy making, collaboration at EU level in advocacy, lobby, advocacy, lobby-access, lobby at EU level, support to national platforms regarding EU policy, support to platforms regarding advocacy, EU level back-up and expertise to lobby national governments.

Representation and networking: Joint European NGDO power, being part of an influential CSO network, being able to collaborate/network at EU level, to be present at EU level of international development cooperation.

Information: Having access to information, information from a trusted source.

Other: Contributing to civil society empowerment, EU fundraising, access.

#### **Main challenges of CONCORD membership**

The “high membership fee” is clearly the main challenge, identified by 10 participants of the group. The other challenges that were mentioned are also interesting:

High Membership Fee: Mentioned 10 times.

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\* Please note that these minutes are part of the Central Training documentation and do not include any TRIALOG analysis or opinion. For substantial analysis of the Central Training outcomes, please refer to the following TRIALOG report: The financial sustainability of national platforms in New Member States. Analysis & future perspectives. TRIALOG Central Training 2009 Vienna. April 2009, <http://www.trialog.or.at/images/doku/sustainability-NMS-NPs.pdf>. For further Central Training documents please visit <http://www.trialog.or.at/start.asp?ID=195>

Other challenges/institutional perspective: Cost effectiveness, different kind of needs among members, low participation in decision making, too soft statements as consensus from different backgrounds, lack of political actions, EU policies – consensus.

Other challenges/member perspective: not sophisticated enough to soak up everything CONCORD has to offer, lack of NGO understanding of what works-how to sustain influence.

### **Added value that NMS platforms bring, and could bring, to CONCORD**

The replies show that NMS platforms see their added value in CONCORD above all in the special and new expertise which they bring into the confederation, followed by a stronger representativity and relevance of CONCORD through a broader membership.

New/Special expertise and perspectives: New expertise, very different perspective, different experience and knowledge, aid recipient perspective, energy, we are fresh, new and have new ways, variety in terms of culture expertise, fresh blood and ideas and experiences from different worlds, closer to developing world status than old members, better understanding of problems in the course for sustainable development, special experiences with former communist developing countries.

Representation and relevance: Legitimacy, the support of NMS capacities in development gives CONCORD relevance that they can use as an argument to get EC funding, increase of political weight, stronger voice and enlarged horizon, there is strength in numbers, added value for CONCORD to have NMS members, inclusive participation perspective of CONCORD.

Lobby/Advocacy influence: Potentially a key way to influence EU decision making through lobby at national level, broader advocacy, AidWatch inputs, commitments in terms of ODA issues.

Working Groups: High participation and commitment of members in different CONCORD working groups, active involvement in CONCORD WGs.

Other: Increase in membership fees, attitude change of population - support on development cooperation.

### **Membership fee levels for NMS**

In 2006, a collective letter asked for a special fee system for NMS, and 2009 is the last year for which the special level has been agreed. Discussions with different platforms at the November 2008 General Assembly (GA) showed that NMS platforms are still unable to cover their fees. The group is facing two problems – the 2009 fees, which some are already facing difficulties to cover, and the increased fees that will be requested next year. It is unclear which fee levels will be applied to NMS by CONCORD from 2010 onwards. The amount the NMS fees could rise to could be 7,500 next year. There is an urgent need to clarify the situation and discuss possible solutions between the NMS. The main concern is what will happen from 2010 onwards. The CONCORD secretariat and board understand and support this group of members, and they are open to discussions but the group needs a starting point. What do NMS platforms want to achieve?

#### Situation in different countries regarding the CONCORD fee

Some platforms have not yet thought about the possible increase in membership fees from 2010 onwards. A question was asked about which platforms had started the process of renegotiating 2009 fees. It seemed that platforms that are not yet members of CONCORD were not fully aware of the fee levels which they have to expect with membership. They were asked whether they plan to participate in CONCORD activities,

become members and pay a membership fee in future. The group learned about the situation in certain platforms.

In Latvia, but also in other places, the choice is between getting rid of the office or paying the CONCORD membership fee. The Latvian platform asked a foundation to pay the fee, showed the government the good results and then the government paid, but now the situation has changed. Now spending is frozen, the government has fallen and a request has gone to the minister to pay the CONCORD fee if nothing else. For Latvia, it seems unrealistic to even talk about keeping the current fee level. It was felt that the other ways in which platforms contribute to CONCORD, apart from their financial contributions through membership fees, have to be highlighted and acknowledged.

Estonia wants to participate in CONCORD activities, and has accepted that this will have to include a financial contribution.

In Bulgaria, the platform does not get enough funding from its members, the government does not yet contribute anything, and the platform is not yet eligible for EC funding. It was mentioned that CONCORD has received EU money, including money from Bulgaria, so the platform should be able to participate as an observer. It was asked which access members have to the decision-making process. TRIALOG clarified that non-CONCORD members can already take part in different processes in CONCORD, covered by TRIALOG, but they do not vote in the General Assembly. This debate is also important for TRIALOG as we cover participation costs but our goal is to have integration into CONCORD for all, as active members. TRIALOG encourages NMS to be CONCORD members in order to have an EU-wide confederation.

The Romanian platform wants to be a member of CONCORD but it is not clear how soon it will be able to cover the current membership fee. To obtain credit from CONCORD and repay this later is one of the few possibilities. Participation and commitment is clear.

In Slovakia, the government has cut funds to the platform this year, so the platform's membership fee will provide a larger share of the CONCORD fee. Saving on the CONCORD fee would help the overall situation. Discussions to renegotiate 2009 fees have only been internal so far, and no decisions have been taken.

In Cyprus, the island-wide Cypriot platform has not yet agreed on any (national) membership fees so it is not clear what will happen. The platform intends to apply for CONCORD membership but as the platform has no income, they hope to be granted a waiver for the first two years.

### **Suggestions and discussions:**

Suggestion: to prepare a joint NMS letter for the June 2009 GA with a concrete collective proposal for a new basis on which to organise the fee system. Some platforms in similar situations (Greece, Portugal) could join the group. The system could be adopted in the November 2009 GA.

Suggestion: to propose a more balanced system where the economic situation in the countries is taken into account; where the CONCORD fee is altered according to the GDP in the country and the financial situation in the platform. The starting proposal was that a certain amount be agreed as a baseline and then an additional amount be adjusted according to the different situations. The suggestion was met with some scepticism. A participant warned against going down a pseudo-scientific route, and encouraged the group to realise that whatever membership fee system is found, not everyone will be satisfied. In CONCORD it is even more complicated than in platforms because of the network members, which means that some individual organisations are linked to CONCORD in five different ways. It is not just about what members are getting out of CONCORD membership, but what they are putting in. It was also said the group

should also think about this from a political perspective. We want to work together, of course we have to pay the membership fee, but it is fair to have this kind of debate because it was announced in the GA; it will be on the agenda of the next GA and possibly of the 19-20 March board meeting.

Suggestion: to do joint lobby work, e.g. the issue could be raised as a hot topic in the DCI committee and with member states (MS), informing them that national platforms are having difficulties with their financial sustainability and saying that it is up to MS to respond to this. It was suggested to communicate a statement from the group to the DCI committee. An increasing number of countries are dealing with development and the sums available to them are decreasing. The main message should be that while facing more and more challenges and more and more actors in development cooperation, it is difficult to justify the amounts being allocated. The DCI committee is an opportunity to say that each government must support its civil society, using CONCORD as an example at EU-level. The long term solution for everyone was for governments to acknowledge the importance of NGOs. When MS meet, it is very political. It is important that we are seen as their friends, and understand the potential for Europe as a positive force in the world, but ask for their support in our work. It is in our governments' long term interest to support civil society and improve the quality of public decision making. It was added that this point goes with government co-financing, which matches EC funding and all NMS countries need this important message – in a period of crisis it is important to sustain local NGOs' ecosystems. If we are unable to get project funding through the EC, we will not benefit and other countries' NGOs will receive the funding. CONCORD needs to take into consideration the NMS' situations, help members and support the CS community. CONCORD needs to be shown what is realistic to be paid and then platforms should create a position paper to lobby MS to fund platforms. It was not clear whether the group really wants to get involved in lobbying the DCI committee and whether this was a role that was wanted for TRIALOG or CONCORD.

It was asked why no projects are 100% funded by the EC. It was explained that they used to be, but then co-financing with private funds was regarded as evidence that NGOs are rooted in their societies, and there is also the financial reason and the fact that the volume of funds has not increased at the speed with which the number of organisations has increased. Regarding co-financing, the difficulty for some organisations in NMS to find matching funds was emphasised; and in general, how bureaucratic it is to apply for EC funds. These are the kinds of issues discussed in the CONCORD working group FDR (Funding for Development and Relief). A participant reminded the group that thanks to TRIALOG 10 million EUR was dedicated to NMS with 15% co-financing in the past.

One idea put forward was a CONCORD solidarity fund, where strong networks and platforms put money in the fund to support financially weaker platforms. A solidarity fund for reimbursements already exists. CONCORD is trying to get more independent from the EC, investing more money in fundraising and approaching donors also outside Europe. Some participants would be in favour of such a fund; others stressed the importance to know where the money comes from and to make sure that the money is coming without conditions and that CONCORD does not get dependent from others (when getting less dependent from the EC). There were also different estimations regarding whether the EC is opposing non-European funds or not. It was mentioned that a CONCORD solidarity fund for Africa was discussed in Paris, but nobody had recent information on this.

Another idea was to lobby harder for regional programmes and projects like the RPP, FEST or the Presidency Fund.

The question of the NMS platforms that are not yet members of CONCORD was raised. It was said that one thing was CONCORD money, and the other was that in order to have full eligibility, CONCORD has to help solve the problem for the platforms to be associated. The CLONG situation was remembered, where there were 3 or 4 levels of

membership. There has to be a political decision taken, demonstrating that some platforms cannot face such a financial burden. A participant asked whether the group could propose a system where everyone is included, but in-kind input would compensate financial gaps. The situation is very difficult and it was suggested that maybe there is a space for TRIALOG in this process – to follow the commitment each platform makes.

It was said that in terms of CONCORD as an income and outcome picture, we can influence what we want the confederation to do. Maybe the group should have a good look at the strategy and the strategic planning process. All the strategic framework information was available at the GA. It was felt that the new CONCORD strategy makes a large rise in membership fees probable, because of the reduction in the percentage of funding asked for from the EC. The part of the CONCORD budget from the EC is decreasing each year. Other sources of funding need to be found and CONCORD is comparing this with other sectors – environment, gender, some of which are being funded on a multiannual basis. Bridging the gap are the membership fees but they are part of a bigger problem. A participant pointed out that the group should not negotiate with CONCORD as a contactor, but as part of the decision-making process. It does no harm to say that for the future the platforms have difficulties and it is clear that new platforms have to have special conditions for a number of years. It was stressed that it is still possible to give comments on the strategy.

There was no clear response/unity from the group which way to go and which suggestion to take up. As a first step and basis for further consideration and action, TRIALOG should clarify the rules of the current CONCORD fee system.