

## **WG EPAN**

### **Working Group on Enlargement, Pre-Accession and Neighbourhood**

April 2009

The CONCORD Working Group on Enlargement, Pre-Accession and Neighbourhood (EPAN) welcomes the European Commission's consultation on the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and would like to contribute the following points, structured according to the questions posed.

#### **How can the goals of the Eastern Partnership be advanced by a Civil Society Forum?**

Civil society plays a vital role, as acknowledged on several occasions by the EC. Although the formulation of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) did not properly engage civil society in the region, the EaP Civil Society Forum is an opportunity to readdress this balance and ensure that all stakeholders are included.

Civil society participation should support sustainable development in the countries concerned, and contribute to strengthening democracy. Civil society supports governments in many ways that benefit citizens. This can be through dealing with poverty reduction, social inclusion and protection, equal opportunities, environmental protection, and quality of life and health as well as playing its valuable watchdog role, promoting dialogue between citizens and government and monitoring the governments' actions.

The Civil Society Forum should become a platform for true cooperation between CSOs in the six countries, and those in the EU. It should provide a space for exchange of information and best practice, as well as providing a strong channel of communication between the European institutions and civil society in the EaP countries.

The Forum can help the EaP more effectively fulfil its objectives in terms of economic and social development as well as improved governance.

#### **How should participation in the work of this Forum be determined?**

The Forum must be inclusive and representative of civil society in the countries concerned. More than this, the Forum must be based on existing networks and groupings of CSOs in the region, rather than being a structure that is imposed from outside. The Forum should be seen as open to CSO participation rather than exclusive. Participants should be selected according to suggestions from national platforms and networks, using a clear set of criteria that take representivity, expertise, experience and capacity into consideration.

The Forum must promote cooperation with civil society in all 27 EU member states, and efforts must be made to ensure the participation of grassroots civil society, avoiding government-sponsored organisations that pose as civil society, especially in the more authoritarian regimes within the EaP countries.

The EPAN group would welcome responses to the issues raised in this paper.  
Please send them to Rebecca Steel, convenor of the EPAN group ([trialog@concordeurope.org](mailto:trialog@concordeurope.org))

## **What should be the structures of the Forum? How would it interface with the other EaP structures (platforms, panels etc)?**

All the platforms within the EaP should be open to civil society representatives and fed into from the Forum, rather than being limited to the 'people contacts' platform. There should be active exchange and cooperation between the four thematic platforms of the EaP and the Forum on a range of issues (social, gender, environment, human rights). It should contribute to the deeper participation of CSOs in the EaP overall.

The Forum should have a light secretariat to organise the logistics of the Forum, but the bulk of the work should be carried out by national and European networks and platforms.

The Forum should be structured around a yearly gathering that focuses on the key policy issues at stake, with preparatory working groups throughout the year. This is a unique opportunity for the EU and EaP countries to come together and share know-how on civil society development, and working groups could tackle the very relevant issues of NGO legislation, which is not in line with international standards in some EaP countries; NGO sustainability, which could cover CSR and other funding sources and so on. The Forum could provide an essential space for advocacy and holding EU and EaP governments to account.

The Civil Society Forum must not be an empty yearly conference but provide the framework for intensified cooperation between civil society from the EaP countries and the EU member states, as well as between the EaP countries themselves. It must contribute to the strengthening of civil society in the countries in a very real and tangible way. Conclusions and recommendations from the Forum should find direct access to the agenda of the four thematic platforms, the European Commission and the European Parliament.

## **What role should the European Commission play in the launch and in the work of the Forum?**

The EC should play a facilitating role, organising events that bring together CS representatives in a way that is inclusive of all those in the region. This should include facilitating visa arrangement for participants when necessary. To that end, the role of the delegations should be strengthened and contacts with civil society in each country reinforced.

The European Commission should remain open to other initiatives that promote the Forum, such as job shadowing exchanges, which, in addition to providing valuable experience, build relationships, strengthen long-term cooperation and underline the true spirit of partnership.

A Civil Society Facility should be created in the context of the ENPI eastern regional programme to ensure that the resources are made available to properly support the Forum with costs associated with the large yearly meeting, and to make it possible for CSOs to participate in the policy dialogue and monitoring work. CSO work directly associated with the Forum, carried out by national platforms and networks throughout the year, should be supported by the European Commission delegations.

### **Additional points:**

Attention must be paid to democracy and human rights concerns in some EaP countries, which pose additional challenges for the aim to involve CSOs from those countries. CSOs in some countries are excluded from the decision-making process and government sponsored organisations may be presented as independent voices, which they are not. Politically independent organisations should thus be given the opportunity to participate.

<p>The EPAN group would welcome responses to the issues raised in this paper. Please send them to Rebecca Steel, convenor of the EPAN group (<a href="mailto:dialog@concordeurope.org">dialog@concordeurope.org</a>)</p>
--