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## **Expert Seminar “The Future of Civil Society Development Organisations (CSOs)” November 10-11, 2009**

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### **Introduction and presentation of the expert seminar rationale**

CSOs are facing increasing pressure to demonstrate their accountability, legitimacy and effectiveness. In response, a growing number are coming together at national, regional and international level, to define common standards and promote good practice through codes of conduct, certification schemes, information services, working groups, self-assessment tools, and awards. However, CSOs, donors and other potential users are often unaware of their existence or what distinguishes one initiative from another, making it difficult to make choices around which initiative best suits their needs.

For CSOs in the development sector, TRIALOG together with other actors decided to contribute to and support this self-reflection and self-definition process on a global level. The 2008 conference on Paradigm Review was initiated by TRIALOG and co-organised by the Ecumenical Academy Prague, the Czech platform FoRS and CONCORD, for whom it represented a first milestone in its strategic planning. The event evaluation showed that the debate should be taken forward, with more focused contributions on practical steps for the CSO community in the South, East and North. Therefore a second conference focused on the Role of Civil Society Organisations in Development Cooperation was agreed on, which is now planned for November 2010 in Managua, Nicaragua.

The enormous amount of written material, including studies and evaluation reports, as well as attempts to achieve a widely shared code of conduct led the TRIALOG Advisory Group to plan an Expert Seminar in November 2009 in Vienna. To make sure that the Managua Conference has optimum impact it was felt that a document with the working title “Managua Declaration on CSO participation in Development” should be proposed.

This Expert Seminar will collate the elements for a first draft, which will then be shared with organisations worldwide for comments. We consider it necessary to undertake such an ambitious and demanding initiative as it is clear that the overall political environment for the work of genuine CSOs is getting less and less favourable. Particularly during the present economic and social crises, ground needs to be regained and the profile of CSOs sharpened.

There is a recent research of One World Trust on the state of CSO self-regulation globally which has highlighted several key findings. First, the landscape of CSO self-regulation is much more populated than was thought before. Previous attempts to map

self-regulatory initiatives have focused on particular sectors or regions and thus only ever touched the surface of what currently exists; the new detailed analysis has uncovered a range of interesting and innovative initiatives that provide significant scope for learning and sharing across contexts.

Second, CSO self-regulation is a rapidly evolving field with many initiatives having emerged in the past five years, the vast majority over the past decade and many still currently in development. Developments need to be monitored closely and globally in order to keep pace with these changes.

Third, the research has identified a diversity of ways in which CSOs are regulating themselves. While codes of conduct/ethics followed by certification schemes are by far the most common, information services and peer working groups, make an important contribution to raising standards as well. What is clear is that the form self-regulation takes is shaped by the context in which CSOs operate. It is influenced by factors such as the level of development of civil society, the resources that are available, the level of debate on quality and accountability issues and the nature of relations with the state. There are no one size fits all approaches.

Finally, CSO self-regulation has not permeated the sector evenly. Anglophone countries and those in Europe are much more likely to have well-developed initiatives, perhaps due to stronger linguistic and cultural ties between these groups of countries in addition to the relative wealth of these countries. Countries and regions where government remains largely authoritarian and the space for civil society to operate remains limited, self-regulatory initiatives tend not to have developed. Countries that are experiencing extensive civil conflicts also tend not to have developed CSO self-regulatory initiatives; many post-conflict countries are just beginning to develop CSO umbrella organisations.

There are some explanations for current patterns of CSO self-regulation, however, each country and regional context is different. Political and cultural factors, as well as the financial capacity and size of the CSO sector, shape pressure on the sector, the nature of the accountability debates and the form of self-regulation.

Dear participants, I want to wish you and us very productive and inspiring one and a half days and hope that together we will manage the process and reach this ambitious aim which will be concluded in about 1 year's time at the Managua Conference.

Thank you in advance for your active participation.