



**SOCIAL PLATFORM ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2008
9-10 December 2008**

**Workshop 3: What is the Role of European NGO Networks in
Bridging the Gap between European and National Levels?**

Workshop 3 was jointly organised by Mental Health Europe (MHE) and SOLIDAR.

Opening – Which capacities and structures are necessary to advance and promote the civil dialogue at the national and the European level?

The aim of the Workshop was to discuss the role of European networks of social NGOs as a capacity-builder, mediator and facilitator for the information flow between the national level and the European arena. Participants vividly exchanged views and experiences. Structures and processes of civil dialogue in Central and Eastern Europe and challenges NGOs in these countries face in view of capacity building and an active involvement in European-level debates and policy processes were dealt with in particular.

Mary Van Dievel, Director of Mental Health Europe (MHE), presented the MHE National Focal Points (NFP) system which is a new form of information exchange and consultation. One member per country is appointed as the MHE NFP, being the intermediary between MHE and the other member organisations in the respective country, in cases where information from the European level needs to be disseminated at the national, regional and local level. If considered appropriate, the NFPs produce a (summarised) translated version of the material. Furthermore, when MHE needs input from its members working at the local, regional and national level, the NFPs report back to the European level on specific issues of consultation. MHE provides (at least) one training session per year to the NFPs on European topics and capacity-building in terms of information management etc. in general.

Elisabeth Muschik, Board Member of MHE and of the MHE member pro mente austria, reported about her concrete experience as NFP for Austria. NFP activities in 2008 were the consultation process regarding the EU's Active Inclusion Recommendation, the lobbying activities in the preparation phase of the National Strategic Reports on Social Protection and Social Inclusion 2008-2010 and later on their analysis towards the taking into consideration of the mental health aspect in the reports, as well as general information dissemination activities.

In the following, Karel Schwarz, President of the Czech NGO umbrella organisation, on invitation by SOLIDAR, presented current framework conditions, structures and processes of civil dialogue in the Czech Republic¹. Civil dialogue is barely made use of at any of the governmental levels. New framework legislation and a concept for the development of public support to NGOs are under preparation. Like practically everywhere in Europe, NGOs in the Czech Republic face problems of funding, strongly depending on project-based funding on an annual basis that can be renewed and as a rule lacking financial support in view of NGO umbrella organisations, platforms, networks. They expect steps towards a paritarian representation in boards, committees, etc. of European NGO networks and an equal

¹ See http://www.solidar.org/Page_Generale.asp?DocID=13958&thebloc=19825 for his presentation (slide set in English and German, text of speech in German)

participation in decision-making processes in European NGOs. They need the continued support of the European networks in terms of visibility, capacity-building measures and representation towards EU institutions, as well as the participation in European-wide projects.

During the workshop the following questions were discussed:

- Which elements can be used by other social NGOs from the MHE National Focal Point model? Where are the advantages and limits of "National Focal Points"? How does this model help to advance civil dialogue at national level and how does it "empower" national members to work with information from European level and to feed back information, opinions, requests, etc. to the European level?
- Civil Dialogue in Central and Eastern Europe: What are the specific needs and challenges? Which elements work well? What could be learnt from these countries' experiences? How can we strengthen the representation of organisations from these countries at European level and in European debates?
- Which role for European networks in view of capacity building and "transporting back" information, opinions and requests from national members to the European arena?
- What are our expectations vis-à-vis European institutions, in particular the European Commission and the European Parliament (and other institutions)?

The workshop was chaired and facilitated by Prof. Josef Weidenholzer, President of SOLIDAR. Elisabeth Muschik from pro mente Austria assumed the role of rapporteur, supported by Astrid Mechel (MHE) and Mathias Maucher and David Andrés Viñas (SOLIDAR).

Challenges

The workshop outlined the different challenges that European networks face when they act as mediators between the European and national level (their members). European networks of NGOs are being faced by a permanent tension to follow an approach focusing on resources and involvement of networks and members on the often largely pre-defined European agenda (i.e. on policy formulation, monitoring and promotion along these lines) or to favour an approach predominantly starting from the needs and interests of the members and to help them to make a difference on the national level when influencing or implementing European legislation, programmes, modes of governance (such as the Open Method of Coordination). European networks or platforms need to find working methods and an agreement on priority issues in view of channelling European-level information to the members and opinions, concerns, requests etc. of member organisations back into European policy discourses and decision making processes. In this context, the capacity to effectively transmit and translate national interests to the European level needs to be strengthened.

Another challenge for European networks is to create an interest amongst members for what is happening at EU level and for what are both opportunities offered and challenges created by European policy processes. The provision of targeted and adequate information is crucial. They have to transfer the relevant knowledge and to understand the issues at stake in the national contexts as well and avoid an information overload. This is in particular relevant when the information provided is only given in English or French. Furthermore, the "EU jargon" and procedures of European institutions have to be translated in an understandable way. The information should be, as much as possible, provided in the respective national language. Translations (as a rule to be done by national members) could be provided in a summarised form, however, some financial support is needed to complete this task that is a requirement to improving structures of communication and to boost civil dialogue around European issues within Member States.

Many NGOs face the problem of non-continuity of financing from public sources. Moreover, in some countries (especially emphasized by participants from the Central and Eastern European countries) there is a lack of support for civil dialogue and their focus is rather laid on decision making according to a top-down approach. An alternative to this top-down approach is the concept of different "umbrella organisations" such as presented by pro mente austria which is the national alliance of organisations all working on the same issues and for the same target group on national/regional/local level. The members elect the board of the umbrella organisation; they pay membership fees and decide upon the common work programme. There is only a small financial contribution for running the umbrella organisation (approximately € 20.000 per year) which comes from the Austrian Federal Ministry for Social Affairs.

What works – but not well enough

During the workshop, good practices were discussed and exchanged. European networks are aware of their responsibility and their role in influencing the political agenda of Europe. They are representing the interests of their members and filter out the priorities according to the respective targets their network is engaged in and assume a role as facilitator and mediator. Capacity-building measures of national members in terms of European issues and related communication strategies are well developed in many networks, therewith giving ownership to the national level. The Mental Health Europe National Focal Points model can be seen as an appropriate and promising way to promote and structure information exchange on sector-specific issues/defined topics, supported by already existing national umbrella organisations. However, cleavages between umbrella organisations, also linked to strong party or other affiliations, can hinder or even block such a dialogue.

Another positive aspect is the trans-national cooperation and transfer of best practices (also as incentive to get involved) and trans-national work on specific topics in regional clusters. Participants experienced this as a useful intermediary step before reaching a broad consensus on positions in a EU-27 context.

European networks are "door openers" for national members (and vice versa national members for the European networks or platforms in their respective country) in view to their participation in consultation processes and European-level civil dialogue. European networks can provide for information and arguments on policy change at national level building upon European legislation or common objectives or on successful models in a specific Member States. Vice versa, European networks need information about social realities and about successful models and procedures that work on the ground.

Recommendations

Workshop participants came up with and broadly shared the following recommendations:

a) to European networks or platforms of NGOs:

- Support the building up of national networks for more effective advocacy in the national policy arena and the feeding back of consolidated positions to the European level
- Capacity-building for NGOs at all relevant levels (national, regional, local); providing the right skills to the respective level (European issues, policies, contents – and other process-based skills such as procedures and methodology) by support of European NGOs; transnational and best practice transfer

- Training of trainers (multiplier effect), which is one element of the MHE model of National Focal Points
- Inform on the aims of European and national umbrella organisations (justify why the networks should get involved in civil dialogue, who they represent, how they arrive at common positions, etc.)
- Empower national members to influence the European level by using their European NGO networks (bottom-up approach) based on structured forms of feeding back information on own positions, expectations, concerns of national NGOs
- Promote exchange of best practices, peer learning and cooperation between organisations on the national level and cross borders/ transnational level
- Empower national NGOs to push their national governments towards implementing European policy and to make effective use of governance tools (e.g. OMC) at national level
- Develop efficient communication strategies, make more use of the media; reach the grass-root level/citizens
- Promote and strengthen NGOs' representation of Eastern and Central Europe in committees/ working groups/ boards of European NGOs
- Make use of institutional frameworks, cultural links and regional bonds (in a first step; afterwards an extension to EU-27 will be easier)
- Enhance further exchange within the Social Platform

b) to European institutions:

- Encourage national and regional governments to co-finance work of national organisations on European issues
- Encourage the establishment of umbrella organisations/platforms/ thematic task forces etc. at national level
- Use national NGOs as "springboard" to reach out to countries also outside of the EU

Outstanding Issues - Conclusions

Civil dialogue all over Europe needs to be further stimulated. The media can play a crucial role in this process, e.g. by transporting good practices and encouraging examples of active citizenship to the public. They can showcase how active citizens (individuals; groups; civil society organisations) can make a difference and an impact, what the work of NGOs is about and what is their role in promoting social inclusion and cohesion. This is in particular needed in Central and Eastern European countries.

Another issue that needs to be tackled is the legal status of European NGOs. A Statute for a European Association – as legal framework for trans-national associations/civil society organisations in addition to existing national rules – is still missing.

The workshop provided a fruitful debate which certainly has to be continued in the future. We have succeeded to involve a great number of our participants, we had really engaged discussions on basic subjects and a lively reflection on the draft report on Wednesday morning; and the participants of our workshop signalled widely satisfaction with the report at the final plenary session of the conference.

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