

EEA AND NORWAY GRANTS: ACTIVE CITIZENS FUND – PORTUGAL

SUMMARY REPORT FROM THE STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION

On **January 30, 2018 in Lisbon (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation)**, a stakeholder consultation was organised to gather civil society stakeholders in Portugal to:

- introduce the Active Citizens Fund in Portugal under the EEA Grants funded by Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein;
- provide feedback to the design of the Active Citizens Fund in Portugal;
- discuss the main challenges in civil society in Portugal of relevance to the programme and how to address these challenges through the fund.

The stakeholder consultation was jointly organised by the Financial Mechanism Office (FMO) - the Brussels based secretariat of the EEA and Norway Grants - and the Fund Operator (FO) for the fund in Portugal, a consortium of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and the Bissaya Barreto Foundation.

It should also be mentioned that this workshop was preceded by an online consultation, carried out from 27/12/2017 to 12/01/2018 (see “Observations and Feedback” below).

PARTICIPANTS

The consultation gathered **34 representatives of Portuguese non-governmental organisations**, working in the areas of support of the Active Citizens Fund. Most participants were based in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area (61.8%) and in the Porto Metropolitan Area (20.6%) but all Portuguese regions were actually represented (17.6% came from the other regions, including the Azores and Madeira Islands).

AGENDA AND PROCEEDINGS

With the invitation from the Fund Operator the participants received a **Discussion Paper** - a short briefing paper providing a brief overview of the Active Citizens Fund and outlining the Fund Operator’s proposal regarding the main challenges to be addressed within the scope of the Active Citizens Fund. The Discussion Paper also invited the stakeholders to reflect on some open questions regarding issues at stake in the civil society sector and possible ways to address them through the upcoming programme.

The meeting was held in English and Portuguese with simultaneous translation and facilitated by the FMO with support from the Fund Operator, through a mixture of group work and plenary sessions. The parallel group sessions were facilitated in English, while the discussions in the group work took place in Portuguese.

The meeting was opened with brief introductions from the FMO and the FO on the Active Citizens Fund, the Consortium organisations, the outcomes and challenges in Portugal identified by the Fund Operator as relevant for the fund, as well as the purpose of the meeting. Brief question and answer sessions followed each intervention, giving the audience the chance to ask questions about the fund and the purpose of the meeting.

Participants were invited to break out into parallel working group sessions (one per Programme Outcome), to discuss the proposals made by the Consortium, identify additional challenges as needed, and propose possible ways to address them.

During each of the parallel sessions, the FO presented a set of challenges to be addressed under each Outcome, ranging from 6 to 10 challenges depending on the Outcome and taking into account the analysis on the basis of which the Consortium's proposal was prepared. The discussion paper was deliberately short, and thus did not cover this analysis at length.

The participants were then invited to reflect upon these sets of challenges and to complement them as needed with additional challenges which, in their opinion, the civil society might address with the support of the EEA Grants in order to reach the Outcome under discussion. The proposed new challenges were debated by each group and aggregated for clarity.

All proposals were written down, for future reference in the planning process which is to lead up to the creation of the new programme. Then, participants in each group session were invited to vote on three challenges to be further discussed among them, regarding the causes of the challenge and possible solutions which might fall under the scope of the new programme. Twelve challenges were thus addressed in all (two of them were new challenges proposed by the participants, the other 10 had been previously identified by the FO).

In addition, three cross-cutting concerns were also brought to the participants' attention, and taken into consideration during these sessions: how to involve young people as active citizens; how to foster gender equality and combat gender-based violence; and how to address environmental and climate change issues.

The groups presented their findings in the plenary session at the end of the day, and the findings under each Outcome were commented by all participants and the FMO and FO representatives. As presented below, significant issues were discussed throughout the day.

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS RAISED IN THE CONSULTATION

Working group 1: Strengthened democratic culture and civic awareness (Outcome 1)

Ten participants from different NGO backgrounds – youth, environment, social services, people with disabilities, watchdog and umbrella organisations – participated in the working group addressing Outcome 1. All participants agreed that this Outcome is of the utmost importance in the Portuguese context and that there is great potential for action and to achieve change. The challenges presented by the FO were all recognised as being relevant and there were only some proposals of rephrasing to clarify challenges and to avoid the possible perception that only NGOs had the onus of action in this context.

The first challenge selected by participants in order to achieve Outcome 1 was the *“Lack of democratic literacy and difficulties in mobilising citizens in defence of democratic values”*. In order to address this challenge, the participating NGOs identified as one solution the need for animation and facilitation of participatory processes. They also acknowledged that NGOs have to build capacities in order to be able to communicate their vision, mission and goals to foster greater mobilisation and civic participation. Two additional solutions proposed by the group were the development of participation and co-decision processes targeting all age groups, with adequate approaches for each one; and the promotion of democratic literacy.

“Not enough structured dialogue and collaboration between NGOs and public and private entities to address and solve social and environmental problems” was the second challenge discussed. In order to tackle this, the two main solutions proposed by the group were the promotion of collaborative partnerships between NGOs, private and public entities; and the preparation and sharing of relevant information free of charge for decision making (in open data format).

Finally, participants decided that the *“Non-adequate investment in civic education and training at formal and non-formal level”* also needs to be addressed in order to achieve a stronger democratic culture and civic awareness. In this regard, participants mentioned advocacy actions targeting curricular flexibility; and the development of long-term strategies between schools and NGOs to support the participation of young people in the diagnosis and rethinking of schools and organisations. Furthermore, participants considered that it was crucial to work on awareness raising and training of strategic publics (teachers, school boards, parents and trainers) on the importance of citizenship education, and that there was a need to mainstream the civic dimension in all types of free time activities and personal development.

The need for promoting civic participation was also pointed out, namely through community awareness raising, and the need for the relevant stakeholders to acknowledge the validity and great relevance of the practices, knowledge and competences acquired through non-formal education.

Working group 2: Increased support for human rights (Outcome 2)

This working group included eight representatives of different organisations from human rights, community development, gender equality, gender-based violence and LGBTI areas. There was consensus on the need to reinforce support for human rights but not on the best approach to achieve it.

During the discussion participants underlined that civil society in Portugal is heavily relied upon to respond directly to concrete needs (or emergency situations) of the population, but not to participate on public policy making. Concerning human rights, this was pointed out as a consequence of the imperceptibility of the work done by NGOs – citizens are not aware of the broad scope of human rights and what the NGO work entails. Furthermore this lack of visibility also undermines regular fundraising for NGO core activities, in a country where private donors are known to be otherwise promptly generous when called upon to respond to a specific issue.

Participants agreed that part of the challenges presented by the FO were key to address Outcome 2 and added suggestions in terms of challenges, even if some were out of the scope of NGO action (e.g. regulatory and legislative issues). Finally the participants chose to work on two challenges previously defined by the FO and on another challenge that reframed a problem already identified by the FO.

“Limited watchdog and monitoring activities concerning human rights and reduced participation in decision making processes” was considered a main challenge by NGO participants and listed as generally applicable. Campaigning for more transparency from the political class – that could result on the creation of a legislative act on open information – was pointed out as a solution. The development of NGO instruments for monitoring state budget was also indicated as a solution.

“Weak human rights education and training” was also highlighted as a main problem, reframing a challenge that had been previously defined by the FO (*“Insufficient means for education and training on human rights, in particular for young people”*). The solutions pointed out for this were to use a more accessible language when communicating on human rights, to establish partnerships between NGOs and schools, to create customised reference materials for training targeted audiences, and to provide human rights training for judges and other entities within the justice chain, and for journalists. Breaking up stereotypes was considered a key factor to acknowledge and promote human rights.

“Weak civil society organisation in the fight for Human Rights” was also featured as an important challenge to be addressed through training and building NGO capacities, producing reference materials and developing a certification process on good practices. Starting a campaign highlighting the human rights work carried out by NGOs was also indicated as a solution.

Working group 3: Vulnerable groups are empowered (Outcome 3)

The working group addressing Outcome 3 was attended by eight participants from different NGO backgrounds: social services, refugees, migrants, Roma, and gender equality organisations. This Outcome was considered by the participants as one important focus area, since provision of services should be more and more accompanied by empowerment measures in favour of the target groups to ensure social change and autonomy.

The challenges presented by the FO were all recognised as being relevant. However, during the discussion, the participants considered that participation of vulnerable groups in all phases of the projects deserved to become a challenge in itself, and therefore confined the scope of the first selected challenge to issues related with project management and implementation. The three following challenges were therefore considered by the participants the most relevant to be examined in-depth.

“The services for the inclusion of vulnerable groups are mostly oriented to social needs, often they are not innovative neither focused enough on the empowerment of target groups”. According to the participants, this challenge is related to problems such as the overlapping of solutions promoted by the NGOs, the length of the projects’ implementation period, or the projects’ dependence on goals set by funders on which they depend. Possible solutions to those issues were proposed: increased cooperation/partnerships between NGOs; lengthened projects’ duration; increased flexibility of project monitoring, allowing the project’s goals to be revised during the implementation; and greater emphasis on good practices rather than just on innovative projects.

“Lacking offer of solutions for the promotion of successful social and professional paths among young people at risk of social exclusion, including those from marginalised communities” was also discussed. As possible solutions, the participants in the group agreed on the importance of providing young people with opportunities to leave their neighbourhoods and experience new realities; and on achieving a better adjustment of projects to the specific needs of each group. It was also highlighted the importance of cross-sector involvement including academia, private companies and public organisations.

“Weak participation of vulnerable groups in all steps of the social inclusion process” was also featured as an important challenge, which could be addressed through the creation of debating spaces where these groups can affirm themselves culturally, socially and under equal conditions; through the development of communication channels between the different groups; and through the promotion of equal treatment, in the context of the cooperation amongst associations representing these groups. As for capacity building, peer-to-peer training of agents for change and for social integration was also emphasised.

Working group 4: Enhanced capacity and sustainability of civil society – organisations & sector (Outcome 4)

Eight participants from different NGO backgrounds: capacity building, social services, umbrella and environment organisations participated in the working group addressing Outcome 4.

The FO presented eight challenges related to this outcome. The participants added their own proposals, but recognised that the three most relevant challenges when it comes to the capacity and sustainability had already been identified by the FO.

Thus, according to the participants, the *“Lack of strategic planning capacity and reduced organisational/operational capacity in NGOs”* could be improved with financial and technical capacity building for the organisations and their leaders, the implementation of that knowledge through mentoring and coaching between NGOs, advocacy reinforcement (to change the current trend of public funding policies determining the actions and priorities of the NGOs) and the financing of human resources in projects.

Regarding the *“Lack of effective collaboration between NGOs and public and private sector organisations”* the proposed solutions included promoting joint consultation systems, joint projects, communication between sectors, human resource mobility between the sectors, as well as a diversification of the NGOs sources of funding and the dissemination of evidence based best practices.

Finally, when it came to the *“Poor consolidation of NGO platforms and coalitions, that aren’t broadly representative, and have limited capacity to make themselves be heard and to produce evidence in support of their views”* the discussion revolved around the problems of and faced by the platforms, as well as the, perhaps, excessive number and overlap of platforms, but it was inconclusive regarding what should be done in this area to strengthen the sector apart from the proposal to study the current state of the existing Portuguese platforms.

On the other hand, in the human rights working group, the participants considered that there was a need to create a platform in that area; it was also said that platform leaders could also benefit from the same capacity building initiatives that were suggested for the rest of the civil society leadership.

OBSERVATIONS AND FEEDBACK

As a general conclusion, the stakeholder consultation provided useful insights regarding the main concerns felt by the civil society as well as its expectations. It deepened the Consortium’s analysis of the challenges and outcomes to be addressed, and broadly validated it. The debate also paved the way for initiatives on civic education at schools and on a Human Rights platform; and for significant support to improve access of underserved regions and target groups as mentioned in the Discussion Paper.

Overall, there was a productive mind-set amongst participants, although the focus for some of them was not entirely on strategic reflection but rather on project ideas or on action to be taken by the public sector.

An evaluation feedback form was distributed to the participants at the end of the meeting. The vast majority of the participants who provided feedback forms (85.3% of the respondents) confirmed that the consultation was well organised in terms of sharing ideas with respect and open minds, feeling that their opinions were taken into consideration. Nevertheless, a few feedbacks reinforced the short time they had in the workshops to discuss the specific topics as thoroughly as they would have liked. The overview of the answers listed in the form shows that the main purpose of the stakeholder consultation meeting was understood and that for the participants it was a very good and challenging task to provide their thoughts and inputs.

The majority of respondents felt that their opinion was heard and taken into account during the consultation process – 58.6% strongly agree; 41.4% agree.

As for the time they had to discuss the topics in the 4 working groups, 24% referred the short time they had to engage in a deep reflexion and this could lead to conclusions that do not fully reflect all group members’ opinions.

It should be mentioned that in the weeks preceding the workshop, an online consultation was carried out. The Discussion Paper was shared online and all interested parties were invited to answer its questions in writing. This enabled a wider participation of Portuguese civil society organisations in this process (in all, 165 replies were submitted and analysed). The workshop participants raised many of the issues also presented in the replies to the online consultation – they arrived at similar conclusions on various subjects, while different perspectives were presented on other issues.

This feedback was fed into a synthesis report and made available online on the websites of both Consortium partners, which was also briefly mentioned during the workshop. The report was well received by participants, some of which had previously taken part in the online consultation.

NEXT STEPS

Up to mid-March 2018, the Fund Operator and the FMO will work together to see how to best integrate the inputs from the online consultation and from this workshop into the required programme documents that the Fund Operator shall submit to the FMO and the donors – a results framework and a concept note. Once the programme implementation starts, the Fund Operator will publicly announce regrating opportunities (in terms of calls for proposals).

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