

POSITION PAPER

The Community and Voluntary Sector and the Future of Europe Access Europe and The Wheel 21 May 2018

Background

In March 2017, the European Commission published a White Paper to kick off a debate on the future of the EU. Why this debate now?

Over the next few years, there will be big changes in the European Union. European Parliament elections will take place in May 2019; a new Commission will be appointed in September 2019; proposals for a new EU budget for the period 2021-2027 will be tabled in the next few weeks and hotly debated over the next year or so; the UK will leave the EU in March 2019; and the leaders of the two most powerful member states, Germany and France, have called for a push towards further European integration, especially of the Eurozone. At the same time EU leaders have already agreed on a number of priorities for concerted EU action and increased funding in the years ahead: migration, defence and security, climate change and research and development. These will compete for future resources with existing priorities like the CAP and Cohesion policy.

In recent months, the Irish Government has undertaken a wide-ranging consultation with different sectors of Irish society as an input to framing Ireland's position on the important decisions EU leaders will take over the next few years. The Wheel hosted the Citizens' Dialogue for the Community and Voluntary Sector, participated in the final National Citizens' Dialogue, and submitted this position paper to the Citizens' Dialogue online portal. A report on this consultation is due at the end of the year.

This is now an important time for civil society in Ireland to press its case for a more active involvement in EU affairs and for Government support in this endeavour. This would respond to the call made by the Taoiseach, in his keynote address to the European Parliament on 17 January, that the EU should "Engage citizens more and engage in more direct democracy".

A European Agenda for the sector

The on-going Brexit process has highlighted how much EU policies affect the daily lives of its citizens. As an important sector in Irish society, the community and voluntary sector should have a forum where it can engage with politicians and senior public servants on a regular basis on key European issues that affect its members. Such a forum could convene twice a year, once at senior official level and once at the political level. This would be a major step in recognising the need for a more active input and feedback mechanism for the sector on EU affairs.

Participation in EU funded programmes is one of the key ways in which the sector can engage with counterparts in other EU countries – the people-to-people dimension to building a strong citizens' Union.

Experience of previous, and particularly the current round of EU programmes funded under the multi-annual financial framework programme 2014 – 2020, points to a number of key measures that could be taken to encourage and support a more active role by the sector in EU programmes.

- Many EU programmes are designed or implemented in a manner that involves heavy, complex application procedures. Despite calls by the European Commission for simplification, the way in which these programmes are implemented at national, regional and local level often results in administrative processes that are a serious deterrent to a more active engagement by organisations in the sector. They should be allowed to apply for funding through simplified procedures more appropriate to their size and function.
- Under the 2014-2020 round of EU programmes, it appears that public bodies will absorb much of the funding. It is almost impossible for voluntary and community organisations to match the resources that public bodies can invest in preparing applications for funding. Given the inherent disadvantages faced by these organisations of small scale and limited resources, ring-fencing a share of some EU programmes' funds for the sector would help to counter these disadvantages.
- The matching fund requirements of some EU programmes are a serious obstacle to the sector. A special national fund should be established to serve as a matching fund source for organisations that are successful in their applications. This would put them on a par with publicly funded bodies (state agencies, universities, local authorities) that can avail of public funds to match EU contributions.
- An important feature of most EU funded programmes is the requirement that projects involve partnerships from different member states. This is a welcome requirement since it reflects the underlying rationale of these programmes – to build collaboration and cooperation across the European Union. It does, however, impose a heavy burden of partner search and subsequent efficient management of agreed partnerships. The Horizon Programme offers initial funding for partner search to potential applications. For the community and voluntary sector, a special partnership facility should be considered for inclusion in all EU programmes for which the sectors members are eligible to apply.
- Accessing EU funding is a complex and heavy administrative process. It requires constant monitoring of the development of EU programmes as they are designed and negotiated at EU level and subsequently implemented at national and regional level. Even the larger community and voluntary organisations do not have the capacity to do this on their own. A national support service to assist civil society organisations to engage seriously in assessing opportunities for and accessing EU funding is needed. The Access Europe project pilot financed by Atlantic Philanthropies over the period 2015 – 2018 aimed to provide such a support service to a small group of organisations. Its results provide solid evidence that such a service works and that a relatively small investment can generate a significant increase in the success rate of applications for EU funding. The Government should consider supporting such a service in the years ahead. [Results of the Access Europe project can be found here.](#)
- European funding is largely project-based, which serves a purpose in that it promotes innovation and competitiveness. However, the community and voluntary sector is constantly in a precarious position in terms of funding, often while struggling to deliver vital services, without which communities and citizens all over Europe would suffer.

Solely project-based funding is not sustainable for our sector and many organisations simply cannot invest in the capacity-building necessary to apply for and manage projects without at least some contribution to their core costs. More operating grants, in addition to project-based funding, should be considered as a means of recognising and supporting the vital role that the community and voluntary sector has throughout Europe.

- The streamlined “lump sum” approach to funding seen in programmes like Erasmus+ and Europe for Citizens is a welcome change, which has relieved the administrative and reporting burden for participating organisations. However, the set amounts for management fees, for example, do not cover much in Ireland compared to some other Member States. This may seem fair in theory in order to increase involvement of particularly the newer Member States. However, in reality, it has an isolating effect on community and voluntary organisations that are already struggling just with co-financing costs. Lump sum grants should therefore take into account the cost of living in each Member State.
- Increasing the participation and engagement of citizens and civil society in research and innovation programmes is essential. Community and voluntary organisations should be empowered to seize the opportunities that Horizon 2020 offers. They ought to be supported to do this as active rather than passive partners, in a way that recognises their expertise and unique capability to ethically and sensitively facilitate access to vulnerable communities and individuals for research purposes. National Contact Point structures in each member state for Horizon 2020 should not be just focused on HEIs but spread widely into other sectors, which will make for robust multidisciplinary consortia that will respect and capitalise on the skills inherent to the community and voluntary sector.

With the departure of UK from the European Union, Ireland will be seen by other member states as a valuable source of partners and expertise in building future European partnerships across the full spectrum of economic, social and cultural life. This is because of its long experience of EU membership, its English language capability and its reputation for efficiency and innovation in the management of EU funds over the past 45 years. Civil society in Ireland wants to play a more active role in this partnership building process. The ideas set out above suggest a number of ways in which decision makers at EU and national level can help it do so.