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PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND
THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

Report on the evaluation of the "Active European Citizenship" Programme 2004-2006

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1. INTRODUCTION

This document presents the main findings and recommendations of the external ex-post evaluation of the 'Active European Citizenship' programme for the period 2004-2006¹, together with the Commission's reactions and conclusions in relation to these recommendations.

1.1. The Programme

The Community action programme to promote active European citizenship (civic participation) was established by the Council in January 2004. The objectives of the programme were:

- (1) To reinforce open dialogue with civil society and intensify links between citizens of different countries.
- (2) To promote and disseminate the values and objectives of the European Union (EU).
- (3) To bring the citizens closer to the EU and its institutions and to encourage them to engage more frequently with the institutions.
- (4) To involve citizens closely in reflection and discussion on the construction of the EU.
- (5) To intensify links and exchanges between citizens from countries participating in the programme, including by way of town twinning.
- (6) To stimulate initiatives by the bodies engaged in the promotion of active and participatory citizenship.

The programme had a budget of €72 million and a specific aim to:

- Provide support in the form of operating grants to organisations in the field of active European citizenship (organisations promoting European ideas and debate and organisations and "think tanks" promoting European values and objectives).
- Support projects initiated by civil society organizations (non-governmental organisations, associations and federations of European interest or cross-industry trade unions).
- Support town twinning actions.

Intended outputs of the programme included:

¹ Council Decision No 2004/100/EC of 26 January 2004 for the period from 1 January 2004 to 31 December 2006, OJ L 30 page 6 of 4/02/2004

- Programmes of activities run by organisations supported by operating grants, including meetings, dialogue with EU institutions, position papers, networking, exchange of good practice and awareness raising.
- Meetings, education and training programmes and tools, publications, dissemination activities organised by civil society organisations.
- Meetings between citizens, conferences, information campaigns and training events for twinning officers.

A characteristic feature of the programme was the large number of small projects supported: during the entire programme period (2004-2006) grants were provided to 4062 town twinning events and to 343 projects initiated by civil society organisations and 40 operating grants to think-tanks and civil society organisations. The programme thus supported a large number of events and other actions in which citizens from different European countries participated directly. For a centrally managed programme this structure presented a major administrative challenge. The departments responsible handled more than 7000 grant applications and 4500 grant agreements.

The programme covered the 25 EU Member States. In addition, Bulgaria and Romania joined the programme during 2005. Participation by organisations based in the new Member States or in the candidate countries increased during the programme period. As an example: in the case of town twinning, the proportion of events organised in these countries went up from 17% in 2004 to 24% in 2006.

1.2. Ex-post evaluation

The ex-post evaluation was carried out by a firm of consultants². The overall aims and objectives of the evaluation were:

- (1) To evaluate the impact of the activities carried out under the Community action programme to promote active European citizenship (civic participation) and ;
- (2) To learn lessons for the implementation of the 'Europe for Citizens' programme (2007-2013)

The evaluation focused on the relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of the programme and its coherence with other initiatives supporting the development of active European citizenship.

The evaluation was carried out during 2006 and was based on data³ from 2004 and 2005.

The European Commission had made its proposal for a new 'Europe for Citizens' programme in 2005, based on an extensive consultation with stakeholders. Already this consultation revealed many findings which have since been confirmed in the ex-post evaluation. Therefore, many of the recommendations of this evaluation have already been

² ECOTEC

³ 31 operating grants, 250 civil society projects and 2,800 town-twinning events.

integrated into the new programme. However, a number of the external evaluation's conclusions are still relevant for the implementation of the new programme.⁴

2. MAIN EVALUATOR'S FINDINGS

2.1. The programming and relevance

The external evaluation confirmed that there is a strong need for Community intervention in the area of the active European citizenship', and that the programme provided a relevant answer to this need. The evaluator also confirmed that the bringing together of previously separate actions into one programme had proved its worth.

According to the evaluator, the objectives and activities of the programme were generally consistent with its overall mission and with the policy context. The programme had a wide range of target groups which, according to the evaluator, were clearly defined.

The evaluator suggests that there needs to be a better fit between the modest programme budget and the breath of its stated aims; whilst the remit of the programme was challenging and very wide, its resources – by comparison - were limited. This, according to the evaluator, could create the risk of a gulf between the programme's aims and what it could actually deliver.

2.2. Overall programme effectiveness and impact

As regards effectiveness, where the programme was most successful was in terms of intensifying links and exchanges between citizens from different countries: 75% of respondents reported achieving this particular objective to a large extent. 45% of respondents felt that the programme had achieved the objective of promoting and disseminating EU values to a large extent. Lastly, only 31% of respondents felt that the programme was able to bring citizens closer to the EU.

These findings indicate that the programme was stronger in its horizontal mission, i.e. intensifying links between EU citizens, civil society organizations and municipalities than in its vertical dimension, i.e. bringing citizens closer to the EU. The latter therefore continues to be a particularly important challenge for the new "Europe for Citizens" programme.

In the evaluator's opinion the main results of the programme activities included tangible products (such as publications), methodological learning, experiences and knowledge, policy lessons and greater European cooperation and awareness-raising about citizenship issues and other cultures. The programme also achieved important results in terms of capacity building for its beneficiaries.

The impact of the Programme can be summarized in the following four categories:

a) EU citizens better informed about the activities of the EU.

⁴The full report of the external evaluation is available on the following internet site: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/evalreports/index_en.htm#civilsocietyHeader

- Greater interest in and better understanding of EU debates and policies by the participants - Some organisations reported that the interest of the project participants in the European projects has increased.
- Better access to EU institutions by individual citizens.

b) Strengthened civil society organisations at EU and national level

- Networking - Many organisations reported that, as a result of their project, they had created a new network or seen a significant increase in the membership of their existing network.
- Improved functioning of the organisations - In the area of civil society projects, EU funding very often attracted match funding from other organisations, both private and public.
- Greater interest in European issues, enhanced sustainability of European activities and increased use of other EU sources of funding - Almost half of the organisations taking part in the programme reported that, owing to their involvement in this programme, their interest in getting involved in more EU activities had increased.
- Improvement in the delivery activities of the organisation in the field of citizenship - Operating grants were seen as an important contribution to the organisations' capacity to work and deliver in the area of active European citizenship.
- Empowerment - Many organisations reported that receiving an EU grant acted as a mark of recognition and therefore gave credibility to the project activities at local level.

c) Increased interaction and stronger international networks between twinned towns.

- Increased level of European activities.
- Networks of twin towns developed and strengthened as a result of the programme – A number of local authorities have created a new network or consolidated and expanded their existing network, and an increasing proportion of town twinning events have been organised on a multilateral basis.

d) Increased use of inputs from civil society organisations in EU policy-making.

- Contribution to policy debate and lawmaking - Some of the organisations that were supported proved to be important sources of expertise and information for policy-makers at national and European level. In several cases their work has directly contributed to policy/legislative changes in national or European Framework.

An example of policy change or a policy impact is the publication of the report on the free movement of workers in the EU by ECAS, which subsequently became one of the sources of the European Commission's work in this area. A similar impact was achieved by other operating grant organisations, such as Social Platform, during the preparation of the Services directive, Free Trials Abroad or the Association of Councils of State and Supreme Administrative Jurisdictions of the European Union, which has informed the change of Belgian legislation on refugees⁵.

The evaluation thus provides evidence of the impact of the programme in line with the programme's objectives.

2.3. Overall programme efficiency

In terms of efficiency, the evaluation shows that the beneficiaries were satisfied overall with the management of the programme by the European Commission. For example, 74 % of respondents found the clarity of documents, such as application forms, was good. Beneficiaries also stressed that they had good direct communication with the Commission officials. However, the evaluator pointed to the relatively high turnover of staff among the Commission officials responsible for projects/grants administration, which beneficiaries saw as a problem.

Among the main points for improvement in the programme management, the evaluation mentioned delays in payments and a relative lack of feedback on the Commission's level of satisfaction with the quality of outputs produced, as well as a need for more information, support in finding partners, and advice and guidance on the programme activities.

2.4. Added value and exploitation of the results

The added value of the programme consisted mainly in strengthening the 'European' dimension of the funded activities and the possibility for direct involvement of European citizens, regardless of their background. Some 80% of the beneficiaries approached reported that they would not have been able to obtain financing for their activities elsewhere.

According to the evaluator, the 'Active European Citizenship' programme could have had more potential for both dissemination and exploitation of the results, especially at EU level. Information on project results was disseminated mainly at local level, with only a minority of organizations undertaking dissemination activities at the European level. Similarly, the dissemination of results between projects was relatively limited – according to the evaluator, only a minority of respondents were informed of the results of other projects.

The evaluation report includes seven examples of best practice. These case studies also provide good examples of dissemination efforts. For example, the Italian town twinning project in Specchia had nation-wide visibility and a spill-over effect on the local

⁵ More detailed information about the case studies can be found in Annex 7 of the Final evaluation report at: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/evalreports/index_en.htm#civilsocietyHeader

*economy as well as on public administration. The ECAS case is a good example of Europe-wide media coverage for some specific activities.*⁶

3. FOLLOW-UP OF RECOMMENDATIONS

This part of the text sets out the recommendations in four major thematic areas, together with the actions that the European Commission has implemented or intends to implement in order to respond to them.

3.1. Strengthening citizens' involvement

It was considered important to involve citizens and their organizations directly when designing the aims, objectives and actions of the new programme. Furthermore, new measures needed to be developed to bring citizens closer to the EU.

Before the adoption of the 'Europe for Citizens' programme, a number of consultations were held with major stakeholders for them to provide feedback on the content, objectives and implementation of the 'Europe for Citizens' programme. This practice will continue throughout the entire programme period in the form of a structured dialogue with networks of European umbrella organizations from different strands of the programme.

In addition, direct involvement of citizens in implementing the activities of the programme is a key feature of Action 1 of the new 'Europe for Citizens' programme.

New types of activities, such as citizens' panels, have been integrated in the new 'Europe for Citizens' programme using new measures. These activities are currently being tested through pilot projects. Based on the analysis of the pilot projects, the new measures will be mainstreamed into the 'Europe for Citizens' programme as of 2008.

Furthermore, the new programme includes high-visibility events to which representatives of local authorities, civil society and European citizens will be invited, to voice their opinion on the future course of European integration and the role of the citizens in this process.

3.2. Strengthening coherence, encouraging partnerships and enhancing synergies

The challenge of strengthening the internal coherence of the programme was recognized by the European Commission. The new programme reflects this challenge and, as a consequence, the programme objectives and priorities contribute to stronger coherence between the various actions of the new programme.

In the coming programming period, strong emphasis will be put on partnerships and cross-sectoral perspectives bringing together civil society, policy-makers and business,

⁶ More information in Annex 7 of the Final evaluation report at:
http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/evalreports/index_en.htm#civilsocietyHeader

which in turn will promote synergies and networking between the various strands of activities and different types of organisations funded through the programme. One of the priorities of the new Europe for Citizens programme is therefore to encourage cross-sectoral partnerships and promote projects which are based on cooperation by different actors, including civil society organizations, local authorities, think-tanks, NGOs, etc.

Developing closer ties between citizens from the Member States that joined in 2004 and those Member States that were already part of the EU on 30 April 2004 is one of the specific objectives of the new programme, and partnership between organisations from old and new Member States is strongly encouraged. This is also reflected in the award criteria used for all actions of the programme.

As far as synergy with other Community action programmes is concerned, the European Commission believes that the new generation of programmes for 2007-2013 has taken a step forward in this area. There is a need to develop synergy in the programme implementation and this will be done over the life of the programmes. The Commission is currently developing a new horizontal approach for dissemination of results in the fields of education, culture, youth and citizenship. This will build new bridges between the various relevant programmes.

3.3. Improving links to the national level

Links with national programmes and initiatives in the area of active citizenship should be fostered through improving contacts with national authorities responsible for civic participation. The European Commission agrees that there is a real need to strengthen the link between the development of active European citizenship at both European and national levels. Linking the two will have a positive effect on the sense of national ownership of the activities in the area of active European citizenship.

The act which formed the basis of the 'Europe for Citizens' programme established a Programme Committee to assist the European Commission in the implementation. This means in effect that the European Commission will have an opportunity for a dialogue with the Member States on the issues that are relevant to the programme. This has already attracted closer attention from the Member States to the issues of active European citizenship, which may well also foster closer links between the new programme and national initiatives in this area.

Additionally, many Member States are in the process of establishing coordination and support structures for the 'Europe of Citizens' programme. Apart from their role of information and dissemination, these structures can also provide feedback to the European Commission on the programme's implementation and on national programmes, initiatives and policies in the area of active European citizenship.

3.4. Enhancing programme management

Recommendations to enhance programme management are:

- a) Finance and administration

- faster disbursement of funds to beneficiaries and simplification of financial reporting procedures;
- establishing a personalized point of continuous support at the European Commission or the Executive Agency for projects throughout their lifetime;
- providing additional guidance in relation to the submission of applications and eligibility criteria;
- greater stability of staff in the area of grant management .

b) Monitoring and evaluation

- on site monitoring visits in order to enhance monitoring arrangements;
- development of benchmarks and indicators against which to measure the success of projects and the programme as a whole;
- guidance to projects concerning the data to be collected in individual evaluations;

c) Added value, dissemination and partner search

- structuring of the programme activities and providing support to larger projects with more visibility;
- encouraging the external use of results (for instance, by recognizing dissemination and exploitation plans as a selection criterion);
- enhancing dissemination of the results of the projects through the creation of an online repository and the production of case studies and good practice guides;
- support for "partner matching";
- creating a programme logo requiring the projects to include visibility actions through the use of media.

The European Commission finds these recommendations useful and has already made a number of arrangements to improve programme management.

The establishment of the Executive Agency contributes significantly to strengthening the programme management. It enables more stable development of the grant management systems and provides an opportunity to reduce staff turnover. Recently introduced simplifications, such as the extensive use of flat rate system and on-line tools, are consistent with the recommendations in this area. The Commission has produced a comprehensive programme grid which provides potential beneficiaries with a high degree of predictability and stability. The use of multi-annual partnerships also represents an important simplification and improvement for the beneficiaries.

Within the new programme period, the support available for the beneficiaries has already been strengthened and continues to be developed, for example, through the de-centralized

support and information structures. The new programme also includes new features like multi-annuality, which will better structure the activities. This generates greater visibility for the activities and their results and it also enables the Commission to develop closer partnership relations with the beneficiary organizations. The Commission has also developed a strategy and a practical action plan for the exploitation and dissemination of the results. This includes tangible measures such as on-line tools to disseminate best practices and actual results of projects to a wide range of stakeholders. Finally, a more structured monitoring system is being developed, which includes impact assessment based on surveys carried out at the level of those directly participating.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The evaluation confirms the importance of the 'Active European Citizenship' Programme in terms of promoting civic participation and encouraging debate on shared values in Europe. The programme has given many European citizens and their organizations an opportunity to participate in the process of building Europe, to express their opinions and to feed into the European political process. It has connected people and local communities in different countries. It therefore follows that Community support for promotion of active European citizenship in the EU needs to continue, and that adequate resources should be made available for this purpose.

The evaluation has also pointed out some weaknesses in the past programme and highlighted significant potential for further development. There is therefore room to strengthen the innovation and structuring measures in order to increase the impact of the new 'Europe for Citizens' programme, in terms of boosting citizens' involvement, developing coherence and synergies, improving links to the national level and further enhancing programme management.

During the preparation of the new programme and when designing its implementation, the Commission entered into a more structured dialogue and partnership with key organizations in the area of active European citizenship. The evaluation has confirmed that this kind of dialogue is a key element in strengthening the impact of the programme, particularly in terms of drawing policy conclusions and learning lessons from the programme. The European Commission will therefore continue to develop and strengthen this dialogue.