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## **POLICY PAPER**

### **Focus on the Positives: The role and relevance for civil society in times of crisis**

*Tell me and I will forget; show me and I will remember; involve me and I will understand.*

Old Chinese Proverb

#### **INTRODUCTION: Crisis or Opportunity?**

The word “crisis” has become part of European citizens’ every day vocabulary. A crisis of the European economy has seemingly had a domino effect instigating crises within and across societal, cultural, even identity lines. Civil society organisations (CSOs) have not been immune to these crises. A recent study (2013) commissioned by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has identified a number of key challenges facing European CSOs in the current environment, but also opportunities that can stimulate debate at both the member state and EU levels.<sup>i</sup>

Whether the effects of the crisis are *external*, for example the rising levels of unemployment amongst European youth<sup>ii</sup>, or *internal*, such as the need for overhauling procedures and modes of operation due to a reduction in available funds<sup>iii</sup>, the crisis nonetheless presents a unique opportunity for civil society to increase both its value and relevance to EU citizens.

#### **CASE STUDY: Shaping the future of civil society through participation - the Cyprus NGO Initiative**

The participation of CSOs in the decision-making process – and by extension citizens themselves – supports the development of a society that is not reliant on top-down solutions to important issues. Across the EU there exists an uneven pattern of civil society development, dependent to a large extent on the frameworks and mechanisms in place. The onset of the economic crisis, accompanied by a decrease in social spending, has crippled the ability of member states to respond to segments of their

constituencies. However, at the same, developments have heightened awareness as to the role that civil society can play in filling this gap.

Since 2007 the Cyprus NGO Initiative<sup>iv</sup> has been working towards involving NGOs in the process of revising and amending the existing legislative framework in Cyprus, seen as a necessary prerequisite for facilitating the operation and meaningful contribution of NGOs to Cypriot society. Despite extensive engagement with the relevant departments in both the Interior and Finance Ministries in the period 2007-2013, progress has been limited towards affecting positive change.

However, while 2013 marked a negative downturn in the economic fortunes of Cyprus, the year has been a positive turning point for the Initiative. Responding to the establishment of the Volunteering and NGO Commissioner<sup>v</sup>, the Initiative has engaged in an advocacy effort with renewed pro-activity, meeting extensively with political party representatives and government officials. The aim is that 2014 will be the year that a new legislative framework is established and an opportunity for all Cypriot NGOs to become fully-fledged social partners.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In light of the crisis there are a number of areas where civil society participation and effectiveness could be enhanced:

- *Define with greater clarity what constitutes a non-governmental organisation (NGO) and a civil society organisation (CSO).* The lack of a unified, pan-European definition hinders the development of the sector. Therefore, in order to promote a unified response to the crisis, this should not be left to member states, and could be promoted by the European Parliament.
- *Develop mechanisms for more effective sharing and dissemination of information about CSO activities.* Despite the crisis there are instances where the number of CSOs has increased<sup>vi</sup>, making it all the more important to share information and avoid the duplication of events and resources. The development of civil society calendars<sup>vii</sup> would both improve participation and increase the relevance of actions taking place at national and EU levels.

- *Support the networking possibilities for CSOs both within member states and across the EU.* The effects of the crisis necessitate the development of coalitions and networks that can pool together resources in light of decreasing budgets. While networking is encouraged at the European level, country-based opportunities remain limited.
- *Enhance the collaboration between CSOs and local authorities.* While often separated by a lack of awareness of each other’s work, both CSOs and local authorities are suffering from the crisis. However they remain the two sectors with the closest proximity to European citizens, and efforts must be made at both the member state and EU levels to support their interdependency and common action.

*This Policy Paper was produced following the [debate](#) entitled “Civil Society and the Economic Crisis” organised by the NGO Support Centre, in collaboration with the European Parliament [Office](#) in Cyprus on 24 January 2014.*



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<sup>i</sup> The “Study on the Impact of the Crisis on Civil Society Organizations in the EU – Risks and Opportunities” was carried out by Prof. Dr Jamal Shahin, Prof. Dr Alison Woodward and Prof. Dr Georgios Terzis from the Institute for European Studies (VUB) and is available to download [here](#)

<sup>ii</sup> See [presentation](#) by Ellada Ioannou, Press Officer for the Cyprus Youth Council

<sup>iii</sup> See [presentation](#) by George Frantzis, Representative of the Cyprus Red Cross

<sup>iv</sup> The Cyprus NGO Initiative is an informal group of Cypriot CSOs whose active members include: INDEX Research and Dialogue, Terra Cypria, the NGO Support Centre, the Cyprus Family Planning Association, Peace Players-Cyprus, and the Association for the Development of Life Skills. Follow the activities of the Cyprus NGO Initiative on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)

<sup>v</sup> Mr [Yiannis Yiannakis](#) was appointed Volunteering and NGO [Commissioner](#) by President Nicos Anastasiades in May 2013.

<sup>vi</sup> See [presentation](#) by Alina Iosifescu, National Association of Citizens’ Advice Bureau of Romania

<sup>vii</sup> An example of such calendar is that of the Cyprus Community Media Centre ([CCMC](#)), a Cyprus-based non-profit organisation, which maintains a [Community Calendar](#) of civil society events taking place in Cyprus