

## 2009 SESSION REPORT

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### Compact style agreements: the way forward in government-NGO relations?

*Moderator:* Tony Venables, European Citizen Action Service

*Speakers:* Stuart Etherington, National Council for Voluntary Organisations; Urmo Kübar, Network of Estonian Non-profit Organisations; Cvjetana Plavska Matic, National Foundation for Civil Society Development – Croatia.

*Session proposed by:* Open Estonia Foundation

Moderator Tony Venables introduced the session as an opportunity to discuss the value of compact style agreements. He described the unusual status of such agreements as neither a legislative nor purely voluntary code and used the diversity of compact style agreements in the United Kingdom; the differences between agreements in England, Scotland and Wales, as an example of the diversity and flexibility of the concept and to highlight the varying perspectives that would be brought to the table by the panelists in this session. Panelists then drew on their own experiences to outline the origins of compact style agreements; how and why they are drawn up.

Stuart Etherington outlined the different historical contexts in which compacts in the UK have come about - against the backdrop of governmental change: a reaction to the perception of the voluntary sector as a deliverer of services under the Thatcher government in England; amid the coming about of devolution in Scotland. The expectation was of partnership between the government and voluntary sector in these contexts and there was in turn the need for a document that would set out the principles to be adhered to and the undertakings to be accepted on both sides.

Urmo Kübar discussed the founding of the Estonian compact known as EKAK (Estonian Civil Society Development Concept) that took place in the 1990s. Here there was likewise the need for partnership but in a different situation: there was a need in Estonia to create a common understanding of what civil society/ the third sector actually is. EKAK was initiated by civil society organisations. The process was lengthy and it took over 2 years before the organisations could reach an agreement. This did however represent a very important learning phase, with a wide range of participants, including parliamentary parties, involved in the drafting process. The final document was adopted by parliament in December 2002.

Cvjetana Plavska Matic then spoke about compact style agreements in Croatia. Work began there on a compact between government and the non-governmental sectors in 2000. There was a new social democratic government and the level of expectation among civil society organisations was high. The work took place over an intensive 8-month period with over 200 people involved on national level. The final document was adopted by the government in 2001.

Mr. Etherington began the discussion on the details of these agreements. He explained that the English Compact, for example, consists of a main document setting out what the state and what civil society will do, underpinned by 5 codes of practice relating to volunteering, minority groups, community organisations, consultations and funding. Different types of organisations have their own different relationships with various government departments, but the compact sets out the broad framework for these. Compacts which last, he noted, are those which have government support.

Ms. Plavska Matic explained how a separate body for the implementation of the compact had been established in Croatia. So far, she commented, this seems to have been successful and the compact has helped civil society in Croatia to gain access to lottery money. While the agreement has not been crucial to civil society organisations in Croatia, it has brought some measurable benefits. It brings a structured way of cooperation and dialogue - this is the added value of the compact.

The discussion also covered ways of moving forward in the use of compact style agreements: how to spread best practices across national boundaries, for example. Ms. Plavska Matic added that there was a need to set up a clear programme of cooperation and institutional frameworks for implementing a compact style agreement. Mr. Kübar commented that the process in Estonia has been very much a case of learning from experience.

Mr. Etherington raised concerns regarding cooperation between governments and civil society over the next ten years – many people have, he suggested, failed to realise that the last ten years has been something of a golden age in terms of government and civil society. Partnership has increased greatly, and although it can and has been widely debated whether or not this has made civil society less independent and/or more effective, the next 10 years, certainly in the UK and most likely in many other places too, will see big cuts in public spending and this will bring changes. The value of compacts changes geographically, as we have noted, and with time – in changing times we will have to see how they develop and where they still have value.

Ms. Mall Hellam, the session designer, closed the session by stressing the role that foundations can play in this process: in countries where there is already a lack of public funding, foundations have a key role to play in developing compacts and monitoring them. There is a need for foundations to participate actively in the process of developing what can be an important tool for building civil society in emerging democracies.