

Inquiry into EU reform and the EU referendum: implications for Scotland

SCVO

Europe needs to be on our sector's radar in a big way over the next 12-18 months. The refugee crisis and Greek economic crisis has shifted the terms of debate about the role and function of the EU, and this will feed into both the approach the EU takes to its funds, as well as the terms of debate for the Referendum on leaving the EU in the UK.

In and amongst this, civil society's voice within the EU bureaucracy is becoming increasingly channelled and structured, and at SCVO we are reviewing the opportunities and challenges this presents. Scottish civil society has both much to offer and learn from greater collaboration and engagement at an EU level.

Civil Society and the value of EU membership

The European Union is much, much more than a peace project or a free trade area for civil society. There is a fundamental desire for, and are benefits from, close co-operation between European civil society. Our broad interest in social issues, containing market forces and promoting strong welfare policies and social issues makes us politically and ideologically compatible.

Consequently, we often agree on broad policies and principles and we are all caught within a similar institutional position. We are small and weak actors relative to the fairly supportive Commission and Parliament and highly sceptical Council. Furthermore, we interact within similar international, European and national demands and constraints. Thus, we are often faced with similar pressures, demands and strategies. This fundamentally similar context should lead to the development of co-operation between civil society across the EU.

There are significant opportunities at the EU level for SCVO and the third sector in Scotland. Collaboration and cooperation on EU wide strategies through EU networks, civil dialogue with EU institutions and transnational funding opportunities. Many civil society organisations across Europe are also engaged in business collaborations such as; owning buildings, trading, recruitment platforms for civil society jobs and community ownership.

European policy agenda

EU social policy has developed in fits and starts and is very uneven. EU social policy is well established in gender, youth and some areas of labour policy; less developed in disability, public health and anti-poverty policy; and poorly established in anti-racism, gender equality and elderly policy. Climate change is an emerging area of focus for European policy, given the EU's power as a European 'bloc' on the global stage.

The fate of the European social model, and the extent to which Europe can integrate its policies, has been a central question recently. Debates have raged over its content and ability to defend itself against the pressures of the financial crisis, economic globalisation and European integration. A central aspect of this debate has been the promotion of EU social policy in equal measure to policies for growth. Defenders of the European social model see it as a bulwark against international and European deregulatory and market-oriented forces. Built into this assumption is the hope that EU social policy could and should be promoted by a strong and extensive array of European level non-governmental organisations (NGOs)/civil society.

At the same time, we are embarking on the new 7-year phase of the European Structural and Investment Funds, which has a greater emphasis on tackling poverty, climate change and research than previous rounds. But the European Structural Funds, however they may be translated into action by our sector or others, should be seen as a mechanism to embody the European Union project. Their primary aim is to guide greater integration across the European Union.

Opportunity to become a major force in Europe but reform is needed

Being organised by the National and/or European political institutions would compromise our independence and plurality so it is essential that we think strategically about how we are organising ourselves at the EU level.

A significant amount of co-operation between civil society from different EU countries is already happening:

- European Economic and Social Committee – The EESC is a formal committee, with members appointed by member governments, which offers greater equality and participation of civil society in EU institutions.
- SCVO is lead member of the European Network of National Associations (ENNA) which takes an overview for representing the interests and securing EU support for civil society organisations across Europe.
- More informal groupings such as European Social Platform continue to operate and network civil society activists across Europe but are being supplanted by the more formal channels above.

Some key points of learning have emerged from this engagement:

- In order to become a major force in the future of EU social policy and the EU project itself civil society either needs to be organised or organise ourselves.
- In order to organise ourselves better at an EU level and to significantly increase the Scottish perspective to the EU project we need financial and political support from the Scottish government and public agencies equal to that for the private and public sector.

In addition we have to overcome significant and complex clashes of interest and institutional positions to exert influence.

- The European Commission still has a long way to go to become transparent and accessible to non-government partners. As part of this, UK membership needs to reflect UK regions better, which in turn will ensure Scottish civil society has better access to EU institutions.
- The EU largely sees Scotland as a region of the UK so awareness, opportunities for funding and engagement can be slow to flow to Scottish organisations or not reach us at all.
- The EU referendum could provide the platform for Scottish/UK third sector to significantly increase their engagement in European policy making and greater collaboration with their colleagues across Europe.

Implications of a vote to leave the EU

The EU is experiencing a serious and profound crisis. The economic and financial difficulties have illustrated that its governance has weaknesses, that its integration is

inadequate, and that there is a real danger of serious divisions and the loss of what was the driving force behind the European venture: the support of its peoples and even the enthusiasm of many Europeans.

Arguments are likely to focus on security, business and the economy, integration for peace and Britain's standing in the world, financial services, immigration and Freedom of Movement. It will be challenging to shift the debate from purely just opportunities for growth and markets to what it means for society, communities, social policy and the welfare of our citizens.

The sector needs to be aware of the implications and complications this agenda will pose for the people and communities it supports as well as the way it does its business.

Many of the implications could be similar to those of any company or individual. Questions would arise around potential employment, employment protection and rights, procurement and VAT changes, for example. Through to concerns over a dilution or removal of the European Convention on Human Rights. A significant proportion of European Funding directly supports the work of the sector.

Fundamentally, civil society is an exporter of participative democracy. This extends from neighbourhoods to the global stage, where citizens can fully participate in and influence decisions that affect the world around them.

In and amongst this challenge, SCVO will be helping our sector to review how it approaches Europe, how it engages in the referendum on UK membership, and how it makes best use of the civil society networks across Europe to push for changes that directly support the people and communities we work with.

Ali Cairns
Head of European Unit