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Civil society development: A Norwegian perspective

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Ladies and gentlemen

It is an honour to address such a large and diverse audience here today, and to share with you some thoughts on the vital role of civil society and its contribution to fostering social, economic and sustainable cohesion in the region.

Norway recognizes the civil society sector as a fundamental building block in any socially responsible, inclusive, fair and democratic society. Not only do we continuously strive for this ideal at home, we have also been a committed contributor to development of civil society elsewhere, in our neighbourhood, including in the Baltic Sea region, and further afield.

In our efforts, we have consistently emphasized the value of international cooperation, supporting initiatives and sharing knowledge and lessons-

learned which bring about mutually beneficial progress. This event is a good example of such cooperation. Norway will take over the presidency of the CBSS this summer and it is my pleasure to express our support for the continued work of this Forum in moving forward the development of the NGO sector in the Baltic Sea region, within the context of the European agenda. I have learned with great interest about the content of the Forum's debates over the past years, and I am confident that further insight will be gained over the coming days on how to strengthen the role of the sector.

This Forum is also a welcome opportunity for Norway to present both its experience of working with the civil society sector and of debating the future of its contribution to the sector in the context of the EEA agreement, specifically through the EEA and Norway Financial Mechanisms. Personally, I look forward to sharing with you some of the lessons learned from the experience of these Funds over the 2004-2009 period and to exchange thoughts on how our cooperation can best contribute to strengthening the region's civil society in the future Mechanism to run till 2013.

Let me first say a few words about civil society in Norway, where the "Nordic paradigm" of civil society, as it is known, is a visible reality. Nordic civic engagement stands out for its to high levels of participation. In Norway, 58% of the population is actively involved in civic initiatives, closely followed by Sweden with 51%. The Norwegian civil society sector is comprised of around 115 000 organisations, which constitute a large, dynamic and diverse sector, performing a number of vital functions. NGO

membership stands at around 10 million- roughly twice the size of the Norwegian population.

High levels of participation also reflect the broad scope of civil society, which encompasses a wide spectrum of goals, opinions and activities and sectors, ranging from children and youth, health and social issues, anti-discrimination and democracy, to culture and sports, education, multicultural issues, religion and development cooperation.

Civil society in Norway provides a critical, yet constructive input to the government in shaping the political agenda, suggesting alternative actions, taking part in public debates pointing to Norway's international obligations and commitments, carrying out independent investigations, but also supporting and raising awareness among the general public of key policy initiatives. A sizable proportion of the civil society sector in Norway today is also engaged in a variety of cultural, recreational, and expressive functions, rather than advocacy or service functions. This is another feature of the so-called Nordic paradigm. Civil society research emphasizes the importance of giving voice to a wide range of interests and concerns; in order for these voices to be heard, diversity and inclusiveness are fundamental.

While Norway has an extensive welfare system, the non-governmental sector still performs an important service function. The Norwegian government believes that our ability to ensure the wellbeing and security of our people can be further promoted by encouraging a thriving civil society and voluntary engagement. The challenges of our time can not be solved by politicians, governments and the market alone. Civil society benefits from a

very high level of trust – higher than for public sector and business community.

At a time when an increasing number of citizens are disengaging from formal political processes and feel distant from European politics (from a 63% turnout in 1979, the European Parliament was elected with only 43% of voters in 2009, and participation was down to 18% in some of the Member states, particularly in central and eastern Europe), civil society organizations appear as a clear asset in ensuring that people are actively involved in shaping their societies.

Particularly in those European countries with a more recent history of democratic transition, the initial enthusiasm and hope raised by these changes is often replaced by a more realistic view and even a sense of disillusionment, confronted with the scope of the challenges that lie ahead. The challenge for civil society organizations, as engines of participation operating at the closest level to the citizens, is therefore huge in empowering citizens to actively engage, to build trust and confidence in their active contribution.

The EEA and Norway Grants, which Norway contributes to through the EEA agreement support social and economic cohesion in Central, Eastern and Southern Europe. The Funds have given us the opportunity to focus support to fields such as sustainable development and environment, health and childcare, cultural heritage, human resources, regional development and academic research.

At the same time, we have strongly emphasised the role of the EEA and Norway Grants in promoting the civil society sector specifically, and its contribution to building fair, sustainable and democratic societies.

The overall goal of the EEA and Norway grants is to contribute to reducing social and economic disparities. It is our firm belief that NGOs can strongly contribute to achieving this by generating social capital and social mobilisation, representing alternative views and sources of information in public debates, by functioning as advocacy groups, by contributing to innovation and democratisation and by providing key accessible and affordable services, particularly to those most excluded from society.

Non-governmental organisations are eligible to apply for both large and small scale funding, including through the separate NGO Funds earmarked specifically for support to the sector. Nineteen such Funds have been set up in twelve Beneficiary states. Support channelled through these funds is sizable, amounting to a total of €85 million, equalling 7.3% of the total approved funding over the 2004-2009 period. In Lithuania alone, €5 million have been made available through the NGO fund.

Later today a more detailed overview of this contribution will be provided, but I would like to briefly address some of the experiences and lessons learned in relation to the NGO Funds in the region to date.

Lack of involvement and weak civic engagement in many of the beneficiary states remains a key challenge to address. Through civil society support channelled via the EEA and Norway grants, we have seen how key initiatives, whether at local or national level have promoted dynamic engagement, challenged existing approaches and developed new cooperation models.

The funds appear to have provided key support to NGOs in promoting their role in advocacy; watchdog and monitoring activities, for which both national and EU funding opportunities are often scarce.

The funds have clearly supported the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in society - minorities, elderly, children, women - through actions aimed at strengthening democracy, human rights and empowerment of individuals and target groups. Still today, these remain critical areas of intervention, where NGOs can mobilise society towards changes in attitudes.

Some of the supported NGOs are key providers of social, educational and care services that benefit groups particularly at risk of inequality and exclusion. These organizations are either mandated to provide such services by the state, fill a gap in service provision or provide innovative services in the country that were not previously available (domestic violence services, services to assist disabled persons, support to minorities, migrants and other groups as just some examples).

Others have addressed important challenges of our societies such as climate change, biodiversity or environmental management, including through integrated approaches.

While the funds aim to support smaller scale, NGO-run activities which contribute to some of the priority sectors identified in the FMs, their aim is also to strengthen the capacity and institutional development of civil society organizations themselves. Many organisations still experience difficulties in raising funds for basic costs or essential equipment. For this reason, in some countries the funds have focused on the gap in funding for capacity building, helping to improve overall efficiency and sustainability of the sector.

This is particularly the case in the Baltic States, where support is granted to the development of annual work-programmes, to strengthening operational capacity, but also to developing leadership, governance and constituency building. This has been perceived as an important step in acknowledging the need for support to core activities, one which is often overlooked. But we cannot forget that the very subsistence of NGOs is, particularly today, at risk.

As such, the funds have also contributed to increasing capacity of many organizations, particularly small and grass-roots organisations to attract funding, giving them confidence to broaden their activities and develop further. This has been coupled in some cases with an increased feeling of legitimacy, recognition and confidence.

The role of the NGO funds in creating new fora for public-NGO cooperation is not to be forgotten. We have seen how in some cases the funds have shaped better understanding and dialogue, as well as mutual recognition, from the national to community-based level. The institutional set-up of the Funds itself has in most cases also contributed to strengthening such cooperation.

Overall there is a sense that the funds have contributed to the most pressing societal needs. At the same time, it is sometimes felt that more focus, and clearer targets could benefit the effectiveness of these instruments. We expect that the ongoing evaluation of our Funds currently being undertaken will provide feedback and insight into the past experience.

The contribution of NGOs to nation building and democratic processes, as arenas for broad public participation and critical corrections to the state is a continuous task, and hence, continuous support to civil society is of vital importance. This brings me to the future perspectives and the introduction of the new Financial Mechanisms which will operate through to 2014.

In this context, we will continue to encourage and support the contribution of civil society to our overall objectives and we will seek to further target the funding to areas where NGOs are best placed to make the most crucial impact on European democracy building.

We are all too aware of the financial support from international donors shifting further east over the past years and the detrimental effects of the financial crisis on the sector in most recent times.

Against this backdrop, I would like to reiterate the Norwegian government's commitment to continued support to the NGO sector in Central and Southern Europe, as well as in the Baltic Sea Region. We acknowledge the scale of the challenge ahead, which makes us both ambitious and humble. I count on your feedback and discussions at this event as a stepping stone towards shaping a relevant and focused support that will yield effective outcomes and results in today's society and build more participatory and responsible arenas for the future.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your attention.