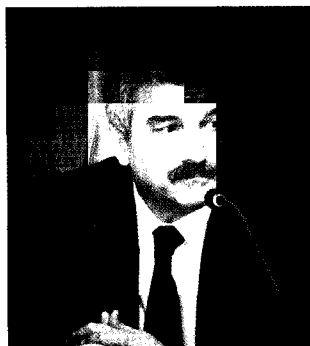


Entry points for engagement

Working with the rotating EU presidency

By Miguel Angel Cabra de Luna, Director for Social Relations, International Affairs and Strategic Planning of Fundación ONCE, and member of the European Economic and Social Committee



Miguel Angel Cabra de Luna

Every six months the presidency of the EU rotates among its members, and a new country provides leadership to the EU machinery. While the effectiveness of this system is not 100 percent, it undoubtedly offers additional opportunities for foundations to engage with the EU and shape EU policies and initiatives. The first half of 2010 is Spain's turn. For the fourth time since its accession in 1986, Spain will be at the helm of the EU.

For an organisation like Fundación ONCE, which aims to promote the creation of a legislative environment that fosters the social and labour integration of people with disabilities, the Spanish Presidency is a unique opportunity. It should not be forgotten that 80% of the legislation that is enforced in Member States originates in Brussels. Although traditionally foundations have been largely regulated at national level, our operations are increasingly impacted by the EU. This extends from the maximum length of the working day of our staff to the tax regime to which our operations are subject, going through reporting requirements, the structuring of our cross-border activities or the legality of a given government grant we may receive or manage. The EU is also a leading legislator in many of foundations'

key areas of action: non-discrimination, the fight against climate change, education, cooperation and development, etc. Moreover, the influence of the policies and laws that are approved at EU level is not limited to the EU Member States, but indirectly stretches a lot farther than the borders of the "Old Continent". It could be said that Brussels has taken over from Washington as the main generator of legislative trends.

Against this background, it goes without saying that foundations cannot afford not to be actively involved and constructively contributing to EU policy-making. Being involved in the preparation of the rotating EU presidency is an important part of this exercise.

In the case of Fundación ONCE, our work for the Spanish Presidency started already in the summer of 2008 and focused on making sure that disability was a priority of the Spanish Presidency and that new initiatives were put on the EU's table, particularly a European Pact on Disability. Although it is still early days to say whether we have been fully successful (only time will tell) certain achievements make us optimistic: the organisation of a Council of Ministers meeting focused on disability; the launch of an EU programme to improve the accessibility of European towns and cities; and the organisation of a Presidency conference on disability which we sponsored, among others.

However, what could interest most Effect readers and our peers, particularly the foundations from the countries that will be holding the EU presidency in the



Pedro Puente, Roma Secretariat Foundation, and Alberto Durán, Fundación ONCE, at the European Conference on Access to Employment of Socially Disadvantaged Groups, held 23-24 February 2010 in Madrid and co-organised by Fundación ONCE in the framework of the Spanish Presidency.

coming years (Belgium, Hungary, Poland, Denmark, Cyprus, Ireland, Lithuania), is the know-how we have acquired in the run-up to the Spanish Presidency. It can be summarised in a sort of Decalogue:

1. Engage early – governments start preparing their EU presidencies well in advance (up to two years in the case of those countries at the end of the presidential trio), so the earlier in the process you engage the higher your chances are of influencing policy. Our first contacts with the Spanish government started in June 2008.

2. Adopt a multi-targeted approach – many government actors are involved in the definition of a presidency programme so make sure that you talk to all of them. We have had meetings with ten ministries and the Prime Minister's office.

3. Timing and targeting are crucial – bureaucracies are not flexible so make sure you understand the administration procedures and reporting lines to provide your input at the right moment and to the right person.

4. Combine political and technical levels – make sure you talk to the ministers and the secretaries of states but don't neglect lower rank officials. They are the ones who write the papers!

5. Join forces – adopt a coordinated approach with other foundations/players from the other members of the presidential trio (in our case Belgium and Hungary; next one will be formed by Poland, Denmark and Cyprus).

6. Involve EU representative organisations – being able to show that your proposals count on the support and reflect the



European Conference on Access to Employment of Socially Disadvantaged Groups Fundación ONCE in the framework of the Spanish Presidency

Mall Hellam on the EESC as a pathway to engagement

As a consultative body to the EU institutions, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) plays an important role in the EU's decision-making. The Committee is made up of representatives of several interest groups, including civil society organisations focused on social and economic issues, and gives these groups a formal platform for getting their views across on issues being decided at EU level. Effect talked with Mall Hellam, Executive Director of the Open Estonia Foundation and member of the EESC, about the Committee and foundations.

Effect: What is the value to foundations of working through the EESC?

Mall Hellam: By its mandate the EESC is a bridge between civil society organisations based in the EU Member States and the EU institutions. Through the EESC the members can obtain first-hand information on EU programmes and initiatives. The Committee provides direct access to EU officials, and enables organisations to influence communications on issues of interest to them, shape policies and highlight under-discussed issues. An important value is the EESC's right to adopt own-initiative opinions, enabling foundations to initiate, explore and develop new and innovative ideas through the EESC.

Effect: How does the EESC benefit from including the voices of foundations?

MH: In addition to issuing opinions (of which there are approximately 150 per year), the EESC has a role of facilitator and promoter of civil dialogue. Unlike formal EU-level institutions,

foundations work directly with people and civil society organisations, possessing a very good understanding of society's most burning issues. I am convinced that the role of public benefit foundations is gradually changing from being mere grant-givers to becoming initiators of new ideas and active partners with the organisations they support. It is all the more important that foundations become more vocal on European issues. Foundations are often also very experienced on a policy level and are thus reliable and professional partners for the EU.

Effect: What was your role in getting the Opinion on the European Foundation Statute released by the Committee, and how important is this Opinion?

MH: Since I made the proposal to the Committee last year to draw up an own-initiative opinion on the European Foundation Statute, I have received extremely positive feedback from different actors involved in the process. The idea is particularly appreciated for its innovativeness and importance in the context



aged Groups, held 23-24 February 2010 in Madrid and co-organised by

thinking of the relevant Europe-wide organisations is paramount.

7. Keep the European Commission in the loop – the relevant Directorate General (in our case DG Employment) can be your best ally. Also your Permanent Representation in Brussels can be helpful.

8. Generate win-win situations – focus on those initiatives that could be most attractive for your national government, both in terms of increasing their international stature and of electoral interest.

9. Act as an expert – given job mobility and the time lapse between presidencies most officials have not been previously involved in preparing a presidency, so in general they tend to be open to receiving input and advice from those that have. In our case we have

been actively involved in the preparation of the three previous Spanish Presidencies so our interlocutors tended to be receptive.

10. Use media – as the presidency gets closer, media attention (EU and national) increases so there is lots of coverage to piggyback on to make your case.

By the time the Spanish Presidency (and our learning process) reaches its end, this list will have certainly expanded with other lessons I am sure we will learn in the coming months. A new assessment with the benefit of hindsight may be useful then. In the meantime, we would be more than happy to share our experience with our European counterparts in a more detailed way. Do not hesitate to contact us!

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of a converging Europe. We are going to need increasingly more forms of cooperation that would facilitate a Europe-wide collaboration on different issues and help non-governmental actors to join up to contribute to the development of education, science, environmental protection and other issues. These joint endeavours will help build a solid basis for a European civil society.

Effect: Sometimes the role of the EESC is misunderstood. In your view, what is the role of the Committee in the political process, and how important is it?

MH: The EESC's role as the institutional representative of civil society and interest groups is indeed vital to compensate for the democratic deficit inherent in the structure of the EU. However, the EESC's position today faces many challenges. The Committee's role as a consultative body to the European Parliament, Council and Commission should be reinforced and its representativeness and credibility strengthened. To that end, it is very important to increase the EESC's presence in the debate on the future of Europe.

Effect: There is now a campaign underway by various civil society networks to promote a better representation of the diversity of civil society on the Committee. What are your views on this?

MH: The representatives of a Member State in the Committee are chosen and appointed for five years by the Member State itself. The principles and rules of the selection procedure are decided by Member States. If we want to harmonise these procedures, we need Member States to reach an agreement on how it should be done.

Effect: How important has it been to you to be able to bring the voice of a new Member State from the east to the Committee?

MH: I have the impression that the dividing lines between the old and new Member States are slowly but steadily starting to blur, although in several aspects differences are still visible, especially regarding the methods for alleviating social problems and providing for the welfare of people. It is extremely important for the new Member States not only to talk about problems at different international forums, including the EESC, but to also initiate debates and propose constructive solutions to the issues raised.

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