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Development Cooperation in New EU Member States: The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations

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8.1 Introduction

Member States joining the European Union (EU) in 2004 and 2007 have through accession also ‘graduated’ to a donor status and became politically and morally obliged to build up an effective strategy for international development cooperation, based on the principles and policies, accepted within the EU. These countries, however, often lack the necessary complex legal and institutional infrastructure to act as efficient donors, face serious difficulties to increase the resources according to the agreed dynamics and have serious human resource problems in area of international development cooperation (Bučar et al., 2007).

On the other hand, the countries are not without experience in the area of international cooperation. In particular, non-governmental development organizations (NGDO) have established links with civil society organizations in the EU networks as well as in the developing countries where development cooperation projects have been implemented. NGDOs have been increasingly involved in development education activities and awareness-raising campaigns in their countries.

The key argument of this paper is that the recently joined member states otherwise known as new member states (NMS)\(^1\) have insufficient multi-stakeholder approach to international development policy and strategic planning of development aid. We believe that the development institutions at the national level should not be divided into governmental and non-governmental but should build stronger partnerships, if the goals and objectives of EU international development cooperation are to be fully implemented. Only by building partnerships with civil society organizations can the governments in NMS hope to become more
effective on the basis of division of labor in designing and implementing development strategies.

Thematically, the paper first presents the issue of international development cooperation in the NMS and the official policies towards the integration of NGDO. It focuses on the role of NGDO national platforms in networking, advocacy, lobbying and campaigning activities. As case studies, three NMS countries Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia, have been analyzed. For the selected countries, the available written documentation was studied (official documents, guidelines, strategies on development cooperation, web pages of the relevant bodies, from the ministries to the NGDO platforms, meeting reports, and the few existing documents and studies on similar topics) as well as interviews conducted with representatives of the government, working in the area of international cooperation and the national platforms of NGDOs. The ambition was to identify the scope of cooperation, legal framework, content/areas of cooperation as well as opinions by each respective site as to how they themselves evaluate their cooperation. We tried to identify the process of the inclusion of NGDOs’ representatives in strategic bodies, planning and implementation of international development cooperation. This is still a topic under research, so there is a considerable lack of information, statistical data or official/non-official documents.

8.2 Current level of international development cooperation in NMS and integration of non-governmental development organizations

Until their accession to the EU, many of the NMS were themselves recipients of donor funds (some still are). Their new donor status requires a different attitude in this area. To participate fully in the activities at the level of the European Commission and to contribute to the effectiveness of EU aid, these countries first had to design their development policies and strategies, raise awareness among their citizens and engage in different development cooperation projects. The integration of already well-developed concepts, principles and commitments of the EU and implementation of these policies is a challenging task for MNS as they emerge or re-emerge as donors (Bučar and Mrak, 2007).

At the initial stages of official aid programs in NMS, NGOs were de facto not recognized by the state authorities as strategically important partners. A particular feature in all these post-communist societies was a lack of confidence between government and civil society. This attitude has its origins in the pre-transition period when NGOs often established