



PERMANENT DELEGATION OF NORWAY TO THE OSCE

STATEMENT BY NORWAY TO THE ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL DIMENSION IMPLEMENTATION MEETING, WORKING SESSION IV: “ENGAGING CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE OSCE COMMITMENTS AT NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVEL”

As delivered by Ambassador Robert Kvile,
Vienna, 22 October, 2013

Thank you, Mr. Moderator (thank you Vuk)

First of all I would like to thank the Ukrainian chairmanship for the invitation to speak on the topic of engaging civil society and the private sector in the implementation of OSCE commitments. The reason why I have been asked to help introduce this topic is – I believe – Norway’s strong tradition in civil society empowerment.

In my presentation I will concentrate on civil society, but here and there also make reference to private sector.

Ladies and gentlemen,

My presentation consists of two parts: I will first answer the question of *why* Norway empowers and engages civil society, and secondly *how* we do it. I will also try to tie this to OSCE second dimension commitments.

Now firstly, let us consider the why-question. The general answer is of course that a vibrant and influential civil society is of paramount importance if a country is to enjoy a thriving democracy. Yet, there are several, more practical reasons as to why a government should empower yet another potential critic on top of the press.

My first of these practical points is that we engage civil society because it improves decision making and shaping processes.

NGOs and other civil society organizations often have a very specific focus-area. They therefore often have very specific knowledge and data. Consequently, if the state engages

with relevant NGOs early in the decision-making process, a decision is far more likely to be well-informed, balanced and thereby successful.

My second point is that an empowered civil society reduces corruption. During the last OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum we concluded that “NGOs can play an important role in identifying corruption in governments and in supporting the necessary reforms to control and limit such mismanagement.”

If we empower it, civil society – together with the media of course – can play the role of auditor of government spending and supervise the impartiality of public services delivery.

My third point is that an active civil society reduces conflict. A free and active civil society allows engaged citizens to take an active part in every day decision shaping processes. This in its turn helps ensure a country’s internal peace and stability. Free debate reduces conflict.

My fourth, overarching point is that we do it because it is profitable. Civil society is an asset that works to optimize the state’s performance and enables the government to make the best possible decisions. Empowering civil society and promoting transparency benefits the state because it fosters trust in government and its institutions on part of the people. A stable and transparent state further adds a crucial measure of predictability to and confidence in the economy. This in turn helps attracting foreign investments.

We did in fact acknowledge all these four points in the Strategy Document for the Economic and Environmental Dimension of 2003. The document states that “problems of governance, such as ineffective institutions and civil society, lack of transparency and accountability in the public and private sectors (...) deprive participating states of the capacity to ensure sustainable economic, social and environmental development, and to address (...) threats to security and stability effectively (...)”.

In other words, an active civil society is crucial to good governance. Good governance in turn works to strengthen a state’s security and stability and improve economic performance.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me now turn to the question of *how* we engage civil society.

My first point is this: How do we ensure that civil society organizations have the resources they need for their work?

You may be surprised by my answer, which is that we finance them! Yes, most Norwegian NGOs are at least partly financed by state subsidies. Admittedly, this probably gives Norway the highest density of GONGOs in the entire OSCE area. But there is a fundamental difference between *financing* and *buying*. It goes without saying, however, that government financing of civil society requires high standards by all and an acceptance of the role civil society is meant to play.

The point is that the Norwegian state pays the NGOs to criticize. An important element of our democracy is founded on input, advice and criticism from civil society. During 26 years in my country’s foreign service I have innumerous times received civil society representatives in my

office, or assisted the Foreign Minister during such meetings. I can assure you that they did not ask for a meeting to commend us for the work we do.

My second point is that we make it possible for civil society to engage by ensuring maximum transparency of government business. All government documents, at state as well as on regional and local level, are in principle accessible to the public. Anyone may order a copy via the Internet. The law that regulates this transparency measure is very specific on when a government body may decline a request.

Civil society may play an active role in decision making processes only when there is transparency and openness on part of the government and government bodies. We therefore strive to provide timely information about issues of interest to civil society and the general public, in order to facilitate a meaningful dialogue.

My third – and final point – is that we regularly invite civil society to take part in public hearings. In Norway, as in many other countries, the government calls public hearings when it faces important decisions. These hearings are called so that other government bodies, private sector, trade unions and NGOs get a chance to voice their opinion. Such processes are of course time consuming and they slow down decision making processes, but they ensure the best possible basis for the decision eventually to be taken by political leaders. And it creates that engagement which is so important for democracy.

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Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to sum up in four points:

We engage civil society because

- It strengthens our democracy, rule of law and good governance.
- It strengthens the economy

We enable civil society to take an active part by

- Financing them, at least partly – but remember that *financing* and *buying* are and must be different things!
- And by seeking their advice and including them in decision shaping processes.

Thank you, Mr. Moderator