

5.6 EUROPEAN EVENT

European Conference on Corporate Social Responsibility, Maastricht NL 7-9 November 2004

Regional and Local Government Initiatives to Support CSR

Participants: 30-35 from business and from public authorities

Purpose

The purpose of this parallel session was to promote learning and exchange between regional and local governments, thereby strengthening their role in promoting collaboration on CSR among various stakeholders. A number of regions shared their experiences. The main focus was on the involvement of stakeholders in the policy process taking as starting point a multi-stakeholder dialogue for new initiatives and bottom-up approach to stimulate CSR.

Contribution

Mr. Don Stewart, Executive Director, People - Yorkshire Forward (UK)

Mr. Leo Leynse, Senior Policy Officer, Province of Zeeland (the Netherlands)

Mr. Jef Van der Wee, Deputy-director, Flemish Employment Administration (Belgium)

Mr. Allan Bussard, Managing Director, The Integra Venture (Slovakia)

Mr. Marcel Braun, ISO Institut zur Erforschung sozialer Chancen (Germany)

Moderator: Ms. Kyla Brand, Director, Agenda Scotland (UK)

Rapporteur: Ms. Trine Morch, County of South Jutland (Denmark)

Content

Ms. Brand introduced the session as an opportunity to share findings from the partnership project CSR Vaderegio 2 financed by DG Employment and Social Affairs and to exchange information with other partners including the Dutch Presidency. Attention would be on what public authorities were doing within CSR, what were their goals and what had been done so far.

Mr. Stewart talked about the ways **Yorkshire Forward** had taken a strategic approach to CSR, including investment of around 6 million euros. He explained the region's interest and involvement in CSR arising particularly from a tight labour market and recognition of the need to marry social and economic progress. Focus was on the partnership with 'Business in the Community' (BITC), Yorkshire and Humber. a UK movement of 750 member companies committed to improving their positive impact on society and the environment. BITC has a strong regional presence.

Mr. Stewart pointed out CSR is no longer something companies do so they can sleep easily in their beds. CSR is the very survival for business in the new economic climate. Concrete examples were given of larger companies making genuine CSR commitments. For Yorkshire and the Humber, initiatives on CSR concerned a wider vision for the community and the exchange of concrete experiences - to achieve more together than apart.

The Provincie Zeeland presentation by Mr. Leynse was another example of a regional CSR initiative. Five years ago initiatives were started in the region to tackle new and emerging problems. Especially, there was a need to implement sustainable business practice and for the companies to take a responsibility in the area. In that sense, a new concept came about and a new role of the province to stimulate, list and circulate good examples of CSR. Today, multi-stakeholder networks have been created where sustainable issues get attention. One of the more successful projects is the Masterclass CSR. The goal is to learn together and from each other. The programme consists of three parts: sustainable strategy scan, meetings and specialists groups.

The Trivisi initiative from Flanders was presented by Mr. Van der Wee. The purpose of the initiative was to promote and stimulate CSR in Flanders. Trivisi started in 2000 where there was a political will to promote an added value economy. The specific challenges in Flanders were on diversity, long life learning and stakeholder management. A bottom-up approach was taken involving participation from companies, NGOs, academics, government and social partners working together to create awareness on CSR. The first phase of Trivisi focused on developing a Trivisi-toolbox with manuals, CD-ROMs etc. as well as congresses with a big audience. The second phase of the project paid attention to the development of specific tools for SMEs and education, ESF project and multi-stakeholder forums.

In the region of **Banska Bystrica in Slovakia** Mr. Bussard stressed the situation was quite different than the previous examples. In Slovakia there was no local government in place until 1990 and the system are still being implemented. The concept of CSR is almost unknown in a region with high unemployment and a not very mature SME sector. However, Mr. Bussard mentioned five interesting CSR cases from the region focusing on women unemployment, women in work, unskilled unemployed, chronic unemployed and environment. The cases showed especially creative corporate responses had been most successful and unemployment skills were the biggest issue on the agenda.

The final presentation was made by Mr. Braun about the content and some early conclusions of **the Vaderegio II project**(which are the subject of this complete report). Issues raised in discussion focused among others on the specific selection of the stakeholders and cases; and on the importance of involving consumers in the CSR debate and initiatives.

Conclusion

The regional and local policy level plays a significant role in promoting CSR, especially in stimulating bottom-up multi-stakeholder dialogue. Indeed, as the examples showed, regions have already developed initiatives to stimulate the dialogue and involve stakeholders in the policy process.

Summing up, **Mr. Stewart** concluded:

- despite differences there seemed to be a common CSR language across Europe
- regions not so far advanced in the area could make good use of experiences already available.
- how we act as individuals has effect at a higher organisational level.
- public authorities have a role to play helping businesses to find ‘the how to do CSR’ by explaining the concept and giving concrete examples.
- there is no reason why SMEs around Europe cannot learn from each other on CSR issues and be clean, clever and competitive from the beginning.