Connecting Scotland - how the Scottish Government and its agencies engage internationally

The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO)

Summary

- SCVO has strong collaborative working relationships with a number of international networks of civil society organisations

- Our work with international networks helps strengthen civil society organisations and builds participative democratic structures

- The third sector engages well with our international colleagues as there are often similar values and common principles to our work

- The third sector is often at the forefront of policy development helps promote societal change around the world

- International connections provide a two way flow of information and ideas which promote good practice and help share innovative ways of working

- To help develop better links with international civil society organisations and other agencies, Scotland would benefit from increased investment in this area

Introduction

SCVO welcomes the opportunity to respond to this call for evidence. We would like to focus our evidence on the second strand of the enquiry:

‘How non-governmental and third sector organisations in Scotland engage internationally’

SCVO and the third sector are engaged with many international organisations. This is of great benefit to the sector and society more generally. It would be impossible to detail all the work that is undertaken, but hopefully this short response will give you a flavour of what is happening and how we can build on the good work already taking place.
Benefits of working with other nations

The third sector engages well with our international colleagues as there are often a similar values and common principles to our work. Principles such as equality, empowerment and social justice are common to civil society organisations around the world and a human rights approach underpins much of our work. Providing opportunities for collective action and participative democratic processes are common goals across the world.

SCVO and the third sector benefit significantly from its international connections with other civil society bodies. These working relationships provide a two-way flow of information and ideas which help promote good practice and spread innovative ways of working. This is vital for developing and sharing good public policy that delivers societal change as well as building business relationships and contributing to economic growth. The partnerships which spring up around projects allow expertise to be drawn from across the globe, bringing in fresh thinking and expertise.

The Independence referendum brought international coverage and attention to Scotland. The high voter turnout and levels of participation in politics, particularly from marginalised groups, are proving to be of great interest and encouragement to those countries struggling with a democratic deficit. If Scotland can build and maintain that level of interest in participatory politics it will provide important examples for others to learn from.

International Networks of third sector organisations

There are a number of formal networking bodies for civil society organisations which SCVO is regularly and actively involved with.

At a European level, SCVO is a board member of the European Network of National Civil Society Associations (ENNA). This body brings together associations equivalent to SCVO that work at a national level to promote the interests of civil society. It brings together a membership that work directly and indirectly with over 80,000 European civil society organisations.

The network provides a forum where civil society organisations can share their challenges and experiences as well as serving as an intermediary with the private sector, public authorities, and the media. This infrastructure helps disseminate and share good practice arising, showcase their work on behalf of civil society organisations within countries and provides a common policy
platform on issues affecting the sector at European level. The network represents civil society at EU level and provides a focus for influencing the European Parliament and policy around European Structural and Investment Funds.

SCVO is also a member of CIVICUS which performs a similar role to ENNA but covering civil society organisations from across the globe. They are set up to strengthen citizen action and civil society internationally. They focus on three priority areas: protecting the rights of civil society, strengthening civil society good practice and increasing the influence of civil society. They undertake a variety of long and short-term projects in each of these areas. In addition, several of their projects, such as the Civil Society Index and the World Assembly, cut across these areas and provide a platform for further strengthening civil society. SCVO was represented on the board of CIVICUS for many years and hosted the World Assembly for three years in Glasgow.

One of the projects undertaken by CIVICUS allows civil society leaders to visit other countries and learn from the experience. In recent years, SCVO has hosted a civil society leader from the Pakistan NGO’s Forum. This proved beneficial in learning about the way we organise the third sector in Scotland and the programmes we undertake with our civil society partners - such as the Human Rights and Citizenship course SCVO delivers in partnership with Glasgow Caledonian University.

**International third sector organisations**

Many third sector organisations working in Scotland have an international element to their work as they are part of global organisations. Organisations like Oxfam benefit Scotland and other countries through an exchange of learning and experience. Their policy work on poverty in Scotland is based on their development work around the world and they can draw on the lessons from that international experience to advise on policy in Scotland. Similarly their experience in Scotland can inform their work in other countries that could benefit from Oxfam Scotland’s work on wellbeing and the Humankind Index.

The Network of International Development Organisations (NIDOS) is a network of over 110 organisations with an international development focus. They unite the international development sector to promote effectiveness and collectively influence the policy agenda. Their aim is to strengthen the contribution of Scottish organisations to reducing inequality and poverty
worldwide by developing networks, sharing knowledge and providing a collective voice.

There are many other examples of the third sector working internationally. The Poverty Alliance is part of the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN). The national network is EAPN UK (made up of Poverty Alliance, EAPN England, NIAPN and Anti-Poverty Network Cymru) and Poverty Alliance acts within this as the Scottish network. The third sector also hosts international conferences which bring experts from around the world to Scotland. Recently Alzheimer Scotland hosted an international dementia conference and the Scottish Wildlife Trust organised the World Natural Capital Programme.

**The third sector leading policy development**

The third sector is often at the forefront in leading public policy in Scotland and this experience is beneficial to our colleagues around the world. The important work that has taken place in Scotland on equal marriage, gender equality or climate change has all been pushed forward by the third sector. This experience can be shared with our civil society partners and can help promote and encourage positive change in other nations.

An example of the work of Scotland's third sector being of interest internationally can be seen in the community ownership movement. Recently, land reform experts from a number of countries were brought together by Community Land Scotland to discuss community ownership of land and to consider how it can be developed and promoted internationally. The community ownership which is taking place in Scotland is seen as world leading in terms of increasing democracy, participation and self-determination.

SCVO has developed a number of international partnerships in recent years that have proved beneficial to the third sector and Scotland. We have hosted policy interns from the University of Trondheim in Norway. They have undertaken research on areas such Public Service Reform, Welfare and Community Empowerment. This has been invaluable in producing new research in these areas, but has also brought a fresh pair of eyes and new ways of approaching topics, without the assumptions that can be associated with over-familiarity.

Similarly, SCVO has also worked with interns based in Scotland on the Third Sector Internships Scotland scheme to look at international examples of good practice. This research has explored areas such as community empowerment
and welfare and has fed into our policy responses and brought new ways of working into public policy in Scotland.

**Business development partnerships**

SCVO are working with colleagues and sister councils across Europe to demand a greater role for civil society in our democracies as detailed but we are also collaborating on projects that generate income, develop our organisations and our workforce, and create jobs.

SCVO has recently expanded its successful Goodmoves jobs website for the third sector into Europe – Goodmoves Europe. Working with our 28 partners in ENNA we are now extending the service to cover European civil society jobs and jobseekers. The third sector in Europe is a rapidly growing employer and increasing workforce. It is also providing solutions to public services across Europe as public sector funding reduces. In addition, this work will provide data on the size and shape of the third sector workforce across Europe, the number of jobs being created, the types, the growth areas and data on the mobility of jobseekers.

**Improving Scotland's international links**

Although there is good work taking place across the third sector in engaging internationally, much of it is not as connected up or as well supported as it could be. Scotland would benefit from a more formal agency to help bring this work together and develop new and better links with civil society organisations as well as international agencies.

Scottish Development International has shown what can be achieved through having a dedicated agency that connects businesses to partners and investors from around the world. However, their focus on economic activity neglects the important societal benefits to be gained from connecting with other nations.

Helping to expand these connections and build international links is vital for sharing knowledge and promoting Scotland. Similar benefits could be achieved for the third sector in Scotland by a small investment that would help facilitate connections between third sector organisations in Scotland and international agencies, businesses and civil society organisations.
We would be happy to assist the committee in exploring further how SCVO could expand on the good work already taking place and deliver greater benefits through our international partnerships.

Alison Cairns
Head of Development

About us

The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) is the national body representing the third sector. There are over 45,000 voluntary organisations in Scotland involving around 138,000 paid staff and approximately 1.3 million volunteers. The sector manages an income of £4.9 billion.

SCVO works in partnership with the third sector in Scotland to advance our shared values and interests. We have over 1,600 members who range from individuals and grassroots groups, to Scotland-wide organisations and intermediary bodies.

As the only inclusive representative umbrella organisation for the sector SCVO:

- has the largest Scotland-wide membership from the sector – our 1,600 members include charities, community groups, social enterprises and voluntary organisations of all shapes and sizes
- our governance and membership structures are democratic and accountable - with an elected board and policy committee from the sector, we are managed by the sector, for the sector
- brings together organisations and networks connecting across the whole of Scotland

SCVO works to support people to take voluntary action to help themselves and others, and to bring about social change.

Further details about SCVO can be found at www.scvo.org.uk.

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