

A NEW ECONOMY OF SOLIDARITY IS BORN IN GDAŃSK

EQUAL has laid the groundwork for a new ‘economy of solidarity’, the Gdańsk Social Economy Conference heard. At the end of June in the presence of Lech Walesa, the event reviewed the programme’s results, launched Poland’s Social Economy Manifesto, and laid plans for transnational work in coming years.



Secretary of State Michał Boni addresses the Gdańsk Social Economy Conference

“When something starts in Gdańsk, no one knows where it will end,” said Kuba Wygnański, one of the motive forces behind the Gdańsk Social Economy Conference. As the cradle of the *Solidarność* movement that inspired the collapse of communism in Europe, the town was a venue rich in symbolism. The pivotal event attracted some 400 people, to take stock of the issues facing Polish society, examine how EQUAL had dressed them, and debate how to build a new ‘economy of solidarity’.

The first day of the conference was held in the Baltic Philharmonic Hall, converted from a Hanseatic grain warehouse in the city centre. Key political speakers paid tribute to the value of the social economy. Jan Kozłowski, Marshal of the Pomeranian voivodeship, stressed its role in addressing the crisis of the welfare state and in enabling individuals to emancipate themselves. Ewa Kaminska, Deputy Mayor of Gdańsk, traced the recent development of the social economy in Poland, which had followed the River Vistula across the country from Krakow in 2004 to Warsaw in 2007 and to Gdańsk today. She pointed to the need for an adequate legal framework and support infrastructure.

SETTING THE AGENDA FOR THE ESF

Kuba Wygnański, from NGO federation FISE, explained the thinking behind the event and what it was designed to achieve. The conference would show whether the social economy was organic, or whether EQUAL had succeeded in genetically modifying it, he said. Something needed to be done to repair the loss of trust in Polish society, which is the lowest in Europe. His colleague Piotr Fraćak then outlined the results of the EQUAL partnership *In Search of the Polish Model of Social Economy*, and the way the social economy provides hope for individuals and development paths for communities.

Dorota Bortnowska of the Ministry of Regional Development noted that the event was designed to familiarise decision-makers with the results of three years of work in EQUAL – and to help define the tasks of the European Social Fund’s ‘Human Capital’ Programme in the future. Jarosław Pawłowski, Undersecretary of State in the same ministry, echoed her by pointing out that the programme has €11.5 billion available and is open to the social economy and anyone promoting it.

In his speech *Social Economy – New Opportunities*, Michał Boni, Secretary of State in the Chancellery of the Prime Minister, was more analytical. He asked what kind of social order Poland needs when facing the challenges of coming years. He described the multi-dimensional nature of social exclusion, and listed some of the groups at risk – including children living in poverty, disabled people and the 8% of the workforce who are long-term unemployed. His analysis is that “the largest Polish deficiency is the ability to co-operate”. His prescription is partnership with the social economy, to rebuild social capital and implement an active social policy.

Outside the Structural Funds, the government is working on the creation of a loan fund to improve finance for the social economy. It also plans to move as regards the legal framework, and has a Social Co-operatives Act in the pipeline. Summing up, Mr Boni announced the government's wish to set the pace on policy for the social economy in the European context.

A MANIFESTO TO INSPIRE OTHER COUNTRIES

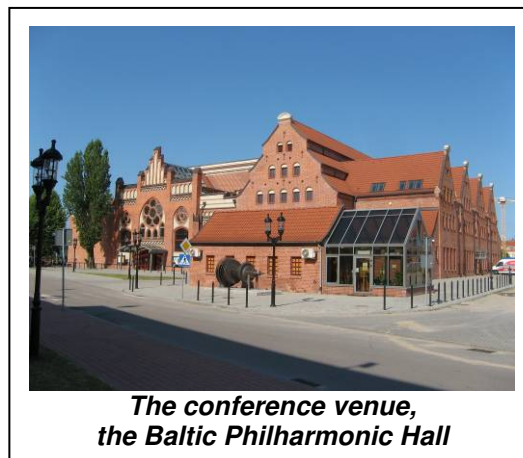
The event's second day was given over to a public debate on the "Economy of Solidarity", held in the historic shipyards where *Solidarność* was born. It was honoured by the presence of Lech Walesa, leader of the protests in 1990 and subsequently President of Poland.

The centrepiece of the debate was the *Social Economy ManifESto*. This substantial document, worked out by members of the EQUAL partnership *In Search of a Polish Model of Social Economy* and developed with SKES (*Stała Konferencja Ekonomii Społecznej* or Standing Conference of the Social Economy) has been boiled down 21 points, on two sides of paper. It pays tribute to the role of EQUAL in supporting pilot activity from which much has been learnt, and stresses the social economy's role as a partner with government. "We should give up the antagonistic idea on the mutual relations between the State and the civil society... they need to support each other," it says. Whilst the private sector is undeniably the main driver of economic growth, the public sector must give up its suspicions and work in true partnership with the social economy for the good of society. "The role of social economy is not only to provide services, but to participate in their definition."

Among all the new Member States, it is Poland that has made best use of EQUAL to develop the social economy, and the Manifesto sees the further potential of transnational work. It rounds off: "We have learnt a lot from our colleagues in other countries. We believe that it will be possible to work out some institutional mechanism for transnational co-operation, and that it can extend beyond the European Union. Our deepest wish is that our Polish experience can become an inspiration for others."

PLANS FOR A TRANSNATIONAL LEARNING NETWORK

The Gdańsk event was also the occasion for representatives of different EU Member States to discuss how to work together on social economy issues in the forthcoming Structural Funds programming period, which runs until 2013. As well as Poland, who hosted the meeting, Finland, Flanders, Germany, Sweden, Wales and the European Commission were represented, and several other countries have signalled their interest. Altogether, the ESF contains budgets of some €3 billion for innovative and transnational work – approximately the same size as the EQUAL programme – but the funding is fragmented among 117 different Operational Programmes, so it is a more difficult job to co-ordinate transnational work. Nevertheless there are several themes that came out of EQUAL as being worth eminently pursuing. To assist the process, the European Commission has launched the 'Learning for Change' programme, which will support transnational learning projects among managing authorities. Each country present outlined their situation as regards transnational working. They discussed themes such as coaching and mentoring, public procurement, price-setting and state aid, and the measurement of social impact. The meeting closed with the intention to establish a consortium to bid for Learning for Change platform.



During the plenary session on the first day of the conference, there was also strong support for transnational work. During EQUAL, thematic work on entrepreneurship was led by Germany and Flanders. Louis Vervloet, head of the Flemish ESF Agency, noted that Europe's diversity makes us rich, and called for people to share their experiences, which would boost learning and growth, like the sap rising in a tree. Apostolos Ioakimidis from the European Commission's Enterprise DG pointed out the success of work at European co-operation in establishing the European Co-operative Statute. Representatives of the United Nations Development Programme, Caritas, Social Economy Europe and DIESIS, a social co-operative consortium, mentioned other

examples of successful transnational work. As regards the future, Gerhard Bräunling, responsible for innovation and transnationality at the European Commission's Employment DG, signalled the Commission's readiness to support a suitable transnational work programme, perhaps one based around the following six issues:

- development skills and attitudes
- appropriate finance for the social economy
- support services
- access to markets (including procurement and social franchising)
- partnerships – both to carry out community development and with business
- evaluation of efficiency and impact – social return on investment (SROI) etc.

The conference also featured a comprehensive range of workshop sessions, on European networking, the Structural Funds, finance, regulation, the support infrastructure, relationships with public authorities and business, and local development. The day before the event also saw a European meeting of researchers on the social economy that took place in the nearby port of Gdynia. EQUAL development partnerships contributed to an exhibition, and the grand event ended with cluster meetings to stimulate cross-border working, and a 'social economy market' in the city's historic Long Market, presenting a range of products of social enterprises.

Documentation on the Gdansk Social Economy Conference can be found at:
<http://www.ekonomiaspoleczna.pl>

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