

European and External Affairs Committee

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SMIDOS - CYMRU

International Development In Wales, And The Wales For Africa Programme.

SMIDOS (Small and Medium sized International Development Organisations) was established in late 2007 following a 'Dialogue Day' attended by thirty five such organisations held in mid Wales. The organisations that met together agreed that they would benefit greatly from receiving information and training appropriate to organisations of their size, and that a particular emphasis on good practice and successful fundraising would be of value.

The Wales for Africa Programme agreed to provide funding for two years to deliver training and capacity building. At that time SMIDOS members expressly avoided the setting up of a large administrative body prior to the completion of this 'pilot period' as they had no additional time to oversee the establishment of a new organisation to delivery such help. SMIDOS opened a simple web site and increasingly worked directly with its members and with other key international development networks and bodies in Wales such as the Millennium Development Goals Task Force, Gold Star Programme, Wales for Africa Health Network, Welsh Centre for International Affairs, Fair Trade Wales, Oxfam and many others. Subsequently it has produced a regular 'SMIDOS Eye' passing on practically useful information on courses and funding.

Over time more small and medium sized organisations have identified themselves and there are now fifty in number. Most of these are run by highly committed enthusiasts from lofts, garages, sheds or kitchen tables, right across Wales. Their average turnover is £15k with a few over £100k employing half time organisers. Very few are able to consistently generate sufficient financial support for their activities and most face significant governance and project delivery challenges. Some of these organisations are registered charities and some are not, and between them they cover an extremely broad range of interventions with 'southern partners' right across sub-Saharan Africa.

The size of the international development sector in Wales is extraordinarily large, although there are few definitive figures to quantify it. Individual organisations, groups, or links interact with numerous networks of which SMIDOS is just one, and membership of these networks is not mutually exclusive. New organisations and schemes are starting up or presenting themselves regularly.

Against the backcloth of this vibrant and diverse tapestry of activity there is no doubt whatsoever that the Wales for Africa Programme has been a recent key factor in encouraging international development at every level of civil society. It has offered invaluable strategic encouragement and, where necessary, modest financial help to turn good ideas into practical projects, and to support schemes at an appropriate moment. It has appreciated the need to help civil society to better orchestrate its work¹, and in turn it has received support from the international development community.

Over the last two years SMIDOS increasingly realised that international development energy within civil society in Wales would benefit from a greater degree of coherence and joint working. A far more unified approach is needed towards ensuring that everyone is better informed, up-skilled and able to successfully compete for scarce funds. This became very clear when SMIDOS facilitated a common response to consultation on the White Paper which, according to the then Minister, played a part in establishing a new DfID funding source for small and medium sized groups.

However, SMIDOS was never established as a representative body and there is no appetite within the sector for an organisational umbrella body, which itself would use up precious resources. Fortunately, the key organisations in the sector work well together and by default as well as by design are well able to collectively drive standards up within the sector.

This means that government at any level does not have one body to relate to in Wales as it does in England (BOND) or Scotland (NIDOS), and may in time have in Northern Ireland if current plans proceed. This requires the sector in Wales to appreciate the breadth of its own activity and to positively nurture an understanding of common interests and joint working. With the support of the Wales for Africa Programme SMIDOS ran Wales first International Development Summit in March of this year as a first step to drafting a forward strategy for international development in civil society. The initial report is out for consultation across the sector and the full report will be published before the end of June 2010.

This provides an opportunity for the Wales for Africa Programme to assess its achievements and devise its future direction in the light of what the international development sector says about its own forward trajectory.

Without pre-empting the text of the final report SMIDOS believes that the following developments relating to the Wales for Africa Programme would be beneficial:

1. An updated published statement on the perceived future role and direction of the Wales for Africa Programme based on its considerable achievements and its accumulated experience.

2. The establishment of a Wales for Africa / Civil Society Standing Group, meeting quarterly to ensure that respective strategic objectives are clear, understood, and matched by encouragement for partnership working.
3. An annual International Development Summit in March of each year designed to bring all parts of the sector together and to increasingly hone and monitor the strategies and impact of all key players.
4. Consideration given to the restructuring of the Wales for Africa grants programme including the identification of key underlying principles and corresponding criteria. This should incorporate a) a robust review of historic allocations, b) incorporate an increased focus on resourcing civil society to enhance standards and deliver high quality projects, c) deliver annual grant themes for project funding, and d) The inclusion of a 'Southern Partner involvement' criteria to ensure that schemes adhere to good practice.

SMIDOS has been working with diaspora communities in Wales many of whom in addition to the remittances they send home to friends and family are keenly interested in international development. Diaspora groups significant knowledge available to Welsh international development organisations and working together an opportunity to strengthen community cohesion across Wales presents itself. The Sub Sahara Advisory Panel has been set up by these diaspora groups and is administratively supported by SMIDOS.

Finally, there is very understandable concern across the international development sector about future income. Individual and corporate giving has declined and at a moment when all eyes are on containing domestic expenditure any commitment to overseas charitable giving is certain to become more fragile. DfID's current funding programmes are uncertain notwithstanding overall funding commitments - but Welsh groups have very rarely received DfID funds in the past. Every effort must now be made to gear up the funding skills of international development groups and use training and the exchange of good practice as the central core of work to strengthen the sustainability of the sector.

1. SMIDOS is now to receive Wales for Africa basic core funding to continue its work for three years to 2013.