

Summary of Conference

Around 70 leading representatives from civil society organisations in Munich, Kiev and Harare - both twin cities of Munich - met in Munich City Hall on the 26th and 27th February. Their goal was to discuss civic participation in politics and the role of civil society in the development and protection of democracy and civic rights.

The Mayor of Munich, Hep Monatzeder, welcomed his counterparts, Emmanuel Chiroto, Deputy Mayor of Harare, and Iryna Golubieva, Director of the Office for Social Development, from the city administration of Kiev. Several elected representatives from Munich City Council were also present. Hep Monatzeder explained the background to the conference:

“The impulse for this conference came from representatives of civic groups in Harare, with whom we have been in contact for many years. In 2004, many Zimbabweans were spellbound by the events of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and saw there a model for their own country. Today the differences between the countries appear stronger and the conditions in each country are not completely comparable. What they have in common, however, is a very active civil society in both countries, which engages critically with the political and social developments. Therefore, we are convinced that an exchange of experience between activists in Harare, Kiev and Munich can be very effective and can provide an important stimulus for the further development of our local civil societies. “

In his key-note speech, former DDR civil rights activist and political author, Wolfgang Templin, focussed on the development of civil society in Eastern Europe. He emphasised that civic involvement and participation is a never ending task and criticised the lack of responsibility shown by the social and political elites.

The subsequent podium discussion made it clear that the situation of civil society activists is very different in the three cities: The most important challenge for civil society in Munich is to work together with the local political authorities to prevent social cleavages arising from the economic crisis. In Ukraine, first and foremost, the question is how to secure the democratic accomplishments of the Orange Revolution and prevent a return to the previous political and social climate. As for Harare, the podium participants were united in their belief that only the enormous efforts of civil society in recent years rescued Zimbabwe from total collapse. The ongoing task for civil society in Harare is to assert itself as a corrective to abuses of political power.

But the panelists also identified many issues and questions which were common to civil society activists in all three cities. For example: How can citizens, particularly those living in extremely difficult circumstances, be motivated and interested in wider political and social issues? How and when should civil society organizations be brought into the political decision making process? How can civil society support the fight against corruption and nepotism and how can they demand from politicians to fulfill their responsibility as ‘servants of the people’? When is it necessary to separate between the role of civil society and that of political authorities?

These questions were discussed on the second day of the conference in several workshops. The participants developed and exchanged ideas on the themes and discussed how they could work together in future to develop a network of mutual support.

Important results from the workshops: Democracy and Good Governance require a permanent, strong and diverse civic participation – by means of elections, referenda and consultation – to support the political decision making process. Recognized and functioning structures for communication between political and civil society are essential to overcome conflicts of interest. Non Government Organizations (NGO’s) must be both democratic and transparent and monitored in the same way as political authorities. International cooperation is essential for the promotion of human rights and the protection of human rights activists. For example, participants from Harare gave impressive reports of the effectiveness of “Urgent Actions” organized by Amnesty International. These actions, on the arrest of human rights activists, flood and immobilize very quickly police stations with thousands of protest e-mails, phone calls or faxes. Accordingly, the participants agreed the importance of promoting their mutual dialogue in the future, firstly via the

internet and the conference web site and later with follow up events. In addition, the recently founded women's network between Munich and Harare is seen as important contribution to exchanges on civil-society activism.

Some views from conference participants.

Dorothea Kläger, student, Munich. „ I have learned a lot about Zimbabwe and Kiev and recognize that we – living in so called democratic societies - can learn a lot from these countries, where civil society is perhaps livelier and more vital than our own.”

Anna Hutsol, leader of a women's activist group from Kiev: „ Events like this and such co-operations are necessary because they allow us to exchange experience between the different countries. I am really impressed by the strength and courage of the civil-society activists from Harare. Their work and tenacity is deserving our respect and they are an example to us all.”

Emmanuel Chiroto, Deputy Mayor of Harare: “I'll take several important things with me from the conference. Above all – ways how we can combat corruption; the recognition how important civic education is for the development of democracy; the intention support our civil society in building an international network; and both the will and the necessity to put into practice what we have learned in Munich.”