



A History of Social Firms Europe CEFEC and the Present State of the Organization

The social Firms movement in Europe led to the first meeting in Berlin in 1987, Torino 1988 and Maastricht in 1989. The strongest step of development was introduced when the European non profit organisation of CEFEC (The Confederation of European social Firms, Employment initiatives and social Cooperatives) was founded. The CEFEC Charta published on 26th April 1990, agreed, according to Belgium law contains the main facts, goals and believes. The first impact came from the Italian movement of cooperatives and the German movement of Employment Firms in the early eighties. The emphasis was on the worker's role rather than the patient's role as an act of autonomy. This attitude also led to a clear distinction between sheltered workshops, their disabling structures and the social firms modelled along normal work conditions.

In 1986 a European meeting was held in London on Occupational Therapy supported by Mr. Partick Daunt, who was in charge of the EU office "Handicapped Affairs". It was his vision to support the setting up of Employment for the psychosocial disadvantaged, an area, neglected so far. A group of activists in the field of work and employment for psychiatric patients in England, Germany, Greece and Italy started the movement which later became the CEFEC organization. There have been annual meetings all through the years, as the stronghold of the network has spread since.

European CEFEC Conferences

- **1987**, in Berlin, there was a first meeting to get to know each other in the field of Employment of psychosocial disadvantaged. The general secretary was started here till Greece took over in 2003.
- **1988**, in Turin, we worked on the guidelines on how to set up social firms with strong participations of the workers, the users.
- **1989**, in Maastricht, the movement of social firms and cooperatives widened.
- **1990**, in Southampton, CEFEC became a legal body.
- **1991** we realised, that the honeymoon was coming to an end; only an auxiliary meeting near Amsterdam was held.
- **1992**, in Delphi, we had to grasp the reality and deal with the problems.
- **1993**, in Londonderry, new Horizons open up and

- **1994**, in Spa, again the workers voice was heard on a transnational forum and not only in the local enterprises.
- **1995** in Turin the users participation was increasing.
- **1996** in Linz there was a big scale Conference with a Trade Fair on a high level.
- **1997** in Zaragoza participants started coming from outside Europe.
- **1998** in Athens the culture of users was continued. An Award was started and given to best practice firms as was in the years to come.
- **1999** in Helsinki a country started anew with social firms.
- **2000** in Lisabon local initiatives and their work projects exhibited
- **2001** in Berlin the method of “open space” conference to develop CEFEC was tried out.
- **2002** in Guildford a varied programme was offered but we found it hard to find a host for the next conference.
- **2003** in Athens the hosts had a hard job to organize the conference and still offered a number of post congress workshops around the country. The general secretary was transferred from Germany to Greece.
- **2004** in Thun, Switzerland we got a CEFEC member country which is not in the EU to cooperate for a very good conference.
- **2005** in Novo Mesto, Slovenia, for the first time a new eastern EU Country organized the conference in good spirits.
- **2006** in Seville, Spain we learned that this region has built up an integrated social psychiatric and work net all over Andalusia having done away with the big mental hospitals.
- **2007** in Linz, Austria, we were proud to celebrate TWENTY YEARS of CEFEC and issued to the European Union recommendations on Social Firms, the “LINZ APPEAL”.
- **2008** in Lisbon, Portugal, the conference was a boost up to sustain the Social Firms movement in this country. Trade name changed to Social Firms Europe CEFEC.
- **2009** in Prague, Czechia, a second eastern EU country offered to organize the conference with the hope that more eastern countries will follow.
- **2010** in Cambridge, United Kingdom which took the general secretariat over from Greece.

The Code of Principles

All in all, the code of principles that govern CEFEC has remained more important than the application forms to national and European funding bodies.

The number of members increased and decreased again according to European support schemes. Apart from annual meetings a great many projects, programmes, written news, activities and investigations have been developed amongst members. A good proportion was supported by the European Community.

Social Firms Europe CEFEC has grown and attracted people and organisations not only from Western Europe, but also from Eastern Europe and individual participants from far reaching countries such as Israel, Japan, Canada and USA.

Social Firms Europe CEFEC has become a movement believing in one major principle: To help organisations to establish social firms, to create employment for psychosocial disadvantaged people and thus giving them a chance for more independence from institutions and care systems. For social firms it is normal to create a good social atmosphere and leave space to each employee/user to develop his own capacity, knowledge and speed, as well as providing financial satisfaction. The economic basis & management plays as important a part as the social aims.

The social firms and their programs aim to meet the needs of the employees, the local open market, cultural particularities and the needs to reform local systems for people severely disadvantaged in the labour market.

The difficulties and the problems faced in individual projects are many. While transnational projects supported the annual Social Firms Europe CEFEC conference the opportunity is given to work closer, exchange experience and gather strength.

One main challenge the social firms have to face is that they work within the local commercial reality and that they pay their workers a normal wage.

To do that, the social firms need:

- Specific administrative-managerial skills and capacities
- Training of the managers as well as of the employees
- Intensive exchange of experience

This need has been met nationally but also on the European level:

The objectives of European support schemes and projects were:

- the transfer of knowledge and experience within social firms in Europe
- the transfer of know-how, concepts and technologies
- the promotion and support of transnational cooperation,

This was met by publication of news letters, conduction of seminars, workshops and community meetings. The main aims and objectives are laid down on the Social Firms Europe CEFEC website at www.socialfirmseurope.org

This includes:

- The Social Firms Europe CEFEC Aims, Activities, Charter, Principles, Status and Definition of Social Firms

Recommendations to the European Union were issued in 2007:

- The LINZ APPEAL “Why there should be more Social Firms for disabled and disadvantaged people in Europe”- see website.

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