

Civicus – At Home in Scotland!

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Glasgow plays host to the Civicus world assembly for the first of three years from 21–25 June 2006. But what will be on offer at Glasgow's SECC during the event?

Scotland's status on the international stage has definitely been on the up over the last few years, with much of this linked to civil society – the 'not for profit' organisations and movement including charities, trade unions and faith groups.

The world's civil society used last year's G8 conference to raise awareness about issues of global poverty and fair trade, while Scotland's own government has been expanding its role abroad by supporting organisations carrying out development work in sub-Saharan Africa, in particular in Malawi.

Now, with 2006 well underway, Scotland is gearing up to be the focus of the international campaigning world for the next three years through the Civicus World Assembly – the world's largest meeting of civil society organisations. The event will see around 1,000 delegates from more than 100 countries descend on Glasgow's SECC for five days every June until 2008.

They will be discussing some of the world's biggest humanitarian problems; poverty, human rights, disease and freedom of association. Big names from Kofi Annan to Bill Clinton are being mooted as likely contributors, while civil society leaders from around the world such as former Irish President and UN Human Rights High Commissioner Mary Robinson, and 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai have confirmed their attendance at this year's event.

The overarching theme of the World Assembly is Working Together for a Just World and the conference will contrast with last year's G8 event because, rather than world leaders, the majority of delegates will be members of grass-roots organisations – those who support and campaign for the poorest and most disadvantaged members of society.

Volkhart Finn Heinrich, Civicus World Assembly programme co-ordinator, said:

"The key to the event is actually the participation by attendees. The World Assembly has a very strong participatory feel, there are lots of workshops, and even in the many plenaries a lot of people will be involved. So it's not the high-profile nature of it that makes it worthwhile, but the fact that there's so much room for engagement for people who are working on the same issues."

This year's event will be the sixth World Assembly, but it is the first of what will now be an annual occurrence, held in one place for a three-year block. Scotland's successful bid to host the event was welcomed by the First Minister at last year's Gathering, the voluntary sector fair, and preparations have been underway in partnership with the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations ever since. A major aspect of this has been publicising the event to the world and trying to persuade and support cash-strapped civil society organisations from the far corners of the earth to travel to Scotland.

What is exciting about the World Assembly for Scotland is that it provides local organisations with the opportunity to link up with some of these delegates, who, coming from every continent in the world, may be working in very different environments but facing similar problems.

At the last World Assembly, held in Botswana, one workshop examined the role of civil society in conflict situations and was run by groups from Northern Ireland, Palestinian and Rwanda – all three were facing different challenges but essentially had been forced into existence because of the same problems. The new three-year format will provide Scotland's voluntary sector with an unrivalled opportunity to access these opportunities, learn from and influence the global situation.

There will inevitably be a political slant. Issues like the Millennium Development Goals Campaign, the impact of last year's Global Call to Action Against Poverty Campaign, to which Make Poverty History was the British arm, and gender equality are already high on the agenda. The benefits of a three-year structure are clear;

“We can start processes in the first year based on what people might think are problematic – there may be a need to work on anti-terrorist legislation, which is increasing everywhere – and we can then report back in year two and develop it for year three. So the event becomes not just a conference that people go to to network but it can actually start some really fundamental and substantial processes and projects.”

This aspect of the event is key to many of the delegates who have signed up because they believe that civil society organisations are in a unique position to influence society and government. Elizabeth Salomon is from Trinidad and Tobago is the programme officer for Novib (the Dutch arm of Oxfam) in the Horn of Africa. She believes that globalisation has led to a huge growth in the power of civil society organisations. “We have seen with the rapid expansion of the World Social Fora and the impact of citizens' opposition to the World Trade Organisation, that civil society has become an axis of positive power to be reckoned with. It is irreversible.

“Civicus has been the leading instrument in globalising citizens’ participation, and the World Assembly has become an important platform for building critical alliances.” She added: “At a personal level, I work at the moment in Somalia, where, without the amazing commitment of civil society, there would literally be no hope. I would like to create some space for Somali civil society to find support amongst the citizens’ organisations participating in the 6th World Assembly.”

There are lots of ways that Scottish organisations can become involved in the World Assembly but Rehse is keen to remind people that ultimately this is a fantastic opportunity to soak up an international atmosphere and enjoy meeting new people. “International conferences are fun” she added finally, “there’s going to be a buzz about the place, we’ll have loads of people in traditional costumes and we’ve got a busy social programme. It will be very harmonious.”