

REPORT ON CROSS-SECTORAL ADVISORY GROUP EVENT 10 JUNE 2008

Event Summary

The event on 10 June opened with a short introduction from Bob Ness, Director UKD, on the purpose of the event. Bob referred to the Terms of Reference which indicate that the groups will: 'Support the British Council in developing large scale global initiatives by acting as a sounding board and by stimulating new ideas'.

John Worne, Director Strategy and External Relations on the Executive Board, provided an overview of strategy, including a statement on vision and a definition of cultural relations and our purpose. He also described the spectrum of international relations and how the British Council fits in, as well as summarising what the British Council offers to different target groups.

Cathy Stephens, Director Innovation on the Executive Board, described the radical shift in terms of expenditure from local to large scale activity. She also summarised the stage of development of different global products within each programme area as well as explaining the process that we are now adopting for developing large scale initiatives.

Mike Hardy, Programme Leader for Intercultural Dialogue, summarised a number of key challenges, provided a definition of our three programme areas and explained current thinking on Intercultural Dialogue and what we expect to achieve in this area of our work.

Following a Question and Answer session, members of the advisory groups and British Council staff divided up into three discussion groups, each focusing on a different global initiative. They considered particular challenges and issues from a cross-sectoral perspective.

After lunch the groups re-convened in plenary and rapporteurs fed back the main points from their discussions. Following a quick summary from John Worne, members divided into their sector groups to pick up on particular sectoral issues.

Opening plenary session

There were a number of questions and observations in the morning session around the British Council's strategy, approach to product innovation and ICD programme area.

On strategy and product innovation:

- There was a query around mutuality and whether this was still a key element of the British Council's approach.
- There were some observations about the precise wording of the vision and purpose and a suggestion that these could have emphasised more our shared interests.
- There was a query around where the ideas would be coming from when developing large scale projects and a suggestion that there was a risk of being too UK centric.
- There was a query around how we measure trust.

On Intercultural Dialogue:

- There was a query around the issue of difference/diversity and a feeling that we needed to clarify our position further.
- There was a query around the use of the term 'qualify' in relation to young leaders.
- One member queried the focus on youth and advised against any age limitations.
- There was a suggestion that within the ICD area it was not clear how we would be connecting leaders and targeting those individuals at the top of the pyramid.

Concluding plenary session

In the final session the rapporteurs fed back ideas from the discussion groups (see annexes).

There were a number of observations from the group on the event itself:

- A strong endorsement of the cross-sectoral nature of the event
- An appreciation of the clear exposition of strategy, product innovation and programme areas
- A sense that we were engaging with them at the right level
- An appreciation of the openness of the dialogue
- The need to follow through and ensure that ideas were taken note of

Overview of discussions

There were a number of general observations and ideas that emerged at different stages during the day and amongst different groups.

One recurrent general issue was around the way we present our three programme areas. Members suggested that at a strategic level we appear to separate products distinctly between the three programme areas whereas we could be highlighting more the integrated nature of our offer.

This separation is reflected within the individual programme areas and the products as we tend not to highlight synergies across the programme areas. There was a view that at an operational level we should develop products in support of the three programme areas. Members felt also that we should be aiming to exploit more fully the broad nature of our offer, including for instance in the arts, in the development and delivery of our global products.

Although at the high strategic level there was an understanding of where the British Council fitted in within the international relations spectrum, this clarity was not so obvious at the programme area or global initiative level. There was a need to define more clearly where the British Council wished to position itself in relation to other key players in the market, particularly within UK Government.

There was a strong sense that we needed to define more clearly the mutual benefits of the work we were doing.

Within aspects of our work there remains an unresolved tension between promoting UK agendas and interests on the one hand and facilitating dialogue and cultural relations on the other. Although at a high strategic level the benefit to UK is made more explicit, this is not always clear in our programmes.

Within the discussions another tension was highlighted around on the one hand the benefit of remaining neutral and developing a reputation for being an honest broker and on the other the need to establish and promote certain core values. In broad terms it was felt that the British Council should avoid a campaigning style in order to make itself more accessible and relevant.

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UK Directorate
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Annex 1: Leadership programmes for young people

Annex 2: Low Carbon Futures

Annex 3: Skills For Employability