

Executive summary

Introduction

This paper is the foundation document of an exercise to test the feasibility of building a live, extensive, web-based searchable database of civil society organisations ('nonprofits', 'charities', 'voluntary bodies', 'NGOs' etc.) on a not-for-profit basis in Ireland. It was prepared during the first half of 2007 and is based on published research and analysis of the voluntary and community sector in Ireland and interviews with key informants.

Following an approach developed and operated first in the US and subsequently in England and Wales, a group of civil society leaders in Ireland have set out to study the GuideStar model, and test its application in the current Irish context.

The definition of organisations to be included in the project, following internationally-recognised norms, is that they be organised, private, not-for-profit and non profit-distributing, self-governing and autonomous, voluntary to a meaningful degree, and constituted for public benefit.

While many (but by no means all) of the organisations matching this definition in Ireland might describe themselves as charities, the sector is poorly defined and unregulated, pending the completion of the legislative process underway at the time of writing this paper. The immanence of new legislation is seen as making a GuideStar initiative singularly timely in Ireland.

The project is being incubated by Irish Charities Tax Research Ltd. and supervised by an expert group of individuals drawn from the charity, voluntary and philanthropy sectors. Financial support has been provided from within the sector itself, from central government and from the European Commission – the project is being undertaken in parallel with similar initiatives in Germany, Hungary and the Netherlands, with coordination and technical support from GuideStar International, a UK-based charity established to support the development of GuideStars around the world.

Feasibility project

Besides the analysis contained in this paper, the 18-month feasibility project will involve building a pilot database, with assistance from GuideStar Data Services (a division of GuideStar International). This web-based resource will use live records verified and augmented, where possible, by the organisations listed. The resulting pilot site will then be tested with users, the results evaluated, and, on a positive result, a business plan prepared leading to the sustainable development of the service in Ireland.

The sector in Ireland

Trends in the sector are discussed – the proliferation of organisations, emergent professionalisation and consolidation within the sector, government funding, regulation and enhanced policy engagement, trends in volunteering and private giving. All point to heightened expectations for greater transparency and accountability on the part of organisations in the voluntary sector.

The effect of new legislation, once enacted, will be for the first time to introduce a legal definition of charity and charitable purposes, and to create a regulatory authority which will publish register of charities based on mandatory annual filings, and promote best practice standards.

Stakeholding interests

The stakeholding interests in an information infrastructure initiative of this kind are understood to be: civil society organisations themselves, and their beneficiaries/ volunteers/clients/service users; personal and institutional donors; public policy makers; grant makers; government regulators; professionals statisticians, academic researchers, journalists & policy analysts; third party service providers, evaluators or accreditation agencies. The nature of their potential interest in the information and knowledge services that GuideStar would offer is discussed in each case.

Existing providers

A variety of (mostly voluntary or public sector) providers have already taken the initiative to provide web-based information about civil society organisations in the Republic. In no case is the production of information about civil society organisations the chief purpose of the organisation providing it.

The directories vary in their currency, the range of information carried, and the number of organisations listed, and none sets out to be as comprehensive in scope as a GuideStar would be. Only the list published and regularly updated by the Revenue Commissioners contains data mandatorily provided as part of a regulatory process (the granting of tax benefits), and the information published is scant. Only the database compiled by Trinity College Dublin School of Nonprofit Management as part of their extensive community and voluntary mapping survey contains extensive data collected on a comparable basis, and this is subject to a confidentiality agreement with participating organisations. Only one directory (produced by ActiveLink) is provided by a commercial organisation, and in their case it is a voluntary service to the community from which they derive a large part of their client base.

On the face of it, therefore, an Irish GuideStar would fill an unmet need.

Why GuideStar?

Based on these stakeholding and competitive interests, the GuideStar concept is considered in terms of its values and potential benefits for the sector in Ireland today. GuideStars around the world are led from within civil society, and are run on a not-for-profit basis. By ensuring their institutional autonomy from any single stakeholding interest, taking a neutral editorial position, sourcing extensive, current information and publishing it freely and in a timely way, GuideStars set out to become the authoritative source of information in their respective countries about an entire sector which, unlike the public or private sectors, lacks such an infrastructure at present.

Besides providing an extensive, up-to-date and free source of information, GuideStars elsewhere have become an important resource for donors, analysts and policy-makers, since the data collected is capable of analysis across many variables – at a point in time, or historically as data accumulates year on year.

As a service to organisations, GuideStars provide a platform for the provision of services, for example simplifying or reducing the costs of fundraising, or appealing for volunteers.

Pilot project data capture

Using international conventions for defining and classifying these organisations, the GuideStar Ireland project will build a pilot database derived from regulatory filings to the Companies Registration Office – baseline constitution and annual financial reporting documents – and will seek to augment these by soliciting the active cooperation and participation of the pilot group. By using public records as the default source of baseline data, GuideStar seeks to avoid the weaknesses of existing directories and databases, which, while valuable in themselves and in providing evidence of demand, by their nature are limited in various unavoidable ways.