Κύριε Περιφερειάρχη, Κύριε Δήμαρχε, Κύριε Πρόεδρε του Επιμελητηρίου, Κύριε Προέδρε του Ιδρύματος Μποδοσάκη, Κυρίες και Κύριοι

It’s always a great pleasure to be on Crete, the great island, and to be here in Heraklion.

I would like to thank the Ίδρυμα Μποδοσάκη for the invitation to speak today. This programme – “We are all citizens” – is a fantastic initiative by the EEA donor states, and I would like to congratulate the Ίδρυμα Μποδοσάκη for driving the programme forward as its Fund Operator.

I hardly need to state the case for this programme.

We all know that Greece has been through its largest economic crisis in its post-war history. GDP has contracted by around 25%. Average household income has shrunk by over 30%. Employment in the private sector has shrink massively. Wages have been cut across the public and private sectors. Taxation has increased, as the Government takes steps to balance its budget and produce a primary surplus.

All of this has, of course, massively increased social need, at a time when the state is shrinking, unable to satisfy public wants and needs.

My impression, as an outsider to Greek society, is that the Greek family has absorbed much of the burden. Institutions such as the Orthodox Church have also played a role in the provision of relief from poverty and destitution, through soup kitchens and the like.

What has been less apparent, at least in the early stages of this social crisis, has been a vibrant and effective civil society, capable of bearing a substantial share of the strain.

Of course there are many exceptions – there are many notable NGOs working hard to alleviate the symptoms of social breakdown (I think of the food charity, Μπορούμε, for example), and I think we are seeing strong signs that the crisis is causing Greeks as a whole to reassess the role of civil society and its position in Greek life.

This seems to me to be the correct response. Whatever view one takes about the responsibility for Greek debt or its long-term sustainability, it seems unlikely that the Greek state will regain its size and its predominance over all aspects of Greek life in the years ahead. New ways of meeting social needs and wants, and new forms of social organisation and solidarity are surely going to be needed.

My country has a long history of encouraging an active and vibrant civil society, in which all citizens can play a full, active and satisfying role. It’s for this reason that I was very keen to accept the Bodosaki’s invitation to speak today. Let me reassure you: I’m not here to preach or to lecture, or to offer a blueprint for Greece. I want simply to share some of our experience, to give you a flavour of some developments we have underway, and to float some ideas. I hope that this will be seen as a useful encouragement, particularly to Greek NGOs and to Greek citizens.

Let me start with a few definitions. In the UK, we have a wide variety of terms to describe what I’m going to talk about. We sometimes speak of ‘civil society’, sometimes of ‘the third sector’, sometimes of the ‘voluntary sector’. What we mean by all of these terms is ‘a means of organising the satisfaction of public wants and public needs through non-governmental and not-for-profit organisations’. Activity may be based on ethical, cultural, philanthropic, scientific, environmental or social considerations. In the UK, the main types of organisation tend to be charities, and we have some hybrid models such as co-operatives and community interest companies.

Our charitable sector is huge.

Annual income to the sector is 81€ billion. There are 164,000 registered charities. The number is relatively stable: about 6000 charities are registered each year and 6000 come off the register.

The sector is diverse. Over 40% of charities are very small, with an annual income of less than 13,000€. Such charities rarely employ staff and rely entirely on volunteers.

At the other end of the spectrum, around 2,000 charities have annual incomes of over 6.5m€, and often employ thousands of staff, operating in many countries around the world.

The purposes for which British charities work are also diverse. They include education, prevention and relief of poverty, religion, arts and culture, heritage, community development, human rights, health, social housing, disability.

Despite the challenges of the financial crisis, which has hit funding, the sector remains vibrant. I think that there are five main reasons for this:

* First, the charity sector is governed by appropriate regulation. All charities above a certain size have to be registered with the Charity Commission. Registration gives the public confidence that charities are well run and meet proper standards.
* Secondly, the taxman encourages individuals to give money. If I pay the basic rate of tax and donate money to a charity, the taxman will give a proportion of the tax I pay to the charity. By these means, the British state recognises that it does not have a monopoly on the satisfaction of public needs. On the contrary, it has an interest in a secure and effective voluntary sector.
* Thirdly, we have a strong tradition of charities and charitable giving. Our oldest charity, the King’s School Canterbury, was founded in 593AD by Saint Augustine...
* Fourthly, the sector relies substantially on the involvement of active citizens, through volunteering. There are many ways to volunteer. Charities are governed by Trustees, who are themselves unpaid volunteers. There are nearly 1m charity trustees in England and Wales alone. But, of course, much of the executive work of charities is carried out by volunteers. In England, there are over 19million people who volunteer formally at least once a year; of those, two-thirds formally volunteer once a month.
* Fifthly, the sector is innovative. Not only are our citizens actively creating new charities every year, we are also looking for new ways to strengthen communities and make it easier for them to achieve community benefits.

I want to share with you an innovative example of civil society in action. This was a project that I ran in 2011 and 2012 for the Department of Environment.

Those of you who understand British history already know about the industrial revolution, which began in the age of the Enlightenment. Through this revolution, empirical science was applied to new manufacturing techniques; we created new means of organising labour and capital; and we created new systems of transport and distribution.

In the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, before the advent of the railways, the industrial fathers of England, Wales and Scotland created a network of artificial canals and canalised rivers, to transport raw materials and manfactures around the country.

Some sixty years ago, almost all of the canals were nationalised by the state – really by accident, rather than by design. By the start of the 21st century, few people were happy with the performance of the nationalised industry, British Waterways, and we were looking for a new way to run the canals.

The more we thought about it, the more we realised that the canals could be run by a charity. After all, as well as providing a home for boats and boaters, the canals in England provide a number of public benefits:

* Environmental benefits – to humans and to wildlife;
* Flood control and flood protection;
* Heritage benefits; and
* Educational benefits.

We also discovered that, if the canals were run by a charity, very many people would be willing to give their time as volunteers: to keep the towpaths tidy, to operate the lock-systems, to protect wildlife, to take part in canal restoration and maintenance. We also realised that if we created the right sort of charity, we would be able to involve local communities much more closely in the decisions about their local canals.

So we decide to invite a group of interested people to form a charity to take over the running of the canal system. Of course, this was a complex process, requiring innovative legislation and complex protection for the public assets. And I will pass over the details.

Suffice it say that in July 2012, we entrusted the running of the canal network to a new national charity called the Canal & River Trust. The charity is already proving a huge success.

Let me summarise the benefits:

* First, the charity is now run by the people – not by state appointees. The Board of Trustees is appointed by the Council of the charity. The Council has representatives from all of the different groups who have an interest in the canals. At local level, we have created partnerships, which enable local people to have a real say in local decisions about their canals.
* Secondly, the charity, which is still supported by a state grant, is now able also to raise money directly from the people and from corporate bodies, through fund-raising and charitable giving. This has increased the overall revenue for the canals.
* Thirdly – and perhaps most importantly, the charity has generated huge excitement among people who want to give their time and expertise freely to the canals. Last year, people freely gave 15,000 days of voluntary activity to the canals, supplementing what the charity’s employees themselves do.

Through this voluntary activity, we are serving the public good, building real community and creating active citizens.

This is something we should all want.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Whatever the sector of activity – whether the environment, social services, culture or other, I strongly believe that we can and should build a strong civil society, in which citizens are encouraged to build community through their active engagement.

I will close, simply by saying that my Embassy too is trying to live according to the values that I am setting out here. We are trying to be active citizens here in Greece. We are supporting Greek NGOs through fund-raising, lobbying, efforts to raise their profile, and through individual volunteering by members of the mission. Every such effort brings its reward: for individual volunteers, for the NGOs we are supporting and for wider society.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Whether you are taking part as an NGO or as a citizen, I wish everyone who is involved in “We are all citizens” every success. This programme deserves to succeed.