



Promoting Civil Society Dialogue
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Roundtable D: Education-I: Preparing Civil Society

The Hague Conference on Environment, Security and Sustainable Development
Peace Palace, The Hague, 9-12 May 2004

In promoting public awareness of and debate about the key issues surrounding environment, security and sustainable development civil society has a key role to play. Within the European Union (EU) the view is that civil society organisations should play a crucial role in the creation of a European model of participatory democracy, a system wherein citizens, through such organisations, actively express their commitment to economic and social development and civic life in their countries. This is true both inside and outside the EU, from local to the European level.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) is a consultative body set up by the Rome Treaties in 1957. It consists of representatives of the various economic and social components of organised civil society. Its main task is to advise the three major institutions (European Parliament, Council of the European Union and European Commission).

It is mandatory for the EESC to be consulted on those issues stipulated in the Treaties and in all cases where the institutions deem it appropriate. It can also be consulted on an exploratory basis by one of the other institutions, or can itself take the initiative to issue opinions (around 15 % of its opinions are own-initiative opinions). The EESC adopts on average 150 opinions a year on a wide range of subjects concerning European integration. It therefore plays an active role in the processes of shaping Community policies and preparing Community decisions.

In view of this role assigned to the European Economic and Social Committee by the European Treaties and in the light of its membership and the expertise of its members, the EESC represents, in the overall EU institutional framework, the ideal forum for representing civil society organisations, expressing their views and providing them with information. The EESC provides a vital bridge between the EU and civil society, thereby complementing the role of the European Parliament and the Committee of the Regions as political representatives of the people. As such it has a key role in addressing the key societal issues the EU faces, including sustainable development.

The European Economic and Social Committee defines the concept of “civil society organisations” as being “the sum of all organisational structures whose members have objectives and responsibilities that are of general interest and who also act as mediators between the public authorities and citizens”. This concept includes in particular all economic, social and occupational organisations, these being a fundamental component of organised civil society and governance with and beyond the borders of the EU. In many cases they also play an increasingly important role in providing access to a number of collective goods or services (education, social protection, health etc.) as intermediaries between the public authorities (the State and its administration) and the marketplace.

The Nice Treaty confirmed the EESC’s function in this respect, by making it the institutional representative, at European level, of civil society organisations. Indeed, it states that “the European Economic and Social Committee shall consist of representatives of the various economic and social components of organised civil society, (...)”. This treaty thus gives the EESC an additional opportunity to play its full role as a relay between Europe and civil society organisations and act as a permanent, structured forum for dialogue and consultation at Community level. The new EU Constitution reconfirms this role for the EESC.

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The EESC Thus has an essential role to play in promoting greater support for participation by civil society organisations in the European venture. In so doing it helps to develop a society that is more participatory, more inclusive and therefore more democratic, and to facilitate the emergence of such a society in countries and groups of non-EU countries and in particular in the applicant countries.

The European Economic and Social Committee's expertise, its discussions and negotiations and the search for convergence on a wide range of issues all serve to improve the quality and credibility of the Community decision-making process, making it more comprehensible and acceptable for Europe's citizens and increasing the transparency, which is so vital for democracy. In this way the concept of political democracy is complemented by the concept of representative democracy in which the European Union's economic and social players have a say.

The challenges the European Union faces today give the EESC a growing importance and added value in the Community institutional set-up. The issues at stake mean that all citizens, and first and foremost those who drive the European economy, must play their part.

In the field of sustainable development the EESC has developed an important role as the conscience of the institutions on the issue. In various opinions it has produced on the subject in the last few years it has made clear its belief that progress towards sustainable development depends on developing a wide social consensus and broad support from civil society. It has made it clear as well that the EU's Sustainable Development Strategy must have as one of its key objectives to ensure that EU citizens and EU society as a whole is fully aware of the benefits of a sustainable development approach. In its most recent opinion on the subject it has inducted that the success of sustainable development as a process, which is an overarching principle of EU policy making, ultimately depends on the extent to which individuals in their private lives embrace it. The key to this is to ensure that individual citizens have access to enough information and are sufficiently aware of what is at stake with regards to the sustainable development process and how it will impact on their lives.

As a forum both for dialogue and for consultation, the European Economic and Social Committee continues to play a dual role, improving democratic expression in the European integration process and bringing the European Union closer to its citizens. In so doing, it contributes to the development of a European consciousness and acts as a true bridge between the Union and civil society organisations across Europe. One of its key roles in the future will be to seek raise the level of public debate on sustainable development and environmental issues including the security issue.

10 May 2004