



**European Economic and Social Committee
Secretariat of GROUP III**

Brussels, 18 January 2012
SB - n° 8/11

MEMO for the file

Subject: Review of the activities of the Various Interests Group in 2011

Copies: Members of the Various Interests Group

I Introduction

The objective of this memo is to review the activities of the Various Interests Group in 2011. Although the overarching objective of the Group is to "Achieve real participatory democracy in the EU, through civil dialogue"¹, which implies a long-term process, this memo will examine firstly, progress made to date towards implementing the priorities of the work programme of the President of the Various Interests Group². Secondly, it will assess the extent to which the decisions of the Presidency on activities in 2011 which were adopted on 13 January 2011, have actually been implemented. It should be noted that this memo will not review the process of nomination of members to study groups, it will not engage in an in depth review of the future role of the Categories, nor will it examine the financing of the experts, all of which were the subject of separate debates on 14 December 2011.

II Political achievements in 2011

Enhancing civil dialogue and consultation

As stated in the work programme of Mr Jahier, President of the Various Interests Group, it is necessary to identify "Increasing occasions for dialogue and discussion of specific issues in the various Group meetings, in particular extraordinary annual meetings and major external meetings." Moreover, culture and notably, education and universities, were identified as areas where Group III can play a leading role.

¹ Please refer to the Group III website on the internet at <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.group-3>

² The six priority areas identified in the work programme of the President include civil dialogue, consultation, consensus, the Categories, communication and culture, please see <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.group-3-presidency>

Within this context, in 2011 a total of nine meetings of the Group took place, in addition to four extraordinary Group meetings and four extraordinary Bureau meetings. Thus, the opportunity was provided to organise a number of high level events on specific topics, which aimed to enhance the knowledge of the members and to build on their expertise. These events also contributed towards establishing consensus within the Group on a variety of topics, which was one of the priorities of the President's work programme.

Crucially, these meetings have provided the opportunity for the Group to actively contribute to topical policy debates and have reinforced the role of the Various Interests Group as a stakeholder in its own right on policy discussions. It is reminded that following the extraordinary meeting of the Group on 'What are the prospects of participatory democracy in Europe?', which took place in Brussels on 22 March, Group III produced a 'Roadmap for Participatory Democracy in Europe' and a Compendium on 'Participatory Democracy: a retrospective overview of the story written by the EESC'. Similarly, following the June 2011 seminar on the European Citizens Initiative (ECI), proposals for the implementation of the ECI were drafted and widely circulated. Finally, after the Group III meeting on volunteering, which took place in Warsaw in September 2011, the President issued a declaration on volunteering, which was distributed to the participants and relevant stakeholders.

The key high level *thematic* events organised by the Group in 2011 include:

- 22/3/2011, Brussels, extraordinary meeting of the Group on 'What are the prospects of participatory democracy in Europe?';
- 13/5/2011, Budapest, extraordinary meeting of the Bureau on 'Building a stronger Europe for its citizens';
- 27/6/2011, Brussels, 'Orientation seminar on the European Citizens Initiative';
- 21/9/2011, Brussels, debate in the Group meeting on the Single Market Act, with the participation of Mr Delsaux, Deputy Director General of DG Internal Market and Services;
- 30/9/2011, Warsaw, Extraordinary meeting of the Group on 'Europe of Active Citizens: volunteering';
- 24/11/2011, Brussels, seminar on 'European Universities';
- 25/11/2011, Brussels, debate in the Group meeting on the Multi-Annual Financial Framework, with the participation of Ms Haug, MEP, Vice-President of the Budget Committee.

In addition, the President of Group III has been nominated as rapporteur on the Own-initiative Opinion on the implementation of Article 11, paragraphs 1 and 2 of the Lisbon Treaty, which deals specifically with civil society dialogue. This Opinion will constitute the principal follow-up of the Group III event on 22 March on participatory democracy.

Mention should also be made of two Extraordinary meetings of the Group which discussed the financial statute of members.

Raising the profile of the Various Interests Group

Arguably, the above events have directly led to raising the profile of the Group, both internally within the EESC and externally, vis-à-vis civil society organisations and the European Institutions. It should be noted that at the Warsaw conference on volunteering some 220 individuals participated, including a number of high level speakers: the President of the Republic of Poland, the EU Commissioner for Employment, Social Responsibility and Inclusion, the Polish Minister for Labour and Social Policy and two Polish Under-Secretaries of State. Similarly, at the 22 March event on participatory democracy some 160 individuals participated, including the Vice-president of the European Parliament and high level representatives of the European Commission. At this event, contacts with civil society and the citizens were actively encouraged through a comprehensive and innovative communication strategy involving live twitting by EESC members and a video of the conference which was published on YouTube.

The profile of the Group has been further enhanced by its civil society outreach programme and notably, by the high number of meetings co-organised by the Group together with its privileged interlocutors (sub-groups). In 2011, there were 17 meetings of civil society organisations close to Group III at the EESC premises, many of which involved the active participation of Group III members. Many more requests for joint meetings were received but did not materialise due to the unavailability of meeting rooms at the Committee. Clearly, the increasing requests by the sub-groups for cooperation with Group III reflects a strengthening of relations with these actors. For a full list of meetings with the Group's privileged interlocutors please see Annex I.

Finally, mention should be made of the vast number of speaking events in which the President of the Group is engaged in on a weekly basis. Since January, the President has spoken on approximately 60 occasions, representing the Various Interests Group in Brussels and in other EU Member States on a variety of subject relevant to the activities of Group III.

Improving communication instruments

In line with the objectives of the President's work programme, significant improvements have been made on the communication instruments of the Group. New publications have included:

- Group III's 'Who's who';
- Updating the Group III leaflet;
- The Compendium on 'Participatory Democracy: a retrospective overview of the story written by the EESC' (English version available; French and German versions in progress; all other linguistic versions will be available on the website in the near future);
- The leaflet on 'Participatory Democracy in 5 Points' (available in 21 languages).

Particular attention should be paid to the Compendium on 'Participatory Democracy', which brings together all EESC Opinions on the topic and which is an excellent communication and policy instrument. Mention should also be made of the qualitative upgrading of the Group's newsletter 'Europe III' and of its website. Moreover, the Group's newsletter is now sent to more than 2,500 individuals, an increase of 1,000 compared to last year. In addition, an innovative communication strategy was used for the Extraordinary Group meeting in Warsaw, with live web-streaming of the discussions posted on the EESC's website. Finally, the request has been made for Group III members to receive an IT app which will allow them to access the EESC website directly from their mobile ICT equipment.

Promoting capacity-building and cohesion within the Group

One of the priorities of the President of Group III has been to promote the activities and added value of the work of the four Categories managed by Group III (the Farmers', Consumers and the Environment, the Social Economy, SMEs and Liberal Professions). Within this context, considerable resources have been invested in further developing the thematic work of the Categories and their cooperation and contribution to the work of with other EESC bodies.

Thus, as foreseen the four Categories held three meetings each, including one joint meeting between the "Farmers" and "Consumers and Environment" Categories on "The future of the CAP: benefitting consumers and producers". In addition, the "Agriculture Category" cooperated with the NAT Section on the organisation of a public hearing on 'The distribution of food products to the most deprived persons in the Union' on 21 November, with the active participation of the Spokesperson of the Category. On 6 June, the Category of "SMEs, Crafts and the Professions" organised a full day conference principally dealing with the Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications. This event marked the European Day of Liberal Professions and included high level representatives from the EC and national organisations. Thirdly, the "Consumers and the Environment" Category participated in a hearing on "The participation of SMEs in the value chain - Core business or extended value chain", organised by the CCMI on 6 October during the 'European Week of SMEs'. As regards the "Social Economy Category", a seminar on Structural Funds and the Review of the EU Cohesion Policy was organised on 18 October and the Spokesperson of the Category actively participated in a number of events both outside and within the EESC, for example, the hearing on 'The distribution of food products to the most deprived persons in the Union' on 21 November. Moreover, at the initiative of the "Social Economy" Category, in 2011 the EESC has commissioned a study on the 'Social economy in the European Union', which will include the 27 Member States and the two Candidate Countries (Iceland and Croatia). For a full list of the meetings of the Categories in 2011, please refer to Annex III.

Moreover, in 2011 a novel practice was introduced regarding the Categories. At the extraordinary meeting of the Bureau of the Group on 19 July, the Chairs of the Categories were asked to present their work programme and to identify challenges and opportunities for increasing the role of the Categories. The exchange led to conclusions by the President, which take into account the fact the

budget of the Categories will not be increased in 2012. A full report with proposals for reviewing the work of the Categories will be presented at the meeting of the Bureau on 14 December.

A second novel practice introduced in 2011 relating to capacity-building and cohesion within the Group, has been the launch of presentations by members of projects or activities managed at the national level by their organisations. This practice commenced at the meeting of the Group in October and will continue at future meetings.

Consolidating the Presidency through teamwork

In order to better organise the work of the Group, a division of responsibilities between the President and the Vice-Presidents has been introduced. Thus, Ms O'Neill is responsible for the follow-up of the conclusions on the European Citizens Initiative and monitoring the appointments of members to study groups. Mr Metzler is responsible for communication strategy and innovation for the Group, in addition to supervising the possible adaptation of Internal Rules of Procedure to evolving working methods within the EESC. Mr Trantina has been appointed to monitor the work of the Categories.

In addition, prior to each plenary session and Group meeting, one of the Vice-Presidents (by rotation) is directly involved in the preparation of proposals to be submitted to the Bureau of Group III, regarding the nomination of Group III members to the new work of the EESC.

Finally, the Presidency meets prior to ordinary EESC Bureau meetings, Group III and Bureau of Group III extraordinary meetings. Moreover, the Presidency also holds extraordinary meetings. For a full list of meetings in 2011 please refer to Annex II.

Increasing support to members

A number of innovations have taken place in 2011, with the aim of better assisting members in the organisation of their work. Principal among these was the decision to ask members to assess the work of the Group, by replying to a questionnaire. The replies to this questionnaire will be used to improve the work of the Group.

Additional innovations relate to better organising the presence of members in the plenary sessions and on the monitoring of votes. Thus, a list of priority opinions is compiled prior to each plenary session and members are invited to be present at the plenary and to vote for these priority opinions. Moreover, the Secretariat has devised a system of SMS alerts to inform members on the timing of voting.

Rules have been adopted on lines of conduct regarding the authorisation of individual missions using the budget line 1004, which is managed by Group III. This allows for transparency and optimal management of the budget line.

Specific criteria have been introduced for the nominations of experts of the Group and a database has been established with their contact details, which helps to strengthen the Group's relations with these privileged interlocutors.

Mention should also be made of the activities of the President of the Various Interests Group, in promoting the general interests of the members, for example on the new financial statute of members and on their future insurance policy. In addition, the President was engaged in discussions with the College of Quaestors on possible improvements to the working conditions of EESC members.

As regards human resources within the Secretariat, an additional Assistant and Administrator have been recruited at the end of 2010 and in July 2011 respectively. Consequently, the responsibilities of the staff have been streamlined to increase specialisation and assistance to members.

Concluding remarks and opportunities for the future

The objective of this memo has been to review the activities of the Various Interests Group for the year 2011, taking into consideration the priorities of the work programme of the President of the Group and the decisions taken by the Presidency at its meeting on 13 January 2011. Clearly, the impact of the Group's activities in 2011 has to be examined as part of a medium to long term process, where the expertise and activities of the Group directly contribute to enhancing participatory democracy at the European level. Account must also be taken of the fact that although the specific work of Group III can be highlighted, nonetheless it cannot be disassociated from the wider activities and political impact of the entire EESC.

In general, in 2011 significant progress has been made in implementing the overall and specific work programmes for the Group. On occasion, the priorities have changed, for example, it was decided to replace the June Communication Conference agreed in January with a seminar on the European Citizens Initiative. Moreover, a number of priorities identified in the President's work programme have not yet been implemented, for example, "putting specific resolutions or initiatives to the plenary assembly, to raise the profile of the Group III".

Significantly, steps have been taken to evaluate existing working methods (questionnaire) and to make recommendations for the future, e.g. on financing of experts, on the Categories, on the appointment of members to new works, etc. Moreover, the work programme for 2012 will clearly build on the political successes of 2011. This could be done by, inter alia, increasingly exploiting the diversity and expertise of the members to organise thematic events and discussions on key policy areas. Cooperation with the Group's privileged interlocutors could be stepped-up and new sectoral topics for discussion identified. Ultimately, it is in the Group's interest to demonstrate internally and externally that it has an important contribution to make to policy-making at the European level.

Secretariat of Group III

ANNEX I

Joint Meetings with Group III's sub-groups

ORGANISATION	DATES OF MEETINGS
EEB	25 May
BEUC	11 March, 16 June, 5 October, 7 October
CECOP	7 September
CEPLIS	21 February
CIA	22 November
COFACE	16 May, 17 May
EFC	7 November
EURELPRO	5 December
FAFCE	17 October
UAPME	4 July
UEPS	13 April
UFE	20 December, 21 December

ANNEX II

Meetings of the Various Interests Group in 2011

Meetings of Group III
19/01/2011
16/02/2011
15/03/2011
04/05/2011
15/06/2011
13/07/2011
21/09/2011 – Participation of Mr Delsaux , Deputy Director General of DG Internal Market and Services
26/10/2011
07/12/2011
Extraordinary meetings of Group III
09/03/2011 – Discussion on the Members' financial statute
22/03/2011 – Conference on 'What are the prospects of participatory democracy in Europe?', Brussels
30/09/2011 – Conference on 'Europe of Active Citizens: volunteering', Warsaw
25/11/2011 – Participation of Ms Haug, MEP and debate on the Multi-Annual Financial Framework and debate on the Members' financial statute
Extraordinary meetings of the Bureau of Group III
28/02/2011 – Preparation of the conference on 'What are the prospects of participatory democracy in Europe?', discussion on rules on experts and on individual missions
13/05/2011 – Conference on 'Building a Stronger Europe for its Citizens', Budapest
19/07/2011 – Debate on the past achievements and future prospects of the Categories
14/12/2011 – Report on the activities of Group III in 2011 and discussion on work programme for 2012
Seminars of Group III
27/06/2011 – Seminar on 'The European Citizens Initiative', Brussels
24/11/2011 – Seminar on 'Universities', Brussels
Extraordinary meetings of the Presidency of Group III

13/01/2011
28/02/2011
22/03/2011
12/05/2011
15/06/2011
19/07/2011
08/09/2011
24/11/2011
14/12/2011

ANNEX III

Meetings of the Categories in 2011

Category of SMEs, Crafts and the Professions
26/1/2011
6/6/2011
6/10/2011 – Conference on the Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications
Category of Consumers and the Environment
25/2/2011
16/5/2011 – Joint meeting with the Farmers' Category
14/09/2011
Category of the Social Economy
13/1/2011
11/5/2011
18/10/2011 – Hearing on Structural Funds and the Review of EU Cohesion Policy
Category of Farmers
9/2/2011
16/5/2011 – Joint meeting with the Consumers and Environment Category
23/11/2011