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Editorial

Mall Hellam
Vice-president of Group III
Representative of the Network of Estonian Non-Profit Organisations (NENO)

Manifester of Estonian Non-governmental Organisations

The 50th anniversary is a cause for celebration but also an opportunity to reflect on what is required for the EU to progress from the economic union of the Treaty of Rome to a citizens’ union. EU initiatives such as plan “D”, the White Paper on European communication policy and proposals to improve transparency show that reaching out and involving citizens is now a priority. Indeed this was also the intention of the authors of a Treaty which innovated by being not just an instrument for governments, but also for citizens.

With similar aspirations in mind Estonian civil society organizations, under the leadership of the Network of Estonian Non-profit Organisations (NENO) started to work out the Estonian Civil Society Concept (EKAK) back in 1999. After extensive consultations with NGOs across the country and debates with all political parties, EKAK was finally approved by the Estonian parliament Riigikogu in 2002. EKAK defines the complementary roles of the public and non-profit sector in developing and implementing public policies and describes the principles and mechanisms of cooperation in building up strong civil society in Estonia.

However, the inability of the public sector to effectively implement the measures foreseen by the EKAK four years ago since its adoption has led to the frustration and disillusionment among a number of NGOs. Given the upcoming parliamentary elections in March 2007 and the obvious need to consolidate and strengthen the voice of the non-profit sector NENO launched an initiative that together with other NGOs sought to work out a so-called Manifesto of Non-governmental Organizations www.nego.et/11854 (for the upcoming parliamentary elections ). Over the course of several months a number of consultations were held with NGOs and political parties.

During a public hearing of political parties on their platforms on civil society development it became clear, however, that although all parties do mention the importance of strong civil society in their platforms they all lack a clear and comprehensive vision and in some cases their understanding of the concept of civil society emphasises the importance of arts and culture societies as well as village associations but fails to recognize the work of advocacy groups and watchdogs. As if to prove that the Constitutional Committee of the Riigikogu decided to cancel a parliamentary session (a public hearing) on the implementation of EKAK as a nationally important strategic issue that EKAK was presented as one of the monitoring instruments of EKAK’s actual implementation and that was originally scheduled to be held in mid-February.

Now, after the elections, NENO together with its partners is working to ensure that measures foreseen by the Manifesto will be in the agenda of the incoming government.

Colleagues and their citizens have been one of the main triggers for even the typically reserved Nordic people in Estonia.

It is every citizen’s duty to make a stand if necessary and not to wait for being asked for their opinion.

Interview of the month

Group III: Past - Present - Future

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary we asked Mr Ceballo HERRERO for an interview to share with us his thoughts now, after having lived through all phases of the EU construction. Mr Francisco CEBALLO HERRERO, Chairman of General Association of Consumers (ASCEGO) in Spain, is the doyen member of Group III, serving at the Committee since 1986.

EUROPE III – What are your thoughts on the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome? How do you see the evolution of the EU and how important was the role of the civil society organisation in this process?

For me, 50 years of peace is a fundamental and most welcome fact. And the Union has played a critical role in achieving this. Europe has done a lot at the economic level, but it is necessary to go deeper towards political integration so that we could carry much more weight in the process of globalisation. Being Spanish, becoming part of Europe meant winning the fight for democracy. Spain’s presence in Europe has contributed to a great extent to its modernisation.

EUROPE III – As a consumer organisation representative, how do you see your work back home influenced by the Committee’s role in the EU decision making process?

The EESC has contributed a lot to the work of our organisations and it has helped them in modernising our working practices. The EESC has gradually driven us to think in European terms, understand how important it is to be rallied by a European organisation / network, understand and apply social dialogue and promote participatory democracy. But, above all it has taught us to act together, as a single voice of civil society, in spite of all the various interests that we represent.

EUROPE III – How do you see the Committee’s role in the future and in consolidating the EU democratic governance?

It is important that the Committee develops its role as a builder of consensus at all levels of acceptability of norms and policies. The Committee should be the vehicle of civil society and take a strong stand on its behalf and in respect of major issues of concern, such as the environment, that we have to deal with seriously at the moment.

EUROPE III – What is your message, as a senior, to other members of the Group?

The members of Group III should be leaders engaged in social and civic endeavours, such as the consumers’ movement; should be the driving force in organisations which act with integrity and, above all, are independent from the rest of the market operators and, at the same time, stand out on the associative environment. Therefore, they should prove their independence, representativeness and militancy in affairs such as, among other things, sustainable development, corporate social responsibility and responsible consumption.

To get a broader perspective of what our members’ thoughts and ideals are about the EU, when we celebrate it, we also interviewed the youngest member of our Group, Mr Martin CHREN, representative of the F. A. Hayek Foundation, Bratislava, Slovakia.

EUROPE III – It’s less than half a year since you became a member of the EESC, Group III. You joined the Committee at a moment when Europe undergoes a lot of transformations. Also your country has gone through many transformations after the collapse of communism and towards EU accession.

On the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, how do you see the future of Europe and the role of civil society organisations in the EU constructions?

The quote that Europe is currently standing at a crossroads is more than just a phrase. The European Union, growing in size, is on the one hand, accumulating more and more political power, while, on the other hand, it is perceived that it is drifting farther and farther away from its citizens. As a Liberal, in the classical sense of the word, I see the key to prosperity lying in the soundness
Other news that matters
The Sustainable Development Observatory (SDO) looking at the possibility of drawing up an own-initiative opinion on Climate Change and the Lisbon Strategy. The reasoning behind this proposal is that the Lisbon strategy should contain a strong sustainable development dimension. Consequently, it would be appropriate to integrate climate change issues into the strategy. Since the EESC’s ongoing work on the Lisbon strategy, on issues concerning sustainable development and particularly on climate change, are hardly visible, it is time to integrate these issues in the EESC work programme, and to make the EESC a very visible actor in the fight against climate change. The opinion could highlight the role of the European institutions and of civil society organisations in integrating sustainable development and climate change aspects into the Lisbon strategy. The idea is that the Commission could then have adequate time to take note of the EESC’s views, in preparation for the review of the Lisbon strategy, which will take place in March, 2008.

Liaison Group’s first meeting this year
The Liaison Group with civil society organisations and networks held its 12th meeting on 1 March 2007. The Liaison Group will discuss and adopt an operational work programme for 2007-2008. Based on the findings and recommendations in the Liaison Group’s evaluation report, on the discussions held between the Liaison Group’s co-chair, Jean-Marc Roirand, and the three Group Presidents, the EESC work programme, and to make the EESC a very visible actor in the fight against climate change. The opinion could highlight the role of the European institutions and of civil society organisations in integrating sustainable development and climate change aspects into the Lisbon strategy. The idea is that the Commission could then have adequate time to take note of the EESC’s views, in preparation for the review of the Lisbon strategy, which will take place in March, 2008.

Our Group’s Strength
The Farmer’s Category
The Farmer’s Category met on 7 March where an official from the European Commission, Mr Summa, Head of Bio-energy Unit (DG Agriculture) gave a presentation on the topic Should we grow food or fuel.

Members of the category expressed many concerns about the consequences of taking arable land out of food production and converting it to growing crops for fuel production. Many speakers felt that adequate funding or preferential financial incentives should be made available to farmers from the EU budget, to help them cope with any change-over in land usage. It was suggested that an observatory should be set-up to monitor best practices in the EU and elsewhere in the world, to provide information on the costs of production and monitor environmental management. A large bone of contention was competition with other large scale bio-fuel producers such as the USA, and smartness of our economic and social policies. Sound policy leads to sound politics - and the civil society organisations at the European level can do a good job in shaping these sound policies through the good management of active communication between the EU institutions and its citizens. We need to focus on the problems of general interest of the European population, not just on those of some influential interest groups. This would mean that civil society organisations should sometimes come out of the shadows, because, eventually, each civil society organisation is an interest group itself. However, civil society organisations can set the best example of how an active dialogue should work.

EUROPE III – What was your first impression of the Committee and of Group III, in particular? Was there much difference from the way you perceived it from the outside?

Probably the most impressive hallmark of Group III is its diversity, arising from the variety of different backgrounds its members are coming from. Discussions within the Group are sometimes more diverse, deeper, and intellectually enriching than discussions among the three Groups within the plenary.

EUROPE III – What is the impact of the EESC’s work on your activities back home? Do you feel that the interests of those you represent reach the EU decision-making process?

Coming from a public policy think-tank, I consider it as a great opportunity to be a small part of the European policy making process. Considering such a background, I can see nowadays is a small ‘clash of civilizations’ among the young, ambitious EU member countries, such as my homeland – Slovakia – and the old member states. A poorer country than most of its Western neighbours, Slovakia is trying hard to improve the welfare of its citizens through a set of progressive reforms. However, such efforts often create competitive pressures on the older EU countries. I hope, for the future, to be able to explain to other EESC members that economic and social reforms do not necessarily represent competition, to convince them that helping increase the prosperity of their eastern neighbours is also in their interest, and that such competitive pressure could actually be the very much needed impetus for the necessary changes in the policies, on a broader scale, at the EU level.

EUROPE III – While celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, let’s allow ourselves to be daring with European goals. How do you see the ideal role of the EESC in the EU decision-making process?

The time is coming for Europe today to extensively review its policies, with a goal to maintain - or sometimes try to gain back - its competitiveness and economic and social sustainability. From my yet short experience, I feel that first of all, the EESC needs to improve its own impact and visibility in the policy making process. Once it succeeds in this, the EESC could become the one European body that will shape the discussion and direct the focus away from political skirmishes and scuffles to the real problems of the citizens in the different European countries.

One piece of news that also matters for Group III is...
Civil Society Development Foundation (CSDF) activities are contentious and the debate remains open. At the same time, advocacy itself is being debated in a strong advocacy campaign.

Participation. The project aims at changing the current law making process (January – June 2007), with the represented by.-

Awareness on the Importance of Public Participation. The project aims at changing the current law making process (January – June 2007), with the represented by.

Mr BERNADO HERNÁNDEZ BALTERALL has been appointed Rapporteur of the expert group on

FUTURE e-Accessibility legislation and aging in particular

Mr Krogius STERN and Mr Janos TÓTH.

Mr Roberto CONGONI will chair the study group of the information on the market for existing products/ Common Technical Simplification. Former CEPS/ETR reached the following conclusions:

COPA – COGECAseld for simplification of CAP

COPA and COGECAs have adopted a position on technical simplification of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in all areas of the future CAP.

The European Union of Social Pharmacies (EUPS) commits for quality services

The position paper is available on COPA – COGECAs website:

http://www.copaca-geca.be/pdf/pr_07_19f_1e.pdf

EUPS commits for quality services

The European Union of Social Pharmacies (EUPS) commits for quality services. The EUPS has made many recommendations on the methods of payment for pharmaceutical services, with a view to encouraging the development of services that patients and society expect of the pharmacist, in other words and useless rather than youthful and effective.

For more information about the European Youth Forum adopted in EU Spring Summit 2005, please visit the European Youth Forum website www.youthforum.org

The Economic and Social Council in France – an active contributor to the EC consultations

Mrs Evelyne PICHENOT breasted us on the latest initiatives taken by the Economic and Social Council (EC) in the context of the European Union and the EuropeanCommission. The EC has recently contributed to the consultations launched by the Commission on demographic change, Green Paper, European Youth Pact (Communication) and on the EU Communication Policy (White Paper).

This guide, elaborated by the Delegation for the European Union of the Economic and Social Council, could be taken as an example of good practice for those members involved in the works of the various national economic and social councils.

Other Group III members of this study group: Mr Roberto CONFALONIERI,

http://ec.europa.eu/commission_barroso/kallas/tr

The Y outh Summit on 23-25 March 2007 was organised in Rome, on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Treaty of Rome. The main objective of the event is to develop a youth input for the debate on the future of Europe. Before the summit, national youth debates were organized in EU countries. There were six main themes of the Youth Summit which were debated at the national level before the event: the future of the EU, a social and economic model for Europe, sustainable development, Europe’s role in a globalised world, building a cohesive society in Europe and youth and education in the EU.

The results of the national youth debate in Prague (and in other EU countries) and copies of the ‘Rome Youth Declaration’ are available on the website of the European Youth Forum:


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Mr Leif Erik NIELSEN, member of Group III, representative of the Danish Agricultural Council, was the Rapporteur of the exploratory opinion on Animal Welfare Labelling (NAT 342, CESE 247/2007). The EESC was asked by the German Presidency to look into the feasibility of introducing a specific labelling regime at EU level for livestock products based on compliance with animal welfare standards. It is proposed that the present mandatory minimum animal welfare standards should be backed up by voluntary labelling rules that can be used in combination with both general commercial labels and more quality-based labels, not least among them ‘quality schemes’. This will underpin market forces and will not put an unnecessary burden on the political system in the EU or on national inspection bodies. Such a market-based system will be more flexible, effective and future-oriented than politically imposed criteria.

The contribution of research in the EU in the field of animal welfare is crucial in determining whether it will be possible in the future to integrate animal welfare into the agriculture and subsequent production and trading chain on a scientific and objective basis.

The exploratory opinion will serve as a basis for a hearing, jointly organised with the German Presidency, which will be held on 28 March 2007 at the EESC premises.

Mr Angelo GRASSO, member of Group III, a rapporteur of the EESC’s Committee on the Rights of the Child, and representative of the National Institute of Family and Social Policy, was elected to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, at the 11th Meeting of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 21 February 2007, United Nations Headquaters, New York, through the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination, punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child, parents, legal guardians, or family members.

Mr Herczég is a member of the SOC and ECO sections of the EESC, and has already supported our recommendations for future cooperation of the development actors were drafted.

The conference constituted a good forum to promote the EESC and the Western Balkans Contact Group, as an active player in the region, and it helped the EESC representative build contacts with a view to the preparation of the 2nd Western Balkans Civil Society Forum (2008).

Mr Miklos BARABAS, Vice-President of Group III, President of the Western Balkans Contact Group, attended an international conference entitled “Changing conditions in the Balkan countries - challenges for future cooperation with the EU and Central European countries” in Lubliana, Slovenia. The participants were representatives of 80 NGO and governmental bodies from Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria, and Slovenia, with experience in the Balkan countries, as well as resource persons from the target countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, Serbia and Kosovo).

During the conference, there was an exchange of information on actual and future cooperation plans between the Balkan countries, as the participating countries and the European Union and the needs and priorities of the target groups have been shared. Recommendations for the future cooperation of the development actors were drafted.

Seppo KALLIO and Staffan NILSSON actively involved in forestry matters

Mr Miklos BARABAS, Vice-President of Group III, in his capacity as President of the Western Balkans Contact Group, attended an international conference entitled “Changing conditions in the Balkan countries - challenges for future cooperation with the EU and Central European countries” in Lubliana, Slovenia. The participants were representatives of 80 NGO and governmental bodies from Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria, and Slovenia, with experience in the Balkan countries, as well as resource persons from the target countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, Serbia and Kosovo).

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The purpose of the seminar was to introduce forestry and forest industry in Nordic countries and also give an overview of EU’s forest political situation. The presentations generated a wide discussion on current forest policy issues in the EU with bio-energy, climate change and research being the most dominating themes. Approximately 100 visitors, with many decision makers from the European Commission and the European Parliament, participated in the seminar and the following reception. Mr Seppo KALLIO, member of Group III, representative of the Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners in Finland (MTK), moderated the seminar, and Staffan NILSSON, President of Group III, was a keynote speaker in the conference.

The presentations of the seminar can be found on the website of the Nordic Family Forestry:
http://www.nordicforestry.org/article.asp?Data_ID_Article=23838&Data_ID_Channel=44

On 7 March, Mrs Renate HEINISCH and Mr Gerd WOLF, members of Group III, participated as distinguished guests in the ceremony of Descartes Prizes for Research. This is awarded by the European Commission to teams of researchers who have achieved outstanding scientific or technological results through collaborative research in any field of science, including the social sciences, humanities and economics.

Mr Gerd WOLF & Renate HEINISCH celebrated European Research

This year three Excellent European Research Projects share €1m Descartes Prize for Research. The High Energy Stereoscopic System is a telescope system that has revolutionized existing astronomical observation techniques and increased our knowledge and understanding of the Milky Way and beyond. The Hydrosol project has developed a method of producing hydrogen from water-splitting, using the energy of the sun, which could lead to environmentally friendly production of hydrogen for energy purposes. The third project, APOPTOSIS, has made great strides in our understanding of apoptosis (programmed cell death), which will lead to new developments in future treatment of cancer and AIDS.

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