



European Economic and Social Committee

Ile de France
Economic and Social Council

Speech

given by

Mr Roger Briesch

President of the European Economic and Social Committee

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Seul le texte prononcé fait foi

Check Against Delivery

Mr President,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear friends and colleagues,

Thank you very much your invitation. We are delighted to have this opportunity to discuss links and potential cooperation between regional and national economic and social councils (ESCs) and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), as part of our multi-tiered European political system

To work together constructively and to forge fruitful relations, it is vital to get to know each other better. As agreed with your president, **Mr Boucherat**, therefore, I should like to brief you on the position, role and activities of the European Economic and Social Committee.

I should thereby like to consider:

- ◆ the Committee's role in the EU political and institutional framework;
- ◆ civil society in Europe;
- ◆ the network of European economic and social councils;
- ◆ the Lisbon process and the possible synergy between the EESC and the national and regional ESCs;
- ◆ and, lastly, the EESC's activities as the European Commission's partner in the field of external relations.

1. **The Committees position and role in the EU political and institutional framework**

Clearly, the European Union is today facing a serious crisis of confidence. Rightly or wrongly, the European public is only too willing to complain about its ineffectiveness and to highlight its "democratic deficit".

If unresolved, this crisis of confidence could call into question not only the Community structures, but also the very foundations of the European social model that are rooted in

inclusion and participation. The time has now come to tackle both the democratic deficit and the deficit of participation.

The European Parliament has key political responsibility on this front. The public looks to Parliament to make up the democratic deficit affecting the EU's institutional framework and decision-making structures.

There is also, however, a "deficit of participation" in the EU, and that cannot be resolved by parliaments, political bodies and political processes alone. The European Economic and Social Committee, as the European assembly representing organised civil society, is ideally placed to help make good the EU's "deficit of participation".

The EESC, which I have the honour to chair, currently consists of 222 members; but from May, when Union enlargement takes effect, membership will rise to 317. Members are split into three groups: traditionally, the employers' and employees' groups take in the social partners (employers' and trade-union organisations) while the "various interests" group brings together representatives of other economic and social activities, including craft organisations, farmers' bodies and organisations representing SMEs and the professions.

The Committee's membership is not static, however. It evolves each time it is renewed so as to reflect changes in organised civil society in the Member States.

Committee membership has thus progressively widened to include representatives of consumer organisations, associations promoting the rights of disabled people and combating exclusion, family organisations, environmental protection associations, and NGOs representing cultural and civic interests. This helps ensure that the Committee represents ever broader swathes of civil society.

The three-group set-up promotes ongoing structured dialogue on virtually all the issues on the Union agenda. The Committee is thus an excellent forum for consultation on draft legislation and is instrumental in making the Union's decision-making process more transparent.

It has to be consulted in cases provided for in the Treaties, and in all the cases where the relevant institutions consider it appropriate.

The Council presidency, the Commission and the European Parliament increasingly call on the Committee to deliver exploratory opinions ahead of the Community policy- and decision-making process.

The Committee can also act on its own initiative to issue opinions or draw up information reports. The Committee currently produces almost 150 opinions a year on a wide range of topics.

Exploratory and own-initiative opinions are of particular interest; their value is often rooted in the fact that they raise the awareness of the European institutions and national authorities about subjects which have not hitherto attracted much, if any, of their attention.

The Committee also has two other, mutually supporting roles that have developed over time. These consist of:

- ◆ involving civil society organisations more in the European venture; and
- ◆ boosting the role of organised civil society in non-member countries or groups of countries, in particular the countries seeking to join the Union, where the Committee has established and continues to develop ongoing relations and structured dialogue with civil society organisations, and the social partners in particular.

The Committee, as well as having a broad range of expertise in the economic and social field, can also act as a catalyst and forum for expression for many interests of society at large and for economic and social relations within the Union. Indeed, the Committee is at the crossroads of social dialogue and European civil dialogue and can facilitate a structured, participatory process, bringing together "the various categories of economic and social activity" that it represents in the strategic debates on future European citizenship.

Alongside the European Parliament – and in partnership with the other EU legislative and executive bodies – we are therefore committed to promoting the interactive approach that is the key to a social, participatory Europe that is closer to the needs of the people.

The Committee's goal is to become the "home" of European-level organised civil society and to act as an institutional bridge between organised civil society and the Community decision-making bodies.

2. **Civil society in Europe**

"Organised civil society" is the term used to describe the part of civil society represented by organisations that make up the very the building blocks of society itself. In other words, organised civil society consists of all non-public, private-initiative organisations, and their members, that promote their own particular interests by using their knowledge, skills and specific potential to influence the running of public affairs.

This definition applies to a wide range of organisations: employers' associations and trade unions, groups promoting certain matters of general interest and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The definition also ties in the aims of the Treaty of Nice, which first introduced the concept of organised civil society – and thus civil society itself – into Community law. It is important to note that this concept is used only in connection with the European Economic and Social Committee. The Committee, however, is defined by its members, in other words the representatives of the three groups of civil society organisations: employers, employees and so-called "various interests".

Civil society organisations seek to be representative (in both quantitative and qualitative terms), to espouse democratic procedures and viewpoints, and to safeguard transparency, continuity, durability and reliability in the activities they undertake.

Over the past decade, European institutions have become increasingly keen to engage in dialogue with civil society – and with organised civil society in particular. They have recognised the impossibility of finding effective solutions without consulting, involving and securing the consent of those affected by legislative and administrative decisions, and that, to have any impact, these decisions must be accepted by the stakeholders concerned.

Consultations on framing and implementing policy must therefore not only include the social partners – i.e. the representatives of the two sides of industry – who are already secured specific participation under the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, but, increasingly, must also bring in all the other players representing organised civil society, i.e. those transnational, European civil society organisations that have, for some time now, also been vocal in calling for action on this front. As representatives of stakeholders on the ground, these organisations are seeking not only to be consulted, but also to be actively involved through appropriate procedures.

Similar calls are being made at administrative level and by local, regional and national governments – and are increasingly being taken on board. This development is taking place at a time when the political world is having to tackle ever more complex and wide-ranging issues, and when there is a growing democratic awareness at grassroots level, as people invoke their right to take part in the opinion-forming and decision-making process – and to have a hand in implementing legislation as well.

3. The network of European economic and social councils

The European Economic and Social Committee and the European economic and social councils work together bilaterally in the context of the EU presidencies.

In 2003 the EESC and the Greek ESC strengthened their cooperation under the *Greek presidency of the Union*. For instance, the two institutions co-organised European Consumers' Day in Thessaloniki on 14 and 15 March 2003. The EESC was also asked to participate in several activities of the Greek ESC, including the immigration conference.

Under *Italian presidency*, the main event was the joint conference of the EESC and the Italian ESC in Rome on 23 and 24 November 2003 on *the role of civil society in Euro-Mediterranean policy after enlargement*.

These conferences aroused considerable interest on the part of the EU presidencies and placed the EESC's work more firmly in the public eye in the countries concerned.

For the *Irish presidency* in the first half of 2004, the Irish Economic and Social Council has already expressed its intention of organising a conference with the EESC in Dublin on 6 and 7 April on *Public services: the role of civil dialogue*.

The national ESCs were also regularly briefed on the progress of the Convention's work on the draft constitutional treaty, and on the EESC's contributions and proposals. The flow of information has been improved – and support for the EESC's positions deepened – thanks to the attendance by the ESCs of the Union, and – from 2003 – of the future Member States, at certain plenary sessions and at the Bureau meetings in Athens and Rome, and also thanks to my own meetings with various opposite numbers.

In 2003, contacts were established with the ESCs of the future Member States with a view to their attending the annual meeting of presidents of the ESCs and the EESC. The take-up rate was good.

Our task in 2004 will be to build on these links, not least by involving the new EESC members.

Attendance by representatives of the national economic and social councils at the conferences organised by the EESC demonstrates the interest elicited by these events and the need to move forward in that direction.

In this connection, the conference on *the contribution of organised civil society to the Lisbon process* in October 2003 marked a special and important stage in the increased involvement of the ESCs. It was decided in Madrid to follow up this initiative, which makes it possible to pool ideas and contributions in preparation for the spring European Councils and thus to influence its decisions.

For their annual meeting, the presidents and secretaries-general of the EESC and national ESCs met in Madrid in November 2003. For the first time, the presidents and secretaries-general of the ESCs and similar institutions of the new Member States also attended this meeting. This constitutes a major expansion of cooperation as nine new councils from eight countries (Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia) have become involved in the EESC's cooperation with the national economic and social councils.

The network thus formed in an enlarged EU will henceforward comprise 21 councils from 19 countries and the EESC. This is a major challenge insofar as new forms of ESC will join the present line-up. In this respect it is very encouraging to note that, despite this diversity, the Madrid meeting clearly demonstrated that the ESCs of the future Member States are keen to participate fully in cooperation between the national ESCs and the EESC.

The 2004 meeting of presidents will be organised by the Luxembourg ESC and will take up and further develop the topics raised at the Madrid meeting.

4. **The Lisbon process:**
Synergy between the European Economic and Social Committee and the national and regional economic and social councils

On my proposal, the presidents of the national ESCs agreed to incorporate work on the Lisbon strategy into their 2004 programmes, the aim being to set out the position of the ESCs and the EESC in a declaration addressed to the 2005 spring summit under the Luxembourg presidency.

This approach has been prompted by the Committee's work following the Commission's request to prepare an evaluation of the Lisbon strategy. The Committee was invited to look at the overall impact of the Lisbon strategy to date, tie that in with the long-term outlook, and offer a qualitative and quantitative assessment of progress made in implementing the Lisbon strategy's three core strands (economic, social and environmental). The evaluation could also identify sectors where new efforts, or possibly new policy initiatives, might be required.

In the wake of that request, the Committee adopted a resolution in December 2003. An important part of the input to this resolution was a major three-day conference which discussed the Lisbon Strategy and what should be done. Its conclusions are poles apart from the satisfactory appraisal given by the UK, French and German governments.

In 2004, the EESC will continue to work to make a success of the Lisbon strategy, by ensuring ongoing monitoring of this strategy. It will continue to propose improvements, in particular by involving broad sections of organised civil society in its work, not least the national and regional economic and social councils. That will be a key part of the EESC's contribution to the 2005 spring Council.

The Committee strongly believes in the importance of the Lisbon strategy adopted by the EU in 2000 and that the Lisbon objectives remain relevant and necessary. The EU's goal to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion, is an objective we all share. For the moment, however, these terms remain an abstract concept. The Committee believes very firmly that efforts need to be made to rebuild confidence among European citizens and to create a positive vision for the future, based on grassroots participation, ensuring a more balanced distribution of the wealth produced and the surplus created by modern technology. Without this, and unless Europe is seen to be becoming much more competitive, we will not win the hearts and minds of European citizens. The Lisbon approach needs to be made relevant to our day-to-day lives. Thus, organisations such as yours and the national economic and social councils have a key role to play.

The Committee considers that, in the present political and economic climate, it is all the more important that political leaders – and indeed all players – deliver a stronger message on the importance of pushing ahead with the Lisbon objectives and sustainable development. We must not let ourselves be driven into different approaches for an old and a new Europe. We must not let our countries be divided or our citizens and organised civil society be alienated by a logic of conflict rejected by the vast majority of people in all European countries. Instead, we need to focus on striving for an inclusive Europe, modernising the European social model and taking up the challenge of globalisation. This involves greater investment in developing a learning society, innovation, new knowledge and new jobs. The Lisbon strategy must not be seen as a neo-liberalist venture that fails to take account of the legitimate concerns of workers and vulnerable groups in society.

The political will is there to get things moving, but delivery on the ground is not taking place. What we need are efforts comparable to those deployed to bring about the single market and the single currency. The reality is that we need to go much further. We need efforts comparable to those made by the USA after the Great Depression and Europe after the Second World War. We need a new New Deal.

5. **EESC activity in external relations**

Thanks to its unique network of relations with civil society in non-EU countries, the EESC adds substantial value to the European Union's international policy, conveying the Union's message to organisations such as economic and social councils, the economic and social partners and other civil society representatives. The EESC also helps to encourage participatory democracy by facilitating the establishment of a culture of dialogue amongst organised civil society representatives and between these representatives and the political authorities

The Committee's work is underpinned by international agreements, and also by the 2001 Protocol, which seeks to strengthen cooperation between the Commission and the Committee and make the EESC "an indispensable intermediary between the EU institutions and organised civil society".

Euro-Mediterranean partnership

Within the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, the EESC coordinates – on the basis of the Barcelona Declaration – the work of economic and social councils and similar institutions. It supports and helps to organise annual summits, which, on the basis of thematic contributions and activity reports, adopt final declarations containing recommendations for the Euro-Mediterranean conferences of foreign ministers.

At the most recent summit, held in Malta in November 2003, the ESCs primarily addressed the issues of the involvement of organised civil society in the Euro-Mediterranean partnership and the impact of new technologies. The highlight of the summit, at least in symbolic terms, was when a representative of the Israeli ESC and a representative of the Palestinian delegation shared the platform with the EESC president in a debate on the development of the consultative role. These two delegations also agreed to work together with the EESC to draw up a thematic contribution on *Agriculture and food safety in the Euro-Mediterranean partnership*, which will be presented at the next summit in Spain in 2004.

Following the fairly recent establishment of ESCs in Lebanon and Israel, to which the EESC has lent its support, information visits were organised in 2003 to a number of Mashreq countries, with the effective support of the Commission delegations, in order to better integrate civil society in these countries into the Euro-Mediterranean partnership and to encourage the creation of consultative bodies representing organised civil society. Furthermore, in July 2003, a delegation from Palestinian civil society spent several days visiting the EESC headquarters, with the EESC supporting it in its aim of setting up an economic and social council. Similar ventures will take place over the coming months involving other Mashreq countries, including Jordan.

South America

In South America, the EESC has established initial contact with the Andean labour and business advisory councils and the Consultative Committee of the Central American Integration System. Regular contact has now been established with the Mercosur Economic and Social Consultative Forum (FCES). Regular meetings with Mercosur representatives give civil society the opportunity to bring its point of view to bear on Association Agreement negotiations. Moreover, on the basis of the provisions currently being negotiated, one of the objectives is to create a joint EESC-FCES consultative committee, once the treaty has been concluded and ratified.

As in previous years, the Commission took advantage of this network and of the EESC's organisational capacity, asking the Committee to organise the third meeting of organised civil society from Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, to be held in Mexico on 13, 14 and 15 April 2004.

The Commission also called on the EESC to draw up an opinion on social cohesion in Latin America and the Caribbean with a view to increasing organised civil society's understanding of social cohesion issues and helping to make a large number of stakeholders aware of these issues. The Committee adopted its opinion on 25 February 2004.

The EESC supported the recent setting-up of the Economic and Social Development Council of Brazil, and an EESC delegation, led by its president, took part in a *Conference on Development Strategies and Social Consultation* in December 2003. Likewise, with the support of the Commission, the EESC is endeavouring to facilitate the setting-up of similar structures in Chile, Bolivia and Mexico. Thus, at the next meeting of civil society from Europe and Latin America, the EESC will seek to enlist the support of the Mexican economic and social groups with a view to setting up an ESC in that country.

Asia

At the commissioner's request, the EESC has set up the India-EU Civil Society Round Table, which has already met six times. Its most recent meeting took place in Rome on 16 and 17 December where it dealt mainly with barriers to trade and investment flows and an assessment of the implementation of the Round Table's recommendations. The EESC considers that the Round Table is a great success and that it has demonstrated its ability to provide a platform for reaching agreement on joint approaches and recommendations in a very wide range of fields. However, it is unhappy that the European Commission's delegation in New Delhi has turned down the request submitted under the patronage of the Round Table for money to fund the Civil Society Internet Forum.

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In the light of past consultative work on EU-China relations and contacts already established with the Chinese ESC, the EESC welcomes the recent Commission communication proposing the promotion of contacts and dialogue between European and Chinese civil societies in accordance with the recommendations issued in the wake of the European Economic and Social Committee's consultations with the Chinese economic and social council. A delegation from the Chinese ESC will also visit the EESC next March to study the question of industrial restructuring and the redeployment of redundant workers, and the EESC will take part in a colloquium on this subject next autumn in China.

I myself have also just returned from New Delhi where we held a working meeting with the Round Table's Indian co-chairman, **Mr Vohra**, to prepare the next joint initiatives.

The United Nations

By the same token, the EESC plans to act as the mouthpiece of European civil society vis-à-vis UN organisations, thereby complementing and supporting the EU's other institutions. The EESC also shares the objectives set out in the Commission communication on the European Union and the United Nations, and in particular, the priority to be accorded to multilateralism and the support to be given to the millennium development objectives. Against that backdrop, an application will be made for observer status at the United Nations' ECOSOC, on the basis of Rule 79 of that organisation's rules of procedure.

The International Association of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions

While I am on the subject of external relations, I should also like to say a word about the International Association of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions (IAESC), which was set up in 1999 as a voluntary association of national ESCs. Its dynamic president is **Mr Jacques Dermagne**, and its executive secretariat has been established at the headquarters of the French ESC. The EESC has been an associate member from the word go.

Forty-one countries are currently represented. At the start, the body was largely made up of national economic and social councils from the EU and Africa, but the association has gradually widened its geographical base as economic and social councils have joined from Brazil, Nicaragua, China and South Korea and the central and eastern European countries.

The EESC's contribution to the work of the IAESC is based on the Committee's specific role in EU external relations and with European and international institutions. An approach must therefore be developed in which the EESC's own activities – pursued completely

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autonomously like the other councils – are complemented by the added value offered by the opportunities for exchanges within the IAESC.
