



European Economic and Social Committee

The Barcelona Process and the Neighbourhood Policy: a major role for civil society in promoting economic, social and cultural dialogue

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Speech by

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Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
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Check Against Delivery

Ministers,
Presidents,
Ambassadors,
Friends, colleagues,

Allow me to begin by telling you how much pleasure it gives me to be here with you today in Algiers. I have only just arrived but I have already been captivated by this city's beauty and the warm welcome I have received.

My visit follows the reinforcement of bilateral relations between the EU and Algeria. As you are aware, the Association Agreement came into force in September 2005 and, at this very moment, the Association Council is holding its first meeting in Brussels.

I earnestly hope that this first meeting reaches a number of decisions with a view to launching an ambitious work programme and setting up technical committees to deal with matters of common interest such as energy supplies, migration and social issues.

I would also like to express the hope, which I am sure is shared by my colleagues in the CNES, that organised civil society should play an appropriate role in implementing the Association Agreement. Civil society should, at the very least, be informed of meetings held in the framework of this agreement and should be in a position to contribute. This is another reason why I attribute so much importance to my visit to Algeria, which follows the visit of Ms Ferrero Waldner, European Commissioner for External Relations, and the visit of Mr Borrell, President of the European Parliament

I am also pleased to note that your country is genuinely leaving behind what some have described as Algeria's "black" decade. In this context, the referendum held on 29 September 2005 to approve the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation constitutes an essential step towards a return to normal life in Algeria. It is also in this context that it is important for civil society to be fully implicated in the decision-making process.

Today you have invited me to address you on the Barcelona Process and the Neighbourhood Policy: a major role for civil society in promoting economic, social and cultural dialogue.

Before I speak to you about the EESC's views on this subject, which is very dear to me, allow me to say a few words about the institution over which I preside.

The European Economic and Social Committee was established by the Treaties of Rome in order to provide organised civil society representatives with access the EU decision-making process.

The Committee is currently made up of 317 members appointed by the Council of Ministers upon nomination by the governments of the 25 Member States and, as a general rule, after having been designated by representative national organisations.

These members are divided into three groups: the Employers group, the Employees group and the Various Interests group, which is made up of representatives from other economic, social and civic sectors.

EESC membership is not fixed. It changes every time the Committee is renewed every four years so as to reflect developments in organised civil society in the Member States. Representatives from consumer organisations, associations for the disabled and for combating exclusion, family associations, environmental protection organisations as well as NGOs in the field of culture and civic life have all contributed to the Committee's gradual enrichment. Thus they contribute to diversifying the EESC's ever-widening representation of civil society.

The EESC, whose representativeness is undeniable, is nevertheless conscious that it only partially reflects the diversity and developments covered by the term "organised civil society". This explains why the EESC, especially in recent years, has taken a number of initiatives, notably the establishment in 2004 of a liaison group between the EESC and the representatives of the major sectors of European organised civil society.

I will now describe the various roles of the Committee.

As described in the Treaty of Nice, the European Economic and Social Committee is European civil society's representative within the EU institutional system. It acts as a consultative body to the Commission, the Council and the European Parliament. Consultation of the EESC by the Commission and the Council is mandatory for the fields stipulated in the Treaty. These two institutions and the European Parliament may also consult the Committee in cases they consider appropriate. The EESC may also deliver opinions on its own initiative in order to launch a debate or to tackle issues of concern to its members.

Thus our membership and role enable us to promote and express civil society views through formal institutional channels at EU level. We are also very active in the international arena. Indeed, on the basis of international treaties and at the request of the public authorities, we are involved in EU-ACP relations with India, China and Latin America, as well as with our immediate neighbours in Europe. In addition, we are also particularly active in the Euro-Mediterranean partnership and relations with our neighbours in the south.

We recall the great hopes engendered by the Barcelona Declaration of 1995. This declaration was founded on three aspects: the political and security aspect, the economic and financial aspect, and the social, cultural and human affairs aspect. It is this third aspect that we have put so much effort into, and that we, the representatives of organised civil society, have tried to make a reality. Furthermore, we are firmly committed to participatory democracy and call for the Euro-Mediterranean framework to recognise and promote it more effectively. Allow me also to point out that the effectiveness of participation, in its various forms, is not by any means a dogma but a reality confirmed by history.

According to the Barcelona Declaration (27-28 November 1995):

"Regular contacts among other European organs, in particular the Economic and Social Committee of the European Community, and their Mediterranean counterparts, would contribute to a better understanding of the major issues relevant in the Euro-Mediterranean partnership.

To this end, the Economic and Social Committee is invited to take the initiative in establishing links with its Mediterranean counterparts and equivalent bodies".

We responded to this invitation, and with the support of our colleagues, ESCs and similar institutions in partner countries, we have helped to promote the role of civil society.

We have fulfilled our mandate and helped promote civil society's role in four key ways:

- By setting up a network of ESCs and similar institutions, which has been meeting once a year since 1995. The first summit was held in Madrid in December 1995 and the most recent one took place in Amman last November. The next summit is to take place in Slovenia in 2006. Furthermore, we have adopted a working method that helps foster dialogue and greater mutual understanding. Each theme is dealt with by a multi-national working group of civil society representatives who hold several meetings. For instance, the Algerian CNES, the Tunisian ESC, the Palestinian ESC, the Maltese ESC and the Italian ESC are supporting the EESC in preparing its contribution to the 2006 summit on youth programmes.
- By maintaining relations with other civil society networks for employers, employees and NGOs, amongst others.
- By developing our consultative function and relations with the public authorities in the partnership. Our recommendations are addressed to the ministerial conferences and the Euromed Summit. I also had the pleasure of representing our network at the Summit of Heads of State and Government in Barcelona last November. We maintain relations with the recently established Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly. Our recommendations cover issues of crucial importance to the partnership. These include the establishment of a free trade zone, migration, energy, water, desertification, SME development, vocational training, environmental protection, and the role of women in economic and social life.
- By ensuring the promotion of our consultative function at national level. We have sought to strengthen the consultative function where it already existed and facilitated the creation of ESCs in countries where they didn't exist. The most recent example is the imminent establishment of an ESC in Jordan. In this context, I think it is essential to recall some important aspects of promoting the consultative function.

I believe that consultative committees and councils in countries where they exist should be free to act independently. Their status must be clearly defined at the legislative level and the

resources required for their functioning must be guaranteed. Moreover, they must be free from all interference and external pressure.

Furthermore, a substantial effort must be made to encourage the creation of consultative bodies in partner countries that still do not have any. It is vital that the laws establishing committees and councils should define their membership, procedures for appointing members and the duration of each mandate.

I should also emphasize that the consultative function can only be successfully and effectively carried out when the organisations represented within the consultative body are stable, representative, and respectful of gender equality. A particular effort should therefore be made to develop the capacity and the representativeness of the social partners and other civil society organisations.

Ten years down the line, we are in a position to make a lucid and dispassionate assessment of the partnership. The latter has not fulfilled all the expectations it had engendered but it nevertheless remains an important instrument for development in the region.

In general, I think that one of the partnership's positive points is that it has facilitated the broad scale development and structuring of relations and networks, particularly in the case of civil society. The network of ESCs is a key illustration of this point, but by no means the only one.

Nevertheless, I still believe, as do many participants at our summits, that the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership lacks a social dimension and has remained too heavily focused on the economy. This is why we have called for a drastic shift in emphasis towards a more social partnership, mainly by promoting employment, health and education. It is satisfying to note that several action plans under the European neighbourhood policy provide for the establishment of sub-committees on social issues and the initiation of genuine debate on these matters. I hope that these issues will be given great importance in the implementation of the Association Agreement with Algeria and that civil society, and the social partners in particular, will be involved in the relevant discussions.

A second priority that the partnership should incorporate more fully is better governance. I see no point in hiding from reality and ignoring the problems of corruption, administrative inefficiency and human rights abuse that persist in several countries.

Governance will not be and should not be imposed from outside. On the contrary, it must come from political will and greater civil society involvement in the decision-making process and post-decision monitoring. Civil society participation, the development of an independent consultative function and civil society capacity building, especially in the case of socio-occupational organisations, are pre-conditions for achieving better governance.

I would like to say a few words about the neighbourhood policy, which needless to say will continue to apply to Algeria even in the absence of an action plan. We have frequently stressed in our documents the need to inform, consult and involve civil society organisations in the implementation

of the neighbourhood policy, and primarily in setting up action plans. Negotiations for an action plan are not on the agenda for EU-Algeria relations but they will be at some point to be determined in the future.

In conclusion, permit me to reiterate once again the importance of involving organised civil society in the decision-making process for economic, social and cultural development.

I am aware that according to some objections, economic growth must be assured before civil society organisations can be involved. You and I can counter these objections with four main arguments:

- If economic development is not accompanied by the appropriate development of social dynamism, it breeds and encourages the expansion of pockets of poverty and thereby aggravates the risk of internal instability and political radicalisation, which can pose a serious threat to democracy.
- The added costs – and apparent delays – incurred by involving civil society organisations in decision making is not as high as the added costs incurred by non-participatory economic development, which is misunderstood and consequently not shared by society and which will eventually hinder progress.
- Similarly, the cost of judicious preventive measures to protect the environment will eliminate the risk of environmental disasters that are more costly in human and financial terms.
- Participation requires a steady and structured flow of information between institutions and society that enhances the development of programmes and the efficient, transparent, realistic and socially acceptable implementation of policies.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak about my perception, or should I say our perception, of civil society involvement and more generally of participatory democracy.

Let us work together to promote this form of democracy in our countries and within the partnership and let us work together, after all why shouldn't we, to export this modern perception of democracy.

Thank you for your attention.
