



**Speech by the President of the European Economic and Social Committee, Dr Göke Frerichs,
to the Committee of the Regions, Brussels, 15 May 2002**

Mr President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

First, I would like to take this opportunity to tell you a little about the new profile of the EESC and how we perceive our role. I will then describe how I see the relationship between the EESC and the CoR and how I envisage future cooperation between our institutions, concluding with some comments on our mission in the European Convention.

You will no doubt appreciate that I need to begin by giving some information about the EESC, as our committee is not actually very well known and its work does not have a very high public profile. There are many reasons for this which there is no time to enlarge upon here, but one of them is certainly that its name is misleading.

Our Committee is actually an assembly of representatives of civil society organizations, that is, employers' and workers' organizations, consumer organizations, charitable associations and cooperatives, and organizations representing the professions, the craft, farming and research sectors and the field of environmental protection. Their task and aspiration is to bring to bear the views, expectations, interests and ideas of these civil society organizations, which are mentioned in Article 257 of the Nice Treaty, in opinion-forming and decision-making within the EU institutions. In so doing, we seek the most effective cooperation and partnership possible with the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission, which the EESC serves as a consultative body.

For some time now, we in the European Economic and Social Committee have been working hard with a fair degree of success to fulfil our remit and our aspirations ever more effectively through internal reforms and by carving out an appropriate political profile.

As part of its work, the Committee has been asked by the Laeken European Council – as has the CoR – to play an active part in developing a consensus on the future shape of the Union by sending observers to the European Convention. In this role, our observers draw support from the Committee's ability – as a catalyst and conduit – to give expression to the views both of national civil societies and of the transnational, European civil society that is gradually emerging.

The praesidium of the European Convention has also sought our services to facilitate dialogue between the Convention and civil society networks and organizations. In collaboration with the Convention vice-chairman responsible, **Jean-Luc Dehaene**, regular information and dialogue meetings have been held at the EESC over the last few weeks between representatives of these organizations and networks on one side and interested Convention members and observers on the other. These meetings are always attended by **vice-chairman Dehaene** or another member of the praesidium.

.../...

We feel that such gatherings – which are held in tandem with Convention meetings – are the initial expression of a new form of involvement in our work for those sections of civil society that are not directly represented in the EESC, but whose experience and commitment we need to underpin the representativeness and credibility of our efforts.

In the same way, we are also strengthening cooperation with the economic and social councils or similar institutions that play a role at national level similar that of the EESC at Union level. We are currently making successful use of this collaboration with economic and social councils to encourage debate on the future of the EU within national civil societies.

As part of the enlargement process, our Committee is no less committed to efforts to strike up dialogue with civil society representatives from countries seeking to join the European Union. The aim is to develop mutual understanding and joint ideas that may be helpful in preparing for accession. There are Joint Consultative Committees in operation with representatives of civil society organizations from almost all the future Member States, in which we also address the issues on the agenda of the European Convention.

We have also built up systematic, institutionalised relations with civil society partners from the groups of countries and regional associations with which the Union is engaged in structured dialogue – i.e. the Mediterranean countries, the ACP states, the countries of Mercosur and Central America and, for instance, India.

Lastly, I would also mention that, when the ECSC Treaty expires on 23 July this year, the European Economic and Social Committee will keep alive the flame of this first European Community – from which the European Union has sprung forth – by taking over the remaining tasks of the ECSC Consultative Committee, thereby harnessing the tremendous experience it has accumulated and putting this to good use in the future.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is clear from the few points I have made that the European Economic and Social Committee has definitely embarked on a new phase in its more than forty-year history. I believe this is also an important date for the CoR, with whom the EESC is closely linked in many respects.

One very tangible expression of this link is our common organizational structure comprising the services which our two committees share. And I would like to stress here that the cooperation agreement which details how this common structure is to operate has certainly proved its worth. It also serves as an example for other institutions.

The link between our two committees will become even more evident when we move into our joint premises in Rue Belliard in early 2004.

But the links between us are not just of a practical nature.

- The ESC and the CoR have the same status within the EU political system; both committees are - in the same way and to the same degree - advisory bodies. Both committees do, however, also have representative roles: the CoR represents regional and local authorities, whereas the ESC represents

"organised civil society". Whereas the CoR embodies the principle of political, regional and local subsidiarity, the ESC embodies the principle of social and operational subsidiarity.

- The members of our two committees also enjoy equal legitimacy - equal in both kind and standing - as they have all been appointed by the European Council of Ministers, following their nomination by the governments of the Member States. While the members of the CoR have a political mandate by being elected in their localities and regions, so EESC members are entrusted with the interests of their organisations, often by being elected in the appropriate forums.
- The two committees do, of course, have their own status and responsibilities and, in particular, different importance to the EU public, for whose benefit and in whose interests our political efforts are made. The public rely upon the political framework of the local and regional areas in which they live. They do, however, also need the social framework provided by the various organisations, associations and trade unions. The equality of treatment afforded under the EU institutional system appropriately reflects this situation.

The involvement, on an equal footing, of the civil society dimension, on the one hand, and the regional and local authority dimension, on the other, in the opinion-forming and policy-making process of the EU in the interests of optimum governance is the right way to proceed. These two dimensions both complement and strengthen one another.

In view of this, I believe that it is extremely important and also necessary, in the interests of the political impact which our two committees are seeking to achieve through their work, that we enter into a dialogue on closer political cooperation beyond our excellent practical and technical collaboration.

For example, I think that it might be interesting both for you and for us, and indeed for the recipients of our opinions (Commission, Parliament and Council), if our two committees occasionally drew up joint, or at least complementary, opinions on matters of particular strategic importance relating to the political organization and social development of the EU.

I also believe it would be worth considering holding joint conferences from time to time on major issues of European unification policy which concern both civil society organisations and legislative and executive bodies in the localities and regions.

Such initiatives would be important, not only because of the results they might produce, but also as a forceful demonstration of the shared will of our two committees to further develop our particular roles within the political system of the EU actively and constructively and, in so doing, support and complement each other.

This brings me to the final point I wish to mention to you, namely the European Convention, which you are following with interest and commitment just as EESC members are.

The participation of observers who are able to speak for our committees in the Convention and submit proposals, provides a certain guarantee that our specific concerns are not ignored, especially when it comes to determining the institutional roles and functions of our institutions. For all the bodies and institutions of the Union will emerge from this undertaking in a different form from

when they went in. Our two institutions will also come in for scrutiny and undergo changes. The question is whether they will be the changes we ourselves wish to see.

I am confident that it will be possible to bring both the local and regional dimension and the civil society dimension to bear in the EU's new constitutional order in a way which far surpasses the current situation and which does greater justice to the importance of these two dimensions in shaping our transnational communality.

The local and regional dimension, with the wealth of so many variously constituted communalities expressed within it, not least the cultural wealth of Europe, will remain a source of strength for the Union inasmuch as the Union is prepared and able to draw on this source.

The civil society dimension offers the Union first and foremost the participation, involvement and accompaniment of the vital and productive forces expressed in the commitment of organisations and associations, trade unions, federations and groups of the most diverse kinds.

Giving one dimension an enhanced and more appropriate role within the institutional framework is not to be achieved at the expense of the other dimension, but only by giving the other a similar and equally prominent role. I therefore advocate that, as far as possible, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions present a united front in the European Convention, coordinating their proposals. In any event we should support each other in our aspirations to improve our performance of the tasks incumbent upon our institutions for the greater good.

I thank you for your attention and look forward to our discussion.
