



European Economic and Social Committee

SEMINAR
on
***Organised civil society in the candidate countries
and the Future of Europe***

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**Closing address by Mr Roger BRIESCH,
President of the European Economic and Social Committee**

Over the coming months, decisions will be taken that will determine the future shape of the European Union (EU), and the place of each institution in its political system.

During this time, the role of the European Economic and Social Committee needs to be clearly affirmed and the Committee recognised as an institutional channel for consultation, representation and information.

Through civil dialogue, representatives of economic, social and civic organisations must be given the opportunity to play an integral part in the Community's policy- and decision-making process.

The EESC draws its legitimacy from the fact that its members – by virtue of their expertise, know-how and representative positions – have been asked by representative organisations in the Member States to play a constructive role in the process of shaping public opinion throughout Europe.

The added value of the Committee resides in the fact that this process involves all the players in civil society, and that it aims to promote consensus by establishing the common ground that unites the various civil society organisations it represents.

Its opinions bring together a variety of different views and achieve a consensus that can help define the general interest.

Its very membership and the remit assigned to it by the Treaties mean that the Committee is bound to play a key role in defining and framing civil dialogue.

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Civil dialogue is an essential tool for involving civil society in public life, in keeping with the European model of society.

It is a key instrument for lasting reform of the policy- and decision-making processes, ensuring that these reflect the principles central to good governance: subsidiarity, openness, participation, reliability, efficiency and coherence.

This aspiration to civil dialogue is fuelled by the principles of democracy and subsidiarity.

The subsidiarity principle is not just about the distribution of powers between the different levels of political and territorial government; it also articulates a democratic concept of State and society, as well as defining citizens' freedoms and responsibilities.

In the same vein, when decisions are made as to who to involve in decision-making, functional and societal (horizontal) subsidiarity, such as in the social dialogue, should be taken into account alongside territorial and political (vertical) subsidiarity.

The role of the EESC, as a channel for societal and functional subsidiarity, complements that of the Committee of the Regions, which embodies political and territorial subsidiarity.

The Community method of seeking consensus and common cause must continue to take on board civil society and local authority inputs on an equal footing, by giving them the same institutional status.

Civil dialogue can be defined as an interactive public discourse between (on the one hand) the various components of civil society and (on the other) between civil society and the legislative and executive bodies.

Civil society – as I have said – should be allowed to play an effective role in the governance and management process, which must be opened up both to social and economic operators and to all the other components of civil society.

Civil dialogue must complement, the political dialogue amongst the European institutions and between them and the national authorities, on the one hand, and the social dialogue with the social partners on the other.

This means that, in the context of a clear distinction between social and civil dialogue, the social partners will take part in civil dialogue according to the issues to be addressed, in the same way as all the other relevant parties in organised civil society.

As an instrument of participative democracy, civil dialogue means not only consultation (in the sense of listening and seeking advice) but also active involvement in shaping opinion, upstream of the legislative process and alongside legislative implementation.

Clearly, only those organisations that are sufficiently representative in terms of size and substance can participate in civil dialogue, i.e. those that are in a position to make a substantial contribution to civil dialogue thanks to their organisational strengths and expertise.

The constitutional Treaty should lay down the procedures for civil dialogue and the conditions for participation.

The EESC wishes to act as a forum for this civil dialogue. Being an assembly that brings together representatives of employers, trade unions and, essentially, the other main categories of economic and social life, the EESC has the structures and experience needed to take on this role.

A democratic European Union – which must, of necessity, be organised along federal lines if it is to operate smoothly, taking into account the variety and diversity of the states, peoples and cultures it embraces – must have a forum for civil society representatives to meet and express their views, articulate their demands and draw up common proposals.

The European Economic and Social Committee provides this forum. The constitutional treaty should give the Committee the resources and scope to fulfil its role as the institutional representative of organised civil society, and do so more and more effectively.

The Committee will then be in a position to play its full role as a bridge between civil society organisations and the European institutions, thus helping to ensure that the public is fully involved in the European project and can play an active, effective role in building the European Union and shaping its development.

The well-structured relations that the Committee maintains with Member State Economic and Social Councils and similar institutions enhance the added value and legitimacy of its efforts within the Community institutional framework to achieve a politically more accessible, more transparent and more participative Europe.

The Committee is determined to contribute fully, in partnership with the other institutions, to the democratic process and to raising the political profile of the European Union in such a way as to make it more transparent, relying on cooperation between all stakeholders at every level.

It is in Europe's interest to improve and develop any structure that will enable its citizens to participate in the European integration project.

My friends, I would ask you to support our Committee's proposals.
