



European Economic and Social Committee

Conference on
*"Participatory democracy: current situation and opportunities
provided by the European Constitution"*

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Session 3

*Participatory democracy: towards a new partnership between
all those concerned by European governance*

STATEMENT

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Seul le texte prononcé fait foi

Check Against Delivery

Thank you very much Mr Chairman.

I would like to address briefly the relationship between social and civil dialogue and its crucial importance for the future of Europe.

I would mention enlargement as the first reason. In the 15 Member States, about 88% of citizens declare that they are happy and satisfied with their life as compared to 65% in the Acceding States. As such it is not tragic because it corresponds exactly to the level of life satisfaction in Greece and Portugal when these two countries joined the European Union.

But it is still a challenge to strengthen the internal cohesion of our societies. To achieve that objective, it is of crucial importance that strong synergies be established between social and civil dialogue in order to make sure that policies are well targeted. This is a reason why the topics addressed during this conference are so important.

Secondly and listening to various speakers, it would appear that there would still be a dividing line between social and civil dialogue. But in reality the situation is more complex. Looking back at my previous career, when I was working in the European Trade Union Confederation, I can tell you that things have changed a lot and it is noticeable that nowadays the boundaries between the two are more blurred, and not so rigid. The social partners are now used to negotiate on issues which go beyond their traditional fields of competence, such as, for example, emission trading, within the context of the Kyoto Protocol on climate Change, an issue which initially was almost exclusive concern of environmental organisations. If we take another example such as working time, which is at the very heart of the social

partners' concerns, they tend now, and even if it is a slow evolution, to consider this issue over a lifetime perspective, and no longer only from an industrial relations one.

Inevitably, such developments imply that social partners get into contact and enter into dialogue with other stakeholders, be it public institutions or civil society organisations active in various fields. So, and when you think of the issues which are dealt with by the social partners, it is a requirement that closer cooperation be between the various players concerned.

In this context, should only the social partners deal with employment policy issues. I believe the answer is no. Employment policy is a multifaceted issue. For instance it has to do with industrial restructuring but also with social inclusion, lifelong learning, etc. And from our experience and research in the European Foundation I am representing here, it is obvious that the solutions are manifold and the more partners you involve the better you will be able to tackle the problems and to find solutions. For that reason, I am convinced that the implementation of the Lisbon Agenda is an excellent field for cooperation and I am also of the view that one of the reasons why progress is rather slow is the fact that there is not enough civil dialogue!

Let me stress another point. My impression, with all due respect, is that many speakers concentrated too much on the European level, focusing on the European institutions, whereas I believe that the real opportunities for social and civil dialogue lie at local level. At local level, you can build up effective and long-lasting partnerships with a better chance to solve employment problems but obviously you also need sound structures,

financing and reliability. Having said that, I am in no way implying that the European level is not important.

As far as representativity is concerned, one must not take the issue lightly. In fact it is very important to know who you are talking to if you want to establish long lasting partnerships.

To conclude, I would like to stress that I am not arguing in favour of doing away with all the boundaries between social and civil dialogue. On the contrary, I still believe that there is a core business to social dialogue which is the responsibility of the social partners. However, the experience in some Member States, Ireland for example, demonstrates that by enlarging the partnership, by involving more players in the dialogue, not only the social partners but also other stakeholders, you increase the chance to tackle the problems successfully through, for instance a better input into the designing of policies and a more effective implementation of these policies.

To end, I would say: Let's not focus only on the European level and always remember the vital importance of the local level.

Thank you very much.