



European Economic and Social Committee

SEMINAR

on

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

Brussels – 30 and 31 January 2003

**Welcome address by Dr Göke FRERICHS,
Vice-President of the European Economic and Social Committee**

Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the home of the European Economic and Social Committee. It is your home too!

The European Economic and Social Committee is a 222-strong advisory assembly. It operates along parliamentary lines, representing organisations, trade unions, federations and associations from the EU Member States. Its ambition is to further consolidate its role as the voice of organised civil society within the EU institutional set-up.

The European Economic and Social Committee is seeking to secure an active role for itself in the future EU constitution currently being drafted by the Convention.

The Committee sends three observers to the Convention, of which I myself am one. It has become involved in the Convention's work in a number of different ways – and in the accompanying overall debate.

We have adopted opinions on the process of drawing up a constitution. We have passed resolutions and tabled written submissions on individual issues.

In particular, we have made it possible for NGOs, associations and movements of all kinds (and their European networks) that are not represented on the Committee to keep in regular touch with Convention delegates and acquire first-hand information about the state of play.

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Thanks to this initiative, we have been able to substantially reinforce dialogue with civil society players.

Increasingly, the European Economic and Social Committee is becoming the home of organised civil society, bringing together leading economic, social and civic players to discuss their concerns and proposals.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In order to secure the successful integration of the new Member States into the European Union, it is vital that employers' associations, trade unions and the various other interest groups from the candidate countries – including farmers, the liberal professions, consumers, women, welfare organisations and all other groups – organise themselves as autonomous, representative bodies that are able to play an active part in forging independent social and civil dialogue. Their input is essential.

The Amsterdam Treaty's social chapter expanded the social partners' powers and responsibilities. A framework is now in place for consultation and negotiation, enabling them to play a key role in developing a European social model. They also have new scope for action under the Treaty's employment title.

For the social partners in the candidate countries, therefore, a great deal is at stake: with EU enlargement on the horizon, they have to develop their own machinery and their own approaches to social dialogue in order to secure appropriate involvement.

At this juncture, I would also stress the EESC's resolute commitment to enlargement and to the strategy proposed to achieve it, which has taken the venture forward so swiftly.

We are working to consolidate existing contacts and, where they do not yet exist, to establish new ones with social, economic and civic organisations in the candidate countries. This is proof indeed of our determination to make enlargement a success for all concerned.

So far, our work has focused on the joint consultative committees, a range of which were set up by the EESC in the second half of the 1990s. Thanks to these committees, preparations for the accession of the central and eastern European countries to the EU are on a sound footing. They provide an opportunity to harness the expertise of social and economic organisations from the EU

and the candidate countries in the implementation of joint agreements, and to turn that expertise to good account to complete the enlargement process successfully.

We have also been particularly interested in moves to set up economic and social councils in the future Member States. Europe needs efficient institutions at national and European level, in which representatives of organised civil society can articulate their concerns and work towards a social consensus on the structure of European integration. That is impossible without the active and committed support of economic and social players from organised civil society.

It is worth every effort to realise our vision of an enlarged Europe, underpinned by a stable economy and a just social model.

On that note, may I wish this seminar every success.
