



European Economic and Social Committee

Conference on
*Participatory democracy: state of play and perspectives opened up by the
European Constitution*

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Session 2

Towards a European civil dialogue

STATEMENT

by Mr Dirk Jarré,

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- I would like to thank the EESC for inviting me to speak at this important conference.
- The conference is taking place at exactly the right point in time on one of the most important aspects of shaping the future of Europe.
- I would like to congratulate **Roger Briesch**, EESC President, for insisting on making this topic a top priority of his presidency's programme.
- We all hope that these joint deliberations and their outcome will have a significant impact.
- I am speaking here on behalf of the International Council on Social Welfare, a worldwide NGO established in 1928, which works to secure social rights, social protection and social development.
- Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, in my statement I would like to present a few comments on today's topic that I see as important and I hope that they can stimulate and enrich further debates, particularly in the working groups.

1. Democracy must meet challenges

Our society is becoming increasingly complex though technical progress and information networking, as well as European integration and globalisation. Old political structures, institutions and processes are progressively less capable of

meeting the new demands for solutions to socio-economic conflicts and the future shaping of society.

The increasing lack of transparency in policies and political and administrative authorities, and the subsequent loss of control dangerously widen the gulf between the public and the State.

This reduces the public's identification with the Community; interests and participation in politics decline. A dramatic loss of confidence in politicians and political institutions is apparent. Susceptibility to populism and other potential threats to democracy grows.

2. Public expectations of democracy are still high – but to a large extent unfulfilled

The public expects the democratic system to provide a visionary and coherent social project, with which they can identify and based on which they can plan their own lives. They also expect policies to be reliable and sustainable.

Policies should tackle problems in line with their relevance and urgency and solve them sensibly and competently. The public also wants to be involved in the processes affecting their way of life. It therefore demands open information, transparent decision-making and clear responsibilities. Membership of political parties and participation in elections every couple of years are not seen as a sufficient opportunity for involvement.

3. Participatory democracy is the natural partner of representative democracy

Participatory democracy does not undermine representative democracy; it underpins and strengthens it. Civil society organisations are the alter ego of the parties and have to be recognised by them as a different, but no less important, form of expression of public concerns and the public will.

They allow a greater degree of control over the development of society, decisively helping to overcome the gulf between the public and political structures. They create trust and social capital, without which a democracy would ultimately wither into formalism.

Without this confidence and public support for and commitment to political decision-making, policies can be neither effective nor sustainable.

4. Article 46 of the draft European Constitution must become a reality

Article 46 of the draft European Constitution will involve a paradigm shift for the European Union by providing a constitutional guarantee for participatory democracy. This is a unique opportunity to consolidate the European model of society.

It is vital that participation (which is more than consultation and has a completely different socio-political value) is not only acknowledged. It must be both actively promoted and demanded by all players. Only in this way can it become an integral and natural component of good governance. Definitive measures are also required to change attitudes.

Participatory democracy must be multi-dimensional, durable and coherent. It starts by identifying and defining society's problems and needs, can be seen in the processes of defining policy concepts and strategies, is expressed in the implementation of these policies and strategies and their continuous monitoring and culminates in the evaluation of the results and the balancing of goals and achievements. Each of these phases is vital.

5. The basic conditions for the implementation of the principle of participatory democracy must be created

As we all know only too well, there is no lack of good intentions, excellent concepts and great promises. However, the hopes and expectations based on them have often been frustrated as the real difficulties and shortcomings lie in the implementation of political action.

Participatory democracy – like democracy itself – must be constantly secured, organised, implemented and monitored. The partners need to jointly agree a binding implementation strategy, which can be monitored.

In addition to the creation of the necessary political, legal, financial and structural requirements, an enabling environment also needs to be promoted. This means that public opinion must be made aware that the basic principle of participatory democracy must be a key political value and therefore influence actions.

6. Civil society participation should be measured using indicators

We must avoid arbitrary assessment of the success of civil society organisations' participation in political processes related to society. All phases of involvement in these processes must be recorded using indicators. These indicators do not yet exist and must still be developed.

Given the significance of indicators in the implementation of the principle of participatory democracy, I would today like to put forward some thoughts on the assessment of participation:

- a. Were the legal, structural and material requirements for participation completed?
- b. Were tangible offers of participation made – i.e. invitations with details of the content of the consultations and decisions, the status of participants and other conditions?
- c. Was a genuine opportunity for involvement given (time, venue, financing, sufficient information, transparency of the processes)?
- d. And lastly, impact assessment – how were the representatives of civil society treated? How could processes be influenced? What (textual and strategic) proposals were accepted? What were the priorities? How was the person responsible recognised and designated? etc.

This kind of assessment should be carried out separately for each phase of involvement, i.e.:

- 1) when problems and needs are identified,
- 2) when corresponding solutions are put together,
- 3) when they are implemented,
- 4) when the implementation is monitored,
- 5) when the results are monitored,
- 6) and lastly, when the overall assessment is carried out.

7. Challenge to reflect on a new political culture

In conclusion, I would like to mention an issue particularly close to my heart. The draft Constitution for the European Union is **the** future project for the European model of society and allows room for creativity. That is good.

The values, goals, rights and principles in it need to be substantiated, completed and developed politically. We should not leave this up to professional politicians alone, who are subject to so-called practical constraints and whose time is monopolised by routine matters.

Let us give the various forces of European society the opportunity and the time to think creatively about the future. Above all, this should involve lateral thinkers and those partners in dialogue who do not share our opinions.

Thank you for your kind attention.