



European Economic and Social Committee

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

Brussels - 8-9 March 2004

Session 1

***The European Constitution, civil dialogue and the
democratic life of the Union in the new Europe***

STATEMENT

**by Ms Anne-Sophie PARENT,
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I would like to thank the European Economic and Social Committee for inviting the Social Platform to take part in the first session of their conference on Participatory democracy and to give our members' views on how we see civil dialogue and the democratic life of the Union developing in the new Europe once the draft European Constitution will be adopted.

Today is the International Women's Day. I am glad that there is one woman on the panel: me. That's better than nothing and this gives me the opportunity to address my best wishes to the billions of women around Europe and the world and to assure them of my full support in their fight for equality. A lot remains to be done to ensure gender equality including in Europe as all reports published today demonstrate.

Now just a few words about the Social Platform for those of you who may not be familiar with our organisation. The Platform of European Social NGOs (the Social Platform) was established in 1995, and brings together 39 European non-governmental organisations, federations and networks which are working to build an inclusive society and promote the social dimension of the European Union.

The members of the Social Platform represent thousands of organisations, associations and other voluntary groups at local, regional, national and European level representing the interests of a wide range of civil society. {These include organisations of women, older people, people with disabilities, people who are unemployed, people affected by poverty, lesbian, gay, transsexual and transgender people, young people, children and families. Member organisations also include those campaigning on issues such as social justice, homelessness, life-long learning, health and

reproductive rights and racism.} The Social Platform channels the concerns of European citizens who have come together in these organisations throughout the Union on issues of common interest. It also ensures a wide circulation of information on EU activities and policies to its members at the national level.

We have been asked to answer a series of questions:

1. First of all, does civil dialogue already exist?

The main mission of all European networks gathered in the Social Platform and of the Platform itself is to engage in the European civil dialogue on behalf of their members. We do that on an on-going basis in the regular contacts we have with the EU institutions. Based on the feedback we gather from our members, we develop common positions on EU policies that are then promoted throughout all levels of our networks: national, regional, and local.

The Social Platform and its members promote social justice and participatory democracy by raising awareness of the common concerns of its member organisations among the EU decision makers (Commission, EP, Council). The European Social NGOs also promote engagement of social NGOs in an enhanced structured civil dialogue at EU level and facilitate the involvement of people experiencing or at risk of poverty, exclusion and discrimination in decision-making processes affecting them. The close link European Social NGOs have with their national and local member organisations helps bring the European Union and its institutions closer to the citizens and empowers them to take part in the decision making process

in their field of expertise. This interactive structure is very important to organise civil dialogue because civil dialogue is not just about consultation, it is about ensuring all stakeholders are given the opportunity to influence policy issues where they have expertise.

2. This is why the proposed Article 146 is entitled "Participative Democracy"

European civil dialogue is not just a form of consultation that happens periodically in Brussels. It is part of an on-going process involving all levels: local, national and European, within a specific sector as well as on horizontal issues. This process is channelled up to the EU institutions by the European NGOs who have been mandated by their constituencies to represent them and advocate on their behalf. This close link between the EU NGOs and their national networks explains why the EU institutions value so much the direct consultation with civil society organizations. This is reflected in the increased dialogue opportunities set up by the EU Institutions: For example: Round Table on Social Inclusion, Peer Review, National Action Plans for social inclusion, bi-annual meetings with Commission, EP Committee coordinators, meetings with EU presidencies, participation of the Social Platform in troika meetings, the regular meetings of the Social Protection committee (SPC) with socially active NGOs that have just been introduced by the Council in the SPC's mandate last week. This is very important given the essential role the SPC plays in the OMC. Other examples are: the involvement of European NGOs in various fora set up by the Commission or the EP: European Health Forum, European Pensions Forum, European Parliament Pension Forum, etc.).

This explains also why the proposed Article I- 46 states clearly in the first paragraph that "the Union Institutions shall give, by appropriate means, citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action." This direct exchange of views is of great value to the institutions (as well as to us).

Our interpretation of what "appropriate means should mean is that some form of support should be developed for civil society organizations whose expertise brings added value to EU civil dialogue. For the moment NGOs have to apply to various EU programmes for funding. But we all know that the practical implementation of these programmes results in the exclusion of many organizations whose valuable expertise does not fit exactly the eligibility criteria or the very specific objectives of the programmes despite the fact that their expertise would be of great value to the EU and would help promote its values and objectives (as stated in new Article 2 and 3). We hope that the EU institutions will share our vision of the "appropriate means" that should be put in place and will adopt an ambitious EU programme to promote civil dialogue where the criteria will be based on the added value that the applicants can bring to the EU civil dialogue.

3. The second paragraph of Article 46 states that "the Union Institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society"

This paragraph acknowledges the need for a better-structured and clearer process for dialogue. For the moment, this dialogue does exist but its modalities are based on the good will of the EU institutions stakeholders. When they drafted Article 46, the Members of the Convention obviously

agreed that citizens have a right to a clear procedure in which they will be able to participate and which should be open to all citizens through the structures that they have established.

In his letter addressed to the Social Platform early February, Secretary General David O'Sullivan gave us an update on the various avenues the Commission is exploring to reinforce the culture of consultation and dialogue with civil society. This includes the support of the Commission to the European Parliament's proposal to strengthen the role of NGOs in the OMC and to conclude an interinstitutional agreement on the OMC. Such an agreement would improve the involvement of the EP, another way of reinforcing citizens' representation in the process.

In relation to this issue, we are interested to see that the EESC has itself recently adopted proposals aimed at strengthening its dialogue with European civil society organizations. We believe that it is useful for European NGOs to work more closely with the EESC in order to strengthen the work of the EESC as a consultative body to the EU Institutions. An informal "liaison group" may be one way of achieving this. However, we do not believe that the EESC should take a more general mandate to implement the civil dialogue provisions of Article 46 with the other EU Institutions, nor that such a "liaison group" can purport to form the structure for organized civil dialogue. Each EU Institution must itself create a direct structure for dialogue with civil society, building in many cases upon the existing forms of dialogue.

The third paragraph mandates "the Commission to carry out broad consultations with parties concerned in order to ensure that the Union's

actions are coherent and transparent". Here again, this paragraph could give the Commission the necessary mandate to propose a general framework for consultation which should not only commit the Commission but also the other EU institutions. Paragraph 2 of Article 46 should indeed provide for an adequate instrument to determine the procedures and conditions of civil dialogue. What form will it take remains to be seen, but we think that an interinstitutional agreement on civil dialogue is a definite option to explore.

Finally, we welcome the last paragraph of Article 46 which will enable citizens to submit appropriate proposal for legal actions provided they gather more than a million signatures. We call on the Commission to ensure that the European Law, which will be needed to enact this paragraph, will be drafted in close consultation with European civil society organizations in order to guarantee that it becomes a useful and user-friendly instrument for the citizens to participate in the EU civil dialogue. Such an instrument will play a key role in promoting a stronger sense of ownership in the European project among citizens.

I thank you very much for your attention.