



*European Economic and Social Committee*

**REX/097**  
**Civil society/development**  
**policy**

Brussels, 16 July 2003

**OPINION**

of the European Economic and Social Committee  
on the  
**Role of civil society in European development policy**

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On 17 January 2002 the European Economic and Social Committee, acting under the second paragraph of Rule 29 of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an opinion on the

*Role of civil society in European development policy.*

The Section for External Relations, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 3 June 2003. The rapporteur was **Ms Florio**.

At its 401<sup>st</sup> plenary session of 16 and 17 July 2003 (meeting of 16 July), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 63 votes in favour and 4 abstentions.

## **1. Introduction**

1.1 This opinion is intended as a contribution to the debate on the role of civil society in international relations and, more particularly, in the European Union's development policy, which has grown in importance over recent years. This has been brought into particularly sharp focus by recent world events such as the war in Iraq, and by the fundamental role the European Union should play in the region in reconstruction and establishing a genuinely democratic society.

1.2 Against this backdrop, civil society's increasing interest in development policy and the international scene has been matched by a growing recognition on the part of international organisations that non-state actors (NSAs) are key actors in framing programmes and development policies.

1.3 An awareness of growing economic interdependence and the recognition that international balances are constructed on the glaringly obvious North-South divide have prompted wide sectors of civil society – the NSAs – to take a closer interest in all development-related issues, and to seek to take a more active part in the debate on social, economic and cultural inequality. This process of engagement, which began back in the 1980s, gathered pace in the following decade, when the changing global political scene and the demise of the bipolar world order removed a number of obstacles to broader expression and participation on the part of non-institutional players.

## **2. The European Union's development policies: legal bases and evolution of guiding principles**

2.1 The European Union's development policy is rooted in the 1957 Treaty of Rome. The Community Member States undertook to maintain bonds of solidarity with "the colonies and overseas territories" and to contribute to their development. In the 1960s, when most of these territories won their independence, their relations with the Community were governed by the Yaoundé Conventions (1963, 1969). Only in the 1970s, and in particular after the United Kingdom's accession, did

development policy begin to grow in complexity: these years were marked by the Lomé Convention and new links with a number of countries in North Africa, Asia and Latin America.

2.2 In 1993, the Maastricht Treaty on European Union, and more particularly its Articles 177 to 181, established a specific legal basis for European development policy. The Treaty defines its objectives as being: the sustainable economic and social development of the developing countries, the smooth and gradual integration of the developing countries into the world economy, and the campaign against poverty. The Treaty also emphasises the principles of freedom, democracy, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Further progress in the affirmation of human rights was marked by the Treaty of Amsterdam (1999) and the European Charter of Fundamental Rights agreed in Nice (2000).

2.3 The European Union and its Member States currently provide 55% of official aid to the developing countries, which gives some idea of the potential significance of the Union's policies and their impact in favour of genuinely fair and sustainable development. The main objective is to combat poverty, starting from the principle of human and social development which is fair, sustainable, and **participatory**.

2.4 The European Union is consequently emerging on the international scene as an active player in disseminating development policies based on an awareness of different cultures and geared to building up partnerships with third countries, treating them as full equals in spite of the difference in levels of development.

2.5 The Cotonou Agreement, signed in June 2000, marks a turning point in the EU's policies in this area. The agreement makes clear the link between social dialogue, civil dialogue, development aid and trade support. For the first time, the dialogue between institutions and NSAs is a legally-binding obligation, with the state and civil society assuming a mutually supporting role which should help to boost the impact of development programmes.

2.6 The background to the Cotonou Agreement is one of an overall shift in EU development policy. The Joint Declaration on EU development policy adopted back in November 2000 by the Council and the Commission urged the most wide-ranging participation of all segments of society in order to create the conditions for greater equity and for the strengthening of the democratic system in the developing countries; in 2001, the White Paper on European Governance (COM(2001) 428 final) underlined the importance of civil society and of the dialogue with governmental and non-governmental actors of third countries in defining policies with an international dimension.

### 3. **The new participatory approach in development policy**

3.1 EU development policy is thus moving towards a participatory approach which acknowledges civil society as a new actor in international relations, at least where development

policies are concerned. It embraces all local social players and, most importantly, promotes their involvement in the various stages of drafting and implementing national strategy documents. As part of this new vision, civil society should not only benefit from being more actively embedded within the decision-making processes, but should itself take on a larger part of the responsibility for the development process as a whole.

3.2 The political dimension of development has therefore been recognised, an area in which the equal contribution of the public and private sectors, economic and social actors and civil society – who should all be brought into the process – is essential. Only close cooperation between these social players can provide any guarantee of coherent development policies and maximise the impact of development aid.

3.3 Participation and dialogue with NSAs also generate considerable added value. Given that the concept of development is no longer seen in purely economic terms, but also includes a political and social dimension, involving civil society is an essential contributing factor in setting up or consolidating democratic systems. It also plays a significant part in conflict prevention and resolution. The Commission's Communication on linking relief, rehabilitation and development (COM(2001) 153 final) marked a step in this direction, arguing that closer coordination between all the relevant actors, including civil society groups as well as NGOs and international organisations, is crucial in responding effectively to crises.

3.4 More recently, the Conclusions of the 5th regional seminar of ACP economic and social interest groups, held in Yaoundé from 21 to 23 May 2003, also emphasised the key role of civil society in preventing conflicts and social tensions, given the large number of coups d'état and civil wars that persist in developing countries.

#### **4. Towards implementation of the participatory approach**

4.1 The Commission's Communication on the participation of non-state actors in EC development policy (COM(2002) 598 final) illustrates how the EU is striving to put the participatory approach into practice in development policy. Overall, considerable efforts and energy have been expended to this end, but full introduction of the approach still seems some way off. This is in part due to the fact that rules and procedures – where they exist – are sometimes not clearly formulated, as well as to the evident difficulties inherent in any thorough-going reform.

4.2 Formal involvement of civil society at all stages in the formulation and implementation of development policy exists only in the Cotonou Agreement. Under the agreement, NSAs must be informed and consulted about cooperation policies; have access to resources in order to support local development; be involved in the implementation of projects and programmes in areas or sectors that concern them; and be provided with capacity-building support. In this regard, it would be helpful for NSAs to be brought into the preparation of national development strategies. Numerous

speakers at the ACP civil society forum organised by the EESC in December 2002 described a serious lack of information and involvement, specifically in cooperation programmes.

4.3 The Barcelona Process is of key importance in this regard. Under the process, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (Euro-Med) was launched in November 1995 with the aim of:

- establishing a common area of peace and stability;
- creating an area of shared prosperity;
- developing human resources, and promoting understanding between cultures and exchanges between civil societies.

The programme has received funding (especially from MEDA sources) and is operational in many fields.

4.4 Other agreements, programmes or dedicated funds, however, make no provision for compulsory consultation or involvement of third country NSAs, although in practice the Commission has consulted with various elements of civil society on a more or less informal basis.

4.5 There are a number of examples of this: human rights NGOs from the EU countries were consulted in the programming phase of the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights, although only after the programming document had been adopted were field missions undertaken and contact made with local NGOs; turning to humanitarian assistance, while ECHO does not directly finance third country NSAs, it views them as local partners essential to identifying local needs; similarly, the European Union has established an institutional dialogue with Latin America through the Rio Group and, at subregional level, through the San José Group and Mexico, the Mercosur countries and the Andean Community; the most recent regulation governing the ALA programmes has accepted various NSAs into the sphere of humanitarian cooperation and, most importantly, has recommended that relations between ALA and EU partners – NSAs in particular – be stepped up.

4.6 It thus emerges from the Commission's communication that a relatively large amount of attention is paid to civil society in granting funds to carry out projects, but that it is not yet involved in policy-formation. Third country NSAs are basically seen as partners or indirect recipients of funds, but not as bearing any active responsibility for shaping development policy.

4.7 In 2001, the Commission initiated a process of "deconcentration" of programming to its delegations, transferring resources and responsibilities to them with a view, precisely, to introducing a more participatory approach.

4.8 The Commission is currently attempting to implement a range of initiatives to achieve real participation of NSAs, in part through enhanced capacity-building support for them. As far back as 1976, the Commission established budget line B7-6000 to encourage the participation of

European civil society in the dialogue with the Commission on development policy, and this was augmented in 1992 with budget line B7-6002, specifically intended to strengthen capacity and mobilise decentralised actors in the developing countries.

## **5. Obstacles and problems**

5.1 As has already been seen, the Commission generally expects NSAs to be brought into all the stages of the development process, from the formulation of national development policy to the preparation of national response strategies, as well as into the political dialogue, once the areas of intervention have been determined and, lastly, into implementation and review processes.

5.2 Strategy for the effective introduction of a participatory approach, however, runs up against a number of obstacles:

- there is still a noticeably high level of resistance on the part of most third country governments to dialogue with NSAs: even where such provision is made, there is virtually no real possibility for NSAs to take part in defining development programmes and strategies;
- the highly centralised administration of such countries constitutes a further obstacle which, because it does not encourage participation by actors who are not already at the centre, tends to marginalise local elements, especially in the least accessible – and often poorest – rural areas;
- there is a clear lack of specific rules and standards governing real participation by NSAs;
- civil society organisation in third countries is often of only the most rudimentary kind, and the main problem is frequently how to boost the capacity of the actors who are to participate in the process;
- a further problem is that of access to funding, closely tied in with that of dissemination of, and access to, information. Third country NSAs complain that there is often a total lack of any system for disseminating information;
- the established procedures for granting funding are in general excessively costly and complex, as the NSAs themselves frequently point out.

## **6. Role of the European Economic and Social Committee**

6.1 Against the backdrop described above, the European Economic and Social Committee assumes a key role as an intermediary and supporter of organised civil society, as clearly established in the Treaty of Rome in 1957 and recently emphasised by the Treaty of Nice.

6.2 As a consequence of the relevant provisions of the Treaty of Nice, in 2001 a protocol was signed between the Committee and the European Commission. Its purpose is to strengthen links between the two institutions, recognising the Committee as an essential forum for dialogue between the European institutions and civil society. Article 14 of the protocol promotes this active intermediary role of involving organised civil society, also in third countries.

6.3 It should however be pointed out that the Committee has long been working in this direction. There has been a wide range of activities geared to launching and sustaining dialogue with the various components of third country civil society, some of which have official European Union status, including regional seminars, summits of economic and social councils, study groups, follow-up committees, initiatives under the ACP civil society forum, the meetings and consultation between European and ACP economic and social operators (explicitly acknowledged by the Protocol to the Cotonou Agreement), the Euro-Med dialogue, the EU-India Round Table, and the framework for relations with the candidate countries and others on the Union's eastern borders.

## **7. Proposals and recommendations**

7.1 The Committee welcomes the Commission's steps to fully implement a participatory approach, reflecting civil society's essential role in development processes, as both target and, above all, an active agent in such processes.

7.2 While welcoming the approach adopted by the Commission, the Committee hopes that a common agreement will be reached in the short to medium term defining the practical arrangements and instruments for the participation of NSAs, culminating in a regulatory system conferring full legitimacy on dialogue. The starting-point for this dialogue must be the definition of precise objectives, models and common values to be promoted.

7.3 A "roadmap" must be prepared on the basis of broader and clearer selection systems in order to facilitate dialogue with NSAs and their participation, taking account not only of long-standing structures at local level, but also of more recent structures provided they appear to offer added value in terms of greater independence from governments. This need was highlighted by delegates to the Yaoundé regional seminar, with a call for clear eligibility criteria to be drawn up at national and local level in order to bring in all civil society stakeholders without exception.

7.4 The process of decentralisation to the delegations, which the Commission has commenced and which should be complete in 2003, must include mechanisms for a real exchange with third country NSAs. The delegations should therefore become a key factor in, and themselves a forum for, dialogue between civil society, national governments and the EU institutions. By virtue of their greater awareness of local circumstances, they should help define ways of optimising the financial resources used, and should assist NSAs in the transparent application of European funds. The Conclusions of the Yaoundé regional seminar specifically ask that each Commission delegation appoint an official to deal with relations with NSAs, as is already the case in some delegations.

7.5 The Committee recognises the particularly important role of NSAs from the EU countries in capacity-building for third country NSAs, while trusting that they will not automatically take the place of local actors. The Committee is convinced that the role of European NSAs in transferring know-how and boosting the capacity of their third country counterparts, so that they can work more effectively in the field, should be enhanced. European NSAs, however, have the readiest access to funding, and the risk that they might come to substitute third country NSAs should be avoided. All measures which could avert the growth of such an imbalance should therefore be stepped up.

7.6 The Committee welcomes the Commission's approach to boosting the capacity of third country NSAs, as it points to general information targeting various sectors of civil society, and the establishment or reinforcement of networks, including the use of the new technologies, as essential means. The Committee however urges that the importance of specific training initiatives also be considered.

7.7 Regarding means of access to funding, third country NSAs complain that even where well-structured NGOs meeting all the requirements of representativeness, transparency and democracy exist, they experience severe difficulty in gaining access to financing.

7.8 The EESC therefore considers it important to establish a constant and comprehensive flow of information at grassroots level. If development programmes are to achieve practical results, much broader participation by representative civil society organisations is essential.

7.9 For this reason, the Committee hopes that the procedures for access to European funds will be made easier, while complying with the rules of democracy and transparency. In particular, it hopes that the costs of submitting the relevant applications will be reduced. The language employed in the official documents is often excessively technical, and the documentation required very costly.

7.10 Concerning the use of funds for development policies, the Committee hopes that anti-corruption measures will also be strengthened. This should be one of the key criteria for granting funds.

7.11 To ensure that the participatory approach is implemented in practice, it is also proposed that arrangements be introduced to monitor the real involvement, in qualitative and quantitative terms, of NSAs in procedures for defining and assessing development policies in those countries receiving European funds. It is important, in this connection, that the strategies adopted by the Committee regarding impact assessment be examined and reinforced. The NSAs meeting in Yaoundé specifically called for such scoreboard monitoring to be taken into account by the ACP-EU institutions, including the Council of Ministers, the Joint Parliamentary Assembly and the European Commission in their own assessments. NSA involvement in development processes does not, of

course, end with access to finance, indeed, it only begins to be meaningful where NSAs can secure an active political role.

7.12 For the same reason, the Committee is convinced that initiatives by NSAs, such as the forum of employers' associations or the trade union committees within the Euromed and EU-Mercosur frameworks, must be supported by the Commission not only in order to strengthen social actors and increase cooperation between them, but also to ensure they are effectively involved in the political dialogue and in negotiations on bilateral regional agreements.

7.13 The Committee would also point out that inconsistencies and contradictions between EU policies and those of the Member States often occur. The EU must therefore act to set equal framework criteria for all the Member States, in order to make such policies more effective.

7.14 The Committee is convinced that full implementation of the participatory approach must necessarily take account of the objective of equality between the sexes. It therefore stresses the importance of boosting the role of women in cooperation policies, affirming their rights within development processes. It calls for dedicated gender equality initiatives to be launched, for focused training to be available to women, and for pro-active measures to be energetically implemented to ensure that women's interest groups are fully involved in development policies.

7.15 As suggested in earlier opinions, it would also be helpful for the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the International Labour Organization to join with the other European institutions in helping to strengthen and promote the social partners and civil society organisations in the developing countries.

7.16 Furthermore, the Committee regrets that only a very small portion of the funds (some 20%) are channelled directly to NSAs in the developing countries, which clearly runs counter to the recent participation-based approach which has been chosen as the method for strengthening development policies.

Brussels, 16 July 2003.

The President  
of the European Economic and Social Committee

The Secretary-General  
of the European Economic and Social Committee

**Roger Briesch**

**Patrick Venturini**

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**N.B.** Appendix overleaf.

**APPENDIX I**

**RELEVANT OPINIONS BY THE EESC**

CES 596/1997

**Development aid, good governance and the role of the socio-economic interest groups**

*Official Journal C 287 of 22.9.1997, p. 44*

CES 66/1999

**World Trade Organization (WTO)**

*Official Journal C 101 of 12.4.1999, p. 43*

CES 459/1999

**Relations between the European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean: socio-economic interregional dialogue**

*Official Journal C 169 of 16.6.1999, p. 49*

CES 561/1999

**Debt relief in the combating of poverty in LDCs**

*Official Journal C 209 of 22.7.1999, pp. 48-52*

CES 370/2000

**Making sure that EC aid produces the best possible results**

*Official Journal C 140 of 18.5.2000, pp.55-59*

CES 477/2000

**Follow-up of the World Summit of Social Development**

*Official Journal C 168 of 16.6.2000, pp.34-42*

CES 1191/2000

**Integrating environment and sustainable development into economic and development cooperation policy**

(COM(2000) 264 final)

*Official Journal C 014 of 16.1.2001, pp.87-91*

CES 478/2000

**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women**

*Official Journal C 168 of 16.6.2000, pp. 42-47*

CES 326/2001

**Coping with globalisation - the only option for the most vulnerable**

CESE 933/2003 Appendix 1 EN/o

CES 932/2001

**European Union negotiations with MERCOSUR and Chile: economic and social aspects**

*Official Journal C 260 of 17.9.2001, pp. 67-78*

CES 1332/2001

**Euro-Mediterranean partnership – review and prospects five years on**

*Official Journal C 036 of 8.2.2002, pp. 117-126*

CES 726/2001

**The preparation of a European Union strategy for sustainable development**

*Official Journal C 221 of 7.8.2001, pp. 169-177*

CES 1494/2001

**A sustainable Europe for a Better World**

*Official Journal C 048 of 21.2.2002, pp. 112-121*

CES 692/2002

**Communication from the Commission – Towards a global partnership for sustainable development**

*Official Journal C 221 of 17.9.2002, pp. 87-96*

CES 521/2002

**ACP-EU Partnership Agreement**

*Official Journal C 149 of 21.6.2002, pp. 38-45*

CES 195/2002

**Relations between the European Union and the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean**

*Official Journal C 094 of 18.4.2002, pp. 43-50*