

Manifesto for a genuine European civil dialogue

Today in the European Union, millions of citizens, freely and voluntarily joining together, are working in civil society organisations bearers, in the general interest of the peoples of the EU, of projects in the field of social integration, human rights, environment, development, culture, sports, etc.

These organisations give voice to concerns relating to their particular areas of action. They share a the same willingness to take part in the building of a Europe that respects human rights and the values that underpin them, that is concerned about sustainable development, that sets an example of international solidarity and embodies the ambition of a "living together" based on social justice, solidarity and equality between all citizens. Through their action, they contribute to the strengthening of the social and societal cohesion of the EU. This bestows on them an even more important role considering the economic and social crisis the EU is going through.

The leading organisations, connected through European networks, have already unveiled their most pressing demands regarding the sectors in which they are active. But they also share concerns and demands that stem from the wish to consolidate the place and role of organised civil society for the democratic life of the EU and, by so doing, to strengthen a European democracy that is more participatory and more deliberative. Such is the purpose of this manifesto.

For us, the democratic legitimacy of the European Union not only is rooted in a clear definition of its institutions' powers and responsibilities but it also implies that those institutions enjoy public confidence and can secure active involvement of citizens in the European venture and that active participation by all representative organised civil society players in the democratic life of the Union is guaranteed.

Participatory democracy meets the present-day needs of European governance by supplementing and reinforcing representative democracy. Involving organised civil society in policy-shaping and the preparations of decisions strengthens the democratic legitimacy of public institutions, of their work and activities. The quality of civil dialogue - like social dialogue, to which it is a necessary supplement - is an indicator of the state of health of our democracies.

Thus, civil society organisations, at both Member State and European level, are everywhere working actively to ensure that the voice of associations is heard by the public institutions.

At European level, many civil society players have been active in the process of building and unifying Europe. They have a key role to play in carrying forward this process so that it fully meets the expectations of the peoples of the European Union. Politicians are confronted with problems of growing complexity and scope, and the challenges facing the European Union are such that tackling them demands that account be taken of all grassroots stakeholders. At a time when many citizens feel that the European institutions are remote from their concerns, the stakes could not be higher.

In the run-up to the European elections, the undersigned European associative networks wish to call on all political parties. **In addition to the relatively permanent and structured sectoral dialogue that the European networks have succeeded in building up over the years with the European institutions, there is now a need to devise a structured, efficient and sustainable overall framework for European civil dialogue.**

In this respect, we consider that, beyond the Citizens' Agora initiative during its latest parliamentary term, the European Parliament has a decisive part to play in ensuring that the voice of associations is fully heard and acknowledged by all the European institutions, and that the contribution made by organised civil society is reflected in such a way that policies, in keeping with the Union's values, meet citizens' concerns and demands, so they can regain confidence in the EU's ability to respond to their needs.

We therefore expect that newly-elected members of the European Parliament will take active steps for civil dialogue to be recognised and will encourage its development, alongside the social dialogue which also needs to be strengthened.

If the Treaty of Lisbon is ratified by all the Member States, the new Treaty on the European Union (TEU) will include an Article 11 which brings recognition of the reality of participatory democracy, and which is the focus of our hopes and demands. We therefore expect candidates for the European elections to adopt a clear stance regarding our expectations, and to specify the contribution that the European Parliament could or should make to meeting them.

1. "The institutions shall, by appropriate means, give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action."

What we think

- The existing procedures and structures are very largely inapt, and there is little visible sign of the impact made by the contributions of civil society organisations and networks to framing EU policy.
- The European institutions must be more open about how the results of civil dialogue are reflected in their decision-making.

We call on the European Parliament to work for:

- further substantial progress regarding transparency in decision-making, especially at the Council (public nature of meetings, access to working documents, etc.), such transparency being needed if organised civil society is to be actively and effectively involved in consultations on EU policies;
- the EU institutions (European Parliament, European Council and European Commission) to enable and encourage greater participation on the part of civil society organisations in the process of shaping Community policies and decisions, and in their implementation. Dialogue with the European institutions should make it easier to take account of the dialogue that must take place within the Member States;
- the European institutions to report on the contributions stemming from dialogue with organised civil society and on whether or not those contributions have been taken into account. They should also report on the outcome of the decisions they take after consulting organised civil society.

2. "The institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society."

What we think

- Recognition of individuals' right of association should be given substance at European level by creating the appropriate European statutes.
- Civil dialogue at EU level should be based on associations or networks of associations that are recognised by civil society to be representative.

We call on the European Parliament to work for:

- the EU institutions, as in the case of social dialogue, to set up a formal framework for civil dialogue. Guidelines are needed. These must be based on a code of good practice governing consultation, agreed between the parties concerned;
- the statutes of the European association, mutual society and foundation to be introduced, in addition to the national statutes;
- transparent and public criteria governing the representativeness of European civil society organisations in the framework of civil dialogue to be defined and implemented, in coordination with the EU institutions and the organisations in question;
- other organisations which have a proven track record of contributing to the themes in discussion to be involved when required, in addition to those whose representativeness is already recognised.

3. "The European Commission shall carry out broad consultations with parties concerned in order to ensure that the Union's actions are coherent and transparent."

What we think

- Consultations on EU policies should take place from the earliest drafting stages through to evaluation of their implementation. This is a precondition for a truly democratic participatory process.
- Consultations must take heed of the contributions of civil society organisations and networks at both EU and Member State level.
- Civil society needs strong associations in the Member States. The picture is still too patchy. The European framework should enable a positive influence to be exerted on Member States practices where civil dialogue enjoys only modest legitimacy in the eyes of citizens.

We call on the European Parliament to work for:

- a consultation framework that permits a broad process. It should in particular be given a feasible timetable (deadlines for consultation, etc.);
- the consultation process to be governed by an interinstitutional agreement, ensuring an effective dialogue with all the European bodies concerned;
- the institutional framework and consultation practices at EU level to provide an example to the Member States where such practices are not yet in place or are not fully fledged. This

framework should also be able to draw upon best practices in the Member States, adapting them to the European setting.

Alongside the provisions of Article 11 of the TEU, we need the support of the members of the European Parliament if European civil dialogue is to be fully effective and efficient and is to be recognised. We therefore call on MEPs to assist in:

- officially proclaiming 2011 the **European Year of Volunteering**, which would provide an ideal opportunity to highlight the role of volunteers and their representative organisations in economic, social and civic life;
- holding an **annual organised civil society conference** as an privileged forum for debating the progress of the European venture and the options for the public policies of the Union;
- appointing a **European commissioner responsible for relations with organised civil society** and civil dialogue, thereby giving this process full credibility;
- developing a **coherent funding policy** for representative organised civil society players at European level, so that they can fully play their part in civil dialogue;
- putting into place a **framework for permanent, structured civil dialogue** between civil society organisations, and between them and the EU institutions, based on the existing institutional framework.

In conclusion, we believe that in the run-up to the European elections, the political parties should undertake to create a climate in which civil dialogue can grow and flourish at both national and European levels, and to ensure that the provisions of the new treaty, giving practical substance to participatory democracy, are brought to life.

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