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WORKSHOP

PERSPECTIVES OF DEVELOPING THE CIVIL DIALOGUE UNDER THE TREATY OF LISBON

Tuesday 3 June 2008
3.00 pm - 6.30 pm
Brussels, Room ASP 3E2

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Perspectives of developing the civil dialogue under the Treaty of Lisbon

European Civil Dialogue was influenced by the pace of European integration. It's a question of rights and duties of citizens to take part in this dialogue. It's a question often of culture and tradition in different countries and also in different sectors. For example, the agricultural, the environmental sectors and BEUC have a very efficient dialogue with institutions; other sectors are lagging behind.

From the 1950s to the 1980s the single market was deemed the most effective tool for overcoming divisions within the EU. This was the driving force of integration. It has enabled Europe to overcome the competitive handicap as against the USA. In the last 25 years European integration has become more and more driven by the forces of globalisation and the fear of Europe being marginalised by other regions, in particular dynamic Asian countries.

We are thus witnessing a progressive shift of powers and responsibilities from the local level to the regional, national, continental and even global level. And sometimes, because of the subsidiarity principle, the shift can go in the opposite direction.

Brussels has become the most important city for lobbyists of all kinds and an intensive dialogue is taking place. We are witnessing a progressive 'Europeanisation' of society, which is marked by delays and blockages because the economic and political process has its winners and its losers.

In this process of 'Europeanisation' it is logical that the Lisbon Treaty - and in particular Article 11 - is underlining the importance of participative democracy at the European level, or the participation of citizens in the democratic procedures of the Union.

It is worth looking at four players in particular: the EP; the Council; the Economic and Social Committee; and the Commission.

Article 11 underlines the need for all the institutions of the EU to hold an open, transparent and regular dialogue with civil society.

The EP obviously has had a positive experience with the AGORA last year and wants to continue with it - codecision has become the norm and so EP's role is increasing.

The Council will introduce transparency to its Council Meetings which will facilitate the participation of citizens and thus increase EU citizenship. The main target in the Council is, however, still the national level.

The Economic and Social Committee has its liaison committee now representing European civil society organisations. The Committee is part of the institutional framework representing civil society. It is one of the bridges between Europe and its citizens, and it can be a window of opportunities for European civil society players.

The Commission is, compared to many member states, rather transparent in its decision making process, for example the White Papers, Green Papers and lengthy consultations.

There are two important questions to be answered. Firstly, how is civil society itself prepared for a structured permanent participation? Secondly, why is it important for citizens to directly participate in a functioning democracy at the European level?

I believe that as we are witnessing a progressive shift of powers and representation to the European level, this has to be accompanied by democratic control. Ergo: more power to the EP; more control of power to national parliaments; more participation - active and passive - by citizens. This is crucial to the well-functioning of democracy in the EU.

What is influencing our decision making? I call this the Bermuda Triangle: It is politics, economics and the media. Unfortunately all three parties are short term thinkers. So if we really want to influence the political process, the Civil Society has to dialogue with the politicians. The civil society as a whole is not under the pressure to regain election, to make profit, or looking for sensation. Slavery, for example, was not abolished because of politicians, but because of civil society. Politicians need a strong backing from civil society to implement the necessary reforms.

The European institutions and the Lisbon Treaty are reacting in this direction, but civil society organisations are often lagging behind. This is due to the following factors: they lack awareness at the national and regional level of what is happening; there is frustration at national and regional level because the EU level is taking the lead - this has provoked some resistance; there is a lack of professionalism, expertise, representative-ness and knowledge; information from national to the EU level is poor and vice versa. There is also a lack of funding - as civil society organisations are vital for a democracy, they should get funding in the same way as political parties do (but problem under which criteria; it remains a political decision).

There is also the question of whether the statements of European organisations are relevant enough. The smallest denominator factor means that it is often necessary for European decision makers to have direct contact with representatives of the national level, such as is done with AGORA.

There is also a lack of visibility of EU matters, largely because the media are not interested in what is going on in Brussels and because members of the Council of Ministers don't communicate what and why they are deciding together.

Nevertheless, in time with more competences for the Union the press will become more aware and thus the coverage will be improved, and the EU citizens will become more involved. Participatory democracy will eventually get a better chance at the EU level.

Brussels, 3 June 2008