

Organised Civil Society and European Governance

ECOSOC Conference

Brussels, 8 and 9 November 2001

Round Table on the theme:

Organised Civil society, participatory democracy and the reform of modes of European governance

Remarks

Ralph Hallo, President, European Environmental Bureau

.....
Introduction

I would like to begin by thanking the Economic and Social Committee for organising this conference and for inviting me to address it. I am speaking on behalf of the European Environmental Bureau, a federation of more than 130 organisations in Europe, including all 15 member states and many of the candidate member states. These remarks are being made following consultation within the EEB and with other civil society groups, including social, development, human rights and other environmental groups.

I will take up the three elements of the title of the round table in reverse order, beginning with European governance and participatory democracy and concluding with remarks on the definition of civil society.

European governance and participatory democracy

The key to reform of European governance (i.e. decisionmaking) is transparency and strengthening of role of citizens and their organisations and strengthening the role of parliaments. The key to reform of European governance is not the creation or perpetuation of institutions which claim to represent civil society.

Transparency means opening up the EU institutions so that citizens and their organisations can discover, or better yet, be informed when policy and legislation is in preparation. The White Paper on Governance has made some interesting suggestions for ways to do this but these suggestions still need to be further worked out.

There is a need for a formal mechanism

It is essential that openness exist from the beginning. Thus, the Commission should be required to establish a mechanism to inform the European citizens and their organisations of the start of policy making or work on new legislation. The Council should deliberate and decide in openness, just as national parliaments do and as the European Parliament does.

There is a need for ongoing participation

Citizens and their organisations have a right to see and comment on policy, legislation and decisions as they are being developed. Structured and open consultation should become the rule.

There is a need to take advantage of the new electronic information technologies

To reach out to every corner of Europe and create the opportunity for broader participation, the maximum use of electronic tools, such as the Commission's website, should be made.

In sum, early and ongoing consultation with citizens and their organisations should form part of the preparatory process of every policy and legislative proposal. This is the kind of public participation we should be encouraging.

Civil Society

Does this require a renewed, reinvigorated ECOSOC?

ECOSOC suffers from a number of significant handicaps which will need to be addressed before it could be said to be a forum for civil society representation to the EU institutions: it is government-appointed – by the Council on the basis of nominations from member state governments, institutionalized, and has only an advisory function. It represents the social partners – employers and trade unions – well, but is not sufficiently representative of civil society.

The advisory function in particular raises concerns. To date, it is not clear that the decisionmaking institutions (Commission, Parliament and Council) have paid much attention to ECOSOC's opinions. The lack of weight given to ECOSOC's opinions may be related to its structure, its consensus-based opinions or doubts about its representativeness.

This raises the question of whether it is worthwhile for civil society groups to invest their scarce resources in ECOSOC. ECOSOC activity would inevitably divert attention from the other institutions.

A stronger role for ECOSOC also raises the issue of whether the position of the European Parliament is being undermined. We support the strengthening of the role of the European Parliament, as an elected, open and accountable body. The European Parliament, as is the case with other parliaments, is meant to act in the general interest, after having considered the positions of the various interested groups. We see no need for a second, parallel institution to assemble and articulate the viewpoints of these interests.

A positioning of one institution, ECOSOC, as the forum for civil society advice to the EU institutions threatens also to create a special, privileged status for those organisations with representation in ECOSOC.

This is a misunderstanding of civil society, even organised civil society. Civil society in our view is not just the organised professional networks of organisations with a European presence or capability. Civil society is also the ad hoc, the local, the momentary, impermanent manifestations of citizen involvement and interest in the decisionmaking on EU matters.

Organisations and networks operating at European level can and do – directly and through their membership - make the link with local and national organisations.

Moreover, we question whether defining civil society as the social partners plus other groups is appropriate. When the definition of civil society is stretched so far that it also include employers organisations, the definition begins to lose its meaning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we place priority on the establishment of mechanisms to open up the institutions and to enable them to reach out to citizens in every corner of Europe and to allow these citizens and their organisations the fullest possible participation in decisionmaking. This means the establishment of structured consultation directly – not via institutionalized intermediaries - with European civil society, at all levels. We see much less in the perpetuation of parallel, privileged, advisory functions.

Thank you.