

EU Civil Society Contact Group

Civil Dialogue: Making it work better

Presentation

1. Civil dialogue at a turning point

The role and contribution of civil society organisations to the policy process has been increasingly acknowledged by European institutions throughout the 90s, amongst others as a consequence of the need to bring the “EU closer to its citizens”. Over the last 15 years, fairly structured practices of dialogue between European institutions and NGOs were developed in a wide range of sectors, and supported by a more and more elaborated legal framework.

Time for a coherent and comprehensive approach - Yet, after more than a decade of civil dialogue development, some major shortcomings can be noticed, amongst which:

- Lack of coherence between (and within) sectors and institutions
- “Major issue” approach, which sets aside a whole range of issues
- Lack of involvement of national NGOs

The need to adopt a more coherent and comprehensive approach to civil dialogue has to be seen through the lens of some new or increasing challenges facing NGOs:

Civil vs. stakeholder dialogue- One of the growing principles of “governance” is *stakeholder* dialogue. Whereas civil society organizations represent general interest, other “interested parties” (many from the corporate sector) are included into many forms of dialogue. Can general and private interests be put on an equal footing? To what extent does civil dialogue differ from a broader stakeholder dialogue? How to differentiate between the two processes?

Increasing pressure on NGOs: towards a backlash? As a foreseeable consequence of the development of participatory democracy and of the innovative character of civil dialogue, NGOs are facing increasing critics, particularly with regard to their representativity, legitimacy and transparency. *Accreditation* has become another leitmotiv of this debate, as well as the status of European association. It is more time than ever for NGOs to develop a common *positive* and *pro-active* (rather than defensive) approach, based on concrete background.

Enlargement and civil society- The structure of civil society organizations and particularly NGOs in the new Member States has been deeply re-shaped in the last decade, as a response to internal and external changes. To what extent does this impact on the structure of civil dialogue?

Article 47 of the Constitutional Treaty, which acknowledged the concept of participatory democracy, could have partly contributed to meet these challenges. Now that the future of the Constitutional Treaty is subject to question, we need to reflect over the developments of the last decades to build upon successful experiences and tackle the remaining weaknesses. This will be crucial if we want the concept of EU participatory democracy to become reality.

2. Objective of the study: providing a trans-sectoral NGO input into the current debate

The objective of the study is to review existing practices of civil dialogue on EU-related issues in the seven sectors covered by the Civil Society Contact Group¹, both at EU and national level, in order to:

1. provide an overview of existing practices
2. identify good and bad practices
3. draft recommendations and provide common input into the current debate on civil dialogue

Added value of the study - what's new? - The CSCG covers seven major sectors in which civil dialogue takes very different forms: the study will therefore provide a more **coherent** and **comprehensive** insight on concrete implementation. Besides, the study will provide a **stakeholder perspective** that puts rhetoric into the perspective of reality. It is also based on a **two-way process**, which will allow to review our own and the institutions' practices and at the same time to learn from the experience of other sectors.

3. Methodology: mapping EU level dialogue and case studies

The study will be organized around a mapping of EU level civil dialogue, which will be completed by case studies reviewing different models of dialogue (including their implementation at national level).

EU level: mapping structures in place

Considering the structure of the Civil Society Contact Group, the study is an opportunity to provide a comprehensive (though not exhaustive) evaluation of the dialogue that happens at EU level, from the perspective of different sectors. This will allow us to identify the EU civil dialogue "acquis" and see where potential weaknesses are.

In this view a European questionnaire has been developed, that will be sent to and discussed with European NGO networks, members of the Civil Society Contact Group, as well as national organizations taking part in EU level dialogue

Reviewing different models of dialogue through case studies

The general mapping of EU level dialogue will be illustrated by case studies of different "models", which were identified as particularly relevant to the study in that they allowed a real participation of NGOs, are particularly innovative or, on the contrary, were identified as a "bad practices" of dialogue or "missed opportunities".

Although the case studies involve a limited number of models, it will allow us to go beyond rhetoric and see how the idea of participatory democracy are concretely put into practice. The case studies chosen are:

- Constitutional Treaty
- Service directive
- Corporate Social Responsibility Forum
- Open Method of Coordination on Social inclusion
- Trade Dialogue

4. Timeframe

The study will be published in June 2006, so as to provide timely input in such debates as Plan D, the feedback process on the Constitutional Treaty and the "transparency initiative".

¹ environment, social, development, women, culture, health and human rights