

**Subcommittee**  
**Civil society organisations**

Brussels, 22 September 1999

**OPINION**  
of the  
Economic and Social Committee  
on  
**The role and contribution of civil society organisations in the building of Europe**

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At its plenary session on 28 January 1999 the Economic and Social Committee decided, under Rule 23(3) of its Rules of Procedure, to draw up an own-initiative opinion on:

*The role and contribution of civil society organisations in the building of Europe.*

In accordance with Rules 11(4) and 19(1) of its Rules of Procedure the Committee set up a subcommittee to prepare its work on this subject.

The subcommittee adopted its draft opinion on 30 August 1999. The rapporteur was **Mrs Sigmund**.

At its 366th plenary session (meeting of 22 September 1999) the Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 116 votes to 2, with 13 abstentions:

## 1. Introduction

1.1 On the initiative of its president, **Mrs Rangoni Machiavelli**, the ESC will hold a conference in October this year to discuss the role and contribution of civil society organisations in the building of Europe. Specific proposals are to be drawn up by three working groups. The topic chosen is a logical follow-up to the approach developed by the Committee in its 1992 opinion on a Citizens' Europe<sup>1</sup>. The conference is not therefore intended to be a "one-off" event, but a prelude to the Committee's programme for the next few years.

1.2 The present ESC opinion has been prepared by a subcommittee so that the event can be facilitated through appropriate preparatory work. The subcommittee members did not see it as their role to propose ready-made solutions; rather they have tried to organise the subject matter, identify the key players and define the institutional framework for concrete proposals. The final part of the report contains specific proposals that could serve as a basis for discussion in the conference's working groups.

## 2. General comments

2.1 People at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are experiencing far-reaching changes which affect not just the substance but also the structure of their lives.

2.2 The end of 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the creation in Europe of social laws which would lead in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the welfare state. Their importance for peace, political freedom, economic performance and social cohesion is unquestionable. But there is also a need to respond to new

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<sup>1</sup> OJ C 313 of 30.11.92, p. 34

challenges, such as globalisation, though many questions as to the form and content of these changes remain unanswered.

2.3 A reform debate is of course also taking place at European Community level. The evolution of objectives between the time of the founding treaties and the Amsterdam Treaty necessitates structural reforms that should be set in train without delay.

2.3.1 It should not be forgotten that the driving force behind European integration was not the economic dimension alone, but the desire to safeguard peace, which is indeed the first thing mentioned in the preamble to the ECSC Treaty (safeguarding world peace; contribution which an organised and vital Europe can make to civilisation; helping to raise the standard of living).

2.3.2 Accordingly, the remit of the European Union has since expanded to embrace not just the original, purely economic, spheres but also the environment, health and consumer protection, as well as education, social policy and employment.

2.3.3 All this illustrates that European integration should be seen not as a single event, but as a process that is not only subject to change but also capable of responding to change. This is how we should interpret the preamble to the Maastricht Treaty, in which the European Union is not defined for all time, but the process is deliberately left open by referring to "an ever closer Union".

2.4 The European Union must currently address such sensitive and sometimes very emotionally charged issues as enlargement, common foreign and security policy and a whole host of institutional matters. At the same time it faces low confidence among its citizens, who accuse it of inefficiency, point to democratic deficits and call for greater responsiveness to grassroots opinion. European integration needs the commitment and support of ordinary people more urgently than ever before, and at present it does not seem to have enough of either.

2.5 It is precisely in connection with this issue of (inadequate) responsiveness to grassroots opinion that the notion of "civil society" is constantly being mentioned. This concept is cited and invoked in the most diverse contexts, and its relevance is not always obvious. It is almost as if "civil society" has become a vogue expression that is often used without any clear indication of what the speaker really means. Experience has shown that a discussion is only fruitful if agreement is first reached on the basic premises. The subcommittee therefore felt it was essential first to describe the historical background and development of civil society, and then, using scientific theories, to provide a definition of the concept<sup>2</sup> that actually reflects political reality.

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See points 6.1 and 7.1

### 3. Historical overview

3.1 The concept of civil society in Western political thought has undergone differing interpretations throughout its history. It is important to transcend these now by providing an all-embracing definition.

3.2 Until the Enlightenment, civil society denoted a particular form of political organisation, namely one that was subject to the rule of law. For Aristotle, the *koinonia politiké* was a dimension of society that encompassed and prevailed over all other dimensions. Cicero talked about a *societas civilis*. This political definition of civil society still applied in the Middle Ages, although it took on the new connotation of the antithesis to religious community. The term was thus secularised. It is interesting to note that according to this interpretation, "civil society" and "state" are virtually synonymous. Thus *good citizenship* is the moral value associated with civil society, which in the Roman tradition means members of civil society fulfilling their duties as citizens.

3.3 From about 1750 onwards the expression came to mean almost the opposite. Civil society was no longer bound up with the notion of the state, but increasingly represented a counterweight to the state. This was because the emerging bourgeoisie with its liberal world view appropriated the concept to denote a social sphere separate from the political sphere, comprising the market and people's private lives. The associated moral and social ethic was no longer "good citizenship" but "good breeding", i.e. good manners and impeccable social conduct.

3.4 It was this liberal approach that Ferguson had in mind when he sang the praises of civil society. It was precisely this apolitical interpretation that disturbed 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophers such as Hegel and Marx, who attacked it for being biased and one-sided. They identified civil society largely with the bourgeois individualistic world view and the formalised regulation of relationships through civil law.

3.5 Liberalism and socialism crossed swords over the concept of civil society, now defined as the antithesis of the political sphere: liberalism saw civil society as the stronghold of individual freedom and contractual relations, socialism saw it as the expression of oppression and the class divide.

3.6 Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, a number of political and social thinkers have been trying to transcend this clash between an "ancient-medieval" and a "modern-bourgeois" version of civil society, and, within the latter, between the liberal and socialist versions.

3.7 A new interpretation of modern civil society, inspired by Tocqueville, Durkheim and Weber, is emerging, based on four principles:

- *Civil society is typified by more or less formalised institutions*: this institutional network forms an autonomous social sphere that is distinct from both the state and from family and domestic life in the

strict sense. These institutions have many functions (not just economic, but also religious, cultural, social, etc.) and are crucial to social integration;

- *Individuals are free to choose whether to belong to civil society institutions*: they are never forced to join any of the associations, businesses or groups which make up civil society, either through a political commitment or supposedly "natural" allegiance to a particular group;
- *The framework of civil society is the rule of law*: the democratic principles of respect for private life, freedom of expression and freedom of association provide the normative framework of civil society. Although civil society is independent of the state, it is certainly not an area outside the law;
- *Civil society is the place where collective goals are set and citizens are represented*: civil society organisations play an important role as "intermediaries" between the individual and the state. The democratic process could not take place without their mediatory role.
- Civil society introduces the dimension of subsidiarity, a concept derived from Christian doctrine, which opens up the possibility of establishing levels of authority which are independent of the state but recognised by it.

#### **4. Civil society: the common denominator for democratic movements in Europe**

4.1 Social changes in Europe have helped to provoke a broad international debate over the past few years, in theory and in practice, about the term "civil society". Remarkably, citizens' groups and movements from western and eastern Europe are addressing the matter together, despite their very different histories. This has become a much-debated subject in the search for a social model that offers a middle way between unbridled individualism and the trend towards total authoritarian collectivism.

4.2 Whereas in western Europe and the United States the main question was how ordinary people could rebuild a sense of solidarity and so strengthen the social ties which a community needs, the initial concern in central and eastern Europe was to dismantle the central government control inherited from the Communist system.

4.3 The difficulties currently besetting both western and eastern European countries are not purely economic, social and financial. They are mostly related to internal changes in the way civil society is organised, and to the limits of state action in a complex society.

4.4 The countries of central and eastern Europe had not succeeded, and in certain cases have still not completely succeeded, either in building confidence in the new institutions or in creating the necessary structures for the existence of a strong civil society. This situation is particularly relevant for the European Union in the context of enlargement. The ESC, too, has launched a large number of

initiatives to support this reconstruction process in the CEEC, and these activities have a high priority in its current work programme.

## 5. An attempt to define civil society

5.1 There is no hard and fast definition of civil society. Because the term is so closely associated with specific historical developments in individual societies and so normative, it can be defined only loosely, as a society that embraces democracy. Civil society is a collective term for all types of social action, by individuals or groups, that do not emanate from the state and are not run by it. What is particular to the concept of civil society is its dynamic nature, the fact that it denotes both situation and action. The participatory model of civil society also provides an opportunity to strengthen confidence in the democratic system so that a more favourable climate for reform and innovation can develop.

## 5.2 Some components in the concept of civil society

5.2.1 The development of civil society is a cultural process, and "**culture**"<sup>3</sup> therefore determines the definition of civil society and has a bearing on all the concepts listed below. If we take the very broad definition of culture as a code of values that apply to the members of a society, then culture also shapes the areas in which civil society operates.

- **Pluralism:** In a pluralist society every member of the community determines his or her contribution, and the community tries to improve the conditions of co-existence. This applies not only to the substance but also to the form of action taken; thus civil society also links diverse social groups through the way in which ideas are exchanged and social contacts established, thus lending some stability to their communication efforts. What is remarkable is that this public discourse is not purely factual, but that the parties involved also exchange value judgements. However, this co-ordination of different views and perspectives does not happen automatically, but requires a constant will to achieve consensus. In a pluralist society, all individuals recognise each other as having equal rights and engage with each other in a public debate. All this takes place on the basis of **tolerance** and **free will**. An example is the democratic culture of the multiparty political system.
- **Autonomy:** Ordinary people determine the pattern of their social actions themselves. These must take place, however, within a state that has been fashioned by its citizens, a state that provides the framework for society to function through basic rights anchored in a constitution. But autonomy also requires independent institutions that protect non-material values - such as education, religion and culture - that guarantee human dignity, a basic right of which the state is not the sole guarantor.

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In broad terms culture can be said to define the past and presently prevailing system of values and needs (material or not material); culture determines the hierarchy of values and needs as well as the 'means' by which values are served and needs are satisfied or met.

- **Solidarity:** Civil society is underpinned by a "culture of solidarity", which manifests itself in a willingness to place limits on one's own interests and take on obligations as the prerequisite for acting in the common interest. People's actions are determined by their own lives (culture, upbringing, education, experience) and they benefit from their interaction with others.
- **Public awareness:** Civil society establishes a climate of communication and so creates a social context of "political awareness". This political awareness is characterised by very grassroots-oriented patterns of communication. The **information society** has become very relevant to such awareness. Even if, as a kind of "non-organised civil society", the information society is still to a certain extent an elite community, it is likely to provoke radical changes, not only in the shape of civil society but also in the way it operates.
- **Participation:** in a flourishing democracy there are two ways in which citizens can be politically represented or active:
  - i) through a range of political institutions at different levels: citizens participate mainly by taking part in election debates and subsequent ballots;
  - ii) through the action of interest groups and citizens' initiatives: people belong to groups that build up expert and grassroots knowledge of the social issues in question. These bodies also participate in public information and communication processes, so helping to create a general perception of the common good. The term "civil society" implies this type of participation.
- **Education** is a fundamental element of civil society. The basic values of human society are communicated through education. Those involved in education establish the principles according to which civil society develops. On no account therefore should education policy be the sole preserve of the state.
- **Responsibility:** civil society is not just the place where individual rights are exercised: these rights are accompanied by obligations in the common interest. In fulfilling these obligations, members of civil society must be accountable to the other members. This is why civil society is the ideal context for practising a particular type of "good citizenship", because it is a community of interests.
- **Subsidiarity:** The grassroots level plays a primary role in this political and social system; higher authorities only come into play when lower levels cannot cope. In the context of civil society, subsidiarity must also be understood as an external factor, i.e. as a recommendation that citizens themselves should be left to deal with matters that concern them.

### 5.3 Civil society in the current debate

#### 5.3.1 The theoretical discussion is broadly based on three approaches:

- The **liberal tradition** sees the citizen as an economic, rational element of society defined primarily in terms of his or her rights and duties. Citizens organise themselves in interest groups and ensure that the state guarantees universally valid, individual freedoms. Civil society is realised through the broadest possible application of individual rights. The focus is on applying liberal principles.
- According to the **theory of communitarianism**, citizens are members of a community established on the basis of values they themselves have defined. People must adapt their behaviour to the objectives of the community, which for its part must act as a system of links between individual and state.
- The third theoretical approach is **discursive democracy**, which lies somewhere between the liberal and communitarianist positions; this theory is based on the concepts of communication and interaction: civil society creates a "political awareness" in which democratic debate not only generates opinions, but also establishes standards, so that the information process also becomes a decision-making process through which civil society agrees on common values. These values - for example in the sphere of justice or protection of minorities - must then be implemented by the democratic institutions (the state).

## 6. State, market and civil society

6.1 There is no doubt that the social state based on the rule of law has enhanced the development of political freedom, economic strength and social cohesion. The typical dual model of former political and economic theories, which revolved around the two poles of "state" and "market", more or less ignored all relationships outside that context, relationships that most closely reflect human and social reality.

6.2 The concept of civil society is thus very important as the third component of the state system. Whereas the "statist society" model sees the citizen first and foremost as a citizen of the state (in relationships determined by the state), the "market society" model sees the citizen as a market player. The citizen as a member of civil society (*homo civicus*) mediates between the two, by embodying all three aspects (*homo politicus*, *homo economicus* and *homo civicus*).

## 7. Civil society organisations

7.1 Civil society organisations can be defined in abstract terms as *the sum of all organisational structures whose members have objectives and responsibilities that are of general interest and who also act as mediators between the public authorities and citizens*. Their effectiveness is crucially dependent on the extent to which their players are prepared to help achieve consensus through public and democratic debate and to accept the outcome of a democratic policy-making process.



7.2 Civil society organisations can also be viewed dynamically as a locus of collective learning. In complex societies, which cannot be run on a centralised basis, problems can only be resolved with active grassroots participation. Various forms of social experimentation and forums for pluralist discussion are a prerequisite for an "intelligent" democracy that can generate an ongoing process of social learning. In this sense, civil society is a "school for democracy".

7.3 This also applies by analogy to the Community sphere, where the role of the nation state is also relativised by the process of European integration and people increasingly sense that the nation state's traditional claims to sovereignty no longer reflect social reality. Employment and environmental problems and issues of welfare and social justice can no longer be dealt with exclusively at national level.

## 8. **Players in civil society organisations**

8.1 Civil society organisations include:

- the so-called labour-market players, i.e. the social partners;
- organisations representing social and economic players, which are not social partners in the strict sense of the term;
- NGOs (non-governmental organisations) which bring people together in a common cause, such as environmental organisations, human rights organisations, consumer associations, charitable organisations, educational and training organisations, etc.;
- CBOs (community-based organisations, i.e. organisations set up within society at grassroots level which pursue member-oriented objectives), e.g. youth organisations, family associations and all organisations through which citizens participate in local and municipal life;
- religious communities.

## 9. **The role of civil society organisations at Community level - the civil dialogue**

9.1 In the context of European integration, civil society organisations have also been set up at Community level, though their make-up and representativeness vary. These organisations range from ad-hoc lobby groups to highly organised associations, all claiming representation and co-decision rights for their particular area of interest. However, only those with a certain basic organisational machinery and which are qualitatively and quantitatively representative of their particular sector can be expected to make a positive contribution to European integration.

9.2 One common feature of these civil society organisations at European level is the intermediary role they which they have taken over from the national level. The European social partners

are a case in point, having employed their communication strategies in a Community-level institutionalised negotiation process. This social dialogue is essentially a decision-making process based on consensus; since the coming into force of the Amsterdam Treaty, the parties in this process act on a quasi-constitutional basis. The importance of social dialogue in core areas of social policy, especially labour relations, is undisputed. Of particular interest, however, is the fact that it serves as a model for applying a form of communication intrinsic to civil society, in which dialogue is a constantly developing, goal-oriented process. The social partners have thus set standards for a new type of political culture which should embrace areas outside the social dialogue.

9.3 There have already been numerous efforts to set up structures for democratic discourse alongside the social dialogue at European level. In the Commission, Directorate-General V plays a key role in promoting civil dialogue at a practical level. It initiated the first European Social Policy Forum, held in March 1996, where the concept of "civil dialogue" was introduced. In its Communication "Promoting the role of voluntary organisations and foundations in Europe"<sup>4</sup>, the Commission took up this suggestion and set as a political objective "the building over time of a strong civil dialogue at European level to take its place alongside the policy dialogue with the national authorities and the social dialogue with the social partners". In its opinion on this Communication<sup>5</sup>, the Committee discussed the question further, observing that: "By organising themselves, citizens provide themselves with a more effective means of impressing their views on different society-related issues on political decision-makers. Strengthening non-parliamentary democratic structures is a way of giving substance and meaning to the concept of a Citizens' Europe."

9.4 Civil dialogue is set to become the communication forum for Community-level civil society organisations. However, it would be wrong to see it as providing an alternative to, or as competing with, the social dialogue. Rather, civil dialogue should be considered a necessary complement to the social dialogue, in which the social partners - depending on the areas to be dealt with - will participate just as all the other relevant players in civil society. It is in Europe's interest to improve and develop all structures which allow its citizens to participate in the common project of European integration.

9.5 A political awareness must be developed in Europe that provides transparency and requires cooperation. In modern societies it is the mass media above all that create such political awareness, but the media tend not to be very interested in European issues. Reports are generally limited to topical matters and allusions to incompetence which are intended to boost sales. So it is hardly surprising that people's distrust of "Brussels", which they equate with aloof bureaucracy and opaque decision-making structures, has grown. "Out of touch with ordinary people" and "democratic deficit" have become catchwords associated with Europe.

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<sup>4</sup> COM(97) 241 final

<sup>5</sup> OJ C No 95 of 30/3/1998, p. 99

9.6 Civil society organisations at European level therefore have the important task of contributing to a public and democratic discourse. Through its remit as a forum for civil society organisations, the Committee can ensure contact with grassroots concerns and contribute to the democratic policy-making process. Its members speak directly for civil society organisations, and together they represent that network of interactions, the "real world", that forms the necessary basis for action in a civil society.

9.7 In this connection the Committee regrets that both the communication "Promoting the role of voluntary organisations and foundations in Europe" and the report on the Second European Social Policy Forum 1998 mention only the Commission and the European Parliament as forums for civil dialogue, omitting any reference to the Committee.

## 10. **The Economic and Social Committee as the representative of civil society organisations**

10.1 By setting up the Economic and Social Committee, the Rome Treaties gave sectoral interest groups access to the European decision-making process and made the Committee the representative of civil society organisations at Community level. Hence, the Committee can trace its special role as the representative of civil society organisations back to both its institutional status and remit, as well as its membership. It should therefore set a clear course for the further development of civil dialogue at the conference in October.

### 10.2 **Committee members**

10.2.1 Under Article 257 of the EC Treaty, the Committee comprises "representatives of the various categories of economic and social activity, in particular, representatives of producers, farmers, carriers, workers, dealers, craftsmen, professional occupations and representatives of the general public". This purely indicative list is deliberately left open, as best befits the evolving nature of civil society organisations.

It is not clear whether current membership of the Committee really reflects social changes that have taken place over the past 40 years.

10.2.2 Committee members are generally nominated by national organisations, but they are not bound to follow those organisations' instructions. In other words, they are independent. But members naturally reflect in their work the reasons for which they were nominated. In this way they represent the pluralist interests of civil society organisations. In addition, the Committee's members must respect their duty to serve the common interest: "The members of the Committee may not be bound by any mandatory instructions. They shall be completely independent in the performance of their duties, in the general interest of the Community." (third paragraph of Article 258 of the EC Treaty). This means that political decision-making in the Committee is not the automatic outcome of competition between interest groups, and its way of working more or less reflects the modus operandi of civil

society organisations. The particular process for drafting opinions in the Committee (study group - section - plenary session) is also consistent with the principle of consensus, which is the basis for negotiated action in civil society. Thus any lack of diversity in the membership of the Committee is partly offset by the rules governing the exercise of their activities and the form of the decision-making process.

10.2.3 The Committee's legitimacy as the representative body of civil society organisations derives not only from its status as an institution of the European Community, but also from the existence of its three Groups. The Committee incorporated this right to form groups from the Council's nomination guidelines of 1958 into its Rules of Procedures, in the first place presumably to simplify its work. But the intention was also to make clear that the Committee was a forum not for national delegations but for European organisations with similar interests. Thus the Committee also sees itself as speaking on behalf of civil society organisations.

### 10.3 **Role of the Committee as a Community institution**

10.3.1 The Committee's role as a consultative body is best summed up in terms of its relationship with other bodies, particularly the European Parliament: the Committee guarantees the implementation of the participatory model of civil society; it enables civil society to participate in the decision-making process; and it helps reduce a certain "democratic deficit" and so underpins the legitimacy of democratic decision-making processes.

10.3.2 Democracy manifests itself through the will of the people, which is expressed through majority decision-making. For the minority to accept the will of the majority, there must be a degree of agreement between them: they must have a common identity. This is not usually a problem at national level, where (in a broad interpretation of the "demos" concept) this identity is defined by a common nationality (or residence in a particular area), and a common culture, language and set of values.

10.3.3 However, when it comes to democratic policy-making at European level, additional identity criteria are required to create a European identity. If European Union citizenship is defined simply as the sum of all national citizenships, then a "European" must be the sum (or synthesis) of several national identity criteria, which all derive from a common tradition and the values of democracy and human rights.

10.3.4 This means, however, that the democratic process at European level - even more so than at national level - must provide a range of participatory structures in which all citizens, with their different identities and in accordance with their different identity criteria, can be represented and which reflect the heterogeneous nature of the European identity.

10.3.5 The European Parliament is elected by Europe's citizens in their capacity as national citizens (residing in a particular Member State), i.e. exercising their democratic rights as part of their national (territorial) identity.

10.3.6 But people's identity is also defined by membership of interest groups in the diverse shape of civil society organisations. These identity criteria, relating to people's role in civil society organisations, are not covered by representation in the EP. It is precisely these identity criteria, however, which are taken into account by the Committee as the representative of civil society organisations; this enables the Committee to promote democratisation at the European level, and to show Parliament that it provides genuine added value in the democratic European decision-making process. The Committee cannot compete with Parliament, in power terms alone, but it complements Parliament's legitimacy in a way that makes sense.

## 11. Measures to support the role of the Committee

11.1 **Cooperation with the Commission:** The Committee currently maintains close working contacts with the Commission which both sides feel to be satisfactory. Contact should nevertheless be established with individual Commissioners so as to ensure that the Commission requests an opinion from the Committee at an earlier stage in its decision-making process. Particularly in matters concerning its interest groups, the Committee should be consulted as early as possible so that it can decide to draft an own-initiative opinion if it wishes.

11.2 **Cooperation with the Council:** Each Presidency generally lays down certain programme priorities. The Committee should build on the already effective cooperation during the preparatory phases and organise accompanying measures during each Presidency (own-initiative opinions, hearings and local events, and joint initiatives with the presidency-in-office).

11.3 **Cooperation with the European Parliament:** The Treaty of Amsterdam empowers the Parliament (or its committees) to ask the Committee for opinions. The interinstitutional working group on ESC-EP relations has a key role to play here, with far-reaching political implications. If solid foundations can be laid for future cooperation, people's current feeling of remoteness from the European institutions could perhaps be reduced, and citizens could be reminded, through their representative organisations, of their responsibility for Europe and motivated to become involved.

11.4 **Cooperation with the Committee of the Regions:** local and regional representation of interests in the COR does not conflict with sectoral representation in the Economic and Social Committee; on the contrary, in many cases it is complementary. Mutual benefits could be won here too. A first step in this direction was taken by the Bureau this July, when a liaison group with the COR was set up to monitor the follow-up to a Committee opinion on "Exploitation of children and sex tourism"<sup>6</sup> and implement with the COR one of the proposals in this opinion, the setting-up of a European network of child-friendly cities.

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<sup>6</sup> OJ C No 284 of 14/9/1998, p. 92

The Committee should do more to encourage such practical forms of cooperation.

## 12. **Creating a "civil society" action plan in the Committee**

12.1 The Committee is the right forum in which to further broaden civil dialogue, and it should therefore make appropriate arrangements as soon as possible for this dialogue also to be conducted with those civil society organisations that are not currently represented in the Committee. This would be a crucial contribution to developing the model of participatory democracy.

12.2 The Committee is the institution in which civil society organisations meet. It is therefore proposed that an appropriate "civil society" organisational structure be set up to introduce initiatives in the following spheres, under an action plan to be implemented in the near future:

- events within the Committee, as well as hearings outside the Committee, which could give more people the opportunity to participate. The possibilities this would provide for opinion-forming and goal-setting through dialogue could represent a valuable contribution to the development of civil dialogue;
- interinstitutional contacts could also be consolidated and developed within this framework, with round tables of outside experts preparing joint opinions;
- there is also considerable scope to make more use of contributions from experts, which are often of high quality. Working up these contributions - where they address civil society issues - into press or scientific reports would not only further the knowledge of Committee members but could also be of interest to the wider public.

12.3 The ESC is the forum for development of a European identity: as already mentioned, European identity has many levels and comprises different criteria, first among which is the acceptance of a common code of values based on respect for human dignity and human rights.

- The German Presidency of the Council launched an initiative to draft a Charter of Basic Rights. At the Cologne summit, the German Minister for Justice noted that establishing a common code of values is of such fundamental importance for Europe's citizens that the highest possible degree of democratic legitimisation is desirable.
- As the representative of civil society organisations, the Committee can make a decisive contribution to this democratic legitimisation. It will prepare an own-initiative opinion on the subject, and will also give its views during the committee procedure for drawing up a list of basic rights, which will be determined in more detail under the Finnish Presidency.

- Even in the preparatory stages the Committee can ensure that as many as possible of the relevant players from civil society organisations are involved, by organising its own consultation procedures and hearings.

12.4 The Committee is the bridgehead of civil society organisations in the context of EU enlargement:

- In the run-up to enlargement, the Committee's involvement in helping to set up civil society structures in those countries that do not yet have them, or in which they are not yet complete, cannot be overstated. As well as legal, economic, social and political action, integrating new members into the Community requires comparable structures, in order to actually implement the shared value system referred to above.
- The Committee has already done a lot of work to facilitate the setting-up in the candidate countries of bodies similar to the Committee, or to the national economic and social councils: it is working in joint consultative committees with those authorities in the applicant countries that are responsible for setting up these bodies. It is organising exchange programmes and in certain cases is also providing assistance with technical and administrative matters. With the help of the relevant sections and other administrative departments concerned, more positive steps could be taken in this direction through the action plan proposed in point 12.2.

### 13. **Summary**

New types of political entity - and the European Union in the post-Amsterdam period is such an entity - call for new ideas. In times of change, the so-called paradigm shift that characterises our present era, there is a need for visionary ideas and joint efforts to implement them. For Europe in particular this period preceding a possible enlargement poses a major challenge: to establish a common European identity based on a common value system, in addition to achieving major socio-economic goals.

The Committee has the opportunity to support this process of development and contribute to European integration as envisaged in the Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties.

Brussels, 22 September 1999.

The President  
of the  
Economic and Social Committee

The Secretary-General  
of the  
Economic and Social Committee

**Beatrice Rangoni Machiavelli**

**Patrick Venturini**

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N.B.: Appendix overleaf.



**A P P E N D I X**  
**to the**  
**O P I N I O N**  
**of the Economic and Social Committee**  
**(in accordance with Rule 47(3) of the Rules of Procedure)**

The following amendment was rejected but received more than 25% of the votes cast:

Amendment proposed by **Mr Nyberg**

**Point 12.1**

Insert the following after the 2<sup>nd</sup> sentence:

*"The various activities occasioned by this broader dialogue should also help to boost participation for non-ESC members from organisations currently represented in the Committee."*

**Reason**

In addition to the problem of organisations for which the ESC is currently unable to find room, we have trouble spreading the message of what the Committee actually does even within our own organisations. Moreover, some of the expertise within our organisations remains untapped in the ESC's regular activity. It should be possible to harness this expertise in various internal or external arrangements, thus making the people involved more aware of our work.

**Voting**

For	: 27
Against	: 40
Abstentions	: 11