

An introduction to Civil Society action at European level

Background note prepared by Culture Action Europe

The issue of Civil Society is central to this year's conference and yet is so broad and varied that we cannot hope to give an exhaustive overview in a few pages. The following paper includes some references and websites that you can go to, a glossary of civil society terms as Culture Action Europe understand them and some background material. Much of this material is already available on the website of Culture Action Europe's or the Civil Society Contact Group.

No single accepted definition of civil society exists. The term is usually taken to be the totality of voluntary civic and social organisations and institutions (i.e. not State, not individual, not business) that form the basis of the social system as opposed to the structures of a State (regardless of that State's political system) and commercial institutions. We tend to talk in terms of 'organised civil society', which implies associations and 'representative' organizations, and excludes therefore citizens in general. There is a common thread in terms of the technicalities of these organisations: NGO statutes, governance structures, etc. Culture Action Europe is a 'representative' platform in these terms, which seeks to put the cultural voice in other civil society debates on general EU topics

Civil society organisations sit between government and the electorate while resenting wider and broader values than immediate political advantage (in theory). They are often referred to as being the institutions of 'direct' democracy, as opposed to 'representative' democracy. In the current context, civil society means us in our role as Non Governmental Organisations representing the interests of our members, the wider cultural and artistic world and by extension the societies in which we live and work.

As we are all aware, Europe has very limited competences in the cultural field. For most arts and cultural groups, their national governments remain the most important partners.

However, European policy has both direct impacts on our sector (in areas such as possible funding streams) and indirect impacts (in areas such as freedom of movement or equality). Also, as the sector becomes more important in terms of jobs, economic and social impact and even in terms of an emerging European identity and values, culture is moving up the policy agenda in Europe. The entire Non Governmental Organisation (NGO) sector needs to be ready to engage with Europe on real or even possible policy changes in the future.

But engaging with Europe is complicated and time consuming. Not all the systems are in place to encourage dialogue. Not all the issues are clear. It is not obvious when to start the conversation and what to expect. But as a sector we need to understand how we can get involved in shaping debates and policy for our sectoral interests, in order to play a full role alongside Parliaments,

Executives, business and the general public in democratic debate. There are many evolving policy implications about the mechanisms by which nongovernmental bodies make their views known to policy makers. These touches on issues of governmental transparency and openness, what mechanisms are in place for consultation and dialogue of the sector and how to use them effectively.

The Civil Society Contact Group published in autumn 2006 the study *Civil Dialogue, making it work better*, which reviews and assesses NGOs' participation in the European project. 'NGOs have played a key role in the development of a more democratic and accountable European Union. Over the years we witnessed the multiplication of opportunities for citizens to take part more directly in the EU project, going from online consultations to citizens' forums or juries' said Ilona Kish, Secretary General of Cultural Action Europe and chair of the Civil Society Contact Group at the time of the publication of the study. 'However, more is not necessarily better: time has come for a common reflection on how to make participatory democracy work better in the EU', she added.

Based on case studies analysing key moments of the EU public debate (such as the constitutional process and the Service Directive), the study is intended as a contribution to the heated debate on how to better connect the EU to its citizens.

The study identifies three main challenges:

Making it happen beyond Brussels - Strong campaigns around the Service Directive or the Constitution have highlighted that involving civil society can be a channel to take citizens on board on the EU project, but this is a difficult process that needs time and commitment, including from the Member States.

Turning the talks into results - Consultation without clear accountability from decision-makers can create an enormous amount of frustration, as was dramatically stressed by recent debate over Corporate Social Responsibility as a mere PR tool, not real engagement.

The need for a better balance between public and private interests - Consultations limited to business are much too frequent in fields where public interest is directly at stake, such as industry, trade or public health. This bias is a major threat to citizenship and should be tackled urgently by more transparency.

'Bringing the EU debate out of Brussels is a major challenge upon institutions and political parties, but also upon us as NGOs. Member of the Civil Society Contact Group will devote all their energy to act as motors of the EU debate and face these key challenges ahead of 2009, and beyond', said Ilona Kish.

CIVIC PARTICIPATION: A GLOSSARY OF TERMS

CITIZENSHIP ORGANISATIONS

There is a growing movement within the “non”-for-profit and “non”-governmental sector to define itself in a more constructive way, instead of being defined by a negative, “non” word. The term “civil society organisation” has been used by a growing number of organisations, such as the Center for the Study of Global Governance. The term “citizen sector organisation” has also been advocated to describe the sector — as one of citizens, for citizens.

CIVIL DIALOGUE/PARTICIPATION

In the social science field these are umbrella terms to describe the means for the public to directly participate in political, economic, management or other social decisions. It is a key issue in all democratic States given the fall in voter participation and the rise of a knowledge gap with the governing elites.

CONSULTATION

Public consultation is a regulatory process by which the public's input on matters affecting them is sought. Its main goals are in improving the efficiency, transparency and public involvement in large-scale projects or laws and policies. It usually involves notification (to publicise the matter), consultation (a two-way flow of opinion) as well as participation (involving groups in the drafting of policy).

LOBBYING

Lobbying is a concerted effort designed to achieve results from government authorities and elected officials. It can consist of public actions (e.g. mass demonstrations), or combinations of both public and private actions (e.g. encouraging constituents to contact their legislative representatives). As a professional occupation it is also known as “government affairs” or “public affairs”.

NGO'S

These are non-governmental organisations, with members representing distinct social interest groups. They are private institutions that are intellectually independent of government, although they may receive government funding for specific activities. Apart from 'NGO', alternative terms are used: for example independent sector, volunteer sector, civil society, grassroots organisations, transnational social movement organisations, private voluntary organisations, self-help organizations and non-state actors. Operational NGO's run projects, advocacy NGO's defend or promote a specific cause, raise awareness, acceptance and knowledge by lobbying, press work and activist events.

PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

Participatory democracy strives to create opportunities for all members of a society to contribute to decision-making, and seeks to broaden the range of people who have access to such opportunities. 'Participatory democracy' is increasingly focused on community-based activity within the domain of civil society, based on the

belief that a strong non-governmental public sphere is a precondition for the emergence of a strong liberal democracy.

TRANSPARENCY

Transparency was initially coined as a term of governance to refer to the fight against corruption. It has gradually been extended over time to include the degree of openness of administrations to the public ease of access of information. The Wikipedia definition says: *'When government meetings are open to the press and the public, when budgets and financial statements may be reviewed by anyone, when laws, rules and decisions are open to discussion, they are seen as transparent and there is less opportunity for the authorities to abuse the system in their own interest.'*

CIVIC PARTICIPATION: KEY ORGANISATIONS AND CONTACTS

EU Civil Society Contact Group

The EU Civil Society Contact Group brings together eight large European NGO platforms in the following fields: culture (Culture Action Europe), development (CONCORD), environment (Green 10), human rights (HRDN), lifelong learning (EUCIS), public health (EPHA), social (Social Platform) and women (EWL). Together they work to develop the dialogue between civil society organisations and the EU institutions as an essential part of strengthening participatory democracy.

coordinator@act4europe.org
<http://www.act4europe.org>

Platform of European Social NGOs (Social Platform)

The Social Platform brings together more than forty European non-governmental organisations, federations and networks which are working to build an inclusive society. The Social platform is an excellent example of how concerted action at the European level can tackle even difficult issues such as the rights of immigrants and fundamental rights.

platform@socialplatform.org
<http://www.socialplatform.org>

ALTER-EU

The Alliance for Lobbying Transparency and Ethics Regulation (ALTER-EU) is a coalition of over 140 civil society groups, trade unions, academics and public affairs firms concerned with the increasing influence exerted by corporate lobbyists on the political agenda in Europe, and the resulting loss of democracy in EU decision-making.

paul@milieudedefensie.nl
<http://alter-eu.org/en>

ECAS

The European Citizen Action Service was created in 1990 as an international non-profit organization, independent of political parties, commercial interests and the EU Institutions. Their mission is to enable NGOs and individuals to make their voice heard by the EU by providing advice on how to lobby, fundraise, and defend European citizenship rights.

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