5.8 The EESC supports the proposal to make the European Parliament the main body responsible for the Community budget in the sense that the Parliament would become responsible for the whole (obligatory and non-obligatory parts) of the budget.

5.9 The EESC also thinks it necessary to point out that, despite the clear challenges created and the necessary initiatives presupposed by the Lisbon Strategy, the Commission text does not appear to propose specific measures likely to give rise to economic development initiatives in the EU. The only specific idea put forward in the text is the foundation of a special 'growth adjustment fund' (IV. The new financial framework: C. Flexibility). However, the funds envisaged under this chapter are regarded as completely inadequate. The application of the Lisbon strategy was based on a framework of average annual economic growth of 3 %, whereas the forecasts for the coming years do not exceed 2.3 % for a 27-member EU. In addition, the anaemic economic growth experienced by the EU since 2000 does not enable it to make up for this 'economic growth deficit'.

5.10 Thus it is necessary to revise these sums upwards in order to meet the basic condition for promotion and success of the Lisbon Strategy, which amounts to changing our system for investment in training and research.


Roger BRIESCH

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on ‘The role of women’s organisations as non-state actors in implementing the Cotonou Agreement’

(2005/C 74/08)

At its plenary session of 17 July 2003, the European Economic and Social Committee decided, under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, to draw up an opinion on ‘The role of women’s organisations as non-state actors in implementing the Cotonou Agreement’.

The Section for External Relations, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 7 July 2004. The rapporteur was Ms Florio.

At its 411th plenary session (meeting of 15 September 2004), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 115 votes to eight, with eight abstentions.

1. Introduction

1.1 As part of the activities relating to the European Union’s policies towards developing regions, and in particular towards the ACP countries, the European Economic and Social Committee has had the opportunity to monitor developments in the EU’s cooperation policy. These developments have increasingly been towards a participatory approach, i.e. moving towards involving and recognising the role of non-state actors (NSAs) in defining and implementing those policies. Thus, institutions and NSAs play a complementary role in activities aimed at enhancing the impact of development programmes.

The Cotonou Agreement is currently the only example of such participation being put on institutional footing. It demands that governments fully involve non-state actors in the various stages of the national development strategy.

1.2 In view of those guidelines and of the fact that the Committee has already set out its position in a previous opinion on the role of civil society in European development policy (REX 097/2003), we feel it is important to look in more depth at the subject of women’s participation and their fundamental and specific contribution to the formulation and implementation of development policies in the ACP countries that are covered by the Cotonou Agreements. We believe that it would be useful to emphasise how valuable their role can be and how it needs to be properly supported within the framework of the Cotonou Agreements and indeed in all development policies.

1.3 Moreover, as the EU body that represents organised civil society, the Committee has previously affirmed ‘the fundamental role played by women as leading players in development, and emphasize[d] the need to promote their organizations and ensure that they participate fairly in advisory and decision-making bodies.’ (Opinion on the Green Paper on relations between the European Union and the ACP countries on the eve of the 21st century - challenges and options for a new partnership (Rapporteur: Mr Malosse), EXT 152/1997).
Real participation in the decision-making process by non-state actors in general, and women's organisations in particular, is still a long way from being fully realised.

2. General comments

2.1 The latest report from the World Bank (World Development Report 2004) explicitly recognises that a global market is no longer sufficient to ensure economic, social and professional development, and in particular to remove those obstacles that hinder equitable and sustainable growth for all the countries of the world, North and South. In 2002, the pro capita income of five sixths of the world's population was less than 1 200 dollars, compared to an average of 26 000 dollars for the remaining sixth of the population, the vast majority of which lives in the richest countries.

2.2 So far, none of the international institutions (IMF, World Bank, WTO, ILO, UN, etc.) has been able to operate as an effective, democratic and worldwide regulating authority, nor have they of themselves been able to limit the inequalities in economic development between countries and social groups.

2.3 Furthermore, particularly in a period when most countries are experiencing sluggish economic growth, developing countries are obliged, at the suggestion or insistence of international organisations, to adopt the very policies of economic restructuring that are difficult to sustain and have the most negative impact on poor people. Structural changes have, in the absence of adequate social protection policies, brought about an increase in poverty, precariousness, and insecurity among the poorest sections of society (both in the North and in the South).

2.4 In recent years, the gap between the formal worldwide economy and the informal local economy has also widened. People who make their living in the informal sector of the economy do not enjoy any rights, nor do they share in their country's economic growth, even if they are making an effective contribution to it.

2.5 Women are in the majority in this section of the population, and are therefore most likely to suffer from such conditions. Women who live in poverty in developing countries are not only unable to access goods and services, but are often also victims of serious violations of their human, social, and economic rights.

2.6 Poverty, unemployment and underemployment affect women most of all.

2.7 A great many proposals for policy, action and projects in support of women have come out of the various conferences organised by the agencies and commissions of the United Nations. The most recent of these was the conference on

3. The European institutions and mainstreaming policies

3.1 Article 3 of the EC Treaty states that in all its activities, including those relating to development cooperation, the EU shall aim to eliminate inequalities, and to promote equality, between men and women.

3.2 The EU and its Member States are signatories to the Declaration and the Platform for Action, approved at the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995), in which a genuine strategy to remove all the obstacles to gender equality was launched and the principle of mainstreaming of the promotion of gender equality was enshrined. Following the commitment made by signing up to the platform in Beijing, a Regulation (EC 2836/98) on integrating gender issues in development cooperation was approved.

3.3 This text, which expired in December 2003, was replaced by a new regulation for the period 2004-2006 that substantially strengthened and confirmed its goals, i.e. support for mainstreaming combined with specific measures in support of women, with the promotion of gender equality an important factor in reducing poverty. The document also reaffirms support for public and private activities in developing countries aimed at promoting gender equality.

3.4 The Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on promoting gender equality in development cooperation can be thought of as an important point of reference for cooperation policies. The areas of activity that were singled out as priorities worthy of attention were control of resources and services for women, particularly in areas of education, employment, and political decision making. The document emphasised the need for statistics disaggregated by sex and age in order to identify and disseminate new methodologies, analyses, impact assessments, etc.

4. Cotonou: participatory approach and gender issues

4.1 The Cotonou Agreement, signed on 23 June 2000 with the ACP countries, constituted a turning point in EU policy on development and trade in that, for the first time, the involvement of non-state actors (NSAs) was included in the definition of national development strategies, giving them a role complementing that of state institutions. In the Agreement, the following are defined as NSAs: the private sector; the economic and social partners, including trade unions; civil society in all the forms it takes in the particular national circumstances.

Millenium Development Goals, where two key documents were approved. In both of these, the rights of women to equal access and full involvement in decision-making processes, prevention of illnesses, and health protection are among the key themes.
4.2 The agreement stipulates that non-state actors shall be informed and consulted about cooperation policies and strategies, about cooperation priorities in the sector that affects them directly, and about political dialogue; shall receive the financial resources to support local development processes; must be involved in implementing projects and programmes in their areas of interest; and finally, receive help and support for capacity-building and improvement of skills, particularly as regards organisation, representation and use of consultation mechanisms, exchange and dialogue with a view to promoting strategic alliances.

4.3 In line with EU policy, the Agreement also emphasises the links that exist between politics, trade and development. Indeed, partnership is based on five interdependent pillars: an overall political dimension, the promotion of a participatory approach, the goal of reducing poverty, the establishment of a new framework of economic and trade cooperation, and finally, reform of financial cooperation.

4.4 Development strategy should also consistently take gender equality into account. This is one of the three cross-cutting themes of the Agreement (Articles 8 and 31).

4.5 The Cotonou Agreement institutionalises the Committee’s role as preferred interlocutor of the ACP economic and social interest groups, with an explicit mandate to consult civil society organisations.

5. Participation of women’s associations, NGOs and organisations

5.1 Taking into consideration the EU’s position on gender issues, and in view of the role assigned to the Committee by the Agreement, it seems appropriate to take a closer look at the specific role of women and of their participation in civil dialogue within the framework of the Agreement.

5.2 Of course, given the huge number and geographical spread of the countries involved, women in ACP countries cannot be considered as a homogeneous group; there are vast differences according to the region, cultural context, socioeconomic group, level of income and whether they live in a rural or urban environment. However, albeit within the limits of the generalisations we are forced to make, it is important that these women can really be involved in the participatory processes set in train by the Cotonou Agreements.

5.3 An initial difficulty arises from the fact that the Guidelines on principles and good practice for the involvement of non-state actors in consultations and dialogue on development mention gender issues only in passing, and that there are no qualitative or quantitative data on the involvement of women in the Preliminary evaluation of the Cotonou Agreement’s provisions for involving NSAs in programming (23/1/04).

5.4 Based on the evidence gathered in various regional seminars and forums, it would appear that the involvement of women’s associations, organisations and NGOs in the framing of national strategies was in most cases very limited.

5.5 There is a large discrepancy between the intentions stated in the Agreement and their implementation. Furthermore, few measures appear to have been taken to facilitate women’s participation.

5.6 In situations where creating and structuring dialogue with civil society in general is difficult enough, increasing the role of women is even more so. Furthermore, the process of implementing the agreement’s provisions on participation is still ongoing, and involves the Commission, whose role we believe to be potentially fundamental; the support of governments; and the NSAs themselves, whose potential, competence and level of organisation vary from region to region.

5.7 The obstacles encountered when implementing a participatory approach in general are many and varied. As already stated in a previous opinion (1), these include:

— the fact that most national governments in third countries are very wary of dialogue with NSAs;

— even where there is provision for such dialogue, the actual ability of NSAs to have real influence on the definition of development programmes and strategies remains very limited;

— the high level of administrative centralisation in these countries does not facilitate the involvement of NSAs in general, and also tends to marginalize the more remote areas, particularly rural ones, which are the most difficult to reach and are often also the poorest;

— the lack of any clear rules and standards governing the effective involvement of NSAs; the limited level of organisation of civil society in many third countries: the main problem is often that of developing the potential of the very people who should be participating in the process;

— the access to financial resources, which is closely linked to the matter of distribution of and access to information. Indeed, NSAs in third countries not only complain that there is often no system for disseminating information; the procedures in place for the provision of funds are, in most cases, too expensive and complicated, as the NSAs have often highlighted.

(1) The role of civil society in European development policy (REX 097/2003)
5.8 When it comes to the involvement of women, these obstacles are aggravated by conditions due on the one hand to socio-economic, cultural and religious factors, and on the other to many governments having a limited grasp of fundamental rights in general and those of women in particular.

5.9 From this point of view, the Cotonou Agreement, citing respect for human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law as essential elements of the partnership, provides for measures to be taken and for the notification of the other party in the event of serious violations. Nevertheless, as already stated in an earlier Committee opinion (Opinion on the ACP-EU Partnership Agreement, CESE 521/2002, Mr Baeza San Juan), it would have been preferable to set more specific criteria for safeguarding those principles.

6. Women in the development process and priority action areas

6.1 In reality, the subject of women’s participation in civil society is closely linked to their role in decision-making and in the whole development process. In view of this, it may prove useful to widen the scope of the discussion.

6.2 Women can not only make a significant contribution to the development process, but must also be able to take advantage of the benefits and opportunities that development brings.

6.3 As women tend to make up one of the weaker sections of society in developing countries in general and ACP countries in particular, they are more likely to suffer poverty and deprivation because they do not have sufficient access to and control of resources to enable them to improve their own living conditions and contribute to their country’s economic development.

6.4 Access to and control of such resources would therefore seem to be an indispensable prerequisite for effectively combating poverty and triggering sustainable, long-term development.

Where women are involved in economic activity, this tends to be in the informal sector, which is particularly vulnerable to the effects of macroeconomic restructuring.

6.5 Notwithstanding the Millennium Development Goals the EU has signed up to, aiming to halve poverty by 2015, there is a danger that the negotiators from both parties will give their attention only to the effects of the macroeconomic and political dimensions, forgetting the wider objectives and the impact that the measures under negotiation will have on different sections of the population. The European Commission’s actions to create monitoring instruments to evaluate the effects of such agreements are to be supported.

6.6 From among the themes highlighted in various documents of the United Nations, the FAO, and other international bodies, it is possible, for the sake of simplicity, to identify a certain number of priority action areas (obviously, this list does not claim to be exhaustive):

— **Education and training**

It has been shown that promoting education and training not only brings about improvements in the lives of individuals, but can also have a positive impact on the local community. The correlation between education and other areas of the economy and society and its effect on the role of (educated) women has been demonstrated in many studies, research projects and sets of statistics. It is therefore of fundamental importance to promote the availability of schooling and training, particularly in rural and impoverished areas of developing countries, and ensuring that both women and men can access it free of charge. Worldwide, it is still the case that 24 % of girls of primary school age do not attend school (for boys, the figure is 16 %). In developing countries, 61 % of men have at least a basic education, against 41 % of women.

— **Access to resources**

Access to financial resources, in particular ease of access for women to bank loans, micro-credit, savings opportunities and insurance services, is seen as one of the priority action areas. Information on such matters is one possible approach. A series of recommendations in this area, in particular on improving access for women to financial resources, have already been made at the UN. Given the rapid pace of change in the global economy and marketplace, all aspects of resources for development should be looked at from the perspective of women. The differences between men and women in relation to access to and control of economic resources, public goods and services, and land ownership, have deprived women of fundamental rights and economic opportunities, of power, and of an independent voice in political and decision-making processes.

— **Employment policies**

Despite a few small advances in the area of women’s participation in the labour market, it certainly cannot be said that there is equality of opportunity in access to the formal labour market and fair pay in ACP countries. In developing countries, the informal sector is the biggest source of earnings and employment. It is women who have been most heavily affected by the loss of jobs in many ACP countries. They have often ended up either unemployed or in unprotected, informal, precarious employment, which often does not pay well enough even to meet vital needs. The opportunity to access forms of microcredit, to promote micro-entrepreneurship among women, and to own land is fundamental to ensuring a decent lifestyle for both men and women, but, according to the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), women are effectively denied that right in many developing countries. An analysis of credit schemes in five African countries shows that women receive 10 % of loans for small landowners; the remaining 90 % goes to men.
— Women and health

The concepts of reproductive health, and women’s right to health in general, are still alien to many developing countries. This has disastrous results not only for individual women, whose very lives are at risk, but also for society in general. For an emblematic example of how critical the situation is, one only needs to think of the difficulties in treating and preventing STI/HIV, and the effect that the spread of disease is having on the social and economic systems in many countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa.

Sexual and biological differences between men and women are also reflected in the area of health and medical treatment. The role and status given to women do not reflect their real need for proper access to healthcare and medicines, nor do they take account of their responsibility within society. Scant attention is paid to the various needs that are particular to women. This has lifelong negative repercussions for women. The problem becomes even more alarming in those places where the socio-cultural context tends to justify physical, psychological and sexual abuse of women.

— Combating all forms of violence against women

Violence against women is still one of the most difficult battles to fight and even to quantify. One has only to think of the phenomenon of domestic violence, which is difficult enough to report in Western societies, of genital mutilation, and of the trafficking of human beings, which seems to be constantly on the rise. The main victims of this phenomenon, which translates into sexual slavery and other forms of forced labour, are women and children, especially those who live in countries ravaged by war and conflict.

7. Recommendations

7.1 If the European Union really wants to have a positive impact on the living conditions of women and poor people, there is a need for more clarity and determination in defining the aims and objectives of support for women and of the steps that need taking. Above all, great care is needed in respect of adjustment policies whose effects have penalised women and, more generally, the most vulnerable sections of the population. The advantages of such policies for these social groups need to be clear.

7.2 We therefore believe that it is necessary that the evaluation of trade agreements between the EU and third countries, in particular ACP countries, should also include specific analysis of their impact on the conditions of the poorest sections of the population and on gender issues.

7.3 Investments aimed at strengthening associations and NGOs that promote gender equality and empowerment of women are fundamental to bringing about an overall improvement in the economic, social and political conditions in developing countries and to ensuring that they enjoy social and economic growth that is consistent with sustainable development.

7.4 Achieving what is set out above is not simply a matter of promoting better integration of women in civil society, but rather of creating the basic conditions that would enable them to become truly involved, valued, and supported, so that they achieve equality with men for the development of the relevant countries. Strengthening the role of women in the participatory process is key to their obtaining decision-making power.

7.5 The most important basic condition is therefore the affirmation of equal rights of access to education and training for women. With this in mind, it is important to promote all programmes and projects aimed at achieving this, from basic literacy to computer literacy and networking of women’s organisations, as a key pillar in ensuring the promotion of the role of women in national development.

7.6 In the context of the devolution process envisaged by the Commission, the role of delegations as set out in the guidelines on principles and best practices for the participation of Non-State Actors, issued on 24 February 2002, is crucial. These delegations enjoy considerable flexibility as to the choice of the most appropriate measures, and are responsible for monitoring and facilitating greater involvement of non-state actors. Although the above-mentioned guidelines contain no specific suggestions as regards the participation and the role of women’s organisations, we believe that the delegations should have considerable influence in facilitating their identification and inclusion in civil dialogue, creating networks, and drawing up a strategy for capacity building aimed specifically at women.

Delegations should be given a specific responsibility for promoting the mainstreaming of gender issues, and at least one representative of the delegation should receive specific training on gender-related issues.

7.7 Particular attention should also be given to establishing the current state of women’s organisations and their characteristics, as there is often a lack of adequate information.

The Committee itself could assist with the identification of European and international associations and organisations that work to support women in ACP countries and to encourage their participation.

7.8 National strategy documents should expressly provide both for the involvement of women in drawing them up and for positive measures aimed at strengthening the activities of women’s groups. We are convinced that the Commission can exercise a certain amount of influence in this regard.
The Committee calls on the Commission to create a specific budget heading for women’s civil society organisations in ACP countries.

7.9 More generally, it is important to create fast-track channels for women’s groups, both with regard to the eligibility of non-state actors and for access to funds.

7.10 Training courses aimed at promoting the activities of women’s groups that operate at grassroots level could, in the context of the Cotonou Agreement, prove to be a useful tool in implementing that agreement.

7.11 The Committee undertakes to promote the organisation of seminars to identify and look in depth at themes relating to the status and participation of women in ACP countries.

7.12 The Committee will call for equal participation of women’s delegations in those seminars and will promote meetings with women and associations from ACP countries and with third countries in general.

7.13 The Committee undertakes to hold, by the first half of 2005, a conference with the above-mentioned players. The objectives of this would be to promote the role of women in decision-making processes, to identify obstacles, and to define strategies based on the outlook of development process actors themselves.


The President of the European Economic and Social Committee
Roger BRIESCH

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the topic: ‘Towards the seventh Framework Programme for Research: Research needs in the area of demographic change — quality of life of elderly persons and technological requirements’

(2005/C 74/09)

On 29 January 2004, the European Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an opinion on the topic: ‘Towards the seventh Framework Programme for Research: Research needs in the area of demographic change — quality of life of elderly persons and technological requirements’.

The Section for the Single Market, Production and Consumption, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 14 July 2004. The rapporteur was Ms Heinisch.

At its 411th plenary session of 15 and 16 September 2004 (meeting of 15 September), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 144 votes to one, with two abstentions:

1. Summary

1.1 In the light of demographic change and the opportunities and risks involved for the quality of life of the growing numbers of older people in Europe, the Committee calls for:

(a) the inclusion of a key action in this field in the seventh Framework Programme for Research and

(b) flanking measures to establish a sound basis for timely policy planning, decision-making and action at both European and national level.

There are close links between the biological, psychological, social, cultural, technological, economic and structural aspects of ageing. Also, people always age within a specific physical and social environment. In Europe, this environment varies widely in geographical, cultural and socio-structural terms. Neither fact — the fact that the ageing process has many different dimensions and the fact that it takes place under a variety of conditions — is adequately reflected in current research programmes. However, given the changes in the population age structure, only such broad and long-term research can provide the sound basis for planning and decision-making needed in the many different areas of society involved and at all tiers of decision-making.