

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on External action of the Union: the role of organised civil society

(2006/C 195/16)

On 28 January 2004 the European Economic and Social Committee decided, under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, to draw up an opinion on *External action of the Union: the role of organised civil society*.

The Section for External Relations, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 4 May 2006. The rapporteur was Mr Koryfidis.

At its 427th plenary session, held on 17 and 18 May 2006 (meeting of 17 May), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 140 votes to 3 with 9 abstentions.

1. This opinion is drawn up on the basis of a questionnaire and a study. These are the result of lengthy theoretical analysis and practical investigation, as well as of the experience acquired by the EESC in the relations it has established with the consultative bodies and other organisations of civil society in the candidate countries and non-member countries. The whole project, which has taken a number of years, has convinced the EESC that it must initiate a new stage in which its commitments and the relations they involve will be more organised and regular and will have better prospects.

2. The EESC takes the view that the globalisation of the economy and developments in science and technology — especially information technology — create a strong force that can be controlled only by shifting the epicentre of formation and development of contemporary international relations. The basic expression of this shift should be the structural integration of relations between societies into traditional relations between states.

3. It follows that the Union as a system of governance and as a unified whole should recognise the new reality as soon as possible. This recognition implies that it should also plan and develop policies for external action, with the active participation and contribution of organised civil society in implementing them.

4. These policies should be preventive where possible, and at all events integrated. The European democratic system, the European economic and social *acquis*, the strategic aims of the Union and reliable knowledge are the basis for framing and developing these policies within and outside its frontiers.

5. This situation will call for a new internal organisational balance and a more creative balance between competition and cooperation, especially in sectors and activities directed outside the frontiers of the Union.

6. How European civil society organisations themselves should become aware of their new role is a complex problem. It calls for the promotion of modern methods of acquiring familiarity with learning and knowledge.

7. To create this familiarity, but also more generally to enable European citizens to cope with a society and an economy based on knowledge, a new approach to lifelong learning programmes is needed. In practice this means inclusion in the existing lifelong learning programmes of knowledge related to globalisation and to the external action of the Union.

8. The EESC as the mouthpiece of organised civil society at the European level is entrusted with a triple role:

— that of organised civil society's voice on matters of external action vis-à-vis the Union's political bodies, based on its democratic *acquis* and a process of reconciliation of different interests;

— that of active participation in the planning and development of the Union's policies involving external action;

— that of monitoring the external policies implemented by the EU and their economic and social effects.

9. The EESC's role covers a wide range of issues and activities, because all the problems arising from the new global environment are relevant to one or other of its aspects (i.e. the economic, social, environmental or cultural dimension).

10. In this context the most substantial contribution of the EESC to the framing and development of policies relating to the external action of the Union is its capacity to produce a creative balance whenever it takes a position on an issue. The balance is achieved by integrating the various interests expressed by its members, in the context of a process and an approach covering the four dimensions mentioned above.

11. It should be pointed out that the EESC already has considerable experience in matters relating to the Union's external action. On the other hand, there is a deficit as regards making good use of this experience through broader Community mechanisms and approaches. The Community institutions, in particular, have not managed to use to the full this experience and the conclusions provided to them through opinions, information reports and suggestions.

12. The EESC takes the view that better ways should be found to make a link between this experience and the Union's central political structures. One possible way would be the signing of protocols on increased cooperation such as the protocol agreed between the European Commission and the EESC. An even better way would be collaboration by all the Union's political bodies and the EESC on the development of relevant integrated, and preferably preventive, policies.

13. At all events the EESC perceives and points out a need to strengthen its role and the role of organised civil society more generally in the processes of globalisation. The broad reason for this is the need to promote the wider goals of the Union in the world of the 21st century. A specific reason for it — particularly in the case of the EESC — has to do with *how* these goals can be promoted. In other words it relates to the EESC's still evolving new mode of operation in terms of the knowledge-based society, together with a unique characteristic: the capacity it has to intervene credibly, outside the Union, at the civil society level, using an approach which could be described as 'soft diplomacy'.

14. The EESC seeks acknowledgment of and support for that unique capacity. It seeks recognition as a global partner — as the institutional representative of European organised civil society — particularly in international organisations such as the Economic and Social Council of the UN. It also calls for promotion of its position and role in treaties signed with third countries and of its policies designed to support civil society in those countries.

15. In carrying out the task referred to above, the EESC seeks support for the development of its main policy choices in the medium term. These include:

- creating a modern integrated system of proactive communication, exchange of information and networking with its partners throughout Europe and the world, as well as with the other bodies of the Union;
 - stepping up its visibility and cooperation with intergovernmental and other relevant international organisations, particularly as regards relations with organised civil society;
 - creating an 'electronic knowledge bank' on the activity of bodies and structures that perform a consultative function throughout the world and of networks of civil society organisations, and making full use of it as a tool for communication, rapprochement, comprehension and interpretation of how civil society operates, and as a tool for promotion of the Union's values and strategic aims throughout the world;
 - a report, to be drawn up every two years, on developments in the activity of bodies and structures with a consultative function in the world and the influence on them of the Union's external action.
16. In the context of the above observations and proposals the EESC calls upon the Union's political bodies to adopt and promote a method of continuing interinstitutional dialogue for the purpose of:
- acquiring reliable collective knowledge about the Union's external action;
 - achieving a consensus on the *what*, the *why* and the *how* of the activities to be developed.

Brussels, 17 May 2006.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Anne-Marie SIGMUND
