

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Prioritising Africa: European civil society's perspective

(2006/C 195/25)

On 14 July 2005, the European Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an opinion on *Prioritising Africa: European civil society's perspective*

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 Bedossa.

At its 427th plenary session, held on 17 and 18 May 2006 (meeting of 18 May), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 125 votes with one abstention.

Summary

The European Economic and Social Committee has drafted this own-initiative opinion on the basis of experience gained by its ACP-EU Follow-up Committee, which has been following the implementation of the Cotonou Agreement for several years and which has played an active role in the preparation of the EPAs with ACP civil society organisations.

The Commission Communication ⁽¹⁾ has prompted the EESC to take stock of these policies, with specific reference to non-state actor involvement in the implementation of the Cotonou Agreement and EU development aid policy. The European Economic and Social Committee notes with regret that these policies have all too often led to broken promises, both on the European and the African side. A certain discrepancy between declared intentions and practice on the ground has been noticed in the past, but the fact is that aid policies are useless unless they are prepared on the ground.

The Cotonou Agreement is primarily an inter-state agreement that does not adequately provide for civil society action on the ground. Furthermore, the aid mechanisms that have actually been provided for under the Agreement have rarely lived up to their promises. Consequently, and given that civil society organisations have some catching up to do before they can act efficiently and independently, it comes as no surprise that the approaching EPAs have raised doubts, fears and concerns.

We must not forget that African society's organisational models have their own deep-rooted social and political characteristics. These must be taken into proper consideration in order to advance the objectives identified by the European Economic and Social Committee, which believes that if the new, ambitious European strategy for Africa is to succeed, then its function must be to support civil society, a key actor in development policy, by highlighting two crucial areas where civil society organisations can make a difference.

Governance that promotes human development on this continent.

⁽¹⁾ EU Strategy for Africa: Towards a Euro-African pact to accelerate Africa's development, COM(2005) 489 final.

— Governance that meets the following specifications:

- respect for human rights,
- the right to free and decentralised information,
- transparency of the organisations and administrative bodies in the relevant countries,
- the elimination of corruption, an absolute obstacle to good governance,
- the universal right to water, health and education,
- the right to food security.

In order to achieve this, the EESC recommends greater, easier access for African civil society organisations to Community funding and their systematic participation in defining and implementing cooperation policies and strategies.

— Combating AIDS

The role of civil society organisations is crucial to this struggle, as they have privileged access to sufferers on the ground: prevention, diagnosis, treatment etc. We need an integrated approach towards the three pandemics and patient associations are a crucial link in this struggle.

The European Union must contribute to solving the crisis in human resources by increasing technical capacities and training all stakeholders. The European Economic and Social Committee calls on all political, economic and social leaders to rally behind this objective.

The European Economic and Social Committee affirms that the absolute priority is access to 'all-in-one' medicines whose cost is controlled by international bodies and that the European Union should use its influence to develop and accelerate research for a universal vaccine.

1. Introduction

1.1 On 12 October 2005, the European Commission adopted a Communication to the Council, the European Parliament and the European Economic and Social Committee on the *EU Strategy for Africa: Towards a Euro-African pact to accelerate Africa's development*.

1.2 The EESC agrees with the broad thrust and consistent approach of his ambitious Euro-African project. However, it has received a mixed reception from African non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which, in their disillusionment, cannot help wondering why this new plan should succeed where others have failed.

1.3 The document under consideration is the outcome of a long-term project initiated by Commissioner Louis Michel at the beginning of his term of office in November 2004. It calls on the 25 EU Member States to adopt a joint cooperation policy with Africa, noting the diverse political contexts and levels of development rooted in age-old relations and requiring a new approach.

1.4 The strategy is ambitious precisely because it outlines the undoubtedly numerous, but non-exhaustive, priority areas for impacting on the continent's development.

1.5 In this respect, it is extremely inspiring and also restores the political pillar to the centre of development, thereby providing the EU with an opportunity to remain Africa's most influential partner.

1.6 Moreover, the proposed system promotes better-coordinated European action and tends towards harmonising practices at Community level. This goes some way towards deepening concerted EU action at a time of widespread condemnation of shortcomings in this area.

2. General comments

2.1 Several voices have been raised in warning that the worst will come to pass in Africa unless Europe and the rest of the world take immediate action.

2.2 Unless Africa achieves independent development, the long-term consequences of migratory flows, disease and environmental issues will get worse, whether we like it or not.

2.3 The obvious conclusion, then, is that industrialised countries must rethink the assistance they deliver to Africa. It is not the first time that these alarm bells have been sounded and some political or economic leaders speak openly of the 'hypocrisy' manifested by industrialised countries.

2.4 Ongoing sustained migrations are expected to result in 'pressure that will continue to rise in the coming years. There will be a substantial increase in the population of Africa

whereas development prospects remains bleak'. People have a right to seek a degree of prosperity as long as water, health, education and food security issues remain unresolved in the long term. The President of the Commission shares these concerns since he has stated that 'we must strike at the structural causes of under-development in Africa'. Although planned several months in advance, the announcement of this new strategy coincided with the Ceuta and Melilla crisis.

2.5 The European Economic and Social Committee takes full note of the Communication's objectives, namely to:

- improve the coherence of development policy for Africa; and to
- reaffirm its will to fulfil the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in Africa by 2015 by launching a major effort and identifying core objectives. Europe must work with Africa to find a productive consensus. Taking action means resolving the vital problems relating to disease, water, education and employment. The Commission hopes that its new strategy will soon produce positive results because — it must be stressed — it has been drawn up in consultation with the people of Africa.

2.6 Nevertheless, the European Economic and Social Committee wonders whether this is not a little too ambitious, particularly in view of the following:

- the large number of broken promises: there is a permanent discrepancy between declared intentions and practice on the ground because aid policies are useless if they are not prepared in cooperation with organisations working locally. For too long now, direct aid to civil society under the Cotonou Agreement has failed to live up to its promises because the Cotonou Agreement is essentially an inter-state agreement that failed from the start to reckon with the presence of civil society action on the ground;
- AIDS — an urgent issue for the continent: it has taken us fifteen years to decide that we can actually help Africa;
- all the problems that make governance necessary in these countries, especially over-indebtedness, a problem that is often created by governments with no democratic legitimacy.

2.7 If the initial ambition is to be respected, three prerequisites must be fulfilled:

- the need for greater security — in the broad sense — for citizens,
- adequate economic growth, to be achieved mainly through the Cotonou Agreement and the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), and
- improved governance everywhere.

2.8 It should be noted that, to this end, the joint resources of the European Union and the G8 are to be substantially increased. They will double over the next ten years, and half these resources will be dedicated to Africa. However, the number of promises broken in the past, albeit on both sides, calls for caution. For if the growing number of promises cannot be denied, the reduction in aid actually provided by certain industrialised countries in recent years is equally undeniable!

2.9 The European Economic and Social Committee agrees with the spirit of the Communication, not least in its definition of human rights policy. Since 2001 a number of countries have made progress towards meeting human rights and democratisation criteria. Nevertheless, the EESC would once again emphasise that human rights and democratisation must be further strengthened. In order to ensure the promotion of justice and rule of law, support is required to strengthen and organise civil society, and in particular the social partners, whose dialogue must be guaranteed in accordance with ILO standards.

2.10 Nevertheless, the European Economic and Social Committee notes the need to define priorities, which further requires a deeper analysis of the major issues involved, namely to:

- coordinate EU policies and, more specifically, to provide for coordination of Member States' policies;
- continue discussions on and implementation of new forms of solidarity-based financing, in particular by providing support for the follow-up group on sources of new funding to supplement government aid (set up at the Paris Conference in February 2006);
- consult and organise essential regional integration, as well as inter-regional policy; and prioritise the creation of inter-regional infrastructure through calls for tender that comply with specific social and environmental standards, thereby facilitating the establishment of regional institutions;
- focus heavily on the issue of emigration, especially by eliminating the causes of population displacement in Africa. For this, the EU must show clear and heightened awareness because migration in sub-Saharan Africa is primarily rural and therefore the European Union should spare no effort in defining and applying a rural policy aimed at progressing towards food sufficiency in these regions in full cooperation with civil society; and
- finally, to strengthen the role of governance through effective civil society participation since the Cotonou Agreement has clearly disappointed in this respect, and the Euro-

African Forum has produced no decisive results. Respect for good governance in partner States should therefore comply with a number of multifaceted specifications:

- respect for human rights,
- gender equality,
- the right to free and decentralised information,
- transparency of government organisations and their administration,
- the elimination of corruption, an absolute obstacle to good governance,
- the universal right to water, health and education,
- the phasing-out of the informal economy, which may amount to 80 % of economic activity in some countries.

2.11 The European Economic and Social Committee would also reiterate that rural development, a frequently underestimated issue, is an absolute priority that we must never lose sight of. In Africa, the importance of agriculture is self-evident for frequently reiterated reasons: self-sufficiency in food is essential for development and population stability. Participatory civil society is largely made up of farmers and pastoralists. It is therefore essential to listen to them before drawing up rural policy, and to involve them in its implementation in order to maximise the chances of success.

2.12 The European Economic and Social Committee recalls the importance of infrastructure, which remains conspicuous by its absence, perhaps for want of imagination. This includes national or inter-regional communication systems and access to water, the geopolitical relevance of which is obvious.

2.13 The European Economic and Social Committee calls for the total cessation of all forms of direct budgetary support.

2.14 None of this will be possible without greater participation of civil society players in an improved framework for global governance, which is of relevance to all public, economic and social authorities.

3. *Specific comments*

In this general context, Africa has been at the top of the 2005 international agenda. The G8 Summit in Scotland last July, the UN 60th anniversary celebrations in New York, and the recent annual meeting of the Bretton Woods institutions, have all provided people including Tony Blair, Horst Kohler and Paul Wolfowitz, the new World Bank President, with the opportunity to say their piece on the need to save Africa from disaster.

The European Economic and Social Committee would therefore focus attention on the pressing issues it has already highlighted in its previous stances:

- Prioritising Africa is a clear necessity but this should be accomplished by considerably broadening, within the framework of this new governance, access for civil society in all its diversity and reality.
- Fighting AIDS must be declared an absolute emergency because another tragedy is currently unfolding before our very eyes in an atmosphere of relative indifference.

3.1 Prioritising Africa

3.1.1 The European Economic and Social Committee supports the European Commission's intention to make sub-Saharan Africa a priority area for EU development aid. Nevertheless, if this measure is to be effective, it must be accompanied by better governance in Africa at both national and regional levels. This concerns African inter-state organisations, States, and civil society organisations. Thanks to their independence (which needs strengthening), their proximity to the population and pro-activism, civil society organisations can help the populations directly concerned to take greater possession of development policies. The reasons for Africa's disintegration are indeed diverse, but civil society's lack of independence and inadequate capacity undoubtedly play a part and have a not inconsiderable impact. The concept of delegation, which was expressly provided for in the Cotonou Agreement for the purpose of resolving this problem, is ineffective because the direct, albeit conditional, assistance to these associations set out in the Agreement has proved difficult to deliver.

3.1.2 The European Economic and Social Committee therefore recommends:

- greater and easier access to Community funding for African civil society organisations. Direct access at national level should be guaranteed. Moreover, a horizontal programme to fund non-State actors should also be set in place to complement programmes at national level;
- civil society participation in defining and implementing cooperation policies and strategies should be broader and more systematic in order to enable civil society to take greater possession of the development process and thereby to contribute to the establishment of good governance. If some instances of progress have been detected, it is due to the slow but steady increase in the number of populations speaking out through all channels: social partners, credible and respected associations, especially institutions promoting gender equality, the local economy, education and information.

3.1.3 The European Union considers that human rights are inviolable. The European Economic and Social Committee calls for EU support to civil society to become a reality, and bearing in mind these human rights concerns, for:

- a pragmatic approach to be adopted in its definition;
- credible interlocutors with the ability to hold dialogue with the government to be identified, including by setting up independent NGO networks;
- project proposals to be introduced to secure their access to funding, and local micro-projects to be set up.

3.1.4 Implementing the EPAs is likely to present the same difficulties. In attempting to achieve a genuine single market programme and a genuine reform programme, we must consider that:

- human resource and technical capacity building for civil society and Africans in general remains precarious, especially for women;
- if targeting EU aid is necessary to support the factors of production, then this should be done more effectively, and more coherent crossborder networks are required in the context of the EPA programme.

3.1.5 The European Economic and Social Committee notes that negotiations to conclude EPAs with various regional blocks have been initiated and hopes that the process will result in a trade upsurge that contributes towards sustainable development and the eradication of poverty. Nevertheless, in order to ensure that these agreements are genuinely beneficial to the population, the EESC requests that the following points be implemented:

- The information disseminated should be as exhaustive as possible in order to permit the systematic involvement of civil society organisations in negotiations and impact assessments at national and regional level.
- The private sector should be involved in negotiations and capacity-building support should be provided.
- Social consequences and gender issues should be included in impact assessments.
- Flexibility in trade agreements should translate into transitional periods for their implementation that would make it possible to protect businesses in the signatory States, and into specific protection for emerging industries and safeguard measures to cope with the competition from newly developed countries.

— There is a need for States to re-accumulate their own resources after integrating temporary financial compensation, possibly in conjunction with the benefits of more flexible measures that enable them to maintain a minimum level of fiscal autonomy in the trade sector. Indeed States affected by the loss of public revenue that will result from reductions in transitional customs duties are already in an extremely precarious financial situation and are struggling to ensure minimum public funding for education and health.

3.1.6 In order to ensure that economic development benefits as many people as possible and does not result in abuse, the EESC believes that EU development aid activities in Africa should take account of the principles of social cohesion and decent work for all. Compliance with these principles will be better ensured if there was a genuine social dialogue and, more generally, if there was a dialogue between civil society organisations.

3.1.7 The EESC therefore proposes to: cooperate with African Economic, Social and Cultural Councils to share experience and knowledge, as proposed by the European Commission in its communication ⁽²⁾, particularly with a view to making them effective partners in sectoral or geographic organisation of investment and aid;

— contribute its experience and know-how at national level wherever necessary, to encourage the creation of economic and social councils in forms which are appropriate to African cultures in all the countries where they do not exist, and to promote the renewal of certain existing ESCs which have lost credibility or become less visible; the European Economic and Social Committee has noted some encouraging signs: positive developments in the growing influence of the African Union; the European consensus on development between the Council, the European Parliament, and the European Commission; the networking of civil society organisations in certain regions, such as farmers, SMEs, social partners, etc.

This might indicate that the European Union has realised that civil society is not sufficiently involved and that respect for it should be incorporated in the new strategy.

3.2 The fight against pandemics

3.2.1 With respect to the AIDS issue, the European Economic and Social Committee calls on all political, economic and social leaders to pool their efforts. It welcomes a recent visit to the EESC by leading representatives from the IOE (International Organisation of Employers) and the ICFTU (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions). These two organisations have asked the Committee to provide multi-tiered support for action plans they launched in 2003 in 8 Southern African countries.

3.2.2 The European Economic and Social Committee should act as spokesperson for this cause in all arenas, at regional and local seminars as well as at plenary sessions. Thanks to the

educational system and the mobilisation of the family by civil society stakeholders, a glimmer of hope has been detected for the first time. The prevalence rate for AIDS is receding in Senegal, Uganda and Zimbabwe, and life expectancy is rising once again. However, we must not drop our guard, and the Commission has announced programming guidelines on combating AIDS for its national partners.

3.2.3 The European Economic and Social Committee would stress that substantial financial resources will be required to combat HIV/AIDS through permanent prevention policies and treatment strategies involving effective and simplified therapies whose costs should be entirely regulated by the World Trade Organisation TRIPS Agreement (Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) as well as support for research on a reliable and universal vaccine.

3.2.4 The human, social and economic consequences of pandemics in developing countries, such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa, are already devastating and place enormous demands on these countries. This is a matter of absolute urgency since famine situations are emerging in countries with high AIDS prevalence rates (45-49 %). The EESC recommends EU action on two levels:

— At world level:

In the framework of the Doha cycle negotiations for the development of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the EESC has supported — and continues to support — the European Commission's view that the countries affected by such pandemics should be granted favourable access to drugs. Furthermore, new instruments enable the European Union to take part in a general debate with UNAIDS, the Global Fund, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the World Health Organisation.

— At national level:

The EESC's point of departure is that in countries lacking infrastructure where the authorities do not have enough resources to provide a minimum service nationwide, civil society organisations are particularly capable of reaching the rural populations.

Accordingly — and here the EESC is passing on the request of its socio-economic partners in the ACP countries — it calls for specific European funding allowing civil society organisations to circulate information about pandemics to the public at large.

The European Economic and Social Committee believes that an integrated approach towards the three pandemics (AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis) should be based on civil society, namely patient associations representing the people living with the disease. This implies the involvement of civil society in beneficiary countries.

The European Union must contribute to solving the crisis in human resources through capacity building in terms of human and technical resources.

⁽²⁾ COM(2005) 132 - *Speeding up progress towards the Millennium Development Goals: The European Union's contribution*, April 2005.

Equipped with the necessary financial and human resources, these organisations should be encouraged to establish alliances and partnerships with all stakeholders involved in fighting pandemics.

The European Economic and Social Committee requests that preventive action — in particular access to family planning for women — and aid for the sick and their families be effectively supported by European funding.

3.2.5 The European Economic and Social Committee believes that all stakeholders — NGOs, social partners, political leaders — should intensify their efforts to this end. It considers that it has a vital coordination role to play between all parties engaged in this struggle. The European Economic and Social

Committee would like to act as a custodian of this struggle since it is an essential priority for all affected countries. For let us not deceive ourselves — lack of stakeholder involvement has already given rise to famine.

3.2.6 The European Union should focus on reducing the costs of pharmaceuticals by forming a special partnership with the WTO. The EESC calls on the EU Member States to subscribe to the initiative to provide large-scale and long-term pharmaceutical financing (Paris Conference, February 2006). It acknowledges that the initiative should enable closer involvement of the national ESCs by associating them with its implementation, evaluation and also monitoring, thus helping to ensure that this new measure is genuinely traceable.

Brussels, 18 May 2006.

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

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning

(COM(2005) 548 *final* — 2005/0221 (COD))

(2006/C 195/26)

On 28 November 2005 the Council decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 3 May 2006. The rapporteur was Mária Herczog.

At its 427th plenary session, held on 17-18 May 2006 (meeting of 18 May), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 124 votes to two, with three abstentions.

1. Executive summary

1.1 The EESC strongly supports the Commission's recommendations concerning key competences for lifelong learning, which are fully consistent with the Lisbon strategy for a knowledge society and with the Employment Guidelines 2005-2008.

1.2 The EESC feels that the proposal, if implemented, could help to overcome current problems on the labour market, particularly in terms of narrowing the gap between economic needs and preparation of the available workforce.

1.3 The focus in training on developing key competences could also help to achieve the important common objective of ensuring that by the end of initial education and training young people have developed the key competences to a level

that equips them for adult life and successful participation in the labour market either as employees or entrepreneurs, and that adults are able to develop and update these competences throughout their lives, based on a solid foundation of general knowledge which is one of the keys to the capacity for ongoing adaptation.

1.4 Among the instruments for achieving this objective, the EESC feels that it is particularly important to prepare teachers to provide effective support for students in secondary education, vocational education and adult education in acquiring key competences, with teachers themselves acquiring or continuously developing the key competences which they need for their work.