

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on ‘Collective civil society initiatives for sustainable development’ (own-initiative opinion)

(2011/C 21/02)

Rapporteur: **Mr HENCKS**

On 16 July 2009 the European Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an own-initiative opinion entitled

Collective civil society initiatives for sustainable development.

The Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 6 May 2010.

At its 463rd plenary session, held on 26 and 27 May 2010 (meeting of 26 May), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 146 votes to 5 with 2 abstentions.

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1 The challenges facing us in terms of sustainable development, accentuated by the public finance crisis, are sufficiently worrying for civil society to commit to supporting the political decision-makers and the necessary economic and social changes, as well as the re-establishment of balanced public finances.

1.2 Beyond scientific considerations, the success of political decisions depends largely on their acceptability to civil society, which, in a spirit of greater transparency with regard to the ultimate choices and responsibilities involved, should be closely involved in every phase of implementing sustainable development policies.

1.3 Civil society’s involvement in developing an ambitious sustainable development policy will need to be carefully structured in order to ensure that it is effective and does not descend into populism.

1.4 In view of the comments and suggestions set out below, the EESC calls for civic participation and the sharing of knowledge to be incorporated in the review of the sustainable development strategy in 2011. This integration must be achieved *inter alia* through an action plan, financial incentives and the publication of best practices in collective civil society initiatives.

1.5 The EESC also feels that sustainable development should have a prominent position in the EU 2020 strategy.

2. Subject of the own-initiative opinion

2.1 ‘We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children’. This proverb from the indigenous Canadian Haida nation is a perfect illustration of the challenge facing the

current generation, namely to change our ways of life and find new routes for effective, socially fair and environmentally sustainable economic development that ensures the fair redistribution of wealth and gives all citizens access to a decent life.

2.2 Some of these changes will require top-down initiatives such as legislation, public and/or private investment programmes, etc., while others call for bottom-up initiatives by concerned citizens. They, in turn, have a personal contribution to make, for example by changing their behaviour and consumption patterns and supporting or getting involved in community initiatives and actions to promote sustainable development.

2.3 Governments and the EU must recognise that these bottom-up initiatives are necessary in order not only to create a more sustainable economy but also to achieve the aims that the political authorities have set themselves with regard to sustainable development. An EU-level initiative could certainly provide considerable added value, for example by publicising best practices in terms of public and community campaigns and initiatives to promote sustainable development.

2.4 The aim of this opinion is therefore to make recommendations on what Europe could do to increase the effectiveness and number of collective initiatives launched by institutional bodies, businesses, trade unions, NGOs, other associations or members of civil society to make more progress with regard to sustainable development.

2.5 In this opinion, the EESC sets out its thinking on ways of getting civil society as a whole to make a more active contribution to sustainable development, and on the type of framework that Europe should construct in order to support and maximise the effectiveness of initiatives in this connection.

3. The challenge for civil society: to become a driving force in promoting sustainable development

3.1 Climate change is currently a hot topic, and undoubtedly constitutes a threat with potentially catastrophic future consequences, but it is not the only phenomenon hampering the sustainable development of our societies: the loss of biodiversity, deforestation, soil degradation, toxic waste, heavy metals, organic pollutants, unchecked urbanisation, social inequalities and injustices, and so on, are all major problems for humanity.

3.2 In order to achieve an environmentally and socially sustainable lifestyle, we need to get away from an attitude of constantly seeking more unsustainable growth, and move from an era of over-consumption and waste to an era of well-being, focused on human and social development. As the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council put it, it is important to take account of *human beings as biological and social, natural and cultural beings, as people*.

3.3 However, poorly sustainable behaviour is not just a modern phenomenon: man's treatment of the environment has always been 'poorly sustainable'. What has changed is the scale and speed of the damage to ecosystems caused by production and consumption patterns.

3.4 What has also changed is that modern scientific knowledge (in relative terms) of how ecosystems function now allows us to demonstrate and understand the seriousness of the situation and to highlight the various aspects of our societies' behaviour that are not sustainable. The clear alarm signals are evidently not enough to make societies sufficiently aware of their actions and to make them adapt to more sustainable and socially responsible behaviour.

3.5 The concept of sustainable development originally dealt primarily with natural resources (exhausting fossil fuel reserves) and pollution (destruction of the ozone layer) by means of emissions standards for harmful substances or abstraction limits for resources, but it has since become more general, and now includes requirements relating to economic growth and social cohesion. Sustainable development thus combines a concern for the balanced development of societies – particularly for combating poverty – with a concern for bequeathing to future generations a healthy, rich and diverse environment.

3.6 The concept of sustainable development has thus become more widely accepted over the years: it was initially mainly the green movements across the western world that worried about ecosystems, but today all the political parties

have embraced the theme of environmental protection, which has expanded to become sustainable development.

3.7 It is worth pointing out that civil society has not remained passive: many citizens are already committing themselves, individually or in group actions, to a more sustainable lifestyle. For example:

- in workplaces, both employers and employees are making efforts to consume less energy, reduce waste and develop more sustainable production methods;
- in the wholesale and retail sectors, traders are working with customers to identify the best ways of promoting more sustainable products;
- at home, people are taking action to improve the energy performance of their homes, avoid waste, reduce water usage and promote recycling;
- in the national education systems of certain Member States, children are made aware of the need to respect the environment and sustainable development from a very early age.

3.8 Similarly, at regional level, associations, professional organisations or residents' panels have been set up to discuss sustainable development issues, issue opinions and launch actions.

3.9 Nonetheless, although it had a very high media profile during the recent UN climate change conference in Copenhagen, sustainable development is suffering a marked loss of interest. This can be explained in part by the fact that climate change, which is only one part – albeit a major one – of sustainable development, sometimes overshadows the other essential aspects. In addition to the disillusion felt by the public, who were expecting a formal commitment from the political authorities, there is a degree of scepticism towards the very real risk presented by climate change. This scepticism is promoted by certain scientists and political bodies who question the seriousness of the situation; this only exacerbates the loss of enthusiasm, along with the denial movement.

3.10 The EESC's resolution '*No turning back*' of 23 November 2009, addressed to the Copenhagen conference, now takes on a new importance, and is addressed to the whole of civil society: business, trade unions, and other civil society organisations. Everyone needs to make efforts both to mitigate and to adapt to climate change.

3.11 Indeed, the disappointing outcome of the Copenhagen conference and the resultant risk of indifference make it all the more important for civil society to rally round. As the EESC has suggested, civil society needs to emphasise that the European Union *must not be tempted to use the failure of Copenhagen to reduce its own ambitions or to lower its own commitment, but must redouble its efforts to establish a model of development based on low-carbon emissions and the preservation of natural resources and drawing its competitiveness from its capacity to coordinate innovation, productive investment and human capital.*

3.12 Indeed, it is undeniable that there are interactions between the environmental, economic, social and cultural spheres. This necessitates an interdisciplinary approach bringing together a group of stakeholders with very different skills and interests, who need to break down the walls separating institutions and sectors and combine their expert knowledge and common sense. It is important to ensure that the various sections of society do not cancel each other out and that the decision is not left to the best-organised elected representatives or interest groups.

3.13 Civil society initiatives in this field really can act as a driving force for political decision-making. Civil society has the ability to bring together stakeholders and political decision-makers, to heighten the awareness of all sections of society so that they rethink their lifestyles, consumption patterns and production methods and initiate ambitious initiatives and actions.

4. The public debate on sustainable development – history

4.1 It was in the wake of initiatives by organised civil society that the declaration of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), held in Rio in 1992, first officially brought civil society into the discussions on sustainable development. The 27 principles of sustainable development established in the declaration include, among other things, the principle that the public must be involved in decision-making and that women, young people, local communities and minorities should have a larger role to play than is currently the case.

4.2 Chapter 28 of Agenda 21 (a sustainable development programme drawn up during the Rio Summit) encourages local authorities to integrate sustainable development in their action plans, via ‘a consultative process with their populations’.

4.3 This acknowledged the fact that it was important for civil society to be involved in analysing the consequences of public policy on people’s ultimate choices and responsibilities

with regard to sustainable development. As a result, all the parties concerned, in whatever way (some of whom, such as future generations, are by definition not present), must be closely involved in planning and implementing these projects.

4.4 Since then, non-governmental organisations, followed by businesses, trade unions, local and regional authorities and other associations, have claimed their place in the debate, alongside the political and institutional players. They have initiated a large number of actions, initiatives and recommendations to promote sustainable behaviour.

5. The actions of civil society

5.1 The EESC, as the institutional representative of organised civil society at European Union level, has been taking an interest in sustainable development for many years. In 2006 it set up the Sustainable Development Observatory, which aims to boost civil society input in sustainable development policy that marries environmental, social and economic interests. In this connection, the EESC has drafted a number of opinions and recommendations on key sustainability issues, and will continue to propose practical solutions along the lines of the opinion on *Building a sustainable economy by changing our model of consumption* (INT/497).

5.2 It is nonetheless evident that institutional and political actors still carry considerably greater weight than civil society, and certain activities that appear to be aimed at promoting sustainable development are influenced by political, financial or ideological, rather than environmental, interests and by the whims of one group or another. This carries with it the risk that sustainable development will be appropriated and used by pressure groups to serve issues that sometimes have little to do with the initial matter.

5.3 Even so, it is not usually possible to get all parties involved: often, a section of civil society does not make its voice heard until resolving the problems has become a matter of urgency, with the field being left to pressure groups and protest groups outside urgent situations.

5.4 We therefore need to go beyond mere information campaigns, and find ways to achieve a participatory democracy in which consultation structures reach all parts of civil society and remain representative and active over the long term, whilst reconciling environmental, social and economic concerns in local and global actions. In this context, it is vital to promote local actions in parallel with global ones and to involve civil society closely: this approach is the best way of ensuring that everyone at whom the actions are ultimately targeted identifies with the steps taken.

6. A representative and active civil society over the long term

6.1 In a system of multilevel governance as applied in the European Union, it would be inappropriate to rely solely on democratically elected representative institutions to ensure that the public are involved in the discussions and the decision-making process.

6.2 The Aarhus Convention, which was negotiated within the framework of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), sets out the principles for effective public participation in decision-making in environmental matters. It relates to rights concerning access to information, public participation in the decision-making process and access to justice, all in relation to the environment.

6.3 The Aarhus Convention specifies that all public-law bodies must make any environmental information they hold available to any person requesting it, without that person having to prove his identity or give reasons for the request. In its opinion on Directive 2003/4/EC, the EESC criticised the fact that certain elements of the transposition of this Convention into Community law did not comply with the provisions of the Convention, *inter alia* regarding the concept of 'qualified entities' authorised to access information. The EESC feels that the aforementioned directive needs to be revised. It also regrets the fact that there has been no EU-level evaluation of the application of this Convention, now that the states that have ratified it are required to produce a report on its application.

6.4 First of all, it will be necessary to define the target population who will be called on to participate in drafting and developing sustainable development policies; It would also be worthwhile, at this stage, to decide on the procedures for recruiting volunteers, and to establish concrete objectives, a methodology and procedures for assessing and publishing results.

6.5 As sustainable development directly affects all citizens, without exception, the group expressing their opinions can only be truly representative if it is based on a broad spectrum of socio-demographic characteristics and a wide variety of expertise and opinions.

6.6 It is therefore important to identify the problems clearly and to establish specific priority objectives to aim for over the short to medium term, taking account of the social and cultural dimensions of the problems, which should be close to people's real interests. This involves prioritising the problems and dealing with them according to their priority, the seriousness of the impact and damage they involve, and the cost of resolving them.

6.7 The public needs to be able to see participation in terms of empowerment: in other words, they need to be involved in initiatives at an early stage, when the strategy and the projects are being planned, and to play an active role in each stage of the process.

6.8 At each stage of discussions and of the process of achieving consensus on solutions, a person with experience in leading discussions and with no ties to any interest groups should be designated as a 'sustainable development mediator' at local, regional or national level; this person should be responsible for informing, encouraging and recruiting all interested individuals who wish to take part. He or she should coordinate all the activities centrally, ensuring that all views are heard and that all the participants have the opportunity to take part in the debate and preventing abuses.

6.9 This mediator should also act as a go-between and spokesperson in the public arena and to the media, in order to give sustainable development advocates a voice, to ensure that the information provided is accurate and to ensure that the press does not monopolise public attention with biased reporting; he or she should also cooperate closely with those responsible for schools to broaden awareness of sustainable development from a very young age.

6.10 In order to encourage as many people as possible to be actively involved in the decision-making process surrounding sustainable development, it will be necessary to analyse and combat the reasons why much of society is looking on hesitantly from the sidelines.

7. Removing the barriers to active participation by civil society

7.1 Lifestyle changes and measures to counter the damage done to ecosystems have become the subject of a long-term plan, rather than a short-term operational reality. The challenges are still too often perceived as if these environmental problems were only slowly growing to a catastrophic scale, negligible at the moment but ultimately disastrous. This is a utilitarian vision that limits environmental awareness to daily life and to visible effects and pollution, and disregards imperceptible, as yet unrealised, potential risks.

7.2 In order for the public to understand why it is important to change behaviour, they need to be given information and explanations in clear language that avoids specialised and overly sophisticated terminology, while nonetheless avoiding lapsing into sloganeering or replacing science with emotions.

7.3 Better communications, using a variety of media to send clear, comprehensible messages, would doubtless help the public to identify more with the problems facing them and with the action that needs to be taken.

7.4 The messages sent also need to be objective. Bombarding the public with crude figures, presented as irrefutable facts even though they are rather unconvincing – such as the former US vice-president's claim that the Arctic summer ice cap would have disappeared in five years – is counter-productive. Such declarations will ultimately result in people distrusting political decision-makers and being indifferent to the real problems.

7.5 The doom-mongers prophesying imminent, undeniable major disasters are creating a climate of chronic fear that leads to selfishness and acts as a pretext for NIMBY (not in my backyard) attitudes that damage social cohesion and sustainable development. Revealing examples of this inward-looking tendency include campaigns against the installation of wind turbines because they disfigure the countryside, and the uncontrolled burning of waste in order to avoid paying collection charges.

7.6 This indifference is a serious matter, because, although the consequences will probably not be as dramatic as some would have us believe, there are problems that call for rapid solutions. In line with the precautionary principle, it is better to respond to potentially dangerous situations without waiting for the danger to be confirmed scientifically.

7.7 It must be ensured that the results and successes of civic participation are documented and publicised outside the specialist community, bearing in mind that examples of best practice are an excellent way of sharing progress.

7.8 Steps must be taken to ensure that civil society remains committed over the long term, the proposals made by the public that have been implemented in practice (even if only in part) need to be highlighted and publicised.

7.9 More effort needs to be put into research into methods of changing people's behaviour; one very useful such method is certainly to integrate sustainable development education into national education systems, in order to make children aware of these issues from an early age. It is in this spirit that the EESC has launched a debate on the feasibility of a European network of national clean-energy education and training forums.

8. Evaluation of actions

8.1 The large number of stakeholders means that there is a great deal of diversity in the actions, in terms of both form and substance. It is therefore practically impossible to compare them, and it is rarely possible to find a common frame of reference, which is why it is vital to undertake a regular evaluation of the actions from the point of view of sustainable development.

8.2 Moreover, the instrumentalisation of sustainable development, on the one hand, and at times excessive regulation, on the other, necessitate ongoing evaluation based on project progress indicators.

9. Evaluation indicators

9.1 Under the action plan adopted in Rio in 1992, countries need to adopt a common system for monitoring and evaluating the progress made by sustainable development in general, and by local agendas in particular. They are also expected to develop generally agreed indicators in the economic, social and environmental fields to establish a useful foundation for decision making at all levels. There must be a consensus concerning these indicators, and they must provide a representative picture of the three dimensions of sustainable development.

9.2 The evaluation is based on a diagnosis, an analysis and recommendations, and the aim is to judge the value of a policy, programme or action. It should, however, be acknowledged that the environmental, human and social aspects are often hard to evaluate, but it is nonetheless worth making the effort to do so, because the dominance of GDP, which is, to date, the primary reference for well-being and quality of life, could encourage politicians to take decisions that damage social cohesion and the environment and to ignore the needs of future generations ⁽¹⁾.

9.3 The evaluation of sustainable development involves understanding the trends in two basic directions: firstly, evaluating the absorption capacity and, secondly, evaluating developments in the administration of human societies.

9.4 In a recent opinion (CESE 647/2010 '*Beyond GDP – Measuring progress in a changing world*'; rapporteur: Mr Josef Zbořil), the EESC welcomed the Commission's endeavours to extend national accounts to environmental and social issues. A legal framework for environmental accounting is due to be proposed in 2010. The social indicators in the national accounts are not yet being used to the full. The need to use these indicators can be expected to grow as a comprehensive and integrated approach to measuring and evaluating progress in a changing world is further refined.

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 100, 30.4.2009.

10. Evaluation method

10.1 The wide variety of programmes and actions implemented by national, regional and local authorities to encourage sustainable behaviours and lifestyles means that the evaluation needs to be multidimensional, bearing in mind that the acceptability of an evaluation varies considerably depending on the areas, methods and criteria used.

10.2 In addition, evaluation at Member State level has to be pluralistic, with the involvement of all stakeholders: the authorities in charge of planning and implementing actions; regulators; service providers; representatives of consumers; trade unions, civil society, etc. Although opinion polls are sometimes difficult to interpret, they form part of a policy of providing information, raising awareness and enabling participation by individuals and businesses, and enable them to communicate with the evaluating bodies and to pass on their complaints.

10.3 Apart from involving multiple parties, this evaluation will have to be independent and take the differing points of view into account given that not all stakeholders have the same interests, and that in some cases they may even clash and not have equivalent information and appraisals.

10.4 The environmental, economic and social effectiveness and performance of the various actions promoting sustainable development therefore cannot be assessed on the basis of a single criterion; a full range of criteria must be used.

10.5 Evaluation is only meaningful if it is connected with the designated objectives and tasks, which derive from the three pillars of the Lisbon strategy (economic growth, social cohesion and environmental protection). It therefore needs to be based on multiple criteria.

10.6 As the EESC proposed with regard to services of general interest⁽²⁾, the evaluation system will have to be based on periodic reports drawn up at national or local levels by evaluating bodies set up by the Member States in line with the above principles.

10.7 At EU level the task will be to lay down the procedures for exchange, collation, comparison and coordination. It will therefore be up to the European Union to stimulate the process of independent evaluation, by defining a harmonised evaluation methodology at European level based on common indicators, through consultation with the representatives of stakeholders. It also needs to provide the means for this methodology to operate.

10.8 To ensure the relevance and usefulness of the evaluation, a Steering Committee should be set up representing the diverse interests of all stakeholders. The mission of this Steering Committee would fall perfectly within the remit of the European Environment Agency, in cooperation with the EESC's Sustainable Development Observatory.

10.9 This Steering Committee would be responsible for:

- defining appropriate indicators;
- evaluation methods;
- specifications for the requisite studies;
- commissioning such studies on the basis of multiple expert opinions, and comparing results obtained elsewhere;
- a critical review of reports;
- extrapolating best practice and innovative approaches;
- recommendations;
- disseminating findings.

10.10 Discussions with all stakeholders on assessment reports could take the form of an annual conference on the performance of actions to promote sustainable development, at which examples of best practice could be presented.

Brussels, 26 May 2010.

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of the European Economic and Social Committee
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⁽²⁾ OJ C 162, 25.6.2008, p. 42.