



Platform of European Social NGOs
Plate-forme des ONG européennes du secteur social

Her Excellency Mrs Lourdes Pintasilgo
Portuguese Ambassador to France de Portugal
3 bis rue Emile Duclaux
75015 Paris-France

09/09/99

Your Excellency,

I am honoured to invite you on behalf of the Platform of European NGOS to a major Conference on "the Civil Dialogue and the European Union: Strengthening Social Cohesion" which we are holding on 18-19 November in Portugal.

We would be very pleased if you would accept to chair the hearing on "the Future of the Civil Dialogue in the European Union" as well as to give the closing speech on 19 November in the afternoon.

The President of Portugal, Mr Jorge Sampaio has expressed his interest in addressing the Conference as has Mr Patrick Venturini, the Secretary General of the Economic and Social Committee. We have also sent invitations to the new Commissioner Designate for European Social Affairs, Mrs Diamantopoulou and to Mr Rocard, chair of the European Parliament Social Affairs Committee and to several representatives of the European non-governmental and trade union sector.

I would be most grateful if you could confirm your participation with the Platform Secretariat at the address below.

Please do not hesitate to contact me or the Secretariat of the Platform if you require any further information.

NB: Enclosed for background information:

- Draft Program for the Conference.
- Platform Position Paper "The European Union and consultation of Social NGOs: Considerations and proposals". 20 February 1998.
- Platform Press releases from 31 March and 6 September 1999.

Yours sincerely,

Giampiero Alhadef
President of the Platform



- the Association of European Consumers
- a European environmental network
- a European Human Rights Association

◆ Workshop

“what is good practice as regards civil dialogue?”

19 November

Morning Session

- ◆ **Hearing: the future of the civil dialogue in the European Union**
- ◆ Report back from Workshops
- ◆ Contributions on the future of the civil dialogue in the European Union by:
 - Anna Diamantopoulou, European Social Affairs Commissioner (to be confirmed)
 - Michel Rocard, the Chair of the EP Committee on Social Affairs (to be confirmed)
 - Portuguese Government Minister
 - NGO representative



Chair of the session: Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo

- ◆ Discussion

Afternoon session

- ◆ **The Civil Dialogue and the Inter-governmental Conference**
- ◆ Contribution of the Secretary General of ECOSOC, Mr Patrick Venturini
- ◆ **Presentation of a proposal for modifying the Treaties**
- ◆ Discussion
- ◆ Adoption of a common resolution

➔ **Closing Session: Speech by Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo**

Brussels, 31 March 1999

PRESS RELEASE

Today ties between the European Parliament and the Platform of European Social NGOs were reinforced when Platform president Giampiero Alhadef and vice-president Marie Françoise Wilkinson spoke at a public hearing organised by the European Parliament's Employment and Social Affairs Committee.

Mr Alhadef began by affirming the Platform's position that a solid legal basis should be established for civil dialogue during the next revision of the treaty. Parliament should not however wait for the revision of the treaty but formalise relations with NGOs at once. He warned however that, "civil dialogue is threatened by the current funding system. The crisis of last year is not over by any means. We as European NGOs urge the Parliament and their colleagues in the Commission to put the funding and management of NGOs on a more secure basis".

Addressing the hearing, Mrs Wilkinson warmly welcomed the work of the Employment and Social Affairs Committee in developing dialogue with NGOs. While this was a promising beginning, she went on to say, "we look forward to working even more closely with the institutions of the European Union on the post-Amsterdam social exclusion and anti-discrimination programmes. She also emphasised the determination of the European NGOs and the ETUC to campaign for the integration of fundamental rights, including social rights, into the next revision of the Treaty.

Ends

For more information on the Platform, see attached annex.
The European Platform of Social NGOs comprises 25 of the major European co-ordination of NGOs, representing millions of citizens.

For more information contact Nia Lewis, Information officer, at the Platform of European Social NGOs.

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For immediate release

Brussels, 6 September 1999

PRESS RELEASE

The Platform of European Social NGOs welcomes the positive stance taken by Commissioners Designate Vitorino and Diamatopoulou on a Charter of Rights for Europe and on civil dialogue.



At his hearing on Friday the Commissioner Designate Vitorino, responsible for Justice and Home Affairs, pointed out that "it was very embarrassing to explain to European citizens that 50 years after the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the EU still does not have a Charter of Fundamental Rights". He went on to say that any Charter had to include social and economic rights.

The President of the Platform, Mr Giampero Alhadeff, said, "any future EU Charter of Rights must be enforceable and based on the indivisibility of rights".

Mr Alhadeff also welcomed the comments made by Ms Diamantopoulou, Commissioner Designate for Employment and Social Affairs, who in her written replies to the Parliament, supported the inclusion of a reference to civil dialogue in the Treaty. She added that a secure legal base would give social NGOs more security, and clarify their relationship with the Commission.

Ends

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The Platform of European Social NGOs was established to promote co-operation between Social NGOs and the European Union. It brings together 25 networks and federations operating in the social field representing a wide range of different groups throughout the Union, including women, lesbians and gays, older people, children & families, disabled people, unemployed people, migrants, people in poverty and homeless people.

PLATFORM OF EUROPEAN SOCIAL NGOs

POSITION PAPER



The European Union and consultation of Social NGOs

Considerations and proposals

Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

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20 February 1998

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The European Union and consultation of Social NGOs *Considerations and proposals*

The Platform of European Social NGOs drew up a document (see Annex) entitled "Taking the unique character of Social NGOs into account at European level" for the Social Policy Forum (Brussels, 27-30 March 1996). It explains the importance, which NGOs attach to their voluntary, non-public sector status. It describes NGOs as focal points for mobilising public solidarity, as social players acting in the general interest to foster economic and social cohesion, revealing society's demands and advocates of the most vulnerable. It concludes that: "Social NGOs must be given a greater role and their uniqueness greater recognition in national and international forums (...) Every effort must be made to involve Social NGOs in building a social Europe worthy of the name. No discussion of European social policy can be valid if it does not acknowledge Social NGOs as players apart and, better still, is based to some extent on them".

After the Forum, the Platform staged a seminar on "The European Union's consultation of Social NGOs" to spark off discussions on what must be done to achieve real consultative status for Social NGOs with the European Union. The Platform set up a working group to take the discussions forward and produce proposals. This document is the product of that process.

1. General considerations

If NGOs are to be involved in forging a more social Europe, then, logically, they must be consulted by all the European Union's institutions. Foremost among these, obviously, is the European Commission because of its responsibilities and powers of initiative. And over the years, it has initiated many consultations. But it does not have the monopoly on consulting NGOs. The European Parliament and the Economic and Social Committee also have procedures for it, whereas the Council of Ministers, on the other hand, does not normally do so. And yet it is the key policy-making body. Any discussion on recognition and consultation of NGOs must bear this in mind, then.

NGOs differ widely in their aims, size, scale of operation (local, regional, national, European), resources, methods, etc. Which ones should the European Union consult? One unique feature (not exclusive to Social NGOs) is that for more than a century - long before states began working together internationally - NGOs have been engaged in a process of Co-operation and coalition leading to the establishment of first national, then international, federations and networks. They are now highly experienced international operators. But most of the European institutions still operate on a national basis. That is the basis for Council of Ministers' meetings; MEPs, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions are all nominated and elected on the basis of national lists. By contrast, the European Commission's task is to uphold the interests of Europe, not its component Member States. It seems essential, therefore, that NGOs should be able to contribute their practical expertise as international operators to the European building. International (or European) NGOs are able to gather national and local experiences in many fields; many of them are in contact with future members of the European Union. Therefore it seems natural that they should be the talking partners recognised by the European Union.

This is not to say that the various Union institutions should have no contacts with national NGOs (notably to support those of their activities, which impinge on European policies). But for the purposes of consultation - what the Commission calls "civil dialogue" or sometimes "regular consultations" - international or European NGOs should speak on behalf of NGOs generally.¹

The European Commission, supported by the European Parliament, intends developing a civil dialogue with NGOs, which it had hoped to include in the Amsterdam Treaty, but that did not happen. This is still a priority for the NGOs. The Treaties presently include two annexed Declarations: a Declaration which calls on "Co-operation with charitable associations" and an other Declaration which shows the importance of "voluntary service activities». Before and after these declarations, the Commission developed co-operation with - and occasionally consultation of - NGOs in a wide variety of ways. It has funded (and sometimes encouraged) the establishment of European INGOs as umbrella organisations of large numbers of NGOs to have liaisons in different areas (development, gender equity, poverty, disability issues, ...). It also works with existing INGOs, which are financially independent from it. It has also funded (and instigated) "interfaces" through which to facilitate consultations with European and international NGOs. The Platform of Social NGOs

¹ To avoid all confusion, the abbreviation "INGO" will be used to describe international and European NGOs, and "NGO" for non-governmental organizations - local, regional, national, European and international - in general.

is a case in point. It has set up a Consultative Committee on Co-operatives, Mutual Associations, NGOs and Foundations of the European Union to give opinions on aspects of the social economy.



Because these instances of Co-operation and consultation have developed ad hoc, instigated by certain NGOs and Commission officials, they have evolved what might be called "sectorally", focused on specific concerns (environment, development, education, social economy, protection of disadvantaged groups, etc.). Over time, each "sector" has developed its own habits, almost traditions. And yet all policy-makers and community leaders - like the social partners - increasingly admit the need for an overall approach in all areas. For that reason, the Maastricht Treaty requires that all European policies shall take cultural aspects into account, while the Amsterdam Treaty reinforces the requirement for an environmental impact assessment of all European actions. Many NGOs have also called for a similar social cohesion impact assessment. Consultations like those conducted by Commissioner Oreja among a very wide cross-section of NGOs from all sectors for the Intergovernmental Conference are few and far between. But why should consultation of NGOs remain essentially sectoral?

The existing legislative vacuum is not conducive to the development of regular, cross-sectoral consultations with INGOs. The individual Commission Directorates General continue to initiate consultations, but there are no moves to draw everything together. The first essential step in this direction is for the Commission to compile a List of INGOs with which it would consult on a regular basis. INGOs would have to apply for inclusion on the List; the Commission would take a decision based on the INGO's representative capacity in its chosen field. Normally, of course, this List should be a List of INGOs registered with the European Union (rather than the Commission) and entail official consultative status. But given the Union's institution-building problems, it seems preferable to suggest that the Commission should take the lead with such a List. The List would be kept by the Secretary General of the European Commission. It could in the future be recognised both by the European Parliament and the Council of European Union.

The compilation of this List would also be an opportunity for regulating the relations between listed INGOs and the European Commission in a formal legal instrument, setting out the rights and duties of each. This would give the INGOs the assurance of permanence in their relations with the different Commission departments. This regulating instrument should be framed in consultation with INGOs currently working with the Commission. It would include provisions on the Commission's financial support to Listed INGOs.



At the same time as drawing up the List, the European Commission should give general thought as to how it intends to carry out regular, coherent, overall consultations with NGOs without losing sight of the fact that INGOs are neither omnicompetent nor capable of satisfying all demands. Establishing a "civil dialogue" with Listed INGOs will allow the Commission to take forward what it has already innovated in this area and devise exemplary, comprehensive consultation arrangements.

Inside the European Parliament, the relations between members of the Parliament and NGOs have been diversified. Many deputies keep personal contacts with NGOs. Some INGOs run parliamentary Intergroup secretariat. NGOs are sometimes heard in parliamentary hearings. When preparing the Amsterdam Treaty, the Commission of Institutional Affairs has organised hearings on the Intergovernmental Conference to which many NGOs have participated. In this context, the setting up of a List of INGOs acknowledged as having to be consulted should be very useful to maintain these relations. This is the reason why the List established by the European Commission should also be acknowledged by the European Parliament. This would intensify, strengthen and give coherence to the existing relations.

The European Parliament should ask the Commission to set up a List of INGOs and to share the work which will determine, from this list, the form and conditions of a systematic consultation of NGOs by the European Commission. This process should allow the Parliament to set up its own consultation process with INGOs related in the List.

This being so, INGOs such as the Platform members cannot wait for such a List to be compiled in order to take forward the consultations in which they are already engaged, especially with DGV and the European Parliament. They must press on with sectoral activities while seeking for ways of breaking free of the "Social NGO" mould to prevent over-specialisation and the counter-productive construction of a Europe in which social concerns are divorced from economic, cultural, environmental, human rights and educational matters. Increased consultation between INGOs and DGV should also be a fulcrum for the development of consultations with other Directorates General and other European Union Institutions.

2. Establish a framework for regular consultations between Social INGOs and the European Commission (especially DGV)



To guard against all misunderstandings, it must be clearly understood - as Mr Patrick Venturini, Adviser to the Director General of DG V said - that the biennial Social Policy Forum is not a forum for "structured civil dialogue". It is an open forum for meetings between NGOs and social partners, experts and government representatives. It cannot be a substitute for the procedure of consultation and dialogue, which the Commission needs to anchor its thinking and action in the experience of INGOs.

The Platform's task is to facilitate consultation of Social INGOs. It cannot speak for each individual NGO; it is not a superstructure to replace NGOs. As the "Codified Standing Orders of the Platform" make clear, it is a "forum for discussion and consultation". Its purpose is to formulate policy position on issues of common interest, promote those common positions to institutions and other social advocacy groups, ...» It is also a forum in which for each association to express its own unique views.

The Platform is not there to supplant individual NGOs' relations with the European institutions, therefore, but to amplify them. If an institution were to use the Platform as an excuse for rejecting relations with an NGO, all Platform members would have to lodge a united protest. That is one of the common interests to be jointly upheld.

To test out these regular consultations - this "civil dialogue" - the Platform proposed that DGV should set up twice-yearly meetings to review key social developments and discuss follow-up and progress on the Social Action Programme. This process is not yet under way, but holds out promise. The Commission (through not just DGV but other DGs, too) should be presenting a stocktaking and future prospects at them, while the INGOs should have their say (jointly through considerations common to the Platform, and individually in their own separate remarks). The ensuing discussions, although not negotiations, should help steer everyone's activities down a common path. It is essential for INGOs to know how the Commission intends taking their views into account. It should produce a report on its intentions within three months of the meeting. That report would be a basis for preparing the following meeting. It is vital that these consultations be on a regular basis from the outset, with dates and venues set a year ahead. The agenda should be drawn up jointly, but the Commission will send out the notices for the meeting.

This experiment is merely a first step. It will indicate how the regular consultations desired by the Commission and INGOs will develop. It must be carried out with a view to consultation of Platform INGOs by other Commission Directorates General.



This type of regular consultation should also be developed with certain European Parliament Committees.

3. How to maintain systematic relations between INGOs of the social sector and the European Parliament

Without modifying the existing relations between INGOs members of the Platform and the European Parliament, more regular contacts should be set up with the various committees of the Parliament, and particularly with the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs. First, it would be very useful to have, twice a year, as it happens with DG V, a meeting gathering members of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs and INGOs members of the Platform. Such meetings would enable us to make an assessment of ongoing projects, the progress of the social action programme of the European Commission, the initiatives undertaken by the European Parliament and by NGOs. This would be a strong basis for coordinating efforts.

Afterwards, on the basis of an assessment made on the setting up of the above mentioned meetings, more regular relations could be set up with other commissions or bodies of the European Parliament.

4. How to ensure effective INGO participation in consultations

INGOs are federations or networks of NGOs. Some are federations of national organisations, others are groupings of individuals, community groups, local, regional, national or international associations. All are faced with the problem of communication between the grassroots and the European level. Communication is a two-way process. It consists partly in consulting the grassroots on initiatives taken by the European institutions in order to feed back experience and proposals to the European level. The other is to bring issues of current concern to the grassroots up to European level so as to input new issues into the European debate.

The Platform must facilitate this two-way process. For one thing it should keep INGOs informed about issues which the Commission wishes to open up such that INGOs can decide individually which issues to explore (it is not possible to give a considered opinion on every topic, and not every Platform INGO may have an opinion to give on every topic chosen by the Platform). For another thing, Platform member INGOs should hold regular discussions - say, every 6 months, run-up to the twice-yearly Commission meetings - on the topics being dealt with in each INGO.

In order to have a clearer grasp and better understanding of precisely what is being done in the Platform, there should be discussions on how each individual INGO is dealing with a topic brought forward by the Commission or other European institutions such as the European Parliament. These forms of internal consultation would certainly be very different. Discussing those differences would help us tackle two key points: the time needed by INGOs for these consultations, and the ways of achieving these consultations.

Because INGOs need time to refer back and consult with their (national or local) members, the Platform must ensure that the consultations are held at suitable intervals. Regular, systematic consultations with a meeting every 6 months would be appropriate, provided the topic is known 6 months in advance. Preparations for the Social Policy Forum must also take the time factor into account. Its topics should be set by mutual agreement one year in advance.

Some structures are needed to achieve regular, systematic consultations. There are three aspects to consider. First, consultations cannot take place unless the INGOs have a permanent European Secretariat, with paid staff, operating expenses and regular meetings of its governing bodies. Secondly, INGOs must be able to draw the experiences of their national organisations together. That requires the enlisting of expertise. Thirdly, for the purposes of consultation by a European institution, INGOs should be able to conduct field surveys via their grassroots groups.



5. Summary of proposals

- ◆ The Secretary General of the European Commission should draw up a List of INGOs with which the Commission would establish a "civil dialogue" (i.e., regular, organised, comprehensive consultations).
- ◆ The compilation of this List should be accompanied by a broader discussion (with the INGOs) on the legal and financial conditions of these consultations.
- ◆ DGV should set up regular twice-yearly "civil dialogue" meetings between the INGO members of the Platform of European Social NGOs and the Commission (including other DGs) based on an ongoing evaluation of the Commission's work programme in social policy matters, and including consultations on matters suggested by both sides.
- ◆ The European Parliament should press on the Commission to set up this list of INGOs and to be part of the reflection that the Commission will have on the conditions of this consultation. The Parliament should experiment a more regular consultation with INGOs, on the basis of twice-yearly meetings between the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs and the Platform of European Social INGOs.



ANNEXE

TAKING INTO ACCOUNT THE SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL SECTOR ASSOCIATIONS AT EUROPEAN LEVEL

Introduction

The social sector associations wish to make their voice heard in Europe.

The NGOs in the social sector of the European Community make an essential contribution to the expression and emergence of the role of the individual and ensure that his or her requirements are always taken into account, especially for the more vulnerable members of society and where guaranteed rights are concerned. They contribute to solidarity between citizens and the taking of responsibility, and thus to democracy. These NGOs also promote social services and manage establishments, and, in this capacity, employ millions of people, both paid and voluntary.

The social sector associations are involved in the debate on the reform of the treaties taking place within the scope of the Intergovernmental Conference of 1996, since they are in favour of the construction of:

- ◆ a genuine social Europe which acknowledges and guarantees the basic rights of all residents, which cannot be limited to workers' rights alone, despite their importance;
- ◆ a genuine citizens' Europe, where individuals may intervene more directly to define the type of society they want.

The social sector associations, which are precursors for public-spirited and mutually supportive participation at the national level, are particularly anxious to make themselves heard at the European level.

There has admittedly been an initial acknowledgement of the role social sector associations play at European level:

- ◆ In Declaration 23 (annex to the Maastricht Treaty), which specifically concerns "charitable associations and foundations as institutions responsible for social establishments and services", the European Union and the European Community acknowledge that co-operation with the social sector NGOs is necessary.
- ◆ The White Paper on the future of the European social policy also emphasises the importance of such co-operation between the European Community and the social sector associations. It is stated in Chapter VIII that they "have the right to be consulted by the Union and play their rightful part in the process of change".



However, their specific role is still little-known and poorly acknowledged, even if it is known that they are non-profit-making partners and different from:



1. Mercantile enterprises.

The market is a formidable instrument for the transformation of society, and Europe has banked heavily on the benefits of the great single market. However, profit, which is the mainspring of mercantile logic, only finds its meaning in the very limited context of commercial relations and exchanges on a market.

When relations of another type are involved, profit has no meaning. Economists, whose vocation it is to specialise in the market, find it very difficult to understand and analyse altruistic behaviour which does not obey the utilitarian logic of interest.

The social sector associations follow a different logic, that of non-profit-making, which makes them:

- ◆ democratic or co-operative, rather than merely hierarchical or commercial, organisations,
- ◆ holistic* structures, as opposed to the individualism of the market,
- ◆ forms of contracts between citizens or social pacts which go beyond commercial trade. What is known as the social link is the expression of these social relations, which are durable and are at least built partly on altruism and donations,
- ◆ arenas in which individuals and their problems can be viewed globally. Markets divide into segments, carve up, specialise. On the other hand associations encourage more global approaches; they target the "whole man" rather than the worker, the consumer, the tenant or the landlord. In this way, the associations have developed forms of social "personalism" and "support", the purpose of which is to offer individuals global and multiple services suited to the situations of the weakest, poorest, most excluded individuals.

2. Public communities:

Associations are not a part of the public sector: they have neither its legitimacy nor its standardising approach. However, many social sector associations act on behalf of the state, as the state is increasingly delegating certain tasks to them, by virtue of a form of subsidiarity.

However, in many other cases, they develop offers in areas where the state is absent or inadequate. Their approach is specific: they implement forms of solidarity which are concrete, active and voluntary rather than standardised according to the requirements of the majority of voters.

What are the social sector associations?

- 1) The associations constitute an arena for solidarity between citizens.
- 2) The social sector associations are social actors, which act in the public interest and contribute to economic and social cohesion.
- 3) The social sector associations reveal social demand and defend the more vulnerable members of society.

1) **The associations constitute an arena for solidarity between citizens.**

In our complex societies, which are subject to the requirements of globalization and the increasing demands for economic competitiveness which have destabilising and destructuring social effects, the traditional forms of political and professional representation cannot, in their present form and on their own, express all the concerns of a society that is in the throes of change.

In a society where the role of work is being questioned, where individuals are not always supported by strong professional and family structures, where disturbing, "different" elements are rejected more or less permanently towards the fringe, and therefore a society that generates exclusion, the social sector associations are in the position of "full social partners".

1-1 The dynamism of associations in a country is a direct reflection of its level of democratic development.

It is the measure of a society's ability to take charge of itself and interact with existing power structures: the state, economic forces, etc.

Indeed, associations are characterised by active and democratic participation:

- ◆ joining is a voluntary and free act; associations are joined or left freely on the basis of a commitment;
- ◆ they rely on voluntary work and on an involvement which goes beyond mere financial donations;
- ◆ they are open to all rather than certain categories only (workers, registered voters, etc.);
- ◆ their services are based on respect for individuals and take the whole person into account;
- ◆ they defend the rights of all and enable everyone, including minorities, to express their rights and requirements.

1-2. Their action is based on the mobilisation and concrete participation of the persons involved:

In this way they enable communities (and, first and foremost, the persons concerned and their families) to be associated with public action. They inspire and steer a number of integration policies. As managers of services, benefits and insertion measures, they guarantee the implementation of rights and the fulfilment of requirements, in particular those of minorities.

They make policies change and enable new services and requirements to emerge as a result of their presence in the field and the quality of their attention. Due to the importance of human relationships in benefits or services supplied by associations, such structures are close to their users.

Above all, they operate in a network form in which it is not immediate results that matter (even more so if it is measured in terms of rentability or profit) but the links which are created. They constitute a system of sharing (above all of experiences and knowledge) between persons of all walks of society, either employees, voluntary workers or users, thus creating solidarity and the social link without which our societies cannot survive.



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The full acknowledgement of the role of the social sector associations also implies the recognition of their specific role in the area of social policy.

2) The social sector associations are social actors, which act in the public interest and contribute to economic and social cohesion.

2-1. Social protection systems and public interest services are essential European values.

Europe should not be merely a large market or a free-trade area based on respect for the rules of competition alone. Competition is but a means, not an end. As stated in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, the aim of the European Community is "a high level of employment and of social protection, the raising of the standard of living and the quality of life, and economic and social cohesion (...)".

The European social model is based on social protection systems and public services which ensure both social solidarity and social cohesion, to guarantee the fundamental rights of individuals and counterbalance and regulate some of the more destabilising effects of the market.

2-2. Although the place and role of the social sector associations in each European country may vary, their place in the social systems is irreplaceable, both to take requirements into account and express them, and to manage the social services.

In each of the countries of the European Community, the social sector organisations have different roles according to the manner in which the guaranteeing of political, civil, economic and social rights of individuals is organised, and in which, in particular, the social protection system is designed. Their place depends on national historical and ideological foundations and on the respective modes of intervention by the state, local communities, and the mercantile and non-profit-making sectors.

Some associations have community, religious, humanitarian or sympathy-based foundations, others do not. The purpose of some is to defend their members, others take a more general view; some operate within a specific area of activity, others cut across several areas. Finally, a number of them focus their action on the defence of rights, while others supply services to respond to actual needs.

The social sector associations are thus an integral part of the European social systems, which are currently under heavy pressure. In Europe, such services were supplied by the state for a long time. In many countries, the state tends to delegate them to civil society and its representatives, i.e. the social sector associations.

In France, a considerable number of associations, in partnership with the public authorities, organise solidarity or development actions and are entrusted with genuine missions in the public interest. In Germany, the current principle of subsidiarity advises that social services be entrusted firstly to associative organisations. In the United Kingdom, after years of the welfare state, the state is becoming disengaged from the management of services and is attempting to set up a mixed social-benefit economy in which associations and the private sector are set up in competition against each other in the face of a single source of funds, i.e. the state. In Denmark, where the public authorities guarantee the right to social security, which is acknowledged to be a fundamental right of citizens, there is combined action in the field by both the public sector and the associations. In Portugal, management agreements formalised by law link the state and the social solidarity associations.



2-3. They play an essential part in increasing the social well-being

Their global vision of the social and economic sectors place associations among the promoters of the principles of solidarity and assistance on which social protection systems in Europe are based. Indeed, they believe that the implementation of solidarity cannot be the sole responsibility of the state, although its role in this area remains essential, but that it must also find a place in civil society, on a voluntary and consensual basis.

- ◆ reciprocity between citizens, for instance solidarity between the generations, is based on strong, shared social links and cannot be ordered by decree;
- ◆ the development of exclusion phenomena has shown that there is a close link between civic and social rights, and that the excluded are often people who have trouble having their rights as citizens acknowledged: who have no identity papers, no fixed abode, etc.

Finally, in the area of social services, the solidarity associations are able to develop offers by mixing mercantile and non-mercantile and public and private resources, thus at a lower cost to the community:

- ◆ when the services supplied by the public authorities are inadequate (e.g. minority demands);
- ◆ in areas where the mechanisms of the marketplace fail (insolvent services, taking into account of non-mercantile values).

3) The social sector associations reveal social demand and defend the more vulnerable members of society

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The social sector associations are essential actors in solidarity and reciprocity within a society subject to important changes.

They are the means of expression of different social groups including minorities.

The associations are fighting a front-line action for the recognition of the rights and requirements of people with health, housing, poverty and social and professional insertion problems, etc.

They intervene with the public authorities on a national level and act at the European level to ensure that the basic rights of all are ensured and guaranteed.

They provide special support for the poorest and most vulnerable members of society; they create social links which enable such people to struggle against exclusion.

They do not let themselves be limited to emergencies and assistance and advise people to consider their own situation, to discover its causes, and take their own lives in hand. They foster the associative life of populations including of those facing particular difficulties.



Conclusion

The role of the social sector associations and the recognition of their specific characteristics must be reinforced within the national and international instances.

Whereas, among the main goals of the Union for the coming years, "employment and the struggle against exclusion" (Westendorp Report) are mentioned, everything remains to be done to involve the social sector associations in the construction of a social Europe worthy of the name.

There can be no reflection on the European social policy which does not take into account the existence of the social sector associations, which are special social actors, and, furthermore, does not rely in part on them.

** Holism: a concept opposed to methodological individualism, based on interpretations of a globalizing nature. In "holistic" societies (the India of Louis Dumont), membership of a group (caste, social class) takes precedence over the individual.*

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