

Civil dialogue and enlargement

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Opening address by Ms. Odile Quintin

*Director General for Employment and Social Affairs,
European Commission*

Minister,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to take part in the opening session of this important Conference, which takes place on the eve of enlargement. We are honoured to have here Minister Péter Kiss, who I would like to thank for accepting our invitation.

Your country has embraced Union membership with strong popular support, and I am looking forward to discussing with ministers, officials and other stakeholders, Hungary's final preparations for full membership on 1st May next year. Hungary has very strong credentials and commitment to civil society as evidenced by recent legislation in this area and is showing great leadership for all the accession countries in this regard.

In this context, this Conference could not be more timely. The Convention set out its proposals for a constitutional Treaty just a few days ago. This draft Treaty will now be discussed by an Intergovernmental Conference, which has the task of developing a fully-fledged Constitutional framework for the Union by the end of this year.

I hope this final text will retain a key element of the Convention's conclusions. Namely that the European model of modern democracy is built on three pillars –representative democracy, participatory democracy and social dialogue. Employment and social policy is where all these forms of democracy and governance meet.

The three pillars are, of course, different and complementary. The Union is clearly based on representative democracy, either directly through the European Parliament, to which the Commission is accountable, or indirectly through the Council of Ministers.

As for participatory democracy, the Convention's text states clearly that the Union should have an open, transparent and regular dialogue with civil society. It also states that the institutions shall give citizens and representative NGOs the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views on all areas of the Union's work.

Civil dialogue is, of course, different from social dialogue. For more than a decade, employers' organisations and trade unions have had the power under the Treaties to conclude binding agreements, either on a voluntary basis, or after being consulted by the Commission. Social dialogue has a specific role to play in such issues as achieving full employment, modernising labour markets and work organisation.

This is the "triangle" of democracy in the Union, with different actors being given specific and complementary roles.

Civil dialogue and civil society are ever more important in the development of European employment and social policies. New areas such as anti-discrimination, the fight against exclusion and the European Year of People with Disabilities – all provide a unique opportunity to strengthen the role and involvement of civil society at all levels, both European and national.

The Community is strongly committed to promoting civil dialogue at European level. It is vital that stakeholders are actively involved in order to ensure that our policies meet the real needs of people. NGOs can be the bridge between citizens and institutions. Civil society representatives can also help make EU policy better known or understood by the citizens of Europe.

In its *White Paper on European Governance*, published two years ago, the Commission highlighted the key role of civil society in giving a voice to the concerns of the citizens and delivering services that meet people's needs.

But what do we mean by *civil society*? As all of you know, there is no commonly accepted - let alone legal – definition of this term –which is one reason why it's difficult to give civil society organisations the same role that is enjoyed, for instance, by social partners.

We can nevertheless use it as shorthand to refer to a broad range of organisations. The “social partners”, although they are recognised a specific role. Other organisations representing social and economic players, such as consumer organisations. NGOs which bring people together in a common cause, such as environmental, human rights, and charitable organisations. Religious communities. Grassroots organisations, such youth organisations, family associations and all organisations through which people participate in local and municipal life.

Civil society is, therefore, one of the principal structures of society outside of government and public administration.

Member States bear the primary responsibility for facilitating civil dialogue - a point I would like to stress today. Civil society organisations increasingly see Europe as offering a good platform to influence policy and promote social change. On the other hand the *White Paper* highlights the need for a stronger interaction between regional and local governments and civil society in policy making. Which means that the role of civil society organisations goes beyond advocacy or influence; they should also build partnerships with other NGOs involved in different areas and commit themselves to delivering concrete results –for instance in the framework of the European strategy against exclusion.

In its own area, the Commission is fully committed to more systematic dialogue with those partners at an early stage in the policy process.

Indeed, in December last year, the Commission adopted a policy Communication on principles and minimum standards for consultation. This Communication puts forward a number of key principles which govern the Commission's relations with civil society, namely participation, openness, accountability, effectiveness and coherence.

It is clear that the commitment to those principles cannot be unilateral: both sides have a role to play. The standards provided are minimum ones and give clear guidelines on the consultation process, the target groups, time limits for participation and feed-back.

As far as employment and social affairs is concerned, the Commission has acknowledged on many occasions, and notably in the Social Policy Agenda, the potential contribution of civil society to promoting a fairer and more inclusive society. Once again, the social policy agenda is based on building partnerships, which boils down to involvement of all actors and a focus on delivery. NGOs are also encouraged to co-operate with the social partners and develop together initiatives on issues of common concern, such as inclusion, fundamental rights or gender equality.

Moreover, dialogue with NGOs is explicitly mentioned in some of most recent European legislation such as the two ground-breaking Directives on fighting discrimination on the grounds of ethnic and racial origin, religion or belief, age, disability or sexual orientation.

These directives – an essential part of the *acquis* - explicitly call on Member States to enter into dialogue with those NGOs, which have a legitimate aim in fighting discrimination. This involvement will undoubtedly be crucial in tackling the major challenge of fighting discrimination faced by ethnic minorities, and in particular the Roma population.

The European Commission will be publishing a study in September 2003 on "Equality and enlargement – measures to combat discrimination in the candidate countries". The study will indicate the steps that should be taken before accession in order to comply with the requirements of these important new Directives.

European level co-ordination of national policies to fight exclusion, insist on the involvement of all actors, including NGOs, in the development of national action plans. Accession countries have already been involved quite closely in this process. A workshop will deal in detail with the European policy towards social exclusion.

DG Employment and Social Affairs has long history of involving NGOs both in consultation processes and in implementing policies. It is in regular contact with the Platform of Social NGOs as well as with numerous "thematic NGOs", such as the European Disability Forum and the European Women's Lobby.

The bi-lateral meetings held twice a year with the Social Platform are always an excellent opportunity to discuss openly and exchange views on wide range of Community matters.

Members of the Platform from the new member states will be invited to these meetings as of January next year. I greatly value this structured relationship and I believe that there is a great need for similar structures at national level.

We are also conscious of the necessity for the Commission to support civil dialogue financially, otherwise it would not be happening at European level. But let me stress two points here. First, as many of you will know, we have since 1st January 2003 a New Financial Regulation into place, which sets out extremely strict conditions for the granting of support. And secondly, Member States must ensure that this support is given at national, regional and local levels.

European-level support is currently channelled mainly through action programmes. You will have more detailed information and be able to discuss this in the workshops in the course of the day.

Today's Conference is organised in a way to provide an opportunity for the NGOs to extend their networks and contacts with each other, with a specific time this evening set aside for networking.

Before that, the main part of the day will be spent in workshops, which will look in detail at the main European policies in the social field. This is particularly important in the context of the opening up of the various programmes to new Member States (gender equality, anti-discrimination, social inclusion programmes), as well as the EQUAL Community initiative and the main European Social Fund.

I would like to conclude by thanking all those who helped organise this important and timely Conference, in particular the Hungarian Ministry of Employment and Labour and the Platform of European Social NGOs and its members.

I hope that this Conference will contribute to the capacity-building of NGOs in the accession countries, so that they are able to play a full and active role in the civil dialogue process. I wish you all a successful conference.