

## Civil Dialogue How can we shape the Europe we want?

### Background document

*This background document is composed of elements of the Social Platform 'reference document' that defines what participatory democracy, civil dialogue and civil society means for the Social Platform. It also sets out the role of European networks. Entitled "shaping an effective civil dialogue at national and European level – 'policies for people with people', this reference document is a first step towards a common position (Feb 2009) It is available on the Social Platform website.*

### Treaty of the European Union, as modified by the Treaty of Lisbon – Article 11

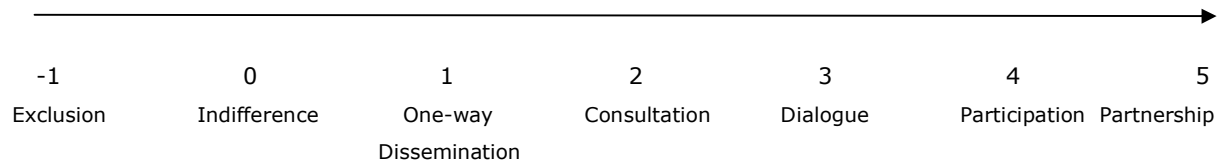
*" 1. The institutions shall, by appropriate means, give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union act.*

*2. The institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society.*

*3. The European Commission shall carry out broad consultations with parties concerned in order to ensure that the Union's actions are coherent and transparent.*

*4. Not less than one million citizens who are national of a significant number of Member States may take the initiative of inviting the European Commission, within the framework of its powers, to submit any appropriate proposal on matters where citizen consider that a legal act of the Union is required for the purpose of implementing the Treaties."*

## From exclusion to a civil partnership? A scale of involvement of civil society organisations



*developed for the Social Platform by Jonathan Zeitlin*

- -1 = **Exclusion**
- 0 = **Indifference**
- 1 = **One-way dissemination of information:** Public authorities provide information.
- 2 = **Consultation:** Public authorities tell NGOs what happens is and ask for feedback. Two-way information channel.
- 3 = **Dialogue:** Both public authorities and NGOs are able to set the agenda, and public authorities may respond to the concerns advanced by NGOs.
- 4 = **Participation:** More than just consultation, ideas put forward by NGOs are incorporated into policy design, documents, and programs.
- 5 = **Partnership:** Final stage, a strong term denoting that NGOs are taken in as partners, and play a real role in: co-decision, co-design, co-production, and possibly co-administration.

Except for exclusion and indifference, the other steps can be legitimate depending on the circumstances: partnerships are not always desirable, especially for NGOs that see their primary role as protesting.

This scale of involvement can/should take place at all stages of the policy cycle: Agenda setting, Policy definition/decision-making, Implementation, Evaluation, Reformulation.

## **Principles for an effective civil dialogue**

### **Civil dialogue: policy making closer to citizens' organisations**

European Social NGOs define civil dialogue as a component and a tool of participatory democracy with public decision makers as the main interlocutor. It defines the relationship between public decision makers and organised civil society.

#### **1. What are the objectives to engaging in civil dialogue?**

The primary objective is to formulate and implement better decisions in the public sphere. Ultimately, the objective is to reach decisions that are closer to the general interest and that improve decision-making

For that, civil dialogue aims to put forward the needs and perspectives of organised civil society, in particular the voice of those excluded from 'official' political arena.

One goal of civil dialogue is also to channel the outcomes of various processes of participatory democracy into 'formal' decision making processes.

#### **2. Who are the partners of civil dialogue?**

Although the ultimate beneficiary of civil dialogue is people, the main partners are organised civil society organisations at local, national and European levels.

At the other side of the table are public decision-makers, and civil servants - at local, national and European levels.

#### **3. What are the principles and elements that should run civil dialogue?**

While participatory democracy and democratic infrastructures are the framework, a meaningful civil dialogue requires the following elements:

##### **➤ Accountability and responsiveness**

Civil dialogue procedures must be accountable to all those involved. This requires proper feedback structures for all participants. The participants are entitled to know what happens with the input they provide.

##### **➤ Political will and openness to make a difference**

The purpose of civil dialogue is to improve decision making. In that respect, there must be an access to decision making arenas, an openness and commitment of public authorities to share power and ultimately to take into account the results of civil dialogue in their decisions. Results of a proper civil dialogue must be enforceable. Consulting civil society when the decision is already taken ultimately backfires on public

institutions as it cast shadows on their openness. This also implies the agreement of both parties on a common goal or objective and therefore and an openness to a common agenda setting.

## ➤ **Transparency and clarity**

For an effective civil dialogue to occur information and documents must publicly accessible and both parties should be as transparent as possible. In addition, both the expected outcome, scope for change should be made clear to participants, so that they can choose not to participate if it is estimated that they would not reach their ultimate goal by participating in a given process.

## ➤ **Equality and inclusiveness**

Not all people are equal and have equal resources to participate and the same goes for organisations. For a participatory process to be democratic, the un-engaged and the voiceless must be actively empowered and receive specific attention. This also means adapting the means and methods of dialogue to all groups (including disabled, immigrants, children...)

## ➤ **Civil dialogue requires structures**

Civil dialogue is not a one-off and should be a regular and on-going process. Participants must be given time to structure their thinking internally and to consult with their membership. In order to be effective, such a process requires appropriate human and financial resources, with identified opportunities and physical spaces for agenda setting and negotiations between identified actors. Civil dialogue procedures must also be clear, and time-bound, with identified and agreed outcomes and targets. In other words, the process needs to be adequately planned ahead by the partners.

## ➤ **A proper recognition of the role of 'NGOs'**

Both NGOs and the European institutions are facing a clear tension between expertise and experience. The role of civil society as partners in civil dialogue needs to be formally recognised, protected and supported, through a variety of policy measures such as funding schemes, statutes or laws.

## ➤ **Including organised civil society at all stages**

A policy process does not end when a proposal becomes law. The implementation of such a provision is equally important. Civil society is an important players in implementing policy measures and monitoring its effectiveness. Organised civil society must be included at all stages of decision making: agenda setting, policy definition/decision-making, implementation, evaluation, and reformulation.