

socialplatform

Response of the Platform of European Social NGOs to the White Paper on a European Communication Policy

“Communication: selling Europe or opening Europe?”

European Social NGOs have contributed since many years in debates on how to improve the dialogue between people and EU decision makers. The Social Platform was actively involved in the discussions on the White Paper on Governance and has successfully campaigned for an article on participatory democracy in the EU constitutional treaty. In these debates Social NGOs have focused on two issues: ensuring the participation of people who are the most remote from, and the least represented in decision-making processes (notably women, people living in poverty or at risk of social exclusion, and those who experience discrimination) and promoting the role of civil society organisations.

Our key messages

- Communicating Europe is not about *selling Europe*, but *opening-up Europe*: **the Union needs a listening strategy, not a propaganda strategy**;
- Those **who communicate Europe should ask themselves the key question: ‘how does this information help citizens to influence the development of the EU?’**
- Communicating the European Union is about giving people the means to change Europe – this is what will allow people to construct an EU which they believe in. What is necessary is not to insist on the added-value of the EU but to make clear to people: **Who takes the decisions and on what? Where and when the dialogue with decision makers takes place? What is done to ensure that everyone can participate in this dialogue?**
- **EU institutions** i.e. the European Commission, elected MEPs, elected governments **have the responsibility to communicate to citizens what they are deciding on their behalf. Not to communicate constitutes a violation of the right to information and an attack on democracy**;
- The **Social Platform supports a Charter on Communication that commits all EU institutions to implement the right to information and to address the democratic gap**. Each institution must be made clearly accountable on how it lives up to the Charter;
- **European and national political parties have a huge responsibility** in articulating a clear European programme and in raising the accountabilities of MEPs or national government on what they have or intend to achieve at the EU level;
- **Representative democracy is a privileged avenue** for communication as a “two-way street” but the **decline in citizens’ political involvement, the under-representation of large sections of society**, notably women, people living in poverty or at risk of social exclusion, and those who experience discrimination **needs to be addressed**;
- We believe that **on-line forums, focus groups and opinion polls are a poor way to reach these groups**;
- **Civil society organisations are extremely important in facilitating the communication between the EU leaders and citizens** because they **focus on the real concerns of people** (i.e. poverty, employment, environment, solidarity, sport or culture)
- The debate on communicating Europe should include discussion of **how participatory democracy (as set out in Article I.47 of the constitutional treaty) can play a key role in communicating Europe by establishing a structured dialogue with civil society**. This debate should focus on exploring the limits of the present dialogue and searching for solutions to improve the dialogue

Introduction

Recently the Commission has adopted a series of initiatives on democracy, communication and European citizenship. These topics are all very relevant for Social NGOs. It is however **hard to assess to what extent these documents are the beginning of real changes or only diversions from the Commission's lack of a clear position in the constitutional debate** (this is particularly true for Plan-D and for the citizens' agenda).

From the beginning of its term in 2004, the European Commission made communication one of its priorities. **However Vice-President Wallström is right to say that for real changes to happen communicating Europe should not only be a priority for the Commission but for all EU institutions and for a wide range of other key actors and in particular European and national political parties.** We are concerned that the White Paper has not quite succeeded in generating this wider consensus on the importance of communication among key players.

One of the reasons for that is maybe that communication cannot be addressed in an abstract way and always needs to be connected to content. It is indeed very much the content of what needs to be communicated that will determine the type of dialogue that should be put in place as well as the actors of this dialogue. **The White Paper is about communicating "Europe". But Europe is not a straightforward concept. "Europe" should be first of all distinguished from the "European Union".** The first concept is wider and has many definitions (cultural, historical, geographical, political etc...) and usually a positive connotation. The European Union is much narrower as it refers to treaties, institutions, competences and 25 countries.

For Social NGOs the priority is not to communicate "Europe" in general but to focus on the European Union, as a centre of power, where important decisions are taken that affect all of us and for which decision makers should be accountable. **Communicating the European Union is about giving people the means to change Europe – to ensure that they know about policy developments and how to influence them. It is essential that people in Europe understand which decision is taken in which institution and by whom. Where and when can citizens take part in the dialogue with decision makers? What is done to ensure that everyone can participate in this dialogue?**

Without more clarity on the decision making process communicating Europe remains very much a one way process where people receive information but are not clear on what they can do with this information. This feeling of powerlessness has dramatic consequences for our democracies as it undermines the trust people have in public institutions and in politicians. **All those with a responsibility for communicating Europe should keep in mind a key question: 'how does this information help people to influence the development of the European Union?'. It is only by providing such tools to overcome powerlessness that the EU can find a relevance to European citizens.**

Communicating the EU: Who takes the decision and on what?

European Social NGOs aim at informing their members and constituencies of relevant EU policies and at helping them engage in EU policy planning and decision-making processes.

Decisions taken at the EU level have indeed all kind of implications for people's life and they need therefore to be submitted to democratic control. However the lack of general information and understanding of what is going on at the European level makes it difficult to engage national members in Europe debates.

One of the members of the Social Platform is carrying a project to raise awareness on the implementation of the Employment Framework Directive (2000/78) among organisations of people with disabilities in the 25 EU Member States. Despite the fact that the Council adopted this directive 6 years ago, the legislation's direct beneficiaries (the directive is about the fight against discrimination in employment) have little awareness of the text, or of how it could improve their lives.

The white paper rightly states **that the right to information is a fundamental right at the heart of democracy in Europe. This means that not to be given the opportunity to be informed constitutes a violation of a fundamental right and an attack on democracy. Unfortunately the white paper does not clearly define who is responsible and accountable for ensuring the implementation of this right.**

Media and NGOs, guided by crucial principles such as freedom of association or freedom of press, do not have any particular responsibility in communicating the EU unless it is of interest to their membership or to their audience. **On the other hand EU institutions i.e. the Commission, elected MEPs, elected governments, political parties have the responsibility to communicate to citizens what they are deciding on their behalf at the EU level and they cannot escape this responsibility.** By putting everyone in the same basket i.e. EU institutions, local government, media, NGOs etc... the Commission is diluting its own responsibility (and that of other EU institutions) to inform citizens and this sends out a very confusing message indeed.

In December 2005 the UK and Austrian Presidencies produced an interim report¹ on "the national debates during the reflection period on the future of Europe" which describes the way Member States implement their commitment to open a wide discussion on the period of reflection and the future of Europe. This report offers a catalogue of piecemeal initiatives which do not constitute very convincing national strategies to bring EU closer to people.

The Social Platform thinks that the proposed **"European Charter or Code of Conduct on Communication"** can be useful in formalising the responsibility of EU institutions to implement the right to information and to address the democratic gap. **However to be effective the Charter needs to make each EU institution clearly accountable on how it lives up to the Charter.** The Charter could also help in the **development of a common communication strategy among EU institutions.** The lack of institutional coordination is indeed a serious obstacle for European NGOs when mobilising their members on European issues.

¹ <http://register.consilium.eu.int/pdf/en/05/st15/st15576.en05.pdf>

On the basis of the official information on the Lisbon strategy, which is after all said to be the key strategy of the EU, it is impossible to develop a clear idea on what it is all about. Information can be found on the Commission's website but it is very limited as it does not include a link to the views of the different groups in the European Parliament, of the Member States let alone of stakeholders like social partners or civil society. This means in practice that this official source of information delivers "flat news" that does not invite people to engage in the debate.

Even a directive as media sensitive as the "services directive" is very difficult to follow through the whole decision making process (Just as a test: try in one hour to find on the web info on: at what stage of the process are we? Who are the key actors in the debate? What is the position of an individual member states? of political groups in the European Parliament? of the European Commission?).

To compensate for this lack of streamlined official source of EU information European NGOs have become very innovative in developing different tools to help activists to engage in the European debate. NGOs' expertise could be useful for the EU institutions and we therefore welcome the "partnership" offer made at the end of the white paper on "targeted cooperation projects in the field of public communication". However it is important to note, that communication requires sustained an ongoing commitment. **It is essential that NGOs are supported on a continuous basis to engage with their constituencies, while targeted cooperation projects are welcome they are no substitute for core funding for civil society organisations.**

The Social Platform for instance uses "process trackers" which group in one single document all the relevant information for a particular European policy dossier. This is necessary because of the lack of integration between the EU Institutions with regards to information on policy areas.

It is also to be regretted that the white paper does not take stock of the well-known fact that most of the communication money is spent during elections. This is not to say that the communication exercise should be limited to elections but that European elections, as a key moment in democracy should be given much more attention. **Political parties have a huge responsibility in articulating a clear European programme and in raising the accountabilities of MEPs or national government on what they have or intend to achieve at the EU level.** This could also be the object of a more formalised commitment by European political parties that could include operational objectives.

How to communicate with EU decision makers?

Knowing who takes the decision and how is only a first step. The white paper correctly emphasises that **communication is a "two-way street"**. It is not enough to be informed as one also needs to be able to react to the information. Representative democracy is a privileged avenue for this to happen and that is why it is so essential to work on the accountability of elected representatives to make sure that they are engaged in a permanent dialogue with their constituencies.

In that respect **the recent decision of the European Council to make public Council's deliberations is a very significant step forwards** (provided that it will be the rule rather than the exception) as it will finally allow people to know what their individual governments are deciding on key European dossiers. But this is clearly not enough.

It is also widely recognised that **representative democracy alone can not ensure the full participation of all in the dialogue with decision makers**. The decline in citizen's political involvement, the under representation of sections of society, notably women, people living in poverty or at risk of social exclusion, and those who experience discrimination needs to be addressed.

The use of digital technologies and public opinion polls are not adequate solution to reach out to these groups of people and to tackle the democratic deficit. **Giving too much attention to these tools only contributes to reinforce the "illusion of democracy" and clearly does not help in bridging the gap with those who have lost faith in the democratic system.**

The website "debate Europe" is a good illustration of the limitations of this type of approach. This internet-based forum, which is located on the Commission's website, invites people to share their views on Europe (but with no clear link to the period of reflection or to any other political process except that views feed "the ongoing reflections on the future of Europe"). The website has recently celebrated one million hits but it is interesting to note that 90% of the participants are male aged 18-44 and that the discussion are mainly in English (56%) and in French (23%). Unfortunately no information is available on the level of education of the participants, their socio-economic background, their ethnicity and if they vote or not during elections (but looking at the type of contributions that are posted is not too hard to guess).

The white paper does acknowledge this fact² but is a bit short in relation to how this objective will be achieved. Solutions can be found in the section "Empowering citizens" but the objectives and the way they are phrased ("improving civil education", "connecting citizens with each other", "connecting the citizens and public institutions") **sound more like forcing people to integrate an existing mould than taking the time to listen and to observe the way people interact with each other and how this can result in a collective action including at the EU level.**

Civil society dynamics are bottom-up processes that cannot be simply "taught" or "forced" on people. Starting from the concerns of people (which is not often about the institutional EU framework but more likely to be on issues such as poverty, environment, solidarity, sport or culture and developing in all kind of activities i.e. provision of services, organisation of activities, advocacy, lobbying) civil society organisations are essential part of a healthy democratic life. They help to break the routine by continuously bringing new issues, new perspectives or new forms of actions in the debate and by motivating people to engage in decision making process. In that respect **NGOs are extremely important in facilitating the communication between the EU leaders and citizens by focusing on things that matters for people.**

We believe that the **white paper does not sufficiently convey this crucial role of civil society.** The debate on communicating Europe should include discussion of **how participatory democracy (as set out in Article I.47 of the constitutional treaty) can play a key role in communicating Europe by establishing a structured dialogue with civil society.** This debate should focus on exploring the limits of the present dialogue and searching for solutions to improve the dialogue.

² See page 6 in the English version on the principle of inclusiveness « (...) people from all walks of life in all EU countries should be helped to develop the skills they need to access and use the information. This is particularly important in the case of minorities, disabled citizens and other groups that might be systematically excluded from participation in the public sphere".

Even if the EU institutions have made progresses in the way they consult with various stakeholders, members of the Social Platform are still regularly reporting examples of poor practices in terms of involvement of civil society organisations. For instance the lack of willingness to consult NGOs on the future EU fundamental rights agency is more than clear. Of course the negotiations are very sensitive but at the same time this lack of transparency constitutes a lost opportunity to engage a wider debate on what should be the role of the EU when it comes to fundamental rights. EU Agencies to function efficiently also rely very much on the support of their key stakeholders and to ensure this support consultation of stakeholders needs to be more than a superficial exercise.

The Social Platform, as member of the civil society group, has recently commissioned a study on « Civil Dialogue – making it work better ». The report in its conclusions list a series of recommendations that enjoys a wide support among the NGO community and which can serve as a basis to improve the communication between civil society organisations and EU institutions.

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ANNEX 1

Examples of work done by members of the Social Platform to communicate Europe

The **European Network against Racism (ENAR)**, a network of over 500 anti-racism organisations across the European Union, is committed to communicating European anti-racism initiatives to its members. ENAR undertakes a range of activities in order to ensure that anti-racism civil society is informed about European developments and empowered to engage in the European debate on anti-discrimination and equal opportunities. Key activities include: a weekly mailing which highlights key developments; a quarterly newsletter which discusses key issues in greater depth (for example the next issues will focus on mobility in the context of the 2006 year); training and capacity building – ENAR offers training sessions to its members on issues such as EU decision making and influencing EU policy.

Through its EU network meeting (bi-annual meetings) the **European Region of the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA-Europe)** explains to its members the most recent evolutions at the EU level. During two days it puts its members in contact with EU policies and legislation experts and with EU decision-makers. The meetings are followed up by regular communication with EU Network – on events, actions, funding opportunities and networking of national and trans-national projects. ILGA-Europe's website contains a page which explains how the EU institutions works and what have been the contributions of the EU institutions to the recognitions of rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in Europe. ILGA-Europe publishes a monthly Euroletter and a quarterly Newsletter which explain recent developments and decisions by the EU institutions and national governments, and their impacts on LGBT people. ILGA-Europe also **trains** its members and publishes guidelines on directives (framework directive, freedom of movement directive and directive on granting asylum) to explain its content and relevance to LGBT people and encourage national NGOs to monitor the transposition and implementation at national level. The information collected is forwarded to the relevant EU institutions.

The **European Children's Network** has involved its member organisations, national and transnational children's rights NGOs, and children themselves in the debate for the European Constitution. The European Children's Network has been convinced from the start that children's rights needed to be included in the European Treaties. Member organisations took an active part in contacting their national members of the Convention on the future of Europe to convince them of the need to include children's rights in the Constitutional Treaty. Also children from 11 European Countries were involved in the debate on the future of Europe. They were informed in child friendly language on the European debate on a constitutional treaty and they gave their own views on what they thought would be important subjects to be dealt with at European level.

SOLIDAR - The Solidar SOS Europe conference in Vienna (Feb 2006) and a second SOS Europe conference in Berlin March 2007 have brought together for 2 days about 500 participants from local, regional and national NGOs to discuss the European dimension of social policy with trade unionists, member of national parliament and European institutions. SOLIDAR has also published "The Constitutional treaty of the EU and beyond – what's in it for the citizens of Europe?" an analysis of the Constitutional Treaty in English, French, German and Estonian. This publication is widely used by Solidar members to inform on national level.

The **European Youth Forum (YFJ)** has worked for a long time in providing information on European debates to its membership and European citizens. Examples of EYF eagerness to circulate information and empower young citizens into the debates are the following campaigns:

- Youth Decide campaign on the European Parliament (EP) elections, informing about the different programmes from the European political groups, about the role of the EP in general, and encouraging young people to vote
- 4 minutes for the Constitution, in a 4 minutes countdown anyone could have an idea of the main content of the Constitution by entering in its website
- Youth Debate website condenses the youth organisations' views on the future of Europe debate.

At the heart of the **European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN)** work is the effort to create an engagement between those active in NGOs involved in the fight against poverty and social exclusion and those charged with developing and implementing the EU project. Some examples of how EAPN tries to meet this challenge include:

- The provision of an annual training for our members on how to engage with the EU decision making structures and how to make links between the daily challenges faced by people experiencing poverty and EU policies and actions.
- The publication of a 'Manual on the Management of the EU Structural Funds' to enable NGOs to influence the management of the funds so that they may be effectively directed towards the reduction and elimination of poverty and social exclusion in Europe.
- An email information service called "EAPN Flash" containing information about relevant developments in the EU social field is sent every 2 weeks, directly to more than 5000 people and indirectly to thousands more.

Mental Health Europe (MHE)

- MHE publishes a monthly Newsletter and uses its website to inform on action taking place at the EU level and why they are relevant for organisations dealing with mental health;
- MHE sends out Information Papers explaining some EU activities in more detail (cf. the latest one on the EU Structural Funds) or simply emails with topical information (cf. the latest one on getting involved in the 2006-2008 national action plan on social inclusion)
- MHE organises seminars on important developments at the EU levels, e.g. on the Green Paper on Mental Health (12 May 2006).
- The next MHE Conference (Vienna, 31 May-02 June 2007) will be dedicated to the different EU processes (e.g. Lisbon Strategy, Green Paper on Mental Health) and their relevance/consequence for the area of mental health on a European, national, regional and local level.
- The MHE's European exchange project brings together organisations from different EU Member States to research, reflect and to act in response to specific question.

Caritas Europa is the umbrella organisation of the European network of 48 Caritas member organisations, working in 44 European countries and focuses its activities on policy issues related to poverty and social inequality, migration and asylum within all countries of Europe, and issues of emergency humanitarian assistance, international development and peace throughout the world. With regard to all these issues, the organisation develops together with its member organisations policies for political advocacy at European level as well as at national level. According to the new Caritas Europa's Advocacy Strategy, the responsible thematic Commissions made up of representatives of Caritas Europa's member organisations are invited to prepare positions on relevant EU policy topics. In this way, they are informed of pertinent issues and are given the opportunity to participate in EU debates.

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