

Adopted by Social Platform's Steering Group on 8 December 2016

CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION & PARTNERSHIP

Four principles for the meaningful involvement of civil society in the EU decision-making process

Introduction

As the largest civil society alliance fighting for social justice and participatory democracy in the European Union, Social Platform strongly believes that decisions that affect people's lives should be made with and for people at the centre. In order to achieve this objective, it is crucial that the EU institutions and a vibrant and diverse civil society engage in a structured and participatory dialogue, in order to shape decisions and policies on the basis of experiences on the ground. In this regard, **four essential principles** in favour of a meaningful and effective civil dialogue define our advocacy activities towards EU institutions, partners and stakeholders.

Principle #1: The right to be consulted in decision-making

The Treaty on European Union, Article 11(1), states that the EU shall "by appropriate means, give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action." This exchange with EU institutions is indeed crucial for Social Platform and its members, as we defend the rights of people in some of the most vulnerable situations, whose voices are so often neglected.

In order to enable equal opportunities for participation, people's different preconditions must be taken into account. This may mean specific attention given to disadvantaged groups in society that need empowerment and resources to be heard. Social Platform's members are best placed to support the EU institutions with identifying such special needs.

We will therefore continue to advocate for the obligation of EU institutions to ensure the active involvement of civil society at all stages of EU decision-making: agenda setting, policy-definition, decision-making, implementation, evaluation, and eventually monitoring. As a network, we will continue to use our position as a recognised stakeholder for relevant EU decision-makers to ensure that our members' views are represented at the highest possible political level.

Principle #2: The need for a transparent and open decision-making process

As we witness a growing mistrust among people on the ground towards the establishment and institutions of "Brussels", the EU should be held accountable by being transparent, inclusive, and sustainable. By involving civil society organisations, EU decision-makers have the opportunity to rebuild trust with citizens across Europe.

We support the implementation of two simple mechanisms designed to ensure that decisions and policies are the result of a relevant and open consultation system:

- In line with Transparency International, we support the call for a mandatory Transparency Register for all EU institutions. Consequently, decision-makers should only set up meetings with registered organisations, and systematically identify which civil society organisations to forge a partnership with on a specific topic.

- More generally, in alliance with other organisations and through our membership of Civil Society Europe, we support the introduction of systematic 'legislative footprints' (i.e. a mechanism by which exhaustive information is provided about whom and what has influenced a certain piece of legislation or policy, and how and when this influence

occurred). This mechanism will help improve policy-making and prevent potential conflicts of interest.

Principle #3: The need for a protective regulatory and financial framework for civil society organisations

Developments in several EU Member States show a worrying trend of shrinking space for civil society. Social non-governmental organisations face increasing difficulties in providing their much needed services with limited financial resources and little or no capacity to act as advocates. NGOs are more than service-providers: they are watchdogs, implementers and innovators, and ensure the link with citizens and communities.

An independent and viable civil society at local and national level is a prerequisite for civil society at European level to function and channel the voices and needs of people we represent. At EU level, in order for a meaningful dialogue to take place, European civil society networks need to be recognised and sufficiently resourced to operate and contribute. In this respect, it is vital to ensure that EU civil society organisations operate in a favourable legal and regulatory framework, and are adequately funded, notably through the following:

- A streamlining of EU funding requirements and formats, to make applying for funding more accessible to organisations.

- The establishment of multi-annual operational grants that favour long-term actions and reduce reporting and administrative requirements to a minimum.

- Last but not least, the maintenance – if not the increase – of EU financial support to civil society organisations.

Principle #4: The institutional recognition of the importance of civil dialogue

The Treaty on European Union obliges EU institutions to engage in a dialogue with civil society. However, in practice fruitful exchanges with EU institutions far too often depend upon the goodwill and individual engagement of decision-makers and civil servants. In order to establish a structured, regular, ongoing and systemic exchange flow with EU institutions, the importance and obligation of civil dialogue needs to be recognised institutionally at EU level. We therefore call for:

- A formal inter-institutional agreement between all institutions, which would set out common guidelines and practices when it comes to partnership with civil society organisations. The guidelines would also set mandatory requirements to ensure the balanced composition and transparency of appointments in EU advisory and stakeholder groups between representatives of industry and businesses, social partners, governments, civil society organisations and independent experts.

- The institutional recognition of civil society by calling for the appointment, within each EU institution, of a top decision-maker (e.g. at Vice-Presidential level) who would formally be responsible for civil dialogue.

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