



What is the civil society perspective of being involved in the European Semester and what should be accomplished to foster inclusive growth

Speech by Heather Roy, President of Social Platform, at the Annual Conference of EPHA

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Thank you for inviting Social Platform to your Annual Conference.

Social Platform is the largest platform of European rights and value-based NGOs working in the social sector. We aim to promote social justice, equality and participatory democracy by voicing the concerns of member organisations. We are very happy that EPHA is one of our 49 members and that we are able to be with you today.

When thinking about the civil society perspective of being involved in the European Semester, I could be very pessimistic or very optimistic. Perhaps I will start optimistically and say that I believe that there is a place for civil society to be involved. But there are doubts for me about how meaningful such a place is in the current climate. The principle of participation is there but in reality the possibility for civil society to bring in meaningful, quality and timely contributions that are actually listened to and are influential, is very narrow.

Let me start by giving you an example: in the 2014 Annual Growth Survey (AGS) there was both a strengthening and a weakening of the status of stakeholder involvement in policy making. The AGS finally called for more engagement with stakeholders but weakened the purpose by linking it to convincing the wider public of the value of current growth policies. This raises the question for me as to what is the purpose of stakeholder involvement at European level. For Social Platform it should not be a validating, convincing or promoting purpose. Instead it should ensure the best possible design, implementation and evaluation of policies promoting well-being, inclusion and cohesion so that they have the maximum positive impact and lead to positive change. We need to be talking about participatory democracy as enshrined in Article 11 TFEU and should not be waiting to be offered a seat at the table in a benevolent way.

To be fostering inclusive growth we need good policies, and a better balancing of social and economic aims. Social and health wellbeing have to be seen as essential for an inclusive society where people are valued, not just as labour units, but for their contributions to all aspects of our societies.

To have good policies frankly we need to involve the people who are both the subject and object of such policies and this is where civil society actors come in. To engage civil society we should consider two axes: first, the responsibilities of civil society organisations for engagement and, secondly, the manner in which the tools and operations of the European Semester support and encourage civil society involvement at European and national level.

So, let me start with the latter: what needs to happen at European and national level to improve our engagement in the European Semester?

How to get there at member state level?

- 1. Adopt clear and transparent procedures for civil dialogue, similar to the ones on social dialogue**, which allow for structural, timely and meaningful involvement of the full range of EU-level stakeholders. Ensure such a framework fosters involvement in developing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating policies under Europe 2020 as well as in developing a genuine EMU when it is linked to the European Semester.
- 2. Expand the sources of information** when developing the AGSs and CSRs as well as the preparatory Staff Working Papers by seeking information from civil society organisations.
- 3. Take into account the alternative CSRs produced by civil society** on the basis of the input of their member organisations and target groups.

4. **Provide guidance on civil dialogue to the member states**, in particular in the context of the NRPs.
5. **Set up a framework for shadow reporting by CSOs**, similar to what already exists within the UN for monitoring the implementation of the UNCRPD and CEDAW Convention.
6. **Organise the Stakeholder Dialogue under the EPAP in a more structured and regular way** to further develop, implement and monitor this flagship initiative. This includes involving participants in setting the agendas of the meetings and informing them about the dates of the meetings and sending out the agenda well in advance.

How to get there at member state level?

1. **Set up a framework for structural involvement of CSOs**, at all government levels, for developing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating policies, and provide sustainable funding and structural support for them to engage. Consult stakeholders in time to allow them to provide meaningful and well-developed input and provide them with sufficient opportunities to contribute throughout the policy process.
2. **Organise specific national stakeholder involvement for the design, delivery and evaluation of the NRPs** (for example through a platform approach, joint debates and public hearings, regular conferences on the implementation of Europe 2020 in member states). Provide detailed information in the NRPs on the extent to which stakeholders have been actively involved in the process and on how their input was taken into account.
3. **Implement the “partnership principle” of the European structural funds** by engaging social NGOs as reliable partners for managing and co-managing the funds. This needs to encompass their involvement in the preparation of partnership agreements and progress reports throughout the preparation and implementation of programmes, as well as in monitoring committees.
4. **Facilitate mutual learning between civil society and national, regional and local authorities** through the expansion of the existing tools, such as the peer review under the Social OMC, into other areas. The topics should reflect the thematic priorities and support the member states in implementation of Europe 2020.

But what are the responsibilities for CSOs? We need to take some actions too

1. We need to **build our capacity** in being able to engage in the European Semester at European and national level. In the past CSOs have not necessarily found their place in the economic arguments but we need to change that. We need to engage with DG ECFIN in the European Commission, the ECOFIN Council and the ECON Committee in the EP if we want to change the current growth paradigm that influences the European Semester.
2. **We also need to have a long term commitment.** Improved well-being is not going to happen overnight, we all know that, and policy change is actually a very slow process. Our engagement needs to be sustainable from our side as well as from our partners’ side and we need to be persistent.
3. **We need to get national CSOs active in the process.** The European Semester has both national and European significance. Therefore we need to not only build capacity at a European level but also at national level.
4. **We need to be focused and pertinent, and show our added value as well as the win-win opportunity of our proposals**, for example when it comes to alternative CSRs. Furthermore, we need to work with networks and partners in the CSOs and try to produce common work to have a greater impact. We also need to pick up contradictions and conflicts in what is presented in EU policies and instruments such as the AGS and CSRs.
5. **We need to stop being linear.** European policy is not linear and also the European Semester timeline is not as linear as it seems. We need to work in advance and be ready to contribute within a very short timeframe.