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THE ROLE OF 'THIRD SECTOR' AT EU LEVEL

INTRODUCTION

As many others have previously observed there is no common European definition or understanding of the 'Third Sector'. For some the term refers to organisations which are established on a not for profit basis and which are independent of state or public sector bodies. Such a definition covers a wide range of organisations including; social and self advocacy non governmental organisations, trade unions, environmental organisations, sports organisations and private clubs, to name but a few. Others prefer to use the term 'organised civil society' to reflect this broad range of organisations, but again there is no common agreement about what is meant by organised civil society. A different definition of the 'Third Sector' tends to acknowledge that 'Third Sector' organisations have an important economic dimension as contributors to the 'social or solidarity based economy'. It is also worth noting that the term 'social economy' face similar definitional challenges at EU level. It is not my intention with this article to try to resolve these difficulties but in one section of this article I will describe work which is ongoing among 'Third Sector' or 'civil society organisation' at European level to try to reach some common understandings about key terms and concepts which are regularly used in relation to the area of work covered by 'Third Sector' organisations.

For the purpose of this article I will adopt a broad definition of the 'Third Sector'. I will present a picture of how a significant part of Third Sector organisations are self organised at European

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level and I will end by drawing conclusions about the need to protect the diversity within the Third Sector and to allow for this diversity to flourish.

THIRD SECTOR – SELF ORGANISED AT EU LEVEL

To give an impression of how the Third Sector is self organised at European level I want to present the European Anti Poverty Network (EAPN), the Platform of European Social NGOs (Social Platform) and the Civil Society Contact Group.

The European Anti Poverty Network (EAPN) was established in 1990 and emerged, with support from the European Commission, from the contacts NGO representatives built up through their involvement in the EU Poverty Programmes which ran from the late 1970's to the early 1990's. EAPN brings together independently organised anti poverty NGOs, both service providers and self advocacy organisations, through National Networks and European organisations. EAPN aims to put the fight against poverty within the EU, high on the EU political agenda. EAPN contributed to the adoption of new articles in the Amsterdam Treaty to give the EU competence to address issues to do with poverty and social inclusion. EAPN then successfully led a campaign to have an EU strategy on inclusion developed based on the new Treaty articles. This strategy which was adopted at the Lisbon and Nice Councils in 2000 is now known as the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) on Social Protection and Social Inclusion. EAPN works to try to make this strategy deliver on the ground progress in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. EAPN is also working to try to have more binding social standards at EU level and has concentrated this work on questions to do with adequate minimum income schemes, access to affordable and quality services and good practices in work and social activation.

EAPN is one of many social non governmental organisations, organised at EU level. Since 1995 these organisations have been cooperating in the Platform of European Social NGOs (Social Platform) which today has over 30 European level social NGOs in its membership. The objectives of the Social Platform are: 1) to strengthen the NGO sector, 2) to reinforce participatory democracy and 3) to campaign to promote a strong social Europe. As well as working to build solidarity between its members, the Social Platform plays an important role in ensuring a regular dialogue between the EU Institutions and social NGOs. This is reflected in the fact that the Social Platform has established bi-annual dialogue with the Council of Social Affairs Ministers, the European Parliament and the European Commission. The Social Platform also worked with the Convention on the future of Europe to propose Treaty changes to reflect a stronger social Europe. Current issues being addressed by the Social Platform include the strengthening of EU anti discrimination legislation, the development of the EU agenda post 2010 and ensuring access to high quality Services of General Interest.

The Social Platform in turn is part of the Civil Society Contact Group which now brings together eight large rights and value based NGO sectors; culture, environment, education, development, human rights, public health, social and women. The Civil Society Contact Group operates as an informal group mainly bringing together the directors and political representatives of the plat-

forms representing the different sectors in the Civil Society Contact Group. The Group has been operating since 2002 and was first established to follow the work of the Convention on the future of Europe with the aim of ensuring that the institutions of the EU function in a transparent, effective and efficient way within a larger EU, and to develop the role of Europe in the world as a positive and stabilizing force. The Civil Society Contact Group has continued to function in an informal way and in recent times has concentrated on issues to do with the future budget of the EU, the EU transparency initiative and the EU register of interests' representatives as well as the follow up to the article in the Lisbon Treaty on participatory democracy. A debate continues to find a name for the group which better reflects its nature as a coalition of sectoral NGOs rather than the contact point for civil society at EU level which is implied with the name Civil Society Contact Group.

DEFINING A COMMON UNDERSTANDING, LANGUAGE FOR THE THIRD SECTOR

So far this article gives a brief overview of how a particular part of the 'Third Sector' organised at EU level tries to influence EU policy developments. Another challenge is to articulate what we mean by 'Third Sector'. In fact this is a challenge which is being addressed both by the Social Platform and by the Civil Society Contact Group. However in both cases the language used has been more about civil dialogue, public interest organisations and participatory democracy rather than an explicit focus on the term 'Third Sector'.

The Social Platform has set as its annual theme for 2008 and 2009, civil dialogue at national and European level. As a matter of fact, the importance of civil society has recently been formally acknowledged by the European Union in its renewed Treaty (article 11 of the Lisbon Treaty), which states that "*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 action.*"

The Social Platform has decided to initiate its own understanding of the concepts concerned. The idea is to understand the relations between participatory democracy and civil dialogue, put some principles and images behind those words and make sure that they really help build more solidarity and social justice across Europe.

On that basis, the Social Platform will assess whether the current forms of involvement at European level match the definitions and principles that we have identified for a meaningful civil dialogue; and ultimately make recommendations on how to move forward.

In the Civil Society Contact Group attempts to address similar issues are part of the discussion on the implementation of the article 11 on participatory democracy. In 2008, the Civil Society Contact Group is to make proposals to the European decision-makers on how to implement this article.

In a first step the representatives of the networks united in the Civil Society Contact Group will meet to develop some common understanding and shared language about civil society, parti-

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icipatory democracy, and civil dialogue. The work will build upon a previous study undertaken by the Civil Society Contact Group, "Civil Dialogue: Making it work better".

CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that in the past 20 years huge steps have been taken to have a stronger 'Third Sector' voice working to influence the future direction of the EU. This can only happen because many people have given of their time, talents and commitment to develop this link between Third Sector organisations within Member States and across Member States. It is also clear that many challenges remain to ensure stronger links between the work of Third Sector organisations at the different levels. It is also clear that there is no one approach to ensure a successful implementation of participatory democracy. The approach should allow for a diversity of Third Sector organisations with a diversity of approaches to flourish. Some will work in more organised civil dialogue with the institutions and some will work more in public spaces to try and shape public opinion and societal priorities. The end point will be to arrive at a stronger and more coherent EU based on a social and sustainable development model.