

Anne-Sophie Parent
Director, AGE-the European Older People's Platform*

THE ROLE OF CIVIL DIALOGUE IN THE EU POLICY MAKING PROCESS

One particular feature of the European Union is its well developed and influential civil society. In many Member States Third Sector organisations participate actively in the delivery of essential social services and in the promotion of fundamental rights of vulnerable groups at local, national and European level. In some countries, civil society organisations are consulted by policy makers just like trade unions or employers' organisations. In other countries however, civil society organisations struggle to make their voice heard in policy debates.

During the Lisbon Summit of 2000, it was highlighted that the EU needed to modernise and strengthen the European Social Model. EU Member States and the European Commission agreed to take the 'necessary steps to make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty by 2010'.

The Lisbon European Council also agreed that Member States' policies for combating social exclusion should be based on the Open Method of Coordination which had been successfully used in the European employment policy, a method which implies a strong participation of civil society stakeholders in all stages of the policy making process.

*AGE - the European Older People's Platform is a European network of organisations of people aged 50+ and directly represents over 25million older people in Europe.AGE aims to voice and promote the interests of the 150 million inhabitants aged 50+ in the European Union and to raise awareness of the issues that concern themmost. Formore information: www.age-platform.org

NOTES AND CONTRIBUTIONS

THE EUROPEAN OPEN METHOD OF COORDINATION

The Open Method of Coordination (OMC) is a process in which Member States agree to coordinate their policies through exchanges, mutual learning and active involvement of the relevant civil society stakeholders. It is applied in policy areas where the European Union has limited competences according to the EU Treaties but where Member States feel that there is an added value in working together at the European level. The OMC is an instrument supporting Member States in their reform efforts, while respecting their legal competences. It is often referred to as a third form of EU governance together with the EU common policy and intergovernmental coordination.

In the framework of this flexible and decentralised method, Member States agree to:

- Common objectives which set out shared goals to strengthen the entire process;
- A set of common indicators which show how progress towards these goals can be measured;
- Prepare national strategic reports in which Member States set out how they will plan policies over an agreed period to meet the common objectives;
- Evaluate these strategies jointly with the European Commission and the Member States (Joint Report).

THE OMC ON SOCIAL PROTECTION AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

In 2006, Member States decided to 'streamline' the work they were already doing in the fields of social inclusion and pensions and they agreed to extend the OMC to the field of health and long-term care. The aim was twofold: to create a strong participative process and to integrate it better with the EU growth and jobs objectives, the so-called renewed Lisbon Strategy.

The new streamlined OMC on social protection and social inclusion aims to help Member States achieve the overarching objectives they have agreed, i.e. to create more and better jobs, promote greater social cohesion and equality for all and improve the way policies are developed by involving civil society in the decision-making process.

The streamlined OMC on social protection and social inclusion covers three specific policy strands:

1. Eradication of poverty and social exclusion;
2. Adequate and sustainable pensions;
3. Accessible, high quality and sustainable health and long-term care.

Member States have agreed the specific objectives and targets they want to achieve for each policy strand. Every year Member States are asked to report briefly to the Commission on how they have moved forward in achieving these objectives and on what their priorities for future action

are. Once every three years, Member States are asked to send in more substantive reports on all three strands (first one in 2008).

Every year, the European Commission analyses the information they receive from Member States and issues an annual report to assess progress. This report is called the Joint Report on Social Inclusion and Social Protection because it is drafted jointly by the Commission and the Council representing the Member States. It includes the Commission's analysis of the national reports and recommendations addressed to the Member States, generally and individually with country fiches.

ROLE OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE OPEN METHOD OF COORDINATION

One of the three overarching objectives of the OMC on Social Protection and Social Inclusion is *'good governance, transparency and the involvement of stakeholders in the design, implementation and monitoring of policy'*¹. With regard to eradicating poverty and social exclusion, EU action should ensure *'that social inclusion policies are well-coordinated and involve all levels of government and relevant actors, including people experiencing poverty and social exclusion ...'* Consequently, the OMC gives an excellent opportunity for older people and their organisations to be included in policy debates at national and European level. It is a right for civil society organisations to be consulted, not an option that governments may choose to take up.

Civil society organisations can contribute their own assessment of their national reports to the Commission which encourage this form of civil dialogue. Every year AGE gathers the feedback from its national member organisations and drafts common comments and recommendations that are sent to the Commission as our contribution to the debate. The Commission values the input of civil society organisations as these bring an additional perspective which complements the official view with the evaluation from end users/citizens directly concerned by the social protection and social inclusion strategies. This form of civil dialogue complements the social dialogue which brings together trade unions and employers to discuss employment related issues.

How does civil dialogue work at national level: Whilst the principle of civil society participation is supported by many Member States, the reality at national level is however often disappointing. Many AGE members reported that older people's organisations were neither consulted by their national governments in the previous OMC consultation cycle 2006-2008 on social protection and social inclusion, nor involved in their implementation and monitoring phases. The involvement of national civil society organisations in the OMC policy making process obviously needs to be improved and AGE is developing a toolkit to help strengthen contacts between older people's organisations and their respective national authorities and the civil servants who are responsible for drafting, coordinating and implementing the National Strategy Reports on social protection and social inclusion.

¹ COM(2005) 706 final; Working together, working better: A new framework for the open coordination of social protection and inclusion policies in the European Union. These objectives have been retained in a new Guidance Note from the Commission on the preparation of the National Strategy Reports 2008-2010.

NOTES AND CONTRIBUTIONS

What about the European level: Civil dialogue is better organised at European level. The European Commission consult regularly European social NGOs such as the Social Platform² and AGE to inform their work. The Commission can launch open consultation procedures (Green Papers) and organise expert hearings. The European Commission can also set up advisory groups to help gather feedback from relevant stakeholders in an on-going basis. AGE is actively involved in the following groups:

- Advisory Group on the 2007 European Year of Equal Opportunities for All
- European Health Policy Forum
- European Pensions Forum
- Advisory Group on the Science and Society Programme
- Advisory Group on e-Health
- Advisory Group on e-Inclusion
- Advisory Group on Digital Literacy

The mandate of the Social Protection Committee³ (SPC) includes consultation with relevant social NGOs. The SPC organises regular peer reviews where a few Member States discuss a specific topic of common interest and a few civil society organisations are invited to contribute their views to the debate.

European NGOs also try to influence EU Presidencies to ensure that work will be done on their policy priorities. Some presidencies are quite open to civil society organisations, others still need to discover the added value of civil dialogue.

An increasing number of European Union (EU) level policies have a direct impact and relevance to older people. Consequently, we feel that civil society groups of older people and organisations working with the elderly must have greater opportunities to become actively involved in important European level debates so as to advance their rights and interests.

AGE seeks to influence EU policies so that these will better reflect the interests and concerns of older people. In order to develop stronger public support for the reforms needed to promote equal opportunities for all ages and to modernise social systems across the EU, AGE builds and draws on the expertise and active involvement of its members.

To this purpose AGE has developed a document designed to introduce older people's organisations to the European institutions and to increase their knowledge and understanding of the main EU level processes. We hope that it will serve civil society organisations as a useful tool to facilitate their understanding of the main legislative instruments of the EU and to explain how they can influence the political outcomes of EU policy work.

² www.socialplatform.org

³ High level group of representatives of national Social Affairs ministries

The document deals firstly with the major European institutions and sets out their respective roles in the European political processes. The most relevant EU processes are then explained both in terms of their background and current methods and in relation to their relevance to older people. To access the document (in English, French and German): <http://www.age-platform.org/EN/spip.php?article565>