

BACKGROUND NOTE ON THE ROLE AND THE FUNCTIONING OF THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE

1. WHAT IS THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE – (EESC)?

Established in 1957 by the Treaty of Rome, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) is a consultative body of the European Union and an integral part of its institutional set-up. It is the body through which organised civil society is represented, consulted and informed, and which acts as its voice, therefore enabling the representatives of economic, social, socio-vocational and civic organisations to be an integral part of the EU policy-shaping and decision-making processes at European Union level.

The EESC main task is to advise the three major institutions: the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union and the European Commission. It is mandatory for the Committee to be consulted on those issues stipulated in the Treaties and in all cases where the institutions deem it appropriate. It can also be consulted on an exploratory basis by one of the other institutions, or can itself take the initiative to issue opinions (around 15% of its opinions are own-initiative opinions).

The EESC also has two complementary tasks:

- **involving civil society organisations more in the European venture**, at both national and European level,
- **empowering civil society organisations** in non-member countries or country groupings where the Committee is furthering structured dialogue with civil society organisations, and promoting the creation of consultative structures based on its experiences, not least in the countries applying for EU membership, the Mediterranean partner countries, African, Caribbean and Pacific countries, India, China, Latin America (Mercosur) and Brazil.

2. WHO ARE THE MEMBERS OF THE EESC?

The Committee is made up of 344 members from national organizations from the 27 EU Member States and it is structured into three Groups:

- **the “Employers” group**, which consists of members coming from private and public sector of industry, of SMEs, of chambers of commerce, retail and wholesale, banks and insurance companies, transports and agriculture;
- **the “Employees” group** which represents all the categories of employees, from workers to top executives. Its members represent national trade union organisations ;
- **the “Various Interests” group**, which brings together representatives from sectors of economic, social and civic life that are not covered by the first two groups, i.e. bodies representing craftsmen, farmers, SMEs, the professions, consumers, environmentalists, social economy organisations (cooperatives, mutual associations), family associations and associations promoting the rights of disabled people and combating exclusion, the general interest (NGOs), etc.

3. HOW ARE EESC MEMBERS APPOINTED?

With the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty on 1 December 2009 members are now **appointed** by the Council of Ministers of the European Union **for a five-year period (instead of four)** on the basis of nominations by the Member States put together in the light of proposals from representative civil society organisations at national level. Their mandate is renewable.

- The latest EESC renewal, covering a four-year period, took place in October 2006;
- The current mandate of EESC members runs until September 2010.

4. THE EESC: A “BRIDGE” BETWEEN EUROPE AND CIVIL SOCIETY?

Through the role assigned to it by the Treaties, and thanks to its broad membership and the members’ expertise, **the EESC therefore constitutes an institutional mouthpiece and forum for representing and informing civil society organisations**. Thanks to its membership and unique role in the EU’s institutional framework, the Committee undertakes to make participatory democracy become a reality of and to encourage the development of structured dialogue between organised civil society and Union institutions. The Committee’s mission is to act as the EU’s “facilitator”.

The 344 EESC members belong to national organisations acknowledged as representative of organised civil society in the EU. They bring to bear the expertise for which they were appointed. Thus, the EESC enables representatives of economic, social, socio-occupational and civic organisations to actively become part of the policy- and decision-making processes at EU level.

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