

EU Civil Society Contact Group

Civil Society Contact Group message to the June European Council 15-16 June 2006

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The EU Civil Society Contact Group brings together seven of the largest European NGO platforms: Social Platform, Concord (European NGO confederation for relief and development), Human Rights and Democracy Network, Green 10 (environmental organisations), European Women's Lobby, EFAH (European Forum for the Arts and Heritage), EPHA (European Public Health Alliance). www.act4europe.org

The members of these sectoral platforms are European NGO networks, which bring together the voices of hundreds of thousands of associations across the EU, linking the national with the European level and representing a large range of organised interests. Together they aim to encourage and promote a transparent and structured civil dialogue that is accessible, properly facilitated, inclusive, fair, and respectful of the autonomy of NGOs.

One year after the French and Dutch "no" to the Constitutional Treaty, the June European Council will be an important test for EU leaders to clearly demonstrate their commitment to taking citizens on board and including their concerns on the European agenda.

A failure to do so might not only undermine the EU's decision-making capacity in the short term, but also significantly damage citizens' trust in the European project and compromise any agreement as to the text's future in the years to come.

1. Opening up the discussion to make it "matter" for citizens as much as for their political leaders

As acknowledged by the European Parliament in its resolution on the "period of reflection", the Nice Treaty is not a viable basis for the future of European integration.

The EU needs to get out of the current deadlock by reaching a constitutional settlement that will be supported by European citizens from the 25 Member States. Yet we are concerned that the "period of reflection" has so far not led to the open and inclusive debate needed for such a consensus to emerge.

A significant number of debates took place from the local to the European level, building upon the strong interest that emerged from the ratification process. Yet because these debates were not connected with the text's future, we may face **an even longer period of frustration** for those citizens who have invested energy with no concrete outcomes:

- The period of reflection often appears as a **period of inaction** designed to last until current EU political leaders are replaced in national elections;

- This is all the more regrettable as it might result in a **damaging two-level process** where decisions that matter take place behind closed doors, as if the open broader debate involving EU citizens did not count;
- The impact of the period of reflection is further undermined by a lack of coordination between European institutions and throughout Member States, but also by the fact that most **debates seem abstract rather than linked with the Constitutional Treaty's** content, potential added value and future.

Initially based on an inclusive approach, the period of reflection now needs to be opened up to make sure citizens matter as much as their political leaders and to **ensure that its outcomes are perceived as legitimate**. A failure to do so would be a major step back with regard to the previous phases of the constitutional process.

2. Building upon the achievements of the Constitutional Treaty

Throughout the Convention on the Future of Europe and the Intergovernmental Conference, members of the Civil Society Contact Group campaigned for a text which reflects the concerns of citizens.

The Constitutional Treaty is not perfect but we feel that the final text contained **important steps forward from the Nice Treaty**, including article I-47 which acknowledges the principle of participatory democracy, the incorporation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, a transversal clause for social, anti-discrimination and gender objectives, strengthened provisions on development co-operation, a new legal basis on humanitarian aid, better access to justice in environmental matters, a move from unanimity to qualified majority voting in the field of culture, and increased co-decision powers for the European Parliament.

Different proposals are being put on the table on how to proceed with the ratification process and our main concern is that whatever the option, **none of the positive steps agreed by the Convention and Inter-Governmental Conference should be lost**.

We thus urge European leaders to:

- Ensure that **future initiatives to amend the current treaty provisions will build upon the improvements included in the Constitutional Treaty as a whole**.

3. Achieving a real "citizens' agenda"

It is now widely acknowledged that the reasons behind the French and Dutch rejection of the Constitutional Treaty can be found in the broader context rather than in the text itself.

A series of debates is not enough to regain citizens' trust in the European project. Concerns about the EU's ability to deliver social and sustainable development must be tackled and the EU needs to live up to its responsibility towards developing countries. A deeper reflection on how to put our common values and principles in practice is also necessary.

We call on Heads of State and Government, the European Commission and the European Parliament to:

- Look beyond a vision for Europe focused primarily on promoting the internal market, deregulation, growth and competitiveness and put the citizens at the heart of the new proposal;

- Clearly demonstrate that a high level of social and environmental protection, quality services of general interest, investment in human and social capital are not threatened but strengthened by internal and external EU policies;
- Create a legal and institutional system that links values to effective delivery and puts human security and fundamental freedoms at the core of any external and internal security agenda;
- Give the EU appropriate tools to become the advocate of people living in poverty around the world by fighting harder in favour of a fairer world in which injustices and inequalities are abolished, women are empowered, human rights are respected and the environment is protected;
- Put such commitment into practice by considering these aims during the 2008-2009 reform of the EU's financial framework.

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