

The European Commission Directorate General for Freedom, Security and Justice is currently holding a **public consultation** on how to strengthen the rights stemming from citizenship of the European Union. Consultations like this are an important way for the EU to take stock of what citizens and stakeholders think of European integration, what are their concerns and expectations.

The conclusions which the Commission draws from the responses will feed into a conference in July, and ultimately inform a **Communication on Citizenship** which the Commission will make to the European Parliament and the Council in the Autumn. By joining the consultation, people and organisations communicate their views to the decision makers, and thereby enrich the democratic life of the Union.

Anyone can participate in the consultation, from citizens themselves to organisations and public bodies. CEDAG will submit a contribution, ensuring that the voice of European civil society organisations is heard on this vital subject of citizen's rights. Out of the questions which the Commission has posed, two themes emerge which are of particular importance to CEDAG and our members: the ease of **access** for citizens to the rights which European legislation grants them; and the level of **participation** in the political and democratic life of our society.

In its consultation documents, the Commission stresses that citizens should be the central focus of policy making in Brussels. All actions should be centred on the citizen and should work towards priorities such as promoting citizens' rights, ensuring justice and protection for all, and working for solidarity within a more integrated society.

The focus on the citizen can be traced back to the Maastricht Treaty (1992), before which the EU conceived of people essentially as economic actors. This citizenship therefore implies a more *human* and less abstract relationship between the EU and its people – at least in theory CEDAG urges the European institutions to keep this humanity at the forefront of its concerns when making decisions. Many people say that the EU is out of touch with its citizens, and an effective way to correct this perception would be for the decision makers in Brussels to ensure that laws are really implemented in the way they are intended, to genuinely benefit citizens and society

This means promoting solidarity by ensuring that all sectors of society, including vulnerable groups, have equal access and treatment with regard to their rights stemming from EU

citizenship. Proper training for key professionals to ensure that they are able to treat citizens fairly, taking into account their personal circumstances, will be one important tool to ensure that rights are enjoyed fully and equally in an increasingly diverse society. Better communication with citizens will also be vital, if they are to feel genuinely connected to the EU.