

Civil society organisations are active in a wide range of sectors and they have a specific expertise because they often work directly with people and groups on the ground. Counting on their grassroots expertise, CSOs have the potential to strengthen citizen participation in European decision-making, helping to develop policies that

meet society's needs.

However, the engagement of civil society actors at present is intermittent and ad hoc. The potential for effective dialogue with European institutions is not channelled with the help of clear and well-defined rules: instead it is rather composed of scattered initiatives.

This can be partly explained by the lack of a coherent approach by European institutions to civil dialogue. The interactions with CSOs vary considerably not only from one institution to another but also within institutions.

The European Commission is the institution which maintains the largest number of formal and informal dialogue links with CSOs. However, some of the drawbacks often highlighted, for instance in the case of public consultations, are that they are not widely advertised, it is hard to obtain feedback on whether or not the Commission has taken the contributions into account and not enough time is allowed to CSOs to prepare their input .

The European Parliament is fairly open to CSOs' concerns and input, preferring mostly informal interactions, than formal ones. In comparison, the initiatives and modalities of dialogue with the Council of the EU appear rather limited. When dialogue takes place is mostly on ad-hoc basis and on the initiative of CSOs. On top of that, during each rotating presidency of the European Union, civil society organisations are not really involved in drawing up the priorities of the Council programmes.

The lack of a horizontal approach by European institutions to CSOs results in a lower level of trust and mutual understanding between NGOs and EU institutions in different fields.

CEDAG has long argued in favour of a **shared decision making process with citizens** and communities to set priorities, implement and evaluate projects, including all the 'hard-to-reach' communities.

In 2009 a seminar was organised gathering different CSOs to discuss the prospects for an **EU Charter for civil dialogue**

. The seminar highlighted the lack of a coherent approach on the part of the European institutions, the need of a common understanding of civil dialogue and the need for more

transparency and representativeness on the side of the EU Institutions and CSOs. Stepping up the process leading to a more effective civil dialogue at European level is even more appropriate at this time, because of the innovation brought by the Lisbon treaty. The Lisbon Treaty introduces civil dialogue as a recognised component of democratic decision-making in the EU. Article 11 contains an institutional commitment to giving **'citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action'** (article 11B.1).

In addition, the EU's institutions are now obliged to maintain **'an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society'** (article 11B.2) and it is further stipulated that **"the European Commission shall carry out broad consultations with parties concerned in order to ensure that the Union's actions are coherent and transparent"** (art 11B.3).