

Resolution on the Communication from the Commission on promoting the role of voluntary organizations and foundations in Europe (COM(97)0241 C4-0546/97)

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The European Parliament,

- having regard to the Communication from the Commission, COM(97)0241 - C4-0546/97,
- having regard to Article 2 of the Treaty establishing the European Community,
- having regard to its resolution of 13 March 1987 on non-profit-making associations in the European Community ((OJ C 99, 13.4.1987, p. 205.)),
- having regard to the amended proposal for a Council Regulation (EEC) on the Statute for a European association ((OJ C 236, 31.8.1993, p. 1.)),
- having regard to the amended proposal for a Council Decision relating to a multiannual programme (1994-96) of work for cooperatives, mutual societies, associations and foundations in the Community (COM(95)0253),
- having regard to the own-initiative opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on 'Cooperation with charitable organizations as economic and social partners in the field of social welfare' (CES 1398/97) ((OJ C 73, 9.3.1998, p. 92.)),
- having regard to the opinion of the Economic and Social Committee (CES 1347/97) ((OJ C 95, 30.3.98, p. 99.)) and of the Committee of the Regions (CdR 306/97) on that communication,
- having regard to the report of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs and the opinions of the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs and Industrial Policy and the Committee on Legal Affairs and Citizens' Rights (A4-0203/98),

A. having regard to the importance of the voluntary organizations and foundations sector in the Union's various sectors of activity, such as social policy, development policy, the promotion of human rights, environmental policy, public health, youth policy, culture, education and training; having regard also to the need for a serious, in-depth debate on relations between the Union and this important sector,

B. whereas this debate should be supported and accompanied by an in-depth analysis of the degree of development and organization of that sector at the various levels (local, national and European) and an assessment of the part it plays in the implementation of the various Community policies,

C. whereas the special characteristic of voluntary organizations and foundations making them of interest to the Community is their independent, non-profit-making nature,

D. whereas voluntary organizations and foundations (hereinafter referred to as NGOs) perform varied and important functions in the various sectors, ranging from the provision of services to social solidarity, public health, the encouragement of active citizenship and the expression of the will of specific social groups or interest groups,

E. whereas the services performed by the NGOs often constitute an efficient, flexible response to new and growing needs of citizens which the public authorities are no longer able fully to satisfy,

F. having regard to the importance of the sector with regard to employment, which has, in addition, already been pointed out in the Delors White Paper, the Santer Pact and, more

recently, in the guidelines contained in the conclusions of the Luxembourg Special Summit, and hoping for an undertaking on the part of the Commission, the Council and the Member States that those statements will result in specific measures to develop and sustain employment in the third system, particularly in the national plans,

G. having regard in this context to the need to make a continuing distinction between voluntary work and employment in the third system, even if they can often be construed as complementary,

H. whereas voluntary organizations can constitute a first step towards more complex, structured activities and the creation of new jobs, often accompanied by a need for advanced educational qualifications,

I. having regard to the fundamental role of local voluntary organizations in combating social exclusion, particularly because they stress the active participation of people who have been excluded and a holistic approach to eliminating the factors leading to exclusion by mobilizing the various key players at local level,

J. having regard to the increasing importance ascribed to the local level as the preferred setting for implementing the Union's social policies, and stressing that this presupposes a commitment by the Union to develop this sector,

K. having regard in particular to the key role which the NGOs could or should play in the context of the European Social Fund in the (re)integration into employment of various social groups, and regretting that the procedures and financing requirements of the Structural Funds constitute a serious and sometimes insurmountable obstacle to the fulfilment of that role,

L. whereas the increase in unemployment and instances of social exclusion, the ageing of the population and the emergence of irregular or unstable employment within the Union is causing a serious problem with regard to the representation of the interests of large groups of the population,

M. whereas the NGOs form a genuine channel of communication between these population groups and the local, national and Community authorities,

N. having regard, in the light of experience gained from the various Community programmes and initiatives, to the need to enhance the role of the non-profit-making sector as spokesman for these social groups, by also giving them the opportunity to make their voice heard in the various European institutions,

O. having regard to the central role played by the NGOs in the field of development policy as the Union's primary discussion partner with regard to the achievement of the Union's political objectives, and to the need for the Community institutions to put to good use the NGOs' wealth of accumulated experience,

P. having regard, in addition, to the growing number of NGOs on the European scene concerned among other things with issues relating to the environment, development, consumer protection, social services, public health and the protection of human rights,

Q. having regard to the wide disparities in relations between the different forms of non-profit-making activity in the various sectors and the Community institutions and to the low level of awareness of the experience acquired in the various different sectors,

1. Welcomes this Communication as an opportunity to revive the political debate on the role of the non-profit-making sector in the process of European integration at the political, economic, social and civil level;

Analysis of the non-profit-making sector

2. Takes the view that an in-depth analysis of the degree of development and organization of the sector at the various levels (local, national and European) should precede and prepare for the European Year of Voluntary Organizations and Active Citizenship proposed by the Commission; notes in this context a survey carried out by Directorate-General V on the

Commission's relations with the NGOs and calls on the Commission to publish the results of it;

3. Hopes that the results of that study will be constantly brought up to date and welcomes, in this connection, the Commission proposal to set up a network of national agencies for monitoring, coordination, information and mobilization of the sector;

4. Believes, in short, that the debate and study mentioned above should enable the Community legislative proposals at present under discussion to be reviewed and revived, especially the proposal for a statute for a European association and the proposal for a multiannual programme for cooperatives, mutual societies, associations and foundations;

5. Hopes that, in this context, a clear distinction will be made between the proposed Statute for a European Association and the proposal for a Regulation on the European public limited company and that requirements and operating procedures typical of purely economic entities will not be imposed on the former, although it must remain possible for voluntary associations to carry out economic operations;

Role at local level

6. Lays special emphasis on the relevance of local action for possible synergies between private business, public responsibility and "third sector" initiatives;

7. Welcomes the proposal to provide simplified means of access to structural resources for the NGOs, in particular by making available 1% of the European Social Fund budget for non-governmental organizations; stresses, however, that this percentage should come in addition, and not as a substitute, to the structural resources already available to the sector in the various Member States and is designed to finance micro-projects administered by associations and groups firmly rooted in local communities;

8. Considers that such measures will be efficient only if they are accompanied by specific information and support measures, such as the setting up of single information desks to provide the NGOs concerned with the necessary technical assistance needed to have access to such resources; considers also that staff of voluntary organizations should be granted appropriate access to vocational training measures co-financed by Community instruments;

9. Believes that, in discussions on the future organization of the European Regional Development Fund, greater importance should be given to the social economy, given its potential contribution to local development;

10. Believes it essential for the new regulations on the structural funds to recognize the NGOs as full partners, especially by encouraging the creation of local partnerships between the public authorities, social partners, private sector, training and educational establishments and the voluntary organizations sector;

11. Recalls that the experience of the PEACE initiative shows how structural resources can be managed on a participative basis through the establishment of advisory forums comprising all (institutional, social, economic and civil) bodies involved in the areas covered by the measures;

Employment

12. Stresses the sector's importance for job creation; calls therefore on the Commission, in the context of the proposal for a multiannual programme of work for cooperatives, mutual societies, associations and foundations, to concentrate the limited resources available on considering the contribution which the sector as a whole can make to carrying out the employment policy measures envisaged in the Commission's White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment;

13. Calls in particular on the Member States and the relevant departments of the Commission, in the context of the efforts being made to implement the conclusions of the Luxembourg European Council, to create instruments to develop in the third system too the pillar of the guidelines entitled 'Developing entrepreneurship', by recognizing the special

nature of its structures and (non-profit-making) activities and of the demand to be satisfied (mainly for services in the social sphere), since these characteristics distinguish this sector from the field of private enterprise;

14. Recalls that with the recent initiative to finance innovative SMEs with high employment levels, part of the financing can be earmarked for SMEs in third system, especially in sectors such as public health and education, which are also priority objectives in the EIB's employment plan;

15. Takes the view that the development of the third system, by satisfying new demands in the social sector, may lead to more equal distribution between the sexes of working hours and family responsibilities and help people, especially women, satisfactorily to combine work and family life; believes that this would strengthen the correct across-the-board interpretation (mainstreaming) of the fourth pillar of the guidelines (equal opportunities);

16. Reiterates its support for a reduced rate of VAT for certain labour-intensive services not subject to trans-border competition and also provided by the third system; calls on the Council to amend the Sixth VAT Directive so as to enable Member States that so wish to apply this rate on an experimental basis; asks, as part of the on-going review of the VAT system, to consider the problems to voluntary organisations, caused by the complexities of the system and in the light of decreasing tax incentives for donations due to reductions in direct taxes.

17. Recalls its commitment, including its action in the context of the EU budget, to promoting experimentation, research and dissemination of improved job creation in the context of the third system; considers that the 1999 budget should include appropriations which will enable activities covered by budget line B5-501 to be completed with serious and detailed assessments, which will contribute to guiding the EU's future action, partly with a view to the incentive measures provided for in the new 'Employment' section of the Treaty;

18. Points out that, for the purposes of developing the third system, cooperation between research institutes, colleges and vocational training institutes is an important way of generating research findings and of training staff to meet the needs of the new types of services;

Enlargement and external relations

19. Urges the Commission to enhance the role of the non-profit-making sector in building and consolidating democratic, participative structures in the countries with which the Union has particularly close links, particularly the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the MDAP countries;

Civil dialogue

20. Welcomes the dialogue and mutual awareness which has recently developed between voluntary organizations and foundations and trade union organizations; believes that, within the different spheres of activity and interest, trade unions, voluntary organizations and foundations can play a fundamental role in the civil dialogue, in promoting active citizenship and, more generally, in guiding economic and social development policies;

21. Calls for a serious, structured sectoral dialogue to be set in motion between the European institutions and the NGOs represented at European level;

22. Believes it is essential for this purpose to launch within the various institutions and in the sphere of the NGOs themselves a joint review of the means of implementing that dialogue based on the experience acquired in the various sectors;

23. Takes the view that that dialogue should be based on common criteria and procedures and that the different resulting viewpoints should be coordinated, within the European institutions, through a multi-sectoral administrative structure;

24. Believes moreover that the NGOs must clearly identify their representatives as the discussion partners responsible for the various issues, in order to avoid overlapping or arbitrary exclusions;
25. Stresses the importance of ensuring that that dialogue is accompanied by similar developments at Member State level and in this connection stresses the mobilizing role which should be played by the European NGOs;
26. Calls on the Commission, finally, to revive the concept of a wide-ranging democratic consultation process in connection with the revision of the Treaties outlined in the report by the Committee of Experts presented to the European Forum on Social Policy in March 1996, bringing it up-to-date in the light of the discussions held at national level in the first half of 1997 and the results of the Amsterdam Intergovernmental Conference;
27. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions, the European Platform of Social NGOs, CEDAG, the European Foundation Centre and the European Social Partners.