

## **Report from working group "Building democracy and civil society in Europe"**

*Democracy.*

- What does democracy mean to you?

*Civil society.*

- What do you associate civil society with?

The current crisis in the EU that we are facing, is foremost connected to the malfunction of the representative democratic bodies. Citizens around Europe don't exercise their right to elect their representatives. It's a crisis for the representative democracy.

- Why are people not exercising their right to vote?

### **Participation**

Bearing in mind the differences throughout Europe on the concerns and possibilities of citizens we cannot deny the essential importance of being involved in Civil Society Organisations (CSO's) in order to influence in democracy building. Nevertheless we also need to stress the importance of including people, especially youth that are not represented in any associations in this process. This means a future Europe needs to increase and diversify the participatory democratic structures. Youth-led CSO's need to engage more young people also from groups not traditionally engaged in these organisations. Participation is the basis of building a civil society. As the European Youth convention states, *the European Union of the future has to include effective possibilities of participation for the citizens and especially young people.*

Article 1-47 in the proposed treaty of the EU touches the principle of participatory democracy;

*(1) The institutions shall, by appropriate means, give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicity exchange their views in all areas of Union action.*

*(2) The institution shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society.*

*(3) The Commission shall carry out broad consultations with parties concerned in order to ensure that the Union's actions are coherent and transparent.*

*(4) Not less than one million citizens who are nationals of a significant number of member states may take initiative of inviting the Commission, within the framework of its power, to submit any appropriate proposal on matters where citizens consider that a legal act of the Union is required for the purpose of implementing the Constitution. European laws shall determine the provisions for the procedures and conditions required for such a citizens' initiative, including the minimum number of Member States from which such citizens must come.*

- What is your perspective on article 1-47 in the proposed treaty of Europe? How could this come into action?
- What needs to be done for your voice to be heard?
- How can youth-led CSO's, in a larger extent, engage young people that are today outside the organisations and outside the debate?
- What does it take for you to engage in something? Why would you not want to engage in politics?
- How can youth-led CSO's work together with formal learning institutions, such as schools, to increase the participation of young people?

### **Role and functions of CSO's in democracy building**

For us, democracy means both the representative democratic structures and the participatory methods of decision making. In the participatory aspects of democracy, CSO's, together with the schools, are the first experience we, as citizens, get of democratic principles. We learn how to build a common position, how to compromise, engage and also to acknowledge and respect another point of view. Therefore CSO's have to be democratic themselves, both legitimate and inclusive.

More and more people tend to organise themselves in more loose structures where representation is less evident and the framework of engagement has changed. In short, there are CSO's that are

representative member organisations and there are CSO's that are not membership based, but that represent a trend and an interest that is still in the interest of the public somehow. However organised, CSO's promote active citizenship. *Active Citizenship* is the participation in civil society, community, and/or political life, characterized by mutual respect and non violence in accordance with human rights and democracy.

- What do you think is the role for CSO's?
- What mechanisms are needed to ensure that there is a role and recognition for CSO's in democracy building? What does it take for CSO's to take upon this role?
- How can we develop other ways of participation without undermining the roles of representative associations like youth-led CSO's?

It is of crucial importance that we can ensure credibility and independence for CSO's despite strong public funding through transparency.

- What role would the member states have in terms of recognition and funding possibilities – for building democracy and involving CSO's?

### **Accessibility**

Again, as stated in the European Youth Convention, *“neither the citizens in general nor we, young people in particular, understand who is responsible for which policy in this labyrinth of European legislation. Intergovernmental Conferences and EU-summits from Maastricht to Nice have shown that EU decision making is not transparent, not democratic, and not efficient”*.

In the past many initiatives have been launched to increase communication and stimulate active citizenship in Europe. They have not been successful, for example many of us didn't experience anything from the plan D.

Through CSO's citizens hold their elected representatives accountable for their decisions. With a low participation, for example, in the elections for European Parliament CSO's responsibility to hold the elected representatives accountable for their decisions is even greater. If youth-led CSO's are active in bridging the gap and holding elected representatives accountable, young people will be more interested and the level of awareness will rise. By making it possible for CSO to register on a European level this will be easier. 2009, we have a new election for the European Parliament and we need already now come to action in order to raise the level of awareness and enhance the number of people participating in the election. On a national level, a European dimension is needed in the political debate and this is, of course, very important as we come closer to this election.

In the political debate about Europe and the future of Europe CSO's also has a clear function and important role to play. But the communication between the EU institutions and the citizens of Europe cannot be done without engagement of the Member States. The Member States has to want a vivid discussion for such to happen. This could be stimulated through public funding opportunities made accessible for CSO's.

Today, media also hold a greater role in explaining politics and political processes. Medias' responsibility has to be stressed for a more alive and vivid European dimension in the political debate throughout Europe.

- How do you like to access information?
- How can we ensure a European dimension in the political debate on a regional and national level? What is the role of the member states regarding this?
- What role can CSO's play in this? How can CSO's better use media?
- How can we make CSO's participation valuable on the European level?
- How can we ensure that the elections to the European Parliament will be about European issues and not about national interest.