



European Economic and Social Committee

Group III Various Interests European Citizens' Initiative The way forward

In its orientation seminar on 27th of June 2011, the **"Various Interests" Group of the EESC** and representatives of key CSO's on national level, debated the issues around one of the biggest democratic innovations in the Lisbon Treaty of the European Union: **the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI)**. The Lisbon Treaty, in its article 11.4, gives a formal recognition to the role of participatory democracy (civil dialogue, consultation, European citizens' initiative) as a tool for the completion and modernisation of the European model of democracy.^{1 2}

During the European Economic and Social Committee's current term of office, the Committee and Group III have set the aim of putting participatory democracy back at the heart of discussions and forging ahead with this concept. Group III feels that the ECI will strengthen the role of European citizens in influencing the European Commission's policy agenda. In this sense, The Orientation Seminar provided an opportunity to inform members of National European Civil Society organisations of the requirements and potential to develop an efficient and operational European Citizens Initiative. With the help of organisations participating in the event, the Seminar opened communication channels with other national organisations concerned by the ECI. By involving a wide range of representatives from European Union Institutions, some of which

¹ 11§4 TEU "Not less than one million citizens who are nationals of a significant number of Member States may take the initiative of inviting the European Commission, within the framework of its powers, 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 Treaties. The procedures and conditions required for such a citizens' initiative shall be determined in accordance with the first paragraph of Article 24 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union."

² Please find the European Council and European Parliament Regulation on the Citizens' Initiative here: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2011:065:0001:0022:EN:PDF>

were at the origin of the European Citizens Initiative, the historical, procedural and infrastructural aspects of the European Citizens' Initiative were highlighted together with the future challenges of implementation with effect from April 2012.

There was clear acknowledgement that the Citizens Initiative as the first transnational tool for citizens was an important complement to representative democracy and would provide a way of enabling citizens to influence the policy agenda of the EU, as well as strengthening cooperation and solidarity in the European civil society, creating a common European civic space.

Group III Strong believes that the dynamics generated by the New Lisbon Treaty, as well as the range of issues and priorities that are now on the European Union's agenda, require a strong and convinced cooperation on the EU level. This that only occur through its profound renewal as well as through a new era of direct engagement of civil society, which focuses on enhancing the European identity and generating interest among citizens making the immense costs of 'non Europe' more evident to everybody²

The following is a summary of the key challenges raised in the debate together with proposals for the way forward.

Proposals for the EESC

- To play a key role in raising **awareness** of the Citizens Initiative using its extensive contacts at EU and local level, including national ESCs and similar bodies.
- As an intermediary body to be a **facilitator** for-
 - Translation services
 - Advice on process, legal issues and practical matters
 - To be a conduit for sharing information and experience³

² Roadmap of Group III for Participatory Democracy in Europe March 2011. see also EESC opinions EESC opinion on the European Citizens' Initiative: Reference: CESE 993/2010, published in the Official Journal C 44 of 11.2.2011. www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.institutional-reform-opinions-resolutions-opinions.10571, and EESC opinion on Participatory Democracy and the Citizens' Initiative (Art. 11) Reference: CESE 465/2010, published in the Official Journal C 354 of 28.12.2010. www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.institutional-reform-opinions-resolutions-opinions.9608

³ Find a first information booklet produced by the EESC “

<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/eesc-2011-23-en.pdf>

-through consultation develop materials and tools to enhance people's understanding of the ECI both for citizens but also for organisers of ECIs.

-a facilitator of Citizens' Initiatives in preparation, enabling those involved to network and possibly to meet;

- to discuss the role of the EESC and possible impacts on the agenda of the EESC in relation to Initiatives gaining a significant amount of support.

-to discuss the possibilities to provide EESC facilities for coordination meetings

- Potential to establish a 'helpdesk' to encompass the above.
- Establish **monitoring** of processes at national and on the EU level.
- Launch **own initiative opinions** on the implementation of the ECI and the progress made.
- Actively work with EU institutions to ensure necessary helpdesk functions on national and EU level and mutual understanding of the implementation process and the progress being made by being involved in preparatory work and in the revision process in 2015, which should besides others ensure a wider scope of possible issues tackled by the ECI.

What can the EESC uniquely bring to the process?

- The added value of the composition of the EESC which is representative of all sectors of European society.
- Through the established forums, such as the Liaison Group⁴, that bring together a range of experience and resources.
- The ability to engage with and involve the national ESCs and similar national bodies

⁴ www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.liaison-group

The identified key success factors for the ECI³

- Clarity of **roles and responsibilities** of the European Parliament, Commission and the EESC. – an inter-institutional Dialogue group should be considered
- Clarity of the role of national governments, especially on the risks of overregulation and in terms of follow-up or support (incl. possible financial support – if certain criteria are fulfilled) provided.
- Clarity of the **mechanics** of the process with the main focus on easy procedures, reflecting the Regulation, which asks for similar conditions in all EU member states⁵
- Clarity about the **legal eligibility-check mechanism** and content possibilities of a proposal.
- The importance of **planning, networking and avoiding risks of “doubling”** topics prior to registration of an ECI including the development of partnerships/coalitions/alliances.
- Ensuring that there is understanding of the **political** and strategic issues involved when developing an ECI.
- Enabling an activity package additional to the foreseen hearings to ensure debate and clarity of purpose of ECIs and reduce risks of frustration. (including a potential wider use of the Citizens Agora)
- Establish a network of national open and accessible helpdesks, clear website for the specific ECI with the knowledge of national requirements about **certification** of such tools.
- Ensure clarity about the **verification** system for signatures in each Member State and make systems as simple as possible. (not as important, as, most probably, it will be done anyway)
- Being aware of **privacy** issues and **data security** for individual signatories.

³ Your guide to the European Citizens' Initiative EESC 2011 Author Bruno Kaufmann gives an introduction to the ECI and provides a step by step guide on how to launch an initiative together with links for further information.

⁵ Regulation Peface No. 2 and 3: [The procedures and conditions]
„should also ensure that citizens of the Union are subject to similar conditions for supporting a citizens' initiative regardless of the Member State from which they come”.

- Ability to **finance** an ECI based on estimated costs of between 0.75 and 1.00 euro. There needs to be clarity about sponsorship and funding support available and used.

Conclusion

As a key feature of the Lisbon Treaty's emphasis on participatory democracy the ECI should play a powerful part in enabling citizens to influence the agenda of the EU and to develop a transnational civil society. It is evident that the EESC can play an integral role in enabling ECIs to be formulated and implemented given its role as a bridge to civil society and that this will require an integrated approach with other institutions and clarity about the resources available to it to undertake this important task.

It is important to invest in our citizens; to communicate in an efficient and timely manner; to ensure that processes are simple and that all involved institutions meet the organisational challenges in a transparent way which is not clouded by other political agendas so that the goal set will be reached in full scale.

It is therefore proposed to organise a special event: 'A European Citizen's Initiative Day' around the beginning of April 2012, in at least 7 different Member States, with the objective of marking the occasion of the definitive entering into force of the ECI regulation in all the 27 Member States of the European Union.

Paragraph No 2 of the Preface:

"The procedures and conditions required for the citizens' initiative should be clear, simple, user-friendly and proportionate to the nature of the citizens' initiative so as to encourage participation by citizens and to make the Union more accessible. They should strike a judicious balance between rights and obligations"

Everything must be ready for implementation on 1st April 2012.

Group III
June 2011