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Towards a more effective relationship between Civil Society and the EU

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The European Union attributes considerable importance to the role of Civil Society regarding it a crucial component of democracy and a key asset for the promotion of pluralism, accountability and, essentially, effective governance. Thus, the EU has established a multi-level relationship with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) that involves their participation in and collaboration with the Union's advisory bodies (e.g. the European Parliament, Commission, Council and the Economic and Social Committee). Moreover, Civil Society Organizations are considered as partners for the promotion and implementation of the Union's policies and strategies.

This viewpoint is evident in the Lisbon Treaty which stipulates that "the institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and Civil Society". Moreover, in Article 26a of the Treaty, there is a clear reference to representatives of Civil Society Organizations as members of the Economic and Social Committee which is one of the advisory bodies of the Union (Lisbon Treaty: 2007). This diversified collaboration between the EU and Civil Society is also made apparent by the wide range and availability of EU grants to Civil Society Organizations so that they can undertake projects and actions in member states and third countries.

Concurrently, Civil Society Organizations have shown considerable work at EU level and have taken wide-ranging efforts to influence EU's institutions and decision making processes. Civil Society Organizations now have a dual focus, operating both at local and at the EU level, trying to influence EU's decisions and policies or to use the institutions and bodies to promote change at a local level. Hence, the creation of European networks of organizations with common causes and interests that are based in Brussels. These networks allow the organizations to exchange views and best practices in their relevant field as well as to organize joint action in their home countries and, more importantly, towards EU institutions.

As a result, the collaboration and engagement of the European Union and the Civil Society have a two-way influence.

Civil Society Organizations through their diverse and multilevel work have been a pivotal agent in the transformation of the Union into an organisation for the promotion, respect and safeguarding of human rights. More importantly, Civil Society, in the form of established organizations or citizen initiatives, is continuously working towards bridging the gap between the decision-making bodies of the Union and the citizens acting as a watchdog and as an agent for the promotion and presentation of causes to the relevant agencies as well as a mean for citizens to express their grievances, views and suggestions. Ultimately, Civil Society plays a decisive role in reducing the so-called democratic deficit of the European Union.

At the same time, the EU has made considerable contributions to the development of the sector through grants and support; but more importantly through providing CSOs and activists access to its processes allowing them to secure elevated influence in the decision making process. Moreover, as it was already mentioned, it has influenced a change in the modus operandi of the Civil Society Organizations and the development of pan-European networks that work and carry out actions and campaigns that are not confined by national borders.

However, this relationship is not without problems or shortcomings.

Though the Union has made some provisions for citizens and organizations to get involved, the European Citizens' Initiative being the most notable example, the tools and means allocated to them are considered insufficient both in terms of inclusiveness as well as effectiveness. Moreover, considerable deficiencies are observed in the relationship and engagement of the Union with the Civil Society.

The European Union still has a long way to go in order to establish a framework through which Civil Society Organizations and more importantly citizens have an established and influential role as proponents, consultants and why not, implementers of action.

European Union has a hierarchical, top-down approach towards Civil Society Organizations while a divergent approach is detected as to Civil Society's access and participation in EU's processes. In some fields and topics, such is the environment for example, Civil Society Organizations have enhanced influenced while in other fields their influence is fairly limited. Additionally the sector's reliance on the EU for funds, mitigates Civil Society's influence. In fact, on various occasions we observe the direct opposite. CSOs are the dependent variable in this relationship and are the ones that often change or adapt their work, actions and campaigns in reaction or accordance to the Union's decisions and policies (Liebert & Trenz, 2008). Besides that, we should keep in mind that the sector has many organizational and structural issues to address in terms of the way it operates at the local level and more importantly in terms of its effectiveness and administrative capabilities at the EU level. European Civil Society networks have many structural problems to address as to the communication and coordination of their member organizations which essentially hinder their appeal to the public as well as their ability to play an influential role. Lastly, we should not neglect the geographical obstacles faced by organizations from the periphery which curb their ability to take an active role in the policy-making procedures of the EU.

Thus, the NGO Support Centre, through the U-Impact project (see Annex I), which wishes to promote a stronger and better functioning relationship between the EU and the Civil Society, proposes the following:

- The European Union to re-examine its current structures and the effectiveness of the participation processes as well as to explore ways to enhance their inclusiveness. It is also essential that the Union works towards enhancing the effectiveness of procedures like the European Citizens' Initiative and introduce further similar schemes that allow initiatives, citizens and organization to introduce their policy proposals.
- The European Union to work towards intensifying the collaboration and links of its country offices with local organizations so that they can reinforce their role as the Union's link to local communities consolidating the periphery's lack of access to the central institutions.
- The expansion of capacity building schemes and grants for the financial and structural support of Civil Society Organizations and European networks that will empower Civil Society and will help it to overcome existing shortcomings in its work and action at both local and EU level.

Existing shortcomings tamper Civil Society's contribution and role within EU's decision-making processes, curtailing the Union from the positives it can reap through it. The current structure withholds Civil Society's role as a bridge between citizens and EU's bodies and a platform for the generation and promotion of proposals, ideas, suggestions and appeals.

Essentially, the EU does not capitalize Civil Society's capacity to support and augment the effectiveness and efficiency of the Union's activities.

We strongly believe that, unless the proposed or similar steps are taken, Civil Society's participation in the decision and policy making process will fall short in practice and the democratic deficit of the European Union will continue to exist. As a result, we will continue to observe a gap between the general public and EU Institutions that will continuously alienate and disillusion citizens hindering EU's appeal and the European integration process. Conversely, by taking measures to make Civil Society actors' participation in the Union's processes more efficient, we could, potentially, cure many of the ills it is facing. Civil Society Organizations will bring citizens' points of view into transnational deliberations among experts and government representatives. Additionally, it is expected that through opening up deliberations to Civil Society actors and by making them more inclusive, public's conception and understanding of EU's processes and governance will be enhanced. Moreover, Civil Society actors will metaphorically act as a 'transmission belt' that connects citizens to the remote venues of international and European governance; with lateral ramifications that point to the public sphere surrounding the governance institutions (STEFFEK,2014).

Consequently, and taking into consideration citizens' growing dissatisfaction with the European Union's modus operandi and the heightened Euroscepticism, we consider our proposals of utmost importance.

The Union should explore ways to make its consultation processes more inclusive and efficient so that citizens and Civil Society are given a more active role in the decision-making process. As part of this process, EU offices in member countries should obtain a more active role establishing links with the local communities. More importantly, the European Citizens' Initiative should be further promoted while similar schemes that allow the initiation of policy initiatives by citizens and CSOs should be introduced. Finally, the Union's current grant schemes should be re-examined and the possibility of structural funds to CSOs should be taken into consideration.

Undeniably, the relationship between the Union and the Civil Society and the way it should evolve is an important parameter of the general discussion on the future of the European Union, during which the set of proposals put forward by the present policy paper along with their reasoning should be taken into consideration.

Annex I

U-Impact Project

The project “*From Citizen Involvement to Policy Impact*” (U-Impact) coordinates citizen involvement with the public authorities at national and European levels in eight EU member states and one candidate state in order to develop a mechanism for increased impact of citizen initiatives on the policy making process in the EU. The project specifically targets the European Parliament elected in 2014 and aims at increasing the citizen participation in the policy-making process of EP in line with its increased power and competences in the Union. U-Impact consist of a series of policy initiatives developed by citizens across borders in the 9 participating countries with the aim of improving important everyday aspects of their lives as European citizens and directly targets policy impact on European and national level. The aims of the project include:

- improve citizen’s understanding of the new power structure of the Union and the new role of Parliament as well as the opportunities to interact and impact its decision-making process;
- help create a sustainable platform for increased pan-European citizen participation;
- offer concrete solutions to specific European citizen problems and have them debated with European and national policy makers;
- create an inclusive long lasting network for policy debate and impact involving citizens across borders building on their cultural diversity and promoting the development of a common European public space.

Stakeholders:

The major groups targeted by this policy paper are the Civil Society Organizations, national governments, the EU Institutions, MEPs and EU officials.

U-Impact Follow Up Activities

This policy paper will be shared by the NGO Support Centre with its partner organizations in Cyprus and abroad, the Cypriot MEPs, the European Parliament Information Office in Cyprus and the European Commission Representation in Cyprus. The same will be asked from all the organizations participating in the U-Impact project.

Annex II

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