



European Economic and Social Committee

the **EESC** in **10** points



1. What is the European Economic and Social Committee – (EESC)?

The European Economic and Social Committee is a consultative body set up by the Rome Treaties in 1957. It consists of representatives of the various economic and social components of organised civil society. Its main task is to advise the three major institutions (European Parliament, Council of the European Union and European Commission).

It is mandatory for the Committee to be consulted on those issues stipulated in the Treaties and in all cases where the institutions deem it appropriate. It can also be consulted on an exploratory basis by one of the other institutions, or can itself take the initiative to issue opinions (around 15% of its opinions are own-initiative opinions). The Committee adopts on average 150 opinions a year on a wide range of subjects concerning European integration. It therefore plays an active role in the processes of shaping Community policies and preparing Community decisions.

The EESC also has two complementary tasks:

- involving civil society organisations more in the European venture, at both national and European level,
- boosting the role of civil society organisations in non-member countries or country groupings where the Committee is furthering structured dialogue with civil society organisations, and promoting the creation of consultative structures based on its experiences, not least in the countries applying for EU membership, the Mediterranean partner countries, African, Caribbean and Pacific countries, India, China, Latin America (Mercosur) and Brazil.

Thanks to the EESC, building Europe is therefore the task not only of the European Union and politicians, but also of members of the public belonging to organisations involved in the economic, social and civic life of their countries.

2. Who are the members of the EESC?

The Committee is made up of 344 members split into three groups: the “Employers” group, the “Employees” group and the “Various Interests” group. This third group brings together representatives from sectors of economic and social life that are not covered by the first two groups, i.e. bodies representing craftsmen, farmers, SMEs, the professions, consumers, environmentalists, social economy organisations (cooperatives, mutual associations), family associations and associations promoting the rights of disabled people and combating exclusion, the general interest (NGOs), etc.

The Committee’s membership is not static. It changes with each four-yearly renewal so as to reflect changes in civil society in each of the Member States as accurately as possible.

The last EESC renewal – which covers a four-year period – took place in October 2006.

Until September 2010, the Committee presidency will be held by Mario SEPI.

The Committee secretariat is headed by Martin WESTLAKE, Secretary-General.

3. How are EESC members appointed?

EESC members are appointed by the Council of Ministers of the European Union for four years on the basis of nominations by the Member States put together in the light of proposals from representative civil society organisations at national level. Their mandate is renewable.

Members generally continue to carry out their professional activities in their country of origin and only travel to Brussels when required to do so for their EESC work. They are not paid for their EESC activities, but they do receive travel and meetings allowances, the level of which is set by the Council.

4. How does the EESC operate?

The Committee comprises six specialist sections covering a very wide range of Community spheres of responsibility:

- Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion (ECO)
- The Single Market, Production and Consumption (INT)
- Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society (TEN)
- Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship (SOC)
- Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment (NAT)
- External Relations (REX)

In addition, following expiry of the ECSC Treaty in July 2002 and on a proposal by the European Commission, the Committee was asked to assume the responsibilities of the ECSC's Consultative Committee. To this end, the EESC set up a Consultative Commission on Industrial Change (CCMI) composed of EESC members and delegates representing the coal and steel sectors, but also other sectors affected by problems caused by the modernisation of the economy.

Committee opinions are prepared by "rapporteurs", usually assisted by a study group, the members of which are selected from the three different groups on the basis of their expertise in a particular subject area and the need to ensure a certain geographical balance. The size of these study groups varies from three to eighteen members, depending on the importance of the subject. Rapporteurs can also call on external experts to assist them.

Where particularly important issues are concerned, the Committee may hold public hearings in order to hear the views of a wide range of parties concerned.

After in-depth discussions in the study groups and then in the sections, opinions are adopted by a

simple majority at plenary sessions (nine per year). Once adopted, the opinions are forwarded to the Commission, the Council and the European Parliament and published in the European Union's Official Journal. They are available on the EESC's website (<http://www.eesc.europa.eu>) and can be downloaded.

5. What added value does the EESC bring?

The EESC's contribution to European integration is threefold:

- firstly, members bring together considerable expertise under one roof. These men and women work actively "in the field" in the economic and social life of their country. This pool of expertise is backed up by specific working methods, such as the use of study groups, experts and hearings;
- secondly, the Committee is a place for reaching solutions based on exchanging views and seeking a compromise or consensus, even where the initial stances are divergent or even diametrically opposite;
- finally, its members' professional origins mean that the Committee is a focal point for the questions and aspirations of civil society organisations regarding all aspects of European integration. It is also an essential information source for these same organisations.

6. In what way does the EESC provide a "bridge" between Europe and civil society?

The 344 EESC members belong to representative national organisations of organised civil society in the EU. They bring to bear the expertise for which they were appointed. The EESC enables representatives of economic, social, socio-occupational and civic organisations to be an integral part of the policy- and decision-making process at EU level.

Within the EU institutional system, the European Economic and Social Committee takes a distinctive approach to dialogue, cooperation and consultation. It is instrumental in ensuring that the EU's legislative and executive bodies reflect the experiences, expectations and proposals of representative civil society organisations.

In addition, the EESC has recently set up a liaison group with certain European civil society networks in order to build up a structured dialogue with them.

Through the role assigned to it by the Treaties, and thanks to its broad membership and the members' expertise, the EESC therefore constitutes the institutional mouthpiece and forum for representing and informing civil society organisations. It thus guarantees a pluralist model which reinforces the legitimacy of the decision-making process and meets the requirements of modern European governance. In doing so it acts as a unique bridge between Europe and its people.

7. What is the impact of the EESC's work?

The European Commission's reports on action taken on Committee opinions show that due regard is given to more than two-thirds of EESC recommendations. In addition, their influence often goes beyond the limited scope of the Commission proposal being examined in a Committee opinion.

The EESC's own-initiative opinions are of particular interest, as they often raise the awareness of decision-making bodies, and the Commission especially, about subjects which have not hitherto attracted much, if any, of their attention.

Exploratory opinions enable the various components of organised civil society represented within the EESC to state early on the expectations, concerns and needs of grassroots stakeholders as

convergence is sought among sometimes diametrically opposed views. They thus help improve the quality, credibility and – above all – grassroots acceptability of Community policies and the decisions implementing them, while at the same time enhancing the EESC's role as an institutional bridge-builder facilitating dialogue and cooperation with organised civil society.

One particularly interesting example of the impact of EESC work relates to the activities of the Single Market Observatory (SMO), which was set up by the EESC in 1994 in order regularly to assess the actual progress achieved on the ground in bringing about the single market and, if necessary, propose improvements. The activities of this Observatory cover four main areas:

- management of an interactive information network bringing together all the data communicated by Committee members, their organisations and single market “users”;
- presentation of investigative reports on topics chosen in close cooperation with the interest groups concerned;
- preparation of opinions on the Commission's annual or half-yearly reports on the Single Market Economic Reform; and
- identification of obstacles to achieving the single market, and identification and circulation of best practices and information designed to encourage partnerships.

In 2006 a Sustainable Development Observatory (SDO) was established with a mandate to carry out the following tasks:

- share best practice (through a data base);
- stimulate debate (through organising conferences and hearings, and publishing publications);
- analyse Sustainable Development issues from a civil society point of view (opinions, reports).

8. What are the EESC's current priority objectives?

As part of its consultative role, the Committee is working to set up a model of participatory democracy throughout Europe and the rest of the world as an adjunct to representative democracy. It has the same objectives as all the institutions that are working towards European integration, i.e. harmonious and balanced development, and the promotion of a European social model comprising social provisions that place human values at the centre of such development. The Committee's work programme is based on the European Commission's work programme, the priorities of each presidency of the Council of the European Union and the work programme presented by each Committee president upon election.

9. What are the links between the European ESC and the national economic and social councils and other similar bodies?

The EESC has developed close cooperation with economic and social councils and similar institutions both inside and outside the European Union. Within the EU – which now has 22 councils in 21 countries – this cooperation is based on regular meetings which focus on specific subjects, the exchange of information and the development of a joint website:

<http://eesc.europa.eu/ceslink/09-fr/presentation-ceslink-fr.html> or

<http://eesc.europa.eu/ceslink/08-en/presentation-ceslink-en.html>.

The EESC also participates actively in the work of the International Association of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions (AICESIS), the members of which span fifty countries.

10. What does the future hold for the European Economic and Social Committee?

Under the Treaties, the Committee is the institutional body for representing civil society organisations.

Thanks to its membership and unique role in the EU's institutional framework, the Committee will in future have special responsibility for making a reality of participatory democracy and for working towards the development of structured dialogue between organised civil society and Union institutions. The Committee's mission is to act as the EU's "facilitator" and forum within which this civil dialogue can take place.

The Committee also adds value to the EU institutions by playing a vital role in external relations – helping spread the European social model and doing much to establish and strengthen consultation mechanisms with civil society in those countries and regions with which the European Union maintains relations. In EU external relations policy therefore, the EESC plays a part in promoting democracy and working to secure better governance at an international level by taking on responsibility for civil society issues.



