



**VOICE COORDINATOR'S NOTE TO VOICE MEMBERS  
ON THE EC – NGOs RELATIONS**

Since the appointment of the new European Commission, in September 1999, and the creation in the European Council of the role of High Representative for the CFSP<sup>1</sup> (PESC), it appeared clear that the EU foreign relations were to undergo a major reorganisation. This was welcomed by most NGOs as a positive step towards a policy that could integrate the traditional EC aid, broadly based on civil society involvement, with a stronger role of the EU as a main international player. Moreover, the appointment of a single Commissioner in charge of both humanitarian and development aid<sup>2</sup>, was seen as an important condition to resolve two of the most acute problems of our sector: the problem of the “grey zone”, the gap between emergency relief and the construction of peace, stability and development; and the problem of prevention and preparedness, requiring an integration of different aid tools.

One assumption for such a positive forecast was that the EC would coherently preserve and value the peculiar asset represented by its partnership with NGOs: symbol of the European citizens' involvement in International relations and solid link between the EC and the European civil society; flexible and adaptable tool for more effective actions; partner fund-raisers and financiers; technically efficient and supported by motivational values; cost-effective and creative; beneficiary-oriented and not conditioned by profit-wise approaches; and finally, acknowledged by two independent evaluations carried out on behalf of the EC in 1998-99 as efficient and cost-effective. In a communication to the Council and the Parliament, in October last year, the Commission declared its firm intention to value and strengthen its relations with the NGO sector.

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<sup>1</sup> Common Foreign and Security Policy. The High Representative is Mr. Javier Solana

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Poul Nielson

Observers and concerned people now agree that such assumption was wrong. The actual picture, at the end of year 2000 is like follows:

- the EC-NGOs partnership is no longer considered by the Commission as a valuable asset for the EU, as it does not contribute to a political use of the aid tool;
- NGOs manage important financial resources (estimated 1,000 Meuro) that might otherwise be used to achieve political goals of relevance to the CFSP;
- in the current regulatory framework the EC bureaucracy lacks the capacity to manage the relevant number of projects and necessary autonomy of NGOs, and is not willing to seek for alternative solutions;
- while the conditions are being created for other actors to become the main executors of EU aid, there is still a need for NGOs for the implementation of actions. Therefore, they will be increasingly used as “subcontractors” or conditioned by pre-determined prioritisation and tight guidelines;
- NGOs joint representations (the Liaison Committee and the networks), formerly useful tools to make the partnership work, are now an obstacle to achieving the new policies and have therefore to be denied any role;
- Dialogue at policy level seems no longer needed and is at stake;
- All projects to strengthen the partnership have been practically dropped.

The assumption that a single Commissioner would easily resolve many problems related to lack of coordination between different EC services (improve the situation of the grey zone and strengthen prevention and preparedness) also proved to be wrong. While decisions to make ECHO withdraw from many countries were made early this year, so far nothing has happened to improve entry capacity for other forms of aid; the case of reconstruction in Central America being an outstanding example, while all rehabilitation budget lines have been closed.

No preventative strategy has been implemented or presented either, while existing preparedness facilities are weakened, as demonstrated by the case of Ethiopia famine in the last spring. It seems that little concern exists about improving the effectiveness of aid, while priority is given to attaching political strings of all type to aid strategies. In the background, the planned re-organisation of the EC aid in a single autonomous agency will have important implications.

Despite the claim for transparency, no official documents have reported clearly about the decisions made to determine such changes and all EU papers still insist on the need for NGOs. The European Parliament, for instance, strongly recommends in its resolutions to strengthen the NGOs role and applaud to this aspect of the past EC policy. But the statements of Commissioner Nielson, in his recent meeting with humanitarian NGOs in Brussels, leave little space to interpretation. The Commissioner said that NGOs have been too close to the Commission in the past, and taking a distance is needed for the sake of their independence. Nonetheless, the EC will increasingly use them as “sub-contractors”, leaving much less space to their autonomy. No formalisation of their role will be considered anyway. Mr. Nielson also added that an increasing percentage of the EC aid will be funded through International Organisations, while NGOs financing will decline. It is not really clear which acts or documents of European Institutions have set such policy. No official debates related to such issues have been reported. No discussion on these themes has occurred with concerned actors. Still, the multiplication of practices and decisions on this line is astonishing.

As far as humanitarian aid is concerned, ECHO remains so far a solid interlocutor, who is still investing on partnership with NGOs and opening new spaces for dialogue and consultation. But this approach is isolated within the EC and the “unfriendly” environment will impose some changes also in ECHO procedures: as an example, its operations will increasingly use mechanisms similar to calls for proposals in future. The long-term future of ECHO as a separate administrative unit is also under threat.

We are aware that strong argument still exist for criticising NGOs on many aspects, but the current policies do not seem to pursue improvement and strengthening, but weakening NGOs and their representations: we have not been invited to discuss on how to solve problems but asked to keep off and not interfere, while we are being cut off the political and technical debate. Also in this sense, Mr. Nielson’s statements, in repeated occasions, have been clear: it is the Commission who makes all the decisions and no consultation with NGOs is envisaged in the mechanism.

In the meanwhile re-design of geographical priorities has been completed, being now dramatically unbalanced in favour of the Balkans; the Rapid Reaction Facility is being set up, providing Member States with a non-humanitarian civilian tool for

intervention in crisis areas; and the secret has been imposed on the European Council's documents on international crises, through a mid-summer discreet decision.

For NGOs, the continued financial support for the NGOs Liaison Committee is threatened, while networks and families are refused any acknowledgment; the call-for-proposal system has become a standard even for the co-financing budget line (B7-6000); the DG Development - a traditional interlocutor for civil society - will probably close down after transferring almost all its prerogatives to the autonomous aid agency, which has no mandate about civil society. On the procedural side, as regulation becomes tighter and controls more obsessive for NGOs, a new regulation will allow more flexibility and less accountability in funding for International Organisations; higher co-financing is required from NGOs and costs eligibility is being reduced, while full financing is provided to profit entities, or organisations working with higher overhead costs.

It is difficult to identify any consistency in such decisions, beyond a general preference for "executors" rather than "interlocutors".

This political framework is the result of several converging factors affecting the overall EU policy. It has been developed during the last year and, for long time we have been careful observers of such evolution. In the traditional spirit of partnership and cooperation with the EC, we have allowed time to our new interlocutors for understanding and offered consultation and dialogue, the latter being refused firmly and repeatedly.

In the meanwhile the European Parliament's resolutions and intervention on this matter are completely disregarded.

In such situation, it is dramatically important to disclose the process and bring the debate back to the civil society, whose role in international aid is a social asset for Europe, produce of decades of civil commitment and expression of the founding principles of the European Union. There is a serious risk to waste such asset because of shortsighted policies, and lack of transparency and openness.

Citizens have to be informed of the implications of such policies in terms of efficiency, benefit for recipients, cost-effectiveness, wise resource management, good

governance, investment in expertise and employment. The ethic and political aspects of the problem also need to be analysed at appropriate level. All concerned actors have to be activated to contribute to debate: at social, political, institutional and academic level.

In 2001, the European humanitarian community will close a decade of European humanitarian aid. It is the moment for serious evaluations, true commitments and celebrations. A campaign at continental level might be considered. It could offer the opportunity to inform European citizens that there is something they can be proud of, and safeguard.