

DIALOGUE PLATFORM ON ETHICAL AND SOLIDARITY-BASED INITIATIVES

Description of the project

Contents

- 1- Introduction**
 - Why a project for a pan-European platform?
 - The concept
- 2- General description of the project**
- 3- Description of project activities**
 - Meetings and seminars
 - Studies, research and setting up an observatory function
 - The experimentation fund
 - Proposals and common actions
 - The website
- 4- Partnership**
 - Public institutions of the Council of Europe
 - Networks and the internetwork
 - The NGO Committee
 - Researchers and universities
 - The media
 - Role of the Council of Europe secretariat (Social Cohesion Development Division)

1- INTRODUCTION

Why a project for a pan-European platform for dialogue on the solidarity-based economy?

After above all emphasising access to social rights for the inclusion of all, the Directorate General for Social Cohesion of the Council of Europe (which has 46 member states) now considers social responsibility a top priority, particularly socially responsible involvement in the economy that helps to strengthen the link between economic, social and environmental dimensions at a time when that link is tending to dissolve in the context of globalisation. This new policy emphasis, which is made explicit in the revised Strategy for Social Cohesion approved by the Committee of Ministers on 31 March 2004, takes as its starting-point the fact that society is evolving towards a greater sharing of responsibilities between the authorities and civil society that is vital for ensuring the links of inclusion and social responsibility. While in the post-war years the talk was of the welfare state, the issue today is the welfare society, in other words, broader collective responsibility for welfare and inclusion. There is an ever-growing need for such joint responsibility based on the involvement of citizens and civil society in general in order to solve crucial problems as varied, for example, as wholesome food and health, waste treatment and the environment, integration policies for disadvantaged groups, policies to support developing regions and countries, the development of a fourth economic sector in the form of caring for one another¹, etc.

Taking as its starting-point the great diversity of forms of socially responsible economic initiatives, particularly through consumption and saving, organised in various often already well-structured networks, the Council of Europe wishes to promote dialogue between the authorities and these networks in order to pave the way for improved linkage between social and environmental policies and socially responsible action. This dialogue, already well under way in some European cities, regions and countries, does not yet exist at European level where it could play a fundamental role, particularly in enabling exchanges of practices and methods to take place between the 46 member states and setting common benchmarks for the new policies to be put in place, helping to define a “European model” with a new approach. For this reason, the Council of Europe’s Social Cohesion Development Division has been working since 2003 to put in place a “platform for political dialogue and the promotion of socially responsible economic initiatives”. Following a number of consultative meetings, specific studies and seminars, the Division organised a forum to launch the idea on 4 and 5 November in cooperation with a working group composed of representatives of the public sector and socially responsible economic networks. The Forum had a significant impact, bringing together more than 400 participants.

¹ See Alain Lipietz’s paper given at the Council of Europe’s Forum 2004, “Socially responsible consumption and finance systems: public authorities’ and citizens’ commitment for social cohesion”.

The concept

The European platform for political dialogue and the promotion of socially responsible economic initiatives aims to open a dialogue between:

- the main representatives of Council of Europe institutions, in particular the European Committee for Social Cohesion (CDCS), the Parliamentary Assembly (representing the parliaments of the various member states), the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe (CLRAE) (representing local and regional elected representatives), as well as representatives of specialised government departments when specific themes of concern to them are being addressed;
- representatives of socially responsible economic networks, including socially responsible finance, fair trade and responsible consumption (in future including responsible tourism networks);
- other players it will be essential to include in this dialogue, particularly the media and researchers interested in the theme of socially responsible involvement in the economy and company and union representatives.

The objective of this dialogue is to facilitate linkage between public actions and those of citizens in such a way as to improve the joint capacity to respond to societal needs (social, environmental, welfare) and make the economy a vehicle of welfare.

2- GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

The platform is not a formal body but a set of activities conceived and implemented around this idea of dialogue and coordinated by a Pilot Group, backed by the Secretariat of the Council of Europe, in particular the Social Cohesion Development Division.

Some of these activities are carried out in the framework of the platform itself; others are carried out by partners of the platform in direct cooperation with it. There is a distinction between:

- activities carried out by Council of Europe bodies (Committees of the Parliamentary Assembly and Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe);
- those carried out by networks of the future internetwork.

a) Activities specific to the proposed platform

These include:

- the functioning of the Pilot Group;
- consultative panels on specific themes;
- studies made for these themes, the results of which will be systematised by an observatory function;
- meetings and seminars to publicise the new approaches;
- conducting specific common actions;

- dissemination through publications and setting up a page on the social cohesion website.

b) Back-up activities by Council of Europe authorities

Political motions supporting socially responsible involvement in the economy could be drafted by certain Parliamentary Assembly committees, in particular the Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs, with respect to socially responsible consumption, and the Economic Affairs and Social Affairs Committees for ethical, socially responsible finance.

This work could take the form of hearings on themes chosen by each of the committees concerned and might result in recommendations put before the Parliamentary Assembly.

A similar process could be put in place in the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe in view of the importance of citizens' involvement and the dialogue between the authorities and socially responsible initiatives at local level.

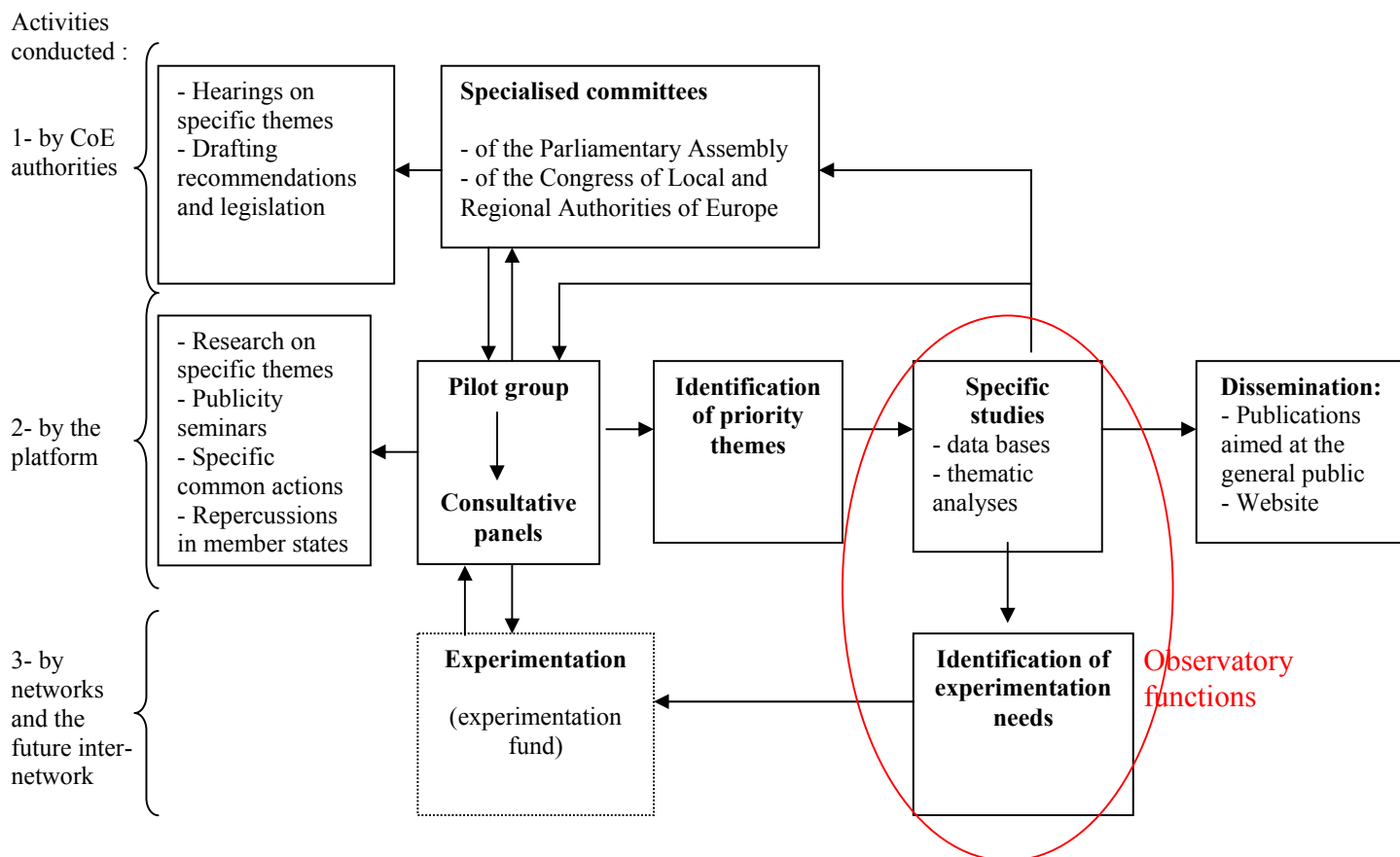
c) Activities by European and international ethical, socially responsible consumption and finance networks

The networks will develop certain specific activities corresponding to their fields of interest. For example, depending on available resources, an experimentation fund could play a particularly important role in relation to the platform.

d) Conclusion: linkage between platform activities

Though involving different players, the platform's various activities will be complementary with strong mutual synergies. The linkage between them is represented in the following diagram:

Diagram of platform activities



3- DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT ACTIVITIES

3.1- Platform activities

a) The Pilot Group

The Pilot Group will be composed of:

- a representative of the CDCS
- a member of the Parliamentary Assembly
- a member of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe
- three representatives of the networks
- representatives of the Council of Europe staff (Social Cohesion Development Division).

The Pilot Group will meet once or twice a year. Its role will be:

- general coordination and monitoring of the project;
- identification of the key aspects to be dealt with by specific studies;
- defining common actions;
- directing dissemination activities (publications, publicity seminars, etc).

The specific themes already indicated by the working group that organised the Forum include:

- Analysis of the value added of dialogue between public authorities and ethical, socially responsible consumption and finance networks; this theme, which is particularly important for the public-private dialogue the platform is seeking to promote, will be developed in 2005;
- Identification of the sectors in which experimentation and innovation are needed (research theme also to be covered in 2005);
- Access to local public markets by socially responsible economic bodies;
- Forms of taxation favourable to socially responsible, ethical finance;
- Food and public health;
- Training executives and other staff working in the sector.

b) Consultative panels

A consultative panel will be formed for each priority theme, composed of the Pilot Group and those actively involved: representatives of specialised committees of Council of Europe institutions, relevant national government departments, specialised networks, experts.

A consultative panel will take the form of a two-day meeting with the objective of making concrete proposals that can be taken up either by member countries or the committees of Council of Europe institutions.

The consultative panels will play an essential role by physically bringing together the various partners involved in the platform and/or their representatives so that they can discuss issues directly and interactively and go on to identify prospects and make political recommendations and common decisions.

c) Specific studies and setting up an observatory function

The specific studies will be one of the platform's essential activities. Their role will be:

- to fuel the debate on the themes to be covered so that it takes place in the light of existing concepts and experiences and with full knowledge of the facts;
- to familiarise the authorities, parliamentarians, networks and other players with experiments conducted in Europe and thus develop exchanges;
- to provide substance for all the forms of dissemination and awareness-raising aimed at the general public;
- to identify experimentation needs.

(see diagram below)

Studies were initiated as soon as preparation of the project began (early 2003). The project now has:

- an initial series of basic studies in the field of socially responsible economic initiatives (socially responsible finance, fair trade, responsible consumption): concepts and approaches; the main European and national legislation in some 30 member states; a description of the main existing rating systems and quality labels;
- a database of legislation and measures on socially responsible economic initiatives in 2/3 of the member states, as well as analytical studies of that legislation enabling both needs and what has already been achieved to be identified;
- a database of experiences of dialogue between authorities and socially responsible economic initiatives (still in the preliminary stages).

These various analyses constitute an initial fund of knowledge on the basis of which:

- proposals have been put forward and meetings and seminars held, including the Namur seminar in December 2003;
- some dissemination work has been done, notably with the publication, in both English and French, of No. 12 in the series *Trends in social cohesion* entitled *Ethical solidarity-based citizen involvement in the economy: a prerequisite for social cohesion*.

This work should be continued, systematised and extended according to the themes identified as priorities. Particularly important among the studies to be conducted in 2005 are:

- further work on the two databases under construction: legislation/measures in the various countries (in particular in order to extend it to support policies in general) and the database of experiences of dialogue in order to draw the value added from it;
- research to assess the value added of public-private dialogue, experimentation needs and possibly initial analyses of the social utility of private actions;
- production of a guide on possible forms of public support for socially responsible involvement in the economy.

These studies will be carried out by lawyers, specialists in taxation, rating systems and the functioning of public markets, etc.

A link also has to be made with the conceptual and methodological frameworks developed elsewhere, including impact measurement in terms of social cohesion and sustainable development such as, for example the methodological guide for the development of social cohesion indicators.

All these activities amount to an observation and analysis function to guide the platform's work and its dissemination. The term "observatory" will therefore be used to refer to them. This does not mean that there will be an observatory in the institutional sense with specific

resources, but in the sense of a function which should to a great extent be performed in partnership (see below). This is why the term “observatory function”, rather than simply “observatory”, will be used.

d) Meetings and seminars to publicise the new approaches

Following the seminar held in Namur on 4 and 5 December 2003 with the support of the Walloon Region, which was an initial experiment in dialogue between the authorities and socially responsible economic initiatives, the Forum held on 4 and 5 November 2004 in the Chamber of the Council of Europe’s Parliamentary Assembly allowed particularly fruitful debate. More than 400 people from 39 countries attended, including representatives of 26 governments and of various networks for socially responsible involvement in the economy at European level. It provided an opportunity to discuss the major questions now arising about dialogue between authorities and citizens and ideas and proposals for linking public policies with socially responsible action. The issues presented and discussed included new concepts and various existing experiences of dialogue between the authorities and socially responsible initiatives, as well as more immediate projects, such as the establishment of an experimentation fund and the introduction, in the framework of the 2005 Year of Citizenship through Education, launched by the Council of Europe, of the idea of raising citizens’ awareness of socially responsible involvement in the economy.

Following on from the Forum, other seminars could be held, in particular with the backing of those governments willing to provide it. Germany and Norway have shown some interest in this. In order to disseminate these concepts in the various countries of Europe, representatives of those countries where they are new will be involved in these meetings and seminars so that they can gradually make them their own.

e) Specific common actions

The platform activities may result in common actions decided upon jointly by the players such as, for example, the establishment of a “life” seal of approval (with a rating system that takes social cohesion objectives into account).

f) Dissemination among the general public: publications and website

The studies and activities conducted in the framework of the observatory function will be published, as was the work done in 2003 in issue No. 12 of the Social Cohesion Division’s *Trends in social cohesion*.

Future publications could appear in the same series or in another form. Efforts will be made to develop forms of partnership involving the media as much as possible (see below).

The website will be the platform’s central means of communication. It will be part of the Council of Europe website and will in particular present:

- the platform’s basic texts (Forum 2004 Declaration, etc);

- the platform's various partners, with links to all of them;
- all the platform activities and their findings;
- all the data available in the observatory function, enabling on-line searches and downloading of texts and information;
- news of particular interest to platform activities and the themes developed;
- possibly, a chat room run by those responsible for the internetwork.

3.2- Activities developed

3.2.1 Activities developed by Council of Europe institutions

(see above)

3.2.2 Activities developed by socially responsible economic networks

a) Experimentation fund

Experimentation will play an essential role in enabling platform activities to be reflected in practical advances in the promotion and development of socially responsible involvement and an economy more productive of social cohesion. On the basis of existing experiences, the analyses will allow the identification of so far unexplored possibilities for innovation that it is important to promote in terms of social cohesion, dialogue, sustainable development and territorial integration, such as, for example:

- forming links between urban consumers and rural neighbourhood producers;
- job creation by grouping consumers;
- describing working conditions on the product (on product packaging).

The experimentation fund would not directly finance projects, but rather supplementary actions on existing projects which may be able to introduce an innovation considered particularly important, in return for a little financial support.

4- PARTNERSHIP

As already indicated, the platform for political dialogue and the promotion of socially responsible economic initiatives is not a formal body or an institution but rather a set of activities carried out in partnership, in particular between the authorities and socially responsible networks, researchers and the media. Partnership is thus the basic principle and should be present in all the activities, not only in meetings (forums and seminars). In order for the project to be clearly understood, it is therefore essential to specify the involvement expected of each partner.

a) Public institutions of the Council of Europe

Partnership with the public institutions of the Council of Europe (Parliamentary Assembly, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe (CLRAE), the European Committee for Social Cohesion (CDCS)) will be essential for fully bringing about the desired dialogue.

The fact that each of these bodies represents at European level the different types of elected democratic institutions in all the 46 member states of the Council of Europe (the Parliamentary Assembly representing national parliaments, the CLRAE municipalities and regional authorities, the CDCS governments) will give full legitimacy to the dialogue, in particular through the proposals and recommendations developed by the various committees and put to the vote, thus becoming official Council of Europe recommendations.

b) Networks and the formation of the internetwork

The networks will be the other essential part of the dialogue. Up to now they have been represented in the working group through the existing European networks for each of the sectors concerned: socially responsible finance, fair trade, socially responsible consumption, etc. These various networks are now planning to establish an internetwork, which will have a number of advantages:

- it will enable the networks to coordinate their positions and speak with one voice (a single interlocutor that can then pass on its positions);
- it will facilitate the work of the Council of Europe, which will no longer have to invite the networks separately for each activity, leaving that task to the internetwork;
- establishing the head office of the internetwork in Strasbourg will allow ongoing contact and facilitate coordination of work.

In addition to these practical advantages, the establishment of an internetwork will provide an intermediary for conducting a number of activities which cannot be conducted by the Council of Europe itself. These include:

- management and allocation of the experimentation fund. The fund could in principle be managed by the European Federation of Ethical and Alternative Banks in partnership with representatives of other networks and Council of Europe staff.
- The internetwork will also play an essential role in coordinating certain activities and could also be involved in the observatory function.

Moreover, the formation of the internetwork will help to structure the socially responsible economic initiatives, which are fairly well organised at sectoral level but still have very few transversal structures. The formation of an internetwork at European level will encourage the formation of internetworks at other territorial levels, such as already exist in some countries and regions. The Council of Europe could help to get such structuring off the ground for the first three years.

c) The Council of Europe NGO Committee

NGOs have been represented in the Council of Europe for a number of years by the NGO Committee, which brings together a number of European NGOs. Their participation in the platform would enable the actions advocated to be linked with those carried out by the NGOs.

d) Researchers and universities

A growing number of researchers and university courses are concerned with socially responsible involvement in the economy. Some are even organised in networks specifically devoted to these questions, as is the EMES network.

Two elements characterise this situation. Firstly, the existing networks, such as the EMES, cover only some of the researchers and universities working on these themes and therefore do not yet make it possible fully to coordinate research activities at European level. Secondly, the dialogue between researchers and practitioners on the ground (socially responsible involvement) is still limited, so research needs do not always reflect the needs of the players. There are, however, some initiatives aiming to take research needs more into account, such as the Third Sector Conference to be organised by the EMES network in Paris in April 2005.

The result is a concentration of research on certain aspects of socially responsible involvement, while other, often more practical, aspects, essential for dialogue in particular, that need to be developed at European level, are not yet covered.

Efforts will therefore be made, through partnership with researchers and university courses concerned with these issues, to involve them in the work needed to develop political dialogue.

e) The media

Partnership with the media is essential.

The media have traditionally seen their role more in terms of information on what is happening (current affairs, news, analysis of social issues, etc) than on the possibilities for practical action by citizens. The Council of Europe has initiated a dialogue to make some media more sensitive to the issues of social responsibility, opening up prospects for partnership, in particular in order to disseminate examples of good practices identified by the observatory function (see the programme for 2005 below). At a practical level, a joint publication by the Council of Europe and the media in various countries (including *Alternatives Economiques* in France) is planned to disseminate good practices of dialogue between the authorities and socially responsible initiatives.

f) Other potential partners

As the platform develops, other potential partners will have to be considered: businesses, workers' representatives (unions), etc.

g) Role of the Council of Europe secretariat

This brief look at the role of the various platform partners brings out the wealth of possible synergies between them.

The role of the Council of Europe secretariat will therefore be to run the platform in such a way that partnership and dialogue are conducted as well as possible, bringing out the potential of all involved. Roles within the secretariat might also be clarified, including:

- The secretariats of the various Parliamentary Assembly and CLRAE committees will have the role of spurring these bodies on to conduct related activities, to draft recommendations, etc.
- The Social Cohesion Development Division will carry out the activities planned according to available resources. In order to do this, it will rely on its permanent team, as well as temporary staff and experts. After the three-year period beginning in 2005, leadership of the public-private dialogue and other definition and dissemination activities will revert to the internetwork.