

29th INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF CIRIEC
Public, social and cooperative economy meeting the general interest

SPEECH

by

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Session on 'Civil Society and Social Mobilisation'

Ladies and gentlemen:

- It is with great pleasure that I am here with you today at this 29th International Congress of CIRIEC, which is dedicated to the subject of 'general interest';
 - Over the last three days, the numerous workshops with high-level speakers have sought to explore how public, social and cooperative economies can 'serve' this general interest and how they can adapt to changing conditions;
 - I hope that as President of the Various Interests Group of the European Economic and Social Committee, I will be able to contribute to the debate, not only with regard to the role of *civil society* in this process, but also on the specific contribution of the *social economy* to the general interest;
 - For the EESC, that we fondly refer to as 'The House of European Civil Society', was established as early as 1957, as a consultative organ of the European institutions. Its members represent Employers, Employee and 'Various Interests';
 - Within the Various Interests Group a wide array of European civil society organisations are represented, including the social economy, whose contribution to driving a sustainable and inclusive growth is increasingly being recognised at the European level;
 - Hence, my presentation today will firstly examine the overall contribution of civil society to the 'general interest', notably in the current socio-economic and political crisis that Europe is undergoing;
 - In the second part of my presentation, I will address the specific role of the social economy as a vehicle for employment creation, sustainable growth and for a fairer income and wealth distribution.
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- Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to begin this part of my presentation, by quoting Jean Monnet, who many years ago said that: "*Nothing can be done without citizens but nothing can last without institutions*";
 - Particularly in this period of severe crisis in Europe, it is imperative that we remember the importance of the contribution of civil society and participatory democracy to the 'general interest';
 - It is crucial that we find effective and reliable forms of dialogue for representative elected and civil actors;
 - For as a result of the economic, social and political crises in Europe, the European Union is in *dire need* of making itself more visible, tangible, relevant and accessible to the lives of its citizens, for the 'general interest';
 - We are in *dire need* of enhancing the sense of 'European identity' among our citizens through increased opportunities for participatory democracy and accountability at the European level;

- For over the past three years, the harsh austerity programmes and the repeated recourse to intergovernmental negotiations have resulted in a heightened sense of disavowal and disassociation of citizens vis-à-vis their local, national and European leaders;
- Indeed, the EU Institutions, which were originally established to be the bastions of democracy, find themselves under attack by citizens in several European countries;
- We must also remember that at the national level we have witnessed the collapse of numerous European governments and the instauration of two technocratic ones;
- The result has been the emergence of stereotyping and prejudices reminiscent of a Europe of many decades ago;
- Within this context, it is crucial that we recognise and act upon the opportunities of the Lisbon Treaty's Articles 10, 11 and 12 to send a *political message of confidence* in active citizenship and representative democracy;
- We should seize upon the opportunity to develop a European identity among citizens so that they recognise that investing in Europe is in their personal and national interest;
- In a nutshell, it is in the 'general interest' to have 'more Europe', which means more trust between Member States, between Member States and Institutions, between citizens, governments and the EU, and between different national societies;
- We need to create a perception of 'community of destiny' among all of the above, something which is currently seriously lacking, both between Member States and even within the governments of single Member States;
- So how should we proceed?
- On other occasions I have already proposed a simple idea, but one which I think could help to strengthen participatory democracy;
- My proposal is for us to jointly invest in the 2013 European Year of Citizens: for the Etats généraux of parliaments to take place (national parliaments from our Member States together with the European Parliament), which would come up with 5 key recommendations for renewal in Europe;
- In parallel, the European Economic and Social Committee could organise a similar event for civil society and working together we could forge the bridge between our citizens, the electorate and the elected;
- So we could jointly work towards a structured debate on our future, restoring both representative and participatory democracy, stimulating governments and European institutions to move Europe forward, which includes preparing the 2014 elections to the European Parliament.
- I would now like to move on to the second part of my presentation, which will address the specific role of the social economy, whose *raison d'être* is to contribute to the 'general interest' of society;
- Perhaps if I can start by mentioning that the Various Interests Group has established a specific sub-group on the sector, the 'Social Economy Category'. Its members represent cooperatives, mutuels, associations, foundations and social NGOs, who meet regularly and are key players in promoting and implementing social entrepreneurship;

- If I can also add that we have commissioned a study from CIRIEC on 'The Social Economy in the European Union' and that we will organise a conference on Social Entrepreneurship, in Brussels on 3 October;
- With the above in mind, there are some very clear messages that I would like to put forward this afternoon;
- The first is that the social economy is a sector which is able to combine profitability with social inclusion and democratic systems of governance, working alongside the public and private sectors in matching services to needs;
- Hence, social economy enterprises play an increasingly important role in the competitiveness and efficiency of the European economy;
- Particularly in the current period of economic and social crises, the social economy can bring innovative solutions for social cohesion and inclusion, job creation, growth and the promotion of active citizenship;
- For in the cooperatives sector alone in Europe today, there are some 160,000 cooperative enterprises owned by 123 million members and providing employment to 5.4 million individuals;
- Not only is the cooperative sector resilient to the crisis, but in many European countries the sector is actually growing. For example, in the UK, the number of cooperatives is steadily increasing with a 9% increase in 2010;
- Moreover, in 2009 the British cooperative sector's turnover grew by 10% whilst the UK economy *contracted* by 4.9%;
- Secondly, the social economy as a whole, is a sector which de facto leads to employment, production and sustainable economic growth at the *local and regional level*;
- And it is precisely the positive impact of social enterprises, cooperatives, mutuals, associations and foundations on local communities, on the environment and on society which is the sector's strength. For they can build cohesion and growth both at the local and European level, thus contributing to the implementation of the Europe 2020 Strategy and the Single Market;
- However, unless a level-playing field for these actors is established, with legal, administrative and financial instruments conducive to the development of the sector, their potential will not be unleashed;
- And there is a great deal of potential to unleash! For this is a sector which has weathered the economic crisis much better than others and is increasingly gaining recognition at the European level;
- Indeed, in the last few years, the sector has also been subject to important improvements in terms of political and legal recognition, both at the EU level (Single Market Act, Social Business Initiative, European Foundation Statute, Social Entrepreneurship Funds, etc.) and at the national level (e.g. the recent Spanish Law on the Social Economy);
- Nonetheless, much still needs to be done in increasing understanding, in raising awareness and in building public trust in the sector;

- In my opinion, it is necessary to reinforce the profile of the social economy, highlighting its economic and social potential as a *solution* to the current economic and social crises and as an instrument for positive change.

- Ladies and gentlemen, Europe is currently on crossroads for its future, its identity and even its very survival;
- Serving the 'general interest' could not be more important and more urgent for Europe today;
- And for this reason in my speech this afternoon I chose to address both the wider contribution of civil society to participatory democracy and the narrower angle of the role of the social economy vis à vis the 'general interest';
- For in my view they are all interconnected, all mutually reinforcing and all urgent;
- As Jean Monnet stated many decades ago: "People only accept change when they are faced with necessity, and only recognise necessity when a crisis is upon them";
- Lets use Europe's crisis to commit to a diversity of enterprise, to commit to the real economy and to what matters most to our citizens;
- Lets strive for both *growth* and *equity* and lets move Europe forward, taking our citizens with us;
- Thank you for your attention.