

Proposal for an introductory note to the workshop WS 24 on Civil Society Organisations/NGOs (Brussels, 4th and 5th october)

A meeting between the actors involved in the action always follows various objectives: to know each other, to exchange views and to build a co-operation. A meeting between European and Chinese NGOs must follow this course, especially because the mutual knowledge that we have on our organizations, our associations, and the legal, political, social or cultural context in which we work is basic and most often largely influenced by a systematic misinformation.

Our newspapers praise the Chinese model's performances; other rumours reach us and alarm us on the economical, social and environmental consequences of this model. We scarcely know anything about the Chinese realities in which NGOs traditionally act, whether it deals with the features of economic development in the regions around or with the social conditions of exclusion or insertion of marginalized groups, with the respect of the Human Rights, or with the management of the environment and the common heritage.

We hardly know anything about the treatment towards the rural populations, especially towards farmers which constitute the majority of the population. We do not know the kind of relations that exist between the NGOs and the public or political authorities, or the non-governmental space allowed to the NGOs and more broadly to the associative world. Moreover, we do not meet Chinese NGOs working in Asian or African countries, and we do not know if Chinese NGOs are considering the idea of participating in international actions, by local interventions as well as in the framework of international campaigns, interventions on the governments and on international organizations involved in international negotiations.

Can we, during the first step of our meeting, learn more about the realities of Chinese NGOs, their work and the kind of relations they establish with their private and public partners?

For us, an NGO is based on freedom of association, a constitutional right which is a pillar of our conception of democracy. The use of this right is at the discretion of the citizens who have no need for an authorization to create an association. Only the need to make financial transactions or to have a juridical existence requires the creation of a body corporate and to register to a competent public authority.

The official authorities can refuse the creation of the association only if the declared objective is not in accordance with the law (promotion of sectarian or terrorist activities...). This means that in the international solidarity field, the citizens' initiative and the creation of NGOs are encouraged. Freedom of association, as it has been established in western Europe at the beginning of the XXe century, is the pillar of what we call participatory democracy, which extends representative democracy, and creates a non-governmental space for initiatives within which citizens can team up and take actions.

Can we agree on notions such as “participatory democracy”, “space of non-governmental initiatives”?

Today, the family of European NGOs is organized at the national and European level. At the national level, the NGOs have created national platforms which enable to pool services, to create resource centre, but also to interact as a body with public and political authorities in order to represent national NGOs movement at an international scale. At the European level, the national platforms and wide NGOs networks have created some confederations, more or less formal, gathering a large part of the European organizations around federative topics such as social issues (Social Platform), environment (Green 10), Human Rights (Human Right and Democracy network), international solidarity (Concord), gender equality (the European Women’s lobby), culture (European Forum for the Arts and Heritage), or health (European Public Health Alliance). Representatives of these wide confederations meet regularly within the Civil Society Contact Group.

We believe important the constitution of a European NGOs movement, which could participate to the European Union’s life and interact with the Commission. This organized movement must also establish partnerships with NGOs coalitions of other regions in the world. These interregional relations are developing; a seminar will take place on the 12th and 13th of September 2007 between Concord and la Mesa de Articulacion, network of national NGOs platforms of Latin American countries.

Do Chinese NGOs believe it possible to get organized at a national level and to exchange with other national platforms?

NGOs are best defined by the struggles they lead against the manifestations of under-development, the ravaging effects of armed conflicts or natural disaster, against Human Rights denial or against an irresponsible management of the environment. NGOs from the “North” act with partners from the “South” by local interventions. They also try to mobilize citizens and public opinions of our countries to convince them that, on the long run, there is no alternative to international solidarity. Finally, European NGOs feed international public debate and interfere in their governments and international organizations involved in the negotiation process where the rules of international games are decided.

Indeed, it would be most irresponsible to fight local issues without trying to step in their international causes. Those various categories of actions are lead in partnership between NGOs and concerned organizations of actors from the “South”. Our seminar can focus on reciprocal knowledge and exchange. Lastly, we could also discuss the conceivable co-operation in case common prospects should appear, whether by exchanging or taking common actions in China, in Europe, countries from the “South”, or at the occasion of international meetings.

Can we learn from each other in terms of making civil dialogue working? (abstracts from “Civil Dialogue – Making it work better”, Civil Society Contact Group, 2006. Full study available at: <http://www.act4europe.org/civildialogue>)

« **Strengthening of alternative forms of participation in the public sphere** – Partly in order to address the obstacles that women and minorities face in representative democracies and to ensure a proper responsiveness of governments, alternative forms

of citizens' participation in public life have increased in the last half-century. They were strongly influenced by the historical experience of the United States, marked by the emergence of the civil rights movements in the 60s, when thousands of citizens realized their own potential to affect their environment, rose up to protest against issues such as racial segregation, to advocate for women's rights, sexual minority rights and the protection of the environment or to gain more power for university students. The aim of these movements was historically to challenge or complete traditional forms of representation through non-institutionalised participation in public life. Examples of citizens' direct participation in the public sphere have now multiplied throughout the world, from the local to the global level. Experiences such as the Neighbourhood Governance Councils of the city of Chicago, the participatory budget of the city of Porto Alegre, the Panchayat reforms in West Bengal and Kerala, the street protests of Genoa, or Hong Kong, and the vast number of internet forums during the French referendum on the Constitutional Treaty underline the many ways for citizens to get involved in the public sphere, be it in direct or indirect interaction with public institutions. Despite their diversity, all these processes can be designed as practices of participatory democracy."

« **State, non-state actors and civil society** – The concept of civil society has attracted considerable attention from lawyers, political scientists and sociologists in Europe. Civil society is generally said to include a wide sphere of non-state actors, distinct from governments, which engage in activities of public consequence. These include actors such as non-governmental organisations, charities, parties, social movements, interest groups, families, churches, cooperatives. Trade Unions are most of the time depicted as part of civil society, although they are involved in specific participation processes (social dialogue). This common definition is mostly based on a 'by default' approach, building upon two common characteristics of these groups (their non-profit and non-governmental nature) and fails to tackle their diversity, as well as the role of the third sector and social economy, the activity of which can be defined as profit making, but not capitalistic. One of the key and most discussed issues remains the inclusion of economic actors, which some scholars define as being part of civil society, along with other interest groups. European institutions have generally opted for this wider definition.

The absence of a single approach to civil society can raise considerable problems when it comes to defining how public and private interest should be taken into account by public authorities. NGOs themselves are not exempt from this controversy, but generally tend to define civil society as neither related to the state nor to the market. »

« **The two 'traditional' modalities of NGOs' participation in public life: two sides of the same coin?** When defining the importance of NGOs' participation in public life, it is crucial to stress not only the diverse nature of the issues they deal with, but also the modalities of their participation in public life, in other words, how they contribute to participatory democracy. The modalities of NGOs' work fall within two broad directions:

- **Service provision** has historically been a key activity of the NGO sector and continues to be, in some specific fields such as the fight against social exclusion, the most visible part of the iceberg. Service providers range from small, local community groups to transnational organisations and are active in

an extremely wide scope of fields, which cannot be fully listed here. As millions of citizens throughout Europe are involved in networks of voluntary associations in one way or another on issues of their concern, it is important to note that volunteers make a key contribution to service provision, through such diverse activities as providing social services, giving advice to refugees, protecting the local habitat, running a women's shelter, or organising a project for a community in Africa. Service provision is thus a key element of 'active citizenship'. Beyond service provision, NGOs also play an increasing role in the implementation of public policies, in particular in such fields as development, peace building or human rights.

- **Political advocacy and lobbying** have become major dimensions of NGOs' work, although the exact terminology of this activity is still highly contested. While both activities aim at influencing public policies, advocacy involves a wide range of activities ranging from research, education, or awareness raising campaigns to direct contacts with policy makers. Lobbying designs a narrower approach, more directly focusing on policy-makers.

Lobby/advocacy and service provision activities should be seen as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. The move to political advocacy can in many fields be traced as a secondary move, once it became clear that the political circumstances relating to NGOs' work needed to be changed. It is therefore not surprising that an important number of organisations are involved in both types of activities, particularly as expertise gained through service provision is often an important legitimising factor for NGOs involved in lobbying/advocacy activity."

"NGOs organise themselves in the EU - The level of NGOs' involvement in service provision, implementation and/or political advocacy and lobbying is deeply influenced by the different paradigms governing public policies, in particular by a degree of interaction between NGOs and public authorities and by budgetary choices (both in terms of funding of NGOs and in terms of public funding for service provision). These paradigms have considerably evolved in the last years both at EU and national level, resulting from an increased outsourcing of the implementation of public policies, as well as for growing opportunities to influence the policy-making process.

The evolution of EU competences and policies in the last decades had major consequences on the way NGOs relate to what was long perceived as a project driven mainly by the internal market and the implementation of the four liberties⁴⁰. The Single European Act and the treaties that followed marked a considerable extension of EU competences in fields that are directly related to the concerns of organised civil society, in all the 'pillars' of the European Union. The extension of EU competences was also accompanied by the emergence of policies which induced an increased level of re-distribution, while the EU had been previously focusing mostly on 'regulatory policies', based on a legislative approach aimed at lifting the obstacles to the achievement of the free market. As the weight of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) within EU expenditure decreased, such public policies have multiplied since the 1980s, which saw the creation or reinforcement of a number of EU funded programmes and the development of cohesion policy. Considering the limited human resources of the European Commission, there was an increasing need for external actors to deliver those programmes. Service provider NGOs appeared as some of the

most relevant actors to implement EU policies, particularly in some specific fields where citizens' interests are directly at stake, such as development, public health, gender equality policies or the fight against discrimination.

Taking stock of this growing impact of the European Union on their constituencies (in terms of advocacy, but also service delivery and implementation work), most of the NGOs that are active today on EU matters started working at EU level in order to bring added value to the local, regional, national or international level and organised themselves in the last 15 to 20 years. This was achieved through a wide range of channels:

- Increasing focus on EU integration by national organisations, some of the largest appointing specialised EU officers and/or setting up a Brussels-based office;
- Setting up of a representation in Brussels of global INGOs (international NGOs);
- Setting up of umbrella organisations bringing together NGOs from all over the EU, working on similar policy issues;
- In a second step, some umbrella organisations and European branches of INGOs chose to partner with other NGOs active in their specific sector of activity to pool knowledge and expertise on issues of common concerns, which led for example to the setting up of the Social Platform in 1995, of the Human Rights and Democracy Network in 2001. »

Coordination SUD (Solidarité - Urgence – Développement), 2007



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