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The Interdependency of Democracy and Social Cohesion:
Strengthening representation and democratic participation
through public dialogue and civic engagement

Issue paper for Working Session 2B:
Creating and Improving Structures for Sustainable and Cohesive
Democratic Societies

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Introduction: the significance of social context

Structures that support the development of democratic societies themselves operate in a social context. The European context is currently subject to rapid change. Relevant features are:

- Relatively high and rising educational standards. People are more able to understand the workings of their own societies, and are more confident in participating in them.

- New interactive communication technologies. Developments in electronics enhance the capacity to access and distribute information. They also enable people to communicate and organise about issues that concern them. However they may facilitate the development of exclusive groups or 'enclaves', defined by access to a specific communication network.

- The fanning out of social inequalities in income and wealth since the mid-1970s, due to changes in work practices and the rapid growth of highly competitive international markets in capital and in professional skills. This effect is most marked in Anglo-Saxon countries and, to some extent, in the Mediterranean Rim. Concentration of wealth among small minorities at the top end enables wealthy minorities to exercise disproportionate influence. Those at the bottom may feel excluded and be less inclined to participate. The impact of recession on this longer-term trend is unclear.

- Migration within and into Europe. Immigration tends to increase social and cultural diversity and to expand the skill pool. To the extent that immigrants are seen to compete for scarce jobs, schooling and housing with the groups among the established population who feel under pressure themselves, greater diversity may foster the growth of extreme right political parties.

- Economic crisis and recovery packages. The 2007 banking crisis and subsequent recession has affected European economies and social groups within them in different ways. Perceptions that valued public services are being cut back or that groups such as bankers or the wealthy do not pay a fair share of tax, combined with wage cuts and higher levels of unemployment, especially for lower-skilled workers and young people, may impose further strains on democracy.

- The diversity of democratic institutions in Europe, including more consensus-forming and more majoritarian systems of government, federal and unitary states, varying roles for civil society institutions such as Trade Unions, NGOs and religious groupings, and different degrees of participation for minorities and for women. These differences furnish strong opportunities for policy learning, and show that challenges to democracy may be addressed in different ways in different countries.

Other long-run contextual factors include the impact of climate change and the shift in geo-political economic activity away from the West. These are not discussed here since their impact is subject to much debate.

The context in which European democracies seek to create and improve democratic structures includes both opportunities and difficulties. Higher education standards, new interactive technologies and greater contact with diverse groups all provide opportunities to strengthen integrative democratic institutions. Growing inequalities, racism and Islamophobia and the impact of economic crisis challenge the capacity to sustain open and cohesive democracies. This paper will consider what might be done to enhance positive effects on institutions and citizens.

1.   How can institutions enhance awareness of the importance of accountability, openness and intercultural competence, and build closer partnerships with civil society and user groups?

The move towards market competition within frameworks that include non-state (for-profit and not-for-profit) alongside state providers, as part of the 'New Public Management' raises particular issues for democracy. Private providers sometimes face a conflict between commercial and public interest in responding to pressures for greater transparency. Current financial pressures point the dilemma between cost-efficiency (which may lead to open market competition) and democracy (which may require investment in civic competence and in institutions to enable citizens to challenge providers) in a particularly acute form.

Practicable responses to these issues fall into two groups: one seeks to empower and support citizens so as to ensure that positive pressures to improve democratic practice are enhanced across society. Such measures include civic education that ensures that people are aware of their rights, and the establishment of a framework of counter-institutions alongside agencies that provide benefits and services, directed at supporting and enabling citizens in claiming their democratic rights. The success of such institutions depends on open and high-quality media and on a sense of efficacy. This derives from the experience of enforcing rights and achieving change through democratic processes. The second group of responses seeks to change practices within institutions: greater transparency in institutional structures and practices, measures to ensure the representation of minorities at various levels within institutions and to audit progress in achieving this, staff training, as a continuing process through working life and so on.

Questions for discussion:

1.   How can we make the institutions of democratic societies more transparent?
2.   How broad is the range of institutions we should address? Does it include the media, the workplace and community as well as the formal institutions of the political system?
3.   What is the best way to provide a good education in welfare and social rights?
4.   How should counter-state institutions be financed and managed?
5.   How can institutions meet insistent demands for cost-efficiency and democratic engagement with users?

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2.   What constitutes an 'educated user' in relation to democratic structures and processes? How can all users be fully informed about choices?

Education as a 'user' requires not only an awareness of rights and duties, a matter of schooling and reinforcement in further training during working life, but also measures to build confidence that the individual citizen can realise those rights and duties and to provide support in doing so. Such confidence can be reinforced through participation in democratic institutions that are experienced as effective during the process of schooling and also in relation to neighbourhood and civic life. Such institutions could operate to manage local social provision (social care of older people, children's day care services, parks and public open spaces, local housing estates or transport networks and so on), so that individuals have an incentive to participate and to build a democratic social capital. In addition the availability of a counter-structure of civic and welfare rights institutions with staff who can advise and

help individuals in confronting state organisations and the providers of public services is necessary in order to realise democratic rights in practice.

Questions for discussion

1. How can a civic education be constructed to include opportunities for participation in democratic institutions as well as information about citizen rights?
2. How can these processes be continued beyond schooling?
3. How can they be reinforced through an institutional structure alongside the state, a question that grows both more pressing and more difficult as the private sector expands into traditional spheres of state provision and as competitive markets became more widespread in public services?

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3.   How can participative processes help extend democratic practices into everyday life, for example the workplace?

The Maastricht Treaty provided for Works Councils. These vary substantially in role and impact, in most cases functioning as consultative bodies. It is often argued that most people will only take the trouble to pursue democratic engagement if they believe that it will lead to positive outcomes. Institutions designed to extend democratic practices must have the capacity to change some aspect of people's lives. Those who participate in them require practical support in understanding their own rights and in promoting them. The various participants can only engage democratically if they are equal in status, resources and information.

Similar institutions can be developed or extended in other areas of social life as in the examples given earlier. These might include the management of schools, hospitals and clinics, day-care centres and similar institutions. One dilemma lies between participative democratic governance, which is often envisaged as embracing local institutions, and the degree of inequality across regions or nations. This raises issues of resource distribution between different social groups or areas of a country, and of the competence of different levels of local and national democracy.

Questions for discussion

1. How is participative democracy at a local level to be balanced with representative democracy at the national level?
2. How far is it possible to guarantee a sphere of competence to democratic institutions in the work-place and in social life, so that people have an interest in engaging with them?
3. How are inequalities in knowledge and resources between participants in works councils and similar institutions to be addressed?

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4.   How can civil society find the resources it needs to modernise and become more participative?

The kinds of participative institutions at the local or works council level discussed above do not require large resources. Some support is necessary for education and training and in order to provide information about rights and about the issues and to support those who wish to participate. This should be provided through channels separate from the institutions in order to ensure independence.

Much larger resource issues derive from the inequalities in the social context mentioned earlier that enable wealthy groups to lobby effectively for their interests and to exert control over information and attitudes. These can be addressed through measures to ensure free, active and varied media, transparency in political donations and lobbying and support in democratic engagement. Further issues of inclusion and exclusion may result from the growth of extreme right and xenophobic political parties in a context of economic stagnation, harsh competition for jobs and housing and incompatible cultural assumptions. Formal non-discrimination and equality legislation goes some way to addressing these issues. One question is whether an inclusive society can be attained by such means, without a positive commitment to and valuing of multi-culturalism as a source of social vibrancy and as contributing to the fund of ideas and cultural resources available within a society.

Questions for discussion

1.   To what extent is the independence of resources from social institutions necessary to ensure the successful operation of democratic governance of those institutions?
2.   What are the implications of policies to ensure that democratic institutions achieve their objectives for regulation of the media and of political lobbying and influence?
3.   How far are equality of resources and an inclusive social environment necessary to enable democratic institutions to operate successfully?

Concluding comments: the significance of a changing context

This paper began by stressing the importance of context and of the way it is changing in assessing conditions for the successful development of cohesive democratic institutions. It is suggested that greater social inequality and increasing pressures on inclusiveness and cohesion must be taken into account in any consideration of democratic institutions. Formal political measures such as redistributive social rights, the strengthening of the resources available to the less advantaged groups, media freedom, freedom of information, non-discrimination and equal citizen rights can help to address these problems. However the creation of a society in which democracy and cohesion are mutually reinforcing may also require shifts at the level of social practices and values: cultural shifts which value those who fail in the labour market and eliminate the possibility of a disabling stigma, and a commitment to positive multi-culturalism.

Pointers for the Forum's Outcome and Conclusions

1.   A number of measures might help to address the immediate question of creating and strengthening cohesive democratic institutions: education and training in civic and social rights; the experience of participating in institutions in which such rights are exercised and achieve positive outcomes at local or work's council level; the provision of resources and particularly of counter-

institutions parallel to the official structures of public service provision which will enable and support citizens in challenging those structures.

2.   These measures will not have a major impact without steps being taken to address the factors in the broader social context which damage progress towards more cohesive democracy: the fanning out of inequalities and particularly the impact on extra-democratic power at the top end and on effective exclusion at the bottom, and the growing importance of extremist far right politics in undermining the values necessary to support inclusion.