

European Institutions Interacting with Citizens’ Organizations - Some findings of a survey on public policies on “civic” NGOs in Europe¹

GIOVANNI MORO
e-mail: g.moro@fondaca.org

INTRODUCTION

One of the main factors affecting the role of NGOs in the process of Europe building is the attitude of public institutions towards them, both at national and at the European Union level. This issue regards in particular citizens’ organizations operating in the public sphere with the aim to protecting rights and caring for common goods, whatever the size, organizational structure, kinds of actions, etc. The expression “Civic NGOs” refers to this wide but not holistic set of organizations operating in the arena of civil society, characterized by the engagement in public policy making, with different strategies and operational patterns.

This topic is linked to two scientific and methodological problems, which must be taken into account.

The first problem is the lack of an adequate common base of information on citizens’ organizations operating in the territory of the European Union. This deficit includes not only quantitative and qualitative data on the existing organizations, but also information on the work they carry out, the critical situations they must address, the cultural and social context in which they live, the political, legal and institutional environment they are embodied in.

Of course, both official data and empirical researches do exist at national level; at cross-national level (for example, research comparing two or three countries, or regarding sub-regional areas such as the Scandinavian or Baltic countries); with reference to single categories of citizens’ organizations (such as social enterprises or consumer associations); with reference to wider areas of civil society organizations (including, for example, religious institutions or private universities). Nevertheless, the available documentation does not allow us to make a general picture of the attitudes and operational patterns of public institutions interacting with citizens’ organizations in Europe.

The second problem is the methodological challenge to identify a general European policy strategy and style (intended as a set of cognitive and operational patterns leading policy making) of public institutions interacting with citizens’ organizations. This task requires, on one side, to take into account attitudes and behaviors of each national authority as well as EU institutions, and on the other side, abstracting general, common features from these different situations.

This paper reports the main results of a survey aimed at contributing to address both these problems.

THE SURVEY

In 2003 Active Citizenship Network, the European policy program of the Italian movement Cittadinanzattiva, has carried out a survey – supported by the European Commission DG Education and Culture and in cooperation with about 35 national-based citizens’ organizations – with the aim to

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collect data and information in the 28 “New Europe” countries (15 EU old member states, 10 new members, 3 candidate countries) and at the European Union level, with the purpose to identify the existing public policies regarding citizens’ organizations.

The full text of the research report can be downloaded at the website www.activecitizenship.net.

Research design and implementation

The survey included two kind of activities: gathering data, materials and information and collecting opinions and evaluations.

The *gathering of data, materials and information* had the goal of identifying the existing policies on civic activism at the national and European levels. This was done through a *form* completed by the partner organizations. They drew on national studies and reports, laws, regulations and other official documents as their main sources.

The *collection of opinions and evaluations* was used for an early assessment of the actual level of implementation of the laws and programs, identification of problems and obstacles as well as achievements and results. This was done using a *questionnaire* that was sent by e-mail to six people (three representatives of civic organizations, a scholar, a journalist and a private sector representative) in each country.

In general, information and data on were collected on institutional status of citizens’ organizations, criteria and procedures of recognition, existence of forms of check and assessment as well as of cases of loss of legitimization, institutions involved in interaction with citizens’ organizations and their role, prerogatives of citizens’ organizations, forms of public support to civic NGOs.

Further information were then collected focusing on three policy arenas: health care, consumer policy, environment protection. They regarded the kinds of organizations operating in the field, the issues they are used to address, the main tools and strategies they carry out, the citizens’ organizations’ role according to institutions.

Questionnaires to the key persons enabled to get information on the existing problems and implementation gaps, as well as on good and bad practices.

As for the European Union, the survey was carried out with reference to the Commission, the Parliament and the Economic and Social Committee.

The research was completed in 26 countries out of 28 (excepting Ireland and Luxembourg). In the collecting of opinions, 61% of the questionnaires sent out were returned with valid answers (105 out of 174).

Value and limits of the results

Evaluating the results of the survey it must be taken into account the following constraints:

- differences between institutional structures and juridical systems;
- differences in the classification of data, organizations, and social phenomena related to civic activism and policy making;
- linguistic barriers in accessing data and information.

These constraints required to use open tools rather than pre-defined indicators. Obviously, this choice implied a lower level of homogeneity of the gathered information, but made it possible to account for a complex reality, which had not been previously defined.

The involvement of citizens' organizations, working at the national level, as actors in the collection of data and information was another relevant methodological choice. Though citizens' organizations do not have professional training in research activities, they do have the ability to get data and information on matters that they are engaged in. This attitude and practice is a well known skill of citizens operating in policy making defined as "civic journalism", "production of civic information" and so on. Of course these skills, in the case of the survey, were supported by appropriate methodology and training to guarantee the reliability of the research.

An added value in involving citizens' organizations in the survey is the fact that their ability to access certain data and information can be considered as an indicator of the level of relevance of this gathered information. It means that the norms, directives, practices, etc. that they were able to collect may not be all that exists, but they are surely the most relevant ones.

Moreover, data and information reported in this paper do not reflect the entire national and European situations, but only the more relevant facts and situations operating in the field of research. Therefore, it must be stressed that the main value of this survey is to report the institutions' general attitudes and behaviors towards citizens' organizations in Europe, both at the national and the EU level. While the results of the survey do not represent precisely any of the specific national situations that have been considered, it can and should be used as a benchmark for each of them.

MAIN FINDINGS

Findings related to national situations

A lack of reliable and/or comparable *qualitative and quantitative data* on citizens' organizations emerged. On the *quantitative* side, out of 26 countries 15 have defined data but too inclusive and therefore just too much, 2 have defined data but too specific or sectional (partial or sectoral), 4 have divergent data, 4 have only estimations and one has no data at all. On the *qualitative* side, three main categories are used: nonprofit sector, which emphasizes the economic aspects; civil society, which stresses the non-governmental nature of citizens' organizations; association, which includes all the forms of citizens getting together or organizing. All of them include citizens' organizations, working in public policies, together with very different organizations, such as: religious hospitals, political parties or game clubs. From a legal point of view, in the laws and regulations, there appear some 30 different denominations for organizations, which seem to have three different origins: the Civil Code, the fiscal legislation, the policy-oriented legislation.

Legal status and role of citizens' organizations are defined in 16 countries in the Constitution, in 22 by the laws, in 4 by regulations and administrative acts and in one in charters and protocols. Though this could be seen as good news, it must be noticed that in *only 13 countries out of 22 the principle of the role of citizens' organizations in public policy is established*, and it is explicitly contained in only one Constitution out of 16. In the other cases this principle has a merely an administrative rank.

About the *criteria of recognition*, what clearly prevails are the *formal and bureaucratic requirements* rather than criteria linked to adequacy of skills and operational ability of citizens' organizations in practicing general interest purposes, such as: a pertinent number of members, effectiveness, continuity and relevance of their activity, adequate assets, etc.

About the *procedures of recognition*, different procedures are usually provided according to the legal status of the organizations. The prevailing form of recognition is the registration of the organization. However, no relevant checks or verification activities are developed.

About the *institutions in charge of the recognition*, the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Justice are the two institutions mostly involved are the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Justice. This does suggest that the traditional state's "fear of organized citizens" still exists.

About the *forms of check and assessment*, the survey results state that about 40% of all the forms of control regard financial and administrative matters. This confirms the widespread idea that the institutions tend to suspect citizens' organizations of mismanagement or frauds. Obviously, any single incorrect or criminal behaviors, which may occur, should not justify this attitude.

This observation is confirmed by the fact that the highest number of *practices and circumstances leading to the inadmissibility* of the registration application or loss of legitimacy by citizens' organizations are related to financial misbehaviors, followed by cases of threat to public security (confirming the existence of the "fear of organized citizens" already mentioned) and lastly cases of organization's performance failures, which normally should normally be the most important factor to consider for the loss of legitimacy.

Concerning the *relation between public bodies and citizens' organizations*, institutions' engagement in the policy on civic activism, only in 7 countries there is a specific institution dedicated to deal with such a role. in charge of dealing with citizens' organizations. These institutions are usually governmental commissions, committees or agencies specifically devoted to coordinate the efforts of governments and citizens' organizations engaged in policy making.

From the point of view of *the institutions dealing with citizens' organizations*, the administrative institutions are almost four times more involved with citizens' organizations than the political institutions are and in an even lesser extent the judicial, independent and quasi-state institutions. Since the interlocution between the state and citizens' organizations usually occurs in the arena of public policies, it can be seen as logical that the administrative institutions have a predominant relation with citizens' organization. Nevertheless, this matter is concerning since it could imply the risk that citizens' organizations tend to be recognized only as a technical supporter or agency of public administration, rather than a political interlocutor.

In relation to *actions developed by the engaged institutions* towards citizens' organizations, they can be divided in three main categories of actions are: consultation in definition and planning of policies; involvement in implementation; support to the development of citizens' organizations.

Regarding the *prerogatives of citizens' organizations*, that is powers that are independent of the goodwill of public authorities and must be granted according to specific procedures, many of them have been provided by national laws and regulations. They regard: a political dimension (appointment of representatives to public bodies, taking the floor and making proposals on laws and policies, the right to petition, etc.), an administrative dimension (access to information, mandatory opinion on certain issues, the right to initiate and participate in administrative procedures, participation in public procurement, activation of the ombudsman, etc.), a juridical dimension (initiate and participate in legal actions, start collective civil actions, sue for damages in criminal trials, join individuals in criminal actions, etc.). Though the list of privileges is definitely positive, their actual level of implementation is often very low.

About the *forms of support*, a typology was done related to three forms: direct support (donations and legacies free of taxes, grants, tax relief for utilities, etc.); indirect (individuals and companies' donations are tax deductible, free use of public buildings and areas, welfare and job facilities for volunteers, etc.); in kind (awards and prizes, access to public broadcast, educational credits, etc.). Again, in reality the situation may be not be so positive. As for the information coming from the

interviews with key persons, a number of problems and implementation gaps were identified. The most important are shown in the table 1:

Table 1 – The “top ten” problems in citizens’ organizations-public institutions relations at national level (interviews with experts and civic leaders)

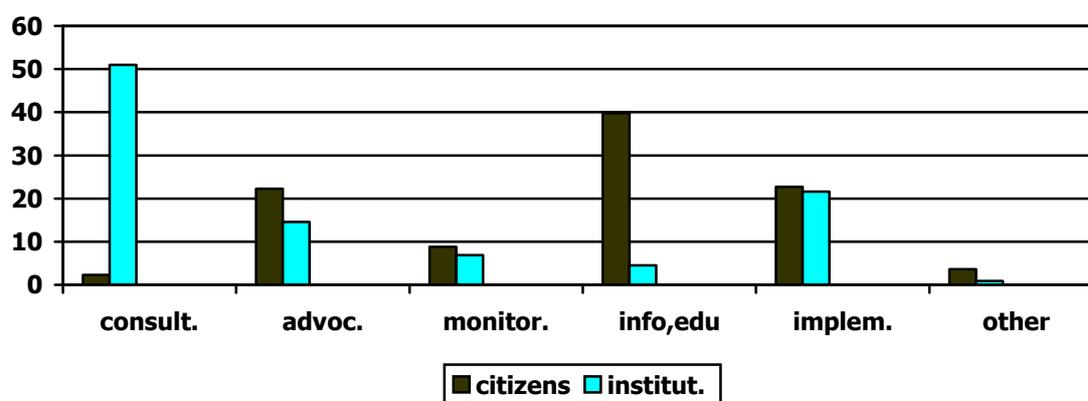
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Lack of public funds for civic organizations: 51,4%;▪ Lack of recognition of organizations as important actors of policy making (in respect to trade unions and business): 40,9%;▪ Difficult access to policy makers; Difficult identification of interlocutors because of lack of transparency and frequent changes in the staff: 37,1%;▪ Distrust and reluctance, lack of consideration, respect and equal partnership towards civic organizations, at national and local levels: 33,3%;▪ Insufficient and incomplete regulation: 23,8%;▪ Attempt of the government to organize orgs, to control them through ministries’ permissions, police or infiltration of executive bodies, to influence them through legislation, administrative rules and funding: 20%;▪ Poor communication and coordination links: 20%;▪ Fear of organizations, considered as trouble makers and capable of influencing elections: 19%;▪ Lack of transparency; Lack of information on laws, programs and provisions: 18,1%;▪ Consultations take place when decisions have been already taken; Organizations’ opinions not taken into account and joint decisions not implemented; Government does not listen to the answers to its questions: 18,1%. |
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Source: Active Citizenship Network, 2004

The result of the *comparison between citizens’ actions and institutions’ views* on the basis of five items (consultation, dialogue between stakeholders; advocacy and representation; monitoring and assessment; information, education and advice; implementation activities, delivery of services), is a clear divergent agenda between citizens’ actions and institutions’ views at least on two points (see Graph 1):

- consultation is at the top for institutions and at the bottom for citizens;
- information and education is at the top for citizens and at the bottom for institutions.

Graph 1 - What citizens' organizations really do and what institutions think they would do. A comparison regarding consultation; advocacy; monitoring and assessment; information, education and advice; implementation of policies.



Source: Active Citizenship Network, 2004

Beside other points of divergence, these two items indicate a kind of double agenda which divides citizens and institutions and which is an hindering element for dialogue and cooperation.

Findings related to European Union situation

At the European Union level, estimates are only available on the quantity of citizens' organizations operating in this dimension. An official database of the European Commission (CONECS) contains only a part, since the insertion in this database is done on the initiative of the organizations themselves. Moreover, the same database includes all "civil society" organizations. For this reason reliable information on qualitative elements is also not available.

There is no official definition of citizens' organizations. EU documents, and particularly those of the Commission and of the Economic and Social Committee, mention "non-governmental organizations", "civil society organizations", "community-based organizations" and "voluntary organizations". The various definitions agree on the following features of NGOs:

- they are not created to generate personal profit;
- they are voluntary;
- they have a formal existence;
- they are independent;
- they are not self-serving.

However, the denomination which is most commonly used by EU institutions in official documents is "civil society organizations", which is much larger than citizens' organizations. It was defined in 1999 in an opinion of the Economic and Social Committee as including social partners; organizations representing social and economic players; NGOs; community-based organizations; religious communities.

Regarding the EU, there is also no formal recognition of European associations yet, which is considered as a bad practice in the answers to the survey questionnaire. However, some calls for proposals refer to “European organizations”. In this case, the main requirement is to have members in more than one member state / candidate country (and sometimes also Balkan countries and EFTA countries), but depending on the policy fields, the required number of members may fluctuate considerably.

Moreover, in order to be inserted in the CONECS database, an organization must meet certain basic conditions, but the Commission does not make any particular checks before inserting organizations in the CONECS databases and assumes no responsibility for the accuracy of the information provided by the organizations.

About institutions involved and their role, the situation at the EU level can be summarized as follows:

- The European Commission interacts with citizens’ organizations in two main ways: consultation and co-funding of projects that implement European public policies. The Commission consults NGOs through different instruments such as: ad hoc meetings, structured dialogue (regular meetings without the formal structure of a committee) and formalized consultation (advisory groups, consultative committees, etc.). The Commission runs nearly 700 consultation bodies. In addition, it is developing an on-line consultation.
- The European Parliament and its committees seek public views through consultation and public hearings. Furthermore, European NGOs can also submit a petition to the Parliament on a matters of general concern or asking it to take a stance on a matter of public interest in the sphere of EU activities.
- The European Economic and Social Committee is composed of representatives from organized civil society and would become the *trait d’union* between the EU and civil society. However, its interaction with citizens organizations is still limited to public events, convened to discuss European issues with a broad range of civil society organizations, and hearings, intended to enable civil society organizations to participate in the drafting of ESC opinions.
- Associations with a registered office in the EU member states can complain to the European Ombudsman about misadministration by the institutions and bodies of the European Community.

Also in the case of the EU a number of implementation gaps in the relations between institutions and citizens have been registered (see table 2).

Table 2 – The main problems in citizens’ organizations-public institutions relations at European level (interviews with experts and civic leaders)

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ The European Commission does not always have a friendly attitude and is sometimes arrogant▪ The underlying idea that citizens’ organizations must conform themselves to institutions’ structure and not vice versa▪ The European Commission does not usually involve citizens’ organizations in the drafting of the calls for proposals, therefore these organizations have to present projects on matters that do not necessarily correspond to their own agenda.▪ The role played by citizens’ organizations is still too limited to periodical consultations▪ Very often there is not any feedback, whether it be positive or negative, to citizens’ organizations’ proposals and remarks |
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- EU institutions do not really perceive citizens' organizations as their closest link with the European society and a source of valuable feedback on their public policies
- Small size citizens' organizations appear to be left out, having limited access to participation processes and European programs
- Access to EU institutions is limited as official information and activities are centred in Brussels
- European civil servants tend to protect the institutions and therefore, they do not always welcome consultations and criticism
- The confidentiality of documents is exaggerated

Source: Active Citizenship Network, 2004

Citizens' organizations operating at the European Union level do not have any prerogatives. Most of the time, they have the same rights as all European citizens (to access administrative documents, to complain to the European Ombudsman, to submit a petition to the European Parliament, possibility to complain to the European Commission concerning an infringement of Community law by a member state, etc.). Besides, all privileges granted by the European directives and case-law exclusively refer exclusively to the national level and not to the European one. Citizens' organizations have no specific right to take legal actions before the Court of First Instance or the European Court of Justice.

The European Commission direct economic support to citizens' organizations was estimated at over € 1.000 million a year in 1997. It is of two kinds: core-funding for the running costs of the organizations and project funding. Their common characteristics are that they both are "co-funding" and that organizations can apply for these funds through "call for proposals". The project funding is usually open to both European and national NGOs, providing that the project has a European dimension and is carried out in partnership with organizations from other countries.

The European institutions, and especially the European Parliament and the Economic and Social Committee, also directly contribute to the activities of citizens' organizations providing them with the free use of rooms for events and the free access to services such as interpretation, photocopies, etc.

Concerning other forms of support, two programs must be quoted:

- The European Voluntary Service, which allows young people (between 18 and 25 years) from an NGO or any type of non-profit-making association to work for a limited period of time (from 3 weeks to 12 months) as a volunteer in another organization located in a different member state.
- Every year, the Commission organizes training programs for NGOs leaders/members, which are often carried out by other specialized NGOs or non-profit organizations, especially in the field of consumer protection and in candidate and other associated countries.

THE EUROPEAN PUBLIC POLICY ON CIVIC ACTIVISM: A TENTATIVE DEFINITION

On the basis of the results of the Survey and taking into account its limits, a tentative definition of the European public policy on civic activism can be tried.

The *starting point* of this policy seems to be a double crisis of governments and, generally speaking, of institutions:

- A crisis of resources and operational ability in fulfilling tasks such as those related to welfare, consumer or environment protection;
- A crisis of trust and legitimacy despite the existence of fully developed democratic institutions.

Therefore, the *objective* of this policy is to involve active citizenship organizations in the management of public issues in order to increase the resources and enhance the legitimacy of public intervention.

This aim is pursued through two *strategies* of involvement:

- In the phases of definition, decision and evaluation of public policies (consultation);
- In the implementation phase (entrustment of projects).

The *tools* used to put into practice these two strategies are of various kinds:

- Law and regulation tools;
- Financial and fiscal tools;
- Symbolic and material tools.

With regard to its *effects*, since now such a policy seems to be achieved some very important results. Three of them appear of the utmost importance:

- The policy has placed citizens' organizations in the realm of policy making, overcoming the traditional approach of freedom of association and the corresponding division of labor (the public affairs to the State, the private interests to civil society associations);
- The policy has enhanced the awareness of citizens' organizations regarding their powers and responsibilities in managing public affairs;
- The policy has increased the expectations of the citizens' organizations' and consequently, has pushed institutions into being more accountable on a daily basis.

Nevertheless, a number of *implementation gaps* emerged from the survey, which seriously question the achievement of the expected results. Five of them appear to be the most important.

The *first gap* is *between what is established in theory and what happens in reality*. Very often, forms of support or rights of citizens' organizations stated in laws are not implemented due to the of lack of funds, arbitrary public choices or mismanagement. This situation can frustrate any positive intention and effort.

The *second gap* is *between the reality of citizens' organizations and how they are perceived by the institutions*. Citizens' organizations are cross-sectorial, they practice at the same time advocacy activities and service delivery, they mix voluntary work with paid work, while according to institutions they would have univocal features in order to be embedded in laws and correspond to bureaucratic structures. This phenomenon can be a potential and real source of misunderstandings and conflicts.

The *third gap* is *between two visions of citizens' organizations: as a resource and as a threat*. This sort of "Dr. Jekyll - Mr. Hyde" situation emerges from the legislation itself, where, on the one hand, citizens are suspected of misusing funds and being a threat to public safety and national unity, and on

the other hand, they are asked to cooperate in managing the core issues of the welfare system, to counterbalance strong powers in consumer policy and to strengthen environmental awareness and behaviors.

The *fourth* gap is *between the activities of citizens and the agenda of institutions*. As we have seen, information and education is at the top of citizens' organizations' activities and consultation is at the bottom, while the institutions' view is precisely the contrary. This is only one example of the divergent perception of the reality that exists between citizens' organizations and institutions, which can be a real obstacle to partnership.

The *fifth* and last gap is *between the constitutional provisions and the operational reality of citizens' engagement in public policies*. The survey illustrated the following: in the existing constitutional framework, citizens' organizations' role comes from the traditional principle of the freedom of association, while in fact their actual involvement and work correspond more to the new principle of horizontal subsidiarity, which regards the cooperation between institutions and citizens for the fulfillment of public interest goals.

Regarding the impact of this policy on citizens' organizations caring for common goods, three negative or risky effects can be noted.

The *first* effect is *uncertainty*. Citizens' organizations are asked and expected to cooperate in the management of public affairs, but at the same time they do not seem to be put in a position to do it. This can result either from cultural reasons or due to the lack of resources.

The *second* effect is a *latent conflict*. Instead of creating a sense of mutual confidence, the implementation of this policy seems to increase distrust and fall short of citizens' expectations to be taken seriously by institutions.

The *third* effect is *the risk of reducing citizens' organizations to quasi-administrative bodies*, which are involved in the implementation of policies but without any political dialogue and interlocution with institutions.

These negative elements can jeopardize the success of the entire strategy of citizens-institutions partnership, which is one of the most important resources for the development of Europe. It is above all the responsibility of national and European institutions to try to remove all these obstacles, fill the gaps and make this policy effective.

However, citizens' organizations themselves are partially responsible for this negative situation, above all especially because of their "double complex" vis-à-vis institutions: a political inferiority complex and a moral superiority complex. These two complexes are a tremendous obstacle to developing a mature, equal and effective partnership with institutions, capable of achieving concrete results.

Though these conclusions come mostly from the analysis of national situations, the *European Union institutions'* policy style does not show relevant differences in respect with national institutions' attitudes and behaviors towards civic activism. In other words, differences related to the non-standard and second-degree nature of European Union institutions do not produce another pattern of relation with citizens' organizations, but rather a variation of the same model. The European Union institutions have a certain regard for citizens' organizations, but they show an odd attitude: they tend to consider them in turn as either mere suppliers of services or "representatives" of the whole "civil society", in the same way that trade unions and employers associations represent social forces. It demonstrates a lack of awareness of the very specific nature of civic organizations.

CONCLUSIONS

Discussing the results of the survey, people participating in a conference held in Warsaw in November 2003 agreed on a “Citizens’ Agenda” to improve the European policy on civic NGOs, filling the gaps emerging from the research.

The elements highlighted in the Agenda are the following:

1. The political attitude towards civic activism (the need to change attitudes of political representatives towards citizens’ organizations, considering them not competitors but facilitators of institutions – as problems solvers and not trouble makers);
2. The legislation (removing the legislative obstacles which make the existence and activity of citizens’ organizations more difficult);
3. The consultation process (stating and practicing clear procedures and pertinent criteria of selection of relevant organizations, avoiding any “fake” or merely symbolic process of consultation);
4. The implementation process (avoiding the waste of resources, time and energy on the citizens’ organizations’ part and taking into account the results of citizens’ activities as a tool for the assessment of the outcomes of public policies);
5. The culture of public officials (which cannot base the relations with citizens’ organizations on the common wisdom or the good will of single public servants, but requires specific know-how and sensitivity);
6. Financial matters (overcoming the present situation that risks to make the rich, richer and the poor, poorer, involving citizens’ organizations not because they are cheaper, but because they can do some things better and increasing the amount of funds invested to this end);
7. Checks and assessment of citizens’ organizations (putting in practice forms of controls able to assess the real ability and effectiveness of citizens’ organizations and not privileging those that excel in the paper flow).

Apart their political meaning, these elements can be considered as focal points for further research activities.

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Abstract

One of the main factors affecting the role of NGOs in the process of Europe building is the attitude of public institutions towards them, both at national and at the European Union level. This issue regards in particular citizens' organizations ("Civic" NGOs) operating in the public sphere with the aim to protecting rights and caring for common goods, whatever the size, organizational structure, kinds of actions, etc. To clarify this attitude, or policy style, two problems must be addressed. The first one is the lack of an adequate common base of information on citizens' organizations operating in the territory of the European Union. The second problem is the methodological challenge to identify a general European policy of public institutions interacting with citizens' organizations. To this end, the paper reports the main results of a survey carried out by Active Citizenship Network in the 28 "New Europe" countries and at the European Union level. Collecting on one side information and data from official sources and on the other side opinions and evaluations from key persons, some basic elements of a European policy style towards citizens' organizations have been defined. They regard the following points:

- Rationale (the double crisis of resources and trust of public institutions);
- Objective (involve citizens' organizations in the management of public issues in order to solve those problems);
- Strategies (inclusion in the phase of definition of policies and in the phase of their implementation);
- Tools (laws and regulations, financial and fiscal tools, symbolic and material tools);
- Positive effects (embodying citizens' organizations as actors of policy making overcoming the principle of freedom of association, enhancement of powers and responsibilities of citizens' organizations, increase of the accountability of institutions);
- Implementation gaps (between what is established in theory and what happens in reality; between the reality of citizens' organizations and how they are perceived by the institutions; between the vision of civic organizations as a resource and the vision of them as a threat; between the activities of citizens' organizations and the agenda of institutions; between the constitutional provisions and the operational reality);
- Risky impact on the development of civic activism in Europe (uncertainty, latent conflict, possible reduction of citizens' organizations to quasi-administrative bodies, also because of the responsibility of citizens' organizations themselves).

Crucial points to be addressed – and observed – are the political attitude towards citizens' organizations, the legislation, the consultation process, the implementation process, the culture of public officials, the financial matters, the checks and assessment of civic organizations.