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Civil society

?Civil society' stands for the totality of citizens and the social organisations representing and acting to promote their will, interests and voices in a society. It is most commonly used as an umbrella term covering all individuals, groups and the forms of organisation that are non-governmental. In some perspectives civil society is equated with the third sector, therefore excluding private and for profit organisations alongside governmental organisations. Some other approaches include economic actors in definitions of civil society.

The main actors of civil society are civil society organisations, which can include organised interest groups, labour market entities such as trade unions, professional associations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), educational and community-based organisations, and other forms of association and organisation which mediate citizens' participation in social, cultural, political and religious life. These organised forms of civil society perform an important role as representatives and facilitators mediating between citizens and the EU and national governments. Through its organisations, civil society is a building block of our contemporary European society, a catalyst for maintaining vibrant democracies and enabling citizens' socio-cultural and political participation. In particular, civil society performs two roles.

First, civil society gives life to democratic procedures and rules that formally and organisationally constitute European democracies. It enables citizens' participation in political life well beyond the traditional channels such as the right to vote. Civil society organisations represent and promote citizens' interests and can become influential in agenda-setting and decision-making by governmental agencies.

Secondly, civil society organisations and associations are catalysts and facilitators for socio-cultural and economic activities, contributing to education and to a rich cultural life. Examples of civil society organisations and initiatives are art and culture clubs, museums, historical societies, dance and folk culture, and literary clubs.

Sources:

Commission of the European Communities (2002) Towards a reinforced culture of consultation and dialogue - General principles and minimum standards for consultation of interested parties by the Commission. COM(2002) 704. Brussels.