

1. THE CITIZENS' AGORA

The original aims of the European project have largely been achieved. Peace, stability and prosperity are now a reality for most Europeans.

Yet beyond reunifying the continent, the European Union now faces new challenges.

This year -- to mark the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Rome -- the European Parliament has opened up a new forum for dialogue with EU citizens. Its name is the Agora and its subject is the future of the European Union.

What Europe can do for you - and what you can do for Europe

Revitalising European integration requires a strong and permanent link with EU citizens. It is not enough to tell people that Europe is being built for them - Europe needs to be built with them. Making this idea clear, and acting on it, is absolutely essential to restore trust.

The European Parliament wants not just to communicate with citizens, **but genuinely to consult them.**

The role of the Agora

What the Parliament proposes here is to combine the best aspects of direct democracy, by mobilising European civil society representatives, such as networks of associations, professional organisations and trade unions, with representative democracy, as embodied at European level by the European Parliament.

This combination could be called the "AGORA", as a tribute to the first public debating forum established by Athenian "direct" democracy, which is at the root of our European democracy.

The Agora, as a forum, would combine the voices of European citizens with those of their elected representatives. It would give its participants an opportunity to (re)define the terms of European debate and to come up with concrete policies, based on everyday experience, to tackle the problems facing the Union.

From stating the problem to achieving a consensus

The Agora is a "pre-legislative" tool. It will work during the drafting of reports in parliamentary committees, i.e. **before** a particular subject is discussed in plenary.

The Agora could also help build **consensus**.

A new way to establish dialogue between EU citizens and institutions

Parliament aims **to transcend** the traditional sector-specific structures of civil society (social affairs, the environment, development, education, and so on), so as to enable opposing points of view to be heard and either a consensus or the full range of options to emerge.

This open and broad consultation would also be **a valuable complement** to the current programme of committee hearings. Such hearings, which are an essential means of enlightening Members of Parliament by providing them with expert information, are still one-off events and are not extended to the large network of European civil society, which often feels left out of the process.

Finally, the Agoras will differ from past citizens' fora held in all Member States in that they will be open to participants from **different countries**, regardless of their national origin. Agoras will enable electors and elected, from all civil society sectors and all EU Member States, to gather together to openly discuss the future of our continent.

Relations with other EU institutions

Other EU institutions would have everything to gain from the success of this venture and are natural partners of the citizens' Agora. A concerted partnership of all the EU institutions around the Agora project could result in **a win-win situation** for each of them.

The Council could encourage its members to publicise Parliament's initiative at an early stage among civil society bodies in their respective countries so as to build popular interest in the project.

The Commission could adopt the Agora as **a new operational tool** in its continuous efforts to improve communication between the Union and European citizens. It could incorporate some of the Agora's conclusions into its own prospective political reflection, and possibly even its legislative initiatives.

The Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Council, given their specific roles, could be involved in determining the work of the Agora and even be invited to express their views in an expert capacity.

Organisation of work

The Agoras will be held in the European Parliament's hemicycle in Brussels **every six months**. 500 representatives from civil society organisations will be invited to each event.

Agoras will be organised in three phases: a) preparation and drafting of the working documents with the help of the Agora web site; b) two-day debates in the Parliament, where conclusions will be drawn up; c) dissemination of the final reports to all parties.

The Conference of Presidents, which represents Parliament's political groups on a proportional basis, will decide an annual work schedule and choose issues of interest to all citizens as topics for Agora meetings.

The parliamentary committees would, on account of their expertise in specific areas, be the bodies best able to determine whom to invite. They would therefore be responsible for the accreditation of European civil society organisations. Each committee would be in charge of issues falling within its sphere of competence under the EP Rules of Procedure.

Each Agora meeting debate would be wound up by two moderators, one chosen among MEPs or representatives from other EU Institutions, and the other from the invited organisations.

By contrast, the rapporteurs in charge of drawing up workshop conclusions will instead be chosen only from among the 500 civil society members. There will be two or three rapporteurs for each of the five workshops. Their role is particularly sensitive.

Rapporteurs will be initially responsible for preparing a discussion document before the meeting takes place, with the help of the contributions sent by the participants on the Agora web site.

Moreover, they will take charge of preparing a single recto-verso page paper summing up the consensus or the range of options that emerged from the discussions. These papers are the official conclusions of the Agora and will be therefore taken on board by the Parliament.

Each organisation involved is asked to choose only one of its members to participate in the Agora. The choice of whom to send to Brussels is up to the organisation itself.

The first Agora will take place **on 8 and 9 November 2007** and focus on the future of Europe: challenges, opportunities and tools presented by the new treaties. At the beginning of next year, other themes such as climate change and the social dimension of the EU will be discussed during a second Agora.

Follow-up to Agora debates

The Agora's conclusion on a particular theme would be taken up not only by MEPs in their own reflection (e.g. in amendments) but would also be brought to the attention of Parliament's committees and/or the other EU institutions concerned. Incorporating some or all of these conclusions would clearly show that citizens' views are genuinely being taken into account.

The conclusions will be sent to the EU and national institutions and to all organisations involved. The civil society organisations will also contribute, via their networks, to the dissemination of Agora final reports.

Following the second Agora, scheduled for the beginning of 2008, the Parliamentary bodies involved will assess the results. They may decide to adjust its form and substance in the light of results to date.

On the 50th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome, the European Parliament is making a remarkable bet - and one that citizens should be ready to take.

The first Agora: the future of Europe (8 - 9 November 2007)

By the end of 2007 the EU treaties should be revised by an Intergovernmental Conference, incorporating the substance of the innovative provisions contained in the draft Constitutional Treaty. The European Parliament therefore invites European civil society to reflect and comment freely and frankly on these institutional reforms, to voice its views and expectations and to define its role within the new framework.

With this in mind, over two days, the 500 members of the Agora will have a chance to debate five fundamental issues.