

## EESC report on EU institutions' civil dialogue practices – a summary

In times where misinformation is rising, democracy is at risk and civic spaces are under pressure, the call for the EU to foster a resilient relationship with civil society actors has never been more urgent. [Civil dialogue](#), defined as a structured and regular interaction between EU institutions and civil society, is grounded in [Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union](#), which mandates transparent and inclusive participation. The EU itself recognizes civil dialogue as “an inherent necessity to realise the Union’s innermost aims, values, and principles.”

The report commissioned by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and published in May this year, maps and assesses how civil dialogue is currently practiced across the European Parliament, the Council, and the European Commission. The study reveals a fragmented and poorly institutionalised landscape, where formal commitments to participation often fall short in practice.

The report highlights how important civil society is in connecting EU institutions with the public. Civil society groups help by sharing information about policies, voicing the needs of underrepresented communities, and encouraging public involvement in policymaking. Their work should be recognized, and they should be treated as equal partners by the institutions.

At the same time, the [European Commission’s new Civil Society Strategy](#), part of its 2025 work programme, aims to support and strengthen civil society. It includes plans to create a platform for better dialogue between civil society and the EU. As support from institutions grows, civil dialogue is becoming more important. The next step is to make sure that the right departments within the EU follow key principles—by giving civil society enough space to speak up and by creating transparent ways to include their input in policymaking.

### Obstacles to civil dialogue

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The report identifies [six overarching barriers](#) that hinder effective civil dialogue:

#### 1. Unclear definitions and lack of standardisation

There is not a common understanding of what civil dialogue is, which makes it hard to measure its impact or effectiveness. The definition of civil dialogue is vague and embedded within a variety of participatory activities – which are often not explicitly labelled as civil dialogue nor organised within a structured framework valid across the different institutions.

## **2. Lack of visible outcomes or impact**

Civil society actors frequently report not knowing whether their input is considered, due to limited feedback and poor documentation of how dialogue shapes policy.

## **3. Limited capacity within civil society organisations (CSOs)**

Especially smaller or grassroots CSOs struggle to sustain engagement due to resource constraints and the need for a constant presence in Brussels or Strasbourg.

## **4. Limited institutional capacity or commitment**

Many EU officials lack training in participatory methods and may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with facilitating inclusive dialogue processes.

## **5. Formats that are not conducive to meaningful exchange**

Dialogues are often one-directional, with CSOs invited to Q&A sessions or panels without adequate time or structure for deliberation or follow-up.

## **6. Low political will at higher levels**

High-level EU actors sometimes show reluctance or disinterest in civil society engagement, viewing it as lobbying or politically sensitive.

# **Institutional differences in civil dialogue practices**

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- **European Commission**

Most engaged in civil dialogue, with multiple Directorate-Generals (e.g. DG EAC on Erasmus+ or DG EMPL with Committee on Vocational Training) hosting units dedicated to civil society. However, these are inconsistently structured and often operate under the label of “expert groups” rather than formal civil dialogue. Civil society is sometimes looped in too late in the policy cycle, with limited impact.

- **European Parliament**

Engagement is often informal or ad hoc, relying on the initiative of individual MEPs or taking the form of campaigning strategies. While there is a Vice-President responsible for civil society, the role is not clearly defined. Events like the EU Roma Week and the Article 17 Dialogue offer recurring engagement opportunities but are not part of a broader institutional strategy. Given its changing composition, civil society actors periodically find themselves in need to rebuild their connections and partnerships.

- **Council of the EU**

Least institutionalised in terms of civil dialogue. Civil society access depends heavily on the rotating presidency's priorities. While the EESC provides input through exploratory opinions, there is no systematic or structured dialogue mechanism.

## Recommendations from the report

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To strengthen civil dialogue across EU institutions, the report calls the EU institutions to:

1. **Clearly define civil dialogue** and distinguish it from other deliberative democratic practices or consultative mechanisms
2. **Establish an inter-institutional agreement** outlining roles, methods, and expected outcomes of civil dialogue according to the trilogue role of the institution
3. **Publish periodic reports** documenting successes, challenges, and good practices.
4. **Create contact points** in each Commission Directorate-General responsible for civil society engagement.
5. **Invest in capacity-building** for both EU staff and CSOs to enhance participation quality.
6. Ensure **early, inclusive, and structured involvement** of civil society across all policy stages.
7. Encourage **civil society coordination** in advance of dialogue sessions to improve clarity and impact.

## The EU Youth Dialogue

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Among the various forms of engagement, the **EU Youth Dialogue** stands out as a more **structured, digitalised, and regular** platform. The report highlights several strengths:

- **Consistent and clear format**, including accessible online tools and webinars.
- **Good information flow**, including opportunities to provide feedback on a dedicated website.

However, the report highlights that:

- The dialogue **lacks formal rules of procedure** or clearly defined policy goals.
- **Marginalised youth**, such as those from rural or disadvantaged backgrounds, are still underrepresented.
- Feedback mechanisms are one-way: **young participants do not consistently receive responses from EU institutions** or see how their input influences policy.

Despite its limitations, the EU Youth Dialogue represents an example of how structured, inclusive, and recurring engagement can bridge the gap between young citizens and EU decision-makers.

The full report can be found here:

[\*\*Mapping civil dialogue practices in the EU institutions | EESC\*\*](#)