

EUROPEAN INTEGRATION FORUM AND EUROPEAN WEB SITE ON INTEGRATION

As already stated in the Hague Programme, the Commission's Communication 'A Common Agenda for Integration: Framework for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals in the European Union' of September 2005 (COM (2005) 389) reaffirmed that a comprehensive approach, involving stakeholders at all levels, is essential for the success of integration policies. It further stated that the Commission would bring together a range of stakeholders active in the area of integration at EU level, setting up European Integration Forum and a Web Site on Integration.

The importance of sharing expertise at EU level among a broad range of stakeholders was then recalled by the Council in the Conclusions on the Common Agenda of December 2005, and more recently in the Conclusions following Third Ministerial Conference on Integration held in Vichy on 3 and 4 November 2008 (doc. 15251/08).

On 20 and 21 April 2009, these two instruments will be therefore launched to improve the cooperation and exchange of information at the EU level in the field of integration.

The development of the European Integration Forum is undertaken in co-operation with the European Economic and Social Committee, which has drawn up an exploratory opinion on the role of civil society in promoting integration policies, 'Elements for the structure, organisation and functioning of a platform for greater involvement of civil society in the EU-level promotion of policies for the integration of third-country nationals'(CES1208/2008).

The objective of the European Integration Forum is to provide a voice for representatives of civil society on integration issues, in particular relating to the EU agenda on integration, and for the Commission to take a pro-active role in such discussions. This will allow the European institutions to promote a comprehensive approach to integration, involving stakeholders at all levels.

The Forum will provide an added value as a complementary source of information and consultation.

In the Communication on the Common Agenda for Integration, the Commission considers that the Forum's main tasks could be "consultation, exchange of expertise and drawing up recommendations". As proposed by EESC, these tasks can also be fulfilled by drawing-up "reports" and "conclusions" on integration policies.

The Forum will not be an exclusive platform of dialogue or representation of civil society organisations, but it would be a European platform, whose added value would therefore be to exchange views on the EU activities in the field of integration and to provide NGOs with an occasion to discuss together with European institutions representatives priorities, issues, problems, views.

The Common Basic Principles on Integration will be the guide for the Forum's activities. Participants should be free to discuss a whole range of issues related to the integration process as such. But in order to provide a "useful input" into the development of the EU's policy on integration, the legal mandate and the policy context would frame the discussion. In particular, its agenda could be shaped along the priorities of on-going EU initiatives.

The Forum will have a maximum of 100 members and meet twice a year in its plenary composition.

Participants to the forum would be primarily EU umbrella organisations having a membership across a number of Member States dealing with integration issues, including social partners with representation at the EU level. Representatives of consultative bodies and platforms established at the national level will also be participants in the Forum, as it is crucial that the European approach of the Forum's work is based on experiences and practices of national civil society organisations. Representatives of the network of National Contact Points on Integration will be part of the Forum as the troika of the Member States of the past, current and future presidencies. Representatives of the Commission, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the

Committee of the Regions will also take part in the Forum's meetings. Experts, specifically academics and researchers, as well as European local authority networks, will also be involved in the Forum's activities.

A 'Bureau', in which both the Commission and the EESC will be represented, together with two members issued by the Forum, will define the Forum's agendas and organise its work. This body will meet four times a year, before and after each plenary meeting. The Commission and the EESC would co-chair the plenary meetings. The Forum meetings will take place at the premises of the EESC

As far as the financial support is concerned, the European Integration Fund foresees in the annual work programme for Community Actions, the necessary resources for the Forum's meeting organisation (Commission decision of 3 October 2008 C(2008)5525).

The Forum's activities will be reflected also on the European Web Site on Integration www.integration.eu.

The European Web Site on Integration is a unique EU-wide platform for networking on integration through exchange about policy and practice.

It aims especially at integration practitioners and policy-makers in both governmental and non-governmental spheres, offering:

- A vast document library containing reports, policy papers, legislation, impact assessment and evaluations
- A collection of over 200 good practices, presented in a clear and comparable way for easy extraction and import
- Country information sheets, with the latest information concerning national legislation and policy programmes
- A repository of links to external websites
- Community tools such as the 'find-a-project-partner-tool', which supports networking between stakeholders and the development of common projects
- Information on financial opportunities through grants and public tenders
- Regularly updated news and events

By acting as a bridge between integration practitioners and policy-makers, the Web Site helps to overcome the vertical fragmentation that exists between actors at different levels of government and will soon become 'Integration at your fingertips' – providing high-quality content from across Europe that responds to actors' needs and builds a community of integration practitioners.