

Comment – Ministry Communication on the Treaty of Lisbon (Ds 2007:48)

The National Federation of Study Associations is the umbrella organisation of Sweden's adult education associations. The Federation's views on the Ministry Communication on the Treaty of Lisbon concerns the provisions regarding democratic principles. Under the heading "The principle of participatory democracy", it says the following: "A prerequisite for a successful democracy is that citizens participate in the decision-making processes of the Union as well as in the development of the Union in general. It is important to consider civil society's views on various EU issues at an early stage." The Communication expresses the aim to seek a greater degree of consultation from ministries with representatives of civil society and with regional and local politicians in important EU issues.

The EU's intention to maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with civil society is praiseworthy. As regards the actual implementation of participatory democracy, we believe that non-formal adult education can contribute with valuable knowledge and experience.

In order for a democracy to operate successfully, citizens must feel that it is worthwhile getting involved in the development of society – that they, together with others like them, will have a reasonable opportunity to influence both their own future and the society they live in. In Sweden, non-formal adult education provides people with a unique opportunity to be active citizens. The country's nine adult education associations offer a stable infrastructure which strengthens the 208 member organisations of the adult education associations.

Adult education associations also provide people with a way to influence local issues that are affected by EU decisions. According to the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR), around 60 per cent of the decisions handled in Sweden's various assemblies are influenced by the EU in one way or another. Adult education associations can channel the needs and views of citizens through to political decision-makers and government agencies. Conversely, decision-makers can use non-formal adult education as a means of informing citizens and tapping into their opinions. In other words, adult education associations can help bridge the gap between the people and their elected representatives.

If democracy is to gain a foothold among citizens, opportunities for discussing issues of a local nature without being restricted by party political or other values. The way in which adult education associations capture and channel the thoughts and ideas of citizens makes them an important complement to political parties.

Using adult education associations to bridge the gap between people and their elected representatives is one step on the way to achieving greater popular support for EU issues.

On behalf of the National Federation of Study Associations

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