

**Note from the General Secretariats of the Conference of Atlantic Arc Cities
and the Union of the Baltic Cities**

April 2004

***Reaction to the European Commission's Communication
"Dialogue with associations of regional and local authorities
on the formulation of European Union policy"***

The Conference of Atlantic Arc Cities (C.A.A.C.) and the Union of the Baltic Cities (U.B.C.) welcome the publication by the European Commission of its Communication *Dialogue with associations of regional and local authorities on the formulation of European Union policy*, adopted on 19 December 2003, which marks the continuation of the work begun with the publication in 2001 of the White Paper on Governance.

The goals of the new dialogue are as follows:

- "to involve regional and local actors – via European and national associations [...] – by giving them the opportunity to express their views on the European policies they help to implement before the formal decision-making processes start;
- to ensure a better understanding of the policy guidelines of the EU and European legislation".

The communication:

- "stresses that this dialogue is additional and complementary to all the other methods it uses to consult regional and local authorities;
- more clearly sets out the role the Committee of the Regions is to play in the proposed dialogue;
- establishes a reference framework for identifying the associations that may participate in the dialogue".

These proposals should reinforce the role and participation of regional and local authorities in first discussing and then formulating European policies, thus responding to the demands voiced by the regional and local authorities and their representative associations since the process of implementing a new European governance was initiated. It is an important step forward, but the C.A.A.C. and U.B.C. wish nonetheless to highlight certain remaining questions, and to make a number of observations.

a. Purpose of the dialogue

1. The two organisations welcome the recognition of the "additional and complementary" nature of this dialogue which, as it indicated in C.A.A.C. reaction to the Commission's preparatory document of March 2003, should not lessen the possibilities for and importance of direct contacts between individual regional and local authorities, their associations and the representatives of the European Union – the Commission, the Parliament or the Committee of the Regions.

2. They regret however that the communication, in outlining the purpose of the dialogue, makes absolutely no mention of the possibility for national and European associations to make their own priorities, concerns and proposals known to the European institutions. The presentation of the dialogue is limited to a description of the procedures for presenting the Commission's priorities and initiatives, to which the regional and local government associations are asked to react. A genuine dialogue can only be established if all the various partners have the possibility not only to react to but also to initiate subjects for discussion.

It is essential that regional and local authorities are able to obtain information and exchange points of view before decisions are taken. It is just as important for them to be able – via this dialogue – to introduce and debate questions concerning their own needs, to which the European Union has to find a response.

3. The dialogue with the associations should make the European decision-making process more coherent. The communication refers in this respect to an "integrated impact-assessment method", already established by the European Commission, which allows it "to establish a dialogue and debate with the various interested parties". It is important that the Commission gives details about exactly how this method will help to establish a dialogue with the regional and local authorities and their representatives, and how these will be involved in the implementation of this method.

Participants

4. The C.A.A.C. and U.B.C. note with interest the European Commission's concern to ensure that "all the interests of regional and local authorities" are represented, notably in order to reflect the diversity of situations throughout the EU. Attention will need to be paid, in the processes by which this dialogue between the Commission, the Committee of the Regions and the associations is implemented, that this vitally important principle is effectively applied.

5. The Conference and the Union reiterate their support for the principle that the Committee of the Regions should play a central role in this process. They wish to emphasise, however, the need to ensure that the cities are represented in all their diversity within the Committee of the Regions.

6. Concerning the identification of the associations to be invited to take part in the dialogue with the European Commission and the Committee of the Regions, a more extensive process than that proposed in the communication should be undertaken.

First of all an inventory should be made – and regularly updated – of regional and local authority associations interested in taking an active part in the dialogue. Certain associations may for example have direct contacts with certain European institutions, even though the Committee of the Regions may not be aware of them. The various institutions concerned should work in collaboration.

This would permit a global vision of a diverse and changing reality. It is reasonable that those regional and local authorities associations that are the most active today should play a more important role. It is however also necessary to take future developments into account and allow new associations that are set up and become firmly established – in response to the authorities' new concerns – to become involved in the dialogue as active partners.

Such an inventory would moreover facilitate the selection of associations on the basis of the subjects to be discussed.

7. Concerning the criteria for selecting associations, the C.A.A.C. and the U.B.C. support the criteria described in the communication, but wish to state that in addition to the criteria mentioned attention should be paid to the financial independence of the associations taking part in the dialogue in order to guarantee that all are free to express their views. In any event, the selection must be transparent and well founded.

8. The communication emphasises the essential role of the Committee of the Regions, but does not give details as to which of the European Commission's departments will monitor the dialogue and contribute to its implementation. A number of different departments are likely to be involved, depending on the subjects being dealt with. However, monitoring of the whole process should be centralised in one Commission department that has a real cross-cutting vision of all the subjects being dealt with, so as to ensure the overall coherence of the initiative.

b. Content and organisation

9. The European Commission proposes to institute a systematic dialogue based on the presentation of its annual work programme and the major policy initiatives that have a direct or indirect territorial

impact. It is suggested that the dialogue could take the form of "an annual meeting between the President of the Commission and/or the vice-presidents, and the representatives of the associations" as well as "meetings with the Commissioners responsible for policies that have an impact at territorial level".

The rules governing the organisation of these meetings need to be clarified in greater detail, so as to ensure that they result in a real exchange between the Commission and the regional and local government associations, which will not be satisfied with mere presentations.

10. The establishment of a real dialogue should also provide a channel by which the regional and local authorities can express their current concerns to the Commission. These do not always correspond to the Commission's own immediate priorities, but it is essential that Commission is be aware of them and takes them into account so that its action can be as close as possible to the citizen. The agenda should not therefore be set solely on the basis of the Commission's general work programme, as is indicated, but should ensure that the expectations of the associations and the regional and local authorities they represent are effectively taken into account prior to the meetings.

The dialogue which is to be instituted in the preparatory phase of the various meetings proposed will be fundamental in ensuring the success of the initiative, and the C.A.A.C. and U.B.C. regret that the communication gives no further details on this question.

Evaluation

11. It is also regrettable that this communication offers no indications about the evaluation of the dialogue which is to be established. There are no details about the monitoring or evaluation of the results of these meetings.

These meetings should be made widely known to the general public. Information about them should be circulated to all regional and local authorities, starting from the preparatory phase. The internet is an essential tool for presenting the issues involved and the results of the dialogue to the public.

12. In addition, the impact of the debates and the extent to which proposals made at the formulation stage of European policies are taken into account should be measured. It is particularly important that when the Commission fails to take account of a significant proposal or demand emanating from the associations, it should give the reasons for its decision.

13. Over and above the immediate results of the dialogue, it would be useful to develop instruments for discussion and action aiming to constantly improve the dialogue in new ways if necessary. A dialogue monitoring and evaluation committee, made up of members of the Commission, the Committee of the Regions, and representatives of the associations, should be set up for this purpose.