RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CIVIL SOCIETY AND PUBLIC AUTHORITIES IN EUROPE

Prague, 27 – 29 October 2005

International seminar jointly organised by

THE LEBRET-IRFED INTERNATIONAL CENTRE

AND THE EKUMENICKA AKADEMIE PRAHA

Report written by François Bellec

Éducation et culture

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ORGANISERS

The Lebret-Irfed International Centre

The Lebret-Irfed International Centre, based in France, defines itself firstly as a network of people, those involved in development work, people from a variety of cultural and spiritual backgrounds, and secondly as a place of applied research on human economics. Its progress is based on one constant: the need for populations to participate in their economic, social and cultural development.

The Lebret-Irfed Centre's objective is to review, research and propose strategies for considering and implementing a process of development that is balanced, sustainable and based on principles of solidarity. This should involve placing people back at the centre of the process and of all development, in accordance with the two elements of Louis-Joseph Lebret's maxim: *"the development of the entire human being and of every human being"*.

By organising seminars, the Centre facilitates exchanges between those involved in development, who are all too often divided by ethnic, social, cultural or religious differences. Its monthly publication *Foi et développement* ["*Faith and Development*"] acts as forum for the members of the network to express themselves and bears witness to the exchange of ideas taking place.

For its 2003-2006 programme, the Lebret-Irfed Centre intends to hold, in conjunction with the members of its network, a seminar in each major region of the world focusing on the main preoccupations of the partners in the region concerned. In addition, the Centre is endeavouring to build bridges between international and local activities.

Ekumenicka Akademie Praha

Ekumenicka Akademie Praha is an independent organisation based in the Czech Republic that holds seminars, conferences and workshops on issues related to culture, politics, social justice, sustainable development, North-South solidarity, the churches and society.

As such, it works in networks and in partnership with institutions on the national, regional (Central and Eastern Europe), and international level. In certain cases, it takes part in campaigns such as "The Czech Republic against Poverty" and "Trafficking of Women", carries out lobbying activities, and undertakes research projects.

Ekumenicka Akademie Praha is a member of the Ecumenical Association of Academic and Laity Centres in Europe, one of the founding members of the Czech forum for Development Co-operation (FoRS), a platform for non-governmental organisations involved in development.

Ekumenicka Akademie has built up expertise in a number of areas. It has also expanded its relationships on a national and international level with partners in civil society and the churches, while other institutions and public authorities are showing more and more interest in its work.
All of this encompasses a potential for development that appears unique in the countries of Eastern Europe: "We can allow ourselves to say that we have played a pioneering role in bringing together partners who otherwise would not have met."

People responsible for organising the seminar:

Jiri Silny for Ekumenicka Akademie Praha
 Mathilde Le Tourneur, Marlyse Thommen and Sergio Regazzoni for the Lebret-Irfed Centre

PARTICIPANTS

In order to bring about the most favourable conditions for a concentrated focus on the future of European civil society, it had been decided that the Prague seminar should involve a limited number of participants, even if this meant that – for logistical reasons – some countries could not be represented. Even so, the panel of representatives was satisfactory.

Countries represented

- Slovakia
- The Czech Republic
- Romania
- Austria
- Germany
- Finland
- Portugal
- Belgium
- France
- Switzerland
- Lebanon
- India
- Latin America and Caribbean network

Countries unable to attend

- Slovenia
- Italy
- Hungary
- Bulgaria
- Vietnam
- Southern Africa network

Also taking part in the seminar:

- Dr Erhard Busek, Special Coordinator of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe,
- Henri Lourdelle, Advisor with the European Trade Union Confederation

SEMINAR PROGRAMME

26 October

Reception at the Hotel Olsanka, Prague, where the seminar is being held, and informal presentation by the participants depending on their time of arrival

27 October

0830-0900:	Welcome to delegates
0900-1000:	Opening speech, outline of objectives
1000-1030:	Presentation about Prague introductory visits
1030-1500:	Prague introductory visits, in groups
1500-1600:	Presentation summarising the participants' written contributions
1630-1800:	Discussion and overview of the challenges to be faced
2000:	"Rytmy Afriky" evening get-together

28 October

0900-1000:	Panel and discussion on the relationship between civil society and public authorities from a European perspective
1100-1230:	Panel and discussion on the relationship between civil society and public authorities from an international perspective (presentation on African and Latin American experiences)
1230-1400:	Lunch
1400-1430:	Group sessions on the challenges identified during the work of the first two days
1430-1500:	Discussion
1600-1800:	Contribution by Dr. Erhard Busek, Special Coordinator of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, on "Civil society and transformation in Central Europe and the Balkans"
1800-1830:	Report back on the group sessions to the plenary meeting

29 October

0900-1000:	Networking and action processes on a European level, practices, and lessons to be drawn from other continental networks (presentation of processes in Southern Asia and the Middle East)
1030-1200:	Group sessions on the prospects for joint action after the seminar
1200-1400:	Lunch
1400-1600:	Discussion on the prospects for joint activities in Europe
1630-1730:	Report and conclusions

OVERVIEW OF OBJECTIVES

No one can deny that the European economic and political project has made considerable advances over the last few years. The entry of ten new countries into the EU and the aspirations of several others to join bear witness to the interest the body provokes in different countries.

However, following the rejection of the Constitution in spring 2005 by France and the Netherlands and the uncertain nature of the forthcoming consultations in other countries, we can only conclude that European politics are currently at an impasse. There are several explanations for this deadlock. One of these, in particular, should not be underestimated: the lack of representation of European civil society bodies in the discussions and decisions taken by the institutions of the EU.

The delays in this regard are indeed obvious. It is pointless to hope for a significant advance while Europe's citizens remain unrepresented in the European project, something that is of the utmost relevance to their lives. This delay is affecting both Europe's economic development and, to an even greater degree, its progress on the democratic front. Who could possibly claim that we can build a genuinely democratic Union without mobilising citizens in every aspect of their lives and societies, on an economic, political, social and cultural level?

On of the difficulties in creating a well-organised European civil society derives from the history of Europe and its separation into two blocs – a separation that left a lasting mark on the continent during the long years of the Cold War. The peoples that previously belonged to the East and West of Europe remain to a large degree ignorant of one another and view each other with some fear, even going as far as seeing the other group as a threat in terms of emigration and jobs, for example.

To this is added another difficulty – that of relating the European question to the local issues facing people on the ground in the different countries of Europe. In this context, Europe's citizens find it difficult to see the value, for their day-to-day lives, in building a European civil society that is capable of acting as a serious partner for discussion with the institutions and public authorities concerned. They face difficulties in identifying the appropriate and effective channels for expressing their desire for local solutions, for transparency, and for involvement in decision-making. This situation can only generate frustration and discouragement among Europe's citizens.

Nonetheless, several actors in society are busy developing many types of civil society organisation. These forums represent a wide variety of voices – in ways that may well be only partial, occasional or poorly articulated overall, but which reveal views that deserve to be known, communicated and confronted. These experiences can be seen as promising models for the construction of a "Citizens' Europe", representing as they do the signs of an organised civil society that is capable of bringing pressure on democratic institutions and being taken into account by these at every level.

On the basis of these statements, the Prague seminar set itself two objectives:

An overall objective
To contribute to the improvement and strengthening of the democratic processes underlying the European Union by promoting dialogue and understanding between civil society and institutions.

Specific objectives
- To help bring together actors in civil society from the different areas of Europe with the aim of overcoming the fear and ignorance existing between populations

- To systematise local experiences, notably in cross-border regions, encouraging the genuine exercise of democracy by groups of peoples within Europe

- To promote and strengthen the involvement of social actors in the process of building a European civil society

- To communicate the experiences and the educational and methodological tools instituted by the seminar for the benefit of a larger audience in each of the countries involved.

I – HISTORY OF THE SEMINAR

A research project initiated in 2001

Since 2001[1], the Lebret Centre[2] has been involved, in cooperation with its members and with its networks of partners, in preparing and holding meetings on the topics such as the *Dialogue between civilisations* and *Relationships between civil society and public authorities*. Thus it was that seminars came to be held in several major regions of the world (the Horn of Africa, the Middle East, South Asia) or are now being planned (Central America, Latin America and the Caribbean).

The idea of holding an event in Europe, as part of this overall project, was raised at a seminar organised in February 2004 by another European network (the Inter-Citizen Seminar) at the Europahaus Burgenland institute in Eisenstadt, Austria. On that occasion, a small group of people from Austria, Hungary, Slovakia and France expressed an interest and immediately began working on a preliminary framework for the project. People from other countries (the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Romania, Belgium and Portugal) got involved subsequently.

To prepare the seminar in concrete terms – both in terms of allowing the participants to get to know each other and in respect of the content to be discussed – two workshops took place. The first was held at Chênex in the Savoy region (on the Franco-Swiss border) in January 2005, and the second at Bratislava (Slovakia) in June of the same year. These two meetings were crucial in ensuring that the Prague seminar would have some chance of success.

Procedures used in preparing for the seminar
In order to prepare for the two workshops and the seminar, a preparatory questionnaire (see Appendix ...) was sent to a number of people responsible for action processes viewed as likely to take part. Although the responses received did not always correspond to the nature of the questions asked, a summary presents these contributions in matrix form (Appendix ...). In addition, a three to four-page summary of each response was provided to all those invited to the seminar in the delegates' folders.

The Chênex workshop (France)

Civil society representatives from Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania took part in this meeting alongside representatives from the Savoy branch of the Lebret Centre. This is not the place to go back over the details of the situations and actions discussed, which varied in line with the domestic context and history of each country. Instead, we will simply reiterate the main points covered in the discussions.

The local branch of the Lebret Centre, which is focused primarily on Franco-Swiss cross-border issues (or more precisely issues involving the Savoy and Geneva regions) described how relationships between civil society and public authorities were influenced by legacies and historical and cultural developments that vary from country to country. They are underpinned by the views that each country's citizens have of democracy: for example, within Switzerland that democracy is in the increasing, or in France that it is in decline.

From that starting point, various questions were raised. For instance, is democracy simply a tool used by politicians in order to gain an electoral majority before power is then delegated entirely into their hands? In the relationships between civil societies and public authorities what is the role of the economic actor? And in what ways are economics, politics and the search for social justice interconnected? To respond to these questions, a strong desire was expressed to see aggressive steps taken to build a democracy that is closer to the citizens involved.

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[1] In October 2001, in partnership with the Economic Commission for Africa, the Lebret Centre organised, at Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, a seminar entitled: *Civil society, local development and globalisation – the case of less developed countries (LDCs)*.
[2] The Lebret Centre became the Lebret-Irfed International Centre in June 2004 following a merger between two organisations.

The other participants (notably from Slovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria) prioritised the need to look more closely at the problems and issues arising in connection with migrant populations, minorities, the rights of these groups, and the application of those rights in different countries. It emerged from this that the issue of intercultural dialogue – another area of interest for the Lebret-Irfed International Centre – should be considered in conjunction with the question of relationships between civil society and public authorities in Europe.

The Bratislava workshop (Slovakia)

This meeting, which again brought together delegates from Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania and France, was marked by the effect of the different political regimes that the people of the East and the West had experienced during the Cold War prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall: foreign hegemony and a denial of democracy. The suffering has by no means been forgotten in the East and mutual ignorance remains strong.

While, in Romania, the efforts that have been made to recapture the philosophical basis of the social change are allowing public opinion leaders to be developed and civil society to be emancipated, the testimony from Slovakia illustrated the difficulty faced by individuals and civil society organisations in having any influence over the political establishment and the administration owing to the corruption endemic in the country.

During the workshop, two exercises bore further witness to this confrontation. The first consisted of a presentation and discussion of the five fundamental maxims handed down by Lebret:
- the human being is at the root and at the heart of all development;
- participation in democracy is essential;
- there is an essential link between local issues and global issues;
- a willingness to engage in social dialogue is critical;
- the encounter with other cultures is an inescapable force for peace and development.

Following the discussion, the participants expressed their agreement on these five points and adopted them as shared points of reference. A complementary proposal was made in relation to respect for all aspects of human rights.

The second exercise was intended to pull the delegates away from their immediate environments in an attempt to encourage them to set their dreams in a European contest by giving rein to their imaginations and ideas of utopia. The results were summarised under three headings: daily life, environment and ecology; political structures and democracy; international relations and society.

Evaluation of the two workshops

The participants felt that significant progress was made between the first workshop and the second in terms of people's familiarity with the other delegates, with the realities of the situations involved, with the organisations, and with the activities carried out. The stated their wish to continue with the process of reflection on which they had embarked and agreed on the need to look more deeply at the issues involved. They were eager to identify concrete opportunities for cooperation and to consider joint projects, and even make proposals for a future programme focusing on cross-border civil society issues.

It should be noted, however, that the actions cited by the participants were focused more on strengthening civil society than on analysing the relationship between civil society and public authorities. Furthermore, the contributions cast little if any light on the delegates' values or motivations, or on their failures, questions, hesitations or initial tentative steps.

Afterwards, two other action processes were considered, from Belgium and Portugal respectively. In this way, a total of eight contributions served as a basis for discussion at the two workshops and for the seminar.

Yves Berthelot, President of the Lebret-Irfed Centre, gave a summary of the main points revealed by the answers given to the questionnaire and proposed some possibilities for considering the issues and taking action.

Examination of the contributions reveals variances in the respondents' experiences in different cultural and historical environments, indicating differences in objectives and audiences. The contributions involved national or local objectives implemented using a variety of methods. Rather than representing an obstacle to dialogue, such differences are in fact a source of inspiration and benefit.

- *Viewing differences as a benefit*

The contributions illustrate three modes of action and of objectives associated with civil society organisations (CSOs). These three modes consist of cooperating with the authorities, opposing them, or seeking to change their policies and behaviour.

These goals, which can be pursued either in tandem or separately, can therefore be summarised as follows:

- heightening public awareness of an issue or cause;
- lobbying local, national or international bodies so as to influence their policies or ensure that they respect the law;
- providing support to a community or individuals.

A consideration of the nature of CSOs would be valuable here.

- *Making use of the law*

Some contributors underlined the importance of those pieces of legislation that give CSOs the right to exist and practise freely. Such a right is now formally incorporated within the constitutions of most European countries. Nevertheless, this does not mean that these rights are automatically respected by public authorities or exercised by citizens, many of whom are focused on satisfying their own needs as individuals.

More generally, individual and political rights, as well as economic, social and cultural rights, are now recognised by most countries. Many of these have adapted their legislative systems accordingly. Such rights, however, are by no means universally respected and may, in fact, be ignored even more if civil society does not insist on their application.

It would be helpful to cover the following points in more detail:

- Rights tend to be eroded if they are not exercised. CSOs have a responsibility to encourage and assist citizens in making use of their rights and accepting their responsibilities.
- In countries where the rights and responsibilities of the different actors (local authorities, businesses and CSOs) are not clearly outlined in legal or institutional frameworks, it is the job of the CSOs to apply pressure on the authorities by making reference to the practices current in other countries.

- *Being competent and attentive*

Supporting a community or an individual, educating people, discussing planning issues for a neighbourhood or region, conducting a campaign to change opinions, or lobbying the powers that be requires commitment, expertise, listening skills and the ability to negotiate.

The contributions underlined the fact that the authorities, for their part, do not listen, while civil servants are unwilling to accept solutions proposed by the general public and of which they would not have thought themselves. The contributions omitted to mention the fact that on occasion the CSOs, too, can fail to listen to the wishes expressed by the people or communities they are supporting, and instead end up imposing their own solutions.

Accordingly, there is a real need to discuss practices and conditions that can lead to successful actions and relationships with the authorities, notably:

- the need to have a clear objective that meets a specific requirement, both for the sake of mobilising supporters and in order to have an impact on the authorities;
- the importance of properly analysing the political, economic and social context;
- the need to stay informed and abreast of the situation, especially by keeping up a dialogue with the authorities.

- *Maintaining ethical standards*

It can happen that government policies involve the use of CSOs whose aims coincide with their interests or for the purpose of carrying out activities that the government prefers to delegate. In itself, this is totally acceptable provided that the CSOs concerned remain faithful to their principles and aims. This is not automatically the case when the reputation of a CSO or its financial resources is at stake.

On this point, it would be useful to share experiences with regard to:

- Ethical issues in dealing with public bodies and politicians;
- GoNGOs ("*governmental NGOs*");
- Accessing international finance.

- *Developing strategies and taking action*

However stimulating a meeting may be, it is of no real use if it is not followed up. At the very least the minutes of the meeting should be written up. It would be even more valuable, however, to devise theoretical and methodological tools for pursuing the dialogue between civil society and public authorities.

In addition, it would appear desirable that the dialogue initiated in preparation for Prague and undertaken at the seminar itself be continued by the network of civil society organisations (CSOs) that has formed as a result. The participants could agree to make this network a permanent feature and to draw up principles that the network members would share with each other and with CSOs in Europe and around the world.

The delegates could discuss the follow-up procedures for the meeting and the formation of a network. All of this requires an exchange of ideas on what a network should be, on what

unites its members, and on how the network should be organised.

II – ORGANISED CIVIL SOCIETY
IN EUROPE

If we are to discuss all aspects of civil society in Europe, then we will need to use methods of investigation and research that are outside the scope of this seminar. That is not our objective here, however. Rather, our aim is – with the help of a panel of organisations that share the same values and represent the situation on the ground in several European countries – to identify the progress made and the barriers to progress, in respect of building a civil society that is able to conduct a dialogue with public authorities and to exert influence on the policy directions and decisions that affect it.

The situation in Central and Eastern Europe

In opening the seminar, Jiri Silny, director of Ekumenicka Akademie Praha, reviewed the difficulties associated with the advance of civil society in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe since the fall of Communism. The process of change has been complex, while integration of the European Union has been slow on account of the economic disparities involved and each country's particular interests. As a result, the transition to democracy is far from complete across Europe.

If we take the case of the former Czechoslovakia, the partition of the country – while a peaceful process in itself – has been viewed negatively by the population. The economy has in the meantime moved over to neo-liberal globalisation without any thought being given to social development. People have been caught out: *"The lack of transparency in the economic reforms, and the privatisation of companies and the market have not caught the public's attention; people were concentrating primarily on political changes,"* noted Jiri with regret. *"The process of democratisation has been marginalised as liberal globalisation involves 'economisation' and favours consumerism."*

Furthermore, the culture of the market exercises a certain control over civil society and impedes relationships with government, relationships conceived with the aim of seeking areas of common interest. *"Even so, none of the major challenges facing us now can be resolved without the involvement of civil society,"* insists Jiri. *"The entire population needs to feel involved in the task of building lives of value for everyone. In this way we can avoid a situation where pockets of affluence exist alongside areas of overwhelming poverty."* And this poverty is becoming more and more similar to the poverty of the South. *"The process of impoverishment of the countries of the former Communist bloc is approaching the levels that affect the countries of the Third World."*

The key question here concerns the place and role to be taken by both citizens and institutions. Peter Marianek of the Slovak organisation Hnutie Human made the following critical point: *"Citizens cannot be treated as mere electors who cast their vote every four years. We don't have a government just so it can dictate to citizens what they should do. We don't want to see a 'God-like' government that controls people in every aspect of their lives. We want citizens to be masters of their own fate in a genuine democracy. Citizens who consider themselves responsible for the quality and ethics of public authorities."*

In the Czech Republic, Jiri Silny does, in spite of everything, see some advances in citizenship, particularly among young people. This sector of the population is increasingly aware of the breadth and seriousness of the issues arising in the modern world and is also showing more interest in Third World development. In Jiri's view, this testifies positively to the work done by the organisations. Another example is the warm welcome given by the Czech public to the promotion by the local organisation of fair trade with the South.

In order to illustrate the activities undertaken by Czech civil society organisations, Ekumenicka Akademie Praha arranged for the delegates to the Prague seminar to take part in some introductory visits to organisations locally. These meetings allowed the participants to gain an initial overview of the activities of civil society organisations in the Czech Republic. Four visits were scheduled:
- The cooperative sector

- A Roma organisation
- Action to assist socially excluded and homeless people
- The environmental movement

- *The cooperative sector*

The Czech cooperative sector experienced significant growth during the period between the two World Wars (1918-1945). This was a boom time for cooperatives in the country, which were active in many different fields (including credit, consumer goods, manufacturing and culture). The cultural cooperatives in particular were a special feature of the movement at this time. (The National Theatre of Prague, for example, was originally founded as a cooperative.) The expansion into these kinds of areas can no doubt be explained by the fact that the movement was driven largely by the country's intellectual elite.

The movement's progress was interrupted between 1945 and 1989 on account of the war and the Occupation. Up until 1948, the movement was either subject to the control of the Nazi regime or was banned. As a consequence, many cooperatives were involved in the resistance movement. From 1948 onwards, the cooperative movement actually formed part of the socialist economic system. There was some easing up in the direction of greater democracy in 1968 (the Prague Spring), but this period came to an abrupt end with the arrival of the Soviet Army.

From 1989 onwards, with the collapse of the communist bloc, a new period of independence and democratisation opened up for the cooperative movement.

Nowadays, the Czech cooperative movement can point to a number of advances:

- The independence of the movement: since 1990, the cooperative movement has been free of state control. This independence was implemented by releasing the cooperatives into independent ownership.
- The formation of a federation of cooperatives, an organisation that now includes virtually every cooperative in the country. It therefore brings together more than one million members and 100,000 employees, organising forums and developing interpersonal contacts on both a national level and also with the intention of forming international links.

Nonetheless, the cooperative sector also faces certain obstacles:

- A tarnished reputation: in many people's eyes, it remains a component of the totalitarian economic system to which it was obliged to attach itself during the period of the Occupation. Additionally, the movement suffered from the discrediting of the agricultural cooperatives, which could not compete with large-scale producers, and from the actions of certain elements within the movement. For example, certain credit cooperatives, on going bankrupt, brought financial ruin for the members who had entrusted their savings to them.

- The obstacle of neo-liberalism: the opening up of the Czech economy to competition, especially since its entry into the European Union, has made it difficult for cooperatives to compete. Since the cooperatives are subject to the same statutory regime as private businesses, they are finding it more and more difficult to survive.

- The difficulty of entering into a dialogue with the public authorities: the government ignores the fact that the cooperatives have not just an economic function but a social value, too. For instance, the employment of people with disabilities, of vulnerable people, and so on, is given no consideration by the public authorities. Lobbying activities have been carried out since 1990 aimed at changing legislation and creating a law that specifically regulates the cooperative sector. Since these actions have met with no success, the cooperative movement now finds itself strongly discriminated against in relation to private businesses.

Nevertheless, the cooperative sector intends firstly to continue lobbying for new laws and secondly to transform cooperatives on the basis of not-for-profit organisational models. This development, ongoing today, is evident in areas such as culture, healthcare and education.

- *A Roma organisation*

There are some 5 million Roma people in Europe, a group that has all the features of a nation – including its own language – but does not have its own territory. Their situation in the countries of Eastern Europe has actually deteriorated since the fall of communism, one of the consequences of which was the abandonment of the principle of employment for all. The rate of unemployment affecting Roma varies from 50 to 80%, depending on the country concerned.

While the conditions they face generally are very poor in most of Europe, in the Czech Republic – where they are no longer a "travelling" community – they are recognised as an official minority and as such can elect members to the National Assembly.

Athinganoi is an organisation set up by Roma people for Roma people. Its role is to allow the Roma population within the Czech Republic to gain education, to take part in economic development, and to benefit from all of the rights enjoyed by ordinary citizens.

The problem of education, to which the organisation attaches the most importance, starts at primary school age but becomes more important at the age of 14, when according to Romany custom children traditionally start to work. A law prohibiting under-age marriages has provided some protection for girls and countered the practice by which they are prevented from continuing their studies.

The methods used by Athinganoi to achieve these goals include:

- Providing information to Roma students about financial support from which they might benefit;
- Helping students with the documentation needed when applying for scholarships;
- Providing information on educational opportunities in the Czech Republic and abroad;
- Developing a database of academic research and publications about the Roma people;

- Maintaining a specialised library of books and materials on all matters of interest to the Roma;
- Forming relationships with organisations dealing with human rights and the Roma minority;
- Building links between all members of the Roma community engaged in higher education so as to facilitate mutual support.

The organisation is also eager to use successful members of the community as role models who can motivate the Roma population.

- *Action to assist socially excluded and homeless people*

There are currently around 3,500 people living in Prague with no fixed abode. At the same time, the various hostels have only 700 bed spaces available in total. Alongside the Salvation Army, the other major bodies involved consist of a "Hope Hostel" (run by Caritas) and the City of Prague. Among those using the facilities, approximately 25% are from Prague, 10% are Slovaks – in Slovakia the government has no policy with regard to the homeless – 4% are foreigners from other countries, and the rest are mainly from other parts of the Czech Republic. Altogether, there are 114 hostels in the country.

The Salvation Army was first set up in 1919 and was suppressed in 1952. It was set up again in 1990 and until 1992 ran the only hostel facility for victims of social exclusion. Currently, it operates 11 hostels in nine different towns and cities. Nine of these facilities are for adults, three are for single mothers, and one is for the elderly.

The Czech Salvation Army is associated with its sister organisation in Amsterdam, which helped it to set up and ensured that it was adequately funded for the first four years of its activity. The Czech organisation now has to source its own funding.

Prague has the largest Salvation Army hostel in Europe, with a capacity of 220 beds, sleeping around 2000 people per year. It also offers a daytime drop-in centre. Users of the overnight hostel service eat breakfast and go back onto the streets from 7am onwards. The

accommodation is free of charge, though those who can make a donation of 10 Crowns. Clients know that they are allowed to stay from three to seven nights consecutively. From the tenth night, they have to make a new request for access. For the people concerned (consisting largely of women, elderly people, and people with physical or mental disabilities), this represents a definite aid to survival.

Any person who turns up to the hostel is received by a Salvation Army social worker, who goes over their choices with them in the light of their situation. A prerequisite is that they should take action to obtain papers (i.e. register with social security and with employment services) and should go and seek casual work and resources. Clients who follow this route can regularise their situation in six weeks. Provided that they are successful, they can aim to move from a large dormitory room to a six-person room. From that point onwards, they make a financial contribution.

Some clients manage to reorganise their lives and then apply to stay longer term in a single room while they are waiting to find a room or other accommodation. It is the elderly clients who have the least success in finding accommodation away from the hostel.

The organisation is supported by a number of volunteers who provide assistance outside their regular work. They include doctors, former students who have taken a work placement, and others.

With regard to relationships with the public authorities, the Salvation Army is a member of a federation of hostels that negotiates with the government, the City of Prague, neighbourhood town halls and other municipalities. The situation in Prague is unusual in that the city suffers from an ongoing crisis with regard to housing.

The Prague city administration recognises the work done by the organisations and willingly provides funding to them. The public authorities know that such organisations are providing an irreplaceable service in terms of preventing crime, antisocial behaviour, and in combating transmittable diseases.

They also produce studies and reports on the situation and propose solutions. One of the major difficulties is that the current legal framework makes no provision for social housing. This is why the organisations are asking for legislation to be introduced on this issue. It is very difficult for people who have experienced homelessness to find alternative accommodation owing to their lack of purchasing power and discrimination on the part of potential landlords.

- *The environmental movement*

The organisation known as Zeleny Kruh ("Green Circle") is a member of the Hnuti Duha network, founded in 1989 in the city of Brno. This is a national organisation that has a wide influence in the Czech Republic. In 1994 it became a member of *Friends of the Earth International*.

Zeleny Kruh is involved in activities in the following areas: energy, forestry, mining and public finances (monitoring how public funds are used).

With regard to energy, the organisation is campaigning for an end to nuclear energy production. It favours energy-saving measures combined with energy production using alternative renewable sources.

In respect of forestry, the organisation campaigns for a policy of reforestation and protection for the country's natural woodlands. There is some way to go in achieving compliance with the European Union rules governing environmental protection.

When it comes to mining, the practice of prospecting for and extracting gold is causing substantial damage to the environment, as is intensive coal-mining. The organisation is critical of the fact that the country's public electricity agency operates coal-fired power stations and exports 40% of its production.

In addition, Zeleny Kruh is campaigning for the survival of the country's railway network. This is because of the government's plans to close a number of minor lines that are considered to be making a loss. This issue is

currently causing controversy in the Central Bohemia region. Bus services are cheaper to run than trains and are preferred by the People's Party, which holds power in the regions. Furthermore, Australian and Canadian multinationals have been investing in this sector since 1989, taking advantage of the general process of privatisation.

Thanks to its website and the conferences it has organised, Zeleny Kruh is helping to raise awareness of environmental issues right across the Czech Republic. (It is represented in each of the country's 14 regions.) It also actively lobbies central government, local bodies, and the Green Party. Such activity is often difficult on account of the tensions that exist between the political forces on the ground (social democrats, conservatives, former communists), who exploit environmental issues as part of their campaigns and battles against one another in national elections. There is a legal procedure available that allows for public access to decisions made, but the pressure to restrict this is strong.

Under the communist regime, environmentalists were persecuted. At present, while the situation has changed substantially, the current government tends to consider civil society organisations as just as dangerous as its communist predecessor did. As a result, relations with the public authorities are tense. And the Green Party, which Zeleny Kruh lobbies to take account of its demands, appears to have no influence in parliament. This has not stopped the environmentalist movement from gaining the support of public opinion in the Czech Republic.

The situation in South-Eastern Europe

In the Balkans, the development of civil society faces obstacles that stem not just from the former communist regimes but also from the history and culture of the countries concerned. For people there, the concept of civil society has little meaning and, what's more, in some countries there is virtually no central government. It is therefore vital that we consider and analyse in depth the difficulties facing the people of the region if we are to help them in making progress towards the achievement of genuine democracy.

Christine von Kohl is the director of the Austrian organisation known as Balkan Dialog as well as being an independent journalist active in the region. She gave a realist's view of the situation in these countries. *"Brussels has set the EU membership criteria that have to be met by the countries of the former Soviet bloc – countries that have been controlled and regulated for many years. This was clearly not the regime that the people there would have wished for. Neither the role of the state nor that of civil society has ever been defined. As a result, people in these countries have not had the chance to develop any real notion of citizenship. This lack of citizenship and of civic responsibility has led to the people concerned being viewed as objects rather than subjects by those in power."*

Christine von Kohl pointed out that citizenship in much of the rest of Europe was acquired and developed as a consequence of revolutions or reforms, leading gradually to the formation of democratic, constitutional states. The population of South-East Europe, however, has not experienced such a process. Their literature was late in developing. Information was transmitted orally for a long time. History is inscribed in people's memories on an emotional rather than a rational level.

As a result, under the communist regime, ideas were imposed from above, by force. *"At present,"* she explained, *"the European Union wishes to convince all of the peoples of the continent – in Western, Eastern, Central and South-Eastern Europe – to share the same model of democracy. But dialogue between these different European partners is not taking place on the basis of equality. The EU does not pay sufficient attention to the difficulties being encountered by the peoples of the Balkan states. They don't have access to what's going on in Europe. They are not aware either of their rights or their duties. What matters for them, after the collapse of communism and the end of the war in Bosnia, is having peace and security at last."*

Because of this, the future of civil society will depend largely on young people. They are the only ones who did not experience the pernicious effects of communism themselves and now have the opportunity to bring about

something new. *"What alternative do we have but to invest our energies in the younger generations?"* wondered Christine von Kohl. *"Many return to their own countries after studying abroad. We need to support those who want to return home and encourage them to get involved in politics and building up civil society."*

Simove Pavel, of the Hnutie Human organisation, responded that while young people in Slovakia are in fact well educated, they lack any clearly defined values to which they can refer. The tendency is simply to replicate a model with the risk that it fails to reflect the reality of the specific social context. *"In every country, we need to analyse the democratic traditions and ask ourselves whether the western model can be adapted to a country that has no democratic foundations. We also need to take advantage of the time available to us during the current period to promote the values that we see as the right ones."*

The situation in Western Europe

Considered, rightly or wrongly, as having more experience of democracy, the civil societies of the Western European countries face just as many difficulties in ensuring that the public authorities recognise them as responsible partners for dialogue.

In Portugal, for example, *"reference is constantly being made to social dialogue but we can't say that it actually exists,"* noted Giorgio Casula, head of the CGTP-IN. This trade union provides professional training to young people and acts as a partner in a pilot project (Requal) that aims to provide training to low-skilled workers. The Requal project is based on cooperation between businesses, public authorities and trade unions. *"It's not easy to change attitudes and behaviour. This also applies to public servants,"* stated Giorgio.

But the problem lies not in the difficulty of gaining recognition from the political authorities, but also in society itself, where people are reluctant to accept their own responsibilities fully. *"Portugal is a young democracy, one that came into being with the*

'Carnation Revolution' of 1974. People – not just young people – fail to appreciate the full significance of having freedom and of living in a democracy. There needs to be a process of education at both local and national level."

At the meeting in Chênex, in Savoy (France), that preceded the Prague seminar () and dealt with cross-border relationships between France and Switzerland, the question was raised of the increasing lack of interest of the French populace in politics. *"In France, civil society is now weak right across the board. Because of the centralisation of power, decisions are taken remotely from the people they affect. This results in a distancing between the* res publica *and citizens, something that can result in opposition, with the state becoming an obstacle to rather than the guardian of the common good."* In contrast, Swiss citizens – thanks to their frequent involvement in voting on a variety of topics – tend to behave as if they are the joint owners of the common good.

This mentality is shown in the position that the trade unions – another partner in civil society – occupy on a national level. They do not wish to consider themselves as joint managers of the *res publica* but instead simply as the defenders of the interests of the people they represent. *"The same applies to organisations in their relationships with the public authorities. Elected politicians tend to react to this by keeping them out of the decision-making process. One effect of this will be that organisations and civil society in general, who frequently have little influence, will lose their dynamism."*

Within the territories covered by the special development agreements ("Contrats de développement") in the French Rhône-Alpes region, development committees have been set up, as elsewhere in metropolitan areas. They have a duty to include civil society representatives, but the problem arising locally is that there are too few candidates for these posts since civil society is not sufficiently structured or receptive. The Chênex workshop concluded from this that *"politicians need to be willing to work with civil society in order to move forward those projects that – while definitely of interest to the public – provoke particular opposition".*

The Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe

Dr Erhard Busek, former Vice-Chancellor of Austria, has been Special Coordinator of the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe since 1 January 2002. He stated his conviction that civil societies have an essential role to play in the European project. Civil society organisations are, in his view, "intermediary bodies", capable of mobilising the people and facilitating relationships with public authorities.

The Pact for which Dr Busek is responsible was set up in the wake of the war in Kosovo and was mandated by the EU to work mainly in South-Eastern Europe (Croatia, Serbia/Montenegro and Kosovo, Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Moldova, Albania, Romania and Bulgaria). It is active in several areas associated with the development of civil society, notably the media, education, women's rights and young people.

"Our teams work with both governments and civil society organisations to promote regional cooperation in these areas of activity," explained Dr Busek. *"In the media, we are working to change legislation and help civil society groups to obtain funds for documentary productions. With women, our teams are involved in a range of schemes aimed at empowering them. With young people, we are developing an exchange programme similar to the Franco-German scheme set up after the Second World War. Finally, in the area of education, we are currently focusing on a key objective known as 'Building human capital', and are helping governments to access EU programmes in the field of education."*

Civil societies in the Balkan countries are often considered as being weak, slow to emerge, and in need of foreign assistance in order to develop. The collapse of the former Yugoslavia was essentially a process carried out by a political elite.
Civil society failed to make its voice heard clearly before the onset of war in the Balkans, although – in contrast – it did express itself forcefully in Serbia when Milosevic was overthrown.
"The wars had a devastating effect on the ability of the civil societies to grow in strength

in the region," noted Dr Busek regretfully. *There was a large-scale 'brain-drain', with a remarkable number of intellectuals, young graduates, educators and artists leaving the region. It will be difficult to get these people to return to their countries."*
Partly because of this situation and partly because of the weakness of the local economies, the majority of civil society organisations are of foreign origin. The churches are seeking funds abroad but they are probably the only locally based organisations. All of this is lending a unique character to the process of democratisation in the region. *"In the long term, having a strong civil society is a crucial factor if we wish to make an impact on poor governance and if we wish to see sustainable results in tackling corruption and organised crime,"* explained Dr Busek.

The European Stability Pact is helping to strengthen civil society by taking both "top-down" and "bottom-up" action. By working with the media, with women, with young people, and in education, it is promoting development from both above and below. Through its intervention with governments, it is active in the field of justice and of private issues. *"By encouraging people to draw on European experiences, we are endeavouring to strengthen the development of civil society from the bottom up."*

The challenges faced by civil society are huge. *"Firstly, civil society needs urgently to get involved in strengthening social cohesion,"* suggests Dr Busek. *"Difficult reforms lie in store for most of the governments in South-Eastern Europe, and the best option would be for them to engage in social dialogue with civil society organisations on every aspect of those reforms. The principles of solidarity and social justice should be incorporated into the processes of government so as to avoid the collapse of social structures. It's also vital that a debate takes place on the values and strategies to be adopted in dealing with globalisation. As things stand, the only strategy being followed by governments involves a wish to join the European Union and to belong to a powerful grouping."*

These countries also need to work on developing competitive advantages. In particular, they should be investing in research

and development and adopting all of the points of the Lisbon Agenda.

Civil society should be thought of not as a means to an end but as an essential element in citizens' lives. *"In an ideal world,"* concludes Dr Busek, *"civil society should be the engine of democratic development. It's vital that a favourable environment be created for the development of civil society. The governments of South-Eastern Europe should start to treat civil society organisations as serious partners, while respecting their critical stance."*

III – THE SEARCH FOR SYNERGIES

BETWEEN ORGANISATIONS AND TRADE UNIONS

Trade unions, just like the organisations described above, are key components of civil society. Their aim is to defend and to ensure respect for the rights of workers, the unemployed, migrants, and people with disabilities, and to help combat every form of social exclusion.

Nowadays, faced with the need to participate in the European project, trade unions and civil society organisations need to cooperate in tackling a number of challenges and in voicing to governments the demands and requirements of civil society. The unions' ability to react, however, varies depending on factors such as the country, history and culture concerned.

Difficulties encountered in the countries

of the former Communist bloc

Under the communist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe, trade unions were instruments of the governing party. In spite of the political changes experienced 15 years ago, the democratisation of the body politic, and inclusion in the European Union, old ways die hard. As far as the trade unions are concerned, their behaviours and attitudes have hardly changed. The union bosses, formerly loyal to the Communist Party, remain in place and block any change.

"In Slovakia, we're not seeing much progress with regard to trade union development," said Pavel Simove of the country's Hnutie Human organisation. *"Under the communist regime, the unions were tools designed to control the working class. After the 1989 Revolution, the same state employees remained in place. What's more, the Slovak trade unions collaborated with the Nationalist Party, which was largely responsible for the break-up of Czechoslovakia. When our country came to join the EU, union bosses went to the West to meet with the main trade union federations, but in spite of that you can't see much sign of change."*

Pavel explained that when doctors and teachers demonstrate for increased pay, the union confederation helps them, *"but it's a fact that they've always given their support to the Nationalist Party. The strongest union reached an agreement with the People's Party, which includes former communists. This party is close to Lukashenko's regime[3]. They are making visits to each other, they're holding discussions with the Belarusian ambassador in Slovakia."*

In Slovakia, people are advised not to quit their trade union if they want to keep their jobs: *"'We know what's best for you', they say to the workers."* In reality, however, union bosses have lost all credibility. The union collaborates with the government and makes promises that are rarely kept.

Pavel made an appeal to the audience: *"What mechanism can we come up with to bring about a change in this, how could we revitalise the trade union movement? How can we involve the unions in a genuine campaign to defend workers' interests? The fact that the unions haven't changed is gradually reducing their effectiveness. People have lost all trust and confidence in the unions."*

Lidmila Němcová, a Czech economist, lectures in ethics at Prague University. She expressed a slightly different point of view. *"During the time of the communist regime in Eastern Europe, everyone belonged to a trade union. After the political changes that occurred in 1989, we witnessed campaigns aimed at denigrating the unions and the cooperative movement. Trade unions are banned in multinational companies. The German and Japanese businesses that have invested in the Czech Republic have placed a strict ban on union membership."*

Lidmila agreed that, in the countries of the former communist bloc, the trade union movement is in the process of collapsing and the number of unions has decreased. In her view, this is also due to policies of the multinationals and to the press campaigns orchestrated by unrestrained capitalist forces.

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[3] - Lukashenko governs Belarus in a despotic fashion. Condemned by the international community – with the exception for Russia – for his repressive practices, he is supported by those nostalgic for the days of the Soviet Union.

She posed a fundamental question: *"Do we need trade unions or not? I would answer yes,"* she stated. *"Nevertheless, we do have to redefine their role."* To support her thesis, she added: *"Within the multinational companies, we can only resolve the problems associated with the right to work with the support of the international trade union movement."*

The challenges to be faced in developing synergies between organisations and trade unions

If civil society is to make a stronger impact on the development and the future of Europe, synergies will need to be built between its different constituent elements: notably organisations and trade unions. Henri Lourdelle, Advisor to the European Trade Union Confederation – the ETUC – with responsibility for issues of social protection, the fight against poverty, the inclusion of people with disabilities, and immigration into Europe, outlined these challenges involved.

"The ECUT's principal role involves helping national trade unions to acquire a European ethos and develop their activities on a European level," he explained initially. Its other tasks include dealing with the difficult issue of integrating people with disabilities into the workforce. *"On this question,"* Henri emphasised, *"a trade union won't have all the answers. It's just one of many actors: organisations, doctors, nurses, as the problems involved are complex. Everyone has his own role to play, without encroaching on that of others."*

The ETUC also deals with the issue of social exclusion, in terms of analysing its causes, considering vulnerable groups, part-time workers, and so on. It negotiates agreements at a European level so as to guarantee social rights to those who lives are impacted by unemployment and end up excluded from the labour market. It is also active in the educational sector and works with teachers' groups to limit classroom sizes, for example. With regard to healthcare provision, the ETUC appeals to civil society organisations to tackle issues related to the quality of long-term healthcare. *"These are a good many challenges to consider in developing the synergies*

between trade unions and civil society organisations."

Henri Lourdelle suggested that these challenges could be divided into seven categories:

- Getting to know one another: organisations and trade unions should not be competing but defining their respective responsibilities.

- Analysing causes in order to be able to fight for them effectively.

- Considering our identity: who are we, and who are we representing? To whom are we accountable for the action we're undertaking? We need to act as civil society organisations that work on the principles of democracy rather than individualism.

- Acquiring a participative culture: in other words, being willing to team up with those we're representing, to consult them before speaking in their name, and to help them to help themselves by organising.

- Taking responsibility: when we conduct negotiations or reach agreements, we should be aware that we are acting on behalf of people who have placed their trust in us.

- Being politically and financially autonomous: the unions and organisations should not replace government or make up for its shortcomings; they should keep their independence and act as a counterweight in the sense that they can express a different point of view. In addition, we need to find ways of financing ourselves so as to avoid being manipulated.

- Training members of our organisations and developing skills.

Summing up this programme in a few words, Henri Lourdelle added: *"We share one main*

set of goals: to put human beings at the centre of our concerns, to give priority to social rather than economic factors, and to develop participative democracy so that people can become masters of their own destiny. We need to act as facilitators allowing people to express their own needs. The great challenge that faces us is that of building a Europe – not of the market – but a Europe for human beings, for the entire human being and for every human being."*

In reality, however, it's not always easy to create this synergy between organisations and trade unions. And this is not a difficulty that's restricted to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. *"In Germany,"* noted Christoph Hüttig, director of the *Stiftung Mitarbeit* organisation, *"there are substantial conflicts between traditional civil society organisations, such as the churches and the unions, and the new forms of civil society organisation that have greater popular appeal. The unions are fighting tooth and nail to defend their position and to obtain finance from the state but in this regard the new civil society organisations are in disagreement with them.*

However, in other areas, joint campaigns by the unions and civil society organisations have been successful. One example was the lobbying of the European Parliament to protest against the liberalisation of social services (the Bolkestein Directive). *"Experience shows that it is possible to call public authorities and European parliamentarians to account by organising demonstrations and joint lobbying campaigns,"* stated Henri Lourdelle. *"With regard to the Social Charter, this was also achieved in a positive way and the synergy achieved clear results. As a next step, a campaign should also be initiated on the rights to long-term healthcare."*

Synergies are possible, then. We simply need the will to achieve these and we have to explain to each other the role that each party should play. This is the price we will have to pay if civil society is to be effective in its interactions with public authorities.

IV – SOME PERSPECTIVES ON CIVIL SOCIETY FROM OTHER CONTINENTS

The Lebret-Irfed International Centre strongly believes that allowing those engaged in development in both the North and South to interact with each other and share details of their practical experiences can represent a valuable learning resource for all concerned. It can also indicate ways to achieve sustainable results, thanks to the broader perspectives to which participants are exposed.

This is why the Centre endeavours to facilitate interaction of this type – so that any regional meetings organised are enriched by ideas and practices from other parts of the world.

Delegates to this European seminar therefore benefited from hearing presentations on the experiences of colleagues from Latin America, the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

Latin America:

local development and citizenship

Jorge Balbis, from Uruguay, is the Executive Secretary of ALOP – the "Asociación Latinoamericana de Organizaciones de Promoción" or "Latin American Association of Development Organisations" – which is based in Costa Rica. ALOP is represented in 19 Latin American countries and works in areas such as democracy, local development, human rights, access to education, and native people's rights.

Jorge's contribution at the seminar dealt primarily with the question of the involvement of civil society in local development in Latin America. He first explained that his continent has a tradition of centralised government that can be characterised as "top-down democracy". *"The traditions of centralisation are very strong in Latin America; decisions are not taken by people on the ground but in the capitals. For this reason government projects are incomplete and, what's more, repressive. The regions are excluded and segregated."*

After the dark period of the dictatorships during the 1970s, followed by the fall of the dictators in the 1990s, the process of democratisation led to the introduction of constitutional powers and the principle of decentralisation. Central government was reduced in size and responsibility given back to local authorities. *"It was established, at least in law, that civil societies should have the right to participate and that there should be the opportunity of organising local or national consultations on planned legislation. But this was only on paper...,"* Jorge explained.

This process of "democratisation" was accompanied by a transformation of social and economic structures, which in turn led to a deregulation of markets and free competition. The objective here was to comply with the Washington Consensus[4]. These reforms did lead to relative growth, but also to greater inequality between rich and poor and a reduction in the power of governments to act. *"Healthcare, education, social security, and personal safety have all deteriorated,"* stated Jorge. *"There has been a massive increase in the take-up of private education at all levels, from primary schools through to universities. Nowadays in Latin America, you're considered a citizen if you're a consumer. In this context, it becomes difficult for ordinary people to participate."*

Nonetheless, civil society has gradually devised new ways to react against this economic model, first of all by calling to account the dictatorial right-wing regimes with regard to the amnesties deliberately introduced in order to whitewash the individuals responsible. *"Civil society has developed a whole series of campaigns to fight for what we might call participative democracy – people being involved, people monitoring, people being permanently active in local issues. At the moment, groups of citizens are discussing budgets with local authorities in order to find out what's going to happen to the money collected as local taxes and in order to set priorities. The private sector – businesses, economic actors – is associated with this*

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[4] - The collapse of the Soviet Bloc in 1989 ensured that the Washington Consensus was approved, under pressure from the United States, by now the only world superpower. The Washington Consensus consists of a set of liberal economic directives including a refocusing of public spending, liberalisation of the financial markets and of foreign exchanges, privatisation of publicly owned enterprises, market deregulation, and so on.

process of participation. It's a major cultural change, one that takes time," explained Jorge.

ALOP has conducted a comparative study in eight Latin American countries so as to examine ways of improving the involvement of civil society in local development. This research has identified four main points:

- The existence of certain shared values: the fight against poverty and social exclusion, the rights of citizens.

- The need to have a methodology for involvement, a socio-political strategy for change aimed at making local development succeed. There need to be clear guidelines for undertaking collective action, and the issue of the relationships between people and of power relationships needs to be resolved.

- The cultural dimension: in other words, consideration of the focus areas appropriate for civil society action in relation to local development.

- The cognitive dimension: acquisition of knowledge and skills required for implementing the changes needed.

For the sake of these factors, it's necessary to identify clearly the issues on which you intend to work. *"First of all, we have to move from the participative phase to the consultative phase. Next, we have to carry out long-term work, though this depends a lot on the results obtained. It's also vital that we try to make connections, as all too often collective action takes place in isolation. Finally, the devaluation of politics in the eyes of ordinary citizens, as a result of corruption on the part of those in power, makes people reluctant to engage in dialogue with public authorities. We need to get past this obstacle to avoid any notion of populism,"* concluded Jorge.

The Middle East:
a dialogue between cultures and civilisations

Boutros Labaki, a Lebanese economist, is President of ILDES (the "Institut libanais de développement économique et social" or "Lebanese Institute of Economic and Social Development"). He began by describing the global background to the urgent need for a dialogue between civilisations and made reference to the content of the seminar held in Beirut in 2003[5]. This was organised jointly by ILDES and the Lebret-Irfed International Centre and focused on the "Dialogue between Civilisations and Human Development".

The theory of the "clash of civilisations", posited by Samuel Huntington in 2001, aims to explain current conflicts in terms of a war between civilisations. *"In our case,"* explained Boutros, *"this would mean a clash between western Christian civilisation and Islam, a civilisation described as representing the source of Islamic fundamentalism, the cradle of terrorism. Nowadays, 95% of Muslims live in the poverty-stricken South of the planet (with 5% – emigrants, minorities in the former Soviet Bloc – on the margins of society in the North), while people of a Christian background live in the industrialised and economically developed North."*

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All of Muslim countries were directly colonised by the industrialised North (except for Turkey and the central and western parts of the Arabian Peninsula, which have US military bases on their soil and are economically dependent on the North to a high degree). The process of colonisation was accompanied by repression, pillage, humiliation, and so on. As for economic exploitation, this continues, with a deterioration in the terms of trade, a situation of debt, a new international division of labour (again to the detriment of the South), a "brain drain", and a transfer of financial resources out of the countries concerned. Political submission (in the form of treaties and military bases) and cultural alienation continue. *"To this we should add that the industrial North has always supported the occupation of Palestine and the ongoing expulsion of the*

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[5] - A further seminar was held in India in August 2005 on the same topic.

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Palestinian people from their lands," noted Boutros. *"Not to speak of what's going on in Afghanistan and Iraq."*

During the Cold War, the movements of protest against and rejection of these various forms of domination by the North over the Arab and Muslim populations of the South found their voice in secular nationalism, popular socialism, and Marxism. Following decolonisation and from the late 1960s onwards, with the Arab defeat in the 1967 war with Israel, and particularly after the end of the Cold War in 1989, these secular ideologies lost much of their power to mobilise people. Muslims in general and Arabs in particular turned to conservative forms of Islam that were soon to become fundamentalist.

This version of Islam had been manipulated by the British and American governments from the start of the 1950s to combat nationalist, anti-colonial and socialist movements and regimes. (Examples include Iran under Mossadegh, Egypt under Nasser, Sukarno's Indonesia, the Ba'athist movement in the Arab countries, and pro-Soviet forces in Afghanistan.) Once the Cold War was over, these Islamist movements were no longer of much use to the Americans. *"Nowadays,"* commented Boutros, *"these Islamic movements are turning against their former mentors in a boomerang effect. And so begins (Sunni) 'Islamic terrorism', from Afghanistan under the Taliban and to the events in the west of occupied Iraq today. And the theory of the 'clash of civilisations' has come to be used as an ideological justification for a battle against forms – reactionary forms, it's true – of protest against the domination by the North of part of the South (the Arab world and the Muslim world) – an area that, what's more, harbours the majority of the world's hydrocarbon resources."*

The programme entitled *Dialogue between civilisations and human development,* initiated by the Lebret Centre for the period from 2002 to 2006, is intended to make those living in the North and South look at the issues in a different way.
The intention here is to trace the problem of the South's "under-development" back to its roots: dependency and "traditionalism".

The programme aims to promote a genuine and forward-looking culture of self-reliance for the societies of the South in terms of respect for their civilisations and a dialogue between them and the other civilisations of the world.

The Beirut seminar brought together delegates from Arab countries (Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt, Muslim countries (Turkey and Iran), as well as participants from other parts of the world (Asia, Africa, Europe, the USA, and Latin America). *"The choice of Lebanon to host this programme was not arrived at by chance. For half a century, Lebanon has been experiencing the foremost process of Muslim-Christian dialogue in the contemporary era. This dialogue continued throughout the wars that threatened it in 1975 and 1990."*

The Beirut seminar cast light on issues such as the experiences of Lebanese civil society actors involved in developing the multi-faith culture of the country; the experiences of civil society organisations in other Arab countries, in Turkey and in Iran; and perspectives from civil society organisations active in other parts of the world.

It gave rise to a number of recommendations for action. Firstly, development should be participatory, decentralised, and respectful of the needs and the choices of those involved. Furthermore, it should always include genuine participation by women in making and implementing decisions. It should also be based on principles of solidarity, starting with a sharing of the participants' intellectual and material resources.

With regard to the proposed means of carrying out this type of development, it was suggested that a structure be created on the topic of *Dialogue between cultures and human development,* making use of an electronic conference, a website and an electronic newsletter. It was also proposed that there be greater coordination between those organisations motivated by dialogue and development within each country, on a regional level and on an international level.

Some specific projects were proposed at the end of the seminar:

- setting up of mechanisms that could allow the rest of the world to benefit from the Lebanese experience
- organisation of dialogue training conferences for children, young people, women, and others
- organisation of intercultural and/or inter-faith panels on a municipal and local level
- preparation of a manual on peace education.

Asia:
inter-faith dialogue and social engagement

Samy Lorthousamy, an Indian sociologist, is President of AREDS, the "Association for Rural Education and Development". This organisation, founded in 1980, works with various communities including, for example, the victims of the catastrophic tsunami of December 2004 in the Southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

Samy started by sketching out a picture of the growing disparities between the North and the South of the planet, and emphasised that the unequal distribution of wealth globally works as a barrier to human development and endangering people's ways of life. *"By transforming the economy, the multinationals are completely reshaping countries and their systems."*

The gaps between rich and poor are becoming even more acute as globalisation extends its influence. This is resulting in situations where the lives of the poor are no longer seen as having any value. *"We often speak about human rights, but the majority of poor people don't have access to a human life worthy of the name,"* protested Samy. *"Nowadays, the poor are meant to disappear, while the rich don't need them and prefer to forget about them. This is the situation being created by the globalisation of the planet."*

In addition, religion is taking on a more and more important role and for some people is becoming their first reference point in terms of affirming their identity, with all the harmful consequences that that entails. *"A combination of the system and the strategy being pursued and encouraged by the policy of economic globalisation on the one hand, and religious fundamentalism on the other, are preventing civilisations from moving closer to one another and entering into dialogue. The result? An increase in violence."* Samy pointed out one's primary identity is as a human being and that any programme of development that fails to put the human being at its centre will end in disaster. In this situation, *"the role and responsibility of civil society and social actors is to meet the challenge and create the conditions for genuine dialogue between civilisations and a real process of human development".*

However, this invitation to intercultural and inter-faith dialogue should not be treated as a magic spell. If it is to make sense, the dialogue should not be separated from the economic, political and historical conditions out of which cultures and civilisations have grown and through which they express themselves today. *"In the same way,"* noted Samy,*" any dialogue taking place nowadays simply has to raise questions about the domination of the market. Grassroots dialogue is essential, but it needs to be accompanied by the involvement of political and religious leaders, as well as intellectuals from different disciplines, to promote social development."*

In India, since the events of 11 September 2001 in New York, tensions have become ever more acute not just between Muslims and Christians but also been Muslims and Hindus. The latter group is conducting a new crusade against the Muslim community. *"However, we should remember that in all these countries Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs and all the others have to live together, and everybody faces the same problems related to under-development, dependence on others, poverty, social injustice, environmental degradation and ecological crisis,"* Samy insisted.

In spite of the concerted efforts by the Hindutva forces[6] to "saffronise" Indian politics and society, they have not succeeded in installing a religious government in India. As a result, India is in

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[6] - The term "Hindutva" describes both the nationalist Hindu movement and the ideology linked with it that aims to identify Hinduism with the Indian nation.

a slightly different position from the other member states of SAARC (the "South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation"), where one or other religion has been granted a privileged status to the detriment of the others.

The seminar in India jointly organised with SAARC in August 2005 brought together several civil society actors from South Asia and Europe to look at the topic of *Religious Fundamentalisms and the Dialogue between Civilisations.* The delegates participating in that seminar came from different religious backgrounds, a fact that greatly enriched the quality of the research and discussions undertaken there. The question of the status of women was widely raised in view of the fact that they are affected most by religious fundamentalism.

The seminar set itself a number of goals:

- To contribute to the prevention of ethnic and religious tensions and conflicts, which tend to hinder the processes of development and people's activities in pursuit of social transformation.

- To arrive at a better understanding of inter-communal strife, fundamentalism and the links between religious discourse and globalisation.

- To produce materials that will enable a variety of methods of communication targeted at the participants of this seminar or a wider audience.

- To organise specific instances of collective action, particularly at a regional level, and to strengthen the relationships between the participants and other networks for the purpose of future collective action.

The seminar also considered the need to strengthen civil society. The resources required for this task depend on an understanding of what dialogue should entail. The process of dialogue rests on improved mutual understanding, a desire to break down barriers to understanding, and a reduction of social, political, religious and cultural divisions. Samy emphasised that, *"Dialogue needs be impregnated with a culture of life, it should breathe the fresh air of humanity. Dialogue involves listening to others, learning from them, sharing one's identity. It means opening one's mind and sharing more openly."*

To conclude, Samy recalled that during the tsunami disaster in December 2004, he saw a radical transformation in people's behaviour. This is just one example: *"In Nagoor Dharga in the state of Tamil Nadu – a well-known place of pilgrimage for Muslims – the Muslims agreed to bury all of the dead in the mosque, whether Hindu, Christian or Muslim."* Surely proof that religious tolerance and dialogue are possible.

Africa:

local participative government

Since the representative of the Southern Africa network was unable to attend the seminar, Joseph Pampalk of the Europahaus Burgenland institute in Austria spoke about civil society activity in the province of Western Cape in South Africa, where he spent many years. He began by going over the recent history of the country, a place that has experienced mobilisation of civil society on a large scale.

Under the apartheid regime, resistance by the black population was violently repressed but never crushed altogether. Resistance involved people at every level of society, working in many different sectors (aid organisations, independent churches, political parties and trade unions) and was expressed in a variety of forms (student revolts, strikes and so on). *"International solidarity undoubtedly played a major role, but it was the action of motivated and united citizens that brought down the apartheid regime,"* noted Joseph. *"Resistance and repression helped to give people an awareness of what was going on. As a result, staying neutral was simply not an option. The process of getting involved in various activities and considering what needed to be done helped people to acquire generalised skills. We can state with certainty that human resources and leadership qualities achieved a level*

comparable to that found in Central Europe."

The radical transformations that occurred on a national level after Nelson Mandela was released from prison and the installation in 1994 of a government of national unity did not, however, change anything on a local level. Although the apartheid system was dismantled, on the ground its effects remain intact in every community. Although, in most towns and cities, local negotiating forums were launched on an informal basis between existing public authorities and the representatives of civil society and grassroots community organisations, a new official system involving local and municipal elected councils was only set up after the first local elections in 1996. *"Participative local government, something that's not a goal in itself but is intended to enhance the quality of people's life and local development, is still only in the pipeline, even after the second and third sets of local elections (in 2000 and 2005),"* added Joseph critically. *"It is being driven mainly by the Annual Integrated Development Plan (the IDP)."*

The thousands of militant citizens who risked their lives during the apartheid period so that they would be able to lead their everyday lives in a participatory democracy now receive support from a variety of bodies: specific NGOs, institutions and individuals who specialise in dealing with these issues. One of these NGOs, known as CORPLAN ("Community Research and Planning") has an office in East London on the boundary between the two ancient homelands of Ciskei and Transkei. *"The organisation was set up by members of the anti-apartheid resistance in 1990 and is supported by an Australian NGO,"* Joseph explained. *"Six young people, who have being trained in socio-political principles and in development, have been devising and working on a Local Government Transformation Programme (an "LGTP") in the province of Eastern Cape. During this time, the rest of the team has been working with civil society organisations in the townships on programmes of housing improvement and settlement development."*

Other similar groups have been cooperating with civil society on comparable schemes and, since the first set of elections, with the new public authorities at a local level in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town. In order to improve research and training methods and their impact on legislation by central government, these various NGOs form an "Urban Sector Network", which was partly subsidised by the European Union until 2004. Together with this network, CORPLAN has served as a kind of laboratory for this new type of relationship between civil society and the public authorities.

The experience of resistance to apartheid prepared the people involved for participation and for a genuine process of education on civil responsibility. The first democratic government realised that it needed civil society. *"In South Africa,"* Joseph recalls, *"government and civil society accept one another, trust one another, work together, and are accountable for the way that they act towards each other. But, over recent years, the government of Thabo Mbeki has embarked on a series of macro-liberal policies and has pushed for the privatisation of public services. The public sector has seen a reduction in the aid it receives on account of 'budgetary priorities', 'new public management practices', and so on."*

Debates of a purely technocratic nature fail to satisfy ordinary people, who are already disappointed by a reduction in public services and an increase in the cost of living. Performance as political managers cannot in itself change behaviour or promote participatory democracy. *"However,"* Joseph explained, *"a new political debate is starting to be heard about the type of society people want to see in the future and the role of the individual in this neo-liberal economy. The issues arising from the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) and the financial situation of the municipalities are the focus of attention for civil society organisations. And marginalised citizens are reclaiming their right to speak and be part of the decision-making process.*

"It's at a local level that we need to see a strategy of defence against uncontrolled globalisation and in relation to the direction of European integration," said Joseph. *Work at the local level represents the most concrete means of transforming civil society. Our ideas and discussion are only useful if they are tied in with real experiences. How can we ensure that our discussions are more closely linked to progress towards genuine local government? How can we make sure our conferences are useful for civil society organisations or for locally elected representatives? How can we cooperate with regional networks? How do we best recognise people's right to express their disagreements and needs, and their right to influence regional development? And how can we transform the historic opportunity for European integration into a process of gradual social development?"*

Joseph concluded with these words: *"Let us have more confidence in the talents of the people, let us make the best use possible of the excellent opportunities to learn that we enjoyed at our workshops at Chênex, in the Eastern Cape, and elsewhere. My greatest hope is that we see progress from this type of approach towards integration and local development. I hope we can look forward to further meetings like this in the future."*

Points of relevance for civil society in Europe

From these four testimonies from the South, we can identify several points of relevance for civil society in Europe and its relationships with the public authorities. While it is indeed true that the contexts are different, the problems encountered bear many similarities to those seen in Europe. We have identified a number of ideas that might inspire and feed into our discussions and our activities among Europe's citizens.

- *Local development and citizens' participation*

Faced with the neo-liberal economic model embodied by globalisation, with all it entails in terms of impoverishment of the masses and social exclusion, civil society organisations in the South are devising new forms of resistance. Many of them are aware that participation in local development and in the democratic control of such development has been an efficient means of challenging the system.

This form of "participative democracy" can only be achieved under certain circumstances, our international partners emphasise. First and foremost, civil society needs to have a presence, a system for checking, a means of monitoring the situation with regard to local policies. One example here: the adoption of the municipal budget. Citizens have to be able to monitor how the money taken from them in taxes is being used and also set priorities based on local people's needs. *"Local development needs to be participative, decentralised, and respectful of the needs and the choices of those involved,"* as Jorge Balbis emphasised.

This new way of conducting politics, in the positive sense of the term, also requires the involvement of the private sector, that's to say businesses. This is because the decisions taken with regard to local development also affect those who are given responsibility for implementing the decisions reached collectively. We therefore need to ensure that they are fully tied in to this democratic process.

In addition, the genuine involvement of women in the making and implementation of

decisions is an integral condition of democracy and an indicator of respect for equal rights.

The things said on this point, concerning local development, can and should also be applied at the regional level and even more so at the national level.

- *Cultural change and directions for future action*

This model of democracy requires fundamental changes in behaviour, both on the part of elected representatives and among members of civil society. Such changes will, in fact, need to take place on a deep cultural level, as politicians are not used to exercising power while sharing it with citizens. Politicians, in fact, are the very people who need to see their power contested with regard to certain of their decisions.

This is also true for citizens, who are being called to work long term on monitoring actions and to overcome some of their apprehension and mistrust towards politicians.

This means that we need to give direction to civil society activity, by clearly identifying the values that we want to defend: human rights, combating social exclusion, and so forth.

- *Acquisition of knowledge and skills*

Effective action on the part of civil society requires real abilities and skills. Our partners from the South have emphasised this point with some force. Civil society organisations need to be constantly focused on helping citizens to acquire knowledge to enable them to negotiate on an equal footing with public authorities (in a process of "capacity building").

Such skills are also required in order to carry out collective action, to work in networks, to cast light on the question of relationships between people, and to manage the acute problem of the exercise of power.

Training is also necessary with regard to dialogue between civilisations and cultures, as Boutros Labaki has pointed out with reference to the situation in Lebanon. This is especially true for young people.

- *Intercultural and inter-faith dialogue*

In view of the many migrants coming from Africa, the question of intercultural and inter-faith dialogue is becoming an urgent concern in Europe. We need, as Boutros (from Lebanon) and Samy (from India) pointed out, to make efforts to prevent ethnic and religious tensions and conflicts. These hinder the processes of development and people's activities in pursuit of social transformation. On that point, Lidmila Němcová recalled the details of a meeting held in the Czech Republic with the aim of advancing dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

There also needs to be greater coordination between those organisations motivated by dialogue and development within each country, on a regional level, and on an international level.

Specific projects can be implemented: organisation of dialogue training conferences for adults, children, young people, and women; organisation of intercultural and/or inter-faith panels on a local and municipal level; preparation of peace education manuals, and so forth.

V – CHALLENGES FACING
   CIVIL SOCIETY

As we have seen, a number of questions have arisen during the seminar discussions, notably on the ethics of action and participative democracy. Suggestions were also made on the urgent need to work in networks and the question of cross-border cooperation. In view of these different challenges, the decision was made to organise, during the seminar itself, workshops on these three points. Below we provide a summary of the discussion that was initiated and that clearly needs to be continued.

The ethics of action

The question of ethics is one of supreme relevance for today. It has a very wide field of application. For this reason, a clear definition of ethics appears necessary. It would be useful to examine how ethical issues come into play in different cultures and in different contexts (personal, local, regional, national and global). It may, indeed, be the case that ethics are understood differently according to culture, and according to one's experience, something that in turn is related to one's environment.

Ethics are always related to questions of liberty, to human rights, and to respect for nature. But liberty has its limits and every one of us is responsible for how this liberty should be applied. We need to look more closely at statements of the following type:

- Social justice for one person can only be implemented at another person's expense.
- Taking from the rich to give to the poor can turn out to be counter-productive.
- If standards of living are different from one country to the next or from one group to the next, does this constitute an ethical issue?
- Liberty only exists in relation to responsibility: we cannot assume that people have the liberty to fight for certain causes. (We cannot, for example, fight for the rights of fascists, for the defence of racist interests, or in favour of xenophobia.)

It is essential that we work on the links between local action and universal values. We already consider some values as "universal", as issues of "human rights". Communities have their own values and limits. When we work together with these communities and their actions, this can lead both parties to broaden their horizons and expand their values.

Ethics do not, however, provide ready-made solutions to every issue. Rather, ethics are developed through human processes and in specific situations. They require us to think and to ask ourselves questions. In addition, ethical principles need to be incorporated into decision-making processes. On this point, too, the human being needs to remain the focus of our concerns.

We also need to reflect on rights and responsibilities, understanding these as being closely connected. On this point, we need to take account of the Declaration on Human Rights, but also be aware of its limitations. It is important that we consider cultural and local circumstances as we apply the principles enshrined in it.

In conclusion, the workshop recommended that the question of ethics be included in the programmes for future seminars, though with one reservation: the issues need to be limited and clearly defined. For instance, are we considering the ethics of business, globalisation and ethics, bio-ethics, the ethics of the environment, social ethics, or what? Otherwise, it will be difficult to control the discussion and come to specific conclusions. We also need to think about our working methods. It will be important to embed ethical principles in all future seminars organised by the Lebret-Irfed Centre.

Participative democracy

The mechanisms of participative democracy have a positive impact on the way that a community operates on the political front. This is clear when we consider experiences such as the work done at Porto Alegre in Brazil and the history of the South African people. We do, though, need to make clear that the processes of participative democracy, as set up today, also have their limits.

On occasion we have seen governments use participative democracy as a cover for legitimising their actions where in fact participation by the people is only a fiction. This is because the mechanisms in place are really focused more on consultation than on directly involving ordinary people. Such discrepancies can result in an opposite outcome to that intended, since – when people feel manipulated in this way – they can end up less willing to get involved in running their communities.

We also need to consider the question of representivity. To what degree, for example, are the people who get involved in the processes of participative democracy actually representative of their community overall? The voices of the socially excluded and of marginalised communities can easily be ignored. This is especially true in view of the fact these communities are the ones less likely to get involved in this type of process. Since it therefore often falls to intermediary organisations to represent the socially excluded, we have to ask how representative such organisations really are.

Another limitation lies in the difficulty of educating the public authorities concerned. Before the process of participative democracy can get underway, we often see incomprehension on the part of certain governmental bodies as to the relevance of such processes for the management of community affairs. The professionalisation of elected representatives and their administrations works to make the public authorities more technocratic. As these bodies become more distant from the situations faced by ordinary people, they lose interest in involving people in the management of their local communities.

The experience of working-class neighbourhoods in Brussels, as described by Benoît Stoffen, clearly illustrates these problems of consultation versus participation, representivity of the groups concerned, the legitimacy of intermediary organisations, and the increasingly technocratic nature of public administrations.

Finally, there is also the issue of external finance. In the developing world, the money awarded by multilateral development bodies such as the World Bank in the name of "good governance" is sometimes provided to promote mechanisms of participative democracy. We need to stay vigilant with regard to these sources of finance. In fragile democracies, they can play a role in supplanting a democratically elected authority with civil society "representatives" who support the neo-liberal policies that the subsidising bodies are attempting to implement.

We can easily fall under the spell of the idea of participative democracy. There's no doubt that it allows for greater "consciousness-raising" among people regarding the role they can play in running their community and gives a boost to democratic practices – and at the very time that representative democracy is running out of steam. However, as we have seen, the idea of participative democracy can also provoke controversy and we need to be careful not to let it replace the concept of democracy itself, nor to isolate it in a local context, shut off from the outside world. We need to ensure we consider its role over the long term and get past partisan confrontations.

The workshop came up with a number of ideas:

- Developing ways of sharing experiences on an international level. In particular, the idea was raised of running a workshop on Agenda 21 initiatives in communities on different continents.

- Lobbying for the introduction of a legal framework to strengthen the opportunities for people to influence legislation in their countries. (Examples include popular initiatives for referendums in Uruguay and Brazil.)

- Setting up local training programmes, firstly for people who have not been directly educated on the question of participative democracy (especially marginalised communities), and secondly for government bodies that do not necessarily understand the relevance of this type of process.

Cooperation in networks and across borders

Civil society organisations will find themselves needing more and more to work in networks in view of the complexity of the problems facing them. This type of collaboration needs to take place not just locally but also on a national, continental and international level.

In the light of this, the representatives of the Gregorie Leu Foundation in Romania submitted a concrete proposal to the seminar delegates. This involves involve setting up an operational discussion and action network to concretise the ideas of a "transnational civil society". At the same time an appeal should be made to explain motivations and objectives, and a schedule should be proposed. The launch of this programme will be announced by e-mail.

In practice, working as a network is not always easy to implement as organisations have different concerns, activities and fields of involvement from one another. Additionally, they are often financed by international aid and their independence is in part conditioned by this support. By comparison, trade unions find it easier to operate in networks.

Nonetheless, we should mention that there already exist several networks involving civil society organisations, and that the process of cross-border cooperation is well advanced. As an example, we can cite the organisations accredited with the United Nations.

Unlike an international body, which has a central office and several branches, a network is decentralised. Its aim is to build a community that is based on joint projects and shared convictions and that utilises today's forms of communication. A network is built up progressively, works in stages, and progresses slowly. It is therefore the result of a process. We must add that a network should not be considered solely as a geographic entity but also in terms of the way it brings together the different strengths of the organisations involved.

A network is created with people who are active in the communities where they live and on the basis of a shared philosophy. If a network is to be sustainable over time and over distances, it needs to have precise objectives.

However, the more a network expands to include other organisations, the more it becomes diluted. It is therefore essential that we base it on a shared set of convictions and values.

At the World Social Forum[7] that took place in Mumbai, India, in 2004 and which brought together 120,000 people, the organisations involved in the Lebret-Irfed networks held their own meetings at certain times to discuss the issues facing this gathering of citizens – a unique event in the history of civil society around the world. To conclude, in the globalised world in which we live, civil society needs to give itself the means to act on a continental and international level, since the issues facing it today cannot generally be tackled within the context of a single country. In view of this, the Prague meeting can be seen as the start of a new European network. This needs to be continued and extended to other countries and other civil society organisations.

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[7] For more on the history of the World Social Forum (the WSF), visit www.forumsocialmundial.org/memorial/historico/texto.

VI – AFTER PRAGUE:

  PROSPECTS FOR JOINT ACTION

During his summary of the Prague preparatory questionnaire, Yves Berthelot, President of the Lebret-Irfed Centre, pointed out that *"however stimulating a meeting may be, it is of no real use if it's not followed up."* Delegates therefore made a collective decision to set themselves concrete objectives in terms of pursuing the issues considered and organising or participating in international meetings that are already scheduled.

1 – Strengthening action at the local, national, regional and international level

There appears to be a need to continue with the consolidation of civil society organisations and to create the conditions for the emergence of new ones. This is a particularly urgent requirement in South-Eastern Europe, where there is no organised civil society to speak of.

We also need to work on developing new networks of organisations within Europe and internationally, and cooperate with existing networks.

2 – Researching and deepening cross-border activities

Cross-border dialogue and activities are important for the future since Europe is made up of many small countries.

Considered in this light, the Savoy experience (involving France and Switzerland) would seem to represent an interesting basis for further thought. We will, however, need to increase the scope of our investigations to cover the Agenda 21 projects, of which there are several in Western Europe. Work on these projects is leading governmental bodies to work with civil society – a by no means negligible fact.

3 – Organising a seminar in Eastern Europe in the near future on the dialogue between civilisations

Such a seminar would bring together delegates from countries that for various reasons could not be represented in Prague. In particular, delegates from the Balkans could attend. As mentioned, the countries there are suffering from the effects of a lack of civil society organisations.

The seminar could focus on dialogue between civilisations in view of the difficulties encountered in South-Eastern Europe in particular. It will need to be preceded by some serious work on identifying the appropriate people and organisations to be involved and by a period of detailed preparation.

4 – Participating in the Europe, Latin America and Caribbean Civil Society Forum in Vienna (Austria)

This forum, which will take place from 30 March to 1 April 2006, consists of a meeting of NGOs charged with drawing up proposals for the summit of European heads of state to be held in Vienna on 13 and 14 May 2006.

Organised by ALOP, of which Jorge Balbis is the Executive Secretary, the meeting will bring together around 100 participants from the three regions concerned (Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean). They will be discussing an agenda connected with the content of the official summit and the future of relations between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean.

The discussions will be centred on the question of regional integration and social cohesion in Latin America and the Caribbean. They will also cover the involvement of civil society in those regions in the relationship with the EU; the future for cooperation between those two entities; and respect for human rights under the association agreements signed by the EU and the various countries in those regions.

5 – Participating in the Asia Europe People's Forum in Helsinki (Finland)

This meeting of NGOs, known for short as the AEPF[8], will take place from 10 to 13 September 2006. Its aim is to give a voice to the views of civil society organisations at the official Asia Europe summit (ASEM).

Three subjects will be covered: peace and security; economic security and social rights; and democratisation and human rights.

The discussions will be enriched by contributions from NGOs and civil society organisations on their experiences. The forum provides an opportunity for a wide exchange of experience, analyses and interaction between the delegates. It will strengthen the foundations for international solidarity.

The Prague seminar encourages the members present to take part in these two meetings, which also represent a chance to get to know other civil society organisations from Europe and Asia, and to set the foundations for future cooperation in networks.

VII - CONCLUSIONS

The Prague seminar constituted a challenge for the Lebret-Irfed Centre and Ekumenicka Akademie Praha, the two organising bodies, primarily in bringing together groups of Europeans who, on account of the continent's troubled history, had been separated for an extended period. It can justifiably be considered a "premiere" by the two organisations involved. This is because, for all of us, it was the first time that such a meeting has taken place in Central Europe with the participation of Europeans from both the East and the West. *"This was a kind of reciprocal learning and discovery experience for different groups of Europeans,"* noted Sergio Regazzoni, director of the Lebret-Irfed Centre, with some justification as the seminar came to an end. From this point of view, the Prague gathering represents an important stage in the progress of our network.

A network called upon to expand

In spite of the apprehensions at the outset, the challenge was successfully met, as many delegates emphasised.

"This was a very positive seminar, and we mustn't let the ideas that arose here fade away," enthused Peter Marianek, of the Slovak organisation Hnutie Human. Giorgio Casula of the CGTP from Portugal shared the same opinion: *"I've discovered a network that simply has to be extended. From it, I'm taking away several calls to action in my areas of work: local development and the trade unions. One small reservation, though: the specific activities mentioned in the written contributions, drawn up before the seminar, were not picked up again during the discussions. This is a shame, as I was dealing there with relationships between civil society and the public authorities, the topic that, I thought, was the objective of this seminar."*

The representatives from other continents also appreciated the opportunities offered to them by this seminar. *"The opening up of channels towards Eastern Europe is something very important for me,"* declared Jorge Balbis as the delegate from Latin America. *"I've discovered*

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[8] - The Asia Europe People's Forum. The AEPF was initiated in 1996 at the ASEM summit in Bangkok.

that the problems faced by the two continents are similar." The same reaction was heard from Samy Lorthousamy from India: *"This seminar has allowed me to find out about a part of Europe that was unknown to me. The meeting has been very positive; it needs to carry on in the same direction."*

The contribution of representatives from other continents in such meetings also allows delegates to gain a broader understanding of what's happening right across the planet. *"The international nature of the seminar was a decisive factor for the approach taken by global civil society. Involving only Europeans would simply be out of the question,"* stressed Marlyse Thommen of the Lebret-Irfed Centre, who was responsible for organising the seminar. This view was shared by Gerhard Weag, an official from the PLOP organisation in Slovakia: *"This was a great experience, but if we organise other seminars in future, we will have to make sure that we invite representatives from other continents."*

Significant shortcomings

The seminar did, however, suffer from two significant shortcomings, though these were not of the same order. The first was the absence of the representatives from Slovenia, Italy, Hungary, Bulgaria, Southern Africa, and Vietnam, who were invited but unable to come to Prague for a variety of reasons. We should make efforts to ensure that they – and also representatives from South-Eastern Europe – are able to attend the next meeting.

The other aspect, which relates more to the way the discussions were conducted, was the general lack of mutual interaction between delegates during the plenary sessions. As a result of this shortcoming, which was noted by many people, we were unable to achieve the principal objective of the seminar, in other words to deal with the issue of the relationship between civil society and public authorities. As Mathilde Le Tourneur of the Lebret-Irfed Centre, who was responsible for the organisation of the seminar, acknowledged: *"We frequently deviated from the original topic. There were deficiencies in the way the debates were managed." "Maybe the aims of the seminar were too ambitious?"* wondered Benoît Stoffen. Peter Marianek, meanwhile, went further: *"I'm sorry that we didn't react more to the interventions of the other participants. There wasn't any real confrontation or genuine dialogue."*

It is true that neither the visits made to the civil society organisations in Prague on the first day nor the workshop sessions were picked up again in the plenary sessions. This does indeed point to problems in the organisation and management of the debates. Jiri Silny of Ekumenicka Akademie Praha, the joint organisers, took a slightly more generous view: *"We need to bear in mind the diversity of the centres of interest and the variance in the activities carried out by the organisations involved. These factors make it difficult to share ideas and go into them more deeply."*

Some of the delegates suggested that in future researchers and academics be invited to this type of seminar so that they can help to consider the issues at a deeper level and cast further light on them. It would also be useful to involve representatives from public authorities (in particular locally elected representatives) so that we hear their views set against those of civil society representatives.

Background issues

The seminar raised a number of background issues that it would be valuable to consider and investigate further:

- participation of citizens in local democracy

- cooperation in networks and across borders

- problems associated with ethics and values

- synergies between different civil society actors

- dialogue between different civilisations and religions

- acquisition of knowledge and skills.

We could also add the following questions:

- How can we ensure that civil society works as an effective counter-balance to the state?

- How can we make the public authorities accept that civil society is an essential component of democracy, one that cannot be ignored? In other words, that there can be no genuine democracy without the active participation of citizens in the political decisions that affect people's lives in a country, at all levels.

- How can we improve civil society's ability to monitor and assess the activities of elected representatives and political parties?

In conclusion, it was often stated at the Prague seminar that local involvement is a prerequisite for transforming attitudes and behaviour, for renewing democratic practices, and for changing economic and social policies. It was also said that such involvement represents the best means of challenging neo-liberal globalisation. But while admitting that civil society should extend its activities nationally and internationally – something that the World Social Forums are trying to do, for example – will the actions taken by organised civil society be sufficiently effective to counter neo-liberal policy globalisation, the ill effects of which are clear for all to see?

Governments themselves have become ineffective in countering the anonymous forces from outside their countries' boundaries, forces represented by the multinationals, the global markets, and international competition. Will international civil society be able, through its dealings with national and international political institutions, to affect the interaction of global economic powers? It would be well worth including this question for consideration at a future seminar.

Appendix 1

Faith and Development: an international newsletter

Every month, the international newsletter *Faith and Development* publishes background articles on issues related to human development, the dialogue between civilisations, the role of civil society, and so forth. It gives a voice to those involved in the transformation of society.

The contributors, who come from every region of the world, represent a wide variety of viewpoints. This diversity reflects a deliberate choice on the part of the newsletter. Our intention is that the newsletter should avoid being tied into an overly western-oriented perspective in view of the fact that four out of every five members of the human race live in the countries of the South.

The principal topics covered over recent years have dealt with:
- the positive and negative effects of globalisation
- the dialogue between civilisations and religions
- sustainable development
- the emergence of an international civil society
- the problems of world governance
- the fight against poverty and social exclusion
- the problem of international terrorism
- the conflicts between tourism and development.

The newsletter also deals with issues of current interest:
- the Israeli-Palestinian conflict
- the World Social Forums (such as Porto Alegre and Mumbai)
- the war in Iraq
- globalisation and the native Indian populations of Latin America
- the tsunami disaster in South Asia
- Mexican immigration into the United States.

The newsletter is currently distributed in 110 countries and has a print-run of 1,800 copies in its French edition. From now on it will also be translated into English.
Articles that have appeared over the last few years, in French and in English, can be accessed by visiting www.lebret-irfed.org.

Appendix 2. List of participants

Balbis, Jorge
ALOP, Costa Rica

Bellec, François
Rapporteur for the Lebret-Irfed International Centre, France

Berthelot, Yves
President of the Lebret-Irfed International Centre, France

Blight, Dagmar
Translator, Slovakia

Dr Busek
Coordinator of the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe, Austria

Casula, Giorgio
CGTP, Portugal

Devetak, Silov
ISCOMET, Slovenia

Dragos, Nicolae
Gregorie Leu Foundation, Romania

Duval, André
Branch of the Lebret Centre, Savoy, France

Gaju, Mariana
Gregorie Leu Foundation, Romania

Glorieux, Yves
Treasurer of the Lebret-Irfed International Centre, France

Hanuliakova, Viera
Translator, Slovakia

Hüttig, Christoph
Germany

Labaki, Boutros
ILDES Lebanon

Le Tourneur, Mathilde
The Lebret-Irfed International Centre, France

Leu, Cornelio
Gregorie Leu Foundation, Romania

Lorthousamy, Samy
AREDS, India

Lourdelle, Henri
ETUC, Belgium

Marianek, Peter
Hnutie Human, Slovakia

Mattila, Mirka
Väestöliitto, Family Federation of Finland, Development Cooperation Unit, Finland

Nemcova, Lidmila
University of Prague, the Czech Republic

Novac, Ion
Gregorie Leu Foundation, Romania

Pampalk, Josef
Europahaus, Austria

Regazzoni, Sergio
Director of the Lebret-Irfed International Centre, France

Roque, Carlos
ASSERCO-MAE, GCM, Mozambique

Silny, Jiri
Director of Ekumenicka Akademie Praha, the Czech Republic

Simove, Pavel
Hnutie Human, Slovakia

Souchier, Bernard
Branch of the Lebret Centre, Savoy, France

Stoffen, Benoit
PICOL, Belgium

Thommen, Marlyse
The Lebret-Irfed International Centre, Switzerland

von Kohl, Christine
Balkan Dialog, Austria

Weag, Gerhard
PLOP, Slovakia