One of the more significant impacts of the European Union on its Member States is the institutional framework it has created to enable them to work out their respective social policy in coordination with each other. The Open Method of Coordination, as it is called, presupposes that the social situation may vary from one country to another and may call for a particular response. There are, however, common challenges that can be more adequately met through a common action framework, while respecting the competence of the individual Member States and recognizing the need for adaptation to local circumstances.

The point of this paper concerns an aspect of the Open Method of Coordination that is receiving increasingly more importance today. This is the participation of civil society in the governance of society. The EU has been giving a continuing impetus to the participation of civil society in the design, implementation and monitoring of social policy as part of the National Action Plans on social protection and social inclusion, including the strategy on pensions, health care and long-term care.

On the local level, two networks of civil society organizations have been particularly active as participants in the consultation process on social inclusion. They can be taken as examples of the kind of impact that membership in the European Union has been having on the involvement of civil society in social policy-making. These two networks are the European Anti-Poverty Network Malta and Caritas Malta. The former represents over forty civil society organizations, including Caritas Malta and other Church organizations, that are engaged in various types of social work. The latter coordinates the work of charitable organizations within the Catholic Church in Malta. It is not the purpose of the present paper to establish, on the basis of empirical research, in what way and how effectively civil society, through these networks, is participating in social policy-making (in Malta). Its purpose is rather to take these two networks as an example to illustrate the new possibilities that civil society in Malta has today to organize itself more effectively and improve its capacity for social advocacy work.

The potential of civil society organizations in Malta has increased substantially as a result of the opportunities that they currently enjoy to form part of European networks and hence to intervene more effectively on social matters at the national and European level. In fact, the European Anti-Poverty Network Malta is part of a European network that has been set up precisely to enable civil society to collaborate with the European Union in its fight against poverty and social exclusion. Similarly, Caritas Malta, as a member of Caritas Europa, also has the advantage of working within a European network of Church organizations that are participating in national planning on social inclusion in the various EU member States. From these two examples, one can see clearly the new potential that civil society in Malta has acquired following Malta’s membership in the European Union.

What a country, like Malta, is giving back is difficult to say but the fact that civil society institutions and organizations are starting to take the opportunity to engage in national action planning and strategies on quite important and yet so vulnerable areas of social life is already a contribution to a European process which, in itself, is vital to the future of Europe and its Member States.

A characteristic feature of the consultation processes in which the European Union has been engaging with interested parties, including civil society organizations and groups, is that these consultation processes have been given a specific structure. This marks an important step forward, since those who wish to participate know the channels of communication and can use them, if they wish to voice their views. Of course, the lingering lack of such knowledge, which involves a variety of quite complex skills, is a problem that needs to be addressed in order for players to be in a position to exploit the full potential of civil society to participate effectively.

The first part of this paper deals with the structures that the European Union has established for the purpose of consultation with regard to the preparation, implementation and monitoring of National Action Plans on poverty and social exclusion. The second part will consider the case of the European Anti-Poverty Network
Malta and Caritas Malta to show the kind of new possibilities that civil society organizations in Malta have acquired to pursue further their social advocacy work. By way of conclusion, some remarks will be made on what Malta is giving back to the European Union.

**Structures for Participation**

The Amsterdam Treaty required that “the Commission should ... consult widely before proposing legislation and wherever appropriate, publish consultation documents”¹. In the field of social policy it is not so much a question of consultation before legislative proposals, because that is a field which falls outside the competence of the European Union. But consultation with interested parties is even more necessary in this case where common action depends more on consensus among the stakeholders than on the binding force of legislative action. Indeed, civil society is being mobilized to participate in social policy matters at both the European and national levels. Participation at the national level would evidently imply participation in the legislative process itself in so far as the design and implementation of social policy would require legislative measures.

The White Paper on Governance², adopted by the European Parliament in 2001, recognized that the democratization process depends, now more than ever before, on how much and how effectively civil society is participating in the governance of the Union, whether this is exercised through legislation or some other form of governance as is the case in social matters. Of course, in a democracy, where the legislative power lies with the representatives of the people in the European Parliament or national Parliaments, civil society, functioning through a variety of movements, organizations and groups, cannot have a vote but only a voice. Yet this voice has become indispensable, especially today when people are empowered not only to articulate their aspirations and needs but also to make concrete proposals for a better kind of governance. The available channels of rapid communication would facilitate the work within as well as between organizations.

Of course, having a voice can be a significant achievement, since the problem of people living in poverty and on the margins of society is precisely that very often they do not even have a voice. They may be diffident, afraid or simply unable to speak and acknowledge that they are living in a state of poverty and social exclusion. One of the functions of civil society is to serve as a bridge between the world of individuals and families suffering in private, very often due to the absence or inadequacy of proper social protection, and the public domain where the cry of the poor can be heard and where appropriate measures can hopefully be taken at the legislative level¹. Civil society is always free to carry out its function as it deems fit, provided that it remains within the limits of what is justifiable in a democratic society. The opportunity for structured dialogue, however, marks a step forward in democratization, especially because the structure allows for the widest possible participation.

It may be useful in this context to review some of the characteristic features of the structure that the European Union has set for social dialogue between the Union and the Member States, on one side, and interested parties, on the other, as part of the Open Method of Coordination.

One feature is that this is a structure that includes practically every individual, group or organization that wants to participate. The definition of ‘civil society organization’ that the Commission adopts is wide enough to embrace practically every type of organization. It understands the term, as it is generally used, to refer to a range of organizations which include: the so-called social partners (trade unions and employers’ federations), organizations representing social and economic players such as consumer organizations; non-governmental institutions (NGOs) through which people promote a common cause, such as environmental or human rights concerns, charitable or educational work on behalf of the poorer sections of society; community-based organizations that are set up at grassroots level to pursue member-oriented objectives such as youth organizations, family associations and all organizations through which citizens participate in local and municipal life; and religious institutions⁴.

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¹ Protocol No 7, annexed to the Amsterdam Treaty.
When it comes to the actual process of participation and application for EU funding by civil society organizations there may be certain limitations. In Malta, as is other countries, where voluntary organizations have to register in accordance with the Voluntary Organizations Act in order to be recognized as having a legal status, problems may arise for their participation in consultation processes of the kind under consideration. Religious institutions, for instance, may have certain legitimate reservations about having to register in terms of the legal definition of “a voluntary organization”, as they may interpret that as interference in their own autonomy as religious organizations. This is not the place to discuss such an issue; it is being raised simply to note that the participation of civil society may be open in principle to any civil organization, including religious organizations, and it may be still somehow limited in practice. Certain limitations, obviously, would arise as soon as a particular practice is institutionalized. But it is precisely because problems may arise over the definition of ‘civil society organization’, whether as commonly understood or as legally defined, that the Commission adopts its own working definition which, as it has been noted, is broad enough to leave the door open to the widest possible participation. Various kinds of associations and organizations are brought within its parameters, without making them lose any of their distinctive features and respective autonomy in case they want to participate in consultation processes.

The Commission serves as the coordinating institution of an action process that is quite complex in itself. The overall aim is that the objectives set by the Lisbon strategy for the decade, between 2000 and 2010, are achieved, even if it is becoming clearer than ever before, now that we are at the end of the term set for this strategy, that the task has been much more challenging in practice than it may have been thought at the initial stage. The Open Method of Coordination, of course, applies to social cohesion, which the Lisbon Strategy has set as an objective along with two other objectives, namely, economic growth and the opening of more and better jobs. As a method of coordination, one of its functions is that of coordinating national action on growth and jobs (which is the objective of National Reform Programmes) and action on social inclusion, pensions as well as health care and long-term health (which is the objective of National Reports on Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion). This may not be the ideal way of addressing the problem of social inclusion, as a greater degree of effective action than is possible under the current method may be required to keep economic concerns from prevailing over social ones. Nonetheless, as the stated purpose of the whole exercise is the proper interaction of the economic with the social sphere, the criticism by civil society organizations of economic practices that are perpetuating rather than eliminating the causes of poverty and social exclusion can be more articulate and, hopefully, more persuasive.

On a more substantive level, one may say that the kind of coordination that the Open Method of Coordination is establishing and trying to maintain can be described in terms of a way of working together on social inclusion. Its merit lies essentially in bringing together different actors so that they can act together on a matter of common concern. The sort of interaction that it involves is peculiar to what Alisdaire MacIntyre calls practice, which he defines as:

“By ‘practice’ I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially

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5 The situation of Church organizations vis-à-vis the Voluntary Organizations Act is still unclear.
7 This has been the constant criticism advanced by several NGO networks. See Social Platform Resolution for the European Council Meeting (22-23 March 2005) From a strategy to a tragedy; Social NGOs call on political leaders to reject Barroso approach to Lisbon and reaffirm the European model of society.

Indeed, the Open Method of Coordination, as a method, sets out a number of things to be done or steps to be followed to ensure that the whole project could work efficiently and effectively. But one would lose the core element animating the entire project if one were to look at it simply as a regulatory framework. The requirements that it lays down are meant to facilitate the coordination between a variety of actors so that they can achieve those goods that define the practice in which they are engaging. The method is, at its core, a way for pursuing a set of worthwhile goals through broad collaboration. The test of its efficiency lies in how much and what kind of cooperation it is generating, while the worth of the whole action process lies in what this concerted action is trying to achieve.

It may be useful, therefore, to look at the goods that the various actors are expected to realize by coordinating their activity now as a socially established cooperative human activity, by the Open Method of Coordination. The overarching objectives for the three strands within the strategies for social protection and social inclusion are inter-related, each one articulating an aspect of the general vision behind those strategies. This vision is described first of all in terms of the goal of social protection systems and social inclusion policies (namely, the promotion of social cohesion and equal opportunities for all) and (at least indirectly) in terms of the ethical qualities of these systems and policies, (namely, adequate, accessible, financially sustainable, adaptable and efficient systems and policies). The vision is then seen as an interactive exercise between the relevant strategies (namely, the strategy for social protection and social inclusion, growth and jobs and sustainable development). Finally, the vision is of a project in which all the stakeholders are cooperating in a transparent way to manage a rapidly changing social situation by taking suitable measures to protect those at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

Accordingly, the involvement of civil society organizations appears clearly as an integral part of a broadly based practice, developing under the auspices of the European Union, as a more or less coherent response to the emerging challenges for social protection and social inclusion. The third overarching objective is precisely “to strengthen governance, transparency and the involvement of stakeholders in the design, implementation and monitoring of policy”. This objective is specified further as applied to action on poverty and social exclusion by requiring: “that social inclusion policies are well-coordinated and involve all levels of government and relevant actors, including people experiencing poverty, that they are efficient and effective and mainstreamed into all relevant public policies, including economic, budgetary, education and training policies and structural fund (notably ESF) programmes and that they are gender mainstreamed”. The overall purpose is clearly to extend the base for a more effective participation on the part of civil society not only in policies that pertain, strictly speaking, to social protection and social inclusion but also to policies for other social spheres in so far as they can have a bearing on poverty and social exclusion.

Looking at the structure of the National Reports on Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion, as designed under the Open Method of Coordination, one notes the potential that these reports could have for increasing participation by civil society. A National Report, covering all the main aspects of the strategy being adopted and followed, constitutes an essential tool for cooperation between various actors, representing possibly different views on how to best achieve a common goal, as it ensures transparency of procedures and promotes accountability for the specific commitments that are undertaken. In fact, the report is designed to serve as a map indicating the areas in which the actors, including civil society organizations, can participate.

I wish to mention how some of the parts of the national reports, as structured, can stimulate a more focused and, possibly, a more effective participation by civil society organizations. The opening part, for instance, should help these organizations to widen their horizon and learn to see the interests they represent and the concerns they are pursuing within a wider social framework. This widening of perspective can only come through a learning process in which one would progressively be able to see one’s own point of view as part of a broader social vision. In practice, this can be a rather difficult task, as we tend to identify ourselves, on

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9 COM (2005) 706, par.2.1 (c).
10 Ibid. par.2.2 (f).
an individual and collective level, through our personal or organizational interests and concerns. For this reason, taking the opportunity to work together on a common overview, as the national reports call the opening part, can have a profoundly significant educational impact on how we can really work together on social inclusion.

The “progress report”, that is required with respect to each of the three strands, provides an opportunity to civil society organizations to participate in the governance of the whole project. The report is expected to indicate the progress registered in relation to the immediately preceding NSRs and the challenges identified in the relevant Joint Report. This would ensure that civil society organizations can react to the progress being made. Their voice can surely be stronger once they have the opportunity to see and react on what the authorities agreed to implement and may have perhaps failed or, at least, have not been successful enough in so doing. If this opportunity is taken in a more organized way, it can be quite an important instrument for the quality assurance of social policies.

One could go over the remaining parts of the national reports and explain the new ways that are opening up for the participation of civil society organizations in social inclusion policies under the Open Method of Coordination. But there is quite a significant point that should not be allowed to fade out in the course of an explanatory exercise of this kind. This is that the reports in question relate the strategic action that the respective countries have agreed to apply. Strategic action is a strategy to change the social situation. A strategy is a specific kind of action. Its purpose is to know what is going on and to take control of the situation. This is certainly an essential and crucial thing for societies to try to do, especially at a time when we are living in a runaway world\(^\text{11}\). But in any attempt to grasp and control reality, especially if this is so large and complex in itself as social realities are nowadays, there are always aspects which are not seen, issues which are not considered and people whose pain and legitimate concerns are not heard. It is this side of the social reality to which civil society is usually responsive and on which it can make a decisive contribution to the ongoing process of social inclusion. So the more organized civil society becomes the greater would its impact be on the formulation and implementation of social policies. How is the European Union helping civil society to organize itself and improve its chances of participation in the consultation processes that the Open Method of Cooperation has been opening up?

One way in which civil society is organizing itself to improve the capacity of its organizations, both inwardly and outwardly, is through networking. Networks of civil society organizations, obviously, can help to strengthen their capability to engage professionally in social advocacy work within the current political structures at the level both of the European Union and of the individual Member States. The European union itself is assisting financially the development of the process of networking to enable civil society organizations to participate effectively in the consultation processes. Open calls for proposals have been made for the co-funding of European-level networks of civil society organizations involved in the fight against poverty and social exclusion to be able to reinforce their capacity to play an active role in the support of the Open Method of Coordination and in particular in the preparation and development of the National Action Plans on social inclusion. Five Networks were selected following the first call\(^\text{12}\) and six following the second call\(^\text{13}\) for proposals, covering between them the period from 2002 to 2007. The number of European Networks that have been selected to take part in a three-year Partnership Agreement in the context of the European Commission’s Progress programme has been increased to twelve\(^\text{14}\). The objectives of the calls for proposals have been set to help these European networks to engage in the Community Action Programme against poverty and social exclusion. More specifically, they aim at enabling civil society networks to function professionally within the current policy-making structures and to be in a position to reinforce policy-making at EU level; to play an active role in monitoring the National Action Plans on poverty and

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\(^{11}\) This expression is used by Anthony Giddens in his Reith Lectures (1999) to describe the late modern world.

\(^{12}\) The five Networks selected were: the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN); European Federation of National Organizations working with the Homeless (FEANSTA); European Transnational Network for Social Inclusion (RETIS); Eurochild and European Public Social Platform (EPSP).

\(^{13}\) The six Networks selected were: CARITAS EUROPA; Eurochild (AISBL); European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN); European Social Network; European Federation of National Organizations working with the Homeless (FEANSTA); European Transnational Network for Social Inclusion (RETIS).

\(^{14}\) The Networks selected are: Caritas Europa; CECOP EUROPE; COFACE; European anti-Poverty Network (EAPN); EUROCHILD; EUROCITIES; EURODIAKONIA; European Foundation for Street Children, European Microfinance Network; European Social Network; FEANTSA; Mental health Europe.
social exclusion; to raise public awareness and build bridges between the different policy levels and between relevant institutions or actors and to consolidate their membership and increase exchange among their members\textsuperscript{15}.

This co-funding scheme set in motion a new way in which civil society organizations, particularly those forming part of European networks, could begin to engage in social advocacy work. It provoked them to see how they could work hand in hand with civil authorities on behalf of the poor and socially excluded. They had to develop a concrete proposal that would enable them to work meaningfully within the new structures. Of course, working within definite institutional settings would involve certain constraints but it could complement well other forms of social advocacy work like making public statements or staging public protests to raise public awareness or to criticize the government of the day for its inefficiencies in tackling certain social issues. To networks of civil society organizations, especially but not exclusively religious ones, that have a long tradition as agents of welfare, the new scheme provides an opportunity to develop a relevant social advocacy programme in the context of the current procedures of social policy-making.

**Maltese Participation**

It may perhaps be too early to analyse and assess the full impact of the Open Method of Coordination and the EU’s co-financing of Partnership Agreements on the participation of civil society in social inclusion policies in Malta, as we are still in the initial stages. But looking at just one aspect of the developments that have been taking place, namely, the mobilization of civil society organizations operating as part of European Networks that are cooperating with the European Union on social inclusion, one can only conclude that new opportunities are opening up for an increasingly more active civil society in our country. These organizations have improved their social advocacy potential substantially in two very significant ways. They have now at their disposal more effective instruments to engage in social policy-making processes. At the same time, they are in a position to participate in the work of the European Union itself. The European anti-Poverty Network Malta and Caritas Malta can be taken as examples to illustrate the new direction in which civil society participation is evolving as a result of Malta’s membership in the European Union.

The European Anti-Poverty Network Malta, set up in 2004, is a network of Maltese NGOs and groups fighting poverty and social exclusion\textsuperscript{16}. Caritas Malta is a member organization. Its participation in the network can well prove to be a positive sign of synergy between the two networks. The EAPN Malta has organized itself specifically to develop its capacity to respond to the opportunities that the European Union is currently providing to fight poverty and social exclusion. In fact, it has set up three working groups to be able to participate in action programmes established by the European Union for its Member States. The most significant one, in the context of the present paper, is the Social Inclusion Working Group. Its composition is intended to reflect a fairly broad and balanced representation of non-governmental organizations working with different target groups. Its aims and objectives show clearly the orientation of the Network toward the work of the European Union and its Member States in the field of social inclusion. They include: monitoring and involvement in the NAP Inclusion; preparing key reports and responses to the NAP inclusion process and engaging with key actors involved in the process; giving feedback and input in EAPN’s work on a European level regarding the Open Method of Coordination in relation to the NAP inclusion and feeding in and following up on the meetings with people in poverty.

The other two working groups reinforce the work of the Network on poverty and social exclusion in the context of the structures that the European Union has established to generate more and better jobs and promote social cohesion. The link between National Reform Programmes, focusing on economic growth and jobs, and National Reports on Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion has been proving difficult to make and maintain in practice in view of the tendency of economic interests to prevail over social ones. The Employment Working Group has been set up precisely to contribute to a better link between the NAP inclusion and the National Reform programme. The Structural Funds Working Group seeks to influence decisions on how Structural Funds could contribute to social inclusion. As one can see from this rather too

\textsuperscript{15} See European Commission, *Open Call For Proposals - VP/2005/00, Under Budget Line 04.04020, For the Support of Key European Networks involved in the Fight against Poverty and Social Exclusion*, section 1.

\textsuperscript{16} The network has over forty member organizations, representing a very broad spectrum of non-governmental organizations either delivering direct services to people in need or promoting the rights of vulnerable categories.
brief and general picture, quite a substantial number of Maltese non-governmental organizations, including religious ones that amount to almost half of the member organizations, are operating directly within European structures for the promotion of social inclusion through this European network.

The other aspect, which is equally or perhaps even more important, concerns the new possibilities that Maltese civil society organizations have to participate in inclusion action programmes at European level. In fact, the European Anti-Poverty Network submits to the European Commission an assessment of the strategic reports presented by the Member States, on the basis of the reports made by the national networks. This is always a very thorough and critical assessment\textsuperscript{17}. Equally impressive is the progress report that the European Anti-Poverty Network submits on the implementation of the Strategic Reports on Social Protection and Social Inclusion under ‘the light year’ of the Open Method of Coordination again on the basis of the feedback provided by the national networks\textsuperscript{18}. These are concrete ways in which civil society is serving as a quality assurance force at the national and European level.

Unlike the European Anti-Poverty Network, Caritas has a much broader scope of activities. Its engagement with the Strategic Reports on Social Protection and Social Inclusion represents only one among several priorities. This does not mean that its interest in the matter is not significant. On the contrary, Caritas Europa considers its cooperation with the European Union on social protection and social inclusion as a very crucial matter for its social advocacy work. In fact, its first priority in its annual work plan for the previous and the current year is to carry out the commitments that it has undertaken as part of a three-year Partnership Agreement in the context of the European Commission’s Progress programme. The activities for 2008 included two which are particularly relevant. One is further participation of the network of social advocacy experts (established earlier with the help of funding by the European Commission and including one expert from Caritas Malta) in shaping the National Strategic Reports on Social Protection and Social Inclusion (2008-2010). The other is a conference on the new developments of the Open Method of Coordination.

Caritas Europa established two networks to promote the social advocacy work of its member organizations in the context of the current European institutional set-up for social policy-making: one in connection with the National Strategic Reports for 2006-2008 and the other in connection with those for 2008-2010\textsuperscript{19}. These networks create a framework in which a Maltese organization, like Caritas Malta, can participate more effectively in the design, implementation and monitoring of the National Reports on Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion. Participation at the national level may even have some impact at the European level, as the assessments of Caritas organizations are used to compile reports that Caritas Europa submits to the EU Commission on the national inclusion reports\textsuperscript{20} and their implementation\textsuperscript{21}.

**Conclusion**

The participation of civil society in national policy-making on social inclusion is now recognized as an integral part of good governance in the context of the Open Method of Coordination. The current National Report on Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion affirms that through the adoption of this method at different levels “Malta shall strengthen its method of governance to monitor and evaluate the overall implementation of policies reported in its National Strategies Report”\textsuperscript{22}. Whether or to what extent the voice of civil society organizations is being heard is another matter. In their reaction to the draft National Action Report on Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion 2008-2010 the European Anti-Poverty Network Malta and Caritas Malta shared essentially the same concern. The former called for “piloting and mainstreaming innovative ways of promoting participative democracy and above all investing in

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\textsuperscript{17} Building Security, Giving Hope is the EAPN assessment of the National Strategic Reports on Social Protection and Social Inclusion (2008-2010).

\textsuperscript{18} Light Year: Hard Work! Assessing the impact on Poverty is the latest EAPN progress report on the implementation of the Strategic Reports on Social Protection and Social Inclusion (2006-2008).

\textsuperscript{19} They are respectively Caritas Organization Network to Challenge the Exclusion and Poverty Trap and Inclusion.


\textsuperscript{21} Concept - The European Social Inclusion Process, Civil Society and the Caritas Contribution, Brussels, February 2008.

\textsuperscript{22} National Report, Par.1.5.
participation through ensuring adequate resources for and liaison with relevant non-government stakeholders”\textsuperscript{23}. The former observed that the report involved much broader participation by stakeholders than had previous ones but the working group, appointed to compile the report, “was taking very little consideration of the ‘experts’ view, in particular the NGO’s view”\textsuperscript{24}.

So what can Malta give to the European Union regarding civil society participation in social inclusion policy-making? A rather obvious but clearly complex answer is that Malta can give an example of good practice in this regard. Due to a long tradition of an extremely wide variety of civil society groups and organizations, including religious ones, Malta is well placed to develop its potential for social advocacy work in the context of the current political structures. This is a challenge that calls for a broadening of perspective on the part of Maltese civil society organizations to include social advocacy as an integral part of their mission and for the provision of appropriate resources for these organizations to be in a position to take up the challenge in creative ways.