European governance

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PURPOSE : to offer improved general principles and minimum standards for the consultation of interested parties. CONTENT : in its Communication on consultation and dialogue the Commission notes that it has a long tradition of open and transparent consultations with interested parties. However, this is based on a variety of methods and traditions. Currently, there is no one unifying set of procedures in place governing aspects of consultation and/or dialogue. In its White Paper on European Governance published in July 2001 the Commission identified improved guidelines for consultation as an area requiring further improvements. This Communication is a response to that observation. Indeed the large reaction the Commission received to the White Paper on Governance confirms that consultation is indeed a matter of interest to many. The overall rationale of this document is to ensure that all relevant parties are properly consulted. The principle aims of the approach can be summarised as follows: - to ensure more involvement of interested parties through a more transparent consultation process, which will enhance the Commission's accountability; - to provide general principles and standards for consultation that help the Commission to rationalise its consultation procedures and to carry them out in a meaningful and systematic way; - to build a framework for consultation that is coherent, yet flexible enough to take account of the specific requirements of all the diverse interests and of the need to design appropriate consultation strategies for each policy proposal; - to promote mutual learning and exchange of good practices within the Commission. The consultation relationship between the Commission and interested parties should be underpinned by certain fundamental principles. The principles are - participation, openness, accountability, effectiveness and coherence. When consulting on major policy initiatives the Commission will be guided by the general principles and minimum standards set out in this document. However, neither the general principles nor the minimum standards will be legally binding. In the Communication the Commission defines "consultation" as a process through which the Commission wishes to trigger input from outside interested parties for the shaping of policy prior to a decision by the Commission. Under this definition specific consultation frameworks already provided for in the Treaties will be excluded. As will consultation requirements under international agreements and decisions taken in a formal process of consulting Member States (comitology procedure). In terms of the minimum standards which are to apply to the consultation procedure, the Commission requires a clear content of the consultation process including, for example, a summary of the context, scope and objectives of consultation details of any hearing, contact details and deadlines and informing participants of what feed-back to expect. The Commission should ensure wide coverage of policy issues so that all target groups affect by the policy, those who will be involved in implementation or bodies that have stated objectives giving them a direct interest in the policy are informed. The Commission further suggests that the web portal "Your-Voice-in-Europe" should be used to publicise anyforthcoming policy initiatives as well as relying on other means such as press briefings and mailings. Time limits for participation will be set allowing enough time for interested parties to prepare their responses and lastly, the Commission will offer a receipt of contributions. The results of open public consultations should be displayed on websites linked to a single access point on the Internet.