

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development must become the EU's strategy for the next decade

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Speaker

Opening speech delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Presidents and Secretaries-General of the national Economic and Social Councils of the EU and the EESC [Check against delivery]

President of the Republic of Italy,

Presidents of the national ESCs,

Secretaries-general of the national ESCs,

Mr Moavero Milanesi, Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the Italian Republic,

Mr Giovannini,

Mr Treu, president of the Italian CNEL,

Colleagues,

I would first like to take this opportunity to thank Mr Treu for hosting this annual meeting of the presidents and secretaries-general of the economic and social councils of the EU and the EESC in Rome and to emphasise the excellent cooperation between our two institutions during the preparations for this event.

Today's event, in the presence of the Italian president Sergio Mattarella and Minister for Foreign Affairs Enzo Moavero Milanesi, gives us, representatives of European civil society, a unique opportunity to clearly set out our vision of the European project.

I therefore warmly welcome the presidents of national economic and social councils, who are delivering on their commitment to today's discussion.

We are now at a critical juncture, I would say even historic. The European elections have just taken place, with an extraordinarily positive verdict both in terms of participation – turnout again exceeded 50%, with an increase of 17% on the last European elections, a result that has not been seen for many elections – and in terms of confirmation of a strong line-up of pro-European forces, which in the European Parliament is now made up of four political families: the EPP, the social democrats, the liberals (who changed their name just yesterday and are now called Renew Europe) and the Greens.

It is on the basis of the results of these elections that the heads of state and government are preparing their strategies for a European Council next week – on 20-21 June – that will be called on to do two things:

- set the strategic agenda for the next five-year legislative term, and on that basis entrust the role of Commission president;
- conduct a very complicated negotiation that will involve appointments to the four key institutional posts (Commission, Parliament, European Council and High Representative for Foreign Policy), in addition to that of the European Central Bank.

At this very important moment, and as a European citizen, I would like to send a very clear message: it's now or never!

Our message, as the EESC and as the national economic and social councils, is unanimous in supporting the European project and its fundamental values, backed up by the unequivocal message of these elections confirming the extraordinary attachment of the majority of Europeans to the European project and its fundamental values. There was even an increase in the number of young people voting in all European countries, who had unfortunately become distanced from politics, and this was partly due to the extraordinary movement of teenagers like Greta Thunberg, which has injected positive energy into efforts to increase participation.

The feared wave of populism failed to materialise, even though many forces increased their authority. The outcome of the May elections is that Europeans see the European Union as delivering indispensable added value in addressing the unprecedented environmental, social and economic challenges that Europe must tackle.

The European Union we want, the Europe dreamed up by the founding fathers, and adapted, over time, to the various challenges of globalisation, economic cycles, the single currency and the sustainability of our economic and social model, is now more alive than ever.

Europeans, through their votes in May have even given a precise instruction: they wanted to give another five years to a European government that puts in place as soon as possible a strong project, which is capable of taking clear decisions on what matters, and of consolidating the EU strategy along the lines already set out in the ten points of the Sibiu Declaration, and also in the extraordinary document of the 21 heads of state and government adopted on 9 May, at the initiative of President Mattarella, who I would like to thank.

This is a challenge of historic significance, and civil society must be involved. We have to say very firmly to the top political leaders (and we acknowledge their presence in this CNEL assembly) that civil society has mobilised as never before. I have seen whole sectors mobilise like I have never seen before, like the business and culture sectors: these sectors will continue to mobilise as Europe faces five major transitions:

- the economic transformation, the fourth industrial revolution, with its ethical, social, economic and geostrategic challenges and opportunities;
- the energy and environmental transition, which is pushing us towards a circular economy and reminding us that the planet we live in has finite resources;
- the social transformation, and changes in the world of work, which are spurring us on to overhaul our welfare system to protect the foundations of our social model;
- the democratic and participatory transformation, in parties and society's representative bodies;
- and finally the geo-political transformation in international relations: in short, one could say that a long period of competitive cooperation has come to an end and that we have entered an era of multiple destructive conflicts.

The way in which Europe manages these changes will determine our future. If it can rise to the challenge, we could really see the emergence of the **European renaissance - rEUnaissance** - that I have strongly advocated, since I was elected president of the EESC.

European civil society forces are already part of this renaissance. One year ago, celebrating the 60th anniversary of the EESC, we launched a slogan [Europe@Work](#); we represent the productive forces, the trade unions and the other sectors of civil society represent an operational Europe, which is not better than the political Europe but which, however, faces an additional constraint. Every day, those who are entrepreneurs, trade unionists, farmers or the head of an NGO must come up with solutions for the future, otherwise the company or the trade union or the association closes its doors.

This Europe at work, I would like to say to you, President Mattarella, embodies the "Forza buoni" slogan rallying the "voices of good" that you yourself used in your message at the beginning of the year. We have made it our own!

We firmly believe that the sustainable agenda, which was adopted at the United Nations in 2015 and then endorsed by the EU, is the strategy that can cement the five transformations I have mentioned and can be pivotal to playing an unprecedented role.

The agenda of sustainable environmental, social and economic **development** has now, I believe, taken a firm hold in the political debate. The European elections have now confirmed that this issue is absolutely central and all of the political forces, which are about to shape the structure of the new European government, have already fully integrated - in different ways and at different levels - the sustainable dimension.

The sustainable development agenda must become the EU's strategy for the next decade, a clear strategy for progress, for work, and for the wellbeing and safety of citizens across Europe.

And this is how it should be. The sustainable development agenda is already enshrined in Article 3 of the EU Treaty, i.e. the Lisbon Treaty, which in a few months' time will be ten years in force.

A treaty that states that Europe is working towards sustainable development and that devotes a whole article, Article 3, to what exactly sustainable development must be. There is no need to invent anything new, it is all already written there.

And it's a win-win agenda for everyone:

- For employers, who know better than anyone that the next battle in global competitiveness will be in the sectors linked to sustainable development. Whether it be ending the use of single-use plastics, renewable energy, the European battery industry, which could already represent more than EUR 250 billion per year in turnover, the transport sector, energy efficiency, these are in fact sectors in which Europe is confronted with the choice of either taking the lead or coming in second or third after others.
- For trade unions and workers, as this could constitute the social contract of the 21st century, aimed primarily at reducing the social inequalities that undermine social cohesion and the foundations of our democracies.
- And it could therefore constitute a new prospect of progress and security for civil society, both European and national, provided that it is fully involved in its governance process.

That is why, in the EESC's view, there is no doubt about it: the 2030 Agenda must become the EU's overarching strategy for the next decade.

The European Commission adopted a reflection paper on this issue in January, which, though it may be somewhat timid, goes in the right direction.

Both the European Parliament and the Council have gone much further than that, calling on the Commission to draw up, by the end of 2019, a comprehensive strategy for sustainable development, with a timetable and specific measures.

Following my lengthy discussions with Finland's new Prime Minister, Antti Rinne, on 6 June in Helsinki, when he confirmed this, I know that the forthcoming Finnish presidency will decisively consolidate this path, with exceptional decisions, of delivering on an earlier 2035 carbon neutral target.

From the next European Parliament and Commission we are calling for firm and decisive political leadership to enable Europe to be the global champion of sustainable development, perhaps appointing a vice-president to implement the 2030 Agenda, but also dealing with the issue of the next European budget and deciding to earmark not just 25% but 40% of total resources to the sustainable development and climate change package, and making the European Union's main economic governance instrument - the European Semester - the main vehicle for managing the Sustainable Development Strategy, no longer the Europe 2020 Strategy.

The European Union is the world's largest economy and, through trade policy, can play a key role in promoting, if not imposing, the sustainable development agenda.

In recent years, the EU has concluded 39 trade agreements with 69 countries and in these agreements it has included provisions on sustainable development. It has included standards in dedicated chapters known as trade and sustainable development chapters.

The recent agreement with Japan, which entered into force just a few weeks ago, is the largest in history, now accounting for 30% of global GDP. Through this agreement, Europe and Japan can shape the fortunes and the direction of the global economy.

If, alongside this agreement, **Europe also manages to form an agreement with Africa in the framework of the renewal of the post-Cotonou agreement under negotiation** - i.e. to develop an agenda and a partnership for progress in Africa, a continent of 2 billion people which only accounts for 3% of world trade, 70% of whose population is under 35 years old and will therefore be an explosive economic and consumption force in the coming years - **then Europe can really play a decisive role in achieving a sustainable future for the world as a whole, now more than ever.**

I would conclude by saying that, in line with the tradition of our meetings, I am more supportive than ever of the idea of adopting conclusions at the end of our work to be addressed to the European institutions, and primarily next week's European Council.

Conclusions which should, however, be ambitious, clear and political, to point out that **we, civil society, have grasped the seriousness of the situation we are now in: we are at a juncture that is historic, unique and will probably never occur again, including in terms of opportunities for genuinely moving into a new era.**

The EESC and national ESCs, which are the home of European civil society - and I say this here in the historic CNEL forum, which has at times been the target of ill-conceived attacks in recent years - remain irreplaceable players.

Institutions such as these have valuable know-how, are able to anticipate the major debates of society, have undeniable political weight and know how to constantly renew themselves. We can see this in our friends at the French ESEC, for example - and today I salute its president, who is engaged in a highly complicated debate with the French Senate - who are about to become a genuine "council of citizen participation", following a veritable constitutional revolution driven by the president, Emmanuel Macron, and will be entrusted with holding public consultations on behalf of the country as a whole.

President, ladies and gentlemen,

The civil society that gathers here today at the CNEL believes more than ever in a European renaissance, with sustainable development at its core, and sees itself as a player in that renaissance, not a spectator, for its own sake and for the sake of future generations!

We are living in a time of ever-growing conflict between passion and reason. Reason is now all too often more derided than listened to.

"The sleep of reason produces monsters": the great Spanish painter, Francisco Goya, immortalised this phrase in his celebrated work. However, Goya also thought that great wonders came only from a fruitful

union between logic and reason, the imagination of the passions.

Well, now we need this new mix in the European Union, a new emotional intelligence which unfurls the sails of our European home once again, and this is what we hope to see at the forthcoming European Council.

Europe was truly the best idea we had in the last century. A daring, highly successful project for peace and progress which we have laboured to build, step by step, over more than 60 years. Now, together, we must propel it into the future, in the firm belief that it is what is truly needed today.

Thank you.