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European Economic and Social Committee

A bridge between Europe and organised civil society

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EDITORIAL

A Year of Progress and Promise: Reflections from President Oliver Röpke

Editorial

As 2024 draws to a close, I reflect on a year of significant achievements for the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). Together, we have strengthened civil society's voice, reinforced democratic principles, and championed sustainability within Europe and globally.

One of our proudest milestones was the launch of the Enlargement Candidate Members (ECM) initiative, bringing representatives from EU candidate countries into EESC advisory processes. This initiative reaffirms our commitment to a transparent and merit-based enlargement process, preparing future member states to fully participate in shaping the EU.

We expanded global partnerships through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with Brazil's Sustainable Economic and Social Development Council. This strengthened cooperation on sustainable development and democracy, exemplified during my meetings with President Lula da Silva. At the G20 Social Summit in Rio de Janeiro, the EESC played a central role, advocating for governance reform and enhanced social protections alongside President Lula and the Brazilian government. Similarly, our partnership with the African Union, formalized through a joint declaration at the UN Summit of the Future, emphasized inclusive global governance and equitable climate action. These global initiatives highlight the EESC's growing influence in addressing shared challenges.

Within Europe, the Civil Society Week demonstrated the importance of grassroots engagement in shaping the EU's future. At the High-Level Enlargement Forum, we reaffirmed that enlargement is not just about expanding borders but about deepening shared values. Meetings with leaders like Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama focused on ensuring that civil society plays a central role in EU accession negotiations. These efforts were complemented by discussions on digital transformation at the EESC Bureau meeting in Warsaw, aligning technological advancements with European values of equity and fairness. These efforts lay the groundwork for the upcoming Polish EU presidency.

As we look to 2025, our focus remains on strengthening participatory democracy, advancing social justice, and tackling global challenges like climate change and digitalization. The EESC will continue to work tirelessly for a Europe that listens, inspires, and leaves no one behind.

May the coming year bring peace, progress, and prosperity to all.

DIARY DATES

4-16 December 2024

Photo exhibition ‘Powerful Encounters: Picturing an end to energy poverty’

9 December 2024

European Consumer Day 2024

11 December 2024

Liaison Group 20th anniversary

22-23 January 2025

EESC plenary session

THE SURPRISE GUEST

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Our surprise guest is Andrey Gnyot, Belarusian filmmaker and journalist who has just been released from house arrest in Serbia, where he spent one year in extradition detention on allegations of economic crimes made by his country. Through his personal story, he describes the fate of independent journalists in present-day Belarus, where even the slightest criticism of those in power can lead to them being labelled 'enemy of the people' and imprisoned on bogus economic charges.

ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE – HOW BELARUS IS PERSECUTING ITS JOURNALISTS

By Andrey Gnyot

To be arrested in Belarus, it is enough to choose the wrong profession. As it turns out, for such a fatal mistake you can be arrested even in the centre of Europe, for example in Serbia. And such a prestigious international organisation as Interpol will facilitate it. There is bitter sarcasm and bitter truth in my words, but I am not exaggerating. My name is Andrey Gnyot. I am a Belarusian filmmaker, journalist and former political prisoner. Here is my story.

I decided to become a journalist in 1999. Television and radio were my passion, my dream and my hobby. Could a 17-year-old have imagined that, in his country, independent journalism would be labelled extremism and all other media would be reduced to a propaganda mouthpiece? No, none of us expected this to happen in Europe in the 21st century. Yet this is exactly the situation in dictatorial Belarus today: there is not a single independent media outlet in the country. All media structures are owned by the state. The state has strict control over editorial policy, which is very simple: Lukashenko's self-proclaimed power is praised and anyone who dares to criticise it, even in a constructive way, is called the 'enemy of the people' - an epithet borrowed from the communist past.

So, in the mid-2000s, a young and naive journalism graduate tried to find his place in the profession. During and after my studies, I gained a lot of practical experience in television and radio, and I knew exactly what I wanted. But the window of opportunity was closing fast: private radio stations were shutting down or being taken over by the state, while independent TV stations couldn’t even secure a broadcasting frequency. There was little choice: either engage in propaganda, or avoid sensitive issues and limit yourself to toothless entertainment. Journalism survived in Belarus only thanks to a few newspapers and independent internet portals. Many journalists left the profession, many were subjected to repression. The Belarusian Ministry of Information regularly issued warnings to the media but just three warnings were enough to have their licenses revoked. According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists, the number of newspapers fell by 21% in 2020-2024. Only harmless publications, such as those for dacha owners, joke lovers and crossword puzzle fans, remained on the Belarusian market. All independent socio-political publications were either shut down by the authorities or chose not to go to print because it had become impossible for them to operate.

Fortunately, I was able to find a compromise solution for myself: I publicly switched to directing and creative work, where I achieved great success. At the same time, I continued my journalistic work as a volunteer, without revealing my name, so as not to be exposed. This proved to be an effective tactic. Using all my experience and professional contacts, I was able to provide the independent media with fresh video footage from 2020, and I was also able to engage in civic and political activism - I became a co-founder of the human rights civil movement 'Free Association of Athletes of Belarus SOS.BY'. I don't think I can be accused of bias and involvement, because I chose the side of the people of my country – a dictatorship has nothing to do with objectivity, just as propaganda has nothing to do with journalism.

In 2021, Belarus ranked 158th out of 180 in the press freedom rating. Compared to 2020, it dropped by five places. 'Belarus is the most dangerous country in Europe for media workers,' warns the international human rights organisation Reporters Without Borders.

Note the preferences of Belarusians in the protest year 2020: internet and social media were the main sources of news for 60% of respondents. Television - only for 11% of respondents. Print media - for 7%, and radio - for 5%. After realising this, the dictatorial regime began to act harshly and uncompromisingly. The main invention has been the fight against 'extremism' as a basis for censorship and persecution. The authorities block access to the content of media outlets that continue their activities from abroad, and any cooperation with them is considered a manifestation of extremism.

At the end of 2023, 32 journalists were imprisoned in Belarus. In detention centres, journalists have been subjected to pressure and inhumane treatment. According to human rights activists, blogger and journalist Igor Losik of 'Radio Liberty' went on hunger strike for a long time in the prison colony, and then cut his hands and neck. He was sentenced to 15 years in prison. Criminal prosecution for any form of cooperation with independent media labelled 'extremist formations' has intensified. A new trend is the persecution not only of civil society representatives, but also of ordinary citizens who comment on any social and political events for journalists.

On October 31, 2024, my personal Instagram account was declared 'extremist material' by the Belarusian regime. This means that not only I, but also all my followers in Belarus will be prosecuted for having subscribed to my account. More than 5000 Internet resources in Belarus have been declared 'extremist' by the dictatorship. Perhaps no other European country can boast such impressive statistics! Do we, Belarusians, think that enough attention is paid to the problem of Belarusian journalism? I will tell you frankly - no, there is a lack of attention to this problem. Not only is the institution of journalism being dismantled in Belarus, but journalism professionals are also being physically destroyed.

The dictatorship also tries to persecute journalists and activists outside Belarus. My example is a vivid illustration of such persecution. The regime has learned to use democratic institutions to achieve its monstrous goals. Journalists, activists, bloggers and politically active citizens have been prosecuted for tax crimes, mainly for not paying taxes in the past. This has proven to be a perfect smokescreen for hiding the political motives behind the persecution. Human rights activist and Nobel laureate Ales Bialiatski is in prison on financial charges. The editor-in-chief of the independent media outlet 'TUT.BY' (destroyed by the regime in 2020) and her colleagues are behind bars under the same financial article. The same financial crime article was accepted by Interpol for my search. It took Interpol almost eight months to conduct an internal investigation and find out that the search for me violated articles 2 and 3 of their constitution. Nevertheless, I was arrested and imprisoned in the Central Prison in Belgrade for seven months and six days. I spent five months under house arrest with severe restrictions. The Serbian Supreme Court decided twice to extradite me to dictatorial Belarus. Twice, my lawyer and I successfully appealed against this decision. In total, one year of my life, my physical and mental health was stolen from me. All because I chose the wrong profession in the wrong country. Just because I had an opinion and expressed it through active citizenship.

Fortunately, I managed to win - otherwise you would not be reading these words. Thanks to the incredible solidarity of journalists, politicians, civil society and organisations, I left Serbia and reached safety in Berlin. But my story is not over. I still have a long process of recovery and struggle ahead of me. I know that I have faithfully chosen my vocation, even if some consider it extremism. I know that independent journalism is an integral part of a democratic society. The kind that Belarusians want to build. And we expect not to be alone on this important path.

ONE QUESTION TO…

October and November were marked by the failure of two top global environment summits: COP16 – the UN Convention on Biological Diversity and COP29 – the UN climate conference, both focusing on finance which is desperately needed for nature preservation and for mitigating climate change. We asked the EESC representatives at this year's COPs – Peter Schmidt, Diandra Ní Bhuachalla and Arnaud Schwartz – to share their thoughts on what is at stake if the world fails to act on climate.

COP16 AND COP29: WE ARE PULLING THE RUG FROM UNDER OUR FEET

By Peter Schmidt, Diandra Ní Bhuachalla and Arnaud Schwartz

Representing EU civil society at COP29 in the Azerbaijan capital of Baku, the EESC advocated for urgent, tangible climate action and the prioritisation of social and environmental justice in climate negotiations.

Peter Schmidt, chair of the Ad Hoc Group on the COP told us about the EESC's key messages on the main theme of COP29 – climate finance.

Peter Schmidt: The surge in extreme climate weather events worldwide is a powerful reminder to step up climate ambition. With this year on its way to being the hottest on record, human-induced climate disasters such as floods, wildfires and droughts are occurring more frequently and with greater intensity, exacerbating social inequalities. The cost of climate inaction is far greater than the cost of action.

The stakes are high for COP29. Agreeing on global climate finance solutions is crucial for developing countries to unlock the means for global climate action. The EESC's participation at COP29 in Baku brought forward recommendations based on our opinion on climate finance focusing on reshaping the international financial architecture to unlock and facilitate effective and accessible climate finance.

We emphasised the need to establish the New Collective Quantified Goal to bridge climate finance gaps, which should make climate finance more fit for purpose, biodiversity-friendly, impactful and accurately targeted towards the most vulnerable countries and communities. Climate finance flows should be guided by the principles of the Just Transition, in line with the Paris Agreement and with the Sustainable Development Goals at the core. Long-term commitments from both public and private actors are key, and public finance will play a crucial role in mobilising and de-risking private investments for climate initiatives.

While access to climate finance should be enabled for local initiatives and grassroots movements, the Committee also calls for a comprehensive approach to break the cycle of indebtedness and underinvestment in adaptation. We call for the equitable distribution of climate funds to address disparities. Additionally, civil society engagement is crucial for creating an inclusive, democratic approach that ensures climate investments are effective and sustainable.

The EESC youth delegate to COP (2023-2025), Diandra Ní Bhuachalla, shared her expectations from COP29. From the perspective of a young person, what would be the most pressing climate issues that need to be solved first?

Diandra Ní Bhuachalla: Following the disappointment of the COP28 outcomes, I sought to manage my expectations as much as possible for COP29. Recognising that the outcomes of yet another annual conference would be limited due to the choice of Presidency – yet another state heavily dependent on profits from fossil fuels – it was especially hard to maintain hope.

Nevertheless, having consulted with various youth organisations across Europe through the structured Youth Task Force meetings as part of the EESC's Youth Delegate to COP programme, I decided that it was best to focus on Climate Justice and the Just Transition, Climate Finance and a New Collective Quantified Goal, and increasing meaningful youth participation in international decision-making processes.

Now, knowing how many negotiations failed to progress in the first week due to a complete lack of agreement and cooperation – including on gender, climate finance, and the just transition – I realise that my expectations were again too high and have pivoted my advocacy efforts in side-events and bilateral meetings as a result. Now, my two main hopes are that existing language, especially on human rights, remains, and that we achieve slight progress to line things up perfectly for COP30, which is the basket that everyone seems to be placing all of their eggs of hope in.

Due to the intersecting nature of climate change and its effects, I could not possibly attempt to rank issues in order of importance or urgency. Young people are worried about their futures, in terms of their job security and whether they will be forced to re-train; in terms of their homes and families and safety from storms, floods, and erosion; in terms of the health and quality of life of their future children or indeed the next generation; and in terms of how our generation will be tasked with much more difficult climate negotiations when we become decision-makers, because not nearly enough action is being taken today given that the impact of this will be felt for decades.

We need climate justice now. We need realistic climate finance now. We need a fair, just, and equitable employment and energy transition now. We need ambition now. We need implementation now.

We need all of you now.

COP16 on biodiversity, which took place in Cali, Colombia in October, ended in disarray and with no agreement on nature funding. We asked Arnaud Schwartz, EESC representative at COP16, if

we can remain optimistic despite this setback. What actions should be taken to make progress in protecting biodiversity?

Arnaud Schwartz: 200 billion dollars a year. That – according to the UN – is the amount of money that would be needed (including all types of funding – public, private, national and international) to meet our biodiversity targets. So what is this about? It is about nothing more than putting a stop to the collapse of the world of living organisms, currently disappearing at an ever-faster rate, and it is about restoring nature and giving it a chance of survival in a 'liveable' world, rather than allowing it to be devastated by greed and stupidity.

What is the future after the failure of COP16?

Each and every one of us should ask ourselves this question and raise it with those around us, especially since it is known that, in France alone, every year, more than a quarter of this sum is being used to prepare for, or wage, war. Indeed, globally speaking, the Cali meeting was a missed opportunity, due to a lack of political will and a lack of economic solidarity.

However, not everything is lost.

There is a feeble light at the end of the tunnel: this COP recognised indigenous peoples and local communities for their role as guardians of biodiversity – after about 30 years of prevarication – as well as those of African origin; a new UN fund, known as the Cali Fund, was also created. In the long run, this fund is to be used to raise voluntary contributions from private companies, half of which will go to the groups of people mentioned above. Whew!

You are ... you are ... well ...

You are part of us; we are a part of you. And in order to continue along our common path, it might make sense to start by putting our economy back on track to benefit the common good. So ... in order to stop pulling the rug out from under our own feet, what are we waiting for before revisiting international finance and trade rules?

The primary focus of the EESC delegates at COP29, Peter Schmidt and Diandra Ní Bhuachalla, was climate finance, in which they were guided by the recent EESC opinion [Climate finance: a new roadmap to deliver on high climate ambition and the SDGs](). One of the [key events]() led by the EESC in Baku was 'A global perspective towards fostering a just transition in the agri-food sector' on 18 November. The event explored building sustainable, low-carbon food systems that are fair to farmers, food chain workers and future generations. The aim was to improve collaboration between policymakers and civil society, amplifying voices from the global south and advancing inclusive climate solutions for all.

As a member of the EU delegation, Arnaud Schwartz took part in meetings calling for greater synergies between the UN processes on Biological Diversity (CBD) and Climate Change (UNFCCC), the phasing out of environmentally harmful subsidies as a means to free up more financial resources, and a more active role for organised civil society in implementing the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. You can find more information about the EESC's contribution to COP16 here.

Mr Schwartz is the rapporteur of the EESC opinion [A comprehensive strategy for biodiversity at COP16: bringing all sectors together of a common goal.]

TO THE POINT

Bulgaria and Romania are paying a hefty economic and political price for not benefitting fully from the Schengen regime, which also adversely affects the EU’s competitiveness and economic growth. It is high time that the Council of the EU set a date for lifting land border controls between the two countries and the other Schengen Member States, writes Mariya Mincheva, rapporteur of the opinion *The cost of non-Schengen for the single market – impact on Bulgaria and Romania*.

THE COST OF NON-SCHENGEN FOR THE EU SINGLE MARKET

By Mariya Mincheva

Bulgaria and Romania fulfilled the conditions for joining the Schengen zone in 2011. However, 13 years later, they have still not been granted the full benefits of free movement. This discrepancy carries a political price and fuels euroscepticism.

At a Council meeting on 22 November in Budapest, the internal affairs ministers of Hungary, Austria, Bulgaria and Romania agreed to 'initiate the necessary steps' to set a date to lift checks on land borders, subject to stronger efforts to stem irregular migrants arriving via the Western Balkan route.

The Schengen Agreement is essential for the free movement of people, goods, services and capital within the EU, and is a key factor in the EU's economic success. Limitations undermine the EU's competitiveness and economic growth and hamper the delivery of the social market economy, as envisaged in the Treaties.

For years, Member States have been temporarily reintroducing border controls. However, the economic and social impact of these decisions on the single market has not been evaluated. The European Commission assesses physical trade barriers, but this only covers border blockades, demonstrations and truck attacks. The effects of land border controls, including the temporary reintroduction of border controls by Schengen Member States, are not taken into account.

In 2023, the Council agreed to lift internal air and maritime border controls with Bulgaria and Romania as of 31 March 2024. However, checks at internal land borders have been maintained, with no date set for their removal, resulting in significant costs and preventing companies from reaping the full benefits of the single market.

By taking steps to fully integrate Bulgaria and Romania into the Schengen zone, the EU can strengthen its internal cohesion, enhance its competitiveness and uphold the fundamental principles of free movement and solidarity underpinning the European project.

The European Parliament has argued that not being part of the Schengen zone could affect market expectations of these countries' status in the EU. It is a political signal that could have a bearing on the yields of government bonds, the prices of financial assets and the interest rates faced by firms and households, and could harm the real economy.

Both countries pay billions of euros annually due to increased logistics costs, delays in delivering goods and equipment, and increased fuel and driver costs. These direct costs are inevitably passed on to consumers through higher prices, impacting workers' physical and mental health.

This situation hampers tourism. It also impedes the free movement of labour, limiting opportunities for workers from Bulgaria and Romania to seek employment in neighbouring Member States. This limitation affects the construction, agriculture and services industries, which rely heavily on seasonal and temporary workers.

In his report on the future of the single market, **Enrico Letta** calls for firm opposition to any attempt to limit freedom of movement between Member States, including technical restrictions on routes and road transport, and any suspension of the Schengen Agreement.

It is high time that the Council set a date for lifting land border controls between Bulgaria, Romania and the other Member States which are members of the Schengen zone. A final decision on this issue is expected at the meeting of the EU Council for Justice and Home Affairs on 12 December.

EESC NEWS

Make EU enlargement happen

The next Commission must be the Enlargement Commission. The question is not whether to enlarge, but how to do it right, the Enlargement High-Level Forum held by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) concluded. The forum featured EESC President Oliver Röpke, European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights Nicolas Schmit and ministers from both EU Member States and Enlargement candidate countries.

The EESC, together with the European Commission, co-organised an Enlargement High-Level Forum, held back-to-back with its October plenary session. More than 140 civil society representatives from enlargement candidate countries converged for the first time ever. The participants' main point was clear: civil society and social partners, often overlooked in the accession process, must be given a central role in the EU enlargement process.

Mr Röpke stressed: 'This is not just about expanding the EU – it's about preparing future Member States to actively participate in shaping the EU, ensuring that they are fully equipped to meet the challenges ahead. Through collaboration with civil society, employers' federations and trade unions, we are creating the necessary foundation for a more inclusive and stronger Europe'.

The debate highlighted the need to keep up the recent momentum surrounding enlargement, as the 2024-2029 Commission will play a crucial role in finalising the enlargement process.

Another key message of the debate was the importance of gradual, predictable and merit-based integration, where progress is recognised and rewarded with real prospects for accession.

Mr Schmit stressed the key role played by civil society, saying: 'A well-functioning bipartite and tripartite social dialogue and the involvement of social partners are crucial elements in the context of EU accession, as they are part of our social market economy'.

German Secretary of State **Rolf Schmachtenberg** said: 'Labour and social aspects are key for successful EU accession. Those who want to improve the lives of all citizens, create opportunities and combat social inequalities need effective employment policies, good working conditions and functioning social security systems, with strong social partners'.

During the debate, **Naida Nišić**, Montenegrin Minister of Labour, Employment and Social Dialogue, underlined the importance of the high-level forum as a platform for dialogue allowing Montenegro to assess progress.

Niki Kerameus, Greek Minister of Labour and Social Security, emphasised: 'It was a great privilege to participate in this important discussion on EU enlargement and the critical role that social partners play in shaping the future of the European labour and social rights landscape'.

Olta Manjani, Albanian Deputy Minister for Economy, Culture and Innovation, said: 'Albania is actively increasing its presence in EU institutions, committees and working groups, and the establishment of the Joint Consultative Committee with the European Economic and Social Committee is one of these efforts'.

The EESC has consistently advocated EU enlargement. In 2024, it launched a pilot project, the Enlargement Candidate Members (ECMs) Initiative, which allows civil society in the candidate countries to contribute to the EESC's work. The initiative demonstrates how the active involvement of civil society from candidate countries strengthens the enlargement process. (mt)

[EESC calls for European flagship initiative for health as well as action plan on rare diseases]

The EESC has called for a European flagship initiative for health, proposing the creation of a European Health Union and urging the European Commission to publish an Action Plan on Rare Diseases with clearly achievable targets.

During a debate on ‘A European flagship initiative for health’ held at its October plenary, the EESC called for the EU to launch an ambitious initiative, aiming to build a cross-cutting health architecture within the EU. Creating a European Action Plan on Rare Diseases (ARPD) was also on the agenda.

Opening the debate, **EESC President Oliver Röpke** stated: ‘It is crucial that everyone living in the EU have access to quality healthcare that is affordable and accessible. We need to invest in innovative and sustainable health systems and take firm action to combat health inequalities both within the EU and globally. Rare diseases make persisting inequalities and vulnerabilities even more visible. This is why we need comprehensive European action on rare diseases.’

The rapporteur of the opinion on the European flagship initiative for health, **Alain Coheur**, said: ‘Today, we are trying to adopt a roadmap for future EU commissioners which promotes healthcare for all and protects people against future crises.’ **Ágnes Cser**, rapporteur of the opinion on rare diseases, added: ‘We have to come up with an action plan. However, we must not solely focus on the rare diseases action plan but on health as well – health is the key to competitiveness. Our health union cannot remain an empty phrase.’

The opinion on the European flagship initiative for health sets out strategic pillars to strengthen solidarity and cooperation between Member States on health. Among these is the establishment of a European care and healthcare guarantee which would set out multiannual health objectives at EU level. This could lead to the creation of a legally binding text (such as a directive).

Another pillar is the implementation of the One Health approach which links human, animal, plant and environmental policies. The opinion on tackling rare diseases calls on the Commission to publish a communication containing a comprehensive European Action Plan on Rare Diseases (APRD), which sets out SMART targets that can be achieved by 2030. (lm)

AI Made in Europe: EESC calls for strategic investment in AI infrastructure

The EESC is urging the European Union to boost its investment in secure connectivity, resilient infrastructure and supply chains to ensure it stays competitive in the rapidly evolving field of general-purpose AI (GPAI). These measures are seen as essential in maximising the benefits of generative AI in line with European values, needs and fundamental

rights.

In its exploratory opinion on *Artificial intelligence/the way forward*, in which it focuses on the key aspects of GPAI, the EESC stresses that the dynamism and complexity of AI require ongoing updates to the EU's AI Act. While GPAI models are largely technical and apply predominantly in the business-to-business (B2B) sector, their indirect impact on workers and consumers cannot be overlooked.

'We think it is very important that any AI we use here in Europe also be based on European values. This of course means the rule of law and human rights, but it also means transparency, credibility and trustworthiness. Those are the key factors enabling any AI system to work for the people,' said **Sandra Parthie**, rapporteur for the opinion, which was requested by the European Commission and the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the EU.

Although supportive of the AI Act, the EESC stresses the need for it to be closely monitored and adjusted if the regulation proves to stifle the innovativeness of EU AI-focused companies. This can happen where there are uncertainties over how the regulation should be applied or if it proves to be too complex, driving investors and innovators away from the European market.

To counteract the heavy dominance of large non-EU digital companies on the EU market, the EESC has called for EU competition policy tools to be mobilised to address any critical behaviour or non-compliance with EU standards.

The EU and its Member States need to invest in innovation to build strong networks for creating and improving AI products and to increase the benefits AI brings to people and the economy. Not developing and using GPAI in Europe might result in decreasing competitiveness among European companies and in declining sales, job losses, economic stagnation and poverty.

'We have very good companies and researchers; we have world-leading research facilities on our doorstep. We need to promote them much more than we do. We need to attract talent and make Europe attractive for them to work here. We need to develop AI made in Europe,' **Ms Parthie** concluded. (ll)

Civil society needs funds to be able to monitor the management of radioactive waste

The EU Member States should facilitate inclusive engagement, openness and transparency with civil society in all areas of radioactive waste management. This applies to both current and potential host communities, especially given that increasing amounts of radioactive waste will be generated every year over the next decade and beyond.

In an opinion adopted during its October plenary session, the EESC takes a firm stand. It argues that available funding should be used to build the capacity of civil society groups, particularly local communities close to nuclear installations, to take part independently in projects and studies assessing participation and transparency in radioactive waste management.

The EESC recommends that Member States report on the methods for public participation in the decision-making process on radioactive waste management, as well as on how transparency is ensured. 'The Committee calls on the Member States to take steps to ensure the monitoring and regular disclosure of environmental, public health and socio-economic developments regarding the management of radioactive waste,' said the rapporteur, **Alena Mastantuono**.

The Member States should shoulder their responsibilities and not leave future generations with the burden of processing nuclear waste, whatever its nature, lifespan and hazard level.

Given that a high proportion of used nuclear fuel can be reprocessed, fissile materials should be recycled, thereby reducing the need for a supply of natural uranium to operate nuclear reactors. Circular economy strategies would enable the Member States to minimise the amount of waste needing to be tackled by waste management strategies.

'Member States should make sure that cost assessments for decommissioning and for managing spent fuel and radioactive waste account for cost increases over time. They should also make sure that funding is sufficient to cover the actual costs,' said the co-rapporteur, **Christophe Quarez**. (mp)

Geothermal energy can make the green transition happen

In Europe, geothermal energy has significant untapped potential and the European Union should take urgent action to adopt a European strategy for geothermal energy aimed at harnessing its benefits.

At its October plenary session, the EESC took an unequivocal position on energy. In an opinion drawn up by **Zsolt Kükedi** and **Thomas Kattnig**, the EESC underlines that geothermal energy production has extremely low greenhouse gas emissions and can play a key role in the EU's green transition by reducing its dependence on fossil fuels and facilitating its decarbonisation.

'Geothermal energy can make a useful contribution to achieving the EU's 2050 climate neutrality goals,' said **Mr Kükedi**. 'Its potential is unexploited and the European Commission should move immediately to put together a comprehensive strategy to make use of the resources it provides,' echoed **Mr Kattnig**.

The EESC points out that investment in geothermal power plants will not work without financial help at national level. More specifically, government funding and incentives will be needed to attract and de-risk the initial investment.

In addition, it is important to note that changes in energy policy or financing may affect the economic attractiveness of geothermal projects.

Building geothermal power plants has risks and those risks need to be accurately identified, especially in terms of environmental impacts. For this reason, it is essential to carry out this process with the involvement of local communities, with a view to increasing public acceptance.

However, the environmental and climate benefits of geothermal energy outweigh the risks, as geothermal energy is one of the best renewable energy sources in terms of land use, resource use and import dependency. (mp)

E?SC urges the EU to lead with a coherent and sustainable bioeconomy

The EESC calls on the EU to lead with a sustainable bioeconomy model aligned with the European Green Deal and climate goals.

In its opinion on *Aligning the circular economy and the bioeconomy*, the EESC outlines how a robust bioeconomy can boost Europe's economic and ecological benefits, strengthen resilience, and support a fair transition. Strategic investments in cross-sector collaboration and community engagement can position the EU's bioeconomy as a global model for sustainable growth.

A sustainable bioeconomy must align with EU frameworks like the Green Deal, circular economy, and biodiversity goals. This ensures that bioeconomy activities contribute to climate and biodiversity targets while remaining within planetary boundaries.

'A comprehensive, ambitious bioeconomy strategy is essential. Aligning with the circular economy and sustainable development goals, the bioeconomy can foster a competitive edge for the EU by creating sustainable, well-paid jobs and ensuring growth that respects ecological limits,' said **Cillian Lohan**, rapporteur for the opinion.

The bioeconomy can build on circular economy principles, reducing waste and improving efficiency through resource cascading and biological material recirculation. It offers social benefits, particularly in rural areas, by creating jobs and skill-building opportunities. Supporting rural communities and youth engagement in this sector is crucial.

Bioeconomy education can help build a skilled workforce and raise sustainability awareness. It also contributes to better public health by reducing healthcare costs. Key to this effort are advancements in technology and sustainable land use, such as regenerative farming and forestry, which boost carbon storage and biodiversity.

Urban farming and circular food hubs can reduce food waste and strengthen local food systems. The EU should uphold high standards in business and innovation, encouraging early adoption of bio-based technologies. Funding should prioritise innovative leaders and support small and medium enterprises.

To integrate the bioeconomy into EU policies, a clear definition is needed. Updating the Bioeconomy Strategy by 2025 should align with the Green Deal and the Paris Agreement, providing a roadmap for a sustainable, resilient bio-based economy. (ks)

The EESC proposes concrete recommendations for building a resilient and sustainable food system for the future

The EESC has outlined a vision for transforming the EU’s agriculture, fisheries and food systems to ensure resilience and sustainability in times of crisis.

In an opinion adopted in October, the EESC called for a food system that is competitive, crisis-proof and aligned with EU environmental and social goals. It emphasised food security, a fair income for producers, environmental resilience and supporting the next generation of food producers.

‘Ensuring stable, sustainable incomes for producers is essential, as is fostering a knowledge-based food policy that encourages innovation,’ said **Arnold Puech d’Alissac**, President of the World Farmers’ Organisation and one of the three rapporteurs of the opinion.

To support this, the EESC proposes strengthening the farming sector’s bargaining power in price negotiations and increasing EU agriculture and fisheries funding. It also calls for future trade agreements to incorporate Green Deal and Farm to Fork standards, ensuring fair competition and high food quality.

‘Ensuring fair incomes for primary producers is critical,’ said **Piroska Kállay**, another rapporteur for the opinion.

To this end, the EESC called for stricter enforcement of fair trading practices and a ban on below-cost selling in order to rebalance the food supply chain. Policies promoting generational renewal, focusing on young people and women, including education, training and support for cooperatives, are also of utmost importance.

To support sustainability, the EESC recommended rewarding carbon sequestration efforts, like sustainable soil management, and preventing carbon leakage. ‘These measures would help align food production with the EU’s climate targets and global environmental commitments,’ said **Joe Healy**, another rapporteur.

Another proposal is a public insurance system to protect producers from climate-related disasters, ensuring food supply continuity.

The EESC called for policies to restore soil and water health, improve water efficiency and reduce usage, alongside cutting red tape and boosting transparency with digitised price and cost tracking.

Finally, the EESC recommended establishing a European Food Policy Council (EFPC) to foster dialogue on food-related issues and align food policy with broader social and environmental objectives. These proposals provide a roadmap to make the EU’s food systems more resilient, sustainable and equitable in the face of global challenges.(ks)

EESC proposes making EU financing clearer and more inclusive

In October, the EESC adopted an opinion proposing a fundamental rethink of how EU finances work. It called for more transparency and citizen participation across the EU, which would enhance democracy and public trust.

To achieve this, the EESC recommended developing a common fiscal transparency framework, involving citizens in budgeting processes, and creating digital tools for clearer budget information.

'Just imagine being able to track every euro of EU funding – from Brussels through national governments down to your local community', said the rapporteur of the opinion, **Elena Calistru**.

In the EESC's view, a common framework for fiscal transparency will set clear and consistent standards for all EU-funded programs and ensure uniform reporting and easy access to financial data across Member States. The focus would be on promoting best practices rather than introducing new regulations.

Participatory budgeting would allow citizens to have a direct say in public spending decisions, particularly at local level, while incorporating participatory elements into EU-level budgeting processes.

The EESC called for a unified user-friendly digital platform offering real-time budget data, clear visualisations, and insights into how EU funds are delivering results. This would increase public understanding and engagement with financial information.

The EESC also stressed the importance of raising public awareness, ensuring stronger oversight, and aligning financial practices with EU goals such as cohesion and sustainability to foster cooperation and accountability.

'EU finances are not just about numbers. They are about trust and democracy and making Europe work for its citizens', Ms Calistru concluded. (tk)

A people-centred economy must remain the focus of the EU

The EESC supports efforts to develop a more human-centred and future-proof industrial ecosystem. At the same time, it calls for an in-depth debate on Industry 5.0 and its social and economic implications.

Industry 5.0 aims to place social and environmental issues at the heart of business processes, advancing beyond Industry 4.0's focus on digitalisation and automation. The EESC recently adopted an opinion titled *Industry 5.0 - how to make it happen*, advocating for a people-centred industrial model that values human skills and creativity.

Industry 4.0 largely overlooked the human impact of automation and paid limited attention to environmental priorities like waste reduction, circularity, and green energy. The EESC stresses that Industry 5.0 should address these gaps, prioritising democratic values, social equity, and sustainable competitiveness. **Giuseppe Guerini**, rapporteur for the opinion on Industry 5.0, argues that digital transformation should contribute to a 'New Industrial Clean Deal', where human factors and creativity play a central role.

Industry 5.0 brings people back into the core of production, viewing their knowledge and skills as essential to competitive advantage. It balances automation with human creativity, using collaborative robots for repetitive tasks, allowing workers to focus on design, planning, and customer service. This shift also emphasises worker health, safety, and support for those displaced by automation.

The EESC calls on the EU institutions to support a future-proof, human-centred industrial ecosystem rooted in social justice and inclusive competitiveness. While backing Industry 5.0, the EESC stresses the need to define its economic, social, and technological impacts further. Existing European policies, such as the Green Deal, AI Act, and Skills Agenda, provide a foundation for this vision but should be updated to align with Industry 5.0 principles.

For Industry 5.0 to succeed, the social partners and workers must be involved at all levels. This inclusive approach will foster a collaborative work environment that combines human and machine strengths, making workplaces more innovative, engaging, and sustainable. (gb)

The EU needs urgent focus on green hydrogen to decarbonise transport

The EESC held a conference on low-carbon hydrogen in Pärnu, Estonia on 12 November. The aim of the event was to discuss and identify strategic actions for the development of sustainable infrastructure for hydrogen and its derivatives, focusing on financing and usage.

Entitled *Offshore Power for E-Fuels: Boosting the New Hydrogen Economy*, the conference brought together the Embassy of the Netherlands in Estonia, the Pärnu County Development Centre, the Metrosert Applied Research Centre, Invest Estonia and the e-methanol plant developer Power2X.

Green and low-carbon hydrogen are crucial components in our energy transition, and recent initiatives, such as the EU Hydrogen Bank, have highlighted that there is momentum in developing sustainable hydrogen markets. To this end, EU and national policy makers need to provide the necessary means to put these ambitions into practice and ease cooperation among Member States to adopt effective strategies.

Commenting on this urgent need, the president of the EESC's Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society **Baiba Miltoviča** said: 'The rapid deployment of renewable hydrogen is critical – not only for the transformation of our energy system but also for the social and economic well-being of the

European Union. However, it’s essential that we direct our resources wisely. To maximise our impact, we need to prioritise hard-to-abate sectors and establish effective ecological and social standards that ensure fair and safe working conditions.’ (mp)

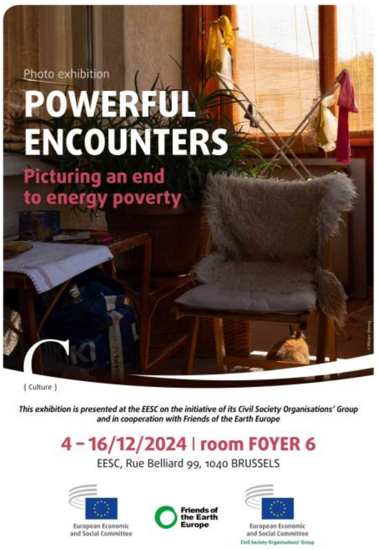
EESC’s TEN section president Baiba Miltovi?a and CoR rapporteur Andres Jaadla sign Declaration on Housing

In a joint statement signed on 14 November, Baiba Miltoviča, president of the EESC’s Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society (TEN) and Andres Jaadla, rapporteur for a Committee of the Regions (CoR) opinion on housing, call on the European institutions to adopt urgent measures to get the European Union out of the current housing crisis. They also welcome the appointment of a European Commissioner for Energy and Housing, who will be tasked with putting forward the first-ever European Affordable Housing Plan.

Declaration on Housing

- We call on the European Commission to organise **an annual EU Summit on Social and Affordable Housing** in partnership with the European Parliament, the EESC and the CoR. This annual EU summit should bring together all the stakeholders involved in the implementation of Member States’ actions on social and affordable housing, on the basis of a multi-level approach and the exchange of best practices in compliance with the principle of subsidiarity;
- We support the plan of the Commissioner-designate in charge of housing to establish a **pan-European investment platform** for affordable and sustainable housing to urgently support national, regional and local partnerships in ending housing exclusion, in partnership with the EESC and the CoR;
- We point out that **innovative ways of boosting public investment** and **mobilising existing EU funds** need to be explored if we are to find a long-term solution to the housing crisis;
- We call on the EU institutions to support the **in-depth renovation of residential buildings** on the basis of diversified, long-term and innovative financial support and coherent legal frameworks, targeting vulnerable populations as well as key actors on the ground, in particular energy communities and local authorities;
- We call for **closer cooperation between actors at different levels of governance**: Member States, EU institutions, civil society organisations, regional governments, local authorities.

We commit to helping implement the measures set out in the Liège Declaration by sharing the views of civil society organisations and local and regional authorities from across the EU as part of a joint effort by all the EU institutions aimed at solving the housing crisis and strengthening European cohesion from all sides.



Powerful Encounters: Picturing an end to energy poverty

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) is hosting ***Powerful Encounters: Picturing an end to energy poverty***, a compelling photo exhibition showcasing the work of photographer **Miriam Strong**. Organised in partnership with Friends of the Earth Europe, the exhibition highlights the activism, collectivism and empowerment of communities across Europe who are facing energy poverty. Organised on the initiative of the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group, the exhibition will be on display at the EESC's JDE building in Brussels, at Rue Belliard 99-101, from 4 to 16 December.

At the opening event, EESC Vice-president for Communication **Aurel Laurenţiu Plosceanu** and the president of the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group **Séamus Boland** emphasised the EESC's commitment to eradicating poverty, promoting affordable energy, fostering systemic change and meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In his address, Mr Boland discussed the rising cost of living and increasing poverty levels in Europe, stressing the need for a strong political response from the new European Commission and European Parliament. 'The first-ever EU Anti-Poverty Strategy and the Clean Industrial Deal, announced by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in her political guidelines for the new European Commission, must provide sustainable solutions to the realities on the ground', Mr Boland said.

Energy Justice Campaigner **Laia Segura** and Friends of the Earth Communications Officer **Yvonne Lemmen** underscored that this photo project explores how people confront energy poverty and fight for their right to decent, climate-resilient homes powered by affordable, clean energy. For more information, click here.

And the prize for the best Connecting EU 2024 photo goes to…

The winner of the Connecting EU 2024 photo competition is Martina Cikojević, editor and journalist at the Croatian Trade Union of Postal Workers.

Her photo, *Brussels Grand Place in the Moonlight*, earned her a two-day stay in Brussels during the EESC's Civil Society Week in March 2025.

Ms Cikojević participated in Connecting EU 2024 seminar on 17 and 18 October in Brussels. The seminar brought together press and communication officers from EU civil society organisations as well as journalists. Held under the title *A bastion of democracy: helping journalism survive and thrive*, it focused on the unprecedented challenges journalists face in a world of rapidly evolving AI and mounting political pressures.

Participants also joined the networking session *Working as a press or communication officer in the age of Instagram, TikTok and AI – how to get your message across* which included two workshops. The photo competition was part of the workshop on *Lessons on communication content*, led by communication specialist **Tom Moylan**.

Ms Cikojević said her photo, showing the moon piercing through dark clouds and bringing light to the night, could also symbolically connect to the seminar's topic. *No one can stop the moon from bringing light into darkness. Nobody should stop journalists from bringing the truth for a better, safer and fairer society*, she said.

As the winner of the photo contest, Ms Cikojević will participate in the EESC’s second Civil Society Week, taking place from 17 to 21 March at the EESC's premises in Brussels. This year's topic is *Strengthening Cohesion and Participation in Polarised Societies.*

The EESC Press Unit congratulates Martina and thanks everyone who sent their photos. (II)

NEWS FROM THE GROUPS

US elections: we must be ready to go it alone on key strategic issues

By Stefano Mallia, President of the Employers' Group

Donald Trump has won the US elections and will become President for the second time. The vote is clear and must be treated with respect. But what now?

The EU and US remain key geopolitical and trading partners as our relationship is grounded in the principle of reciprocity. There is no room for isolationism or protectionism in today’s interconnected world, as such approaches undermine our mutual and global cooperation and economic prosperity.

The EU and the US are each other’s largest trading partners. EU-US bilateral trade is at a historical high, with over EUR 1.6 trillion in 2023 and with bilateral investment stocks topping EUR 5 trillion. The US is a major source of foreign direct investment (FDI) in the EU, with US FDI in Europe estimated at around USD 3.6 trillion, while EU investment in the US is approximately USD 3 trillion. This mutual investment strengthens economic interdependence and creates millions of jobs on both sides of the Atlantic.

For this reason, it is important to continue working on our relationship. The imposition of tariffs on EU goods, as Trump has previously suggested, implementing tariffs of 10% to 20% on imports from all countries, including the EU, is a dead-end street. This is why we are calling for a more open dialogue and a forward-looking agenda for cooperation.

The EU-US Trade and Technology Council (TTC) has facilitated dialogue on critical issues such as artificial intelligence and semiconductors. If on the one hand the dialogue must be strengthened and upgraded, on the other the EU must speed up its policy reforms, get its act together and look for the best way to find ways to cooperate with the US.

We must also prepare for the scenario in which, on important matters such as climate change and Ukraine, we may have to go it alone. This is a very real possibility and, as such, we should begin treating it as the de facto new reality.

It's the cost of living, stupid!

By the Workers' Group

Paraphrasing Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign slogan – 'It's the economy, stupid!' which at the time very much resonated with American voters grappling with recession – seems more than appropriate today. You just have to look at the results of the latest Eurobarometer EU post-electoral survey which revealed that inflation and the economy were the main topics encouraging people to vote.

No, there is no one-size-fits-all solution and economic hardship alone cannot explain all the troubles surrounding the elections ahead. However, it is safe to say that rising prices, cost of living and the economic situation were the main voter motivators in the EU last spring and across the Atlantic a few weeks ago. Not that the writing was not on the wall: it was the main concern (followed by poverty and social exclusion) back in early 2023. While macroeconomic indicators seem to give policy makers a pat on the back, the direct impact of inflation on essential goods like food and energy remains severe, disproportionately affecting those who spend a larger share of their income on these necessities. This comes on top of the pandemic recovery and its catastrophic policy response, with many countries still reeling from the aftermath of the 2008 crisis.

For decades, wages have been decoupled from productivity growth, causing the prospects of a better future to fade for many in Europe's working and middle classes. Political extremism and electoral turmoil are here to stay.

Addressing the cost-of-living crisis is crucial for Europe's future, as it highlights structural issues in our societies and economies while challenging the principles that uphold the social fabric of our democracies.

On 26 November, the Workers' Group met with several stakeholders to discuss this, and we invite you to revisit this discussion and join us in calling on policy makers to cut the buzzword spree, close their own skill gap and focus on what matters.

Eradicating poverty once and for all

By Séamus Boland, president of the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group

Despite the fact that the EU is wealthier than most parts of the world, millions of children still rely on their schools to provide them with food on a daily basis. In fact, the number of Member States supplying food to children during school holidays is increasing. This alone tells us that poverty at its most basic level exists and is on the rise, and must be tackled strongly and unhesitatingly by the incoming European Commission.

European poverty statistics are depressing. Around 21% of the EU population is at risk of poverty and social exclusion (Eurostat data for 2023) and almost 25% of children are at risk of falling into the poverty trap (Eurostat data for 2023). It may well be that the problem would be worse without current EU initiatives to drive change in this area, but it has to be admitted that they are not enough. This is why the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and its Civil Society Organisations' Group welcome Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's announcement that the Commission will be working on an EU anti-poverty strategy addressing the root causes of poverty during the 2024-2029 term of office. The EESC, and my group in particular, have been calling for such a strategy for a long time.

Sadly, poverty is not just a 'shortage' of the basic resources that families need on a daily basis. It is the result of a series of long-term circumstances which go hand in hand with long-term deprivation. This deprivation is linked to political systems, which at best ignore certain demographics and at worst discriminate against them.

Solutions will need to assess the deep historical causes of poverty. This means examining every stage of people's lives, from birth to death. The same applies to housing provision, which is becoming one of the most serious problems facing European societies. This is why, at the request of my group, the EESC has commissioned a study on affordable sustainable housing in the EU. It was presented at our conference on 21 November on protecting Europe's most vulnerable people through sustainable and affordable housing. With this conference, we demonstrated that affordable housing is one of the key instruments for combating poverty.

We are pleased that the new European Commission will include a commissioner responsible for energy and housing, thus helping to eradicate poverty. However, it is worrying that most politicians still view poverty eradication as a problem to be solved by large, bureaucratically managed budgets. Resources will reach those affected only if this mindset changes. Poverty is a cross-cutting issue and the new European commissioners for energy and housing, equality, cohesion and reforms and just transition must take responsibility for driving this change, as a matter of urgency.

FOCUS ON CLIMATE


Photo by Lucie Morauw

Betrayed by the billions: COP29's failure to deliver for climate justice

Young climate and human rights activist and co-founder of Youth for Climate Belgium Adélaïde Charlier lists all that is wrong with the COP29 climate deal that has just been brokered in the Azerbaijan capital of Baku. Seen by many as a symbol of broken trust and climate inequality, COP29 has left vulnerable nations and civil society bitterly disappointed.

The recent COP29 climate conference in Baku has left the world divided, with vulnerable nations and civil society expressing deep frustration over what is seen as a betrayal of trust. While a deal was reached—pledging USD 300 billion annually to help developing countries adapt to climate change by 2035—it falls drastically short of the urgent needs of those on the front lines of the climate crisis.

'No deal is better than a bad deal'

Harjeet Singh, Global Engagement Director with the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty Initiative, set the tone 24 hours before the final deal was passed: 'No deal is better than a bad deal.' His statement echoed the mounting tension between affected countries, civil society, and wealthier nations. By Sunday, the conference presented a sobering reality with only one financial target: the pledge of 'USD 300 billion per year by 2035'. This goal is ridiculous as it is far below what the vulnerable nations had collectively called for (USD 1.3 trillion to cover their needs in terms of adaptation, mitigation and addressing loss and damage).

This agreement is tied to the New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG), which is meant to finance the climate transition in developing countries. While it is three times higher than the USD 100 billion target set in 2009, which was only met two years late in 2022, it is still far from sufficient. The 2009 USD 100 billion commitment would, accounting for inflation, amount to USD 258 billion by 2035, representing a real increase of only USD 42 billion in actual effort. The call from vulnerable nations has been clear: 'Trillions, not billions'.

The structure of the proposed financial objective is just as disappointing as the amount itself. It lacks any specific commitment to public funding mechanisms, such as grants or subsidies, which are critically needed by countries in the Global South.

Additionally, there are no sub-targets to adequately fund mitigation, adaptation, and addressing loss and damage. The lack of a clear focus on adaptation, combined with a disproportionate emphasis on mitigation—primarily financed by multilateral development banks and the private sector—demonstrates an ongoing failure to learn from 2009, where adaptation was significantly underfunded, compounded by the absence of accountability and dedicated financing for loss and damage.

Furthermore, while loss and damage are mentioned, they receive only a vague and superficial reference, rather than being integrated meaningfully into the agreement. The framework also leaves the door wide open for heavy reliance on private financing, including public-private partnerships, de-risked private investments supported by public funds, and fully private investments, which are actively encouraged.

Ignoring historical responsibilities

Beyond the insufficient funding, the deal has exposed deep cracks in climate diplomacy. Wealthier nations have ignored differentiated responsibility—shifting part of the financial burden to vulnerable countries already bearing the brunt of the climate impacts. Nations like India, Cuba, Bolivia, and Nigeria voiced their anger, accusing the rich countries of failing to pay for their historical greenhouse gas emissions.

This disregard has left trust in tatters, with tensions reaching levels unprecedented in the history of the COP negotiations. The current pledge of USD 300 billion pales in comparison to the USD 1 trillion estimated by UN experts as the minimum investment required for developing countries (excluding China) by 2035.

A bad deal under pressure

The world's poorest and most vulnerable nations, including the 45 least developed countries (LDCs) and 40 small island states, ultimately accepted the deal under immense political pressure. The fear of losing any agreement, particularly with the possibility of a Trump presidency threatening future climate progress, forced their hand. For many, it was a bitter compromise: accepting insufficient funding to secure immediate aid.

The price of delay

This 'bad deal' is not just a blow to diplomatic relations; it will have devastating consequences for millions of lives. Vulnerable nations have already been pushed to their limits by extreme weather, rising sea levels, and resource scarcity. Governments in wealthier nations must recognise that investing in climate action now will cost far less than waiting for the increase in the catastrophic bill Nature is making us pay.

The outcome of COP29 leaves a stark reminder: the climate crisis demands bold, urgent action, and justice for those most affected. Without transformative commitments, we are deepening year by year the divides between the global North and South—undermining the very essence of global climate cooperation.

As we look toward COP30, it's clear that the fight for climate justice is far from over.

Adélaïde Charlier is a 23-year old European climate justice activist, best known as a co-founder of Youth for Climate Belgium and now as a founder of the Bridge organisation (bridging youth and climate politics). She is also a 2024 Forbes 30under30 nominee.

Fight for a healthy planet is a question of life or death

'We rural women do not want to be viewed with pity or compassion; we want to be recognised and valued as allies in achieving sustainable development. We need opportunities and quality basic services to be able to stay in our territories and continue feeding the world', says Luz Haro Guanga, Ecuaduarian peasant farmer and Executive Secretary of the Network of Rural Women of Latin America and the Caribbean (RedLAC), who

recently spoke at the EESC debate on Women and the triple planetary crisis. In her interview with EESC Info, Ms Haro Guanga talks about the impact of climate change in Latin America and why – despite the setbacks of COP16 – there is no room or time for pessimism in the fight for a more sustainable and healthier planet.

Your organisation, RedLAC, participated in COP16. Are you disappointed with the results of the conference, given that no consensus was reached on funding for the protection of nature and biodiversity? Was anything achieved at COP16?

As an Ecuadorian woman from the countryside, I have been fighting for the rights of my rural sisters in Ecuador since the 1980s. Among the lessons that these nearly 40 years have taught me, is that social processes require enormous efforts, give few immediate rewards and, most of all, require persistence, consistence and insistence. A consensus on financing for the protection of nature and biodiversity would have been great, but I'm sure that the voices of thousands of urban and rural men and women, brought to COP16 as an avalanche of grains of sand, won hearts and minds that previously had no desire to support this urgent climate action.

We didn't end up achieving our goal, but right now we need to continue insisting before the authorities of every city, community and country, so they take note and, with personal, technical and political will, make the best decisions to avoid human deaths from hunger in the future as a result of not acting today.

How does climate change affect indigenous and rural women in Latin America?

I would like to highlight some facts from a document compiled by the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM) of the Organisation of American States (OAS), on the basis of dialogues with 70 female leaders from 16 countries. The dialogue process started in September 2024. The document was presented at COP16 and put forth the opinions of rural women.

The conclusion was that climate change is a reality in all countries, including in the Americas, and is causing serious impacts. However, four climate events were singled out.

Prolonged droughts: Some countries reported months with very little rainfall, with countries further south reporting years-long droughts.

The rise in temperatures is well above normal levels: These high temperatures, together with dry soils, are contributing to numerous fires (some spontaneous and others deliberately lit), but all of which are exacerbated by dry conditions, affecting life and biodiverse systems. For example, at the time of the Brazil meeting, it was reported that there were 300 active fire outbreaks in the state of Piauí.

Windstorms: It was mentioned that rain is intense and comes in very short bursts, often accompanied by strong windstorms. Participants from Central America, Mexico, the Dominican Republic and coastal Colombia spoke of an increase in the intensity and frequency of hurricanes and tropical storms that impact their areas.

Changes in rainfall patterns: 'It rains when least expected' is an expression that cropped up in all meetings, and in the south and in Andean areas they spoke of unexpected frost, hail and snowfalls. In general, a decrease in yearly rainfall was noted, but it was said that when it does rain, the rains are torrential, causing floods and natural disasters, resulting in loss of life, infrastructure, roads and crops, and affecting living conditions, mainly in rural areas. One participant summed it up by saying 'sometimes the rainfall is terrifying'.

On the other hand, unsustainable practices are being implemented, depleting natural resources. The most worrying and also most commonly mentioned issues were logging or deforestation of forests and mangroves; deliberately lit forest fires; inadequate handling of water resources; pollution; the promotion of intensive, expansive, water-intensive and polluting activities; and the excessive use of agrochemicals, herbicides and pesticides.

One aspect that stood out was the **inaction of some local and national governments** that were not developing regulatory frameworks to curb destructive activities and promote sustainable productive strategies. Some countries have regulations, but because of corruption or personal political interests, the authorities do not implement them.

International leaders are therefore called on to put more pressure on states to comply with the biodiversity and climate change treaties they have signed.

Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the direction that the fight for climate and environmental protection is going? What do you think should be done?

If we do not dream big, we will not achieve great things. While climate change affects us and its effects are progressing rapidly, we cannot stop fighting for decision-makers to pay attention to those fundamental aspects that require priority action, not only in terms of financing, but also in terms of coordination, cooperation, and less egoism and partisan political zeal.

I am optimistic that if we continue insisting, raising our voices, and sustaining the long-term social processes through perseverance – if we make strategic alliances, in the Americas and across the world, we can influence public policies and ensure that those who take up positions of power or decision-making roles do so with the conviction that there is an urgent need to fight climate change and, at the same time, reduce actions that accelerate its harmful and destructive effects on our planet: fires, single-crop farming, indiscriminate use of insecticides and chemicals, the destruction of water basins, indiscriminate fishing, the destruction of water springs, sewage treatment, etc.

Pessimism will weaken our voices, eventually leading us to give up our work and our fight. There is no time to lose, nor space for pessimism in the fight for a more sustainable and healthier planet, despite negative occurrences. It's a question of life or death for current and future generations!

The time to act was yesterday. But today is still a good day to start changing attitudes and make commitments for the good of all people.

Luz Haro Guanga *is Ecuadorian peasant farmer and Executive Secretary of the Network of Rural Women of Latin America and the Carribean (RedLAC), as well as the president of the technical arm of RedLAC in Ecuador, FUNMUJERURAL-e. RedLAC is a social organisation made up of more than 200 rural women's organisations from across Latin America and the Carribean. Founded in Argentina in 1990, its purpose is to promote the effective civic and political participation of rural women. Thanks to RedLAC's long-standing efforts, the Organisation of American States (OAS) proclaimed the period between 2024-2034 as the 'Inter-American Decade for the Rights of All Women, Adolescents and Girls in Rural Areas of the Americas'.*

Invest sustainably for the future of your grandchildren

In 2021, the Belgian association *Grootouders voor het Klimaat* (Grandparents for the Climate) won the EESC Civil Society Prize, which was focused on the theme of climate action, for their campaign entitled *Our Savings for their Future*. The campaign was aimed at encouraging some 2.4 million Belgian grandparents to redirect their savings – estimated at the time to amount to around EUR 910 billion in assets – to more sustainable projects. EESC info spoke with co-chair of Grootouders voor het Klimaat Hugo Van Dienderen about the current situation regarding climate and sustainable finance, and their expectations and plans for the future.

Three years on, are you seeing tangible results from your campaign? How would you generally assess the current situation regarding climate and sustainable finance in Belgium – has there been progress, and are people becoming more aware of the importance of this?

The EESC prize gave us important recognition and support. We have often referred to it in contacts with the government, other support organisations and our fellow citizens. It has helped us to make more contacts and develop our campaign further, in relation to both our fellow grandparents and the younger generations, with the development of presentations, workshops and a series of lectures on sustainable finance.

We realised that while this is still not a straightforward topic, major legislative efforts have been made in Europe (the taxonomy, the Green Deal, the CSRD, the CSDDD, etc.), which means that companies and sectors are now also taking more and more initiatives to which we can refer. This is a source of hope and very much needed, as the (inadequate) outcome of the COP in Baku has highlighted again unfortunately.

We learned from a recent study that our work in raising awareness is still very much needed. Only 5-15% of investors make use of their right to ask their financial institutions to take into account their sustainable preferences. We must therefore continue to work on this.

What do you expect from COP29? Are you participating in the conference, if not directly, then by supporting the 12-year-old boy Ferre and his grandparents? Do you think that climate finance is a crucial issue in a just transition?

At the time of writing, COP29 has just finished. From the outset, we gave our full support, in financial and communication terms, to the 12-year-old Ferre, who took the trip to Baku with his grandparents, who are members of *Grootouders voor het Klimaat*, to ensure that the voice of children continues to be heard. We would also like to thank all the fellow grandparents and authorities that made this possible.

COP29 had to be the climate finance COP because funding is indeed crucial for the just transition. Unfortunately, in Baku, this was insufficiently in evidence. Our message remains: the money is there, and we ask those who have it to step up to the mark and use it sustainably for the future of our grandchildren.

What are the latest projects of *Grootouders voor het Klimaat* that you would like to mention? Are there any new projects in the pipeline?

We continue to be hopeful about the future. For *Grootouders voor het Klimaat*, 2025 – ten years on from the Paris Agreement – will be the year in which we call on large numbers of our fellow grandparents, who are members of the big senior citizen organisations in Flanders. We are in the midst of preparations whereby several dozen 'grandparents for the climate' are being trained to engage in climate discussions with confidence, and to be ready to reach out and to listen.

We have developed a series of workshops, including one on sustainable saving and investing, which we offer free of charge to all local branches of the senior citizen organisations. We are already witnessing a lot of enthusiasm. At the end of November 2025, we will be hosting a major final event, which – we hope – will not be an end but rather the start of a growing commitment for the future.

Hugo Van Dienderen is co-founder and co-chair of 'Grootouders voor het Klimaat'. Founded in 2019, 'Grootouders voor het Klimaat' is an independent movement of older people, mainly grandparents, who want to pass on a liveable world to future generations. It is a member of the European Grandparents for Climate Association.

In the photo: Ferre with his 'grandparents for the climate' at COP29 in Baku. Ferre had the opportunity to express his concerns about the climate crisis to many key people.

Impact investing: transforming finance for a sustainable future

Can we help save the world by investing sustainably? With the financial sector undergoing a remarkable transformation in the face of environmental and social challenges, Dr Brigitte Bernard-Rau of University of Hamburg looks at impact investing, the new powerful investment strategy. A fundamental shift in how we think about the role of capital and finance in society, the strategy challenges the traditional idea that investors have to choose between making money and making a difference.

By Brigitte Bernard-Rau

In a world facing unprecedented environmental and social challenges ranging from climate change and biodiversity loss to food security, inequality, well-being and healthcare, the financial sector is undergoing a remarkable transformation. Impact investing has emerged as a powerful approach that challenges the traditional idea that investors have to choose between making money and making a difference. But what exactly is impact investing, and how does it differ from other forms of sustainable finance?

Understanding impact investing

At its core, impact investing represents a fundamental shift in how we think about the role of capital and finance in society. As defined by the Global Impact Investing Network (GIIN), impact investing is an investment strategy encompassing 'investments made with the intention to generate positive, measurable social and environmental impact alongside financial return'. However, this apparently simple definition belies how complex the transformative potential of impact investing is.

To fully grasp the distinctive role of impact investing in modern finance – with its materialistic approach – it is necessary to see where it sits on the broader spectrum of investment approaches. At one end of the spectrum we have traditional investing, where financial return and profit maximisation reign supreme and social or environmental considerations play no role in decision-making. As we move along this continuum we encounter increasingly sophisticated approaches to incorporating social and environmental performance factors, giving way to a variety of sustainable finance investment. Of this, impact investing is the ultimate investment strategy, championing positive and transformative change by combining financial return with social and environmental goals.

Investment approaches in a nutshell:

- **traditional investing** focuses solely on financial return, ignoring social and environmental factors. It has long been the cornerstone of capital markets;
- **ESG integration** incorporates ESG (environmental, social and governance) factors as risk indicators in investment decisions but does not see them as primary investment drivers;
- **sustainable finance** integrates ESG considerations into investment decision-making and sees sustainability as a value creator. It supports investment that addresses sustainability challenges and brings about positive social and environmental change. It also includes investing in the transition, financing both what is already environment-friendly today (green finance) and the shift to environment-friendly performance levels over time (transition finance);
- **impact investing** refers to a significant shift in financial markets, a ‘substantial reorientation towards impact’, and addresses the question Does investment in sustainability contribute to a better world?. Therefore, impact investing emerges as the most intentional approach, actively seeking to achieve both financial return and measurable positive social or environmental impact with equal commitment.

The two faces of impact investing: aligned vs generating

Within impact investing, a crucial distinction exists between impact-aligned and impact-generating investment. This differentiation helps investors understand not just where their money goes, but also how it contributes to positive change.

- **Impact-aligned investment** supports companies that have already shown that they use positive environmental or social practices and have proved their commitment to positive impact through their operations and outcomes.
- **Impact-generating investment** actively creates new solutions to social or environmental challenges, often focusing on transformation and systemic change.

This theoretical distinction is brought to life through real-world applications across different sectors.

Clean energy

In the clean energy transition, impact-aligned investing might involve purchasing shares in established renewable energy companies or electric vehicle manufacturers. These companies already contribute to environmental sustainability through their core business models. Impact-generating investment in this same sector might instead focus on funding early-stage battery technology startups or innovative community solar projects in underserved areas, creating entirely new solutions to energy challenges.

Sustainable agriculture

The sustainable agriculture sector offers another illustrative example. Impact-aligned investors might support established organic food producers or sustainable farming operations, while impact-generating investors would focus on developing new regenerative agriculture techniques or revolutionary urban farming solutions that could transform how we produce food.

Social impact

In the sphere of social impact, aligned investment often supports companies with strong diversity policies and fair labour practices. In contrast, generating investment might fund new, affordable housing developments or pioneer educational technology solutions for underserved communities, actively creating new pathways to social equity.

The investment process: from intention to impact

Success in impact investing requires a rigorous process which, with the intention of bringing about positive social and environmental change, begins with setting clear impact objectives. Investors have to define specific environmental or social outcomes that they seek to achieve, establish measurable targets, and often align these goals with established frameworks such as the United Nations Global Indicator for 17 Sustainable Development Goals and their 169 targets of the 2030 Agenda.

This intentionality distinguishes impact investing from other forms of sustainable finance. It requires impact-oriented investors to start a due dilligence process that thoroughly assesses both financial performance and the ability to generate and measure meaningful social or environmental outcomes.

Financial appraisal of an investment is a well-established practice, supported by standardised metrics and robust methodologies. However, non-financial appraisal, such as evaluating social and environmental impact, remains comparatively less developed and lacks universal frameworks. Investors therefore have to go beyond traditional financial analysis to assess how deep a company's commitment to impact is. This includes evaluating the management's commitment to achieving impact goals, their capacity to measure impact effectively and their ability to transparently disclose and report outcomes. The assessment process often involves examining specific impact metrics tailored to the goals of the investment, ensuring alignment with recognised frameworks such as IRIS+ or the Impact Management Project (IMP, 2024).

Additionally, to enhance the due diligence process, differentiating between ‘company impact’ and ‘investor impact’ is essential. Company impact is the direct social or environmental effects generated by a company's operations and products. In contrast, investor impact is the influence that investors have on a company's behavior and outcomes through their investment choices and engagement strategies. Understanding this difference is crucial in order to assess the overall impact of investment accurately and to develop effective impact measurement practices.

Challenges, complexities and considerations

Despite its promise, impact investing faces significant hurdles:

1. **impact measurement:** in the absence of standard measurement metrics, it is difficult to quantify or compare social and environmental outcomes. Transparency and rigorous tracking and reporting of impact metrics are crucial to provide consistency and accountability, ensuring that impact claims are backed by evidence;
2. **attribution challenges:** it is difficult to isolate the effects of specific investment amid broader systemic changes and attribute them to one's investment. Determining how much of the observed change can be directly attributed to a specific investment remains one of the most persistent challenges in impact investing. For example, improvements in SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-Being – might be the result of a combination of investment in healthcare facilities, education, and infrastructure, rather than a single targeted investment. Developing methodologies such as counterfactual analysis and control group comparison is necessary but can be resource-intensive and not always feasible, particularly for smaller projects or in developing markets;
3. **impact washing:** exaggerated or false claims by companies or funds about their social or environmental impact undermine trust in the sector. To maintain trust and integrity within the entire impact investing field, transparent reporting and verified impact claims are of the utmost importance (ITF). Clear standards for impact measurement and robust verification methods, along with third-party audits and independent certification, are vital for maintaining credibility.

Unlocking the transformative potential of impact investing

Impact investing stands at the forefront of a profound transformation in global finance, representing far more than just another investment strategy. It embodies fundamental reimagining of the role of finance in society. It challenges the traditional belief that financial return and positive social and environmental impact have to exist in separate spheres.

The evolution of impact investing has demonstrated that investors can simultaneously pursue profitable return while contributing to meaningful social and environmental change. By integrating purpose with profit, impact investing provides a compelling approach for a financial system that serves both people and planet.

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Citizen journalism supports traditional media

‘Climate Reporters’, Lithuania's brand-new climate news agency, aims to tackle fatigue in climate reporting and bring the topic of climate change back to the forefront of editorial agendas. In a shining example of citizen journalism, Climate Reporters combine communication and climate activism to educate people about climate change and give Mother Earth a voice during the environmental crisis.

By Rūta Trainytė

The climate news agency ‘Climate Reporters’ started up this year in Lithuania. It is an initiative run by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and an example of citizen journalism. The news agency aims to help journalists report on the various aspects of the environmental crisis. To that end, the agency’s team drafts texts and forwards them to editorial offices.

The agency’s work is carried out by a community of activists. The texts are written by journalists, public relations specialists, representatives of NGOs, activists and scientists – in short, people who care about what is happening and want social change. They also make up the board of ‘Climate Reporters’. The board ensures that the new initiative is trustworthy.

The ‘Climate Reporters’ are not new to the world of communication but have already gained considerable experience in public relations, in editing and in creating and maintaining web portals. Nor are we novices in climate issues. This is how the idea came about. We do what we do best and combine it with climate activism. We give Mother Earth a voice during this environmental crisis.

Of course, we are in contact with journalists. The dominant trend in editorial offices is to believe that climate news is not of interest to the public and does not generate clicks. They avoid publishing articles with headlines containing the terms ‘climate change’ or ‘climate crisis’. What does climate crisis denial mean? Is it a way to protect society from bad news and anxiety?

It might not be that bad. A vast amount of news floods editorial offices every day, which is physically difficult to process, even without producing climate-related news items. You also have to be familiar with the topic. This is where we come in. The next step that the ‘Climate Reporters’ are taking is to train journalists. We can see that journalists need to understand the issue to avoid spreading greenwashing.

Another idea is to teach certain groups about climate change in an attractive way. Above all, we want to reach out to young people, and we have realised that they respond well to humour. We are not sure yet what this will look like in the future, but we are already thinking in this direction.

The news agency has been operating for a good six months. We know from our own experience that we need patience. We persistently and purposefully knock on the doors of editorial offices with our news items. Our texts are already being published on major Lithuanian news portals, and we get invited onto radio shows.

To ensure that our editorial work is high-quality, it is very important that we receive considerable support from Lithuanian environmental organisations, that our organisations are members of international NGO networks, that our members participate in working groups at EU level and that they represent Lithuania in the EESC. This enables us to broaden our range of topics and stay up to date with current affairs.

Our connection with the EESC goes beyond the fact that one of the initiators of the project, **Kęstutis Kupšys**, is a member of the Committee. EESC members can share relevant experiences from their various countries to enrich the climate news published by ‘Climate Reporters’. In this regard, we recently spoke with EESC member from France **Arnaud Schwartz** on the fringes of the COP16 World Biodiversity Summit. The insights he shared with us directly from Cali led to a ‘Climate Reporters’ article. His thoughts were soon heard in the Lithuanian media. This model, whereby the expertise of EESC members is used to effectively communicate global news to local audiences, has proved its worth. We will therefore use it again in future.

Rūta Trainytė is the editor at the climate news agency ‘Climate Reporters’. The agency is part of the state-funded ŽALINK project. The project, which is run by the Consumer Alliance, the Development Cooperation Platform and the NGO ‘Circular Economy’, is funded by the Climate Change Programme of the Environmental

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