

# Europe must be sustainable - or it will simply not be

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Luca Jahier, EESC President  
Speaker

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Dear First Vice-President Timmermans,

Dear Minister Kaag,

Dear President Hamer,

Dear Guests and Colleagues,

Let me start by welcoming you very warmly to this high-level conference that we have the honour of hosting at the European Economic and Social Committee.

I am particularly grateful that we the Dutch Ministry for Foreign Trade and Development, the Dutch Economic and Social Council (SER) and the European Economic and Social Committee have taken the initiative to organise a joint high-level conference on the topic of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and initiatives for Sustainable Global Value Chains.

The UN's Sustainable Development Goals were agreed in September 2015, providing the world with a blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all.

They are universally applicable and present a unique opportunity for global leaders to unfold a forward-looking vision, built on the values of solidarity and human rights, social justice, equality, democracy and participation, entrepreneurship and environmental responsibility.

My work programme as President of the EESC places great emphasis on sustainable development. The slogan of my Presidency is *rEUnaissance - Dare a sustainable Europe*, because I believe Sustainable Development should support all the transformations that will shape the Europe of tomorrow. Bottom-up initiatives involving citizens and civil society will have a key role to play in this agenda to achieve economic prosperity, which must go hand in hand with environmental sustainability and social inclusion.

SDG 17 (revitalise the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development) specifically refers to the role of civil society and states that: "a successful, sustainable development agenda requires partnerships between governments, the private sector and civil society".

The implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is a joint responsibility of civil society, the EU and Member States' authorities as well as the private sector. This is why coordinated, multi-stakeholder approaches to achieving these goals are essential.

These goals cannot be achieved without the ongoing commitment of the business community and it is encouraging to see how many businesses are taking full ownership of the SDGs and using them as a guideline to achieve sustainable business development in their global supply chain operations.

That allows me, First Vice-President Timmermans, to mention that your colleague, Vice-President Šefčovič came to the EESC's plenary session in July and that he quite rightly referred to the enormous market that batteries are about to create. As of 2025, he expects Europe's battery sector to be worth €250 billion annually; he also added, though, that currently, Europe is lagging behind as it is lacking a call manufacturing base.

And Europe is also lagging behind in other sectors linked to sustainability: we can think of the production of electric cars and possibly of other sectors.

The challenges we face today are numerous and unprecedented. The word we hear more and more is "urgency". We need to act now. There is no time to lose. There is no plan B.

The IPCC report (UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) published on 8 October states very clearly: either we act now to limit global warming to a 1.5°C increase; or the consequences will be disastrous. We all need to change our behaviour and our way of living. "Business as usual" is not an option, not for citizens, governments or businesses.

But we must also see this challenge as an opportunity to consolidate the transition to a sustainable model of development. Europe needs to lead the way and set an example in the international arena by taking action in global supply chains. The real question here is if we are leading this change or others will do.

We should see it as an opportunity to create decent work conditions and enhance sustainable economic development. Individual suppliers and clusters of businesses can contribute to the elimination of unlawful or unruly work conditions, worker rights, human rights and child labour. (SDG 8)

Businesses have an opportunity to be the source of collaborative innovation, riding the wave of the digital revolution to create sustainable business practices and new standards. (SDG 9)

However, this is still not enough. The actions of some must become the actions of all. We know that achieving sustainable development can only become a reality if we all pull in the same direction. It is essential that business be fully involved and mobilised in relation to the future EU Sustainable Development Strategy as well as trade unions civil society and local authorities.

The EESC has been and will continue to advocate the implementation of the Sustainable Development Agenda at a European level and beyond, transitioning to a society that is sustainable in economic, social and environmental terms. Europe must be sustainable - or it will simply not be. Trade policy is a very effective instrument to spread this message globally.

This is an opportunity to ensure sustainable consumption and production, to increase transparency and traceability in order to respond to the demands of the consumers on the one hand, and to improve working conditions and prevent conflicts in producing countries on the other. (SDGs 12, 16)

Sustainable development should underpin all transformations that will shape the Europe of tomorrow, such as the fourth industrial revolution, the transition to a circular and low-carbon economy, growing challenges to EU values, threats to peace and stability on the EU's borders and many others.

In particular, we should consider how the international trading system (WTO rules) should better enshrine the SDGs and especially the Paris Agreement.

To sum up, the EESC believes the EU is uniquely placed to further the realisation of the SDGs, for three reasons:

First, it has the credibility to play an effective bridging role between developed and developing countries, through:

- the renewal of the "Cotonou" ACP – EU Partnership Agreement as well as the EU's wider interaction with those regions, and the wider joint EU/Member State Aid for Trade strategy;
- trade as a means to boost both regional integration and the SDGs;
- synergies between the SDGs and the 27 core conventions relevant to the EU's GSP+ scheme;
- the promotion of the SDGs through bilateral relations;
- sharper focus given to integrating the SDGs fully in the European policy framework, in conjunction with Member States where necessary.

Secondly, bottom-up initiatives at Member State level could strengthen European efforts and commitments from all levels, translated per sector and could contribute to close the SDGs implementation gaps. The impact of the private sector in helping realise the SDGs is ensured by:

- promoting Responsible Business Conduct
- encouraging socially responsible investments
- enhancing effective management of Global Value Chains

Thirdly, the EU is the champion of promoting civil society involvement in the implementation of sustainable development in trade.

I will mention here the role played by joint civil society mechanisms for the monitoring of trade agreements. The EESC has played an important role in raising awareness of EU trade policy among civil society both in the EU and in developing countries. The EESC encourages strengthening dialogue with civil society to develop the functioning of chapters devoted to the link between trade and sustainable development in current and future trade agreements. These chapters must be given equal weight to commercial, technical or tariff issues covered by other parts in free trade agreements.

As First Vice-President Timmermans is well aware, the EESC is playing an important role at the high level Multi-Stakeholder Platform on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The report recently adopted by the Platform should be the base of inspiration for the Reflection Paper "Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030" that the European Commission will adopt at the end of the year.

It is, in our view, vital that the Reflection Paper is ambitious enough to respond to the enormous challenge that we are facing by calling for a comprehensive EU Sustainable Development Strategy, which will integrate the SDGs into EU governance and all policies (including trade) and programmes.

We are eagerly waiting for the adoption of this Reflection paper, which will - for sure - generate some fresh new momentum and we stand ready, once it is published, to adopt a political contribution on it.

Let me close by saying that it is essential that organised civil society is fully involved and mobilised in relation to a future EU Sustainable Development Strategy. This calls for a new governance mechanism that takes everyone on board. Public consultations are not enough. We need to embed participation and engagement into the policy-making and -implementation processes.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

All this is very important and valuable, but it cannot be achieved without proper awareness raising. Europe must find ways to better communicate the SDGs to citizens and make the goals concrete and relevant to all stakeholders across all sectors. Today's conference will contribute to this effort by showing how specific global supply chains can help achieve the SDGs through more integrated and comprehensive approaches. I wish you all the successful completion of today's task.

Thank you.