



No real reconstruction without civil society - Joint statement by the EESC Liaison Group Co-Chairs

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European civil society organisations must be equal partners in the post-COVID recovery journey for a sustainable future

Civil society organisations have been at the forefront of the response to the global COVID-19 health crisis, supporting the most vulnerable and ensuring that people's basic needs are met in a challenging reality – even at the risk of the health of their own employees and volunteers. We have seen a great many inspiring initiatives of great solidarity and courage across Europe, despite lockdowns and physical distancing regulations. The millions of volunteers on the ground have demonstrated extraordinary individual and

intergenerational solidarity, and frontline workers have shown a wholehearted commitment to continuing to provide vital support to people in need.

During this pandemic it has become clear that governments alone cannot overcome the many challenges citizens continue to face: Civil society is not only a key component of democratic systems, but also an indispensable player in ensuring social justice in partnership with stakeholders from other sectors. The coordinated response from the European Union institutions was welcome, and unprecedented, but implementation of the measures introduced still poses a challenge and positive effects are failing to reach grassroots level, leaving many CSOs increasingly fragile.

As co-chairs of the EESC Civil Society Liaison Group, we wish to emphasise this critical role for civil society in our democracies in Europe, both in the current crisis and in the upcoming recovery, as clearly demonstrated in the experiences and ideas shared at the EESC Liaison Group's last meeting on 12 May 2020. The pandemic has been a magnifier of huge fractures in our systems, of existing social injustice and inequality. Civil society organisations themselves are among the victims of such inequalities and weaknesses in the system. Their current and future ability to respond to needs is threatened by often scarce and fluctuating resources, leaving a void where no help is available at all or where the only alternatives are offered by organised crime and extremist groups ready to exploit people when they are most vulnerable.

European institutions must make sure that European civil society networks are trusted partners in political processes and decision-making during and beyond the crisis, in order to make sure that citizens, through the channel of organised civil society, have a real say in constructing a new Europe with a stronger social dimension and a more sustainable future.

We must provide conducive environments and funding options for European civil society networks in order to continue to promote European values and diversity, and foster cooperation and solidarity across Europe and beyond. This will help to avoid the temptation of an authoritarian "strongman" figure to lead us through troubled waters, or of making use of the fear and insecurity to curb civic space and freedoms disproportionately, with a devastating and long-lasting impact.

A real recovery – a true transformation – requires moving away from "business as usual" and changing working methods for the better – and that means truly acknowledging and listening to the voice of European civil society networks, engaging them as key players in the co-creation and continuation of a better Future for Europe. We must develop a people-centred social and economic future, turning our fears into hopes for a more sustainable and just society, where dignity, wellbeing, and respect for every person and their rights are at the centre of all decisions and actions.

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