



## It is time to truly scale up our action - Concrete measures to combat climate change in the new EU term 2019-2024

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Speaker

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Let me start by expressing my great appreciation for the choice of the theme of this seminar to our Finnish colleagues! What a pertinent choice of time and place to have a discussion on concrete measures to combat climate change!

Less than two weeks ago, the citizens of Europe expressed their democratic right and voted in the European elections. For the first time in the EU elections' history, the turnout was higher than in the previous round and higher than in any European election since 1994. Clearly, the legitimate concerns over climate change and environment were on top of the agenda of voters in many European countries and also in all the four main political forces.

Yet, the populist vote is there to remind us that we cannot fall into complacency: we must propose a positive and concrete European narrative.

But let me highlight the encouraging outcome of these elections, which to me is a direct translation of the urgency felt among many European citizens, in particular our youth.

These voters point to the urgency to address our numerous economic, social, environmental and political challenges. The urgency to stop the rise of social inequalities. The urgency to finally halt the collapsing biodiversity and take far-reaching and decisive action on climate change. These citizens are telling us that we have one more chance to deliver on ours and their expectations, and they may well have more than a point!

We have no time to lose. We have been told once again and very clearly that business as usual is not an option. There will be no life, no jobs and no entrepreneurship on a dead planet.

In this regard, the upcoming Finnish Presidency will have a crucial role to play in ensuring that Europe's answer to the climate crisis and to the demands of the European voters is ambitious.

It is important to stress that European citizens already face direct impacts of climate change. Average annual losses caused by weather and climate-related extremes in the EU amounted to around EUR 12.8 billion between 2010 and 2016. If no further action is taken, climate damages in the EU could amount to at least EUR 190 billion by 2080.

The IPCC 1.5° special report determined that net-zero greenhouse gases emissions target needs to be reached globally by 2067, at the latest. However, if we continue without changing our course and without taking more ambitious action, we will reach an estimated 3.2°C warming by 2100.

All this means that there is a cost to the transition to a climate-neutral economy, but let's be clear: the cost of non-action is much higher, it is in fact a cost that we simply cannot afford because not addressing the transition to a climate neutral economy can only have dramatic consequences for EU citizens.

To succeed in this transition, we have to fully take on board the objective of competitiveness of our industries: to remain competitive we need to demonstrate our ability to be the first mover. Only then we will reap the benefits of the transition.

We must encourage research and development and create favourable conditions for Europe, including European industry and business in general. The private sector has already been quite active.

For instance, to date, more than 300 investors with more than USD \$33 trillion in assets under management have signed on to the Climate Action 100+ initiative to ensure the world's largest corporate greenhouse gas emitters take necessary action on climate change. European companies are doing their share in this initiative, since they are more than 32% of them.

However, this is still not enough. The action by some must become the action by all. It is essential that business remains fully involved and mobilised.

It is urgent that climate action is immediately taken, and that the EU and its Member States support the objective of making the European Union a climate neutral society and economy by 2050.

This transition must be carried out in a socially fair and cost-efficient manner. As reminded by the recent Communication of the European Commission, this transition is possible and beneficial.

According to the Commission, the transition to climate neutrality is expected to have a moderate or positive impact on GDP, with estimated benefits of up to 2% of GDP by 2050. These estimates would not even include avoided damages from climate change nor co-benefits such as improved air quality.

There are however several key conditions that need to be met. First of all, the multistakeholder approach. We must ensure full involvement and acceptance of civil society, including all citizens, businesses and organisations and in this regard we need appropriate tools to be put in place.

The opinion that the EESC will adopt in a couple of weeks on the EU's long term strategy, is expected to call for a permanent citizens' dialogue as a compulsory preparatory element of all major political decisions and law-making initiatives in the area of climate policy.

Financing is another key condition. The EESC has made strong recommendations to ensure that 40% of the global EU budget is invested in the fight against climate change and that the rest of it is climate-proof. In addition, financing is not only a matter of public funding: it is therefore important to promote mechanisms that seek to encourage green investments.

The EESC has called for a finance-climate pact that aims to redirect the money towards the fight against climate change and the real economy. This Pact would allow the EU to maintain its leadership in sustainable development and in the fight against climate change. It must cover all aspects of a climate change policy, such as a just transition to mitigate the effects of change, and compensate for the damages and losses, for companies, workers, citizens and territories, as well as real policies for adaptation to climate change.

Far-reaching research and innovation is another condition without which the transition to a climate neutral economy will not happen. We urgently need all sorts of innovation, including in the area of new behaviours, business models, social norms, processes, techniques, marketing and technologies.

Of course, concepts such as the circular economy and the sharing economy are important contributions and can become significant means to reduce emissions and I am particularly proud to underline how much the EESC is doing in order to promote this further.

Lastly, we must ensure that the transition leaves no one behind. This transition must be an opportunity to eradicate energy poverty and improve quality of life, job creation and social inclusion, and ensure equal access to basic energy services for all Europeans.

The much-needed climate-friendly measures cannot be imposed in the same way to all people in our society. The groups most affected by environmental problems are often the ones least responsible for causing them. They won't be able to understand, accept and endorse policy measures leading to e.g. price increases of essential commodities such as energy. We can see this around us - the voices calling for climate justice are becoming louder and clearer.

Finally, climate change has to be seen in the broader context of sustainability. The EESC has stressed the importance of adopting a strong and comprehensive EU strategy for the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development 2030 Agenda. This agenda represents a global and positive economic, social and environmental contract of shared responsibility to commit to a path towards sustainable human well-being within planetary boundaries.

The Paris Agreement on climate change and the 2030 Agenda are intrinsically interlinked and should be the foundation for an ambitious EU action in the area of climate change.

All these conditions were rightly highlighted by today's Seminar. The next European Parliament and Commission will need to demonstrate decisive political leadership to adopt an ambitious strategy and to reform the EU governance mechanisms using the well experimented European semester in a new logic "beyond GDO", as recently done by the Budget for Happiness adopted by the New Zealand Government.

This will allow a transition to an equitable and sustainable Europe. We will make sure that the recommendations of the EESC in this regard are pertinent and constructive and that we deliver clear and balanced proposal for the new EU Strategic Agenda.

## **Closing speech**

Dear guests, dear colleagues,

Thank you for this inspiring session which demonstrated the very concrete actions already taken by the EESC

and set out further political recommendations and next steps.

We all feel the climate emergency. Earlier this year at the World Economic Forum in Davos the economic leaders were presented with a Global Risks Report for 2018. This report indicated that environment-related risks occupy three of five most important risks, both in terms of likelihood and in terms of impact. We have been pushing our planet to the brink and the damage is becoming increasingly clear. Biodiversity is being lost at mass-extinction rates, agricultural systems are under strain and air and sea pollution has become an increasingly pressing threat to human health.

With the Paris Agreement we have made a pledge to address this crisis and COP 24 build on that momentum, but we are not yet on track!

It was the same economic and business leaders in Davos who were lectured by the Swedish climate activist, Greta Thunberg. She told them, as she told us a few months ago at the EESC in Brussels that she does not need us to give her and her generation hope. She needs us to panic... and to act. Her message is clear and simple and yet, true.

We have been engaging with the youth activists in the recent months and I am very proud to say that not only did we hear them, but we also listened to them and have acted accordingly.

I have attended the COP24 in Katowice at the end of last year and the EESC has been actively involved in the COP process for many years, consistently contributing with civil society's vision and pragmatic proposals for an ambitious climate action. We have achieved a lot with the Paris Agreement and its technical rules finally agreed in Katowice.

Now it's time for action and for renewed ambition because climate change is not only an environmental challenge. Addressing climate change is a challenge for all the European society and for Europe at work: employers, trade unions and civil society at large!

COP25 in Santiago de Chile later this year and the special Climate Summit of the UN Secretary General in September are the key milestones on the path towards adopting comprehensive long-term climate strategies that are indispensable for arriving at climate neutrality in the second half of this century, not just in Europe but in every country on the planet.

The EU has been the driving force behind the high ambition coalition that achieved many breakthroughs in the international negotiations of these past years. We need to be consistent with this approach and remain in the driving seat.

Let me underline the importance of the action taken at local and community level and the importance of fully involving local and regional authorities. Many communities are taking invaluable initiatives, and play an effective part in the solutions needed. Indeed numerous bottom-up initiatives are led by citizens, local authorities, consumers and innovative enterprises. Today they are the true leaders of climate action.

By combining efforts from local communities, non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations, businesses, researchers and multi-level governments, it will be possible to spur robust climate action and effect positive change and speed up both low-carbon development and sustainable development. The EU should take this task very seriously and we are happy to engage in a constructive dialogue with the other Institutions and with the stakeholders on the ground to promote this agenda.

Operationalising the recommendations made today during the next term of the European Commission and of the European Parliament is of paramount importance. Acting on the climate emergency will be a true test that the EU cannot afford to fail. We are confident that the EESC will be a key partner in the discussions between the EU, Member States, regions, cities, social partners and organised civil society. We particularly look forward to cooperating with the Finnish Presidency in this regard.

Thank you all for your active participation and we will continue our work in Brussels.