I have attended many COPs, but this one in Bonn was particularly interesting for me. In terms of the negotiations per se, it was rather routine: the agenda featured largely “technical” items such as how to draw up the reports that will have to be submitted in the future and how transparent they will be, as well as what transparency actually means. Of course there was disagreement about money, specifically the Green Climate Fund, which will have a budget of EUR 100 billion from 2020 and which is designed to help poorer countries address the dire consequences of climate change. The poorer countries, in my view quite justifiably, want to see money on the table right now, to provide some relief from the damage done by hurricanes, droughts and flooding. The donors, which are the countries who bear most of the responsibility for global emissions, are taking a hard line.

What was really exciting was the area at the COP conference centre where science, civil society and regions and cities met – in other words all those who are already directly affected by climate change or who have to implement the decisions taken by the negotiating parties. Because transformation clearly does not happen by itself but has to be put into effect and realised through practical measures. There was essentially a feeling of unity and positive energy around one goal: that it is time to take action now, without further delay.

Particularly striking was the presence of two United States delegations at the conference. The smaller of these was the official White House delegation, which Trump had put together from a mixture of coal and nuclear sector lobbyists. This delegation was reserved and non-aggressive at the talks, though it seems that it was also quite isolated. But when it started fulminating against climate protection at a US side event, the other US delegation – which consisted of regional and municipal representatives, mayors, NGOs, scientists and prominent figures such as Arnold Schwarzenegger – stood up and burst into song. The elegant and peaceful protest went on for twenty minutes.

The second US delegation was very engaged, and it had two messages for Bonn. The first was “We’re still in”, meaning that it is not the United States that has withdrawn from the UN Climate Convention but its president, that the US will continue to implement its commitments under the Paris accord, that it is already on the right track, and that it doesn’t need its president to do this.

I was very impressed by the examples from American cities like Des Moines or states such as California. They show that the Americans are not being cowed by their president but are going ahead and implementing climate protection measures with considerable commitment and success through global alliances such as the Global Covenant of Mayors.

Municipalities and regions were in fact very visible as pro-active players. Stockholm has announced its intention to be a fossil-fuel free city by 2040. CO2 emissions have already been reduced by 55% compared with 1990 levels, despite a 37% increase in the population and doubling of the city’s GDP. Where there’s a will, there’s a way.

The mayor of Ghent spelled it out clearly: there is no longer any reason not to initiate effective and ambitious action already. The technology is available, and we all owe it to future generations to do something now and not wait in the hope of “better times ahead”.

COP 23 made one thing very clear to me personally: that civil society, regions, cities and municipalities, as well as some business players, have made much more progress than those who are framing policies. The German logistics firm DHL, which operates worldwide, has announced that it will be emissions-free by 2050 at the latest. It is finding unconventional ways of achieving this. As none of the established car-makers would or could supply it with electric cars, DHL took the initiative itself. In collaboration with
Aachen University and a start-up company two new factories were built that are manufacturing 20 000 electrical cars annually for parcel delivery. A logistics company manufacturing cars because car-makers won’t meet its needs: is this an upside-down world? No, more likely evidence that transformation takes place from the bottom up rather than the top down. Incidentally, Ford has just offered to help out, citing its expertise in making cars.

It is a shame that the role played by citizens was not as visible at the COP as it needs and ought to be. After all in Germany over 50% of all emissions-free power generation capacity is owned by private individuals, land-owners, associations and SMEs. So it is true to say that here too energy transition has so far been a grassroots movement, under the motto ‘citizens’ energy’. The advantage is that by producing electricity from renewables, citizens are combining practical climate protection measures with regional development. And people also enjoy making an active contribution.

This applies not just in Europe, but in other parts of the world too. COP visitors were impressed by Indonesia’s demonstration that for instance it is economically feasible to develop a new electricity supply infrastructure on small islands based solely on decentralised renewable energies. Green electricity has long been recognised in Indonesia as a precondition for any degree of economic development.

The COP held a mirror up to reality. Across the planet, ordinary people are taking control themselves, when they are allowed to and are given the means. It is they, not politicians, who are the real climate champions. Citizens want to change this world for the better and do not want to watch it being destroyed by today’s profit-seeking interests. But unfortunately politics often confounds this trend: through red tape, market barriers or public funding that flows to large-scale projects rather than local opportunities for action. Consequently initiatives are often hampered rather than promoted, generating disappointment and frustration. “Allow us to act” was a recurring theme at the COP, and is a watchword that the EESC should itself embrace.
The European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform, as proposed by the EESC continues to progress at a rapid pace. Following a successful launch at a two day event early this year, the structures and terms of reference have now been set. The next big meeting of the Platform will be early next year, probably February.

As envisioned, a Coordination Group has been established comprising representatives from all sectors. All call for expressions of interest in this was launched over the summer with 24 places available. In a measure of the level of interest in this process, and a reflection of the need for such a Platform, we had almost 200 applications for the positions.

The first meeting of the Coordination Group on November 22nd was a huge success, and chaired by EESC’s Group III representative, Cillian Lohan.

You may recall this is a joint initiative with the other EU institutions, primarily the Commission as represented by DG GROW and DG ENV. The EESC team has worked hard to ensure that the ownership of the Platform rests with the stakeholders and that the objectives of delivering best practices, and identifying obstacles to transition are met.

To this end an interactive website has just been launched and can be found at http://circulareconomy.europa.eu/platform. The members of the Coordination Group (which is balanced across sectors, gender and geography) can be found on the website along with the Terms of Reference and Structure of the Platform.

There has been much hard work to get to this point, and strong engagement and leadership will now be required to ensure that the establishment of the Platform is instrumental in delivering progress on the Circular Economy Action Plan.

The team of members working together to advance the Platform are Cillian Lohan (Group III) Peter Schmidt (Group II) and Bernd Dittman (Group I).

A big thank you to all members who have helped to promote this stakeholder group and ensured such a strong level of engagement from across member states.
HIGHLIGHTS OF THE OCTOBER PLENARY SESSION
Group III members co-ordinating the work on new opinions

Bernardo HERNÁNDEZ BATALLER (ES) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Tackling Illegal Content Online – Towards an enhanced responsibility of online platforms” – INT/836

Miguel Ángel CABRA DE LUNA (ES) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Public procurement package” – INT/834

Michael SMYTH (UK) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “European System of Financial Supervision (ESFS)” – ECO/441

Giuseppe GUERINI (IT) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Fair taxation package” – ECO/442

Carlos TRIAS PINTÓ (ES) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Completing the Banking Union” – ECO/443

Mihai IVAŞCU (RO) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Economic and Monetary Union Package” – ECO/446

Krzysztof PATER (PL) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Review of the prudential rules for investment firms” – ECO/447

Imse SPRAGG NILSSON (SE) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships” – SOC/569

Pasi MOISIO (FI) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Access to the International market for coach and bus services” – TEN/650

Benedicte FEDERSPIEL (DK) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Screening of foreign direct investments into the European Union” – REX/498

Graham WATSON (UK) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Statute and funding of European political parties and European political foundations” – AHGFinEur

Etele BARÁTH (HU) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Annual Growth Survey 2018” – SC/050

Europe’s Poverty Crisis

On October 17th, UN International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, Séamus Boland represented the EESC at a meeting in EU Parliament.

Chaired by Silvia Costa, an Italian Socialist deputy, the event highlighted the fact that globally, some 3 billion people are affected by extreme poverty and in the EU this amounts to one in four people at risk of poverty.

A more worrying figure is that according to statistics Eurostat figures published in 2015, some 26.9% of children experience poverty compared with 24.7% of adults and 17.4% of elderly (above 65). On their own, these figures represent an appalling failure of EU policy in tackling poverty and marginalisation. Sadly, following the financial recession, the trend is not expected to decrease in the foreseeable future.

The Eurostat report identifies a number of factors that contribute to these figures. They include; households where there is undue dependency on low wage employment, single parents with dependent children, extremely low levels of education and of course the situation of migrants and homeless families.

The consequences for families locked into a continual poverty cycle are far reaching. People in poverty suffer disproportionally from poorer health conditions, which in turn are triggered by poor housing access or none at all. They access less education opportunities and often drop out at an early age. Families from ethnic minorities are also at risk. Many of them become forced migrants. Hence the horrific scenes of people begging for basic supports from neighboring countries, who themselves are locked in their own internal political combat as to whether migrants should be allowed entry in the first place. For the millions affected by poverty, particularly children, there is a constant daily catalogue of experiences which are continually demeaning and humiliating to the point where for them there is no European union; there is no political entity that they can reach out to. Indeed, their experience is one which firmly identifies the EU as part of the root cause of their situation. A situation with no end in sight.

It is generally accepted that the EU as an entity is perhaps the largest world peace project in existence. It would be foolish to ignore the progress made since its foundation. Progress on rights, social welfare and a range of measures designed to introduce equality measures that improve the lives of all European citizens have been made. However, it is acknowledged by all that the failure of Euro 2020 strategy to reduce the figures tells a story that is inherently sad and in the long term extremely dangerous in terms of the long term stability of the union. Indeed, the Union by failing to tackle the problem seriously is consigning children to live in a manner that will force them into crime, in some cases prostitution or live shortened lives caused by poor or no real access to essential health care.

It should be noted that the Estonian Presidency has highlighted the plight of all people affected by poverty. Clyde Kull, Estonia’s deputy permanent representative to the EU, said his country - current holder of the EU Council presidency; “The goal should be to empower people and our presidency welcomes adoption of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The aim now is to ensure that this is signed off by the end of this year and implemented.” He went on to say that “The basic right of citizens to a dignified life must be respected.”

The EESC has contributed to the development the work on the European Pillar of Social rights and The Future of Europe. Group Three members, in particular has produced a plethora of opinions on the issues related to poverty; all of them highlighting the frustrations felt by civil society and all of them seeking the EU Commission and the various institutions to initiate real reform. Indeed, the EU parliament itself has also been to the forefront in this area. Yet we have failure on a grand scale.

In environmental work Poverty is one of the main seventeen goals for sustainability. Yet implementation of these goals is hampered by the fact that measures to alleviate short term poverty caused by change are usually omitted from these plans.

It is clear that the strong legislative teeth are missing from all of the high goals articulated by the commission. The 25% of the EU population affected by poverty are amazed at the speed in which EU institutions move when the banking system is in danger or the Euro needs assistance. That is not to say they are displeased with such speed. However; the lack of real actions following the launch of The Future of Europe or the Social Pillar of Social Rights demonstrates to people that the EU really doesn’t care enough. Otherwise the target of eradicating poverty would have moved by now; downwards.

The EESC has advocated “the creation of an integrated European fund to combat poverty and social exclusion, based on experience to date of the implementation of the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) and the European Social Fund (ESF)”

Furthermore, it has stated that “the intervention of such a fund should make full use of the experience and capacity of civil society organisations by granting them a leading role in programming, implementation, monitoring and evaluation”

In other opinions we have recommended changes in the way we look at minimum pay, supports to people and families who because of circumstances are no longer able to work, greater access to real vocational education, supports to family businesses and proper investment strategies aimed at tackling a range of social infrastructure that forces people into rather than out of poverty. Indeed, the lack of any serious attempt to poverty proof decisions made at Commission level and by member governments ensures a climate that by default perpetuates the growth of poverty, particularly among communities who have been living in situations of long term economic and social disadvantage.

In the last ten years the EU has been immersed in a series of crisis. Yet it seems oblivious to the fact that the crises of poverty figures now at its highest number since its foundation continues to be ignored.

Let’s think about it. 29.6% of our children are currently affected by poverty. And that’s not a crisis?
On 26 October 2017, the newly sworn-in Dutch cabinet – the third Rutte cabinet – posed with the king on the steps of his working palace. It had been 225 days since the parliamentary elections on 15 March this year, the longest it had ever taken to form a cabinet in the Netherlands. And this is a trend that is not limited to the Netherlands, looking at a number of other European countries. Why did it take so long, what kind of cabinet ultimately came out of it, and what are that cabinet’s plans for Europe? I will give a brief overview of those questions here.

The most important reason it took so long is that today’s electorate is very fragmented. In the Netherlands, which has proportional representation and no electoral threshold, this resulted in a Lower House with 13 different parties, of which the smallest has two seats and the largest (Prime Minister Rutte’s VVD) has 33. Following the elections, it took several weeks to establish which parties were compatible and were prepared to give up on some of their own policies in order to form a cabinet with parties with different opinions. It turned out to be four parties with a total of 76 of the 150 seats in the Lower House – i.e. the smallest possible majority.

Those four parties are the VVD (right-wing liberal), the CDA (Christian conservative), D66 (progressive liberal) and the CU. The CU (Christen-Unie) is a party that is somewhat harder to categorise. On climate and environmental issues, for example (with the exception of agriculture), it can be regarded as progressive, but on questions of medical ethics such as embryo selection and euthanasia it is a conservative party.

After months of talks, lunches, adjournments, bilateral meetings, etc., they had reached a decision: the four parties had a coalition agreement, and had found 23 people willing to be ministers or state secretaries under Prime Minister Rutte.

The coalition agreement reflects the diversity of the four parties. It is conservative on questions of medical ethics, very accommodating to the interests of big business in particular, and strongly worded when it comes to climate policy objectives. Unfortunately, though, the new cabinet’s proposed climate policy has since been costed by the government’s paymasters, and it turns out that the policy set out in the coalition agreement will only be able to achieve a maximum of half of the objectives. It will be interesting to see how that works out in the months to come.

The parties are vocally pro-Europe – the coalition agreement states: “Europe brings peace, security, safety and prosperity to the Netherlands. Apart from being an economic community, the European Union is a community of values in which the Netherlands feels at home. Justice and liberty are central. In the European review of the Union’s role, of foremost importance is the fact that the Netherlands is inextricably linked to the EU. There are important issues where the EU should play a more active role because the Netherlands cannot achieve objectives alone. Migration, climate change and cross-border crime are examples.”

But fine words are often easier said than done, as it is also crucial that the ministers who have to put those words into practice actually want to do so – and will actually do it. The cabinet has a number of new faces, and it is not yet clear how these new people will develop politically. At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (which is so important for the EU), we have an interesting duo. The new Minister for Foreign Affairs is Halbe Zijlstra, the former leader of the VVD. In the past, he has often described trade policy as the heart of foreign policy, disregarding the Dutch tradition of promoting good governance and protecting human rights. At the same ministry, Sigrid Kaag (D66) has been appointed Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation. She also has international environment and climate policy and the Sustainable Development Goals in her portfolio. And she has a very different background: she was a top diplomat for the United Nations, working inter alia for the United Nations Development Programme and then in Syria and Lebanon, and, as such, lived in Beirut until recently.

In short, we are entering an exciting political period with a tiny majority in parliament, an open-ended coalition agreement and an interesting mix of government members, but it is nonetheless clear that the EU will enjoy the support of this cabinet. We will review the situation in a year’s time.

Jan DIRX (NL)
Natuur & Milieu
Member of the Various Interests’ Group
Group III Members in the Spotlight playing a key role

ESPAS CONFERENCE
GLOBAL TRENDS TO 2030: The Making of a New Geopolitical Order?

On 22-23 November 2017, this landmark conference brought together a select community of global foresight practitioners and strategists to explore the latest and most pressing trends shaping geopolitics in the coming decade.

Together, the aim was to shed light on pressing issues such as the future of multilateralism, new challenges to Europe’s security outlook, and how governments and international institutions can thrive in an increasingly uncertain and volatile world.

The rolling programme of the conference covered two-days. The first day was hosted by the European Political Strategy Centre, the European Commission’s in-house think tank, at its headquarters, the Berlaymont. The second day took place in the library of the European Parliament and was hosted by the European Parliamentary Research Service, the Parliament’s own think tank.

President Luca JAHIER participated in the panel on ‘The Geopolitics of an Economically Interdependent World’. Below is an extract from his speech:

“Nowhere is the complexity of our interdependent world as evident as in the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Nowhere are the stakes so high, so finite and so important for the future of our world. In no other field are we called upon to literally imagine a new world, to use our human creativity, innovation and determination to transform accepted global models of development. Taking risks, embracing change and putting opportunities before problems is at the heart of an interdependent sustainable world in 2030 and beyond.”

“How to implement the UN Agenda 2030 is a profoundly political debate and necessitates a paradigm shift. Away from accustomed definitions of GDP-based economic growth and towards a new definition of prosperity based on well-being. It is the concept of beyond GDP, social inclusion, societal happiness, environmental responsibility and democratic participation, which are at the heart of sustainable development. They define the type of society that we aspire to. They also require a new development model based on innovation, new consumption patterns and models of behaviour. However, we will only be able to design this new world if we work transparently in partnership. A new global governance model is necessary, to be driven by bottom-up initiatives by local and regional authorities, civil society organisations and citizens. Young people in particular should be made partners in change. We will only be able to deliver the UN 2030 Agenda by building trust, decentralising governance to local actors and empowering citizens to create their own sustainable solutions. As His Holiness Pope Francis stated in his Encyclical letter on the environment, the protection of “…our common goods…” will require a new and universal solidarity.”

Panagiotis Gkofas participated in the roundtable discussion organised by UNITEE ‘Homo Faber: the benefits of migrant entrepreneurship in Europe’.

The EU has been engulfed, in the past years, into a series of crises that have put into question its survival itself: from the economic crisis, to the migration crisis, up to a widening gap between the North and the South, Europe is going through a deep rethinking of its identity and political situation.

In all this, migrant entrepreneurship has slowly started to be acknowledged as a potential solution at different levels. Indeed, migrant entrepreneurship not only is an instrument of economic growth, in as much as it created new jobs; it also provides a powerful vector of social and economic integration for individuals who would otherwise remain at the margins of society.

Furthermore, diversity can foster increased innovation, as research has shown in numerous occasions. Finally, it contributes to reduce the impact of migration and the cost of integration into European society.

Active ageing, investing in education and developing the right skills among main solutions for future-proof Europe

Despite a record high number of people in employment and continued economic growth in the EU, young Europeans today face less stable career prospects, less social security and worse living standards than older generations. This makes intergenerational fairness one of the top political priorities, a conference held at the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) revealed.

The high-level conference entitled “Review of Employment and Social Developments in Europe: Intergenerational Fairness and Solidarity”, held in Brussels on 10 October, was co-organised by the EESC’s Labour Market Observatory (LMO) and the European Commission’s DG for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion.

Its goal was to hear the views of EESC members, social partners and other civil society organisations as well as government representatives about the findings of the 2017 Employment and Social Developments in Europe (ESDE) review, published by the Commission in July 2017.

The ESDE review, which annually presents key employment and social issues for the EU and its Member States, confirmed positive labour
The first National Social Economy Congress has been held in Lisbon, in response to a proposal adopted by the plenary of the National Council for the Social Economy (CNES). The Congress took the form of a series of thematic meetings over the course of 2017 (Description of the social economy in Portugal; The social economy satellite account / 2013; The social economy and employment and cohesion; Employment and cohesion; and the development of a structured civil dialogue.) and concluded with a closing session held on 14 November. The initiative generated a high level of mobilisation, with more than two thousand participants in all.

During the Session, a wide-ranging discussion was held on national and international issues of relevance to the social economy in Portugal. Miguel Ángel Cabra de Luna, together with other social economy representatives, took part on behalf of the European Economic and Social Committee in a round table on “The challenges of the social economy”. A Letter of Commitment was also signed to set up a Portuguese Social Economy Confederation under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the European Union. This step is intended to signal the vitality of the social economy sector in Portugal.

But the review also showed that young people were at a disadvantage compared to prime-age and older workers. Despite having better education than their parents or grandparents, young Europeans face difficulties in entering the labour market and are more at risk of precarious work, such as part-time or temporary contracts.

This in turn makes them more vulnerable on the labour market, as they have lower job tenure and are less protected by welfare systems or collective agreements. As a result, they tend to postpone important life decisions such as starting a family.

“This review shows a generational divide in the labour market. Member States, the European institutions, social partners and civil society organisations share a responsibility to work for a future-proof Europe,” said Pavel Trantina, the president of the EESC’s Section on Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship.

The Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility, Marianne Thyssen, stated that “intergenerational fairness and solidarity is one of the big challenges that policy-makers face today.” “We have to ensure fairness between generations and the sustainability of our social model,” she added.

In his speech at the EESC’s October plenary session, Vice-President Timmermans pointed out that even though the economic climate in Europe was better than it used to be, many people were still dissatisfied. The reasons for this were the increasing disparities within European society as well as the loss of control over our destinies, both collectively and individually. “The only way I believe that we can, with reason and not just by symbolic gestures, fulfil the promise of convergence, the only way I honestly believe we can portray the vision of a society where people regain control over their destinies individually and collectively, is if we tackle problems that are of a global nature together as Europeans on a European scale”, said Timmermans. “The need for collective European action today is greater than ever before. It is about time we acted together.” Using the opportunities of the circular economy and the Digital Single Market, creating an Energy Union and building a strong Social Pillar were some of the things the Commission was planning to focus on in 2018.

Luca Jahier, President of the Various Interests’ Group, welcomed the 300 Citizens’ Dialogues organised by the Commission in 27 Member States but stressed the need to go further. “The EESC can become an important ally of the Commission, working in partnership on the EU Dialogues.” On the Sustainable Development Goals, Luca Jahier stated that “it is our responsibility to deliver the 2030 Agenda and to lead by example, with a coordinated and systematic approach which includes sustainable development in all EU programmes, policies, actions and financial instruments.”

**Group III Members in the Spotlight playing a key role**

![Italian Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility, Marianne Thyssen](image)

Marianne Thyssen, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility, addressed the meeting. She highlighted the need for governments to act “coherently, together, and within all three policy areas: i) fostering the economic foundations of Europe; ii) promoting entrepreneurship, innovation and industrial development; iii) ensuring that the social dimension of the EU is strengthened.”

**European Commission Vice-President Frans Timmermans participated in last EESC Plenary Session.**

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**Background:**

The EESC adopted its contribution to the Commission’s 2018 Work Programme on 5 July. The Committee called on the Commission to adopt sustainable development as an overarching approach to its work, making reference to the three “pillars” of sustainability: i) strengthening the economic foundations of Europe; ii) fostering its social dimension; and iii) facilitating the transition towards a low-carbon and circular economy. The EESC made detailed recommendations and proposals for action structured around six priority policy areas:

- further development of the single market;
- promotion of entrepreneurship, innovation and industrial development;
- the social dimension of the EU;
- focusing public finances on sustainable growth, innovation, employment and cohesion;
- protecting Europeans against security threats;
- and the development of a structured civil dialogue.
In the end of October REX organised a joint seminar of the EU-Japan Follow-up Committee and the International Trade Follow-up Committee to examine the significance of the EU-Japan EPA in the global context for free trade agreements and geo-economic interests on both sides and to reflect on the role that civil society can play in the implementation of the future agreement.

An agreement in principle was reached in July 2017 in the negotiations for the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement. The details of the agreement need still to be fleshed out and some chapters are still open such as investment protection, data and some aspects of regulatory cooperation, in other chapters details need to be fine-tuned. This process will probably take some months and it is possible that the final conclusion, ratification and eventual entry into force will require more than a year. However, since the start of the negotiations in 2013, the global trading context has changed significantly with the US decision by the USA not to ratify the Transpacific Partnership Agreement (TPP), for example, or the impact on Japanese competitiveness of the Free Trade Agreement between the EU and the Republic of Korea, which has been in force since 2007, and the potential impact of the other FTAs the EU is currently negotiating or has recently concluded with countries in Japan's neighbourhood. Consequently, the rationale for reaching this agreement has changed, too. This changing political context probably played a role in bringing about this agreement in principle. By concluding it, the EU and Japan sent a strong signal of commitment to free trade, open markets and rules-based international exchanges.

In this rather complex and dynamic overall context, a number of chapters in the future EU-Japan Agreement have proved particularly strenuous, such as negotiations on non-tariff barriers, agricultural market access, public procurement, investment protection, geographical indications or data flows. Furthermore, from a civil society point of view, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) would have liked to see the EU-Japan negotiations benefitting from the same level of transparency as the TTIP negotiations. This was not the case; the texts of some of the EU proposals were published only shortly before the end of negotiations. Thus, civil society was not in position to comment on the content of the EU proposals during the negotiations. The publication of the Agreement in principle and the agreement of the Council to publish the mandate for the EU-Japan negotiations, now provide an opportunity to civil society to comment on the agreement and to assess in advance the opportunities and challenges for its implementation.

Moreover, civil society must take the opportunity to reflect and prepare for the monitoring of the agreement and set up of the Domestic Advisory Groups foreseen in the chapter on Trade and Sustainable Development.

During the seminar organised by the EESC on Thursday 26 October, civil society organisations agreed on the geo-strategic importance of the free trade agreement between the EU and Japan, and on its positive impact for the two economies, but some of the organisations deplored the lack of transparency in the negotiations with regard to public opinion.

"Unlike TTIP (the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership), these negotiations have not been raised to the attention of the public opinion", the chair of the EESC follow-up committee for international trade, Benedicte Federspiel, stated.

The president of the Japan follow-up committee at the EESC, Krzysztof Pater, underlined the need to involve civil society closely in the monitoring and implementation of the agreement, by setting up a civil society domestic advisory group (DAG) as soon as possible after the agreement’s entry into force. He also noted that throughout the negotiations, excellent working relations have been built between the EESC and its Japanese counterpart organisations, which would be a good starting point for cooperation under the agreement.

The Japanese ambassador to the European Union, Kazuo Kodama, underlined the economic, but also strategic, importance of the EU-Japan free trade agreement, which has been very positively received by most Japanese stakeholders.
On 22 October 2017 in the Casino-Kino Aschaffenburg, Ernst Schulten of Aschaffenburg University, and the chair of the Europa-Union in Aschaffenburg, Dieter Schornick, held the latest in their series of Europe-themed events in cooperation with the Main-Echo newspaper and the adult education centre (VHS) for an engaged audience of 70 young and young-at-heart Europeans. Ernst Schulten, head of the Career Service at Aschaffenburg University, was the overall host of the event, entitled “From the ruins of the Second World War to the European Union’s digital future – a thrilling 80-year journey”.

Dieter Schornick introduced and moderated the panel discussion, which began with Ursula Schleicher – former vice-president of the European Parliament – and Renate Heinisch, Group III member, giving their striking and moving recollections of their childhood experiences of the Second World War and how these experiences continue to mark them to this day. Dieter Schornick spoke about his professional experiences as a German living in Europe and Australia. Alexandra Angress, a European specialist and lecturer at Aschaffenburg University, gave an enthusiastic account of the EU education programme Erasmus+ and spoke about its advantages.

During a discussion with the audience, Ursula Schleicher, Renate Heinisch and Dieter Schornick explained how the EU institutions worked and how they were directly involved in many EU legislative processes. Renate Heinisch continues to play an active role right across the EU as part of the EESC, an institution, little known among the general public, that reflects the whole of society. Within the EESC, she represents the interests of older people, who need to be taken into account when new EU laws are drawn up. For Alexandra Angress, success stories like Erasmus+ – especially at times like these – provide a counterweight, upholding European values such as tolerance, openness and solidarity and bringing young people together.

More than 9 million Erasmus participants (including 3 million students alone) have benefited from the programme, creating numerous friendships, as well as young European families. She noted, however, that even more money had to be invested in EU education programmes such as Erasmus+ in future so that even more young people in Europe could benefit from these opportunities. Emily Fella spoke forcefully about how young people yearned for European idols like Emmanuel Macron who advocated a renaissance of the European idea, thereby reigniting the enthusiasm of Europe’s young people. The question was asked, with some concern, about how to communicate EU values such as democracy, peace, freedom and tolerance to less educated social groups so as to counteract nationalist tendencies. Better education, the courage to engage in dialogue and more efforts to bring about an equitable society were some of the approaches that were mentioned.
The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) supports a development policy that sees development as a process carried out between countries on equal terms, based on respect and sovereign decisions. Financing and implementing sustainable development goals (SDGs) agreed at United Nations (UN) level requires globally coordinated efforts. The EESC would point out that the UN’s Economic and Social Council could play an even stronger role as a suitable forum for dealing with tax matters. This would ensure both the gearing of Agenda 2030 to the SDGs and the participation of all countries on an equal footing.

The EESC warmly welcomes the fact that the European Union (EU) and its Member States have made considerable efforts in the context of international reform to address the weaknesses of the international tax system. These efforts are welcome and need to be supported and implemented effectively and then subject to regular monitoring.

The EESC calls for coherence to be ensured between Member States’ international taxation policies and the objectives of development policies, so as to avoid conflicts between individual countries’ taxation policies and joint development priorities.

The opinion stresses that the EU has a responsibility to become a global actor in promoting respect for fundamental rights and adequate protection of private life and personal data and encourages the European Commission to be pro-active at bilateral and multilateral level in promoting the highest standard of personal data protection.

In this sense, the EESC finds well-balanced and reasonable the four key criteria outlined in the Communication to be taken into account by the Commission when assessing the countries with which a dialogue on adequacy should be pursued. However, it finds important to interpret these criteria in the light of a real commitment on the part of the governments, parliaments, and courts in these countries to reach an equivalent and functional level of personal data protection and calls for more transparency and civil society participation in the process of granting adequacy decisions.

The complete texts of all EESC opinions are available in various language versions on the Committee’s website: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.opinions-search
At its plenary session on 18–19 October 2017 the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted the following opinions for which Group III members were Rapporteurs or Co-Rapporteurs.

**INT/825 – Compliance package**

The EESC:
- welcomes the Commission’s plans to create a culture of compliance and smart enforcement,
- supports the action plan to improve the quality and effectiveness of the SOLVIT network,
- welcomes that this portal includes access to information, procedures, effective assistance and problem-solving services, on the basis of the “only once” principle and the “whole-of-government” approach,
- hopes there will be a mandatory assessment of the functioning of the Regulation within five years,
- encourages the Member States to make more progress in the area of e-governance, particularly as regards the recognition of eID and foreign identity documents, as the services provided are not deemed to be sufficient,
- calls on the Commission to involve civil society in this process, as a means of assessing the state of the EU Single Market.

**NAT/699 - Ex post evaluation of rural development programmes 2007-2013**

The EESC has found the rural development policy to be one of the most welcome EU policies. RDPs boosted regional development, stimulated economic growth and job creation and succeeded to transform the situation of the countryside across the EU.

A lack of coordination, complementariness and consistency with the actions of the other structural and cohesion funds (Social Fund, Regional Development Fund, etc.) in rural areas hindered the overall aim of a more balanced territorial development. Future RDPs should focus on vulnerable EU areas in order to achieve a better balance between rural and urban areas.

**SC/047 - The transition towards a more sustainable European future – a strategy for 2050**

Like all other parts of the world, Europe is facing three major issues: (1) the depletion of the earth’s natural resources, (2) social inequalities; and (3) public loss of trust in the political establishment. These three issues need to be understood against the background of digitalisation, and globalisation. Based on a thorough analysis of the interplay between these issues and digitalisation, the EESC calls on the Commission to prepare a long-term strategy for Europe’s sustainable development. This opinion aims to put forward issues and input to be considered in the preparation of the long-term strategy.
The traditional market system is competing with the emergence of a multitude of new models that are transforming the relationship between producers, distributors and consumers. In addition to economic returns, some of these new models seek (or claim) to address other key challenges for people and the planet that are crucial for sustainable development, such as social justice, participatory governance, the conservation of resources and natural capital. This Opinion makes 10 recommendations on the following areas:

1. Improving coordination of action for the sustainable economy within the EU, by creating a permanent body for the new sustainable economy;
2. The public authorities of the EU should support research, including responsible research and innovation;
3. The EU must encourage and support education, training and information provision to improve understanding among all stakeholders of the new sustainable economic models and of the role of sustainable finance;
4. The Commission should analyse and complement (but not replace) private initiatives for the exchange of good practice and experience between innovators;
5. The public authorities of the EU must ensure that the developers of new genuinely sustainable economic models have access to finance during the initial phases of development and as they continue to grow.

The EESC supports the Commission’s proposals but voices its concern at delays in the adoption and implementation of the 35 actions and legislative initiatives submitted.

It also stresses the need to strengthen the social dimension of the digital single market strategy and hopes the EU will launch a major plan for digital education and training, providing everyone with the cognitive tools they need to cope with the transition.

In the EESC’s view, social dialogue can play a key role in this process and it calls on the Commission, together with the social partners, to set the ball rolling by exploring the medium- and long-term prospects and identifying robust strategies to guarantee decent wages, good jobs, a sound work-life balance and widespread access to social security. The infrastructure and cultural digital divide must be closed as soon as possible.

The EESC:
- welcomes the European Commission’s proposal, recognising it as a good start for a broader discussion, but with a lot of elements to clarify and improve;
- is satisfied that some of the priorities that were highlighted by the civil society organisations in the various stakeholder consultations organised by the Commission were included in the legal basis;
- considers that the added value of the ESC projects lies in the fact that they seek to establish among participants and the communities hosting them a full awareness of European citizenship and a sense of belonging to one Union;
- asks for more “fresh money” to be invested in the programme;
- is very concerned about the merging of the ESC goals with those of youth employment policies; it therefore suggests that the inclusion of job and traineeship placements in the programme should be reconsidered.

The rapporteur underlines the need to establish an EU reference framework aimed at protecting agricultural land. A joint EU soil protection strategy defining good soil status, laying down uniform terminology and harmonised criteria for monitoring, and defining priority policy measures would be of decisive importance for the sustainable use and protection of agricultural soil.
The EESC: following opinions for which Group III members were Rapporteurs or Co-Rapporteurs.

At its plenary session on 18–19 October 2017 the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted the following opinions for which Group III members were Rapporteurs or Co-Rapporteurs.

Cillian LOHAN (IE)
Green Economy Foundation
Member of the Various Interests’ Group

NAT/712 - Climate Justice

Climate Justice is typically viewed in a global context of spatial and temporal interdependence and recognises that the most vulnerable and poorest in society often suffer the greatest impact of the effects of climate change, despite these people being the least responsible for the emissions that have driven the climate crisis. Climate Justice recognises the need to consider the fairness of the often disproportionate impact of climate change on citizens and communities.

The EESC believes that citizens have a right to a healthy, clean environment, and to expect governments to take action on the drivers and threats of climate change.

Production and consumption systems must change to adapt to and to mitigate climate change. Sustainable food consumption must start at the upstream stage of soil preparation and management of natural systems in order to provide the primary building blocks for food, thus the EESC highlights the need for a Soil Framework Directive.

Consumers need sustainable ethical alternatives that will not reduce the convenience or quality of services or their accessibility. New economic models such as the Digital, Collaborative, and Circular Economy offer alternatives, but public investments are also required to ensure that infrastructure and appropriate supports exist to enable consumers to choose a low carbon lifestyle, including assistance for meeting the higher costs of ethical and sustainable goods and services.

The EESC: • considers that further training needs to be provided not only to teachers and school heads but also to the real-life educators, such as parents, the community and non-formal education providers; • considers essential the availability of sufficient, equitably allocated funding and a coordinated governance in the framework of high-quality and effective social dialogue; • emphasises that educational resources should not only focus on performance, but also on inclusiveness, for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and for refugees; • highlights the importance of involving the social partners and other civil society organisations effectively in the process.

SOC/567 - New EU education strategy

The EESC proposes a debate on an EU Bill of Climate Rights to ensure climate justice at all levels

During the COP23 in Bonn on 8 November, a side event on “Just transition to low-carbon economy” was organised jointly by the EESC, King’s College London, Foundation for European Progressive Studies and Fondation Jean-Jaurès.

The EESC used this event to present its opinion on Climate Justice. The concept of “climate justice” frames global climate change as a political and ethical issue and not just an environmental one. It recognises that the poorest and most vulnerable in society often have to suffer the greatest impact from climate change. Climate Justice has been traditionally dealt with as an issue of emerging economies. The EESC wants to apply these principles also to the EU Member States. Therefore the EESC calls for a debate on an EU Bill of Climate Rights that encapsulates the rights of EU citizens and those of nature in the context of the challenges of the global climate change crisis. “We call on institutions and governments to ensure climate justice at all levels – global, EU, national, regional and community level, in this way we can make climate policy more human centered,” said Cillian Lohan, rapporteur of the opinion.

Stop unfairly penalising those who have no alternative – EESC calls for a genuine polluter-pays principle

In order to mitigate the impact of climate change, it is necessary to change production and consumption systems. Consumers need to be provided with sustainable ethical alternatives which do not mean less convenience, poorer quality or even higher prices. “The polluter-pays principle must be applied to those causing pollution and profiting from it,” said Mr Lohan. The EESC therefore encourages subsidies on fossil fuels to be eliminated.

Pavel TRANTINA (CZ)
Czech Council of Children and Youth
Member of the Various Interests’ Group
President SOC section

SOC/567 - New EU education strategy

The EESC: • welcomes the initiatives and agrees with their principles; • calls on the Commission and the Member States to include the need to value cultural diversity and tolerance in education policies as another area for fostering active citizenship and promoting EU fundamental values; • believes that we are all responsible for educating people and making them truly aware of common European history and values, yet it maintains that a more ambitious initiative is needed, one that would lead to a more holistic education strategy that changes the current paradigm; • considers that further training needs to be provided not only to teachers and school heads but also to the real-life educators, such as parents, the community and non-formal education providers; • considers essential the availability of sufficient, equitably allocated funding and a coordinated governance in the framework of high-quality and effective social dialogue; • emphasises that educational resources should not only focus on performance, but also on inclusiveness, for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and for refugees; • highlights the importance of involving the social partners and other civil society organisations effectively in the process.

ADOPTED
Participatory democracy needs intermediary bodies if it is to involve the public and encourage them to express their views in all civic spaces. A robust, independent and diversified organised civil society is underpinned by adequate public financing.

The EESC:

- considers that the European institutions could take steps to establish genuine European civil society dialogue. Discussions must be resumed on a statute for European associations and a statute for European foundations, and Article 11 of the TEU on structured dialogue with civil society must be implemented;
- considers that the European institutions should promote a positive image of CSOs and preserve their independence;
- calls for the establishment of an EU Coordinator on civic space freedoms to whom NGOs could also report incidents related to harassment or restriction of their work;
- calls on the budget authorities to increase funding for CSOs, including in the form of operating grants and multiannual financial support;
- calls on the Commission to propose a European fund for democracy, human rights and values within the EU, to be equipped with an ambitious budget, directly open to CSOs and managed independently, similarly to the European Endowment for Democracy;
- believes that the Europe for Citizens programme should be endowed with a budget of EUR 500 million under the next multi-annual financial framework (MFF). Similarly, Erasmus+ actions targeting civil society should be increased;
- calls on the Commission to monitor the implementation of the code of conduct on partnership with civil society within the Structural Funds.

The EESC believes that the collaborative economy may offer a new opportunity for growth and development for the countries of the European Union, as it allows untapped resources to be mobilised and gives the initiative to individual people.

The EESC is of the view that the EU must not miss the opportunity provided by the collaborative economy to bring innovation to bear on the system of relations between businesses, individuals and markets. However, given the particularly rapid nature of change in this sector, it is crucial for fiscal regulatory systems and tax regimes to be adapted in an intelligent and flexible way.

The EESC recommends that the tax system for the collaborative economy comply with the principle of neutrality (i.e. it must not interfere with market development), identifying appropriate tax mechanisms that are fair to the different types of business operating within the collaborative economy.

Better rural development is possible, and local people are willing to deliver, but they need a support. EU and national authorities need to empower villages and small towns with new programmes that are flexible enough to be adapted to the diverse needs of Europe’s rural areas. Positive examples should be promoted – for instance through a yearly celebratory day – in order to encourage other communities. With its opinion “Villages and small towns as catalysts for rural development”, adopted at its last plenary session, the EESC wants to contribute to a revitalisation of Europe’s rural areas.

“The challenges of the 21st century can only be tackled when towns and villages, regions and national states work together. The countryside and local communities in particular need to be better involved and play a greater role in smart and sustainable economic development, and it is the responsibility of the EU and its Members States to deliver the impetus for rural development. We must make our countryside a more attractive place to live, particularly for young people”, says rapporteur Tom Jones.

### Smart infrastructure

Economic and social development requires adequate infrastructure, including fast broadband services and a modern transport network. “This includes not just the provision of a smart transport network for road and rail, but also smart and efficient use of the transport network”, Mr Jones explains. Shared transport, including car-sharing, community- or cooperative-owned buses and cars, shared taxis, mobile services and shops are concepts that already work quite well in some parts of Europe. Businesses should be encouraged to support teleworking. Fast broadband – mobile as well as fixed – is crucial for the further economic and social development of villages and towns. The EESC strongly supports the European Commission’s Smart Villages Initiative as a first step in the right direction, particularly as it combines initiatives from all directorates-general. Mr. Brendan Burns, President of the Agriculture and Rural Development Section of the EESC: “The European Investment Bank (EIB) must also rise to the challenge and develop tailor-made support schemes for small rural businesses, both private and social enterprises, as promised in its 2017-2018 programme”.

### Rural-urban partnerships

Cooperation between cities, towns and rural areas in agri-tourism and rural tourism, health-related activities, and the food supply chain, would benefit all stakeholders and particularly the general public. Creating clusters of public and private services in education, training, health and social care in rural areas also provides an opportunity to renovate empty buildings and attract other businesses or even government offices. Social and community enterprises can increasingly contribute to replacing lost public and private services, as initiatives such as the Virksomhed in Denmark or the Cletwr café in Wales emphatically prove.

“Many regions have historical buildings, such as old castles or farms, which could find a new use and so be maintained as historic monuments. Other cultural values found in villages should also be highlighted, especially since 2018 is the European Year of Cultural Heritage”, says Tom Jones. The Rural Development Programme (RDP) should be better supported by other European, national and regional programmes, as it is an excellent opportunity for local entrepreneurs to create new business, for instance by branding and marketing local farm and craft products such as drinks, food and handicrafts, as well as landscape and historical heritage, cultural and health recreational activities.
OUR GROUP’S STRENGTH

The last meeting of the **Farmers Category** took place on 20 November 2017. In the morning, risk management was discussed, followed by talks on the preparatory work for the Group III study on “Implications of new economic models on the different stakeholder groups – the case of ecosystem services: benefits and challenges for the circular economy and consumers”. The following items were then debated with **Clara Aguilera**, Vice-Chair of the European Parliament’s AGRI Committee: the upcoming CAP reform, the Omnibus proposal and relations with Mercosur.

The last meeting of the **Social Economy Category** took place on 10 November 2017, presided by the co-spokespersons **Krzysztof Balon** and **Alain Coheur**. The principal topic for debate was the presentation of the new study “Best practices in public policies regarding the European social economy after the economic crisis”, commissioned by the EESC and carried out by CIRIEC. Other topics for discussion included the category’s 2018 Work Programme and an exchange of views on the EU-funded project for a European network for employers in social services (PESSIS III).

The last meeting of the **Consumers and Environment Category** took place on 9 November 2017. A discussion took place on the preparatory work for the study “Implications of new economic models on the different stakeholder groups – the case of ecosystem services: benefits and challenges for the circular economy and consumers” by **Thia Hennessy**, professor and Chair of Agri-Food Economics at Cork University Business School and head of the Department of Food Business and Development, which was then followed by a debate. **Cillian Lohan** then gave a short report regarding his involvement in the Climate Chance Summit and Marrakech Partnership – both important aspects of the UNFCCC process. Luis Lobo from the INT Section secretariat and Bogomil Nikolov gave an overview of preparations for European Consumer Day 2018, which will be held in Sofia.