**Speech by Christa Schweng,**

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**Circular Economy Stakeholder Conference on**

**"Together for a cleaner and more competitive Europe"**

**3 November 2020**

**"Towards a sustainable and inclusive recovery: unleashing the circular economy together"**

*[check against delivery]*

Good morning ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here today to welcome you to this 2020 edition of the Circular Economy Stakeholder Conference, a joint initiative of the European Economic and Social Committee and the European Commission and a model of good cooperation and synergy.

This is my first major event as EESC President, since my election a few days ago. This is a calendar coincidence – but a very happy one, actually! Because my commitment is to work for a Europe that is not only economically prosperous and socially inclusive, but also environmentally sustainable. I believe all our efforts towards climate neutrality should be mainstreamed in all policies. I also think we need an open, values-based society, which allows all civil society actors to thrive and contribute.

That is why it is an excellent opportunity for me to welcome you at this event. I see the Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform as a bridge, which links the EU institutions with grassroots civil society organisations. We all know that the transition to a circular economy is a long-term process. It requires a "sustainability" mindset and the active involvement all stakeholders - at local, national and European level. I am proud that our Committee supports the voice and action of civil society, because the grassroots organisations are at the heart of the transition to more sustainability and circular economy.

This year's conference takes place in appalling circumstances … COVID-19 has brought disruption into our lives, businesses are going bankrupt and unemployment and social inequalities are increasing. And the science is clear: if we keep exploiting wildlife and destroying our ecosystems, we can expect more diseases like Covid-19 passing from animals to humans in the years ahead.

So, we need to relay this message and strengthen our joint efforts toward a sustainable, just and inclusive recovery, and that includes the action to move from the linear to the circular economy.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have 3 main messages to share with you today:

My first message is that the European Green Deal is vital for our future and circular economy plays a front role in its success.

The European Green Deal announced measures to shift energy supply to renewable energies, improve energy efficiency of transport and housing, make food systems sustainable and products last longer, be better repairable and recyclable. It offers a direction for all EU policies, from Research and Innovation to industry, trade and consumers.

The Green Deal will have an enormously positive effect, beyond the environment. It will modernise industry, improve social inclusion and create more and better jobs. One of the conditions is that people are equipped with the skills required by green transition. Also, we have to take into account that ambitious climate-protection measures often pose a challenge to the businesses concerned. That's why, especially in the current economic downturn, it is essential to support companies to recover, while enabling them to innovate and invest in climate and environmental protection. Businesses need realistic targets, planning, security and flexibility when new measures to mitigate climate change are adopted, in order to remain competitive and provide jobs.

Businesses are part of the solution, when it comes to making efforts towards a greener economy. They must be encouraged to take an active part in shaping the transition to a low-carbon, resource-efficient economy.

All this – benefits and challenges - is particularly relevant when we speak about the transition to a circular economy. This involves measures covering the whole lifecycle of products: design, production, consumption, waste-management, and even their second life as secondary raw materials. Circular economy involves new business models and creates new, local jobs. The figures of 2012 to 2018 show that the number of jobs linked to the circular economy in the EU grew by 5%, to reach around 4 million.

Our Committee has welcomed the new Circular Economy Action Plan. We have said that we should take into account the transition when drawing up the plans for post COVID economic and social reconstruction. Our EESC opinion has also highlighted that the complementarity between climate change, circular economy policies, and corporate social responsibility should be recognised, and that the proposed pact for skills and jobs in the European Social Fund Plus is an excellent opportunity to implement the envisaged programmes.

The Action Plan relies on public authorities, the business community, and civil society working together, from the outset. I totally agree with Mr Executive Vice-President Timmermans, when he said that we needed our active engagement and innovative ideas for the next months and years.

And this leads me to my second message:

That the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform, your Platform, is a great example of policy and practice working hand in hand.

The past three years have shown that this is the way people want to work together.

So, please continue to share lessons learnt and inspiring examples, whether they are consumer products designed for circular behaviour, or innovative ideas for decreasing and managing waste, or designing jewellery from recycled material, or governments designing national circular strategies, or schools preparing the next generation.

Our digital platform, and other digital tools will help us achieve the transition towards a circular economy, but let's also remember to use them wisely, always with a strong focus on sustainability.

The Stakeholder Platform, where policy and practice work together could also be a hook for further joint actions on Circular Economy, such as further industrial symbiosis or enabling the full integration of European SMEs into the circular economy.

Mr Executive Vice-President Timmermans, perhaps we could also use this kind of cooperation to tackle other pressing issues like the climate. And since our choices today will mostly affect tomorrow's generation, younger stakeholders could play a key role.

My last message is that under my Presidency, the European Economic and Social Committee, with its diverse array of members, will continue to strive for a just and inclusive transition toward a circular economy.

As you well know, the COVID-19 crisis is amplifying social and economic inequalities, and disproportionately impacts vulnerable and marginalised groups.

In this context, I fully agree with the World Economic Forum that we need to "Fight back with long-term thinking". Respecting the planet and following the path set by the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Sustainable production and sustainable consumer choices in the circular economy hold a key to addressing this growing problem. How?

* by making more efficient use of secondary and critical raw materials,
* by creating jobs in new sectors where waste is now a resource,
* by educating younger and older consumers in generating less waste, and
* by stimulating demand for circular products through public procurement and economic incentives.

We look forward to progressing further on this path, building on our outstanding cooperation with the European Commission and with you, as stakeholders of the circular economy.

Ladies and gentlemen,

If you look around, you will see that our joint transition has started: there is an increasing number of national Circular Economy strategies and roadmaps, and engagement of stakeholders across Europe has never been so high.

We have achieved a lot, but we will need to do much more for the European Union to truly lead the global transition towards a circular economy.

Allow me to conclude by thanking you all – policy makers and stakeholders, and all the networks you represent – for your excellent collaboration and enthusiasm. I hope this conference will give you interesting elements to think about and share with your organisations and networks. I hope what we learn in the next two days will help us remind people of the stakes we share in the future of our planet.

I wish you all a fruitful debate.