**Speech by Christa Schweng,**

**President of the European Economic and Social Committee**

**European Migration Forum**

**Keynote speech**

**21st Oct 2022**

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Dear Commissioner Johansson,

Dear Participants of the European Migration Forum,

Welcome to you all, here today, on behalf of the European Economic and Social Committee, the house of EU civil society – so also the house of many of you. I am particularly glad to see so many of you in person, as this is our first physical forum in two years! Welcome, and I hope you are enjoying the event.

Dear Commissioner Johansson,

Thank you for highlighting the important initiatives that the Commission is taking to enable young migrants, refugees, and young people of migrant background, to be and to feel included in our society. We agree that our European way of life is enriched and emboldened by the contribution that these young people make.

As always, it is a pleasure to speak beside you again. I would like to very much thank you and your colleagues at DG Migration and Home Affairs for our cooperation and for co-organising this forum with us. I know your colleagues and mine have worked very hard, so many thanks to all for organising such an interesting forum.

Dear Participants,

Before I begin, I want to make special mention of our European Migration Forum Bureau. First, thank you to the bureau for your ideas and help for planning this year's forum. Secondly, I want to welcome our new members, who were elected today. I wish you a fruitful mandate, and I am looking forward to your ideas to advance our forum next year. Also, many thanks for their great contribution to Rosella Nicoletti and Marie Paule N'Guessan, our two CSO bureau members who are standing down this year. I hope that you remain active with the forum in the future.

Now, I would like to turn towards the theme of this year's forum. I am very delighted that this year I am surrounded by young people, and of course, people inspired by the young. To celebrate the European Year of Youth, young people must take centre stage at this forum, whether they be our exceptional young participants or those of you here that bring out the best of our young: the mentors; the teachers; the social workers; the coordinators; the policy officers; the integration and inclusion officers; the story-tellers.

You are all here today because you want our young people, irrespective of where they came from or how they got here, to thrive. Thank you for that. Young people must thrive, and for that, we must overcome our current challenges, together, in solidarity.

At the moment, we are recovering from one of the biggest public health emergencies of our time. There is an interminable war in our neighbourhood. We are facing a cost-of-living crisis – the inflation rate stood at 10.9% in September, in the European Union mainly due to the increase of energy and food prices. This situation is exacerbating inequalities and threatening the social fabric of our society, and our youth should not pay the price for it.

We know that young people have been particularly affected by the pandemic, and the disruption in acquiring skills and in their mental well-being can also impact their entry into the labour market. Young people of migrant or refugee background have suffered more acutely. The school closures and distance learning measures placed children of migrant background at a disadvantage.

The EESC has supported all the initiatives put forward by the Commission to improve the integration and inclusion outcomes for people of migrant background, such as the action plan on integration and inclusion, and the legal migration' skills and talents package. Furthermore, we welcome the proposals to improve the career prospects and democratic participation of young people via the reinforced Youth Guarantee and the EU Youth Test.

We also welcome the measures of some Member States to increase women's participation in the workforce, by encouraging and promoting entrepreneurship and employment, and investing in adequate child and social care. We are grateful to Member States, their civil society organisations and local communities for their tremendous efforts to welcome and integrate 7.6 million refugees, who are mostly children, young people and women, from Ukraine.

In particular, the initiative of the ‘talent pool’ launched on 10 October by the Commission, will certainly facilitate Ukrainians’ access to labour market, by matching Ukrainian refugees with open vacancies across member states. This is a very welcome initiative, in a context where companies lack more than ever before skilled workers and more than 3% of all available jobs remain vacant. I am also looking forward to a wider EU Talent Pool to attract third-country nationals to the labour markets of the European Union. To this end, we will need more efforts to facilitate the recognition of non-EU qualifications, something that can be done in the context of the European Year of Skills in 2023.

Indeed, in the context of the war in Ukraine, we should not forget about the other migrants and refugees, from other parts of the world. There are 27 million refugees in the world, around half of whom are under the age of 18. They also deserve our attention. It is important that young people receive the right support - be it language, educational or social - and guidance early on so that they are given an equal footing to their native counterparts.

We call for Member States to have ongoing consultations with social partners, civil society and youth organisations when they design, implement and monitor measures tailored to young people in work, training, or those who are actively seeking work. Also, funding to support integration should be accessed easily by civil society organisations, who are usually the first port of call.

With regards to the work of our members, they fight for young people, including the most vulnerable. Some of our members are representatives of youth organisations and youth councils across the EU. They aspire to include young people's perspectives, demands and needs in our opinions and activities at the EESC. Our member, Michael McLoughlin of Youth Work Ireland, will be participating at the interactive debate later today.

One of our most cherished activity is this European Migration Forum, because it embodies what I believe the EESC does brilliantly: bringing people from different organisations, backgrounds, and walks of life – you, dear Participants - together. It is this space, here, which is invaluable for fostering collaboration and friendships. For example, the networking village that we had last night showcased just a fraction of the fantastic work that you do. "The floor is yours", an event that you will have shortly, is also a great opportunity for you all to come together and just talk, discuss, and sow the seeds for potential cooperation.

In challenging times like these, you, dear Participants, shine a bright light on the good of humankind. And on this line, I want to conclude this speech with the story of Sainey. Sainey is from the Gambia and lives in Bologna, Italy. He is a young baseball player. Unfortunately, he has a degenerative disease and he is going blind. Thanks to one of the organisations participating at the forum, the organisation Arca di Noè, he made a short film about his situation. His film caught the attention of film-makers to become a full-length documentary on himself and his journey, helping in this way other migrants and other people suffering of a disability or an illness. This event shows me that the work that you do, as civil society organisations, the people that you are, improves in a very concrete way the lives of young people, like Sainey.

Thank you, and I wish you a fruitful rest of the forum.