Diversity Europe Newsletter

OUR CLIMATE, OUR FUTURE
Imagine if we had time, let’s say 20 years, to plan for the COVID-19 epidemic. Would we have done any better than we have now? Or would we have followed a more familiar path with a number of delaying stages?

Stage one would be complete denial. Stage two is where a minority of learned but uncommunicative scientists prove it is going to happen. Stage three is where the possibility that it could happen, but doing anything about it is ruled out because of costs, political ideology differences and a touch of populism, which dismisses anything that might be remotely scientific. Meanwhile, twenty years have passed, the pandemic arrives and suddenly the world reacts. A vaccine is developed rapidly, the citizens completely change all social behaviour. Fears of the population resisting vaccine take up prove unfounded, despite the many social media campaigns warning that they should not.

Now let’s look at climate change and the fact that our planet will heat up dramatically during this century. The projections of serious ecological, economic and social disruptions across Europe and the whole planet are well documented and even though there have been numerous climate summits to address and resolve these problems, it would appear that we are lagging behind by a considerable distance. Unfortunately, if we wait for the worst of climate change to arrive before we act, then we will not be able to react in a way that saves our planet and by extension life itself.

It is noteworthy that the baton has been taken up by the younger generation. They, more than any generation, will have to live through and manage the consequences of climate change, some of which have manifested themselves in terms of weather events and other unusual developments in our ecosystems.

In November 2021, world leaders will meet in Glasgow at an event that will be the successor to the Paris event held in 2015. Paris was the first time that world leaders agreed that action needed to be taken. Unfortunately, the objective to keep increases in temperature to 1.5 degrees Celsius by the end of the century is now in doubt and indeed, it will be a challenge to keep it to 2 degrees Celsius. This in itself, will cause enormous problems for various parts of our planet, which cannot be dismissed.

Connected to this, it is worth noting the objectives of the Slovenian Presidency which has started on 1 July. Under the slogan “Together. Resilient. Europe.” it lists four priorities:

- The resilience, recovery and strategic autonomy of the European Union;
- Conference on the Future of Europe;
- A union of the European way of life, the rule of law and equal criteria for all;
- A credible and secure European Union, capable of ensuring security and stability in its neighbourhood.

Clearly, the importance of these objectives cannot be under estimated and their success will be measured by the way in which we manage the reality of climate and environmental change.

The good news is that as the human species on this planet, we have at least proved that when necessary, we can rapidly achieve solutions.

Séamus Boland
A ‘fit-for-climate-neutrality’ union

Johanna SANDAHL  
President, European Environmental Bureau (EEB)

Climate neutrality has become the political heart of the European project. Fulfilling this commitment by 2050 relies on today’s policymaking, in which civil society can play a game-changing role. Next station is the ‘Fit-For-55’ package.

Just over a year ago, the EU rolled out its plan to help curb global warming: the European Green Deal, a roadmap that aims to provide the necessary policy and regulatory tools for making Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050.

The speed and scale of the climate and environmental challenges we are facing is such that this decade will be critical to put us on the right path. Civil society, backed by science, has a decisive role to play in this journey towards a climate neutrality, as each piece of legislation entails a thought dispute of political wills and vested interests among EU actors.

This year, the agreement reached on the ‘55% net’ greenhouse gas emissions reduction target for 2030 can be considered a remarkable political achievement. Yet, this climate target is still well below the 65% required by science. Efforts must be stepped up in Europe if we want to increase our chances of keeping the global average temperature rise below 1.5°C, as set out in the Paris Agreement.

At the same time, the unprecedented amount of funds made available for the COVID-19 recovery, provide a unique opportunity to put in place more ambitious policy, economic and fiscal instruments that foster Europe’s green transformation.

Together with our members, we’ve been monitoring the drafting process of the national plans that will enable EU governments to access recovery funds on condition of meeting the climate and ‘do no significant harm’ provisions in the Next Generation EU Recovery Plan. On the ground is where civil society has proven itself as a much-needed watchdog, safeguarding our common environmental interests.

The next key policy milestone in the Green Deal Roadmap will be the ‘Fit-for-55’ package, that the European Commission is due to adopt on 14 July. This comprehensive policy and regulatory review will address issues crucial for the decarbonisation of our economy: emissions trading systems, renewable energy and energy efficiency, green taxonomy, etc.

As we have seen in previous legislative initiatives like National Climate and Energy Plans, advocacy can make a difference, especially when we build synergies with other organisations at local and international level. From ‘Fit-for-55’ to recovery plans, the coming months promise to be challenging. Civil society organisations urgently need to join forces to push for a greater climate and environmental ambi-

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1. European Environmental Bureau (EEB), https://eeb.org/
2. European Commission, European Green Deal, https://europa.eu/176418n
Our climate, our future – the contribution of the CIVINET Slovenia-Croatia-Southeast Europe Network to the green transition

Lidija PAVIĆ-ROGOŠIĆ (HR)
Director, Croatian civil society organisation “Sustainable Community Development” (ODRAZ)

Civil society organisations (CSOs) contribute to the green transition for instance by communicating about new policies and possible ways of implementing them or by sharing examples of good practice. They also contribute through local community capacity building and by mobilising local communities to take part in planning and in solving problems (environmental, social, mobility, etc.) in order to improve the quality of life. Furthermore, CSOs can contribute to establishing links and partnerships between different sectors, in order to work in synergy on addressing common challenges.

All these are activities pursued by the CIVINET Slovenia-Croatia-South-East Europe Network for Sustainable Urban Mobility, which brings together over 190 stakeholders from six countries: Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia. Since the Network’s creation in 2013, secretariat services have been provided by one civil society organisation – ODRAZ – Sustainable Community Development, which plans and organises activities in cooperation with the members. This is a truly joint project shared by different actors – cities, ministries, universities, institutes, civil society organisations, public transport companies, companies dealing with innovations in mobility etc.

The Network supports EU policies (European Green Deal3, Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy4) and monitors good practice examples in European cities. It strives to transform societies and local communities by orienting them towards more sustainable ways of mobility, with the aim of improving people’s quality of life and encouraging them to change their transport habits by ensuring better access and affordable public transport, as well as the adoption of Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans.

Renewable energy - a “vaccine”

Lutz RIBBE (DE)
Director, Department for Nature Conservation Policy, environmental foundation EuroNatur

Nowadays it’s not just COVID, but also the worldwide climate crisis that requires much faster and more decisive action. And for this, the world has a wonderful “vaccine”: renewable energy sources. These don’t need to be developed from scratch or adapted to mutations. They are (or at any rate, should be) immediately available worldwide and even produce electricity cheaper than fossil or nuclear energy sources, which are still heavily subsidised.

In 1998, the big German energy companies prophesised that the share of renewables in the electricity mix could not exceed 6% in the long term(!). Today, we know that they were wrong. In Germany, renewables now have a share of more than 40%. The drivers of this energy transition are private individuals, farmers, newly established energy cooperatives, innovative municipal companies and businesses, among others.

The Network helps build trust between stakeholders, including decision-makers, leading to public policies that address mobility improvement, as well as the social and health dimensions and equitability of the green transition.

Training and transfer of good practices are an important element of the Network’s work. Two webinars were held this year: “COVID-19 as a catalyst for change in sustainable transport planning” and “Clean vehicles and innovative technologies in sustainable transport planning”. The next webinar will deal with the topic of “Sustainable mobility planning in rural areas”.

As epidemiological conditions are improving, the Network is switching to hybrid meetings, the first of which will focus on sustainable mobility in tourist destinations. A study trip is also being planned.

Last but not least, I need to mention that the network prepares partnership projects and workshops for students from different universities, who jointly and in an integrated manner reflect on how to solve transport problems in local communities, bearing in mind both the social and environmental dimensions and the involvement of local residents.

2. Odraz - Sustainable Community Development, independent civil society, non-profit organization, https://www.odraz.hr/?lang=en
Therefore, to my mind, the real revolution in the energy transition is not a shift from fossil/nuclear sources to renewables; it is the change in the structure of energy production, shifting away from large central power plants and towards decentralised production facilities.

Where do we stand now? Are citizens, the drivers of the energy transition so far, actually at the heart of the policy? Unfortunately, the European Commission puts its faith above all in large-scale technologies such as offshore installations and hydrogen technologies and makes no more than a very general appeal to the Member States to take a closer look at community energy.

It has yet to dawn on politicians that clean small technologies and smart approaches can afford enormous opportunities that go way beyond climate protection. For example, think of the regional value-added opportunities deriving from the fact that wind, solar and biomass readily available in regions can now be turned into money. A “vaccine” for the benefit of all.

Saving “mother earth” is a life-or-death issue

Juraj SIPKO (SK)
Director, Institute of Economic Research, Slovak Academy of Sciences

We are now living in a totally interconnected world. This is also a time in which civilisation is facing enormous challenges. The primary one is how to avert the threats to our very existence resulting from change to the climate and to the natural world. It is therefore time for the global community to adopt and implement a raft of measures to lessen the continuing risks to our nature and above all to preserve life on the planet. And it is saving “mother earth” that is the life-or-death issue in terms of continued life on the planet.

Nature, humankind’s greatest capital, is very much part and parcel of all areas of everyday life. Preserving an unspoil natural world and focusing on its long-term sustainability is therefore important for preserving life on the planet for current and future generations.

The fundamental question that arises is how to arrest the process of devastating nature, which can lead to unpredictable loss of life, material damage and financial loss.

The aim behind the adoption and implementation of measures should be to reduce potential damage and the measures should look to the future. It is important to increase green investment. This investment opens wide horizons and offers opportunities to transform all sectors of the economy. It will be important to adopt and implement measures for the event of natural disasters, focussed primarily on:

• mobilising additional resources for infrastructure investment;
• building structural resilience to climate risks;
• strengthening financial resilience through national budget resources;
• continuing to diversify the economy into less climate-sensitive sectors in the economy;
• setting binding rules for national CO2 levies.

Future life on the planet depends on how all the parties responsible for implementing the relevant transformation policies work together and adopt and implement measures without delay to rescue life on the planet for future generations.
Young farmers are committed to play their role in the green transition

Doris LETINA
Vice-President, European Council of Young Farmers (CEJA)

European Council of Young Farmers (CEJA) Vice-President and apple farmer Doris Letina shares her views on how the next generation of EU farmers can contribute to climate neutrality and meet the EU's green ambitions.

Climate change is for us not merely a challenge to overcome or green targets to reach: It is a very real threat to our livelihoods. Our generation is committed to step up efforts to mitigate climate change and biodiversity loss but needs for this that environmental ambitions are integrated within farmers’ economic and social conditions and ultimately generate a viable income. Farmers simply cannot farm in a green way if they are already in the red.

Green transition: the significant potential of EU farming

The EU agriculture sector has a large potential to reduce its reliance on fossil fuels and to provide primary renewable material for a broad range of industries. In the livestock sector, some opportunities for improving productivity and reducing emissions include genetic selection of the herd, feed additives, improving manure management and animal housing infrastructure, and closing the nutrient cycle through better forage and grassland management. European agricultural soils can also offer significant potential as carbon sinks, and thus lay the groundwork for young farmers to help reach climate goals.

Supportive policies to allow young farmers to move towards sustainability

To allow young farmers to contribute to the green transition, policies need to address their core challenges and protect their future. Funded transitional measures such as trainings and investment support but also solid private and public risk management tools are also strongly needed to allow farmers adapt their production methods to new climatic conditions and cope with adverse events jeopardising their sustenance in the sector. Importantly, EU legislations must also acknowledge the diversity of farming practices within the EU and incentivise differentiated approaches across farms, regions and sectors to encourage each individual farmer to contribute in accordance to his/her own realities, potentials and ambitions.

Consumers have a key role to play in this change

Even though consumers are increasingly aware that they can have an impact with their choices and contribute to a sustainable food system, they need to be further encouraged to make well-informed decisions and take responsibility for the food they buy and eat. One way to empower them to do so is through clear labelling and more transparency along all the food chain. As young farmers, we are committed to establishing trust and understanding with consumers. At the end of the day, the relationship with consumers is the one that matters the most to young farmers.

Young farmers are aware of the magnitude of the task and want to play their part in the green transition but to do so they need the support of policymakers and consumers.

Is the EU’s green transition a chance for us to create a more accessible Europe for all?

Ioannis VARDAKASTANIS (EL)
Vice-President, Diversity Europe Group
President, Greek National Confederation of Disabled People (NCDP)
President, European Disability Forum (EDF)
Treasurer, International Disability Alliance (IDA)
Member, Economic and Social Council of Greece (OKE)
Member, Greek National Commission of Human Rights (EEDA)

The EU needs to be transformed and it needs to do so by becoming greener. This will require changing the way we move around, how we work and how we consume energy. However, it also offers us the opportunity to tackle several challenges at once.

An example of this is investment in more sustainable forms of public transport. While the majority of cities in the EU have a rich public transport infrastructure, there are two fundamental problems. Firstly, the vehicles themselves are sometimes too outdated to meet our modern expectations regarding emissions. Secondly, and most crucially, they are for the most part unfit to be used by all citizens.

For Europe’s growing number of persons with disabilities and older people, using public transportation often becomes a logistical nightmare. Trains, metros, buses, ferries, stations and even public spaces that cannot be accessed by a person with reduced mobility; this is still an all-too-common reality. One only needs to spend a day in Brussels to see just how difficult it can be to navigate the city. Finding a metro station with an elevator, waiting for an accessible bus or metro, taking a train without having to give more than a day’s prior notice, for many of us these are the guiding thoughts determining how we must plan our every movement.

So, while the green transition can be a way to reduce the carbon footprint linked to our mobility, it can also be a chance to rethink how to make these greener forms of transport usable for all. A green transition that leaves out persons with disabilities and ignores our ageing population is bound to fail, and that is a mistake we cannot afford to make.

PORTUGAL HANDS OVER EU COUNCIL PRESIDENCY TO SLOVENIA

Transform Europe and make it a leader in promoting social and cooperation values

Edgar Vilares Diogo (PT)
Administrative Expert, Union of Portuguese Mutual Societies (UMP)

Our current situation is unprecedented and it is time to put the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) into practice, requiring European leaders and all the social, institutional and civic partners that participated in the Porto Social Summit to commit to a social and a global Europe.

Building on the words of Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, in her opening speech at the Social Summit, the European social model is ‘unique’, and it is therefore time to consolidate and promote it in order to build a Europe that is open to the world. To this end, we all need to be more resilient and committed to economic recovery, social cohesion and the defence and promotion of European values.

1. European Commission, European Pillar of Social Rights, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do
I believe that we are on the right track and I have hope that European leaders and all their social, economic and institutional partners will enable us to meet our commitments and achieve what Portugal has set as priorities for its Presidency\(^1\) of the Council of the European Union, namely: a greener, digital, more social and more global Europe.

This is the opportunity to launch the EPSR action plan\(^2\), an extremely important document that warrants the utmost attention of the upcoming Slovenian Presidency\(^1\). We should put all our commitment and energy into its implementation, so that all parties, working along the same lines and in partnership, can respond to social needs and continue to promote a more social, more cooperative Europe.

At the same time, it is crucial that issues such as gender equality and anti-discrimination policies remain priorities.

It is also worth underlining the key role played by the Portuguese Presidency in the process of vaccinating the European population. However, it is important and imperative that we continue this work, also not leaving behind those countries experiencing the greatest difficulty in gaining access to vaccines. Vaccination and aid targets need to be set, because only by immunising the population of the whole world will we be able to tackle the pandemic effectively.

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**Space and participation for all?**

**Neža Repanšek (SL)**

Vice-President, National Youth Council of Slovenia for International Cooperation

The presiding trio (Germany, Portugal and Slovenia), in their 18-month programme, chose **Space and participation for all** as one of the Presidency’s focal points in the field of youth.

I believe that this theme also ties in closely with our work here at the EESC and that it should be pursued by non-governmental and civil society organisations in all activities relating to the upcoming Slovenian Presidency\(^3\).

Why? The Slovenian Presidency presents multiple windows of opportunity: to strengthen the capacity of civil society organisations, to enhance public participation, to support innovative practices and to enhance the resilience of the entire European community in this post-COVID era.

It is most positive that the Conference on the Future of Europe\(^5\) is one of the four top priorities of the Presidency. The aim here is for the consultation process to be very inclusive, and it is the responsibility of all the parties involved to ensure that this is the case.

**Civic space - forums - for participation**, where individuals are given the opportunity to actively co-create policies, will be crucial in reshaping the modern society and economy. Civil society organisations and their forums are often the first place where people can learn to participate: a playground for participation where young people can spend time with each other, discuss political views, meet decision-makers and organise projects that are important to them.

Providing the right forums strengthens young people’s democratic participation, giving them autonomy to take informed action. Since it works so well with our civil society organisations, why wouldn’t we apply it as a modus operandi for our Presidency? Providing space and participation for all sounds like a very basic principle, yet that does not diminish the difficulties encountered in applying it in real life. Not impossible, but definitely more demanding than just “doing things the old way”.

I hope that in a year’s time we will be talking about the Slovenian Presidency’s **success in facilitating and opening up spaces for dialogue** with our young people, civil society organisations and social partners.

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On 30 June, the Diversity Europe Group held a webinar under the banner of the Conference on the Future of Europe on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the mental health and employability of young people. The event, entitled “Age of inequality: Youth in times of COVID-19”, was opened by group president Séamus Boland. The president stressed that young people must be empowered to set the agenda and be involved in meaningful legislative processes and debates. Mr Boland said that “grassroots youth organisations need to be effectively involved and help with funding and training on youth advocacy”. Building alliances between organisations is crucial.

The moderator Katrīna Leitāne (Diversity Europe Group and National Youth Council of Latvia) agreed that the pandemic has hit young people particularly hard. “If we want young people to be Europe’s future, to drive our green and digital recovery, it is critical that we make sure they have the resources to do so.”

In the keynote speeches, Pete Chatzimichail (European Youth Forum) said that policy makers at all levels must act now to tackle the long-term impacts of COVID-19 and avoid a ‘pandemic scar’ on young people. João Pedro Videira (National Youth Council of Portugal) stressed that the Youth Guarantee must be bolstered to make sure that young people have opportunities to explore their career options and get decent and stable jobs in the future.

Later on, Radost Zaharieva (European Public Health Alliance) said that despite evidence demonstrating that young people are exposed to intersectional forms of inequality that affect their physical and mental health, current policy responses in the youth sector are not receiving sufficient funding to mitigate the pandemic’s impact. Neža Repanšek (Diversity Europe Group and Slovenian National Youth Council) said “by watching a simple bean seedling grow, we observe the remarkable ability of plants to adapt to their environment. If they cannot grow, we don’t change the seed: we change the environment. After COVID-19, we must enable young people to grow.”

Katja Ćić (International Youth Health Organization) said that the question of long-term effects on young people’s mental health remains and needs to be addressed as soon as possible. Helena Ripollés (Equipo Europa) said that many grassroots organisations are combating youth unemployment and calling for improvements in public mental health systems. To have a real impact, these organisations need to be genuinely involved in decision-making processes.

The debate was followed by a discussion with questions from the audience, concluding that all social actors, including young people, minorities and other vulnerable groups, should have the power to influence policy-making processes. This can only be achieved by mandatory consultation and with more funding.

The webinar is available at: https://youtu.be/4Ugvpy52z4I
During the event, Svjetlana Marijon explained that the EESC was an advisory body to the European Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission, and as such issues opinions according to the EU treaties. In the current times of crisis, the EESC has shown that it can react very swiftly. As an example, Ms Marijon mentioned the document *A New Narrative for Europe - The EESC resolution on the Conference on the Future of Europe* and its adoption at the Committee’s April plenary session, all of which was organised in only two months. The resolution makes a contribution to the *Conference on the Future of Europe*, which fosters communication and engagement with citizens on the topics of democracy and building a more resilient Europe together.

Ms Marijon commended the civil sector in Croatia, which has proved itself to be flexible and rapidly adjusted to the unforeseen circumstances caused by the impact of COVID-19 and the earthquakes that hit Croatia in 2020 and 2021. The Croatian Member also stressed the importance of conducting a wide range of consultations and involving different stakeholders at all levels, from national to local, in the process of the Conference on the Future of Europe. This could lead to a greater variety of opinions and a clear contribution of citizens to the building of Europe.

It was stressed at the discussion that the EESC had consistently emphasised the importance of gaining public support for development and governance models focussed on sustainability and the building of a more equal society, and a society in which civil society organisations are at the heart of recovery and resilience.

### Young people must play an active role in the discussions on the future of Europe

*Elena SINKEVICIUTĖ (LT)*
Representative, Lithuanian Youth Council

For the launch of the *Conference on the Future of Europe* at the national level, EESC Diversity Europe Group Member Elena Sinkevičiūtė took part in several activities to promote the process and to encourage young people to play an active role in it.

Together with Lithuania’s Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, Arnoldas Pranckevičius, Ms Sinkevičiūtė re-

corded a podcast episode discussing various scenarios for a European Future and a variety of means for citizens to engage in this process. Ms Sinkevičiūtė stressed how crucial it is to involve civil society actors in both European and national activities of the Conference, to ensure that the process is led by the citizens and to boost outreach to all citizens, making participation accessible to everyone, regardless of their background.

On 7 June, Ms Sinkevičiūtė also joined a panel debate with MEP Juozas Olekas and MP Radvilė Morkūnaitė-Mikulienė during the national launch event for the Conference on the Future of Europe to discuss the future of European society. The Diversity Europe Group Member highlighted the fact that future European society is expected to face many challenges due to the climate crisis, digitalisation and, more generally, the changing economy and labour market. The skills of agility and resilience will be of great importance for facing the future, and the way to equip citizens with those skills is to consistently invest in young people and youth policies today. A quality horizontal youth policy and guarantee for young people to access their rights and fulfil their potential across the EU would allow today’s youth to be ready to upskill, adapt and rethink the reality of the future. A quality youth policy is a guaranteed long-term investment, enabling the EU and the Member States to build solid foundations for the future European society.

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1. EESC, A New Narrative for Europe - The EESC resolution on the Conference on the Future of Europe, [https://europa.eu/!dD34xFy](https://europa.eu/!dD34xFy)
Frans Timmermans stresses the need for a green transition that is fair

On 9 June, EESC Members welcomed European Commission Executive Vice-President Frans Timmermans to a plenary debate on the European Green Deal. Opening the debate, EESC President Christa Schweng stressed that Europe needed a truly green and social deal. This was even more urgent now as Europe was rebuilding its economies and societies after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Frans Timmermans stressed that the social dimension of the green transition was the Commission’s prime concern and described the main elements of the Commission’s Fit for 55 package, which will be unveiled on 14 July. The package would ensure social fairness in new proposals by sharing the burden of climate action fairly between industries, governments and individuals, and by introducing a social mechanism to help soften the impact on the most vulnerable when it comes to initiatives such as the possible extension of emissions trading to heating and transport fuels.

During the plenary debate, the Executive Vice-President also listened to the views and proposals of Diversity Europe Group Members.

Miguel Ángel Cabra de Luna underlined that in the green and digital transition no one should be left behind and that “the implementation of all the measures included in the Green Deal has to dovetail with the European Pillar of Social Rights, especially with the Social Economy Action Plan”.

Diversity Europe Group vice-president Simo Tiainen spoke about forest management in Europe. “The sustainable use of forests, the climate goals and biodiversity can be reconciled,” he said and called for sustainable forest management that supports a holistic approach, combining the economy, climate and biodiversity.

Javier Garat Pérez voiced concerns about the impact of the Green Deal on the European fisheries sector. “Some of the policies proposed may lead to a loss of competitiveness that could lead to the collapse of fishing enterprises,” he said, and he urged policy-makers to seek a balance between the protection of biodiversity, the sustainable use of natural resources, food security and the three dimensions of sustainability.

Joe Healy reaffirmed that farmers wanted to play their part in the green transition. He called for recognition of agriculture as a commercial business, extra funding for farmers to cover additional costs resulting from the transition and equivalence of standards in trade deals.

The full debate can be viewed at https://fb.watch/v/3hqvdRPa1/

European Commission 2022 work programme must focus on European values, Health Union and social and economic recovery

“For the EESC, the work programme should focus on restructuring and improving our economy and society based on these values: unlocking the full potential of the Single Market; achieving the Sustainable Development Goals; creating a circular economy and achieving climate neutrality in the EU by 2050 at the latest; and ensuring good governance and democratic accountability.”

This is one of the key messages of the resolution on the EESC’s contribution to the 2022 European Commission’s work programme, which was unanimously adopted by the EESC plenary on 9 June. The document, which had been prepared by the rapporteurs Jan Dirx (Diversity Europe Group), Mariya Mincheva (Employers’ Group) and Stefano Palmieri (Workers’ Group), provides timely input into the Commission’s forthcoming work programme.

2. EESC, Resolution on the European Economic and Social Committee’s contribution to the 2022 European Commission’s work programme, point 1.4, https://europa.eu/!kt64vFU
During the plenary debate on the subject, Diversity Europe vice-president Jan Dirx emphasised the need to defend European values. One of the key messages, he underlined, was the EESC’s call for all EU policy “to be rooted in the EU goals and values laid out in the Lisbon Treaty and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights”, such as “human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law and human rights”.1

Diversity Europe Group president Séamus Boland and vice-president Rudolf Kolbe also took the floor. Séamus Boland focused on the European Health Union2: “the pandemic has clearly shown that health dictates the wealth of our citizens”, he said. “It is high time that we started to prioritise health and a European Health Union, in the same way as we prioritised the Banking Union during the economic and financial crisis.”

Rudolf Kolbe spoke about the economic and social dimensions of the recovery. “We need economic growth, innovation, employment and entrepreneurship in its various forms”, he stressed. However, he also underscored the need to bundle resources to provide high-value jobs and training, and prevent poverty and exclusion, amongst other things.

The resolution is available at: europa.eu/!kt64vFU.

The plenary debate on the resolution can be watched at: https://fb.watch/6qIG98e3oe/

Members examine the EU’s work on democracy and fundamental rights

On 10 June, the European Commissioner for Justice, Didier Reynders, took part in the EESC plenary session to discuss with Members about the Rule of Law, the New strategy for the implementation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the European Democracy Action Plan.

The Commissioner briefly outlined the new strategy1 and action plan4. The two initiatives are part of the Commission’s efforts to further promote and protect the fundamental rights and values of the EU5. Following the presentation, EESC Members and rapporteurs presented two opinions on the subject and engaged in a general debate with the Commissioner.

Cristian Pîrvulescu, the rapporteur for the EESC opinion5 on the New strategy for the implementation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, welcomed the proposed strategy but was concerned about the lack of awareness of the Charter among European citizens. One of the opinion’s main calls, he underlined, was for civil society to be supported so that it can defend fundamental rights more effectively.

Andris Gobiņš, the co-rapporteur for the EESC opinion7 on the European democracy action plan, said that the action plan should include a focus on promoting active and democratic participation beyond elections. Furthermore, the Commission’s Rule of Law Report should include a separate chapter on civic space. “Freedom of association, the right to speech, protection from the state and freedom of assembly are in danger in several Member States”, said the rapporteur. “We need a clear monitoring system.”

In the ensuing debate, Diversity Europe Group president Séamus Boland highlighted the findings of a recent study8 commissioned by the Group, in which the majority of civil society respondents felt that the centralisation of power during the COVID-19 pandemic had hindered their political work. “Rights are not automatic and […] must be constantly defended”, the president warned.

Diversity Europe Group representatives Ionut Sibian, Justyna Ochędzan, Elena Calistrut and Pietro Barbieri also addressed the Commissioner on different areas of his work. Members spoke about the need to support civil society organisations in promoting human rights, their crucial role for democracy, the worrying situation of activists, journalists and other players and the need to effectively uphold human rights for everyone.

Both EESC opinions were adopted after the debate. Further information can be found here9.

The full debate can be viewed at: https://fb.watch/6qJTtwWz-xd/

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1. Cf. point 1.4
2. European Commission, European Health Union, https://europa.eu/!Vf4R0
3. European Commission, EU Strategy to strengthen the application of the Charter, https://europa.eu/!Ht8qNn
6. EESC opinion SOC/671, https://europa.eu/!wH84mc
7. EESC opinion SOC/672, https://europa.eu/!uhBhU
9. EESC, Civil society must be given an active role in the defence of EU values, https://europa.eu/!xckw8q
CoFoE: Building resilient, equal and sustainable communities and societies with civil society in the driving seat

On 10 June, the EESC held an event to launch its activities in connection with the Conference on the Future of Europe entitled “Bringing the European project back to citizens”. The forum served as a brainstorming session and a laboratory for the citizens’ consultations in the Member States that the EESC is organising in connection with the Conference starting from September 2021. The consultations will feed into the Conference’s official online platform and culminate in country reports that will be shared for further follow-up by the EU institutions in spring 2022.

The kick-off event was opened by EESC president Christa Schweng, who said that the Conference was an opportunity to reconnect European institutions and policies with citizens and organised civil society. A broad participatory, bottom-up approach was key for its success and developing an online dashboard that provided transparency and accountability on the follow-up of the Conference should be considered. Her speech was followed by statements from Dubravka Šuica, Vice-President of the European Commission and member of the CoFoE executive board, and Eva Maydell, MEP and President of the European Movement International.

The event featured several round table discussions. Diversity Europe Group president Séamus Boland took part in the discussion on “Sustainable, inclusive and participative societies”, which included a keynote speech by Dr Sean Healy, CEO of Social Justice Ireland, and a statement by Brikena Xhomaqi, co-president of the EESC Liaison Group and director of the Lifelong Learning Platform.

“Many people feel that their voices are not heard in shaping the decisions that affect them,” said keynote speaker Sean Healy. “We need to tackle this issue of participation and governance. Social dialogue on all major issues that shape our future is needed. It must include civil society on an equal footing with employers and trade unions.” To achieve a sustainable, inclusive and participative Europe, Mr Healy saw a need, an opportunity and a responsibility for a new social contract “focused on delivering simultaneously a vibrant economy, decent services and infrastructure, just taxation, good governance and sustainability.”

Séamus Boland underlined that everyone had a role to play and was impacted by the objective of European sustainability. “I firmly believe that we need to build resilient, equal and sustainable communities and societies with civil society in the driving seat,” he said and explained that this would require a very inclusive approach: “Inclusiveness must span all EU policy areas.” He said that all parts of society must have a genuine role in designing, implementing and assessing future EU policies.

Brikena Xhomaqi also called for policy and decision-making practises to be modernised, putting citizens at the heart of the process. She said that the Conference was an opportunity in this regard and must be seized. Creating more space for dialogue between citizens across cities, regions, countries and the world was key. Finally, Ms Xhomaqi emphasised that the Conference should not raise false expectations and that real political commitment to follow-up on its outcomes was needed.

The kick-off event is available at: https://fb.watch/6j9hYVxH6J/

UPCOMING EVENTS

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OVERVIEW OF RECENT WORK BY OUR MEMBERS

The last EESC plenary session took place from 9 and 10 June, in a hybrid format. The EESC plenary adopted 17 opinions, 6 of which were drafted by Members of the Diversity Europe Group. A list of the recent work can be found below.

Ákos TOPOLÁNSZKY (HU), rapporteur, SOC/676 A Counter-Terrorism Agenda for the EU
Anastasis YIAPANIS (CY), rapporteur, INT/936 Establishing the Joint Undertakings under Horizon Europe
Andris GOBINŠ (LV), co-rapporteur, SOC/672 European democracy action plan
Cristian PİRVELESCU (RO), rapporteur, SOC/671 New strategy for the implementation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights
Lidija PAVIĆ-Rogošić (HR), co-rapporteur, TEN/728 Evaluation – 2011 White Paper on Transport
Małgorzata Anna BOGUSZ (PL), rapporteur, SOC/677 Europe’s beating cancer plan

The complete texts of all EESC opinions are available in various language versions on the Committee’s website.

The next EESC plenary session will take place on 22 and 23 September. For more information on the upcoming plenary session please visit our website.

A list including all new work appointments of Diversity Europe Group Members is available on the Committee’s website.

1. EESC opinion SOC/676, https://europa.eu/!tNgQkt
3. EESC opinion SOC/672, https://europa.eu/!xwHT6mc
5. EESC opinion TEN/728, https://europa.eu/!XG76xt
6. EESC opinion SOC/677, https://europa.eu/!nq3vFh
7. EESC opinions, https://europa.eu/!wF66y7
8. EESC plenary sessions, https://europa.eu/!Dg84qG
WHAT HAPPENED TO NAT/808?

Interview with rapporteur Arnaud Schwartz on EESC opinion NAT/808 – Application of the Aarhus Convention - Access to Justice in Environmental Matters

Arnaud SCHWARTZ (FR)
President, France Nature Environnement

Mr Schwartz, in January the plenary adopted your opinion, NAT/808. What are the three main conclusions of this opinion?

Firstly, the EESC supports the four priority actions identified in the European Commission’s communication¹ “Improving access to justice in environmental matters in the EU and its Member States”, namely:

• The obligation on Member States to fully and correctly transpose access to justice requirements stemming from EU secondary law;
• The need for the co-legislators to include provisions on access to justice in new and revised EU legislation on environmental matters;
• The review by Member States of their own national laws and regulations that prevent or undermine access to justice; and
• The obligation on national courts to guarantee the right of individuals and NGOs to an effective remedy under EU law.

Second, the Committee nonetheless points out to the Commission that its proposal² on the application of the provisions of the Aarhus Convention contains loopholes which may be used by institutions to avoid being held accountable.

Third, the EESC believes that civil society organisations (CSOs) must be properly protected from extra burdens (such as additional costs and bureaucratic measures) at both national and EU levels in order to make judicial review accessible in practice.

What are your main recommendations or proposals?

The EESC recommends, for example, that the Commission include EU acts entailing “national implementing measures”. Otherwise, there is a real possibility that excluding them could nullify or devalue the Commission proposal.

Furthermore, the EESC believes that CSOs should be able to request a review even if implementing measures have not yet been adopted. The opposite would risk insulating many, if not most, EU acts and omissions from internal review.

Despite the arguments put forward by the Commission, the EESC notes that non-legally binding EU acts can have a significant impact both on the implementation of EU legislation and on its interpretation by the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU). It must therefore be possible to take them into account.

The social partners are key players in environmental issues, and so the Committee urges that they be explicitly recognised as such when it comes to access to justice.

Finally, the EESC stresses that the new regulation should also permit internal review of Commission state aid decisions.

How do you ensure that the voice of civil society is heard? What are the next steps you intend to take to promote this opinion?

Following discussions with the Commission when writing the opinion, we then adopted the document and launched a series of meetings with MEPs and representatives of the EU Member States. The next steps will depend on the ongoing trilogue and will be in the run-up to the meeting of the parties to the Aarhus Convention. It is important for the EESC to make its voice heard there.

Find out more about the EESC opinion NAT/808 at: https://europa.eu/!Rg83nW

Arnaud Schwartz

¹ EUR-lex, COM/2020/643 final, https://europa.eu/!7hNjUr