READY FOR 55% EMISSIONS’ REDUCTION?
FOREWORD

Séamus BOLAND (IE)
President, Diversity Europe Group

Time is running out.

Firstly, I would like to highlight the plight of thousands of families in Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Greece which were affected by the summer’s extreme weather.

Many people lost their lives. Houses were lost and whole areas destroyed. It is hard to disagree with the sentiments expressed by German Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, when he visited Erftstadt in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, commenting on the fact that at least 45 people died. “We mourn with those who have lost friends, acquaintances, family members”, he said. “Their fate is ripping our hearts apart.”

We are told that we must expect more of these extremes in weather and must prepare ourselves and our communities for such consequences of climate change. Unfortunately, we may be running out of time in terms of mitigating against such events. The need to meet the various targets set out by international agreements is urgent. It is not easy, as many families are consumers as well and hence they need support in the form of information and direct assistance.

It is timely that on 1 October, we will celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Committee’s Consumers and Environment Category. The Category is very much a creation of our Group and since its formation it has served the interests of our Members very well. The Category’s focus has been to influence and contribute to various EESC opinions in a manner that ensures that the consumer and environmental perspective is included. Looking back at the various programmes it has promoted, it is correct to say that in many cases the Category was ahead of its time. By promoting the concerns of consumers, especially in the many areas of sectoral regulation, it ensured that the overall aims of our Group, centred around justice and equality and fighting against poverty, were upheld.

So let’s celebrate this anniversary in the knowledge that the Category is needed now more than ever. The current joint spokespersons, Thierry Libaert and Bernardo Hernández Bataller, have referred to the need to promote dialogue between all sectors, in order to overcome the many challenges now facing European citizens.

One of these challenges is the requirement to act on the Commission’s Fit for 55 package to implement the policy initiatives under the European Green Deal. The package, which seeks to cut emissions by at least 55% by 2030, is necessary and urgent. This target, to be reached while achieving objectives that are fair and socially just, is welcome, as indeed is the sense of urgency demonstrated by all stakeholders involved. Also welcome is the commitment of the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, to prioritise it during their term.

Séamus Boland
Today we live in a world where nobody can ignore the effects of climate change and we almost get daily reminders about the importance to act. Farmers have always been and still are one of the most affected professions by these changes, one just needs to look to the very difficult harvest conditions we faced this summer to be convinced of it. I believe that farmers’ organisations have a key role to play in leading the difficult but essential transitions to be made towards more sustainability and less emissions from the sector. As a farm leader, my role is not to say what is pleasing or reassuring but to point the way towards an agriculture that is both sustainable and productive.

Considering the European Union’s climate ambitions, outlined in the Green Deal, and different strategies such as the Farm to Fork or the recent “Fit for 55” plan, it is crystal clear that we need farmers and forest owners on board as they will be some of the key players to deliver, in practice, on the ground. Our sector is special, as no other sector can sequestrate carbon naturally while producing food. In order to fully do our share, we need coherent national and EU policies and the capacity to plan and invest. We need to ensure the development of carbon farming schemes at EU level, the advancement of smart farming, new breeding techniques and incentivize and reward our farmers for their efforts. Still there will also be risks if we do not match our internal ambition with the reality of the European trade policy. Europe is not an island, like it is the case for many other sectors, agriculture is also a global market and our farmers are affected by it. This is why coherency is key, the policies and strategies we put forward in Europe must still allow our farmers to remain competitive on the global market. Otherwise, we will damage our local production, reinforce the imports from countries which have lower standards which will lead to carbon leakage. This is a risk clearly identified by a recent report of the Commission’s Joint Research Centre (JRC), which shows that up to half of our agricultural emissions reduction could come from relocation of production under the Farm to Fork strategy. This is not the way to do it. We must help and incentivize our farmers to achieve realistic and beneficial reductions of their emissions, encourage investments and additional market-based revenues for them through ‘carbon farming schemes’, while also ensuring their productiveness and competitiveness.

It is therefore necessary to collectively take care to avoid this pitfall and consumers also have a key role to play in this. The COVID-19 pandemic showed the importance of how attached to their food consumers are and new consumption patterns have emerged during the crisis. I see this as an opportunity to reconnect farmers and consumers. Consumers could support us by paying more attention to choose seasonal, local and European products, accepting to pay adequate prices for more sustainably produced food and helping us limit food waste. We often say that the citizen and the consumer have different aspirations, it is essential, after this crisis, that the two become one.

Christiane Lambert
President, COPA

1. COPA-COGECA, https://www.copa-cogeca.eu/
2. European Commission, European Green Deal, https://europa.eu/T748n
3. European Commission, Farm to Fork strategy, https://europa.eu/!7DnHBT
4. European Commission, European Green Deal: Commission proposes transformation of EU economy and society to meet climate ambitions, https://europa.eu/!ckCQgP
Climate change is becoming a global emergency. The time for theorising and projecting far into the future has passed: the deadly impacts of climate change are now a reality in our own communities. In just the last months we have seen record temperatures in Canada, wildfires ravaging Siberia and, closer to home, floods devastating communities in Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands.

The EU institutions are doing their best to introduce policies and regulations that will make the European economy more sustainable, in line with our common climate ambitions. It is encouraging to see that the social implications of these policies have not been forgotten, and that there are a number of plans to ensure a just and socially fair transition towards a carbon-neutral economy by 2050.

It is in developing the concept of a just transition that civil society organisations have the most to contribute, especially those organisations representing groups of citizens on which such transition could have the biggest impact.

The involvement of civil society organisations in developing the new policies will ensure representation of citizens who would otherwise not be part of the process: an obvious case would be social groups that might be left out of the ongoing industrial and economic transformation, such as persons with disabilities.

But as well as ensuring representation of vulnerable citizens, civil society organisations can also add to the knowledge needed to develop policies for a carbon-neutral economy and address the social challenges that are emerging as we combine our efforts to address climate change. Civil society organisations can also promote new economic models known to be useful in addressing societal challenges, like social economy.

As a Member of the EESC and a proud advocate of the social economy, I personally look forward to continuing to support our significant joint effort to make our Union more sustainable, more resilient, and fairer.

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**Helping to create a fairer and more sustainable Europe**

**PhD Miguel Ángel CABRA DE LUNA (ES)**
Member of the Board of Directors and President of the International Relations Commission, Spanish Confederation of Social Enterprises (CEPES)
Director of Alliances and Social and International Relations, Fundación ONCE

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**Gentle streams**

**Jan DIRX (NL)**
Vice-President, Diversity Europe Group Liaison Officer, Groène11 (Green11), Dutch nature and environmental organisations

In mid-July, the European Commission presented “Fit for 55”, its largest ever legislative package, with a view to achieving its climate target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 55% by 2030.

In the same week, in Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands, more than 200 people died, hundreds of homes were destroyed, thousands of people lost all their possessions and billions of euros’ worth of damage was done. This was the result of extreme rainfall, which turned gentle streams into devastating torrents of water. That week, we also saw pictures in the newspapers of extraordinary flooding in many other countries around the world and extreme heat together with huge wildfires in western Canada, California and Siberia. These were later followed by pictures of massive wildfires in Turkish, Greek and Italian holiday resorts.

These extreme weather events are a direct result of global warming and all the experts say that we will be seeing them much more often. This was also confirmed in the latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which was published in August. All of this is hard and painful evidence of the importance of the Commission’s climate legislation package.

Fit for 55 is without a doubt a clever piece of work from Commission Executive Vice-President Frans Timmermans and his team, especially when you read in the reports about the internal fights.

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1. European Commission, European Green Deal: Commission proposes transformation of EU economy and society to meet climate ambitions, [https://europa.eu/!ckCQgP](https://europa.eu/!ckCQgP)
2. IPCC, AR6 Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis, [shorturl.at/eoqG8](shorturl.at/eoqG8)
3. IPCC, [https://www.ipcc.ch/](https://www.ipcc.ch/)
that had to be fought at the Commission. It is also a package that will affect literally every citizen and every social and economic sector. This means, of course, that in many places in Europe lobbyists are currently sharpening their knives in preparation for the fight in the European Parliament and between the heads of state and government.

In my view, when the EESC draws up its opinions on the measures set out in the package, based on its previous opinions, it should always ask itself the following two questions: do these measures make achieving the 55% reduction target by 2030 realistic and does the package, including the Social Climate Fund, ensure that nobody will be left behind? It is important here to set aside individual sectoral interests, not only because of the future of people living along gentle streams is at stake, but also because this concerns all of our futures and the futures of our children and grandchildren.

The Fit for 55 package must not hit the vulnerable disproportionately

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President, TEN section, EESC
International and EU Affairs Adviser, Latvian National Association for Consumer Protection (LPJAA)
Member, European Commission’s European Consumer Consultative Group (ECCG), subgroups on Energy and Artificial Intelligence (AI), connected products and other new challenges in product safety
Member of the Advisory Board, Latvian Public Utilities Commission

The European Commission’s Fit for 55 package aims to put the bloc on course to meet its ambitious target of a 55% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, relative to 1990 levels.

For me as president of the EESC’s TEN section, the following initiatives in the package are of special interest:

The Emissions Trading System (ETS) previously covered roughly 40% of total emissions in the EU, the revised version increased this share with the inclusion of additional sectors such as maritime, as well as a new ETS for transport and buildings from 2026.

The Effort Sharing Regulation (ESR) sets differentiated binding national targets for emission reductions based on the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita. ETS and ESR are arguably more highly integrated under Fit for 55, with certain sectors now covered by both instruments.

The Renewable Energy Directive (RED) sets a target for the level of renewable energy in the overall EU energy mix, as well as defining which energy sources can be considered “renewable” and therefore contribute to the target.

The Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) aims to protect EU industry from “carbon leakage” of production to other regions with lower operating costs than the EU due to weaker environmental standards.

The renewable and low carbon hydrogen sector was well represented across the different initiatives announced under Fit for 55.

The Commission has proposed a Social Climate Fund. If co-financed by the EU states as envisioned, it will amount to a total EUR 144.4 billion.

With the Fit for 55 package, the European Commission unveiled its long-awaited roadmap for the implementation of the European Green Deal. The next steps are execution and transcending a traditional silo-specific approach to drive decarbonisation to meet mutually reinforcing climate policies. However, at the same time, we cannot forget about society’s most vulnerable. The increase in the price for fossil fuels is already a reality in the energy market and will have significant social and distributional impacts that may disproportionately affect vulnerable consumers who spend a larger part of their incomes on energy and transport and who, in certain regions, do not have access to alternative, affordable mobility and transport solutions.

Creating a new emissions trading scheme to impose a carbon price on road transport and buildings (ETS II) as proposed in the package would hit society’s most vulnerable even more.

The TEN Section started to look at this and other aspects of the Fit for 55 package during its meeting on 10 September. It will continue its work in the coming month.

2. European Commission, European Green Deal: Commission proposes transformation of EU economy and society to meet climate ambitions, https://europa.eu/cCQcP
EU needs to increase short-term car CO2 targets to meet climate ambitions

Alex KEYNES
Clean Vehicles Manager, Transport & Environment

On July 14, the European Commission finally adopted one of the most important packages of climate legislation the world has ever seen. The ‘Fit for 55’ package revises the EU’s main climate and energy legislation and is intended to put the EU on track to cut overall greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by at least 55% by 2030 and reach net zero emissions by 2050.

Road transport is amongst the big polluters, with cars alone responsible for 12% of all GHG emissions in Europe. Switching from polluting engines to fully electric is a crucial step to reaching net-zero emissions by mid-century. Turning this objective into reality means setting significantly higher CO2 reduction targets for new cars and vans and setting an end date for the sale of engine cars - be it gas, diesel or hybrid.

As the IPCC’s recent and damning report has made abundantly clear, there is no time to waste.

Officials in the Commission had been briefing for weeks that an end date for the sale of engine cars would be in the final car CO2 targets proposal. The big question was whether the Commission would hold its nerve, or buckle to late pressure from carmakers and certain governments to give polluting petrol and diesel cars a new lease of life.

First, the good news. The final proposal to go to 100% zero emission car sales from 2035 shows the Commission is serious about going carbon neutral by 2050, and will put European industry in the driving seat to dominate the new global electric vehicle (EV) market. It will also democratise EVs in Europe, ensuring them become affordable and accessible to all Europeans from Porto to Poznań.

Produced in small numbers - just enough to allow carmakers to meet EU mandated CO2 targets - electric cars are still expensive. Carmakers need to move to mass production to drive costs down, just as Henry Ford did with petrol cars at the beginning of the last century. Analysis shows that if we continue to ramp up electric car volumes, they will be cheaper to buy than petrol in just six years’ time. The trajectory and pace of the ramp up to reach 100% zero emission cars, and not just the end point, matters: which brings us to the less good news.

The revised 2030 CO2 target - up from 37.5% to 55% - means half of cars sold across the EU will be battery electric (less if some are hybrids) by the end of this decade. This is considerably less than the two-thirds battery electric sales needed to be on a cost-effective path to full electric by 2035. Regretfully, the Commission only increased the 2030 CO2 target. Leaving the weak 2025 target of just 15% untouched means little progress in the next 8-9 years. This risks EV production stagnating, delaying the point at which they become affordable to the mass market. With cars one of the single largest sources of CO2 emissions, this will seriously undermine Europe’s aim to be ‘fit for 55’ by 2030.

MEPs and national governments must increase the car CO2 targets between 2025-2030 (including an interim 2027 target) in line with the cost-effective trajectory so that sales of battery EVs hit 22% in 2025, 37% in 2027 and 67% in 2030. We have a golden opportunity to make this Europe’s Henry Ford moment (this time for EVs). But this isn’t guaranteed unless we are more ambitious on CO2 standards. As the climate crisis accelerates around us, it is incumbent on policy makers to accelerate the transition to affordable zero emission transport now.

2. European Commission, European Green Deal: Commission proposes transformation of EU economy and society to meet climate ambitions, https://europa.eu/!ckQrOD
4. IPCC, https://www.ipcc.ch/
In July the heavens opened over Belgium, the Netherlands and North Rhine-Westphalia. Torrential rain and the resulting floods and landslides cost many lives and caused untold human suffering among the survivors and victims of the catastrophe. The material damage amounted to tens of billions of euros. The floods are the worst in these regions since records began. Scientific opinion overwhelmingly agrees that extreme weather events such as this flooding, the “heat dome” over North America, multiple forest fires across the world, droughts, and unusually heavy storms are largely attributable to climate change caused by human activity.

This view is now broadly shared by policy-makers and a steadily increasing proportion of the population. Achieving a significant slowing of global warming is an important objective for society as a whole and thus also for government agencies, public authorities and the public sector.

Government action is also needed in disaster areas to supplement the many private initiatives: it is essential in order to save human lives, prevent the outbreak of disease and create the right conditions for recovery. But climate change also means that rapid and fundamental changes are needed in public administration itself. This applies to all spheres of activity.

So for instance Germany’s federal administration must already be climate-neutral by 2030, a long time before the 2050 deadline for the economy and society. This has been laid down in German law. Government departments must take the lead in procurement, making buildings energy-efficient, and property management, as well as official travel and commuting, public vehicle fleets and many other areas.

The German Civil Service Federation (DBB), the umbrella organisation of the German civil service, which I represent in the EESC, is monitoring and supporting this process, and is advocating for its members, which come from 40 sector-specific associations of civil servants and employees at all levels of government. The DBB project Climate Change and the Public Sector provides a forum for debate on the subject with policy-makers and official bodies, as well as civil society representatives. An example of this is the dialogue with my EESC colleague Lutz Ribbe, a noted expert on the environment.

Combating planetary warming, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, taking care of our environment, and protecting threatened species: all these things are the responsibility of society as a whole, for which the public sector is an important role model. It goes without saying that authorities should work together with civil society organisations in particular to achieve European environmental and climate protection objectives.

1. DBB, https://www.dbb.de/
Cohesion policy as a booster for digital transformation and grassroots engagement in Member States

A comment by Elena Calistra in view of the plenary debate with Elisa Ferreira, Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, in September

Elena-Alexandra CALISTRU (RO)
President, Funky Citizens

The cohesion policy framework has the potential to have important spill-over effects with regard to bringing public administrations in Member States closer to beneficiaries. It is also learning to make use of new digital tools and finding new ways to ensure openness and transparency for expenditure occurring from EU funds. All of this has been boosted by the e-Cohesion requirements.

The EESC missions in five Member States1 have shown that the COVID-19 pandemic has further confirmed and hastened the need for streamlined e-Cohesion systems for implementing the cohesion policy. These systems have ensured communication and the exchange of information between beneficiaries and authorities, offering a chance for many of them to improve or accelerate the digital management of projects.

The e-Cohesion systems lead to great examples of how Member States can take EU regulations to the next level and generate good practices. The best-known example probably comes from Italy, where OpenCoesione.gov.it2 started from the e-Cohesion regulation but evolved into a platform that offers civil society, academia and citizens the opportunity to learn and engage in a transparent manner about what cohesion policy can bring to their communities.

The diversity of e-Cohesion systems across the EU and even within Members States leads to a more general conclusion – European regulations should not necessarily focus on a one-size-fits-all solution, but rather on “one standard for all”. That standard should offer flexibility, less bureaucracy (especially for local and smaller beneficiaries), while ensuring the maximum transparency possible in the spending and allocation of all the funds, no matter how they are managed.

1. Note: The EESC has carried out an evaluation (information report) of the implementation and performance of e-Cohesion systems for the operational programmes funded by the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund during the programming period 2014-2020, as well as of their preparedness in view of the 2021-2027 programming period. The findings from the information report are the result of numerous meetings with institutions in charge of e-Cohesion systems, but also with beneficiaries, social partners and civil society in Greece, Italy, Latvia, Poland and Romania. The report is to be presented at the September plenary session.

2. Open coesione, https://opencoesione.gov.it/it/
Just before the summer break, Commissioner Mairead McGuinness joined an extraordinary meeting of the Diversity Europe Group of the EESC to debate the role of finance and banking in Europe’s recovery. The Commissioner for Financial Services, Financial Stability and Capital Markets Union talked about the Commission’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, gave some insights into its ongoing and future initiatives, and engaged in a lively debate with Diversity Europe Members.

In his welcome address, Diversity Europe Group president Séamus Boland got the ball rolling by asking if there could be recovery across the board in the Member States given the diversity of their economic situations. Mr Boland pointed to high levels of debt in the Member States and recommended considering the role that conventional and alternative banking systems could play in the financial recovery, especially for small socially minded businesses, the social economy sector and SMEs. The Group president saw the need for a shift to financial and banking systems that take more account of citizens’ choices and preferences.

Commissioner McGuinness addressed different aspects of finance and banking in Europe’s recovery from the public health crisis. She pointed out that the role played by the financial system in the recovery was crucial for a sustainable future.

“There is a lot of money looking for a home. We would like that money to flow to sustainable economic activities and to social investments.” The pandemic and the consequences of climate change have raised awareness about the need to redirect money towards sustainability so that economies, businesses and society become more resilient to shocks. One of Ms McGuinness’ key objectives is the promotion of financial literacy.

Referring to the Commission’s Fit for 55 package for implementing Europe’s climate goals, the Commissioner noted: “We need companies, both in the financial and non-financial area, to step up”. Clarity was needed about what companies are doing to make themselves more sustainable.

The Commissioner said that the pandemic had brought about a tremendous acceleration in digitalisation, particularly in the financial system. “Financial stability is crucial. We are looking carefully at these innovations, which are positive, but equally we have to manage the risks that can arise from innovation and make sure that we protect citizens”, she explained.

The Commissioner accepted that there was work to do on issues such as the Banking Union and the Capital Markets Union. “We need to have a stronger Banking Union. We also need alternatives to bank lending. Our capital markets are not fully developed and that’s something we need to look at.” The Commission is also mindful of the regulation of local and cooperative banks and asset price inflation.

A number of Members took the floor during the debate with the Commissioner. Ioannis Vardakastanis, vice-president of the Diversity Europe Group and of the bureau of the EESC’s ECO section, stressed that recovery efforts need to address existing problems that had been exacerbated by the pandemic. He said that borrowing must become possible again and warned: “There will not be any economic or social recovery in Europe if financial and banking actors do not work together in the interest of the economy and society as a whole”.

Giuseppe Guerini, spokesperson for the EESC’s Social Economy Category and Member of the EESC’s ECO section bureau, said: “There is a lot of speculative finance that’s becoming more interested in ethical investment funds and in the social economy, and that has to be part of the Banking Union and the Capital Market Union in the EU”. Regarding the digitalisation of finance, it was important to strike a balance between the necessary regulation and the need to encourage innovation.

1. European Commission, European Green Deal: Commission proposes transformation of EU economy and society to meet climate ambitions, https://europa.eu/!ckCQgP
Other Members asked questions or commented on issues including:
- the Commission’s action plan to tackle non-performing loans¹;
- the EU Taxonomy for sustainable activities², e.g. in forestry and agriculture;
- the role of financial advisors and the regulations applicable to them;
- the future of the financial sector in view of digitalisation; and
- the future of the Banking Union and Capital Markets Union.

In response to the many questions from Diversity Europe Group Members, Commissioner McGuinness said that the Commission was working hard to avoid a financial crisis as a result of the pandemic. It was important to prevent a build-up of non-performing loans on bank balance-sheets: “Our work on trying to develop European secondary markets for non-performing loans is important and we need to have a strong protection of the borrower in all of this”.

Addressing Members’ concerns on the EU Taxonomy for assessing sustainability, Ms McGuinness said large and small businesses should see the taxonomy as “a management tool to show how you can transition towards being sustainable”, stressing that it did not force businesses to do anything, but that sustainability was the only viable course. The taxonomy is a “living document”, and work is ongoing at international level to get partners on board in the fight against climate change. The Commission is also looking at a transitional taxonomy to address issues raised by the EU Taxonomy.

On the role of financial advisors and kick-backs for financial advice, Ms McGuinness was reassuring: “We are conscious of the potential for inducements to influence advice and therefore we are looking at this very crucial issue”.

The Commissioner summed up: “There is a role for all of us to make sure that our citizens both understand and are part of the journey to sustainability, and that we leave no one behind”. Financing the recovery needs to take account of the different starting-points, as the impact of COVID-19 has varied within and between Member States. “We have to use this crisis to change for the better”, she underlined. “We in Europe have the resources and the capacity to make these changes. So let’s face this daunting but brighter future together.”

The full debate can be viewed at: https://youtu.be/Plzj7axVbxE

The social economy’s links to current European challenges took centre stage at the Social Economy Category meeting

On 9 July the Members of the Social Economy Category¹ held the second meeting of the year. The principle topic of discussion was the relationship between the social economy and current European challenges, such as the digital and green transitions. The questions of how to create a digital Single Market⁴ in which the social economy can contribute and thrive and how to build trust and use data to foster social cohesion were explored. The necessity to support the social economy through these transitions, as well as the opportunities to share data and cooperate in the management of data were also widely discussed, alongside the topics of how to integrate the social economy business model into a wide spectrum of sectors such as health and energy. Guest speakers included Ms Anna Athanasopoulou, Head of the Unit “Proximity, Social Economy, Creative Industries” in DG Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs, who spoke alongside Mr Krzysztof Pater, EESC rapporteur of the Own-initiative opinion “Volunteers: citizens building the future of Europe” and Mr Andris Gobiņš, Spokesperson of the EESC’s Associational Life Category.

The meeting on 9 July also provided the Members of the Category with the opportunity to reflect on two pivotal events for the sector, namely: the Porto Social Summit⁵ on 7 and 8 May and the European Social Economy Summit⁶ in Mannheim on 26 and 27 May.

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¹ European Commission, Coronavirus response: Tackling NPLs to enable banks to support EU households and businesses, https://europa.eu/!Md48FQ
² European Commission, EU taxonomy for sustainable finance, https://europa.eu/!WV46yv
³ EESC, Social Economy Category, https://europa.eu/!ht47UK
Associational Life Category discusses strengthening participatory democracy and approves its preliminary work programme

On 9 July, the EESC’s Associational Life Category held its second meeting of the year. The session was divided into two parts, in which Members first exchanged their ideas on improving participatory democracy and then discussed the Category’s work programme.

Andris Gobiņš, spokesperson for the Category, opened the first panel by inviting participants to discuss how the Category could contribute to making the EESC and the EU more democratic and participatory for associations. Brikena Xhomaqi, co-chair of the EESC’s Liaison Group, saw the Conference on the Future of Europe as an opportunity to bring the implementation of a solid civil dialogue to the top of the political agenda at the European and national levels. Pavel Trantina, who had been co-spokesperson for the Category in 2019-2020, gave some practical advice to Members, recommending for example that they liaise more with organisations active in the Member States and with European networks. The ensuing debate featured contributions by both EESC Members and external civil society organisations invited to the meeting, including the European Citizen Action Service (ECAS) and the European Movement International (EMI).

The second part of the session was dedicated to the Category’s work programme, which had been drawn up on the basis of suggestions made by Members during the previous Category meeting and which focuses on five areas of action, including:

• the rule of law and human rights,
• an association-friendly working environment,
• a real civil dialogue/Article 11 TEU,
• social issues, and
• links between associations and businesses.

The Category approved a preliminary version of the work programme, and discussed some specific ways in which the programme could be refined and implemented.

Farmers’ Category welcomes Commission representatives

The EESC’s Farmers’ Category met on 14 July to discuss “Agriculture in trade relations” and the “New Common Agricultural Policy” (CAP) with representatives of the European Commission.

Koen Mondelaers from DG Agriculture and Rural Development was the first Commission representative to speak and gave an update on the performance of agri-food trade and the trade agenda. “Trade and exports are an important element and driver for the benefit of our agricultural sector”, he said, regarding overall trade development in the sector.

Cristina Rueda-Catry, from the private office of Commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis, presented the rationale for the 2020/2021 trade policy review and the proposal on a new trade policy. The latter would build on openness, sustainability and assertiveness and would focus on six critical areas in the medium term, including share of agricultural area devoted to non-productive areas or features, and the eco-schemes, which will be compulsory for Member States but voluntary for farmers. Closing his statement, Mr Major reported on the Commission’s work to support Member States in drafting their national strategic plans for the CAP. The presentations were followed by a lively debate.
MEMBERS IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Fitness for All – Sif Holst for accessible fitness facilities

Sif Holst (DK)
Vice Chairperson, Disabled People’s Organisations Denmark (DPOD)

On 18 August 2021, Diversity Group Member Sif Holst had the honour of cutting a ribbon together with Her Royal Highness, Princess Benedikte of Denmark. The ceremony marked the reopening of Viking Atletik, Bornholm, a non-profit fitness centre, which is now inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities.

The project behind the reopening, Fitness for All, was run by Danish civil society. Disabled People’s Organisations Denmark, of which Sif Holst is vice-chair, has played a major role in this project, together with different national sports organisations and local volunteers from Viking Atletik and two other fitness centres. The project was funded by private foundations and by the fitness centres. Sif Holst was part of the project’s steering committee and has been an important advisor.

In her speech at the reopening ceremony, Sif Holst highlighted why accessible fitness facilities are so important: “people with disabilities too often live shorter lives and are more prone to comorbidity. Better access to training is important so we can stay in shape, but there are too many barriers today: facilities inaccessible for wheelchair users, a lack of understanding why an assistant might be vital for a blind person and a general uncertainty whether you are welcome. Becoming part of a local sports community is often the key to better physical and mental health and to new opportunities for people with disabilities”.

The project will work together with the University of Southern Denmark to carry out an evaluation, and the know-how will be shared, with a view to finding a way forward and to achieving better health for all and a more inclusive society.

Twin transition in finance: digitalisation raises the risk of deeper societal divisions

Kęstutis Kupšys (LT)
Representative, Lithuanian Consumers Alliance

On 3 September, Diversity Europe Group member Kęstutis Kupšys took part in a multi-stakeholder event at the Chancellery of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, where two important pan-EU dossiers – the Sustainable Finance and the Digital Finance packages – were discussed.

Mr Kupšys, who is the president of the study group for the EESC opinion on sustainable finance taxonomy – climate change, which will be presented and put to the vote at the plenary session in September, used the opportunity to point to the possible impacts of the so-called twin transitions. “From the sustainability point of view, digital tools might improve our chances of mitigating global warming and better adapting to the consequences of climate change”, he said and mentioned climate and environment information tools as an example. These tools could help monitor high water levels at local level or signal hazardous air pollution areas in cities.

In his speech, Mr Kupšys also addressed the issue of greenwashing. “Ambitious taxonomy and strong regulation are needed to stop these practices”, he said and argued that more initiatives like Fair Finance International were needed in Europe and globally to help consumers assess financial institutions’ green claims.

1. DK, https://handicap.dk/
2. European Commission, Sustainable Finance, https://europa.eu/!f9q33by
4. EESC opinion ECI(549), https://europa.eu/!C0I549
5. EESC opinion NAT/815, https://europa.eu/!H44kn
The representative of the Lithuanian Consumers Alliance also raised concerns over the “diluted” ambition of the taxonomy delegated acts on climate change proposed by the European Commission and in this regard emphasised the role of the EESC and civil society actors in policy-making. Finally, Mr Kupšys disagreed with several other participants who hinted that digitalisation could solve all problems related to climate change. “Electronic-only banking has delivered benefits for some, but has caused deep social issues for others, especially older people. We should remember that in the ESG triad, all three aspects are important and interrelated: environmental, social and governance.”

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE LAST PLENARY SESSION

EESC Members and economists discuss the future of Europe’s economy

During the last EESC plenary session in July, Members held a debate on “A post-COVID economy that works for all - Towards a well-being economy?”. Prominent speakers participated in the debate on the future of Europe’s economy after the pandemic.

Economic prosperity, care for the environment and people’s well-being can and must go hand in hand; this was the key message of EESC president Christa Schweng. “The time has come for the EU to work on a comprehensive strategy: the EESC is ready to support the reflection on the foundations of a post-COVID-19 economy that works for all and includes new indicators for economic performance and social progress that can provide a comprehensive picture of people’s well-being”, she said.

Tim Jackson, from the Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity, suggested that health, and not wealth was the foundation for prosperity. Fabrice Murtin from the OECD stressed that it was vital to start shaping people-centred policies and that social inequality was a systemic weakness and led to lower efficiency. The lessons learned from the pandemic could be used to understand what was essential and bring about change, believed the representative of the Club of Rome, Sandrine Dixson-Declève. In the view of James Watson from BusinessEurope, it still makes sense to use GDP in spite of its limitations, but other indicators such as economic, social and environmental ones should complement it in the future.

The debate was followed by a discussion with EESC Members, reiterating the need to have alternative models of growth and human and social development. In this regard, Séamus Boland, president of the Diversity Europe Group, emphasised that societal progress and an economy that works for all could only be achieved through a transition to an alternative model of development firmly rooted in the SDGs. “Let’s make COVID-19 the opportunity to get it right!”, urged Mr Boland. Moreover, Diversity Europe Member Jarmila Dubravská said it was important to deal with the weaknesses revealed by the pandemic, and that one single indicator was not enough to assess and solve a highly complex situation.

Finally, Sif Holst called for an inclusive post-COVID-19 economy, where diversity was seen as a strength and where it meant looking out for those in need. She joined in the call of previous speakers for a more people-centred approach to the economy after the pandemic.

The full debate can be viewed at: https://fb.watch/7VZj9dbG9U/

Members discuss AI and Real Values with World Economic Forum expert

Is the development of artificial intelligence (AI) truly for all? This was one of the questions at the heart of the plenary debate on Artificial Intelligence and Real Values: Our Digital Future held on 7 July with Jayant Narayan. Mr Narayan is project lead at the Centre for the Fourth Industrial Revolution of the World Economic Forum (WEF), which focuses on new and emerging technologies such as AI and its governance. He also manages the WEF’s Global AI Action Alliance.

Addressing the plenary, Mr Narayan delivered a speech on AI governance and the EU’s recently proposed AI Act, the availability of new technologies for everyone and the impact of AI on citizens and civil society. The expert then

1. WEF, Centre for the Fourth Industrial Revolution, https://www.weforum.org/centre-for-the-fourth-industrial-revolution/about
In his contribution, Diversity Europe vice-president Rudolf Kolbe concentrated on inclusion, a factor which was also central to the three opinions presented. “We have to include all parts of the population in this digital change”, he urged. “That is the only way we can make it a success.”

“I am convinced that digital technologies and AI can help us to deal with questions such as sustainability, too”, said Giuseppe Guerini. However, one would have to be mindful of their effects, such as on health. “Digital technology and AI are not neutral”, he warned.

Regarding the possible effects of new technologies on health, Alessandro Mostaccio said that the new industrial revolution should be accompanied by a monitoring strategy for electromagnetic pollution, an issue which was also included in the EESC’s opinion on the 2030 Digital Targets.

Maurizio Mensi stressed the importance of rules as opposed to only ethical principles when it comes to AI. In his view, citizens and companies needed a legal framework which was “properly put together” and “where non-compliance is penalised”.

The three aforementioned opinions were put to the vote and adopted immediately after the debate.

The full debate can be viewed at: https://fb.watch/7VZm9a8p-x/

Slovenian Presidency starts with an appeal for a European Health Union and for a green and digital recovery

On 8 July, the EESC’s plenary held a debate with the Slovenian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Anže Logar, on the the priorities of the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the EU, which started on 1 July. Presenting the priorities, the Foreign Minister said that the Presidency would focus on economic recovery based on the green transition and digital transformation, the EU’s resilience and the Conference on the Future of Europe. The Presidency would pay special attention to the Western Balkans and, in particular, to a credible continuation of the EU enlargement process. Another focus would be on building the European Health Union.

The EESC’s president, Christa Schweng, welcomed the declaration and said that one of the main lessons to be drawn from the coronavirus crisis was that “the health systems of practically all European countries need to be strengthened, primarily by focusing on resilience and prevention”.

In the ensuing general debate, EESC Members welcomed the priorities of the Slovenian Presidency and declared that they would cooperate closely with the Presidency to help turn them into a reality.

The president of the Diversity Europe Group, Séamus Boland, remarked that the objectives of the Slovenian Presidency for a more resilient and autonomous Europe would only be achieved by investing and

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1. EESC opinion INT/933, https://europa.eu/!qB7Bvh
2. EESC opinion INT/942, https://europa.eu/!CPMBWj
3. EESC opinion INT/943, https://europa.eu/!mXbbrk
re-structuring our health systems. Furthermore, structured and meaningful dialogue with European civil society was needed, embracing alternative models of growth and development anchored in the United Nations’ SDGs and ensuring social cohesion, as well as combating climate and environmental change.

Ionuț Sibian mentioned that Slovenia had been added by the CIVICUS to a watch list of countries that had seen a recent and rapid decline in fundamental civic freedom. He asked the minister, if the Slovenian government would take steps to reverse all the decisions to curb funding for NGOs, particularly those taken on the pretext of tackling the COVID-19 pandemic. Diversity Europe vice-president Jan Dirx said that “the Slovenian Presidency can only be credible if Slovenia respects fundamental rights and the rule of law, including press freedom, in its own country”. Ágnes Cser said that it was very important to promote a better understanding of fundamental rights. There was a need to talk about minorities, the importance of using mother tongues, dialogue among cultures and a better understanding between urban and rural areas.

During the debate with the Slovenian minister, EESC exploratory opinion SOC/684 on Adult Learning was presented, the study group on this topic having been chaired by Diversity Europe Group Member Diana Indjova. The opinion had been requested by the Slovenian Presidency and was therefore a first contribution by the Committee to the Presidency’s work.

1. EESC opinion SOC/684, https://europa.eu/!qxQcCU
2. EESC, Consumers and Environment Category, https://europa.eu/!Nf36rW

UPCOMING EVENTS

01/10/2021 - 30 years defending European consumers, Category Consumers and Environment
07/10/2021 – Associational Life Category
05/11/2021 – Conference on Civil Society Organisations: Key actors for the Future of Europe

01/10/2021
30 years defending European consumers

Since it was set up in 1991, the Consumers and Environment Category has had the same objectives, namely to ensure that all EESC opinions take into account the interests of consumer associations and environmental issues, to enhance dialogue with consumers and environmental campaigners, and to promote opinions that link consumer and environmental questions.

On 1 October the Category will mark its 30th anniversary, with high-profile speakers and round tables on: A radical rethinking of consumption in a Europe that protects and The new challenges.

1. EESC opinion SOC/684, https://europa.eu/!qxQcCU
2. EESC, Consumers and Environment Category, https://europa.eu/!Nf36rW
The event is organised in the context of the **Conference on the Future of Europe**.

One of the Category’s concerns has been to try to ensure that legislative changes adopt an approach that favours responsible lending; in particular, it has worked to secure common EU legislation to regulate consumer over-indebtedness.

Since its inception, the Category’s Members have drawn up a large number of opinions covering every key issue relevant to consumption and the environment. But Members are proud-
est of having championed innovative ideas in opinions that won broad support and were followed up on by the European institutions.

One of the Category’s achievements recognised by all its Members is that it changed the narrow industry-oriented approach to the circular economy – based on upstream ecodesign and downstream recycling – by introducing consumer behaviour as a key consideration. The Category has consequently looked at the functional economy – which is intended to promote the use of a product over its ownership – as well as the sharing economy and collaborative consumption, and the fight against planned obsolescence, to now give a much more comprehensive view of the circular economy.

A lot is at stake here. First, it is the everyday habits of consumers that will determine whether Europe succeeds in attaining its climate change objectives. And then, if we want Europe to be in touch with its citizens and avoid resurgences of populism, it is essential to show that the European Union is not just trying to regulate key economic and financial mechanisms but also to protect its consumers in all of their activities.

**More information and a webstream** will be available at: [https://europa.eu/lbHvJGy](https://europa.eu/lbHvJGy)

External participants can **register for remote participation until 28 September noon** at: [https://europa.eu/idCqVHY](https://europa.eu/idCqVHY)

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05/11/2021

**Conference - Civil Society Organisations: Key actors for the future of Europe**

Civil society organisations respond to a wide variety of concerns and perform very important social, cultural, civic, recreational and economic functions. A serious concern is that in several countries politics is restricting the public and financial freedom of these organisations. This goes against the values of the European Union and specifically against the values that the EESC, as one of the European voices for civil society, stands for. That is why the Diversity Europe Group in partnership with Civil Society Europe is organising a conference to draw attention to these disturbing developments.

The conference “Civil Society Organisations: key actors for the future of Europe” will take place in hybrid form on 5 November 2021. External participants will be invited to follow the meeting remotely. More information in the next issue of this newsletter and also on the EESC website soon.
OVERVIEW OF RECENT WORK
BY OUR MEMBERS

The last EESC plenary session took place from 7 and 8 July, in a hybrid format. The EESC plenary adopted 14 opinions, 4 of which were drafted by Members of the Diversity Europe Group. A list of the recent work can be found below.

Cristian Pîrvulescu (RO), co-rapporteur, SOC/679 Action plan on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights
Ioannis VARDAKASTANIS (EL), rapporteur, SOC/680 Strategy on the rights of persons with disabilities
Kinga JOÓ (HU), rapporteur, SOC/682 EU strategy on the rights of the child/Child Guarantee
Kęstutis KUPŠYS (LT), co-rapporteur, NAT/815 New EU strategy on adaptation to climate change

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 20 and 21 October. 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/679, https://europa.eu/!VX38MM
2. EESC opinion SOC/680, https://europa.eu/!Xr47PX
3. EESC opinion SOC/682, https://europa.eu/!py44YY
4. EESC opinion NAT/815, https://europa.eu/!H444kn
5. EESC, opinions, https://europa.eu/!dF34nT
6. EESC, plenary sessions, https://europa.eu/!Dg84qG
WHAT HAPPENED TO THE EESC OPINION NAT/788?

An interview on the own-initiative opinion “Towards structured youth engagement on climate and sustainability in the EU decision-making process” with rapporteur Cillian Lohan, EESC vice-president for communication.

Mr Lohan, your opinion NAT/788 was adopted by the EESC plenary in September 2020. What are the three main findings of this opinion?

We acknowledge that we need new approaches to achieve our climate and sustainability goals. That means putting young people at the heart of decision making. That needs to be in a meaningful way, giving the youth movement access to powerful decision makers and regularly feeding back to them on progress. This is in recognition of the fact that climate challenges are intergenerational.

How could these issues be addressed? What are your three main proposals?

Amplifying the voice of the youth is a primary goal. This can be done through working with the EESC Members who represent Youth Organisations and Networks. The EESC must give a voice to youth on these critical topics of Climate and Sustainability.

We proposed the establishment of Youth Round Tables, facilitated by EESC, where youth delegates are put face to face with Commissioners and Parliamentarians to make proposals and receive regular feedback on how those proposals are being acted upon with the urgency demanded by the scale of the climate and biodiversity crises.

After the adoption of the opinion, what have you done to promote the opinion and to make civil society’s voice heard?

The European Commission responded with interest in our opinion. As rapporteur I met with the Cabinets of Commissioner Timmermans and Commissioner Sinkevičius. I also met with MEP’s who are working on the same agenda. In parallel, I met with a variety of Youth Representatives and Climate Strikers to ensure that they were part of the process in designing this new type of engagement and inclusivity.

What are the next steps?

Already, we have hosted the first Round Table with Commissioner Timmermans on 13 July, and a second is planned for November with Commissioner Sinkevičius. The EESC has had debates on finding ways to include youth voices in more opinions and public hearings.

The next step is to ensure these Round Tables do not become simply a talking shop but have actual measurable impacts through a structured feedback process.

The addition of a youth delegate on our COP missions from EESC, and the addition of a Youth Delegate in the official EU COP delegation will also show that the EESC can be the driving force for youth engagement.

Find out more about the EESC opinion NAT/788 at: https://europa.eu/!gf69yp

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1. EESC, PR, [https://europa.eu/!kdhJuY](https://europa.eu/!kdhJuY)