



WORK PROGRAMME OF THE DIVERSITY EUROPE GROUP

October 2020 – April 2023

REVISED VERSION FOR THE YEAR 2022



European Economic
and Social Committee

Diversity Europe Group

INTRODUCTION

For the current mandate (October 2020 to April 2023) of the Diversity Europe Group (Group III), it has been decided to concentrate on the topic of **poverty** and on the **role of civil society organisations and citizens' initiatives in combating it**. The objective of the work programme of Group III for this period is to contribute to making local communities more **sustainable, resilient, equitable, productive and socially just**, whilst also upholding the highest levels of **democratic governance, respect for rights and the rule of law**. **European civil society** and the **EESC** in particular, have a key role to play in this process. **“Leaving nobody behind”** and **“changing by design and not in reaction to”** circumstances, as the President of the European Commission urged in her 2020 State of the Union speech.

The Group III commissioned study on **“The response of civil society organisations to face the COVID19 pandemic and the consequent restrictive measures adopted in Europe”** published in January 2021, constituted the starting point for the Group's work programme for this mandate.



CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

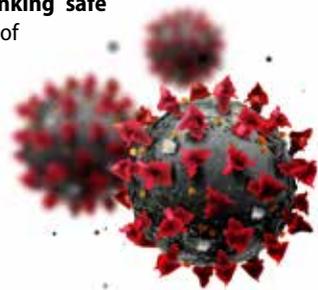
Measuring the impact of COVID-19 on European societies and local communities

The EESC's current term of office has coincided with a period of **heightened socioeconomic and political insecurities**. Since March 2020, at the global and European level, containing the COVID-19 pandemic became *the* overriding political objective, at the same time as levels of **poverty increased exponentially**. Within EU Member States, the coronavirus pandemic impacted *all* aspects of citizens' lives. Many priorities took second stage to combating COVID19: **European integration, jobs** and the **economy, democratic rights**, the **shrinking civic space** and even **respect for the rule of law**.

During this period, existing levels of poverty and social challenges have become more acute, notably among the most **vulnerable groups**. Moreover, the **self-employed, micro companies** and **SMEs** have faced increasing levels of **precariousness, including poverty**, whilst **consumers** have seen their **rights undermined** by the pandemic. Recent exponential increases in the **price of energy** have multiplied the vulnerabilities of many Europeans, bringing **energy poverty** squarely within political domain. Similarly, **new forms of poverty** and **inequality** have emerged, such as **digital poverty** and **unequal access to health systems**.

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the levels of **domestic and child abuse** have increased significantly, whilst **women**, the **elderly** and **young people** have been particularly affected by the health crisis. According to data from UN Women, COVID-19 has wiped out 25 years of progress on **gender equality**. In the case of the **elderly**, the pandemic has raised serious questions about the **quality of their care** and their **equal role in our societies**. In turn, **young people** have been disproportionately affected by **job losses, increased socio-economic uncertainty** and **deteriorating mental health**.

Finally, the health pandemic has aggravated **political and economic obstacles** for European civil society. Notably, a **shrinking safe civic place** and **restrictions to the civic freedoms** of association, assembly, expression and privacy online and offline. The **serious economic difficulties** for civil society emanating from the pandemic, have undermined their capacity to play an effective '**balancing**' role in liberal democratic societies.



Seizing the opportunities

Despite the above challenges, parts of **European civil society did remain resilient** and together with spontaneous volunteers, they were able to **mitigate many of the immediate needs of local communities**. This pivotal contribution by European civil society has rendered even more obvious the necessity for these actors to be directly involved in **socio-economic reconstruction, 'building back better' at the national and EU levels**.

The year 2021 saw a number of ambitious EU initiatives, to which the Diversity Europe Group contributed and which will provide **opportunities for further follow-up by the Group in 2022**. Notably, the launching of the **Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE)** and of the **Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)**, including the **National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs)**. The EU took important steps forward in improving the social landscape, for example, the **Porto Social Summit** to reinforce commitments to the **European Pillar of Social Rights**. 2021 also saw proposals to implement the **European Health Union**, through crisis preparedness and response measures, as well as a new **European Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA)**.

Reference should also be made to the proposals in 2021 for a **European Action Plan for the Social Economy** and the **European Disability Rights Strategy 2021-30**, as well as the decision to render 2022 the **European Year of Youth**. Lastly, 2022 will see the follow-up of the **COP26** and preparations for the **COP27**. Crucially, 2022 has been designated as the **'European Year of Youth'**. All of these initiatives will provide the Diversity Europe Group with ample **opportunities for creative and effective participation** during the course of 2022.

At the level of the **EESC**, President Christa Schweng continues to direct the work of her Presidency towards the following **key priorities**: *Recovery after the pandemic, the Digital and the green transitions, a Socially inclusive Europe, an Economically prosperous Europe based on Common European values, etc.* **These priorities fully complement those of Group III.**



PRIORITIES OF THE DIVERSITY EUROPE GROUP FOR 2022

Within the above context and under the overall topic of *poverty* and the *role of civil society organisations in combating it*, Group III will seek to adopt a work programme that continues to unite the Group, actively promotes its interests and reaches out to external civil society organisations. Moreover, ensuring continuity with previous work will constitute an important element to the 2022 work programme.

The work programme of the Diversity Europe Group for this year will:

- 1. Strengthen its position as a leader within the Committee on the following policy areas: poverty reduction, just transitions, youth, Climate Change, health and the voluntary sector.** Opportunities to promote additional Group III priorities (e.g. support for the disability sector, the elderly, the social economy, SMEs, the liberal professions, rural communities and farmers) will also be sought;
- 2. Find solutions to Europe's recovery through the green and digital transitions, focussing on the SDGs, Climate Change and all angles of the Green Deal, including just transition. Solutions will also be found through a fair and effective implementation of the new CAP, the Rural Pact and through inclusive dialogue on the effects of the digital transition.** The central premise should be that the Green Deal, the green and digital transitions, as well as efforts to combat the climate emergency and the loss of biodiversity, will provide *new opportunities* for all stakeholders, from farmers, to environmentalists and consumers. Group III will utilise these opportunities to promote sustainable socio-economic and regional development, a climate-neutral EU by 2050 and poverty reduction, including combating digital, energy and rural poverty;
- 3. Reinforce the identity of the Diversity Europe Group and enhance its external relations.** As a first step, a reflection will be launched on the possibility of changing the name of the Group. In addition, during the course of 2022, the Group Presidency, Categories and individual Members will seek to consolidate existing relations and/or develop new relations, with external civil society organisations and the European Institutions. Particular efforts will be put towards building more structured working relations with civil society networks and sectors (e.g. with European youth) and involving them more in the work of Group III;
- 4. Continue to reflect on the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of EU citizens and to make recommendations on the type of societies and economies we want to create.** The Group will bring to a close a series of studies on the impact of the health pandemic on democracy, rights and the rule of law. It will continue to explore the impact of COVID-19 on European integration, European health systems, jobs, women, the young and elderly, as well as on the most vulnerable citizens, notably persons with

disabilities and minorities such as the Roma. Moreover, during the course of 2022, the Diversity Europe Group will pursue its work on advocating sustainable and inclusive economic growth post COVID-19, 'building back better' our European economies. For example, by actively supporting the premises of "beyond GDP" and diverse forms of enterprise (e.g. micro and small enterprises, the social economy, the liberal professions and the self-employed);

5. Build up the capacities of civil society to contribute to the Europe of tomorrow through structured dialogue, social innovation, ownership and community resilience. Strong support will be given to the active involvement of civil society in both the process and implementation of the CoFE, as well as in the implementation and monitoring of the NRRPs. In this context, re-building the capacities of civil society and supporting the provision of adequate financing to these actors will be crucial. Finally, the Diversity Europe Group will raise awareness of the key role of citizens' activities in shaping European societies. The Group will continue to be guided by the motto "Nothing for us without us!".

The **instruments** to implement these priorities will be multiple, for example:



- Group III initiated studies;
- Seminars, webinars and conferences;
- Group III own-initiative opinions;
- Extensive and targeted communication strategy;
- Outreach programmes of relations with external civil society organisations;
- Going local activities in rural and urban areas (remote and/or physical);
- Continued support for the EESC categories managed by Group III;
- Encouraging and supporting more exchanges and dialogue between the different sectors of Group III, e.g. between the categories and Group III.

ACTIVITIES (to be regularly reviewed in line with the Group's priorities)

- Actively support **topics within the Committee** on which Group III has or can **take the lead**, e.g. poverty reduction, just transitions, youth, Climate Change, health, the voluntary sector, disability, elderly, social innovation and the social economy;
- Explore and decide on **a new name for Group III** in a transparent and collaborative process;
- Follow-up on the Group III statement "**The urgency of Climate Change**" and the **COP26**, with the European Institutions and civil society;
- Publish the Group III commissioned study on "**The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on fundamental rights and civic space**";

- Launch and publish the Group III commissioned study on ***“The Cost of Climate Change for Families and Households”***;
- Propose a Group III Own-initiative Opinion on the subject ***“Ensuring Strong European Solidarity for Care Disease Patients”***;
- Propose a Group III Own-initiative Opinion on the subject ***“The EU Youth Test”***;
- Propose a Group III Own-initiative Opinion on the subject ***“The role of family members caring for people with disabilities and the elderly: the explosion of the phenomenon during the pandemic”***;
- Adoption of the Group III proposed Own-initiative Opinion ***“The Role of Civil Society Organisations as Guardians of the Common Good in the Post Pandemic Recovery and Reconstruction of EU Societies and Economies”***;
- Adoption of the Group III proposed Own-initiative Opinion ***“Towards a New Care Model for the Elderly: learning from Covid-19”***;
- Organise a conference of the Group or Bureau to present the preliminary results of the Group III commissioned study on ***“The Cost of Climate Change for Families and Households”***;
- Organise a Group III conference in Paris during the French Presidency of the Council of the EU (2 March) on the topic: ***‘Climate Change and Energy Transition’***;
- Organise a Group III conference in the Czech Republic during the country’s Presidency of the Council of the EU (2nd semester of 2022);
- Organise a Group III conference in Gdansk, Poland, on the topic of volunteering (7 & 8 July). This event would also be linked to the Group III initiated study on ***“New Trends in the Development of Volunteering in the EU”***;
- Organise a meeting of the Bureau of Group III in Ireland, on the topic ***‘Just Transition’***; (economic, social, environmental and digital dimensions);
- Organise a meeting of the Bureau of Group III in Brussels, on the general topic of the ***‘European Health Union and Care services’***;
- Organise a second youth webinar and possibly another youth event;
- Continue to hold thematic debates during ordinary meetings of Group III on topical subjects, e.g. the **involvement of civil society organisations in the NRRPs**; invitation to Ms Sirakova, the **EU Youth Coordinator**;
- Promote Group III positions in relevant EESC bodies, notably the sub-committee on **PostCOVID-19 Recovery and Reconstruction** and the ad hoc group on the **CoFE** (plenary and working groups);
- Continue to actively reach out and cooperate with external **European level CSO networks**. Building on the success of the Group III event on 5 November 2021 organised in cooperation with Civil Society Europe (CSE), in 2022 the Diversity Europe Group will explore **possible joint activities** with CSE.



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