FOREWORD

Urgent times

Séamus BOLAND (IE)
President, Civil Society Organisations’ Group

At the time of writing, we are experiencing the strangest summer in terms of weather, oscillating between extremes of boiling temperatures and extreme high rainfall causing flooding in different parts of Europe. António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, has named it “the era of global boiling”. Clearly, the onset of climate change is no longer a prediction, it is a reality. And given that we have now entered this era in a dramatic fashion, we will have to deal with the consequences in terms of managing the various rolling crises that will emerge. This will no doubt be one of the considerations voiced at the conference that we will organise at the end of this month in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, in the context of the ongoing Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU. Titled EU food sovereignty: the role of agriculture, fisheries and consumers, the conference is timely. Faced with the new common agricultural policy (CAP), including rural development objectives, and the challenges of climate change and food supply, it is clear that all of the stakeholders involved will need to urgently establish a system of food production that meets the overall target of reducing the temperature of our planet.

In our Group, representing civil society organisations from the 27 EU Member States, we have historically advocated a system of structured civil dialogue, a system that gives civil society a role in determining policy as it is formulated rather than only dealing with the end stages. It is well documented how civil society organisations assist people in times of crisis, such as the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, and on a daily basis, alleviating poverty and other shortcomings in our communities. We believe it is time to create a new paradigm in policymaking that capitalises on the skills and knowledge of the thousands of organisations which do this work on a daily basis and because of this can offer real solutions based on lived experience. On this note, I was delighted to seize the opportunity to meet with Dubravka Šuica, European Commission Vice-President for Values and Transparency.

During these meetings, I was heartened by the Commissioners’ awareness of the enormous contribution that civil society makes to our societies on a daily basis. We will most definitely continue this discussion on civil dialogue. Firstly, through a thematic debate on this topic on 20 September with Gabriella Civico, Director of the Centre for European Volunteering, and Yannick Blanc, President of the French Institute for Civil Society Organisations. Secondly, through an exploratory opinion on the same topic requested by the upcoming Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU. Thirdly, as part of the wider EESC reflection on how to involve civil society in EU enlargement. Finally, we and Civil Society Europe are also drafting an open letter to the European institutions on civil dialogue. More on this next time!

Let us not forget the thematic debate on health which our Group held in July, attended by Maya Matthews from the European Commission and Sibylle Reichert from the International Association of Mutual Benefit Societies (AIM). The discussion demonstrated once again that the lessons learned from COVID-19 must be acted upon. It also highlighted the huge concerns people have about how to achieve resilient health systems that will be prepared for this kind of crisis and how to speed up research to make treatment and care systems better. In the Civil Society Organisations’ Group, we will continue to work on these issues, notably during the upcoming Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU.

Finally, a word of thanks to our Group’s delegations, which are central to organising these debates in the countries holding the EU presidency, namely Spain and Belgium.

Séamus Boland

1. EESC, conference, https://europa.eu/!CkTHyG
2. European Commission, common agricultural policy, https://europa.eu/!BxMm4V
3. EESC opinion SOC/782 on Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward, https://europa.eu/!7P7vOw
Caring for nature – a winning choice for long-term European food sovereignty

Arnaud Schwartz (FR)
Vice-President, EESC Sustainable Development Observatory
Vice-President, France Nature Environment

Can farming, fishing and consumption contribute positively to our social, economic and ecological future? The answer is yes. It has been scientifically proven, in particular by top researchers working together at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), that through our individual and collective choices we can, by restoring our food safety, create more jobs and economic value. At the same time, we can also combat climate change and fight to protect biodiversity together. This is why so many scientists and large companies have this year supported a nature restoration law, as part of the European Green Deal and the Farm to Fork Strategy.

We have the power to take care of nature, which we are a part of, by working with it rather than destroying it. Protecting our oceans, our soils, our water, our hedgerows, our forests and, more generally, all of our biodiversity, will help to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions, store more carbon and adapt to climate change. All this will also allow us to produce healthy and varied food, and to mitigate the costs of future disasters, such as the recent floods in Italy, that would otherwise be even greater and more difficult to tackle.

Together it is possible to move towards more responsible consumption, fishing and farming, taking into account ecosystem limits and the rights of all, here and elsewhere. With a little willingness, we can find the compromises needed to help us to continue to produce without causing damage and income or job losses, in fact quite the contrary.

In order to do this however, there are still some obstacles that need to be removed at different levels. First, at consumer level – for example by moving away from unnecessary consumption and increasing the share of household spending devoted to food in favour of products that are as local and as healthy as possible; second, at the level of state policies – for example by establishing trade rules that are truly undistorted, upholding the best social and ecological standards; and lastly at entrepreneurial level, through for example a more equal sharing of profits within food systems.

As an opening and closing remark, I would like to invite each of you to read an article on the topic of food sovereignty by the international farmers organisation La Via Campesina and watch the video of my interview on the nature restoration law.

The future of food: for citizens or Big Agri?

Kestutis KUPSYS (LT)
Vice-President, Lithuanian Consumers Alliance

In a previous edition of the Civil Society Organisations’ Bulletin, a colleague wrote: “The environment must be managed in a way that ensures that future generations are able to enjoy the resources of our planet.” I quickly got into an emotionally charged dispute: the Earth is not just a “repository” of resources for humanity, far from it.

Of course, food sovereignty and food security arguments were brought to the table. Indeed, these issues need to be dealt with urgently.

However, it is unfortunate how often food sovereignty and food security issues are turned into lobbying arguments to propel the interests of the few and not to secure the welfare and health of the many. Some even believe that agribusiness’s capture of EU policies prevents decision-makers from addressing the true causes of food insecurity.

I witnessed a vivid example of such manipulation on a global scale myself. In New York in July 2023, during my presentation as part of Lithuania’s Voluntary National Review on the progress of the Sustainable Development Goals, another
representative accused my country of "not allowing Belarusan fertilisers to be exported via Klaipėda port", and even provided a fabricated statistic: the crop yields in Africa would have "dropped by 60(%)" for this reason. Despite the bloody war, opportunistic actors want to take advantage of someone’s hunger to push for relief from the sanctions regime.

Let’s not fall into the same trap when we discuss food policies in the EU. We should talk about food security failures in Africa without taking a euro-centric view, but clearly acknowledging that African issues arise because of EU politics exploiting that continent, its resources and its people.

I visited an agroforestry start-up in the US near Harrisonburg, Virginia. A devoted team of enthusiastic people works there to show that different, regenerative agriculture is possible. The results are amazing! Some studies\(^1\) show that it could be financially sustainable too.

The EESC opinion NAT/873\(^2\) on the current food price crisis reveals the speculative behaviour of financialised agri sector giants. Despite millions starving, a few are making billions in profits. Are we serious about believing that without deep reform (Common Agricultural Policy\(^3\) included), the EU can achieve the complex, multifaceted goals of affordable food, rural rejuvenation, food security and a clean environment? Yes, if the agri sector stops misleading society and policy-makers with disinformation and gets serious about the survival of current and future generations.

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**Food sovereignty in the EU from a peasant farmer perspective**

**Morgan Ody**

**Farmer in Brittany**

**General Coordinator; La Via Campesina (ECVC)**

Food sovereignty is the right of people to define their own food and agricultural systems, giving priority to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced locally through sustainable methods. The demand for food sovereignty arose in the 1990s from the international peasant movement La Via Campesina, in an attempt to combat neoliberal policies pushing international trade to replace local food systems.

For decades, EU policy makers have prioritised “competitiveness”, export-oriented agriculture and corporate-driven agricultural development. This has led to the destruction of millions of small-scale farms throughout Europe and to the weakening of local food systems in most Southern countries. Hunger, migration and ecological disasters are the result of this neoliberal dogma.

Yet, all across Europe and the world, farmers and communities are implementing agroecological best practices, connecting with each other to develop food democracy and inspiring grassroots initiatives. They continue to produce healthy, local food, including and ensuring access to these local food systems for marginalised people. Despite no public support, local food systems continue to be absolutely key to the sustenance of millions of people in Europe, as became obvious during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the current context of climate crises, war, financial speculation and rising inequalities, it is time for the EU to change the current paradigm and build policies based on food sovereignty. As highlighted in ECVC’s manifesto\(^4\) for agricultural transition, Europe needs more farmers. We need more people to engage in food production if we want robust food systems and to achieve a genuine agroecological transition, as proposed in the EU’s Farm-to-Fork strategy\(^5\) that aims to make food systems fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly. In order to achieve this, the issues of agricultural prices and farmers’ revenue are absolutely central: who is going to engage in this sector if they can’t make a decent living?

The first step towards food sovereignty is to put a stop to free trade agreements and WTO-driven agricultural policies, and start negotiating a new trade framework for food and agriculture based on food sovereignty. This framework must allow all countries to protect and support sustainable small-scale food producers, not least through market regulation, with tools such as minimum support prices, public food stocks and supply management. All countries, including the EU, should also be able to establish environmental and social standards that are appropriate for their context, without having to compete with cheap food imports. The goals of the Farm-to-Fork strategy can only be achieved if the EU commits to food sovereignty, prioritising local food systems in Europe and beyond.

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1. European Coordination Via Campesina (ECVC), https://www.ecv.org/
2. ECVC, Manifesto for Agricultural Transition to Address Systemic Climate Crises, https://www.ecv.org/publications/manifesto-for-agricultural-transition-to-address-systemic-climate-crisis/
4. World Trade Organization

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Visit at an agroforestry farm near Harrisonburg, Virginia, US.
Food sovereignty or food security?

Jarmila DUBRAVSKÁ, PhD. (CZ)
EESC Member nominated by the Czech Chamber of Agriculture
General Director, Skalíčan (meat plant and abattoir)

These two concepts are often confused: food sovereignty effectively means not having to rely on the import or supply of food from other countries. Food security concerns food safety from a health perspective. Here we will focus on food sovereignty and the role of the primary sector and consumers.

Today, more than ever, we are aware of our level of dependence on third countries in all sectors, from energy, water, food, and fertilisers to critical raw materials. If a country has suitable conditions for crop production and livestock farming but does not make use of them, it has both a negative impact on the food sovereignty of that State and its fellow Member States. If we want to achieve food sovereignty in the EU, Member States must use suitable natural conditions for balanced farming, and ensure that livestock grazes on pastures, and that cereals, oilseeds, root crops, fruit and vegetables are grown on arable land, always with regard to the quality of the soil. To balance the system, the cultivation of crops needs to be followed by livestock production, which provides high-quality organic fertilisers and thus nutrients for the crops grown.

Fish and seafood are very important in our diet. Countries with access to the sea have the advantage that, in addition to marine fish, other species of seafood can be farmed and the inhabitants of those States have access to fresh catches. In landlocked countries, fish production in ponds or in different breeding facilities is an important activity. This is known as aquaculture or freshwater fish farming.

Farmers have a key role to play in producing high-quality and fresh food and providing it to consumers at fair prices. Although farmers across all forms of farming are currently not increasing their prices, their produce is reaching consumers at significantly higher prices. For example, in the Czech Republic a litre of milk was purchased from the farmers for EUR 0.33 per litre in July, but it is normally not possible for consumers to buy milk below EUR 1 per litre. This is indeed a high price, given the price at which the milk is bought by processors from farmers, and it undermines the EU’s food sovereignty. This is where we as EESC Members have a role to play, in feeding up-to-date information into our discussions and proposing solutions for achieving food sovereignty and ensuring that the agriculture and fisheries industries benefit the producers, as well as us, the consumers.

The EU needs an environmentally, economically and socially sustainable agricultural and food policy

Giuseppe GUERINI (IT)
Co-spokesperson, EESC Social Economy Category
President, Cecop-Cicopa
Europe (the European confederation of industrial and service cooperatives)
Board Member,
Confcooperative (Confederation of Italian Cooperatives)
President, Confcooperative Bergamo
President, Ecosviluppo (social cooperative for labour market integration)

Food sovereignty is fundamental to defining sustainable policies and strategies for food production, distribution and consumption. In addition, European countries must be able to define their own agricultural and food policies under an EU strategy, in line with their needs and in cooperation with farmers’ and consumers’ organisations. Food sovereignty also helps to combat possible food security problems, which are always just around the corner in these times of climate change and geopolitical uncertainty.

Certainly, incentives and tools that favour the development of European farms and cooperatives, such as the introduction of new technologies in agriculture, can help make the EU’s food production system self-sufficient, without the need to import massively from third countries, which often have lower standards than European ones.

In fact, European farmers have for years been introducing a number of practices to make their production more sustainable and in line with the new European climate goals to preserve our planet. To give you just a few examples, several cooperatives are very active in the circular economy, transforming wastewater into biogas, such as biomethane, which is then used in agriculture, to try to minimise the impact on the climate. Other companies have significantly reduced their use of pesticides in recent years, using integrated pest management and organic methods. Lastly, further downstream in the agricultural sector, several manufacturers are experimenting with new forms of packaging, using alternatives to plastic and single-use plastic.

Despite the latest crises – from the COVID-19 pandemic to the war in Ukraine and the production costs crisis caused inter alia by high inflation rates – the EU agricultural sector has shown itself to be extremely resilient.

That is why new European policies, such as the Farm to Fork strategy, that aims to accelerate our transition to a sustainable food system, should not only tackle environmental sustainability, but also focus on economic and social sustainability. This would enable these companies to continue to allow the European food sector to display excellence in this domain.
Human health must continue to be the guiding objective of agricultural and food policy in the EU

Elvira DROBINSKI-WEIß
(DE)
Consultant, German Confederation of Consumer Protection Organisations

Food prices for consumers are a key factor in food security. While raw material prices for some basic foodstuffs have recently reached pre-war levels, consumer prices continue to rise. The average increase in food prices for EU consumers was estimated at 18% in October 2022. Higher food prices and changes in purchasing behaviour may lead to health problems such as diabetes, overweight and (micro)nutrient deficiency. Social safety nets should therefore be introduced for vulnerable groups.

A shift to a more plant-based diet would not only improve food security by enabling agricultural land to be used for the production of food for direct human consumption instead of animal feed. It would also greatly benefit the climate and human health and could help achieve more food sovereignty at EU level.

1 European Commission, Commission proposal on plants obtained by certain new genomic techniques, https://europa.eu/!mQVVn8

Food sovereignty is considered a holistic system with an emphasis on the farmer/producer maintaining more control over the food system, across the food chain, with a closer, stronger and more trusted relationship with the consumer. It also allows both the producer and consumer controlling how to produce and what type of food to produce as opposed to the large corporations. It is not the same as food security, which is defined as people being able to access a sufficient quantity of affordable and nutritious food to meet dietary needs for an active and healthy life.

According to Priscilla Claeys (2013), president of FIAN Belgium and academic, food sovereignty is based on the seven key principles of:

- food as a basic right;
- agrarian reform;
- protection of natural resources;
- local food production;
- reducing multinational concentration of power;
- fostering peace; and
- increasing democratic control of the food system.

Historically, from a Fisheries point of view, small-scale farmers and their neighbours from the local coastal communities were the main suppliers of fish to consumers. As recently as 2018, an FAO report indicated that 82% of all the motorised fishing vessels in the world were smaller than 12 metres thus identifying them as small-scale.

While writing this (19.07.23), the Irish Farmers Journal, in a very timely article, highlighted

Agriculture, fisheries and consumers play a crucial role in EU food sovereignty

Joe HEALY (IE)
Representative, Irish Farmers Association (IFA), Gurteen Agricultural College and Self Help Africa

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While writing this (19.07.23), the Irish Farmers Journal, in a very timely article, highlighted
that research by Bord Bia (Irish food board) has shown that 90% of consumers claim they like to support local fruit and vegetable growers with almost 8 out of every 10 believing that local produce tastes better and is of a higher quality. It's very likely that those consumers would have a similar opinion across most other food items.

The consumer is a necessary player in food sovereignty. If consumers seek a product and are willing to buy locally and pay enough above the cost of production to make it viable for the farmer, then it will be produced. The farmer in return must produce a safe and nutritious product in an environmentally sustainable way. All of these elements together will help sustain food sovereignty while satisfying the three prongs of economic, social and environmental sustainability.

While not included in the title, the role of our policy-makers at Member State and EU level cannot be overstated. They must strive to ensure that policies are in place to support, develop and strengthen food sovereignty.

Towards sustainable food systems: empowering consumers and enhancing food sovereignty in the EU

Marco Pierani
Director Public Affairs, Euroconsumers

Food affordability is a major concern in the EU, with rising prices a strain on households. It’s crucial to note though that food price inflation existed before the conflict in Ukraine, driven by post-COVID global demand recovery, increased energy costs, and higher transportation, feed and fertiliser expenses.

An open debate on EU food sovereignty is therefore both welcome and timely. However, it’s essential to understand that food sovereignty’s core aim is to empower communities to control their food systems holistically, taking full account of the social, environmental and economic aspects. The goal is a fair, just and sustainable food system for all, not merely maximising food production.

On the other hand, advocating a novel form of EU protectionism would be misguided. Global trade has brought tangible benefits, though not without distortions, including in the realm of food supply. The real issue is the lack of supply chain diversification, exacerbated by the ongoing war. Strengthening internal EU resources and creating a diversified, robust internal market is key, not solely reducing imports.

However, all of us, as consumers, can also play a crucial role. Reducing food waste and adopting sustainable diets has a positive impact on health, climate and food security. Many consumers are willing to make these changes, like consuming less meat and more fruits, vegetables and pulses. To illustrate the power of dietary shift, Test-Achats, our Belgium affiliate consumer organisation – has created this effective chart which shows that replacing meat (e.g., beef in a chili recipe) is good for the climate, for health and for our wallets.

Consumers can evolve: from just weak individuals in need of protection to active protagonists driving together sustainability with their critical mass. It is no longer a theoretical or elitist concept, but a practical approach where their choices shape a balanced, responsible market for the future. Achieving these changes requires of course action from regulators, food producers and retailers to encourage healthier and sustainable choices.

Europeans are calling for transformative food systems. They are speaking for the environment, animal welfare and improvements in pesticide use. It is paramount to strike a balance between sustainability and shared cultural traditions that food brings to our lives, so that the pleasure of gathering in conviviality around a sustainable meal enhances the experience. These two aspects should pull together rather than apart.

A further issue is merging innovation with culinary tradition; highly innovative supply chains and products challenge social acceptance (how do you feel about insect flours or cultivated meat?) and need to be combined with the products we have always known and which are made using traditional methods.

In conclusion, addressing EU food affordability and security requires a multifaceted approach involving systemic changes and individual action, in order to create a sustainable and inclusive food system for everyone.

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1 Gathering five national consumer organisations and giving voice to a total of more than 1.5 million people in Italy (Altroconsumo), Belgium (Test-Achats/TestAankoop), Spain (OCU), Portugal (DecoProteste) and Brazil (Proteste), Euroconsumers is the world’s leading consumer cluster in innovative information, personalised services and defence of consumer rights. Our European member organisations are part of the umbrella network of BEUC, the European Consumer Organisation. Together we advocate for EU policies that benefit consumers in their daily lives. More: https://www.euroconsumers.org/

2 BEUC- Key findings on consumer attitudes towards sustainable food: https://www.beuc.eu/sites/default/files/publications/beuc-reports/2020-0145_consumers_and_the_transition_to_sustainable_food_executive_summary_and_recommendations.pdf

WHAT ARE EESC OPINIONS NAT/849 AND NAT/895 ALL ABOUT?

An interview with Javier Garat, rapporteur for the EESC opinions NAT/849 on Action plan to conserve fisheries resources and protect marine ecosystems and NAT/895 on Decarbonisation of the fishing fleet

Javier GARAT (ES)
Secretary-General, Spanish Fishing Confederation (CEPESCA)
President, Europêche
President, International Coalition of Fisheries Associations (ICFA)

What are the three main findings of this opinion?

If Society is facing global challenges such as climate change, the energy crisis and sustainable food security. Both opinions revealed the following.

- The need to further preserve and sustainably use our seas. Oceans are a fundamental source of food and biodiversity that help regulate the climate and provide many coastal communities with livelihoods. Oceans provide considerable benefits for our health, society and the economy.
- The need to reduce CO₂ emissions and support the search for sustainable and renewable energy alternatives, and to reduce energy dependency on third countries.
- That the EU fishing sector is a key strategic sector for our society, given that it supplies high-quality seafood products for healthy diets, with a relatively low carbon footprint.

The opinions propose paths for the sector to continue both contributing to society and efforts to reduce its impact on the marine environment.

How could these issues be addressed? What are the three main recommendations or proposals of the opinions?

The opinion on the action plan recommends a marine protection strategy compatible with fishing activities, based on science and impact assessments and that guarantees a level playing field between EU and non-EU operators.

The opinion on decarbonisation calls for an appropriate and realistic decarbonisation timetable in which technological, logistical and legislative developments go hand in hand. Given the challenges of the fisheries sector, the most realistic option is hybrid technologies for the short term, and priority access to advance fuels in the long run. A just and balanced energy and ecological transition must be accompanied by incentives and compensatory mechanisms which are sufficient for the fisheries sector.

After the adoption of these opinions, what have you done or what will you do to promote them?

Promoting these opinions is an important, if not the most important, part of the policy-making process. The EESC has already used various channels, such as social media, conferences and workshops, to disseminate information and engage with different audiences.

In addition, the EESC has fostered collaborations with relevant stakeholders, including environmental organisations, fishing communities, industry representatives, research institutions and governmental bodies.

In my capacity as rapporteur for both opinions, I have engaged with policymakers at European Union (EU) level, with national governments and with other relevant bodies involved in decarbonisation and fisheries policies. Furthermore, I was invited by the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU to present the opinion on decarbonising the fishing fleet in the Informal Council of Ministers that took place in Vigo last 18 July. It was a great opportunity to show all the EU fishing ministers the opinion that was adopted by the EESC plenary by unanimity on the 12 July.

I am planning to share the EESC’s opinions, provide evidence-based arguments, and participate in consultations and public hearings to influence policy decisions. I have engaged with media outlets and journalists to increase the visibility and coverage of the EESC’s opinions.

By leveraging different channels and strategic partnerships, the EESC’s stance on decarbonisation and marine protection can be effectively disseminated and influence relevant policies and actions.

Both opinions were presented and adopted at the July plenary session in 2023.

Read the EESC opinion on Action plan to conserve fisheries resources and protect marine ecosystems at: https://europa.eu/!yrChpp

Read the EESC opinion on Decarbonisation of the fishing fleet at: https://europa.eu/!KRMmN9

1 EESC opinion NAT/849, https://europa.eu/lyrChpp
2 EESC opinion NAT/895, https://europa.eu/!KRMmN9
How will Europe boost green skills? Civil society has a central role to play

In the era of climate breakdown and biodiversity loss, the urgent need for a just and green transition has never been more apparent. Our progress in achieving climate and environmental goals will depend on workers having the necessary skills to adapt and participate in the emerging green economy. As the European Year of Skills sets the stage for enhancing the capabilities of the workforce, it is essential to recognise the invaluable role that civil society organisations play in supporting this journey towards a sustainable future. In Ireland, we have many examples of civil society contributing to this paradigm shift. Numerous examples come from the member organisations of the Irish Environmental Network.

**ECO-UNESCO** is focusing on addressing the demand for jobs in the green sector by running Green Youth Employability programmes for economically disadvantaged 18-25-year-olds. The organisation aims to improve participants’ employability and communication skills, to increase their environmental awareness, and to support them in seeking employment, apprenticeships or training in the green sector.

**Irish Seed Savers** is emphasising the importance of preserving Ireland’s genetic food crop heritage, while promoting sustainable food systems through education, training, and seed-saving initiatives. From agroecology to regenerative farming, one- and two-year vocational programmes on a range of skills are offered for commercial growers, those growing at scale, and community groups and individuals.

**Hedgerows Ireland** is leading practical training events on the traditional skill of hedge-laying. By training a broad population of people capable of and committed to managing hedgerows properly, Hedgerows Ireland is helping to preserve a critical home for much of Ireland’s biodiversity.

The **Rediscovery Centre** is working to revolutionise bike reuse and bicycle-related skills training in Ireland, while making affordable, high-quality bicycles available to individuals who may not have the means to purchase new ones. A partnership between the Rediscovery Centre and Róthar has helped spur a significant step forward in promoting sustainable transportation, creating training and employment opportunities, and fostering social inclusion.

**CEL T** is driving the revival of traditional and ecological skills by providing education in topics such as sustainable woodland management, agroforestry, and tree propagation. These initiatives target landowners, land managers, and students with a view to increasing tree cover, especially with native trees, in order to enhance biodiversity.

The **Organic Centre** is delivering invaluable training opportunities on all things organic, sustainable living, and biodiversity. Over 100 courses per year are offered, ranging from renewable energy, stone wall building, cheese making and organic horticulture, as well as many free public events to celebrate biodiversity.

The European Year of Skills serves as a timely reminder that investing in skills development is not just an economic imperative, but a moral obligation to tackle the twin climate and biodiversity crises. The role of civil society organisations in helping to up-skill Europe’s workforce cannot be overstated. By providing specialised education they empower individuals to support and benefit from the green economy. However, many organisations across Europe often struggle to secure the financial resources necessary to sustain their skill development programmes. This hinders their capacity to reach a broader audience and provide widespread access to training. To fully harness the potential of these initiatives, support from the government, the private sector, and the European Union is vital.

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1. IEN is an umbrella organisation supporting more than 30 of Ireland’s leading environmental non-government organisations (eNGOs). The IEN works to place environmental issues centre stage in Ireland and internationally, and to promote the interlinked principles of environmental, social, and economic sustainability. Learn more about IEN and its members at [https://ien.ie/](https://ien.ie/)
3. ECO-UNESCO, [https://ecounesco.ie/](https://ecounesco.ie/)
4. Irish Seed Savers, [https://irishseedsavers.ie/](https://irishseedsavers.ie/)
5. Hedgerows Ireland, [https://hedgerowsireland.org/](https://hedgerowsireland.org/)
7. CELT, [https://www.celtnet.org/](https://www.celtnet.org/)
8. Organic Centre, [https://www.theorganiccentre.ie/](https://www.theorganiccentre.ie/)
Resilient European health and care systems remain at the top of the agenda


During the conference, which the Group organised on 25 May, Members of the CSO Group, together with Swedish and EU interlocutors, discussed the accelerated European cooperation on healthcare as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, tried to identify ways to build resilient and qualitative healthcare systems in the EU, and looked into solutions to enhance access to healthcare for the most vulnerable.

The conclusions and recommendations of the conference stressed that healthcare must be people-centred and valued as a social investment, not a ‘cost’. For this to happen it is necessary to change mindsets socially, economically and politically. Building on cooperation during the COVID-19 pandemic, EU Member States need to join forces to build resilient and sustainable health and care systems that leave no one behind and value the work of care workers, civil society organisations and volunteers.

Speaking on 12 July in Brussels during the follow-up event to the conference, Ms Matthews said that world health systems were not prepared for a pandemic of this magnitude. There would now be a lot of reflection about what can be done to make sure that our health systems are resilient and able to cope with the next shock (whether resulting from a pandemic, climate change or economic challenges). It was therefore very important that health systems have now been brought up to the same level of emergency preparedness as other sectors.

“This global crisis has shown that we need solidarity. We need to get away from an economy that is only based on competitiveness to an economy that is based on cooperation, and this is also certainly true for the health system. We need to make sure that all the different actors are integrated and work together, to make sure that all citizens have access to health without inequalities,” stressed Ms Reichter.

Several Members of the CSO Group contributed to the discussion. The Group will continue its work on resilient European health and care systems with a conference on ‘The State of Health in Europe’ in the first semester of 2024, during the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU.

Let us protect and empower youth civil society

On 4 July, the Civil Society Organisations’ Group (CSO Group) and the Young European Federalists (JEF Europe) co-organised a youth seminar entitled Youth under pressure - Safeguarding youth civil society. The seminar followed on from previous webinars on youth civic participation organised by the Group in 2021 and 2022. In an exchange between youth and institutional representatives, the seminar addressed the tendencies and specific violations of youth civic spaces across Europe.

Pietro Vittorio Barbieri, one of the vice-presidents of the CSO Group, and Christelle Savall, Vice-President of JEF Europe, opened the seminar. Mr Barbieri highlighted the EESC’s work towards youth inclusion and the crucial role of youth organisations in upholding democratic values. He emphasised the need for sustainable funding for youth organisations and called for a cultural adjustment that values and meaningfully engages with youth organisations for the benefit of healthy democracies and inter-generational cooperation. Ms Savall discussed the ongoing threats to democracy within the European continent, emphasising the need to protect youth civic space and stressing that youth participation cannot and should not be taken for granted, stating that “youth civic spaces are the most difficult civic spaces to see flourish, so if youth civic spaces are endangered, so is our democracy”.

In the discussions that followed, several representatives from youth organisations, including but not limited to the European Youth Forum, the Belarusian National Youth Council, the Vesna Youth Democratic Movement, the Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions and Civil Society Europe took the floor. Dr Sergey Lagodinsky, Member of Parliament (Greens/EFA), emphasised the indispensable nature of civil society for the proper functioning of a democratic system. He proposed that the EU grant civil society a formal status. Alessia Valentino, Legal Officer at the European Commission, emphasised the significance of monitoring the rule of law. She also spoke of existing mechanisms, such as Article 7 and the infringement procedure, that can hold Member States accountable. Christian Moos, Member of CSO Group and rapporteur for the EESC’s upcoming opinion on the Defence of Democracy package, argued that young people’s passion and innovative ideas are essential for a thriving civil society, highlighting the need to sustain their enthusiasm and willingness to participate.

The seminar highlighted the urgent need for coordinated civic dialogue at national and European level, increased funding for youth organisations and inclusive decision-making, and argued for a more holistic approach that considers the political, social and economic dimensions of youth civic spaces.
participation of all youth. It also stressed the need for mechanisms to protect activists, meaningful follow-up to youth dialogues, and addressing the increasing restrictions on civil society organisations. Despite the differing perspectives and the acknowledgement that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for addressing concerns across Member States, all speakers and participants collectively agreed on the imperative need to protect and empower youth civil society for the continued vitality of democracies.

The complete list of conclusions and recommendations from the seminar is available on our website at: https://europa.eu/!DFFpPj.

MEMBERS IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Christian Moos meets Věra Jourová on European Media Freedom Act and Defence of Democracy package

On 5 September, Christian Moos spoke to Věra Jourová, Vice-President of the European Commission, about current challenges for liberal democracy in Europe. The Commissioner for Values and Transparency had invited Mr Moos because, as rapporteur for the EESC opinion on the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA), he had campaigned for the adoption of this Commission initiative, particularly in Germany. The Federal Council of Germany, which had led the negotiations for Germany, had been a long-time critic of the EMFA. The EESC supports the Commission’s goal to create European safeguards to maintain an independent and diverse media landscape in Europe. Commissioner Jourová welcomed this support and the EESC opinion. The EMFA is currently being discussed in the European Parliament. Questions about the regulation of large platforms and, above all, the use of spyware against journalists who are suspected of committing serious crimes are still controversial. Mr Moos insists that surveillance must not be related to journalistic work and that serious crimes must be precisely defined. He considers the current definition of “a threat to national security” to be too vague and therefore susceptible to abuse. Ms Jourová is confident that the legislative process in the trilogue can be brought to a successful conclusion in autumn.

Mr Moos is also rapporteur for an EESC opinion on the upcoming Defence of Democracy package, which was originally to be published by the Commission in early summer and was postponed after complaints from civil society. The protest centred around a directive included in the package that, it was feared, could require non-governmental organisations to disclose foreign funding sources, and would therefore be similar to “foreign agent” laws. Commissioner Jourová announced that the European Commission wanted to continue to set up effective barriers that would prevent third countries exerting influence. Transparency remains an important principle of liberal democracy. Nevertheless, the Commission responded to legitimate fears and concerns, particularly from organised civil society, and revised the directive that will be included in the package accordingly. Mr Moos promised that the EESC would carefully examine the Democracy package and take a position in consultation with the European umbrella organisations of organised civil society.

President Séamus Boland talks civil dialogue with members of the College

The president of the EESC Civil Society Organisations’ Group, Séamus Boland, met with Dubravka Šuica, European Commission Vice-President for Democracy and Demography, Nicolas Schmit, Commissioner in charge of Jobs and Social Rights, and Věra Jourová, European Commission Vice-President for Values and Transparency, at the beginning of September. At these meetings, the president emphasised the need for a sustainable and structured approach to civil dialogue at EU level, direct channels for civil society organisations to engage in EU-policy making and greater cooperation between civil and social dialogue actors.

These meetings took place as a follow-up to the Group’s amendments in April to the EESC opinion SOC/764 on strengthening social dialogue.

Christian MOOS (DE)
Divisional Director (European and International Affairs), German Civil Service Association (dbb)
Secretary-General, Europa-Union Deutschland
EU representative, German National Network for Civil Society
Board Member, European Movement Germany (EBD)

1 EESC opinion SOC/742, https://europa.eu/!dkm3W7
2 European Commission, EMFA, https://europa.eu/!FqckQW
3 EESC opinion SOC/773, https://europa.eu/!98m4bB

Věra Jourová and Christian Moos © EU, 2023

Séamus Boland, Dubravka Šuica, Nicolas Schmit and Věra Jourová © EU, 2023
EESC debates role of CSOs in EU enlargement process

At its July plenary session, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) held a debate on the future role of civil society in the enlargement process. Several guest speakers, including representatives of civil society organisations (CSOs) from the candidate countries, took part. During the debate, EESC President Oliver Röpke announced the Committee’s plan to appoint Honorary Enlargement Members and invite them to participate in the daily advisory work of the Committee. With this initiative the EESC wants to support the gradual integration of the EU candidate countries.

Oliver Várhelyi, Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, sent a video message in which he commended the EESC’s Honorary Enlargement Members initiative as a way to continuously keep the enlargement policy high on the EU’s agenda. The Prime Minister of Moldova, Dorin Recean, stressed that this new initiative was timely and would strengthen cooperation with Moldovan civil society.

Majlinda Bregu, Secretary-General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), stressed the immense support for regional cooperation. “Paired with the expertise and knowledge networks of our civil society sectors, it can be a decisive contribution to our enlargement and integration agenda.”

Several Members of the EESC’s Civil Society Organisations’ Group (CSO Group), and the RCC’s Organisations’ Group took the floor. Séamus Mostaccio suggested to reinforce the EU by equipping it with a strong constitutional foundation, with a separation of powers, and in respect of the rule of law. “We must not make the mistakes made in the past of proceeding to enlargement without investing in enhancing the rules as if the constitutional set up at the moment were perfect. Our credibility and our competitiveness are at stake.”

With a view to future enlargements, Alessandro Nabais suggested to reinforce the EU by equipping it with a strong constitutional foundation, with a separation of powers, and in respect of the rule of law. “We must not make the mistakes made in the past of proceeding to enlargement without investing in enhancing the rules as if the constitutional set up at the moment were perfect. Our credibility and our competitiveness are at stake.”

A generation ago, enlargement was dominated by economic aspects said Ágnes Cser, “now we find ourselves in a situation in which we must try to help each other”.

The plenary debate was preceded by the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the EESC and the RCC to advance a structured engagement of civil society and youth in promoting peace and prosperity in South-East Europe.

EESC urges EU and Member States to create a new strategy for older persons

At its July plenary session, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) presented and adopted its opinion on a European Strategy for Older Persons, during a debate with European Commission Vice-President Dubravka Šuica and the president of AGE Platform Europe, Dr Heidrun Mollenkopf. In the opinion, the EESC called on the Commission and the Member States to develop a new European Strategy for Older Persons. In the absence of a comprehensive policy on older persons and ageing, this would be the first EU strategy to protect the rights of older people and ensure their full participation in society and the economy.

“The EESC is making a clear and unequivocal call to the Commission to draw up a European Strategy for Older People before the end of the current term of office,” said Miguel Ángel Cabra de Luna, rapporteur for the opinion and Member of the EESC’s Civil Society Organisations’ Group (CSO Group). “The strategy should have a life-cycle approach to prevent and reduce age-related challenges, correcting the current focus on ageing as a cost.”

The EESC suggests supporting the strategy through a “guarantee” for older people, which would serve as the tool for implementing the strategy at EU and national level. Furthermore, it asks the European Commission to organise a European Year of Older People.

**HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE LAST PLENARY SESSION**


2. EESC opinion SOC/757, https://europa.eu/!JBmbQw
Vice-President Šuica said that a new strategy and a “guarantee” for older persons would be the next logical step, which the Commission would carefully examine. Dr Mollenkopf said that her organisation AGE Platform Europe, which represents indirectly around 200 million older persons in Europe, fully supports the EESC’s initiative, as to date there has been no such framework plan at European level.

Several Members of the CSO Group participated in the debate. Referring to demographic trends in the EU, the Group’s president Séamus Boland said: “The question is how to best manage and adapt our societies’ economies to the reality of longer living and falling birth rates.” The measures suggested by the Committee could help achieve upward convergence of national and EU strategies on older people.

Vice-president Pietro Vittorio Barbieri underlined the need for a structured and solid European policy for older persons. He lamented the lack of recognition and support for family caregivers and reiterated the Committee’s call for change in this respect.

Andreas Kruse spoke about some imperatives for a new strategy, including: recognition and use of older people’s wealth of knowledge; use and promotion of the cognitive and emotional adjustment potential in old age; and recognition of the “task character of life”.

While the funding of pension systems was a national competence, much could be done at EU level regarding the requirements that are provided for older people, said Jan Andersson. “We can exchange experiences and look at best practices and examples of these, so that we can face up to the major challenge of demographic change.”

1. Age Platform Europe was set up in January 2001 to improve and strengthen cooperation between older people’s organisations at EU level, [https://www.age-platform.eu/](https://www.age-platform.eu/)
2. EESC opinion SOC/730, [https://europa.eu/!QlOngk](https://europa.eu/!QlOngk)

### OVERVIEW OF RECENT WORK

The last EESC plenary session took place on 12 and 13 July 2023. The EESC plenary adopted 27 opinions of which 11 were drafted by Members of the Civil Society Organisations’ Group. A list of the recent work can be found below.

Bernardo HERNÁNDEZ BATALLER (ES), rapporteur, INT/1026 Advertising through influencers

Francisco Javier GARAT PÉREZ (ES), rapporteur, NAT/849 Action plan to conserve fisheries resources and protect marine ecosystems

Francisco Javier GARAT PÉREZ (ES), rapporteur, NAT/895 Decarbonisation of the fishing fleet

Giuseppe GUERINI (IT), rapporteur, ECO/608 Review of the Bank crisis management and deposit insurance framework

Jarmila DUBRAVSKÁ (CZ), rapporteur, NAT/896 Revision of the EU pollinators initiative – A new deal for pollinators

John COMER (IE), co-rapporteur, NAT/891 Sustainable water management and climate emergency: circular and other solutions for the EU agri-food system in a future “Blue Deal”

Kinga JOÓ (HU), co-rapporteur, SOC/763 Access to water: tackling water poverty and its implications for social policy

Maurizio MENSII (IT), rapporteur, TEN/806 Gigabit Infrastructure Act

Maurizio MENSII (IT), rapporteur, CCMU/211 Critical Raw Materials Act

Maurizio MENSII (IT), rapporteur, CCMU/215 EU space strategy for security and defence

Miguel Ángel CABRA DE LUNA (ES), rapporteur, SOC/757 European Strategy for Older Persons

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 25 and 26 October 2023. For more information on the upcoming plenary session please visit our website.

A list including all new work appointments of Civil Society Organisations’ Group Members is available on the Committee’s website.
14th EESC civil society prize – Rewarding excellence in civil society initiatives on mental health

The 14th edition of the EESC civil society prize has officially been launched.

The specific theme of this edition is “Mental Health”. The prize will reward effective, innovative and creative initiatives carried out on the territory of the EU which support people with mental health conditions and promote an environment which fosters mental well-being on an individual or collective basis.

The prize, which is open to non-for-profit activities carried out by civil society organisations, individuals and companies, has a total value of EUR 50 000 and can be shared among up to five winners. The deadline for entries is 30 September 2023.

Detailed information about the prize, as well as the contest rules and the on-line application form, are available on the EESC website.1

We warmly invite you to spread the word and look forward to receiving your application if you are eligible.

UPCOMING EVENTS

26/09/2023 – Conference on ‘EU food sovereignty: the role of agriculture, fisheries and consumers’ in Santiago de Compostela, Spain

26/09-02/10 – Photo exhibition ‘Mariscadoras’ by Adrián Baúlde organised by the Civil Society Organisations’ Group in collaboration with the City of Culture of Galicia in Santiago de Compostela, Spain

11/10/2023 – Conference on ‘Empowering consumers on climate change’ in Brussels, Belgium

18/10/2023 – Meeting of the Associational Life Category in Brussels, Belgium

18/10/2023 – Meeting of the Farmers’ Category in Brussels, Belgium

1  EESC 14th EESC Civil Society Prize, https://europa.eu/!6KTvpp

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Register for our conference on ‘Empowering consumers on climate change’

With the impact of climate change felt in the daily lives of European citizens, the subject will undoubtedly be centre-stage in the considerations of European voters in the lead-up to the elections to the European Parliament next year.

The conference on 11 October 2023 will bring together approximately 140 participants, including the Members of the Civil Society Organisations’ Group of the European Economic and Social Committee, national and European level representatives of civil society organisations (CSOs), as well as European policy makers. The discussions will centre around three topics:

- Measuring the cost of climate change on households and families in the EU;
- Addressing the impact of the climate crisis and climate actions on vulnerable groups, communities and ecosystems;
- Placing consumers at the heart of sustainable action against climate change.

The event will also provide the opportunity to publish the results of a novel study on climate change which was commissioned by the EESC at the request of the Civil Society Organisations’ Group. Moreover, the discussions will provide the forum to exchange views on the draft EESC Own-initiative Opinion on the same topic, initiated by the Group.

The subject of climate change and its impact on European citizens has been the focus of much of the work of the Civil Society Organisations’ Group over the last three years, notably in relation to the necessity for a just transition, a topic that we addressed at two events in Ireland and in the Czech Republic.

This is a hybrid conference. Participants can either join the conference at the EESC in person or follow from remote. Please register for in-person and remote participation by 10 October 2023, 12:00 (CEST).

Register at: https://europa.eu/hXfwWN

For more information, please visit the event page at: https://europa.eu/lCk1HyG

The Civil Society Organisations’ Group of the European Economic and Social Committee will hold a conference entitled ‘EU food sovereignty: the role of agriculture, fisheries and consumers’ on 26 September 2023 in Santiago de Compostela, Spain. The conference will take place from 09:30-16:30 and is organised in the context of the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

The event will address the importance of food production in the EU. It will also look into the role of the primary sector and of consumers in ensuring strategic autonomy. National and European civil society organisations representing agriculture, livestock, fisheries and consumers, will discuss ways to address current and future challenges to European food production, while providing European citizens with healthy and sustainably produced food. Guest speakers from the European institutions and the Spanish Presidency will also contribute to the debate.

This conference will bring together EESC members, Spanish and European civil society organisations and representatives of regional, national and European authorities.

This is an in-person conference that will be live streamed. Registration for in-person participation will close on 21 September 2023, 12:00 (CEST).

Register at: https://europa.eu/hXfwWN

The draft programme and the web streaming will be available at: https://europa.eu/lCk1HyG

On 26 September join our conference in person or via streaming

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