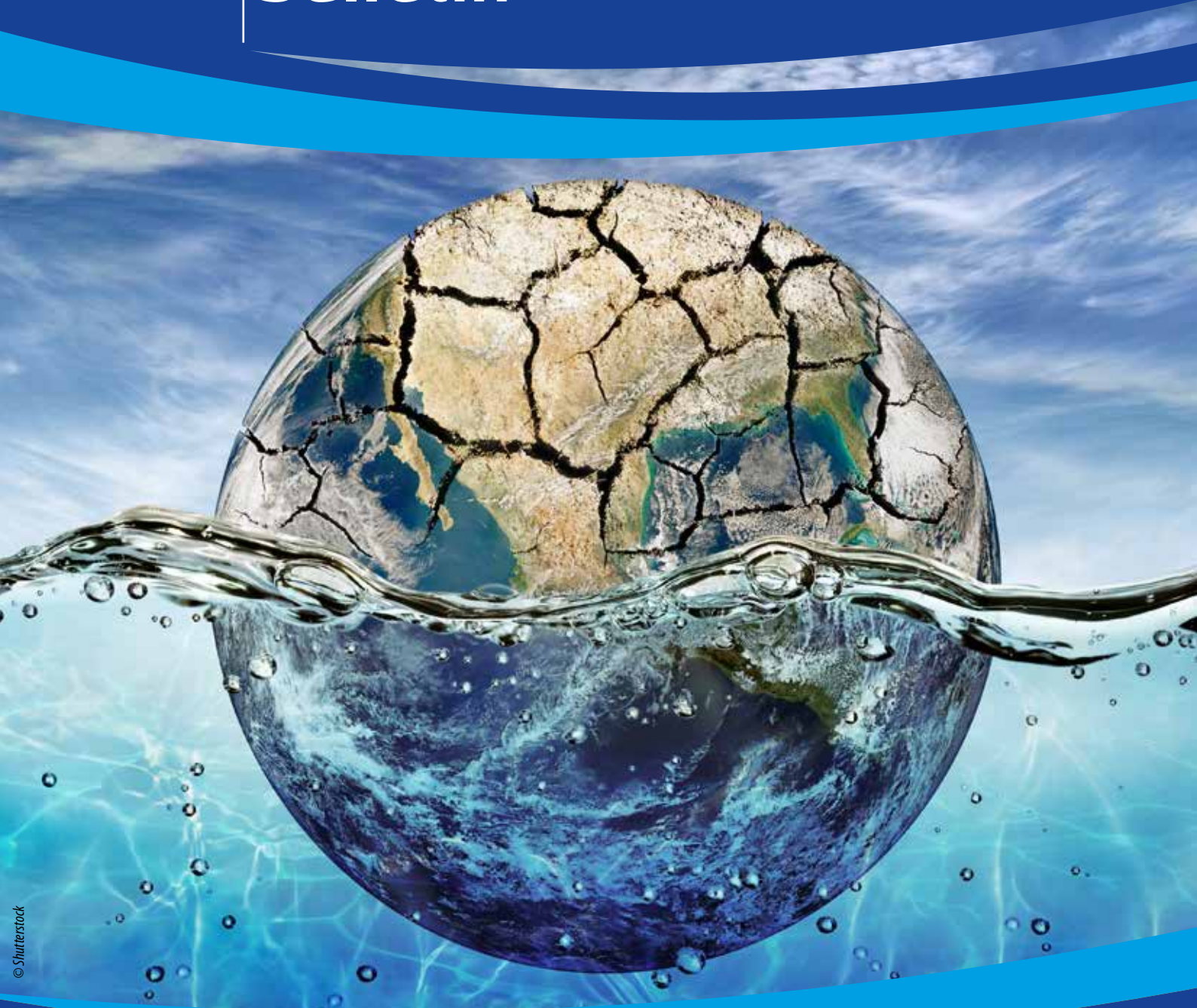




European Economic
and Social Committee

October
2023

Civil Society Organisations' Bulletin



**WATER, TOO MUCH
AND TOO LITTLE**

FOREWORD

Water, water, every where...

Séamus BOLAND (IE)

President, Civil Society Organisations' Group



Séamus Boland © EESC

Written in a different time, the phrase "Water, water, every where, Nor any drop to drink" from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is suddenly a real possibility.

This issue is all about water on our planet. No doubt you will already know that water (especially fresh water) is becoming alarmingly scarce, and if we are not careful, this scarcity will become a major issue over the course of the century.

In July 2010, the United Nations' General Assembly declared the right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation a human right. Since then, it has emerged that roughly half of the world's population does not enjoy such a right, due to severe water scarcity for at least part of the year¹. Sources outlining the availability of water to the population show considerable evidence that we are experiencing a consistent decline in water security due to factors connected to climate change, population growth and land management practices that are detrimental to water protection.

At our [conference](#)² in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, at the end of September, we examined the trends that affect EU food sovereignty in terms of agriculture, fisheries and consumers. We were particularly impressed by the sustainability measures taken by the Port Authority in Vigo. However, we also learned that meeting the challenges posed by the need to produce sustainable food for an increasing world population will require large-scale systems of dialogue between all stakeholders. We were also proud to launch the photographic exhibition "Mariscadoras" by Galician photographer Adrián Baúlde on the day of the conference. The exhibition captures the lives and labour of people, in particular women, who completely depend on the sea to live. Those of you who missed the exhibition can watch the [opening event](#)³ and see the photographs on the [artist's website](#)⁴. It was inspiring to see the portraits, which, like all photographs, tell stories of a thousand words.

During our thematic debate on strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU, with external contributions by Yannick Blanc, President of the French Institute for Civil Society Organisations, and Gabriella Civico, President of Civil Society Europe, we once again examined ways and means to involve civil society organisations in all dialogues needed to resolve the big challenges of the day. For us in the EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group, developing these processes is a natural first step for continuing the work carried out during the Conference on the Future of Europe⁵.

At our recent extraordinary meeting entitled "[Empowering consumers on climate change](#)"⁶ we also welcomed Commission Executive Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič. We applauded his initiative to hold "green dialogues", and the fact that he had chosen our conference to hold the first edition. The initiative aims to invite citizens, civil society organisations and other stakeholders to have a say in how the European Green Deal is designed and delivered.

Our conference on empowering consumers on climate change included the launch of an EESC-commissioned study at the request of our group on [The cost of climate change on households and families living in the EU](#)⁷. This is a unique study and I believe one of the very few of its kind available. Therefore, required reading.

Finally, two points of information. Firstly, in September, Simo Tiainen from Finland replaced Ileana Izverniceanu de la Iglesia from Spain in the role of vice-president of the Civil Society Organisations' Group. We look forward to working with Mr Tiainen for the rest of this term and thank Ms Izverniceanu de la Iglesia for her engagement and contributions during the past five months. Secondly, a note for your diaries: on 14 November we will partner up with the European Environmental Bureau for an event entitled "Unmasking citizenwashing: the dos and don'ts of participation". The event will explore the risks of justifying decisions based on citizens' opinions, while in reality not taking them properly into account.

Séamus Boland

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1 IPCC, 6th assessment report, fact sheet on food and water, https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/downloads/outreach/IPCC_AR6_WGII_FactSheet_FoodAndWater.pdf

2 EESC conference, <https://europa.eu/!CkThyG>

3 EESC, exhibition opening recording, <https://europa.eu/!GFvNrx>

4 Adrián Baúlde, *Mariscadoras*, <https://www.adrianbaulde.com/mariscadoras-mujeres-rias-gallegas->

5 European Commission, CoFoE, <https://europa.eu/!WD6HXn>

6 EESC conference, <https://europa.eu/!qycnhq>

7 EESC study, <https://europa.eu/!mNCntr>

WATER, TOO MUCH AND TOO LITTLE

Fighting water poverty



Kinga JOÓ © EESC

Kinga JOÓ (HU)
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Water poverty affects around 26 million people in Europe - that's around 6% of the European population who have problems accessing or affording good quality water and sanitation. **The most vulnerable groups in society are at the highest risk of water poverty.** Moreover, certain groups are more affected, for example water poverty has a significant gender dimension because of women's greater needs in terms of hygiene. Also, Europe's largest ethnic minority, the Roma, are primarily affected as every third Roma person faces obstacles to access water and sanitation services.

Besides water poverty, a much higher proportion of the EU population – 30% on

- 1 EESC opinion SOC/763, <https://europa.eu/!b8Jv98>
- 2 Right to Water, ECI, <https://right2water.eu/>
- 3 European Commission, European Pillar of Social Rights, <https://europa.eu/!MC96Vn>

average – is affected by some form of water stress: a mismatch between water supply and demand.

In the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) opinion entitled "[Access to water: tackling water poverty and its implications for social policy](#)"¹, for which I was one of the rapporteurs, the EESC thus calls on the European Commission to develop common guidelines for monitoring **access to high-quality, affordable water and sanitation services** and the related geographical and social disparities at national and EU level. The EESC also emphasises that the guidelines

should ensure that vulnerable users are not disconnected from the water supply, and also points out that paying for water and sanitation services should not stop people being able to meet other human and social needs.

Ten years after the success of the "[Right to Water](#)" [European Citizens' Initiative](#) (ECI)² and with the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#)³ establishing the general principle of the right of access to water and sanitation services since 2017, it is now time to apply a **human rights-based approach to water policies** and to address water poverty in the EU.



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All together for water



Alain Coeur © EESC

Alain COEUR (BE)
Director, European and International Affairs, National Union of Socialist Mutual Health Funds (UNMS)

Europe failed to adequately anticipate the energy and critical raw materials crises, and then had to find last-minute solutions that were not always the best ones. Let's not make the same mistake with water. Let's decide, starting today with the [EU Blue Deal](#),¹ to put in place robust measures to face this challenge and turn it into an opportunity for Europe.

Yes, households account for only about 10% of water consumption. Nevertheless, consumers, especially young people, play a key role – through their choices – in companies' commitment to decarbonisation. A similar movement should be initiated for water. To do so, **the EU and Member States must help**

citizens to develop a culture of awareness regarding their water consumption, to reduce it and make it less polluting.

First, citizens must understand that their water consumption goes way beyond their use of drinking water. Every product and service consumed involves a certain amount of water. 500-700 litres of water are needed to produce 1 kg of beef, 7 000-10 000 litres are needed to produce a pair of jeans, and 35 000 litres of water are needed to make a car. The EESC recommends adding a **water label** to product energy labels. There are also several online [water footprint calculator](#)² available, where consumers can get data on their footprint. They should be made aware of these.

The European Union and the Member States must launch **widespread awareness-raising campaigns**, targeted in particular to children and young people. Households should also be informed of **short-term emergency measures that can be implemented** in the event of droughts or floods.

Recycling strategies are needed. Households should **collect rainwater whenever possible** and use it appropriately, for example for watering gardens and cleaning. Lastly, it is important to **support water and energy-efficient technologies and to offer financial incentives to households for installing them.**

By getting everyone involved – we can do it!



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1 EESC EU Blue Deal, <https://europa.eu/!6Qhwwf>

2 E.g.: Water Footprint Calculator by the Water Footprint Network, <https://www.waterfootprint.org/resources/interactive-tools/personal-water-footprint-calculator/>

Sustainable and resilient water infrastructures and distribution networks



Baiba Miltoviča © EESC

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 Consumer Consultative
 Group (ECCG)

Water is not a commodity like any other, but rather a heritage that must be protected and defended. Therefore, universal access to high-quality drinking water and sanitation at affordable prices is to be regarded as a service of general interest.

This was the basis for the TEN section's¹ contribution to the EESC [EU Blue Deal](#)² initiative, an opinion on water infrastructure.

First of all, the EESC stressed in the opinion that the EU should adopt and strengthen regulatory frameworks in order to guarantee **universal access to affordable water** and sewage systems with sufficient quality standards, to restore and protect ecosystems and to generate the necessary investments in infrastructure.

Secondly, in the context of the climate crisis, **water and wastewater should not be**



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treated as mere commodities. With the situation as regards distribution of water resources getting worse, the economy should be organised in such a way as to reduce water consumption and improve water reuse. This will also require water consumption to be better regulated and more effective financial support for water infrastructure.

Last but not least, water shortages resulting from the climate crisis will affect the production and storage of electricity in the long term. Therefore, the EU must continue to promote **urgent expansion of renewable energy sources**, in order to compensate for potential shortfalls from hydropower plants.

In line with these considerations, the EESC has put forward concrete recommendations, notably that:

1. water distribution networks and infrastructure be resilient and adequately financed;
2. water leakages and preparedness and management of water-related disruption be addressed as a priority;
3. a public consultation process conducted by the European Commission serve as the foundation for future action in this domain.

1 EESC section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society, <https://europa.eu/!kn94kX>
 2 EESC EU Blue Deal, <https://europa.eu/!6Qhwwf>

Water: sometimes too much, sometimes too little



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The number of deaths from **extreme rainfall** in Libya will never be truly known; it could well far exceed 10 000. The area of rainfall had previously hit Greece, causing considerable material damage there, with the country already having suffered from heat, drought and major fires.

In the western part of Germany, there was such **little rainfall** in 2018-2020 that not only the farmers were suffering. In forests, almost

all the spruce trees were dying. Due to lack of water, they could no longer form enough resin, making them an easy target for bark beetles. Until then, spruce had accounted for around 35% of the tree population. Now our forests are no longer recognisable. The following year, 2021, brought a terrible flood, with around 200 people losing their lives, more than EUR 40 billion in damages, and with the destruction still widely visible today.

What is going on? Has the weather gone crazy? The simple answer is no. It's not the weather, it's humans. This situation is the **result of man-made climate change and reckless use of water.** Warnings about the consequences of climate change and unsustainable use of water had long been ignored by policymakers, and even today the necessary action is not being taken. The European Union (EU) often looked away – and still does – when wells are built illegally or surface water is overexploited: the water-intensive

cultivation of tomatoes and berries in southern Spain is an example here.

Adapting to the new reality of climate change means having to pursue a **different water policy.** In Germany, for example, it has been an unspoken objective for centuries to allow every drop of water to be discharged as quickly as possible into the sea: it was drained and canalised, streams and rivers were straightened, sealed areas created, etc. The EU will now have to ensure that water – the crucial foundation for all life and economic activity – is once again enhanced within the landscape. Creating new wetlands and restoring peatlands is part of this, and has the benefit of supporting our depleted biodiversity.



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To drink or not to drink. That is the question!

Challenges to accessing drinking water



Justyna Kalina Ochędzan
© EESC

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Blue gold: this is what we could call drinking water these days. It is leading millions of people around the world to migrate, not in the pursuit of happiness, work or better conditions, but in pursuit of life.

Does the [European Blue Deal](#)² foresee millions of climate migrants, Europe's regions becoming deserts, or increasing consumption of energy that can't be produced without consuming huge amounts of water? Does the green transition see the digital transition in terms of building efficient energy infrastructure, research, innovation and global cooperation on ways to generate energy that follow the "Do No Significant Harm" principle?

- 1 EESC Social Economy Category, <https://europa.eu/!ht47UK>
- 2 EESC EU Blue Deal, <https://europa.eu/!6Qhwwf>
- 3 EEA report 'Water resources across Europe — confronting water stress: an updated assessment', <https://europa.eu/!CH3HnR>
- 4 European Environmental Agency, <https://europa.eu/!XKFrBg>
- 5 EEA Environmental Indicator Report 2018, <https://europa.eu/!RPPr9g>
- 6 United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/>

Although we are used to always having running water here, the effects of water stress can also be felt in Europe. According to a [report](#)³ by the [European Environment Agency](#)⁴, droughts and water shortages affect about 20% of Europe's territory and 30% of its population every year. Water poverty has become a new category of poverty alongside financial deprivation or energy poverty.

Who is using the most water in Europe? Is it farmers, industry or ordinary people running the proverbial taps? If we look at the **use of fresh water**, from which we get drinking water, agriculture uses the most (58%), followed by cooling water for electricity production (18%), mining, quarries, construction and manufacturing industries (11%), households (10%) and services (3%) ([EEA, report on fresh water use](#)⁵). Therefore, green thinking on the part of **consumers** in terms of saving or efficient use of water in the

spirit of the circular economy is only the tip of the iceberg in terms of possible savings in use of fresh water. In the case of Europe, agriculture and the manufacturing and energy industries should be the **economic sectors** that feel the greatest pressure to develop efficient methods of saving water and reducing the pollution that further restricts access to drinking water.

Is it realistic to **ensure universal and equitable access** to safe and affordable drinking water by 2030, given that according to the [United Nations](#)⁶, 50% of adults around the world possess only 1% of its wealth? What is an affordable price for drinking water as social inequalities continue to rise globally? Access to drinking water must not be a commodity, but a human right – the right of everyone in Europe, and in addition to creating a subsidy scheme for the most vulnerable populations, access to drinking water should also be provided through access to free infrastructure.



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EU Blue Deal



John Bryan © EESC

John BRYAN (IE)
Chairman, EU Commission's
Sheep Reflection Group
Delegate, EESC Consultative
Commission on Industrial
Change (CCMI)¹

It is critical that the European Union (EU) adopts a **strategic approach** to dealing with the ever-increasing threat posed by water scarcity and water stress, in the form of a [Blue Deal](#)².

Water is a vital resource and the implications of not taking direct action on the issue of water security has far-reaching consequences for the future of EU industry, the environment, food security, employment, and social and economic stability.

The EU has many **water-intensive industries**, employing a huge proportion of the EU

population, which require access to a sustainable supply of large amounts of water on a constant basis in order to continue to operate. While some EU industries such as the paper, textiles and dairy sectors, are already considerably more water-efficient than their international counterparts, many others are not.

The EU has taken some steps towards addressing these issues, but more needs to be done, and these **efforts need to be scaled-up, properly funded** at both national and EU level, and **quickly implemented**.

To help advance work in this area, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has included water as a cross-cutting theme in its [2023 work programme](#)³, and in October will present a [declaration](#)⁴ to the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union on the issue.

In short, it is essential for the continued operation of many EU industries that

commitments are made at both EU and national level to provide the funding required to invest in water security, in the form of efficient technology, research and development, and up-skilling and training. Furthermore, the [EU Blue Deal](#)⁵ should contain a sustainable water management policy for all industries based on reducing water use, increasing water capture and recovery, and greatly increased storage.

This is a challenge that needs to be tackled head on, by adopting a comprehensive and coordinated EU-wide approach towards water security.



CALL FOR AN
EU Blue Deal

- 1 EESC Consultative Commission on Industrial Change, <https://europa.eu/!fu46bN>
- 2 EESC EU Blue Deal, <https://europa.eu/!6Qhwwf>
- 3 EESC's Contribution to the 2023 European Commission's working programme, <https://europa.eu/!RNfjRN>
- 4 EESC, high-level conference, <https://europa.eu/!9FMcdP>
- 5 EESC EU Blue Deal, <https://europa.eu/!6Qhwwf>

Time to speed up water action



Hasmik Barseghyan

**Hasmik
BARSEGHYAN**

*President, European
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The recent [United Nations World Water Development Report](#)¹ points out that globally two billion people (26% of the population) still do not have access to safe drinking water and 3.6 billion (46%) lack access to safely managed sanitation. This means that every third person in the world is deprived of their human right to water and sanitation. We are struggling to come to terms with the impact of the climate catastrophe and do not have the luxury of time to manage past, present and future crises.

Water use has been increasing globally by roughly 1% per year over the last 40 years and is expected to grow at a similar rate through to 2050 ([Aquastat](#)²) under the pressure of population growth, socio-economic development and changing consumption patterns. The lion's share of this increase is concentrated in middle- and low-income countries, particularly in emerging economies.

The [European Environment Agency](#)³ reports that about 20% of European territory and 30% of Europeans are affected by water stress during an average year. The cost of economic damage caused by droughts is between two to nine billion euro per year, not counting the unquantified damage to ecosystems and their services.

According to the [United Nations' annual report on the Sustainable Development Goals](#)⁴, in order to meet the drinking water, sanitation and hygiene targets by 2030 (SDG6), the rate of progress must be increased four-fold.

But what are we doing to speed up the pace?

Investments to date have largely proved insufficient to guarantee universal access. Inequitable access is due to poor governance and lack of specific attention to the poor and vulnerable.

The main challenge associated with acceleration is to move from voluntary to mandatory actions. Acceleration is a synonym of cooperation, it is associated with coherence and consistent commitments within the various international decision-making bodies: I'm particularly referring to the need to strengthen synergies between the [Paris Agreement](#)⁵, the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#)⁶, the [UN 2023 Water Conference](#)⁷ in 2023 and the [EU Blue Deal](#)⁸ and [Green Deals](#)⁹.

A Nexus approach will help to better understand the interrelatedness and

interdependencies of environmental resources. It forces us to think of the impacts and to anticipate potential trade-offs and synergies, so we can design, appraise and prioritise better response options that are viable across different sectors.

In order to speed up the implementation of water-related goals and targets, the [European Youth Parliament for Water](#)¹⁰ is co-initiating and joining forces with a number of global initiatives, such as the [Global Youth Movement for Water](#)¹¹. The involvement of young professionals in the search for solutions and the advancement of dialogue must be considered a major opportunity for the advancement and reinforcement of resilience in response to global challenges. We call for strengthening the policy dialogue and multilateral coordination on water and respecting the human rights to water and sanitation.



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1 United Nations World Water Development Report, <https://www.unwater.org/publications/un-world-water-development-report-2023>

2 FAO, Aquastat Database, <https://data.apps.fao.org/aquastat/?lang=en>

3 European Environmental Agency, <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en>

4 United Nations, The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023, <https://sdgs.un.org/documents/sustainable-development-goals-report-2023-53220>

5 United Nations, Paris Agreement, https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/parisagreement_publication.pdf

6 United Nations, The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

7 UN 2023 Water Conference, <https://www.unwater.org/news/un-2023-water-conference>

8 EESC EU Blue Deal, <https://europa.eu/!6Qhwwf>

9 European Commission, European Green Deal, <https://europa.eu/!8bB4bR>

10 European Youth Parliament for Water, <https://youthforwater.org/parliament/european-youth-parliament-for-water/>

11 Global Youth Movement for Water, <https://filluptheglass.org/>

WHAT IS EESC OPINION REX/570 ALL ABOUT?

An interview with Ioannis Vardakastanis, rapporteur for EESC opinion [REX/570 on Water Politics: Between Desertification and Securitization - Time for a Blue Diplomacy](#)¹



Ioannis VARDAKASTANIS (EL)

President, EESC ECO section²

President, Greek National Confederation of Disabled People (NCDP)

President, European Disability Forum (EDF)

President, International Disability Alliance (IDA)

Member, Economic and Social Council of Greece (OKE)

Member, Greek National Commission of Human Rights (EEDA)

Ioannis Vardakastanis © EESC

Mr Vardakastanis, your opinion [REX/570](#) was adopted by the EESC plenary recently. What are the three main findings of the opinion?

Of all the natural resources, water has become the most precious. Global water scarcity is a severe challenge for continued human development and for achieving several [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#)³.

Water stress threatens the resilience of many areas in the world, fuels inequalities and raises food security concerns. Water stress and desertification often lead to the securitisation of water supply. Unequal access to water fuels social instability and consequently results in local and international conflicts and tensions.

Conflicts are often linked to the diversion of water sources for irrigation or industry, managing water scarcity and floods, pollution and the passage of sea vessels. However, water stress caused by extreme events and



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growing water scarcity have already led to conflicts over access to and control of water resources across the globe. The climate crisis will exacerbate this situation. In many cases conflicts and disputes involve two or more

countries, as transboundary waters account for 60% of the world's freshwater flows, and 153 countries have territory within at least one transboundary river or lake basins.

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

The EU should focus on increasing efforts in blue diplomacy and should streamline it in its foreign policy and external relations, including neighbourhood, trade and development policies.

The EU should support easy and uninterrupted access to affordable water for everyone throughout the world, and facilitate sustainable water and wastewater management.

The UN treaty framework that addresses water-related issues should be upgraded in light of recent international developments and the climate and water crises.

After the adoption of this opinion, what have you done/will you do to promote it?

The report was provided to all relevant European institutions with the aim of raising awareness about this topic of crucial significance for the future of Europe and the planet. Blue diplomacy can emerge as one of the most pertinent and effective tools of EU foreign policy at a time when the effectiveness of EU foreign policy is heavily

debated. It can protect sensitive ecosystems and biodiversity, prevent the outbreak of regional conflicts and mitigate the effects of the climate crisis on growing migration towards the European Union.

Last but not least, it has to be underlined that this opinion is part of our Committee's proposal for an [EU Blue Deal](#)⁴ through which a new approach to water issues in Europe (and throughout the globe) is promoted.

The opinion was presented and adopted at the September plenary session in 2023.

Read the EESC opinion on Water Politics: *Between Desertification and Securitization - Time for a Blue Diplomacy* at:

<https://europa.eu/!3xVjxb>

1 EESC opinion REX/570, <https://europa.eu/!3xVjxb>

2 EESC section for Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion, <https://europa.eu/!RD39rY>

3 United Nations, SDGs, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>

4 EESC EU Blue Deal, <https://europa.eu/!6Qhwwf>

COMMENTS ON CURRENT AFFAIRS

Commentary on the Speech by the European Commission President on the State of the European Union 2023¹



Rudolf Kolbe © EESC

Rudolf KOLBE (AT)
Vice-President, Civil Society Organisations' Group
President, Austrian Federal Conference of the Liberal Professions
President, Austrian Federal Chamber of Architects and Chartered Engineers

From my perspective, as a representative of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), and specifically of the liberal professions, it was particularly pleasing to hear the emphasis on the role of social partners at the "Heart of our Future". Four decades after the inception of the historic cooperation with European social

partners in 1985 at Val Duchesse, the aimed revitalisation and reinforcement of social dialogue stands out in its symbolic significance. This breathes new life into the cooperation and underscores the European Commission's intention to leverage the expertise of unions and professional associations in its policy direction.

It is imperative that the social dialogue isn't confined only to the established social partners. The ongoing shifts in civil society need to be acknowledged and more deeply integrated into the dialogue, with the EESC playing a pivotal role.

European businesses are facing towering challenges, whether it be labour shortages or qualification gaps. An inclusive social dialogue is indispensable here, especially to facilitate labour market access for marginalised population groups, which is also of great

importance in the fight against poverty.

While the Commission President illuminated numerous current challenges, I personally felt that a stronger emphasis on the topic of water and the introduction of a "Blue Deal"², which is closely intertwined with many of these concerns, was missing. Regarding von der Leyen's assertion that agriculture and nature conservation can coexist, I would have appreciated more specificity.

In conclusion, the acknowledgment that global challenges necessitate a global approach is especially commendable. Europe's willingness for an equitable global dialogue and a fairer distribution is crucial. The proactive inclusion of civil society remains at the heart of this initiative.

1 European Commission, 2023 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen, <https://europa.eu/!qdHwRM>

2 EESC EU Blue Deal, <https://europa.eu/!6Qhwwf>

NEWS FROM THE GROUP

Conference on EU food sovereignty highlights essential role of agriculture, fisheries and consumers and calls for inclusive and sustainable food policies with a long-term vision

Fair prices for both farmers and consumers and truthful and transparent information are essential if the primary sector and consumers are to play their key role in guaranteeing strategic autonomy in European food production. This sovereignty must be in line with the [European Green Deal's¹ Farm to Fork strategy²](#), which requires an adjustment of current food policies.

These were the main conclusions of the [conference on EU food sovereignty: the role of agriculture, fisheries and consumers³](#), organised by the European Economic and Social Committee's (EESC) Civil Society Organisations' Group, with the Minister for Rural Affairs and the Minister for the Sea of the Regional Government of Galicia, on **26 September 2023** in the City of Culture of Galicia, Santiago de Compostela.

The President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group, **Séamus Boland**, said that all Europeans, including producers, distributors

and consumers, benefit from a fair, healthy, resilient and sustainable food chain. However, recent global crises have demonstrated the **need for European food sovereignty with very high global security standards**. Furthermore, he highlighted the importance of collaboration: "The future of the food sector will depend on working together across actors, sectors and policy areas to effectively address and remedy the many challenges. We should aim for inclusive food policies and develop a long-term vision for the EU fishing sector". In his opinion, Europe's food sovereignty will be determined by the decisions of individuals, communities and organised civil society.

The Minister for Rural Affairs, **José González Vázquez**, considered that agriculture and food are two sides of the same coin. He explained that the Autonomous Government of Galicia believes strongly in the need to foster rural development with productive activity in the primary sector in order to achieve food sovereignty in which the consumers have full



Séamus Boland, President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group of the EESC, opening the conference © EESC

1 European Commission, European Green Deal, <https://europa.eu/!8bB4bR>

2 European Commission, Farm to Fork strategy, <https://europa.eu/!3D4qwB>

3 EESC, conference, <https://europa.eu/!CkThyG>



Conference Santiago de Compostela © EESC

power over decision-making and control and we achieve decent standards for the food industry and, above all, for our producers.

In the closing session of the conference, the Minister for the Sea, **Alfonso Villares Bermúdez**, highlighted the need for campaigns to promote the consumption of fish and seafood such as those launched by the regional government. Actions, he emphasised, which are necessary to reverse the fall in consumption caused by inflation in the current complex economic scenario. He also stressed that, to encourage people to consume seafood again, it is also key to reduce VAT from 10% to 4% to bring it into line with the tax rate of other EU countries.

Various speakers, representing agriculture, livestock, fishing, consumers and other sectors, such as environment protection, debated ways to address the current and future challenges of European food production. The debates focused on the perspectives of Spanish civil society, the perspective of institutions and possible solutions at EU level.

Participants agreed on the need for European food sovereignty in the face of current and

future crises such as COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, supply bottlenecks and ongoing inflation. They called for measures to ease the financial pressure on households, especially the most vulnerable ones, while promoting a more balanced, healthy diet. They furthermore observed greater awareness of the value of food and greater demand for local products.

Several representatives of the **primary sector** called for support measures to address the multiple crises and the transition to a more sustainable economy. Furthermore, they warned that the current lack of political responses to the delicate situation of many companies in the sector could end up seriously affecting other sectors of the economy. While showing a commitment to environmental protection, they noted that this cannot be achieved without sustainable economic and social development. The importance of family farming for the future of food systems and sustainable food production was highlighted. At the same time, it was emphasised that food sovereignty is the basis for ensuring the existence of family farms and maintaining the population in rural areas. Consequently, participants called for fair prices for farmers and consumers.

In addition, the participants' **proposals included:**

- creating protection rules for the fishing sector to avoid social and environmental dumping of imports;
- promoting structural change in the European Commission. Specifically, the appointment of a Commissioner who is solely in charge of fisheries, with a strong focus on food security.

Various representatives of consumer associations reiterated that food is not just consumption, but also part of culture and identity. In addition to consumers purchasing decisions and commitments, multifaceted systemic change was needed – including in the agricultural sector – to obtain a balanced and sustainable market that guarantees food affordability and security for all. The participants considered information for consumers the key for food sovereignty. The origin of the products on the market should be clear, truthful and transparent.

Civil Society Organisations' Group proud to complement work on resilient and sustainable food systems with photo exhibition in Spain

The Civil Society Organisations' Group organised a **photography exhibition** in collaboration with the **City of Culture of Galicia**¹ in the framework of its conference on *EU food sovereignty: the role of agriculture, fisheries and consumers*² in Santiago de Compostela, Spain. The conference was organised at the City of Culture in the context of the ongoing Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU³. The subject of the exhibition supported and complemented the Group's and the European Economic

and Social Committee's work on resilient and sustainable European food systems. The content and profile of the exhibition promoted Spanish culture and supported the younger generation of artists in the country.

The Group invited the Galician artist, **Adrián Baúlde**⁴, to present parts of the series **Mariscadoras**⁵, which pays tribute to **shellfish gatherers and their role in the local food system**. The photos provide insights into the

needs of this specific sector and are therefore a creative way to address topical issues that are crucial for civil society and the EESC.

The exhibition was opened during the Group's conference. **Séamus Boland**, President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group, welcomed Adrián Baúlde, Ana Isabel Vázquez Reboredo and Javier Garat. He thanked the City of Culture and the artist for their collaboration and said how proud the Group was to be associated

1 City of Culture of Galicia, <https://www.cidadedacultura.gal/en/info/city-culture-galicia>

2 EESC, conference, <https://europa.eu/!CkThyG>

3 Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU, <https://europa.eu/!Xbknn6>

4 EESC, artist Adrián Baúlde, <https://europa.eu/!xV3WKJ>

5 EESC, photo exhibition Mariscadoras, <https://europa.eu/!xrcggt>



Photo of the exhibition © Adrián Baúlde



Photo exhibition Mariscadoras © Adrián Baúlde

with the exhibition. Mr Boland explained that, exceptionally, the Group had organised this annual cultural activity abroad, at the culture centre hosting the conference.

The artist, **Adrián Baúlde**, said that the Mariscadoras series has taken almost 10 years to put together. The series portrays the work of mostly female shellfish gatherers in Cambados, a small municipality of almost 15 000 inhabitants on the Ría de Arousa on the Galician coast, which is the largest estuary in Spain. "Each day, the 220 shellfish gatherers of Cambados, portrayed in the photographs of this exhibition, work an area of approximately 300 hectares. They fight against water, mud, sand and stones with uncommon effort and skills, enduring sun, rain, wind and fog," said the artist. He added: "The images are intended to pay tribute to these women and raise awareness of their hard work, making it visible while highlighting the attractiveness of a task well done. Their hands work ceaselessly to put the hidden wealth of Galician estuaries on our plates."

The Managing Director of the City of Culture, **Ana Isabel Vázquez Reboredo**, said that agriculture, livestock and fishing were - and had always been - key sectors not only in the Galician economy but also in the social

organisations of local communities. "Logically, this has had a strong influence also on our cultural heritage, from our music, oral tradition and intangible heritage to our visual arts and architecture. The sea, the fishermen and the shellfish gatherers, who are the main subjects of Adrián Baúlde's powerful and beautiful images, have inspired and continue to inspire countless photographers, painters, filmmakers and sculptors, leaving us artistic works that transcend borders and generations." Their works were an invaluable testimony to what has changed and what has remained in the country, people and communities over time.

Javier Garat, Member of the Civil Society Organisations' Group, Secretary-General of Cepesca and President of Europêche and the International Coalition of Fisheries Associations, stressed the need to recognise the contribution of shellfish gatherers and fishermen to society. "The shellfish gatherers perform a job which is silent, hard, sacrificial, sometimes not well appreciated and often invisible, as they weather adverse conditions."

Mr Garat further explained that shellfish gatherers face problems with the generational relay and the decrease in the profitability of their work as productivity declines. The

sector calls for greater commitment from the administrations and scientific community when it comes to analysing water quality and the impact of climate change on the species usually harvested and finding solutions to their challenges.



Photo exhibition Mariscadoras © EESC

The opening of the exhibition ended with the screening of a **short video** that illustrated the work of shellfish gatherers.

Shellfishing is an activity based on the farming, harvesting and gathering of molluscs, primarily, but also crustaceans and other marine invertebrates. Shellfish gatherers go to work when the tide goes out. Their activity combines tradition, culture and respect for the environment and is also an economic driver and energising force for indoor and outdoor markets, the hotel and catering industry and tourism. Shellfish gatherers collect the product and help with tasks such as cleaning shellfish beds, semi cultivation to improve production, and activities relating to the care, protection and monitoring of shellfish banks.

The Civil Society Organisations' Group thanks Adrián Baúlde, the City of Culture of Galicia, which staged the exhibition from 26 September to 2 October 2023, the shellfish gatherers of Cambados and all the other people who contributed to the design and implementation of this exhibition.

Watch back the opening of the exhibition at: <https://europa.eu/IGFvNrx>



Speakers with the book 'Mariscadoras' © EESC

Thematic debate: EU institutions must develop structures for civil dialogue

On 20 September, the Civil Society Organisations' Group (III) held a **thematic debate on *Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: the way forward***, with external contributions by **Yannick Blanc**, President of the French Institute for Civil Society Organisations, and **Gabriella Civico**, President of Civil Society Europe.

"Civil Dialogue is part of our Group's DNA", said **Séamus Boland**, explaining that the European Economic and Social Committee's (EESC) work on the topic dated back to the time of the former Group III and EESC President Beatrice Rangoni Machiavelli (1998-2000), and has been continued by Group III and EESC Presidents since then¹. However, at European level, there is still a lack of recognition of the role of civil society organisations (CSOs). He therefore called for a system that gives civil society a role in determining policy as it is formulated rather than only dealing with the end stages.

Yannick Blanc drew attention to the important knowledge gaps. More research would help identify how CSOs can be better included in policy-making and how to leverage their expertise, amongst other things. **Gabriella Civico**, stressed that EU institutions must develop structures for civil dialogue on cross-cutting issues and specific policy areas, citing the Roadmap for the implementation of Article 11 TEU².

The debate was organised as part of the wider focus of the Civil Society Organisations' Group on civil dialogue. In this framework, the Group drafted an open letter to the European institutions in cooperation with Civil Society Europe. The Group also holds the rapporteurship for an [exploratory opinion](#)³ requested by the Belgian Presidency of the Council on "*Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: the way forward*".



Civil Society dialogue debate - Séamus Boland, Gabriella Civico and Yannick Blanc © EESC

- 1 A list of EESC opinions on the topic can be found in the publication *Participatory Democracy - A success story* written by the EESC, <https://europa.eu/Cu66yD>
- 2 Roadmap: cf. *ibid.*, p. 112. Article 11 TEU states that "the institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society".
- 3 EESC opinion SOC/782, <https://europa.eu/17P7gXw>

Consumers and Environment Category held a conference in Madrid on the new challenges for consumption and the environment

On 13 September, the meeting of the Consumers and Environment Category entitled "**The Spanish Presidency's new challenges for consumption and the environment**" was held in Madrid. It was jointly organised by the [Spanish Presidency](#)¹ and the [Spanish Council for Consumers and Users \(CCU\)](#)². The topics discussed at this meeting were "The rules governing influencers and consumer protection", "Green claims" and "The Representative Actions Directive and its transposition in the different Member States".

The conference brought together key stakeholders in the sector and included some high-level presentations. It was attended by leading consumer and environmental experts and representatives. This provided this important event with solid expertise and effective coordination, contributing to its success. You will find the full programme, the recording of the conference (in Spanish), the speakers' presentations and the photos relating to the meeting by clicking on the link below:

[The Spanish Presidency's new challenges for consumption and the environment | European Economic and Social Committee \(europa.eu\)](#)



The next meeting of the Consumers and Environment Category will be held on 13 November 2023.



- 1 Spanish Presidency, <https://europa.eu/WqyPKg>
- 2 Spanish Council for Consumers and Users (CCU), <https://consumo-ccu.consumo.gob.es/>

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE LAST PLENARY SESSION

EU budget must reflect realities on the ground and EU ambitions



Debate on Mid-term revision of the MFF linked to the adoption of the opinion ECO/625 on Mid-term evaluation of the Multiannual Financial Framework © EESC

During the September plenary session, Members discussed the **mid-term revision of the multiannual financial framework 2021-27 (MFF¹)** proposed by the European Commission last June. The plenary welcomed Johannes Hahn, Commissioner for Budget and Administration, and Margarida Marques, Member of European Parliament and Vice-Chair of the Committee on Budgets. The debate was linked to the adoption of the European Economic and Social Committee's (EESC) [opinion ECO/625 on the Mid-term revision of the Multiannual Financial Framework²](#) for which the Civil Society Organisations' Group Member Elena-Alexandra Calistru was one of the rapporteurs.

The Committee finds that the changes proposed in the revision lack the ambition to respond properly to Europe's key challenges. Short-term solutions are needed to address the proposal's shortcomings. Nevertheless, the EESC joined the calls for the mid-term review to be completed this year. The debate on the new MFF should start soon with an approach that increases civil society's role.

Commissioner Johannes Hahn pointed out that "The EESC is extremely influential. Your opinion can be used as a tool to reach out to the Member States and the various national parliaments and explain that the MFF is not about pleasing a few people in Brussels: it is about cooperating to make the European Union work well in the future".

MEP Margarida Marques said that the budget must be adjusted to match the EU's political ambitions.



Elena Calistru - rapporteur ECO/625 on the Mid-term revision of the MFF © EESC

Presenting the EESC opinion, rapporteur **Elena-Alexandra Calistru** suggested setting up a mechanism to increase civil society's involvement in the MFF. Regarding the Ukraine Facility, she said that the EESC supported the idea of using frozen Russian assets as an additional resource for the reconstruction of Ukraine and stressed that in the medium to long term, Europe will need a "major sustained commitment on the scale of the Marshall Plan" for Ukraine.

Following the presentation of the EESC opinion, several members of the Civil Society Organisations' Group took the floor. **Séamus Boland**, President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group, said: "We support the budget as you propose. The ambitions of the EU have to tie in with the budget and the budget has to tie in with the ambitions." The MFF needed to pay attention to the realities on the ground, referring to issues such as health, the cost of living and climate change.

Giuseppe Guerini considered that the question of demographic imbalance had not

been sufficiently taken into consideration in the context of the revision. "It's a serious threat that we are faced with as a continent," he said.

TEN section³ President **Baiba Miltoviča** asked the European Commission to closely monitor the implementation of instruments linked to housing. "Currently, the annual renovation rate of the building stock in Europe stands only at 0.2%, and in some Member States only a small number of renovation projects have been submitted since 2021."

ECO section⁴ President **Ioannis Vardakastanis** believed that the MFF should introduce "very strong and robust measures for monitoring, designing, planning and implementing programmes and for involving civil society". He lamented that the MFF revision did not address the reduced purchasing power of the MFF in itself due to high inflation. The MFF should better reflect all the EU's main priorities.

Simo Tiainen underlined the strategic importance of food production and security to EU citizens and hence the funding of the common agricultural policy (CAP⁵). "We have to make sure that we maintain a vibrant countryside, meet our climate change objectives, ensure the functioning of our food chain and address all sorts of other issues to make sure that we have availability of safe food for all citizens," the Vice-President of the Group said.



Simo Tiainen, Vice-President Civil Society Organisations' Group © EESC

Finally, **Juraj Sipko**, President of the EESC's [Thematic Study Group on Economic and Fiscal Governance of the Euro Area⁶](#), asked the two guest speakers to assess the risk of the budget not meeting all commitments and obligations in the future.

1 European Commission, MFF, <https://europa.eu/lw8hX47>

2 EESC opinion ECO/625, <https://europa.eu/d4xPXB>

3 EESC TEN section, <https://europa.eu/lkn94kX>

4 EESC ECO section, <https://europa.eu/RD39rY>

5 European Commission, CAP, <https://europa.eu/lxcCxFN>

6 EESC thematic study group, <https://europa.eu/lXqMDmF>

Support for Civil Society in the area of fundamental rights in Member States and enlargement countries



Debate on the support for civil society in the area of fundamental rights in Member States and enlargement countries © EESC

In the EESC's 581st plenary session a discussion was held on supporting civil society in the area of fundamental rights linked to the own-initiative opinion SOC/762 "[Civil society support and funding in the area of fundamental rights, the rule of law and democracy](#)". **Cristian Pîrvulescu**, Member of the Civil Society Organisations' Group, acted as rapporteur with **Ozlem Yildirim**, Member of the EESC's Workers' Group, as co-rapporteur.

EESC president **Oliver Röpke** stressed the need to "get rid of dividing lines in Europe" as "we cannot let fundamental rights and the rule of law end at the EU borders." This focus on engaging with candidate countries aligned with von der Leyen's [State of the Union](#)² announcement to open Rule of Law Reports to accession countries.



Cristian Pîrvulescu - rapporteur SOC/762 Civil society support and funding in the area of fundamental rights, the rule of law and democracy

"There is a big problem concerning the support given to civil society organisations (CSOs)" said **Cristian Pîrvulescu**. The rapporteur and co-rapporteur explained that this missing support is reflected in the lack of funding, hostility by populist governments, and employees' poor working conditions. They also reiterated the

need for concrete action to help CSOs. Several Members of the Civil Society Organisations' Group took part in the debate.



Christian Moos - Vice-President of the Ad hoc group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law © EESC

Christian Moos, vice-president of the Ad hoc group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law, presented the opinion as a signal for governments that are supportive of fundamental rights, stating that governments cannot walk this walk alone. Without civil society, the backbone of liberal democracy, they will be "washed away by this big wave of populism". Strengthening it at all levels is the best remedy against autocracy. Similarly, **Séamus Boland**, Civil Society Organisations' Group President, declared "democracy under attack" and demanded the protection of CSOs as the "vanguard of fundamental rights."



Séamus Boland, President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group © EESC



Ariane Rodert © EESC

In line with the rapporteur's speech, **Ariane Rodert** emphasised the urgency of the opinion: "we need to develop an action plan for civil society", and specified that "funding is one component but there are so many more."



João Nabais © EESC

João Nabais concluded by saying that a strong presence of civil society organisations, especially those concerning human rights is essential for democratic legitimacy. In Member States and in enlargement countries, a major public funding effort is needed to ensure that their work is not undermined.

1 EESC opinion SOC/762, <https://europa.eu/lhRNjX>

2 2023 State of the Union Address by EC Commission, President von der Leyen, <https://europa.eu/lqdHwRM>

OVERVIEW OF RECENT WORK

The last EESC plenary session took place on 20 and 21 September 2023. The EESC plenary adopted 28 opinions of which 15 were drafted by Members of the Civil Society Organisations' Group. A list of the recent work can be found below.

Anastasis YIAPANIS (CY), rapporteur, [INT/1006](#)¹ Customs reform package

Anastasis YIAPANIS (CY), rapporteur, [REX/576](#)² The EU Maritime Security Strategy and its Action Plan

Christian MOOS (DE), co-rapporteur, [REX/568](#)³, The Arctic – how to ensure a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous future for a geostrategic region

Cristian PÎRVULESCU (RO), rapporteur, [SOC/762](#)⁴ Civil Society support and funding in the area of fundamental rights, the rule of law and democracy

Cristian PÎRVULESCU (RO), rapporteur, [SOC/772](#)⁵ Multiannual strategic policy for European integrated border management

Danko RELIĆ (HR), rapporteur, [REX/573](#)⁶ EU Global Health Strategy

Elena-Alexandra CALISTRU (RO), rapporteur, [ECO/607](#)⁷ Mid-term evaluation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility

Elena-Alexandra CALISTRU (RO), rapporteur, [ECO/625](#)⁸ Mid-term revision of the Multiannual Financial Framework

Francisco Javier GARAT PÉREZ (ES), rapporteur, [NAT/883](#)⁹ Conservation and control measures applicable in the area covered by the Convention on future multilateral cooperation in the North-East Atlantic fisheries

Ioannis VARDAKASTANIS (EL), rapporteur, [REX/570](#)¹⁰ Water Politics: Between Desertification and Securitization - Time for a Blue Diplomacy

Kerli ATS (EE), rapporteur, [NAT/884](#)¹¹ Revision of EU marketing standards for agricultural products

Luca JAHIER (IT), co-rapporteur, [ECO/622](#)¹² New economic governance rules fit for the future

Maurizio MENSI (IT), rapporteur, [TEN/792](#)¹³ Drone Strategy 2.0

Panagiotis GKOFAS (EL), rapporteur, [TEN/818](#)¹⁴ Revision of Port state control Directive

Rudolf KOLBE (AT), rapporteur, [INT/1035](#)¹⁵ Patent package

1 EESC opinion INT/1006, <https://europa.eu/!6xrPvc>

2 EESC opinion REX/576, <https://europa.eu/!rcmHqt>

3 EESC opinion, REX/568, <https://europa.eu/!8Cqcpy>

4 EESC opinion SOC/762, <https://europa.eu/!hRNjnX>

5 EESC opinion SOC/772, <https://europa.eu/!mJ8hcw>

6 EESC opinion REX/573, <https://europa.eu/!VWHPG7>

7 EESC opinion ECO/607, <https://europa.eu/!gQCFNN>

8 EESC opinion ECO/625, <https://europa.eu/!d4xPXB>

9 EESC opinion NAT/883, <https://europa.eu/!T38ydv>

10 EESC opinion REX/570, <https://europa.eu/!3xVjxb>

11 EEC opinion NAT/884, <https://europa.eu/!tdWG68>

12 EESC opinion ECO/622, <https://europa.eu/!ttqpy8>

13 EESC opinion TEN/792, <https://europa.eu/!fWtYYJ>

14 EESC opinion TEN/818, <https://europa.eu/!PJPCdD>

15 EESC opinion INT/1035, <https://europa.eu/!tgHJCT>

The **complete texts** of all EESC opinions are available in various language versions on the [Committee's website](#)¹⁶

The **next EESC plenary session** will take place on 13 and 14 December 2023. For more information on the upcoming plenary session please visit [our website](#)¹⁷.

A list including all **new work appointments** of Civil Society Organisations' Group Members is available on the [Committee's website](#)¹⁸.

16 EESC opinions, <https://europa.eu/!wF86wY>

17 EESC plenary sessions, <https://europa.eu/!Dg84qG>

18 EESC, New work appointments, <https://europa.eu/!YfwtDN>

UPCOMING EVENTS



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07/11/2023 – 3rd meeting of the Social Economy Category

13/11/2023 – 3rd meeting of the Consumers and Environment Category

14/11/2023 – Symposium on Unmasking citizenwashing the dos and don'ts of participation

22/11/2023 – 3rd meeting of the Liberal Professions Category

The poster features a photograph of a speaker at a podium with a microphone, addressing an audience. In the top left corner, there are logos for the European Economic and Social Committee (EEESC) and the European Environmental Bureau (EEB). The text on the poster includes the event title, the organizing bodies, the date and time, and the location. Social media handles for @CSOGroupEEESC, @Green_Europe, and #Citizenwashing are also provided.

**Unmasking citizenwashing:
the dos and don'ts of participation**

Symposium co-organised by the Civil Society Organisations' Group and the European Environmental Bureau

14/11/2023 | 10.00 – 13.00 CET | EESC, room JDE63 + online (Interactio)

@CSOGroupEEESC
@Green_Europe
#Citizenwashing

For more information on this upcoming event visit our Group [website](#).

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