



European Economic and Social Committee | Comité économique et social européen

PERIOD **ACTIVITY REPORT**
2020 **SUSTAINABLE**
2023 **DEVELOPMENT**
 OBSERVATORY (SDO)

**DIRECTORATE B3 – LEGISLATIVE
WORK**

**PRESIDENT: LUTZ RIBBE (until
25/10/2022), ARNAUD SCHWARTZ**

Table of Contents

Introduction.....3
Activities and main findings3
Appendix I – List of meetings and events7

Introduction

As the 2020-2023 term of office is coming to an end, it is time to reflect on our activities and review the progress made on our priorities during this period. We continued to work in support of a European Green and Social Deal, which is essential for a just transition that leaves no one behind.

The SDO was the first EU body fully dedicated to sustainable development, and it continues to be a hub for discussing sustainability in Europe and beyond. In particular, our priorities for the 2020-2023 SDO half-mandate were to **accelerate the implementation of SDGs, strengthen the path towards climate neutrality and support a sustainable recovery and transition**. As the SDO is part of the NAT section, our work was closely aligned, making good use of synergies throughout the term of office.

We continued to work closely with the Labour Market Observatory ([LMO](#)) and the Observatory of the Digital Transition and the Single Market ([DSMO](#)) to promote synergies between the three observatories. There were two Joint Observatories' meetings on cross-cutting issues, bringing together the green, digital and social transition. The presidents of the Observatories were invited to each other's meetings to ensure a regular exchange.

Through our work, activities and events, we were able to keep SDGs high on the agenda of the Committee and the other institutions. As a result of our continued efforts to mainstream the SDGs, the Committee was asked to compile the civil society contribution to the first EU Voluntary Review on the SDGs. We also managed to promote a more cross-cutting approach with other policy areas in the NAT section and beyond, for example by organising debates on sustainable food and renewable energy.

Although the more recent challenges we faced with COVID and the war in Ukraine have overshadowed our daily lives, it remains clear that the climate and biodiversity crisis persists; this is why we stress the importance of maintaining or even strengthening our commitment to the objectives of the Agenda 2030 and the SDGs in order to achieve a sustainable, just and all-inclusive recovery.

Arnaud Schwartz Lutz Ribbe

Presidents of the Sustainable Development Observatory

Activities and main findings

Description of activities, key challenges and achievements/results

The SDO continued to work closely with the NAT section on three cross-cutting priorities: SDG implementation, climate neutrality and sustainable recovery and transition.

Our priority to **accelerate the implementation of SDGs** was at the core of the Observatory's work. We started off the mandate with the presentation of our work programme, and a thematic debate on the sustainability dimension of the CAP (22/10/2020), closely linked to SDG2 on Zero Hunger and SDG 15 on Life on Land. We continued our call for an overarching EU strategy for the SDGs with a public event in the context of the EU Green Week to take stock of the progress made on the 20th Anniversary of the first EU sustainable development strategy (01/06/2021), in line with our "whole of society" approach. Towards the end of our term of office, and with NAT in the lead, the EESC was asked to contribute to the first EU Voluntary Review on the SDGs and the SDO was consulted in the process (see NAT report for more details).

The **Circular Economy** holds promise for achieving multiple SDGs, including SDG 6 on energy, 8 on economic growth, 11 on sustainable cities, 12 on sustainable consumption and production, 13 on climate change, 14 on oceans, and 15 on life on land. The circular economy is thus an alternative model to our current linear economy, and remains a key social and environmental objective of the SDO.

The SDO has also been actively engaged in the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform ([ECESP](#)). While SDO Member Cillian Lohan continued his role as one of the three EESC members for the ECESP by participating in the steering group meetings and providing strategic input to ECESP, several SDO members participated in various circular events. These include the [#EUCircularTalks on Youth Voices on Circular Economy](#) on 3/6/2021, [Exploring EPR for textiles: taking responsibility for Europe's textile waste](#) on 21/9/2022, [The role of Network Governance and circular economy hubs in the EU circular transition](#) on 11/10/2021, [Circular textile design: get it right from the start!](#) on 9/11/2021, [Cities and Regions fostering circular economy transition](#) on 13/12/2021 and [Switching to the circular economy to tackle carbon emissions](#) on 28/06/2022. Moreover, SDO members had speaking opportunities at COP side-events co-organised by ECESP ([COP26](#) and [COP27](#)), as well as [COP15](#). Furthermore, several SDO members were part of the EESC delegation to the annual Circular Economy Stakeholder Conference, the ECESP's flagship event on the Circular Economy (3-4/11/2020, 1-2/03/2023 and 27-28/02/2023).

In the context of our priority **on climate neutrality**, we held a debate on the Climate Pact and the role of the Climate Pact Ambassadors in cooperation with DG CLIMA and the Climate Pact Secretariat, with particular focus on tackling the climate emergency through integrated food policies and empowering citizens via community energy (16/02/2021). Following the severe floods and wild fires in the summer of 2021, we dedicated a meeting to hearing testimonials on the impacts of the climate crisis, and on

how to translate climate science into concrete policy and climate action, showcasing the importance of practical examples of European solidarity at governmental level as well as amongst civil society actors (22/11/2021). The climate crisis was further exacerbated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the ensuing energy crisis led us to organise a debate on **how to speed up the shift to renewable energy in Europe** and reduce our dependency on fossil fuels (4/11/2022).

Half-way through the term of office, we organised a first **joint meeting of the SDO and the Temporary Study Group on food and food systems**, with the idea of increasing synergies and cooperation between the two groups and within the NAT section. This meeting focused on how sustainable food systems can contribute to climate neutrality and biodiversity protection, especially by using circular economy approaches.

As part of our continuing efforts to enhance our international ambition and cooperation, we supported the EESC's outreach to international events such as the **High-Level Political Forum** in New York and the **United Nations Climate Change Conference**, specifically by including members of the SDO in the newly created **Ad Hoc Group on climate** and in the delegations to COP26 and COP27 (see AHG on UNFCCC/COP report). Through the NAT section, we continued the **collaboration with EMAS** to make the EESC more sustainable.

On **youth engagement**, we have been working in close collaboration with the NAT section to ensure strong, meaningful youth engagement following the own-initiative opinion [Towards structured youth engagement](#) on climate and sustainability in the EU decision-making process, adopted in September 2020. As a result, young people are involved in our legislative work and we have launched the [EESC youth delegate to COP programme and established dedicated Youth Roundtables](#), among other things.

Regarding our priority of a **sustainable post-COVID recovery and transition that leaves no-one behind**, we started off the mandate with an online meeting on the role of European Civil Society in using digitalisation in a way that enables and drives sustainability to support the European Green Deal and the EU sustainable recovery (25/11/2020). We also dedicated one of our meetings to **The European Green Deal: enhancing the resilience of EU society to face future shocks and contribute to a healthy planet**.

In December 2021, the EESC adopted an Information Report on [Environmental protection as a prerequisite for respect for fundamental rights](#) to shed light on the concept of the right to a healthy environment as a fundamental right. It laid the groundwork for examining and advancing the EU's approach to ensuring a healthy environment and thus improve citizens' rights, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine.

On 10 October 2021, the three Observatories of the EESC organised the Conference entitled [Green, digital and social recovery – How the recovery plans are supporting a wellbeing economy for people](#)

[and planet?](#). The main purpose of this event was to present and discuss the involvement of civil society in the implementation of the recovery plans, through concrete examples. The Conference focused on the energy sector, the car industry and the digital sector to analyse the opportunities and challenges of shifting towards a wellbeing economy, aligned with the SDGs. The NAT study [Shifting priorities towards post-COVID sustainable reconstruction and recovery](#), published a few weeks before the Conference, provided a good overview of the extent to which a selection of national post-COVID-19 Recovery and Resilience Plans have adopted the principles of the wellbeing economy and sustainable development and contributed to feeding the event.

In 2022, the joint EESC Observatories Conference focused on [Accelerating transitions to build open strategic autonomy for Europe](#). Originally focused on matters of security and defence, open strategic autonomy has expanded to encompass a wide range of policies from geopolitics, trade and economics (i.e. critical raw materials and supply chains) to technology, environment and climate, social and governance. In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis and then with the war in Ukraine, everyone seems to agree that the EU should develop more capabilities to increase self-sufficiency. With the organisation of the Conference, the SDO aimed to explore what strategic autonomy should mean, how civil society could help to accelerate the transition to an open strategic autonomy of Europe, and how to ensure coherence between EU policies.

The last event organised by the SDO in the 2020-2023 period was the [Conference on Ecological overshoot: How the EU can push back against resource depletion](#). At this event proposals from organised civil society to combat resource depletion were considered, and good practices and initiatives to reduce the EU's impact on the environment were presented. The invited speakers reflected on how the European Green Deal and EU climate change policies were tackling the EU's footprint, and which policy measures were needed to reduce this footprint. They looked into the role of organised civil society in pushing back on resource depletion and the main challenges in scaling up the actions required to reduce the EU's footprint. This event was a timely milestone towards the [Beyond Growth Conference](#) that will be organised by the European Parliament in May 2023.

Appendix I – List of meetings and events

	As of 29 October 2020	2021	2022	Until 25 April 2023	Total
Observatory meetings	25/11/2020	16/02/2021 01/06/2021 Green Week partner event 22/11/2021	29/03/2022 (with TSG on food) 24/05/2022 04/11/2022	16/02/2023	8
Conferences and hearings organised by the Observatory		<u>Green, digital and social recovery – How the recovery plans are supporting a wellbeing economy for people and planet,</u> 22/10/2021	<u>Accelerating transitions to build open strategic autonomy for Europe,</u> 6/12/2022 Joint meeting of Presidents and Vice-Presidents of the three EESC Observatories and SOC, NAT and INT Section Presidents, 11/07/2022		