

Conference of the Diversity Europe Group of the European Economic and Social Committee in partnership with Civil Society Europe, Brussels, 5 November 2021

'Civil Society Organisations: key actors for the Future of Europe'

With the support of the EESC Civil Society Liaison Group and the Associational Life Category

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



**Civil Society Organisations:
Key actors for the Future of Europe**

Conference on the state of associations

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Realising our potential: civil society organisations as guardians of the common good

- Civil society organisations are key actors as **guardians of the common good** and integral to identifying **sustainable solutions**. It is imperative for the EU and national authorities to recognise and actively support their crucial role in **building trust, shaping public opinions** and as **positive agents of change**;
- These actors are the **vehicle** through which communities and societies express and act upon their **deepest concerns, commitments and ambitions**. Civil society are key actors in making national and European **politics** and **policy-making**, more **relevant** and **legitimate** to citizens;
- The Covid-19 pandemic has taught us once again how much we are **reliant on civil society**. They acted as a **safety net** at the local level, providing **essential health** and **social care services**, alongside local authorities;
- However, civil society's role goes **far beyond** social service provision. They are also **advocacy actors**, with an essential role in **building societal innovation, sustainable resilience** and **growth**, as well as in implementing the EU's **green** and **digital transitions**. In this context, national and European **youth organisations** should be systematically and meaningfully involved in policy dialogue and implementation;
- Crucially, if we want to live in **sustainable, resilient, equitable** and **democratic societies**, then civil society must be effectively involved **in partnership** and with **full respect**;
- Regrettably, there have been too many **missed opportunities** in engaging in dialogue with these actors at the EU level. **Article 11** of the **TEU** raised **expectations** which have largely **not been met**;
- Moreover, the **Covid-19 pandemic** has **exacerbated** existing **political** and **economic challenges** for civil society, thus seriously **undermining their sustainability**, as well as their **capacity to act efficiently** and **independently**;
- Within this context, there is **insufficient structure, regularity, transparency, inclusiveness and partnership in civil society dialogue** on EU and national policy-making. There are also too many **quantitative** and **qualitative differences** in this dialogue, depending on the policy area, European Institution or Member State. For this reason, **positive examples** of civil society dialogue should be **mainstreamed** and **multiplied**;
- In addition, there should be more **follow-up** and **monitoring** of civil society dialogue, with precise **explanations** of why certain proposals were implemented by national and European authorities.

Jointly finding solutions: civil society as enablers of democracy and fundamental rights

- The Covid-19 pandemic has clearly illustrated the importance of the **rule of law for our democracies, fundamental rights** and **daily lives**. Even in EU Member States, these **rights can be fragile** and **cannot be taken for granted**;
- Civil society organisations play an essential role in **protecting those values** and in overcoming threats to democracy from **identity politics** and **public distrust**;
- However, alongside economic adversities, civil society organisations are also facing **very significant political difficulties**, including a **shifting civic space** in favour of **illiberal civic organisations** and a **shrinking safe civic space**. The latter takes the form of **restrictions to civic freedoms** of association, assembly, expression and privacy online/offline, as well as **regulatory constraints** and **controls** of civil society organisations, notably **limitations to funding**. **Reduced access to decision-makers** and outright **threats** and **attacks** are also becoming increasingly prevalent;

- Within this context, it is imperative to move from awareness-raising to **political pressure** and **concrete action**. Civil society organisations must be **protected** by the **State**, through an **enabling environment** which encourages **dialogue** through **legislation**, provides **structured support**, while respecting the **independence** and **democratic role** of civil society;
- Civil society must also take recourse to existing **EU complaints procedures** and **work closer together across different sectors**, along topics of common interest at the national, regional and European levels;
- The EU should **effectively monitor** developments at the national level and **incentivise national authorities** to support the democratic role of civil society organisations. In addition, Member States should be encouraged to **measure** the **impact** of civil society and to **raise awareness** of their positive contribution;
- Crucially, civil society organisations need **sustainable and direct financing**, better **information** on existing EU funding opportunities and **simplified EU financial processes**;
- More EU programmes should include funding opportunities specifically for civil society organisations, for example, the **Multi-annual Financial Framework**, the **European Semester**, **Next Generation EU**, etc;
- Particular efforts should be made to reach out and fund **small civil society organisations**, including those in **non-urban areas**;
- Moreover, much greater efforts should be made to **educate citizens** on the value and contribution of civil society to democracies and fundamental rights.

Seizing the moment: jointly building the Europe of tomorrow

- The **National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs)** and the **Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE)**, constitute two **opportunities to be seized** by European civil society, in order to **'build back better'** and **design the future we want**;
- However, these two processes must be accompanied by a **greater sense of urgency** and **boldness** by all actors, including the European Institutions and Member States;
- Concretely, civil society organisations should be more efficiency involved in **co-designing, co-implementing and co-assessing the NRRPs** in each Member State, as already stated by the EESC in its Resolution *'Involvement of Organised Civil Society in the NRRPs: what works and what does not?'* (<https://europa.eu/!bX67CX> 25 February 2021);
- In particular, there should be greater involvement in the NRRPs of the **social economy**, a sector which is central to developing **inclusive** and **sustainable** models of **growth**;
- As regards the **CoFE**, it should explore all possible **policy and legislative measures** to enhance civil dialogue and participatory democracy, thus unleashing the **full potential of civil society** in European policy-making;
- It should also provide the opportunity to **better define** and **implement civil dialogue** beyond consultation, thus ensuring **policy coherence** throughout **all EU Institutions**;
- The involvement of European civil society and of the **EESC** in the **CoFE** will play a **decisive role** in representing the voices of **marginalised individuals** and **communities**, in reaching out to actors beyond the 'Brussels bubble' and hence, in devising **innovative and results-oriented proposals for EU reform**;
- In this context, the contribution of both the **Citizens' Panels** and of organised European civil society is **fully complementary** and both sets of actors will **enrich the outcome** of the process;

- Nonetheless, a **transparent, representative** and **bottom-up participation** by civil society actors in the CoFE is essential. These actors will also play a pivotal role in the **implementation** of the **recommendations** emanating from the CoFE;
- To this end, the EU must adopt a **structured, meaningful** and **long-term approach** to civil dialogue;
- It should also recognise the role of civil society organisations as the **collective representation of citizens** concerns in European democratic societies;
- Principally, it is recommended that the EU adopts an overall **EU Strategy to Promote Civic Participation and Civil Dialogue**;
- The EU is also urged to rapidly adopt a **Statute of European Associations** and NGOs. With a **uniform definition** and **legal provisions** between Member States and the EU, such a Statute would enable **cross-border cooperation** and **funding**;
- A Statute of European Associations would also necessitate agreement on **common EU standards** on the right to association and civil dialogue **across all EU policies** and **mechanisms**;
- Of central importance will be the extent to which civil society organisations **collaborate** closely along **topics of common interest** and forge **alliances** at the regional, national and European levels. **Transversal cooperation** will directly impact the effectiveness of civil dialogue and of a future Statute of European Associations.

Brussels, 11 November 2021