

Conference of the Diversity Europe Group of the European Economic and Social Committee
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*Civil Society Organisations during and after Covid-19:
what challenges and what future?*

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Extraordinary meeting of the Diversity Europe Group

**Civil Society Organisations
during and after COVID-19:
what challenges and what future?**

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Preamble

The impact of the Covid-19 global pandemic will linger for many years. As will the reminder that health can have a direct impact on economic and social stability, even in the EU. The challenge, is to turn fears into opportunities. To accept that civil society organisations are guardians of the common good and integral to identifying solutions. To recognise that they shape public opinions and are positive agents of change. To acknowledge that the current health crisis will be won by and in communities. Citizens have experienced Covid-19 as a human-centred pandemic and as Europe slowly moves towards socio-economic reconstruction and recovery, people must remain staunchly at the centre. Building just societies with equal recovery, will only be possible through compelling civil society engagement and dialogue. These are the lessons of the Covid-19 pandemic to the Porto Social Summit and the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Working in partnership: civil society striving for sustainable, equitable and resilient communities

- The Covid-19 pandemic which engulfed European societies and economies, has **devastated citizen's lives and livelihoods**, dramatically increasing levels of **poverty, inequality, domestic violence and gender divisions**. Women in particular have been **disproportionally affected**, in terms of **unemployment, imbalances in care and domestic responsibilities** and notably, in terms of exposure as **front-line workers**;
- Existing **systemic problems** have been **revealed and magnified**, such as under-investment in public health, social security and education systems, as well as **insufficient coordination** within and among EU Member States, notably on public health;
- The eruption of **civic activism, volunteering and solidarity** by individual citizens of all ages and backgrounds, as well as by civil society organisations, notably social economy actors, has been **inspirational** and their sense of **responsibility exemplary**. Without these actors stepping in to fill the gaps, the human cost of this pandemic would have been much greater;
- Crucially, these actors have focussed on the **dignity, equal treatment and respect** for fellow community members, whilst demonstrating high levels of **adaptability, innovation and resilience**;
- Their activities have directly contributed to enabling the continuation of **essential public health, education and social care services**. They have reached out to **families, the elderly, young people, persons with disability, ethnic minorities and migrants**, facing a range of difficulties from **food and financial security to mental health, domestic violence, digital poverty** etc. They have also alleviated everyday life through **cultural** initiatives and launched key **public information and advocacy campaigns**. These include **combatting misinformation** on the **Covid-19 vaccines**, highlighting the **risk of discrimination and increases in poverty** among certain groups of people at risk of social exclusion, e.g. the elderly.

Measuring the scale of the challenges: first steps to overcome the hurdles

- The **obstacles** faced by civil society organisations during the Covid-19 pandemic fall within the categories of **societal, economic and political**. Collectively, these challenges will reduce their ability to **restructure and recover**, be sustainable and enhance their future influence;

- The **societal difficulties** resemble those faced elsewhere, e.g. low digital literacy of workers and low digital accessibility of beneficiaries, notably the most marginalised, lack of appropriate digital infrastructure and equipment, reduced access to political authorities and the negative psychological impact of the pandemic;
- The **economic obstacles** reflect the sudden escalation in requests for services, reduction in donations, the uncertainties of project funding and increases in operating costs;
- **Successful examples** of civil society activities include cases with **flexibility** in the **redirection of resources** to emergency assistance, waving or reducing co-financing of operating grants, as well as ad hoc assistance from local authorities;
- As regards the **political challenges** faced by civil society organisations during the Covid-19 pandemic, these include **lack of recognition of their capacities**, **non-involvement** by national relief taskforces, **centralised government approaches**, as well as limited dialogue with civil society organisations in the preparation of the **EU National Recover and Resilience Plans (NRRPs)**. The EESC Resolution '*Involvement of Organised Civil Society in the NRRPs: what works and what does not?*' adopted on 25 February 2021 clearly illustrates these shortcomings and proposes innovative solutions (<https://europa.eu/!bX67CX>);
- Of particular importance have been the increases in **negative public** and **political discourse** against civil society organisations in certain Member States, the persistence of the '**shrinking civic space**' and **populism**, which threaten both their current and future role and capacities to advocate democratic values, fundamental rights and the rule of law.

The future we want: civil society in the driving seat

- The Covid-19 pandemic has ushered in a heightened sense of **social cohesion** and **social activism**, with **families** and civic activism providing crucial **social safety nets**. The pandemic has nurtured greater respect for the values of **solidarity**, **social justice**, **inter-generational cooperation**, **gender equality**, **sustainability**, **just green** and **digital transitions**. It is now imperative to **leverage public support for these values**, in order to **re-think our growth** and **governance models**, build a more equal society based on **citizen's well-being** and place civil society organisations at the **centre** of this **reconstruction** and **recovery**;
- Essential to this mind-shift will be a strict adherence to **policy coherence**. Ensuring that the post Covid-19 recovery is not dealt with in isolation from the **deepening social, economic, democratic** and **climate crises** in EU Member States, nor from the necessity for **green** and **digital transitions**. The **SDGs** and **poverty reduction** in particular, must be at the heart of this recovery;
- Imagining and building these resilient, equal and sustainable societies will require **bottom-up initiatives**, which embrace **new definitions of development beyond GDP** and which respect the **opinions** and **rights of citizens**. Moreover, it is imperative that **limitations to rights** introduced during the pandemic are not continued post Covid-19;
- The first step in this reconstruction, will be ensuring that all parts of society are effectively involved in the **co-design, co-participation, co-implementation** and **co-assessment of the NRRPs**. It is now time to fulfil the opportunities of Article 11 of the Treaty on the EU and to find **new, more meaningful** and more effective ways of **engaging** with civil society organisations. Using **existing consultation structures** such as the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) and the European Semester process. Civil society actors should also

be explicitly recognised as both **implementing partners** and as **beneficiaries** of the NRRP funds;

- Crucially, in order for civil society to be able to effectively contribute and **shape post Covid-19 communities, societies and economies**, it must embark on a number of **fundamental internal revisions**. These include **re-designing their own structures** to render them more **proactive** and **sustainable** on a permanent basis;
- The opportunities of **digitalisation** should be seized upon, in order to prepare civil society organisations for future crises. **Inequalities** relating to **accessibility** must be reduced by redirecting the EU Cohesion Funds, notably the European Social Fund, towards **digital literacy, training programmes** and **digital infrastructure**;
- The principles of **partnership** and **structural alignment** along topics of **common interest** will be of principal importance. Working in **collaboration, networking, exchanging good practices** and seeking rapid **consensus**. Collaborating across **different types** of civil society actors and movements at the national and EU levels, including enterprises and trade unions;
- Better informing on existing **EU funding opportunities** for civil society organisations, investing in **simplified administrative** and **financial processes** are also primordial. Civil society organisations need **sustainable financing** to be able to experiment, innovate and act with agility;
- Particular efforts should be made to **promote meaningful youth engagement**, collaboration and participation, thus **mainstreaming inter-generational considerations**;
- It is essential that the **essence, contribution** and **value of volunteering** are **acknowledged** and **advocated** by the whole of society;
- The EU must strongly encourage **national authorities** to systematically and constructively **engage in dialogue** with civil society organisations. This includes properly **measuring**, through robust and comparative **research**, the impact of civil society. **Raising awareness** of their **positive contribution**, creating an **enabling EU legal environment and policy mix**, to be extended to the national level, are also of key importance;
- In this sense, the **social economy** should be recognized as one of the **key players** that can re-shape the post-crisis economy by providing **inclusive** and **sustainable models**;
- It is imperative that the EU supports more vehemently the pivotal role played by civil society organisations in promoting and defending **European values, democracy, fundamental rights** and **the rule of law**, against **increasing illiberalism, populism** and '**shrinking civic space**'. Civil society must have an essential role to play in **rebuilding trust** between citizens and the EU, in rendering democracy more **resilient** and **responsive to citizen's needs**. Greater explicit EU recognition and support for these roles should result from the EU Social Summit in Porto and the Conference on the Future of the EU.