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Brussels, 22 October 2020

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| **PLENARY SESSION   16, 17 AND 18 SEPTEMBER 2020**  **SUMMARY OF OPINIONS ADOPTED** |
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The plenary session of 16, 17 and 18 September 2020 was marked by an end-of-mandate ceremony with video messages by **Ursula von der Leyen**, president of the European Commission; **David Sassoli**, president of the European Parliament; **Maroš Šefčovič**, vice-president of the European Commission; and was attended by **Klara Dobrev**, vice-president of the European Parliament; and by **Giuliano da Empoli**, writer and journalist, founding chairman of Volta think tank.

The following opinions were adopted at the plenary session:

# **SINGLE MARKET, PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION**

* ***The digital single market – trends and opportunities for SMEs***

**Rapporteur:** Pedro Almeida Freire (Employers' Group – PT)

**Reference:** Own-initiative opinion

EESC-2017-01768-00-01-AC

**Key points:**

In hearings that the EESC held in a few countries (Belgium, Germany, Portugal and Romania) selected in respect of the 2019 Digital Economy and Society Index, it noted that many European small and medium enterprises, in particular micro- and small enterprises (93% of businesses in Europe) have been slow to adopt digital solutions. Those that have taken the plunge told the EESC that they faced a number of barriers hampering their operations.

The EESC:

## recommends that every effort be made to remove the main barrier, which is the lack of comprehensive high-quality broadband coverage across Europe;

## proposes that schools offer compulsory courses in digital technologies and that small and medium enterprises be able to access training in these tools. In addition, appropriate and affordable continuing training for the self-employed, small and medium enterprises' managers and their employees needs to be further supported and promoted;

## calls for tax harmonisation in this field, as ensuring fair competition between small and medium enterprises and large companies is essential for the proper functioning of the internal market;

## considers that small and medium enterprises' access to financing is a priority in order to support the investments that these businesses make to adapt to the digital transformation of society, trade and consumption patterns and to the internationalisation of trade.

***Contact***: *Silvia Staffa*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 83 78 – e-mail:* [*Silvia.Staffa@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Silvia.Staffa@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***SME strategy***

**Rapporteur:** Milena Angelova (Employers' Group – BG)

**Co-rapporteur:** Panagiotis Gkofas (Diversity Europe Group – EL)

**Reference:** COM(2020) 103 final

EESC-2020-01450-00-01-AC

**Key points:**

The EESC:

## calls upon the European Commission to implement the strategy by adopting a coherent, integrated and cross-cutting approach, placing small and medium enterprises at the heart of all key political decisions, such as the Green Deal, the Industrial Strategy and when shaping the EU budget and empowering the Recovery Plan for Europe;

## advocates applying multi-level governance. At EU level, a Cross-Directorate-General small and medium enterprises Taskforce has to ensure that:

## the "Think Small First" principle is applied in all policy areas impacting small and medium enterprises, and especially for the Recovery Plan for Europe, the Invest EU Programme, the Solvency Support Instrument and the European Green Deal Investment Plan;

## the implementation of the "Next Generation SME Strategy" and the Small Business Act is properly carried out and evaluated within the European Semester exercise and the small and medium enterprises scoreboard that has been created;

## the Member States strongly commit to implementing the small and medium enterprises Strategy, since many EU policies have failed due to negative reactions, inaction or evasion, including gold-plating, at national level;

## organisations representing small and medium enterprises and social partners have a central and greater role and can make constructive contributions, as this is somewhat lacking in the EC's current proposal;

## the concept of ecosystems as priority areas for funding is only introduced after thorough consultations with the organisations representing small and medium enterprises at EU, national and regional level to guarantee that it properly reflects the actual situation of small and medium enterprises, as it seems to be too bold a step.

## asks the EC to draw up a "Next Generation SME Strategy", which must take stock of the small and medium enterprises supporting measures in the Recovery Plan for Europe to help them to mitigate the negative effects of the lockdown, social distancing and health security measures on their business and to recover quickly.

***Contact***: *Silvia Staffa*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 83 78 – e-mail:* [*Silvia.Staffa@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Silvia.Staffa@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***Strengthening non-profit social enterprises***

**Rapporteur:** Krzysztof Stanisław Balon (Diversity Europe Group – PL)

**Reference:** Exploratory opinion

EESC-2020-01962-00-01-AC

**Key points:**

The EESC:

## calls for the strengthening of and targeted support for social enterprises and other social economy organisations, particularly those that reinvest any profits fully in tasks in the public interest or for non-profit purposes as set out in their statutes;

## considers that a protocol on diversity in types of enterprise should be annexed to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, along the same lines as Protocol No 26 on services of general interest (SGIs), including a separate definition of non-profit social enterprises;

## believes that support for non-profit social economy organisations should also be addressed in the Social Scoreboard linked to the European Semester.

***Contact***: *Marie-Laurence Drillon*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 83 20 – e-mail:* [*Marie-Laurence.Drillon@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Marie-Laurence.Drillon@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***Tourism and transport in 2020 and beyond***

**Rapporteur:** Panagiotis Gkofas (Diversity Europe Group – EL)

**Reference:** COM(2020) 550 final

EESC-2020-02964-00-00-AC

**Key points:**

The EESC:

## believes that the European Commission Communication Tourism and transport in 2020 and beyond (COM(2020) 550 final) should be a strategic policy tool for rethinking the EU sustainable model of tourism and transport;

## calls for a comprehensive package of measures, with guidelines and recommendations aimed at:

## the safe restoration of transport and connectivity following the adoption of a common political framework agreement for all EU Member States;

## establishing an EU common strategic plan to help the Member States implement economic and support measures for tourism small and medium enterprises, restaurants, hotels, travel agencies, tour guides, etc.;

## pending a vaccine, establishing a EU health passport, with a harmonised Passenger Locator Form and QR codes combined with a multilingual Health Assistance Platform+

## establishing immediately a European mechanism for monitoring the implementation of support measures for small and medium enterprises and workers, particularly liquidity, lending and transparency in support measures.

## asks for intensive social dialogue and a substantial policy agenda which are urgently needed to negotiate updated sectoral collective agreements for the tourism and transport sectors. These include small and medium enterprises and representative small and medium enterprises organisations most affected by COVID-19.

***Contact***: *Alice Tétu*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 82 86 – e-mail:* [*Alice.Tetu@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Alice.Tetu@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***Mandatory due diligence***

**Rapporteur:** Thomas Wagnsonner (Workers' Group – AT)

**Co-rapporteur:** Emmanuelle Butaud-Stubbs (Employers' Group – FR)

**Reference:** Exploratory opinion

EESC-2020-02926-00-00-AC

**Key points:**

The EESC:

## affirms that it is time for the European Commission to act and propose legislation to the Member States and the European Parliament on mandatory due diligence that acknowledges responsibility based on current standards and offers a clear and secure legal framework for European businesses;

## believes that due diligence obligations should cover most notably environmental impacts. They should be considered of great importance for sustainable business conduct and be a high priority in global value chains;

## considers that a mandatory due diligence framework would be realised by an agreed standard that is enforced by proportionate, effective and dissuasive sanctions, whereas liability would have to be based on the violation of a clearly defined set of Human Rights;

## stresses that the following quality standards must be ensured in a binding legislative initiative:

## clear definitions and comprehensible language;

## ensuring legal certainty and practicability in particular on the applicable law, proportionate reporting requirements respecting legitimate businesses secrecy.

***Contact***: *Claudia Drewes-Wran*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 80 67 – e-mail:* [*Claudia.Drewes-Wran@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Claudia.Drewes-Wran@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

# **Economic and Monetary Union, Economic and Social Cohesion**

* ***Economic governance review 2020***

**Rapporteur:** Judith Vorbach (Workers' Group – AT)

**Co-rapporteur:** Tommaso Di Fazio (Diversity Europe Group – IT)

**Reference:** COM(2020) 55 final

EESC-2020-00732-00-00-AC

**Key points:**

The EESC:

## welcomes this review and calls for a reform to establish a prosperity-focused economic governance, which focuses on a range of key policy objectives, such as sustainable and inclusive growth, full employment and decent work, and avoids asymmetric effects in the Member States;

## believes that after a future deactivation of the general escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact, the best way forward would not be a “return to normal” but a “turn” to a revised and rebalanced economic governance framework as follows:

## make public finances sustainable in the long run and eliminate macroeconomic imbalances by: acknowledging that economic difficulties make budget consolidation extremely difficult; prioritising sustainable and inclusive growth while being aware of fiscal multipliers; ensuring sufficient revenues by combating aggressive tax planning and tax fraud; implementing symmetrical indicators showing surpluses as well as deficits; placing more weight on employment and social development within the Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure;

## ensure that fiscal policies target both sustainability and short-term stabilisation by: strongly mitigating the influence of economically and technically questionable indicators; placing more weight on increasing revenue; conducting further analyses in the event of significant deviations;

## bring about key reforms and stimulate sustainable investment by: applying the Golden Rule and safeguarding public assets to ensure future productivity and prosperity; implementing a strategic investment plan; making public support conditional on sustainable and social criteria;

## put forward an economic governance framework based on solidarity with responsibility by: developing solutions together with the affected countries on an equal footing in the event of significant deviations; enhancing the role of the European Parliament; involving the social partners and civil society to a greater extent; making consultation of the EESC mandatory;

## deepen the Economic and Monetary Union in the following areas: implementing a stabilisation function in order to pursue a common countercyclical policy; combating the disastrous consequences of the COVID-19 crisis in a solidarity-based way; issuing long-term common debt accompanied by measures to distribute the tax burden fairly; deepening the banking and the capital market unions to further consolidate the single market by introducing effective regulation;

## calls for the pivotal question of how to adapt the Treaty on functioning of the European Union's economic governance provisions to the EU's current economic reality to be debated at the upcoming conference on the future of Europe.

***Contact:*** *Alexander Alexandrov*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 98 05 – email:* [*Alexander.Alexandrov@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Alexander.Alexandrov@eesc.europa.eu) *)*

* ***Revision of the Territorial Agenda of the EU, the Leipzig Charter and the Urban Agenda for the EU***

**Rapporteur:** Petr Zahradník (Employers' Group – CZ)

**Co-rapporteur:** Roman Haken (Diversity Europe Group – CZ)

**Reference:** Exploratory opinion

EESC-2020-01847-00-00-AC

**Key points:**

The EESC:

## recommends that the new circumstances and parameters that have arisen during the operating period of the current Leipzig Charter (see paragraph 2.2) be fully included in the content of the new Charter, with a view to ensuring that the Charter is functionally compatible with the future EU multiannual financial framework and its links with the European Semester process. It should also take into account the impacts and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economic, social, environmental and territorial development of the Member States;

## draws attention to the anticipated increase in distortions and risks (economic, health, environmental, cyber, etc.) and proposes to explicitly highlight the need to systematically consider resilience in the New Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities;

## welcomes the text of the Territorial Agenda 2030 and endorses its central pillars, which are based on justice, an environmental focus and the need for the territorial dimension to be reflected in all relevant areas of public administration;

## welcomes the opportunity provided by the Territorial Agenda 2030 to participate in the process of implementing it;

## is aware of the huge scope for using an integrated approach in territorial and urban development and the benefits associated with this approach in terms of synergising the effects, saving on costs and making functional connections between the content of supported projects;

## points out that there is also scope for an integrated approach in terms of the possibility of linking public and private financial resources to increase capacity and share risk for the benefit of both territorial and urban development subject to democratic control, transparent governance and accountability;

## strongly supports a balance between different types of territory in the use of territorial and urban development instruments. It recommends using the most appropriate support instruments for each type of territory, while respecting the principle of subsidiarity;

## underlines the importance of new models and aspects of the development of urban agglomerations and metropolitan areas as key factors for improving of the EU's global competitiveness through their openness;

## is, however, also well aware of the importance of protection and support for peripheral and outlying, mainly rural, territories to help include them in modern and sustainable regional development;

## recommends that the Urban Agenda be coordinated as much as possible with territorial cohesion policy. This can be achieved through functional partnerships between urban and rural areas and through integrated projects aimed at enhancing the sustainability and resilience of the local economic, social and environmental systems of cities, their functional areas and their rural periphery;

## calls on the European Commission to support exchanges of experience gradually leading to methodological recommendations for taking emerging risks and resilience into account as part of the preparation and assessment of development plans at urban and regional levels;

## notes, on the one hand, that metropolitan areas and urban agglomerations – thanks to the concentration of resources and the diversification of economic activities – are well placed to be the growth poles of the national economy as a whole as well as acting as its contact points in the context of economic openness and globalisation. On the other hand, it is fully aware of the need for a more balanced development of the entire national economy, including rural and peripheral areas;

## insists that a more balanced representation must exist under the partnership principle in urban and regional development;

## notes that, in practice, the integrated territorial approach is primarily applied in rural areas (LEADER/CLLD) and in the case of functional urban and metropolitan agglomerations.

***Contact:*** *Georgios Meleas*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 97 95 – email:* [*Georgios.Meleas@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Georgios.Meleas@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***Combatting tax fraud, tax avoidance and money laundering***

**Rapporteur:** Javier Doz Orrit (Workers' Group – ES)

**Reference:** Own-initiative opinion

EESC-2020-00997-00-00-AC

**Key points:**

The EESC:

## proposes launching a European pact to effectively combat tax fraud, evasion and avoidance and money laundering;

## urges the European institutions and the Member States to provide the financial and human resources required for the effective implementation of existing European legislation;

## finds that eradicating criminal activity by tax havens should be a priority for the EU;

## supports the new Anti-Money Laundering/Terrorist Financing action plan, that should be implemented as a matter of urgency;

## backs the proposed measures like the establishment of a single EU legal code and the creation of a European supervisory body with direct responsibility for monitoring and investigating;

## wants the EU and Member States to maintain common positions in international forums such as the Financial Action Task Force (FATF, housed at the OECD), G20 and the UN;

## demands that the measures taken take account of European data protection legislation and European Court of Justice case law on the matter and ensure that they entail the smallest possible administrative and financial burden for the Member States and the obliged entities;

## calls on the European Commission to assess the current list of non-cooperative jurisdictions and to consider the possibility of establishing additional criteria;

## welcomes the introduction of tax indicators into the European Semester;

## calls for the progressive abolition of the schemes set up in certain Member States for citizenship or residence in exchange for investment;

## supports a global solution on the corporate taxation of companies with a significant digital presence under the aegis of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's work, but if a solution is not reached by the end of 2020, the EU should resume its initiative for taxing large digitalised companies;

## finds that the Anti Tax Avoidance Directive should be revised to include rules on tax treatment in relation to low-tax jurisdictions and on the repatriation of dividends or capital gains that have not been taxed abroad;

## calls on the Commission to carry out a study on the role of "letterbox companies" in tax fraud, evasion and avoidance as well as money laundering and react to findings with appropriate legislation;

## calls on the Commission and the Member States to explore the concept of minimum effective taxation of corporate profits, and its possible application;

## proposes that EU trade or economic agreements include, in keeping with World Trade Organisation's principles and rules, a chapter containing clauses against tax offences, money laundering and aggressive tax planning and for cooperation between tax authorities.

***Contact:*** *Gerald Klec*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 99 09 – email:* [*Gerald.Klec@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Gerald.Klec@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***The rule of law and its impact on economic growth***

**Rapporteur:** Jukka Ahtela (Employers' Group – FI)

**Reference:** Own-initiative opinion

EESC-2020-01261-00-01-AC

**Key points:**

The EESC:

## underlines that the weakening of the rule of law affects the functioning of society, fundamental rights, civil society, as well as the economy;

## calls on the European Commission to make efforts to measure the economic impact of the rule of law, taking into account both the substantive and the procedural part of the rule of law;

## welcomes the efforts of the European Commission and other institutions to develop appropriate tools to defend EU values and promote a rule of law culture;

## considers that the effectiveness of existing tools could still be improved and should be complemented by measures focused on the rule of law, but geared more effectively towards economic considerations;

## calls on the Commission to accelerate highlighting the relevance of the rule of law in the European Semester as one of the key elements underpinning a competitive and sustainable economy;

## recommends that national follow-up review processes be created, which include representatives from civil society and the social partners;

## reiterates its call for an annual forum of civil society organisations, which would contribute to the annual rule of law review cycle with its diverse representation;

## calls for increased financial and substantive support for organisations involved in defending and promoting the rule of law and fundamental rights;

## underlines the importance of sanctioning non-compliance with the rule of law, otherwise, the value of EU membership for all complying members is reduced;

## calls for a permanent awareness-raising strategy to alert EU citizens to just how crucial the rule of law is.

***Contact:*** *Krisztina Perlaky-Tóth*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 97 40 – e-mail:* [*Krisztina.PerlakyToth@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Krisztina.PerlakyToth@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***The role of cohesion policy in the transformation of the economy***

**Rapporteur:** Gonçalo Lobo Xavier (Employers' Group – PT)

**Reference:** Exploratory opinion

EESC-2020-01921-00-00-AC

**Key points:**

The EESC:

## calls on the European Commission to address cohesion policy as a fundamental tool for dealing with the huge challenges caused by the coronavirus pandemic. There is an urgent need to respond swiftly, and the financial means to help and support Member States must be deployed in keeping with the relevant criteria, but also with courage;

## agrees that the priorities of the German Presidency must focus on these new circumstances and calls for action to protect employment and social rights across the Union;

## believes that any recovery plan for Europe must bear in mind the consequences of this crisis, namely Europe's dependence on other economic areas for specific products and services. It is clear that Europe must reflect on its trade policy, boost innovation and turn to good advantage its smart specialisation strategy based on regions and a sectoral industrial approach;

## believes that digitalisation of services must continue to be a priority for all Member States. This crisis has shown the need for simpler, more comprehensive services to support all Europeans, particularly those who require extra support;

## agrees that there is still a need to invest in full broadband systems to allow rural areas to develop modern agriculture and tourism activities. Cohesion policy instruments have been neglecting this need, or at least Member States have been distracted from existing opportunities under the financial programmes;

## strongly believes that e-business is fundamental to the "new normal" as a result of COVID-19's impact on society and the economy. It will be necessary to provide different options for both companies and consumers. Small and medium enterprises can also benefit from this new approach, so structural funds must be allocated to allow companies to discover new markets and new opportunities;

## believes that there is an urgent need to protect small and medium enterprises and their sustainability. Therefore, the usual, existing European tools such as the European Social Fund must be deployed;

## draws attention to the need to boost and create the right conditions for developing public investment in, and mechanisms for, life-long training schemes to allow people to adjust their skills to the needs of the market now and also to prepare to provide future generations with new skills;

## also agrees that the "Green Deal" programme must be supported and urges the European Commission to provide clarification to Member States as regards, for example, how the EUR 40 billion in the "Just Transition Fund" can be used to "decarbonise" the economy;

## welcomes the "REACT programme", under which EUR 55 billion will be invested to support cohesion policy, but it calls on the European Commission to swiftly inform Member States and provide clarification about the conditions and distribution criteria, bearing in mind the fact that these funds must be allocated by the end of 2022;

## suggests that consultation and extensive involvement of civil society organisations in the definition of regional policies must be ensured.

***Contact:*** *Georgios Meleas*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 97 95 – e-mail:* [*Georgios.Meleas@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Georgios.Meleas@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***COVID-19: Amendments to the CPR, ERDF and Cohesion Fund***

**Rapporteur:** Mihai Ivaşcu (Diversity Europe Group – RO)

**Reference:** COM(2020) 452 final – 2018/0196 COD

COM(2020) 450 final – 2018/0197 COD

EESC-2020-02766-00-01-AC

**Key points:**

The EESC:

## fully supports the initiative of the Commission to use the EU budget to mobilise investment and offer financial support during the post-COVID-19 recovery;

## considers that certain amendments to the Common Provisions Regulation proposal are absolutely necessary and salutes the intention to add simplification and flexibility for the seven shared management funds;

## considers that the proposed flexibilities are the right approach in a complicated economic and social situation and shall allow Member States to use the available funds where they are most needed. The post-COVID-19 recovery should follow sustainable principles and a correlation of efforts between the European Regional Development Fund, Cohesion Funds and other European programmes;

## on the other hand, is dissatisfied with disparities on how different Member States include and involve the social partners and civil society organisations in the preparation of Partnership Agreements and in the setting up and implementing of programmes, as well as within the monitoring committees;

## considers that special attention must be given to the regions severely affected by the COVID-19 crisis and which face the most difficulties to resume sustained economic recovery. Social inclusion and reducing disparities both between Member States and between different regions are and should be the top priority of Cohesion Funds;

## agrees that extended timeline flexibility is absolutely necessary and supports the proposal that the transfers could be done at the beginning of the programming period or at any other point during the implementation phase;

## believes that ensuring temporary measures to enable the use of the Funds in exceptional circumstances will increase trust and correct imbalances in the economy. Expected high public debt shall have an important impact on the economy, if not efficiently supported by all necessary means;

## believes that it is imperative that the EU budget is allowed to be more flexible when dealing with adverse shocks, especially those that are not economic in origin;

## recommends that the EU should pursue policies for improving trans-border cooperation in times of crisis. Better protocols and enhanced collaboration would allow for a streamlined and prompt European response to any kind of catastrophe.

***Contact:*** *Georgios Meleas*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 97 95 – e-mail:* [*georgios.meleas@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:georgios.meleas@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***Public sector loan facility and amendment to the Just Transition Fund***

**Rapporteur:** Petr Zahradník (Employers' Group – CZ)

**Reference:** COM(2020) 453 final – 2020/0100 COD

COM(2020) 460 final – 2020/0006 COD

EESC-2020-02765-00-00-AC

**Key points:**

## The EESC:

## strongly supports and appreciates a big increase in the Just Transition Fund financial allocation to facilitate a changeover from a carbon intensive economy and society to a more modern, sustainable and diversified one;

## is deeply convinced that for reaching an optimal result in the Just Transition process, not only sufficient financial resources of a modern type addressed to precisely defined areas of support, but also the flexible interpretation of State Aid rules is of great importance;

## appreciates the proposal for a public sector loan facility and considers it innovative, original and highly demanded by the public sector entities on their way to climate transition;

## underlines that after the new proposals connected with the Recovery Plan and the Next Generation EU, the Just Transition Fund has a real chance to become a very important tool of the future Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 with its benefits not only for the EU Green Deal, but also for the post-COVID recovery and reconstruction;

## calls on the relevant EU institutions to accelerate the preparatory, approving and implementation works with the adjusted Just Transition Fund as much as possible to introduce it to practical functioning soon. In this game, time is a fatal parameter;

## welcomes the specific attention paid in the public sector loan facility to the less developed regions in the just transition;

## is convinced that the innovative idea on which the public sector loan facility is based could also serve as a source of inspiration for a similar type of financial products at the Member States level;

## considers the eligibility selection criteria as well as the proposed investment areas very relevant for the purpose of a just transition;

## also welcomes and supports additional financing in favour of the InvestEU Programme and its dedicated just transition scheme which increases the potential to utilise financial instruments in the process of just transition.

***Contact:*** *Georgios Meleas*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 97 95 – e-mail:* [*Georgios.Meleas@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Georgios.Meleas@eesc.europa.eu))

# **EMPLOYMENT, SOCIAL AFFAIRS AND CITIZENSHIP**

* ***Decent minimum wages across Europe***

**Rapporteurs:** Stefano Mallia (Employers' Group – MT)

Oliver Röpke (Workers' Group - AT)

**Reference:**  Exploratory opinion

EESC-2020-00358-00-00-AC-TRA

**Key points:**

The EESC:

## underlines that in the context of the economic recession following the COVID-19 pandemic, coordinated and decisive short and medium-term policies are needed to safeguard employment and income as well as to ensure a rapid and sustainable relaunch of economic activities, competitiveness and a well-functioning social and economic model. Quality jobs, with fair wages – including decent minimum wages across Europe – are needed as part of the solution. Economic factors, including productivity and the sustainability of enterprises, must also be taken into consideration.

## stresses that wages, including minimum wages, are an important aspect of the European Union's social market economy model, and that ensuring decent minimum wages in all the Member States would help in achieving a number of EU objectives. Wages are linked to the economic situation in a country, region or sector, and changes may have an impact on employment, competitiveness and macro-economic demand.

## acknowledges that there are concerns regarding possible EU action in the area. Among the key concerns are that the EU has no competence to act on "pay", including pay levels, and that such action could interfere with the social partners' autonomy and undermine collective bargaining systems.

## welcomes the Commission's recognition that there is scope for EU action to promote the role of collective bargaining in supporting minimum wage adequacy and coverage. Measures to support collective bargaining could be included in the EU action on minimum wages whilst respecting different national industrial relations systems.

## welcomes the opportunity to further contribute to the discussion on what action could be taken at European level, taking into account the different realities in Member States and division of competences between the EU and national level.

## believes that the most effective way of reducing in-work poverty is by decent minimum wages and person-centred, integrated, active inclusion policies, which promote access to adequate minimum income, employment services and quality jobs, as well as to essential and enabling social services

## fully appreciates the complexity of the issues involved in this debate and recognises that minimum wages are not the silver bullet that will solve all problems. However, a common EU approach with clear policy objectives for the Member States to achieve, through different means, and ensuring the involvement of the social partners, as part of well-functioning collective bargaining systems, could ensure that workers' rights to fair remuneration and to freedom of association and employers' needs in relation to productivity and competitiveness are safeguarded.

***Contact:*** *June Bedaton and Sophie Zimmer*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 81 34 – e-mail:* [*June.Bedaton@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:June.Bedaton@eesc.europa.eu))

*(Tel.: 0032 2 546 95 64 – e-mail:* [*Sophie.Zimmer@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Sophie.Zimmer@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

1. ***The protection of unaccompanied migrant minors in Europe***

**Rapporteur:** Özlem Yildirim (Workers' Group – FR)

**Reference:**  Own-initiative opinion

EESC-2020-02281-00-00-AC

**Key points:**

The EESC:

### is concerned about the situation of unaccompanied minors, one of the most vulnerable migrant groups;

### recommends that the principle of "the best interests of the child" should take precedence over all other national and international law;

### calls on the European Union to develop a coherent and uniform approach to protecting unaccompanied foreign minors in Europe;

## urges the European Commission to draw up a Directive on the protection of unaccompanied minors that serves the best interests of the child;

### reiterates its request to the Member States to ensure that undocumented migrant children are protected first and foremost as children;

### calls on the Member States to prevent any form of violence against migrant children by creating safe, legal and regular migration paths;

### points out that detention of children, regardless of their administrative status, is absolutely prohibited and condemns this practice in the strongest terms;

### points out that every unaccompanied minor must be supported by a qualified guardian;

### notes that a young person who presents themselves as a minor must be considered a minor until a final court ruling has been delivered;

### calls on the Member States to evaluate minority based on a body of evidence, but calls for bone age tests to be stopped, given that such tests are not reliable;

### intends to conduct a series of follow-up studies on specific sub-themes given the difficulty of covering all the issues and rules relevant to unaccompanied minors in the present opinion.

***Contact:*** *Annemarie Wiersma*

*(Tel.: 0032 2 546 9376 – e-mail:* [*Annemarie.Wiersma@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Annemarie.Wiersma@eesc.europa.eu))

* ***Fair work in the platform economy***

**Rapporteur:** Carlos Manuel Trindade (Workers' Group – PT)

**Reference:** Exploratory opinion

EESC-2020-01859-00-00-AC

**Key points:**

The EESC:

### recommends that questions concerning platform work be addressed and resolved bearing in mind, in particular, the Sustainable Development Goals, the Digital Agenda and the European Pillar of Social Rights;

### notes that the platform economy still carries little weight, although it offers potential for growth;

### notes that platforms have "a generally positive impact on the economy"[[1]](#footnote-2), contributing as much to job creation and innovation, flexibility and autonomy for workers, as to ensuring income for workers (often supplementary) and allowing vulnerable people to access employment;

### notes that there are risks that must not be underestimated: (i) for workers, the denial of basic rights, including the rights to organisation and collective bargaining; precariousness; low pay; the increasing intensity of work; the extreme fragmentation of work on a global scale; the non-affiliation of workers to social security schemes; and (ii) for society, the increased risk of competition based on undercutting social standards, which also has harmful consequences both for employers, who are subject to unsustainable competitive pressure, and for Member States, who forego tax revenue and social security contributions;

### is aware of the argument over platform-related concepts, in particular regarding platforms as "employers" rather than "supply and demand intermediaries" and "employees" and "self-employed workers", since it has consequences for their rights;

### urges the Commission and the Member States to work to clarify these concepts and move towards uniformity of concepts in order to achieve decent work in the platform economy;

### recommends that, in view of Member States' sovereignty in social issues, guidelines be drawn up to help clarify employment status on platforms. The EESC considers that in the platform economy steps should be taken to ensure that all workers have access to a set of rights and to protection, regardless of their employment status or type of contract, guaranteeing that some operators cannot gain a competitive edge by not meeting obligations and responsibilities;

### recommends clarifying the responsibilities of all parties involved in matters such as health and safety, data protection, insurance and legal liability, with a view to evaluating, adjusting and harmonising existing regulations;

### emphasises that social dialogue and collective bargaining must play a key role at all relevant levels, fully respecting the autonomy of the social partners;

### believes that steps should be taken to ensure that platforms provide information which would allow there to be transparency and predictability for all parties concerned. To this end, the platforms in each Member State should be registered and a database established in the EU to monitor the development of the platform economy.

***Contact:*** *Ana Dumitrache*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 81 31 – e-mail:* [Ana.Dumitrache@eesc.europa.eu](mailto:Ana.Dumitrache@eesc.europa.eu) *)*

* ***ESF+/Amended proposal***

**Rapporteur-general:** Krzysztof Balon (Diversity Europe Group – PL)

**Co-rapporteur-general:** Carlos Manuel Trindade (Workers' Group – PT)

**Reference:** COM(2020) 447 final – 2018/0206 COD

EESC-2020-02948-00-00-AC

**Key points:**

The ESF+ is not adequately funded to meet the needs of social cohesion policy. Therefore, the EESC is strongly opposed to reducing the overall financial envelope for the ESF+ for the 2021-2027 period.

Instead, the EESC reiterates its request for the allocation of 30% of all resources earmarked for economic, social and territorial cohesion policy to the ESF+, and, in addition, for the allocation of 30% of existing resources under the ESF+ to social inclusion measures.

The EESC is in favour of allowing the ESF+ operations to be co-financed using the Resilience and Recovery Facility. The use of the ESF+ to fund operations in support of the green and digital transformation should be focused on upskilling and reskilling, and be complementary to other European funding under the Multiannual Financial Framework and to the Resilience and Recovery Facility.

While the allocation of 5% of the ESF+ resources to tackle child poverty is considered an absolute minimum, the proposal to increase the minimum envelope for inclusion of persons not in education, employment or training to 15% is supported.

Given the role of the ESF+ in implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights, the EESC urges the European Commission to better monitor the social situation of Member States in the European Semester, which should be based on an adequate set of social indicators.

The EESC insists on allocating enough funding for the capacity building of social partners and other civil society organisations providing services financed by the ESF+.

The EESC reiterates its request that the social economy becomes a specific stand-alone objective under the ESF+.

In connection with the removal of the health strand from the ESF, informal carers should be identified as a target group of the ESF+.

The EESC recommends the introduction of a recital clarifying that there are no restrictions on the access of refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants to the measures financed by the ESF+.

***Contact:*** *Judite Berkemeier*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 9897 – e-mail:* [*MariaJudite.Berkemeier@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:MariaJudite.Berkemeier@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***EU4Health***

**Rapporteur-general:** Antonello Pezzini (Employers' Group – IT)

**Co-rapporteur-general:** Alain Coheur (Diversity Europe Group – BE)

**Reference:** COM(2020)405 final – 2020/0102 COD

EESC-2020-02821-00-01-AC

**Key points:**

The EESC calls on the EU institutions and the Member States to demonstrate the political will to implement a "Health Pact for the Future of Europe" that reflects the fundamental values of the European Union, including European solidarity, and the pledges made both internationally and at European level.

The EESC calls on the European Parliament, to negotiate with the Council both to increase funding for the health programme and other instruments promoting synergies in health and to have specific recourse to European Stability Mechanism funds to put an end to austerity.

The EESC calls for European guidelines to be adopted to meet the needs of the most vulnerable among us: people with a precarious existence, the elderly and people with disabilities, particularly those who have to live in facilities accommodating considerable numbers of people, which have been hit hard across Europe by the pandemic and its aftermath.

The EESC proposes that a European mechanism for coordination and rapid intervention should be deployed as soon as possible.

A task force of experts must be set up immediately to act as a knowledge and resource coordinator to create a network of the best virology and epidemiology centres and the best diagnostic capacities.

The EESC believes that the health programme can only achieve real results by adopting an inclusive approach that involves international organisations (including the World Health Organization), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and those health sector stakeholders most familiar with people's situations on the ground, not to mention regularly assessing the objectives.

The EESC stresses the value of healthcare personnel and calls for constant monitoring to anticipate their needs in terms of training, organisation, protective equipment and economic and social well-being.

The EESC strongly supports European public/private partnerships in the field of health along the lines of the Innovative Medicines Initiative 2 Joint Undertaking, and upholds the joint efforts to redevelop European technology and manufacturing by making greater use of European scientific and health bodies seeking to create a genuine European health space.

***Contact:*** *Valeria Atzori*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 8774 – e-mail:* [*Valeria.Atzori@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Valeria.Atzori@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

# **CONSULTATIVE COMMISSION ON INDUSTRIAL CHANGE**

* ***Public procurement in cleaning and facility services***

**Rapporteur:** Diego Dutto (Diversity Europe Group – IT)

**Co-rapporteur:** Nicola Konstantinou (Cat. 2 - EL)

**Reference:** Own-initiative opinion

EESC-2020-01563-00-00-AC

**Key points:**

## The European Commission, the European Parliament and the Member States must develop the necessary support instruments to promote the use of strategic public procurement to advance the systematic use of sustainable, transparent, ambitious and enforceable strategic criteria to ensure higher social and quality standards in public procurement.

## To ensure that the focus of cleaning services is put on quality and not on price, the principle of transparency must be upheld for both client and contractor.

## The European Commission and Member States should take the initiative to fight undeclared work and to further improve employment conditions in the cleaning industry. Strengthened regulation and stronger enforcement mechanisms such as wage criteria and sectoral collective bargaining can contribute to fair competition, higher social standards and quality employment.

## The EESC believes that in addition to collective agreements, additional safeguards should be developed to uphold the principles of non-discrimination and equal treatment of workers.

## The EESC recommends that sustainability conditions, labour rights and generally applicable collective bargaining agreements be respected throughout the subcontracting chain.

## The EESC calls on the Member States, if they do not already do so, to pay special attention to and effectively check respect for all statutory and contractual obligations and occupational safety and health aspects concerning social, environmental and sustainability aspects in the execution phase of public tenders in the cleaning industry.

## The EESC recommends that EU directives on public procurement should ask or require the Member States to exclude the use of the lowest price criterion for the award of tenders, to set a ceiling of 30% on the score to be awarded to the price compared to the score to be awarded to quality and to ensure, by means of specific social clauses, the employment stability of staff employed under the tender, the company's work arrangements and in compliance with collective bargaining.

## The European Commission should encourage Member States to start an accreditation process or qualification system for contractors who wish to be considered for public cleaning contracts.

## The EESC advocates that the EU institutions, the Member States and local and regional authorities adopt a comprehensive approach to the purchasing of cleaning services. Such an approach does not envisage a trade-off between environmental and labour conditions, but advances social cohesion, labour standards, gender equality and the environmental goals proposed by the European Commission's Green Deal.

***Contact:*** *Amelia Muñoz Cabezón*

*(Tel.: 0032 2 546 8373 - e-mail:* [*Amelia.MunozCabezon@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Amelia.MunozCabezon@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***Digital mining in Europe: new solutions for the sustainable production of raw materials***

**Rapporteur:** Marian Krzaklewski (Workers' Group – PL)

**Co-rapporteur:** Hilde Van Laere (Cat. 1 – BE)

**Reference:** Own-initiative opinion

EESC-2020-01559-00-00-AC

**Key points**:

## The digitalisation of the EU raw materials sector is a singular opportunity to enhance the resilience of European industrial supply chains, to improve the environmental performance of the minerals sector and to increase transparency and dialogues with citizens and communities affected by mining activities.

## Mining companies which started the digital transformation have seen improvements in safety, sustainability, productivity and margins. But the combination of enhanced connectivity, mobility, machine learning and autonomous operations raises ethical, social and regulatory questions.

## The EESC points out the importance of having a global, comprehensive minerals intelligence network structure to underpin the digital transformation and informed decision-making at the EU level. The EESC acknowledges the effort of the Joint Research Centre in setting and maintaining an European raw materials information system.

## The EESC considers that the digital transformation of the EU raw materials sector should be accompanied by data protection measures, and recognises the need for strictly enforced regimes to protect sensitive data.

## The EESC recommends the development of an EU regulatory roadmap addressing the challenges created by the digital transformation of the raw materials sector, dealing with topics such as cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, automation, multi-level governance and sea and space mining.

## The EESC considers that the digitalisation of the mineral raw materials industry is crucial to tackle the economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and to foster the implementation of the European Green Deal and the EU Recovery Plan. In this context, it is paramount to stimulate investments in the digitalisation of the extraction and processing of primary (mining) and secondary (recycling) mineral raw materials.

## The EESC calls on the European Commission to ensure that the social partners in the extractive sector are involved and consulted by the European institutions in the policy-making process and on any EU initiative affecting the mineral raw materials sector.

***Contact:*** *Amelia Muñoz Cabezón*

*(Tel.: 0032 2 546 8373 - e-mail:* [*Amelia.MunozCabezon@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Amelia.MunozCabezon@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

# **AGRICULTURE, RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENT**

* ***EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030***

**Rapporteur:** Antonello Pezzini (Employers' Group – IT)

**Co-rapporteur:** Lutz Ribbe (Diversity Europe Group – DE)

**Reference:** COM(2020) 380 final

EESC-2020-00896-00-01-AC

**Key points**:

The EESC welcomes the Commission's efforts to develop a Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 as one of the paths towards the European Green Deal and the global biodiversity framework proposed by the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Efforts to protect remaining natural resources need to be significantly increased in the EU, through sustained awareness-raising and communication campaigns targeting society and in particular young people, highlighting the benefits of protection measures. To this end, the EESC considers it necessary, in agreement with the Commission, to increase the size of protected areas, in particular strictly protected areas, limiting the impact on agriculture and forestry as far as possible, although this will in no way be sufficient to halt the decline in biodiversity. This is why the EESC believes that there needs to be a significant increase in efforts to restore habitats and combat species decline caused mainly by poor implementation of the legal framework and insufficient funding for the necessary measures.

The EESC regrets that the EU's new financial plan 2021-2027 contains no sign of full, effective, consistent integration of biodiversity, and considers this to be a worrying indication that there are – yet again – significant discrepancies between words and actions.

The EESC stresses that farmers and forest owners cannot be expected to bear the cost of protecting biodiversity. Rather, providing this "public good and value" should become a useful source of income for them.

***Contact:*** *Conrad* *Ganslandt*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 82 75 – e-mail:* [*Conrad.Ganslandt@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Conrad.Ganslandt@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***From farm to fork: a sustainable food strategy***

**Rapporteur:** Peter Schmidt (Workers' Group – DE)

**Co-rapporteur:** Jarmila Dubravská (Employers' Group – SK)

**Reference:** COM(2020) 381 final

EESC-2020-00994-00-00-AC

**Key points**:

A comprehensive EU food policy should, according to the EESC, deliver: i) economic, environmental and socio-cultural sustainability; ii) integration across sectors, policy areas and levels of governance; iii) inclusive decision-making processes; and iv) a combination of compulsory measures (regulations and taxes) and incentives (price premiums, access to credit, resources and insurance) to accelerate the transition towards sustainable food systems. The proposed strategy doesn't reflect those objectives sufficiently.

Fair food prices (reflecting the true cost of production for the environment and society) are the only way to achieve sustainable food systems in the long term. The EU and Member States should take action to ensure that farmgate prices stay above the costs of production and that healthy diets become more readily accessible. In order to do so, it will be necessary to deploy the full range of public governance tools, from hard fiscal measures to information-based approaches to make the true costs visible.

Without changes in EU trade policies, the objectives of the strategy will not be met. The Committee urges the EU to ensure true reciprocity of standards in preferential trade agreements.

***Contact:*** *Arturo Iniguez*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 87 68 – e-mail:* [*Arturo.Iniguez@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Arturo.Iniguez@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***Towards structured youth engagement on climate and sustainability***

**Rapporteur:** Cillian Lohan (Diversity Europe Group – IE)

**Reference:** Own-initiative opinion

EESC-2020-01552-00-00-AC

**Key points**:

The intergenerational aspect of climate and sustainable development policies and implementation mechanisms needs to be reflected in strong meaningful youth engagement at all stages of EU decision-making processes, from the drafting of legislative proposals and initiatives through to implementation, monitoring and follow-up.

Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals through the European Green Deal requires a new approach to a more inclusive multi-stakeholder governance model that would put young people at the heart of the engagement process and go way beyond ad hoc meetings and mere calls for consultation.

The EESC proposes the establishment of Youth Climate and Sustainability Round Tables to be hosted by the EESC in collaboration with the European Commission and the European Parliament.

It also proposes the inclusion of a youth delegate in the official EU delegation to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of the Parties meetings. In addition, the EESC proposes including a youth delegate as an additional member of the EESC delegation which holds observer status at such events.

The EESC will endeavour to amplify the voices of young people and youth organisations through considered inclusion in opinions relating to climate and sustainability, by proactively seeking input from youth representatives and continued invitations to them as speakers at EESC events; it will also request that the same opportunities to be heard are granted to youth representatives in the other EU institutions, for example at the European Parliament.

***Contact:*** *Stella Brozek-Everaert*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 92 02 – e-mail:*  [*Stella.BrozekEveraert@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Stella.BrozekEveraert@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***Towards an EU strategy on sustainable consumption***

**Rapporteur:** Peter Schmidt (Workers' Group – DE)

**Reference:** Own-initiative opinion

EESC-2020-01596-00-00-AC

**Key points**:

The ways that we consume today – at a high rate and along a take-make-dispose trajectory – are not sustainable in terms of planetary boundaries.

Although the EU has several good policy tools to build from, a comprehensive approach on sustainable consumption is still missing and should be at the heart of the European Green Deal.

The aim of the opinion is to develop recommendations for a comprehensive European policy for sustainable consumption, covering for example nutrition, mobility, housing and lifestyles, as part of the European Green Deal and as a complement to the circular economy package. It pays particular attention to the impact of such a policy on vulnerable populations and low-income households.

A strategy on sustainable consumption is necessary to provide a framework for Member States and for the private sector to address both household consumption and public sector consumption. The opinion highlights that such a policy should carefully balance the three dimensions of sustainability and thus contribute not only to Sustainable Development Goals 12, but also to the achievement of all Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Increasing the sustainability of consumption should not come at the expense of other societal objectives such as social justice, health, well-being and quality of life.

***Contact:*** *Monica Guarinoni*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 81 27 – e-mail:* [*Monica.Guarinoni@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Monica.Guarinoni@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***An integrated approach for the EU's vulnerable areas***

**Rapporteur:** Josep Puxeu Rocamora (Employers' Group – ES)

**Co-rapporteur:** Dilyana Slavova (Diversity Europe Group – BG)

**Reference:** Own-initiative opinion

EESC-2020-01454-00-00-AC-

**Key points**:

Remote mountain and rural areas and peripheral, outermost and artic regions are subject to objective constraints such as a lack of critical mass (demographic or economic), difficult accessibility, etc. Conversely, congestion and pressure on natural resources (air, water, soil) are at the same time increasing in urban areas.

The Common Agricultural Policy should operate in close conjunction with regional and cohesion policies to ensure balanced territorial development as both a consideration and a requirement for any political decision that has a local impact.

***Contact:*** *Arturo Iniguez*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 87 68 – e-mail:* [*Arturo.Iniguez@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Arturo.Iniguez@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***Compatibility of EU trade policy with the European Green Deal***

**Rapporteur:** John Bryan (Diversity Europe Group – IE)

**Reference:** Own-initiative opinion

EESC-2020-01349-00-00-AC

**Key points**:

The EESC welcomes the European Green Deal, in particular the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies, which are ambitious, will have a major impact on EU farming and the agri-food sector, and will play a central role in future trade deals.

The EESC is of the opinion that the EU must respond to the COVID-19 crisis with the urgent implementation of the European Recovery Plan, to get the EU economy back up and operating fully again, as quickly as possible taking account of health and environmental risks. The Green Deal should be an integral part of the recovery.

With the world economy facing an unprecedented recessionary challenge from the COVID-19 crisis, fair and rules-based level playing field trade was never more important to drive economic recovery. A well-functioning open EU single market and international trade are essential. The EESC is of the view that the EU cannot allow its trade policy to slip into a defensive position.

Fundamental lessons that the EU must take from the COVID-19 crisis include:

### the critical importance of the one health concept, food security and food sovereignty for Europe;

### the need for a strong Common Agricultural Policy and a sustainable and resilient supply chain for food and essential health-related products;

### the need for the EU to have a strong well-funded own resources budget to deal with crisis;

### the importance of trade and protecting the EU Single Market to prevent renationalisation and a repeat of developments like Brexit.

The EESC requests that the impact of the Green Deal Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies for EU trade agreements, farming and the agri-food sector must be fully assessed with a detailed impact assessment.

It is well recognised that trade in agriculture plays a core role in realising most, if not all, Sustainable Development Goals and that the World Trade Organization has an important part to play in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, and that this would be far harder without an effective multilateral trade mechanism.

The EESC proposes that all future EU trade deals incorporate the Green Deal Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies as global standards on sustainability, recognising that incorporating and implementing Sustainable Development Goals and higher standards into Multilateral trade deals is extremely challenging. Greater progress on Sustainable Development Goals and essential environmental and social standards seem possible in bilateral trade deals in the shorter term.

The EU has to guarantee that trade deals will not externalise the problem and increase deforestation in other countries.

The EESC considers it essential that the viability and competitiveness of EU farming and the agri-food sector is not eroded by the imposition of higher costs and standards through the Green Deal Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies, which competitors are not willing to adopt and implement.

The EESC believes that there needs to be much greater coherency and coordination between and across EU policies like the Green Deal Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies, Common Agricultural Policy, trade policy and social policy.

Farming, in line with the EU family farm model, has a vital role to play in the implementation of the Green Deal Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies and it is essential that there is an adequate Common Agricultural Policy budget to cover the additional demands on farmers.

In relation to conversion of land to organic production, the impact of the resultant drop in production must be assessed. Research must be intensified to better define "organic" and assess the real net contribution of organic farming to global sustainability, including biodiversity.

All EU trade deals must respect EU sanitary and phytosanitary provisions and adhere to the precautionary principle.

***Contact:*** *Monica Guarinoni*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 81 27 – e-mail:* [*Monica.Guarinoni@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Monica.Guarinoni@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***Equivalence of inspections - cereal seed in Ukraine***

**Rapporteur working alone:** Arnold Puech d'Alissac (Employers' Group – FR)

**Reference:** COM(2020) 137 final – 2020/0053 COD

EESC-2020-02029-00-01-AC

**Key points**:

The EESC notes that certain standards are not fully aligned with EU requirements, particularly those relating to the isolation distance for certified seed for sorghum, which are lower, the varietal purity of parental lines used for the production of seeds for hybrids of maize, and the content of seeds of other species for certified seed for maize. The EESC agrees with the legislative proposal under examination, subject, however to first obtaining the necessary guarantees showing that the limitations indicated in the audit report have been remedied, that production standards in Ukraine now comply strictly with European requirements and that an absence of unfair competition can be guaranteed.

Ukrainian producers have access to certain substances that are banned in the European Union. These divergences lead to a distortion of competition and would result in products which do not comply with EU health and environmental standards being able to enter the territory of the European Union. The most significant differences include access to active weed control substances such as atrazine (banned in the EU since 2003) or acetochlor (banned in the EU since 2012). With regard to pest protection, Ukrainian producers still have access to active substances in the neonicotinoid family, some of which are banned in the EU, such as clothianidin, thiamethoxam or very soon thiacloprid.

***Contact:*** *Arturo Iniguez*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 87 68 – e-mail:* [*Arturo.Iniguez@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Arturo.Iniguez@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***Digitalisation and Sustainability – status quo and need for action from a civil society perspective***

**Rapporteur:** Peter Schmidt (Workers' Group – DE)

**Co-rapporteur:** István Komoróczki (Employers' Group – HU)

**Reference:** Exploratory opinion

EESC-2020-01918-00-00-AC

**Key points**:

The EESC calls for policies that further embed a digital economy incorporating our societal values, thus ensuring that a digital wellbeing economy is as inclusive as possible, allowing workers, consumers, small and medium enterprises, large companies and non-profit economic actors to benefit alike, especially in rural areas. Such policies include:

### developing fiscal policy to ensure that digital businesses pay their fair share of taxes;

### building upon the General Data Protection Regulation to develop a distinctive law on data protection in the workplace;

### adjusting current legislation to the digital age in order to regulate digital platform markets;

### fostering open-source software and applications;

### taking a "public money – public data" approach, so that publicly-funded research data is publically available;

### developing a strategic data governance policy, including "public data trusts".

The EESC calls on national and local governments to support cooperative sharing platforms. It also calls for transparent, fair and green Information and Communication Technologies production chains, ambitious energy standards and an extension of the EU eco-design directive, and asks the European Commission to:

### adapt EU legislation to make online shopping more sustainable, and develop responsible policies on packaging, deliveries and return of packages;

### protect small operators in the market against monopolistic platforms;

### develop a comprehensive set of criteria and indicators for sustainable software products and a digital product pass;

### improve General Data Protection Regulation regarding data sufficiency and data coupling;

### impose restrictions on online advertising to create ad-free spaces.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a sudden and significant decrease in transportation, production and consumption; the increased use of Information and Communication Technologies mitigated energy-intensive working practices and lifestyles. The EESC calls for appropriate political measures to help consolidate these positive aspects after the pandemic. This, of course, raises wider questions about the energy efficiency of the "cloud" and the data centres that sustain it. For example:

### establishing an EU inventory of data centres (covering energy efficiency, lifecycle, construction materials, etc.) and a top-runner scheme, to ensure that the most energy-efficient data centres become the norm;

### requiring new data centres to be 100% energy-efficient;

### using Artificial Intelligence to support the climate and energy transition;

### suggesting measures for sustainable Artificial Intelligence solutions.

The EESC commends current EU projects like REMOURBAN or MAtchUP, recognising the central importance of sustainable smart city development, including innovative approaches to integrated mobility, energy and tourism.

***Contact:*** *Anna Cameron*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 82 28 – e-mail:*  [*Anna.Cameron@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Anna.Cameron@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***Conservation and enforcement measures – NAFO***

**Rapporteur:** Gabriel Sarró Iparraguirre (Diversity Europe Group – ES)

**Reference:** COM(2020) 215 final – 2020/0095 COD

EESC-2020-02842-00-00-AC

**Key points**:

The EESC believes that the conservation and enforcement measures adopted by the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organisation (NAFO) should be transposed into EU law, with a view to achieving their uniform and effective implementation within the EU.

However, it considers that the proposal under consideration does not establish an efficient mechanism for transposing the measures adopted by NAFO and does not resolve the issue of having to update these measures each year.

The Committee is in favour of a more efficient, simpler mechanism and therefore proposes drafting a regulation that contains a single article stipulating that the European Union must without fail apply NAFO measures to its fleet.

The EESC stresses the risks involved in introducing a system of delegated acts, granting the Commission the power to legislate without following ordinary procedures.

***Contact:*** *Arturo Iniguez*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 87 68 – e-mail:* [*Arturo.Iniguez@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Arturo.Iniguez@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

# **TRANSPORT, ENERGY, INFRASTRUCTURE AND INFORMATION SOCIETY**

* ***Secure 5G deployment – EU toolbox***

**Rapporteur:** Alberto Mazzola (Employers' Group – IT)

**Co-rapporteur**: Dumitru Fornea (Workers' Group – RO)

**Reference:** COM(2020) 50 final

EESC-2020-00956-00-00-AC

**Key points:**

The EESC welcomes the initiative of the Member States and the European Commission to review Member States' progress in implementing the set of key measures recommended in the conclusions of the EU toolbox of strategic and technical measures for the secure deployment of the 5G ecosystem.

The EESC considers that, in view of the increasing complexity and variety of 5G applications, this review of the 5G ecosystem and the Commission's measures to safeguard the cybersecurity of 5G networks and a diverse 5G value chain, technical standardisation and certification, foreign direct investment, trade defence and competition, public service obligations, procurement and cyber diplomacy should cover geopolitical security, infrastructure and data security and health safety, including pursuant to Article 168(1) Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

The EESC believes that it is important for the European 5G ecosystem to ensure integrity, confidentiality, management and operational responsibilities, safety, fungibility of supply, interoperability of hardware and software components, common technical standards, continuity of service, flow reliability and data protection, coverage in all areas, including sparsely populated areas, clear communication targeting users as active digital market players, and proactive adherence to the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection guidelines seeking to protect the health of the population, while reducing radiation as much as possible.

The EESC asks the Commission to strictly monitor progress in the deployment and real use of 5G and calls on the Member States to further accelerate the process and ensure a responsible implementation.

In particular, the EESC believes it is vital to assess the risk profile of suppliers and apply relevant restrictions for suppliers considered to be high risk. In addition, the EESC reiterates its suggestion of having at least two suppliers for each country, at least one of which is European, in order to ensure political security of data and respect for heath requirements.

The EESC recommends that European technological diplomacy be strengthened to enable the EU to ensure more balanced, reciprocal conditions for trade and investment, in particular as regards market access, subsidies, public procurement, technology transfers, industrial property and social and environmental standards.

***Contact:*** *Agota Bazsik*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 8658 - e-mail:* [*Agota.Bazsik@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Agota.Bazsik@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***Energy: women as equal players in the 21st century***

**Rapporteur:**  Laure Batut (Workers' Group – FR)

**Co-rapporteur**: Evangelia Kekeleki (Diversity Europe Group – EL)

**Reference:** Own-initiative opinion

EESC-2020-01515-00-01-AC

**Key points:**

The EESC recommends that the Commission encourage all decision-making authorities to: create the conditions for access to energy for all, reduce energy poverty, and gather qualitative and gender-specific data with appropriate indicators; strengthen and enforce existing legislation; provide for a targeted policy on gender equality in the energy sector.

The Committee likewise invites the Commission to encourage all decision-making authorities to create a level playing-field for training in energy-related careers in the Member States and at European level – to set up a European science, technology, engineering and mathematics college, as well as to create a level playing-field on the labour market in the energy sector.

With regard to the labour market in the energy sector, the EESC calls on the Commission to encourage all decision-making authorities to present gender-specific data for all parts of the sector, including renewable energy; consider the opportunities for women, but avoid the energy and digital transitions trammelling women's careers and salaries; introduce binding measures regarding the transparency of salaries and remuneration because this is a prerequisite for real equal pay across the board, and enforce equality on company boards.

Furthermore, the Committee recommends that the Commission encourage all decision-making authorities to develop social dialogue and collective agreements throughout Europe on equality in companies in the energy sector; to help change the mindsets of women about themselves by means of role models, and to create a network of EU outreach teams. Similarly, measures should be taken to promote a change in men's mindsets and management training approaches.

***Contact:*** *Laura Ernsteina*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 91 94 - e-mail:* [*Laura.Ernsteina@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Laura.Ernsteina@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***Between a trans-European super grid and local energy islands***

**Rapporteur:** Lutz Ribbe (Diversity Europe Group – DE)

**Co-rapporteur:** Thomas Kattnig (Workers' Group – AT)

**Reference:** Own-initiative opinion

EESC-2020-01448-00-00-AC

**Key points:**

The European Economic and Social Committee points out that energy transition is not just a technological issue but also a profoundly social and political challenge. Future energy system will have both centralised and decentralised elements, and its organization should not be left to chance. In a centralised system, value creation is typically concentrated on a small number of players. In a decentralised system, consumers can contribute to value creation as active customers, citizen energy communities, farmers, small and medium enterprises and municipal companies. Therefore, the question of how the new energy system will be organised is much more than just a technical question, it is a highly political issue.

With regard to the economic and social policy consequences, the EESC reiterates its position that decentralised energy systems provide major impetus for regional development and can lead to the creation of new, high-quality and skilled jobs in the regions. As this critical power grid infrastructure is a natural monopoly, the fundamental question is whether it should not belong to the public sector in the interests of sustainable security of supply, particularly as it was created and expanded using a considerable amount of public funds.

***Contact:*** *Alessandro RIZZI*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 8679 - e-mail:* [*Alessandro.Rizzi@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Alessandro.Rizzi@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***Universal access to housing that is decent, sustainable and affordable over the long term***

**Rapporteur:** Raymond Hencks (Workers' Group – LU)

**Co-rapporteur**: András Edelényi (Employers' Group – HU)

**Reference:** Own-initiative opinion

EESC-2020-01076-00-00-AC

**Key points:**

The health, economic and social crisis of COVID-19 has intensified the severity of the affordable housing crisis that Member States have been facing for years. Although housing policy remains the competence of the Member States, the shortage of decent and affordable housing in the EU requires a European action plan on housing that includes a comprehensive set of measures, which are easy for people to understand, to help Member States, regions and cities in Europe to sustainably boost the supply of social and affordable housing.

The EU must, first of all, ensure that a real universal right to housing is enshrined, particularly acting by means of a sector-specific regulation under the ordinary legislative procedure, to establish the principles and set the conditions for providing, commissioning and funding affordable and decent housing, in accordance with Article 14 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU.

In this regard, the EESC welcomes the Commission's initiative to establish a link between the European Pillar of Social Rights and the European Semester, which, in the area of housing policy, should lead to better monitoring of social housing reform, of the accessibility and affordability of housing and of the effectiveness of housing benefits.

The creation of a "European fund for investment in affordable, decent and suitable housing", aimed at creating and maintaining low-cost housing, would enable the EU to make its actions and policies clearer and more consistent for Europeans, particularly in the context of the buildings plan to be rolled out under the Green Deal, and the future European Pillar of Social Rights action plan.

The European Commission will have to carry out a review of the Decision on Services of General Economic Interest regarding the target group for social housing as soon as possible, and specify that housing policy must not be restricted to assisting people at risk of poverty, but must ensure decent housing that is accessible and affordable over the long term for everyone. In this context, the Commission should propose a common definition of excessive housing costs, a harmonised method for assessing those costs, a statutory regulation against speculative hoarding of empty dwellings and residential land and a framework for the practice of converting affordable housing into short-term tourist accommodation.

Finally, the EESC calls on the Commission to organise an annual EU summit on affordable housing bringing together all those involved in implementing and monitoring this European action plan on affordable housing, based on an annual report on the state of housing in the EU.

***Contact****: Agota Bazsik*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 8658 - e-mail:* [*Agota.Bazsik@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Agota.Bazsik@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***A European strategy for data***

**Rapporteur:** Antonio García del Riego (Employers' Group – ES)

**Reference:** COM(2020) 66 final

EESC-2020-01042-00-00-AC

**Key points:**

The EESC welcomes the Commission's proposal for a Data Strategy that sets cross-sectoral data sharing as a priority and to improve the use, sharing, access and governance of data with legislative, sector-specific action. An ambitious Data Strategy can address the critical need to enhance EU data capabilities.

The EESC endorses the Commission's proposal for the overall design of EU data architecture to further enforce individuals' rights regarding the use of their data, the protection of and their control over their data, as well as their awareness. However, it calls on the Commission to deploy a clearer strategy to advance its data framework, as well as proposes further clarification of the Strategy's funding approach and recommends ways to close the skills gap.

The EESC is of the view that the development of data-driven platforms in Europe should reflect European values, including by focusing on individuals. The EESC believes that the current consumer-centric approach should extend to a "human-in-command" approach that integrates an ethical dimension with respect to the use of data.

Furthermore, the Committee considers the completion of the single market an essential priority for common data spaces to work. Given the sensitivity of the data shared, the EESC insists on the need to guarantee safeguards to individuals' data privacy through consent, control, sanction and oversight mechanisms, and to ensure that data will be anonymised (and cannot be de-anonymised).

The EESC recommends that the Commission define in the Strategy the option it recommends for the concept of data ownership. The ongoing legal debates currently create uncertainty for individuals to identify which demands they can raise.

The EESC advocates for stronger dialogue with civil society and recalls the need to provide small and medium enterprises with clearer guidance on data sharing mechanisms, as both aspects will be key to broad participation in data spaces. It also recommends the Commission to ensure that the legal framework enables equal access to data among all companies, large and small, and addresses the market power of dominant platforms.

The EESC insists on the urgent need to improve digital skills and literacy through education and training, including by building on the Digital Competence Framework and encouraging Member States to improve lifelong education for the skills that will be most in demand, at all levels of education. Last but not least, the EESC invites the Commission to clarify and strengthen the role of competent authorities, consumer organisations and independent bodies, which is relevant in the governance of sectoral initiatives and to ensure business compliance and user guidance, advice and training.

***Contact:*** *Laura Ernsteina*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 91 94 - e-mail:* [*Laura.Ernsteina@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Laura.Ernsteina@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***The future of EU air transport in and after the Corona crisis***

**Rapporteur:**  Thomas Kropp (Employers' Group – DE)

**Reference:** Own-initiative opinion

EESC-2020-01239-00-00-AC

**Key points:**

Aviation is one of the sectors most badly affected by the Corona crisis with dramatic consequences for the revenues of all stakeholders and their employees in the aviation value chain.

The EU Member States are willing to assist all economic sectors in the recovery process. Nonetheless, it is unlikely that global economic activities will regain pre-Corona levels in the near future. For this reason, the EESC calls upon the Commission to develop a comprehensive road map for the recovery of the entire European aviation sector; such an action plan should include dedicated resources to support all sub-sectors and their workforce.

The Corona crisis requires a clear distinction between the recovery phase of the aviation sector in the short term, while securing the sector’s international competitiveness and a level playing field in the medium to long term.

The retention of quality jobs and appropriate working conditions are key requirements to retain a skilled workforce, without which sustainable competitiveness cannot be secured. The continued recruitment and training of a qualified workforce in the aviation value chain is, therefore, a prerequisite for ensuring the recovery of European aviation.

Passengers must receive reassurance of the conditions under which prepaid tickets will be refunded in the event of cancellations during this crisis.

The EESC calls on the Commission to seek and maintain a good balance between the recovery measures necessary to overcome the Corona crisis and the desired adjustments to the financial regulations arising from the European Green Deal. The EESC urges the Commission to avoid imposing additional financial and/or regulatory burdens on the sector, particularly in a recovery phase, when the entire sector is financially extremely weakened.

***Contact:*** *Antonio Ribeiro Pereira*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 9363 - e-mail:* [*Antonio.RibeiroPereira@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Antonio.RibeiroPereira@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***Agreement on construction and operation by private concessionaires of a Channel Fixed Link***

**Reference:** Category C opinion

COM(2020) 622 final – 2020/0160 COD

EESC-2020-03940-00-00-AC

**Key points:**

The EESC decided to endorse the proposed text.

***Contact****: Birgit Fular*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 90 44 - e-mail:* [*Birgit.Fular@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Birgit.Fular@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***Railway safety and interoperability rules within the Channel Fixed Link***

**Reference:** Category C opinion

COM(2020) 623 final – 2020/0161 COD

EESC-2020-03941-00-00-AC

**Key points:**

The EESC decided to endorse the proposed text.

***Contact****: Birgit Fular*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 90 44 - e-mail:* [*Birgit.Fular@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Birgit.Fular@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

# **EXTERNAL RELATIONS**

* ***EU and Africa: Making an equal development partnership a reality based on sustainability and common values***

**Rapporteurs:** Dimitris Dimitriadis (Employers' Group – EL)

Dilyana Slavova (Diversity Europe Group – BG)

Thomas Wagnsonner (Workers' Group – AT)

**Reference:** Own-initiative opinion

EESC-2020-01715-00-01-AC-TRA

**Key points:**

The common foundation of any EU political engagement leading to an equal development partnership with Africa shall be based on a multidimensional approach, articulating the Sustainable Development Goals, the respect of Universal Human Rights - including fundamental rights, the right to a healthy environmentand the freedom to conduct a business.

The EESC advocates promoting a decent life and good prospects, creating a middle class and supporting equal partnerships by strengthening sustainable social-liberal democratic structures in Africa.

The EESC highlights that the EU strategy on Africa must focus on Development and welcomes the African Continental Free Trade Area.

The EESC reiterates the important role of organised civil society in the up-coming ACP-EU Partnership Agreement.

The EESC stresses that long-term investment in intra-Africaninfrastructures makes economic sense, is ecologically sustainable and creates production capacities, while an approach geared solely towards overseas exports is unsustainable. Intercontinental economic collaboration should favour local production in Africa, whose main sectors should be sustainable agriculture, energy and the circular economy. In this context evaluation systems that heavily involving the organised civil society are absolutely vital.

***Contact****: Cédric Cabanne*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 9355 - e-mail:* [*Cedric.Cabanne@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Cedric.Cabanne@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***Contribution of civil society to the Green Agenda and sustainable development of the Western Balkans as part of the EU accession process***

**Rapporteur:** Dragica Martinović Džamonja (Employers' Group – HR)

**Co-Rapporteur:** Pierre Jean Coulon (Workers' Group – FR)

**Reference:** Own-initiative opinion

EESC-2020-02228-00-00-AC

**Key points:**

The opinion deals with two major current topics, the enlargement and the Green Agenda, integrating the new COVID-19 crises, and points out the importance of assimilating the Western Balkans in the European Green Deal.

The EESC has supported and continues to strongly advocate for the enlargement of the European Union to the six Western Balkans countries provided they fulfil the necessary criteria for membership.

The EESC believes that the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis should endorse green policies and that the green transition has to be an integral part of a comprehensive and forward-looking recovery plan in the Western Balkans.

Considering the significant investments and regulatory adaptations required, the EESC strongly believes that social partners and civil society organisations have a particularly important role to play in the transition towards a greener and more sustainable society, especially as regards specific political contexts in the Western Balkans.

The EESC recalls that the Western Balkans are highly sensitive to the impacts of climate change resulting in damage to general health and the economy, and need urgent action to better the quality of life for their citizens, especially children and young people, by a just transition to a greener model, having in mind the 'no one should be left behind' principle.

The EESC calls for the future actions towards greener Western Balkans to be adapted to the region's specific challenges, including an adequate regulatory framework, cross-border activities, innovative technological solutions, locally produced and consumed energy and energy efficiency, sustainable urban transport, road and rail networks, public and private engagement, information and communications technology and fast internet deployment, agri-food measures, etc.

The EESC considers that the challenges in the Western Balkans can be turned into opportunities by investing in research and innovation, learning and adopting alternative approaches, circular economy, waste management, greener energy and connectivity solutions, as well as active measures to protect the rich biodiversity of the region.

The EESC stresses the importance of developing green skills within active national and regional education/training and skills strategies, with a particular accent on gender equality, in cooperation with relevant actors and within an effective social dialogue.

The EESC stresses that good governance and democratic institutions, the rule of law, successful anti-corruption policies, the fight against organised crime, respect for human rights and security need to be properly implemented in the Western Balkans. As greening of the economy needs substantial investment, it is vital to recall that the rule of law is a key factor in ensuring an effective business climate and attracting private and foreign direct investment.

***Contact****: Ana Dujmovic*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 8290 - e-mail:* [*Ana.Dujmovic@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Ana.Dujmovic@eesc.europa.eu) *)*

* ***Evaluation of the role of civil society in the participation structures under the European Union/Colombia/Peru/Ecuador Agreement***

**Rapporteur:** Giuseppe Iuliano (Workers' Group – IT)

**Reference:** Information report

EESC-2020-01342-00-01-RI

**Key points:**

The Multi-Party Trade Agreement is currently under assessment, which the European Commission is expected to approve by the end of 2020. According to the European Commission's data on the economic aspect, the Multi-Party Trade Agreement works well, with increases in the volume of EU trade in 2017 with Colombia, Peru and Ecuador.

The EESC believes that the assessment must take full account of whether the Multi-Party Trade Agreement is fostering human rights and the economic and environmental conditions that are at risk. The Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council – European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean: joining forces for a common future, published in April 2019, considers it a matter of priority to "further sustainable development, human rights and good governance".

The EESC notes weaknesses in the implementation of the commitments as regards the rights recognised in the fundamental International Labour Organisation Conventions and in the Trade and Sustainable Development Title itself.

For the EESC, it is particularly serious that after several years of improvement there has been a resurgence of violence in Colombia. Although the signing of the Peace Agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia in 2016 was received with hope by the international community, many Colombian organisations consider that peace is at risk and are calling the new government to account over the murders between 2016 and 2019 of 777 people in the country – trade unionists, social leaders and human rights defenders.

The EESC considers that the current mechanisms for civil society involvement in the Multi-Party Trade Agreement need to be made more effective.

The EESC regrets that the Andean governments have delayed setting up and recognising the Domestic Advisory Groups, that they have not provided their members with travel funds to attend meetings, and that the Peruvian government has not facilitated the operation of an autonomous Domestic Advisory Groups.

The EESC appreciates the involvement and human and practical support of the European Commission in obtaining the participation of civil society. The Committee believes that the European Commission needs to press the Andean governments to shoulder their responsibilities for the operation of their countries' Domestic Advisory Groups and for travel by their representatives.

The EESC calls for the assessment to refer to the need to officially recognise the annual joint meetings of the four Parties' Domestic Advisory Groups, and for the Sub-committee on Trade and Sustainable Development to bring together all the Domestic Advisory Groups every year in order to put dialogue on an institutional footing and to provide official responses to all the questions it may be asked by the Domestic Advisory Groups.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, both in Europe and in the Andean countries, are causing terrible damage to the health of millions of people and require measures to strengthen health and social protection systems. Temporary restrictions on free movement must not lead to discrimination against persons, including migrants or the most vulnerable groups, and nor must they limit opportunities for dialogue.

In the EESC's view, EU and Andean governments should spare no effort in ensuring that the involvement of civil society in the Agreement is not prevented by the pandemic, providing forms of remote consultation when face-to-face meetings are not possible. Civil society and its organisations have an essential role to play in the global response to the pandemic and efforts are needed now more than ever to ensure that they are included.

***Contact:*** *Sara Nanino*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 88 78 - e-mail:* [*Sara.Nanino@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Sara.Nanino@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***Carbon markets: Emergence, structuring and challenges for European industry***

**Rapporteur:** Emmanuelle Butaud-Stubbs (Employers' Group – FR)

**Reference:** Own-initiative opinion

EESC-2020-02395-00-00-AC

**Key points:**

Numerous carbon markets are functioning in the world and the EU Emissions Trading System is not working in isolation.

These local carbon markets should be monitored by the European Commission in order to identify the best practices that could be useful for revising the Emissions Trading System and the directive on energy.

This knowledge and understanding of other carbon markets is also key for calibrating the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, which should apply differently to countries with carbon markets and countries without carbon markets.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic cannot slow down action on climate change, either at the European or international level. That means that the European Green Deal should be put in place in line with the planned timetable.

The slightest delay takes us away from the goal of carbon neutrality by 2050. More importantly, recovery packages must be aligned with the EU climate goal and have to be harmonised with the objective of the European Green Deal.

The EESC considers that the adoption of Article 6 of the Paris Agreement is a key opportunity to strengthen climate action post-2020. Therefore, the EESC asks the European Commission to obtain a clear mandate from Member States to reach the necessary compromise for the adoption of Article 6 guidance during COP26 in 2021.

The EESC supports the Green Deal policy and asks the European Commission to table the various proposals planned in the coming months, including the one on the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism. Such a mechanism could bring a level playing field for the most CO2-intensive sectors in the EU.

As the EU explores future modifications to its Emissions Trading System, significant and close attention should be paid to market design and operationalisation experiences across North America's subnational emissions trading regimes.

The EESC supports opening up dialogue with third countries in order to discuss the content and the impact of carbon border measures on their exports to the EU. This dialogue should take a different form with countries that have ambitious climate policies (like Canada) than with others without such ambitious climate policies (the United States, China, Russia).

The EESC insists on the need to combine and harmonise the various available tools in order to combat the climate crisis and pleads in favour of a harmonisation of approaches, ultimately leading to the emergence of a comparable price signal across different jurisdictions.

***Contact****: Maarit Laurila*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 9739 - e-mail:* [*Maarit.Laurila@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Maarit.Laurila@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

* ***Sustainable supply chains and decent work in international trade***

**Rapporteur:** Tanja BUZEK (Workers' Group – DE)

**Reference:** Exploratory opinion

EESC-2020-02161-00-00-AC

**Key points:**

Global supply chains are key and complex in economic activities across the world and in global trade. Economic growth, job creation and entrepreneurship are also contested by evidence of negative implications for working conditions as well as for sustainability in some supply chains.

The COVID-19 crisis has unveiled the serious downfalls related to highly fragmented and undiversified supply chains. It exposed the vulnerability of workers' health and safety, and it highlighted violations of human rights. Trade will have to play a key role in promoting a sustainable economic recovery. However, stronger instruments need to deliver on a socially and environmentally responsible business, trade and investment agenda.

Global supply chains need to become more resilient, diversified and responsible, and ambitious actions need to ensure they contribute to a fairer economic and social model, based on sustainability and decent work.

Many EU companies are positively engaged on the issues of Human rights, sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility, implementing international guidelines and principles. These voluntary measures have led to some positive behavioural change, but action for improvement is needed.

It urgently requires a more effective and consistent regulatory framework to achieve decent work, respect for human rights and sustainability in global value and supply chains and to promote global and EU social and environmental objectives, fair competition between economic operators and to support European economic activities.

The EESC calls on the European Commission to develop a European Action plan on human rights, decent work and sustainability in global supply chains, building on social dialogue and a multi-stakeholder approach. As a general framework for both policy and legislative initiatives this action plan should:

### be ambitious, comprehensive and transversal, recognising the complementary roles of the different actors;

### cover a broad definition of human rights, including workers' and trade union rights, and build on a range of international instruments, most notably International Labour Organization conventions;

### promote responsible business conduct, and ensure the respect of human rights and EU social and environmental objectives in business activities and their supply chains;

### support businesses and small and medium enterprises in adopting a responsible business conduct approach, and ensure a level playing field for businesses.

The EESC sees the EU as uniquely placed to drive multilateral progress on this issue and deliver global policy coherence and calls for more effective and binding international instruments, in particular supporting a UN Binding treaty on business and human rights and an International Labor Organization Convention on decent work in supply chains.

A European Action Plan should have at its forefront a binding cross-sectoral legislative initiative on human rights due diligence and responsible business conduct with remedies and enforcement tools, covering all companies established or active in the EU, as well as the public sector, and be responsive to the specific needs of and constraints on small and medium enterprises. Due diligence should explicitly cover trade union and workers' rights, which form an essential part of decent work. Its specific features, including corporate liability, will be followed by a dedicated EESC opinion, due to be adopted at the same plenary session.

In terms of other EU legislative initiatives, the Action Plan should include most notably:

### an ambitious revision of the non-financial reporting directive;

### legislative measures on board of directors' duties;

### conditionality and incentives linked in all recovery instruments and EU funding tools;

### public procurement procedures should indeed effectively support and promote human rights due diligence and responsible business conduct in business operations and their supply chains, including decent work.

The Action Plan should also comprise non-legislative EU measures, including initiatives to raise awareness of consumers, investors, and other stakeholders, and incentives to responsible businesses, which go beyond the legal obligations and specific support to small and medium enterprises to introduce due diligence policies.

European cross-sectoral and sectoral social dialogue and national social dialogue should assist its implementation. Workers and trade unions must be part of the solution.

Its specific trade elements should be reflected in the new EU Trade Strategy Review. Trade and investment policy can boost and ensure a more even implementation of standards by both investors and governments. Foreign investors should be required to comply with due diligence before they can benefit from an international investment agreement;

### free trade agreements must promote best practices on how to include environmental and social criteria in public procurement, and in no way limit their application;

### the new Chief Trade Enforcement Officer must have stronger instruments to enforce Trade and Sustainable Development commitments;

### a revamped Panel of experts should be able to trigger a treaty State-to-State dispute settlement mechanism, with possibilities for financial penalties or sanctions, and remedies for the aggrieved party;

### an independent labour secretariat and collective complaint mechanism should complement enforcement of Trade and Sustainable Development chapters;

### the impact of Domestic Advisory Group recommendations on investigating Trade and Sustainable Development violations needs to be considerably strengthened;

### fresh approaches to labour disputes should look into remedies against non-compliant companies and in addition look into a system inspired by the EU Anti-Dumping measures to cover Social Dumping;

### the EESC suggests linking tariff reductions with the effective implementation of Trade and Sustainable Development provisions;

### and finally, the EU should secure International Labour Organization ratifications from partners before their conclusion so that they may form integral part of the agreement. The "essential elements" clause should be extended to cover International Labour Organization fundamental and up-to-date Conventions ratified by all EU Member States and the International Labour Organization be included in the implementation monitoring of its Conventions in Free trade agreements.

***Contact:*** *Delphine Galon*

*(Tel.: 00 32 2 546 92 06 - e-mail:* [*Delphine.Galon@eesc.europa.eu*](mailto:Delphine.Galon@eesc.europa.eu)*)*

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1. [OJ C 303, 19.8.2016, p. 54.](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2016:303:SOM:EN:HTML) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)