



## **2023 WORK PROGRAMME OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS' GROUP** (Subject to review according to developments during the year)

### **INTRODUCTION**

The first half of the 2020s is likely to be remembered as one of great **insecurity, uncertainty and social anxiety**. Arguably, the **successive crises** (the COVID-19 pandemic, the war against Ukraine, inflation in the cost of living, energy and food prices) and **insufficient responses to ongoing global crises** (climate emergency, weakening of democracy and shrinking civic space) have encouraged **civil society organisations (CSOs)** to search for **decentralised solutions**. CSOs are today the **driving force** in our communities and societies, **voicing local concerns, defining local needs and finding local solutions**. Emboldened by their pivotal role in the COVID-19 pandemic and the war against Ukraine, it is likely that CSOs and youth organisations in particular, will become **more prevalent, more vocal and perhaps more political in the near future** in order to attain their given objectives.

Within this context, the Civil Society Organisations' Group, whose members represent national CSOs, will maintain the topic of the **fight against poverty and the role of CSOs in combating poverty**, as the **overriding priority of the Group**. This priority will apply both to 2023 and to the duration of the next 2.5-year mandate (beginning in April 2023). The emphasis on poverty eradication is all the more relevant given that it constitutes the first objective of the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** and that the EU has a relatively high percentage of its **population in poverty, or at risk of poverty and social exclusion**. Moreover, prevailing **downward demographic trends** in Europe will necessitate **increased investment in care and the elderly**, in order to avoid even greater levels of poverty and social exclusion.

Whereas the mandate of Group III which began in October 2020 focussed on **consolidating the Group, both internally and within the EESC**, 2023 and the forthcoming mandate will shift the focus of the work programme. In this forthcoming period, the Civil Society Organisations' Group will seek to render its work **more qualitative and effective** through a more **coherent, structured and focussed approach**, taking advantage of the various policy instruments at its disposal. Concretely, the Civil Society Organisations' Group will take a **three-pronged approach to its work**.

**Firstly**, the Group will **comprehensively plan its work** along a **limited number of thematic areas**, which will feed into the overall objective of **poverty eradication**. **All of the policy instruments** available to the Civil Society Organisations' Group (studies, own-initiative opinions, events, thematic debates at ordinary Group meetings, etc.), will be employed to **simultaneously advance the policy contribution of the Group on these specific topics**.

**Secondly**, the Civil Society Organisations' Group will **strategically and proactively engage with the European Institutions**, in order to promote the selected thematic areas, notably in relation to the forthcoming **presidencies of the Council of the EU**. The objective will be to establish contacts several months prior to the presidencies in order to **influence**, inter alia, the priorities of the forthcoming presidencies and/or the exploratory opinions requested from the EESC. To this end, a number of novel activities could be explored, e.g. **ex ante meetings** and **exploratory missions** prior to the Group's conference in the country of the presidency, or **ex post meetings** in order to present the results of the Group's event.

**Thirdly**, the Civil Society Organisations' Group will aim to establish effective civil dialogue and **structure its outreach to and collaboration with external CSOs in order to better advance the Group's priorities and common interests**. This will involve a more comprehensive approach to engaging with CSOs, e.g. **feeding topics from the Group's work programme** into this collaboration. According to the thematic area and the objectives to be attained, the Group may seek collaboration with **umbrella and/or sectoral CSOs**. Ultimately, the Civil Society Organisations' Group will seek to **strengthen the EESC as the house of European civil society**.

**In 2023, the work programme of the Civil Society Organisations' Group will:**

1. Ensure **continuity** by maintaining the topic of the **fight against poverty** and the **role of CSOs in combatting poverty** as the **overriding priority** of the Group;
2. Strive to **facilitate the path of civil society organisations** towards fully fledged **policy dialogue** and **social partnership**<sup>1</sup>;
3. **Concentrate on the following priority areas:**
  - ✓ Resilient European health and care systems;
  - ✓ Climate change, energy poverty and vulnerable groups;
  - ✓ Skills, digitalisation and vulnerable persons;
  - ✓ The role of CSOs in defending and strengthening European democracy;
  - ✓ The impact of high energy prices on the agricultural sector and rural areas;
  - ✓ Listening to and empowering youth; protecting children;
4. **Weave together the entire plethora of policy instruments available to the Group**, in order to simultaneously advance the priority topics, to **better structure** and render **more coherent** the entirety of the work.

The **instruments to implement these priorities** will be multiple, for example:

- ✓ Fully utilise the contacts of the members of the Civil Society Organisations' Group with European CSOs and the European Institutions, in order to strengthen dialogue and advance the priorities of the Group;
- ✓ Capitalise on the role and networks of members of the Group within Member States in order to multiply efforts and reach out to grassroots actors at both local and national levels;

---

<sup>1</sup> E.g. social partnership in the Republic of Ireland.

- ✓ Civil Society Organisations' Group initiated studies and own-initiated opinions;
  - ✓ Seminars, webinars and conferences;
  - ✓ Strategic outreach in relations with external civil society organisations, relevant third party institutions, as well as the European Institutions, notably the European Commission (EC), European Parliament (EP) and forthcoming presidencies of the Council of the EU;
  - ✓ Extensive and targeted communication strategy;
  - ✓ Going local activities in Member States (remote and/or physical);
  - ✓ Continued support for the five EESC categories managed by the Civil Society Organisations' Group;
  - ✓ Encouraging more synergies between the Group and sections and facilitating more cooperation between the different sectors represented within the Civil Society Organisations' Group.
5. **Invest more time and resources in building strong and mutually beneficial working relations** with the **EP**, the **EC** and the **forthcoming presidencies of the Council of the EU**. Civil Society Organisations' Group own-initiative opinions and studies, EESC resolutions, Group events, conclusions and recommendations will provide the opportunities for establishing these contacts;
  6. **Improve, widen** and render **more regular** existing cooperation with **external civil society organisations (CSOs)**, notably European networks at the umbrella or sectoral levels. The Group will build on the outreach and joint events with CSOs over the last two years, including the cooperation on the CoFE and on the topics of civil dialogue and shrinking/shifting civic space;
  7. Organise more **qualitative thematic events in Brussels**, alongside a **limited number** of large-scale conferences in **Member States**;
  8. Explore how to adapt the *Civil Society Organisations' Bulletin* (content, form and frequency), in order to better contribute to the achievement of the objectives of the Group's work programme.

#### **Priority thematic areas and policy instruments in 2023:**

- ✓ Resilient European health and care systems; (e.g. *debate during ordinary Group meeting, preparatory institutional outreach and Group conference in Sweden*);
- ✓ Climate change, energy poverty and vulnerable groups; (e.g. *Group study, Group own initiative opinion and Group conference in Brussels*);
- ✓ Skills, digitalisation and vulnerable persons; (e.g. *Group study, debate during ordinary Group meeting, Bureau seminar or press event in Brussels*);
- ✓ The role of CSOs in defending and strengthening European democracy, including the fight against disinformation and the shrinking/shifting civic space; promoting the effective implementation of civic dialogue as provided for in Article 11 (TEU) (e.g. *preparatory outreach to CSOs, Group conference in Brussels*);
- ✓ The impact of high energy prices on the agricultural sector and rural areas (e.g. *Group own initiative opinion*);

- ✓ Listening to and empowering youth; protecting children; (e.g. *preparatory outreach to CSOs, webinar/seminar*).
- ❖ *The topic of Group III event in Spain during the Spanish Presidency of the Council still unknown*

*Total: Four Group meetings (two in Brussels and two abroad), one seminar of the Bureau or press event in Brussels and one seminar of the Bureau or webinar; other proposals still to be defined.*

## **ACTIVITIES (to be regularly reviewed in line with the Group's priorities)**

### ***Group III studies***

- ✓ Publishing the Civil Society Organisations' Group commissioned study on ***The cost of climate change on households and families in the EU***;
- ✓ Launching and, if possible, publishing a Civil Society Organisations' Group commissioned study on ***How to eradicate skills poverty among the most vulnerable***;
- ✓ Launching and, if possible, publishing a Civil Society Organisations' Group commissioned study on ***Affordable sustainable housing in the EU***.

### ***Group III Own-initiative Opinions***

- ✓ Proposing a Civil Society Organisations' Group own-initiative opinion on the topic ***The Climate Crisis and its Effect on Vulnerable Groups***;
- ✓ Proposing a Civil Society Organisations' Group own-initiative opinion on the subject ***The impact of high energy prices on the agricultural sector and rural areas***;
- ✓ Proposing a third Group own-initiative opinion on a subject still to be defined.

### ***Group III events***

- ✓ Organising a conference of the Group on the topic ***Empowering consumers on climate change***, to include the presentation of the Group commissioned study *The Cost of Climate Change for Families and Households* and of the Group own-initiative opinion on *The Climate Crisis and its Effect on Vulnerable Groups* (Brussels, third quarter of 2023);
- ✓ Organising a conference of the Group on the topic ***The indispensable role of civil society organisations in defending and strengthening European democracy*** (title to be confirmed), possibly as a follow-up to the 2022 Round Table with European CSOs (Brussels, first quarter of 2023);
- ✓ Organising a conference of the Group during the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the EU on the topic ***Health, Care and Prosperity after COVID-19: Swedish and European perspectives*** (Stockholm, 25 and 26 May 2023 *date tbc*);
- ✓ Organising a conference of the Group in Spain, during the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU (third quarter of 2023);
- ✓ Organising a seminar of the Bureau or a press event to present the results of the Civil Society Organisations' Group commissioned study on ***How to eradicate skills poverty among the most vulnerable*** (Brussels, third quarter of 2023);

- ✓ Organising the 15 annual meetings of the five Categories managed by the Civil Society Organisations' Group;
- ✓ Organising a youth webinar as a follow-up to the 2021 and 2022 editions, **or** an in-person seminar of the Bureau, possibly in collaboration with a European CSO, focussing on **children** in the context of the 2023 revision of the Directive on combatting child sexual abuse (second quarter of 2023).

*Thematic debates during ordinary meetings of the Civil Society Organisations' Group*

- ✓ Holding thematic debates during ordinary meetings of the Group on topical subjects and/or in preparation of Group conferences, e.g. the European care and health sectors, cooperation with the EP Inter-Group on Fighting against Poverty exploring, inter alia, financial solutions to reduce poverty, the integration of Ukrainian refugees, the mid-term review of the Multi-Annual Financial Framework, etc.

*Proactive outreach to CSOs, the European Institutions and third-party institutional actors*

- ✓ Continuing to actively reach out and cooperate with external **European level CSO networks**, e.g. bilateral meetings with the Group President, speaking opportunities and partnerships on joint events. According to the thematic area and the objectives to be attained, the Group may seek collaboration with **umbrella and/or sectoral CSOs**;
- ✓ Engaging in structured outreach to the **EP (MEPs, relevant inter-groups, political groups and committees)** and the **EC**, prior to and following key thematic Group III events and in relation to Group own-initiative opinions, Group studies and the Group's overall work programme;
- ✓ Proactively engaging with the forthcoming **presidencies of the Council of the EU** in anticipation of conferences by the Civil Society Organisations' Group in the countries holding the presidencies, e.g. **ex ante exploratory missions** or **ex post meetings** after the Group conference;
- ✓ Strengthening working relations with relevant **institutional third parties**, e.g. the Scottish office in the context of EU-UK civil society relations.

*Actively defending the interests of the Civil Society Organisations' Group within the EESC*

- ✓ Promoting Group's positions in key horizontal EESC bodies, notably the **CAF, COCOM, Liaison Group, the Ad hoc Group on the EC work programme, the Audit Committee** and the **Questors**;
- ✓ Promoting Group's positions in **key horizontal EESC events**, e.g. the EESC Civil Society Days and the ECI Day;
- ✓ Pursuing the Group's interests (actors, topics, activities) in the context of the EESC's role in the forthcoming **Citizen's Panels** and ensuring active involvement in the follow-up to the **Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE)**;
- ✓ Promoting **topics within the Committee** on which the Civil Society Organisations' Group has or can **take a lead**, e.g. poverty reduction and combatting social exclusion; youth and children; climate change, just transition and vulnerable groups; resilient health and care systems; gender equality; protecting vulnerable groups (persons with disabilities and the elderly); social

innovation and the social economy, including contributing to the implementation of the EU Action Plan for the Social Economy, etc.;

- ✓ The Group will work towards ongoing reform in the EESC, with the aim of further recognising and **strengthening its role as the house of European civil society**;
- ✓ Finally, bearing in mind the forthcoming **elections to the European Parliament** and the **appointment of the new College of Commissioners in 2024**, the Civil Society Organisations' Group will already begin reflections on its longer term strategy and priorities.

---