

NAT Work Programme 2023-2025

I. Context

- The **multiple and interlinked global crises** we are facing – the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate and biodiversity emergencies (also impacting our food production systems), the cost-of-living crisis and the consequences of conflicts in Ukraine and elsewhere – will continue to affect the work of the NAT section during the half-term of office from 2023 to 2025. In particular, the NAT section will have to continue to reflect on the aftermath of the war in Ukraine in the various relevant areas of work of the section.
- The **European agricultural and agri-food sector** made a great effort during the pandemic and managed to maintain a level of supply at all times to meet the demands of the population. Even during these months of energy crisis and supply disruptions caused in large part by the invasion of Ukraine, the sector continues to respond. In the second half of the term of office, NAT must keep working on strengthening the agri-food system considering all agri-food chain actors so that it continues to respond efficiently by consolidating its strategic role and ensuring its sustainable competitiveness¹ in the context of multiple crises.
- The **NAT section should build on the foundations** laid in the last few years, keep the "red line" and foster long-term strategies based on the Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development and the objectives on climate neutrality set in the European Green Deal.
- The **European Parliament's election and Commission's renewal** in 2024 will provide the opportunity not only to respond to referrals but to be an agenda-setter for the future.
- Through its work, **the NAT section will continue to develop processes and structured approaches**, aiming for a stronger impact on the policymaking processes in close coordination with its bodies and structures (Sustainable Development Observatory, Permanent Study Group on Sustainable Food Systems, Ad hoc Group on COP, European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform) and with the other EESC sections/CCMI.

II. Cross-cutting principles and working methods

- **Promoting civil society's structured involvement** in the design, implementation and monitoring of the various policies is essential. NAT will continue to uphold and further

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"In order for a comprehensive European food policy to be truly relevant for European consumers, it is essential that the food produced sustainably in the EU is competitive. This means that the European agri-food sector is able to deliver food for the consumers at prices that include extra costs for criteria such as sustainability, animal welfare, food safety and nutrition but also a fair return to the farmers, and at the same time maintains its position as the preferred choice for the vast majority of consumers." *Opinion Civil society's contribution to the development of a comprehensive food policy in the EU*, paragraph 5.8, [OJ C129, 11.04.2018, p. 18.](#)

develop proposals and initiatives to foster a more participatory approach, by consolidating existing initiatives (such as ECESP and the Rural Pact) and promoting new ones (such as a European Food Policy Council and a space for stakeholders' engagement in the SDG implementation). Underrepresented groups (such as indigenous communities) will also be better involved.

- **Reinforcing youth engagement:** For some years, the EESC has been working on how to better integrate the voice of young people in its work and in the EU decision-making process in a structured and meaningful way. NAT has been pioneering these efforts and will remain committed to amplifying the voices of young people and youth organisations on climate and sustainability through the projects: [Youth Climate and Sustainability Round Tables](#), [EESC Youth Delegate to COP](#) and [European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform \(ECESP\)](#).
- **Mainstreaming sustainability, circularity, rural-proofing and the EU youth test across the section's priorities:** all NAT activities should contribute to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the link with the SDGs should be made explicit whenever possible. For the circular economy to turn into a "circular society", circularity principles should also be embedded in all NAT policy work, for example on sustainable food systems, biodiversity and rural areas. NAT will aim to assess the anticipated impact of new legislative initiatives for rural areas ("rural-proofing"²) applying the "leaving no one behind principle", and highlight the potential of rural areas in achieving the SDGs across all sections' opinions. NAT will also contribute to the EESC commitment to implement effectively [the EU Youth Test](#) and the [Resolution on the long-lasting legacy of the European Year of Youth](#), based on the results of the upcoming study on [Structured youth engagement in the aftermath of the European Year of Youth 2022](#).
- **Fostering knowledge, skills and education about sustainability for the whole population, from an early age, across the various policy areas.** Following up on previous NAT work, it is important to establish critical thinking and knowledge about the SDGs – and more specifically on agriculture and sustainable food – in particular for young people, and to provide discussion fora (e.g. on agriculture, food systems, the circular economy, ...) and highlight career opportunities in these sectors.
- **Adopting a fundamental rights-based approach across all areas of NAT work,** including for example the right to sustainable and healthy food, to healthy environments, etc. embedded in a wellbeing economy.
- **Applying foresight approach** in NAT opinions and different initiatives to ensure that our recommendations will benefit in the long-term and contribute to building open strategic autonomy and sustainability in the EU, especially in the agri-food sector.
- **Ensuring close cooperation with other EESC sections/bodies** in all NAT-related policy areas. Only by breaking silos and working together, can we find systemic solutions to the complex challenges ahead of us.

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See the [EU long-term vision for rural areas](#) - rural areas are home for almost 30% of the EU population.

- **Strengthening follow-up of opinions and communication** through strategic approaches for greater impact.
- **Fostering team spirit between the NAT members and secretariat** through co-creation and co-design: we have different roles, and we can use our individual strengths to achieve better results. The secretariat can support and equip members to fulfil the EESC consultative role, but also to become "story tellers" of what is happening on the ground.
- **"Walking the talk" – leading by example on sustainable and inclusive working methods** through continued cooperation with EMAS (plastic-free, food waste reduction, soft mobility, sustainable sourcing, climate-neutrality, etc.), optimising the use of digital tools, webinars, etc. and making events more inclusive (gender balance, youth participation, go beyond the "Brussels bubble" by including for example local communities, indigenous people, etc.).

III. Overarching priority

The overarching priority will build on the previous mandate and focus on:

"Fostering the systemic change and wellbeing economy we need for the successful implementation of the European Green and Social Deal and the Sustainable Development Goals towards a just transition. This will contribute, among other things, to more sustainable and fairer agri-food systems and thriving rural areas while respecting the planetary boundaries"

In a context of multiple crises, the SDGs remain our compass as the only universal vision for peace, socioeconomic prosperity and environmental sustainability we have. Failure to implement the SDG principles of social inclusion, clean energy, universal access to public services and responsible consumption and production will lead to even more crises and geopolitical rivalries. Failure to implement the SDGs will also be harmful for business and future competitiveness.

The objectives of climate neutrality and just transition will hopefully also remain high on the agenda of the institutions in the years to come. In any case, **developing the social dimension of the green transition while respecting the planetary boundaries will be key to achieving a wellbeing economy, a more sustainable and fairer agri-food system and a more balanced rural/urban development.** The transformation to sustainability will only be successful if it is based on broad support, just transition and active participation by all parts of society. With a growing number of civil society actors and academia promoting a systemic and transformative approach to combine the social wellbeing and viable economic development with respect for planetary boundaries, the NAT ongoing work towards a wellbeing economy "beyond growth" will to be more relevant than ever.

IV. Policy priorities

1. **Accelerating the implementation of the SDGs** will be pursued by NAT in the new half-term of office, in close cooperation with the SDO, by continuing efforts to call for an overarching EU strategy on the SDGs, proposing a more structured engagement of civil society actors (for which the EESC could offer a convening space) and fostering policy coherence. NAT will continue to prepare related opinions and contributions in coordination with the other EESC sections/CCMI as appropriate, be involved in the annual High Level Political Forum in New York and cooperate with key stakeholders and networks such as SDSN and ESDN.
2. **Climate neutrality** remains at the heart of NAT's work while touching upon many other aspects of the EESC's priorities. NAT will continue the work of the established Ad Hoc Group on UNFCCC, preparing our participation to the annual UN Climate Conferences in close cooperation with DG CLIMA and civil society organisations to contribute to attaining climate neutrality in the EU by 2050.
3. **The circular economy** will remain a transversal priority in close cooperation with the INT section and DG ENV/DG RTD, as well as with involvement of the other sections and CCMI, as appropriate, to integrate the broad scope of dossiers from legislative works. Led by the Coordination Group of 24 organisations from civil society, the success story of the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform will continue to drive the implementation of the new Circular Economy Action Plan, thus accelerating the shift towards a circular society in Europe and beyond. In the context of this priority area, NAT will also continue and reinforce its work on the bioeconomy, linking food and agriculture with the circular economy and participating in the European Bioeconomy Policy Forum.
4. **Fostering a Comprehensive Food Policy – Towards a More Sustainable Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Common Fisheries Policy (CFP)**
 - **More sustainable and fairer food systems** will continue to be a main priority for NAT, especially in the context of the upcoming Framework on Sustainable Food Systems. The framework will set the foundations for the systemic changes that are needed by all actors of the food system. It will also provide a framework for the future governance of food systems, which could hopefully include the creation of a European Food Policy Council. The section will in particular focus on promoting effective and inclusive governance for sustainable food systems and on fostering an open strategic autonomy for sustainable food. The EESC has already proposed that all future EU trade deals incorporate the Green Deal F2F and Biodiversity strategies as global standards on sustainability. The EU is a forerunner on sustainability and quality of food and should ensure **true reciprocity of standards in trade agreements**, particularly regarding welfare, sustainability,

transparency and traceability from farm to fork. This is necessary in an increasingly competitive and open global context. It is also important to look at the relationship with neighbouring countries.

- **More sustainable and fairer agriculture:** NAT will continue to support the implementation of the farm to fork strategy while providing support and concrete tools to EU farmers and agricultural workers (e.g. through promotion policy, quality schemes, origin labelling, a ban on unfair trading practices, support of local production and distribution schemes, etc.), creating alternative economic sources of revenues in rural areas (e.g. through renewable energies), fostering generational renewal, promoting its previous work on the protein strategy, and proposing recommendations well in advance for the new Commission related to the next revision of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), namely through an own-initiative opinion.
 - The CAP has been central to European integration, but we must work to improve it to meet economic, social and environmental needs. A future-proof agri-food system should guarantee the viability of farms and the agri-food industry, especially family farming and small and medium-sized enterprises.
 - NAT will also foster transparency all along the marketing chain. Clear labelling rules for consumers, indications of origin PGI and PDO and control of speculative processes affecting consumers and producers will help avoid distorting the market and harming the entire chain.
- **Sustainable fisheries (including aquaculture):** NAT will develop a comprehensive vision that promotes a just transition for the sector while fostering decarbonisation, protecting biodiversity, highlighting nutritional aspects linked to healthy diets and promoting opportunities for rural areas. The implementation of the vision could then be adjusted to the local and national specificities.

5. Restoring and preserving natural capital - Healthy planet for healthy people

- **Biodiversity:** The 2022 Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework marked an historic achievement in the fight against biodiversity loss. However, much more needs to be done to protect and restore the natural ecosystems on which human beings and the majority of their economic activities depend (e.g. on large carnivores). In particular, human beings should rethink their relationship with nature and a change of narrative is needed. NAT will step up efforts in the new mandate to ensure a more structured approach to biodiversity protection and to increase synergies between the climate and biodiversity COP processes.
- **Environmental protection (air, water, soil):** NAT will continue to mainstream environmental protection as well as extended producer responsibility schemes in all EU policies. This remains crucial in preventing and remedying pollution of air, water, soil and consumer products. In particular, NAT will also contribute to the EESC's ongoing work on fostering a more strategic approach on water through an EU Blue Deal. The links

between environmental protection, a circular and wellbeing economy and citizens' health will be strengthened.

- **A rights-based approach for people and nature** - The right to a healthy environment and the implementation, as well as the continuous improvement, of the environmental *acquis*: As human rights and the environment are interdependent, a clean, healthy and sustainable environment is necessary for the full enjoyment of fundamental human rights such as the rights to life, health, food, water and sanitation and development, among other things. In this context, acting for a European Union where the environmental rights are truly implemented and continuously improved is the most effective way forward.. NAT will build on the work of recent years to further develop a rights-based approach for people and nature.

6. Towards sustainable rural/urban development – implementing a holistic strategy

- **Further contribute to the facilitation process of the Rural Pact at political level.** Public participation is crucial for ensuring sustainable rural/urban development: Europe should listen to the rural world and its communities – this goes beyond the agriculture sector. Specific NAT activities could imply, for example the further participation in the co-design of the Rural Pact and in the organisation of the biannual Rural Pact conference; the involvement of EESC members at national level to foster commitments (going local); the promotion and implementation of the Rural Pact through internal EESC meetings of the sections/CCMI and Observatories, e.g. on rural mobility, digital transition... or through the organisation of ad hoc meetings; the possible organisation of an EESC civil society prize or "Your Europe Your Say" event on rural areas.
- **Continue to develop a holistic strategy**, increase cooperation with other bodies (PSG) and sections (e.g. ECO, SOC) with a view of promoting a more structured approach within the Committee and also with external stakeholders and other institutions (CoR, European Commission, EP). European rural and urban territories are not developing evenly. It is critical to foster policies that curb this trend, ensure a fair and sustainable transition to a wellbeing economy in all areas and promote population rebalancing.

V. NAT and its bodies – a joint architecture

The NAT competences are: Sustainable Food Systems, Agriculture, Fisheries, Environmental Protection and Biodiversity, Forestry, Rural and Urban Development, Sustainable Development, Climate Policy and Climate Action, Circular Economy – as listed in the EESC Bureau decision on Streamlining the Committee's Structures and Working Bodies.

The NAT section includes three other bodies: Sustainable Development Observatory, Permanent Study Group on Sustainable Food Systems, and the Ad hoc Group on UNFCCC COP. In addition, NAT and INT provide the secretariat for the joint EESC-European Commission European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform. The work of these bodies

will be articulated with the main work of the NAT section to foster synergies, ensure consistency and maximise impact.

