



European Economic and Social Committee | Comité économique et social européen

PERIOD **END-OF-TERM-OF-OFFICE REPORT**
2020 **SECTION FOR**
2023 **AGRICULTURE, RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE ENVIRONMENT (NAT)**

DIRECTORATE B – LEGISLATIVE WORK

Introduction

During the half-term-of-office 2020-2023, the overarching priority for the NAT Section was to deliver on the European Green and Social Deal as a means to achieving sustainable recovery, the implementation of the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), fostering a fairer and more sustainable food supply chain and supporting a resilient agriculture sector in the various areas of section competence.

This period was a challenging time, leading to more conflicts, social injustice, cost of living crisis and climate devastation while the world was still bearing the consequences of the COVID pandemic. Yet, it was also an opportunity to demonstrate civil society's resilience, generosity and engagement, and the importance to face these challenges in solidarity.

I am particularly proud that, at times of multiple crises, we have continued and multiplied our efforts to uphold the objectives of the European Green Deal and the UN Agenda 2030 on sustainable development. As detailed below, we have had a meaningful impact and received important recognition through our various activities, also thanks to the work of the other NAT bodies (Sustainable Development Observatory, Permanent Group -PSG- on Sustainable Food systems and AHG on climate) and the close cooperation with EESC bodies.

Most importantly, across all of our work, we have promoted and amplified the voices of young people, offering them a space to engage meaningfully in climate and sustainability discussions - via dedicated youth roundtables, by including a youth delegate in the COP delegation and by involving young people regularly in our legislative work. Youth is our present and our future: we must and we will continue to listen to their precious views and expertise.

All of this we could only manage thanks to the dedication and commitment of the NAT members and brilliant secretariat, jointly working together in a true team spirit.

As we look ahead to the next half-term-of-office, I am hopeful that transformative change towards a better, more sustainable and fairer future is still possible – for the current and next generations. We should never give up our efforts and commitment, as we keep showing through our work that we can indeed make a difference.

Peter Schmidt

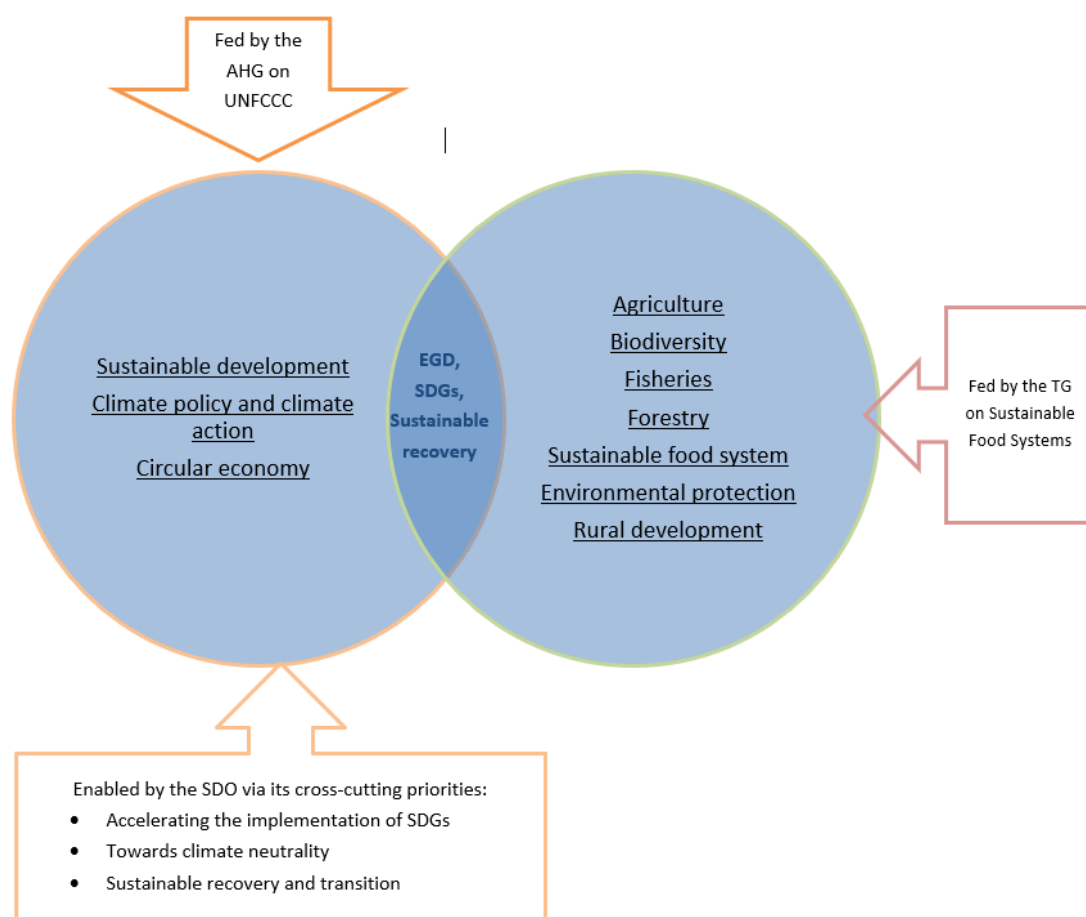
President of the NAT Section

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NAT work programme 2020-2023 in a nutshell

Overarching priority for the NAT Section: "Delivering on the European Green <u>and Social</u> Deal as a means to achieving sustainable recovery and the implementation of the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)"
Priority 1. Fostering a Comprehensive Food Policy – Towards a More Sustainable Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Common Fisheries Policy (CFP)
Priority 2. Restoring and preserving natural capital - Healthy planet for healthy people
Priority 3. Towards sustainable rural/urban development – designing a holistic strategy



Overall priority: Delivering on the European Green and Social Deal as a means of achieving sustainable recovery and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Delivering a European Green and Social Deal as the EU contribution to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs was the cornerstone of the NAT Section, SDO and PSG work programmes in the 2020-2023 term. Despite the short-term actions imposed by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, the section continued to uphold the objectives of the EGD and the SDGs as a compass to achieve the necessary transformations for a more sustainable society, leaving no one behind. In particular, the following activities have been carried out with successful impact:

- On **climate**, an Ad Hoc Group on UNFCCC/COP has been set up under the NAT Section (see separate AHG report for more details). It reached out to different stakeholders and prepared a [comprehensive civil society contribution to COP 27](#). In Sharm El-Sheikh, we called on the EU institutions and governments to step up climate ambition, including via the creation of a loss and damage facility, and to empower civil society in accelerating climate action. The [EESC Youth Delegate to COP](#) programme was also launched, a very successful follow-up to the opinion [NAT/788](#).
- The NAT Section was responsible for numerous opinions on the **"Fit for 55" package**, including the **Chapeau opinion** [NAT/843](#) on delivering the EU's 2030 Climate Target on the way to climate neutrality. Other opinions of the package looked at the Revision of the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS, [NAT/833](#)), the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM, [NAT/834](#)), the Effort Sharing Regulation ([NAT/835](#)), the New EU Forest Strategy for 2030 ([NAT/831](#)), and the Revision of the Regulation on land use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF, [NAT/836](#)).
- The work on a **"wellbeing economy"** has been further developed, in particular by emphasising in a [study](#) the importance of shifting priorities in the post-COVID recovery to achieve a transformational shift beyond a GDP-based approach. On the 50th anniversary of the Club of Rome's landmark report on the limits to growth, the NAT Section in cooperation with ECO and SOC brought together EU policy makers and civil society in an [event organised with the French Presidency](#) and laying the ground for a major 2023 EP conference on Beyond Growth.
- On the **SDGs**, the NAT Section has coordinated the Commission's request to prepare the civil society's contribution to the [first EU-level Voluntary Review on the SDGs](#), which will be presented in July 2023 at the High Level Political Forum in New York. SDG implementation has been at the core of the work of the SDO (see separate SDO report for more details) and NAT also prepared **two opinions** on the crucial role of education of our children towards the SDGs and sustainable food.
- The [European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform](#), a joint initiative of the EESC (NAT and INT) and the European Commission, has continued to be an interactive hub and "network of networks" for the circular economy community in Europe (see the [ECESP Annual Report 2022](#)). Youth representatives have played a prominent role in the last few years as active members of the Coordination Group and key participants in the annual stakeholder conferences.
- On **youth engagement**, the NAT Section closely cooperated with the SOC Section in the context of the Coordination Group for the European Year of Youth, contributing to the opinion [The EU Youth Test](#) and the [Resolution on the long-lasting legacy of the European Year of Youth](#).

Priority 1: Fostering a Comprehensive Food Policy – Towards a More Sustainable Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Common Fisheries Policy (CFP)

During the half-term-of-office, the new CAP entered into force after the approval of national CAP strategic plans. Efforts to implement the various actions of the Farm to Fork Strategy have continued, despite the repercussions of COVID and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. **In this challenging context, NAT has always remained part of the interinstitutional conversation, feeding ideas into policy-making and being the first to highlight important areas of concern for civil society, such as food speculation.** In particular:

- On **agriculture**, a high-level [thematic debate](#) was held for the 60th anniversary of the CAP, with the EP AGRI chair and representatives from the Commission and the French EU Presidency. Evaluations [on the CAP's impact on territorial development](#) and on the [EU school scheme](#) and an information report on the [Benefits of extensive livestock farming and organic fertilisers](#) were also carried out. The gender dimension and youth perspective were highlighted with a series of presentations and with the [Youth Round Table with Commissioner Wojciechowski](#). On the social dimension, a study on seasonal workers in the agri-food sector is being prepared.
- On **sustainable food systems**, important opinions have been drafted providing innovative ideas, for example on [aligning food business practices with the SDGs](#), on [strategic autonomy in food security and sustainability](#), on [food security and sustainable food systems](#), on promoting [a Fair Food Supply Chain](#), on an [EU plant protein and oil strategy](#) and [sustainable food labelling](#) (see also separate report of the PSG on SFS). In the context of the war in Ukraine, we have explored the [role of food speculation](#) in the global food price crisis, showing that food should not be treated as a financial asset. This opinion has resonated widely with MEPs and key stakeholders.
- On **fisheries and aquaculture**, opinions on [Strategic Guidelines for the sustainable development of EU aquaculture](#) and [a sustainable blue economy in the EU](#) have been adopted. Several new opinions on the conservation of fisheries resources and protection of marine ecosystems, decarbonation of the fishery sector are currently being prepared.
- **Thematic debates** were held in the context of NAT Section meetings to provide regular updates on the **state of food insecurity in the world**, with **high-level speakers** such as the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty, Prof. Olivier De Schutter, the FAO Chief Economist, Maximo Torero and the FAO Representative for Europe and Central Asia, Vladimir Rakhmanin.
- With the [first edition of the EU organic awards](#), co-organised with the Commission and other partners as a follow up to the [Action Plan on organic production and related EESC opinion](#), the EESC has played an important role in attracting a large number of applications from inspiring projects, demonstrating that the sustainability transition is already happening on the ground.
- Participation in the Commission's [EU Platform on Food Losses and Food Waste](#) and [European Bioeconomy Policy Forum](#) and in the annual meetings of the [Committee on World Food Security \(CFS\)](#) and the [World Food Forum](#) (WFF) have also contributed to increasing the visibility of the

Priority 2: Restoring and preserving natural capital - Healthy planet for healthy people

On environmental protection

- The NAT Section prepared a milestone opinion on the **EU Zero Pollution Action Plan**, one of the key elements of the EGD aiming to reduce air, water and soil pollution to levels no longer considered harmful to health and natural ecosystems, that respect the boundaries with which our planet can cope, thereby creating a toxic-free environment. The opinion has been an opportunity to reiterate the EESC and NAT Section's **call for restoring and preserving natural capital** and recovering a healthy planet for healthy people. In its follow-up, the EESC has been invited to join as observer the [Zero Pollution Stakeholder Platform](#), a great **opportunity to connect with the successful experience of the ECESP and ensure synergies**. Related opinions, e.g. on the New Soil Strategy (NAT/838), have also led EESC rapporteurs to be part of **Commission's expert groups**. Several opinions have also been prepared on **air** ([NAT/879](#)), **water** ([NAT/877](#) and [NAT/878](#)) and **forestry**.
- To help improve environmental protection, combat environmental crime and strengthen environmental rights, the NAT Section has drawn up the information report entitled **"Environmental protection as a prerequisite for respect for fundamental rights"** ([NAT/825](#)) and the opinion **"Improving environmental protection through criminal law"** (NAT/853), organising related debates. In the context of the war in Ukraine, an own-initiative opinion has been proposed to address **environmental impacts caused by the conflict** (NAT/885) for both the Ukrainian and EU population.
- The NAT Section also organised a [Youth Round Table With Commissioner Sinkevičius](#) on "Protecting ecosystems and restoring biodiversity" to convey the perspective of young people in its work.

On biodiversity

- The NAT Section has continued to follow-up on the **implementation of the Biodiversity Strategy**, e.g. with opinions on the **Sustainable Use of Pesticides** (NAT/862) and **Nature Restoration Targets** (NAT/841). NAT has also prepared the **first own-initiative opinion** on a **European Citizens' Initiative**—the one on "Save bees and farmers" (NAT/868).
- The NAT Section participated **for the first time in the UN Biodiversity Conference (CBD COP 15)** from 9 to 15 December 2022. The aim of the EESC participation was to **advocate for an ambitious agreement to protect our planet and for strong civil society engagement in biodiversity conservation and restoration**, a key element for the implementation of already existing but never delivered policies.

Priority 3. Towards sustainable rural/urban development – designing a holistic strategy

Building on previous Committee work related to rural areas, the NAT Section developed the strategic opinion [Towards a holistic strategy on sustainable rural/urban development](#) calling on policymakers to develop and implement a comprehensive and holistic EU strategy for balanced, cohesive, equitable and sustainable rural and urban development. This holistic approach was supported by the Commission with the publication on 30 June 2020 of the [EU long-term vision on rural areas](#), that we welcomed in our opinion [on the EU Long-term vision for rural areas up to 2040](#). In this context:

- Thanks to **extensive consultations with rural and urban stakeholders**, the NAT Section played an important convening role, bringing together different Commission DGs, the CoR, representatives of the EP, local communities and other stakeholders, and managed to put this cross-cutting issue at the forefront of EU policy-making (NAT Section [thematic debate](#) on 8 March 2021 and [public hearing](#) co-organised with the European Rural Parliament on 18 June 2021).
- The NAT Section also brought the **topic of sustainable rural development to the forefront of our Committee**, with a plenary debate with the Commissioner for agriculture Janusz Wojciechowski in October 2021 and the [EESC commitment](#) to the Rural Pact in 2022.
- [The energy and digital transition of rural areas](#) was also tackled as part of the EESC's cross-cutting package of opinions on the energy transition.

With our NAT Section thematic debate on 9 February 2022 "[Insights for the implementation of the Rural Pact towards a sustainable rural/urban development](#)" and the NAT secretariat participation in the Rural Pact preparatory group, we have contributed to shape the [Rural Pact](#), a new initiative bringing together rural and urban areas, local communities and stakeholders to achieve the goals of the EU long-term vision on rural areas. Structured engagement of civil society is essential to make the EU's rural areas stronger, more connected, resilient and prosperous.

- In this context an own-initiative opinion has been proposed to address **The role of youth in rural development** (NAT/893).
- The NAT Section will continue to raise the voice of rural areas and inhabitants through various debates. The first of this series was organised on 9 March 2023 with a [EESC thematic debate on the Rural Pact #1: renewable energies in rural areas](#).

Interinstitutional echo

As mentioned above, the NAT Section has intensified its cooperation with the other institutions during the half-term-of-office. Main highlights include:

- **With the Commission:**

- Joint organisation of the EU Organic Awards
- Joint EESC-EC initiative on the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform
- Close cooperation on the EU Rural Pact
- Youth Climate and Sustainability Roundtables with Commissioners
- EESC's contribution to the EU Voluntary Review on the SDGS
- Discussions to shape the future Sustainable Food Systems Framework

- **With the Parliament:**

- The EESC is included as an organising partner in the high-level EP Beyond Growth conference
- Follow-up activities and meetings between EESC and EP rapporteurs led to the presentation of several EESC opinions in EP Committee meetings, for example NAT/825 on livestock farming, NAT/847 on F-gases, NAT/848 on Ozone-depleting substances, NAT/856 on plant protein (upcoming), NAT/868 on the ECI "Save bees and farmers" and NAT/873 on food speculation (upcoming).
- MEPs, including the AGRI Committee chair, regularly attended NAT Section meetings and other events.

- **With the Council/rotating Presidencies:**

- Presentation of the EESC's contribution to the EU VR in the Council's Agenda 2030 Working Party
- Exploratory opinion on *A fair food supply chain* requested by the Croatian Presidency
- Exploratory opinion on *Food security and sustainable food systems* requested by the French Presidency
- Exploratory opinion on *Childhood obesity* requested by the upcoming Spanish Presidency
- Organisation of the conference on "The sustainable economy we need" with the French Presidency

Communication achievements

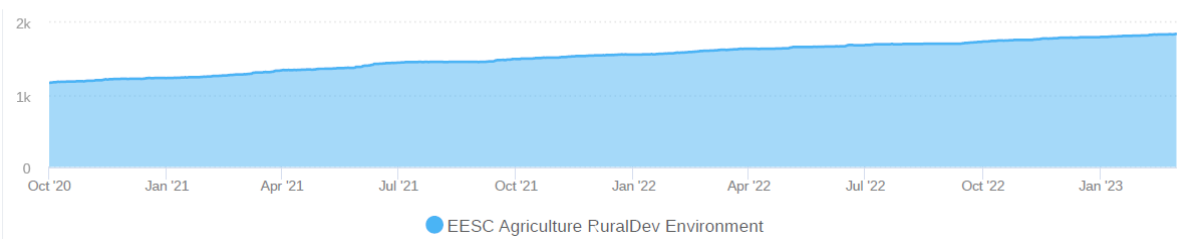
The NAT section actively promotes its work outside of the Committee thanks to a regular newsletter and a Twitter account.

The **NAT newsletter** is issued nine times a year and is sent to approximately 1 700 recipients, of which about 1 300 are external stakeholders who opted in to receive our newsletter. Other recipients include internal stakeholders such as EESC staff and members. New recent features include:

- a regular editorial by the NAT section president, each time highlighting the impact of our activities on a different field of our work;
- a column "meet our members";
- a section dedicated to our work in the context of the war in Ukraine;
- a spotlight on public consultations for EU policies that fall within our remit.

The **NAT Twitter account** is an important communication tool for the section, used to disseminate information about our events, our adopted opinions, members' activities and other projects that the section works on, such as the EU Organic Awards or the Youth Round Tables. The followership of the account grew to 1 842 followers (an increase of 58% since 01.10.2020, when the followership was 1 165).

Followers



Monitored Profile: User Evolution

	Thursday, October 1, 2020	Friday, October 2, 2020	Saturday, October 3, 2020	Sunday, October 4, 2020	Monday, October 5, 2020	Tuesday, October 6, 2020	Tuesday, February 28, 2023	Wednesday, March 1, 2023
EESC Agriculture RuralDev Envi...	1,165	1,169	1,171	1,172	1,173	1,174	1,841	1,842

Perspective/outlook

The multiple and interlinked global crises we are facing – the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate and biodiversity emergencies, the cost of living crisis and the impacts of the conflict in Ukraine and elsewhere – will continue to affect the work of the NAT Section. Against this background, the following main policy areas will remain particularly relevant and challenging in the next months and years:

Accelerating the implementation of the SDGs: in a context of multiple crises, the SDGs remain our lighthouse and our compass as the only universal vision for peace, socio-economic 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.

Developing the social dimension of the green transition– towards a wellbeing economy: Climate change poses a severe threat to people's livelihoods and ecosystems across the globe, not just for future generations but already for ourselves. 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 well-being 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.

Fostering the transformation to more sustainable and fairer agri-food systems will continue to be a main priority for the section, 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, including policy makers, business operators and consumers in order to accelerate the transition to a sustainable EU food system. The framework will also provide a frame for the future governance of food systems.

Promoting civil society's structured involvement in the design, implementation and monitoring of the various policies is essential. The NAT Section will continue to uphold and further 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 a European Food Policy Council and a space for stakeholders' engagement in the SDG implementation).

Reinforcing youth engagement: For some years, the EESC has been working on how to better integrate the voice of young Europeans 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 amplify the voices of young people and youth organisations both within the Section and across the EESC, in order 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 [Structured youth engagement in the aftermath of the European Year of Youth 2022](#).

Appendix – Key statistics

	As of 29 October 2020	2021	2022	Until 25 April 2023	Total
Section meetings	2	9	9	4	24
Section Bureau meetings	2	11	10	4	27
Study Group meetings	6	43	46	20	115
Permanent Study Group meetings	0	3	3	1	7
Observatory meetings	1	3	3	1	8
Opinions	5	35	30	9	79
Referrals	5	26	21	9	61
Exploratory opinions	0	2	2	0	4
Own-initiative opinions	0	3	6	0	9
Information reports	0	4	0	0	4
Evaluation reports	0	0	1	0	1
Studies	1	0	0	1	2
Fact-finding missions	0	1	5	1	7
Conferences and hearings organised by the section	2	15	10	3	30
Participation of members in meetings/events/conferences	17	111	198	42	368
Meetings between EESC/EP rapporteurs or section/EP Committee presidents	0	8	9	2	19
Meetings of EESC members with Commissioners, members of Cabinet, Commission directors-general or directors	0	2	2	1	5
Meetings of EESC members with Council representatives, permanent representatives or EU presidency representatives	0	4	0	2	6