The future of the world is digital

60 years after the Rome Treaty, the Union is looking for a new positive direction. The European Union continues to face major challenges such as increasing poverty, aging population, the need for further innovation, sustainable development, clean and safe energy supplies and many others.

In this “multi-speed” Europe, one of the smallest countries in the EU, Estonia, has just taken the lead of the Council: a major challenge for this State, a member of the EU since 2004. The country which has been able to rebuild itself largely thanks to digital technology, to the point of being 26 years after the collapse of the USSR as a world reference for digitization and entrepreneurship. It is by leaving zero that you have managed to carry out your e-revolution and the complete transformation “through” and “thanks to” digital.

This is why the Various Interests’ Group has decided to hold its Extraordinary meeting entitled “Smart solutions for sustainable and inclusive societies” in Tallinn, to engage with, listen to and learn from Estonian civil society and citizens as well as providing a forum for local civil society organizations to come together and openly discuss the need to play a part in this digital revolution.

Digitalisation is now a full part of our everyday life. The digital transformation in recent years offers new means of communication and exchange and has radically changed the forms of ownership, production, distribution and consumption. The long-term competitiveness and cohesion of the European Union depend on its ability to innovate and develop in a harmonious way. The performance of EU regions still differs significantly in terms of innovation, social progress and economic development.

There is a need for sound projects to increase jobs and growth and improve the social and economic conditions for a more resilient and cohesive Europe.

To achieve a sustainable future and emerge stronger from the global financial crisis, Europe must turn into a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy, delivering high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion.

The future of the world will be digital. But at the same time, rapid change and new technologies always create vulnerabilities: our task will be to balance these risks and benefits fairly.

Estonia has managed the balance between security and freedom by providing a network of public and private e-services based on a secure online identity. The country has high-functioning e-government infrastructure, reliable digital identity, a system of security measures and a central system for monitoring, resolving and reporting cyber security incidents.

To end with the words of Robert Schuman: “Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity.”

60 years after the Rome declaration, will digitalization be this new achievement? Will it allow us to give new impulse to the construction of Europe?
Europe III

Smart solutions for sustainable and inclusive societies

In the framework of the Estonian EU presidency, the EESC Various Interests Group organised an extraordinary meeting in Tallinn, capital of Estonia, on Tuesday 12 September 2017.

The conference, entitled “Smart solutions for sustainable and inclusive societies”, focused on the promotion of e-services, e-government, urban development and e-solutions and their role in boosting innovation and a sustainable and inclusive EU, which is a crucial component of the current Estonian presidency’s work programme.

The event was attended by over 100 local civil society stakeholders and experts in the field. The conference was opened by Mr Luca Jahier, president of the Various Interests’ Group, and the key-note speeches were given by Mr Indrek Saar, Minister of Culture of the Republic of Estonia, and Mr Arnold Rüütel, former President of the Republic of Estonia.

The conference was divided into two parallel workshops, which provided the opportunity to focus on Smart technologies servicing balanced social development on the one hand, and Smart solutions for sustainable agriculture on the other.

Workshop 1 focused on:
- Development of e-health services
- Disabilities and e-solutions/help
- Bridging digital divide for an aging society

Workshop 2 focused on:
- Innovation and sustainability in the farming sector
- EESC perspective on sustainable farming and innovation
- Simple e-solutions for smart farming

Panel on ‘Smart technologies servicing balanced social development’

Panel on ‘Smart solutions for sustainable agriculture’
In the second half of 2017, Estonia will take on the presidency of the EU Council for the first time.

Unarguably, Europe is currently facing complex internal and external challenges, including the start of the negotiations regarding the UK’s exit from the EU. Among other things, slow growth and persistently high unemployment in many Member States, the ongoing migrant and refugee flows and heightened terrorism threats are spreading uncertainty, making people susceptible to populist movements.

No country has a magic wand to resolve such economic and political pressures during its six-month Presidency. However, Estonia will work hard to move things forward in a positive direction that benefits both the Member States and the Union.

During the Estonian presidency, the Various Interests’ Group of the EESC takes a closer look at how the digital services can be used even more to help the Europeans to meet the various challenges our aging societies are facing. Inclusive approach to design of services is key, and that was exactly the issue addressed by the Group at their Conference in Tallinn 12th of September.

The Estonian presidency slogan - Unity through balance - is highlighting technology on one side but pure nature and preservation of our environment, be it natural or cultural environment, on the other side. This is what we need for a progressive and inclusive society. With this conference, the Various Interests’ Group makes a small but important contribution to our common Europe.

Here you can download the brochure which introduces the priorities of the EESC during the Estonian Presidency:
Estonia’s place on the map of Europe is significant in many ways: it neighbours Russia to the east, the EU Member State of Latvia to the south, the Gulf of Riga and the Baltic Sea to the west, Finland and the Gulf of Finland to the north. So considerable is the flow of traffic between Tallinn and Helsinki that these capitals are almost twin cities. There are also direct links to Stockholm across the Baltic Sea. The Baltic states form a sort of chain, leading anyone coming from the north-east to the rest of Europe and the EU.

However, the Gulf of Finland and the Baltic Sea are to all intents and purposes an inland sea. The links to the Atlantic through the Danish straits are narrow, and currents through the straits are weak. The marine environment is prone to sharp deteriorations. In recent years, sewage treatment capacity has nonetheless improved in the megalopolis of Saint Petersburg, and the state of many rivers is also better, partly thanks to measures taken at local level.

Nevertheless, a major new problem has arisen for the Baltic Sea coastal states. The sea has once again become a strategically important region between East and West. To put it another way, problems have emerged between East and West, having manifest and perceptible effects on the Gulf of Finland and the Baltic Sea.

In the first half of the last century, during the Russian Revolution, there were international air and sea battles at the head of the Gulf of Finland close to Saint Petersburg. During the Second World War, fighting took place over even wider area, with conflicts and war right across Europe. Now peace has prevailed around these waters for decades.

Nevertheless the current generation faces a completely new predicament. Military intelligence operations, exercises and intimidation have become commonplace in the Gulf of Finland and in the Baltic Sea. Northern European countries and all countries along the Baltic coast are facing these new kinds of threat. Fighter planes with the capacity for nuclear weapons fly overhead, sometimes within touching distance of one another and occasionally they cannot be identified. Submarines move under the water, sometimes unidentified. Military exercises have returned to a part of Europe as if there were no less populated regions available in which to conduct them. In today’s world, and in Europe, they are apparently invisible. But are they really?

I am a war orphan: I lost my father in the Finnish Winter War, our defensive war against Soviet Russia, when I was two years old. I have vague recollections of him: a pale figure cleaning his hands in a pile of sawdust in our farmyard, before entering the house for evening supper and a night’s sleep. He was wounded while on military patrol duties, for which he would have been rewarded home leave – enabling him to return home for the first time after leaving to go to the front. He might have been a homesick, young man. “I never got to see Pirkko again”, he said when helped back to the unit next morning. He passed away on that same day. We have all lost our best men, women, youngsters and even children to war, also in recent times. Far too many.

Should war ever break out, then it must remain beyond the borders of the European Union. We are not a threat to anyone. We don’t need war to demonstrate our strength. We do not need new land or sea, either close to our borders or further afield. We still have so much to do in terms of improving the lives of humans and animals and the environment; nurturing culture, science and the arts; developing better living conditions for the people of the world; and even conquering space jointly with other responsible countries and continents. All of this should be done without violence or force, through education, science, and cooperation, on a global scale.

Estonia appears to us to be a dynamic and bold country. Estonia cherishes its own culture with happy minds; it is friendly, innovative and easy going. Estonia will succeed fully in achieving the Presidency’s programme. Any initiatives Estonia does not have time to see through to completion will surely be taken up by the presidencies that follow.

Now more than ever, the world needs alliances between countries and joint initiatives to drive forward life-enhancing changes. Estonians do this while singing together! And of course also through skilful diplomacy and cooperation, at European and global level. We all wish you many successful and enjoyable times throughout your first European Presidency and we support you in your efforts to endorse and keep peace on our whole continent. The world deserves it.
“Brexit means uncertainty”, said Michel Barnier at the outset of the debate with EESC members on 6 July, “uncertainty for citizens, businesses and jobs”. He stressed that his task was to negotiate on the basis of what the United Kingdom put on the table, which included no free movement for EU citizens, full autonomy of laws, no role for the European Court of Justice and the autonomy to sign free trade agreements. The latter involved leaving the customs union and the single market.

But there was also one certainty, he said, namely that the UK would become a third country, and this would entail three main consequences:

1. The basic freedoms – free movement of people, goods and capital – would be indivisible;
2. There would be no option for sector-by-sector participation in the Single Market; and
3. The EU would maintain its independence in setting economic and social rules and standards that all third parties must respect.

The United Kingdom and the EU needed to be aware that Brexit had a cost and it was the task of the negotiating team to keep this cost as low as possible. “From the EU’s side, there will be neither aggressiveness nor arrogance”, said Mr Barnier, “but we need to be ready for any situation, even a no deal situation, although this would be the worst-case scenario.”

Luca Jahier, president of the EESC’s Various Interests’ Group stated that “A bad deal is better than no deal; we need to achieve a deal at any cost, because nobody voted to become poorer, nor for the end of the Irish peace process.” Mr Jahier proposed that “half of the frontier negotiations should take place at the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and a cultural route of peace should be established between the Irish border and Nicosia in Cyprus, where another wall still exists in Europe.”

Every three years the non-governmental sector in Poland and the largest Polish NGO federation - the National Federation of Polish NGOs (OFOP) - organise the Polish NGO Forum, which is not only a great celebration of the sector (exhibitions, picnics, performances) but also a place for substantive discussions and preparation of programme documents. The two days of debates, workshops, exhibitions and picnics was attended by about a thousand participants from all over Poland.

For the past few years, the Forum has been a place to build a strategy for the development of the civic sector (the so-called Strategic Road Map), which is also intended to increase the role of the organisation in civil dialogue. Representatives of the organisations discuss the final form of relations with the government. One of the important long-term goals is to bring about the establishment of the Social and Economic Committee in Poland, which will allow additional reinforcement of existing social and civic dialogue.

The position of Polish NGOs in light of the present situation in Poland is not ideal. The strong intervention of the state administration (attempting to establish the governmental National Institute of Freedom) has led to division within the sector and the strengthening of national right-wing organisations, while other organisations (including ecological and democratic ones) are discredited by the national public media. In view of the above, the VIII Forum is an important element in the development of NGOs in Poland and their attachment to democratic values. The EESC supported the event - the speakers of the plenary session were: Mr Luca Jahier, president of the Various Interests’ Group and Mr Jacek Krawczyk, president of the Employers' Group.
Group III Members in the Spotlight playing a key role

On 28 June 2017, CEEP (Centre Européen de l’Entreprise Publique) held its third Public Services Summit in Brussels. From the changing face of terrorism and the rise of populism to the ongoing Brexit process, the European Union faces unprecedented challenges. Is the EU sufficiently prepared to manage current disruptions and foster new strategies?

Group III president Luca Jahier participated in the panel on “The Future of Europe, the Future of Democracy” together with Klaus Welle, secretary-general of the European Parliament and Petros Fassoulas, general secretary of European Movement International. The panel discussed the state of the European Union, addressed the role of public services in giving new momentum to the EU project, and discussed how stakeholders could contribute to the discussions and initiatives.

The last panel of the day addressed the state of the European Union and of democracy, and discussed how citizens and stakeholders could contribute to the discussions and initiatives, having in mind the upcoming 2019 European elections. Speakers included Klaus Welle (secretary-general of the European Parliament), Petros Fassoulas (general secretary, European Movement International) and Luca Jahier (president of EESC Group III).

The event was an opportunity to exchange ideas about a wide range of topics and challenges, from Brexit to the rise of populist movements around Europe, and touch upon the rising international tensions. The existing initiatives to support better democratic processes were highlighted, coming from panellists (the ALL Alliance, civil society and social partners within the EESC) and EU institutions (Bratislava Roadmap, La Valletta Summit, anniversary of the Rome Treaty).

While Mr Welle called on the EU to provide “complementary executive assistance” as an interesting option and to respect the autonomy of national, regional and local authorities, in order to ensure that Europe was in a position to support Member States whenever needed, Mr Jahier insisted on the crucial importance of involving stakeholders as well as national, local and regional governments and parliaments in EU debates, especially when discussing the future of Europe.

Baiba Miltoviča, rapporteur for heating and cooling strategy, was invited to participate in and moderate a panel discussion during European Sustainable Energy Week in June 2017 (EUSEW 2017). The panel was entitled “Building Blocks for European Leadership in Renewables – The Importance of the Local Level”.

The purpose of this session was to evaluate the role of local actors, such as municipalities, consumers and citizens, in energy transitions towards sustainable, renewable-based heating and cooling, explore the success factors that contributed to the progress in renewable energies at the local level, and present good examples of successful local initiatives.

The panel, introduced and moderated by Baiba Miltoviča, brought together relevant actors to provide insight into the challenges of mainstreaming renewables into heating and cooling, the ways in which these challenges were and could be addressed, and the role of local actors and consumers as the engines of this transformation.

To a large extent the energy transition takes place at a local level: buildings need to become energy efficient and start producing renewable electricity and heat; citizens need to accept RES installations in their environment; and citizens need to invest in RES production. With the Clean Energy Package the European Commission proposes a legal framework that puts consumers at the centre, to enable the uptake of renewable energy technology. This session brought together relevant local actors (municipalities and consumers) to discuss how the uptake of RES at a local level could be accelerated and which barriers needed to be overcome.

On Thursday 8 June 2017, M. Libaert addressed a conference debate organised by the Nudge France association to present the opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee.

The conference was held in the most prestigious setting of the École normale supérieure in rue d’Ulm, Paris. The room was filled to capacity with 250 people attending the event, and the organisers told me that reservations had been closed just four days after announcing the event, more than three months earlier. The overwhelming majority of participants were public and private sector decision-makers.

M. Libaert spoke at the request of the organisers to present the opinion of
Group III Members in the Spotlight playing a key role to be very useful.

The EESC opinion had recommended holding a European conference on nudges, and the numerous contacts established at the event could prove very useful.

Other speakers included Xavier Troussard, head of the European Commission’s Foresight and Behavioural Insights Unit.

Ms Slavova participated in the Global Media Forum in Bonn in the EESC break session on “The future of Europe”.

The EESC was a strategic partner of DW. EESC members participated in different panels, provided their expertise and contributed the point of view of civil society, reaching around 600 journalists and 1500 other participants.

The EESC was also present with its own stand, where information material was made available while both members and staff explained the EESC’s role and activities to interested visitors. During two break sessions, EESC members Jane Morrice and Dilyana Slavova discussed “The future of Europe” including with regard to BREXIT, making the EESC stand interactive.

On 12 July 2017 the REX Section, together with DG Trade, organised an event dedicated to the trade and sustainable development (TSD) chapters of trade agreements. The meeting was attended by civil society participants in the DAGs, representatives of partner countries’ embassies, EESC members, and academics.

I would like to underline the importance of this meeting because the inclusion of TSD chapters in trade agreements has created a lot of expectations for more progressive trade policy that will take sustainable development, environmental protection and the social protection of workers into account. These expectations are reasonable and justified but we have seen that they cannot be met immediately, given the innovative nature of the TSD chapters and the important institutional and capacity building that they require. It is a common responsibility to make sure that these chapters, which are based on internationally agreed conventions and obligations for the protection of social rights and the environment, can function and contribute to the improvement of workers’ rights, environmental protection, fighting climate change, strengthening responsible business conduct, promoting fair trade practices and increasing trade in environmentally friendly goods in the EU and its partner countries. They should also contribute to exporting EU values such as genuine civil and social dialogue in our trade partners.

Therefore, the EESC welcomes the proposal of Commissioner Malmström to start an inclusive stakeholders dialogue on the trade and sustainable development chapters. In the EESC, we have not waited for this call; on the contrary, almost two years ago we started a process of internal reflection. Some of our conclusions are included in our opinions on the “Trade for all” communication; others we sent to the commissioner in a letter co-signed by some of the civil society organisations participating in the DAGs.

I would like to mention some points that we consider important in this debate and which are based on the five years’ experience that we have with TSD chapters and civil society participation in these chapters:

- We welcome TSD chapters in trade agreements, as we have been requesting them in all our opinions on trade since 2008
- We welcome their scope, which is extensive and based on internationally agreed conventions and obligations, and we particularly welcome the inclusion of civil society in these chapters, which is a unique feature of the TSD chapters of the EU trade agreements
- We appreciate the mandate given to the EESC to provide part of the membership and to serve as a secretariat for the six Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs) created as well as for the Consultative Committee for the EU-CARIFORUM economic partnership agreement. We are certain that these civil society mechanisms have an important role to play, as they are the main, if not only, space for the representation of European civil society in trade agreements vis-à-vis the co-signatory countries.
Every year, a Conference of States Parties (COSP) takes place in the headquarters of the United Nations in New York. Representatives from the UN Member States that have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), UN agencies and bodies, NGOs, DPOs and other interested parties from all over the world take part. It is the most important annual meeting for disability rights globally. This year the EESC was represented in the 10th session of the Conference of States Parties to the CRPD by a delegation of three members (Irena Petraitiene, Madi Sharma, and Ioannis Vardakastanis).

1. **12 June 2017 - Civil Society CRPD Forum**
   On 12 June 2017, Mr Vardakastanis represented the EESC at the Civil Society CRPD Forum and specifically in **Panel 1: Nothing about us without us: Practical implementation of Article 4.3, giving a speech about “the impact of DPO parallel reporting on the UN system**. The Civil Society CRPD Forum provided an open forum for persons with disabilities and their representative organisations to discuss the full and effective implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD), with particular regard to UN CRPD Article 4.3 and the foundation of the disability movement: “Nothing about us, without us”.

   On 13 June 2017, Mr Vardakastanis represented the EESC at the side event entitled “Transforming Lives: Accessibility Resources for Human Rights in Action”. This side event was organised by the European Union and co-sponsored by the European Disability Forum (EDF).

3. **13 June 2017 - Side event entitled “Persons with disabilities on the move – The rights of refugees and migrants with disabilities”**
   On 13 June 2017, Mr Vardakastanis represented the EESC at the side event entitled “Persons with disabilities on the move – The rights of refugees and migrants with disabilities”. This event provided a clear overview of the global refugee crisis, highlighting the data available about the situation of refugees with disabilities and other persons with disabilities moving from one country to another.

The Sustainable Development Observatory at the European Economic and Social Committee organised a conference on sustainable development in order to celebrate World Environment Day and raise awareness about the challenges and in particular the opportunities that a sustainable economic and social development can bring for businesses, the environment and European citizens.

The conference brought together speakers from the UN, the EU and the Czech government as well as academics, representatives from civil society, and EESC member Roman Haken.

The EESC presented the opinion “Sustainable Development Forum”, of which Mr Haken is co-rapporteur, as well as some other recommendations focused on the Agenda for Sustainable Development. There was an opportunity to speak about the global level – UN and national level – and to present the views of the Czech Government Council for Sustainable Development. The final part of the conference consisted of a moderated discussion with examples of activities by universities and organised civil society.

On 22 June, Group III member Renate HEINISCH participated in a conference on “Growing older with PID:s: Issues of Transitional Care and Ageing”. Ms. Heinisch spoke on Ageing with a primary immunodeficiency, and elaborated on the Social perspective of the issue.

A lot has changed in the European Union for the past 20 years. Our community keeps expanding, the technology is evolving rapidly and EU competences in the field of healthcare continue to grow, as we have observed with the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union. As a former Member of the European Parliament, I remember how together with my colleagues, we were strongly supporting the rare disease community, at the time requiring much-needed support. Today, through legislative and technological advances the treatment of rare disease patients, such as PID:s, have led to an increased number of elderly rare disease patients. With this being a much-welcomed result, we are now facing the new challenges of this situation, with elderly PID patients being at higher risk of infections, amongst other factors influencing their health.

Older citizens have a range of specific needs. I am convinced that targeted measures should be taken with regards to infrastructure, the supply of adequate health care and care services, the provision of education...
and information for the elderly, as well as their participation in the economic, political and social life. With diverse challenges faced by the elderly, including the fast services digitalization, healthy ageing should not be addressed through a single initiative, but rather through a comprehensive strategy with actions on individual, organisational and societal levels. Reliable health care for elderly PID patients entails medical care (especially geriatric) and rehabilitation, adequate care services, advice, information and education on patient rights, formal and informal social support groups and technical support systems. In this sense, I believe the digital evolution should also be taken into account, when tackling the problems of future elderly patients. In 20 years, we will have a much more computer literate elderly patients, which will need better digitalization facilities, guaranteeing them living an independent life.

Health promotion is a cost-effective way to prevent further illness development in elderly PID patients resulting in a longer hospital stays, bacterial infections and increased risks of cancer. Therefore, I am convinced that further provisions on specialised PID elderly patients care are needed in national rare disease plans. Together with other previous contributions on transitional care for PID patients, I believe we have a strong base to develop concrete suggestions on addressing these challenges and I am ready to support IPOPI.
Cillian LOHAN (IE)
Green Economy Foundation
Member of the Various Interests’ Group

Waste to energy under the Circular Economy

The EESC supports the adherence to the waste hierarchy when making decisions on waste management, including waste-to-energy options. The EESC espouses the principle of sustainability-proofing of EU public money in the light of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and that any public funding should be improving the well-being of the citizens of Europe. Public funding should also adhere to the principle of not supporting any activity that causes harm to citizens.

It is important not to create infrastructural barriers to the achievement of higher recycling rates by investments in outdated waste-to-energy processes.

Member States with a large number of incinerators at the moment represent an inconsistency with the ambition of higher recycling targets proposed by the Circular Economy Action Plan. The challenge is to transition these Member States out of incineration dependency and into a diverse range of waste management solutions, through push and pull policy factors including:
- introducing taxes;
- phasing out support schemes;
- a moratorium on new facilities and decommissioning older ones.

The transition to a circular economy has been hindered in the EU by a lack of the right price signals. This is accentuated by continued unjustifiable subsidies for the unsustainable production systems, specifically for the fossil fuel sector. The EESC welcomes the explicitly stated link between access to Cohesion Policy funds and both national waste management plans and the European Circular Economy Action Plan. The link to the European Fund for Strategic Investment could be stronger.

Cillian LOHAN (IE)
Green Economy Foundation
Member of the Various Interests’ Group

Ecodesign Working Plan 2016-2019

The scope of the Ecodesign Working Plan 2016-2019 is too limited to be a strong driver for wholesale change in behaviour through the supply chains of goods and services at a pace that would reflect the ambition of the Circular Economy Action Plan.

The ecodesign of goods and services needs to go beyond just energy considerations. Although these are important, there is a need to have a focus on the full lifecycle of products, including their durability, ease of maintenance and repair, potential for sharing and digitisation, reuse, upgradeability, recyclability and actual uptake after use in the form of secondary materials in products entering the market.

Ecodesign needs to incorporate the principles of the circular economy, in the context of digitisation, sharing and the functional economy, in order to have consistency across the various strategies that are intended to deliver a new economic model.

The component parts of a product should be easily recoverable for reuse and/or remanufacture and drive the creation of a strong secondary raw materials market.

Labelling requirements can drive improved ecodesign strategies and help consumers in decision making, thus becoming a driver for behavioural change. Labelling should include a life expectancy of a product, and/or its important components.

The EESC reiterates it support for the use of Extended Producer Responsibility as a tool to promote the transition to circular economy business models, and emphasises that this too can play a role in the promotion of ecodesign.
On Wednesday 5 July, the plenary session of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted the opinion on "The external dimension of the social economy" with 129 votes in favour, one against and four abstentions. Miguel Angel Cabra de Luna, a Spanish member of the EESC’s Group III and a representative of CEPES, was the rapporteur for the opinion. He worked together with his expert, José Luis Monzón, a professor of applied economic and president of CIRIEC Spain.

Mr Cabra de Luna himself presented the opinion to the EESC’s Section for External Relations at a meeting on 8 June 2017 in Brussels. In the opinion, the rapporteur notes that the social economy is a key player and helps to achieve the objectives of all European policies with an external dimension: external and security policy, trade policy, neighbourhood policy, climate change and sustainable development. However, he regrets that “the lack of an appropriate regulatory environment, at both European and national level, prevents this sector from developing its full potential and maximising its impact”.

The adopted opinion refers to the documents adopted by the various EU institutions in recent years that recognise that the social economy has an important role to play in many fields, in particular in global sustainable development, decent work and development cooperation. Among the “business successes observed” in various non-EU countries, the opinion singles out the productive activity of the social economy in Africa, America and Asia, where it “makes a major contribution to improving the living and working conditions of millions of people”.

In his opinion, Mr Cabra de Luna also warns that “traditional financing instruments” do not work for the social economy and regrets that it is not “systematically considered” to be an actor in programmes designed to boost the international dimension of business, nor in EU development cooperation. Nor is the social economy mentioned as a player in certain trade agreements, such as the revision of the Cotonou Agreement, which will affect more than 100 African, Caribbean and Pacific countries.

According to the opinion, both the European Fund for Sustainable Development (EFSD) and the EIB “should work together to establish a financial ecosystem” specifically for the social economy, with regard to both development cooperation and the digital economy.
The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) welcomed the Commission's decision to establish a multi-stakeholder platform on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the EU. The EESC supports the work of the platform by nominating a member to represent the EESC on the platform and provide expertise as well as by critically reviewing and changing its current policies.

The EESC stresses that the SDG mapping of EU policies needs to be complemented by a profound analysis of the real gaps that are currently in evidence in the EU with regard to SDG implementation. Only a reality check will enable the EU to identify areas where prior action is needed and to critically review the effectiveness of current EU policies when it comes to implementing the SDGs.

The EESC welcomes the Commission's decision to establish a multi-stakeholder platform on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in the EU. The EESC will support the work of the platform by nominating a member to represent the EESC on the platform and provide expertise as well as by facilitating outreach to civil society and contributing with other activities.

Directive 2010/40/EU | delegated acts

Directive 2010/40/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 July 2010 on the framework for the deployment of intelligent transport systems in the field of road transport and for interfaces with other modes of transport (the ITS Directive) is aimed at accelerating the coordinated EU-wide deployment and use of intelligent transport systems (ITS). It requires that specifications be adopted, through delegated acts, for actions in four priority areas. It was one of the first pieces of Union legislation stipulating the use of delegated acts and the power to adopt the delegated acts was conferred on the Commission for a limited period only, until 27 August 2017. The Committee agrees in principle with the Commission's proposal and is pleased that, as the Committee has always called for, it has considered it appropriate to extend the delegation for a fixed period, with the possibility of renewal, as long as there are no objections raised by the Council and the Parliament.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted the following opinions for which Group III members were Rapporteurs or Co-Rapporteurs.

Overview of our Members’ Work in the EESC

At its plenary session on 5 – 6 July 2017 the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted the following opinions for which Group III members were Rapporteurs or Co-Rapporteurs.

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The EESC is disappointed by the Communication Next steps for a sustainable European future as it gives the impression that all the main objectives and requirements of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development have already been covered and addressed by the existing EU policies. The Communication does not introduce into EU policies the paradigm shift brought about by the 2030 Agenda towards a new model of development that is economically more sustainable, socially more inclusive and environmentally more viable in the long term. The EESC feels that concrete leadership is lacking on the part of the EU, as it has not presented an ambitious roadmap for action on the implementation of the SDG with a time horizon of 2030 nor has it demonstrated willingness to critically review and change its current policies.

The EESC stresses that the SDG mapping of EU policies needs to be complemented by a profound analysis of the real gaps that are currently in evidence in the EU as regards SDG implementation. Only a reality check will enable the EU to identify areas where prior action is needed and to critically review the effectiveness of current EU policies when it comes to implementing the SDGs.

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The complete texts of all EESC opinions are available in various language versions on the Committee's website: http://dm.eesc.europa.eu/EESCDocumentSearch/Pages/opinionssearch.aspx
NEWS from Group III

Welcome, Arnaud Schwartz!

Following a proposal by the French government, Arnaud Schwartz joined the Committee and became a member of Group III after the resignation of Michel Dubromel. We have asked him to introduce himself here and share his expectations with us so that you can get to know him better.

Having grown up in the Alsatian countryside, not far from Strasbourg, I wanted to do something for nature conservation, justice and peace. That’s why I studied nature and society (human and natural sciences, environmental techniques and land management, including public law, economics etc.) and worked for the most part in Franco-German cross-border cooperation (on issues such as climate, energy and sustainability, among others), as well as in the field of science education.

At the same time, in my personal life I joined the Alsace Nature association, where I met Michel Dubromel and gradually became a volunteer leader for various local and regional activities before being elected at national level as a member of the board of France Nature Environnement, which has been chaired by Michel since April 2017. Like the other members of the board, we are volunteers and are responsible in particular for the proper functioning of this umbrella organisation, which gathers together about 3500 associations and more than 880 000 citizens.

As science has shown, humanity is part of nature and need its presence, beauty and diversity in order to feel good. We also know that a protected environment is one of the key factors for a healthy life, and the latter in particular is very much dependent upon sustainability, resilience and peace. The EESC’s members can take this into account in each and every single piece of work they produce (not only in the NAT section or the SD Observatory).

On the eve of the 2018 European Year of Cultural Heritage, I am not asking everyone to practice and spread permaculture and beekeeping skills as I try to do, but I would like to be confident that we have established a respected precautionary principle (see for example some EDCs and nanoparticles damages…). The same goes for our air and water directives (…) while soil has not even reached this stage. On the contrary, it continues to disappear or at best to suffer from pollution and urbanization as if it were a commodity that was available in unlimited quantities… Please (re)think the meaning and origin of the word “culture”. What do you want to leave behind you, a toxic desert and wars or living soils in a peaceful environment?

Year after year, all across the world, over-exploitation of the earth’s resources, including human beings, is causing more and more trouble. Climate change, which is already taking place, is only one example of how short-termism is generating consequences with impacts such as terrorism and an increasing risk of economic chaos. Our intelligence services and military headquarters have been working on these issues for years, dealing with the outcomes of the trend towards “business as usual”. What are the elected representatives of our nations waiting for when it comes to openly discussing with their populations this trend that is affecting our lifestyles, the impossibility of generalising with regard to the rest of the world and the resulting geopolitical risks? Do we want to build bridges or walls? Can we share fairly or do we want to carry on as we are?
GROUP III STUDIES

For the third time, following its 2008 and 2012 studies, the EESC will publish a study on Recent Evolutions of the Social Economy in the European Union. This study, which was entrusted to the International Center of Research and Information on the Public, Social and Cooperative Economy (CIRIEC), has not simply updated its predecessors, it also focuses on three areas: the social economy and emerging concepts/movements, public policies in the broader meaning of the term framed in recent years at EU level and in the Member States to improve the social economy sector and, lastly, the size of the social economy in each EU Member State.

It is an opportunity to remind ourselves what the social economy brings to our society today. Based on a different model from capital enterprises, the social economy holds an important place in the market economy, working with and alongside it. By ensuring that economic efficiency serves social needs, the social economy creates genuine independence between economic and social issues rather than making one subordinate to the other.

By being present in all sectors of activity (social services, healthcare, insurance, banking, agriculture, renewable energies, recycling, housing, education, tourism, culture, sport, etc.), the social economy demonstrates that a sustainable economic model and social objectives can go hand in hand. The social economy consists of a wealth of initiatives which build a range of ethical criteria (economic, social, political, societal, environmental, regional) into the entire chain of production, distribution, trade and consumption.

By being much more than a mere adjustment variable in the capitalist economy, the social economy may be described by the adjective "different", namely: a different way of producing, doing business, managing, consuming and providing protection.

Thus, it is within the framework of a pluralist economy and also by strengthening societal considerations and the social dimension in the face of an approach that seeks to maximise individual profits, that the European project will once again reconnect with its founding values.

The social economy’s potential for growth at a time of economic and social crisis has been highlighted on many occasions. Indeed, the social economy is not only a resilient model in times of crisis; it continues to develop and grow while other economic sectors struggle. It is not an offshoot: social economy enterprises reflect the need for an economy that reconciles social, economic and financial dimensions, that is able to create wealth and that is not measured solely in terms of its financial capital, but also – and above all – by its social capital. The activities of social economy enterprises are not driven solely by market or growth criteria. Development, double-digit profitability and profits are not the ultimate objectives: the contribution to the general interest, social cohesion and the well-being of our societies are.

The social economy aims to meet all societal needs, it is never limited to vulnerable sectors of society, and it has based its development model on the following concepts:

- “stakeholders”, the recipients of services are not only members, they are also consumers, “users” and “people”. Our organisations constantly strive to strike a balance between the dynamics needed for wealth creation on one hand and social cohesion on the other, particularly through solidarity, redistribution and pooling mechanisms;
- democracy that forces the social economy to develop strong empowerment strategies (training, education, awareness raising, transparency, capacity and skills building, etc.) and to step up the involvement of affiliates/members in the organisation’s activities and boost its role in decision-making.

Giving individuals back control of their own destiny is undoubtedly one of the most significant objectives of social progress.

Today, we want the European Commission to show political courage and support the development of the social economy through measures on taxation, loans and red tape and specific measures to support the social economy – particularly for young people who want to engage in a more responsible economy and to invest in people.

Faced with the social emergency, the EESC has played its role to the hilt by highlighting – through its work, conferences and studies – that social economy enterprises are innovative organisations in many areas responding to local societal needs, usually before there is any demand from local, regional and national authorities. In the case of services to people, they generally come under what is described at European level as “services of general interest”. Thus, the social economy has the ability to provide key solutions to social issues.
The current edition of the EESC study „Recent evolutions of the Social Economy in the European Union“ confirms once again the important role of the Social Economy Sector in creating employment, facilitating sustainable growth, matching services to needs and in distributing fairer income and wealth. However, activities undertaken by Social Economy entities have a much broader context, namely the building of both participatory democracy and social capital. This applies in a special way to the Member States, which have joined the EU since 2004. Most of them were until 1989/1990 socialist countries under the domination of the Soviet Union with non-existing or very limited activities by civil society. The consequences of these historical developments are, inter alia, a fragile financial situation in the NGO sector and a low level of civil society engagement in creating local job opportunities. This is visible even in the statistics: while the paid employment rate in the social economy is 6.3% in the EU as a whole, the same rate in the “new” Member States amounts to an average of 2.5%.

Ex oriente lux: on the other hand, a lot of new ideas and approaches coming from these countries contribute to the enrichment of the European Social Economy. From the experience of the Polish Solidarność/ Solidarity movement, to discussions on the implementation of the principle of subsidiarity including the independence of Social Economy from authorities, to practical models such as the Slovak for municipal social enterprises.

A permanent dialogue between lawmakers/politicians and the social economy sector, at both the national and European levels, which includes experiences of all Member States seems to be of great importance for the creation of a long-term strategy for the development of the social economy. All relevant actors are invited to work together with the EESC for the recognition of the Social Economy as a crucial – perhaps a dominant – part of the future economic and social model in Europe.
HIGHLIGHTS OF THE JULY PLENARY SESSION
Group III members co-ordinating the work on new opinions

Panagiotis GKOFAS (EL) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Report on Competition Policy 2016” – INT/829

Christian MOOS (DE) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “European defence industrial development programme” – CCM/154

Mihai IVAȘCU (RO) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “European Defence Fund” – CCM/155

Mindaugas MACIULEVIČIUS (LT) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Boosting climate actions by non-state actors: An EU framework for encouraging more and better actions” – NAT/718

Pasi MOISIO (FI) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Clean, competitive and connected mobility for all” – TEN/643

The full listing of membership of the above study groups for the new work may be consulted here: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.group-3-new-study-groups