

**SPEECH by Séamus Boland, President of the Diversity Europe Group**  
**Inaugural panel of the conference**  
**'Civil Society Organisations During and After Covid-19: what challenges and what future?'**  
12 March 2021

Esteemed speakers, ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to the first thematic conference of our Group during this mandate. An event that will look at the **engagement** of civil society organisations during the Covid-19 pandemic, the **challenges** they faced and the **roles** they aspire to in the future.

As individuals, most of us very much look forward to the 'post-Covid-19' era. To regaining our **freedoms**, embracing our loved ones and just getting back to **normality**. The same can be said for civil society organisations.

Indeed, there are **great aspirations by civil society**, that after the Covid-19 pandemic the values of social solidarity and cohesion, inter-generational cooperation and sustainability, which really came to the fore during this crisis, will remain in the hearts and minds of citizens and on the policy agenda of politicians. Ultimately, the prospect of exiting this pandemic raises the **opportunity** for civil society and citizens, to **tell politicians what type of society** they want to **create and live in!**

And this is where concrete collaboration with EU and national authorities should commence. For let us not forget: **Article 3 of the Treaty on the European Union** states that the aim of the EU is the **promotion of peace, its values and the well-being of its people**. At the same time, the Covid-19 pandemic has shaken up our communities, societies and economies to such an extent, that *now* is the right time to **re-think our growth and governance models**. It is the right time to **balance economic prosperity with social inclusion, human capital, sustainability and well-being**. Ensuring that no individual, territory or community are excluded, nor left behind and encouraging **young people** to take the lead. Crucially, civil society and public authorities must continue to defend **democratic governance, fundamental rights and the rule of law**.

But this can only be achieved under two conditions. The first, is that there is **policy cohesion**. A holistic and integrated approach to policy making which actively promotes **EU values and the well-being of its people**. The post-Covid recovery cannot be dealt with in isolation. There must be **direct links to the SDGs and poverty reduction**, to **just green and digital transitions**.

The second condition, is that civil society is directly involved in **designing and delivering this new world**, with **bottom-up initiatives** which **respect the opinions and rights of EU citizens**. What is crucial, is to **leverage** the new forms of **solidarity** and **social activism** that sprung to life during the pandemic. To leverage them and **create civil society alliances**. For the next step will be the **reconstruction of the economic and social fabric** of our communities and for this, we will need to work in **partnership**.

During the course of the day, we will have the opportunity to listen to the stories of many actors, who took up very different roles during the pandemic. Some are **individual citizens**, others are groups of **volunteers, national and European civil society organisations and networks**. I am also very pleased

that today we will have the official launch of the **study** that the EESC commissioned, at the request of our Group. This study is entitled *'The response of civil society organisations to the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent restrictive measures adopted in Europe'*. As you will hear, the **recommendations** emphasise the importance of **proactivity, cooperation** and **structural changes**. The recommendations also echo the results of other studies that will also be presented today. Notably on the participation of civil society organisations in the preparations of the **National Recovery and Resilience Plans**.

But whichever the sector or the actors, whether they were providing essential public health, education and social care services. Whether they helped with alleviating food and financial insecurities, combatting domestic violence and digital poverty, or supported mental health, in each and every case their contribution has been **inspirational** and their **sense of responsibility exemplary**. Whether they worked with families, the elderly, young persons, persons with disability, ethnic minorities or migrants, these volunteers and civil society actors focussed on the **dignity** and **respect for fellow community members**. We are now seeing civil society organisations engaged in public information and advocacy campaigns, fighting misinformation on Covid-19 vaccines. Once again, filling in the gaps left by governments and local authorities.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated, for all to see, the role of civil society in **shaping public opinions**. And that includes **combatting populism** and **illiberalism**, which continue to scourge our societies. What I would hope, is for the EU and national authorities to **trust** civil society a little more. To work together as **partners**. Civil society can help **rebuild trust in the EU**. But it will do a better job, if the EU supports it a little more in doing so.

Before I close, I would like to say that we really are **standing on a precipice**. We have in front of us two major events: the **Porto Social Summit** and the longer-term **Conference on the Future of the Europe**. It is my firm belief that the EESC and wider civil society should focus its ambitions, energy and time on two priorities: **rethinking our growth** and **governance models**. Without these fundamental changes to European economies and societies, we will have missed opportunities provided by the pandemic to **reform, restructure** and **rebuild** in the mirror of the society that WE, civil society, really want.

Thank you for your attention.