

*'Empowering Consumers on Climate Change'*  
Brussels, 11 October 2023

**Inaugural speech by Séamus Boland, President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)**

Dear Executive Vice President, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I would like to welcome you to this conference of the Civil Society Organisations' Group of the EESC. I am particularly pleased that we have with us today the **Executive Vice President** of the European Commission, **Maroš Šefčovič**. We very much appreciate that you took time out of your busy schedule to join us. You are very welcome.

I would like to begin my introductory comments with a reference to a new *book*, whose title caught my eye. The author, **Jeff Goodell**, named his book '**The Heat will Kill you First**'. The writer demonstrates that heat, which he refers to as the '**invisible killer**', snuffs out more American lives than any other type of weather.

However, the main message of the book, is that heat harms mostly those who are the least able to protect themselves. In other words, the **most vulnerable**. I was particularly struck by the following sentence from the book and I quote: "The most enduring legacy of air-conditioning may be the divide between the cool and the damned".

Clearly, the author echoes the conclusions that we have reached as a Group over the last two years, with our work on the topic of '**Just Transitions**'. We dealt with this subject in events in France, Ireland and the Czech Republic. Also, in an **Own-initiative Opinion** and a **study**, both of which will be presented today.

The main conclusions of our work so far are that firstly, it is necessary to understand the **varying impact** of Climate Change and the necessary green transition, on **different** socio-economic groups of people.

Secondly, that all actors must work **together in partnership**. Civil society organisations, national and European policy-makers – all must agree on coherent and tailored responses, with sufficient and targeted funding.

Thirdly, that the green transition can only be just if it is about **people, respect and bottom-up approaches which empower local communities**.

Without wanting to pre-empt the presentations this afternoon, I would nonetheless like to say a few words about the relationship between the climate crisis and vulnerable groups of persons.

It is common knowledge that higher inflation and interest rates, are already negatively impacting the most vulnerable in our societies. Our colleague and President of the ECO Section, Yannis Vardakastanis,

is best placed to explain how certain groups of people are disproportionately negatively affected by Climate Change. We will hear from him later this afternoon.

What is perhaps less well known, but which is clearly demonstrated in the **study that we commissioned**, is that Climate Change will result in decreases in labour income, in nearly all EU Member States. This loss of income and climate-induced expenditure are direct consequences of Climate Change and the necessary adaptation costs.

In addition, EU regions will face differentiated effects from Climate Change. Southern Europe will be the most impacted. Households and families will be obliged to spend more on health, electricity and food. The percentage of the European population at risk of poverty will rise in almost all countries.

Regrettably, politicians have not always admitted to voters the full socio-economic **costs of climate change**. Decarbonisation at the required scale will be painful. If we take the example of households replacing gas and oil boilers with air-source heat pumps: 60% of European properties are old.

The installation of the new heat pumps will require extra and costly insulation. In the specific case of oil and gas boilers, last month the British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak unfortunately reneged upon targets and decided to delay deadlines.

In my opinion, this was not the most efficient approach. Firstly, because the change antagonised investors, who want stable, long-term policies in order to plan investments into new technologies. Without sufficient investment, the price of new technologies will remain high and these costs will be passed onto consumers.

Secondly, this decision does not seem to reflect the wishes of voters. According to a poll carried out in May by the think tank 'More in Common UK', across political parties, voters are much likelier to say that the government should do more, not less, on tackling Climate Change.

The reality is that today, 72 countries, accounting for 80% of global emissions, have committed themselves to net zero targets. And it is estimated by the International Energy Agency, that a carbon-neutral world by 2050 will require 35 million tonnes of green metals, annually.

This implies that unless industry, governments and consumers change their habits, we will be heading for a 'supply crunch', Perhaps even a 'supply war', in search of these precious green metals. I can only agree with the President of the European Commission, who at last month's State of the Union speech, declared that "The future of our clean technological industry has to be made in Europe".

Ladies and gentlemen, I have outlined some of the challenges to consumers that Climate Change will incur. I would now like to explore how consumers could be empowered to play a central and active role in sustainable action. Perhaps even becoming prosumers. We will hear more about the activities of prosumers from our Vice-President Jan Dirx.

Let me start by saying that civil society organisations, national and European policy-makers must **together design climate neutral policies**. These policies should help to reduce emissions through **incentives, rather than coercion**. To achieve this, we need regulations and policies which will

encourage consumers to make informed sustainable decisions. The EC package of proposals on common rules to repair goods is a very welcome step in this direction.

But as I am certain that we will hear from my colleague Thierry Libaert, we need even clearer labelling on the durability and repairability of products, as well as on commercial guarantees. We also need bans on obsolescence, intentional serialisations and misleading environmental claims, otherwise referred to as greenwashing.

There is no doubt in my mind, that consumers want to be part of the circular, green economy. But we must help and protect them. One way is to update existing consumer legislation. However, as I have already said, it is crucial that there is coherence between national and European policies. It is also imperative that CSOs work hand in hand – among themselves, as well as with policy-makers.

After all, neither individual Member States, nor the EU exist in a vacuum. They are part of a global market. And this is particularly evident in relation to sustainable farming. The Covid pandemic sensitised consumers to new consumption models, which are local, sustainable, seasonal and less wasteful.

We can all agree on the benefits of sustainable agricultural production with fewer emissions. But farmers also need **incentives** to cooperate and contribute to the green transition. And environmentalists need to work with farmers to find mutually acceptable sustainable solutions.

I will bring my comments to a close by congratulating the European Institutions on the 'Fit for 55' package. This strategy has demonstrated the extent of the EU's soft power. But it has also given a purpose to a generation of young people who are exasperated with our renege promises.

I know that here at the Committee, our '**Youth Climate and Sustainability Round Tables**' are very successful, with a large outreach. I can only express my optimism that despite the calamitous predictions on Climate Change, this generation of young people will in effect 'save our planet'! Thank you for your attention.