

Brussels, 14 May 2020

Draft MINUTES¹
of the 35th meeting
of the
Liaison Group with European civil society organisations and networks,
held virtually
on **12 May 2020**

¹ Please note that the minutes have not yet been adopted but are joined to the input document as an extra source of information for the Sub-committee members.

The Liaison Group with European civil society organisations and networks held its 35th meeting virtually, **from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. on Tuesday 12 May 2020.**

ATTENDANCE LIST (See appendix)

1. Adoption of the draft agenda

The draft agenda was adopted.

2. Approval of the minutes of the 34th meeting

The minutes were approved.

3. Introductory statements by the EESC president, **Luca Jahier and the Liaison Group interim co-chair, **Brikena Xhomaqi****

Luca Jahier welcomed all of the participants and commented on the record attendance, underlining that he was glad to be back in Brussels, after two months of quarantine in Italy, for this virtual meeting with the Liaison Group (LG). This meeting was intended to be an important opportunity for the members of the group to share their experiences in terms of specific measures they had undertaken and the challenges they were facing during the COVID-19 pandemic, be it for reasons of restricted civic space, reduced funds affecting their activities or other reasons. He then mentioned the setting up of an EESC sub-committee on the Post-COVID Recovery and Reconstruction, chaired by himself, and which was notably in charge of drafting an EESC resolution by June as a key contribution from the house of civil society to the institutional recovery process. He highlighted that this plenary LG meeting, through its outcomes, should deliver a key contribution to the EU's post-pandemic recovery plan by feeding into the process of the EESC resolution. The post-pandemic recovery would be the key priority of all future work carried out by the sections and groups of the EESC. Here, he also reminded the participants of the statements, declarations and position papers issued by the EESC in recent weeks. Before giving the floor to Ms Xhomaqi, he said that he greatly regretted the forced postponement of the Civil Society Days, stressing that he was well aware how much time and commitment had been invested by the organisations actively involved. Unfortunately, no alternative date had yet been confirmed.

Brikena Xhomaqi welcomed all participants to this first virtual meeting of the LG, and wished that this had been the consequence of a digital revolution rather than of a pandemic. She commented on the difficult times many civil society organisations were facing while keeping up their solidarity, cooperation and engagement at the frontline of this crisis. In her view, this highlighted the fragility of our democratic systems and the weaknesses in terms of public and social services. She expressed the hope that the necessary political changes, inter alia, following institutional dialogue such as this, would be made so that there would be no business as usual after the crisis and no one would be left behind. She agreed with the EESC president that the citizens' voice had been a victim of the crisis since many decisions had been taken without consulting civil society. She advocated that citizens should be at the heart of the economic recovery, which needed to be a social and sustainable one.

Mr Jahier then opened the debate, allowing each participant to take the floor for three minutes.

Arno Metzler, president of Group III, started by underlining the challenging times being faced by civil society organisations, as, on the one hand, they were being asked to provide help and support, while on the other hand, they needed to ensure their own survival due to financial restrictions and the erosion of fundamental freedoms. He pointed to the revival of nationalism and old prejudices as well as a lack of joint citizenship understanding. He advocated acting quickly in order to prevent a return to business as usual, and saw there a key role for organised civil society.

Pierre-Jean Coulon, president of the TEN section, underlined the importance of this meeting and of a new solidarity between the civil society organisations which were members of the LG and the EESC members. He mentioned the invitation to Ms Xhomaqi to attend the last TEN meeting, highlighting how important this cooperation with organised civil society was to him. He argued that, when drafting an own-initiative opinion or organising a hearing, the EESC should consult and invite systematically the civil society organisations represented in the LG. He concluded by reassuring them of the support of the TEN section.

Oliver Röpke, president of Group II, started by pointing out that this pandemic was not only a major shock for businesses and economic sectors but also a big disaster for workers and their families as well as for civil society organisations, the latter playing a crucial role in overcoming the crisis. He underlined that, in the upcoming days and weeks, decisions on the future direction of the EU would be taken. For this reason, now was the time to address the new economic model and the new sustainable social model in Europe, inviting all civil society organisations to join the debate in order to influence the upcoming decisions.

Luk Zelderloo, **EASPD** representing **Social Services Europe**, pointed out that the coronavirus crisis had hit the sector he represented extremely hard. Nevertheless, he was very impressed by the enormous commitment of social-service providers at grassroots level and by their innovation capacities to keep the support system alive, despite the fact that the situation in many communities had been dreadful. He expressed his disappointment that the EU had not been visible enough. The EU should do more; despite the positive will of the EU Commission, the initiatives were not reaching the grassroots level. The social-service providers sector was facing a deep crisis and he hoped that the EU would be part of the solution. What was needed in his view was better access to the CRII (Coronavirus Recovery Investment Instrument), an emergency fund for social services, as well as a specific task force at EU level.

Jana Hainsworth, **Eurochild**, pointed out that children should be a key target group of the recovery plan as they might suffer a substantial impact of this crisis on their lifelong chances (education gap, mental health, poverty). Furthermore, she saw in this crisis a huge opportunity to review the EU engagement towards civil society organisations in terms of financing and participation in decision-making.

Sevda Kilicalp, **European Foundation Centre**, pointed out that philanthropic organisations had quickly reacted to the crisis, providing support and funds to the most affected, although closed borders had hampered cooperation. Philanthropic institutions were hoping to see more public and private partnerships and structured cooperation between philanthropy and governments, and to be recognised as important partners in the discussions.

Francois Balate, **European Youth Forum**, stressed that this crisis showed the resilience and the added value of civil society organisations and youth groups and that civil society should be recognised as a key component of our democracy. The crisis had led to a rise in inequalities and would hit young people the most. When discussing the new MFF, the recovery plan or the Green Deal, it must be ensured that the voice of citizens, civil society and young people was heard.

Piotr Sadowski, **Volonteuropa**, highlighted the fact that the pandemic crisis had magnified the huge social injustice and inequalities existing in our societies. Civil society organisations that had responded quickly and in a flexible and resilient way to the crisis needed to be recognised and treated as equal partners in finding solutions to those issues.

Emma Achilli, **Front Line Defenders**, pointed to the crackdown on many human rights defenders, who were being persecuted for trying to hold governments to account during this crisis. Amongst many concerns regarding human rights defenders, which she would be grateful to the EESC for voicing, she expressed her worry regarding the new MFF proposal: without civil society consultation there might be no more funds to support the activities of human rights defenders worldwide.

Philippe Seidel, **European Older People's Platform (AGE)**, pointed out that while the pandemic had triggered a wave of ageist and age-discriminatory statements and policies considering older people as second-class citizens, it had also showed solidarity between generations in action. He commented on the shocking situation in long-term care homes and in home care. He also referred to exit strategies based on age-discriminatory criteria and the risk of mental and physical health problems linked to the prolonged social isolation of older persons. To come out of the crisis, AGE proposed an initiative on the human rights of older persons, a European initiative on the quality and funding of long-term care, and strengthening the approach to health in all policies, while also stressing the need to address climate change in a longer-term exit strategy.

Léa Gaudron, **Rurality – Environment – Development (RED)**, commented on the rediscovery of rural areas and landscapes during this crisis as well as on the challenges faced in these areas, such as the lack of services. Citizens and NGOs had been at the forefront in facing these challenges in rural areas, and the consequences would be huge for all stakeholders, for tourism, rural tourism, agriculture, etc. She underlined the need to develop a new paradigm building on the resilience of citizens, the innovation of NGOs and the specific features of different areas (urban, rural, etc.). Civil society organisations had a huge role to play in overcoming this crisis and for this a holistic approach was necessary.

Jeremy Wates, **European Environmental Bureau (EEB)**, wanted to see a sustainable exit from the crisis, avoiding the mistakes that had followed the 2008 financial crisis when short-term economic growth had been prioritised over the long term-sustainability of the environment and society. He praised the many voices supporting a sustainable exit and called not only for a restart but for a reset of the European economy, turning away from business as usual. Environmental sustainability and social justice must guide the recovery packages in a medium long-term perspective. Public money needed to be spent in the public interest. Good governance and democratic accountability were crucial at this time, including transparency around funding. To tackle and overcome this crisis we needed more international cooperation as well as solidarity between and within the Member States.

Gabriella Civico, **European Volunteer Centre (CEV)**, pointed out that civil society organisations should not be seen only as delivery partners/contractors stepping in in emergency situations but that they needed to be involved in the planning of the recovery process. The EU institutions should lead by example on this as a sign of good practice to the Member States. Another issue could be the co-financing for civil society networks in relation to EU events being postponed or cancelled or public financing or grants being cut. She therefore proposed a rethink of the co-financing mechanism, which was very often based on cross-border mobility. CEV would like to see a focus on work-life balance and volunteering and on the issue of the digital divide that had been highlighted by this pandemic in order to prevent the inequalities in Europe being increased by this crisis.

Gohar Hovhannisyian, **European Students' Union (ESU)**, commented on the current difficulties students were facing regarding education, digital, social and economic issues, pointing out that many had lost their jobs, and faced accommodation issues, while students' organisations were losing a part of their income.

Lisa Mashini, **Cooperatives Europe**, highlighted the fact that cooperatives had been hard hit by the pandemic, especially those active in the sectors of tourism, culture, agriculture and healthcare. She called for close cooperation between the Member States when tackling the crisis and implementing the upcoming recovery plan.

Elisa Briga, **European Federation for Intercultural Learning (EFIL)**, commented on the efforts to repatriate 8 000 young people who were on exchange all over the world, generating huge costs. She raised the question of the future mobility of national member organisations which were forced to close down their cross-border activities due to barriers recently being raised at borders, and the risk of losing many volunteers. In her view, the resilience of civil society should not be taken for granted, if the organisations were forced to shut down. For this reason, she considered it important that the funds made available by the EU for the Member States would be earmarked to civil society organisations. Intercultural learning, bringing people together, and allowing them to meet and discover, was more important than ever considering the amount of hate speech.

Sarada Das, **Standing Committee of European Doctors (CPME)**, commented on the outcomes of a survey amongst national medical associations, highlighting shortages with regard to personal protective equipment (masks, disinfectant, sometimes even soap), medical technologies (medicines, medical devices, ventilators in hospitals and ICU), personnel, access to testing for medical staff without symptoms, etc. CPME national member associations were trying to assist doctors and medical staff with helplines connected to COVID-19 issues. She also commented on the huge solidarity as a sign of the strength of civil society and its ability to respond to emergency situations.

Dirk Bochar, **Federation of professional engineers (FEANI)**, pointed out that the crisis had led to a more extensive use of electronic platforms in the field of construction and engineering and that engineering SMEs might not experience financial problems in the long run. Many companies had been creative and quick to adapt and had diverted their activities into items currently in high demand (ventilators, fans etc.). He emphasised that the battle against COVID-19 could not be won without technology.

Diego Naranjo, **European Digital Rights (EDRI)**, also stressed the importance of technology in facing this pandemic, congratulating the Commission for having prepared the guidelines and toolbox containing very good recommendations on the use of digital technologies with regard to COVID-19. He invited the EESC to follow the Commission's proposal and to call for civil society to be involved in the implementation of these recommendations.

All the above-quoted participants thanked both the co-chairs of the Liaison Group and the EESC staff for having organised this important and timely meeting.

In his short final statement, **Luca Jahier** invited the EESC secretariat to prepare a commented summary on the outcomes of this meeting to be submitted to the first meeting of the COVID-19 subcommittee the following Monday. He then added that the crisis had undermined and shrunk the role of many civil society organisations, giving as an example the care sector where they had been called to step in as implementing agencies at the last minute but had not been involved at previous stages. Nevertheless, it was thanks to them and their committed engagement that, in many cases, the worse had been avoided. According to the EESC president the first main lesson to draw from this crisis was the need to rethink our system of welfare state and to reinvent it, involving all stakeholders, through new public-private partnerships. In this context, he stressed that the EESC had been the first institution to underline the need for a Health Union. Before giving the floor to Brikena Xhomaqi, he wished to emphasise that children, young people and students had been completely forgotten in this crisis, despite the fact that social distancing for them is a real drama. He concluded by stating that Europe had done a lot in this crisis. However, these measures very often had not reached the grassroots level or had not yet been implemented for different reasons. This pandemic crisis, the impacts of which would be huge and long lasting, stressed once more the need for sustainability in the fields of health, economy, social sphere and environment.

Brikena Xhomaqi thanked all the participants for their valuable input expressing her hope that the EESC would reflect some of the common issues which will also be part of a joint declaration by the two co-chairs of the LG. She stressed that civil society organisations were not a delivery mechanism but had to be part of the dialogue with the institutions and governments while being supported in do so. To conclude, she thanked the EESC for having offered to the LG member organisations the use of its tools and spaces so as to continue this fruitful cooperation. The joint declaration would reflect the outcomes of this meeting drawing the attention of the EU institutions to the role which civil society organisations could and should play in the recovery.

Due to some technical issues, some participants could not take part in the virtual discussion. Please find hereafter their written contributions:

Social Economy Europe (SEE): Social economy enterprises have had a key role during the pandemic, providing essential healthcare services, social services, especially for vulnerable people, producing and distributing food, producing protective equipment and hospital devices as well as ensuring the provision of other basic services like water, energy, cleaning, recycling, telecommunications, etc. They will continue to do so in the recovery phase. SEE is advocating a people-centred, green, digital and sustainable approach to the economy, based on the values of solidarity, democracy, participation and cooperation.

Culture Action Europe: The cultural and creative sectors are among the most severely impacted by the pandemic crisis. The world of arts, culture, heritage and creativity will not be the same after COVID-19. The state of emergency at both local and national level has forced governments to redirect their resources to respond to the most urgent needs at home and this has left little room to address issues on a European scale. Culture Action Europe therefore urges the European institutions and the Member States to recognise the cultural and creative sectors as an integral part of the economic, social and environmental recovery plan for Europe within the next Multiannual Financial Framework and to support the cultural and creative sectors with at least 7% of the Recovery Fund over the first programming years. Because this collective crisis proves, once more, the fundamental role culture plays in building resilient, healthy and fair societies. Cultural sustainability is therefore needed.

Social Platform: In the framework of the current crisis, actions taken by leaders need to be inclusive. No one should be left behind, including groups at heightened risk of poverty, social exclusion and discrimination: children, youth, older people, women, people with disabilities, the LGBTIQ community, homeless people, migrants and refugees, and ethnic and religious minorities. All measures taken in response to the pandemic should always ensure that fundamental rights, the rule of law and democratic principles are protected. Under no circumstances should this crisis be used to undermine any of the founding values of the EU. Furthermore, adequate support should be maintained for civil society organisations, both at European and national levels, who are working on the front line. This must include the continuity of funding to be ensured between the two programming periods while adequate investment in social inclusion measures needs to be ensured in the revised post-2020 MFF.

SDG Watch Europe: A new social and sustainable economic system for a green recovery is needed, as promoted by many, including Ms von der Leyen. We can be happy that the world, since 2015, already has a roadmap for such a pathway for all countries – the universally agreed and applicable Agenda 2030. Furthermore, there is a need to increase the resilience of people and to achieve this, active lifestyles need to be promoted, pollution reduced and access for people to the environment maintained. For this purpose, we also need to increase the resilience of that very environment, of the ecosystems that provide such services and carry us all.

European Citizen Action Service (ECAS): The most evident consequence of the COVID-19 emergency and one of the first ‘victims’ of the crisis health-related measures was the freedom of movement in the Union, the most cherished right by the European citizens. This crisis has exposed the cracks in the European unity, with Member States quickly diverging to unilateral decisions shutting down their national borders and imposing 14-day-quarantine periods for those arriving into their territory.

8. **Any other business**
None.

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Tuesday 12 May 2020 at 3.00 p.m. – virtual meeting

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

(in alphabetical order)

EESC members who have confirmed:

Mr	Pierre Jean COULON	President of the TEN section
Mr	Luca JAHIER	President of the European Economic and Social Committee
Ms	Violeta JELIĆ	President of the SMO
Mr	Arno METZLER	President of Group III
Mr	Krzysztof PATER	President of LMO
Mr	Oliver RÖPKE	President of Group II
Mr	Peter SCHMIDT	President of SDO
Ms	Dilyana SLAVOVA	President of the REX section
Ms	Lucie STUDNICNA	President of the CCMI section

Members of civil society organisations who have confirmed:

Mr	Ian PRITCHARD	ACE
Mr	Philippe SEIDEL LEROY	AGE
Ms	Kornelia KISS	CAE
Ms	Gabriella CIVICO	CEV
Ms	Liz GOSME	COFACE
Ms	Kasia HANULA-BOBBITT	CONCORD
Ms	Lisa MASHINI	Cooperatives Europe
Ms	Sarada DAS	CPME
Ms	Annabel SEEBOHM	CPME
Mr	Luk ZELDERLOO	EASPD – Social Services Europe
Ms	Assya KAVRAKOVA	ECAS
Mr	Jan Robert SUESSER	ECF
Mr	Haydn HAMMERSLEY	EDF
Mr	Diego NARANJO	EDRi
Mr	Jeremy WATES	EEB
Ms	Sevda KILICALP	EFC
Ms	Elisa BRIGA	EFIL
Mr	Davyth HICKS	ELEN

Ms	Gohar HOVHANNISYAN	ESU
Mr	Dirk JARRÉ	EURAG
Ms	Jana HAINSWORTH	Eurochild
Mr	Dirk BOCHAR	FEANI
Ms	Emma ACHILLI	Frontline Defenders
Ms	Ilaria D'AURIA	IUT
Ms	Tamara GOJKOVIC	LLL
Ms	Brikena XHOMAQI	LLL
Ms	Léa GAUDRON	R.E.D.
Ms	Jessica FIORELLI	SEE
Ms	Laura GAFFORIO	SEE
Ms	Kélig PUYET	Social Platform
Ms	Elisa GAMBARDELLA	SOLIDAR
Ms	Ingeborg NIESTROY	SDG Watch Europe
Mr	Edoardo CONCARI	UIPI
Mr	Piotr SADOWSKI	Volonteuropé
Mr	François BALATE	YFJ (European Youth Forum)
Ms	Liva VIKMANE	YFJ (European Youth Forum)

EESC Members who sent their apologies:

Ms	Christa SCHWENG	President of the SOC section
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Members of Civil Society organisations who have sent their apologies:

Mr	Horst DREIMANN	EVBB
Ms	Valentina PRESA	UEF

EESC staff:

Ms	Eleonora DI NICOLANTONIO	Director ad interim, Directorate D
Ms	Katherine HEID	Member of the Cabinet of the EESC President
Mr	Pierluigi BROMBO	Head of Unit Relations with National Economic and Social Councils and Civil Society (CSS)
Ms	Karen SERAFINI	Administrator, Unit Relations with National Economic and Social Councils and Civil Society (CSS)
Ms	Sandra SCHWEDER	Assistant, Unit Relations with National Economic and Social Councils and Civil Society (CSS)