New NAT 2020-2023 term of office

A Work Programme to deliver on the EU economic, social and environmental agenda

General observations:

- The coronavirus pandemic and the Europe recovery plan and response measures mark the new half term at the EESC. In this context, urgent and short-term measures should not blur the agenda of the von der Leyen Commission and in particular its sustainable development (SD) contents (principally contained in the European Green Deal (EGD)). The environmental goals might be challenged due to economic and social national circumstances. The need to have a **solid narrative** that **delivers socially, economically and environmentally** becomes more pressing and precious than ever. The pandemic is a **wake-up call for change**. With Next Generation EU, Europe must seize the opportunity to **re-boot the economies on a more sustainable basis**. Post-COVID recovery plans should fully reflect climate commitments and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and be the driver of transformational change.

- The pandemic has shown how human health and human well-being may be severely threatened by natural elements such as zoonotic pathogens. It has also demonstrated that human health and the health of the biosphere are not separate – they are strongly interdependent. Health is closely linked to our food systems that are assumed to provide safe food and allow for healthy diets, as well as with our environment through its air, soil and water components. The World Health Organization (WHO)\(^1\) considers that adequate responses to address the health risks posed by large-scale environmental change are needed. Furthermore, the One Health concept\(^2\) recognises that human health is tightly connected to the health of animals and the environment, i.e. that animal feed, human food, animal and human health, and environmental contamination are closely linked. Therefore, health considerations should be seen as a cross cutting issue linked to all NAT priorities.

- The **European Green Deal** (EGD) should naturally be the cornerstone of both NAT and SDO (Sustainable Development Observatory) work programmes (as it should be for all EESC sections/CCMI). However, the EGD should be put in the wider context of the implementation of the universal Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 and SDGs. For example, the environmental goal of climate protection, as primarily pursued by the EGD, must be addressed by giving proper attention to social equity and social justice.

- In this regard, NAT priorities should give **continuity to the work done** so far, and have the capacity to link it with an ever **far-reaching perspective**. Building on the key messages from recent opinions, the NAT Section and its Thematic Group (TG) on Sustainable Food Systems could frame a narrative and strategic approach around the need to promote a **European Green and Social Deal** that ensures **Economic Prosperity**.

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1. [https://www.who.int/globalchange/environment/en/](https://www.who.int/globalchange/environment/en/)
2. [https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/773830](https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/773830)
According to the July 2020 EESC Bureau decision on streamlining of EESC structures, the NAT Section has seen its competences extended to three new areas (sustainable development, climate policy and climate action, circular economy) on top of its "historical" responsibilities (agriculture, biodiversity, fisheries, forestry, sustainable food system, environmental protection, rural development). In this note on EESC structures, sustainable development is considered as a key cross-cutting issue that should implicitly be included within the remits of all sections and the CCMI. Moreover, cross-cutting work and sustainable working methods is one of the priorities of the EESC 2020 Work Programme. NAT, but also the SDO, have been the leaders in promoting sustainable events and cross-cutting cooperation, and they should continue doing so in an open and transparent way in the new term.

The COVID crisis has influenced the way we have lived and worked over recent months and will continue shaping the agenda for the coming years. To walk the talk, the EESC should apply to themselves their own recommendation for the post-COVID recovery process and get prepared to continue delivering its institutional function in case of new pandemics or similar issues in the future. Adopting climate-ambitious opinions at its plenaries should have some implications on the way the EESC carries out its advisory function. We cannot simply restore what existed in the past: we need to restructure and improve it. The NAT Section should open a debate on holding virtual study group meetings and related hearings as much as possible. While the NAT Section meetings would obviously continue to be held physically, all options to reduce the footprint of its opinion-making activities should be objectively assessed. The EESC must assure that the technical options are available and work well. We should practice what we write in our opinions.

As in the previous term of office, the NAT Section will maintain close and dynamic cooperation with the Sustainable Development Observatory (SDO) that is attached to the Section. The NAT and the SDO share a history of mutual inspiration. The additional competences of the NAT Section (see above) implies that the two EESC bodies will have to further reinforce their working together, notably regarding the implementation of the new sustainable development related activities of the Section.

The new term of office gives us the opportunity to work better. In order to do so, the new NAT Work Programme is an occasion to:

Imagine, reinvent and bounce forward: we know that incremental changes will no longer be enough; we need truly transformational shifts. While building on the work done in the previous term, we have an obligation to be open minded, think outside the box and reinvent how we work together across the EESC, maximising synergies and enhancing cooperation for greater impact. In practice, this could mean:

- genuine follow-up of opinions - EESC opinions have enhanced legitimacy – we should use them better at national level or in international discussions; provide guidance to members on opinion follow-up best practice;

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3 As listed in the EESC Bureau decision on Streamlining the Committee's Structures and Working Bodies (EESC-2020-00978-10-00-NB-TRA)
– spread the information on SDGs to other EESC bodies: new role of VPs of sections/CCMI as members of the SDO - find an inspiring way to discuss synergies at SDO meetings;

– European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform (ECESP) is a major success story – new flagship projects (as proposed by recent EESC opinions) such as European Climate Pact Stakeholder Platform, Youth Climate and Sustainability Dialogues, European Food Policy Council can bring greater visibility to the EESC. We need to invest more and promote these structures;

– strengthen the relationship with the European Parliament and national representatives within each EU Member State.

Inspire: the power of story-telling can be overwhelming. We need inspiring, broad and diverse narratives, communicating why the world has to change. We can inspire the NAT/SDO members so that they can inspire the decision-makers and their home constituencies. The image, reputation and impact of the EESC's work depend on it. The way the new Work Programmes are designed and presented is the first step. In practice, this could mean:

– continue engaging members on social media (Twitter, Instagram etc.) on relevant occasions (once a month) – encourage members to be story-tellers!

– use SDG icons more in communication overall (it was done to some extent for events, but could be done for so many other communication purposes on the EESC website) as well as on strategic documents such as work programmes;

– walk the talk on sustainable working methods via continued cooperation with EMAS (plastic-free, food waste reduction, soft mobility, sustainable sourcing, climate-neutrality etc.), optimising use of digital tools, webinars etc. and making events more inclusive (gender balance, youth participation, go beyond the "Brussels bubble" etc.). Continue to invite the EMAS team to NAT/SDO meetings to report on progress towards achievement of EGD objectives at the EESC level, and encourage other sections to do likewise. The power of leading by example is strong!

– mediatise less opinions (too many at each plenary blurs the focus) and/or cluster several opinions by theme (e.g. joint mediatisation for EGD-related opinions across sections);

– make more videos of members on SDGs – to be displayed in the EESC reception area – members adopting SDGs/members as ambassadors, etc.;

– Continue to deepen structural cooperation with colleagues following NAT/SDO issues in the press and social media team in order to further integrate legislative and communication activities.

Co-create and co-design: use the synergies better across the EESC. This refers also to the cooperation between the members and the secretariat – we have different roles, and we can use our individual strengths to achieve better results. In practice, this could mean:

– we made progress on working with other sections/CCMI and bodies in the previous term, but we have done it ex-post. This time we should try to engage in conversations before; promote more joint own-initiative opinions, activities, events and meetings;

– work consistently with different units to ensure consistency across the EESC, strengthen the impact, explore the possibilities of reducing the number of opinions (notably "technical" referrals) but improve their quality and increase cooperation in joint areas;

– mainstream the SDGs across the Committee and promote a systemic approach across NAT/SDO policy areas (e.g. digitalisation) as well as across sections/observatories;
– strengthening links to other institutions (focus efforts not only on the Commission and EP but also on Council Presidencies): we need time to invest in relationships with administrations and the political level, to increase impact and visibility. This will reinforce the NAT/SDO convening role;
– ask members to share contacts to media in their countries that deal with European issues - we can send opinions to these contacts in their languages;
– demonstrate to NAT/SDO members that the secretariat's support goes beyond logistical and organisational assistance; that staff of the secretariat, being highly knowledgeable about policy areas they work on and knowing the EU political landscape on these issues, can provide valuable analytical advice in support of the political role of section members; the secretariat doors are always open (either physical or virtual);
– closer cooperation with other sections in order to apply sustainability criteria transversally in all the Committee's work.
Delivering a **European Green and Social Deal** as the EU contribution to the implementation of the **Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** will be the cornerstone of both NAT and SDO work programmes in the 2020-2023 term. The EGD is an ambitious strategy for the EU to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 and provide economic impetus, but the social, labour and health dimensions should be strengthened to contribute to the SDGs more comprehensively and to ensure that no person/community/worker/sector/region/country is left behind. The SDGs, the EGD and the European Pillar of Social Rights are the best blueprints we have to pave the way towards a sustainable recovery from the COVID crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a **wake-up call for change**. It has demonstrated that humans are not only part of nature, but that they need it for their survival, health and well-being, and recalled that a poorly respected environment can be responsible for disease emergences and pandemics. Implementing an agenda that **delivers socially, economically and environmentally** is more important than ever. The pandemic had and still has detrimental impacts on the most vulnerable households, which calls for the EU agenda to reinforce measures to counter poverty. It is clear that incremental changes will no longer be enough; we need **truly transformational shifts**. Inspiring **story-telling, broad and diverse narratives, communicating clearly why the world has to change** and **leading by example** will be guiding the NAT and SDO work in the new term.

Achieving climate neutrality is the overall objective of the EGD, which resets the Commission’s commitment to tackling climate and environmental-related challenges as this generation’s defining task. The European Climate Law enshrined the **2050 climate neutrality objective in legislation** and aims to ensure that **all EU policies contribute to the climate neutrality objective** and that all sectors play their part at the same time reaping the benefits for workers via more sustainable jobs. The same approach is taken by the NAT WP, which does not separate climate neutrality/climate action as a stand-alone

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4 The SDO draft work programme (to be adopted in February) is appended for information.
priority, but reflects this overarching goal in all NAT priorities. Sustainable development, climate policy and climate action as well as the circular economy\(^5\) have been now clearly listed as NAT competencies, which makes the link between the SDO and NAT all the more substantial.

**Proposed actions:**

- Hold high-level discussions on the cross-cutting issues of EGD, Agenda 2030 and sustainable recovery at NAT Section meetings
- Open discussions with the wide range of stakeholders representing different viewpoints across all EU Member States
- Promote structured involvement of civil society, including youth and women, in sustainability and climate decision-making by continuing the successful work on the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform (in cooperation with INT) and setting up European Climate Pact Stakeholder Platform and Youth Climate and Sustainability Round Tables
- Promote the need for social inclusion to achieve the objectives of the European Green Deal, with a special focus on ownership and participation, including for remote rural areas
- Further develop the work on a "wellbeing economy", e.g. with an own-initiative opinion
- Carry out and follow up on a study on "Shifting priorities towards post-COVID sustainable reconstruction and recovery"
- Highlight key messages from NAT opinions at high level international fora (COP, HLPF)

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There are a series of ongoing transformations with considerable impact on the EU policy-making and implementation process, such as digitalisation, sustainability and circularity. Whereas digitalisation is an already plainly influential "megatrend", sustainability and circularity are just at the beginning of their development cycle, which we will support. **Sustainable Development** is a key cross-cutting issue. The Agenda 2030 and SDGs adopted in September 2015 are a universal call for action to end poverty, achieve zero hunger, protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects for good livelihoods and quality jobs for everyone, everywhere. Implicit in the SDG logic is that the goals depend on each other, they are interlinked and so are the issues under policy areas covered by the EESC sections/CCMI, observatories and other bodies. Exploring these links within the EESC requires out-of-the-box thinking and breaking the long established silos. Whereas, the SDO remains the body responsible for accelerating the implementation of SDGs across the board, the NAT Section will address the SDGs through specific

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work in all its areas of competence\textsuperscript{6} in order to accelerate the sustainability megatrend. The EESC believes that climate-resilient pathways and sustainable development can be mutually supportive: the effective implementation of the Agenda 2030 and the SDGs depends on cross-sectoral cooperative action, implying integrated responses that link adaptation, mitigation and other societal objectives.

**Digitalisation**

Digitalisation refers to enabling or improving processes by leveraging digital technologies and digitised data, leading to substantial social, economic and environmental impacts. As we reflect during the COVID-19 outbreak, the digital revolution ought to be sustainable in all its components to deliver its expected benefits. While the opportunities of digital transformation are often presented as granted, we need to assess carefully the risks involved with it, with special emphasis on resilience and sustainability. Digitalisation has a particular impact on delivery of several SDGs, in particular, on SDG8 (decent work, job creation), SDG12 (responsible consumption and production) and SDG13 (climate action), and therefore it strongly links factors for environmental and social sustainability. Digital transformation should be based on European social values and ethical standards, to ensure that we seize the digital opportunities for the economy, while protecting our privacy as well as respecting planetary boundaries and advocating for a form of digitalisation that works for all of us, delivers protection of the environment, quality jobs, and leaves no one behind. Other particular points of focus include digital education (SDG4), smart cities (SDG11) and e-health (SDG3). Hence, a number of NAT priorities and activities will need to address the impacts of this megatrend. For instance, digitalisation presents new opportunities for distance monitoring of air and water pollution, or for monitoring and optimising how energy and natural resources are used; it can help improve the availability of information on the characteristics of products sold in the EU; or can lead to reducing GHG emissions by better connectivity in the transport systems. Such examples can be multiplied. Last but not least, equal access to the benefits of digitalization remains a challenge. The support for the digital transition should take into account that not all rural areas have access to internet, digital technologies and innovation, and that the level of digital alphabetisation and the persisting intergenerational are issues.

\textsuperscript{6} These are: Agriculture, Biodiversity, Fisheries, Forestry, Sustainable Food System, Environmental Protection, Rural Development, Sustainable Development, Climate Policy and Climate Action, Circular Economy – as listed in the EESC Bureau decision on Streamlining the Committee's Structures and Working Bodies (EESC-2020-00978-10-00-NB-TRA).
Circularity

Circular Economy is an approach to promote the responsible and cyclical use of resources that still needs to receive a massive push forward. It is the EESC’s position that the circular economy is capable of developing a functional economy, which can deliver significant benefits to society. Circular economy promotes: corporate social and environmental responsibility; new local, high-quality jobs; the elimination of waste; the continuous and secure use of natural resources; a circular design-production-distribution-consumption cycle; the regeneration and reuse of end-of-life waste. The transition to a circular European economy cannot be seen in isolation from the socio-economic situation in which it must currently play out. For example, the challenges posed by the health crisis should be turned into an opportunity for a renaissance framed on the establishment of a new circular approach, including positive outcomes for workers and quality jobs. Recognising the complementarity between climate change, circular economy policies, and corporate social responsibility, as well as circular characteristics of renewable energy sources or relevance to the construction and transport sectors (use secondary of raw materials), bioeconomy and the food system (reducing waste and improving people's well-being), it is clear that circularity directly impacts on a number of NAT priorities. While the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform (ECESP) as the EESC success story has an activity of its own that needs to be continuously supported, transition to circular economy is a megatrend across the priorities and actions, rather than a priority on its own.

The following graph attempts to present the interlinkages discussed above.
NAT competencies

Sustainable development
Climate policy and climate action
Circular economy

Agriculture
Biodiversity
Fisheries
Forestry
Sustainable food system
Environmental protection
Rural development

Enabled by the SDO via its cross-cutting priorities:
- Accelerating the implementation of SDGs
- Towards climate neutrality
- Sustainable recovery and transition

Fed by the TG on Sustainable Food Systems
NAT priorities

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

For years the EESC has been at the forefront of promoting a comprehensive EU food policy. Food is a common thread linking all 17 SDGs and sustainable food systems are instrumental to achieving the Agenda 2030 and a European Green and Social Deal.

The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated that getting food “from farm to fork” cannot be taken for granted and has shown the interconnectedness of actors and activities in agriculture/fisheries and throughout the food system. Fair, resource efficient, inclusive and sustainable supply chains in the whole agriculture/fisheries and food sector are needed more than ever to deliver equally for citizens, farmers, workers and business.

The Commission's "Farm to Fork Strategy" (F2F) is at the heart of the European Green Deal. Turning this strategy into meaningful and timely actions is now crucial. As explicitly stated in the EGD, European farmers, fisherpeople and all food supply chain actors (including consumers) are key to managing the transition to a sustainable and climate-neutral society. The Farm to Fork Strategy will strengthen their efforts to tackle climate change, provide healthy and nutritious food, protect the environment and preserve biodiversity. The common agricultural and common fisheries policies are key tools to support these efforts while ensuring a decent living for farmers, fisherpeople and their families and communities, while fostering the competitiveness of the sector via a fair distribution of the returns.

"In order for a comprehensive European food policy to be truly relevant for European consumers, it is essential that the food produced sustainably in the EU is competitive. This means that the European agri-food sector is able to deliver food for the consumers at prices that include extra costs for criteria such as sustainability, animal welfare, food safety and nutrition but also a fair return to the farmers, and at the same time maintains its position as the preferred choice for the vast majority of consumers.” Opinion Civil society’s contribution to the development of a comprehensive food policy in the EU, paragraph 5.8, OJ C129, 11.04.2018, p. 18.
The Commission proposals for the period 2021-27 aim to ensure that the CAP and the CFP can continue to provide strong support for European sustainable farming and fishing, enabling prosperous rural areas and the production of high-quality food. The CAP and CFP should also make a significant contribution to the European Green Deal, especially with regard to the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies, setting higher ambitions for environmental and climate action, striving for more sustainable and resilient food systems and ensuring that the social dimension is properly taken into account.

Therefore, as in the past, the NAT Section will look at the sustainability of the agri-food sector holistically, with a whole supply chain vision including the primary producers, retailers, food transformers and consumers. The EESC, through its NAT Section, was the first European institution to call for a comprehensive approach, hence paving the way to the Farm to Fork strategy.

Proposed actions:

I. Farm to Fork strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system

The Thematic Group on Sustainable Food Systems (TG SFS) will, among other things, contribute to this priority with a detailed work plan of action organised around the three megatrends of sustainability, circularity and digitalisation. In the last term of office, the thematic group has developed a solid framework for action through the development of a strategic vision on how to promote a comprehensive food policy. New initiatives will be developed by building upon this strategic framework, e.g. to align agri-food business and retail strategies and operations with the SDGs, to achieve resource efficient, fair, sustainable and healthy food systems in practice. The contribution of SMEs, self-employed food-transformers and craftspeople has to receive special attention. The contribution of different food supply models for sustainable food systems (retail sector, consumer cooperatives, short supply chains, etc.) and the challenges in a post-COVID era, shall also be taken into account. It is essential that all stakeholders in the agri-food sector work together to promote the needed changes throughout the entire food supply chain, while recognising and valuing the central role of consumers and achieving a holistic view of and approach to nutrition.

- Follow-up of specific aspects of the Commission's F2F strategy and action plan, such as on sustainable and transparent food labelling, origin indications of certain food products, criteria for sustainable food procurement, legislative framework for sustainable food systems, healthy diets, unfair trading practices, food losses and waste, the perspective of consumers as well as the level playing field in international trade negotiations
- Ensure structured civil society participation in the implementation of the F2F strategy by advancing the idea of a European Food Policy Council, e.g. via a study to map composition, aims etc. and/or contacts with the Commission, Committee of the Regions and other stakeholders
- Provide input to the Commission’s EU Platform on Food Losses and Food Waste, European Bioeconomy Policy Forum and foster linkages with the EESC/EC European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform
- Explore how digitalisation can help achieve more sustainable food systems (precision farming techniques, traceability, logistics and mobility, digital labelling, sustainable consumption, short/resource efficient food supply chains etc.), e.g. by proposing an own-initiative opinion

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The TG SFS draft work programme is appended for information.
Explore ways to participate in international processes such as the UN Food Systems Summit 2021 and to continue engagement with the Committee on World Food Security and its Civil Society Mechanism

II. A biodiversity friendly sustainable agriculture and forestry

Promote sustainable farming and forestry with enhanced job and business opportunities. Explore new avenues for moving towards a more sustainable CAP that enhances farmers’ opportunities, conditions and livelihoods.

Develop opinions on the novel components of the reformed CAP that would deserve to be further investigated in terms of their application and/or civil society's differentiated impacts. The NAT Section should be involved in the evaluation of the CAP’s strategic programmes.

Sustainable use of pesticides: carry out an evaluation of the Directive on the Sustainable Use of Pesticides (ongoing NAT/805) and pursue reflections on ways to further reduce the overall use and risk of chemical use in food production, notably via smart farming practices.

- New EU Forest Strategy: Develop an opinion on the new EU forest strategy for 2021 to 2030.
- Make concrete proposals to balance the role of forests as carbon sinks and as creator of new job opportunities in the bioeconomy, in order to attain climate neutrality by 2050.

III. Sustainable aquaculture and fisheries

Promote sustainable fishery in all forms notably through an enhanced balance between fisherpeople's livelihood and fish stock preservation. Keep track of the most recent evolutions of the fishery and aquaculture sector in order to continue issuing recommendations on its alignment with the main EGD climate goal;

- Develop opinions related to upcoming Commission initiatives, for example on the role of fisheries in a sustainable blue economy as well as marketing standards and consumer information for fishery products;
- Assess the impact of the European Commission's biodiversity and farm to fork strategies on EU seafood production, fishing fleet diversity, market supply and seafood imports.

IV. EU agri-food trade compatible with the EGD

Reflect on finding ways to secure a level playing field for all agri-food industries globally so that EU sustainable production is not externalised nor negatively affected by imports from countries with lower environmental, social, health and quality standards, particularly in light of the economic and trade disruptions created by the COVID-19 crisis.

Promote border environmental adjustments in the agri-food sector through exploring the possible use of border environmental adjustments (BEAs) in agri-food trade.

Provide NAT input to the Commission’s EU carbon border adjustment mechanism to avoid carbon leakage (in cooperation with the REX Section)

EESC opinions - building blocks from previous term: NAT/747 CAP legislative proposals (rapp. Bryan), NAT/711 Comprehensive EU food policy (rapp. Schmidt), NAT/755 Healthy and sustainable diets (rapp.: Schmidt), NAT/734 improving the food supply chain/UTPs (rapp. Schmidt), NAT/763 Short food
Europe faces environmental challenges of unprecedented scale and urgency. Although EU environment and climate policies have delivered substantial benefits over recent decades, Europe faces persistent problems in areas such as biodiversity loss, natural resource use, climate change impacts and environmental risks to health and well-being. The European Green Deal and its zero pollution objective provide an opportunity for the EU to reaffirm its previous environmental commitments while ensuring wellbeing for all and staying within the planetary boundaries. The mounting concerns of EU citizens regarding environmental degradation (cf. Eurobarometer) call for active engagement of all stakeholders at all levels of governance, to ensure that EU climate and environment laws are effectively implemented.

With the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 adopted as part of the EGD, the Commission provides a comprehensive, long-term plan for protecting nature and reversing the degradation of ecosystems. It is also the proposal for the EU contribution to the upcoming international negotiations on the global post-2020 biodiversity framework. In the EESC's view, the strategy should put Europe's biodiversity at the heart of the post-COVID-19 recovery for the benefit of people, the climate and the planet. There also needs to be a significant increase in efforts to restore habitats and combat species decline caused mainly by poor implementation of the legal framework and insufficient funding for the necessary measures, besides the impact of the industry and human behaviour.

Mainstreaming environmental protection in all EU policies, including health, remains crucial. With the EU Zero Pollution Ambition to be launched in 2021, the Commission aims to secure healthy ecosystems and a healthy living environment for Europeans, by better preventing and remedying pollution from air, water, soil, and consumer products; further decoupling economic growth from the increase of pollution; and strengthening the links between environmental protection, sustainable development and people's well-being.

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Proposed actions:

I. **Biodiversity**

- Implementation of the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030:
  - Follow-up on the opinion NAT/786 2030 biodiversity Strategy with Parliament and Council and ensure a swift application of the measures in the Action Plan of the strategy
  - Reflect on finding new ways to mobilise European civil society and citizens to protect biodiversity, including at work level
  - Raise the awareness of other sections/CCMI on the importance of streamlining biodiversity issues into Committee's opinions since all EU policies should contribute to preserving and restoring the EU natural capital
  - Highlight the health aspects linked with the biodiversity decline, from the positive impacts of high-quality ecosystems on air/soil/water pollution and on mental health (e.g. recreation, new green spaces), to the negative impacts of the emergence of zoonoses (pathogens shared between humans and animals)\(^{10}\)
  - Use the EESC Open Day to display biodiversity friendly actions.

- International dimension:
  - Participation of a NAT delegation in the COP 15 in China in 2021, possibly with appropriate side event(s)/alternatively – mirror activities in Brussels and Member States.

II. **Environmental protection**

- Continue efforts to mainstream environmental protection in EU policies by identifying policy areas in need of refit
- Starting from the opinion on the 8th Environment Action Programme, keep track of EU policy efforts to ensure their alignment with the EGD
- Develop an opinion on a zero pollution Europe – clean air, water, soil (linking with health aspects)
- Develop an opinion on a long term Chemicals strategy for sustainability
- Contribute to the EESC works on the sustainable management of raw and critical materials (with INT/CCMI)
- Work together with the REX Section to organise conferences related to the environment and sustainable development involving stakeholders inside and outside of the EU
- Participate in Green Week 2021 on the theme of zero pollution, possibly with a side event
- Pursue the work in relation to the Rights of Nature, by
  - following-up the 2020 EESC study "Towards an EU Charter of the Fundamental Rights of Nature: event with European Parliament and key stakeholders

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

**Rural areas** are home to 55% of the EU population, produce 45% of its gross added value, and host 50% of its jobs. However, they have featured less and less on the political agenda in recent years. Large-scale projects and funding programmes have readily been targeted at towns and cities, which have been assigned the role of transforming society based on "smart" technologies. During the 2014-2020 financing period, at least half of the resources available under the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) had to be invested in urban areas.¹¹

Rural areas play a critical role in economic and social cohesion, in regions' resilience, and in the contribution of countless services from various local ecosystems. Women in rural areas play a key role in supporting households and communities in providing food, generating income, or improving social cohesion; often they do not have decent working conditions or access to social protection. Rural areas in the EU have higher poverty rates (25.5%) than cities (24%) or towns and suburbs (22%)¹². As well as being important in terms of their size, rural areas shape a country's culture and its collective imagination. Rather than rural areas being limited to agri-food and forestry, or leisure activities offering alternatives to the beach, it should be possible to focus more policy measures on these areas with a view to **exploiting their huge development potential, including by boosting traditional industries and activities and by creating new economic activities and jobs.** Rural areas must enjoy equal treatment to urban areas in respect of public services and infrastructure, given that their residents pay similar taxes. Policy-makers must also put rural areas at the heart of strategies to achieve the **17 Sustainable Development Goals.**

The time has come to adopt a **holistic approach covering all regions, urban and rural,** with special emphasis on the phenomenon of depopulation that threatens many European rural areas. The support of rural development has to be placed within a broader framework that links rural policy with all other relevant policies, such as food, climate and biodiversity policies, poverty reduction, land use, transport infrastructure, services of general interest or development of new activities based on the circular economy and the bioeconomy. Digitalisation could also be a key tool to promote the rural-urban linkages, e.g. to facilitate short supply chains, information flows, social contacts, etc. The Committee

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¹¹ Eurostat regional yearbook 2019, p. 20.

could act as a catalyst for a reformed strategy favouring balanced and sustainable territorial development, building upon exhaustive consultation of stakeholders and an alliance with other EU institutions and bodies, including the European Committee of the Regions. The NAT work should be inspired by the 2016 Cork 2.0 Declaration for "a better life in rural areas" that sets out 10 points with a view to ensuring a sustainable and economically viable future for rural areas.

**Proposed actions:**

- Organise a thematic debate on the preparation of a holistic strategy for developing sustainable rural/urban areas at one of the 2021 NAT Section meetings and prepare an Information Report exploring concrete proposals to promote a more sustainable development of rural and urban areas

- Contribute to the Commission's proposal on the EU’s long-term strategy for rural areas

- **Social, economic and territorial cohesion – leaving no territories behind in the transition towards sustainability**
  - Promote the accelerated development of rural areas, notably by tapping more intensively into the potential offered by the circular economy and bioeconomy. Ensure that rural areas receive the appropriate backing in the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform (ECESP) activities.
  - Carry out an evaluation on the CAP's impact on territorial development of rural areas
  - Contribute to the preparation and follow-up of the Commission's new initiative for a long-term vision for rural areas
  - Liaise with other existing organisations and initiatives such as the Local Action Groups, Euromontana, the European Parliament Intergroup on Rural, Mountainous and Remote Areas & Smart Villages, the Smart Rural 21 project (building on the Smart Villages initiative of ENRD), the European Rural Parliament, R.E.D., ECOLISE and others in order to create a coalition of interest towards balanced territorial development.
  - Organise a high-level conference on 10 or 11 May 2021 under the title *Potsdam+22: time is due for a true European Territorial Strategy*. This would look back at the conclusions of the informal EU Council held in Potsdam on 10 and 11 May 1999, which remain entirely relevant today even if the stated goal of more balanced competitiveness seems farther than ever from being achieved. The event should ideally be co-chaired by the EESC and CoR presidents and involve representatives of organised civil society, academia, EU institutions and national, regional and local administrations and stakeholders form the rural areas.

*EESC opinions – building blocks from previous term: NAT/790 An integrated approach for the EU’s vulnerable areas (rapp. Puxeu Rocamora, co-rapp. Slavova); NAT/739 on the role of Bioeconomy (rapp. Andreas Thurner)*

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