

Newsletter

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Business for Climate Neutral Europe

MAKING THE MOST OF THE SDGS AND THE GREEN DEAL



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A growing number of European companies have already changed their mind-set and, over and above the strictly business aspects, are now taking environmental and social aspects into consideration as well in their daily operations. To make the transition to a green economy a success, the EU needs to provide a level playing field for its companies, boosting competitiveness and investment. These are some of the conclusions of the conference on *Business for Climate Neutral Europe – making the most of the SDGs and the Green Deal* that took place on 9 March in Split, Croatia.

"Business is not the problem but part of the solution when we are talking about achieving climate neutrality and implementing the SDGs", observed Jacek Krawczyk, president of the EESC Employers' Group, at the opening of the conference. The transition to a green economy would only succeed if companies delivered climate-friendly technologies and services and if there was growing societal support for bringing about these major changes. Mr Krawczyk underlined that for companies to be fighting climate change was both a matter of responsibility for the future of the planet and a sound business case, as climate-friendly projects and investments could be profitable.

Gordana Deranja, president of the Croatian Employers' Association, underlined that the starting point differed among the countries, and even the regions, in the EU, something that had to be taken into account in greening the economy. She pointed out that the scale of change meant that both private and public investments needed to be mobilised. European employers needed support from the EU and their governments to provide the proper conditions for the transition to a climate-neutral economy. It was especially important to have fair competition on the international markets.



"The Green Deal has been long-awaited: it provides clear objectives for the EU and its members and has to be taken seriously, as it offers completely new opportunities and new perspectives for development", remarked Tomislav Ćorić, Croatian Minister of Environmental Protection and Energy. In his view, progress in aligning the European economy with the SDGs would advance at different rates in the different EU countries, but this was a turning point, especially for the smaller economies. He said that projects promoting sustainability would be given priority in the next long-term EU budget.

How do businesses incorporate the SDGs into their activities?

The first discussion panel focused on how businesses incorporated the Sustainable Development Goals into their daily operations. "Businesses are completely changing their focus, and now it is just as much about prosperity, people and the planet", stated Davor Majetić, director-general of the Croatian Employers' Association. In addition to business aspects, modern companies had to take into account the environmental, societal and technological context. Only those companies that adjusted to the new mind-set and treated the SDGs as an indispensable part of their business model would succeed in the future.

Maja Fredotović, dean of the Faculty of Economics, Business and Tourism at the University of Split, focused on action taken by the university to implement the SDGs in its daily operations and described its activities to promote entrepreneurship among young people. She underlined that for Croatia, sustainability was especially important in sectors such as tourism and construction. In an economy so heavily dependent on tourism, only sustainable solutions based on long-term, stable growth could be successful in the future. She admitted that there was a lack of knowledge on how to implement sustainability in tourism.

"Sustainability and environment issues are having a growing impact on customers' decisions", said Marinko Došen, president of the management board of the AD Plastik Group. For AD Plastik – a

company working for the car industry, with eight factories in the EU exporting products to 25 countries – sustainability was already an indispensable component of daily operations. To deliver products that met high customer standards and expectations at the same time as staying competitive, the company had to invest heavily in R&D, in a constant search for new materials.

Stéphane Buffetaut, member of the EESC Employers' Group, focused on how the SDGs were being implemented in his area of activity, social housing. He admitted that while "green" technologies and solutions were becoming increasingly available, the cost was still a challenge. Businesses often had to find a balance between the higher costs of "green" solutions and the long-term benefits, such as lower maintenance costs.

What does the European Green Deal mean for EU industry?

The second panel looked into the consequences of the European Green Deal for EU industry. Participants cited a number of practical examples of potential challenges facing businesses.

"The adoption of the European Green Deal is proof that European societies are aware of how important and urgent it is to counteract climate change", said Igor Kreitmeyer, Assistant Minister for Nature Protection at the Croatian Ministry of Environmental Protection and Energy. He reminded those present that while the EU share in direct CO₂ emissions was indeed low, our indirect CO₂ footprint was much higher owing to imports of goods where production contributed to deforestation, etc. He mentioned a number of key EU political initiatives, such as new Industrial Strategy, that would have a significant impact on the implementation of the Green Deal.

Sabina Škrtić, member of the management board of the Energia Naturalis Group, emphasised that the gas sector was strongly exposed to the consequences of the Green Deal and was concerned about the future. The whole sector, and her company in particular, were now looking for solutions to finance this change, especially the R&D component. She also explained that the company was preparing for the new reality in terms of its mind-set. The entire management had attended a three-day workshop explaining the Green Deal and looking into policy documents to assess its relevance.

"Implementing the European Green Deal has to go hand in hand with a level playing field for companies competing on the global markets. Otherwise, if international trade allows unfair competition, the EU risks exporting its emissions, production, investments and jobs", said Michal Pintér, coordinator of the EESC Employers' Category - CCMI Delegates. He reminded those present



that energy-intensive industries had already made enormous progress in reducing CO₂ emissions. Further significant reductions would require decarbonisation and switching to green energy sources, which was currently impossible technically speaking. As the investment needed to bring about the economic transition was substantial, no one industry could finance it on its own. Private capital had to be backed up by public funding at EU, national and regional level.

According to Bernd Dittmann, member of the EESC Employers' Group and vice-president of the EESC Section for the Single Market, Production and Consumption, the assessment of the first Circular Economy Action Plan showed that the current approach was a good way forward. The plan provided targets and tools for the Member States, allowing them to reach the goals individually.

Mr Dittmann also gave an account of the Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform, where stakeholders could exchange best practices and learn from each other on how to implement circular solutions and how to reduce their costs.

Summarising the discussion, Mr Dittmann underlined how important the change in mind-set was. Everyone was asking who would be paying the bill, whereas we should actually be treating the current transition more as an investment. This would certainly require fundamental changes in people's habits and behaviour.

The conference was organised jointly by the Employers' Group, Croatian Employers' Association, UN Global Compact Network Croatia and the Faculty of Economics of the University of Split.

The Employers' Group delegation visited the CEMEX cement production facility, located close to Split. It was an excellent opportunity to see how a company from an energy-intensive industry implemented sustainable solutions in its daily operations.



Green Deal: Energy Intensive Industries IF WE GET THE RIGHT SUPPORT, WE CAN DELIVER

Energy-intensive industries, such as cement, ceramics, chemicals, ferrous and non-ferrous metals, fertilisers, glass, lime, paper and refineries, provide more than 2.6 million direct jobs in the European Union, as well as millions of indirect jobs. These industries underpin Europe's key value chains in fields such as the automotive industry, machinery, construction, and energy technology. However, the environmental impact of these industries remains large even though emissions have been reduced by 36% since 1990 – no other part of the economy has reduced more.

The EU's emissions make up only around 9% of the global total, yet the Union has the most comprehensive and ambitious legislative framework on climate action. Between 1990 and 2017 its greenhouse gas emissions were reduced by 23% while the economy grew by 58%.

We might have been somewhat sceptical about the EU's climate ambitions – given the global aspect of this whole issue – but we understand that it is imperative to combat climate change by every means available.

The Masterplan for a competitive transformation of EU energy-intensive industries enabling a climate-neutral, circular economy

by 2050, published at the end of last year, sets out a number of concrete policy priorities, most notably the creation of markets for climate-neutral and circular economy products, support for the industrial-scale demonstration of breakthrough technologies, and access to competitively-priced low-carbon or carbon-neutral energy.

In the steel sector, which I represent, we have mapped out the path ahead and are confident that we can achieve an 80-95% reduction in CO₂ emissions by 2050 if the right circumstances prevail. Nevertheless, the transition to carbon-lean, "green" steel requires a fundamental change in the way steel is produced, because our current processes are already at the technical and thermodynamic limits.

Energy

The breakthrough technologies to make clean steel involve using hydrogen and renewable electricity for its production; they also mean capturing and either storing or using the carbon that is emitted to bring the environmental footprint of our production as close to zero as possible.

The technical demands are enormous: our sector alone will require 400 terawatt hours of renewable electricity, including 250 terawatt hours for the production of 5.5 million tons of hydrogen. This equals the current electricity demand of Germany, and that quantity will be needed every year from 2050 at the latest.

Looking at all Energy Intensive Industries (EIs), an indicative estimate based on sector studies and calculations suggests a range of between 2980 and 4430 TWh for the aggregate possible future electricity demand from EIs following the wide-scale deployment of low-CO₂ processes. This is ten times the current annual consumption of Germany...

Importantly, a reliable and abundant supply of low-carbon or CO₂-neutral energy must be available at an economically viable, affordable cost.

Costs

The capital and operating costs of this change are massive, numbering in the multi-billion euro range. EU steel producers face not only the costs of compliance with the EU ETS, but also the full costs of abatement. These costs may be more than ten times the current compliance cost per tonne of CO₂ abated. This is why our transition to a carbon-lean future relies so heavily on the right conditions being in place, and why we need a "Green Deal for Steel".

Trade

If international trade allows unfairly priced, more CO₂-intense steels to be imported, we will simply be exporting our emissions, production, investment and jobs outside the European Union.



Therefore, from the short-term point of view, we need to improve carbon leakage protection by imposing a Carbon Border Measure in addition to existing carbon leakage provisions on free allocation and indirect cost compensation within the EU ETS. At the same time, the EU should look at all possible options to counter dumping, government subsidies and other support schemes in third countries by improving the application of Trade Defence Instruments and to modernise the WTO rulebook to more effectively tackle trade distorting practices. And we will need significantly enhanced measures for the long-term.

Financing

If there is no way to sustainably finance our innovation, we cannot deploy the new technologies we will need to succeed. This challenge can be overcome only if private capital is supported with a consistent and coordinated framework of public funding opportunities at EU, national and regional level. Dedicated European Partnerships under Horizon Europe, together with other support schemes such as the EU ETS Innovation Fund, Invest EU, Connecting Europe Facility, and Important Projects of Common European Interest (IPCEI), should be coordinated to function in a mission-oriented approach, supporting the transition to low-CO₂ industry.

Market

At the end of our de-carbonisation efforts, the cost per tonne of primary steel would likely increase by between 35% and 100% compared to the current baseline. If there is no market for green steel products, the whole transition would not make any sense and the other regions of the world would not want to follow it.

Therefore, we must create lead markets for low-carbon products with demand-side measures, we need to introduce incentives for users (such as the automotive industry, among others) to use "green products and materials", and we must also promote low-carbon products in public procurement.

There are a lot of barriers ahead and we will need each of the factors to be in place in order to succeed. Climate mitigation is a shared responsibility between industry, policymakers and civil society. If we establish the right set of support measures, the EU steel industry and other energy-intensive industries can deliver.



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Towards greater European cooperation, collaboration and cohesion

Cooperation, collaboration and cohesion are three nouns with Latin roots, which convey two key aspects of the actions that derive from them: solidarity and unity. Solidarity guarantees cohesion, while unity ensures that cooperation and collaboration lead to tangible results in terms of greater development, prosperity and equality within the European Union, avoiding any kind of discrimination and enhancing our ability to respond to unforeseen events of particular severity.

With the undesired and rapid expansion of the coronavirus (COVID-19), solidarity and unity between the European Institutions and the Member States are essential if we are to confront this challenge and make every possible effort to prevent and contain it. In this regard, businesses and business organisations are well aware that collective and individual health should be prioritised and are therefore working closely with public authorities to comply with their recommendations to the letter.

But since every crisis provides an opportunity, and there is no reason for this one to be different, it is now time to raise our ambitions for European policy. This is essential in order, on the one hand, to ensure that citizens, businesses and workers have faith in the EU's ability to respond; and on the other, to create an atmosphere of certainty that can attract greater investment, which is essential if we are to move the sustainable development of our economies forward and create more opportunities.

In this context, the implementation of urgent measures to limit the socio-economic impact of COVID-19, whether these measures have already been adopted or will be adopted in the near future, should be accompanied by the consistent application of the European Green Deal for decarbonisation and sustainable development. This is a priority that, without a doubt, we all share, because it is businesses that, by continually innovating, are able to adapt their services and production processes in favour of a greener and more socially inclusive economy.

This will only be possible if their competitiveness is not compromised by the imposition of targets that are as ambitious and laudable as they are difficult to achieve, depending on the deadlines and terms for their implementation ultimately agreed upon by the Council and the European Parliament.



From this point of view, it is crucial that the roadmaps put forward by the European Commission on digitalisation, SMEs, industrial policy and the internal market are considered on an equal footing with the European Green Deal. It is equally important to have a clear and defined strategy as well as the actions and means necessary for its implementation. This is one of the keys to success that the European Commission must keep in mind.

The proposals made by the European Economic and Social Committee in its Resolution on its contribution to the Commission's work programme for 2020 and beyond, for which I had the pleasure and honour of being a co-rapporteur, remain fully valid in this regard.

More specifically, in this Resolution the EESC: firstly, recognises the central role of social dialogue and the work of the social partners in facilitating job creation and the smooth functioning of labour markets; secondly, calls for the revitalisation and integration of the internal market, in all its dimensions (including digital), and with a focus on SMEs; thirdly, advocates increasing the resilience of the European Union, both internally and externally; and fourthly, calls for a tangible increase in investments, both public and private, in order to deal with the transitions that the EU is currently going through, in particular with regard to energy.

These proposals are much more than a statement of intent. We feel strongly about the importance of working closely with Groups II and III, as well as with the European Commission and the rest of the European Institutions, to ensure their proper development. This is because, as I mentioned at the beginning of this article, cooperation, collaboration and cohesion – on the basis of solidarity and unity – are the principles that have and will continue to guide us, especially in a situation as complex as the one we are living through in the European Union today.



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EU-Africa: TIME TO MOVE FROM WORDS TO DEEDS

Affirming Africa's key role as a strategic partner of the European Union over the coming decades, the European Commission held its 10th meeting with the African Union in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa on 27 February 2020. The meeting was led by the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat and the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and 22 members of the European Commission and 9 members of the African Union Commission took part.



Prior to this meeting, referred to as C2C (Commission-to-Commission), Ursula von der Leyen had made her first official foreign visit as the newly elected President of the European Commission to the African Union headquarters in Ethiopia.

A ministerial meeting of the European Union and the African Union in May 2020 and an EU-AU summit in October are planned. Both parties are also planning a joint business forum. The declaration from Abidjan in 2017 and creation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) have been great steps towards partnership.

So far, the EESC has helped bring Africa and the European Union closer together through two missions by the Committee President Luca Jahier to Ethiopia in April 2019 and to Senegal in January 2020. The EU-ACP Follow-up Committee, which I have the honour of chairing for the current term, is also working very hard. We have organised many meetings in Africa and Brussels and attended a number of meetings of the European Parliament and African parliaments and Commission meetings and negotiations. Unlike official meetings and summits, the meetings of the EESC President and the Committee were mainly aimed at dialogue with African civil society.

And now for the main question. EESC President Luca Jahier already raised several questions in his statement after the C2C meeting in Addis Ababa (*Thumbs up to the Commission for a successful trip in Africa but more room for civil society is definitely needed*). The main question is this: why are things so bad when they're so good? Why do so many people (the population of Africa will soon reach 2 billion, half of whom are younger than 35) not see their future in Africa, but in Europe?

There are many answers, programmes and plans and there is concern that the topic of African development and EU-Africa cooperation will be lost in a sea of words. Three key issues that we should focus on have emerged from our meetings and visits.

The first is helping African countries reform their economies. The EU countries, particularly in Eastern Europe, have experience and knowledge of how to transform centrally planned economies into free-market economies. How can agriculture be comprehensively reformed and an agricultural processing industry be created? How can foreign direct investment be used for the development of a country? How can communication infrastructure and transport networks be built? Reforms carried out in African countries have been piecemeal and don't lead to a breakthrough. Indeed, it is not possible to reform the economy, invest and dismantle the informal economy, while maintaining the banking monopoly and

controlling currency. And this is just in Ethiopia. In other African countries, there are more of these complicated problems. It is not possible to reform agriculture while maintaining a monopoly on land ownership and trade. The economy can't be modernised by creating technology parks that exploit a dirt cheap local labour force to sew clothes for Asian companies, for export to Europe under a local African brand name. There are more problems like this. The European Union should help African countries carry out reforms by providing examples from its own regions, teaching and organising missions.

The second key question is getting societies involved in the reform programme and dialogue with civil society. As the EESC President noted, the C2C meeting in Addis Ababa sidestepped this issue. It is hard to expect African countries to engage in dialogue with society when we don't even do this in the European Union. The provisions on the role of civil society in the revised Cotonou agreement are not a step forward, and even take a step back compared to the current Cotonou agreement.

On one hand, civil society has been left out of EU-Africa dialogue, while on the other hand the European Commission is putting forward bold private investment plans in Africa that amount to 500 billion euro. I find it interesting how private investors could be led to make large-scale investments in Africa without dialogue with entrepreneurs and private investors who, along with trade unions and NGOs, represent civil society.

The third main issue, without which there will be no breakthrough in Europe-Africa relations, is information. The average small and medium-scale entrepreneur does not have the slightest idea about investment possibilities in Africa, economic priorities and existing legal and tax laws. Of course, to a certain extent, EU foreign missions provide this information, governments and economic organisations such as the African Union or the UN Economic Commission for Africa also have it. In order to achieve large-scale direct investment from SMEs, this information must be widely available and easily accessible, and the EU's foreign missions must support EU business, which is not the case.

These three issues are essential in order to achieve a breakthrough in EU-Africa relations and bring about a significant influx of European investment in Africa, economic and social development and to stem emigration. Of course, there are other important issues that I have not touched on: education, infrastructure, environmental protection and much, much more. These are discussed in documents that followed the C2C meeting, documents and declarations from subsequent summits, etc.

But to make a breakthrough, we have to stop talking and start acting. It's better to have one good idea with a good amount of funding than many good ideas with little funding. Surely the institutions will not achieve this through good intentions and a sea of declarations alone. Societies must be involved.



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Meeting with Commissioner Hahn

In the framework of the budgetary procedure 2021, Commissioner Hahn kindly agreed to meet a small delegation of CAF members comprising the CAF chair, CAF rapporteur for B2021 – Mihai Ivaşcu and CAF member Gerhard Riemer in order to discuss the state of play of the negotiations on the European budget and the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 and, in particular, the short, medium and long-term budgetary challenges that the EESC would have to face in the coming years.

The Commissioner painted a comprehensive picture of the overall negotiation process for the MFF 2021-2027, underlying the inflexible position of the so-called frugal countries – mainly the Scandinavian countries and Germany – on not increasing the Member States' contributions after Brexit, but finding more internal resources to finance the EU budget. This, coupled with the imperative of not decreasing the scope of the common agriculture and cohesion policies and the additional need for resources imposed by the Green Deal and the priorities of the new Commission, makes reaching an agreement on the MFF very challenging.

An additional layer of complexity comes from the very ambitious role that the European Parliament is choosing to play in this process, which often differs from the position of the Member States. In this regard, Commissioner Hahn called upon the EESC to mobilise its members to actively communicate to their constituencies the need to convince the Member States to find compromise positions in the process of negotiations and to speed up the adoption of the MFF.

He also underlined that the whole process was already lagging behind, also in terms of adopting the necessary regulations, and if a swift solution was not found soon, this would put a great deal of pressure on the process of preparation and adoption of the partnership agreements and operational programmes by the Member States. Commissioner Hahn underlined the importance of the EESC as the structural link with European civil society and was interested in exploring further opportunities for participating in discussions with our members.

Together with Gerhard Riemer and the CAF rapporteur for B2021 Mihai Ivaşcu, we informed the Commissioner in detail about the EESC's specific, responsible and not always easy role and thus the unique needs of the EESC B2021 with a view to safeguarding enough resources for the EESC's political work, as 2021 will be a year when the Committee will reach full cruising speed and will have to produce an even greater number of opinions, which will result in a really heavy workload. Bearing in mind the extremely



high execution rate of the EESC budget for 2019 and 2020, even though they are renewal years and therefore had a lower workload, we seemed to arrive at a common position that, after eight years of budget austerity, the EESC should receive a bit more. The same is valid for the need to finance a one-off effort regarding the buildings, as the EESC should prepare for the swift transfer of the VMA building and guarantee a high quality working environment for its members and staff.

The meeting took place in a very positive spirit and we were honoured that the Commissioner showed such an interest in our work. With all due respect for the huge challenges and budgetary restrictions ahead, we have hope that we can further build on this initial basis both in terms of increasing the visibility and importance of the EESC's political work and in achieving an optimal solution for B2021 and beyond.

At the end of the meeting, the Commissioner also kindly shared with us some thoughts regarding the situation with the coronavirus and what the coordinated response of the EU institutions should look like.

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The future of retail in city-centres

Exchanging best practice, ensuring sufficient funding and cutting red tape to a minimum – these were the keys for small retailers to revitalise and modernise their businesses discussed at the meeting of the EESC's SME, Crafts and Family Business Category. Held on 26 February, it was an opportunity for business associations, as well as a representative from the European Commission's Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs, to meet category members and examine the outcomes of the study on *The future of retail in city-centres* and the priorities for Europe's retail SMEs.



The study identifies challenges and trends for small retailers and showcases good practice. After a thorough analysis of five best practices the Panteia research group authors arrived at the following recommendations for revitalising small-scale retail:

- Providing accessible and concise digital learning tools
- Highlighting the importance of public-private partnerships
- Rethinking framework conditions and the environment
- Establishing partnerships among retailers
- Supporting retailers in setting up shared digital sales platforms with delivery services
- Reducing the complexity of regulations, and designing certain regulations to actively support and help small retailers
- Small retailers should realise their strengths and capitalise on changing consumer preferences and retail trends

Drawing on these findings, discussion participants set out their priorities for Europe's retail SMEs. Speakers from business associations (Eurochambres, EuroCommerce, Euro Coop, Independent Retail Europe, SMEunited and UNIZO) agreed on the following recommendations to modernise the sector:

- Funding is needed that offers suitable options for small retailers.
- Strategies should be established together with local stakeholders. These strategies need to have a broad vision and include a range of topics, such as mobility.
- Legislation is needed that does not limit the competitiveness of small retailers and guarantees the diversity of the retail landscape. A level playing field has to protect small retailers against international competition and big business.

- Exchange of best practice has to be fostered, for example through a European digital platform.
- Red tape needs to be minimised to spare the resources of small retailers.

Ms Leena Whittaker from the European Commission's Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs ran through measures that the European Commission was currently implementing to support Europe's small retailers: the 2018 Communication "A European Retail Sector fit for the 21st Century", the guide entitled "Facing the Future" for the revitalisation of small retail and several retail workshops that facilitate the exchange of best practice. Workshops already conducted showed there was a need to better connect local and EU levels, not least in order to share best practice effectively.

Digitalisation and a changing global environment will continue to pose challenges to small retailers. But they will also give them the chance to build on their strengths: being able to deliver unique goods and services with a personal touch and an individual customer experience. SMEs must have a level playing field if they are to be able to meet these challenges.

Speakers at the meeting agreed that small retailers were important for keeping the character of European city centres alive. If they were to close down, a core part of our society would be lost. They needed support in the form not just of subsidies, but also societal measures.

The study *The future of retail in city-centres. Challenges, good practices and recommendations for small retailers in city-centres, including small centres in rural areas* was compiled by Panteia in 2019 and is available here: <https://europa.eu/UW49Dt>

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