The UN Sustainable Development Goals are paving the way for a better and more sustainable future for all. At the heart of these goals is a commitment to ensure that no one is left behind. This is why new approaches are examined here to more fairly distributing the burden of the transition to a low-carbon and resource-efficient economic model.

Leaving no one behind means that all members of society have a real chance to seize the opportunities and are well prepared for coping with the risks. In this context, the most vulnerable groups in society as well as the most disadvantaged regions and territories need special consideration. Therefore, it should be clear that the sustainable development agenda is not only about environmental goals or the economic dimension. For the Workers’ Group, tackling the social question will be absolutely crucial in implementing this agenda and it will monitor every step of the process to ensure that all facets of the European Green and Social Deal proposed in the document are taken into account.
Human-centric Artificial Intelligence
Franca Salis-Madinier

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is already part of our daily lives, for instance in voice recognition, on streaming platforms or during semi-automatic driving. However, citizens’ trust in such products can only establish itself when AI proves to be a safe solution that respects certain rules, such as data protection and non-discrimination. This is especially true for appliances in the workplace: Humans need to stay accountable for AI-driven processes and switch off the machine if necessary.

Developing ethical guidelines for AI is a crucial task for EU politics: A European trusted-AI Business Certificate could be a good way to ensure that companies follow the rules and citizens understand what is happening. Additionally, the EU should lobby for international guidelines on the ethical use of AI.
This is EU civil society’s economic, social and environmental policy input into the European semester. Strong emphasis is put on the need for sustainable growth policies guided by the UN 2030 SDGs. For the Workers’ Group, important issues still need to be addressed including current investment gaps particularly as regards digital research, the enhancement of people’s skills and qualifications, enabling the implementation of the Social Pillar and fighting against the existential threat of climate change.

Furthermore, the low compliance of current account surplus countries with the macroeconomic imbalance procedure needs to be addressed for the sake of economic and political stability in the EU. The Workers’ Group particularly welcomes the intention to deepen the dialogue with social partners and calls for minimum standards to be introduced concerning their consultation in the framework of the Semester.

EU’s trade and investment policies
Their role in enhancing the EU’s economic performance
Tanja Buzek

Trade and investment are essential for the EU, particularly as they have the potential to enhance its own internal economic performance. One job in seven in the EU depends on exports and, given that 90% of global economic growth over the next 10 to 15 years is expected to occur outside Europe, the EU needs to ensure it gains the biggest possible share of these opportunities. This means also addressing controversial trade issues by promoting fair trade rules and worker rights internationally.

For the Workers’ Group, the EU must promote a progressive trade agenda that ensures high environmental, safety and labour standards.
Ensure inclusive sectoral transition to a digitalised rail industry

Guy Pierre Albert Theo Greivelding

The introduction of digital technologies in the railway industry is expected to increase efficiency and productivity, which will benefit the sector’s competitiveness. It will open the door to many opportunities such as new and evolved services for passengers and enhanced train safety, but also to new challenges that will need to be addressed, such as cybersecurity risks and data protection.

For the Workers’ Group, this transition must above all be fair and inclusive, as there will be profound changes in the nature of work and the demand for skills. The Workers’ Group particularly highlights the importance of dealing with skills gaps arising from digitalization as well as the potential impact on the health of railway workers. Social dialogue will be essential to anticipate the impact of automation and digitalization on workers to maintain a high level of employment and social guarantees.
Delivering on the circular economy action plan
Peter Schmidt

Preserving the value of products and materials for as long as possible and minimizing waste and resource use is the core of the circular economy. Incorporating these aspects in the current European economic model is a true challenge, but also a necessity to fight climate change. In 2017, the EESC and the European Commission joined forces to launch a European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform (ECESP) in order to turn the circular economy into reality. Two years later, the platform has proven to be a success in bringing together different actors (such as companies, retailers, consumers and citizen initiatives) and moving from words to concrete actions on all regional levels.

In this opinion, the Workers’ Group asks for enlarging the ECESP activities to reach out even more to citizens and incorporate new aspects, such as finance and public procurement. A new Commission Action Plan for some of the most promising sectors such as textile and construction would also be welcomed.
Generational renewal in agriculture

Piroska Kállay

Most young farmers around Europe do not start a farm “from scratch”: They take up an already functioning farm from an older relative or person of trust. This process means specific challenges: Young people take up the responsibility of becoming an entrepreneur and managing an often large-scale business. However, sufficient and predicable income as well as structural investments in the farm are often difficult to realise, and many young people suffer from the lack of basic services and social isolation in remote rural areas. It is striking that young women especially decide overwhelmingly against taking up this challenge.

Improving this situation and facilitating generational renewal is an important task of EU agriculture policies: Direct financial transfers to young farmers should be expanded and additional support such as low-interest loans and advisory services should be at their disposal in order to make farming an attractive choice for the next generation. Changing hands between old and young farmers must be as easy and unbureaucratic as possible if agriculture as a life choice is to have promising future.
The European Economic and Social Committee’s contribution to the 2020 Commission’s work programme and beyond

Rudy de Leeuw

Digitalisation, climate change, demography, and globalisation are the four issues at the heart of the political priorities in the new term of the European Parliament and Commission. To tackle them, the Workers’ Group calls for an overarching strategy that empowers citizens and workers, ensures sustainability and protects fundamental rights.

In particular, a new sustainable industrial model is needed including a fair transition towards a circular and green economy and European frameworks for unemployment insurance and decent minimum income. Sustainability must include social, economic, and environmental dimensions and the burdens and responsibility distributed accordingly. Social dialogue, involvement of the social partners in policy-making and respect for collective bargaining and workers’ rights is the only way in which this can be achieved.
On the first day of the October Plenary Session, a debate on the current progress of Brexit and its impact on civil society took place. Chief negotiator Michel Barnier highlighted that the latest version of the agreement was the result of extraordinary and complex negotiations with the UK government. The fact that the British parliament finally approved the deal was a “key moment” in the Brexit process, Barnier rejoiced.

As it preserved the Good Friday Agreement, the new solution for Northern Ireland’s UK customs territory was an especially important breakthrough in the negotiations. Even if the proposed solution was a rather complex and creative one, Barnier described it as operational, democratically supported and good for the people. For a future trade agreement between the UK and the EU, Europeans aimed at a “zero tariffs, zero quota and zero dumping” guarantee.

Barnier closed by making clear that Brexit was not a destination, but rather a starting point for reconstructing and developing a new strategic and economic partnership. Exchanges of understanding, knowledge and culture would never stop between the UK and the EU, he highlighted.

In the debate that followed, Workers’ Group members particularly stressed that the priority was to have an agreement between the EU and the UK that protects workers’ rights, their jobs and their families and which ensures that the still fragile peace in Northern Ireland is maintained.
Debates

Oliver Röpke thanked Michel Barnier for his work, especially for guaranteeing transparency during the Brexit negotiations. He expected the views of the EESC on the future relationship between the EU and the UK to be taken into account by the relevant EU actors. The United Kingdom would never be a third country like any other: The priority of the Workers’ Group was that any future agreement between the EU and the UK would preserve workers’ rights, their jobs and their families.

Judy McKnight expressed her disappointment, stating that the latest withdrawal agreement was significantly worse with regard to workers’ rights than the previous draft under Theresa May. Many citizens were concerned that the objective of the far-right to abandon environmental and social standards after the Brexit would turn into reality, she said.

Finally, Jack O’Connor affirmed that the new draft did not take labour standards and ecological questions sufficiently into account. While acknowledging Barnier’s efforts for transparency in the negotiation process, he expressed particular concern that a new regulatory competition between the UK and the EU could occur and result in detrimental outcomes for workers.

A Cultural vision for Europe

The second day of the plenary began with a debate on “a cultural vision for Europe”.

André Wilkens opened the debate: The director of the European Culture Foundation pointed out the need for a renewed sense of European belonging and European sentiment. Especially younger people often experienced Europe as a problem in itself, he said, for example in the context of the economic crisis. Therefore, there was a need to “tell the future of Europe” beyond economic narratives.
Pier Luigi Sacco, special advisor to the Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, focused in his contribution on the economic added-value of culture. He mentioned culture as a powerful instrument to overcome the fear of innovation and foster behavioural change in companies: These economic effects were much larger than the turnover of the cultural industry as such. Additionally, culture could change the life course of those who felt neglected in European societies: For instance, cultural participation had positive effects on social cohesion and could remove resentments, for example against immigrants.

The third speaker on the panel was Elke Kaschl Mohni from the Goethe Institute. In her presentation, the director of Brussel’s local branch of the institute said that strengthening relations of trust and understanding between humans was crucial in a globalised world. Especially the UNESCO Convention on the Diversity of Cultural Expressions had contributed to a global paradigm shift from cultural diplomacy to cultural relations, she said. Airan Berg, a cultural manager and theatre director, followed up on this contribution by presenting European projects that promoted “participative and collaborative” culture.

During the discussion that followed the different presentations, for the Workers’ Group, it was particularly important to address precarious working conditions for culture professionals and the lacking visibility of women in the world of culture.

Tatjana Babrauskienė said that culture had to become more accessible. She criticised that political actors put an emphasis on high culture while at the same time support for artists and cultural work “on the ground” was lacking. Additionally, knowledge about culture should be made compulsory in education curricula to provide all children with access to high culture.

Adam Rogalewski focused on the importance of public investment in culture and the public responsibility of preventing precarious working conditions for culture professionals. Rogalewski also mentioned that those who want to use culture for their agenda of national identity could abuse it. He also identified a need for a more diverse cultural landscape, with culture produced by women, migrants and people with disabilities.

Maria Nikolopoulou likewise emphasised this point by demonstrating the lacking representation of women in the world of culture, especially in job profiles related to photography, orchestra and directing films. Women had to become more visible in these areas, she urged. Additionally, more should be done to facilitate access to culture for everyone and address precarious working conditions.
Highlighting the need to go beyond words, Workers’ Group President Oliver Röpke stressed that:

‘we must challenge the way populists frame problems, but we shall also tackle the context. Communication is fundamental, but cannot replace policy. In inequality or poverty, but for example also when posting of workers is used to avoid minimum wages and proper working conditions, what is needed is action to change this situation. This should be done through a real dialogue in which civil society is included and has equal footing, rather than holding a one-way talk for PR purposes’.

With these words, Oliver Röpke opened the morning panel “Together for Europe” of the Civil Society Media Seminar held in the Public University of Malaga this October 2019.

Focused around civil society and its role in communicating the European Union, the event gathered students, journalists, communication experts, and other institutional, political, academic, and civil society figures.

The members of the Workers’ Group attending the event discussed, among others, communication in the age of fake news and social media, as well as the role of inequality and poverty. Isabel Caño, President of the EESC’s Communication Commission, who led the organization of the event, highlighted among others the importance of holding such events in public universities, thus encouraging the participation of young people, an essential factor in the European construction process today and in the future.
Our mission in the EESC Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law Group (FRRL) is to bring to Brussels the voice of civil society that works on the frontline. Those people are the first to suffer from attacks against fundamental human rights; they do not have the opportunity to be listened to here or in their own countries’, said José Antonio Moreno Díaz. The President of the FRRL Group participated in an important conference organized by the EESC to discuss developments with regards to fundamental rights and the rule of law in Europe and seek concrete solutions to effectively protect those values. Participants to the event included European government representatives, representatives from the EU institutions, EESC members, etc.

José Antonio Moreno Díaz raised the alarm during the conference, warning that these values were more and more challenged and European civil society’s work constantly undermined: ‘The facts and data we collected raise the question: when did it go wrong in the EU? How can we have, in 2019, some governments that do not respect fundamental rights or the rule of law? We need to reflect on this, and find concrete measures’, he stressed.

Presenting the FRRL Group’s interim report based on visits undertaken in different EU countries, José Antonio Moreno Díaz said that the aim was not to single out and criticise any country but to highlight trends in fundamental rights and the rule of law in the entire EU as they developed in national specific contexts. This made it possible to put civil society concerns on the table as a basis for further dialogue and as a way to relay “early warnings” about some worrying developments.

Oliver Röpke, President of the Workers’ Group, stressed that there could be no exception for fundamental rights, no excuse and no crisis that allowed to violate them. Austerity after the crisis left people without proper healthcare, attacked collective bargaining, threatened human dignity. And this wasn’t Member States alone: The Troika and the memorandum had much to do with it. We must understand this for the future, to avoid repeating the same mistakes’, he affirmed. Oliver Röpke insisted that the European Pillar of Social Rights was indeed a step in the right direction, but declaring rights was simply not enough. It was imperative that these rights are implemented and that a strong political focus on social rights and workers’ rights is maintained. Indeed, civil and political rights could not be separated from social and labour rights. Freedom of expression or the right to strike were necessary to fight for better working and living conditions.

The Fundamental Rights and Rule Of Law Group provides a forum for European civil society organisations to meet and share their assessment on the state of fundamental rights, democracy and rule of law in the Member States. It was set up at the initiative of Workers’ Group Member José Antonio Moreno Díaz. The workers’ movement is constantly at the forefront of the fight for fundamental rights.
Visit of the Workers’ Group president Oliver Röpke in Cyprus

Following an invitation by Nicos Epistithiou on behalf of the Cypriot Workers’ Group representatives in the European Economic and Social Committee, within the framework of further improvement of the relations between the EESC and the Trade Union Movement, Group II President Oliver Röpke made a 6-day visit in Cyprus from 12 to 18 September 2009.

During his visit, colleague Röpke accompanied by the members of the Cyprus delegation to the Committee, Nicos Epistithiou and Andreas Pavlikkas, had meetings with the Minister of Labour, Welfare, and Social Insurance, Mrs Zeta Emilianidou, and the Secretaries-General of SEK (Cyprus Employees Confederation, member of the European Trade Union Confederation), Mr. Andreas Matsas, and of PEO (Pancyprian Federation of Labour), Mr Pampis Kiritsis, respectively.

At the meetings, Mr Röpke referred to the role that the EESC and in particular the Workers’ Group play at European level. Reference was made to the priorities of the Group for the promotion of social dialogue and collective bargaining, defending workers’ rights and improving the working and living conditions via the implementation of the Pillar of Social Rights, equality at work, the need for setting a minimum wage, promoting and implementing the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and others. He also referred to the EESC relations with the Commission and the European Parliament and stressed that they should be improved so that EESC Opinions are taken seriously by these two European bodies.

Members of the European Parliament at the Workers’ Group Meeting

Nicolas Schmit
LSAP - S&D - Luxembourg

‘We cannot allow the 21st century platform economy to function with 19th century working conditions,’ Nicolas Schmit declared during the Workers’ Group preparatory meeting. The Commissioner-designate for Jobs and Member of the European Parliament added that ‘we need a common framework for minimum wages that makes it a living wage, we need a common minimum unemployment insurance scheme; we need a true Social Union’, opening a lively debate with President Oliver Röpke and the Workers’ Group Members.
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