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**Cohesion must be at the heart of post-pandemic Europe, say European Commissioner Elisa Ferreira and EESC president Christa Schweng**

**The September plenary of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) hosted a debate on EU cohesion policy, where all participants agreed that the recovery must address the socio-economic inequalities that the COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated.**

Cohesion policy is key to developing a new post-COVID-19 vision for the European Union, centred on prosperity, inclusion and environmental sustainability, a vision in which organised civil society is fully included. This was the message from **Christa Schweng**, EESC president, and echoed by **Elisa Ferreira**, European Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, at the EESC September plenary session.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, cohesion policy has been instrumental in finding solutions during the emergency, and in the 2021-2027 programming period it should continue to be used to address the challenges and inequalities existing within and between Member States, regions, cities and people, with the situation worsening during the pandemic.

"Cohesion policy plays a key role in ensuring a balanced recovery that leaves no one behind. The principle of partnership with civil society organisations is part of the policy's DNA, and we would like to see this principle extended to NextGenerationEU and implementation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plans. Cohesion policy should also become less bureaucratic, more digitalised and more effective", said **Ms Schweng**.

**Ms Ferreira** noted that the COVID-19 crisis had made existing inequalities worse and opened up new ones, affecting in particular workers on the front line, vulnerable people such as the elderly and people with disabilities, those with less access to services, and those who had suffered more from the impacts of lockdown, such as women and young people: "Our Union is as strong as its weakest link. To fight back and reduce inequalities is a *sine qua non* for a strong and thriving Union. Social fairness and inclusivity need to be at the centre of our recovery. We cannot solve social issues without solving spatial and regional inequalities. We must take account of the places where people live".

**EU cohesion policy – e-Cohesion systems and combatting inequalities**

The plenary assembly adopted two key documents on cohesion policy. In the first one, an information report drawn up by **Elena-Alexandra Calistru** ([ECO/547 – Evaluation of the implementation of e-Cohesion in Programmes financed by ERDF and Cohesion Fund 2014-2020](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/information-reports/evaluation-implementation-e-cohesion-programmes-financed-erdf-and-cohesion-fund-2014-2020)), the EESC carries out an evaluation of the implementation and performance of e‑Cohesion systems for the operational programmes funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Cohesion Fund during the programming period 2014-2020, stressing that e‑Cohesion systems are useful tools and have established a framework for more efficient implementation of cohesion policy.

Commenting on the opinion, **Ms Calistru** said: "Digital tools are an important mechanism to facilitate the implementation of EU-funded policies at all levels of Member States. As EU financial instruments become more sophisticated, such tools are needed in order to ensure transparency of funding, open data with regards to the funded projects, and constant communication that facilitates access for civil society to EU policies".

In the second document, an opinion prepared by **Ioannis Vardakastanis** and **Judith Vorbach** ([ECO/550 – The role of cohesion policy in combatting inequalities - complementarities/overlaps with the RRF](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/role-cohesion-policy-combatting-inequalities-new-programming-period-after-covid-19-crisis-complementarities-and-possible)), the Committee focuses on the ways in which cohesion policy and NextGenerationEU (NGEU), primarily through the flagship Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), aim to resolve deficiencies in the social, economic and environmental spheres and to implement a prosperity-focused economic and social approach where people's well-being is prioritised and no-one is left behind.

**Mr Vardakastanis** said: "While it is important to avoid overlaps and confusion in the implementation of programmes, it is also crucial to ensure that they do not contradict or undermine one another. The principles of cohesion policy, with its strict rules on stakeholder consultation, should be taken over by the RRF procedures in order to direct investments efficiently to measures for social inclusion".

**Ms Vorbach** added: "NGEU is a decisive step towards EU integration. Every effort has to be made for its success. For this reason, we urge that there be a focus on fair distribution of NGEU resources in order to tackle the gaps in society, which have deepened during the pandemic. To safeguard a balanced policy approach and to leave nobody behind, better involvement of social partners and civil society is necessary."

**Taking into account civil society's views in future EU cohesion policy**

During the debate, **Gonçalo Lobo Xavier**, on behalf of the EESC Employers' Group, referred to the important resources of the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs), emphasising that now was the time to make sure that civil society got the chance to really take part in their implementation.

**Oliver Röpke**, president of the EESC Workers' Group, highlighted that it was vital to align the cohesion funds with the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights in order to fight inequalities and foster quality employment in all regions in a sustainable manner that leads to social inclusion and fair mobility.

Finally, **Séamus Boland**, president of the EESC Diversity Europe Group, pointed out that future cohesion policy had to include four elements: defining the societies that we wanted, a holistic and complementary policy approach, determining our own red lines between European values and EU funding, and the opportunity to forge a European identity around cohesion and solidarity among Member States.

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[VIDEO: The EESC from the inside](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/avdb/video/eesc-inside)

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*The European Economic and Social Committee represents the various economic and social components of organised civil society. It is an institutional consultative body established by the 1957 Treaty of Rome. Its consultative role enables its members, and hence the organisations they represent, to participate in the EU decision-making process.*

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