Organised civil society’s vision for the future of Europe

Conclusions from the EESC events in the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe
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The role and activities of the EESC within the Conference on the Future of Europe

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has been deeply committed to the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) since the moment it was first mentioned by Ursula von der Leyen in a speech to the European Parliament at the beginning of her mandate.

In 2020, while the three main EU institutions were discussing the terms of the Conference, the Committee created an ad-hoc group and began planning its contribution to the Conference.

Already during that early phase, it was clear that one key element of success for this exercise would be its ability to involve as many citizens and intermediary bodies as possible. Broad, cross-cutting participation would directly translate into a stronger political push towards implementing the recommendations of the Conference and would therefore increase the chance of real follow-up to the exercise.

Therefore, as a representative of European organised civil society, the EESC identified that one of its most important contributions to the process would be to increase the reach of the Conference. To do so, the Committee relied on its members’ network, which includes not only the social partners – employers’ associations and workers – but also wider civil society, from environmental associations to farmers, NGOs working on the rights of people with disabilities to consumer associations, and many more. Based in their Member State, EESC members were in an ideal position to work as facilitators for these debates, supported by their organisations, which are deeply rooted in national civil society, and by their partners.

The EESC members responded enthusiastically to the challenge and have been active since the summer of 2021 in raising awareness and organising events all over Europe.
All in all, the EESC supported the roll-out of **75 events**, 33 at national level and 42 at central level. 60% of these events produced reports on the Conference platform and these **45 events** alone gathered more than **7600 participants**.

Among other activities, the Committee worked hard within the bodies of the Conference, namely the executive board, where it was an observer, and the plenary and the working groups, where it put forward the contribution of organised civil society through detailed position papers and specific proposals.

The Committee also promoted the use of the online platform, where it encoded **60 new ideas**, and launched a vast communication campaign on social media, promoting national events in English and in the local language and reaching out before and after every plenary and CoFoE-related meeting.
EESC events on the Conference on the Future of Europe - summary

This document reports on the events whose results have been shared on the Conference platform, either organised directly by the EESC (at secretariat, section or Group level) or at national level by EESC members. Most of the events presented in this report were hybrid or took place in person. In addition, EESC members arranged online events in several EU Member States around the topics of the Conference.

The reported events amounted to 45 in the period from June 2021 to February 2022, with a total reach of over 7600 participants. Out of the total of 45, 17 events were organised at national level and included 1470 participants, while the EESC organised 28 events, with 6267 participants.

The most prevalent topic was “a stronger economy, social justice and jobs”, with 13 events and 1219 participants, while the most popular one was “climate change and the environment”, reaching 1540 people across 11 events. Other events were organised in the area of “education, culture, youth and sport” (5 events with 257 participants), “values and rights, rule of law and security” (3 events with 375 participants), “health”, “digital transformation” and “migration” (1 event each, with 320, 400 and 200 participants respectively). Under “other ideas”, 10 events were organised, with 3406 participants.

With regard to the national events in particular, these took place in 12 EU countries, with the relative majority (3) organised in Poland, for 481 participants. The strongest presence was registered by Croatia, which had 2 events comprising 547 participants. Two events were registered in Germany and 2 in the Czech Republic, while 1 event was organised in each of the other countries (Belgium, Denmark, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, The Netherlands, Slovakia and Spain), with the number of participants ranging from 15 to 80 per event.
Recommendations and main ideas

A stronger economy, social justice and jobs

Out of the 13 events, 4 were organised at national level, with 154 participants, and 9 at EESC level, with 1065 participants.

Main ideas:

- **The future of the EU.** A stronger EU is an essential element of security in areas where it is most needed, such as healthcare. Strengthening the social economy is key in order to make it more resilient for future challenges. The Banking Union and the Capital Markets Union should be completed. The completion of the single market is key, coupled with a strong industrial base and resilient supply chains, in the framework of a forward-looking climate policy.

- **Labour relations, participatory democracy and business models.** In the labour relations of the future, social dialogue, collective bargaining and participatory democracy in the workplace should play an important role. Circular economic growth can only be achieved by engaging all levels of an organisation in activating new business models and supporting and upskilling people.

- **Crises, resilience and lessons learnt.** The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and InvestEU should be instruments for long-term development, beyond emergency response. Greater involvement of CSOs is needed. Financial stability should be preserved through a set of minimum prudential standards in the EU Banking Reform package. Increasing the EU’s strategic independence on raw materials is a strategic priority.

- **Development and well-being indicators** should go beyond gross domestic product (GDP).
Climate change and the environment

Out of the 11 events, 5 were organised at national level, with 641 participants at 4 of them, and 6 at EESC level, with 899 participants.

Main ideas:

• **Climate, its effects and the economy.** There is a false dichotomy between the economy and environmental protection. The negative effects of climate change should be shared fairly. Investment in climate finance for mitigation and adaption is urgently required.

• **The transition.** The EU has to invest in renewable, affordable and home-grown energy supplies and abandon all subsidies for fossil fuels. A rapid diversification of energy sources and a swift increase in the share of renewables are urgently needed, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russia. The transition must also address poverty reduction and the issue of energy poverty. Autonomy in energy production and a strong focus on innovation would help address the volatility of energy prices.

• **The transition in practice.** The European Commission’s Renovation Wave, as well as the European Green Deal and the ‘Fit for 55’ package, should be made more operational with commitments, action and measurable results. Strategic autonomy, digitalisation, regional differences and social impact are to be considered. Creating an enabling environment for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) would help them embed sustainability in their business models. The transition should leave nobody behind, including vulnerable citizens and least developed countries.

• **The role of civil society organisations (CSOs).** Trade unions should play a key role in the transition as well as in advocating for more ambitious policies. Responsible marketing and advertising as well as education and the involvement of CSOs are key in order to move from individual responses to systemic societal change.
Values and rights, the rule of law, security

Out of the 3 events on this topic, 1 was organised at national level, with 15 participants, and 2 at EESC level, with 360 participants.

Main ideas:

- **Inclusive policies.** The EU should push national political systems to improve inclusive policies for people with disabilities.

- **Rule of law.** The scope of the EU Rule of Law Mechanism should be extended to cover fundamental rights and the civic space. CSOs should be more involved in its preparation and follow-up phases. The EU Rule of Law Reports should include country recommendations that are directly linked to follow-up actions, including sanctions.

- **The statute and role of CSOs.** The role of CSOs as advocacy and intermediary agents in building a sustainable, resilient, equitable and democratic society should be fully recognised. They should be more involved in National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs). An overall EU strategy to promote civic participation and civil dialogue and a statute of European associations and NGOs should be adopted.
Health

1 national event was organised on this topic, with 320 participants.

Main ideas:

- **Mental health** in the aftermath of the pandemic should be an element of concern.
- The target of reaching a comparable level of **healthcare** across the EU is proposed.

Education, youth, culture and sport

Out of the 5 events on this topic, 2 were organised at national level, with 65 participants, and 3 at EESC level, with 192 participants.

Main ideas:

- **Education**. Education needs modern approaches that combine the use of the latest technologies, the study of languages, lifelong learning and a good level of connectivity. Wider recognition of non-formal education is proposed.
- **Youth involvement**. A youth dimension should be included in the NRRPs, with the proposal to prioritise at least 7% of funds for youth policies, including mental health prevention measures. The Youth Progress Index should be further used to gain more information about young people.
- **Voting age**. The voting age could be lowered.
Digital transformation

1 event on digital transformation was organised by the EESC sections, with 400 participants.

Main ideas:

• Artificial intelligence (AI). AI should be further explored in the world of work but with a careful approach when it comes to biometric identification, transparency and the control of personal data. There is a need for clear rules for AI deployment that do not diminish the legal protection of workers.

Migration

1 event on migration was organised with the EESC sections, with 200 participants.

Main ideas:

• Policies for migrants. The EU should be encouraged to offer more humanitarian visas and invest in peer-to-peer mentoring programmes for community leaders, as well as the promotion of knowledge sharing on legal pathways between Member States. There should be more support for migrants to become entrepreneurs or operators in the social economy.
Other ideas

This category includes 10 events, with 3406 participants, which could not be classified in a single area due to their multi-disciplinary discussions. Of these, 4 events were organised by EESC members at national level, with 275 participants, and 6 events were organised at EESC level, with 3131 participants. Among them, the EESC kicked off its activities relating to the CoFoE in June 2021 with the grand conference on “Bringing the European project back to citizens”. It also organised a “Connecting EU seminar” in Lisbon in November 2021 as well as “Shaping Europe together”, a high-level event in Brussels in February 2022.

Main ideas:

- **The future of the EU.** Lasting peace can only be achieved and maintained if there is a feeling of social justice and cohesion among European citizens and a basic sense of trust that the EU is able and willing to solve the global threats and challenges of the future. Europe should continue to emphasise the “Europe of values” as the most significant pillar of the European project. The EU needs to go further in addressing attacks on the rule of law if people are not to lose trust in the EU.

- **The future of societies.** There is a need to imagine and to build equal, resilient and sustainable communities and societies; this requires bottom-up initiatives and involves embracing new definitions of well-being and development beyond GDP.

- **The governance of the EU.** There is a need to avoid unnecessary bureaucracy. The EU needs to devise more flexible tools in order to act more effectively in the global arena: qualified majority decisions should be taken in the area of foreign and security policy. The role of the European Parliament should be increased and the Spitzenkandidat procedure revised.
• **The economy, digitalisation and education.** Europe should be better at attracting talent and investors. It is proposed to develop a comprehensive digital European infrastructure, coupled with improved digital literacy for every age group.

• **Social policies.** The EU should rebuild the European social model, a social model that should be a benchmark and an example to the world. It should coordinate action on minimum incomes and tax competition and implement the European Pillar of Social Rights. The Social Progress Protocol should deliver stronger social rights for workers, in the framework of a forward-looking Stability and Growth Pact, a post-pandemic environment and the green and digital transitions.

• **Sustainability and food supply chains.** Sustainability policies should work across the economy. Sustainability of food supply chains can only be achieved by a fairer distribution in the chain, with longer-term links between farming and the retail sector, and by reducing food losses and waste. Food supply chains should be shortened to reduce emissions from nautical and air miles.

• **Sustainable consumption.** Consumers should be at the centre of new energy policies and should be supported in their transition to more sustainable ways of living. Two key methodologies include evaluating the sustainability of a product and calculating its carbon footprint.

• **Health.** The EU should have more powers on public health and should make health a shared EU competence by changing the Treaty, more specifically Article 168 (public health), Article 173 (industry), Article 4 (shared competences) and Article 6 (national competences) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU.

• **CSOs and fundamental rights.** There is a need for connections with civil society organisations, which can strengthen a culture of fundamental rights.
Conclusions

The ideas and recommendations shared in this report, as well as on the online Conference platform, reflect the discussions held during the events that the EESC as a whole or some of its members, sections or Groups, individually, organised in the framework of the CoFoE. While these fed into the reports from the platform, together with other ideas shared by citizens and other organisations, the EESC as a whole put forward its positions, the fruit of consensus and negotiations among its three Groups, within the proceedings of the Conference, namely its plenary and working groups.

Overall, the EESC contribution fed into the since-adopted 325 final proposals to achieve 49 objectives identified across 9 themes, based on 178 recommendations from the European citizens’ panels, input from the national panels and events, and 43 734 contributions on 16 274 ideas recorded on the multilingual digital platform.

Many of the ideas mentioned in this report can be found among the final proposals, from the completion of the single market to the need for investments focused on the green and digital transitions, the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights to the need to include a “youth dimension” and “check” on public policies, the call to enhance the European Health Union, and the challenge of tackling climate change, investing in sustainable energy policy and going beyond GDP, to name but a few.
In particular, the role of CSOs, and of the EESC as their institutional representative at EU level, were fully recognised in the final recommendations, namely under proposal 39 on the “EU decision making process”.

This is consistent with the recognition of the importance of civil society organisations across all EESC events and consultations, as agents of systemic change – something also underlined in the EESC Resolution on a new narrative for Europe.

The challenge will now be to provide transparent, structured and systemic follow-up to the proposals, integrating citizens’ engagement in a more permanent way and by default in the development of EU policies as well as within the global architecture of European democracy.