



*European Economic and Social Committee*

## **Liaison Group - Civil Society Organisations**

Record of proceedings of the meeting  
19 November 2019, 10.30-12.30, JDE 61

**Participants:** Conny Reuter (Solidar/Co-chair of the LG), Brikena Xhomaqi (Lifelong Learning Platform), María Orejas-Chantelot (European Foundations Center), Oonagh Aitken (Volonteuropa), Dirk Bochar (FEANI), Elisa Briga (EFIL), Edoardo Concari (UIPI), Gabriella Civico (CEV), Ilaria D'Auria (IUT), Horst Dreimann (EVBB), Elisa Gambardella (Solidar), Léa Gaudron (RED), Christopher Glück (UEF), Davyth Hicks (ELEN), Assya Kavrakova (ECAS), Kornelia KISS (CAE), Fanchon Lefevre (ESU), Pascual Martinez (COFACE), Lisa Mashini (Cooperatives Europe), Ingeborg Niestroy (SDG Watch Europe), Francesco Pala (ALDA), Ian Pritchard (ACE), Kristine Roke (UEF), Annabel Seeböhm (CPME), Alexandrine Najmowicz (ECF), Katherine Heid (President's Cabinet), Pierluigi Brombo, Karen Serafini, Sandra Schweder, Margaux Cognard (trainee).

**Guest speaker:** Katarina Barley (Vice-President of the European Parliament in charge of relations with citizens)

**Excused:** Emma Achilli (Front Line Defenders), Dirk Jarré (EURAG), Maciej Kucharczyk (AGE), Diego Naranjo (EDRi), Marie Ranty (Social Platform), Réka Tunyogi (Eurochild).

### **Welcome by Conny Reuter**

The Liaison Group co-chair, Conny Reuter, opened the meeting and, following a round of introductions, welcomed Katarina Barley, guest speaker for the session. Mr Reuter observed that the new faces present at this meeting were proof that the efforts to bring greater diversity and variety to the Liaison Group had not been in vain. He noted that for 15 years the Liaison Group, which was made up of European networks, had been responsible for civil dialogue. He also highlighted the attachment of the Liaison Group to Article 11 TEU and the need to continue and further extend the relationship with the European Parliament, as well as the work on civil dialogue. He hoped that more synergies would be developed in the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe and finished by announcing that the Civil Society Days 2020 would take place on 22-23 April 2020.

### **Improving EU relations with citizens and involvement of civil society organisations**

**Katarina Barley** began by announcing that her statement would be short in order to have enough time for discussion. She then commented on the importance of passing from a mere direct communication with European citizens to a stronger focus on cooperation with civil society. In her view, civil society organisations had, thanks to their networks, the possibility of reaching more people as well as specific groups. She then referred to the Conference of the Future of Europe, noting that it was not yet clear who

would be in charge; however, a working group from AFCO had already begun work on it. She expected the first results of the working group in December. Her aim for this conference was for it not to become a PR event.

To support the point made by Ms Barley, Mr Reuter said that "civil dialogue is not communication; rather, it is there to accompany policy-making". Therefore, it was necessary to ensure that civil society organisations were not excluded from this process.

Assya Kavrakova (ECAS), Christopher Glück (UEF), Brikena Xhomaqi (LLLP), Elisa Gambardella (Solidar) and Ingeborg Niestroy (SDG Watch Europe) asked questions about the modus operandi of the European Parliament and the European Commission for this conference, how civil society would be involved, how rural areas could be reached, how cooperation between European and national networks would operate, and finally how to take into account the lessons learned from previous exercises.

Ms Barley answered by highlighting the need to focus more on the content than on the procedure. In her opinion, citizens would be more interested and would have more to contribute to policies than to transnational lists or Spitzenkandidaten. She added that the process was at a very early stage and that more details would soon be known. Furthermore, she raised the question of the resources needed to reach citizens, especially in rural areas, and mentioned the use of digitalisation. She also insisted on the role of civil society and its involvement in the process, as it had a representativeness and level of preparation that individual citizens did not. She ended her intervention by demanding the existence of any role models.

To follow up on this point, Mr Reuter highlighted three different role models that engaged with civil society: the Citizens' Agora organised by the European Parliament, the Civil Society Days organised by the EESC, and the consultation of social partners ahead of the EU Summits, which should be extended to civil society organisations.

After the EP Vice President left, Mr Reuter observed that the group should think about producing a short paper to see what could be capitalised on in the context of this process, in order to start a real dialogue.

Annabel Seeböhm (CPME) asked for details on the Future of Europe process. Mr Reuter provided some explanations and underlined that for the Liaison Group it was important to identify the questions with which we could engage, take initiatives, and put forward concrete proposals that should be approved together with Luca Jahier.

Katherine Heid (member of the EESC President's Cabinet) noted the necessity of a creative approach to the process of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Following remarks by Gabriella Civico (CEV), Mr Reuter emphasised the importance of being involved at each stage of the process.

Assya Kavrakova (ECAS) suggested a paper that focused on the success of crowdsourcing exercises managed by civil society organisations in order to show how important CSOs were as intermediaries and point out that they could have a positive impact on these exercises. This proposal was backed by Mr Reuter, who noted that it should also be supported by the EESC President's cabinet so as to add more institutional weight.

### **Internal Affairs**

Mr Reuter gave the floor to the new member organisations of the Liaison Group. EEVB, ALDA, SDG Watch Europe, FEANI, CPME, ACE, UIPI and ELEN took it in turns to present their goals and what they

were advocating for. SDG Europe and CPME asked for a slight modification to the PPT graphic of the CSO families.

### **Civil Society Days 2020 on 22-23 April 2020**

Conny Reuter started by thanking the President of the EESC for enabling the Civil Society Days 2019's results to be presented at the EESC plenary session. Together, Mr Reuter and Pierluigi Brombo explained the proposed title for the 2020 edition: Sustainable Future of Europe. The idea behind this title was a wish to establish an explicit link with the Conference of the Future of Europe in order to make it clear that we were part of the process and represented added value. An additional aim was to establish continuity with the 2019 edition on Sustainable Democracy and to encompass a broad vision in our reflection. Mr Reuter then invited the members of the Liaison Group to be co-organisers of workshops on subjects that were yet to be defined. The subject proposal was welcomed by the members and would be presented to the EESC President for approval.

Solidar, EFC, LLLP, RED and Cooperatives Europe expressed their will to participate in the organisation of workshops.

Ingeborg Niestroy (SDG Watch Europe) remarked that sustainability did not only represent longevity but was also an interlinkage of three dimensions (social, economic and environmental) that needed to be examined together.

Mr Reuter replied that the Civil Society Days could provide a good opportunity for creating interlinkages and finding synergies, especially in the discussion session at the end of the event.

For the organisation of the workshops, Conny Reuter suggested a participatory form of engagement similar to previous editions. He announced that an electronic call for volunteers will be sent out by the LG secretariat and that the first preparation meeting would be scheduled for the beginning of December (the date has since been confirmed as 3 December at 3.00 p.m.).

### **New commissioners, their portfolios and future interaction with the LG**

A list of the commissioners' names and portfolio had been distributed as well as a powerpoint detailing their mandate. Mr Brombo summarised the meeting that took place between Ursula Von der Leyen and Luca Jahier about cooperation between the Commission and the EESC. The President of the EESC expressed his concern that there was no commissioner for civil dialogue, to which Ursula Von der Leyen answered that the portfolios had not yet been finalised and that changes would still be possible before the final adoption of the full Commission by the European Parliament.

### **Special announcement**

Before concluding the meeting, Mr Reuter announced his departure from Solidar, and therefore from the co-presidency of the Liaison Group, at the end of the year, as he just had been appointed Coordinator of the Progressive Alliance, a worldwide network of social-democratic and socialist parties. He underlined how much he had enjoyed his time as co-chair and warned against weakening a body that is the only institutional link between a European institution and European CSOs. The CSOs needed to overcome egotism and individual vanity and continue to join forces to act and create an impact. He thanked his EESC colleagues for their strong support over the years.

The EESC secretariat of the Liaison Group thanked him for his work by offering him a selection of EESC gifts.