



Civil Society Days 2021 – Closing Session

The closing session of the Civil Society Days 2021 was moderated by **Assya Kavrakova**, director of the European Citizen Action Service (ECAS). Ms Kavrakova began by welcoming the participants and observing that more than 1400 people had taken part in the ten sessions over the course of the week. She pointed out that the eight thematic workshops focused on very specific topics which showcased the huge diversity, breadth and depth of civil society expertise. Civil society networks and organisations have an amazing resource at their disposal in their members and expertise, which – in Ms Kavrakova's view – is still not fully utilised in the decision-making process.

Ms Kavrakova then addressed a specific question to each of the **rapporteurs of the eight workshops**. (The full reports of the workshops can be consulted on the [event's webpage](#).)

- To **Flavio Grazian**, participatory democracy manager at ECAS and rapporteur of **Workshop 1**: "Do your recommendations for ensuring a sustainable multilevel democracy apply equally to the local, national and EU levels?" Mr Grazian replied that different approaches would work better for different levels. For example, intermediaries between citizens and governments are particularly effective at national and international levels in bridging the gap between policy-making and citizens' needs; conversely, a participatory process could work better at local level, while boosting civic and digital education is more appropriate for higher levels. However, he pointed out the need to adopt a more holistic approach and to combine these methods and recommendations in order to get the general public involved. He felt that it was important to further develop and include these methods of deliberative and participatory democracy in the democratic system, as well as to look at the long-term perspective, in order to ensure sustainability.

- To **Lisa Mashini**, Advocacy Officer at Cooperatives Europe and rapporteur of **Workshop 2**: "What should be achieved, and by whom exactly, in order to ensure that young entrepreneurs are included in the recovery process?" Ms Mashini answered that social economy actors

demonstrate their strength through their solidarity; this business model is therefore a natural network to turn to when people are looking for a sustainable recovery that helps tackle global challenges, such as inequality and climate change. Due to its key role, social economy should have a horizontal presence in the EU's socio-economic policy, both within and outside the EU.

- To **Theodor Grassos**, secretary-general of the European Association of Institutes for Vocational Training and rapporteur of *Workshop 3*: "How exactly can both culture and education contribute to the recovery process?" Mr Grassos replied that culture can be a driver of innovation, and cultural values should therefore be included in all educational settings, both formal and non-formal. Starting from an early age, there is a need to create an inclusive environment that enables people to continue with lifelong and intergenerational learning, from emotional intelligence to STEM.

- To **Jan Mayrhofer**, senior policy officer at the European Youth Forum and rapporteur of *Workshop 4*: "Is there a silver bullet that can make the future of work an essential ingredient for the wellbeing economy?" Mr Mayrhofer answered that instead of a silver bullet, there is a need to put in place the right conditions for recovery. The three key factors for doing so are: the need to define the problem accurately; the need to nurture alternatives to the mainstream economic model; and the need to find solutions in cooperation with the affected communities all across Europe.

- To **Oonagh Aitken**, president of Volonteuropa and rapporteur of *Workshop 5*: "What modus operandi for youth engagement can ensure both systemic change and democratic recovery for Europe?" Ms Aitken replied that the recipe for success was to make sure that all young people have access to education, information and technology, as well as involving them in high-level decision-making processes, especially where there are funding opportunities for organisations. The key concepts are: inclusion, active citizenship, engagement and young people's voices being really listened to at EU level.

- To **Mikael Leyi**, secretary-general of the Solidar Foundation and rapporteur of *Workshop 6*: "How could climate action and the European Green Deal contribute to eradicating poverty, injustice and gender inequality?" Mr Leyi responded that it is crucial to adopt structural reforms based on solidarity rather than austerity. The European Green Deal must have a strong social component and be linked to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights: ensuring effective civil dialogue at all levels is therefore the only way to make sure that the Deal is successful and accepted by everyone.

- To **Eugen Panescu**, executive board member of the Architects' Council of Europe and rapporteur of *Workshop 7*: "Which civil society groups have you identified as the key ingredients of a successful renovation wave?" According to Mr Panescu, renovation in Europe cannot be achieved without the mobilisation of key civil society groups, notably representatives of owners and architects. Affordability and quality are two principles that are particularly important for any project. A holistic approach to renovation is needed to improve the wellbeing and comfort of occupants as well as to protect the heritage of buildings.

- To **Gabriella Civico**, director of the Centre for European Volunteering and rapporteur of *Workshop 8*: "How do you see the role and the economic value of volunteers in the road to recovery and the future of Europe?" Ms Civico replied there was a need to look beyond the immediate impact of the actions of volunteers, since their extended impact – e.g. social

cohesion in the community, crime reduction, social connections – is also important. For Europe, volunteers are engaged citizens who act in solidarity and care about each other.

The moderator then opened the **panel discussion** and gave the floor to **Miguel Cabrita**, secretary of state for labour and vocational training of the Portuguese Presidency of the Council. Stressing the relevance of the EESC and the strategic importance of social dialogue and participation at all levels, Mr Cabrita pointed out that many of the Civil Society Days workshops touched on key topics for the ongoing debate about the future of work, such as education and skills, multilevel democracy, participation and activism. Policies and instruments to steer change in the labour market must combine a sense of urgency with a strategic vision for the future, to help recovery in the short and medium term. The European Commission recently presented the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, which includes concrete steps and instruments but also ambitious targets in areas such as lifelong learning, employment, and combating poverty and exclusion. The Portuguese presidency is fully committed to taking these issues forward and building on the participation process, which is why it is organising the European Social Summit next May in the city of Oporto (Portugal). The presidency's hope is to mobilise different voices and perspectives from civil society to strengthen and support an ambitious social agenda.

The floor was then given to the first vice-president of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), **Vasco Cordeiro**, who spoke about the workshop on multilevel sustainable democracy in Europe, in which many of the speakers and participants stressed the importance of the local and regional dimension both for the design and the implementation of the recovery, as well as for the long-awaited Conference on the Future of Europe. He noted that at all four political levels – EU, national, local and regional – public confidence in local and regional authorities is a key factor for the democratic process. One of the CoR's five-year priorities is to bring Europe closer to people by rethinking how democracy works today and how it must be modernised in the future, in order for the EU to respond more efficiently to people's needs. According to Mr Cordeiro, there are three main challenges for the sustainability of multilevel governance in Europe: first, local and regional authorities should be counted as equal partners at European level; second, people expect to see results after the debates; third, delivery and accountability are also very important issues.

Subsequently **Sandro Gozi**, MEP and president of the Union of European Federalists, stated that recovery must be sustainable, digital and much more democratic. There is a need to find a new balance between dealing with the pandemic and protecting citizens' rights. This issue should be included in the discussion about a sustainable recovery, which must be green, digital and, above all, democratic and citizen-focused. The Conference on the Future of Europe is a unique opportunity to refund Europe in a new way with a much more open and participatory approach, with civil society and citizen participation at its core. Mr Gozi was convinced of the need to ensure that the outcome of the Conference was effectively followed up.

Daniel Mes, member of the cabinet of Frans Timmermans (executive vice-president for the European Green Deal, European Commission), noted that the European Green Deal, the EU's plan to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent in the world by 2050, is now a year old. The Deal would not have happened without civil society, young people, social communities and businesses. Clean energy, affordable mobility, smart farming and the circular economy are the key elements for the transition. Some very concrete recommendations came out of the eight

Civil Society Week workshops, which now should be put into practice. According to Mr Mes, there are three ways that we can work together to get the European Green Deal done: a climate pact for everyone, digital tools, and building bridges between different groups in our society.

The vice-president of the European Youth Forum, **Anja Fortuna**, pointed out that young people are the actors of change, so young voices need to be heard all across different policies and should enter into dialogue with different institutions and decision-makers. Regarding the event's workshops, two aspects caught her attention: regardless of the topic, young people are always very important stakeholders when talking about the future; moreover, sustainable development must be looked at in a holistic way. Sometimes young people are seen as being part of the problem, but they are in fact the solution and need to be part of the discussion.

The president of the Social Platform, **Piotr Sadowski**, remarked that all the topics discussed in the workshops need to be fully recognised by EU institutions and national governments alike. Europe is facing an unprecedented health, economic, employment and social crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic: now is the time to act and deliver a recovery that really addresses health, environmental, social and economic priorities. Commenting on the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, Mr Sadowski argued that it has not achieved its potential to become a comprehensive and ambitious implementation plan that would really point the way to Europe's recovery. This is mainly due to insufficient coverage of all the 20 principles of the Pillar and the absence of a post-2020 strategy. The Portuguese EU Council presidency's Social Summit in Oporto in May will be a crucial opportunity for the EU to make sure it can deliver the real social Europe that people have been asking for. The recommendations that have come out of the 2021 Civil Society Days, based on meaningful dialogue among organisations, must reach decision-makers in Brussels and in all EU capitals – the message must be spread even beyond the 27 EU Member States.

The last panellist, the Director of Social Economy Europe, **Victor Meseguer**, was unable to take the floor due to a technical issue.

The moderator related a question from the chat addressed to the first vice-president of the CoR, **Vasco Cordeiro**: "Who in your opinion should be in charge of kick-starting the changes that need to take place after this talk?" Mr Cordeiro replied that the first answer is "we, the people", directly and indirectly through political representatives and civil society actors. However, the EU needs to ensure accountability, as in the case of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Ms Kavrakova then asked a question to all the speakers: "**If you had to identify one key element without which we cannot ensure a sustainable recovery and a citizen-centric democratic Europe, what would it be?**" **Mr Gozi** said that the main issue was the follow-up of the Conference on the Future of Europe, as it is the only way to make a difference in how Europe works. **Mr Mes** highlighted the need to create a compelling, persuasive and inclusive agenda for the sustainable recovery of Europe. **Ms Fortuna** replied that for her the key elements were working on things together, not leaving anyone behind and not imagining things without knowing the reality. **Mr Sadowski** answered that in the rebuilding process it is fundamental to think about how every decision, policy, or instrument for recovery impacts on the life of every person in Europe.

The moderator invited the audience to share its impressions on the week via a selection of polls that focused on the **main take-aways from the event**, which were **dialogue, participation**

and **opportunities**, as well as on the **biggest hope for the upcoming year**, which turned out to be **health**.

Finally, the floor was given to the president of the EESC, **Christa Schweng**, for the concluding remarks of the week. Ms Schweng declared Civil Society Days 2021 a successful and participatory event, highlighting the impressive level of mobilisation on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. The fact that the Civil Society Days event was virtual this year allowed it to reach out to many more people than usual: in the opening session alone there were more than 500 participants. The EESC achieved its objective, namely to bring together citizens, civil society organisations and EESC members with high-level representatives of EU institutions. Regarding sustainable recovery and future resilience, what really matters for people now is to ensure a swift recovery while safeguarding European values, supporting businesses, rebuilding the economy and recovering lost jobs. The EU Member States expressed an unprecedented level of unity and solidarity, as well as an ambitious effort to share resources and work together for a common goal, when they adopted the Next Generation EU agreement.

Civil society organisations have only been involved to a limited extent in the preparation of the national recovery plans, and the EU must ensure that this trend will be reversed when the plans are implemented. The EU's economies and societies need to become more resilient for the future and better adapted to the green and digital transition, with no one left behind. Regarding the recovery and a sustainable future, there were more key take-away messages from the workshops: the social economy is one of the EU's assets, which brings innovative solutions to today's challenges; education, training and culture are the keys to helping our society recover from the current crisis, prepare for the future and create a more inclusive and cohesive society. The EU will pursue the objective of achieving a European education area by 2025 and translating the new skills agenda into concrete measures in the coming years.

Another conclusion that could be drawn from the Civil Society Days event was that the EU can – and needs to – count on young people to contribute to policies and to the roadmap for the future, since a sustainable and socially just Europe cannot afford to lose young people along the way. The message is similar when it comes to recognising the value of volunteering, which is an expression of European values and contributes to creating a society based on solidarity, inclusion and democratic principles. Finally, participants in the event discussed ways of avoiding public disengagement from and loss of trust in the governing institutions: the role of intermediary organisations between citizens and governments, such as civil society organisations, parties, trade unions, etc., needs to be strengthened. Ms Schweng then went on to highlight the role of the Committee in all discussions related to the Conference on the Future of Europe, as the EESC will make a substantial contribution to this debate by involving workers, employers and organised civil society.

The Liaison Group co-chair **Brikena Xhomaqi** then pointed out that this year's Civil Society Days were held in very difficult circumstances, both personally and professionally. She therefore expressed her thanks to the secretariat and civil society members of the Liaison Group, the members of the EESC, the speakers and experts, and the technicians, interpreters and communications team.

In Ms Xhomaqi's view, the message of the 2021 Civil Society Days was that the future of Europe should be about a recovery that is greener, more social and more democratic, and which leaves no one behind. A vibrant civil society needs to be at the heart of plans for the Future of

Europe, which should enable it to play a key role at all levels – especially as a watchdog to guarantee the implementation of social and economic policies. These plans must also address rising inequalities that have deprived people of their right to participate actively in society. Ms Xhomaqi concluded by saying that willingness and hard work were needed to deliver a social Europe and make intergenerational solidarity the currency for a sustainable recovery for the future of Europe.