

Speech by Séamus BOLAND, President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group of the EESC
Debate on the results and the follow-up of the Conference on the Future of Europe, with Dubravka
ŠUIČA, Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography
EESC plenary session, 15 June 2022

Dear Vice-President,

Thank you for taking the time to discuss with us this afternoon, you are most welcome at the Committee.

The process of the Conference on the Future of Europe was a democratic exercise, new and unique in its kind. Its outcomes, in the form of 49 proposals comprising more than 300 measures, are a testimony of the richness of the debates among citizens but also in the working groups, which refined these proposals and subjected them to first reality checks.

To me, this innovative exercise has brought to light two key realities, that policy makers can no longer ignore. Firstly, not only there is **no contradiction between representative democracy and participatory democracy**. But, secondly, it became evident that the **two participatory democracy processes, dialogue with citizens and dialogue with civil society organisations are complementary and can - and indeed should - go hand in hand!** Randomly selected citizen, who come together to deliberate and find solutions on a common societal problem and without political agenda on the one hand. Civil society organisations, who bring together citizens around an issue of general concern and contribute with their expert voice on the other, as part of a wider participatory environment.

Now, however, is the time to **go from words to action**. In this Committee, we call for a for genuine follow-up of the recommendations, producing tangible policy results.

The European Parliament has outlined its position in resolution of 9 June. We are now waiting for the European Commissions' communication announced for this Friday, and later, the Council. With a view to the follow-up to be provided by the college, let me **highlight two crucial elements coming out of the report**, amongst so many other important measures put forward by citizens:

Firstly, the clear and repeated references made to **civil society as a vital component of democratic life**. We know that a vibrant and open civic space is a precondition to maintaining healthy democracies. Especially in the current context of shrinking and shifting civic spaces, I have time and again stressed that we need to safeguard and foster this space. As outlined in the report, the European Commission could address this situation immediately and effectively, by dedicating a specific pillar in the European Democracy Action Plan for involvement of civil society and social partners, and by elaborating a dedicated civil society strategy.

Secondly, the CoFoE calls for the **EESC to be empowered as facilitator and guarantor of participatory democracy activities like structured dialogue with civil society organisations and Citizens' panels**. With its Liaison Group, the EESC has created an institutionalized channel of dialogue with civil dialogue organisations. Moreover, we involve civil society stakeholders in our works. Internal reflections on how to further develop these tools and especially on how to foster citizens' participation

within our Committee and beyond are ongoing. This morning, with our Civil Society Organisations' Group, representing a variety of civil society stakeholders, we reflected on preliminary ideas. We had the **pleasure to discuss with Mr Scicluna**, your head of cabinet, as well as a citizen ambassador and our interlocutors from European civil society networks. This will feed into the work of the Committee.

President Von der Leyen's State of the Union address in September and the 2023 work programme will be two other occasions for the EC to integrate the outcomes of this process into its concrete work and I count on you to take good note of these points.

Before I conclude, let me come back to your declaration at the last plenary of the Conference on the Future of Europe, in which you rightly pointed out – allow me to paraphrase – that the **CoFoE was a process of coming together to nurture democracy. To feed EU democracy from the grass roots.**

This is precisely where this committee, together with our partners in the wider organised civil society, excels and can contribute. Our Members are rooted in their national, regional and local communities. They bring their national perspectives and needs to the EU-level, but also take the discussion on EU legislative proposals home to their countries.

We have done so during the conference and you can count on us to continue to do so in the future, using the tools and processes at our disposal to and you help you strengthen participatory democracy in the European Union.

Dear Vice-President, dear colleagues, thank you very much for your attention and we look forward to continue working with you.