



**SPEECH by Diversity Europe Group President Séamus Boland  
EESC Kick-off event for the 'Conference on the Future of Europe'  
Panel 'Sustainable, Inclusive and Participatory Societies'**

10 June 2021

Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to join the other Presidents in thanking you for participating in this kick-off event. This panel will look at **'Sustainable, Inclusive and Participatory Societies'** and in my commentary this afternoon, I will address each of these interrelated dimensions. As **Martin Luther King** said fifty years ago: *"All life is interrelated. Whatever affects one destiny, affects all indirectly"*. This **inter-connectivity** is something we should keep squarely in mind when discussing the future of the European project and our role as civil society in shaping it!

Allow me to begin with the topic of **'Sustainable Societies'**. Perhaps more than any other European ambition, the objective of sustainability is at the **heart of the Diversity Europe Group**. Whichever component of Group III one looks at, environmentalists, farmers, consumers, the social economy, SMEs, social NGOs, even the Liberal Professions, **everyone has a role to play and is impacted** by the objective of European sustainability. And this is because sustainability is above all a **societal project**, where the economic, social and environmental dimensions in our communities are completely intertwined.

In this context, both the changes to our societies and economies resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic and the deliberations on the Conference on the Future of Europe, must be viewed as **opportunities**. Opportunities to embrace **sustainable growth** and greater **policy coherence**. Opportunities to ensure that the post COVID-19 recovery is not dealt with in isolation from the **deepening economic, social, democratic, demographic and climate crises** in EU Member States, nor from the necessity for **green and digital transitions**. The **SDGs** and **poverty reduction** in particular, must be at the **heart of this recovery**.

In other words, the EU can only lead globally in **climate protection**, if we **manage the green transition socially, as well as economically**. We will only achieve the Green Deal production and consumption objectives, if we transit towards a circular economy, using innovative entrepreneurship by key civil society players, such as the social economy. And all EU policies, from sustainable food, farm to folk, energy transition, even sustainable and smart mobility, must be **anchored in social innovation and cohesion**.

This brings me to the second part of my intervention, on **inclusivity** and **participation** and I will address these concepts together. The conclusions of a conference that Group III organised in March this year, called for **'civil society to be in the driving seat'**. 'For civil society to **define and play a key role in designing and building the future that we want'**. The same language was used in the EESC resolution on the CoFE, adopted in April.

It is my firm belief that we need to imagine and build **resilient, equal and sustainable communities and societies**. But this will require **bottom-up initiatives**, which embrace **new definitions of well-being and development beyond GDP**. For example, quality of life, social cohesion, health and the overall well-being of current and future generations.

It will also require a very **inclusive** approach. Toward our youth, the elderly, towards persons with disabilities, people at risk of socio-economic exclusion and minorities. Crucially, the attention to inclusiveness **must span across all EU policy areas**, from reducing the digital divide and energy poverty, to access to quality education, services, etc.

What is certain, is that in the Europe of today and tomorrow, civil society organisations must be viewed as **guardians of the common good and integral to identifying solutions**. EU and national authorities must recognise their crucial role in **building trust, shaping public opinions and as positive agents of change**.

And this will mean ensuring that all parts of society are effectively involved in the **co-design, co-participation, co-implementation and co-assessment of EU policies**. Notably the National Recovery and Resilience Plans and the National Reform Programmes.

It is now time to truly fulfil the opportunities of Article 11 of the Treaty on the EU. We can do this by using **existing consultation structures**, such as the European Semester process and explicitly recognising civil society as both **implementing partners** and **beneficiaries**. This implies civil society working in **collaboration among themselves, networking, exchanging good practices** and seeking rapid **consensus**.

Ladies and gentlemen, I will end my commentary by making **one simple request**: do not be afraid of responsibilities, nor of the challenges. It is our **raison d'être** as civil society to make our common future more **sustainable, inclusive and participatory**! Thank you for your attention.