



Coronavirus response: let's not forget civil society organisations and the role of communication

Statement by Arno Metzler, president of the Diversity Europe Group of the European Economic and Social Committee

12/05/2020

The coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak will continue changing our lives. It's up to us to see this as an opportunity to make positive and sustainable changes. The pandemic could give rise to a real European civil society, a joint understanding of obligations, duties and rights, and a common understanding of European citizenship. This can start by eradicating all the old but common prejudices about each other in the various Member States.

The European Commission's *Spring 2020 Economic Forecast*, published on 6 May, is worrying. The coronavirus pandemic will not only have severe consequences for the world's and the EU's economies, which will require excellent, efficient and comprehensive policy responses at EU and national level; it is also having a significant **impact on civil society and its organisations**.

Civil society organisations (CSOs), e.g. family, mother-child, consumer, environmental, social and professional associations, foundations and others, are facing major financial difficulties in particular, as a result of the pandemic. Their work in this time of crisis has greatly helped to keep our societies cohesive and stable. CSOs have done and are doing their utmost to support people in need, giving them a voice and expressing their solidarity and compassion despite limited resources. There are endless examples of European civil society in action to tackle this crisis, showing that **civil society structures are now more important than ever**.

In our response to the coronavirus outbreak, we therefore must not forget these/our civil society structures, as otherwise we run the risk of losing them. EU leaders and institutions must acknowledge the value of action taken by CSOs for our communities. In this unfortunate situation, **we have to do whatever is possible to support our CSOs**. They must be able to access **state aid** for companies or shall have **special programmes**.

This can be the time when a real European civil society emerges, with a joint understanding of obligations, duties and rights. To make this possible, first and foremost money is needed. To raise these large amounts requires mutual understanding and knowledge about our partners – and not prejudices – at both political and civil society level. **It's time to take a stand and eliminate old and new prejudices**. At least the start of the coronavirus crisis has shown that in this regard there is still a lot to be done to prevent individuals from returning to old feelings of nationalism. We must address and challenge prejudices with transparency and information and use trust in CSOs to advocate the European process and respect for the other citizens. The number of individuals to collaborate in this is key.

As well as money, the economic situation requires out-of-the-box thinking to find efficient solutions to common challenges. The answer cannot be nation states first. **There must be a**

collective understanding and awareness of the fact that we are stronger united. The European Economic and Social Committee must provide added value to these debates by raising these unpopular, often forgotten issues.

Another broad challenge for civil society is to **restore open communication** with the public and overcome social distancing. Communication is a crucial cornerstone of our democratic society. We as civil society organisation representatives must start exchanging and monitoring best practices to overcome the shutdown of social life.

Understanding and addressing the potential consequences for communication and our society is hence of utmost importance if we are to prevent the rise of populism and major conflicts in our societies. Only in this way will we be able to preserve our European way of life and prosperity for the whole of Europe.

Let's use this unfortunate situation to improve the European Union's resilience by introducing a real **European civil** society.

All politicians – at all levels – must understand that only our Europe is acceptable.

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