**Launch of the 1st European Civil Society Forum on TSD**

**At this critical time for trade and sustainable development (TSD), the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) held the first** [**European Civil Society Forum on TSD**](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/1st-european-civil-society-forum-trade-and-sustainable-development)**. This was a platform bringing together civil society, academia, EU and international institutions to discuss innovative ideas and concrete recommendations on the future of the EU’s trade policy. A series of breakout sessions covered TSD topics from substantive rights to monitoring, enforcement and much more, inviting participants to voice their views as part of the ongoing review of the 15-point action plan on TSD and recent developments in EU partner countries.**

The EESC commits to being a driving force for an ambitious TSD debate that reflects the high expectations of civil society, reaffirmed Committee President **Christa Schweng**. She also referred to the geopolitical challenges of our times: *"The war in Ukraine, like so many others, has a sustainability dimension: it is about resources and dependencies in a world impacted by climate change".* Investing time and effort on trade and sustainable development, whether environment, labour or climate change-related means investing in our collective security, Ms Schweng noted.

**Bernd Lange,** Chair of the International Trade Committee at the European Parliament, underlined that the global framework had changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian war aggression. *"The multilateral system is in danger",* he said, *"and it is clear that more emphasis should be given to bilateral trade agreements".* However, TSD improvements such as ratifying the ILO core labour conventions, implementing concrete TSD roadmaps(missing from some agreements), sanctions as part of their enforcement mechanism and strengthening the Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs) whose role is unique, were of paramount importance to Mr Lange.

**Luisa Santos**, from BusinessEurope, shared the view of a crisis in multilateralism but added, *"We should not give up, because we need the multilateral institutions to keep the dialogue",* pointing to a number of recent environmental initiatives at WTO level.She advocated for ensuring a level playing field and emphasised the significance of TSD for business, stressing theirhigh ambitions when it comes to climate change and social aspects.On a former conflictual aspect of the TSD debate she confirmed: *"We are ready to talk about sanctions"*. Ms Santos also raised the question of balance. "*How much more can we get and how can we convince non-EU countries that trade agreements are equally beneficial for them?*" she asked. She also called for a multidisciplinary approach to integrate autonomous initiatives, human rights and environmental protection as main tools of the EU’s external policy, to promote sustainability at global level.

**Daniele Basso**, from the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), called for a bolder approach to labour in trade agreements that are *"still far from a fair trade policy for workers"*. An improved TSD complaint mechanism needs to include sanctions as a last resort and tools to change things on the ground, Mr Basso stressed, urging the EU to "*take inspiration from other trade partners' models with enforceable labour clauses*". Equal attention needs to be paid to improving the relationship with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) regarding trade agreements, working on International standards. The COVID-19 crisis and the war in Ukraine were no reason to rush into more bilateral trade agreements without careful consideration of TSD commitments, he argued.

**Anaïs Berthier**, from Client Earth, considered that EU trade policy was too isolated from other policies, such as environment and climate policies. She strongly advocated for the EUto ensure that trade decisions take into account human rights standards and reduce the environmental footprint as a must. *"Autonomous initiatives undertaken must guarantee that the products put on the EU market meet sustainability criteria*", Ms Berthier stressed.

**Maria Martin-Prat**, Deputy Director-General for Trade at the European Commission and 'at the helm' of the ongoing work on the TSD review, said coherence would not be the goal, but that it is "*what is effective and makes the change*". Key focus was making sure international standards such as ILO core conventions or the Paris Agreement are respected, "*to apply standards to ourselves and the partners*". Ms Martin-Prat emphasised strong engagement with one another, stressing that a one-size-fits-all approach should not be sought and highlighting the role of trade to help with development since "*developing countries also want to develop in a sustainable manne*r".

**Jean-Marie Paugam**, Deputy Director-General at the World Trade Organization (WTO), stressed that trade should not be an obstacle to environment policies. *"For sustainable development, we have a trade measures notifications mechanism and we have seen that massive trade measures have been leveraged to environment objectives*", highlighting movement in a more sustainable direction. For the WTO, Mr Paugam also stressed the importance of involvement of stakeholders and consultation with civil society – an area still to be improved – and he welcomed ideas on how make progress here.

**Tanja Buzek**, Chair of the EESC Follow-up Committee on International Trade and rapporteur of the [EESC opinion on the TSD review](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/next-generation-trade-and-sustainable-development-reviewing-15-point-action-plan-own-initiative-opinion), set the bar high on expectations saying that *"our priorities on the TSD review should be met with a fresh mindset which also means breaking down the silos".* An ambitious review must feature a revamped sanctionable enforcement approach with stronger civil society monitoring, using innovative instruments and enhancing the leverage for TSD. She summarised the EESC recommendations and added that *"a non-paper will not cut it this time"*. In particular, strengthening the monitoring role of DAGs requires stronger language in the agreements themselves, regular and structured follow-up on recommendations, open institutional channels and ensuring the necessary resources.

*"This is only the beginning of the conversation",* both Ms Martin-Prat and Ms Buzek concluded, because of the importance of working and coordinating with civil society, also because we need to see how to support them and how they can support the Commission’s work, echoing the EESC's ambition of turning this Forum into a recurring event.

*Recordings of the event will be available at the* [*Forum’s website*](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/1st-european-civil-society-forum-trade-and-sustainable-development) *soon, along with a summary of the main take-aways. Thanks go to the experienced and knowledgeable rapporteurs from think tanks, academia and the media, making sure that the issues and questions raised are included in the report.*