



WORK PROGRAMME OF GROUP III October 2020 – April 2023

INTRODUCTION

For the current mandate of the Diversity Europe Group (Group III), it has been decided to concentrate on the topic of *poverty* and on the *role of civil society organisations and citizens' initiatives in combating it*. The objective of the work programme of Group III for this period is to contribute to making local communities more **sustainable, resilient, equitable, productive and socially just**, whilst also upholding the highest levels of **democratic governance, respect for rights and the rule of law**. **European civil society** and the **EESC** in particular have a key role to play in this process; "Leaving nobody behind" and "changing by design and not in reaction to" circumstances, as the President of the European Commission urged in her 2020 State of the Union speech.

The Group III commissioned study on *The response of civil society organisations to face the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent restrictive measures adopted in Europe* will constitute the starting point for the Group's work programme for this period.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Measuring the impact of COVID-19 on local communities

The EESC's new term of office coincides with a period of **heightened socio-economic uncertainty and constant change**. At the global and European level, containing the COVID-19 pandemic has become *the* overriding political objective, at the same time as levels of **poverty** have **increased exponentially**. Within EU Member States, the coronavirus pandemic has impacted *all* aspects of citizens' lives. Many priorities have taken second stage to combating COVID-19: **European integration, jobs and the economy, democratic rights, the shrinking civic space, and even respect for the rule of law**.

Existing levels of poverty have undoubtedly become more acute, notably among the most **vulnerable social groups**. The **self-employed, micro companies and SMEs** face increasing levels of **precariousness, including poverty**, whilst **consumers** have seen their **rights undermined** by the pandemic. Levels of **domestic and child abuse** have increased, whilst **women, the elderly and young people** in particular have been very negatively affected by the pandemic. According to recent data from UN Women, COVID-19 has wiped out 25 years of progress on **gender equality**. In the case of the **elderly**, the pandemic has raised serious questions about the **quality of their care and their equal role in our societies**. In addition, **young people** have been disproportionately affected by **job losses and deteriorating mental health**.

In parallel, **new forms of poverty and inequality** have emerged, such as **digital poverty** and **unequal access to health systems**. Pre-existing challenges have been overshadowed by COVID-19; for example, the **climate emergency, loss of biodiversity, asylum and migration**, the implementation of the **European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)** and even **Brexit**. During this period, political differences between Member States relating to **respect for the rule of law** have also been aggravated.

For the **EESC**, there are additional challenges to be met, notably **restoring** and **rebuilding** its **reputation** and demonstrating its vital role as an influencer on European policy-making. **Group III** has a direct role to play in this process and in affirming a **collaborative** and **constructive working environment**, within the Group and the Committee.

Seizing the opportunities

Nevertheless, there have been a number of **recent positive initiatives** at the European level. The EU has been spurred into action on the **mutualisation of debt** (EU Recovery Fund), the **European Health Union** (EU4Health) and proposals for a **New Pact for Migration and Asylum**. There has also been progress on implementing the **EPSR**, through proposals for a **Child Guarantee** and **Adequate Minimum Wages**. Moreover, important new initiatives such as the **European Disability Rights Strategy 2021-30** and the **European Action Plan for the Social Economy** will be adopted in 2021. The above constitute **opportunities** for the Diversity Europe Group to **align its work programme** and priorities with the priorities of the wider EU.

At the level of the **EESC**, the President Christa Schweng has adopted relevant **key priorities**, such as *Recovery after the pandemic*, the *Digital and the green transitions*, a *Socially inclusive Europe*, an *Economically prosperous Europe* based on *Common European values*, etc. These priorities **fully complement** those of **Group III**.

PRIORITIES OF THE DIVERSITY EUROPE GROUP

Within this challenging context and under the overall topic of *poverty* and the *role of civil society organisations in combating it*, Group III will seek to adopt a work programme that **unites the Group, builds on previous work** and which:

1. **Reflects the wider objectives of the EESC to modernise its working methods, repair and rebuild its reputation and reach out more to external civil society organisations.** The Diversity Europe Group will strive to propose new initiatives and to become a leader within the Committee on certain policy fields. The Group will build partnerships with external CSOs and demonstrate the value added of the EESC to the European Institutions;
2. **Examines the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of EU citizens**, including its impact on democracy, the rule of law, fundamental and human rights and on the balance *between* rights; explores the impact of COVID-19 on European integration, European health systems, jobs, the economy, women, the young and elderly, as well as on the most vulnerable citizens, notably persons with disabilities and minorities such as the Roma;

3. **Finds solutions through the green and digital transitions**, focussing on the Sustainable Development Goals, just transitions and all angles of the Green Deal. The central premise should be that the Green Deal, the green and digital transitions, as well as efforts to combat the climate emergency and the loss of biodiversity, will provide *new opportunities* for all stakeholders, from farmers, to environmentalists and consumers. Group III will utilise these opportunities to promote sustainable socio-economic and regional development, a climate-neutral EU by 2050 and poverty reduction, including combating digital, energy and rural poverty;
4. **Reflects on the post COVID-19 civic space and on the type of societies and economies we want to create**. This would include ensuring that the current restrictions on rights are *not* continued post-COVID-19, stimulating sustainable economic growth, supporting the premises of "beyond GDP" and diverse forms of enterprise (e.g. micro and small enterprises, the social economy, the liberal professions and the self-employed);
5. **Builds up the capacities of civil society to enhance participation, innovation, ownership and community resilience**. This could be achieved through the work of the categories and by Group III consolidating existing partnerships with civil society, actively building new ones (e.g. with European youth) and involving external civil society organisations more in the work of both the Group and the EESC. Re-building the capacities and supporting the provision of adequate financing to civil society will be crucial in post-COVID-19 Europe. Similarly, engaging in initiatives with *local* CSOs, e.g. on combating fake news regarding COVID-19 vaccines, will be an important part of this process. Finally, the Diversity Europe Group will raise awareness of the key role of *citizens' activities* in shaping European societies. The Group could be guided by the moto "Nothing for us without us!"

The **instruments** to implement these priorities will be multiple, for example:

- ✓ Group III initiated studies;
- ✓ Seminars and conferences;
- ✓ Group III own-initiative opinions;
- ✓ Extensive and targeted communication strategy;
- ✓ Outreach programmes of relations with external civil society organisations;
- ✓ Going local activities in rural and urban areas (remote and/or physical);
- ✓ Continued support for the EESC categories managed by Group III;
- ✓ Encouraging and supporting more exchanges and dialogue between the different sectors of Group III, e.g. between the categories and Group III.

ACTIVITIES (to be regularly reviewed in line with the Group's priorities)

- ✓ Publish the Group III commissioned study on *The response of civil society organisations to face the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent restrictive measures adopted in Europe* (January 2021);
- ✓ Organise a Group III **conference on the topic of the COVID-19 study** (first trimester of 2021);
- ✓ Publish the Group III commissioned study on *New trends in the development of volunteering in the European Union (2nd semester of 2021)*;
- ✓ Organise a Group III conference in Warsaw, Poland, on the topic *The role of volunteering in the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals – Ten years on from the*

European Year of Volunteering (including a presentation of the Group III interim study on volunteering) (date *tbc*). The conference will also highlight strong European values and how they can be used to ensure civic society has a voice in their articulation at all levels;

- ✓ Organise group **conferences in the countries of the Presidency of the Council of the EU**;
 - ✓ Propose an own-initiative opinion on ***A new care model for the elderly: learning from the COVID-19 pandemic***;
 - ✓ Actively support topics within the Committee on which Group III has or can take a lead, e.g. the **social economy, disability, the elderly, the voluntary sector**. A thematic debate at the EESC plenary on the European Disability Rights Strategy has already been requested;
 - ✓ Promote Group III positions in relevant EESC bodies, notably the sub-committee on **Post-COVID-19 Recovery and Reconstruction** and the ad hoc group on the **Conference on the Future of Europe** (CFoE).
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