



**European Economic and Social Committee
Sustainable Development Observatory**

A European Sustainable Development Forum - a multi-stakeholder platform

The Sustainable Development Goals – a multi-stakeholder agenda for Europe

With the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development world leaders have agreed on an unprecedented broad action plan to end poverty, protect the planet, ensure human rights and guarantee prosperity for all. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) require transformational changes from all countries, both developing and developed. In its Communication, *Next steps for a sustainable European future*¹, the Commission embraces the UN 2030 Agenda as a unique opportunity to put the European and global economy on a new path to give better lives to people, ensuring a fair share for all and notably the younger generation.

The SDGs are a multi-stakeholder agenda. They can only be put into practice if civil society, businesses, trade unions, local communities and other stakeholders take an active role and ownership. Participatory governance mechanisms have to ensure that civil society is involved at all levels: from local and national to European and UN levels. The SDGs require institutions and stakeholders to cooperate in an integrated way across different sectors.

The European Sustainable Development Forum

According to its Communication, the Commission will launch a multi-stakeholder platform enabling exchange of best practices and follow-up on the SDGs across sectors, at Member State and EU level. Further details about the design of this platform are still to be discussed. The EESC welcomes this project and offers its help to set up the platform

Over the past year, the EESC has elaborated on the idea of creating a European Sustainable Development Forum in partnership with the European Commission and has put forward recommendations for its design². These are based on the results of presentations of the Forum at conferences, Council working parties, at the Commission and at stakeholder consultations during two hearings where participants expressed support for the Forum.

The EESC is confident that the European Sustainable Development Forum would fulfil the purpose of the multi-stakeholder platform envisaged by the Commission and regards the recommendations on its key features, shared already by many stakeholders, as a good starting point for shaping the platform.

¹ COM(2016) 739 final, 22.11.2016

² Information report, *Opportunities and processes for civil society involvement in the implementation of the post-2015 agenda in the EU*, [OJ C 303, 19.8.2016, p. 73–80](#); EESC opinion on *A European Sustainable Development Civil Society Forum*, [OJ C 303, 19.8.2016, p. 73–80](#).

Key features of the Forum

Main objectives of the Forum are:

- Providing a **regular, structured and independent platform** for informed dialogue on sustainable development at EU level **between the EU institutions and non-governmental stakeholders**, as well as **between non-governmental stakeholders from different constituencies**;
- Creating a space and peer learning hub for stakeholders, players and grass root initiatives to **share suggestions, best practice and solutions** for meaningful implementation of the 2030 Agenda, across sectors, at Member State and EU level;
- **Facilitating cooperation**, building trust and capacity for consensus between the parties involved, while also reflecting upon diverging views;
- Ensuring **strong involvement of non-governmental stakeholders in the ongoing monitoring and review** of the 2030 Agenda at EU level.

Since the SDGs are a new policy area, the Forum's set up should allow **flexibility** in order to align with the evolving governance framework. The EESC recommends the following as key initial features of the Forum:

- The leading **role of the European Commission at a high level is crucial**.
- The Forum should **involve, in a balanced way, representatives from a broad range of organised civil society and stakeholder associations**, including the private sector, trade unions, farmers, local communities, consumers and development, social, environmental and human rights NGOs as well as youth representatives.
- Representatives from the Council of the EU and the Parliament will be invited. Cooperation with National Sustainable Development Councils and Economic and Social Committees in EU Member States should support outreach to the national and subnational level.
- The Forum must be well **embedded in the processes of SDG implementation, monitoring and review at national, EU and UN levels**. It should be organised as a continuous working process and convene as a whole at least once a year. Between the annual meetings other events and an online-platform could complement the work. A first meeting could take place in 2017, in advance of the 2017 session of the UN High-Level Political Forum for Sustainable Development.
- Additionally, **debates and workshops** could be organised **in European Member States** in order to raise awareness and support SDG implementation on the ground. The EESC could use its outreach to the social partners and civil society organisations in European Member States for this purpose.
- Each year the Forum could **focus on specific thematic areas** according to the priorities in the EU and the annual theme of the UN HLPF. Participants should be consulted in advance in the agenda setting of the Forum.
- The composition and the Forum's way of working should respect the right of **civil society organisations** involved to define their contributions in an **independent and self-organised** manner.
- The Forum's debates have to build upon an excellent **knowledge base**. Eurostat's regular monitoring reports will form a substantial part of it. This will have to be complemented in close cooperation with scientific networks and think-tanks, as well as citizens' monitoring activities.
- The Forum should be **managed by a board** composed of a majority of members coming from civil society and stakeholder organisations and other members coming from the Commission and the EESC.

Role and added value of the EESC

The EESC offers to **host and coordinate the Forum**. In this role as the body dedicated to facilitating civil society participation at EU level, the EESC, could contribute efficiently to the Forum's objectives.

Over the past years, the Sustainable Development Observatory of the **Committee organised a platform for civil society dialogue at EU level during the preparation of the 2030 Agenda**, with a series of conferences and workshops, organised in conjunction with the Commission and various UN bodies. The Committee will **use these experiences as well as the trust of the various stakeholders** now to further develop this practice into a permanent structure of the Forum.

As the host of the Forum, the EESC will use its unique **capacity to reach out to a wide diversity of stakeholders** from different backgrounds. In particular, the EESC will bring together the critical NGO community with the more traditional stakeholder groups, thus helping to broaden ownership for SDGs across all key stakeholders, widening the horizon of the debate, increase mutual understanding and creating new alliances.

Through its Members' constituencies in all EU Member States and the close cooperation with national Economic and Social Committees, Sustainable Development Councils and the European Sustainable Development Network the EESC is also connected to **civil society "beyond the Brussels bubble" at national and subnational levels**. This will help to bring the active players from the private sector, trade unions and NGOs into the practical work of the Forum and facilitate awareness raising events at national and subnational level. The EESC has recently demonstrated this capacity by organising debates with social partners and civil society on the Social Pillar of Rights in all EU Member States.

The EESC is particularly well versed in **facilitating dialogue between stakeholders from different backgrounds**, with diverging and conflicting interests. Organising cross-sectoral debates and promoting consensus on practical solutions are at the Committee's core competences.