FROM THE PAST TO THE FUTURE: Shaping our Europe!

Dear colleagues, dear friends,

It is with immense pleasure that I would like to welcome both new and returning members to the Various Interests Group of the EESC, for the mandate 2015-20. As with all things in life, new beginnings are times of both excitement and sadness, as the old gives way to the new. So it is this October, when almost 50% of our members have been replaced. Hence, I would like to begin this editorial by wishing a very warm welcome to all of you, both ‘new’ and ‘old’ members, for what will be a journey through Europe by European citizens. For without doubt, you have all been nominated as members of the EESC because of your expertise, creativity and determination to shape the ‘Europe’ of tomorrow and to bring this ‘Europe’ closer to citizens!

This is a path that we embarked on very actively during the previous mandate and one that I intend to continue. For in my view, over the last five years we have achieved two principle results. Firstly, we have created synergies, sought new frontiers and long-term perspectives. Concretely, over the last five years our Group has focussed on three principle themes. Firstly, the necessity for sustainable growth and investment in Europe, which is founded on a wide range of actors including SMEs, the Liberal Professions, social enterprises, farmers, consumers, etc. i.e., stakeholders who are at the very heart of our economies and societies, and who have demonstrated their resilience during the crisis. Secondly, we have focussed on the importance of rebalancing European debates and policies and of investing more in a social, sustainable and inclusive Europe. For example, via social innovation, social investment, the social economy, sustainable development and active citizenship, with a renewed protagonism for local communities. Thirdly, we have stressed that it is crucial for European civil society to take on an active role in the entire legislative process, from formulation, to implementation and evaluation.

The second achievement of the last five years has in my opinion been the collegiate approach to governance, both within our Group, the Committee but also within the various bodies in which we have a leadership role, such as the Categories. Overall, we have sought consensus over conflict, prioritising the cumulative benefit of the entire EESC.

Personally, I consider that both of these elements, the search for novel initiatives and the collegiate approach to governance, constitute the inheritance that we will pass on to the newly constituted Group. Of course, a great deal has changed since 2010 and unfortunately, ‘Europe’ is facing unprecedented challenges. In these current times of extreme civil frustration, mistrust in the national and European political order and insecurity at Europe’s borders, there is a momentous necessity for the EESC to bring Europe closer to its citizens and to actively engage in and influence the European legislative process.

The Lisbon Treaty has increased the powers of the EESC by conferring it with an advisory role to the European Commission, European Parliament and the Council. Moreover, these Institutions are moving in a new direction, focusing more on targeted consultations, assessments and evaluations. Hence, it is imperative that during this mandate we adapt and complement our working methods, in order to actively support the work of the European Institutions. By engaging more in policy evaluations in the future, we will undoubtedly contribute to the implementation of the principles of proportionality and horizontal subsidiarity.

I would like to end this Editorial by recalling that European integration and the EESC have always been part of a process. The EU is constantly evolving, in ways that we would not have imagined only a few years ago. What is certain is that we, organised and representative European civil society, must be at the centre of this Europe of Tomorrow! We have to engage with it, reshape it, drive it!

The end has come to the 2010-2015 mandate during which, as the editorial above outlines, we have achieved a great deal and are proud of our collective hard work and impressive track record. At the final Plenary Session, on Wednesday, 16 September 2015, we had the sad duty to bid a fond farewell to a staggering 49 members of our Group, who retired, or are not be returning to the Committee in the next mandate. That represents almost 50% of our total membership and is a milestone in our long journey of representation at the EESC.

Amongst these 49, we are losing a number of giants and historical figures, whose commitment, dedication, work and expertise have guided and led our Group through thick and thin over the past 20 years. We could not let this occasion pass without marking our deep appreciation and expressing our admiration of the various roles played by these key personalities at the highest political level in the Committee and thank them for their invaluable contribution to our Group’s profile and progress, over the years, and to the European Project as a whole.
Special feature

A TIME FOR FAREWELL AND GRATITUDE

Anne Marie Sigmund (AT)

Anne Marie joined this Committee in 1995, the year of the accession of her country to the EU. She was elected President of Group III in 1998, succeeding another lady, Beatrice Rangoni Machiavelli, who became President of the EESC. Anne-Marie led our Group for six years, some of which were particularly “tumultuous” – I am referring to the Convention on the Future of Europe in 2002-2003 - in which she participated as an observer but actively voicing the cause of civil dialogue and the role of the EESC in this respect. Her engagement continued also during her years as President of the Committee from 2004 to 2006, leading successfully the EESC through the “crisis” started with the NO votes from France and the Netherlands. Also as an “ordinary” Member, Anne-Marie continued working to achieve a genuine civil dialogue and a real implementation of Art.11 of the TUE, patient step by step work for which we express gratitude and commit to carry it on.

Our heartfelt thanks, dear Ann Marie, for all you have done for us and for the citizens of Europe in your time at the EESC!

Maureen O’Neill (UK)

Maureen leaves the EESC after thirteen years of active membership. During this period we had the privilege of having her as Vice-President of our Group in 2010 for three years, in charge, amongst other things, of observing the trends of appointments of Group III members in the EESC work. We all remember her commitment for improving the functioning of our Committee as a member of the Rules of Procedure Panel in 2008 and of the ad hoc group on working methods later on. Maureen advocated the cause of social exclusion and poverty, the need for social services and inclusion with a particular focus on older people. Maureen concludes her mandate at the EESC in the position of President of the SOC Section, in coherence with her professional vocation that she fulfills with passion in these times in which the European Social Model is so hard to preserve.

Thank you so much Maureen and we wish you all the best in your future career!

Seppo Kallio (FI)

Less than ten years after joining our Committee and after six years of Vice-Presidency of the Group, Staffan was elected President in 2004. Splitting his life between Brussels and his dairy farm in Sweden, he managed to effectively lead our Group for six years to then become President of the Committee in 2010, the first EESC mandate under the Lisbon Treaty. His open and jovial attitude, always ready to listen and take into consideration the views of others, alongside his dedication and abilities made it possible for him to convey the heterogeneous interests of our Group and to bring the EESC together around “hot” topics, such as the UN Rio + 20 summit and the input into the G20 discussion on food security with the slogan of “Engaging people for a sustainable Europe”. All of this in the aftermath of the financial markets crisis and all its consequences, always keeping an eye on international cooperation, and never giving up on the need for civil society’s input in the decision making process.

Thank you Staffan, for your courage, determination and humour, even in times of great uncertainties!

Staffan Nilsson (SE)

Difficult to choose where to start from with Seppo: he has been a member of the EESC Bureau since he arrived in 1995. He was elected Vice-President of the EESC in 2008, has been a guiding light, a prominent member of the Bureau of Group III, of the Budget Group as well as of the last Rules of Procedure Panel. His specialty is that he was Rapporteur on forestry and agricultural dossiers, actively involved in the international dimension of these issues with a passion for external relations from Russia to the Mediterranean... and where to stop? In all these years, Seppo certainly worked intensively in a variety of different bodies and topics but, he was always ready, with his gentlemanly charm, to endorse Group III’s interests however various they can be and faithfully defend them.

Thank you Seppo for representing us so well and so loyally!

Maureen O’Neill (UK)

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Highlights of the September 2015 EESC Plenary Session

Group III members co-ordinating the work on new opinions

Antonio Longo (IT) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Green Paper on Retail Financial Services and Insurance” – INT/772.

Krzysztof Pater (PL) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Action Plan on Capital Markets Union” – ECO/384.

Krzysztof Pater (PL) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “A legal framework for simple, transparent EC/386.

Roman Haken (CZ) is the Rapporteur for the explanatory opinion on: “Future of the EU Urban Agenda seen from the perspective of civil society” – ECO/386.

Lutz Ribbe (DE) is the Rapporteur for the opinion on: “Launching the public consultation process on a new energy market design” – TEN/577.

Lutz Ribbe (DE) is the Rapporteur for the opinion on: “Delivering a New Deal for Energy Consumers” – TEN/578.

Ioanțu Bîban (RO) is the Rapporteur for the opinion on: “Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2015-2016” – REX/447.

Yves Somville (BE) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Future of EU’s relations with ACP Group of countries” – REX/455.

The full listing of membership of the study groups for the new work may be consulted here: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?n=portal.en.group-3-new-study-groups

OUR GROUP’S STRENGTH

On Wednesday 18 November 2015, the SMEs, Professions & Crafts Category will meet for the third and final time this year. In view of the recent renewal of the Committee for the 2015-2020 mandate, a fresh list of members will be established, from whom, a Spokesperson will be elected. A full agenda of discussion points will be made available on the website, in due course.

The Farmers’ Category will hold their third and last meeting for this year on Thursday 19 November 2015. Given the start of the new mandate of the Committee, 2015-2020, a new list of members will be established, from whom, a Spokesperson will be elected. Full details of the agenda points will be available on the website, in due course.

Quote of the month…

“For man, autumn is a time of harvest, of gathering together. For nature, it is a time of sowing, of scattering abroad...”

Edwin Way Teale (1899 – 1980)

American naturalist, photographer and Pulitzer Prize-winning writer

The EESC organised the conference “The implementation of the UN CRPD by the EU: Assessing the impact of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities’ concluding observations – The way forward” in Thessaloniki, Greece, on 10 September 2015. It is the first time ever in history that the European Union (EU) has been assessed by a UN Human Rights Treaty Committee. After the UN CRPD came into force in the EU in 2011, the UN CRPD Committee analysed the last 4 years of implementation of the UN CRPD by the EU and issued 94 concluding observations that are mandatory to the EU as state party.

The Conference gathered 150 participants representing all stakeholders in the field of disability. The conclusions of the conference reflected satisfaction towards the concluding observations as they were considered comprehensive, cross-policy, forward-looking and requiring a profound legal and policy review of the current European policies and regulation on disability.

The conference reflected the need to improve integration of persons with disabilities into society, to provide them with better access to education, employment, healthcare, and to encourage the participation of persons with disabilities in political life. The conference also emphasised the importance of ensuring the accessibility of the internet and information and communication technologies for persons with disabilities.

In his closing speech, the President of the EESC, Lord Lynch of Brook, highlighted the importance of the conference and the need for concrete action to implement the UN CRPD in the EU. He called for the EU to take a lead in promoting the rights of persons with disabilities and to work closely with the UN CRPD Committee to ensure that the concluding observations are fully implemented.
The EESC strongly believes that emphasis should be placed on identifying, recording, assessing and hence valorising the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning and doing so in the most comparable way that is comprehensible to all parties involved, particularly employers and educational institutions. Member States should provide opportunities for people of different ages and qualifications to level up the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning validated. The EESC recommends that Member States broaden the range of institutions providing guidance and counselling on the benefits of validating competencies and the options and mechanisms for doing so, to the public and, in particular, enlist employment services, youth information centres, educational institutions, employers, trade unions, career advice centres, youth organisations, women’s organisations, organisations providing support to migrants and disabled people, and public institutions. The EESC calls on educational institutions, particularly secondary schools, to promote the validation of skills and knowledge acquired through non-formal means. Given the high rate of youth unemployment, opportunities for interaction between public and private employment agencies, volunteer organisations (particularly of young people) and employers should be supported. This can serve as a means of promoting the visibility – and raising awareness of – non-formal and informal education and training and informal learning in voluntary organisations, as well as strengthening mutual trust. The EESC has already supported the creation of the competence bank and, subsequently, the Europass Experience. It is therefore disappointing that the European Commission has suspended the preparatory work on the Europass Experience and calls on it to see the initiative through to completion.

Jorge PEGADO LIZ (PT) – INT/768 “Delegated acts” (EESC opinion 1035/2015)

In this additional opinion, the EESC:
• welcomes the proposal for a new binding interinstitutional agreement, based on Article 295 TFUE, recently presented by the Commission. It is particularly pleased at the effort that has been made to strike the right balance between fundamental values and legislative simplification;
• especially welcomes the fact that the Commission is committed to gathering all the necessary expertise before adopting delegated acts. It fears, nevertheless, that all these consultations could cause the time taken to prepare acts to be prolonged excessively and unnecessarily.

Lucia JAHMER (IT) – Ad hoc Group “Improving the functioning of the European Union building on the potential of the Lisbon Treaty” and “Possible evolutions and adjustments of the institutional set-up of the European Union” (EESC opinion 3236/2015)

The European Citizens’ Initiative, the European Parliament as co-legislator in the majority of EU policies, an enhanced role for national parliaments: the Lisbon Treaty has brought about many positive changes to bridge the gap between the EU and its citizens. However, the existing Treaties provide untapped opportunities which could be grasped to improve policies and strengthen the EU both internally and externally. Whether exploring deeper policy action or improving implementation, there is a wealth of policy areas and technical instruments, which could be tapped. This should be the current priority for the European Union and its institutional set-up, says the European Citizens’ Initiative. As a representative of organised civil society, the EESC was asked by the European Parliament to examine how the functioning of the EU could improve on the basis of the potential of the Lisbon Treaty and to reflect on possible developments and adjustments to the EU’s current institutional set-up. In its opinion, the Committee stressed that democracy and accountability are fundamental to European citizenship and that the potential of the Lisbon Treaty should be fully and systematically implemented. Moreover, in future it will be necessary [to] extend the competencies of the European Parliament, for instance, to increase its role in European economic governance and the European Semester, and [to] put in place a more balanced share of responsibilities and inter-institutional cooperation between the institutions with a view to consolidating the community method.

The economic crisis, as well as current migration challenges and their impact on freedom of movement within the EU, have revealed internal divisions within the Union and European unemployment’s increasing trend. It is time to improve the principles of horizontal subsidiarity and proportionality and to break the glass ceiling between the general public and the EU institutions. We must ensure civil society involvement in democratic processes and European policy making. We must work together for the future of this Union,” said Luca Jahmer, President of the EESC’s Various Interests Group (VIG). “The preparations for the new binding interinstitutional agreement on the existing provisions of the Lisbon Treaty would be to achieve economic, social and territorial cohesion (Article 3, TEU) and to make the last of the five priorities (Articles 8 to 12). In future, these clauses should be used to promote greater interconnectivity between European policies and more accountability with regard to EU citizens. The internal market should be completed with a focus on the Digital Single Market and Energy Union. The EU should be given the means to act through the reform of its system of own resources, as this will help, inter alia, to achieve economies of scale across the EU. In addition and in order to reinforce the sense of common citizenship by enhancing public participation in the EU decision-making process, steps should be taken to implement the EU Charter on Fundamental Rights effectively. The existing Treaties also provide for increased room for manoeuvre and deeper integration in the fields of migration and asylum, and in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

Lastly, reinforcing the Eurozone’s governing structures and completing and Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) will speed up real European economic convergence and territorial cohesion. This should be based on four pillars: a monetary and financial pillar, an economic pillar, a social pillar and a political pillar.

Carlos TRÁSS PINOTO (EU – SCO) “The Economy for the Good Common Model (EGCM) and the Lisbon Treaty: Common Good model geared towards social cohesion” (EESC opinion 2060/2015)

“The Commission recognises that the Economy for the Good Common (EGCM) model is conceived to be included both in the European and the domestic legal framework. Aligned with the Europe 2020 framework, it proposes the transition towards a European Ethical Market which will foster social and economic innovation, boost the employment rate and benefit the environment. The "European Ethical Market" will be built through the implementation of several strategies:

• Measuring indicators of wellbeing and social development beyond the GDP such as the Common Good Product and the Common Good Balance Sheet.

• Policy-making aimed at favouring companies with higher contributions to the common good, such as ethical public procurement and the promotion of ethical internal trade.

• Promoting ethical external trade as the "Brand Europe". In this way, the European Union will provide an ethical reference model for EU Cooperation.

• Promoting new models in the finance sector, such as ethical and impact investment and cooperative banking.

The EESC demands from the European Commission, in the framework of the renewed CSR strategy, to make a qualitative step in order to avoid (in terms of public funds, external markets, tax advantages, etc.) those enterprises that can demonstrate higher ethical performance.

Tom JONES (UK) – NAT/461 "Rural Development Programmes – Sticking Plasters or Green Shoots of Recovery” (EESC opinion 601/2015)

The EESC welcomes the continuing commitment of the Member States and regions to address some of the challenging faces rural areas through a wide ranging Rural Development Programme (RDP). There is disappointment about the delay to the Commission, approval and start of the programme across several states and regions. We therefore recommend that the Commission orders an independent review of the process to avoid future new scheme delays. This opinion stresses the importance of sustainable development, economic activity, the environment and social justice with a strong emphasis on adding value to land-based resources. Further targeted resources, for longer periods are required, including cross-cutting issues, such as farming, capacity building for advisory structures and innovative private and social enterprise loans and investments. The ability to transfer funds from one CAP pillar to another should be extended. The EESC supports a joint approach and creating new employment opportunities in rural areas is clear across programmes. Measures to incentivize young people to seek a career in rural areas is urgent, along with measures to facilitate the integration of women with special needs or with physical or mental disabilities.

Furthermore, rural schools and colleges need closer links with both traditional and changing skill needs of their areas. The contribution of women to the success of the programme should be specifically targeted and supported. Their role is crucial to ensuring that people can continue living in rural areas. Measures to enhance the development of tourism and leisure, including rural tourism, support for local products, accurately labelled, for rural tourism and small scale and community renewable energy schemes should bring new income streams and economic opportunities. Moreover, the issue of climate change on agriculture and forestry, and vice versa, are priorities in the programmes. Village economy and community involvement is key and the RDP should also be tested for their inclusiveness of all rural citizens. Civil society involvement and entrepreneurship are vital to the sustainability of rural areas.

Bernd SCHULTER (DE) – SOC/320 “Sound social benefit systems – a social agenda for Europe” (EESC opinion 1011/2015)

The EESC sees the need to safeguard basic welfare provision by having common rules at a level. Social policy principles could provide a substantive basis for the Commission’s recommendations, especially in the context of the future European Semester, to implement the open method of coordination and application of the social impact assessment under Article 9 TFUE. Such principles should also provide the substantive basis for a binding social protection floor and for the action and governance of the EU institutions themselves. The EESC proposes a number of principles for welfare provision systems, amongst which are:

• Principle of accessibility: ensuring that welfare provision, and above all social services, are affordable and accessible on a non-discriminatory basis wherever and whenever they are needed;
• Principle of personal responsibility: job seekers and those finding it difficult to enter the labour market should take responsibility through social services and incentive systems enabling them to subsist through their own efforts;
• Principle of the use of public funds by welfare providers and public administrations should be transparent;
• Principle of a joined-up approach: peoples’ everyday situations, changing life paths, new family constellations, ageing and immigration demand new thinking;
• Principle of quality: social services should be backed up by quality assurance measures.

Eveline PICHENOT (FR) – RXE/443 “Corporate social and societal responsibility are an important lever for driving forward sustainable development – for all countries involved in trade, investment and development cooperation”. (EESC opinion 552/2015)

While implemented with other policies and measures, corporate social and societal responsibility are an important lever for driving forward sustainable development – for all countries involved in trade, investment and development cooperation. With regard to EU actions, the EESC calls for the inclusion of internationally-recognised guidelines and principles on CSR into the sustainable development and the shared agreements. Given the diversity of partner countries, the EESC calls on the Commission to facilitate an evaluation and to improve the implementation of the challenges. Moreover, it asks to lay out their commercial activities in countries with weak legal systems or institutions, or that do not implement or apply human rights legislation.

With regard to actions of the EU Member States, the EESC supports the development of action plans for implementing the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and reiterates the central role of the EU to promote these principles in their activities. As regards economic operators, the EESC urges all multinational corporations, whether listed or not, to adhere voluntarily to the internationally recognised CSR principles deemed most relevant, and recommends that they disclose how they propose to apply them in a dialogue with their stakeholders. Moreover, the EESC supports measures, such as labelling, which provide clear and transparent guidance.

As regards civil society, the EESC recommends further encouraging more sustainable production and distribution, by raising the profile of the Ethics Council in the field of fair trade, justice, local production and the design and circular economy. It also proposes offering assistance to civil society organisations in non-EU countries involved in drafting and formulating CSR guidelines, and support to the implementation of the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) to support civil society stakeholders involved in human rights work, and particularly whistleblowers.