



# Europe III

The voice of Group III  
Various Interests  
October 2015



## 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 capitalised on the diversity of our members and have

been able to innovate, to drive new ideas, thinking ahead, bringing new initiatives and strategies to the foreground. 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!

ED  
Editorial



Luca JAHIER (IT)  
President of the Various  
Interests Group



Luca JAHIER (IT) presentation of  
farewell gifts ceremony

## Special feature A TIME FOR FAREWELL AND GRATITUDE

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!*

**Staffan NILSSON (SE)**



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!*

**Seppo KALLIO (FI)**



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 speciality 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)**



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 overseeing the trends of appointments of Group III members in the EESC works. 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 fulfils 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!*

## 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 and standardised securitisation” – ECO/385.

Roman HAKEN (CZ) is the Rapporteur for the exploratory 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.

Ionuț SIBIAN (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/?i=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

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edwin\\_Way\\_Teale](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edwin_Way_Teale)

## Group III Members in the Spotlight playing a key role



*Ioannis VARDAKASTANIS (EL)*  
*President of the National Confederation of Disabled People of Greece (N.C.D.P)*  
*President of the European Disability Forum (EDF)*  
*Treasurer of the International Disability Alliance (IDA)*  
*Member of the Various Interests Group of the EESC*  
*President of the EESC ad hoc Group on Disability*

### HUMAN RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE EU: THE EESC ORGANISES A CONFERENCE TO SHOW THE WAY FORWARD

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 legislation on disability.

The UN CRPD Committee has also made observations about the current policy making procedures. In this regard, the Committee has requested to review the impact assessment system, the reform of the EU monitoring mechanism for the UN CRPD, the creation of focal points in all institutions and the establishment of an inter-institutional mechanism for the UN CRPD.



*President Jahier delivering his inaugural speech at the conference*

Participants agreed on the need to **develop a disability human rights’ agenda** based on the concluding observations with a specific action per institution and body. The EESC itself would need to adopt a plan that could be proposed by the Permanent Study Group on disability, which will be set up in the new mandate starting 7-8 October 2015.

Finally, an entire session was dedicated to an in-depth analysis of the impact of the crisis on the Human rights of persons with disabilities and it was recommended to include specific targets for persons with disabilities in the Europe 2020 strategy.

The conclusions of the conference can be read here:

<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.events-and-activities-disabilities-convention-conclusions>

## News from Group III



### WELCOME AND TRAINING SESSION FOR NEW MEMBERS

As already mentioned elsewhere, almost 50 new members have been nominated to join the Various Interests Group. On 22-23 September 2015, a two-day welcoming and induction session was held at the EESC. Our Group had a stand in the Atrium on the 6th floor, which we manned throughout the two days. We were on call to inform our new members about the structure and composition of the Committee, our Group, the Sections, and the Categories, amongst many other things; make them feel at ease and answer their many queries. We hope that we succeeded in helping them have a soft landing and get more to grips with the plethora of information and forms they were required to fill out.



We are pleased to welcome a new member of the secretariat staff. *Chloé Lahousse*, is half Belgian and half Spanish, previously worked at the European Commission, before joining the EESC in 2011. She holds a Degree in Communication and Media Studies from the KUL, Leuven, Belgium, and an MA in Communication and Development from the IHECS, Brussels. Chloé comes to us from the Communication Unit where she was Press and Communication Officer. Initially, she will fill the job of general assistant in the Secretariat and then from January next year, she will take over from Liam, who is going on pension.

Welcome Chloé!



Another new staff member is *Isabell Scheidt*, our Stagiaire from Germany, who will be with us until the end of February 2016. She will assist with the updating of all our information concerning our members and in particular, the Vademecum, “Who’s Who”, a very useful tool in getting to know our members, the profiles of their organisation and their particular tasks, responsibilities and professional skills.

Herzlich Willkommen Isabell!

## Overview of our Members’ Work in the EESC

At its plenary session on 16-17 September 2015 the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted the following opinions for which Group III members were Rapporteurs or Co-Rapporteurs.



**Dilyana SLAVOVA (BG) – REX/439** “Agriculture, Rural Areas and Sustainable Development in the Eastern Partnership Countries” (EESC opinion 902/2015)

The Opinion focuses on the possibilities for a better development of rural areas and achieving sustainability in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries. What happens in the countries of Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus has consequences for the EU. As the EU has expanded, these countries have become closer neighbours, and their security, stability and prosperity increasingly affect those of the EU. Closer cooperation between the EU and its eastern European partners – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine – is of primary importance for the EU external relations. For the six EaP countries, economic development remains a key priority through flows in capital, goods, people and know-how. This can only be achieved in a secure environment, which is a prerequisite for sustainable development, overcoming the all too prevalent corruption.

The EESC calls for **strategic modernisation of the agricultural sector** in the EaP countries that **increases domestic production of safe food in a sustainable manner**. With this opinion, the EESC also clearly states its wish for **civil society to be much more widely represented** in Platform 2 – “Economic Integration and Convergence with EU Policies”; in its Panel on Agriculture and Rural Development, the Panel on Environment and Climate Change with regard to the promotion of green technologies, eco-innovation and biodiversity, the Trade Panel on SPS matters and in the SME Panel where the Committee’s expertise and skills provide a useful contribution.



**Renate HEINISCH (DE) – INT/767** “Towards digital health – electronic information for safe use of medicinal products” (EESC opinion 424/2015)

In this own-initiative opinion, the EESC, amongst other things:

- notes that people seeking information, patients and healthcare professionals have repeatedly stressed the need for full,

accurate and up-to-date information on medicinal products and for a single digital market;

- points out that having all this on a single portal means there is a trustworthy and in many ways easily accessible source of officially authorised information that meets disability-access criteria. This means that patients and healthcare professionals can compare any information available elsewhere with the basic authorised information;
- stresses that doctors (particularly GPs) and other healthcare professionals, such as pharmacists and nurses, are the first point of contact for patients, providing them with recommendations regarding their ailments and treatment options.



**Ariane RODERT (SE) – INT/770** “Building a financial ecosystem for social enterprises” (EESC opinion 3146/2015)

The EESC welcomes the Luxembourg EU Presidency **prioritising social economy** and in particular its focus on creating a tailored financial ecosystem. In this context, the EESC considers that:

- the Commission should not to lose the momentum in supporting the social economy agenda and should see access to finance as one component in the full ecosystem needed for the development and growth of Social Economy Enterprises (SEE);
- the Commission should make full use of the fact that the social economy is an investment priority in the current Investment Plan for Europe;
- financial support from the EU level must be coupled with the EC providing guidance, training and capacity building for governments and key stakeholders;

But, to fully unleash the potential of the SEE, all Member States must develop and implement national action plans for the social economy based on a broad stakeholder approach including representatives from civil society.



**Bernardo HERNÁNDEZ BATALLER (ES) – TEN/560** “Social innovation, networking and digital communication” (EESC opinion 4902/2014)

The opinion sets out to assess the conditions needed for social innovation to benefit fully from the ICTs, in

order to serve the common good, and calls for measures to be taken in favour of digital technology and platforms to promote online relations and the development of synergetic interactions. The EESC concludes that **social innovation and collaborative networks must become tools to boost public participation and civil society** in general, in designing and managing EU policies, by means of distributed, collective and bottom-up projects that strengthen more direct democracy. Universal access to the new technologies and particularly broad-band internet must be a priority for the European Union. The EESC recognises that **social innovation, based on the new technologies, can play an important role in creating new skilled jobs** by supporting projects seeking to set up new and innovative businesses.

The EESC calls for **social innovation and the use of new technologies; social networks and collaborative work for implementing of technical solutions that help people with disabilities**. It urges the institutions to stimulate capacity-building and the use of essential digital environments and to help create spaces for horizontal, innovative connections and to facilitate and promote quick and secure real-time access. The European Commission must launch a clear and concrete policy on **social innovation and public access to the new technologies** that triggers initiatives bringing shared benefits to the population, in line with the European Commission’s Social Investment Package.

**Bernardo HERNÁNDEZ BATALLER (ES) – TEN/571** “Cyber activism and civil society organisations” (EESC opinion 1058/2015)

In today’s digital society, **cyber-activism is a useful tool for empowering citizens** insofar as it facilitates and promotes active social engagement and participation through new technologies, while contributing to reducing social and digital exclusion. A conceptual approach to cyber-activism defines it as a form of activism that encourages people to actively champion political, environmental, social, civic and cultural, etc. causes, without the prior need for defined ideologies, hierarchies or programmes, and which uses technological tools that promote viral dissemination and participation in order to do so. Moreover, the EESC believes it is essential to provide the public with the necessary knowledge and skills to handle cyber-activism intelligently and securely. It therefore urges the European institutions to **encourage awareness-raising activities, training and education**, with special emphasis on disseminating good practice and eradicating the malicious use of online activism. .../...

.../... Moreover, and in relation to institutional governance, cyber-activism promotes co-decision areas and shared power through proactive and reactive multidirectional interactions between multiple actors (governments, civil society organisations, social stakeholders, citizens and businesses).



**Pavel TRANTINA (CZ) – SOC/521** "Validation of skills and qualifications acquired through non-formal and informal learning – the practical input of organised civil society" (EESC opinion 802/2015)

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 possible that is comprehensible to all parties involved, particularly employers and educational institutions. Member States should provide opportunities for people of different ages and qualification levels to get 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 and universities, 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 the importance and value – of non-formal education and informal learning in voluntary organisations, as well as strengthening mutual trust. The EESC has already supported the creation of the European Skills Passport and, subsequently, the Europass Experience. It is therefore disappointed that the European Commission has suspended the preparatory work on the Europass Experience and calls on it to see this initiative through to completion.



**Jorge PEGADO LIZ (PT) – INT/768** "Delegated acts" (EESC opinion 1053/2015)

In this additional opinion, the EESC:

- welcomes the proposal for a new binding interinstitutional agreement, based on Article 295 TFEU, 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;
- considers that it too should be consulted for an opinion, in the same way as for the ordinary legislative procedure;



**Luca JAHIER (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 current institutional set-up of the European Union" (EESC opinion 3264/2015)

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 Economic and Social Committee. As a representative of European organised civil society, the EESC was asked by the European Parliament to examine how the functioning of the EU could be improved by building on 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 this dimension of the Lisbon Treaty must be fully and systematically implemented. Moreover, in future it will be necessary (i) to extend the competences of the European Parliament, for instance through an increased role in European economic governance and the European Semester, and (ii) to put in place a more balanced share of responsibilities and inter-institutional cooperation between the institutions with a view to consolidate 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 Europeans' increasing mistrust. "It is high 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 Jahier, President of the EESC's Various Interests Group and rapporteur for the opinion. The first step towards capitalising on the existing provisions of the Lisbon Treaty would be to achieve economic, social and territorial cohesion (Article 3, TEU) and to make better use of the five horizontal clauses of the TFEU (Articles 8 to 12). In future, these clauses should be used to promote greater inter-connectivity 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 (CSFP)

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



**Carlos TRIAS PINTO (ES) – ECO/378** "The Economy for the Common Good: a sustainable economic model geared towards social cohesion" (EESC opinion 2060/2015)

The EESC considers that the Economy for the Common Good (ECG) 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 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, European companies will lead the global ethical market and will contribute to the enhancement of human rights, labour standards and the protection of the environment throughout the world.
- Fostering ethical consumption and awareness among European consumers.

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



**Tom JONES (UK) – NAT/661** "Rural Development Programmes – Sticking Plasters or Green Shoots of Recovery?" (EESC opinion 601/2015)

The EESC welcomes the continuing commitment of the EU, Member States and regions to address some of the challenges facing rural areas through a wide ranging Rural Development Programme (RDP). There is disappointment at the delay to submission, 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 of 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-border mentoring, twinning, 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 is noted. Strong emphasis on keeping jobs and creating new employment opportunities in rural areas is clear across programmes. Measures to incentivise young people to seek a future in rural areas are important, along with measures to facilitate the integration of all people 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 environment, its ecosystems and cultural landscapes, are welcomed. Support for local products, accurately labelled, for rural tourism and small scale and community renewable energy schemes should bring sustainable economic and community benefit. Tackling the impacts of climate change on agriculture and forestry, and vice versa, are priorities in the programmes. Village economic and community renewal is essential and the RDPs 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 SCHLÜTER (DE) – SOC/520** "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 EU level. Social policy principles could provide a substantive basis for the Commission's recommendations, especially in the context of the European Semester, the Europe 2020 strategy, the open method of coordination and application of the social impact assessment under Article 9 TFEU. 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 be supported through social services and incentive systems enabling them to subsist through their own efforts;
- Principle of transparency: the use of public funds by welfare providers and public administrations should be transparent;
- Principle of a joined-up approach: people's everyday situations, changing life paths, new family constellations, ageing and immigration call for integrated and joined-up services;
- Principle of quality: social services should be backed up by quality assurance measures;



**Evelyne PICHENOT (FR) – REX/443** "Corporate social and societal responsibility as a lever for action in the EU's partnership agreements (trade, investment and cooperation/development)" (EESC opinion 558/2015)

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 chapter of trade and investment agreements. Given the diversity of partner countries, the EESC calls on the Commission to facilitate an evaluation and to improve the understanding of the challenges and risks for companies that carry 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 state in promoting and protecting human rights. It calls on state authorities to enhance fiscal supervision measures and measures to tackle money laundering and corruption. It calls moreover on development and export credit agencies to fully implement CSR 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 useful information to consumers and also improve transparency. As regards civil society, the EESC recommends further encouraging more sustainable production and distribution, by raising the profile of initiatives in the field of fair trade, sector-specific labelling, eco-design and the circular economy. It also proposes offering assistance to civil society organisations in non-EU countries involved in drafting and implementing national CSR plans. It recommends using funding from the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) to support civil society stakeholders involved in human rights work, and particularly whistle-blowers.

NOTE: The complete texts of all EESC opinions are available in various language versions on the Committee's website: <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.opinions-search>