



Making civil society a driving force in the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Position paper – September 2015

Introduction

During the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit, 25 – 27 September 2015, world leaders adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This unprecedented broad action plan for people, planet and prosperity aims at ending poverty and fighting inequality worldwide while respecting the boundaries of the planet. It establishes a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030.

The new agenda is universal; it applies to developing countries as well as to developed countries – like EU Member States – and will require transformational economic and societal changes on all sides.

In order to implement the SDGs, efficient governance mechanisms have to be put in place at global, regional, national and local level. These must be based on a participatory approach, building upon the principles of transparency, accountability and empowering citizens, local communities, businesses, NGOs and other civil society players to take an active role at all policy levels. For the European level the Committee recommends the creation of a **European Sustainable Development Forum** as a platform involving a broad range of civil society organisations and stakeholders in the implementation and monitoring of SDGs in the EU.

“The new agenda must become part of the contract between people, including civil society and responsible business, and their governments — national and local.”¹

Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary-General

What the EU is doing

Ever since the Rio+ 20 conference kick-started the “post-2015” process in 2012, the EU has played an active role in preparing the new UN agenda. In several communications, the Commission has outlined its vision, developed necessary elements of the new Global Partnership and put forward proposals on how the international community should organise actions to deliver on the SDGs, and how the EU and its Member States can contribute to

the international effort². The Council has also expressed its strong support for an ambitious, transformative and inclusive post-2015 agenda³. However, there is not yet a clear strategy on how the EU will take responsibility in the implementation of the new global agenda for sustainable development and how it will involve civil society.

The EESC’s position

Over the past few years the Committee has been promoting an ambitious post-2015 agenda with several opinions and, in particular, with a series of conferences and workshops, organised in conjunction with the Commission and various UN bodies. These have provided a platform for civil society and yielded conclusions that have contributed to the preparation process.

Now that the new agenda has been adopted, the EU and the Member States will have to align all their policies – not solely development – towards the fight against poverty and inequality, preserving the planet and creating inclusive economic growth in a balanced and coherent way. In addition to the global fight against inequality and poverty, the EU will have to increase its efforts to create prosperity and social coherence domestically. It will also have to pursue the transition of its economy towards a low carbon and circular economy to ensure the preservation of functional ecosystems.

For the European region, the EU will have a key role in integrating the new agenda into European policies, communicating it, defining European milestones, coordinating and providing guidance, as well as monitoring and organising peer reviews. In order to achieve these objectives effectively, the mid-term review of the Europe 2020 strategy and the European Semester must tie in closely with the new sustainable development agenda. In addition, the EU will have to extend its planning horizon beyond 2020 in order to implement the SDGs by introducing an integrated strategy for a sustainable Europe in a globalised world, with a time horizon of at least 2030⁴.

Strong and inclusive multi-stakeholder partnerships, involving governments, parliaments, local authorities and organised civil

1. *The Road to Dignity by 2030, Synthesis Report of the Secretary-General*, http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/reports/SG_Synthesis_Report_Road_to_Dignity_by_2030.pdf, paragraph 145.
2. *Communication on “A Decent Life for All: ending poverty and giving the world a sustainable future”* COM(2013) 92 final, http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/documents/2013-02-22_communication_a_decent_life_for_all_post_2015_en.pdf.
Communication “A decent Life for all: from vision to collective action” COM(2014)0335 final, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52014DC0335>.
3. *Council Conclusions on a transformative post-2015 agenda*, 16 December 2014, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/foraff/146311.pdf.
Council Conclusions on a New Global Partnership for Poverty Eradication and Sustainable Development after 2015, 25 May 2015, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/05/26-fac-dev-council-conclusions-global-partnership/>.
4. *EESC opinion SC/039 Taking stock of the Europe 2020 strategy*, Brussels, 15 October 2014, <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.europe-2020-opinions.33520>.

society – including the private sector and citizens – will be vital to effect the necessary transformational changes.

“Participatory governance mechanisms based on the principles of transparency and accountability have to be put in place to ensure that civil society has a strong role in the implementation, monitoring and review of the SDGs. Existing arrangements for participatory governance and stakeholder involvement at EU level need to be further developed in order to meet these challenges.”

Brenda King, rapporteur on EESC Information Report: "Civil society involvement in the implementation of the post-2015 agenda"

The EESC's Recommendations

Building upon its extensive experience in the outreach to civil society organisations from all sectors and the organisation of civil society dialogues in the post-2015 process, the Committee has investigated opportunities and processes for civil society involvement in the implementation of the post-2015 agenda in the EU and drawn up an information report putting forward recommendations on how to strengthen participatory governance⁵.

The Committee intends to support citizens and civil society involvement in the implementation, monitoring and review of the new agenda at EU level by organising a regular platform or **European Forum for Sustainable Development** in partnership with the Commission and representatives of organised civil society. This forum shall bring together, on a regular basis, policy actors from EU institutions with a broad range of civil society representatives, including the private sector, matching the EU Semester cycle as well as the UN SDG monitoring intervals.

The forum will provide the required regular, stable, structured and independent framework for civil society dialogue and debate on

sustainable development at EU level. Stakeholder engagement in long-term sustainable development works best if it is organised as a continuous and integrative process rather than being conducted through one-off or ad-hoc engagement exercises at different points of the policy cycle. A structured process enables stakeholders as well as governments to plan ahead, to assemble evidence, reports and other material to make well-researched contributions at the appropriate time in the policy cycle.

The Committee is clear that such an independent forum will be in addition to, and would by no means replace, the various communication channels, policy dialogues and forums established by non-governmental organisations and stakeholders in certain policy areas related to sustainable development. The added value of a forum organised by the Committee would be that it would act as a bridge between citizens, organised civil society and EU institutions; reach out to all relevant stakeholders and policy makers; and help to overcome sector-specific thinking. Civil society organisations must play an active role by setting the agenda of the forum and contributing in a self-organised manner.

“We strongly believe that civil society involvement in the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs requires a political framework and an organisational and procedural structure in order to become operative. That is why we suggest creating a European Forum for Sustainable Development covering all relevant policy sectors and bringing together civil society with the responsible political decision makers.”

Brenda King, rapporteur on EESC Information Report: "Civil society involvement in the implementation of the post-2015 agenda"

Further information

EESC Information Report - "Civil society involvement in the implementation of the post-2015 agenda":

<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.nat-opinions.35521>

Study of the Stakeholder Forum conducted for the EESC – *Building the Europe We Want: Models for civil society involvement in the implementation of the Post-2015 agenda at the EU level*: <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.publications.36483>

UN Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/>

European Commission on global sustainable development:

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/international_issues/index_en.htm

https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/policies/european-development-policy_en

⁵ <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.nat-opinions.35521>