



European Economic and Social Committee

NAT/678
**A European Sustainable
Development Civil Society
Forum**

Brussels, 26 May 2016

OPINION

of the

European Economic and Social Committee

on

A European Sustainable Development Civil Society Forum

(exploratory opinion requested by the Dutch presidency)

Rapporteur: **Brenda King**
Co-rapporteur: **Roman Haken**

On 16 December 2015, the upcoming Dutch Presidency decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, on

A European Sustainable Development Civil Society Forum
(exploratory opinion).

The Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 11 May 2016.

At its 517th plenary session, held on 25 and 26 May 2016 (meeting of 26 May), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 148 votes to one with no abstentions.

*

* *

1. Conclusions and recommendations

- 1.1 The Committee welcomes the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It regards the adoption of this agenda together with the Paris COP 21 agreement on climate change as a big breakthrough in setting a global course of action to end poverty, promote prosperity for all and protect the planet's natural resources in an integrated way.
- 1.2 The Committee recommends the creation of a European Sustainable Development Forum (The Forum) in partnership with the Commission and representatives from civil society as a platform involving a broad range of civil society organisations and stakeholders in setting the framework for the implementation of this agenda in the EU, and its ongoing monitoring and review.
- 1.3 The new agenda with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) applies universally to developing as well as to developed countries and will require transformational changes on all sides. The EU and the Member States will have to align all their policies – not solely in development – in a balanced and coherent way.
- 1.4 As one of the driving forces in the preparation of the UN 2030 Agenda, the EU and its Member States should lead by example in putting the 2030 Agenda into practice and setting up the governance framework. The Committee therefore welcomes the Commission's intention to issue a new initiative in 2016 *Next steps for a sustainable European future* because of its new and most urgent approach to ensure Europe's economic growth and social and environmental sustainability beyond the 2020 timeframe and to implement SDGs in

European internal and external policies in an integrated manner¹. The Committee calls on the Commission to give high priority to this initiative, also incorporating a participatory governance framework. It regards this initiative as a necessary step to strengthen the concept of sustainable development throughout Europe by introducing an integrated strategy for a sustainable Europe in a globalised world with a time horizon of at least 2030 which would frame national implementation.

- 1.5 The Committee commits to contributing to the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the EU. Based on its longstanding experience in outreach to civil society, the Committee feels particularly suited to contributing to a strong involvement of civil society in this context.
- 1.6 At EU level, arrangements for participatory governance need to be further developed in order to strengthen democratic and inclusive decision making and to allow civil society a stronger role.
- 1.7 The Sustainable Development Forum, recommended by the EESC, will facilitate the dialogue and communication between the European institutions and non-governmental stakeholders and between non-governmental stakeholders from different constituencies on progress towards sustainable development in the EU. It will raise awareness of the 2030 Agenda, provide an informed debate and foster ownership on all sides involved.
- 1.8 The Committee is convinced that organising the Forum would be practically feasible and beneficial for the various parties involved. This is based on an in-depth investigation in this opinion, including hearings and meetings where stakeholders expressed support to the idea of establishing the Forum, and considering the very successful example of the European Migration Forum.
- 1.9 Since the management of SDGs at different levels is a new policy area, appropriate governance frameworks still have to be established and consolidated in the coming years. Therefore, the Forum's set up should allow flexibility in order to align it with the evolving overall governance framework.
- 1.10 The Forum should involve representatives from a broad range of organised civil society and stakeholder associations, including the private sector and trade unions. The composition should be as inclusive as possible without compromising the possibilities to manage and operate the Forum efficiently. It should also be open to grassroots initiatives in sustainable development. The participation of academia and research should contribute to a fact-based debate.

¹ COM(2015) 610 final.

- 1.11 The participation of the European Commission at a high level is crucial, representatives from the Council of the EU and the Parliament will be invited and cooperation with the Committee of the Regions is anticipated. National Sustainability Councils and National Economic and Social Councils should be represented, along with similar national bodies devoted to making progress in sustainable development.
- 1.12 The Forum should be managed by a board composed of a majority of members coming from civil society and stakeholder organisations and other members from the Commission and the EESC.
- 1.13 The Forum must be well embedded in the processes of SDG implementation, monitoring and review. It should be organised as a continuous working process, meet at least once a year and address inter alia the EU preparation for the annual UN High-Level-Political-Forum on Sustainable Development. The Forum should serve as a platform to discuss the design, set-up and modalities of the EU framework for SDG implementation. Furthermore, the Forum should facilitate the involvement of its constituency in intergovernmental SDG reviews of Member States.

2. **Introduction**

- 2.1 At the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit, 25–27 September 2015, world leaders adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030.
- 2.2 For the European region, the EU will have a key role in integrating the new agenda into European policies, communicating it, defining milestones, coordinating and providing guidance, as well as monitoring progress and ensuring the quality of (national) peer reviews.
- 2.3 In order to implement the SDGs, appropriate governance mechanisms have to be put in place at global, regional, national and local level. Based on a participatory approach, and building upon the principles of transparency, accountability and empowering citizens, local communities, businesses, trade unions, NGOs and other civil society players must take an active role at all policy levels.
- 2.4 In its information² report the Committee has investigated models for civil society involvement in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the EU and put forward recommendations for strengthened participatory governance. The suggested Forum builds on key recommendations of this report.

²

[Information report](#), EESC-2015-1169 of 17.9.2015, The report was accompanied by a research study from Stakeholder Forum, [Building the Europe We Want - Models for civil society involvement in the implementation of the Post-2015 agenda](#), commissioned by the Committee, June 2015.

2.5 Following the presentation of the report at the Commission, the UN HLPF, working groups of the Council and other conferences, the Dutch Presidency of the Council requested that the Committee draw up an exploratory opinion on how a mechanism for civil society involvement at EU level could be practically set up, managed and financed in order to make it an effective tool for participatory governance of the 2030 Agenda. The recommendations from this opinion should facilitate the following political decisions about the introduction of such an instrument.

3. Civil society and stakeholder involvement in sustainable development

3.1 The process leading to the UN 2030 Agenda has been based on a broad participatory dialogue with civil society and stakeholder organisations contributing substantially to the development of the SDGs in the UN Open Working Group. This inclusive approach must be pursued since civil society has a key role to play in each stage of the sustainability policy cycle (i.e. setting goals and targets, establishing implementation strategies and policy programmes, implementation and monitoring). Progress on sustainable development will only be made when it comes directly from committed and innovative businesses, local communities and citizens.

3.2 One of the key findings of the previous EESC information report was that stakeholder engagement in sustainable development works best if it is organised as a structured and continued process rather than being conducted on the basis of solitary topical or ad-hoc consultations. A structured process enables stakeholders to plan ahead and make well-researched contributions.

3.3 The existence of diverging definitions of civil society in this context has to be acknowledged. While from some sides a distinction is made between civil society organisations, engaging in the protection of collective goods, and the private sector the Committee has a broad understanding of "organised civil society" as comprising all groups and organisations in which people work cooperatively and express their positions, including organisations of the private sector, trade unions and other interest groups³. The recommendations in this opinion are based on a broad understanding of civil society, covering all non-governmental stakeholders in an inclusive and wide-ranging way since an involvement of all groups and sectors is needed in order to address the challenge of SDG implementation.

4. A European Sustainable Development Forum - an added value

4.1 The Committee has long experience in reaching out to civil society organisations from all sectors and creating value through dialogue and concrete action with European policymakers. The Committee has been promoting an ambitious 2030 Agenda with several opinions and a series of conferences and workshops, organised in conjunction with the Commission and

³ Art. 300 para. 2 TFEU

various UN bodies. On the occasion of the negotiation of the 2030 Agenda these have provided a platform for civil society dialogue at EU level. The Committee proposes now to further develop this practice into a permanent and more stable structure.

4.2 Based on the report's assessment, the Committee intends to set up a European Sustainable Development Forum (the Forum) in partnership with the Commission and representatives of organised civil society and stakeholders.

4.3 The Forum should provide a regular, stable, structured and independent platform for civil society dialogue on sustainable development at EU level. It should focus on the following tasks:

- Providing a frame for dialogue on sustainable development and facilitating cooperation between the EU institutions and non-governmental stakeholders as well as between non-governmental stakeholders from different constituencies;
- Creating a space for non-governmental stakeholders, players and grass root initiatives to share suggestions, best practice and solutions for a meaningful implementation of the 2030 Agenda;
- Ensuring strong involvement of non-governmental stakeholders in the ongoing monitoring and review of the 2030 Agenda;
- For this purpose organising a continued dialogue process with meetings complemented by other means of communication, such as an e-platform.

4.4 The added value of this Forum will be

- **Outreach:** as the facilitator of the Forum the EESC brings its capacity to reach out to various interested parties and to ensure cross-sectoral integration.
- **Information and advice:** the Forum would show both policy successes and policy shortcomings and failures on the implementation of SDGs in an informed way and foster success through expertise from various stakeholders, exchange on best-practice as well as through safeguarding the long-term horizon and bringing in new perspectives.
- **Raising awareness and creating ownership:** the Forum will raise awareness of the 2030 Agenda and strengthen ownership through the involvement of various stakeholders in the process.
- **Partnership:** the Forum could facilitate multi-stakeholder partnerships for the implementation of SDGs at EU level.

4.5 The Forum offers an opportunity for enhanced dialogue, for building consensus and for scanning controversies. It does not speak on behalf of CSOs nor does it replace advocacy campaigns by participating organisations. The Committee appreciates the effective work of NGOs and other alliances advocating an ambitious implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the EU. It invites all these to participate in the Forum, using it as a platform to promote their

messages and engage in a dialogue with a broader range of stakeholders and the EU institutions.

4.6 With its proposal the Committee also builds on the positive experiences of several EU Member States with the effective input of National Sustainability Councils (NSCs) into domestic decision making by government, local communities and corporations, reflecting on the broader debate on sustainability. Members of NSCs represent civil society, advocacy groups and stakeholder associations along with corporate and trade union associations. Appointed by government, their institutional design may vary according to national specificities. Without replacing legitimate advocacy approaches those Councils connect with top level decision makers and operate on a broad base of activities and tasks:

- providing advice to the government;
- bringing stakeholders together, connecting with target groups and expanding vertical integration;
- monitoring progress;
- facilitating policy learning, in particular through Peer Reviews;
- setting the agenda and
- stimulating the outreach of the concept of sustainability.

4.7 The example of the European Migration Forum (EMF) demonstrates the benefits of a platform similar to the Forum, organised by the EESC. The EMF was established as the European Integration Forum in 2009 by the European Commission in cooperation with the EESC⁴. Given the success of the Forum, it was decided to expand its scope to include topics related to immigration and asylum. It brings together around 200 participants, including ca. 120 civil society organisations, 20 representatives of local and regional authorities, representatives of EU Member States and EU institutions.

4.8 In 2012 DG DEVCO very successfully set up a "Policy Forum for Development" at EU level as a space for multi-stakeholder dialogue with CSOs and local authorities from EU and partner countries to ensure their effective consultation and contribution to the EU development policies and programmes. Participants include development NGOs, trade Unions, cooperatives, foundations and philanthropies, local authorities, chambers of commerce, human rights organisations, relief/humanitarian organisations, environment organisations and youth organisations. However, the Policy Forum only covers aspects of the EU external and development policy, in particular by providing a thorough dialogue with civil society on development policy and projects. This is an ideal complement to the wider sustainable development agenda the European Sustainable Development Forum is aiming at and its imperative for integrating internal and external aspects of SDGs. In practical terms, a great part of the discussion in this Forum will be dedicated to the EU internal implementation

4

EESC opinion on *Elements for the structure, organisation and functioning of a platform for the greater involvement of civil society in the EU-level promotion of policies for the integration of third-country nationals*, [O.J.C 27 of 3.2.2009, p 95-98](#).

of SDGs. The work of the Forum will have to be closely coordinated with the Policy Forum for Development in order to create synergies.

5. **Main features/building blocks of a European Sustainable Development Forum**

5.1 As the SDGs are unprecedented and governance frameworks are still in the process of development, the Forum's setup should focus special attention on the work-in-progress governance aspects and be kept flexible. The Forum will have to integrate itself into the full policy cycle of sustainable development. For this purpose it will need a detailed review once EU and Member State governance frameworks for the 2030 Agenda take shape.

5.2 Having investigated the main features of the Forum in the preparation of this opinion, the Committee is convinced that its initial launch should consist of the following elements.

5.3 **Participants**

5.3.1 As regards the participation of non-governmental stakeholders the objective is to be as inclusive as possible, as pointed out in 3.3, and include representatives from

- development, social, environmental, human rights and non-discrimination NGOs,
- the private sector, including industry, SMEs and micro-businesses, services, and sustainable investment,
- trade unions,
- farmers, forestry,
- consumers,
- the cultural dimension of sustainability
- youth,
- urban and rural development,
- and other relevant sectors.

5.3.2 Civil society groups whose interests are normally not well represented at EU level need to be involved. Participants should also include not only representatives of organisations, but genuine initiatives and players in sustainable development who can bring in experience from best practice.

5.3.3 The composition should ensure that different sectors and stakeholder groups are represented in a balanced way and all dimensions of sustainable development are covered appropriately. On the other hand, the varying specific thematic focus of each meeting will also have to be considered. This will lead to core groups for sustainable development policies being represented permanently while the participation of others will depend on the specific thematic focus. Core groups are those that follow up on all 17 SDGs and focus on overarching governance issues. Participation of special focus groups will be based on an open call that sets out the agenda of each meeting.

- 5.3.4 Membership of the Forum should reflect cross-level governance, as well as continuity and flexibility in expertise. The prime focus will be on organisations working at European level. From the national and subnational level SD Councils, ESCs and local and regional communities should be represented in the Forum. Cooperation with the Committee of the Regions should be anticipated.
- 5.3.5 On the institutional side the Commission, in particular the Vice-President in charge of sustainable development policy coordination should be present in the meetings and be invited to provide presentations and engage in a dialogue with stakeholders. Representatives of the Council of the EU and the European Parliament should be invited.
- 5.3.6 Research and science should be represented in the Forum. Involving the scientific pillar could also facilitate the science-policy interface in the implementation of the 2030 agenda at EU level.
- 5.3.7 Funding for travel and accommodation will have to be provided for civil society organisations with a limited capacity to participate.
- 5.3.8 In order to balance continuity and flexibility, the selection of non-permanent participants should be made in advance of each Forum meeting, taking into consideration the thematic focus of the meeting and on the basis of an open call. A similar procedure is successfully applied for the European Migration Forum.
- 5.3.9 To ensure inclusiveness and trust, the conditions for participation will be transparent and participants will be required to sign-up to the EU Transparency Register and appropriate principles, such as the Istanbul Principles for CSO Development Effectiveness⁵.

5.4 **Organisation and management**

- 5.4.1 The multiple functions of the Forum have to be taken into account in order to define its institutional status and organisational design appropriately. Independence and credibility of the Forum are of high value. The governance of the Forum will have to be as clear and transparent as possible, avoiding any blurring of responsibilities.
- 5.4.2 The Forum should be hosted and coordinated by the EESC as the body dedicated to facilitating civil society participation at EU level.
- 5.4.3 The preparation of meetings should be managed by a board with a mixed composition of representatives from civil society and stakeholder organisations, who will form the majority of board members, as well as representatives of the Commission and EESC. As is the case

⁵ <http://cso-effectiveness.org/InternationalFramework>.

with the European Migration Forum, board members could be elected by the participants of the SD Forum, based on a rotation principle.

5.5 Working process and meetings

5.5.1 The Forum should be designed as a continuous working process. Each year there will be regular meetings accompanied by preparatory meetings, be it as "open space meetings", working groups and continuous cooperation based on online platforms using innovative methods of organising communication processes and events.

5.5.2 The composition and the Forum's way of working should respect the right of the civil society organisations involved to define their contributions in an independent and self-organised manner.

5.5.3 The Forum will strive for a meaningful connection with the SDG implementation process at European level, and at UN and Member State level correspondingly. At Member State level national governments are expected to adapt to the universal goals and to report back to the UN where the UN High-Level-Political Forum (LPF) for Sustainable Development has been established to guide and monitor the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda. The Forum should meet in plenary at least once a year ahead of the annual HLPF summer meeting so that the outcome can be brought to bear.

5.5.4 For timing of other meetings reference should be paid to the European Semester, budgetary negotiations, and the EC work programme. The Forum shall facilitate the participation of peers from civil society and stakeholders in emerging peer review schemes of Member States governments which are currently explored by the European Sustainable Development Network.

5.5.5 Another important reference point for involving stakeholders in the monitoring is given by the monitoring reports on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the EU, particularly Eurostat's monitoring reports which for the debates in the Forum may provide a solid knowledge base.

5.6 Agenda setting

5.6.1 The plenary meetings' agenda must regularly focus on progress and modalities of the 2030 Agenda in a comprehensive way. In addition the agenda could focus on a specific theme, reflecting a cluster of SDGs or a theme of horizontal importance for many SDGs (e.g. halving poverty and inequality simultaneously). The agenda should be designed in a way that encourages cooperation of stakeholders from different backgrounds.

5.6.2 Since the Forum should act as an independent and transparent body, participants will be consulted in the process of agenda setting via the Forum's management board.

5.7 Knowledge base

- 5.7.1 In order to be effective and meaningful the Forum's debates have to build upon an excellent knowledge base. It is to be expected that Eurostat will proceed with its bi-annual reports⁶ monitoring the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda in the EU. These reports will form part of the knowledge base for the discussion in the Forum.
- 5.7.2 Information from independent sources must be included in the process, such as reports and initiatives from organised civil society, national Economic and Social Councils and Sustainability Councils, academia, research bodies, such as the IISD knowledge management system on SDGs, and European agencies as well as citizens' monitoring activities. Information input could be supported by web-based platforms. To obtain expertise through inviting experts or initiating research, the Forum should strive to link to existing research capacities.
- 5.7.3 Using good practice experiences from national Councils for Sustainable Development the Forum should establish links to research funding institutions and initiate transdisciplinary research into the transformation towards sustainable development throughout Europe.

5.8 Outcome

- 5.8.1 The outcome of the Forum meetings and discussion processes should be summarised in reports or other suitable documentation methods. All representatives should see their views and recommendations reflected in the outcome documentation. Resolution of conflicts of interest lies with the Board. The outcome should provide also opportunity for participating organisations to present their results and reports.
- 5.8.2 If regular progress reports on sustainable development are produced by Eurostat or the Commission, the Forum will suggest taking its findings on board as a shadow report from a civil society perspective.
- 5.8.3 It must be ensured that the outcome feeds into the work of the Commission and the other European Institutions on the 2030 Agenda and any feedback will be closely monitored.
- 5.8.4 Another outcome might be a series of European dialogues with special interest groups or other target groups of people, e.g. young people as members of the next generation of decision takers who will reach retirement age in the year 2050.

⁶ <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/products-statistical-books/-/KS-GT-15-001>.

5.8.5 Furthermore, the Forum may choose to establish new forms of interaction. The establishment of a European Sustainability Award is conceivable and could be awarded for extraordinary action and leadership on the part of civil society.

5.9 **Funding**

5.9.1 The EESC could provide its technical infrastructure and the management of the secretariat. Funding for required travel cost reimbursement for participants and speakers as well as the management of on-line platforms and the production of reports and outcome documents will have to be investigated with the cooperating partners.

Brussels, 26 May 2016.

The President
of the
European Economic and Social Committee

Georges Dassis
