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Towards structured youth engagement on climate and sustainability

OPINION

European Economic and Social Committee

**Towards structured youth engagement on climate
and sustainability in the EU decision-making process**
(own-initiative opinion)

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1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

- 1.1 The intergenerational aspect of climate and sustainable development policies and implementation mechanisms needs to be reflected in strong meaningful youth engagement at all stages of EU decision-making processes, from the drafting of legislative proposals and initiatives through to implementation, monitoring and follow-up.
- 1.2 Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals through the European Green Deal requires a new approach to a more inclusive multi-stakeholder governance model that would put young people at the heart of the engagement process and go way beyond ad hoc meetings and mere calls for consultation.
- 1.3 The EESC proposes the establishment of Youth Climate and Sustainability Round Tables to be hosted by the EESC in collaboration with the European Commission and the European Parliament.
- 1.4 It also proposes the inclusion of a youth delegate in the official EU delegation to UNFCCC COP meetings. In addition, the EESC proposes including a youth delegate as an additional member of the EESC delegation which holds observer status at such events.
- 1.5 The EESC will endeavour to amplify the voices of young people and youth organisations through considered inclusion in opinions relating to climate and sustainability, by proactively seeking input from youth representatives and continued invitations to them as speakers at EESC events; it will also request that the same opportunities to be heard are granted to youth representatives in the other EU institutions, for example at the European Parliament.

2. **Introduction**

- 2.1 The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹ represent a turning point in the way the international community has decided to tackle global issues by bringing together economic, environmental and social dimensions in an integrated manner. The Agenda 2030 is a people-centred project designed to leave no group behind and intergenerational equity is a concept inherent to sustainability. The young generation should not be left to deal with the consequences of unsustainable policies they have not contributed to shaping.
- 2.2 The world today is facing a climate emergency. The response of governments to the climate crisis thus far has not been sufficient and the world is not on track to meet the objective of the Paris Agreement and the SDGs. Civil society has been calling forcefully for more ambitious and urgent climate action. The most dramatic demonstration of these calls are the youth climate strikes.
- 2.3 The first half of 2020 has been defined by the global pandemic induced by COVID-19. The unprecedented response to this virus will have a lasting impact on short- and medium-term

¹ [UN sustainable development goals](#).

economic forecasts. The design of the financial response packages cannot be ignored. As the youth of today enter the workforce they will continue to experience the financial impact of COVID-19. In addition, young people will continue feeling the impact of COVID-19 on their mental health, education and overall participation in society. The Sustainable Development approach of balancing financial, societal and environmental needs is even more relevant in this context.

- 2.4 The financial support announced for the economic recovery will place a burden on future generations. There should be fairness in how resources and opportunities are used between generations. The support given to sectors in post-COVID plans should take into consideration the demands of young people with regard to climate and their right to a healthier, more sustainable future.
- 2.5 The Recovery Plan for Europe², as announced by Commission President von der Leyen, has reflected the need to ensure that the economic recovery should be founded on the principles of the EU Green Deal, and deliver for both climate and sustainability. The recovery programme has the potential to be a transformative stimulus package.
- 2.6 David Boyd, UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment made an appeal in mid-April, saying countries must not use the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse to weaken environmental protection and enforcement, after several governments announced plans to lower environmental standards or reduce other related measures like monitoring and enforcing environmental requirements³.
- 2.7 In light of the global environmental crisis that predates COVID-19, these actions are irrational and irresponsible and jeopardise the rights of vulnerable and marginalised people. Such policy decisions are likely to result in accelerated deterioration of the environment and have a negative impact on a wide range of human rights, including the right to life, health, water, culture and food, as well as the right to live in a healthy environment. COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of having a safe, clean and sustainable natural environment.
- 2.8 As the SDGs are now to be implemented via the European Green Deal, this should in principle open the debate on a paradigm shift towards a more participatory model of multi-stakeholder governance for sustainable development. Young people should be part of this new governance model and should be enabled to engage in the decision-making process at EU level in a structured and formal way going beyond mere consultation and ad hoc meetings.
- 2.9 Youth organisations play an important role in this context, as they represent the interests of millions of young people in Europe and globally through their wide networks. They are key actors in ensuring that young people are not only present in institutions, but are also enabled to contribute to the decision-making process in a meaningful way.

² European Commission: [Europe's moment: Repair and Prepare for the Next Generation](#) COM(2020) 456 final and accompanying document [The EU budget powering the recovery plan for Europe](#).

³ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061772>

- 2.10 Youth organisations can play multiple other roles. Youth work and non-formal learning have a positive impact on sustainable development, as its purpose is to build empowered young individuals that actively contribute to our society. Youth organisations can also help to amplify youth voices to collectively push for sustainable development at local, national, regional and global level and to hold governments and institutions to account on their commitments.
- 2.11 Quality youth participation and representation mechanisms create an opportunity for a partnership between policy makers, young people and youth organisations to shape decisions that impact young people's lives. It is important to take this opportunity to also ensure the stability and resilience of our democracies for which participation of all groups of society in decision-making processes is a prerequisite.
- 2.12 All aspects of policy need to consider the impact on youth and their perspectives, including for future generations. From climate change investment to Farm to Fork, the role of youth is especially important when considering social aspects and future-proofing policies.
- 2.13 This opinion will look into the possibilities to engage with young people in a formal way at institutional level. It will provide the building blocks for a new structured approach to youth engagement at EU level. Lastly, the opinion will also propose recommendations to the EESC on how to better integrate young people into its working processes, in order to help voice their message and thus make the EESC's message fairer in an intergenerational context.

3. The link between climate change and the need for youth engagement

- 3.1 Young people have the right to have a say on matters that concern them. The right to participate is anchored in the UN Sustainable Development 2030 Agenda, which acknowledges youth as "critical agents of change", as set out in the Sustainable Development Goals.
- 3.2 No other issue has mobilised more young people around the world in the last years than climate change. Young people aged 15 to 24 represent 16% of the world population and will reach 1.3 billion people by 2030. The decisions on climate change and other environmental issues taken by political leaders today will affect generations to come. This principle is known as intergenerational equity.
- 3.3 Young people possess the energy, creativity and motivation to challenge current unsustainable models. Social change led by young people extends beyond generational, cultural and geographical boundaries. Less bound by ideological and institutional structures, young people have demonstrated the ability to think outside the box and develop innovative solutions for society as a whole.
- 3.4 Since climate change disrupts the basic necessities of life – shelter, food and water – it is regarded as the biggest global human health threat of the twenty-first century. Children and young people are amongst the most vulnerable when it comes to climate change impacts, with the World Health Organisation estimating that children will suffer more than 80% of the illnesses, injuries and deaths attributable to it. Children are also more susceptible to indirect effects of climate change, such as food shortages, intergroup conflict, economic dislocation and

migration. The vulnerability of children has been highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, as their exposure as a dependent group has been clearly identified.

- 3.5 Moreover, the psychosocial impacts of climate change arise not only from directly experiencing its effects but also from vicarious experience and knowledge of the threat it poses for the future. There is clear evidence of widespread emotional reactions to climate change, even in high-income countries that are not yet suffering its direct effects. Surveys have found that many young people experience fear, sadness, anger and a sense of powerlessness.
- 3.6 Furthermore, the climate crisis causes the breakdown of our economic and social support structures. Young people must grapple with serious economic, social, cultural, political and environmental problems inherited from previous generations. Young people are disproportionately affected by economic crises and subsequent austerity measures. The most disadvantaged among young people experience precariousness and prolonged poverty. They face additional obstacles, such as difficult living conditions and barriers to jobs opportunities, due to their socio-economic background, sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, ethnicity or race, migratory status, disability and/or other status.

4. **Learning from existing structures and processes**

- 4.1 Over the last eighteen months, we have seen children and young people from all over the world striking and using their voices to demand change. Some are inspired by well-known activists at a global or national level; others are inspired by each other; others can no longer tolerate the continuing support for a "growth at all costs" society or use of public money to support unsustainable practices, for example fossil fuel subsidies and other harmful subsidies. Since the FridaysForFuture movement began in August 2018, 13 million joined climate strikes in 228 countries⁴.

Youth engagement at national level

- 4.2 Some EU countries have since created mechanisms to include the voice of youth representatives in policy-making on climate. The Youth Climate Council in Denmark is an independent youth-led advisory board to the climate minister. It gathers input from young people all over the country and formulates tangible policy proposals to the minister. The proposals are then included in the policy processes to give young people a channel for directly influencing the development of climate policies. Moreover, local level Youth Climate Councils exist in some cities in Denmark.⁵
- 4.3 Many young entrepreneurs think of the ecological and social aspects of their activities right from the start. Business practices aiming to reduce environmental impact should be supported at national level, for instance, by tax exemptions and encouraged as positive trends mobilising young entrepreneurs' energy to create sustainable business models.

⁴ Source: [Fridays for future: strike statistics](#).

⁵ Source: UN [Youth Climate Council](#).

- 4.4 Initiatives like the Green Students' Parliaments in Hungary, which provide proposals on environmental matters to city administrations, are important, as they not only educate but also provide an opportunity for schools to strengthen links with city residents and between schools and parents.

Youth engagement at European level

- 4.5 The EU Youth Dialogue is an EU participatory process enabling young people to engage with decision-makers on a given topic by bringing their ideas and proposals on youth policy-related topics in the EU. It supports the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 and is organised into an 18-month work cycle.
- 4.6 The Council of Europe Advisory Council on Youth is the non-governmental partner in the co-management structure which establishes the standards and work priorities of the Council of Europe's youth sector and makes recommendations for future priorities, programmes and budgets. It is made up of 30 representatives from youth NGOs and networks in Europe and its main task is to advise the Committee of Ministers on all questions relating to young people. It promotes a co-management system in decision-making processes at all levels as good practice for youth participation, democracy and inclusion.

Youth engagement at UN level

- 4.7 At UN level, the Major Group for Children and Youth (UN MGCY) is the UN General Assembly-mandated, official, formal and self-organised mechanism for young people to meaningfully engage in the UN. UN MGCY has working and coordination structures responsible for different aspects of its work, as well as several formal mandated positions.
- 4.8 On climate, YOUNGO is the official youth constituency at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). YOUNGO is made up of organisations and individuals who identify as young. It is not an organisation, but rather a unified open formal engagement mechanism for groups and/or individuals to provide an input into UNFCCC processes in a frequent, formalised, democratic and inclusive manner.
- 4.9 The need for greater involvement of young people was recognised in September at the Youth Climate Summit in New York on 21 September. The Kwon-Gesh Pledge, which calls on young people to hold their governments and leaders accountable, has been endorsed by over 50 countries since the Summit took place.
- 4.10 The UN Youth Strategy 2030 aims to address the needs, build the agency and advance the rights of young people, and to ensure their engagement and participation in the implementation, review and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as well as other relevant global agendas and frameworks.

Learning from other platforms

- 4.11 The MSP on Sustainable Development Goals set up by the Commission in 2017, in which the EESC took an active part, played an important role, but also left much room for improvement in terms of resources for its work, frequency of meetings, ownership of the agenda setting, opportunities for extended debate and engagement amongst members and facilitation of more regular, transparent and accessible public consultations.
- 4.12 The European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform (ECESP), which is run jointly by the EESC and the European Commission, provides a space for a wide-ranging group of stakeholders to exchange good practices and ideas and create valuable networks. Giving ownership of the platform to stakeholders is the main difference with the MSP on SDGs and is a good practice to follow in setting up other structured engagement mechanisms.

5. Vision for meaningful youth engagement

Principles

- 5.1 It is clear that youth organisations do not want to create new engagement mechanisms for processes that they do not deem meaningful in the first place. The climate crisis has deeper roots and proposing solutions to it means asking fundamental questions about what society we want to live in in the future and what vision of the economy we want to create to sustain our climate-neutral society. "If the goal is to change the underlying system, not the climate, it may be necessary to do more than just educate young people about climate change and encourage youth activism. Instead, it may be time to recognise the many facets, forms, spaces, and expressions of youth dissent."⁶ Therefore, the horizontal issues that are closely linked with effective climate policy, such as monetary issues, should also facilitate youth engagement.
- 5.2 For the engagement to be meaningful, young people should be included throughout the entire institutional process: preparatory phases, implementation, follow-up and evaluation of the initiatives and policy processes. Many consultation channels already set the frame and lead to power imbalances. It is important that young people have ownership over their own engagement and are able to co-create the agenda with institutional stakeholders.
- 5.3 As a starting point, it would be beneficial to identify obstacles to young people's participation, which could be legal or administrative in nature or due to lack of awareness or lack of access to information regarding youth participation and representation mechanisms. Social, economic and cultural obstacles hindering young people's participation should also be addressed. The role of informal social and cultural conversations and information exchanges should not be underestimated, for example within peer groups or within families. Participation should be clearly understood to be for everyone.
- 5.4 It goes without saying that resources are needed to provide support to build necessary knowledge and skills and ensure equal opportunities for meaningful participation, as well as for

⁶ Source: Ecology and Society: [Exploring youth activism on climate change: dutiful, disruptive, and dangerous dissent](#).

young people who are taking part in youth participation and representation mechanisms. Governments and relevant institutions should provide sufficient, structural, reliable and sustainable resources and necessary political support for youth organisations to engage in youth participation and representation mechanisms.

- 5.5 The youth climate movement and its activists have a right to have their voices heard in the decision-making processes that will have an impact on their lives. This is also a clear component of the intergenerational aspect of Climate Justice.
- 5.6 The EU must continue to lead the way in innovative engagement with stakeholders. As the institutional home of civil society, the EESC is a natural conduit and partner for delivering on structured engagement.

Tangible proposal

- 5.7 At European level, the EESC has repeatedly stated⁷ that structured involvement of civil society is necessary, and a clear mandate for civil society's participation in the development, implementation and monitoring of policies and strategies aiming to achieve climate neutrality should be provided. The EU currently has an opportunity to create engagement mechanisms via a European Climate Pact. The youth engagement mechanism on climate and sustainability should be an integral part of this Pact, facilitated by youth organisations.
- 5.8 The EU decision-makers should create a space for regular and meaningful dialogue with young people on policy proposals and strategies in the area of climate and sustainability. Youth Climate and Sustainability Round Tables facilitated by the First Executive Vice-President of the European Commission should take place twice a year in Brussels.
- 5.9 These Youth Climate and Sustainability Round Tables should be hosted by the EESC in cooperation with the European Commission and the European Parliament.
- 5.10 Young people's input to the Round Tables should be collated and formally sent to the EP and EC with both institutions providing a written response, which would outline which proposals can and cannot be implemented and why. The Round Tables must not become a "talking shop" but rather demonstrate meaningful engagement and responses from policy makers.
- 5.11 In addition to meeting with the European Commission and the European Parliament, the relevant presidencies could also be invited. This will ensure that young people can enter into dialogue with the Council of the EU. The Round Tables could be timed to match the presidencies' rotation so that young people can have a genuine impact on the presidency agenda.
- 5.12 To create a channel of communication with young people, a "Youth Climate and Sustainability Dialogue mailing list" should be created and managed by the Youth Climate and Sustainability Round Table facilitators, building on the example of the UN youth constituencies' organisation.

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Ref: EESC opinion on Boosting climate actions by non-state actors: An EU framework for encouraging more and better actions [OJ C 227, 28.6.2018, p. 35](#) and EESC opinion on the [European Climate Pact](#) (not yet published in the OJ).

The mailing list would be open to all young climate stakeholders and facilitate good communication and information-sharing amongst the group and with the institutions.

- 5.13 The EU decision-makers should ensure high-quality involvement of youth organisations in the development, implementation and follow-up of different mechanisms for structured youth engagement on climate and sustainability in the EU decision-making processes. It will help create engagement that fosters young people's creativity and ideas while at the same time making sure that these ideas are translated into policies.

6. **Practical implementation of the vision by all EU institutions**

EU institutions

- 6.1 Dozens of dedicated youth delegates from around the world participate in the annual climate conferences to make recommendations, urge on delegates, track progress, organise and attend side events and build their networks. Adding a Youth Delegate to the EU Climate Delegation for UNFCCC COPs would demonstrate that the EU institutions are serious about engaging with young people in a meaningful manner.
- 6.2 The Aarhus Convention, to which the European Union is a Party, should be fully enforced, granting opportunities for young people and youth organisations and supporting their access to justice before the Court of Justice of the EU with a view to safeguarding their right to receive environmental information from public authorities or the right to participate in environmental decision-making⁸.
- 6.3 Young people and youth organisations should be involved in the EU's continuing response to the COVID-19 crisis and working towards fundamental change in our social, economic and political systems, with sustainable development principles at the heart thereof. The over €500bn response package announced in April 2020 needs to ensure that these principles are at the core of its deployment. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to redress systemic inequalities and transition away from unsustainable practices.
- 6.4 It is important that youth organisations benefit from capacity-building efforts that help them navigate regulatory and administrative environments. Providing capacity-building, political and financial support, as well as facilitating networking and connections, will empower young people and facilitate their engagement in the decision-making processes.

⁸ EESC Opinion on Access to justice at national level related to measures implementing EU environmental law [OJ C 129, 11.4.2018, p. 65](#).

The EESC

- 6.5 The EESC should lead by example by including the EU youth delegate in its UNFCCC COP delegation, which has observer status within the EU delegation. This youth delegate would be included in EESC bilateral meetings and side events. They could communicate on the process and outcomes with youth organisations and networks, including the Youth Climate and Sustainability Round Table network. They would benefit from secretariat support provided by the EESC for these missions.
- 6.6 The EESC could commit to engaging with a youth representative on each EESC opinion relating to climate and sustainability. This person would provide the rapporteur with a contribution on the views of young people and would be invited to present input at a hearing, study group meeting or section meeting, as appropriate. The youth representative could be selected by the EESC rapporteur based on a recommendation from the Youth Climate and Sustainability Dialogue facilitators. This role could be described as an informal shadow-rapporteur-type arrangement.
- 6.7 The EESC has already started providing opportunities for youth representatives to regularly speak at public events focusing on climate and sustainability. In the next term, this practice should be extended to all public events that concern future-oriented issues and that would benefit from youth input.
- 6.8 The European Youth Climate Summit hosted jointly by the EESC with the European Parliament could become a yearly event for young people. This event can help enhance youth advocacy, contribute to capacity building and empowerment of young people and build connections between the EU institutions, which would be crucial for meaningful, structured and lasting engagement of young people in the EU decision-making process.
- 6.9 The EESC asks that the European Parliament also establish a formal consultation process with youth representatives when drafting their positions on policy proposals relating to climate and sustainability.
- 6.10 The EESC could future-proof its membership to ensure sufficient representation of youth organisations at the EESC and also ensure experience and knowledge is shared with youth branches of member organisations. Many EESC member organisations have youth divisions – more members should be actively encouraged to engage with potential future members from such sections of their organisations. The EESC continues to use the excellent Your Europe Your Say event to ensure youth engagement, and despite being postponed this year due to COVID-19, it will continue next year with a focus on climate and sustainability.

7. **Embracing a positive vision for the future**

- 7.1 The worst consequences of the climate crisis are still a number of years away for most Europeans. The COVID-19 pandemic gives us a practical example of what can happen when scientists and experts are ignored. It has also shown that creating policy based on accurate science can be effective in dealing with a crisis. This lesson must be applied to the climate crisis: we still have time to avert some of the worst consequences and to prepare for the rest.
- 7.2 The design and implementation of recovery from the economic impact of the pandemic must keep climate action and sustainability commitments at the forefront of policy. The UN Agenda 2030 and the Paris Agreement form the backbone of international multilateralism in dealing with these issues, and the European Green Deal must be strengthened to deliver the sustainable carbon-neutral future society that will honour intergenerational commitments.
- 7.3 The youth movement has demonstrated great adaptability during the pandemic lockdown. Their message has resonated through online mobilisation and innovative ways of spreading their message using all forms of communications from policy asks to humour. This innovative and ambitious approach to designing our future needs to be recognised and included.
- 7.4 A positive vision of the future has been glimpsed during the otherwise awful impact of COVID-19. The lowest paid workers in our economy have been recognised as essential. Our workforces are more flexible than anyone realised. Connecting with family and our immediate communities has been hugely rewarding and valuable. Appreciating the health and well-being benefits of having access to nature has been highlighted. We have an opportunity now to ensure that we take the positive lessons learned and apply them as essential elements of the new normal.

Brussels, 18 September 2020

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