

**Annual meeting of the presidents and secretaries-general of the EESC
and of the Economic and Social Councils of the European Union**
Paris, 22-23 November 2021

Participatory democracy and its role in making the EU resilient and future-proof

**The contribution of the European Economic and Social Committee and the national
Economic and Social Councils to the Conference on the Future of Europe**

CONCLUSIONS

The presidents and secretaries-general of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the EU's national Economic and Social Councils (ESCs) met in Paris on 22 and 23 November 2021.

Following an in-depth and rich debate, they present the following conclusions, which reflect full support for an ambitious Conference on the Future of Europe that will deliver tangible results, in order to make the European Union stronger, more future-proof and closer to its citizens. To achieve this, the EU must listen and act upon the messages and proposals of European and national organised civil society.

Overview

1. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the national Economic and Social Councils (ESCs) see the exit from the pandemic as an opportunity to **move forward and improve our societies**, in order to create a stronger European Union that promotes upward convergence, better cohesion and solidarity, a guarantee of a strengthened European citizen's identity. **This vision of Europe combines sustainable prosperity, social justice, inclusion and a just green and digital transition, while promoting respect for fundamental rights and the rule of law.**

2. To achieve this, the European Union can rely on **key strengths** such as its **large internal market, its robust industrial base, its role on the international economic scene, a thriving civil society and unprecedented solidarity**, as demonstrated by the adoption of the new recovery instrument, **NextGenerationEU**. The EESC and the national ESCs stress the importance of involving organised civil society in a concrete way in the implementation and evaluation of national recovery and resilience plans. They insist on the need to put the social dimension at the heart of their policies and especially the development of a Europe of health, in all its dimensions.

The Green Deal for Europe, with the aim of achieving carbon neutrality by 2050, is the new European growth strategy, with prosperity, sustainability and social justice at its heart. In the context of the **digital transition**, it is also about empowering people and businesses to take ownership of a people-centred, sustainable and more prosperous digital future. **The twenty principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights** are the beacon guiding us towards a social Europe that is inclusive and full of opportunities.

3. At a time when the European Union needs to be rebuilt and prepared for the future, **social partners and civil society organisations, as well as the EESC and the ESCs of the Member States, are key players.**

The EESC and the ESCs of the EU Member States reaffirm their **willingness to participate actively in the processes of designing, formulating and implementing the current reforms**, to ensure that policies are fully responsive to citizens' needs and expectations and to create a greater sense of common ownership. They highlight the need to strengthen public policies in favour of the most vulnerable and the need for European convergence in youth policies. The EESC and the national ESCs have a deep knowledge of the field and are unique permanent forums for civil dialogue, with the advantage of offering **solutions based on consensus** between different stakeholders.

4. The EESC and the national ESCs consider that the **Conference on the Future of Europe is a historic opportunity** to create a dynamic for relaunching the European integration project and to develop participatory democracy. They consider that the Conference must make Europeans the centre of attention, ensure that the citizens and civil society organisations in the 27 EU Member States participate in the debates and achieve concrete, visible and measurable results.

The Conference must build on a **transparent, bottom-up process and deliver tangible results**. In order to ensure transparency and accountability, an online **dashboard** shall be developed, to inform citizens about how EU institutions are following up on their requests, about whether reform measures stem from the Conference on the Future of Europe, and about the timeline for implementing these measures. If no action is taken on some ideas, the reasons must be explained.

The EESC and the national ESCs, by virtue of their membership and networks, are particularly well equipped to **connect with citizens** and bring their proposals to the attention of the governing bodies of the Conference. It is now important to move from a common vision to concrete action by European organised civil society as the key to trust in the future of the EU.

1. The Europe of tomorrow: the vision of the EESC and the national ESCs

The recovery will need to address the consequences of the pandemic, as well as the **challenges and transformations** we face, such as the twin technological and green transitions, demographic ageing and globalisation.

We cannot simply restore the pre-crisis situation: we must **move forward**, restructure and improve our societies. Our efforts must be directed towards creating a stronger European Union that promotes **upward convergence and greater cohesion and solidarity**. This vision of Europe combines **sustainable prosperity, social justice, inclusion and just green and digital transitions, while promoting respect for fundamental rights and the rule of law**.

To this end, Member States should support the **competitiveness** of the European economy and businesses of all sizes and forms, in particular SMEs and the social economy, as well as **entrepreneurship**, which should also contribute to the creation of quality jobs.

At the same time, Europe needs a **social approach that leaves no one behind and tackles poverty**. For this, we need increased infrastructural and social investment, including in social protection and in support of innovation and future proof skills.

In particular, we need to **protect the most vulnerable people in our societies**, who have been particularly affected by the coronavirus crisis (such as persons with disabilities and people with migrant or ethnic minority backgrounds). In a spirit of intergenerational equity, special attention should be given to young people, who deserve a brighter future. The EESC and the national ESCs welcome the attention given to young people by the Conference on the Future of Europe and the fact that 2022 has been declared the European Year of the Youth.

It will be essential to strengthen Member States' **health systems**, to further improve EU-wide health coordination and to prevent cross-border health threats more effectively. The EU should demonstrate ambition, with regard to the European Health Union and the European Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA).

The EESC and the national ESCs also reiterate the urgent need to take action in the face of a **climate crisis**, that has been caused by human activities and is unequivocally affecting every corner of the planet's land, air and sea, with the aim of achieving carbon neutrality by 2050. The wellbeing economy should protect ecosystems, conserve biodiversity, and deliver a just transition to a climate neutral way of life across the EU and foster sustainable entrepreneurship.

Last but not least, the European Union must defend **gender equality, diversity, peace, fundamental rights, the rule of law, democracy, social dialogue and inclusive governance**.

2. Building on our strengths to achieve our common vision

The European Union can rely on **key strengths** such as **its large internal market, its robust industrial base and unprecedented solidarity**, as demonstrated by the adoption of the new instrument for recovery, NextGenerationEU.

To protect its **values, respect for fundamental rights and the rule of law** and to defend its priorities, the European Union must also play a **positive role on the international economic stage**. It needs to achieve a certain degree of open strategic autonomy and increase its crisis preparedness and crisis management capabilities.

The Green Deal for Europe is the new European growth strategy, with prosperity, sustainability and social justice at its heart. The aim is to transform the EU into a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy, ensuring the end of net greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 and an economic growth decoupled from resource use, where no one is left behind.

A just transition to a climate-neutral way of life, the creation of quality jobs and the promotion of sustainable entrepreneurship and innovation, including the circular economy and the social economy, will be essential for Europe's prosperity.

Successfully completing **the digital transition** is another major challenge. It is about empowering people and businesses to embrace a digital future that is people-centred, sustainable and more prosperous. The EU Digital Agenda aims to ensure that this transformation benefits everyone - citizens and businesses, while helping the EU to reach its goal of climate neutrality by 2050.

Finally, **the greatest assets of our Union are its citizens and the European civil society**. They must be put at the centre of policies through effective civil and social dialogue and empowered to meet the changes required in the context of the twin transitions. The 20 principles of the European Social Charter of Rights are the beacons that guide us towards a social Europe that is inclusive and full of opportunities.

The EESC and the national ESCs welcome the fact that 2022 will be the **European Year of the Youth**. Young people have been affected by the pandemic the most and have seen their unemployment and inactivity rates rise. The EESC and national ESCs are calling for measures that focus both on active labour market policies and on education and skills. Intergenerational solidarity also vital: it is a key factor in helping young people while valuing the elderly.

The NextGenerationEU and the National Recovery and Resilience Plans

The EU must continue the positive and historic momentum created by the adoption of NextGenerationEU, a temporary recovery instrument of over €800 billion to help repair the immediate economic and social damage caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Recovery and Resilience Facility, the centrepiece of NextGenerationEU, supports the reforms and investments undertaken by EU countries. The aim is to make Europe greener, more digital, more resilient and better adapted to current and future challenges.

The Recovery and Resilience Facility Regulation stresses the need to consult both civil society organisations and social partners in the development and implementation of national recovery plans. However, it has been shown that, so far, this has not been the case¹. The EESC and the national ESCs conclude that in most Member States consultations are far from satisfactory in relation to the justified demands of organised civil society. They therefore call for a **much more concrete involvement of organised civil society** at the stage of implementation and evaluation of national plans, with more formal procedures that facilitate real exchanges.

3. The voice of organised civil society: an essential element in shaping our common future

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, employers' organisations, trade unions and other civil society organisations have played a major role in mitigating the effects of the crisis. There are countless examples of actions undertaken by European civil society, which testify to the importance of their structures. Their work at the peak of the COVID-19 crisis made an important contribution to maintaining the cohesion and stability of our societies.

At a time when the European Union needs to be rebuilt and prepared for the future, **social partners and civil society organisations, as well as the EESC and the ESCs of the Member States, are key players.**

The renewal and socio-economic reconstruction of Europe requires the real and concrete involvement of all components of society, particularly in the processes of designing, implementing and evaluating reforms.

The EESC and the ESCs of the EU Member States have a deep knowledge of the field and are unique permanent forums for civil dialogue, with the advantage of offering **solutions based on consensus** between different stakeholders. Thanks to their creativity and capacity for anticipation, they are able to develop responses adapted to the challenges of the 21st century and must play a key role in the reconstruction process.

The EESC, in association with the network of national ESCs, is in a privileged position to share with the European institutions the best practices of the Member States and the best solutions for reform.

The EESC and the ESCs of the EU Member States reaffirm their **willingness to participate actively in the processes of designing, formulating and implementing the current reforms**, so that the policies are fully in line with the needs and expectations of the citizens and to create a greater sense of common ownership.

The EESC and the ESCs recall the need to bring to life **Article 11 of the TEU**, which, in the context of the provisions on democratic principles, states that 'the institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society'.

They intend to continue to commit themselves to this crucial challenge, aware of the fact that participatory democracy needs intermediary bodies to involve citizens and encourage them to express their views in all civic spaces.

It is essential that the European Union supports the central role played by social partners and civil society organisations in promoting and defending our European socio-economic model and values, democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law, against the shrinking of civic space. This is the very heart of the European project.

4. The Conference on the Future of Europe: a chance to build a better future for all

The EESC and the national ESCs consider that the Conference on the Future of Europe is a **historic opportunity** to create a dynamic for relaunching the European integration project. The particularly innovative aspect of this project is its aim to connect with citizens in all 27 Member States.

The EESC and the national ESCs strongly support this process of developing **participatory democracy**. They consider that the Conference on the Future of Europe must make Europeans the centre of the attention, ensure that citizens from all over Europe participate in the debates and achieve concrete, visible and measurable results.

The Conference must build on a **transparent, bottom-up process and deliver tangible results**. In order to ensure transparency and accountability, an online **dashboard** shall be developed, to inform citizens about how EU institutions are following up on their requests, about whether reform measures stem from the Conference on the Future of Europe, and about the timeline for implementing these measures. If no action is taken on some ideas, the reasons must be explained.

The EESC and the national ESCs, by virtue of their membership and networks, are particularly well equipped to connect with citizens and to bring their proposals to the Conference's governing bodies. To this end, the EESC welcomes its participation in the Conference bodies.

¹ EESC Resolution, February 2021: <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/documents/resolution/involvement-organised-civil-society-national-recovery-and-resilience-plans-what-works-and-what-does-not>