

Shaping

EUROPE

Recent EESC Achievements

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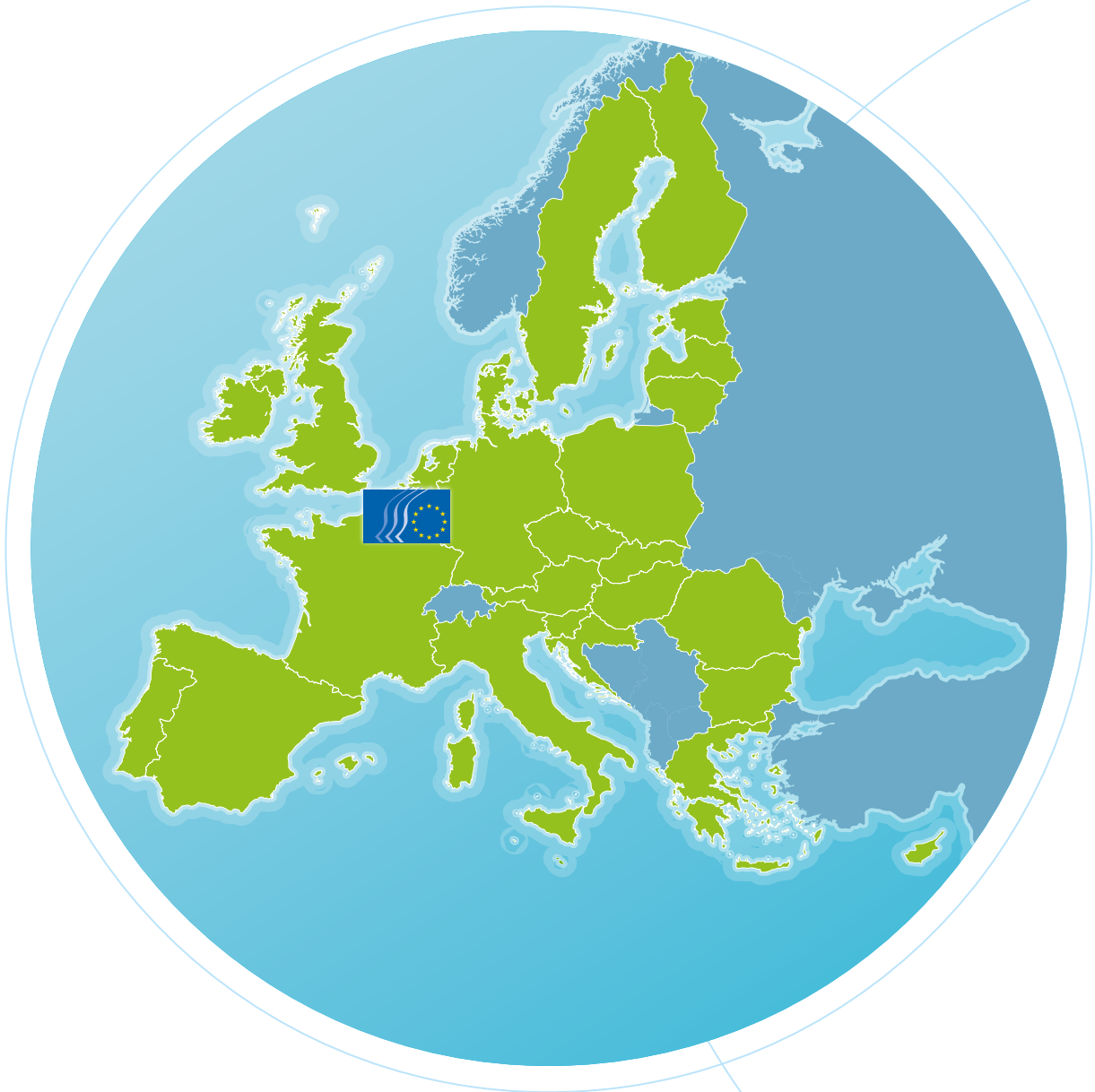


European Economic and Social Committee



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INTRODUCTION

The EU needs the European Economic and Social Committee

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) does not pass laws. It strives to bring real-life expertise to EU policy-making by providing good, sound advice to the legislators.

The EESC was set up over 50 years ago to speak directly on behalf of European citizens through their representative organisations. Its advice takes the shape of expert opinions, which synthesise the experience and viewpoints of a wide spectrum of society including representatives of employers (Group I), workers (Group II), professions, and associations representing a wide range of interests, notably in socio-economic and civic areas (Group III). These opinions are adopted at plenary meetings of the Committee's 350 members, and help to improve the quality of EU policies.

But the Committee is much more than a cog in the wheel of legislative procedures. It is a unique channel for the active involvement of civil society in the evolution of Europe, up to the highest level. It gives practical expression to the principle of participatory democracy in the EU, and fosters "active citizenship" and social solidarity. Participatory democracy offers scope for involvement through individual and voluntary commitment and encourages citizens to take action themselves to improve their living environment. It is the ideal complement and back-up to representative democracy and both are vital to a healthy society.

The EESC works in an open, transparent way, seeking to involve the widest possible range of people in its activities – especially those who sometimes find it difficult to have a voice in formal structures, like young people.

EESC members are not paid for their Committee work – they do it out of dedication to shaping Europe. Most of their time is spent working within their own organisations in their home countries, so their hands-on experience means they know what they are talking about. The definition of organised civil society has expanded to guarantee the broadest possible representation: employers, trade unions, farmers, consumers, liberal professions, SMEs etc. are all represented on the Committee.

A progressive force

In recent years, the proportion of women on the Committee has increased, and the average age has fallen. Besides their work on opinions, members are involved in all sorts of activities, ranging from taking part in international delegations, to cultural events and local school visits. The Committee is a constant source of innovation and new ideas, flowing from the grass roots into the heart of Europe and expressed through, not only referrals from the European Parliament, the Council or from the Commission, but also "own-initiative" and "exploratory" opinions. In short, the EESC is a dynamic and forward-looking influence within the EU.

The Lisbon Treaty entrenched the EESC's role even more firmly. Article 11 requires EU institutions to "maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society". This dialogue takes place with the European Parliament and the European Commission, with whom the EESC has cooperation protocols. The Council Presidencies are also increasingly seeking EESC input on policy decisions. And the Committee maintains important links with organised civil society in other countries and regions where the EU has political and trade agreements.

Value for money

Each year the EESC organises over 2 000 meetings and publishes about 200 opinions, plus a vast range of information materials helping spread the word on EU and EESC-related issues in 24 EU languages. To maximise economies, the EESC shares many resources, such as translation services, offices and meeting rooms, with other institutions and bodies, in particular the Committee of the Regions.

In this booklet we briefly showcase how EESC members' expertise makes a difference in each of the main policy EU areas it covers: economic, social, environmental and international. Committee members have reached out to young people in both schools and universities, listening to their views and harnessing their enthusiasm. The EESC has brought together people from all sectors of society to promote solidarity and thrash out solutions to the economic crisis, including innovative responses such as social entrepreneurship. It has encouraged high standards in business and stronger partnerships between politicians, industry and communities. The Committee continues to protect the interests of consumers across the EU, and takes steps to make e-literacy a right for all. It fosters practical ways to integrate new migrants, and develops plans for sustainable living in Europe's towns and cities. It has put forward measures to safeguard the natural environment while at the same time supporting farming communities and food production. And it has looked to the wider world in demanding that human rights and social welfare must be part and parcel of EU trade deals. Overall, the EESC is working to strengthen dialogue and active citizenship, and to make Europe a better place to live. And the fact that every step is taken in consultation with organised civil society gives the Committee – and therefore the EU – an even greater democratic legitimacy.

Positive assessment

The European Commission publishes quarterly reports indicating how it has taken the EESC's opinions into account, showing clearly that the EESC has an impact on the shape of EU policy proposals. A range of publications and studies complete the picture of the Committee's important contribution to the quality of European policy-making. The EESC does not seek press headlines, but aims to exert influence through expert knowledge and well-reasoned argument.

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Competitiveness is key to growth and job creation

The economic crisis and its repercussions on European society and business call for a greater focus on long-term conditions to restore sustainable growth. Despite what has been done so far, the EU, and in particular the euro zone, continues to underperform in terms of competitiveness.

"Improving the EU's competitiveness is a key priority for the EESC Employers' Group. This means creating a business environment and regulatory framework which are conducive to growth and job creation"
– emphasises Jacek Krawczyk, President of the EESC Employers' Group.



Lost competitiveness occurs over time as minor relative adverse changes in any one year, and compound to become a gap large enough to make a punishing difference. After the outstanding achievement of economic and monetary union, the insidious creep of lost competitiveness has manifested itself in Europe's, and more particularly, the euro area's inability to respond to the global economic crisis. It has left us with large debt problems, near economic stagnation, high unemployment and a lack of business confidence.

Two things are needed. First, Member States must continue implementing growth-enhancing structural reforms at national level. Secondly, all EU policies should improve the business environment, to enable European companies to generate sustainable growth and jobs.



EU manufacturing must be driven by innovation, knowledge-based capital and embodied or embedded services.

More action

Since 2013, the Employers' Group has organised two events on 'Boosting industry and competitiveness in Europe' and 'Reinforcing European Industrial Competitiveness'. The discussions enabled the group to formulate a number of recommendations, underlining employers' needs and views.

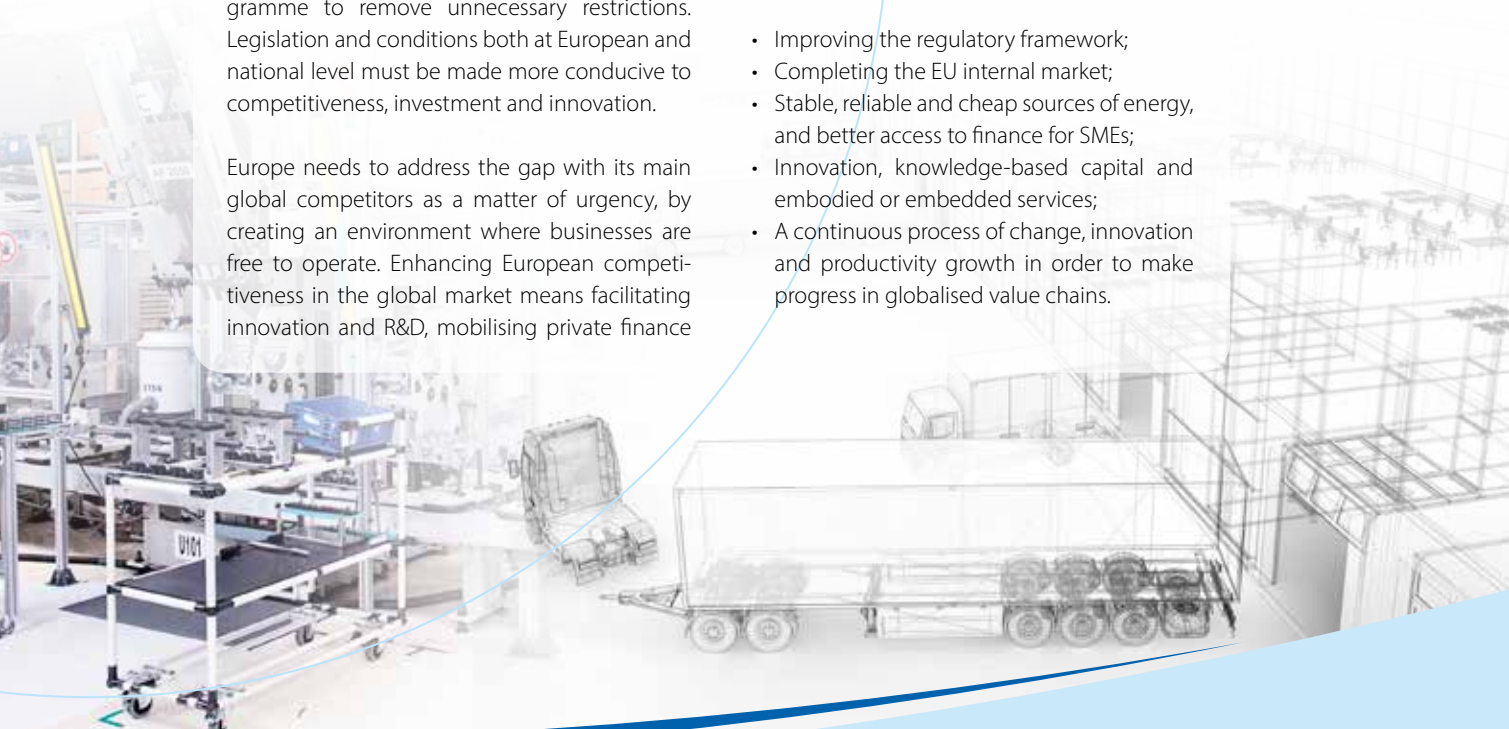
Europe needs a strong and competitive industrial base, in terms of both production and investment, as a key driver for economic growth and jobs. Competitiveness requires a stable, simple and predictable environment, with better regulation and in particular an ambitious REFIT programme to remove unnecessary restrictions. Legislation and conditions both at European and national level must be made more conducive to competitiveness, investment and innovation.

Europe needs to address the gap with its main global competitors as a matter of urgency, by creating an environment where businesses are free to operate. Enhancing European competitiveness in the global market means facilitating innovation and R&D, mobilising private finance

to promote growth, supporting entrepreneur education and training, and facilitating mobility and economic migration. Taxes and energy costs should be cut. Europe is trailing behind other advanced economies such as the USA in terms of competitiveness, and is facing growing competition from emerging countries. From now on, EU manufacturing must be driven by innovation, knowledge-based capital and embodied or embedded services (linked to the manufacture and sale of goods).

A number of areas of action were identified as crucial:

- Improving the regulatory framework;
- Completing the EU internal market;
- Stable, reliable and cheap sources of energy, and better access to finance for SMEs;
- Innovation, knowledge-based capital and embodied or embedded services;
- A continuous process of change, innovation and productivity growth in order to make progress in globalised value chains.



WORKERS' GROUP (GROUP II)

A concrete response to the crisis

Addressing the economic and social consequences of the crisis in Europe has been the top priority for the EESC Workers' Group in recent years. Austerity policies have failed, and alternative and complementary solutions are needed to tackle growing poverty and inequalities.

"It is urgent to send a concrete signal to citizens that this European Union can guarantee a dignified life, well-being for all, and has not abandoned the objective of social progress," says Group President Georges Dassis, from Greece.



The Group has focused on democratic governance, the central theme of the special meeting held in Athens in March 2014, on the eve of the European elections. Stakeholders, including trade unions, MEPs and EESC members, emphasised the need for democratic legitimacy in decision-making by elected representatives, as opposed to the unaccountable intergovernmental method and opaque actions of the troika (the European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund) in crisis-hit countries.

The Group has repeatedly demanded a strong social dimension in economic governance, covering aspects such as social dialogue and social rights as guarantors of a more just society, social cohesion and minimum income, and social and sustainable development in trade agreements.



Raising the social and educational capacities of workers, particularly the most vulnerable, to enable them to find or keep a decent job and be actively involved in society.

Social problems

Several studies of the economic and social situation have shown that even countries less affected by the crisis, like Germany and Austria, are experiencing significant social problems. Research commissioned by the Group has looked at new forms of social governance in EU policy-making, for example, the role of trade unions and social partners in the planning and monitoring of economic cohesion policies.

This work has formed the basis of several important EESC opinions. Raising the social and educational capacities of workers, particularly the most vulnerable, to enable them to find or keep a decent job and be actively involved in society, runs through them like a red thread. For example, the opinion on family services aims to professionalise domestic services, which are too often provided illegally. Other opinions have addressed undeclared work, migrant women, the employability of youth and social investment. Three opinions were designed to strengthen social governance: on growth, stability and employment, on the European minimum income and poverty indicators, and on the social dimension of Economic and Monetary Union, particularly the European Semester.

"Social indicators are important. But it is urgent to invest massively to create quality jobs, because otherwise we will have unemployment and people will be left in desperation and will adopt all sorts of extremist ideas," says Mr Dassis. *"The investment of EUR 6 billion for young people's employment (through the Youth Guarantee) is important but inadequate."*

"The big majority of EESC members is in favour of asking the Commission to propose a European minimum income for all citizens, as that is an efficient way to combat poverty and it's a signal to send to citizens to show them Europe is there for them."

"At the request of the Parliament, we also adopted a unanimous opinion on perspectives for social dialogue in order to give a new momentum to the democratic mechanism of participation as it has been established by the Treaty," he explains.

"Since the beginning of the crisis, our Group has reacted by demanding concrete initiatives. We asked the Commission to propose the putting in place of a mechanism for financial stability, and they did it two years later. We proposed a Financial Transaction Tax, which the Commission tabled two and a half years later. We have made a lot of other proposals through our opinions which the Commission has taken account of."

"Our duty now is to monitor the implementation of good measures to boost employment and growth and to develop new policy to recover from the tragic crises of the last years."



Social innovation to build a better future

What form will European welfare systems take in the decades to come? How will society manage in 2040, when there will be only two people of working age to support each pensioner? How can Europe afford 50% of global welfare spending when it has only 7% of the world population?



These questions were on the agenda of a high-level conference in Milan in October 2014, organised by the EESC's Various Interests Group, in partnership with the Cariplo Foundation and the ANIA (National Association of Insurance Companies) Consumer Forum – two leading players in the Italian social and economic field.

The aim was to launch a debate on the future of Europe's welfare systems and the EU social dimension.

More than 1 000 people followed the discussion, in the meeting room or via live web streaming.

"We tried to address how to modernise, reform and adapt European welfare systems to current challenges, given the pivotal role of social innovation and civil society in this process," explains Group President Luca Jahier.

Social innovation takes a bottom-up approach and involves many sectors of society, including social economy enterprises, local communities and authorities. In several EU Member States it has already demonstrated its potential for reshaping society and the way the state operates. *"In my own country, Italy, we refer to this as 'Secondo' welfare."*



It is up to us to empower citizens and local communities for a more inclusive Europe – a Europe that cares.

The right environment

The Milan event aimed to draw up specific proposals for the incoming EU executive, and to emphasise why Europe needs an inclusive and sustainable social market economy, as set out in the Treaty on the European Union. The Milan Declaration on “Boosting Innovation for a Better Social Outcome” argued that public authorities need to support social investment and social innovation as a source of growth. Secondly, it called for partnerships between civil society actors and for the right kind of environment – or “ecosystem” – to unleash the full potential of social innovation. The third recommendation urged better evaluation of the social impact of policies, including social indicators in national progress reports, and the exchange of good practices. Finally, it called for social innovation and social investment to be included in the review of the Europe 2020 strategy.

“It is clear to me that there is still a great deal to be done” says Mr Jahier. *“Nonetheless, during the conference we heard many ideas and examples of innovation.”* Three points emerged. The first was that courageous and innovative decisions have to be taken and implemented at once. Secondly, Europe needs effective alliances. Thirdly, the

powerful, positive energy that emerged in Milan shows that society should not be afraid to experiment with social initiatives, and this is a growing phenomenon. Numerous actors already exist across Europe, and they are highly competent, diverse and motivated. They are already creating innovative ways to fill the gaps and conflicts of the past: between public and private, growth and fairness.

The question now is how to expand these social initiatives. For example, private savings in Italy constitute 450% of Italian GDP. Of course, not all of that can be redirected towards social investment, but a proportion could be. However, investment needs to be accompanied with reliable financial instruments and options, which would be attractive to investors.

“The state alone cannot solve all the problems,” concludes Mr Jahier. *“We now need systemic change, we need a paradigm shift and we need to engage with a greater range of actors. It is up to us to empower citizens and local communities for a more inclusive Europe – a Europe that cares.”*



A stronger economy for a stronger Europe

Today, more than six years after the outbreak of the international financial crisis in 2008, the economic prospects for Europe are still gloomy. While other regions of the world have recovered from the recession, the EU and the euro area have seen record-low growth and inflation levels with skyrocketing unemployment, in particular youth unemployment. While Member States and the European Commission were locked in discussions on just how much fiscal consolidation would be enough to ensure sound public finances, in 2012 the EESC sketched out a new growth model for Europe, with measures to tackle unacceptable levels of unemployment and scope for future-related investments as well as social and environmental investments, which generate growth and demand.



An EMU roadmap for new EU decision-makers

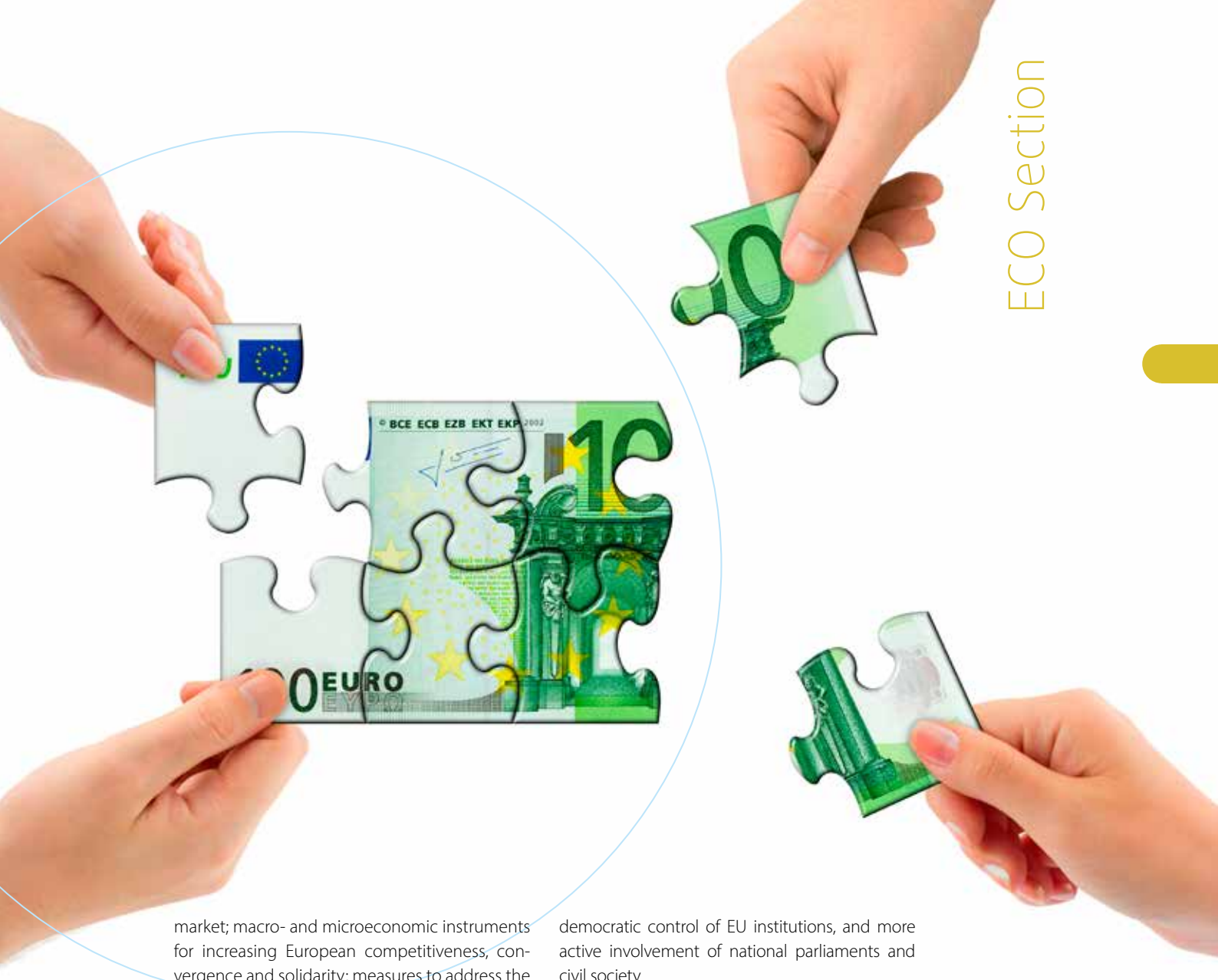
In its recent opinion on 'Completing EMU' the EESC went further, drawing up a concrete roadmap for the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) during the new European legislature. *"The coming five years are crucial to developing the still fragile architecture of EMU to maturity,"* points out one of the two EESC rapporteurs on this topic, Carmelo Cedrone.

"This calls, most importantly, for ownership, openness and transparency; therefore, we need effective policies, as well as plain and clear speaking by governments in the euro area, by the Council and by all other EU bodies. No double-talk!" warns the other EESC rapporteur Joost van Iersel.

This roadmap calls for a genuine pact for growth, jobs and stability (a European New Deal), driven by a substantial public and private investment programme, and rebalancing of the existing instruments: the so-called "Six-pack", "Two-pack", and the European Semester of policy coordination. In addition, as the crisis brought to light deficiencies in the EMU architecture itself, the EESC proposed that EMU should be based on four pillars: a fully integrated European capital



Europe needs to invest in its future to achieve a strong, sustainable economic recovery.



market; macro- and microeconomic instruments for increasing European competitiveness, convergence and solidarity; measures to address the social impact of economic adjustment; and new rules to boost the democratic legitimacy of the EU and euro-area institutions.

In 2014, the EESC was the first EU body to state publicly in its roadmap that “investment, growth and jobs should top the agenda for the EU’s next term”. The new Commission, led by President Jean-Claude Juncker, picked up the Committee’s core proposals in his “Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change”, with an ambitious EUR 315 billion Investment Plan and with a focus on achieving a deeper and fairer EMU, more

democratic control of EU institutions, and more active involvement of national parliaments and civil society.

The new Parliament and Member States firmly supported President Juncker’s proposals. EU leaders acknowledged at their October and December 2014 summits that Europe needs to invest in its future to achieve a strong, sustainable economic recovery and that the economic governance framework needs to be developed further. At last, European political leaders seem ready to take the courageous steps needed to build the model of a stronger economy for a stronger Europe, inspired by European civil society.

The Social Entrepreneurship project

The EESC has backed the social economy for some time. Indeed, the Committee's exploratory opinion was one of the elements used by the European Commission in drawing up its own Communication on social entrepreneurship.

The Commission estimates that there are 2 million business and more than 14 million jobs in the social economy across Europe. They are present in almost every sector, including banking, insurance, agriculture, crafts, hospitality, commercial services, health and social services.

Since the crisis hit in 2008, the social economy has survived the recession better than conventional businesses, so there are lessons to be learnt from this sector.

Social enterprises are set up to offer a public service or promote social welfare rather than just to make money. They reinvest profits in pursuit of this aim, and are managed in a transparent, accountable and inclusive way implying a strong personal commitment from their members.

Among a vast range of examples of European social enterprises are an award-winning restaurant in the UK which employs disadvantaged young people and trains them up as chefs, and a mothers' group in Zagreb, Croatia, which manufactures eco-friendly cloth nappies.





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Speaking up for social enterprise

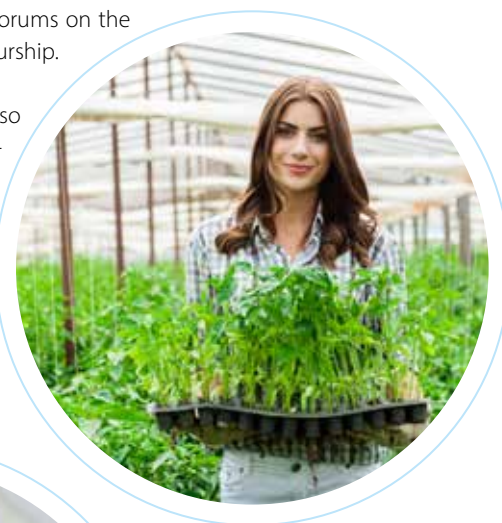
In January 2014, the EESC, the Commission and the City of Strasbourg organised an event entitled “Social Entrepreneurs: Have your say!” attracting some 2000 people, which adopted a declaration with action proposals.

As a result, the EESC launched a “Project on social entrepreneurship” to develop further measures and activities. It collected constructive contributions from actors in this field throughout the EU, and met with stakeholders active at local, regional, national and European levels, so as to share and act upon existing knowledge and experience. This led in turn to publication of a report summarising the contributions from stakeholders, in the form of recommendations and observations.

“The key point is that we are talking about an enterprise model, not about charity,” insists project coordinator Ariane Rodert.

The Committee has helped to generate a growing momentum in this area, extending to social networks and other stakeholders, and has become a key player in expressing the voice of civil society in Europe’s various forums on the subject of social entrepreneurship.

In January 2015, the EESC also highlighted the sector’s potential for boosting the development of emerging economies. The social economy is about helping people to help themselves, and the EU must step up its support.



Business services: the fourth industrial revolution

The development of business services in Europe should be a top priority for policy-makers, according to the EESC's Consultative Commission on Industrial Change.

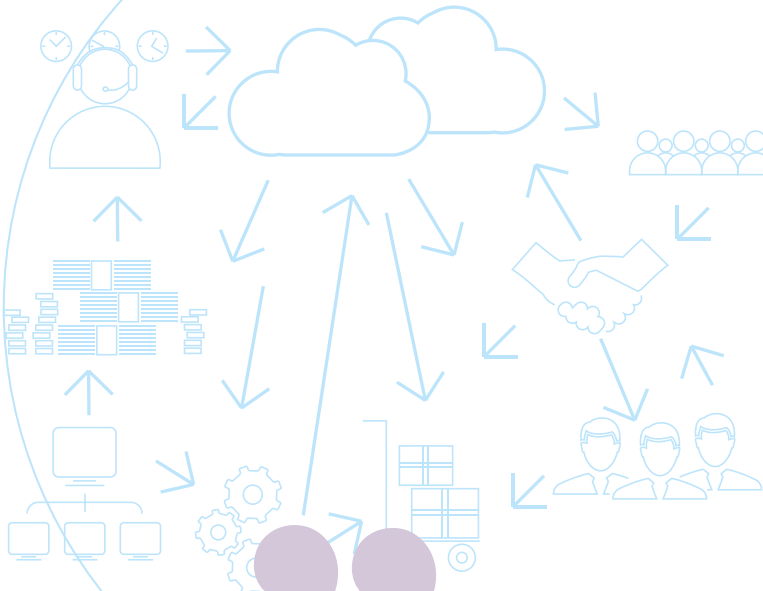
A first opinion on "Services and European manufacturing industries: Interactions and impacts on employment, competitiveness and productivity" emphasised the positive contribution of business services to increasing productivity and boosting competitiveness in manufacturing. The opinion stressed the interdependence of the two sectors, and highlighted the positive potential for expansion on a larger scale.

Business services hold an important potential for economic recovery. In mature economies, more than 70% of output and employment comes from services, and this is rising throughout the world.

Wide implications

In April 2014, in the framework of a new EESC opinion on "The impact of business services in industry", the CCMI organised a public hearing at the Hannover Messe, the largest exhibition of industrial technology in the world.

Participants heard that services are a fast-growing part of the European economy, creating more jobs than manufacturing. The ICT industry alone is now expanding in Europe by 10% annually. Above all, they discovered more about a new production model sometimes called the "fourth industrial revolution", with the "internet of things" interconnecting manufacturing, services and ICT. This will have huge socio-economic and political implications, changing the way that millions of people live. It will also impact on the labour market, for example through demand for greater mobility, flexibility and new skills.



“The fourth industrial revolution: an opportunity for EU to take the lead?”



Education systems need to respond to new requirements and qualifications. In industry – manufacturing and services alike – digitalisation, ICT and developments such as 3D printing are changing industrial processes and working methods.

The opinion attracted a very wide consensus in the Committee and was adopted unanimously.

“Business services should be part of an active industrial policy and be taken on board in the mid-term revision of the Europe 2020 strategy in 2015,” explains EESC rapporteur Joost van Iersel. The EESC found that their significance had been undervalued by both the European Commission and the Council. *“The EU has to decide now whether it wants to take the lead, contributing to*

new sustainable growth and new jobs, or leave its place to others,” he challenges.

In November 2014, the EESC held a conference on “The fourth industrial revolution: an opportunity for EU to take the lead?” with high-level speakers and some 140 participants. The Committee plans to develop further initiatives around this theme, starting with own-initiative opinions on 3D printing or the effect of digitalization on services and employment. No doubt further work will follow on the effect of new technologies on industry, the economy and society in general. Already, a high-level conference on digitalisation took place on 25 March 2015, to allow for further analysis and discussion of this important paradigm for the future of Europe.

***CCMI**: acronym used only in French for *Commission consultative des mutations industrielles*.

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If trust in EU values is to be restored, the future strategy for growth and development must become more relevant to people's needs.





EUROPE 2020 STEERING COMMITTEE

Putting Europe on a new path

Since the Europe 2020 strategy was launched in 2010, the EESC's Europe 2020 Steering Committee has been working closely with networks of national economic and social councils and similar bodies to make sure the strategy stays on target. In 2014, the Steering Committee conducted a rigorous assessment of Europe 2020 and prepared a set of policy recommendations for the mid-term review.

Five years on from its launch, the Europe 2020 strategy is stagnating. It is beset by structural and short-term problems linked to the deepest economic and social crisis – in terms of intensity and duration – of the last 80 years. The collapse in the labour market, spiralling unemployment among young people and women, and rising numbers of people living in poverty or at risk of social exclusion have all combined to widen the economic and social disparities between Member States, and – within those States – between regions. This has undermined not only the principle of cohesion that has always been a hallmark of European integration, but also people's confidence in the EU.

The EESC believes that Europe is at a critical juncture. If trust in EU values is to be restored, the future strategy for growth and development must become more relevant to people's needs. European civil society, as a key player in implementing European policies at national, regional and local level, is actively involved in ongoing discussions on reconciling economic governance and budgetary discipline with social cohesion targets.

Setting course for radical change

Failure to turn things around will be disastrous for the European project. So the mid-term review of the Europe 2020 strategy is a unique opportunity to set in motion the radical step-change needed for an effective relaunch.

To plot a course out of the crisis, the growth and jobs strategy needs to be transformed into an effective lever for European competitiveness and cohesion. The EESC believes this requires a thorough rethink of key aspects of the current strategy, focusing specifically on:

- the paradigm of 'smart growth' underpinning the strategy itself: changes are needed in the way policies are defined and evaluated, in order to overcome the crisis;
- governance of the strategy: the Europe 2020 goals and the European Semester and priorities are not consistent. Moreover, most of the Europe 2020 goals are not legally binding and the involvement of Member States and civil society is inadequate;
- policies aimed at fostering sustainability, competitiveness and cohesion need to address issues like energy, resolving the digital divide and improving welfare systems.

The EESC believes it is urgent to implement a pan-European Europe 2020 strategy, based on boosting investment, structural reforms and fiscal responsibility, which is genuinely coherent and integrated, and responds adequately to the challenges of the 21st century.

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Education systems must work more closely with the labour market in order to equip young people with the skills that companies are demanding.



EMPLOYMENT, SOCIAL AFFAIRS AND CITIZENSHIP SECTION (SOC)

The EESC takes on the challenge of jobs for young people

The high level of unemployment among young people is a major concern in today's Europe. Since the outbreak of the financial crisis, the EESC has repeatedly emphasised the need for EU institutions and Member States to step up their efforts and invest more in young people. This is particularly important in a time when the economic outlook is bleak.

By the end of 2014, over 5 million under-25-year-olds were out of work in the EU. With an average youth unemployment rate of some 22% across the 28 Member States, this rose to more than 50% in countries worst hit by the crisis – half of their young people – leading commentators to warn of a “lost generation”.

Determined to contribute to tackling this problem, in 2014 the EESC Labour Market Observatory conducted an in-depth impact study. It held a public hearing to gather the views and recommendations of organised civil society on the European and national policies put in place to help young people find work. The study focused on six selected Member States that had adopted a variety of policies and approaches towards young people in the labour market: Greece, Croatia, Italy, Austria, Slovakia and Finland. Members of the Committee conducted interviews on the ground in these Member States to get a direct insight into good practices, ideas and concerns among public authorities and representatives of civil society, including employers and trade unions: the social partners. The study has triggered considerable interest from EU institutions and national stakeholders.

Education for employment

The EESC has consistently supported the EU's Youth Guarantee, recommended by the Council in April 2013. The aim of this initiative is to ensure

that all young people under 25 receive a concrete offer of work or training within four months of them leaving formal education or becoming unemployed. The study examined the Youth Guarantee schemes in the selected Member States and concluded that, if well implemented, the Youth Guarantee has the potential to bring about many of the structural reforms that are needed. In particular, education systems must work more closely with the labour market in order to equip young people with the skills that companies are demanding.

The final results were presented at the EESC's 500th plenary meeting on 10 July 2014. *“Civil society stakeholders can bring genuine added value to youth policies as they know and live the realities of the labour market. This civil society “reality check” is indispensable to shaping employment policies that work,”* says Christa Schweng, President of the Labour Market Observatory. *“Bringing in stakeholders creates a broader sense of ownership and contributes to greater acceptance of reforms by citizens.”*

The EESC has also issued an opinion highlighting best practices from across the EU in relation to youth employment. This confirmed that the Committee is well placed to continue to monitor the situation and contribute ideas through its members, who are closely involved with the practical implementation of policies on youth employment in the Member States.

Giving a voice to young people: “Your Europe, Your Say!”

The EESC regards reaching out to young people as a top priority. And since 2010 it has been living up to that commitment through the annual “Your Europe, Your Say!” (YEYS) event in Brussels.

About 100 students and teachers – three students and one teacher per Member State – are invited to the heart of the EU to argue for the policies young people in Europe care about.

In 2014, “Your Europe, Your Say!” took place at EESC headquarters in March, on the eve of European Parliament elections and the appointment of a new European Commission. It was the right time to hear the voices of young people.

The schools were picked by draw from a pool of more than 700 applicants, each one hoping to get the chance of a privileged insight into EU decision-making. The students, aged 16-17, had an opportunity to prepare for the event, thanks to EESC members in their own countries, who visited schools to tell them more about the work of the Committee and its activities on behalf of civil society.

The students took part in a simulated plenary session, where they had the opportunity to select five proposals for action to make Europe a better place to live in, more attuned to the needs and expectations of its (young) citizens. The five demands were then forwarded formally to the incoming European Parliament.



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Education, the environment,
and finding a job turned out
to be the students’ main
preoccupations.



"We understand that what goes on in Strasbourg and Brussels can seem remote and disconnected from daily life," reflects EESC Vice-President Jane Morrice. "But we really want to encourage everyone to get involved in the debates and to help shape the policies and decisions made by our governments and politicians at EU level... I have a strong suspicion that young people can show adults a thing or two!" she adds.

Into the future

In the final vote, education, the environment, and finding a job turned out to be the students' main preoccupations. From a list of 14 topics, their chosen priorities were: achieving equality in education; developing language teaching; encouraging research and innovation to boost renewable energy and recycling; recognising work experience, whatever its form and duration (i.e. internships, volunteer work, seasonal jobs, etc.); and promoting equal opportunities.

The young Europeans demonstrated a keen awareness of the issues at stake, and of wider European values. Through debate and negotiation in workshops, they overcame obstacles of language and culture to forge a common European identity. Looking to the future, in 2030, their attitude was generally optimistic, except when it came to concern about the state of the environment.

During the youth plenary session in 2014, EESC President Henri Malosse invited a five-strong delegation of students to present their arguments at the EESC's 500th plenary session, on 9 July 2014. The five, from Cyprus, Germany, Austria, Sweden and Croatia, addressed an audience of some 500 EESC members and other EU decision-makers.

One of them, Theseas Efstathopoulos, painted a picture of unfairness for poor families in his home country, Cyprus, because of austerity policies. *"Rights need to be implemented in practice and equality in education cannot exist if there is social inequality,"* he warned.

Regional policy: EESC one step ahead

The EESC supports EU regional policy in its efforts to foster solidarity and development. Indeed, for some years now, the Committee has taken the lead in this area. Partnerships agreements, urban policy and macro-regional strategies are three clear examples of this role.

To enable regional policy to be successful in fulfilling its task of investing and combatting the crisis in the EU, civil society must have a say at every stage of planning and implementation.

Thanks to its passion and determination, the Committee has succeeded in getting the 'partnership principle' accepted as one of the fundamental rules of EU cohesion policy, ensuring that all interested stakeholders are involved.

"From a civil society perspective, I should be very happy right now," affirms former ECO section President Michael Smyth, from Northern Ireland. *"After years of lobbying and cajoling, European policy-makers have finally accepted the partnership principle in cohesion policy, including in macro-regional cooperation strategies. In theory, this means that in future, civil society will play a positive role in the design, selection, implementation and evaluation of cohesion projects and programmes."* Lobbying has obviously paid off as, at present, the majority of EU countries have partnership agreements with the European Commission.





Community-led Local Development means empowering citizens at local level to help develop solutions to social, environmental and economic challenges.

The EESC listens to cities

For 10 years, the EESC has called for EU policy-makers to recognise the specific characteristics of metropolitan areas, seeking an imaginative approach to urban renewal in the 21st century. *“Economic, social, environmental and territorial trends, together with poor financial prospects, urgently require a coherent EU urban policy closely linked to the Europe 2020 strategy,”* wrote current ECO section President Joost van Iersel, from the Netherlands, in 2007. Once again, the Commission has recognised the Committee’s pioneering role. Thanks to the perseverance of civil society representatives, the importance of cities has been recognised, and the Commission department concerned is now called the Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy. Sustainable urban development is acknowledged as contributing to EU competitiveness in a constantly changing world.

The Committee continues to give a voice to cities and their citizens. It holds a structured dialogue with representatives from major cities including mayors, architects, chambers of commerce and university professors. At the annual Open Days of the Committee of the Regions and the Commission, the EESC organises a forum where major cities can present projects and learn from each other’s experiences. In its role as intermediary, it conveys the results to the European institutions, civil society and other partners.

Building partnerships in macro-regional strategies

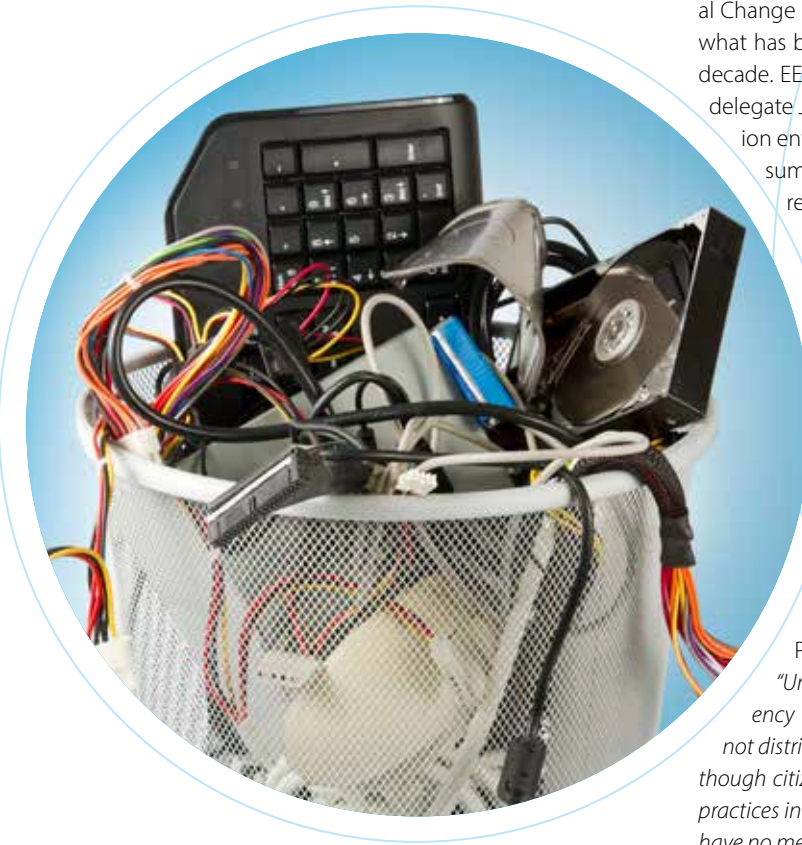
With the aim of bringing neighbouring countries together to deal with common challenges, the EU’s macro-regional strategies embody a “bottom-up” approach to action. Partnerships are vital to their success. The EESC continues to fight for this principle, encouraging people to take ownership of projects at the grass-roots. Strategies are already in place around the Danube, Baltic, and Adriatic and Ionian Seas, and Committee members are working together with civil society to extend this approach.

Communities take the lead

The EESC has embraced the new Community-led Local Development (CLLD) method of regional policy planning with open arms. CLLD means empowering citizens at local level to help develop solutions to social, environmental and economic challenges. Member States will have to specify in their partnership contracts how they intend to apply CLLD, and in which programmes and regions. The Committee welcomes this new way of building partnerships on a local level. The EESC listens to all stakeholders in order to reach a balanced and pragmatic assessment of this approach, aimed at bringing decision-making closer to people and their needs.

Goodbye to planned obsolescence

Planned obsolescence is a deliberate business strategy that started life in the 1930s as a way of boosting demand, by forcing consumers to replace worn or outdated products more quickly. But in the 21st century, the practice also known as “shortening the replacement cycle” has become a menace to society, consuming precious resources and causing environmental, health-related and economic damage.



The EESC’s Consultative Commission on Industrial Change (CCMI) decided to take action against what has become a growing trend over the last decade. EESC member Thierry Libaert and CCMI delegate Jean-Pierre Haber drew up a first opinion entitled: “Towards more sustainable consumption: industrial product lifetimes and restoring trust through consumer information’ – better known as the opinion on planned obsolescence. It was followed in 2014 by a second EESC opinion, from Bernardo Hernández Bataller, promoting ‘Collaborative or participatory consumption, a sustainability model for the 21st century.’

Drawing on the views of stakeholders at a public hearing in 2013, the first opinion called for a total ban on planned obsolescence. CCMI President Carlos Trias Pintó explains: *“Unfortunately, there is a lack of transparency because the majority of producers do not distribute relevant consumer information. Although citizens often have an intuition about bad practices in the domain of obsolescence, they often have no means to verify it.”*



It is very important to define the whole model of society that we want for the future.

On the political agenda

The two opinions gave birth to a new, wide-ranging project on the issue. This was not merely a one-off action, but rather a series of events, opinions, declarations, articles and follow-up activities to make sure that the issue of planned obsolescence made its way on to the political agendas of the European Commission and the European Parliament.

“After our opinion on planned obsolescence, the EESC has maintained an active role promoting and stimulating a dynamic debate among stakeholders and institutions,” adds Mr Trias Pintó. The project combined the issues of collaborative consumption and built-in obsolescence, within the framework of exploring new forms of more economical, environmental and user-friendly consumption.

Activities so far have included a conference in Madrid in June 2014, looking at best practices, a public hearing in Brussels in September 2014 entitled “Towards a Circular Economy: a zero waste programme for Europe”, and a round-table event on “Planned obsolescence” the following month. The Spanish conference culminated in the so-called Madrid Declaration, setting out a manifesto for the CCMI project.

The project has turned into a major success story, thanks to the large number of stakeholders involved, and very positive feedback from the media in several countries including Spain, France and Germany. At the same time, the EESC is working ever-more closely with the Commission and the Parliament. *“It is very important to define the whole model of society that we want for the future,”* confirmed MEP Pascal Durand.

“In this context, I plan to introduce a draft resolution to the European Parliament on the subject of the fight against planned obsolescence in Europe, so as to reach a uniform legislative standard.”

The CCMI is also launching a study to find out whether labelling that indicates a product’s estimated lifetime could influence consumer behaviour. Stay tuned...!



***CCMI**: acronym used only in French for *Commission consultative des mutations industrielles*.

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Consumers in Europe have legally binding rights, and even a long-lasting economic crisis should not be used as an excuse for neglecting them.



SINGLE MARKET, PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION SECTION (INT)

Consumers at the heart of economic recovery

The European Consumer Day, organised every year by the EESC, took place for the 16th time on 14 March 2014, focusing on a very important topic: “Consumer protection and social inclusion in times of crisis”.

The date was marked by a conference in Thessaloniki City Hall, in Greece, organised by the EESC with the support of the Greek Consumers’ Protection Centre (KEPKA).

Consumers in Europe have legally binding rights, and even a long-lasting economic crisis should not be used as an excuse for neglecting them. Are enforcement bodies doing their job, or are consumer rights suffering in these difficult times? And what steps are required to tackle over-indebtedness and financial exclusion? These were some of the questions discussed with high-level European and national experts during the conference.

Among the participants was European Commissioner for Consumer Protection Neven Mimica. *“By helping consumers we can make consumer policy a policy for economic recovery”,* he argued. *“We must make sure they are not exploited and that they get the best deal possible.”*

“The European Consumer Day is about helping consumers realise their power, making them better aware of their rights and encouraging them to make full use of them in practice. This is the way to ensure that markets work for consumers and not the other way around”, added Commissioner Mimica.

Some 200 representatives from consumer groups and business, as well as Greek citizens, particularly affected by the crisis, were able to

take part and express their views. The event coincided with the drawing up of an EESC opinion on “Consumer protection and over-indebtedness”, adopted in April 2014.

Consuming differently

The EESC is also alert to new evolutions in consumer behaviour. Its January 2014 opinion on “Collaborative or participatory consumption” sparked a number of activities. The opinion explains that “Collaborative or participatory consumption is spreading to a growing number of communities and cities around the world, which are using technological networks to do more with less, through activities such as hiring, lending, exchanging, bartering, giving away or sharing products on a previously unimaginable scale.”

This practice not only has an impact on poverty and waste, but is also “a major potential source of jobs in the coming years”. The EESC called on the Commission to include the issue in its work programme. It joined with other stakeholders to organise a conference on “Boosting partnerships in collaborative consumption”, in Brussels in July 2014, to examine what sort of political framework is necessary to enable Member States, businesses, consumers and local communities to benefit from collaborative consumption.

EURO **ROAMING**



European civil society on the offensive against roaming charges

As cross-border mobility and trade increase, millions of Europeans travel from one EU Member State to another for private or professional reasons. Being able to communicate and exchange data easily and at a reasonable price is a priority. But just as “Rome wasn’t built in a day”, the EU’s internal market for services such as telecommunications has been slow to take shape.

High mobile telephone roaming charges have created a price barrier to communication in a united Europe. Paying more for speech and data via mobile devices in another EU country has discouraged people from communicating, and left many Europeans in a state of shock when faced with the bill from their mobile operator after a summer holiday or business trip abroad.

In 2013, former European Commissioner Neelie Kroes acted on the momentum created by civil society movements such as the One Single Tariff European Citizens’ Initiative. EESC President Henri Malosse was one of the first “citizens” to support this initiative, which demanded an end to roaming charges across the EU. Commissioner Kroes eventually put forward a broad policy proposal called “Connected Continent” that also included measures for frequencies, regulation and administration. With “Connected Continent” moving very slowly through the legislative process, and several Member States lukewarm about the changes it would impose, the EESC took up the challenge of keeping the roaming problem high on the EU agenda.

In September 2013, the Committee launched an online stakeholders’ consultation, collecting proposals for a concrete strategy to end roaming charges for all communications in the EU. All relevant civil society stakeholders, including industry and consumer associations, contributed to the

information report drawn up by the EESC’s rapporteur Raymond Hencks, from Luxembourg – a member of the Workers’ Group.

Praise for the EESC

At a public hearing in October 2013, Roberto Viola, overseeing the issue on behalf of the European Commission, praised the EESC’s efficiency in getting all the major players with a stake in roaming around one table, and putting pressure on the EU legislators for a swift agreement.

The EESC was in constant contact with a broad civil society coalition in order to make sure that the strong calls and commitments of EU decision-makers to introduce zero roaming charges across the Union were converted into action.

“The EESC is in favour of the total abolition of all roaming charges, and asked the legislators – whether the Council or European Parliament – to move as fast as possible towards this end,” says Mr Hencks. “Of course there is a risk. We have above all to avoid national tariffs being increased to compensate. Our Committee believes that national regulatory authorities must make sure this does not happen. We will continue to follow this issue, and bring together the voices of civil society in favour of the total abolition of roaming charges, which have become anachronistic and counter-productive in the EU.”

The birth of a European Energy Dialogue

The idea of a European Energy Dialogue (EED) grew out of an EESC opinion adopted in March 2013, on “Needs and methods of public involvement in the energy policy field”.



Behind it is the idea that Europe’s public will need to prepare for and have a say in the many regulatory, technological, and social changes inherent in the transition to efficient, sustainable energy systems. The EED is meant to go beyond existing consultation processes, to be a transparent, coordinated conversation across all Member States. To be understood, energy questions need to be seen as part of a broad and interrelated picture.

The EED will boost understanding and influence energy policy-making, stimulating convergence and taking account of costs and climate objectives. Citizens, civil society organisations, national and local authorities and all types of energy organisations participate. The dialogue brings together different perspectives and ensures that actions carried out at national and regional level take account of the broader European context. And it will allow for sometimes conflicting goals – like security and sustainability versus affordability – to be reconciled.

Possible topics for consideration are energy production and consumption patterns; citizens’ preferences; infrastructure and grids; energy efficiency, education, costs and affordability; and energy management innovations, to name but a few.



The EESC has always insisted that civil society must be part of an integrated and effective energy policy.

Achievements and perspectives

The EESC has always insisted that civil society must be part of an integrated and effective energy policy. The EED helps to foster participatory democracy and make sure that stakeholders are involved in energy decisions in each Member State. The European Commission has already acknowledged that this means building trust through an honest and balanced account of the state of existing knowledge and the opportunities and challenges of new technologies. In line with this approach the need for citizen's engagement and a structured dialogue on energy has been clearly recognised in Commission's recent Communication on the Energy Union, which places empowered citizens at the core of the Energy Union implementation and makes energy dialogue one of the purposes of its new governance system.

EESC members already meet their counterparts in the Commission on a regular basis, and work closely with them on climate and energy policies and the Energy Union, promoting the EED as a supporting process to strengthen these policies, facilitate their implementation and align them with citizens' expectations. They speak at events organised by the Commission, and promote the EED among stakeholders and civil society at large. For example, the Committee organised a major conference on energy transition and public engagement, in Paris in May 2013, attended by energy ministers and a wide range of civil society representatives from several EU countries. In June

2014, the EESC also took part in a conference on energy prices, bringing together representatives of the entire energy chain and civil society. It emphasised the place of public involvement and dialogue in improving price-formation mechanisms and fostering understanding and acceptance of energy transition challenges.

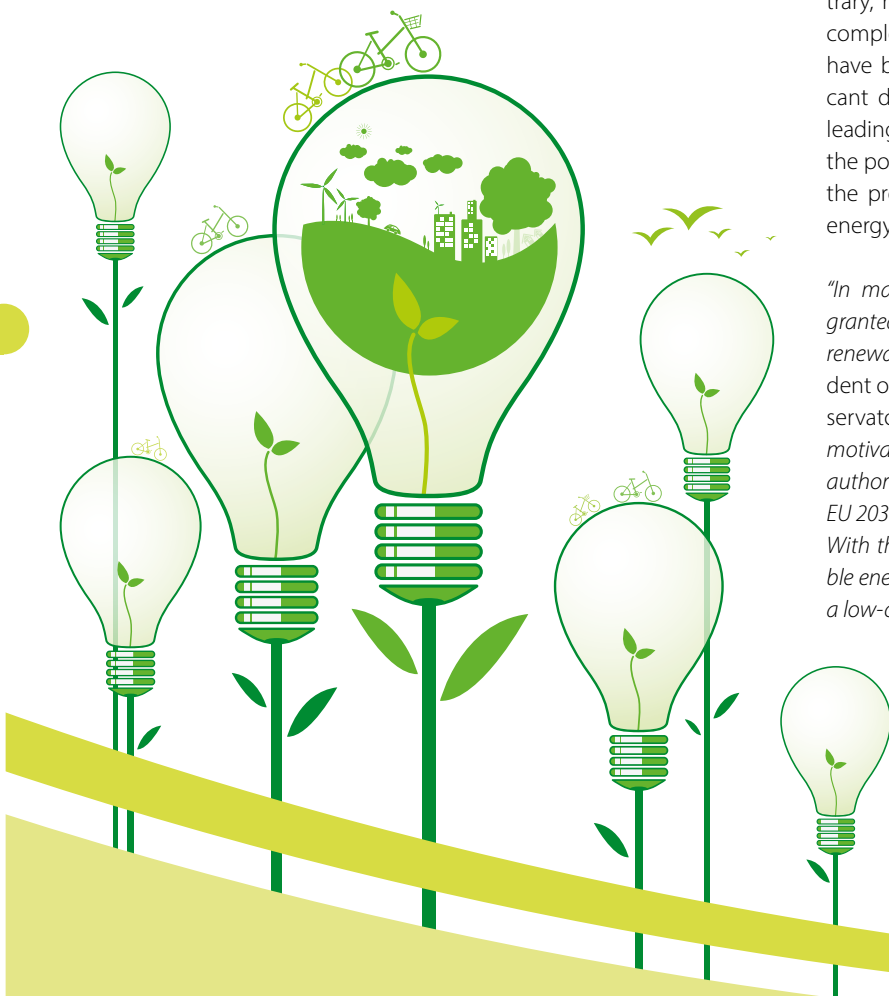
The dialogue will encompass a range of actions that will be principally carried out and financed by other institutional and non-institutional partners. As the Commission proceeds to concrete actions to deliver on the Energy Union the EESC will continue to refine the idea of the EED and communicate it to stakeholders, so as to create a momentum for effective dialogue on energy. In particular, it will promote the EED as an essential governance element and its implementation as a parallel supporting process fostering understanding acceptance and ownership of the Energy Union's vision and policy measures.

Heated debate on the Renewable Energy Directive

Europe's climate and energy challenges will only be met if small producers get the right conditions to make their renewable energy projects flourish. With this goal in mind, the EESC has set out to assess the conditions required for citizens, communities, farmers, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and local authorities to develop their own renewable energy initiatives.

By October 2014, after numerous meetings with authorities and stakeholders in six Member States, coupled with desk research, the Committee had uncovered no consistent strategy to unleash the potential of civic energy. On the contrary, repeated policy changes and increasingly complex and costly administrative procedures have been placing small producers at a significant disadvantage relative to larger producers, leading to a slowdown in new investments, to the point that stakeholders are concerned about the prospects of achieving Europe's renewable energy targets.

"In many Member States, civil society has been granted limited opportunities to participate in the renewables revolution," observes Lutz Ribbe, President of the EESC's Sustainable Development Observatory. *"However, it is the collective power and motivation of citizens, farmers, cooperatives, local authorities and small businesses that can make the EU 2030 climate and energy policies a success story. With the appropriate policy support, civic renewable energy can become a driver for the transition to a low-carbon economy."*





Recommendations

Civic energy is associated with local development and job creation and a faster transition to sustainable energy, due to its capacity to pool financial resources and to increase acceptance of renewable energy infrastructures. The EESC is recommending that the EU and its Member States should make civic renewable energy a policy priority through:

- long-term strategies, stable policy frameworks and targeted support mechanisms for civic energy;
- mechanisms supporting civic energy, such as regularly updated feed-in tariffs combined with net metering, and providing easy and affordable connection to the grid;
- simple, quick and affordable administrative procedures (e.g. civic energy projects should be exempted from tenders and direct marketing obligations).

The results of the Renewable Energy Directive (RED) impact study have been presented to the EESC Plenary in January. The main findings have also been presented at conferences such as the ICLEI's "Local Renewables Conference" in Freiburg (Germany, October 2014), triggering a strong interest among the numerous local authorities and stakeholders present. The report

was widely disseminated, including a summary for policy-makers. The EESC and the Committee of the Regions also organised a side event during the Conference of the Parties (COP 20) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Lima (Peru, December 2014), entitled "Renewable energy as a local development opportunity." The EESC recommends the European Commission and the European Parliament to develop policy frameworks favouring civic energy when preparing the legislative acts enforcing the 2030 Climate and Energy package. The Committee also recommends permanent representations and Member States to favour civic energy in their own legislative frameworks and regulations.



With the appropriate policy support, civic renewable energy can become a driver for the transition to a low-carbon economy.

EESC RED portal: <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.sdo-observatory-red>

Food for thought on food waste

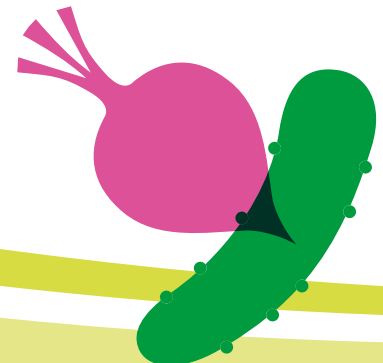
The EESC's campaign against food waste started in March 2013 with an opinion on 'Civil society's contribution to a strategy for prevention and reduction of food losses and food waste'. Among its conclusions and recommendations, it called for the food service industry to redistribute the largest possible number of products still fit for consumption to food banks, especially in the context of the economic crisis.

"In a world where many people do not have enough to eat and resources are limited, the Committee believes that the prevention and reduction of food losses and food waste must urgently have a key place on the political agenda," argues opinion rapporteur Yves Somville. According to EC figures over 100 million tonnes of food are wasted annually in the EU (2014 estimate). If nothing is done, food waste is expected to rise to about 126 million tonnes by 2020.

As a result, EESC President Henri Malosse selected food waste as a Committee priority, focusing on the largely untapped potential of food donations to reduce food waste.

Making giving easier

First, the EESC undertook a study of Member States' legislation and practices on food donation, mapping key obstacles, identifying best practices, and developing recommendations on how to legislate or interpret legislation in order to facilitate food donation.





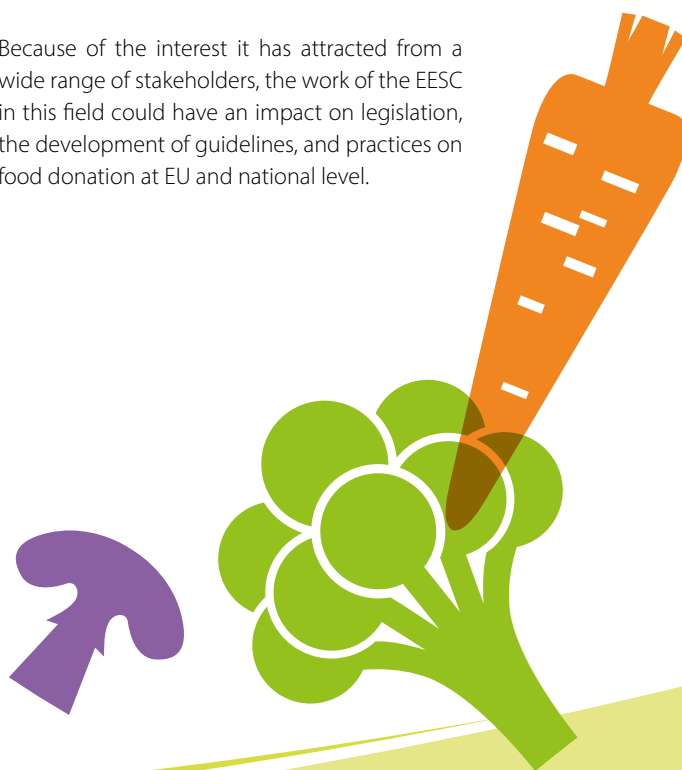
These recommendations were discussed at a conference on “Food donation: Fighting food poverty and addressing food waste”, in July 2014. It concluded that the EU should publish guidance on a food-use hierarchy that clearly prioritises feeding people, by preventing food waste and donating unsold food rather than managing waste through composting, anaerobic digestion or landfilling. It also proposed removing value-added tax (VAT) on donated food. It called on the EU to limit donor liability on food that meets legal quality and labelling standards and is donated in good faith. This should be accompanied by a clear, harmonised system for tracing food products. Food waste could be cut by exempting a larger number of products from “best before” labelling.

In its ongoing work, the EESC has developed partnerships with civil society organisations, including food banks, social services, farmers’ and trade associations, and NGOs, and attracted interest from other EU institutions and the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). Members are currently engaged in “Going Local” activities to disseminate the results of the study in Belgium, Spain, France and Slovakia. The Committee is also undertaking activities with the private sector – big retailers and supermarket chains – as they

play an important role in preventing and reducing food waste and promoting food donations. Furthermore, the EESC is planning to take part in events on food waste organised by the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety, during Expo 2015.

Further research has been launched into donating fish discards, which under the latest Common Fisheries Policy reforms can only be used for non-human consumption (e.g. fish meal, pet food), to soup kitchens or food banks.

Because of the interest it has attracted from a wide range of stakeholders, the work of the EESC in this field could have an impact on legislation, the development of guidelines, and practices on food donation at EU and national level.



Rewarding outstanding support for Roma communities

The EESC's annual Civil Society Prize is a very effective way of highlighting the commitment and achievements of Europe's civil society organisations. They do vital work that complements the activities of public authorities.



"Civil society organisations really are the body and the soul of the EU. That's where all the work gets done, and the civil society prize is about promoting and showcasing that work," explains EESC Vice-President Jane Morrice.

Launched in 2006, the award goes to organisations or individuals in any of the EU's 28 Member States, who have made outstanding efforts to strengthen European identity and integration, participative democracy and active citizenship. It helps to raise awareness of civil society's vital role in promoting the common values that form the cornerstone of European solidarity. The prize focuses on a different theme each year, and in 2014 it highlighted initiatives specifically designed to improve the economic and social inclusion of Roma communities.

The topic was not selected by chance. The results of the 2014 European elections showed an alarming rise in support for racist and xenophobic parties that like to pin the blame for Europe's current economic woes on minority ethnic groups. The EESC wanted to demonstrate its backing for efforts to promote tolerance and combat the rise of prejudice



2014 EESC CIVIL SOCIETY PRIZE

and discrimination against one of the most vulnerable communities in our society.

Record number

The competition attracted a record number of 81 candidates. They included a wide range of initiatives, including awareness-raising among non-Roma communities, equal opportunities in the workplace, empowering Roma to participate more fully in the political, economic and social spheres of their home countries, and practical support in accessing housing, health services, education and employment.

A group of expert assessors drew up a shortlist of eight outstanding projects to be considered by the jury, made up of the EESC president, two vice-presidents, three group presidents and the secretary-general. *“What’s amazing is that among the more than 80 projects we received, practically all of them were good,”* reported EESC President Henri Malosse. *“It was an agonising decision.”*



In the end, the first prize of EUR 15000 went to the Centre for Sustainable Development (ETP) in Slovakia, a not-for-profit organisation that works predominantly with Roma communities in eastern Slovakia, encouraging integration by improving their social and economic situation. ETP focuses on five main areas: housing, education, employment, health and financial inclusion.

“We hope that our self-empowering initiative will be a role model for European policy-makers,” said ETP Director Slávka Mačáková, receiving the prize. *“Our services are available to everyone, free of charge, and on a voluntary basis.”*

The two runners-up, each receiving EUR 7500, were IQ Roma Servis, a pro-Roma non-profit non-governmental civic association established in 1997 in the Czech Republic, and the Reverend Archimandrite Athinagoras Loukataris, who launched the “Lighthouse of the World” project to support vulnerable Roma – especially children – in northern Greece.

EESC Civil Society Prize:

<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.events-and-activities-civil-society-prize-2014>

ETP Slovakia: www.etp.sk

IQ Roma Servis: www.iqrs.cz

Reverend Archimandrite Athinagoras Loukataris: www.farostoukosmou.gr



“ The right to mobility and migration should be a fundamental principle in a globalised world.

EMPLOYMENT, SOCIAL AFFAIRS AND CITIZENSHIP SECTION (SOC)

A place for migrants in Europe

The European Union continues to be an attractive destination for migrants from all over the world. It is not always easy for European countries to deal with migratory pressures, in the short term, but ultimately their economies can only benefit from the arrival of courageous, entrepreneurial people from third countries.

Yet coordination at European level is absolutely crucial to share the responsibility and enable governments to deal with migration flows fairly. The EESC constantly encourages EU decision-makers to establish a common policy, with harmonised legislation on immigration and asylum. At the same time, the Committee nurtures links with people involved at local level, and are active in welcoming and integrating newcomers into host communities.

Since 2009, the EESC has provided a platform for dialogue between EU institutions and organisations working to promote integration of migrants across the EU. This platform, the European Integration Forum, has allowed for a regular exchange of ideas for practical action covering virtually all aspects of integration. Recently, the European Integration Forum was transformed into the European Migration Forum, to extend its scope from integration to cover migration and asylum issues as well. The new Forum continues to be managed jointly with the European Commission, and the EESC provides its secretariat.

A body of experience

The Forum is a practical example of how the EESC acts as a bridge between EU institutions and civil society. With a solid body of work over the years on integration, migration and asylum, including the adoption of a large number of opinions, the Committee has taken on a strong European role in relation to migration issues.

The Committee's approach is based on the principle that migrants' fundamental rights must be respected and safeguarded. *"The right to mobility and migration should be a fundamental principle in a globalised world,"* argues Luis Miguel Pariza Castaños, who represents the EESC on the Bureau of the European Migration Forum. *"Shutting the door on immigration is not consistent with the interests of Europeans, human nature, the times we live in, or the interdependence between Europe and the rest of the world."*

Known for their daily involvement and expertise in these areas, EESC members are frequently invited to speak about integration, immigration and asylum matters at events organised by international organisations and NGOs, other EU institutions, research centres and think-tanks.

A greater say for civil society in trade negotiations

The potential impact of international trade agreements on European citizens has become a hotly debated topic since the start of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) talks between the EU and the USA.



In the wake of the Lisbon Treaty, and with sustainable development becoming an element of EU trade policy, the EESC has played a growing role in international trade issues.

The Committee aims in particular to prevent the proliferation and complexity of trade negotiations weakening the EU's own regulations and standards. It considers that the economic, social and environmental aspects of trade deals are closely interlinked. The EESC draws up own-initiative opinions on all major trade negotiations and closely follows ongoing talks such as those with the USA and Japan.

In its opinions on the American and Japanese discussions, the EESC insists on the need for more transparency and dialogue with civil society during the talks, in order to gain broad-based public support.

For the first time, in the framework of the TTIP negotiations, a steering group of three Committee members gained access to all negotiating documents. The EESC called on the new EU Trade Commissioner Cecilia Malmström, who is in favour of more transparent trade negotiations, to extend this good practice.



The EESC draws up own-initiative opinions on all major trade negotiations and closely follows ongoing talks.

“This is welcome recognition of our role as the bridge between civil society and other EU institutions,” insists the President of the EESC’s International Trade Follow-up Committee, Alexander Boyle. *“It is important that, within the new spirit of transparency, the EESC’s role is recognised and that this more inclusive approach is built upon in all current and future trade negotiations. There should be no turning back. Sharing of information is a vital ingredient of transparency.”*

In the context of a specific TTIP project, the EESC also planned a number of civil society events and opinions, designed to strengthen its role in coordinating a joint civil society position on important issues like sustainable development, energy, small and medium-sized enterprises and the controversial Investor State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) mechanism, which sets up special tribunals where investors can sue governments.

Monitoring role

The EESC makes a particular effort to monitor sustainable development chapters in the existing EU Free Trade Agreements, and has demanded that joint civil society monitoring bodies should be part of the institutional framework of such deals. As a result, EU trade agreements have developed a unique and innovative civil society

monitoring system which evaluates the impact on labour, environmental and economic aspects of sustainable development. Since 2012, at the request of the European Commission, the EESC has been supplying members for the monitoring groups provided for in EU trade agreements.

The EESC keeps working to support these bodies and to cooperate with counterparts in the partner countries or regions, and has managed to get this joint effort recognised by the signatory parties in such agreements, for example with Central America and Colombia / Peru, where it was not anticipated that civil society would be able to work together. The EESC is also making good progress in getting the main European civil society organisations representing wide economic and social interests onto these bodies, in place of sector-based lobbies, representatives of national interests or big international organisations.



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The Network is also developing capacity-building programmes targeting African civil society organisations.



EXTERNAL RELATIONS SECTION (REX)**New EU-Africa civil society Network prepares for the future**

Bringing together members of civil society organisations in Africa and Europe is the best way to increase knowledge and awareness on both sides.

The EESC was instrumental in organising the first-ever meeting of a Network of representatives of EU and African economic and social stakeholders, in Brussels in March 2014, to discuss the EU-Africa joint strategy (JAES), adopted by leaders from both sides in 2007.

Representatives of employers, workers, farmers, consumers and players in the social economy and cooperatives from the two continents met to exchange views and draw up recommendations to go to the summit of heads of state and government in early April 2014. They covered a range of topical issues such as youth employment, food security and social protection systems.

Following its successful inaugural meeting and constructive input into the JAES, the new Network won official recognition at the highest political level, through a mention in the final summit statement.

Capacity building

The EESC is committed to continuing to work to develop the stakeholders' Network. A follow-up meeting was organised in October 2014, to start preparing for the next Network exchange, focusing on the topic of social protection. Both sides identified this as an issue of major interest, which is among the key priorities identified at United Nations level in the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Network is also developing capacity-building programmes targeting African civil society organisations, with the backing of the EESC and financial support from the European Commission.

"The EESC's role is to push the European institutions, such as the Commission's Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO), to make available the financial and logistical resources to enable African civil society to develop its capacities," explains EESC member Xavier Verboven. *"This will allow for greater civil society participation in social dialogue, negotiations on Economic Partnership Agreements, and in a range of other areas."*

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Now, more
than ever,
the EESC has a
vital role
to play in securing
Europe's future.

CONCLUSION

The importance of good advice

The European Union is facing serious challenges: and they are both economic and social. To bring the crisis to an end as soon as possible, all stakeholders and their representative organisations need to be mobilised.

Solutions, however plausible, will not be successful without the support of EU citizens. The experience and expertise of civil society players needs to be harnessed to find common ground with decision-makers, in the interests of all. The quality and credibility of political decision-making at EU level are at stake.

The Lisbon Treaty acknowledges that civil society's active participation and a transparent dialogue with EU institutions are vital for Europe's future development.

The European Economic and Social Committee is the one EU body that has direct day-to-day contact with civil society, right down to the local level. It is therefore uniquely placed to manage this dialogue, to strengthen the EU's democratic legitimacy and to give civil society organisations the opportunity to make their views heard in all areas. With its proven experience, the Committee has the tools to bring together diverse interests and aspirations, and to achieve consensus and commitment.

Now, more than ever, the EESC has a vital role to play in securing Europe's future.

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