

**ANNUAL MEETING OF THE PRESIDENTS AND SECRETARIES-GENERAL  
OF THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCILS OF THE EU  
AND THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE**

**ROME, 13 AND 14 JUNE 2019  
CNEL, Villa Lubin - Viale David Lubin 2, Rome**

**Concept note:**

***The ESCs' role in sustainable development and the implementation of the  
European Pillar of Social Rights***

***Introduction***

The challenges Europe faces today are numerous and unprecedented. It has become evident that environmental risks constitute a serious threat to Europe's whole political, economic and social system. The special report by the IPCC (the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) adopted in October 2018 presented scientific confirmation of the need for urgent climate action.

At the same time, in Europe, a significant proportion of the population is at risk of poverty or social exclusion, millions of young people cannot find a job and more than half of adult Europeans believe that younger generations will have a life worse than their own. Recent events in France and Belgium have demonstrated the strong link between social and environmental crises. It is impossible to end the ecological crisis while high levels of poverty and inequality persist. Much needed climate-friendly measures cannot be imposed in the same way on all people in our society. Large sectors of society will not be able to understand, accept and endorse policy measures leading to e.g. an increase in the price of essential commodities such as energy.

At the same time, the coming years will also be crucial for European companies. They will need to have a favourable framework that enhances innovation and competitiveness at global level through ambitious research and development and by providing the right conditions for investment and developing skills and competences.

Europe needs a new model of growth and competitiveness, one that is qualitatively different from what we have had thus far, more socially inclusive and ecologically sustainable, and able to encourage and accompany the convergence of digital and ecological transitions in our countries and societies. We need to move towards sustainable competitiveness, a model that balances economic prosperity, growth and social issues, while taking into account the finite resources of the planet.

In this context, the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the EU and the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) offer opportunities to tackle today's economic, environmental and social challenges through different means and new forms of governance, involving European, national, regional and local levels and civil society.

## *The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*

On 25 September 2015, the United Nations General Assembly formally adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development along with a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 associated targets. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development requires new approaches, with a view to creating synergies between economic, environmental and social policies.

So far, the 2030 Agenda has not been used as an opportunity for the EU to set out a new, proactive, transformational and positive narrative, as the EESC, the European Parliament and many voices from civil society have called for; a vision of a more sustainable and socially inclusive Europe that benefits its companies, its workers and its citizens, building on the values which have made Europe a successful model: solidarity and human rights, social justice and equality, democracy and participation, entrepreneurship and economic growth and environmental responsibility.

National strategies for the implementation of the SDGs have already been developed or are being developed by several Member States<sup>1</sup>. An EU-wide strategy for the implementation of the SDGs, including a comprehensive monitoring mechanism, would provide an enabling framework for the national strategies to gradually move towards greater convergence. In this regard, it would be desirable to introduce monitoring mechanisms to keep track of progress and to encourage Member States to act in line with the objectives set.

Although the Reflection paper on "Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030", adopted by the Commission on 30 January 2019, is limited, sketching only three possible scenarios that would involve taking up the sustainable development challenge at EU and national level, it must be seen as a political window of opportunity and a stepping stone that European civil society must seize.

For the reasons outlined here, the sustainable development agenda should be the EU's strategy for the next decade. In fact, this agenda is a win-win strategy for everybody. It is a winning agenda for employers because it is now absolutely clear that the real competitiveness battle will take place at global level, in all of the sectors linked to the sustainable development agenda<sup>2</sup>. It is also a winning strategy for workers because several SDGs are linked to the social dimension of the European project<sup>3</sup>. In fact, the 2030 Agenda is an extremely solid firewall against social inequalities and could be the basis for the social contract of the 21st Century.

The sustainable development agenda is also a winning strategy for civil society, provided it is fully involved in its governance process so that it can further improve it.

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<sup>1</sup> See EESC country fiches on SDGs Member State activities: <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/initiatives/advancing-sustainable-development-strategies-eu-wide-multi-level-overview>

<sup>2</sup> Electric cars, renewable energies, plastic transformation and batteries.

<sup>3</sup> Ending poverty (SDG 1); zero hunger (SDG2); good health and well-being (SDG3); quality education (SDG4); gender equality (SDG 5); decent work and economic growth (SDG 8) and reducing inequalities (SDG 10).

## ***The European Pillar of Social Rights***

The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) was jointly signed by the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission on 17 November 2017 at the Social Summit for Fair Jobs and Growth in Gothenburg, Sweden. The EPSR outlines 20 "rights and principles" considered essential for fair and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems in the 21st century.

The EPSR has generated positive momentum for a more ambitious social agenda and has been the basis for number of important measures<sup>4</sup>. These measures partially cover some of the rights and principles enshrined in the EPSR, but the majority of the pillar's principles remain largely unaddressed and have not been implemented so far. Drawing up a roadmap would strongly encourage all sectors involved to implement the Social Pillar. Implementation of the principles set out in the Social Pillar should be strengthened gradually, this could be done either by legislative means or by contract.

### ***The need for an overarching strategy, based on an effective governance tool and adequate financial resources***

There is a need to adopt the sustainable development agenda as the overarching strategy of the next decade, based on an efficient governance tool and adequate financial resources.

With regard to effective governance tools, it should be noted that the European Semester process has proved to be efficient. It is a very useful economic and social governance tool that should serve the sustainable development agenda. Existing EU instruments such as the European Pillar of Social Rights and the European Semester could be aligned with the 2030 Agenda. In particular, the European Semester, as the EU's economic and social governance framework, has some focus on employment and social performance, but it does not yet integrate climate change challenges nor the EU's progress towards reaching the Paris targets, as reported in the Annual Growth Survey 2019. The EESC has repeatedly called for a forward-looking, overarching sustainable development strategy embedded in a Sustainable Development Cycle and based on complementary social, economic and environmental indicators and targets. In particular, the targets need to be monitored using a set of indicators that are sufficiently comprehensive to provide a basis for policy planning and policy shaping.

In terms of adequate resources, the Commission, in its MFF proposal, proposed dedicating 25% of the overall budget to sustainable development, the European Parliament proposed 30%, while the EESC has proposed 40 %. If we want to be consistent, then we have to call for adequate resources.

### ***Objectives of the discussion***

- to inform the national ESCs on the ongoing debate at EU level relating to the implementation of the EPSR and the achievement of the SDGs;

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Such as the Directive on work-life balance for parents and carers, the Directive on transparent working conditions for workers and the Regulation establishing a European Labour Authority, as well as "soft law" – e.g. the Recommendation on Access to Social Protection for workers and the self-employed.

- to assess how national ESCs are involved in this debate and in the development of implementation strategies at national level, and discuss ways in which this could feed into the EU decision-making process;
- to discuss and adopt conclusions from the meeting.

***Questions to steer the discussion***

- What are the most pressing economic, social and environmental issues in your country that you feel require urgent action at EU level? What would be the priority policy measures to be taken by the new European Parliament and Commission (e.g. sustainable measures – including financing – to fight poverty, to ensure a fair transition to a zero-carbon economy, to manage migration, etc.)?
  - (How) Is your council involved in national strategies for the implementation of the SDGs? Do you feel that the economic, environmental and social dimensions are equally addressed in this context? Do you have any specific examples of successful approaches to balancing the different dimensions?
  - How do you see the role of the European Pillar of Social Rights in connection with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development? How could the 20 rights and principles of the EPSR be aligned with the 17 SDGs to produce tangible results? How could the different sets of indicators to measure economic, social and environmental variables across the EU and their sustainability be aligned?
  - Do you agree that the sustainable development agenda could be the solution to addressing (jointly) the economic, social and environmental challenges, and that it ought to be the EU's main for the next decade?
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