Conference of the Diversity Europe Group of the European Economic and Social Committee in partnership with Civil Society Europe, Brussels, 5 November 2021

'Civil Society Organisations: key actors for the Future of Europe'

With the support of the EESC Civil Society Liaison Group and the Associational Life Category

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
Realising our potential: civil society organisations as guardians of the common good

- Civil society organisations are key actors as **guardians of the common good** and integral to identifying **sustainable solutions**. It is imperative for the EU and national authorities to recognise and actively support their crucial role in **building trust, shaping public opinions** and as **positive agents of change**;
- These actors are the **vehicle** through which communities and societies express and act upon their **deepest concerns, commitments and ambitions**. Civil society are key actors in making national and European **politics** and **policy-making**, more **relevant** and **legitimate** to citizens;
- The Covid-19 pandemic has taught us once again how much we are **reliant on civil society**. They acted as a **safety net** at the local level, providing **essential health** and **social care services**, alongside local authorities;
- However, civil society's role goes **far beyond** social service provision. They are also **advocacy actors**, with an essential role in **building societal innovation, sustainable resilience and growth**, as well as in implementing the EU's **green** and **digital transitions**. In this context, national and European **youth organisations** should be systematically and meaningfully involved in policy dialogue and implementation;
- Crucially, if we want to live in **sustainable, resilient, equitable and democratic societies**, then civil society must be effectively involved in **partnership** and with **full respect**;
- Regrettably, there have been too many **missed opportunities** in engaging in dialogue with these actors at the EU level. **Article 11** of the TEU raised **expectations** which have largely **not been met**;
- Moreover, the **Covid-19 pandemic** has **exacerbated** existing **political and economic challenges** for civil society, thus seriously **undermining** their **sustainability**, as well as their **capacity** to **act** **efficiently and independently**;
- Within this context, there is **insufficient structure, regularity, transparency, inclusiveness and partnership in civil society dialogue** on EU and national policy-making. There are also too many **quantitative** and **qualitative differences** in this dialogue, depending on the policy area, European Institution or Member State. For this reason, **positive examples** of civil society dialogue should be **mainstreamed** and **multiplied**;
- In addition, there should be more **follow-up** and **monitoring** of civil society dialogue, with precise **explanations** of why certain proposals were implemented by national and European authorities.

Jointly finding solutions: civil society as enablers of democracy and fundamental rights

- The Covid-19 pandemic has clearly illustrated the importance of the **rule of law for our democracies, fundamental rights** and **daily lives**. Even in EU Member States, these rights **can be fragile** and cannot be **taken for granted**;
- Civil society organisations play an essential role in **protecting those values** and in overcoming threats to democracy from **identity politics** and **public distrust**;
- However, alongside economic adversities, civil society organisations are also facing **very significant political difficulties**, including a **shifting civic space** in favour of **illiberal civic organisations** and a **shrinking safe civic space**. The latter takes the form of **restrictions to civic freedoms** of association, assembly, expression and privacy online/offline, as well as **regulatory constraints** and **controls** of civil society organisations, notably **limitations to funding**. Reduced access to **decision-makers** and outright **threats** and **attacks** are also becoming increasingly prevalent;
Within this context, it is imperative to move from awareness-raising to political pressure and concrete action. Civil society organisations must be protected by the State, through an enabling environment which encourages dialogue through legislation, provides structured support, while respecting the independence and democratic role of civil society;

Civil society must also take recourse to existing EU complaints procedures and work closer together across different sectors, along topics of common interest at the national, regional and European levels;

The EU should effectively monitor developments at the national level and incentivise national authorities to support the democratic role of civil society organisations. In addition, Member States should be encouraged to measure the impact of civil society and to raise awareness of their positive contribution;

Crucially, civil society organisations need sustainable and direct financing, better information on existing EU funding opportunities and simplified EU financial processes;

More EU programmes should include funding opportunities specifically for civil society organisations, for example, the Multi-annual Financial Framework, the European Semester, Next Generation EU, etc;

Particular efforts should be made to reach out and fund small civil society organisations, including those in non-urban areas;

Moreover, much greater efforts should be made to educate citizens on the value and contribution of civil society to democracies and fundamental rights.

Seizing the moment: jointly building the Europe of tomorrow

The National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) and the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE), constitute two opportunities to be seized by European civil society, in order to 'build back better' and design the future we want;

However, these two processes must be accompanied by a greater sense of urgency and boldness by all actors, including the European Institutions and Member States;

Concretely, civil society organisations should be more efficiency involved in co-designing, co-implementing and co-assessing the NRRPs in each Member State, as already stated by the EESC in its Resolution 'Involvement of Organised Civil Society in the NRRPs: what works and what does not?' (https://europa.eu/!bX67CX 25 February 2021);

In particular, there should be greater involvement in the NRRPs of the social economy, a sector which is central to developing inclusive and sustainable models of growth;

As regards the CoFE, it should explore all possible policy and legislative measures to enhance civil dialogue and participatory democracy, thus unleashing the full potential of civil society in European policy-making;

It should also provide the opportunity to better define and implement civil dialogue beyond consultation, thus ensuring policy coherence throughout all EU Institutions;

The involvement of European civil society and of the EESC in the CoFE will play a decisive role in representing the voices of marginalised individuals and communities, in reaching out to actors beyond the 'Brussels bubble' and hence, in devising innovative and results-oriented proposals for EU reform;

In this context, the contribution of both the Citizens' Panels and of organised European civil society is fully complementary and both sets of actors will enrich the outcome of the process;
Nonetheless, a transparent, representative and bottom-up participation by civil society actors in the CoFE is essential. These actors will also play a pivotal role in the implementation of the recommendations emanating from the CoFE:

To this end, the EU must adopt a structured, meaningful and long-term approach to civil dialogue;

It should also recognise the role of civil society organisations as the collective representation of citizens concerns in European democratic societies;

Principally, it is recommended that the EU adopts an overall EU Strategy to Promote Civic Participation and Civil Dialogue;

The EU is also urged to rapidly adopt a Statute of European Associations and NGOs. With a uniform definition and legal provisions between Member States and the EU, such a Statute would enable cross-border cooperation and funding;

A Statute of European Associations would also necessitate agreement on common EU standards on the right to association and civil dialogue across all EU policies and mechanisms;

Of central importance will be the extent to which civil society organisations collaborate closely along topics of common interest and forge alliances at the regional, national and European levels. Transversal cooperation will directly impact the effectiveness of civil dialogue and of a future Statute of European Associations.

Brussels, 11 November 2021