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Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Strengthening multilateralism and core international principles for a rules-based order in a rapidly changing world — The importance of the civil society contribution to the UN system

(own-initiative opinion)

(C/2024/1573)

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1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) reiterates the European Union (EU) institutions' obligation to promote universal values according to Art. 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and respect for the principles of the United Nations (UN) Charter.

1.2. The EESC and civil society expect the UN to deliver on its own goals of maintaining peace and security, supporting sustainable development and implementing human rights to the benefit of an increasing number of people. Civil society's contribution is essential for finding and delivering solutions on the ground, achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), fostering a just transition and fighting climate change.

1.3. The UN is the only organisation in which likeminded countries and adversaries continue to talk across a broad range of policy areas. However, it is prone to obstruction by single UN Member States (MS), undermining its ability to react to current crises and challenges. MS in breach of the UN Charter or their commitments under UN agreements or conventions should not be allowed to exercise their full participation and voting rights.

1.4. Civil society, including the social partners, expect the EU and its Member States to commit more than ever to strengthening the UN through fundamental reform. In order to make the UN fit for the rising challenges and to stabilise the consensus on shared values and norms, UN governance has to become more representative, inclusive and effective. To ensure more equal representation, the Global South needs a stronger say in the UN.

1.5. The UN has to further develop its integrated Civil Society Organizations System by establishing, inter alia, a UN-wide consultation regime on key initiatives and a right of petition to better involve citizens, civil society organisations (CSOs), social partners, business organisations and other stakeholders, with a special focus on improving the representation of women, young people and vulnerable groups. Greater attention, support and recognition should be given to major groups and other stakeholders (MGoS).

1.6. Despite some progress, the EESC believes the EU's coordination needs to be improved. In all UN bodies and related institutions, it should speak with a single voice and act accordingly. The EESC's contribution⁽¹⁾ to the first EU voluntary review on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its involvement during the official EU presentation at the High-level Political Forum in 2023 are examples to follow for the EU institutions, as well as for the structured engagement of European civil society and the convening role that the EESC can play in this context.

1.7. In addition to the introduction of qualified majority decisions, a reform of the EU Treaties on foreign, security and defence policy is worth considering to improve the EU's ability to act and also enhance its influence in the UN.

1.8. The EESC commits itself to making its positions better heard in the processes of formulating the EU's common position on all UN-related matters, to more closely engaging with the EU and Member States' delegations to the UN and to developing a roadmap to engage more with UN bodies relevant to its work.

2. Challenges to multilateralism, a rules-based world order and the UN

2.1. As a community of values, the EU and the UN share a common agenda in promoting multilateralism and a rules-based world order as well as maintaining peace and security.

2.2. To achieve sustainable development for all peoples and address shared global challenges, the UN is the only global framework for finding common solutions, covering all policy areas, which allows for engagement with EU partners and adversaries alike. The UN's many specialised agencies, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and its programmes and funds, including the UN Conference on Trade and Development (Unctad) and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), provide a wide institutional and topical platform.

2.3. In its war of aggression against Ukraine, Russia is violating the principles of the UN Charter and international law.

2.4. A wave of autocratic regression is reducing the number of democracies in Europe and all over the world. Autocracies challenge the values and norms, most notably human rights and the rule of law, enshrined in the UN Charter and the European Charter of Fundamental Rights. Even liberal democracies, including inside the EU, prioritise their own interests over these principles.

2.5. Founded in 1945 in response to the horrors of World War II and with a Western centric focus, the UN is unable to sufficiently represent non-Security Council (SC) Member States. Developing countries in particular are underrepresented. Equal representation is, however, necessary to stabilise the consensus on shared values and norms.

2.6. To contribute to SDG 17 (Partnerships for the goals) several UN bodies have established their own procedures for engaging with stakeholders, including civil society. To democratise the UN and empower it to address current challenges, engagement with civil society should be carried out in a more systematic way.

2.7. The UN remains the only global framework suited to working towards global solutions to address the climate change challenge and mitigate its effects. Without a just transition, respecting every society's right to sustainable development, new conflicts will arise, forcing more people to flee their home countries.

2.8. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the vulnerability of our societies to sudden crises, further exaggerating the unequal distribution of wealth and prospects in life between the Global North and South. Whereas high-income countries have returned to their pre-COVID-19 levels in terms of social and economic development, low-income countries will struggle for years to come.

3. The UN in the 21st century

3.1. The EESC acknowledges the UN's contribution to maintaining peace and security, supporting human rights and fostering sustainable development during the past 77 years. They are the best proof that the UN remains the only platform to commonly address global challenges.

⁽¹⁾ EESC contribution to EU-level Voluntary Review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda (SDGs).

3.2. The EESC supports reform of the UN and calls upon all MS to commit themselves to making it fit for the changing geopolitical environment. It calls in particular on the EU Member States to coordinate and promote a joint vision and position, with close involvement of CSOs.

3.3. The EESC supports the work of the High-Level-Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism and considers the blueprint 'A Breakthrough for People and Planet' ⁽²⁾ an important contribution to developing concrete recommendations for UN reform.

3.4. The EESC considers the 'Summit of the Future' an opportunity for the EU, its Member States, citizens and civil society to actively work towards reform. The EESC's own best practice experience of including a youth delegate in the EESC delegation ⁽³⁾ to the UN Climate Change Conference ⁽⁴⁾, as well as the initiative of the UN secretary-general's envoy on youth, give a meaningful voice to the youth. The EESC highlights the Commission's Youth Action Plan (YAP) in EU external action for 2022-2027 and believes this can be a point of reference for UN initiatives as well as EU activities in the UN forum.

3.5. The 'New Agenda for Peace' is an opportunity to relaunch the UN's capabilities in the area of conflict prevention, and peace building and keeping peace. However, to make the UN more effective in working for peace, reform of UN decision-making, including the SC, is necessary.

3.6. Just transition solutions can be effective means of conflict prevention. These include the promotion of collective bargaining at all levels to anticipate and manage change to low-carbon economies and measures to mitigate climate change effects, offering opportunities for sustainable development to all societies, improving working conditions as well as achieving the SDGs.

3.7. The EESC welcomes the UN's ambition to put special emphasis on the protection of women, children and vulnerable groups in its conflict prevention and resolution activities. To this end, MGoS should be given stronger voice, support and recognition.

3.8. The EESC reiterates that the global guarantee of rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has to become a key priority of the UN's work.

3.9. The pledge of the SDGs to improve the lives of all people appears to be failing ⁽⁵⁾, as also highlighted in a recent EESC opinion on the EU and Agenda 2030 ⁽⁶⁾. The EU and its Member States bear a special responsibility for narrowing the unequal distribution of wealth between the Global North and South and stepping up efforts to achieve the SDGs by 2030.

3.10. The UN's current governance no longer represents the geopolitical and societal realities of the 21st century. In order to strengthen support for the UN and its common norms and values, it is necessary to make the UN's governance more representative, inclusive and effective. In the SC, like in all other UN bodies, developing countries require better representation.

3.11. While preserving its intergovernmental structure, the UN has to engage in a more inclusive and transparent way with citizens, democratic civic organisations and movements, other stakeholders, parliaments, subnational authorities and other official entities and offer them additional opportunities to participate, including the MGoS. In line with SDG 17, inclusive decision-making in the UN is crucial to achieving its goals and has to be complemented by making it more accountable and transparent.

3.12. The UN will only be considered a legitimate actor if it delivers on its own goals to the benefit of an increasing number of people. To this end, the UN's decision-making processes have to become more efficient, transparent and less prone to deadlocks.

⁽²⁾ High-Level-Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism: A Breakthrough for People and Planet: Effective and Inclusive Global Governance for Today and the Future, New York 2023.

⁽³⁾ <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/initiatives/climate-change-conferences-cop/eesc-youth-delegate>.

⁽⁴⁾ Conference of the Parties (COP) on the UN Framework Convention of Climate Change (UNFCCC).

⁽⁵⁾ General Assembly Economic and Social Council: Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: towards a rescue plan for people and planet: Report of the Secretary-General (special edition) (A/78/80-E/2023/64, p. 2).

⁽⁶⁾ EESC opinion on 'EU and Agenda 2030: strengthening the implementation of the SDGs' (OJ C, C/2024/876, 6.2.2024, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/876/oj>).

3.13. The UN needs sufficient resources and capacities to ensure inclusive decision-making. They need to be tailor-made for civil society, whose capacities vary widely, allowing citizens and organisations from across the globe to engage with the UN.

4. The EU in the UN

4.1. To promote multilateral solutions to global challenges, the EU 'shall establish all appropriate forms of cooperation with the organs of the United Nations and its specialised agencies' (Art. 220(1) Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union).

4.2. Being the biggest contributor to the UN budget, with one permanent member on the SC and comprising more than 13 % of all UN Member States, the EU and its 27 Member States have the potential for substantial influence in the UN.

4.3. However, the EU remains unable to make full use of its resources to take a leading role in addressing global challenges in the framework of the UN, with notable exceptions including the fight against climate change where the EU plays a leading role.

4.4. The EU's formal participation in UN bodies and agencies remains limited. Obtaining enhanced observer status in the UN General Assembly and its subordinate bodies in 2011 ⁽⁷⁾, including the right to speak and orally present proposals and amendments, has been a step forward.

4.5. Despite limited progress in enhancing participation rights, the EU exercises only observer status in most UN bodies and agencies. In policy areas of exclusive EU competence such as trade, the Commission speaks on behalf of all 27 MS with a coordinated position, like at the UN Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL).

4.6. In most policy areas covered by the UN, the EU often lacks a coherent position due to insufficient coordination between the EU institutions and its Member States. The EESC calls upon the EU and all Member States to increase the EU's visibility to strengthen its influence in the UN.

4.7. The EESC has the potential to bring added value to the promotion of the UN's goals, for instance by providing a platform for civil society stakeholders to meet and exchange with UN representatives. In July 2023, the EESC organised a roundtable with the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights (UNHCR), offering the expertise of its own EESC Fundamental Rights Group ⁽⁸⁾.

4.8. The EESC will examine the possibility of establishing continuous cooperation with MGoS and their regional coordinators, in order to present their views to the EU and UN bodies and give greater visibility to their demands.

5. Considerations

5.1. Given the EESC's institutional role as a consultative body, its wide-ranging work is relevant to a number of UN bodies and agencies. Its positions are heard, where the EESC directly cooperates with different UN bodies, agencies, and programmes, but it requires a structured and ongoing framework to be channelled in a timely manner through the EU institutions in order to make a difference.

5.2. The EESC commits itself to a structured approach of making its positions on UN-related topics better heard when the EU formulates its common positions to the UN. EESC rapporteurs have to engage directly with key players in charge of drawing up the EU's common position in a timely manner.

5.3. The EESC commits itself to fostering closer collaboration with the EU and its Member States' Delegations to the UN and expects its opinions to be followed up by the respective units in the European Commission dealing with the UN and multilateral bodies.

⁽⁷⁾ UN General Assembly: Participation of the European Union in the work of the United Nations (A/RES/65/276).

⁽⁸⁾ Strengthening the fight for Human Rights, EESC Conference on 20 July 2023, Brussels (<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/news/strengthening-fight-human-rights-eesc-president-exchanges-un-high-commissioner-volker-turk-and-csos>).

5.4. The EESC also sees the need for better cooperation between its sections to break down internal silos, given that in particular the SDGs span across all sections' work. For increased coordination of all sections and with the EESC President, the EESC tasks all sections with developing a roadmap for better representation of the Committee's work in the UN and establishing more inclusive relations with relevant UN bodies. A mapping exercise of all sections shall identify the UN bodies of key interest, listing the ongoing activities and existing relations with UN bodies and processes, to highlight the state of play and explore opportunities for further cooperation.

5.5. The EESC sees a need for better coordination of EU positions on UN-related matters. In line with the provisions of Art. 34(2) TEU on the SC, the High Representative should represent the EU's position in all UN bodies on behalf of all Member States. As long as the EU lacks formal participation rights, national governments' representatives shall represent the EU's common position and act accordingly.

5.6. The EESC calls upon the EU High Representative to take a leading role on behalf of the EU and its Member States in the debate on UN reform. Only an EU speaking with one voice, taking clear positions, can have an impact on the future of the UN.

5.7. The EESC strongly supports the European External Action Service's efforts to extend the scope of the EU's rights, under its enhanced observer status, to include additional UN subordinate bodies.

5.8. The EESC commits itself to giving civil society a strong voice in the 'Summit of the Future' process by deepening its recent cooperation with the UN Economic and Social Council (Ecosoc). Ecosoc member governments should consult and exchange views with civil society and social partners on their activities and report on a more regular basis at their national level. The EESC can provide a forum for discussing Ecosoc's work.

5.9. Recognising the 'Summit of the Future' as a pivotal moment to meet existing international commitments, in particular to accelerate the implementation of the SDGs and build a new agenda for peace, the EESC will strengthen its internal cross-section approach and continue the ongoing dialogue with UN bodies to identify opportunities for increasing civil society's role in preparation for the Summit.

5.10. The EESC supports the idea of inclusive consultations with civil society on a new architecture for stakeholder involvement in UN governance throughout the whole design-process; some UN bodies already offer advanced opportunities to participate, more UN bodies should follow this example.

5.11. The EESC calls upon the EU to take a leading role in improving opportunities within the UN system to engage with democratic CSOs, with the EESC's assistance. In its foreign policy, the EU should help build civil society's capacity around the world, including its ability to better engage with the UN.

5.12. The EESC suggests further developing UNCITRAL's practice of asking for written contributions by stakeholders to an UN-wide consultation on key initiatives, and to establish a right of petition to the UN offering opportunities for citizens, civil society organisations and other stakeholders to get involved directly.

5.13. The EESC calls for UN structures to be streamlined and UN decision-making processes to be made more transparent in order to increase its legitimacy, while making the financial basis of the UN more sustainable.

5.14. The EESC supports the longstanding call for reform of the UN, including the SC, in order to ensure equal representation of countries from all continents and a more effective decision-making less prone to obstruction by single MS. UN Member States including members of the SC in breach of the UN Charter must lose their voting rights until they return to the strict observance of international law. UN Member States in breach of their commitments under UN agreements or conventions should not be elected to a leadership role in a UN or related body. The most recent case involved Qatar presiding over this year's International Labour Conference, despite not fulfilling its commitments to the ILO Governing Body on reforms, undermining the ILO's reputation and role as guardian of international labour standards.

5.15. The EESC expects the new European Parliament and Commission in 2024 to make implementing the concrete steps agreed in the 'Pact for the Future' a key priority of the EU's external relations during the next institutional term in 2024-2029. The promotion of multilateralism and a rules-based order should be a priority area in the next Commission's political guidelines and be reflected in the work programme as well as the European Council's new strategic agenda.

5.16. The EESC calls upon the EU institutions to work for swift implementation of the recommendations of the Conference on the Future of Europe in order to strengthen the EU's international role and to 'relaunch [...] global multilateralism[...] and a reinforced role for the ILO' ⁽⁹⁾ while introducing qualified majority decisions in EU foreign policy; a reform of the EU Treaties is worth considering in order to considerably improve the EU's ability to act and also enhance its influence in the UN.

5.17. The EESC proposes building a coalition of like-minded regional organisations so that they can be better represented at the UN, including more rights for its representatives to participate in various UN bodies and agencies. In order to achieve a better representation of the Global South, the EU should partner in particular with its closest neighbour, the African Union, in pursuing common reforms in the UN.

Brussels, 14 December 2023.

The President
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⁽⁹⁾ Conference on the Future of Europe: Report on the Final Outcome, May 2022, Proposal 24, No 5.