

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the ‘Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Next steps for a sustainable European future European action for sustainability’

(COM(2016) 739 final)

(2017/C 345/15)

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Consultation	European Commission, 8.12.2016
Legal basis	Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
Plenary Assembly decision	13.12.2016
Section responsible	Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment
Adopted in section	15.6.2017
Adopted at plenary	5.7.2017
Plenary session No	527
Outcome of vote	124/0/7
(for/against/abstentions)	

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. The EESC is disappointed by the Communication *Next steps for a sustainable European future* as it gives the impression that all the main objectives and requirements of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development have already been covered and addressed by the existing EU policies. The Communication does not introduce into EU policies the paradigm shift brought about by the 2030 Agenda towards a new model of development that is economically more sustainable, socially more inclusive and environmentally more viable in the long term. As pointed out by the European Political Strategy Centre⁽¹⁾, and also by the EESC in previous opinions, such a paradigm shift is urgently needed in order for the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be properly implemented in the EU, taking into account the rising social inequalities and high unemployment rates in Europe as well as the unsustainable environmental footprint of its economy.

1.2. The EESC has always welcomed the Commission's display of leadership when the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was created. Now that the 17 Sustainable Development Goals need to be put into practice, the EESC feels that such concrete leadership is lacking on the part of the EU, as it has not presented an ambitious roadmap for action on the implementation of the SDG with a time horizon of 2030 nor has it demonstrated willingness to critically review and change its current policies.

1.3. So far, the 2030 Agenda has not been used as an opportunity to set out a new, proactive, transformational and positive narrative for Europe, as the EESC, the EP and many voices from civil society have called for: a new vision of a more sustainable and socially inclusive Europe that benefits its citizens and leaves no one behind; a forward-looking vision, building on the values which have made Europe a successful model: solidarity and human rights, social justice and equality, democracy and participation, entrepreneurship and environmental responsibility. Neither the Commission White Paper on the Future of Europe nor the Rome Declaration on the occasion of the 60th EU anniversary sufficiently acknowledge the value of European sustainable development for European citizens.

⁽¹⁾ EPSC Strategic Notes, Sustainability Now! A European Vision for Sustainability, 20 July 2016; EESC opinion on *A European Sustainable Development Civil Society Forum* (OJ C 303, 19.8.2016, p. 73); EESC opinion on *Sustainable Development: A Mapping of the EU's internal and external policies* (OJ C 487, 28.12.2016, p. 41).

1.4. The EESC regrets the fact that the Commission has not launched a participatory process leading to an overarching and integrated strategy for a sustainable Europe in 2030 and beyond. Such a strategy is needed in order to provide the necessary long-term time horizon, policy coordination and coherence for implementing the UN 2030 Agenda. It should be part of a new, single long-term strategic policy framework for the period after 2020.

1.5. The EESC is concerned about the lack of coordination between the EU and the Member States in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The aforementioned overarching strategy should serve as a common framework for coordinated action.

1.6. The EESC appreciates the work that the Commission has carried out in identifying the potential contribution that the Commission's ten priorities can make to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. However, the EESC stresses that the SDG mapping of EU policies needs to be complemented by a profound analysis of the real gaps that are currently in evidence in the EU as regards SDG implementation. Only a reality check will enable the EU to identify areas where prior action is needed and to critically review the effectiveness of current EU policies when it comes to implementing the SDGs.

1.7. The EESC welcomes the Commission's decision to establish a multi-stakeholder platform on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in the EU⁽²⁾. The EESC points out the need to ensure that non-governmental stakeholders are able to cooperate with institutional representatives in this platform on an equal footing in order to transmit the multi-stakeholder approach of the UN 2030 Agenda into EU policy on sustainable development. The platform must involve a broad range of non-governmental stakeholders in the full cycle of SDG implementation in the EU, from designing new policy initiatives, long-term strategies and awareness raising activities, to reviewing and monitoring policy implementation and the exchange of best practice. The platform should also facilitate multi-stakeholder cooperation and partnerships. The EESC will support the work of the platform by nominating a member to represent the EESC on the platform and provide expertise as well as by facilitating outreach to civil society and contributing with other activities.

1.8. With regard to fostering sustainable development, the EESC feels that the multi-annual financial framework post-2020 needs to be aligned with the sustainable development priorities in the EU. It ought to significantly increase the proportion of own resources and revenue, and make implementation more effective and efficient.

1.9. In the EESC's view it is essential to introduce, in addition to the generally accepted GDP indicator which has, until now, proven relevant, other indicators capable of measuring not only economic growth but also its impact and results with regard to the well-being of citizens and the environment⁽³⁾. This is due to the fact that the viability of the desired development process by 2030 can only be guaranteed by ensuring and monitoring complex social and environmental changes.

2. Introduction

2.1. With the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, world leaders agreed in 2015 on an unprecedented broad action plan to end poverty, protect the planet, ensure human rights and guarantee prosperity for all. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030 require transformational changes from all countries, both developing and developed.

2.2. Based on the outcome of several conferences, in 2016 the EESC set out its recommendations for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the EU with a set of three opinions⁽⁴⁾.

⁽²⁾ C(2017) 2941 final.

⁽³⁾ EESC opinion on *New measures for development-oriented governance and implementation — evaluation of the European Structural and Investment Funds and ensuing recommendations* (OJ C 487, 28.12.2016, p. 1); see also OECD, *Measuring wellbeing and progress: Well-being Research* (<http://www.oecd.org/statistics/measuring-well-being-and-progress.htm>).

⁽⁴⁾ EESC opinion on *A European Sustainable Development Civil Society Forum* (OJ C 303, 19.8.2016, p. 73); EESC opinion on *Sustainable Development: A Mapping of the European Union's internal and external policies* (OJ C 487, 28.12.2016, p. 41); EESC opinion on *The 2030 Agenda — A European Union committed to support sustainable development goals globally* (OJ C 34, 2.2.2017, p. 58).

2.3. With the Communication *Next steps for a sustainable European future*⁽⁵⁾ the Commission has laid out its approach to implementing the 2030 Agenda as part of the EU's internal and external policies. The Communication was accompanied by several other documents, in particular a Communication on a new European Consensus on Development and a Communication on a renewed partnership with ACP countries. The EESC has delivered its views on these Communications more specifically in separate opinions⁽⁶⁾.

3. General comments

3.1. According to the introduction to the Communication, the EU is fully committed to acting as a frontrunner in implementing the 2030 Agenda⁽⁷⁾.

3.2. However, the Commission has not risen to the challenge of showing leadership by presenting an ambitious roadmap for implementing the SDGs.

3.3. The Communication does not achieve its purpose, as set out in the Commission's 2016 work programme, of presenting 'a new approach to ensure Europe's economic development and social and environmental sustainability beyond the 2020 timeframe and to implement the SDGs in EU internal and external policies in an integrated manner'.

3.4. According to the Communication, the EU's response to the 2030 Agenda includes two approaches: the full integration of SDGs into current EU policies and a reflection on the long-term implementation of the SDGs beyond 2020.

3.5. The EESC acknowledges the efforts of the Commission, as reflected in this Communication, to link SDGs with current EU policies and the Commission's ten work priorities. However, the Communication focuses too much on the current business of EU policies. The Commission does not understand the 2030 Agenda as a call to critically review and change its own policies. The Communication does not reflect the paradigm shift that the SDGs stand for⁽⁸⁾: a new model of development that is economically more sustainable, socially more inclusive and environmentally more viable over the long term, and that ensures that the resources of our planet will be shared fairly with a growing world population⁽⁹⁾.

3.6. So far, neither the Commission nor the Council has used the 2030 Agenda as an opportunity to set out a new, proactive, transformational and positive narrative for Europe, as the EESC, the EP⁽¹⁰⁾ and many voices from civil society have called for; a new vision of a more sustainable and socially inclusive Europe for the benefit of its citizens and leaving no one behind⁽¹¹⁾. Neither the Commission White Paper on the Future of Europe nor the Rome Declaration by the leaders of 27 Member States, the Commission, the European Council and the European Parliament on the occasion of the 60th EU anniversary sufficiently reflect the value of long-term sustainable development for European citizens and the need for a united Europe to deliver on this.

3.7. Moreover, the Communication does not provide the urgently needed framework for future action on implementing the 2030 Agenda. So far, the Commission is not planning to launch a participatory process to set up an overarching and integrated strategy for a sustainable Europe in 2030 and beyond, as the EESC has called for⁽¹²⁾. Currently, Europe's strategic frameworks operate with 2020 as their horizon. This is unacceptable, not only because the UN's Agenda identifies a time horizon of 2030 and the even longer-term perspective of the Paris climate agreement, but also considering the length of

⁽⁵⁾ COM(2016) 739 final.

⁽⁶⁾ EESC opinion on *The 2030 Agenda — A European Union committed to support sustainable development goals globally* (OJ C 34, 2.2.2017, p. 58).

⁽⁷⁾ COM(2016) 739 final, p. 3.

⁽⁸⁾ 'We need to turn around our economies' Speech given by Commission Vice-President Frans Timmermans at the UN summit on 27 September 2015.

⁽⁹⁾ OJ C 487, 28.12.2016, p. 41, para 3.4.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Resolution of 12 May 2016 <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P8-TA-2016-0224+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>.

⁽¹¹⁾ Common appeal to European leaders by European Civil Society Organisations and Trade Unions, 21 March 2017 'The Europe we want' https://concordeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/EuropeWeWant_Statement_English_201703.pdf?1855fc; Statement by Solidar on 'Our Common Future' <http://www.solidar.org/en/news/statement-our-common-european-future>.

⁽¹²⁾ OJ C 487, 28.12.2016, p. 41, para 1.5.

processes of economic and social modernisation. A single overarching strategy for the post-2020 era should be set up, building on the European Commission's ten work priorities, the Europe 2020 strategy with its seven flagship initiatives and the 11 thematic targets of EU cohesion policy, and integrating the multi-annual financial framework post-2020.

3.8. The Commission does not fully practice the multi-stakeholder approach set out in the 2030 Agenda. In contrast to the process leading to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the Commission's approach so far has not been very transparent and inclusive.

4. Specific comments

4.1. *The mapping of European policies contributing to the SDGs (chapter 2.1 of the Communication)*

4.1.1. This mapping appears to be mere paperwork: it is a compilation of EU policies which address in one way or another issues related to the 17 SDGs. The mapping exercise does not sufficiently reflect the realities in Europe. It doesn't justify the Commission's conclusion that all 17 SDGs are addressed through European action, since no assessment has been made as to whether these policies are actually effective or undermined by other conflicting measures. For example: the EU 2020 Strategy is mentioned as addressing the SDGs on poverty and inequality yet there is no mention of the fact that the relevant EU 2020 headline targets are not going to be reached.

4.1.2. Therefore, the mapping of EU policies has to be complemented with a detailed gap analysis in order to assess where the EU really stands as regards SDG implementation⁽¹³⁾. Only a reality check would enable European policy makers to identify the right priorities for implementing the SDGs. The conclusions the Commission has drawn from the mapping exercise lack credibility and are not based on facts.

4.1.3. Together with the Communication, Eurostat published an initial statistical overview on the current situation in EU Member States as regards the SDGs⁽¹⁴⁾. However, the Commission has made no attempt to create the necessary links between the mapping exercise, the statistical facts and the identification of political priorities for implementing the SDGs.

4.1.4. The EESC hopes that the introduction of a full monitoring framework for the implementation of the SDGs in the EU will allow for a more fact-based approach to identifying the main gaps and challenges for the EU as regards the 2030 Agenda.

4.1.5. As the EESC has already pointed out, the areas where the EU needs to do most in order to achieve the SDGs are in reducing its environmental footprint and creating a more socially inclusive Europe: SDG 12 (sustainable consumption and production); SDG 13 (climate action); SDGs 14 and 15 (ecosystem conservation); SDG 2 (sustainable agriculture); SDG 9 (investing in infrastructure and innovation); SDG 10 (reducing inequalities); SDG 8 (decent work and employment); SDG 1 (poverty reduction); SDG 5 (gender equality); SDG 4 (education)⁽¹⁵⁾.

4.2. *The contribution of the Commission's ten priorities to the 2030 Agenda (chapter 2.2 of the Communication)*

4.2.1. The Communication demonstrates how the Commission's ten work priorities can contribute to the implementation of the SDGs. However, the Commission should also have the courage to revise/adapt its work priorities if needs be, in order to make full use of any potential synergies with the work of implementing the SDGs.

4.2.2. In the EESC's view, more attention should be paid to the cultural dimension of sustainable development and the role of communication in promoting the 2030 Agenda.

⁽¹³⁾ OJ C 487, 28.12.2016, p. 41, para 1.7.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Eurostat, Sustainable Development in the European Union, 2016.

⁽¹⁵⁾ OJ C 487, 28.12.2016, p. 41, para 4.1.

4.3. Governance (chapter 3.1 of the Communication)

4.3.1. The EESC recommends the introduction of a framework for governance and coordination alongside the long-term strategy for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, in order to ensure coherence between centralised and decentralised measures, as well as to involve organised civil society at national and regional levels.

4.3.2. The EU Semester should be developed into an instrument of vertical, multi-level coordination with regard to implementing the SDGs within Member States⁽¹⁶⁾. Unfortunately, in its Communication the Commission does not make use of the opportunity to further develop the EU Semester in that direction.

4.3.3. The EESC considers that, although since 2010 sustainable development has been mainstreamed into the Europe 2020 strategy, coherence between economic, social and environmental objectives has not been achieved. Mechanisms ensuring policy coherence for sustainable development need to be strengthened.

4.3.4. The EESC welcomes the more integrated approach found in the Commission's new structure and the coordinating role of the FVP in taking forward the work on implementing the SDGs. However, the coordinating units within the Commission will need to be equipped with sufficient capacities in order to drive these processes forward with the appropriate vigour.

4.3.5. It is up to EU leaders to make use of the potential for better governance, to strengthen management, to understand the importance of a cross-cutting coordination method aimed at improving interactions and possibly to hand control over to the socioeconomic players during the preparation phase, so as to render 'participation' more effective. They will therefore be able to benefit from the formidable latent forces that will come into effect during the implementation process.

4.3.6. The Commission's Communication unfortunately does not address the issue of how to recognise and improve this process.

4.4. Financing (chapter 3.2 of the Communication)

4.4.1. The establishment of the post-2020 multi-annual financial framework must be used as an opportunity to align the spending of EU funds with the implementation of the sustainable development priorities in the EU.

4.4.2. The EESC agrees that the EU should further develop its financial support system, which improves economic performance at territorial, regional and local levels and promotes the common good, while also taking into consideration the needs of sustainability. Economic prosperity should form the economic basis of the SDGs, but rules should be put in place to ensure that the social and environmental objectives are met. The EESC feels that reforming the European tax system could consolidate the increase in budget resources and encourage better implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

4.4.3. The Commission places particular emphasis on issues related to sustainable financing. Of particular importance in the EESC's view is the need to create the right framework conditions for private and public investors for the massive long-term investment in infrastructure modernisation and innovation that is required in order to facilitate the transition to a more sustainable economy⁽¹⁷⁾.

4.5. Measuring progress (chapter 3.3 of the Communication)

4.5.1. The EESC appreciates the Commission's intention of carrying out detailed regular monitoring of the SDGs within the EU context, drawing on a wider range of ongoing monitoring processes across the Commission, Agencies, EEAS and Member States. However, specific information about what this monitoring system would look like is missing.

4.5.2. The EESC welcomes ESTAT's work on a set of indicators for monitoring the implementation of the SDGs in the EU. The EESC stresses that decisions about monitoring and in particular the design of the indicators have substantial political implications. The continued development of the indicators must therefore be discussed and civil society consulted in a transparent way.

⁽¹⁶⁾ OJ C 487, 28.12.2016, p. 41, para 1.11; (EESC opinion on *Annual Growth Survey 2017*, OJ C 173, 31.5.2017, p. 73)

⁽¹⁷⁾ EESC opinion on *Sustainable Development: A Mapping of the European Union's internal and external policies* (OJ C 487, 28.12.2016, p. 41); see also EESC opinion on the *Green Paper on long-term financing of the European Economy* (OJ C 327, 12.11.2013, p. 11); see also *The Green Book*, UK government https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/220541/green_book_complete.pdf.

4.5.3. The EESC expects that, following the publication of a regular SDG monitoring report by ESTAT and a sufficient timespan allowing civil society organisations to consult their constituencies, a dialogue will be held via the multi-stakeholder platform on the conclusions arising from the monitoring process and the necessary policy review measures.

4.5.4. Several EESC studies have confirmed the view that it is essential to introduce, in addition to the generally accepted GDP indicator which has, until now, proven relevant, another indicator capable of showing not only economic growth but also its impact and results (gross domestic result). The monitoring of the desired development process leading up to 2030 must be based on a complex set of economic, social and environmental indicators ⁽¹⁸⁾.

4.5.5. The monitoring framework should also be linked to the EU Semester.

4.5.6. The UN 2030 requires governments to establish a framework for monitoring *and review*, thus setting up instruments for the full policy cycle of strategy-making, implementation, monitoring and review of strategies. The review stage has not been taken into account in the Communication. The reason for this might be the fact that an overarching strategy and action plan for SDG implementation, which could be regularly reviewed, is missing.

4.6. *Shared responsibility and a multi-stakeholder approach*

4.6.1. The SDGs are a multi-stakeholder agenda. They can only be put into practice if civil society, businesses, trade unions, local communities and other stakeholders take an active role and ownership. Participatory governance mechanisms need to ensure that civil society is involved at all levels: from local and national to European and UN levels. The SDGs require institutions and stakeholders to cooperate in an integrated way across different sectors.

4.6.2. In a recent decision, the Commission launched a multi-stakeholder platform on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in the EU ⁽¹⁹⁾. The EESC welcomes this new project and offers its help in making the platform a success.

4.6.3. However, the EESC is disappointed that the Commission, in its Communication, did not respond to the EESC's proposal to create a European Sustainable Development Forum in partnership with the European Commission, and its recommendations on how to design such a forum ⁽²⁰⁾ which were based on the outcome of presentations about the proposed forum at conferences, Council working parties, the Commission, and stakeholder consultations, in which participants expressed support for the forum.

4.7. The EESC appreciates that the Commission, in its decision establishing the multi-stakeholder platform, has expanded the platform's tasks with regard to following up on SDG implementation and exchanging best practices and included an advisory role for civil society representatives in the reflection work for the long-term implementation of the SDGs as well as involvement in the monitoring and review of implementation policies. The platform should also facilitate multi-stakeholder cooperation and partnerships. The EESC believes that this kind of participatory platform needs to play a crucial role in a new kind of European governance, which should be characterised by shared ownership.

Brussels, 5 July 2017

The President
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Georges DASSIS

⁽¹⁸⁾ See more on: Genuine progress indicator (GPI), Happy Planet index, the 'footprint index', etc.

⁽¹⁹⁾ C(2017) 2941 final.

⁽²⁰⁾ EESC opinion on A European Sustainable Development Civil Society Forum (OJ C 303, 19.8.2016, p. 73).