

Conference of the Civil Society Organisations' Group
of the European Economic and Social Committee

Brussels, 3 March 2025

Turn up the volume for civil society!

Key actions for the EU's new political cycle



CONFERENCE

Turn up the volume for civil society! Key actions for the EU's new political cycle

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Rue Belliard/Belliardstraat 99, 1040 Brussels

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European Economic
and Social Committee
Civil Society Organisations' Group

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Civil society plays a unique role in making society more resilient, resistant and strong by defending fundamental rights, upholding the rule of law and ensuring that policy is responsive to people's needs. The EESC's **Civil Society Organisations' group calls for a regular, structured and transparent civil dialogue between civil society and European institutions**. Moreover, at a time when the legitimacy of CSOs (civil society organisations) is being questioned, it is important to continue supporting their capacity and ensuring fairness through funding.

In the context of the European Commission's plans for a **Civil Society Strategy and Civil Society Platform, a dialogue with civil society actors must be established**. The **EESC must take part in the governance and be a key part** of the initiative to create a Civil Society Platform.

Moreover, civil dialogue should be built on existing structures and bring together all relevant stakeholders. Consequently, the Civil Society Organisations' Group also **calls for a working group** to be set up, which would directly support the strategy and a possible interinstitutional agreement on civil dialogue. The working group could work towards creating a blueprint for a more enabling environment for CSOs in the policy-shaping process. It could be facilitated by the EESC and be open to EU institutions and bodies, as well as EU civil society networks.

The EESC and its Civil Society Organisations' Group have been spearheading civil society dialogue by initiating a mapping exercise¹ of civil dialogue to get an overview of the practices in European institutions, identify key challenges and put forward recommendations.

Ensuring stability in the funding of Civil Society Organisations while maintaining independence

- The role of CSOs intensifies quickly during crises, often leading from the front. **It is crucial to raise awareness of their importance and invest proactively** to ensure they are ready for future challenges.
- It is essential to recognise that CSOs have their own distinct characteristics, and **funding instruments must be tailored and adapted to fit these unique needs**.
- **Firstly, social economy organisations** are major contributors to the economy and serve as an intermediary between the state and the market. It is imperative that their unique status is recognised, and that they are **not reduced to commercial functions**.
- To finance and strengthen social economy enterprises, the **single market needs a new dynamic, by changing public market regulations, changing state aid rules, and using a fiscal approach to support social economy enterprises**.
- It is also important to involve citizens and encourage them to invest their savings in these organisations.
- Secondly, **philanthropy plays a vital role in protecting civic spaces, democracy and fundamental rights**. It is important that **public-philanthropy collaboration is developed in the European Union**.
- Furthermore, policy-makers must empower philanthropy, by making it easier to make donations. **Cross-border philanthropy should be facilitated**, and the free flow of philanthropy capital guaranteed.

¹ The aforementioned research was commissioned by the EESC at the request of the Civil Society Organisations' Group. Results are expected to be available as of July 2025. The study undertakes a comprehensive mapping of civil dialogue practices within the EU institutions: what is the current approach to involving CSOs and what kind of methodology is being used? Knowledge of existing practices should inform and support the work towards more structured civil dialogue in the new legislative cycle.

- While ensuring transparency, new rules concerning for instance anti-money laundering and counterterrorism financing must not unduly restrict philanthropy.
- Lastly, the EU must **ensure fairness in the funding of CSOs** and **overcome administrative burdens** in accessing EU funds. Funding should be more focused on **capacity-building**. It should also be geared **towards output and results**, rather than deliverables and projects. Dedicating funds to **networking and awareness-raising** are also important, as it is increasingly difficult to reach out to communities and members.
- **Volunteers' contributions should be recognised in the financing** of CSOs by the EU.
- **Structural funding for CSOs should become mainstream at the national and EU level** and should be looked at in the context of a European Civil Society strategy.

Civil dialogue: Mapping existing initiatives and learning from good practices

- **It is crucial for democracy to recreate a link between civil society and policy-making**, at a time when trust and participation is waning, and citizens feel far away from institutions.
- **Civil dialogue is key to rebuilding this trust**, as it allows citizens organised around a common cause to make their voices heard. Likewise, **citizens' democratic participation must be encouraged**.
- There is a need for a **specific strategy for civil dialogue** and to **work at interinstitutional level**. The EU's **engagement with civil society** must be **properly monitored**.
- **Participation in civil dialogue must be inclusive**, and institutions, as well as the EESC, should strive to bring on board people who are not familiar with EU institutions and their work.
- Its format should encourage democratic opinion-forming, and it should be done in a **transparent manner, on a regular basis**. At the same time, a 'one-size-fits-all approach' should be avoided and sufficient adaptability ensured.
- Dialogue involves **structured and interactive communication between parties**. It therefore implies a commitment to listening to and considering each other.
- Preliminary research suggests **several barriers to an effective exchange between EU institutions and civil society**. Firstly, there are different understandings about what format a dialogue should take. Secondly, civil dialogue is considered outside of the mandate, thus it is not given enough attention and ends up being a low priority. Then, there are capacity and human resources issues, little experience with participatory formats, as well as reporting burdens to justify investments. Finally, a lack of culture of civil dialogue can be an additional barrier.
- An example of good practice would gather diverse stakeholders and be more than an information session. People would leave with new connections and fresh ideas. The time and date of the dialogue would be specifically chosen to ensure impact. **Making sure that it takes place on a regular basis is crucial, as it favours connections and accountability**.