

Liaison Group - Civil Society Organisations

Minutes of the virtual meeting

23 June 2020, 10.30 - 12.30

Attendance list

Participants: Ian PRITCHARD (ACE), Lisy PITER (ALDA), Kornelia KISS (CAE), Gabriella CIVICO (CEV), Elizabeth GOSME (COFACE), Annabel SEEBOHM (CPME), Luk ZELDERLOO (EASPD), Flavio GRAZIAN (ECAS), Alexandrina NAJMOWICZ (ECF), Jeremy WATES (EEB), Sevda KILICALP (EFC), Elisa BRIGA (EFIL), Davyth HICKS (ELEN), Horst DREIMANN (EVBB), Theodoros GRASSOS (EVBB), Dirk BOCHAR (FEANI), Emma ACHILLI (Frontline Defenders), Ilaria D'AURIA (IUT), Barbara STEENBERGEN (IUT), Brikena XHOMAQI (LLLP, Co-President), Léa GAUDRON (R.E.D.), Julie ROSENKILDE (SDG Watch Europe), Laura DE BONFILS (Social Platform), Edoardo CONCARI (UIPI), Piotr SADOWSKI (Volonteuropa), François BALATE (YFJ).
Observer: Jedde HOLLEWIJN (SOLIDAR).

Guest speaker: EESC president Luca Jahier

Apologies received: Pierre OBAJTEK (ACE), Philippe SEIDEL (AGE), Francesco PALA (ALDA), Tanya COX (CONCORD), Kasia HANULA BOBBITT (CONCORD), Diego NARANJO (EDRI), Marie Noël NEVEN (R.E.D.), Ingeborg NIESTROY (SDG Watch Europe), Liva VIKMANE (YFJ).

Welcome: Brikena Xhomaqi, interim co-chair of the Liaison Group (LG)

Brikena Xhomaqi, director of the Lifelong Learning Platform and interim co-chair of the LG, opened the meeting by welcoming all the participants and announcing that later on the EESC President, Luca Jahier, co-chair of the LG, would be giving a short good-bye address as his term of office would be coming to an end at the end of September. She informed the participants of some important dates:

- this was the last CSO meeting this term as the EESC was going to be partly renewed at the end of September;
- first CSO meeting of the new term: 5 October, 10.30 a.m., with the approval or election of the CSO co-chair. Participants were asked to pencil this date in;
- the first full LG meeting would probably be held on 24 November, with old and new members of the EESC.

Jeremy Wates, director of the European Environmental Bureau, asked to raise the issue of nomination of EESC members by national governments under Any Other Business (AOB).

Follow-up to last full LG meeting (12 May) and EU Recovery Plan

Brikena recalled the lively debate that had taken place during that meeting and the subsequent developments, mentioning amongst other things the EESC resolution drafted by the Post-COVID

subcommittee, where most of the concerns raised by CSO on 12 May (funding, increasing participation of civil society in decision-making etc., social innovation) had been taken into account. In addition, she said that the LG's input into the work of the subcommittee would serve as basis for the LG's contribution to the EESC resolution on the EC work programme 2021.

Pierluigi Brombo, LG secretariat, commented briefly on this EESC resolution, saying that the future work of the EU institutions would be focused on recovery and it therefore seemed logical to base the LG's contribution on this topic too. Due to the tight deadline (3 days after the meeting), it would not be possible to discuss a LG contribution further. He mentioned that the rapporteurs who would draft the EESC contribution to the EC work programme were the same as those who had drafted the EESC Resolution on Post-COVID Recovery so as to underline how much the contribution should focus the recovery.

Alexandrina Najmovic, European Civic Forum, commented on the EU Recovery Plan, saying that it did not provide a direct response to the social consequences of the crisis, although she hoped this would be provided through the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Regarding the new MFF, she expressed disappointment in relation to the financing of NGOs, as the programme on justice, rights and values had been cut by 20% in the revised MFF. Her organisation was building alliances to counter this at national level. She condemned the fact that all financial resources were designed for economic purposes but not the non-profit sector. Relating to the LG's contribution to the EESC resolution on the EC work programme, she proposed to look at the EESC contribution and check how the LG could get involved.

Jeremy Wates, EEB, was wondering about the possibility of a cover message for the LG's contribution, emphasising key points. He was pleased to see the European Green Deal as a way out of the crisis, underlining that the deal also had a social component. He condemned: the lack of conditionality in the current MFF proposals to ensure that programmes were in line with the Green Deal; the fact that the NGO sector was being neglected, and the fact that the Life programme, the only programme related to the environment, had been reduced in comparison to the 2018 MFF proposal.

The proposal of a cover message was embraced and Brikena asked for volunteers to help draft this message.

Luca Jahier's hello and farewell-address in a nutshell:

- his term would end in September 2020. The new EESC president would come from the Employers' Group (Gr.I);
- renewal: 40-50% would be new members. The Council will take a decision on national lists in July;
- nomination of EESC members: some national delegations had some problems. The longstanding problem that the treaty included no provision for nomination criteria had never been solved. For instance, the cultural sector should be represented in the EESC, but this had never been implemented by national governments, whose procedures were all very

different. He saw no possibility for a common frame at EU level for nomination of EESC delegations in the short-medium term;

- he briefly summarised his ongoing engagement for better recognition of civil society, briefly calling to mind some historic moments in the EESC and the creation of the LG, such as for instance the year-long discussion on inviting external CSOs and networking platforms to the EESC. Since then, the EESC had changed a lot, passing from five hearings a year to five hearings a week;
- he commented on his stand against the Polish government, publicly criticising an EESC member from Poland, since EESC members had to act in complete autonomy and should not be put under pressure and criticism;
- with regard to the key role of civil society during the pandemic, the EESC had decided to award a special EESC civil society prize 2020, changing it into a Civil Solidarity Prize. There would be 28 prizes recognising one outstanding organisation per EU country. He asked the participants to promote this prize amongst their national member organisations;
- the process of the Conference on the Future of Europe, under the leadership of the European Commission, would probably restart this week depending on the GAC (General Affairs Council), giving the EU institutions the opportunity to finalise the common declaration in July;
- the EESC ad-hoc group on the CoFoE would meet on 10 July and co-chair Brikena had been invited. The conference was scheduled to start in September/October.

Civil Society Days

Brikena announced that with a view to the EESC renewal in September/October, as well as considering the uncertainty of mass gathering rules for autumn and the expected second wave which would jeopardise the event once again, it would be much safer to focus on early 2021, besides the fact that it would now be quite difficult to find another date in 2020. Preparations could be further discussed in November/December taking into account the work that had already been done without neglecting the pandemic crisis and all important topics on the EU agenda by then. The participants agreed to this proposal.

Revision of operating rules

Brikena underlined that the proposed modifications need to be ratified by the full LG. Nevertheless, the CSO component could agree now to apply these changes to the upcoming election of the next co-chair in the next meeting, scheduled for 5 October. She explained that the proposed changes should clarify the voting procedure as the arrangements set out in the operating rules were quite general, and that some specifications had proved to be useful during the election of the interim co-chair in January.

Gabriella Civico commented on a number of points:

- terminology needed to be harmonised (member organisations – people);
- a 2nd ballot would be difficult for those voting online;
- voting should only be possible by people present in the meeting and a quorum should be established. Online voting would not be anonymous. → abolish email voting;
- it should be specified when the meeting to elect the co-chairs needed to take place in relation to a new term.

Abolishing the possibility of voting by email had been approved by the participants.

An updated, modified version of the operating rules would be sent to the group during the summer for comments and feedback, including also the question of proxy.

Jeremy Wates, EEB, raised the question of how to ensure distance voting while preserving anonymity if virtual meetings were still to continue for a while.

The EU survey might offer a possibility of voting online anonymously. The LG secretariat would find out about this solution for any kind of voting necessary during meetings.

Brainstorming on a work plan for the Liaison Group

Brikena reminded members that one of the main objectives of the LG was to contribute to the work of the EESC and proposed as key topics: civil dialogue, financing of CSOs, sustainability as an overarching topic. One way to work on this could be to step up the forms of cooperation with the EESC SDO (Sustainable Development Observatory), LMO (Labour Market Observatory), the Group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law and the EESC Associations category.

Kornelia Kiss, Culture Action Europe, talked about financing of CSOs, raising the issue of the funding gap due to late MFF approval, which affected all CSOs. She was wondering if the EESC could step in and make a statement.

Alexandrina Najmovic pointed out that the LG was not intended as a group for horizontal dialogue, although in the past this had seemed to be the only task owing to lack of involvement from the EESC. This had changed when Luca Jahier became co-chair of the group, getting the LG more involved and connected with the EESC bodies. She proposed to continue meetings between sections and rapporteurs for important topics specific to LG CSO members. She mentioned the institutionalised group designed to influence the work of the EESC. She supported Brikena's proposal of civil dialogue as key topic while wondering if a work plan was really needed as this group depended on the EESC's work and needed to be flexible, unless it might try to be agenda-setter. In any way, in her opinion, cooperation with the EESC should be strengthened as much as possible.

Pierluigi Brombo confirmed that cooperation had been strengthened throughout the last year and that much work was carried out behind the scenes. He said that the secretariat had been regularly contacting newly-appointed rapporteurs to propose specific CSO members as experts for their opinions. Furthermore, the EESC LG members had received not only the LG's newsletter but also a targeted email pointing out to them specific events in the newsletter that might be relevant to them. Furthermore, there was good contact with group and section secretariats and CSO members were regularly invited to EESC hearings.

Brikena agreed that there was not necessarily a need for a work plan but that the LG could stick to guiding topics, and proposed a further reflection during the summer. Fostering cooperation with different bodies should be key. In this context she mentioned that the European Civic Forum led by Alexandrina was the expert for the EESC opinion on the Statute for associations and NGOs. She

furthermore suggested to follow the proposal from a member to send out a survey asking members to identify the three main topics they wish the LG to focus on.

Any other business

Brikena announced that a survey had been sent out which the LG secretariat had prepared to find out about the outreach of the CSO members.

The **next CSO-only meeting** was scheduled for 5 October, 10.30 a.m. On the agenda, amongst other things, was the election of the new co-chair. She declared her willingness to continue in this role while stressing that of course other candidates were welcome.

The **next full-LG meeting** (with EESC members) was scheduled for 24 November, tbc. The main topic would be chosen later on, along with who to invite as high-level speaker. Topics could include the Conference on the Future of Europe and/or the EU Recovery Plan, tbc. Any ideas for topics and speakers were welcome.

Relating to the topic of nomination of national delegations in Croatia and the Czech Republic, **Brikena** reiterated that this was not within the mandate of this group, which was nevertheless free to have a discussion on this issue. As co-chair she invited everyone to gather with other CSO platforms to raise this problematic issue.

Pierluigi provided some information on the legal background of this topic, specifying that according to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, Article 302 (1), the members of the EESC were appointed for 5 years and the Council adopted the list of members drawn up in accordance with the proposals made by each Member State. The Committee had no word to say on the appointment of its own members.

Furthermore, he drew attention to Article 13 of the LG's operating rules, whereby only the EESC president was entitled to represent the LG in external relations which may have a bearing on the EESC.

Jeremy Wates took the floor and underlined that the LG was the place where topics of any issue of political importance could be discussed, particularly by CSO members, and that this topic should be raised as it went to the heart of what the EESC was. He quoted Article 300 TFEU, according to which the EESC was to consist of representatives of organisations of employers, of the employed and of other parties representative of civil society, notably in socio-economic, civic, professional and cultural areas. He was wondering if it might be a case for the European Ombudsman as some Member States were clearly trying to bypass this provision. He expressed the wish that the topic be put forward by CSOs and said that the EEB was willing to contribute.

Alexandrina commented on a trend whereby in authoritarian countries civic space was being more and more reduced because of the way organisations which were close to governments' positions were being selected. In relation to the Polish Poland case which Luca Jahier had mentioned, she highlighted that this was a matter of refusing a candidate on the basis of their previous activities as member of the

EESC in the field of justice and the rule of law. Since the mandate of the LG was quite limited and linked to the EESC institution, external platforms like Civil Society Europe could also follow up on this topic, mapping how nominations were made in different countries. She invited participants to get in touch with her or Brikena to coordinate further action.

She then reported on a small campaign which, on the occasion of a previous EESC renewal, had been carried out by some CSO members of the LG at constituency level to make their governments call for more transparency in order to ensure better representation of associations and NGOs in Group III. At that time the nomination procedures in each Member State had been mapped. She suggested raising this issue of transparency at the next full LG meeting in November.

Gabriela Civico commented on the definition of civil society, pointing out that for the EESC, employers and trade unions were also part of civil society and that the EESC as such was civil society, not just Group III.

Jeremy Wates returned to the nomination process of the Czech Republic, which had nominated Group III representatives who ought to be in Groups I and II, highlighting that in his view Group III already covered a very wide range of different types of organisations.

Brikena proposed holding a discussion on the national nomination processes of EESC members in the next full LG meeting planned for November, keeping up CSO pressure on these issues with a focus on transparency and participation.

Pierluigi stressed that the final decision where a member, appointed by national governments and approved by the Council, became a member of one of the three EESC groups, remained with the groups. He explained that in the past there had been cases where members meant to be part of Group II had been rejected because they were not really trade unionists. In this context, it should be possible to point out to the future president of Group III what had happened in Croatia and the Czech Republic and maybe influence this.

Brikena concluded the meeting by thanking the participants for their contributions and inviting them to continue the discussion by email and to connect with each other on the different issues.

SAVE THE DATE: NEXT CSO LG MEETING: 5 OCTOBER, 10.30 a.m.-12.30 p.m.