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Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee

A comprehensive strategy for biodiversity at COP16: bringing all sectors together for a common goal

(own-initiative opinion)

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1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. In the run-up to COP16 to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the EESC wishes to make the following points:

1.2. Biodiversity represents the stock of genetic variety, which is the most important part of the natural capital that humanity inherited from mother nature. It is a precondition for long-term food security and sustainable economic prosperity. The existence and prosperity of humankind will depend on our capacity to cooperate and respect planetary boundaries. The EU has a key role to play both within the EU's borders and beyond, particularly through EU legislation and trade agreements, in order to avoid the import or export of environmentally and socially unsustainable food, products and technologies.

1.3. To be more effective, policies to foster biodiversity must become more coherent and comprehensive across sectors; be better integrated with the climate, environmental and food security agendas in the EU and globally; encompass not only the environmental but also the social and economic dimensions; and receive the necessary financial support.

1.4. Innovative and effective public, private and blended financial support for the most essential and sometimes vulnerable stakeholders (including small-scale farmers and fishers, indigenous people, etc.); a global financial architecture with a standardised reporting mechanism and new metrics that hold respect for planetary boundaries at their core; the realignment of investments toward low-carbon, resilient economies and thriving ecosystems; as well as EU support for countries in the Global South in protecting biodiversity are needed now more than ever.

1.5. Dedicated funds, a global standard setter and enforcer on the integrity and transparency of financial instruments for biodiversity, as well as divesting financing from 'environmentally harmful subsidies' are essential to reward biodiversity services and offset fairly the financial losses that land users might incur in order to provide for more biodiversity, which in the long term will lead to more sustainable, resilient and healthier production.

1.6. The health of ecosystems, animals and people are interdependent, as they are part of the same natural ecosystem. A 'One Health' approach therefore has to be developed in Europe.

1.7. Environmental and climate policies should not be seen as a burden in the recovery from the current crisis, but rather as part of necessary long-term solutions for the future. Stronger climate and biodiversity diplomacy is also key to enhancing international cooperation and succeeding together in sustaining our ecosystems, economies and societies.

1.8. In order to mainstream biodiversity and identify nature-positive climate actions, the EU should take an integrated multi-level and multi-stakeholder approach consisting of scientific research, policy development, stakeholder engagement, and public awareness campaigns.

1.9. Implementing international agreements, such as the ones on climate and biodiversity, will require, at all levels, a more inclusive multi-stakeholder governance model that includes the systematic, deliberative ([1]), early and consistent participation of citizens and civil society organisations, the public, including young people, the private sector, and academia, while ensuring the most effective accountability mechanisms and fair access to justice and data. The consolidation of social dialogue and collective bargaining in biodiversity protection and the clear involvement of social partners will also be necessary.

1.10. Last but not least, the EESC is concerned not to see any mention of the SDGs in the Commission's new political guidelines and reiterates its call for an integrated, holistic strategy with ambitious long-term goals and plans – an EU 2050 Sustainable Development Agenda – to ensure a wellbeing economy operating within planetary boundaries. Instead of addressing the goals and targets separately, the EU needs to adopt a systemic, cross-sectoral and foresight-based approach to reduce the complexity of its policies and make them more efficient ([2]).

1.11. A Commissioner for Future Generations, responsible for promoting long-term, holistic and systemic thinking, focusing on and mainstreaming wellbeing and biodiversity indicators going beyond GDP data, could help in this regard. That's why the EESC calls for an inter-institutional declaration by the European Parliament, the Council of the EU and the European Commission to provide a robust framework that guarantees the protection and advancement of the rights of future generations. To this end, the Commission should establish an office of the Executive Vice-President for Future Generations.

2. **Context**

2.1. In the context of the current triple planetary crisis (climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss), it is becoming increasingly urgent to rethink our relationship with nature and to protect, and where necessary restore, the natural ecosystems on which human beings and the majority of their economic activities depend, including agriculture, forestry and fisheries. It is estimated that more than 50 % of global GDP is dependent on nature ([3]) and some 40 % of jobs globally directly depend on healthy ecosystems ([4]).

([1]) Deliberative participation comes from theories of deliberative democracy and the belief that political decisions should be the product of open discussion and debate among citizens. Examples of deliberative participation, SALTO.

([2]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee 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]) Study for a methodological framework and assessment of potential financial risks associated with biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation, European Commission.

([4]) World Employment and Social Outlook 2018, ILO.

2.2. In particular, while stressing the importance of tropical forests for global biodiversity, the EESC points to the equal importance of biodiversity in aquatic systems and soils and the importance of agrobiodiversity within the agricultural sector, e.g. the variety of cultivated crops, for resilient food production.

2.3. The World Health Organization (WHO) considers pollution and environmental degradation to be a major risk to human health ([5]). A clean, healthy and sustainable environment is a fundamental human right ([6]). Anchoring the right to a healthy environment in EU legislation ([7]) and developing a 'One Health' approach would help to safeguard a sustainable future for the present generation and those to come.

2.4. The disproportionate risk of biodiversity loss and environmental deterioration to certain communities and groups of people within and across countries has also become apparent, highlighting the need for a just transition ([8]).

2.5. The 2022 Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, also known as the Biodiversity Plan for Life on Earth (Biodiversity Plan) ([9]), adopted at COP15 to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) marked a historic achievement in the mobilisation against biodiversity loss. Based on the implementation of the SDGs, it sets out a pathway to reach the global vision of a world living in harmony with nature by 2050. Among the Biodiversity Plan's key elements are four goals for 2050 and 23 targets for 2030.

2.6. However, assessments of developments show that the world is not delivering in line with promises ([10]). Additionally, in the EU progress is lagging behind targets (e.g. EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 ([11])). The main causes of ongoing loss of biodiversity remain climate change, habitat loss (due to land use for agriculture and urbanisation), pollution and overexploitation of natural resources.

2.7. Market mechanisms do not by themselves deliver public goods or a sustainable global economic system. Public goods require public governance and money, and market mechanisms need corrections and guidance by public authorities to ensure that they result in social wellbeing.

2.8. Environmental policies (legislation, measures, funding) require solidarity and strong international cooperation. In spite of the progress and success of UN Conventions when it comes to setting targets, implementation has been insufficient due to a lack of political consensus on measures and burden sharing at all institutional levels ([12]). This has jeopardised the planet's ecological resilience, which, if not reversed, will pose massive socioeconomic challenges and place a disproportionate burden on young people and future generations, especially in the Global South.

([5]) Estimating environmental health impacts, WHO.

([6]) Resolution *The human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment*, UN General Assembly.

([7]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the right to a healthy environment in the European Union, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine (OJ C 228, 29.6.2023, p. 10), EESC information report on *Environmental protection as a prerequisite for respect for fundamental rights*.

([8]) NAT/933 *'Towards a just transition legislative proposal and EU policy tools that enable a more social European Green Deal'* (ongoing); Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Advancing the EU's just transition policy framework: what measures are necessary?' (OJ C, C/2024/1576, 5.3.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/1576/oj).

([9]) Biodiversity Plan for Life on Earth.

([10]) CBD Online Reporting Tool.

([11]) EU Biodiversity Strategy Dashboard.

([12]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on a General Union Environment Action Programme to 2030' (OJ C 123, 9.4.2021, p. 76), Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 – Bringing nature back into our lives' (COM(2020) 380 final) (OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 259), Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'A more constructive role for civil society in implementing environmental law' (OJ C 47, 11.2.2020, p. 50), Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Implementation of EU environmental legislation: air quality, water and waste' (OJ C 110, 22.3.2019, p. 33), 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 on EU actions to improve environmental compliance and governance' (COM(2018) 10 final) (OJ C 283, 10.8.2018, p. 83).

2.9. Political tensions and disinformation ([13]) around climate and biodiversity, escalating conflicts, migration and the rising cost of living are posing a risk to the objectives of the European Green Deal, the Biodiversity Plan, the Paris Agreement and UN Agenda 2030. While these multifaceted problems have exposed the fragility of our economic system, they also present an opportunity for transformative change towards a wellbeing economy and a new narrative for people and the planet ([14]).

2.10. With the European Parliament's elections and the Commission's renewal, the time has come to prioritise biodiversity and the implementation of the environmental *acquis* through all EU policies. There is also every reason for the EU to assume responsibility for global biodiversity and phase out actions that have negative impacts on ecosystems and communities in third countries, especially in the Global South.

2.11. The objective of this own-initiative opinion is to:

— build a new narrative for people and the planet, stressing the interconnection between resilient ecosystems and prosperity;

— develop a comprehensive strategy on biodiversity that includes the environmental, economic and social dimensions, and links with the climate, environmental and 'One Health' agendas, as well as with the sectors most dependent on and impacting biodiversity;

— identify the needs and concerns of those sectors (including agriculture, forestry, fisheries and bioeconomy) and propose solutions to help them achieve the EU and global biodiversity targets;

— propose concrete recommendations for the new Commission's agenda and UN CBD COP16;

— increase synergies between the UN Conventions on biodiversity, climate and desertification (UN CBD, UNFCCC and UNCDD).

3. **Biodiversity finance**

3.1. Global assessments highlight the necessity of mobilising substantial financial resources for climate adaptation and mitigation and biodiversity conservation, preservation and restoration, especially in the context of the UNFCCC and UN CBD ([15]). Recognising that public finance is not enough, the EESC stresses the importance of mobilising private sector investments, including potentially through financial instruments, such as carbon credits, debt-for-biodiversity swaps and SDGs-linked bonds. However, the EESC warns that the integrity of these instruments must be strictly assured and that, in particular, proposals for 'biodiversity markets' have to be made with careful consideration. The EU should promote in international fora, such as the International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD), the creation of a global commission to ensure the transparency and integrity of financial instruments for biodiversity conservation.

3.2. In view of the apparent loss of biodiversity due to climate change, while calling for the phase-out of fossil fuel subsidies, the EESC also welcomes the identification of 'environmentally harmful subsidies' (EHS) and calls for their further identification and planned phase-out, ensuring that investments under the green and just transition have a net gain for biodiversity and the environment.

3.3. The EESC asks the Commission to encourage Member States to further develop, introduce and operate harmonised, green and sustainable tax systems based on the 'polluter pays' principle in a just, non-regressive manner ([16]). This principle should also apply to municipalities and other local or regional authorities and the resulting funds can be earmarked for pollution prevention.

([13]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee – Safeguarding Democracy Against Disinformation (OJ C, C/2024/4052, 12.7.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/4052/oj)..

([14]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee — A Blueprint for a European Green and Social Deal, based on a wellbeing economy (OJ C, C/2024/6879, 28.11.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/6879/oj).; Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'The sustainable economy we need' (OJ C 106, 31.3.2020, p. 1).

([15]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee — Climate finance: a new roadmap to deliver on high climate ambition and the SDGs (OJ C, C/2024/6881, 28.11.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/C/2024/6881/oj).

([16]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'A more constructive role for civil society in implementing environmental law'(OJ C 47, 11.2.2020, p. 50).

3.4. The EESC has stated in several opinions ([17]) that farmers, fishers and forest owners cannot be expected to bear the cost of protecting biodiversity. Rather, providing public goods and value should become a useful source of income for them, e.g. by developing eco-incentives. The EESC also criticised the underfunding of Natura 2000 measures and called for the creation of a European fund dedicated to biodiversity. These recommendations must now be followed by the Commission and Member States.

3.5. The EESC points out that public money, including the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), should be prioritised for the public good, and calls for coherence to be ensured between all policy areas (CAP, CFP, energy, transport, social policies, etc.), funding and subsidies that have implications for biodiversity protection and restoration. In this connection, the EESC considers that the CAP post-2027 must provide a stable long-term policy framework geared to sustainable food production and open strategic autonomy for the EU, while protecting the diversity of crops and types of farming in the EU and its ecosystems ([18]).

4. **Enhancing biodiversity and nature-positive climate actions: dos and don'ts**

4.1. Climate change is one of the main drivers of biodiversity loss. Therefore, most policies to counter climate change are also beneficial for biodiversity. However, some technological and digital solutions for climate action could harm biodiversity and the environment (e.g. AI, nuclear energy, carbon capture and sequestration, etc.). The EU should follow the precautionary principle.

4.2. In order to enhance biodiversity and nature-positive climate actions, the EESC recommends the following:

4.2.1. **Cooperation** between scientists in various fields (mostly biodiversity and climate), but also between policymakers and stakeholders. The EESC calls for new workshops co-sponsored by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to provide guidance to the international community on fostering this needed cooperation ([19]). It also calls for piloting multistakeholder biodiversity solutions in the European Climate Missions (e.g. Climate Adaptation and Climate Neutral Cities).

4.2.2. **Integration** of biodiversity in climate action and vice versa. The EESC calls on the Commission to design integrated policies for climate and biodiversity both internally and internationally. To this end, **impact assessments** of climate solutions and biodiversity measures are needed.

4.2.3. **Monitoring** of the implementation of the Nature Directives, the Nature Restoration Law and the follow-up on the promises related to the UN CBD.

4.2.4. **Nature- and ecosystem-based solutions** simultaneously addressing climate change and biodiversity loss ([20]), such as protecting natural habitats, restoring ecosystems, forests and wetlands, sustainable land management and sustainable agriculture practices provide ecosystem services while reducing greenhouse gas emissions and respecting the rights and culture of the people concerned, such as local communities and indigenous people.

4.2.5. Embedding the **circular economy**, that offers a frame for transformative change towards the sustainable use of natural resources and a wellbeing economy operating within planetary boundaries. The environmental and socio-economic benefits of circular approaches can become success factors for the implementation of biodiversity and climate policies.

([17]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on nature restoration' (OJ C 140, 21.4.2023, p. 46), Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 – Bringing nature back into our lives' (COM(2020) 380 final) (OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 259).

([18]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Promoting autonomous and sustainable food production: strategies for the common agricultural policy post-2027' (OJ C, C/2024/2099, 26.3.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/2099/oj).

([19]) Biodiversity and Climate Change workshop report, IPBES & IPCC.

([20]) IUCN Global Standard for Nature-based Solutions: first edition, IUCN.

4.2.6. **Public awareness and education** for everyone, and especially among policy-makers, young people and businesses, about the interconnectedness of biodiversity, climate change, ecosystem stability and human wellbeing.

4.2.7. **Incentive mechanisms** to promote environmentally friendly practices and discourage activities that harm biodiversity and the environment should include payment schemes for ecosystem services (e.g. to farmers, foresters and fishers), nature's contributions to people ([21]) and eco-certification programmes. In addition, introduction of an ecological compensation system based on clear criteria should be considered as a last resort. For instance, construction projects that are harmful to nature could be compensated elsewhere. It is also worth considering creating a common marketplace for ecological compensation.

4.2.8. **International social and green diplomacy** for financing and knowledge-sharing targeted towards the Global South and indigenous peoples should complement internal EU efforts and increase synergies between the UN CBD, UNFCCC and UNCDD COPs.

4.3. The EESC also proposes to nominate a Commissioner for Future Generations, responsible for promoting long-term, holistic and systemic thinking, focusing on and mainstreaming wellbeing and biodiversity indicators going beyond GDP data.

5. Building a positive narrative for biodiversity through strong civil society participation

5.1. The intergenerational aspect of biodiversity and environmental policies needs to be reflected in strong meaningful youth engagement at all stages of the decision-making processes, from setting the agenda and drafting legislative proposals, to implementation, monitoring and follow-up ([22]), so as to ensure that the impact of policies on future generations is considered ([23]).

5.2. Civil society's participation in biodiversity governance is crucial for achieving biodiversity targets and integrating the needs and concerns of all sectors, including agriculture, forestry and fisheries. The EESC proposes to structure it on local, European, international and cross-cutting scales as follows:

5.2.1. Locally and nationally

— Including biodiversity and ecology in life-long learning and national education systems is of paramount importance in building a positive attitude towards biodiversity ([24]). Member States should ensure access to, and awareness programmes about, national parks and natural areas to foster stewardship and the benefits of bringing people closer to nature. Educational programmes such as those organised by the IUCN and the EUROPARC Federation should be supported ([25]).

— Organise local biodiversity workshops with representatives from civil society organisations, local communities, young people, indigenous peoples, academia, the financial sector and other relevant sectors such as agriculture, forestry and fisheries.

— Facilitate participatory decision-making processes involving stakeholders in the development, implementation and monitoring of local biodiversity conservation actions.

— Support grassroots initiatives and community-based conservation projects empowering local communities to take ownership and stewardship of biodiversity conservation efforts and piloting new business models for protecting biodiversity (e.g. ecotourism, organic and regenerative agriculture, etc.).

([21]) Nature's Contributions to People (NCP), IPBES.
([22]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Towards structured youth engagement on climate and sustainability in the EU decision-making process' (OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 44).
([23]) EU Youth Test, Fit for Future Generations.
([24]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Empowering youth to achieve sustainable development through education' (OJ C 100, 16.3.2023, p. 38).
([25]) EUROPARC Federation.

5.2.2. EU level

— Strengthen the representation of civil society organisations and indigenous peoples in EU biodiversity policy-making processes through their effective participation in consultation mechanisms, advisory bodies and stakeholder dialogues.

— Organise workshops like those mentioned in chapter 5 and systematise multi-stakeholder partnerships for cooperation between civil society, government agencies, research institutions and businesses to implement biodiversity conservation measures effectively.

5.2.3. Internationally

— Advocate for better inclusion of civil society representatives in international biodiversity governance forums, such as, but not limited to, the UN CBD, UN CMS ([26]), UNFCCC and UNCDD COPs.

— Strengthen the role of NGOs, youth and indigenous peoples' organisations and other civil society actors in shaping global biodiversity policies and agreements, such as the Biodiversity Plan.

— Facilitate knowledge exchange and collaboration among civil society organisations across different countries and regions to promote best practices in biodiversity conservation and organise workshops described in chapter 5 that include them.

5.2.4. Cross-cutting

— Foster dialogue and collaboration between civil society organisations, scientists and sectors like agriculture, forestry and fisheries to develop mutually beneficial solutions.

— Support research and innovation initiatives that explore sustainable practices and nature-positive solutions to support livelihoods with fair incomes in these sectors, while also maximising positive impacts on the climate.

— Increase financial support and capacity-building for civil society and youth organisations working on biodiversity, including those focused on supporting sustainable agriculture, forestry and fisheries and those working in public interest litigation for environmental matters, with an emphasis on those in the Global South.

— Consolidate social dialogue and collective bargaining in biodiversity protection and ensure clear involvement of social partners.

5.3. The EESC further supports the establishment of a permanent global assembly for citizens, as suggested by the Iswe Foundation and supported by the United Nations, the creation of which will be announced at the Summit of The Future in September 2024 ([27]). The EESC also believes that such an assembly should work on the issues raised in this opinion. However, it highlights that this does not represent a sufficient solution to ensure adequate stakeholder representation in decision-making.

5.4. The EESC supports the proper enforcement of the Aarhus Convention environmental rights by EU Member States and the appropriate capacity building among civil society to ensure that they know how to utilise them ([28]). It also supports the implementation of legal pathways to secure nature, such as nature's rights and the right to a healthy environment, with the guidance of civil society ([29]).

5.5. Strengthening civil society participation is the best way to integrate the needs and concerns of all sectors in order to create a positive narrative for biodiversity, reach our targets on all scales and address a 'super wicked' issue effectively.

([26]) UN Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals.
([27]) Global and permanent citizens' assembly, UN Foundation.
([28]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on amending Regulation (EC) No 1367/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 6 September 2006 on the application of the provisions of the Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters to Community institutions and bodies' (COM(2020) 642 final — 2020/0289 (COD)) (OJ C 123, 9.4.2021, p. 66).
([29]) Study *Towards an EU Charter of the Fundamental Rights of Nature*, EESC.

5.6. In this regard and in line with a recent reposrt ([30]) of the UN rapporteur on environmental defenders, the EESC recognises the risks posed to them and calls upon Member States to respect their rights, including but not limited to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association, and to address the root causes of biodiversity loss.

Brussels, 19 September 2024.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Oliver RÖPKE

([30]) *State repression of environmental protest and civil disobedience: a major threat to human rights and democracy*, by Michel Forst, UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention.