Official Journal
of the European Union

EN
C series

C/2025/5141

28.10.2025

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee

Good practice for EU civil dialogue in the light of participatory processes

(own-initiative opinion)

(C/2025/5141)

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Plenary Assembly decision	19.9.2024
Legal basis	Rule 52(2) of the Rules of Procedure
Section responsible	Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship
Adopted in section	27.6.2025
Adopted at plenary session	16.7.2025
Plenary session No	598
Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	183/3/5

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. The tireless efforts of civil society to promote citizen engagement and active citizenship, foster civil dialogue, advocate for human rights and promote democratic practices are an invaluable contribution to the EU's strength, resilience and legitimacy ([1]).

1.2. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) points out that the specific role of social partner organisations should be fully recognised and respected in social dialogue structures and processes, while recognising that civil dialogue, involving a broader set of stakeholders on a wider range of topics, is a separate process. This distinction should also be made in the capacity-building support for social partners and wider civil society ([2]).

1.3. In a context of manifest geopolitical, economic, social and ecological crises, in addition to digital challenges, the EESC urges the EU institutions and Member States to act on the EESC's previous proposals on social dialogue and civil dialogue and to engage individual citizens in democracy in general.

([1]) EESC contribution to the 2025 European Commission Work Programme: https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/documents/resolution/european-economic-and-social-committee-contribution-2025-european-commission-work-programme-all-languages.

([2]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the proposal for a Council Recommendation on strengthening social dialogue in the European Union (COM(2023) 38 final – 2023/0012 (NLE)) and 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 strengthening social dialogue in the European Union: harnessing its full potential for managing fair transitions (COM(2023) 40 final) (OJ C 228, 29.6.2023, p. 87), point 1.7.

1.4. In addition, the EESC calls on the EU institutions to take advantage of the complementary elements provided by civil dialogue which are outlined in this own-initiative opinion.

1.5. On the basis of the commitment by the European Commission to *step up its engagement with civil society organisations* (CSOs), the EESC intends to work closely with the European Commission on the creation, governance and regular operation of a civil society platform.

1.6. In this regard, the EESC, as the Treaty-based EU consultative body composed of representatives of employers', workers' and civil society organisations and the house of organised civil society, proposes to host this platform. A dedicated ad-hoc group composed of EESC members has been created to further develop the EESC's engagement with the platform.

1.7. Supported by the EU institutions, the EESC could also act as a hub and custodian for public and organised civil society participation, multiplying the effect of consultations held by the Commission and other institutions and systematically collecting input on its opinions from its members and European organised civil society more generally on major priorities and policies on the European political agenda ([3]).

1.8. Moreover, the EESC emphasises that its proposals build on the Treaty on European Union (TEU), the Treaty on the Functioning of European Union (TFEU) and the final report of the Conference on the Future of Europe of 9 May 2022, which explicitly calls for the EESC's institutional role to be enhanced and for it to be empowered as a facilitator of participatory democracy activities, such as structured dialogue with civil society.

2. **General comments**

2.1. Organised civil society has a key role to play in facilitating the participation and voicing the aspirations of the entire, diverse range of individuals and societal groups in democratic decision-making. Civil society participation is a crucial component of European democracy, both as a prerequisite for the legitimacy of EU policies and as a tool to ensure that policies and laws drawn up at European level respond to the situations and needs of everyone impacted by these policies. Dialogue between institutions and civil society is a key tool in building people's trust in democracy.

2.2. As an advisory body mandated by the TFEU ([4]), the EESC has specific expertise and constitutes a unique, permanent forum for civil dialogue, where solutions are put forward based on consensus between representatives of employers, workers and other civil society organisations ([5]). Its members have mandates from their respective organisations ([6]) and represent roughly 90 million people from all walks of life.

2.3. For decades the EESC has contributed to the evolution of civil dialogue ([7]), which was subsequently included in Article 11(1) and (2) of the Lisbon Treaty. Recently, the EESC has noted ([8]) that Civil Society Europe has called for a shift to a more formalised and structured EU civil dialogue framework ([9]).

([3]) EESC Liaison Group, Dialogue Cycle 2024 Reflection Paper on *A European Strategy for Civil Society*: https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-01/reflection_paper_on_a_european_strategy_for_civil_society_fin_eesc-2024-04653-00-00-info-edi.pdf.

([4]) TFEU Articles 300-304.

([5]) TFEU Article 300(2).

([6]) OJ C 349, 29.9.2023, point 4.5 and Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward (exploratory opinion requested by the Belgian Presidency) (OJ C, C/2024/2481, 23.4.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/2481/oj), point 1.8.

([7]) EESC Compendium 2020 on participatory democracy: https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/publications-other-work/publications/participatory-democracy-success-story-written-eesc.

([8]) OJ C, C/2024/2481, 23.4.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/2481/oj, point 3.8.

([9]) Open letter from Civil Society Europe to the President of the European Commission, 2022: https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/publications-other-work/publications/participatory-democracy-success-story-written-eesc. This does not include social partners.

2.4. The EESC has also called for the EU institutions to take the lead in developing a strategy for civil society, with a clear action plan ([10]). At the request of the Belgian Presidency, the EESC recently explored how to strengthen civil dialogue, including which elements could be included in a framework to make it more conducive to direct citizen participation and dialogue with intermediate bodies, at both European and Member State level ([11]).

2.5. Following on from the EESC's earlier work on this topic ([12]), this opinion outlines the main characteristics of a framework that is more conducive to civil dialogue at EU level based on the TFEU and good practice.

3. **Purpose of civil dialogue**

3.1. Civil dialogue should be a permanent, structured, equal and meaningful interaction between institutions and organised civil society, intended to generate proper policies that are then implemented and evaluated.

3.2. Building on the recommendations from the Conference on the Future of Europe, the EESC's special role as the institutional guardian of civil society consultation procedures and civil dialogue in general needs to be highlighted and improved, as stated in its opinion on Citizens' Panels ([13]).

3.3. Civil dialogue should also be inclusive, transparent and results-oriented, allowing for a substantive exchange of information, expertise, and experience, as well as providing room for feedback. It entails the co-creation of solutions and long-lasting partnerships between public authorities and organised civil society. This dialogue should take place at all levels and all stages of the political decision-making cycle, from setting the agenda to framing positions and priorities, to evaluation. Civil dialogue should ensure policy decisions take into account the needs of those affected by these decisions, in particular groups in vulnerable situations and the most marginalised, ensuring their participation in the policymaking process and the effectiveness of the adopted measures.

3.4. Civil dialogue at EU level should always involve EU-level civil society organisations. The EESC established the Liaison Group in 2004 – setting an example among EU bodies – to provide a framework for dialogue and cooperation between the EESC and European CSOs and networks. The Group liaises on cross-cutting issues of common interest. It provides European civil society umbrella organisations ([14]) with a unique institutional structure, enabling civil dialogue to take place and promoting participatory democracy. It is a channel through which organised civil society participating in the Liaison Group can discuss and influence the EU agenda and decision-making processes (as provided for under Article 11 TEU) ([15]).

([10]) EESC contribution to the 2025 European Commission Work Programme, point 6.7: https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/documents/resolution/european-economic-and-social-committee-contribution-2025-european-commission-work-programme-all-languages.

([11]) OJ C, C/2024/2481, 23.4.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/2481/oj.

([12]) In particular OJ C, C/2024/2481, 23.4.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/2481/oj, Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee – Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Defence of Democracy (COM(2023) 630 final) – Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulations (EU) No 1024/2012 and (EU) 2018/1724 as regards certain requirements laid down by Directive (EU) XXXX/XXXX (COM(2023) 636 final) – Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing harmonised requirements in the internal market on transparency of interest representation carried out on behalf of third countries and amending Directive (EU) 2019/1937 (COM(2023) 637 final) (OJ C, C/2024/4061, 12.7.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/4061/oj, OJ C 349, 29.9.2023, p. 69), OJ C 228, 29.6.2023, p. 87.

([13]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'How to engage with the intended public and how to effectively use the results of the work of citizens' panels' (own-initiative opinion) (OJ C 349, 29.9.2023, p. 69), and Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee – Imbalances in social protection in general and specifically for the new forms of work and atypical workers (own-initiative opinion) (OJ C, C/2025/106, 10.1.2025, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2025/106/oj), point 5.9.

([14]) This does not include the European social partner organisations: Civil society organisations/Sociétés civiles organisées, EESC: https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/sections-other-bodies/other/liaison-group/organisation/civil-society-organisations-societes-civiles-organisees.

([15]) OJ C, C/2024/2481, 23.4.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/2481/oj, point 2.4.

3.5. The EU institutions have a legal obligation to implement Article 11 TEU continuously and effectively at EU level ([16]), as also emphasised in the recent Liaison Group reflection paper *A European Strategy for Civil Society* ([17]). Article 11 TEU legally obliges the EU institutions to maintain open, transparent, regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society. However, there is a lack of guidelines on how civil society can engage in this meaningful dialogue with the EU institutions ([18]).

3.6. The EESC believes that it is essential that certain standards be applied across the EU institutions to make Article 11 TEU effective. This should cover issues such as the meaning of civil dialogue, its results-orientation, the regularity and timing of activities, the sharing of the policy agenda and priorities, including vulnerable groups, and feedback and outcomes. The EESC stresses that this strategy has real potential to improve the implementation of European policy measures in the daily lives of citizens. Furthermore, improving the implementation of Article 11 TEU in order to improve organised civil society engagement in the EU policymaking process while strengthening the role of the EESC would lead to more targeted and effective policies ([19]).

3.7. Participants in civil dialogue should be representatives delegated by organised civil society. National and regional CSOs have historically self-organised into membership-based networks and EU umbrella organisations to interact with EU institutions. The European Parliament, and then the European Commission through the different funding programmes, have supported this transnational cooperation to ensure democratic participation and enhanced governance, helping to bridge the gap between citizens and EU institutions, and balancing private interests.

3.8. Civil dialogue does not exclude the participation of organised civil society in consultation and policymaking forums together with other important actors, such as think tanks, research institutes and other stakeholder organisations. It should complement rather than replace the current stakeholder engagement practices set out in the Better Regulation framework, and it should provide input to improve transparency, feedback and follow-up.

3.9. The EESC reiterates its request ([20]) for a strategy for civil dialogue resulting in an action plan. In its opinion on *Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU*, it proposed that the strategy include a pillar as part of the European Defence of Democracy Package. This request remains valid and should be included in the upcoming proposal for a European Democracy Shield. Additionally, the strategy could seek to achieve an interinstitutional agreement among the EU institutions that sets out actions and the *related resources* to be used, as requested by Group III of the EESC and a number of civil society networks, organisations and representatives ([21]). This could be facilitated by the EESC and involve civil society networks at EU level. The strategy would be a first step in strengthening the role of civil society and further developing civil dialogue ([22]).

3.10. The EESC notes that the Commission has committed to step up engagement with civil society on democracy, the rule of law and related issues and building a civil society platform to support more systematic civil dialogue and work to strengthen protection of civil society, activists and human rights defenders in their work ([23]).

3.11. As the EU consultative body mandated by the Treaties, composed of representatives of employers', workers' and other civil society organisations, the EESC urges the Commission to make it the host institution facilitating the establishment, operation and governance of the civil society platform, supporting it with appropriate additional resources for this purpose.

([16]) OJ C, C/2024/2481, 23.4.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/2481/oj, point 5.3.
([17]) https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/news/civil-society-organisations-call-eu-civil-society-strategy.
([18]) Liaison Group Dialogue Cycle 2024 Reflection Paper on *A European Strategy for Civil Society*.
([19]) OJ C, C/2024/2481, 23.4.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/2481/oj, point 1.9.
([20]) OJ C, C/2024/2481, 23.4.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/2481/oj, point 1.5.
([21]) https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2024-01/OpenLetter_EN_updated.pdf.
([22]) OJ C, C/2024/2481, 23.4.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/2481/oj, point 1.5.
([23]) Mission letter of Commissioner McGrath: https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/27636865-211e-46fe-97fb-582b514c78f9_en?filename=mission-letter-mcgrath.pdf.

3.12. As the EESC has previously stated, the specific role of social partner organisations should be fully recognised, respected and promoted in social dialogue structures and processes, while acknowledging that civil dialogue, involving a broader set of stakeholders on a wider range of topics, is a separate process ([24]). Discussions and any action on civil dialogue, including a civil society platform, must not undermine, encroach on or interfere with social dialogue or the role and prerogatives of social partners, as defined by the Treaties. Social dialogue should be reinforced and not undermined.

4. **Paving the way for a framework that is more conducive to civil dialogue at EU level**

4.1. The EU's existing civil dialogue framework has been identified ([25]) as including both the 'vertical' dimension (sector-specific civil dialogue between CSOs and their partners within the legislative and executive authorities on specific policies) and the 'transversal' dimension (structured and regular dialogue between EU institutions or their national counterparts and civil society on the development of the EU and its cross-cutting policies). EU civil dialogue concerns both specific policy fields and general policy and political guidelines, such as the European Commission Annual Work Programme).

4.2. In this regard and with a view to helping them co-create with organised civil society a European framework that is more conducive to civil dialogue at EU level, the EESC draws the EU institutions' attention to the following national good practice, highlighting successful participatory processes:

4.2.1. In France, the National Commission for Public Debate (CNDP) ([26]) is an independent authority that safeguards the public's right to information and participation in the development of projects and public policies that have an environmental impact. Its intervention from the earliest stages questioning not only the 'how' but also the 'why' enables decisions to be influenced.

4.2.2. In Italy, Article 118 of the Italian Constitution enshrines citizens' right of autonomous initiative in the general interest, on an equal footing with public institutions. This principle of subsidiarity is reflected in local regulations on shared administration, although its application remains complex and subject to variable interpretations ([27]).

4.2.3. In Ireland, the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) ([28]) analyses and reports to the government 'on strategic policy issues relating to sustainable economic, social and environmental development'. The NESC has five pillars of 'social partnership': trade unions, business and employers' organisations, agricultural and farming organisations, the community and voluntary sector, and the environmental pillar.

4.2.4. In Latvia, a Memorandum of Cooperation ([29]) signed in 2005 between the government and over 500 organisations structures civil dialogue. Civil dialogue is now starting to play a key coordination role, with working groups, arbitration opportunities and a portal dedicated to public decisions. CSOs also participate in an annual parliamentary forum, open door days and the preparation of the foreign and European affairs report. All documents are available online and meetings are frequently in hybrid mode to ease participation from regions.

4.2.5. In the Netherlands, the Climate Council ([30]) is the consultative body which was responsible for developing the National Climate Agreement in 2018-2019. It brought together representatives from the economic sectors, CSOs and local authorities under the leadership of the government. The agreement, presented in 2019, underlines the irreversibility of the energy transition and the need for strong political commitment.

([24]) OJ C, C/2024/2481, 23.4.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/2481/oj, point 1.4.
([25]) See e.g. Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward (exploratory opinion requested by the Belgian Presidency) (OJ C, C/2024/2481, 23.4.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/2481/oj), point 3.5.
([26]) www.debatpublic.fr.
([27]) www.labsus.org/2024/03/unutopia-realizzata-dieci-anni-dopo.
([28]) www.ihrec.ie.
([29]) www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/Latvia_memo.pdf.
([30]) www.klimaatakkoord.nl.

4.2.6. In Sweden ([31]), cooperation between the government and civil society is structured around dialogue platforms and strategic partnerships aimed at strengthening citizen participation in public policymaking. A strong role in crisis preparedness exists from individual, to local and national level.

5. **Organisation within each EU institution**

5.1. The EESC's consultative role enables European civil society to participate in the European Union decision-making process, thus supporting the European idea and helping to increase public confidence in Europe ([32]).

5.2. Civil dialogue should be organised with the three main EU institutions according to their respective structures and aims. Below are some of the measures that could be taken.

5.3. European Parliament – in addition to appointing a vice-president tasked with organising structured dialogue with civil society, focal points for civil dialogue in the secretariat of every Parliamentary Committee could be set up, including annual dialogue with representative organisations in these Committees and annual dialogue with organised civil society on key issues discussed in Parliament, supporting interaction between rapporteurs and civil society organisations.

5.4. European Commission – the following should be set up: guidelines for civil dialogue within the different directorates-general; an interservice group on civil dialogue with members from different DGs; training courses on civil dialogue; and, as proposed previously, a civil society platform hosted by the EESC. In this regard, in April 2025 the EESC Bureau decided to set up a dedicated EESC members' group to further develop the EESC's engagement with the platform.

5.5. Council – The Council should review how it organises systematic consultations with organised civil society concerning its legislative and policy work. These consultations may take the form of inviting CSOs to its working party meetings. Moreover, the rotating presidencies of the Council may organise meetings with CSOs regarding their priorities ([33]).

6. **Civil dialogue and the EESC**

6.1. The EESC, as a consultative body composed of representatives of employers, workers and other civil society organisations, is a key player in safeguarding and promoting civil dialogue.

6.2. Current practices for EU civil society involvement in the EESC's work will continue, notably the Liaison Group, the organisation of hearings with organised civil society, contributions to the drafting of EESC opinions, the Youth Test, inviting CSOs to speak at plenary sessions, and the annual Civil Society Week.

6.3. As follow-up to the Roadmap adopted by the NGO Forum in Riga in 2015, the EESC Liaison Group drew up an action plan in 2018 for the implementation of Articles 11(1) and 11(2) of the Treaty. One of the proposals was the establishment of a European Observatory on Civil Dialogue. The EESC takes due note of this request ([34]).

([31]) www.nodsverige.se/english/.

([32]) A new Eurobarometer survey shows record high trust in the EU: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_6126.

([33]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward (exploratory opinion requested by the Belgian Presidency)(OJ C, C/2024/2481, 23.4.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/2481/oj).

([34]) OJ C, C/2024/2481, 23.4.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/2481/oj, point 1.11.

6.4. Lastly, EESC reiterates the call made in its *Opinion on Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU* for a strategy for civil dialogue that results in an action plan which could include a pillar as part of the proposal for a European Democracy Shield.

Brussels, 16 July 2025.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
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