



SOER 2020: CIVIL SOCIETY'S ROLE FOR A JUST AND FAST TRANSITION TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY

Joint EEA and European Economic and Social Committee public event held in Brussels on 12th February 2020

Summary points relevant to EEA/Eionet Strategy 2021-2030

The EESC Sustainable Development Observatory and the EEA hosted a public event that engaged approximately 140 participants from a broad range of civil society organisations. Participants discussed the core messages of the SOER 2020 report and their implications for actions in support of ongoing policy processes. The event explored ways to leverage the role of civil society and foster the engagement and active participation of all stakeholders, including youth, in accelerating the shift towards a more sustainable Europe.

The event aimed to inform EEA activities including the EEA strategy (2021-2030) and the development of future partnerships to produce knowledge that can guide and support sustainability transitions. The event consisted of a keynote presentation of SOER 2020 and two panel discussions focusing on the questions:

- For a European Green and Social Deal: how can we ensure that no one is left behind?
- How can we leverage civil society actions in sustainability transitions?

Representatives of the European Commission (DG Env and DG REGIO), EEA and EESC then responded to the discussions linking them to the European Green Deal, implementation of the SDGs and highlighted priority areas for action.

For a European Green and Social Deal: how can we ensure that no one is left behind?

There was widespread appreciation of the clear analysis set out in SOER 2020, support for the key messages and the need to take a systemic approach. It was recognised that the key question is no longer, why or whether sustainability transitions are necessary, but how to make them happen. There was broad consensus that this will require engaging all sectors of the economy and society, making sure that no one is left behind, and translating knowledge into action.

A European Green and Social Deal

- The European Green Deal is welcome and as the defining policy agenda of the European Commission, it is an important first step and window of opportunity.
- The European Green Deal has been called a transformative agenda but also the European growth strategy. There is some inherent contradiction already in this. How far will the current European Green Deal help rethink how to meet societal needs?
- Recent decades have seen a decoupling of economic growth and people's income so there is a need for a European Green and Social Deal. The European Green Deal does not talk about inequality, poverty, housing and adequate welfare. It can contribute to, but not replace the SDGs and Agenda 2030.
- There are equity issues such as the uneven exposure to risk, uneven ability to capture the benefits and uneven responsibility for damage that need to be addressed for the European Green Deal to be a green and social deal.
- In a European Green and Social Deal, just transition principles need to be mainstreamed across all proposals not just the just transition fund.
- To bring about transformative change, there should not be too much focus on individuals. Behaviours are the outcome of systems so the focus should be on system change.
- Ambitious targets are needed, but targets are not the policy on their own, they need to be supported with budget commitments.
- There is a need for effective public spending. The European Semester process will be key for implementation and keeping Member States accountable.
- Social aspects such as health benefits are an important part of the message when talking about why we need to take action on the environment.
- There are actions that can have multiple benefits e.g. the introduction of free public transport would really benefit the poorest households and rural communities.



How can we leverage civil society actions in sustainability transitions?

Sustainability transitions also critically depend on the emergence and spread of diverse forms of innovation that trigger alternative ways of thinking and living. Citizens, communities and civil society groups are important sources of creativity and innovation. They are instrumental in bringing about behavioural and lifestyle changes. The total number of initiatives across Europe is likely to number in the tens of thousands. Cumulatively they represent a substantial amount of societal energy that policymakers could engage with more strategically.

Actions to support the emergence of civil society action and innovations

- A vital step is the rebuilding of social capital. This would enable people to work together on the basis of trust, bridging differences and seeing diversity as an asset.
- There needs to be freedom to experiment. Promising niches should be managed by temporarily, at least, shielding innovations from competition rules. Public procurement could be used more effectively, along with taxes that differentiate on environmental/social aspects and extended producer responsibility.
- Alliances between civil society groups and others need to be encouraged and supported. For example, civic-public-private partnerships and acceleration houses.

Actions to support the scaling up of civil society action

- The state needs to be active and support civil society.
- A move from sectoral policies to place based/territorial approaches would bring together different levels of government to work together and improve coherence of actions. Cities have the potential to play more of a transformative role.
- Tools for participatory democracy should be part of all levels of government as this enables learning and sharing knowledge from civil society experience e.g. food policy councils.

Need for genuine engagement and participation

- The European Green Deal is a European Commission agenda and needs to have broader ownership to succeed, which will not happen without civil society.
- There are lessons to be learnt from previous experience. For example, the failure to halt biodiversity loss. Here the conservation sector defined what had to be done but the sectors whose activities were driving biodiversity loss had no ownership of the agenda. In addition, targets are not enough on their own, reflecting these priorities in the budget is crucial.

- There is a need to give a real voice to civil society and facilitate a genuine dialogue. Transformative change is a difficult agenda – diets, lifestyle, consumption – civil society can bring this to the fore and engage citizens in change. Inclusive approaches are essential to ensuring societal support for sustainability transitions.

Final reflections

- The European Green Deal is a positive agenda that recognises the need for systemic change, addresses systems and tries to identify responses. While it forms a key framework, targets are not enough and there is still a need to go further in scope and level of investment.
- For a Green and Social Deal, a just transition is needed. This will only be successful if there is strong engagement from society and affected communities and if just transition principles are integrated across European actions and budgets.
- Co-creation and participation are crucial to ensure legitimacy and societal support for sustainability transitions. However making shared choices together can be difficult to achieve when under time pressure to develop and implement policy initiatives.
- Accelerating sustainability transitions requires doing things differently. Urgent action is required in the next 10 years across the areas identified in SOER 2020 with a focus on addressing drivers, lock-ins and barriers to change. Key to this will be ensuring investments do not lead to dead-end streets and lock society into unsustainable pathways.
- Achieving change is linked to wider social and economic issues and values. There is a need to develop a better understanding of what it means to be a citizen and have prosperity and a good life within environmental boundary constraints. This will present challenges to the current economic model, and the role of vested interests in preventing change will need to be tackled. It will require consideration of what it means to have genuine societal engagement, along with putting in place the mechanisms to ensure civil society involvement. This should be supported by a positive narrative and a well-being pact to ensure societal support.

