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**ECO/ESG**

**RESOLUTION**
European Economic and Social Committee

**Involvement of Organised Civil Society in the National Recovery and Resilience Plans –
What works and what does not?**

based on consultations in the 27 Member States

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# At its plenary session of 24 and 25 February 2021 (meeting of 25 February), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following resolution by 268 votes with 5 abstentions.

# **Introduction**

## The EESC has adopted a number of opinions, resolutions and declarations on the NextGenerationEU Recovery Plan and its various components, in particular the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). The Committee has expressed its agreement with its content and the direction of the reform proposals, which are intended to boost economic and social recovery and trigger a change in the production model.

## The EESC considers that all reforms in the restructuring process must be based on the principles underpinning the EU: the protection of human and social rights, democratic values and the rule of law. Investments under the RRF must aim to unlock the full potential of the single market, strengthen the EU's economic resilience, meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), create a circular economy, achieve climate neutrality in the EU by 2050 at the latest, encourage innovation and modernisation related to the digitalisation of the economy and society, and secure effective implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights to ensure social cohesion, eradicate poverty and reduce inequalities. They must respond to the economic and social crisis caused by the pandemic, taking into account that the impacts will be larger, heavier and deeper than earlier anticipated, ensuring a swift recovery. The use of the RRF should also fall fully in line with international conventions and treaties to which the EU and Member States are party, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Committee considers it essential to ensure good governance, vigilance against corruption in the management of funds and democratic accountability.

## The Committee also considers it very important that reforms are aimed at both improving the productivity of the economy and strengthening the innovative industrial tissue through support for SMEs and social economy enterprises. It underlines the role of research at the European level and its links with the production process. It also believes that mechanisms should be put in place to ensure fair green and digital transitions in the EU and in all Member States, and to support the economic reintegration of those excluded from the labour market. In this regard, the EESC reiterates its concern that the funds set aside for just transition in the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) are insufficient.

## The EU institutions have reacted very differently than they did to the 2008 crisis. The financing of the Recovery Plan (RP) through the issuance of common European debt is a milestone in the history of the EU. The Committee is particularly concerned about the support for a deepening of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). This issue should be taken up at the forthcoming Conference on the Future of Europe, while also appreciating the importance of the Porto Summit to be convened by the Portuguese Presidency on the effective implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The EESC believes that the involvement of civil society must go beyond the economic, social and environmental spheres to such important issues as the Future of Europe or accession and pre-accession negotiations with the EU applicant countries.

## The Commission should take account of the impact of the pandemic on the different Member states and their capacities when assessing their NRRPs.

## In this resolution we would also like to express our satisfaction with the agreement reached last December between the European Parliament and the Council, in the framework of the trilogue, which includes the approval of a Regulation that establishes (Article 18) the need for social partners and civil society organisations (CSOs) to participate, by consultation, in the drafting and implementation of National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs).

## Civil society participation in the NRRPs is precisely the subject of this resolution. On the basis of the reports drawn up by the national delegations of the European Semester Group, we would like to make an initial assessment of how this participation is developing and be able to inform the European institutions and national governments of the shortcomings we find there. In this way, the Committee could help to ensure that national governments and European institutions take appropriate corrective measures before the deadline for the finalisation of the NRPPs by national governments and their approval by the European Commission. This assessment should unveil not only the extent of civil society participation in the design of the plans, but also the quality of their involvement, and how transparent the different Member States have been in making their draft NRRPs available to the public.

## With regard to the involvement of pan-European social partners and CSOs in the NextGenerationEU Recovery Plan, they have acknowledged that progress has been made compared to the usual European Semester procedures. They also recognise the positive role that the European Commission is playing in promoting civil society participation at national level. However, most of them consider that the level of actual participation is still largely insufficient and that the processes do not allow CSO opinions to have enough of an impact. Social partners and CSOs call for these shortcomings to be corrected in the NRRP implementation and evaluation phases by establishing more formal procedures that facilitate real exchanges.

# **Background**

## On 18 December 2020, the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament reached an agreement on the RRF. In order to access funding, Member States will prepare NRRPs that set out a package of investments and reforms, in line with guidance from the European Union concerning the consultation process. Already the first guidance note, published in September, asks Member States to "describe any consultation and contribution of social partners, civil society and other relevant stakeholders, in the drafting and implementation of the recovery and resilience Plan"[[1]](#footnote-1).

## The agreement reached by the European Parliament and the Council in December includes a paragraph on the involvement of the social partners and civil society, among others. Article 18(4)(q) requires NRRPs to set out "a summary of the consultation process, conducted in accordance with the national legal framework, of local and regional authorities, social partners, civil society organisations, and other relevant stakeholders, for the preparation and, where available, the implementation of the plan and how the inputs of the stakeholders are reflected in the plan"[[2]](#footnote-2).

## The 2020-2023 Work Programme of the European Semester Group was adopted during the group's first meeting on 16 December 2020. An important new element in the Work Programme was the organisation of virtual consultations by EESC members in the Member States in January 2021. The purpose of this exercise was to collect information on involvement of organised civil society (OCS) in the NRRPs so that the EESC could adopt a resolution at the February Plenary Session.

# **Method**

## The data and information required for this report were collected in January 2021.

## In total, 26 national contributions were received. Consultations took place on the basis of members' own knowledge and involved social partners and CSOs. In some countries, national economic and social councils or equivalent bodies were involved, and in others, government representatives were also consulted.

## The following five questions formed the basis for the consultations:

1. Are there mechanisms for consultation on the Recovery and Resilience Plans in your country? Do you consider them sufficient and adequate?
2. Are there different consultation mechanisms for the social partners and the rest of civil society in your country?
3. Your country must submit its National Recovery and Resilience Plan by 30 April at the latest. Where is your country in the process?
4. How does the R&R procedure differ compared to the consultation of OCS during the normal Semester procedure in your country?
5. To what extent does the R&R plan of your country correspond with the policy objectives of OCS in your country?

# **Observations from the results of the consultations**

## *Question 1: Are there mechanisms for consultation on the Recovery and Resilience Plans in your country?*

### The vast majority of responses reported that some form of consultation mechanism has been established by the national government in question for the involvement of OCS in the drafting of their recovery and resilience plan (RRP). In some Member States, consultations with civil society have already been carried out, whereas in others they are still ongoing or scheduled to take place at a later stage.

### The mechanisms employed are varied, including submission of written proposals, high-level meetings with responsible ministers, evaluating purposely designed and returned questionnaires and round table discussions between representatives of the government and CSOs. Some Member States have also used and built on mechanisms established for consultation within the ordinary European Semester procedure, mutatis mutandis, the special new calendar of the 2021 one and the limiting circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Nevertheless, several responses pointed to a lack of real participation from civil society. One barrier for involvement identified was the apparent unwillingness of some national governments to include civil society in the drafting of their plan. Rather than the government seeking to involve civil society, consultations were often carried out at the initiative of and following appeals from the social partners and other CSOs.

### Although civil society was formally included, the insufficient time reserved for civil society consultation was identified as another barrier to true involvement. Participants were critical of the tight timetables adopted by some governments, as they are likely to hinder substantive debate and consideration of civil society's input regarding the RRPs. Hence, while a large number of Member States do have some form of consultation mechanism for OCS as part of their RRP drafting process, a significantly smaller number actually enables civil society to be truly involved and the resulting proposals to have a real impact.

### Regrettably, a number of participants reported that no consultation has been carried out or is scheduled to take place in the drafting stage of their national plan. In addition, some respondents reported that, although consultations have taken place, they have so far only encompassed the social partners and not the broader OCS.

### On the basis of the information that we have obtained[[3]](#footnote-3), we divided the Member States into three categories in relation to the subject of this resolution: those where there has been virtually no involvement, at least so far (Denmark, Slovakia); those where there has been some formal or informal involvement but where no capacity to influence has been identified (Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Germany, Greece, Spain, Estonia, France, Croatia, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Sweden, Slovenia); and finally, those where there has been more structured involvement, which in some cases has had an impact on some aspects of the plans (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Finland, Italy, Malta).

### Overall, the responses reveal a strong desire on the part of OCS to contribute to the drafting of NRRPs. Respondents representing social partners and CSOs described attempts to become involved, including drawing up proposals and reaching out to government representatives. In some Member States, these initiatives have led to civil society being more involved in drafting the plans, but unfortunately, in others they appear to have fallen on deaf ears.

## *Question 2: Are there different consultation mechanisms for the social partners and the rest of organised civil society in your country?*

### The majority of Member States have different procedures for consulting the social partners and the rest of OCS. Respondents reported that the social partners are included on a more structured, institutionalised and permanent basis whereas the remaining CSOs are instead consulted in an ad hoc and informal manner. As mentioned above, a number of Member States have only consulted the social partners and not broader civil society as part of their RRP drafting process. A version is true for one Member State, where the government only consults the body of wider civil society including also the social partners but not the narrower body including only the social partners. A smaller number of Member States have opted to use a common procedure encompassing all stakeholders.

## *Question 3: Your country must submit its National Recovery and Resilience Plan by 30 April at the latest. Where is your country in the process?*

### In terms of substance, the responses gathered were mixed. While all participants reported that their national government has begun work on their RRP, Member States are at different stages of the process.

### In the majority of Member States, a first version of the NRRP is being drafted by the ministries responsible, most often the Ministry of Finance. Some have concluded civil society consultations whereas others are yet to consult outside stakeholders. A number of respondents also reported that their government is consulting closely with the European Commission or planning to begin consultation shortly.

### A few Member States were reported to be working on a second version of their national plan, following consultation with the European Commission at an earlier stage.

## *Question 4: How does the R&R procedure differ compared to the consultation of OCS during the normal Semester procedure in your country?*

### The responses here are also mixed and somewhat inconclusive. However, some of the same trends can be observed as in the answers to the previous questions: some respondents say that it is too early to tell, some say that there is not enough time for a proper consultation and some say that the social partners are more involved than the rest of OCS. A few report that the R&R procedure has been more open or adapted to OCS than the normal Semester procedure, but even more state that the established framework in place for consulting OCS during the normal Semester procedure is not being used for the R&R procedure.

## *Question 5: To what extent does the R&R Plan of your country correspond with the policy objectives of OCS in your country?*

### The answers to this question fall into three broad categories, roughly of the same size. One group thinks that the objectives generally correspond, either as a result of a consultation procedure or because the interests were already the same. Another group regrets that governments have ignored the public and well-known interests of OCS in drawing up the plans, and the third and final group is unable to answer, either because of a lack of solid knowledge, or because it is still too early in the process.

# **Conclusions**

## Although the NRRP consultation processes with the social partners and CSOs have generally improved on those of the regular European Semester from previous years, the EESC considers that, in most Member States, they are far from satisfactory in relation to the justified demands of civil society and even in relation to the terms set out in the RRF Regulation. While social partners generally have more opportunities to participate, through either social dialogue or processes specific to the NRRPs, other CSOs have more limited options.

## The results of the survey on which this resolution is based are consistent with those of other studies[[4]](#footnote-4) carried out by pan-European CSOs on the participation of Member State CSOs in the NRRPs. According to these studies, there has been little or no real CSO participation in the majority of countries. The data we collected in January for our study show only a slight improvement in this regard. A similar level of dissatisfaction emerges from the Committee of the Regions'[[5]](#footnote-5) consultation on the involvement of regional and local political institutions in the NRRPs.

## The Committee considers that real participation takes place when, in formal consultation processes based on legal rules and public and transparent procedures, CSOs are duly informed by means of written documentation, have sufficient time to analyse the government's proposals and draw up their own proposals, which are either taken into account or justifiably refused, and which are in any case set out in minutes or public documents. When new framework conditions apply, this consultation should be repeated. Civil society participation is in no way intended to replace or call into question the primacy of parliamentary democratic institutions, only to complement them by collaborating with them.

## The EESC calls on the governments of the Member States that have not established adequate procedures for consulting the social partners and CSOs to put such procedures in place as a matter of urgency and to comply with the RRF Regulation. The Committee calls on the European institutions, in particular the Commission, to use their powers to require national governments that have not done so to fulfil their obligations in this respect. It is still possible to do this within the deadlines set for the adoption of the NRRPs. The EESC shares the view of the other political and social actors that the resources for financing investment for the recovery and transformation of European economies and societies must reach the Member States and their societies as soon as possible.

## The experience of civil society participation in the drafting phase of the NRRPs and the assessment of the gaps and shortcomings in this regard must be used to ensure that, in future, during the implementation phases of the NRRPs and with a view to the drafting of the 2022 NRRPs, these gaps and shortcomings are corrected. Strong involvement of social partners and CSOs more generally is a guarantee for bottom-up-driven changes that will be sustainable and effective. CSOs also have to be taken into account in the implementation of the plans as many social services are provided by CSOs.

## Among the risks arising from the need for public and social players to invest considerable financial resources in a short space of time are an inability to absorb and execute the funds within the planned timeframe and inefficient use of those resources. An even more serious risk is that of corruption. While the Committee calls on national governments to put in place the necessary measures to improve management capacity and promote transparency and administrative and parliamentary control to address these risks, it stresses that the involvement of representative CSOs in monitoring the implementation of the NRRPs is a powerful tool in the fight against corruption and inefficiency.

## The EESC is concerned that at the time of drafting the national reports on which this resolution is based, there is insufficient clarity in most Member States on the NRRP governance systems and the distribution of responsibilities between the central, regional and local levels for their implementation. Nor, of course, is there sufficient clarity on the appropriate mechanisms for involving OCS and social partners in the implementation, monitoring and adjustment phases of the NRRPs.

## This resolution focuses on the involvement of social partners and CSOs in the NRRPs at a time when the process of drawing up the NRRPs has not yet been completed, with a view to being able to improve these processes and also push for social partners and CSOs to be properly involved in the implementation, monitoring and adjustment of the NRRPs. We are aware of the contents of the plans as expressed in the framework programmes and in the first drafts of some Member States' NRRPs. From the answers to question 5 of the questionnaire, however, it can be deduced that among those who are speaking out at this stage of the process, in most countries – ten out of sixteen – there is broad or partial alignment between the objectives of CSOs and what is stated in the framework programmes and draft NRRPs, in keeping with the objectives and guidelines set out by the Commission and the European Parliament for NextGenerationEU and its RRF. In the remaining six countries, CSOs are critical, and in ten they do not answer, mostly because they consider it premature.

## The Committee would, however, like to echo some concerns and demands expressed by social partners and CSOs regarding the content of the NRRPs:

* Investments consistent with the objectives of the Green Deal and the digital transformation – and the associated just transitions – and those related to national social vulnerabilities, employment, health and social protection, together with the implementation of the necessary structural reforms indicated in the 2019 and 2020 country-specific recommendations, should lead to a shift towards a more productivity-enhancing, environmentally and socially sustainable economic model.
* The NRRPs should make explicit the relationship between investment projects and each country's reform agenda, setting out appropriate indicators, timetables and monitoring methodology.
* The NGEU programme offers unprecedented financial support by the EU to national budgets. When assessing the national plans, the Commission should demand that the European funds will also be used to create real European added value by supporting cross-border infrastructure investments and projects. There are clear positive economic and social spill-over effects of cross-border investments, which need to be promoted more strongly.
* Investments under the NRRPs should serve as leverage for other private investments in the sectors identified as priorities in these plans. Investment programmes must take sufficient account of eligible projects coming from SMEs and social economy enterprises.
* As the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Olivier De Schutter, expressed very clearly in his speech at the Committee's plenary session on 28 January 2021, there is a risk that social issues, including instruments to combat poverty and inequality, will not be given the necessary weight in the NRRPs. It is important to underline how high the risk is that the digital gap will not be reduced, considering that the digitalisation of the economy and society is one of NextGenerationEU's main focuses.
* Investments in high-quality education, lifelong learning and R&D are essential to drive and complement the economic and social changes that NextGenerationEU promotes, as well as investments that strengthen the health systems and public health policies of societies that have been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## The EESC calls on national governments and the EU institutions to take account of these concerns of European civil society regarding the content of the NRRPs when adopting them.

Brussels, 25 February 2021

Christa Schweng

The president of the European Economic and Social Committee

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1. [SWD(2020) 205 final](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/3_en_document_travail_service_part1_v3_en_0.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [OJ L 57, 18.2.2021, p. 17](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2021:057:SOM:EN:HTML). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The reports from the various Member States are analysed in the annex to this resolution. All this material is available on the [Committee's website](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/sections-other-bodies/other/ad-hoc-group-european-semester/civil-society-and-recovery-and-resilience-plans). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Civil Society Europe and the European Center for Not-for-Profit Law: [Participation of civil society organisations in the preparation of the EU National Recovery and Resilience Plans](https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CSE-ECNL-Participation-of-CSOs-in-the-preparation-of-the-EU-NRRPs_spread.pdf); December 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. CoR-CEMR: [The involvement of municipalities, cities and regions in the preparation of the national Recovery and Resilience Plans](https://memportal.cor.europa.eu/Handlers/ViewDoc.ashx?pdf=true&doc=COR-2021-00131-00-00-TCD-TRA-EN.docx); 20 January 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)