EUROPEAN SEMESTER

Social Platform guidance document to EU Member States on improving civil dialogue in the European Semester process

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Social Platform is the leading alliance uniting networks of civil society organisations advocating for social justice and participatory democracy in Europe. With a membership of 45 pan-European networks, Social Platform campaigns to ensure that EU policies are developed in partnership with the people they affect, respecting fundamental rights, promoting solidarity, and improving lives.

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1. Build or improve processes for active outreach to and consultation of stakeholders, including civil society organisations (CSOs) and the people they represent, at national and regional levels, ensuring that they are structured, regular, and meaningful

- Make sure that cooperation protocols contain clear consultation structures, timetables, and resources for strengthening the involvement of stakeholders, including CSOs in all steps of the Semester process, including on how feedback will be taken into account.
- Pay particular attention to involving those in the most vulnerable and marginalised situations and who are underrepresented in decision-making.
- Make sure consultations take place across all relevant national ministries and involve all relevant stakeholders, including CSOs, at national and regional levels.
- Make sure consultations are user-friendly and accessible to enable CSOs to participate. Reach out to and inform them about upcoming consultations.
- Use the EU Technical Support Instrument to involve CSOs as experts.

2. Make sure that the regulatory and financial framework at national level ensures an empowering, and not limiting, environment for organised civil society

- Guarantee adequate funding of CSOs for their work, including on the European Semester process specifically, to enable their active involvement and that of the communities they represent.
- Make sure that CSOs are considered an implementing partner and beneficiary of the funds available under the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), including different forms of disbursement, such as public procurement, public-private partnerships, and grants.

3. Recognise, engage with, and invest in targeted capacity-building of CSOs in all their diversity to enable them to engage with policy-making processes, like the European Semester

- A truly open, transparent, and regular civil dialogue at both EU and national level would increase legitimacy, accountability, and efficiency of decision-making and make it more evidence based.
- Pay particular attention to involving CSOs who represent people in the most vulnerable and marginalised situations and who are underrepresented in decision-making.
- Organise specific outreach to include vulnerable and marginalised communities and the CSOs who represent them.

More detailed recommendations on improving civil dialogue in each step of the European Semester process can be found in the annex of this document.

The importance of structured, meaningful civil dialogue

As the 2019 Annual Growth Survey highlights, the involvement of social partners, national parliaments and civil society is fundamental to improving ownership and legitimacy of reforms by making our representative democracies more participatory. It also helps address the growing lack of trust of people in decision-making processes at EU and national level and brings about better socio-economic outcomes. CSOs bring together local, regional, and national member organisations working with and representing people, including those who are traditionally underrepresented in decision-making, as well as of not-for-profit service providers. They are the only organisations that represent people in all their diversity, such as women, older people, people with disabilities, people affected by poverty, young people, children and families, ethnic and religious minorities, migrants and refugees, and the LGBTIQ+ community. Members of these groups might be voters or trade union members, but they also have demands that are not necessarily taken up by political parties or trade unions. Many of these groups of people are among the most affected by systemic issues like poverty, social exclusion, and the social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

CSOs at European and national level have been active working on mitigating the socio-economic impact of the pandemic on their constituencies. Therefore, they have first-hand knowledge and expertise gathered through working directly with concerned groups of people who know best what they need and what would work to support them. They can also report on emerging issues that might not be on the radar of decision-makers yet. In addition, many CSOs engage in research and can provide evidence.

However, despite obligations regarding civil dialogue contained in the EU treaties (article 11 (1) and (2) of the Treaty on European Union) and the 2020 EU employment guidelines, civil dialogue at EU and national level is much weaker than social dialogue. It is treated as ad hoc and is dependent on the political will and individual engagement of decision-makers and civil servants.

The implementation of the national recovery and resilience plans (NRRPs) and all actions taken by Member States to turn the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights into reality is monitored through the European Semester process. The full involvement of CSOs in this process will help the European Semester correspond to needs on the ground and therefore have a positive impact on people's living and working conditions.

Outlook

Input by national CSOs on how they see the progress made in achieving the objectives set in their NRRPs will be key to ensure successful implementation of the RRF through the NRRPs.

In this context, the review report on the implementation of the RRF that the European Commission must put forward by the end of July 2022, is an important opportunity for the involvement of organised civil society. Member States must make sure to include in their reporting to the European Commission relevant information about the involvement of stakeholders, including CSOs, in the implementation and monitoring of the plans.

Only with the full involvement of all stakeholders, including CSOs, in all decision-making processes can we achieve Europe's social recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the building of a more resilient, socially just, and inclusive Europe that leaves no one behind.

Annex 1: Social Platform policy recommendations to EU Member States on improving civil dialogue in the different steps of the European Semester process

This annex provides more detail on how to practically apply the above recommendations for the different stages and documents of the European Semester process.

Overall recommendations for all stages of the process

- Make sure to consult stakeholders, including CSOs at national and regional level, fully and meaningfully or support their consultation by the European Commission in the early drafting stages of all Semester documents.
- Ensure a balance between consultations of different for-profit and not-for-profit interest groups. Input from different stakeholders should be given equal weight to not give for-profit organisations with more human resources an unfair advantage.
- Commit to fully involving CSOs in the design, delivery, and monitoring of national priorities through a civil dialogue process on equal footing with social dialogue.

1. Country Reports

- Involve stakeholders, including national and regional CSOs, in the fact-finding missions and study visits the Commission organises in Member States to get a sense of national realities.

2. National Reform Programmes

- If they do not exist yet, set up formal consultative bodies comprising CSOs who actively participate in the drafting of the NRPs.
- Provide information on the process in a timely and easily accessible manner (including through simple language, minority languages etc.).
- Make sure that there are national debates on the topic and take-up in the media.
- Make sure to include a distinct section in the NRP reporting on the stakeholder consultation that was undertaken and the impact it has had, describing:
    - Who was consulted, how, and at what stages of the process.
    - How information was made available in a timely and accessible manner to a wide variety of stakeholders in the country, including diverse CSOs.
    - How the selection of stakeholders to consult was made, and which specific outreach measures and pro-active initiatives were carried out to ensure variety and representativeness, especially for grassroot non-governmental organisations and vulnerable communities.
    - How the process was codified, which partnerships with civil society were put in place, which standing bodies were established, and which procedures were adopted.
    - What the key steps of the consultation were – at which stage of the process, through which means, how many stakeholders were reached, how the obligations were met.
    - Quality indicators about how input was incorporated and how participating stakeholders were informed.
    - What the impact of the consultation was.

3. Spring Package (country-specific recommendations)

- When developing and putting into practice policy, legislative, and funding measures that implement the country-specific recommendations, make sure that consultations with stakeholders, including national and regional CSOs, take place across all involved ministries.