EUROPEAN SEMESTER

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

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For further information: katja.reuter@socialplatform.org

www.socialplatform.org @social_platform @socialplatform Social Platform

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

1. Formally recognise structured, regular civil dialogue as a necessary condition in all Semester procedures to increase dialogue between civil society organisations (CSOs) and all European Commission Directorate's-General (DGs), Council configurations and advisory committees, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the European Committee of the Regions

- Set clear consultation structures, timetables, and resources that strengthen the involvement of stakeholders, including CSOs, in all steps of the process. Establish requirements for consultation on all draft Semester documents, both on stakeholder consultation and reporting processes on how the consultation was managed and how input was taken into account.
- Hold strategic dialogue meetings at key moments of the process to gather feedback from stakeholders, including CSOs, and create a procedure on how feedback is taken into account.
- Strengthen the role of European Semester Officers and country desk officers and their outreach to stakeholders, including CSOs. Create a formalised process through which they proactively seek their input and keep them informed about developments.

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

- Provide adequate funding and capacity-building for European and national CSOs to support them in being involved in EU processes like the European Semester. This could be done through strengthening existing funds like the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) or the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV) in the future or by creating similar targeted budget lines to those that exist for funding of social dialogue. Ensure lower levels of co-financing or greater flexibility for negotiating co-financing rates, particularly for smaller and grassroots CSOs for whom high co-financing rates are a significant barrier.

3. Recognise and engage with civil society organisations in all their diversity to reach all people in society, including people in vulnerable situations

- 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.

4. Regularly collect quantitative and qualitative data about the involvement of CSOs in the European Semester process to identify and remove structural barriers to their involvement

- Develop a mapping detailing how EU institutions and Member States incorporate stakeholder feedback, including of CSOs, throughout the process. This would support the sharing of good practices across Member States, as per article 18 (5) of the Recovery and Resilience regulation.

5. Review civil dialogue in EU policy-making

- Develop an initiative on supporting civil dialogue at EU and national level, similar to the one foreseen for social dialogue in 2022.
- Put forward a European Commission communication on civil dialogue setting principles and making specific suggestions on the value of civil dialogue and how to improve it.
- 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 CSOs 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 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, CSOs 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 2020/2021 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 all stakeholders, including CSOs, on how they see the progress made in achieving the objectives set in their NRRPs will be key to successful implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)

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 involvement of CSOs. It is crucial that the European Commission undertakes structured, coherent, and meaningful consultation of CSOs at EU and national level in the drafting process of this report. The European Commission should clearly state which stakeholders are involved in the monitoring of the implementation of the plans. If certain stakeholders are excluded or have little influence, the European Commission should make country-specific recommendations on how to remedy this. The report should also give an overview of the different economic actors, including CSOs, who were beneficiaries of the funds (and how funding was split proportionally between them).

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 the EU institutions on improving civil dialogue in the different stages of the European Semester process

This annex provides more detail on how to practically apply the above recommendations on improving civil dialogue 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 EU and national level, in the early drafting stages of all Semester documents, ensuring a balance between 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.
- Set a requirement to include a detailed section in each Semester document about engagement of stakeholders, including CSOs. This section should detail their involvement in the drafting of the document itself, as well as in the design, implementation, and monitoring of reforms. This section should describe:
    - How information about the consultation process was made available in a timely and accessible manner to a wide variety of stakeholders, including diverse CSOs.
    - How the selection of stakeholders to consult was made, and what 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 CSOs 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 obligations were met.
    - Quality indicators about how input was incorporated and how participating stakeholders were informed.
    - What the impact of the consultation was.
- Strengthen the capacity of European Semester officers and country desk officers to collect input from stakeholders, including CSOs, and keep them informed about developments.
- Commit to fully involving CSOs in the design, delivery, and monitoring of the EU's priorities through a civil dialogue process on equal footing with social dialogue.

1. Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy (ASGS)

- Communicate significant changes to the process and its timeline for the annual cycle transparently to stakeholders in advance to allow them to adjust to the changes and engage in the process.

2. Joint Employment Report (JER)

- When collecting on-the ground evidence from stakeholders, focus consultations both on the social and employment situation across the EU as well as on the necessary measures in these fields to positively impact people's living and working conditions.
- Strengthen the section of the JER which looks at civil dialogue to monitor the extent and quality of civil society consultations, their impact on the final policies enacted, and their role in implementation and monitoring, to provide recommendations on how the consultation process can be improved.

3. Country Reports

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

4. National Reform Programmes (NRPs)

- Set the quality of consultations as an assessment criterion for the reports, which needs to be reported on specifically in the section on stakeholder consultation.
- Undertake a mapping exercise on how Member States consult stakeholders, including CSOs, throughout the process.
- Put forward common guidelines for Member States on drawing up the NRPs to enable Member States to set up or improve processes based on good practices.

5. Spring Package (country-specific recommendations)

- Stakeholders, including national and regional CSOs, can provide valuable input on the priorities of action for each country. They can help assess which reforms are missing and which recommendations need strengthening or overhauling, to ensure evidence-based policies that really work. Civil society seminars that explicitly invite national CSOs are one method of consultation but need to be part of the more comprehensive consultation and drafting process described above.
- Use more accessible language when drafting country-specific recommendations (CSRs). CSRs often use abstract, technical language that is more specific to an EU level working environment, which is difficult for national CSOs to understand. Using more accessible language would help the involvement of all stakeholders, including CSOs, at national level.