

The fight against climate change cannot be won at the expense of ordinary citizens

The EESC proposes a debate on an EU Bill of Climate Rights to ensure climate justice at all levels

“The fight against climate change can only succeed if all citizens are included. But it is not enough to convince people that we need to change our lifestyles: it is also important to give them the necessary support,” said President Georges Dassis at the start of a side event on “Just transition to low-carbon economy” organised jointly by the EESC, King’s College London, Foundation for European Progressive Studies and Fondation Jean-Jaurès during the COP23 in Bonn on 8 November. “The transition towards a zero-emission society must be designed in a way that does not aggravate inequalities or create social fractures, but instead helps to balance differences. In calling for a fair transition, the EESC has always refused to play employment off against environmental protection. These two objectives are closely linked and should be pursued with equal determination.”

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) used this event to present its opinion on Climate Justice. The concept of “climate justice” frames global climate change as a political and ethical issue and not just an environmental one. It recognises that the poorest and most vulnerable in society often have to suffer the greatest impact from climate change. Climate justice has been traditionally dealt with as an issue of emerging economies. The EESC wants to apply these principles also to the EU Member States. Therefore the EESC calls for a debate on an EU Bill of Climate Rights that encapsulates the rights of EU citizens and those of nature in the context of the challenges of the global climate change crisis. “We call on institutions and governments to ensure climate justice at all levels – global, EU, national, regional and community level, in this way we can make climate policy more human centered,” said Cillian Lohan, rapporteur of the opinion.

Stop unfairly penalising those who have no alternative – EESC calls for a genuine polluter-pays principle

In order to mitigate the impact of climate change, it is necessary to change production and consumption systems. Consumers need to be provided with sustainable ethical alternatives which do not mean less convenience, poorer quality or even higher prices. “The polluter-pays principle must be applied to those causing pollution and profiting from it,” said Mr Lohan. The EESC therefore encourages subsidies on fossil fuels to be eliminated.

The Rapporteur on Climate Justice of the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council (ESEC), Agnès Michelot also took part in the COP23 side event. The ESEC opinion adopted in 2016 and the EESC opinion have a high degree of complementarity and convergence and are mapping out concrete solutions at national and European level.

The EESC believes that all citizens have a right to a healthy, clean environment, and not only in Europe. In this context, President Dassis reminded participants of increased migration and how badly prepared Europe is to deal with it and share the burden equally. "Solidarity must be at the heart of the implementation of the Paris Agreement. This is a common and inclusive initiative which needs cooperation at all levels of civil societies and between Member States and EU institutions," he concluded.