

Civil Society Forum for Sustainability Shaping the European Green Deal
Civil Society's Strategic Role in the 2024-2029 Mandate
4th & 5th of November
Elzenhof, Brussels

Overview

The Civil Society Forum for Sustainability gathered civil society leaders, activists, and experts to discuss civil society's role in advancing the European Green Deal (EGD) and addressing global sustainability challenges. The event focused on how civil society can influence key EU policies over the next five years, especially in the areas of environmental justice, social equity, and the just transition. Key sessions underscored the urgency of collective action given the evolving geopolitical climate, economic pressures, and growing resistance to civil society participation in global governance spaces. Panellists stressed the need for:

- **Environmental justice** – Achieving ambitious decarbonization targets, strengthening regulations on hazardous chemicals, and reforming agricultural policies were highlighted as urgent priorities.
- **Social justice & Just Transition** – Panellists urged the EU to adopt a systemic approach to social justice, prioritizing redistributive taxes, living wages, and protections for platform workers.
- **Civil society engagement** – Civil society must continue to advocate for a larger role in policy discussions, and pressure EU institutions to ensure transparency and inclusivity in decision-making.

Objective

The panel, moderated by Hanna Gunnarsson (WECF), focused on identifying strategic priorities for civil society engagement within the upcoming EU mandate, featuring perspectives from three keynote speakers:

- **Ingo Ritz** (Global Call to Action Against Poverty - GCAP)
- **Patrizia Heidegger** (European Environmental Bureau - EEB)
- **Mikael Leyi** (SOLIDAR)

Key issues raised by panellists

Ingo Ritz - Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP)

- **Post-summit reflections**

The recent Summit of the Future was critiqued as both a positive and challenging step forward. While it resulted in the "Pact for the Future," geopolitical tensions, including the crises in Ukraine and Palestine and Lebanon, hindered ambitious commitments. The summit highlighted the increasing polarization between the Global North and South, especially around issues like debt and economic justice. According

to Ingo, the Global South has expressed mounting frustration with the Global North's limited engagement in systemic reform, especially in terms of fairer debt management.

- **Global debt crisis**

The worsening global debt crisis is pressing nations in the Global South to cut essential services, leading to significant social hardship. Ingo emphasized the need for a new approach to global debt relief and financial reform, noting that without a reformed international finance system, the Global South will struggle to achieve meaningful progress on climate and social protections.

- **Civil society participation**

Ingo raised concerns about the shrinking space for civil society in global governance processes, with civil society sidelined in major discussions. He pointed to the upcoming 2025 World Social Summit as a critical venue where civil society can push for stronger engagement, though the decision to hold the summit in Qatar could present additional obstacles.

Patrizia Heidegger - European Environmental Bureau (EEB)

- **Progress on environmental goals**

Patrizia praised civil society's mobilization efforts, noting significant legislative wins under the EGD, including stricter regulations on resource use and waste, more robust climate targets, and new ecodesign standards. These developments position the EU as a global leader in environmental legislation, with ambitious targets such as 30% nature restoration by 2030.

- **Gaps and barriers**

Despite these advances, major obstacles remain, including inadequate fiscal commitments to support decarbonization and dematerialization. Industrial resistance—particularly from sectors like chemicals—continues to stall efforts to phase out hazardous substances like PFAS. Additionally, the EU's Common Agricultural Policy is outdated, needing reform to reduce environmental impacts and support farmers more sustainably.

- **Resource dependency**

A critical challenge is Europe's reliance on non-renewable resources. Patrizia warned of a potential scramble for raw materials, particularly in regions like the Balkans, where local communities are already mobilizing against extractive projects like lithium mining in Serbia. She stressed the need for a "non-colonial" approach to resource use that respects the rights and ecosystems of local populations.

Mikael Leyi - SOLIDAR

- **Social justice setbacks**

Mikael highlighted troubling trends in social justice, with poverty rates on the rise and social indicators declining. The climate crisis has compounded these issues, yet the EU remains primarily focused on short-term solutions rather than systemic change. The failure to mainstream social justice as a priority across EU policies threatens to leave marginalized communities further behind.

- Just transition and systemic change** A coherent
 policy framework for a just transition is essential, and Mikael called for better integration of social and environmental justice goals. The European Pillar of Social Rights was noted as a positive step, introducing progressive measures like the directive on minimum wages and platform work rights. However, there's a need to deepen these initiatives and ensure they have a broader transformative impact.
- National-level mobilization**
 Mikael noted the growing influence of nationalist and far-right movements within EU member states. He urged civil society to mobilize nationally and within the EU, building broad alliances to counter anti-democratic trends and ensure that social and environmental justice remain priorities in the next EU mandate.

Recommendations for the 2024-2029 EU Mandate

Civil society engagement

- Expand civic spaces** – Strengthen civil society's role in EU policy processes, ensuring access to consultations and decision-making, particularly in areas like climate, social protections, and financial reform.
- Support public mobilization** – Coordinate campaigns at national and EU levels around key summits (FFD, World Social Summit) to advocate for fairer global governance structures and increased support for climate finance.
- Media and public awareness** – Increase visibility for civil society actions through media engagement and targeted campaigns, especially ahead of critical events to amplify public support and accountability.

Environmental issues

- Commit to ambitious decarbonization** – The EU should adopt more ambitious timelines to achieve carbon neutrality by 2040, aligning with historical responsibilities and global climate targets.
- Reform agricultural and resource policies** – Modernize the Common Agricultural Policy to support sustainable farming and reduce the EU's environmental footprint. Establish clear pathways for dematerialization and responsible resource use, with attention to impacts on global partners.
- Implement stronger chemical regulations** – Address industrial resistance to environmental regulations, especially in sectors such as chemicals. Prioritize policies to phase out hazardous substances and reduce pollution.

Social Justice and Just Transition

- Develop a coherent Just Transition framework** – Establish a policy framework for the just transition that integrates social protections, redistributive taxes, and labour rights into environmental policies.



- **Address rising inequalities** – Implement measures to combat poverty and social exclusion, including revisiting fiscal commitments, wealth redistribution, and bolstering social protections.
- **Global justice commitment** – Ensure EU trade and development policies do not perpetuate global inequalities. Address the legacies of colonialism in EU policy by promoting fair trade practices, debt relief, and climate finance for the Global South.

Conclusion

The forum highlighted the urgent need for civil society to play an active role in shaping the EU's environmental and social justice agenda in the coming years. With the European Green Deal at a pivotal juncture, and pressures from both within and beyond the EU, civil society's advocacy and mobilization will be crucial in ensuring that the next EU mandate adopts transformative, inclusive, and equitable policies.