

# Citizen engagement and consumer policy – towards the SDGs

Active Citizenship Network's Mariano Votta and European Consumer Union's Sergio Veroli introduce this feature on European citizen engagement and consumer policy in the service of the Sustainable Development Goals

**T**ogether with the EU Institutions (the European Commission, Parliament, and Council), civil society organisations have a role to play in supporting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within the European framework: this is the main message of the new political initiative launched on 16 February 2021 during the European digital conference 'Making sustainability an easy choice for EU citizens'.

Promoted by [Cittadinanzattiva](#) through its EU branch [Active Citizenship Network \(ACN\)](#), the [European Consumers Union \(ECU\)](#), and the [Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development \(ASViS\)](#), this initiative is now officially presented as the informal [Inter-Institutional Group 'SDGs for Well-Being and Consumers' Protection'](#), which is currently being endorsed by eight Members of European Parliament (MEPs) – interviews with some of whom can be found within this section of *The Innovation Platform*. Representatives of the EU Commission and the European Economic Social Committee also took part in the aforementioned conference, underlining the interest in the initiative.

The [Inter-Institutional Group](#) represents civil society's desire to contribute to the SDGs and the Green New Deal, aiming to discuss and raise awareness of how each and every EU citizen can contribute. In fact, we strongly believe that citizen and consumer empowerment should be a central pillar of the transition towards a more inclusive and sustainable Europe.

## A call to action

Rather than simply waiting for the European institutions to propose a debate and to foster the more widespread involvement of civil society on the themes of the SDGs, it is civil society itself, right across Europe, that is now calling upon and urging these European institutions to affect this change. This paradigm shift is a defining characteristic of the initiative. To underline this, 47 European and national associations (from 24 EU Member States and two non-EU countries) support the initiative and are gathered in the SDGs Stakeholder Network. From our perspective, the Inter-Institutional Group also represents the translation into practice of the



This interview is part of an EU initiative focused on Sustainable Development Goals ideated by Cittadinanzattiva/Active Citizenship Network and realised in partnership with *The Innovation Platform*.

thematic 'citizens' agoras' which were encouraged by the Resolution taken on 15 January 2020 at the Conference on the Future of Europe on the European Parliament's position regarding the inclusion of citizens.

Due to the profound interconnectivity of the SDGs, both between themselves and the various areas and sectors of society, and the real need to avoid a siloed approach – which remains all-too prevalent in the development of public policies both at European and Member State level – the Inter-Institutional Group is not only open to MEPs; the invitation has also been extended to the representatives of the other European institutions. Indeed, as described in its Manifesto, a second characterising trait of the Initiative is to ensure that it remains open to all EU institution members who are willing to work together with civil society to ensure that Europe will be a global leader in the development and implementation of the SDGs.

The third aim of the political initiative – towards which the promoting associations started working long before the European elections in May 2019 – is to help bring EU consumer policy (and with it the diverse consumer movement) closer to achieving the objectives established by the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda: the SDGs provide guidelines for the sustainable transformation of all policy areas, including consumer policy. Consequently, no actor – whether public or private – engaged in the implementation of consumer policies can be considered as exempt from providing their own contribution towards achieving the objectives of the 2030 Agenda.

In this sense, the Inter-institutional Group's contribution will be:

- a) To act as an **awareness rising catalyst** across Europe for civil society, business, research, media, etc. at local, national, and European level
- b) To act as a **dialogue facilitator** between the European institutions and stakeholders active in specific fields
- c) To act as an **incubator of good practices** in order to facilitate the process of exchanging and disseminating best practices geared towards enabling EU citizens to make sustainable choices.

### No one left behind

As responsible consumption and production is increasingly prioritised, no one should be left behind in the green transition. As underlined last November in the context of the XII Citizen's Energy Forum, which was promoted by the EU Commission, when the global population reaches 10 billion, experts warn that the equivalent of almost three planets would be required to provide the natural resources needed to sustain current lifestyles. A worrying idea in itself, this is made all the more concerning by the fact that the global population could reach this number by 2050!

The majority of EU citizens are now conscious of environmental issues and they are willing to make environmentally correct choices when it comes to their consumption. However, citizens in Europe also encounter many obstacles in terms of translating their willingness into action, and the gap between intention and action remains high.

In recent months, young people in several EU countries have come together to call for a more ambitious political leadership on climate action and green lifestyles. For its part, the New Consumer Agenda, adopted on 13 November 2020 by the European Commission, gives momentum back to the EU consumer policy, aiming to better equip the bloc to tackle the new challenges facing consumer rights and to provide opportunities for consumer empowerment via the green and digital transitions, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the plans for post-COVID recovery. This demonstrates that the required momentum for public action to accelerate the transition to the green economy is already there: citizens at the global level are united by a common language, the one of the SDGs, which now needs to shift from being simply a language to a shared 'culture of doing'.

However, questions remain, including:

- What responses could EU consumer policy provide?
- What role can European citizens play in reaching the ambitions of the European Green Deal and the SDGs? And
- What are the connections with European consumer rights?

The transition to a sustainable Europe has to be based on the commitment that 'no one is left behind', as stated by the European Commission's President



Ursula von der Leyen [presenting Europe's roadmap for the green transition to the European Council in December 2019](#). Everyone must be involved for the goals to be achieved. For this to happen, social concerns need be addressed in full synergy with environmental and economic ones. The transition to a sustainable and efficient economy requires radical changes in the consumption habits of our society and in the production models of our economy. Leaving no one behind means that all members of the society, including the most vulnerable classes, are enabled to take advantage of this opportunity while simultaneously being better protected from the risks. Leaving no one behind also means empowering as many people as possible to play a positive and active role so that they can fully participate in the transition.

For these reasons, the active participation of European citizens should be at the base of the transition. As such, the Inter-Institutional Group's promoting associations want to strengthen the dialogue with the European institutions, convinced that – now more than ever – there is the need of a European Union that is much closer to its citizens. This need is made even more urgent by the rise of new challenges that are creating first-and second-class citizens in terms of access to primary goods and public services, beginning with but not limited to healthcare. We are convinced that these issues should be at the centre of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

In the following pages of this Special Feature, which is the result of the continued partnership between Active Citizenship Network (ACN) and *The Innovation Platform*, you will find interviews with some of the initiative's supporters, who discuss several of the important issues discussed above.

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