

Civil Society Priorities for the Portuguese EU Council Presidency

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Civil Society Priorities for the Portuguese EU Council Presidency

It is during these challenging times that Portugal will occupy the rotating presidency of the EU Council from January to June 2021. The Portuguese Presidency will face the deep consequences of the crisis triggered by the pandemic, the first steps of an EU with 27 Member States after the final departure of the United Kingdom and the transition to a new Multiannual Financial Framework reinforced by the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism - the largest financial package in the history of the Community.

Under the Presidency Project, the Portuguese NGDO Platform (Plataforma Portuguesa das ONGD) has developed a consultation process of Portuguese Civil Society Organisations aimed at identifying the priority areas for the current period. With the *Civil Society Priorities for the Portuguese EU Council Presidency*, the Portuguese NGDO Platform seeks to reinforce the discussions on several subjects and help provide answers to current global challenges.

Civil Society Priorities for the Portuguese EU Council Presidency were based on a common vision that the challenges the world faces require the EU to play a leading role in *contributing to Global Development, through its internal policies and external action, by promoting a fair, sustainable and resilient global transition on the social, environmental, economic and governance fronts. To this end, it is key that the Portuguese Presidency commits to guaranteeing equitable access to health and education; that it establishes the necessary mechanisms for active and free participation by all, valuing the political role and contribution of organised civil society; that it integrates in its priorities an active effort for the inclusion of minorities and excluded groups; that it prioritises the setting of policies consistent with the imperative of Sustainable Development and the affirmation of democratic values and principles and the rule of law, either internally and in its relationship with partners.*

In the pursuit of this vision, the Portuguese NGDO Platform will seek to bring to the heart of the political agenda and decision-making processes the priorities that Civil Society considers crucial to address during the Portuguese Presidency. Consequently, **it is important to consider the internal and external dimensions of EU policies and their Member States, the relevant bilateral and multilateral relations, and the priorities that the current Presidency Trio** (Germany, Portugal and Slovenia) has set. The actions implemented aim to ensure that Global Development is at the top of the priorities and that solutions are found for the most urgent challenges, particularly under the thematic areas listed in this document.

To guarantee a supportive EU committed to Global Development, prioritizing Human Development and an equitable response to the Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought about great changes in the world, reinforced a set of perverse dynamics that were already taking place, and the harmful effects it triggered are estimated to be

devastating harming the progress achieved until 2020. **The pandemic has exposed the weaknesses and shortcomings of the health systems in most countries, especially developing countries.** Although this is a global crisis, the situation has been aggravated by the fact that it has not always been possible to find answers based on international cooperation. **Given the importance of engaging in global solidarity as a determining factor in the response to the crisis** - a call that has been repeated countless times in recent months -, the Portuguese Presidency will also play a central role in guiding the work of the EU Council.

The Portuguese Presidency is expected to be strongly influenced by the response to the pandemic - both in the internal and short-term dimensions and in the international arena, and in establishing the answers to the crisis triggered by the fight against the spread of the disease. Therefore, the connection between all these dimensions will be a great challenge for which the Portuguese Presidency must be prepared. This means ensuring that the vaccination process functions as planned in all EU countries, while preventing partner countries, with less capacity to access the vaccine, from being left behind. **It is therefore critical to ensure that all countries have equal access to Covid-19 vaccines through the implementation of a global vaccination plan against the virus**, with a particular focus on those countries less capable of obtaining the vaccines.

However, effective response to the impacts of the pandemic goes well beyond the successful distribution of vaccines. Considering the effects of the pandemic on the economy, in particular increasing unemployment and worsening living conditions for many households, it is important that the Portuguese Presidency focus on **strengthening social cohesion and include in the economic recovery programmes the groups of the population that are systematically discriminated against in accessing decent jobs**: women, younger people, migrants and people with disabilities. The commitment to place the social dimension at the top of Portugal's agenda of the EU Council Presidency is a good sign, which should also be a clear demonstration of the importance of extending this priority to discussions on the EU's role in the world - particularly in its relations with developing countries.

For a sustainable response to the consequences of the pandemic, **it is necessary to consider the impact of the current situation on deepening inequalities** that jeopardize access to health care and to inclusive, quality and equitable education, and increase unemployment - particularly among young people and segments of the population in a more fragile situation and among women.

At the same time, due to the global nature of the current crisis, the disproportionate impact experienced by the most unprotected sections of the population also extend to relations between the different countries. Although the effects of the pandemic are apparently more severe on countries with greater economic power from a health point of view, **the social and economic dimension is affecting in a particularly dramatic way countries in greatest difficulties on the global stage.** Consequently, the Portuguese Presidency must be able to **bring to the centre of**

the debate the global role that the EU must play in finding the solutions for the social impacts of the pandemic.

From Civil Society's point of view, especially regarding development policies, this implies that the Portuguese Presidency seeks to work with the EU Council to ensure that it is committed to focusing EU action on **combating poverty, reducing inequality and promoting sustainable development in partner countries**. It is equally important to focus the initiatives planned by Portugal for the next semester - namely the High-Level EU-Africa Economic and Business Forum - on the **need to pay special attention to the challenges faced by the populations in a more fragile situation and on reinforcing investment to strengthen the business and economic fabric of the African continent**. Given the trend to link cooperation policies to the overall political and geostrategic interests of donor countries - as specifically reinforced by the Portuguese Presidency's programme -, to focus such policies on the groups of people facing vulnerable situations and their needs is an extremely relevant challenge.

The Portuguese Presidency aspires to provide the grounds for the EU to initiate a process of recovery from the crisis that was triggered by the pandemic. At the heart of the response are not only efforts to transition to a more environmentally sustainable economy, but also the issue of digital transition. Digital skills are of great importance at various levels of the approach to the current situation. Although this was already one of the key challenges elected by the current European Commission when it took office, **the pandemic has accelerated the need to work towards a fair, inclusive digital transition that respects the principles of democracy and the rule of law**. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) find these issues as fundamental aspects on which the Portuguese Presidency should focus during the discussions it intends to develop on the topic - especially in the period leading to the Digital Assembly scheduled for June in Lisbon.

*The Portuguese Presidency should seek to ensure the good management and distribution of recovery funds in order to **guarantee the implementation of support programs for groups of people in vulnerable situations and their full social inclusion in terms of health, employability and digitalisation**, working together with CSOs to reach out to communities and groups with specific cross-cutting needs.*

*Portugal should **also guarantee that the fight against poverty and socio-economic inequalities is prioritised, addressed across the various programmes** and considered in the discussions on the major topics of the Portuguese Presidency - namely in the context of EU's external action and energy and digital transitions.*

Ensure the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the promotion of democracy and the rule of law, and the protection of an enabling environment for Civil Society

The **2030 Agenda** and **Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD)** should be a **top priority** of the Portuguese EU Council Presidency to ensure that the way in which certain sectorial areas and European policies are addressed do not undermine the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Therefore, **the multidimensional approach to sustainable development enshrined in the 2030 Agenda** (in its economic, social and environmental dimensions) should be reflected in all actions under the Portuguese Presidency, and their interconnection and interdependence should be fostered, **transversally integrating PCSD into EU governance**. This will require **coordination between all actors (political, public, private and civil society), and institutions of EU Member States and partner countries** to avoid creating silos that could hamper the full implementation of the Agenda. **A strategy or plan must also be adopted at the European level to operationalise the 2030 Agenda** with a clear, comprehensive and integrated approach, and **ensure monitoring and assessment of the progress related with the Sustainable Development Goals in partner countries and the EU**. The monitoring and evaluation system must be adequately resourced for its implementation, it should encompass common European targets, an analysis of the contribution of EU policies and funding to achieving the 2030 Agenda, an assessment of the negative impacts of European policies in third countries, and mechanisms for dialogue and analysis with the European Parliament and Civil Society.

As a union of countries committed to multilateralism, international cooperation and the promotion of sustainable development, the EU bears a great deal of responsibility in strengthening international solidarity aimed specifically at fighting against the crisis caused by the pandemic. Now is thus, the time to reinforce actions and **allocate the necessary resources to assist people in fragile situations in tackling the situation they are facing**. Consequently, the Portuguese EU Council Presidency must **prioritise the promotion of EU-Africa relations on equal terms, based on its privileged relations and under its strategic partnership with Portuguese-speaking African countries**, focusing on critical matters such as **health, education, human rights and reinforcing Democracy and the Rule of Law**. To the extent that the vitality of democracy depends on the existence of an environment conducive to the exercise of civic rights, **an environment fostering the participation and action of European and African civil society in the pursuit of the objectives in question should also be promoted**. Since the next Summit between the European Union and the African Union may take place during the next six months, these are aspects that the Portuguese Presidency should consider, as the development of a fair partnership depends on it.

It is equally important to **highlight the unique role of Official Development Assistance (ODA)** in reducing asymmetries, fostering development and protecting Human Rights. That is why CSOs urge the Portuguese Presidency to steer discussions in the EU Council to **reinstate the importance of increasing ODA allocations (at national and European levels) in the coming years**, to ensure focus on the **needs of Least Developed Countries** and **most vulnerable communities** and to pay special attention to the challenges of **poverty, inequality and climate change**. Therefore, it is necessary to frame the debate on the most urgent challenges, e.g. the dramatic increase in the number of people under the poverty threshold and the challenges of food insecurity in regions hit by drought and affected by unsustainable farming systems.

Since many countries live in emergency and humanitarian disaster situations, the EU should **reinforce humanitarian action under its programme and involve CSOs in such action**, due to their broad knowledge of the territories of the countries with which it has relations. It is therefore crucial that the **"triple nexus"** (the operationalisation of the correlation between humanitarian action, development cooperation and peacebuilding) **strictly complies with the humanitarian principles**, providing the framework for the implementation of policies consistent with the SDGs and fostering international cooperation agreements for promoting local development. **Peacebuilding actions must indeed target human safety to the detriment of securitisation approaches and the criminalisation of migration influxes.**

Considering the large amounts of tax revenues that are lost from governmental control globally every year through tax evasion and avoidance - with especially serious consequences for developing countries - Civil Society considers it especially important to **invest in the fight against corruption, tax evasion and avoidance and in the promotion of transparency to ensure Fiscal Justice**. This is particularly relevant since large sums are needed to finance the implementation of sustainable development measures. Civil Society also believes that the discussion on the financing of social protection and development programs should address issues like the eventual **taxation of financial and digital transactions and the elimination of tax havens and offshores.**

The development of policies aligned with the principles of sustainable development must consider the **importance of Democracy, the respect for the Rule of Law and the promotion of Human Rights**. In this regard, the Portuguese Presidency's approach to the discussions must **involve Civil Society as a key actor** in enhancing the Community's contribution to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. As an independent and fully-fledged player with widely recognised experience and a true commitment to the values and principles of the Rule of Law and Democracy, **Civil Society should be engaged in the discussions held under the Portuguese EU Council Presidency.**

The Portuguese Presidency should seek to guide discussions in the EU Council in accordance with the principles that ensure the coherence of policies with the goals set in the 2030 Agenda. It is thus

essential to **highlight the founding values of the EU - Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law - and to put the needs of the most vulnerable populations at the core of our concerns.**

Furthermore, the Portuguese Presidency must regularly hold **discussion forums** with decision makers and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). This is key to ensuring the respect for Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development, as it will help, on the one hand, to project the voice of many underrepresented groups in policy making and, on the other hand, set up **systems for monitoring and assessing the coherence of development policies.**

Implementing the European Green Deal, tackling the ecological crisis and fostering a fair climate transition

The public's perception about the importance of **environmental issues** has been growing ever since it became clear that **climate change** causes irreversible damage to the planet, populations and biodiversity, and that action is urgently needed. For this reason, the **European Green Deal** is of utmost importance as it will frame the EU's approach to areas in several sectors with implications for the ecological balance. The Portuguese Presidency will take place during the important **process of transposing the principles envisaged in the Green Deal into EU law** - starting with the final approval of the European Climate Law. It must be firm and ambitious in the swift approval of the mechanisms envisaged.

Overall, the environmental goals created in this framework are crucial to ensure that the **loss of biodiversity** is reversed and that all efforts are guided by objectives such as **carbon neutrality, combating deforestation and establishing green tax mechanisms.** This entails, among other things, promoting sustainable agriculture and the right conditions to **ensure food security for the most vulnerable groups in all parts of the world, and supporting local producers.** The definition of the Farm to Fork strategy, for example, was an important step forward and must now be put into practice to meet the objectives of establishing more efficient and intelligent systems for creating a sustainable food value chain.

However, Civil Society is particularly concerned that **large polluting companies enjoy disproportionate access to European decision-makers and with the possible permanence in the Energy Charter Treaty and the Protocol on Energy Efficiency.** In this respect, the importance of the discussions on trade agreements must also be stressed, particularly in the framework of the negotiations between the EU and Mercosur, which could pose a real threat to progress towards the environmental targets, given the nature of unregulated regional practices in this area. Ensuring the consistency of the choices made in this regard inevitably involves assessing their impact on the environmental goals.

It is clear that action must be taken with urgency. The acknowledgement of the global dimension of the matter and the interdependence with different sectoral areas is paramount for setting fair environmental policies capable of making the difference. For this reason, Civil Society believes that it is equally important to ensure that the **energy transition is accompanied by mechanisms to prevent any negative socio-economic consequences**. In the dynamics of social mobilisation that have grown in recent years, **particular importance has indeed been attached to the issues of climate justice**. This is because **developing countries suffer the most from the effects of climate change**, although they have contributed the least to the problem. The green transition must therefore acknowledge that these countries cannot progress at the expense of polluting more, but that **there must be compensation mechanisms** because they have not been able to use the same development methods as EU countries did. Therefore, the environmental priorities that the EU has set have immediate external implications. The Portuguese Presidency must recognize the importance of focusing the discussion on climate transition in the context of relations with Africa, on the **need to pay special attention to the social and economic impact of its approaches to the issue** - namely in the context of the initiatives that are being prepared regarding the role of private investment in the area.

*The Portuguese Presidency should seek to **steer the work of the EU Council towards the adoption of ambitious targets that will allow the objectives laid down by the Paris Agreement to be respected**, while ensuring that the approach to different sectorial areas - namely agricultural policy and EU trade policy - considers the priorities set for climate action.*

*The success of climate transition will depend on the EU's ability to adopt a **fair approach** that takes into consideration the other dimensions of sustainable development. The Portuguese Presidency must therefore help the EU external action on environmental matters to respond consistently to global challenges - particularly those affecting the Least Developed Countries and the populations disproportionately affected by climate change - and ensure that no one is left behind.*

Adopt human rights-centred migration policies

Human mobility is a complex issue that affects hundreds of millions of people every year in voluntary and involuntary migration flows. Regardless of its root causes, **EU migration and asylum policies must focus on the need to protect the most vulnerable people**. This means that Human Rights must provide the framework for establishing responses to migration flows, while allowing for the dismissal of securitization approaches that have contributed to the worsening of sensitive humanitarian situations. Despite this being a topic of difficult consensus, the Portuguese Presidency

can certainly **advocate for solidarity and human rights to be at the realm of discussions regarding the new Pact on migration and asylum.**

For this to happen, it is key to **abandon the notion of illegal human beings, to support the countries most pressured by migration flows,** to bet on the speedy regularisation of asylum seekers' situations on EU territory and to **ensure that practices of refoulement to countries where there is risk of torture, ill treatment, arbitrary arrest or even extrajudicial execution/death penalty are not promoted.** From Civil Society's perspective, this means that asylum policies establishing aid mechanisms, **guaranteeing human protection and ensuring access to the labour market are paramount.** This approach is clearly different from the one that has been followed in recent years - focusing, in many cases, on detaining asylum seekers and criminalising humanitarian support efforts - and it can make a difference. For all these reasons, Civil Society calls on the Portuguese Presidency to highlight these principles during the discussion on the matter - particularly in the context of the Ministerial Conference on migration management due to be hosted in May by Portugal.

This will allow both the urgent issues related to integration and the fight against discrimination on grounds of nationality or origin, and some aspects concerning flow management and cooperation with partner countries, to be addressed. The Portuguese Presidency can foster the discussion on the need to **reject the conditionality approach to managing migratory flows imposed on partner countries** that threatens to assert itself as a key feature in EU development policies. In effect, Civil Society has defended that linking development cooperation programmes to migration management deals, not only falls short of meeting the objective of reducing the flows but is also a serious threat to the safety of those who are the most disadvantaged. Guaranteeing the **safety of people and fighting crimes such as human trafficking,** especially of **unaccompanied minors** must be an absolute priority. To this end, legal channels must be put in place.

Such an approach would indeed contrast with the one that has been followed over recent years. To the extent that the causes of forced migration cannot be tackled through security measures, it is up to the Portuguese Presidency to help agencies such as FRONTEX function as a structure mandated to enforce the fundamental rights and to carry out search and rescue missions of people at risk, while preventing situations of abuse. Civil Society believes that this is a central aspect, as part of the migration routes are linked to a high degree of risk for migrants, including exposure to human trafficking networks.

*The Portuguese Presidency must foster an **approach to migration based on the protection of human rights,** the full integration of refugees and migrants, and the dismissal of securitization trends that contribute to the deepening of fragile situations.*

***CSOs specialised in migration and human rights issues constitute crucial partners of the Portuguese Presidency in this regard.** In order to take full advantage of their experience, it is important to promote the involvement of Civil Society in ongoing processes - starting with the Ministerial Conference on migration management due to take place in May.*

Tackling inequalities, discrimination and social exclusion

Tackling discrimination, inequalities and hate speech, and the promotion of human rights must be cross-cutting priorities across all actions under the Portuguese Presidency. Although European values clearly affirm the universality of human rights, everyday **minority and vulnerable groups - including girls and women - suffer from social exclusion and discrimination.** Such dynamics often end up lifting barriers to the access to economic, social and cultural rights, but also civil and political rights, among other consequences. In light of what this type of phenomenon implies for groups in a more fragile situation and the potential worsening of their situation due to the growth of populist movements, Civil Society believes this should be a priority for the Portuguese Presidency.

In this regard, **Development Education and Awareness Raising (DEAR)** has proven to be a **fundamental tool in Portugal for combating the root causes of discrimination and prejudice.** Hence, it is key that the Portuguese Presidency fulfils its commitment towards the acknowledgement of “the role of citizenship training in education systems” of EU member states. Civil Society believes that Portugal can help to **reinforce the importance of enhancing the work that is already being carried out in the EU in this area – e.g., by leading efforts around defining strategies at Member-State level such as the National Strategy for Development Education currently being implemented in Portugal.** This means emphasizing approaches that foster the development of educational programs, especially for young people, with a **strong focus on non-formal and truly inclusive education** and targeting the necessary resources for their implementation.

Knowing that the dynamics of discrimination, stereotypes and prejudice are instilled from an early age, it is especially relevant to use formal and non-formal education to break down such preconceived ideas, to **counter sexist, racist, xenophobic and homophobic discourses and other narratives based on hate, intolerance and contempt for human rights.** This is also why it is important to promote the **empowerment of people and communities,** leading to a more informed action and democratic coexistence. Civil Society has, also in this regard, an important role to play. Due to all the experience organisations have built up in the design of DEAR programmes, it is paramount to include Civil Society in the discussions about the role of education in boosting Sustainable Development.

Despite all this, this is a fundamental issue with implications across several other areas of activity that go beyond the need of investing in education and training. The way in which populist movements have adjusted to the new ways of communication, especially to digital platforms, and what this implies in terms of combating misinformation, hate speech and all kinds of discrimination is a clear sign of how manipulation based on the treatment of personal information is used to pursue corrosive political agendas. In the framework of the Portuguese Presidency, Civil Society believes that clear **commitments to mechanisms that ensure that the digital transition affirms itself as a process of strengthening Democracy is crucial for promoting Human Rights and the fight against discrimination, inequalities and social exclusion**. The Digital Assembly, which is scheduled to take place in June in Lisbon, should help in raising awareness to this matter, as has already been assumed by Portugal.

Alongside these issues, and with the aim of eliminating all existing forms of discrimination and ensuring that all people can fully enjoy their rights, **the assertion of equality between men and women** as a key feature in all policy fields must also be among the top priorities of the Portuguese Presidency. In this regard, the **Portuguese Presidency can play an important role in the discussions on the recently published Gender Action Plan III, in the EU Council**. To tackle one of the main obstacles to Sustainable Development, Member States must indeed be capable of strongly engaging in **combating violence against women and girls, prioritising the protection of sexual and reproductive health and rights of girls and women, and preventing the sexual exploitation of women, girls and children**.

*The Portuguese Presidency must ensure the protection of all people who are victims of human rights violations, discrimination and inequalities and the implementation of **independently monitored complaint mechanisms**. Portugal must also work with the Council and with CSOs towards the **implementation of structured programmes of Development Education and Awareness Raising (DEAR)** – both in formal and informal Education contexts – that allow for a fairer and more equal society.*

Civil Society Priorities for the Portuguese EU Council Presidency – the Process

The **Portuguese Platform of Non-Governmental Development Organisations (Plataforma Portuguesa das ONGD)** is a non-profit private association formalized in 1985, which currently has a membership of 63 Portuguese Non-Governmental Development Organisations (NGDOs) registered in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Platform brings together NGDOs working for a fairer and more equitable world in the areas of Development Cooperation, Humanitarian Aid and Development Education and Awareness Raising.

In the context of the Presidency Project **“Towards an Open, Fair and Sustainable Europe in the World”, co-financed by the European Commission, the Portuguese NGDO Platform** is working closely with five other NGDO platforms from the countries presiding over the EU council from January 2019 until December 2021 (FOND – Romania; Fingo – Finland; CROSOL – Croatia; VENRO – Germany; SLOGA - Slovenia) and the European Confederation of Relief and Development NGOs (CONCORD Europe), through concerted practice for global development.

Before the beginning of the Portuguese Presidency, the Portuguese NGDO Platform consulted with **Portuguese civil society in order to establish Civil Society’s Priorities for the current period.**

In methodological terms, a **broad and participatory process of consultation** was carried out, for jointly establishing the advocacy **priorities** for the Portuguese Presidency.

Considering the objectives, a process of listening and coordinating priorities was developed, which resulted in this document and included:

- a) **An extended workshop** with civil society organisations (CSOs) held on November 4, 2020, for which 188 CSOs were invited to attend. These CSOs work mainly in the areas of education and development cooperation, health, migration, humanitarian aid, local development, social inclusion, gender equality, women's rights, citizenship, environment and youth. The workshop (attended by 43 organisations) sought to briefly introduce the project and inform participants about the themes and current (political and legislative) processes. The programme further addressed topics related with EU’s external action, such as the EU-AU Partnership;
- b) **A questionnaire** addressed at CSOs, launched on November 11 that was available until November 25, 2020, sent out to 220 entities with 99 valid responses. The questionnaire aimed to take the brief consultation exercise, conducted during the workshop, a step forward and to gather inputs from several organisations and in different parts of the country, expressing their opinions, concerns and reflections on the priority themes and sub-themes to be addressed by the Portuguese Presidency. The questionnaire helped to assess the priority themes and the opinions of CSOs on the matters that had already been identified as the most pressing issues during the workshop and by the Portuguese Platform itself;

- c) **A technical concertation meeting** on the priorities of civil society for the Portuguese EU Council Presidency that took place on December 10, 2020, attended by 23 entities, out of 28 that were invited. Its objectives were the following: (i) to determine the priorities of CSOs for the Portuguese EU Council Presidency; and (ii) expand upon the topics that the organisations selected previously as most relevant to the advocacy work.
- d) **A critical analysis and cross-referencing of priorities**, to lay out the priorities in a guiding document for advocacy during the Portuguese Presidency, summarizing the various contributions collected mentioned during the consultation process.

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